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RESEARCH PAPER

Multilingual Identity Construction in Pakistani Instagram Discourse: An SFL and Emoji-Based Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of digital social networks has transformed online platforms into significant spaces for identity construction and negotiation. This study investigates how Pakistani Instagram users construct social, emotional, and ideological identities through language, emojis, and multilingual digital practices. The study is limited to Instagram comments collected from selected Pakistani social media posts. A qualitative descriptive-analytic approach was employed to analyse approximately 115 Instagram comments from ten purposively selected posts on relationships, politics, social issues, entertainment, and beauty standards. The analysis was guided by Halliday's (1993) Systemic Functional Linguistics and Dresner and Herring's (2010) functional perspective on emojis. The findings reveal that users strategically employ evaluative language, stance-taking, emojis, code-mixing, and lexical borrowing to negotiate multiple identities in online interaction. Emojis function as meaningful pragmatic resources rather than merely decorative symbols. The study highlights the multimodal and multilingual nature of Pakistani Instagram discourse and recommends further research using larger datasets and multiple social media platforms.

KEYWORDS Identity Construction, Systemic Functional Linguistics, Emojis, Code-Mixing, Digital Communication

Introduction

Identity is not a fixed or stable quality but is socially constructed. Contemporary linguistics understands identity as constituted through interaction and discourse. Different communication methods and multiple languages help with identity construction inside social media conversations. Many people believe that social media participants apply small pictures, mixed languages, word borrowing, and mixed talking styles to make deep meanings while they show their feelings to the public (Saleem & Yasmin, 2024; Saleem et al., 2021).

Communication in many lamguages is significant for identity formation within the Pakistani location because Urdu and English live together in digital communication. Specific linguistic forms are used by individuals to mark their social place. When speakers use foreign words incorporated into their own language to express their group affiliation, identity remains important.Urdu as a language and language of culture is related to emotional intimacy, cultural belonging and local identity, while English is related to education, modernity and participation in the digital world. Users create identities which

are locally rooted and globally oriented through code-switching and hybrid linguistic practices, which result in pride and cultural awareness in the audience.

Theoretically, the study is based on Halliday's (1993) and Dresner and Herring's (2010) theories of social and functional view of language and pragmatic view of using emojis. The study also borrows from the writings of Voloshinov (1986) who sees language as social and an ideology with meaning being built up in interaction and not as an innate property of the word.The functions of language involve ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions which are explained by Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics because this theory shows how individuals express life relationships, manage social bonds, and organize meaning during social communication.While these functions are important, Dresner and Herring (2010) argue that emojis serve as pragmatic resources for the tone, purpose, intention and decoding of messages in online communication.These frameworks provide a complete foundation for analyzing how identity is constructed through linguistic and semiotic practices within social media discourse.

The growing importance of the online presentation of the self has made digital identity a relevant field of linguistic research. Researchers are increasingly interested in studying linguistic and semiotic features of Internet language and technologically mediated communication (Zummo, 2018). However, little research has been done on the combined roles of Systemic Functional Linguistics, multilingual practices and emojis in identity construction in Pakistani Instagram discourse.

This current research focuses the way in which identity is formed and negotiated through language, emojis, and multilingual practices in relation to Instagram comments.Despite examining the different aspects separately, the research considers digital communication as a holistic and semiotic activity.The research specifically addresses the ways in which users construct social, emotional, ideological and bilingual identities in online interaction through evaluative language, stance-taking, code-mixing, lexical borrowing and emoji use. The study adds to discourse analysis, digital linguistics and identity studies by examining naturally occurring online interaction in Pakistani context. It underscores the multimodal and multilingual character of digital identity construction. It stresses the importance of language choice, code-switching, and symbolic resources in self-representation and social positioning in contemporary social media discourse. As sociolinguistic research has shown time and again, the choice of language is closely related to the construction of individual and collective identity (Martin Rojo & Grad, 2008). Therefore, this study seeks to answer the following questions: 1. How do social media consumers produce and negotiate identities via ideational, interpersonal and textual meanings in online comments within the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)? 2. How do Emojis as pragmatic resources and code-mixing practices in social media discourse play a role in identity construction.

