

Bilingual Play and Social Identity: Code-Mixing among Malaysians on X (Twitter)

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ABSTRACT

This study explores bilingual play and social identity through code-mixing among Malaysians on X (formerly known as Twitter), concentrating on the types and contexts of code-mixing in digital communication. Based on Muysken's Theory of Code-Mixing (2000), it explores the inadequately studied domain of online code-mixing, particularly on X, which has distinct communicative limitations. A qualitative content analysis was performed on 150 purposively selected posts from active Malaysian X accounts. Posts were coded into insertion, alternation, and congruent lexicalization, followed by thematic classification of contexts. Findings show insertion as the most dominant type, with code-mixing primarily occurring in informal communication and, to a lesser extent, in public discourse. Code-mixing serves multiple communicative functions, such as humour, solidarity, critique, and emphasis. The study concludes that code-mixing is not random but a strategic resource for identity expression and communicative efficiency. These findings contribute to sociolinguistic theory by linking structural patterns to social functions and offer practical implications for language policy, education, and digital literacy. Future research should expand to multimodal data and cross-platform comparisons.

Keywords: bilingual, social identity, code-mixing, identity expression, communicative efficiency

INTRODUCTION

The multilingual setting in Malaysia makes code-mixing an inevitable aspect of daily communication. As Malay functions as the national and official language, it serves as the primary medium of interaction across domains such as education, administration, and public discourse. Meanwhile, English is recognised as the second language and continues to play a significant role in business, higher education, and as a common language in digital communication, particularly on social media platforms. In daily conversation, speakers often transition between two languages within the same clause, seamlessly incorporating words or phrases to express stance and connection. Hadei et al. (2016) assert that mixing of two or more languages is a common and accepted phenomenon in multilingual societies like Malaysia, where speakers engage in code-switching instinctively and often for a sense of linguistic integration. This illustrates that the use of multiple languages in daily communication is prevalent and socially accepted among Malaysian speakers. These ways of speaking are prevalent and represent belonging, efficiency, and originality in daily speech. Recent research highlights the diverse bilingual profiles of Malaysian students, ranging from simultaneous to late bilinguals (Fatin Nadiah & Khazriyati, 2023), alongside differing student conceptions of bilingualism and multilingualism shaped by education and globalisation (Nabila, 2024). Treffers-Daller et al. (2022) demonstrate that Malay-English code-switching patterns are influenced by typological similarity and bilingual optimisation strategies, emphasising the structural and attitudinal flexibility of Malaysian bilingual repertoires.

Social media encourages both code-switching and code-mixing in daily life, with platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter) providing users with avenues to maintain connections, share ideas, and communicate identity. Malaysia's elevated internet usage and extensive social media engagement facilitate multilingual exchanges, in which tone and style are perpetually negotiated (Datar portal, 2025). Digital platforms promote experimentation, providing low-risk environments for users to participate in bilingual interactions to connect with audiences and express individuality. A study of Facebook posts by Malaysian university students revealed prevalent English-Malay code-mixing, commonly employed to enhance meaning and convey identity in casual digital communications (Nurul Iman et al., 2021). Similarly, an analysis of the Instagram comments of Hitz FM demonstrated that the primary factors influencing the frequent Malay-English code-switching, particularly intra-sentential switching, were language proficiency, semantic emphasis, and stylistic choices (Munirah 'Izzati & Nor Eleyana, 2023). The multilingual environment of Malaysia and digital platforms converge to create an ideal context for code-mixing, which is both practical and socially significant.

Problem Statement

While code-switching has been extensively examined in sociolinguistic studies, code-mixing in digital contexts is still relatively unexplored. Most research has focused on classroom or conversational contexts, resulting in a lack of information of how bilingual individuals integrate languages on social media. Research in Malaysia illustrates this disparity, with code-mixing recognized in educational settings (Nur Aina Irman & Fatin Nabila, 2024) and in extensive analyses of social media utilization (Nur Rasyidah, 2023). Code-switching remains a focal point for scholarly studies, as shown in systematic evaluations of popular culture discourse (Siti Nur Atikah & Asiah, 2023) and analysis of celebrities' Instagram postings (Sofia Hanis et al., 2023). Collectively, these findings indicate that Malaysian scholarly literature acknowledges both activities, yet code-switching garners more systematic and widespread focus than code-mixing. Consequently, there is limited knowledge regarding the varieties of code-mixing employed by Malaysians in digital communication, the contexts in which these practices occur, and the communicative purposes they fulfil. This underrepresentation underscores the necessity for a deeper exploration into the functionality of code-mixing as an expressive bilingual resource in digital contexts.