Literature Review

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) was founded by Halliday in the 1960s, which describes communication as a social semiotic resource for the construction of meaning in a particular environment. Halliday followed Malinowski and Firth, and so Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) focuses on communication, the purpose of speaking and social interaction, rather than just on internal mental processes. Experts claim that the focus of SFL on the context of the situation makes SFL very popular for people studying discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, and communication learning at an educational institution (O'Donnell, 2012; Matthiessen & Halliday, 1994). This method is utilized by many researchers who seek to understand the social nature of words.

Gebhard and Accurso (2020) present SFL as a structure that looks at how speakers describe life events, manage their social connections, and arrange their talk through ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions. Specifically, the interpersonal metafunction shows how speakers choose their status through evaluation, mood, modality, and appraisal resources. Even though the work of Gebhard and Accurso (2020) gives strong theoretical ideas about how meaning is made, this work stays mostly as a concept and does not look deeply at identity construction in digital discourse. Many people believe that this gap shows that more investigation is needed regarding how linguistic choices based on SFL help people manage identity construction when they are online.

Current studies about digital discourse highlight that social media sites are not neutral places, because social media sites are places where social ideologies, cultural norms, and power relations are reproduced and discussed. Researchers claim that communication habits on the internet are connected to race, gender, sexuality, and class. Criticism around the use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) by non-Black speakers on social media like Twitter and TikTok also highlight concerns related to commodification of culture (Alim, 2021; Cutler, 2022). Hashtag collectives have revealed that communication can also be a form of solidarity where struggle and collective creation has been evident among activists on social media platforms such as #BlackLivesMatter or campaign movements, such as #MeToo (Jackson et al., 2020).These changes are recognized by scholars who believe it is vital to study digital discourse using frameworks like SFL that focus on society.

Earlier research has also pointed out that building identity construction in online interaction is filled with ideology. Noble (2018) argues that digital platforms frequently show how things like accent, dialect, grammar, and word choice can lead to being left out or treated unfairly. Because of this, assumptions about "authentic" identity construction are often reinforced by digital platforms. Digital discourse is a place where identity construction is performed, talked about, and controlled all the time. Many people believe that this process of identity construction never stops in the digital world.

Emojis have been addressed in scholarly research on their communicative function in digital discourse as well. Arafah and Hasyim (2019) examine emojis in WhatsApp interaction using a semiotic perspective and identify three levels of emojis: syntactic, semantic and pragmatic. Their research suggests that emojis do not just convey emotions, but can also affect relationships and how people represent themselves online.Although they sometimes touch upon identity construction as an interactional process, their study is restricted mainly to the structural functions of emojis.

Similarly, Arshad et al. (2025) build upon discourse theory along with the performative lens for identity offered by Bucholtz and Hall (2005), in examining identity construction on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter. They show that online identity performance has a strong reliance on code-switching, hashtags and emojis, as well as visuals and informal language. The research also reveals that identity production is specific to the platform, with Instagram putting less weight on narrative identity. However, the study does not introduce an SFL based framework to understand linguistic choices and interpersonal meaning in online interaction.

Interpersonal meaning in digital communication has also been studied from the SFL perspective. For example, Tran and Ngo (2018) conducted an appraisal theory and speech function analysis of Facebook news comments. Their results reveal that online interaction is marked by evaluation, contestation, celebration and adjudication, wherein users take up social and ideological stances. The study focuses on the role of interpersonal resources in

shaping alignment and social relations in digital discourse without explicitly addressing identity construction.

Recently, the significance of multilingualism and code switching in the identity negotiation online has also been emphasized in the study.The multilingual strategies (e.g., translanguaging, lexical borrowing, code-switching) are known to foster group identification and identity constructing within digital communities (Delaroche, 2025). Although this study conceptualises identity as fluid, interactional and contextual, the role of the SFL-based interpersonal meanings in the construction of multilingual identity in social media discourse must be further explored.

The reviewed literature emphasizes a range of scholarly interests focused on digital discourse, multilingualism, use of emoji and online identity construction. But few studies have examined the relationship of SFL, multilingualism and emojis in the process of construction of identities at Pakistani Instagram. This study aims to fill this gap by examining how various linguistic and semiotic resources i.e., code-mixing, stance-taking and emoji play a role in both the construction and negotiation of social, emotional, ideological, and bilingual identities in online interaction.

Material and Methods

The research employed a qualitative and interpretive paradigm based on discourse studies. This qualitative approach was most appropriate as the research investigates identity construction through language and symbols in authentic virtual interactions. It investigated the process of identity construction by social media users through language, emojis, code-switching, and evaluative lexical items in online conversations. Digital interaction is now a major form of communication, with the proliferation of internet-based communication platforms (Fedotov et al., 2020; Goroshko, 2007). Instagram was selected as the primary data source because of its interactive, user-generated communication environment, in which users are able to engage interactively through comments, responses, captions, and various means. It focused on timely communication and public interaction which fits well for studying identity representation and making meaning in digital settings.

Data Collection

This study gathered data from Instagram which is a popular social media platform,which encourages users to interact constantly. On Instagram, users engage actively with shared content through comments and reactions and various expressions. This makes it ideal for exploring digital discussions and identity building. Ten Instagram posts were selected in order to cover different communicative contexts and audience interactions. These posts included themes like entertainment,sports,celebrity related content,motivational talks, opinions and social issues such as gender roles and education. Including diverse topics helped the study in order to analyze natural discussions in different interactional environments. Around 115 comments were gathered from the posts to create the main corpus of the study. These comments showed a range of real online interactions and digital communication in multiple languages. The selected comments displayed important linguistic and semiotic features such as emoji usage and code-switching between Urdu and English.Furthermore,it includes evaluative language,stance-taking,lexical borrowing and interactional positions. Building on the characteristics of the research subjects referenced in the preceding text, this study was adapted to analyze identity construction in social media conversations in Pakistan.The collected comments were organized into tables to ensure clear, systematic interpretation, and prioritize

analytical depth over the breadth of quantitative analysis in order to produce a multi-dimensional, detailed interpretation of digital identity practices.

Sampling Technique

As a discourse-oriented qualitative study, this research adopted the purposive sampling method widely used in similar studies. This study adopted purposive sampling, and screened comments that aligned with the study's research objectives according to the linguistics and semiotics.To be eligible for inclusion, comments were carefully chosen in accordance with the goals of the study which must meet all four requirements at the same time: containing emojis, exhibiting multilingual features, using emotional evaluative language, and having clear interactive significance. This method provided theoretical support for the analysis and for the research context.Moreover,it served the core inquiry goal of exploring identity construction.

Data Analysis

By looking at how meaning is built, Halliday's (1993) model formed the base. Emojis came into view through with the pragmatic perspectives of Eli Dresner and Susan Herring, with respect to emojis in digital talk patterns. By following these perspectives,each comment was analyzed under three metafunctions by using Halliday's three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual that shows experience, managing relationships, organizing flow. These parts helped spot what messages do beyond mere words.

Through the ideational lens, meaning about lived experiences took shape in online communication.Under the interpersonal metafunction,speakers showed feelings, stance, or judgment and how they manages social interaction and attitudes.It analyzed the mood, attitudes, evaluation, alignment and evaluation in the on-line discourse by different types of people.On the other hand,textual metafunction analyzed the cohesion and coherence and placement of ideas in a structured way.