Despite the growing body of research on social media language use, studies focusing specifically on X (formerly Twitter) remain scarce. Posts on X are characterised by character restrictions, immediacy, and multimodal features that set the platform apart from others, creating distinct communicative conditions for bilingual expression. However, existing research often generalises across platforms, overlooking these unique affordances and failing to consider how conciseness, engagement, and dominant discourse practices shape linguistic strategies (Nur Aishatul Aleeya & Nur Husna, 2024). This lack of platform-specific inquiry leaves critical questions unanswered about the relationship between linguistic structures and digital competencies, particularly in the Malaysian context. Exploring X in depth is therefore essential to uncover the nuanced ways in which Malaysians use code-mixing to negotiate meaning, identity, and creativity within its concise and fast-paced environment.

Furthermore, there is an insufficient level of understanding regarding how Malaysians utilise code-mixing across various contexts on X, including informal communications and public discourse. Although previous research recognises multilingual discourse on social media, limited studies differentiate between informal communication and opinion-based remarks (Nur Khairunnisha & Nur Husna, 2023). The absence of contextual difference obscures the social implications of code-mixing and hinders a comprehensive understanding of multilingual creative cognition in digital interactions. Analysing these contextual disparities is crucial, as linguistic choices in digital environments frequently denote status, identity, and group association. Without such insights, the importance of bilingual play in shaping Malaysian online identity is inadequately theorised and empirically unverified, underscoring the need for a more comprehensive investigation of the communicative roles of code-mixing across various X contexts. Thus, the current study explores the utilisation of code-mixing by Malaysians on X as a means of bilingual play and identity expression. It concentrates on

three primary aspects which are the types of code-mixing present on the platform, the contexts in which code-mixing occur, and the communication functions they fulfil.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Muysken's Typology of Code-Mixing

Muysken's (2000) typology categorises code-mixing into three primary types, namely insertion, alternation, and congruent lexicalisation. Insertion denotes the incorporation of individual lexical items into the grammatical structure of another language. In the post "*jaga solat korang, please*," the English term "please" is incorporated into a Malay statement to mitigate the tone and increase relatability. Alternation happens when speakers transition between extensive discourse portions. This can be observed in "*You akan lebih tenang when you realised that rezeki itu semua dari Allah*," where the speaker alternates English and Malay sentences to communicate an introspective message. Congruent lexicalisation is an occurrence in which the grammatical structures of both languages are equivalent, thereby enabling seamless integration. This is illustrated in the sentence "*Marriage is scary what if beras habis laki kau joget kat Tiktok ngemis*," in which the English and Malay components are interconnected within a single syntactic structure.

This theoretical framework has been widely employed in Malaysian contexts. The structural study of Malay–English data reveals diverse patterns shaped by typological similarities (Treffers-Daller et al., 2022), whereas qualitative studies identify the same range of strategies in public discourse (Nur Khairunnisha & Nur Husna, 2023). On social media platforms, where conciseness governs communication, the frequent use of insertions commonly arises to augment expressiveness and reinforce audience engagement (Nur Aishatul Aleeya & Nur Husna, 2024).

Code-Mixing in Malaysia

Studies in Malaysia continually indicate that insertion is the predominant method, especially in digital contexts, due to its association with style, efficiency, and stance-taking (Adzu Farhana et al., 2020). Code-switching and congruent lexicalisation generally arise during subject transitions or when languages exhibit shared syntactic structures (Treffers-Daller et al., 2022). Comparative research in Brunei and Malaysia demonstrates that multilingual repertoires facilitate the normalisation of code-mixing in digitally mediated interactions (McLellan, 2022). Bilingual play in Malaysia transcends pragmatic considerations, embodying cultural value and expressing the nation's continuous negotiation of postcolonial identity.