Besides, emojis were examined as tools shaping tone, showing intent, carrying emotion, and helper to sort out shared understanding in online chats (Dresner & Herring, 2010). Another angle checked how shifting languages and using more than one language helps build personal, cultural, political, and dual-language identity. What they did included selecting comments off certain Instagram pictures, spotting key language signs and visual hints, sorting talk styles via SFL layers, then making sense of emoji moves in real exchanges. On top of that, it explored how such elements shape who people become and act as together in digital spaces.This study was based on the analysis of comments on certain Instagram posts, the linguistic and semiotic traits found in these comments, their grouping with regard to SFL meta-functions, and a pragmatic interpretation of the use of emojis. Furthermore, the role of these discourse resources were considerd in identity construction.

Ethical Considerations and Research Validity

The study followed to ethical research guidelines throughout the research process. All comments were collected from publicly accessible Instagram posts, and no private or restricted content was used(Aulia et al., 2024). To keep the people who made the comments anonymous and to protect their privacy their usernames and other personal information were not included in the analysis. The person teaching the course also looked at the information that was collected. The way it was chosen to make sure it was done correctly

and in a way that was fair. This review made sure that the way the information was collected and analyzed was okay and followed the rules for doing research in a way.

The study also made stronger by doing things like choosing the information in an systematic way using the same method to analyze the information making sure the analysis fit, with the ideas of SFL and the study of emojis and explaining the results in a clear way. The Instagram posts and comments that were chosen are listed in Table 1 so they can be examined closely and analyzed in detail according to the objectives of the study.

Table 1
Selected Instagram Posts and Example Comments for Discourse Analysis

Sr. No.	Context of Post	Views	Example Comments
1	Abusive Relationship Story	500K Views	"Stay strong, Sehar. You deserve better ❤□" "It takes courage to speak up. Respect for her 💯" "Log ab bhi usi ko blame karenge, typical mindset □♀□."
2	Rising Petrol Prices in Pakistan	20K Views	"Yeh government sirf awam ko loot rahi hai; petrol mehnga aur zindagi azaab 😩" "Bro, ab bike chalana bhi luxury lag raha hai 💀" "In logon ko bas apni kursi bachani hai, public jaye bhaar mein 🖕."
3	Whitening Cream Advertisement	50K Views	"This cream actually looks promising. Might try it 👍" "Nice offer, skin looks better in the results shown 😍" "When will this colonial mindset end 😑? Skin tone se kya farq parta hai?"

Results and Discussion

Based on Halliday's (1993) framework of social semiotic and Dresner and Herring's (2010) perspective on emojis in computer-mediated communication, this section analyzes how Instagram users realize emotional, ideological, social and multilingual identities via linguistic/semiotic resources in the digital discourse. As Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) emphasizes language in use, it centers on the socially-constructed nature of meanings through ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunctions rather than grammatical structure (Kress, 2010; Matthiessen & Halliday, 1997).

The first Instagram post draws on the story of an abusive relationship to uncover how Instagram discourse serves as a site for emotional solidarity, moral judgement and social critique. For instance, the comments "Hang in there girl, you deserve way better ❤□" and "Speaking up takes guts, props to her 💯" mainly draw on relational and mental processes to build a system of support empathy applied, respect or validation. Phrases as: 'you deserve better' or 'respect for her', attribute merit to the victim and build her discursive identity as brave and strong. As stated by Halliday (1994) and Halliday and Matthiessen (2004), language itself is a social semiotic resource with which the realities of emotion and inter-personal relations are negotiated. According to interpersonal metafunction,these comments make the compassionate and socially supportive user who microsocially aligns with the victim. Even emojis like ❤□ and 💯 adorn emotional harmony and validation.

According to either Dresner and Herring (2010), emojis serve as pragmatic resources to strengthen interpersonal meaning across modalities, while clarifying communicative intention. While many may have previously thought emoji were simply decorative symbols, in these comments they reinforce sincerity, empathy and moral endorsement. Textually, the comments all have encouraging yet coherent structures that show emotional support as the main communicative goal.