Code-Mixing on X

Extensive corpus analyses reveal the widespread prevalence of code-mixing in Malaysian X communication. A dataset of 29,566 postings featuring #Malaysia revealed approximately 2,000 mixed items, demonstrating extensive bilingual engagement (Afifah et al., 2024). A COVID-19 X corpus over 108,000 tweets similarly shown significant code-mixing, even in critical debates (Kong et al., 2023). These findings indicate that code-mixing extends beyond informal conversation to encompass civic and serious discourse. Nonetheless, the majority of corpus-based research has prioritised sentiment analysis above sociolinguistic function, so constraining understanding of identity, power, and audience design challenges.

Context, Identity, and Functions

Social interaction, particularly on digital platforms, often displays code-mixing in informal contexts, fulfilling relational purposes such as humour, playfulness, solidarity, and coordination (Gafaranga, 2007; Latifah et al., 2023; Sebba, 2012). Recent research on code-switching in multilingual communities affirms these functions, demonstrating that language shifts, both between words and within-utterance, builds identity, fosters rapport, and enriches expressive nuance (Filani & Onurisi, 2018; Hernias, 2024; Kipchoge, 2024). According to Halim and Maros (2014, as cited in Mafarhanatul Akmal & Bazrina, 2022), individuals utilise code-switching to communicate their emotions, thoughts, and sentiments during online Facebook interactions. They also

observed the tendency to employ basic English and Malay words as a means of emphasising specific ideas or messages, clarifying statements, and condensing language.

While these studies predominantly examine code-switching, their findings are relevant to code-mixing, particularly in dynamic multilingual exchanges when linguistic boundaries are indistinct. Political discourse on Malaysian X utilises code-mixing for rhetorical objectives, including message advocacy, engagement with multilingual audiences, and expression of identity or party allegiance (Androutsopoulos, 2013; Farrah Diebaa & Nur Farah Suhada, 2022; Nurul Iman et al., 2021). These roles are reflected in wider political contexts where intentional language alternation, frequently intersecting with code-mixing, serves to foster solidarity, enhance accessibility, and balance authority with relatability (Kementchedjhieva, 2016; Sravani et al., 2021;). These functions demonstrate that code-mixing is intentional and context-dependent, adjusting flexibly to communicative requirements. Nonetheless, the distinction between informal and public discourse remains ambiguous in much of the literature. This underscores the necessity for more nuanced contextual analysis. The convergence of structural typologies and functional views remains little explored, highlighting a significant research vacuum that this work aims to fill.

METHODOLOGY

This research employed a qualitative design to explore language practices within context, facilitating an in-depth review of meanings, structures, and identity construction in digital communication (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The dataset consisted of 150 intentionally selected public posts on X, featuring occurrences of code-mixing. These posts were curated from active Malaysian accounts between January 2024 and January 2025. This sample size achieves a balance between manageability and diversity, consistent with previous research on social media language variation (Zulfati Izazi & Tengku Sepora, 2020). As the dataset comprises only publicly available posts, with no interaction with users and no collection of identifiable personal information, formal ethical approval was not required. This approach aligns with standard ethical practices for content analysis of public online data.

A coding checklist was created according to Muysken's (2000) typology, encompassing X ID, language(s) employed, type of code-mixing, and context (informal versus public discourse). Posts on X were collected, cleaned up, and anonymised. Only contributions from public accounts were incorporated. The data was transferred to the checklist for analysis using standard X linguistics study procedures. Posts were categorised into insertion, alternation, or congruent lexicalisation. Contextual coding differentiated informal discourse from public discourse, whereas thematic coding recognised communication functions. Given the subjective nature of linguistic categorisation, inter-coder reliability and expert review are crucial to ensure consistent interpretation and enhance the credibility of the findings. Inter-coder agreement was assessed to assure reliability, and expert review was employed to augment content validity (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020).

RESULTS

This study explored the use of code-mixing by Malaysians on X (previously Twitter) as a means of bilingual play and identity expression. The study focused on categorising the types of code-mixing employed, the contexts in which they occur and the purpose of communication they fulfil in digital discourse.

Types of Code-Mixing on X

Table 1 Distribution of Code-Mixing Types

Type	Frequency	Percentage
Insertion	88	59%
Congruent Lexicalization	32	21%
Alternation	30	20%

Total	150	100%
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Table 1 illustrates the types of code-mixing employed in posts on X. Insertion comprised 59% of occurrences, followed by congruent lexicalisation at 21% and alternation at 20%. Examples of insertion are "*meeting kena postpone*" and "*basically tak sempat*," when English lexicon is integrated into Malay syntax to express urgency or stance. Congruent lexicalisation is seen in posts like "*Marriage is scary what if beras habis laki kau joget kat Tiktok ngemis*," where the two languages seamlessly integrate inside an identical grammatical structure. Alternation is seen in posts such as "*I told you already, jangan risau*," where complete phrases interchange between English and Malay to maintain clarity and emotional resonance. These findings reiterate Muysken's predictions and validate insertion as the most common strategy in Malaysian X discourse.

Contexts of Code-Mixing on X

Table 2 Code-mixing Distribution by Context

Context	Frequency	Percentage
Informal Communication	114	76%
Public Discourse	36	24%
Total	150	100%

The analysis in Table 2 indicated that informal communication predominated the dataset, constituting 76% of code-mixing occurrences. In this context, users utilised code-mixing to convey humour, disseminate personal updates, and facilitate social coordination. Posts frequently exhibited whimsical language and indicators of camaraderie, demonstrating informal, emotionally expressive exchanges. For instance, "*Kadang kita rasa flow hidup kita lambat dari orang lain*" merges Malay and English to express introspection, whereas "*I decide jadi Wanita cool tahun depan je babe*" exemplifies congruent lexicalisation, in which English and Malay elements are cohesively integrated within a unified grammatical framework. Likewise, "*Jaga solat korang, please*" exemplifies insertion, softening a religious admonition with an English politeness marker.

On the other hand, public discourse constituted 24% of the data and generally encompassed critique, reflection, or commentary on governance, religion, and social issues. These posts exhibited a more ordered and formal style, frequently employing code-mixing to augment clarity, inclusivity, or rhetorical effect. For example, "*You akan lebih tenang when you realised that rezeki itu semua dari Allah*" alternates English and Malay to deliver a contemplative message, while "*USA at least tau la duit cukai pergi mana, they spend billions for their military, Malaysia?*" employs English for emphasis and comparison. Additional instances, such as "*Menjaga solat ini bukan setakat bare minimum, tapi perkara wajib bagi Muslim*," illustrate how code-mixing facilitates nuanced religious discourse. These patterns indicate that informal posts prioritise expressiveness and relatability, whereas public discourse employs code-mixing for clarity, reach, and ideological framing.

Communicative Functions of Code-Mixing in Digital Discourse

Expanding upon the contextual patterns, the analysis further demonstrated the communicative purposes of code-mixing in public and informal discourse. These functions demonstrate that users engage in code-mixing intentionally, with distinct relational and rhetorical intentions. In informal communication, code-mixing served to convey humour, foster solidarity, and facilitate social engagement. Posts such as "*Kadang kita rasa flow hidup kita lambat dari orang lain*" and "*I decide jadi Wanita cool tahun depan je babe*" exemplify personal introspection and whimsical identity formation. Likewise, "*Jaga solat korang, please*" employs insertion to mitigate a religious reminder, but "*IG story member-member aku harini tak dekat Thailand confirm kat Indonesia*" blends languages to humorously reflect on social trends.

Code-mixing in public discourse facilitated critique, reflection, and engagement with wider audiences. Posts like *“Tah apa priority Menteri Malaysia ni taktaulah”* and *“Ketuanan Melayu were created to make sure Malay got their rights in their own land. But that on zaman dulu punya konteks”* showcase how individuals question political leadership and debate ethnic identity. Likewise, *“USA at least tau la duit cukai pergi mana, they spend billions for their military, Malaysia?”* and *“Dengar cerita, UPSR dengan PT3 nak dikembalikan semula. Baguslah. Budak-budak ni at least ada target nak dikejar”* exemplifies the utilisation of bilingual expression to interrogate governance and critique educational reform. Meanwhile, *“You akan lebih tenang when you realised that rezeki itu semua dari Allah”* utilises many languages to express a reflective, spiritual message. Other examples, such as *“Menjaga solat ini bukan setakat bare minimum, tapi perkara wajib bagi Muslim,”* demonstrate how code-mixing enables nuanced religious or ideological discourse. These patterns suggest code-mixing is intentional and contextually adapted, allowing users to adjust tone, audience, and purpose with linguistic flexibility.