On the other hand, comments like "Log abhi bhi ussi ko blame karenge kuch nahin badla typical mentality □♀□" and "If this is true then that man should be ASHAMED 😭" reflect how social media users use discourse to contest victim-blaming ideologies of a

certain kind and build identity around experiences rooted in social empathy and activism. The comments focus mainly on verbal, mental and relational processes, in which societal attitudes as well as moral obligation are reflected critically. A social problem towards victim blaming behaviour is generalized by the phrase typical mindset, whereas "that man should be shame" creates moral accountability through evaluative judgment.

These comments also speak to multilingual digital identity via Urdu-English code-mixing. To belt higher chaps for critique and ideology, an English lexical item like "mindset" or ashamed is smuggled into the Urdu structure. This reflects the dual, increasingly globalised identities exhibited by many Pakistani digital discourse communities, where bilingual speakers creatively juggle their identities between the local and global. Emojis like □♀□ and 😭 also carry higher-level meaning as stance-enhancement and illocutionary-force markers by signaling frustration, anger, or disapproval in greater amounts. These linguistic and semiotic resources are then used by commenters to fashion identities that resist ideology, promote ethics, or voice social criticism.

The second post on burgeoning petrol prices in the Pakistan presents digital discourse as a space in which political critique, economic outrage and public dissent cohere. As Ahlqvist et al. As also Cohen (2008) explain social media platforms promote the opinion exchange and social Identity building process through interactive communication. Material and relational processes present inflation as an exploitative and emotionally oppressive act in comments like, "Yeh govt sirf awam ko loot rahi hai petrol mehnga aur zindagi azaab ☹" Here the government and its institution is depicted as Actor doing wrong with "awam" while "zindagi azaab" phrases shown economic hardships that are unbearable.

Interpersonally, the commenter is drastically critical and annoyed of economic policies. The factors behind the use of Urdu–English code-mixing, particularly lexicon entry "govt," illustrate hybrid multilingual behavior typical in Pakistani online communication. And the ☹ emoji increases outrage and discontent, serving as a pro-stance tool which exacerbates how accusatory they are being in their message. The comment itself begins by accusing.... and then moves on to highlight the sufferance due to inflation, thus foregrounds suffering economic as communication.

Similarly, the comment "Bro ab bike chalana bhi luxury lag rahe ga 💀" shows how users build identities related to youth and middle-class status with humor, irony, and casual interaction. There is a mental process behind saying luxury lag raha hai which is an ordinary transport appeared to be economically impossible because of inflation.The use of the modern referent "Bro" conveys shared bond and intimacy between users; Urdu-English code-mixing mirrors Gen-Z's hybrid and dominant style of speech in Digital Discourses.

The 💀 emoji primarily serves as an illocutionary force indicator for mock expression of helpless rage and despair. The emoji does not communicate literal meaning; instead, it reframes the complaint as a kind of socially relatable humor. As a result of these language and semiotic strategies, the commenter crafts an identity that combines economic hardship, emotional vulnerability, and digital irony.

The statement "In logon ko to bas apni kursi bachani hai, public jaye bhaar mein 👊" is another similar example of how political debate on social media builds a narrative where political elites and average citizens are opposing sides in an ideological battle. Psychological and relational processes are mapped in such a way that political leaders appear narcissistic and out of touch with the so-called "public." The conjoined embedded

English lexical item 'public' in the Urdu sentence reflects inner bilingual identity construction of the own self and serves to intensify political criticism. The 👊 emoji reinforces the illocutionary force of protest and resistance by emphasizing confrontation and dissatisfaction.

For example, the comments Petrol prices up again? "This is becoming ridiculous man" is an example of how emojis are not necessary to construct high interpersonal meaning. The rhetorical question, along with the evaluative adjective "ridiculous," sets up inflation as a current social problem, while the colloquialism "man" shows solidarity and conversational closeness.This completely English structure mirrors how English is often used in Pakistani digital spaces as a lingua franca for public critique and commentary on socioeconomic status.