DISCUSSION

The prevalence of insertion in the dataset corresponds with the simplicity and immediacy of X, where short, embedded lexical terms improve clarity and efficiency. This corroborates prior studies on Malay–English insertion in both spoken and digital contexts (Adzu Farhana et al., 2020; Treffers-Daller et al., 2022). Alternation and congruent lexicalisation, though rare, were employed strategically, particularly when users shifted their position or exploited more complex syntactic structures. These patterns support the applicability of Muysken’s (2000) typology to digital discourse and suggest that platform constraints influence the prevalence of mixing types.

Besides structural patterns, the findings suggest that code-mixing is affected by the communication context. In informal communication, it was predominant and served as a medium for relational expression, enhancing a sense of identity, solidarity, and humour. This aligns with research on intra-linguistic code-switching in humorous and conversational settings, emphasising how language shifts facilitate identity formation and audience engagement (Filani & Onurisi, 2018; Hedrenius, 2024; Kipchoge, 2024). Conversely, its application in public discourse demonstrated rhetorical purpose, fostering critique, reflection, and wider audience involvement. This dual role corresponds with prior studies on political and public discourse, indicating that code-mixing promotes inclusion and accessibility (Kementchedjhieva, 2016; McLellan, 2022; Sravani et al., 2021).

The findings validate that code-mixing is an intentional and contextually reliant strategy. It facilitates several communicative objectives, such as stance-taking, persuasion, and emotional expression, in accordance with previous studies on multilingual interaction (Androutsopoulos, 2015). Code-mixing demonstrates users' linguistic creativity and flexibility in navigating Malaysia's multilingual digital landscape, rather than reflecting linguistic deficiency.

The findings theoretically augment Muysken’s framework by demonstrating its relevance in microblogging environments. The heightened occurrence of congruent lexicalisation relative to traditional speech data suggests that digital platforms may facilitate hybrid syntactic structures, requiring the refinement of existing typologies to integrate digital affordances (Muysken, 2022).

These findings have substantial implications for language instruction, policies, and digital communication. Recognising code-mixing as a fundamental component of users' linguistic repertoire may improve inclusive teaching practices and reduce stigma. Policymakers and communicators can derive insights by understanding how multilingual practices affect participation in digital settings, particularly in diverse cultures like Malaysia.

CONCLUSION

This study illustrates that Malaysians primarily employ code-mixing on X (formerly Twitter) through insertion, whereas congruent lexicalisation and alternation provide supplementary functions. Code-mixing

predominantly occurs in informal communication, facilitating relational functions such as humour, solidarity, and identity expression; nevertheless, it also appears strategically in public discourse to foster critique, reflection, and broader audience engagement. These findings confirm that code-mixing is a purposeful, context-dependent strategy, shaped by both digital platform constraints and bilingual capabilities. The study theoretically extends Muysken's typology to microblogging contexts, highlighting the importance of integrating digital affordances into models of bilingual interaction. It also underscores the need to incorporate bilingual awareness into language education, digital literacy, and inclusive communication practices.

For future research, expanding datasets and integrating multimodal features would provide a richer understanding of code-mixing practices. Cross-platform comparisons involving platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, or Facebook could further illuminate platform-specific linguistic strategies and constraints, offering broader insights into Malaysia's digital linguistic landscape. Given Malaysia's multilingual and multicultural context, future studies should also compare code-mixing patterns across different language pairs and communities, such as Malay–English, Mandarin–English, Tamil–English, or other local languages, to capture the full range of linguistic diversity online. Additionally, incorporating more detailed qualitative analyses of discourse strategies and pragmatic functions, as well as examining the nuanced pragmatic, cultural, and emotional dimensions of code-mixing beyond thematic classifications, would deepen interpretive insights and strengthen the understanding of how bilingual users negotiate identity and meaning in dynamic online environments.

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