The third post which is related to the advertisements of whitening products for skin highlights how discourse of beauty becomes a territory for contestation of consumerism, colonial ideology and socially constructed ideals of what constitutes attractiveness. For instance, comments like "This cream actually looks promising,might try it 👍" and "Nice offer,skin looks better in the results shown 😍" use a mental process and relational processes that construct the product positively. The cosmopolitan express look promising and the hands-free cream looks so much better is an effective desire, thus constructing beauty enhancement in the visual fora as socially valuable and rather easily quantified. Previous works also show the impact of ideology, gender, culture and personality traits in social media behavior (Correa et al., 2010; Muscanell and Guadagno, 2012; Saleem and Javaid, 2026; ul Sabah et al., 2026).

On an interpersonal level, these statements put users in the role of a consumer and reinforce digitally mediated beauty ideals. Tentative acceptance and thus consumer interest is reflected in modal expressions like "might try it". Emojis like 👍 and 😍 act as stance-enhancement devices which magnify approval, admiration and emotional engagement with the ad. By making these semiotic choices, commenters manage to construct identities linked to aspiration, consumer enthusiasm and alignment with a commercial beauty discourse.

On the other hand, replyers also showed shades of colonial era things by writing comments like "When will this colonial mindset end 😒?? "Skin tone sa Kya farq parta ha ? And stop promoting these unrealistic beauty standards 🙏 These comments mainly use relational and verbal processes to critique the fairness image of beauty and intellectualize its ideological motivations. Both use of the term "colonial mindset" frames skin-colour preference as a socially inherited and historically conditioned form of belief, rather than an innate standard for beauty. Likewise, the directive expression "Stop promoting" situates the commenter as socially aware and oppositional to deleterious media practices.

The Urdu-English code-mixing as shown in these comments reflects hybrid digital identity construction in Pakistani online discourse. For the ideological label it is English ("colonial mindset"), and for the emotional and culture-grounded" critique it is Urdu ("skin tone se kya farq parta hai"). The emojis such as 😒 and 🙏 are also stance markers and mitigation devices. This 😒 emoji is used to show irritation and ideological disgust, whereas 🙏 turns an the communication into a request for change. Through their choice of language and symbols, the commenters create identities of ethical awareness, ideological struggle, and citizenship activism.

In sum, it can be stated that the study shows how Instagram comments are not only casual but also meaningful discursive practices through which users construct their identities, negotiate ideologies, and make sense through multiple modes. In particular, users use the metafunctions of language through which they express their experiences, negotiate interpersonal relations, and strategically organize their discourse. Moreover, emojis are used by users as pragmatic and semiotic resources that increase emotions, clarify the communicative intentions of users, mitigate criticism, and solidify stances. Furthermore, it is shown that Urdu-English code-switching plays an integral part in Pakistani online discourse through which users can express their emotional, ideological, and sociocultural meanings more effectively.

Conclusion

The current study explores the construction and negotiation of identity in Instagram discourse through linguistic and semiotic resources within digital interaction. Based on Halliday's (1993) SFL and Dresner and Herring's (2010) pragmatic approach to understanding emojis, the study revealed that Instagram comments are crucial sites for the making of emotional, ideological, social and cultural identities. Digital identities, the findings concluded, are transient, emergent and manifest on different spectrums of stance-taking, evaluation and critique, emotionality and alignment with social ideologies. The analysis also found that gender expectations, economic issues, political discontent and social inequality and beauty standards are built into the discourse within social media. Emojis are powerful shapers of interactional meaning as they intensify emotion, reinforce attitude, soften criticism and clarify intent. The identification of these concerns indicates their significance for grasping the mechanisms of online sociality and identity.

Recommendations

The findings suggest that language and emojis should be recognised as significant resources for identity construction and meaning-making in digital communication. Researchers are encouraged to investigate larger and more diverse datasets across multiple social media platforms to gain a broader understanding of how identities are constructed and negotiated in online environments. Future studies may also adopt comparative and longitudinal approaches to examine how digital identities evolve across different sociocultural and political contexts. Given the prominent role of emojis in shaping interactional meaning, further research should explore their pragmatic and multimodal functions in greater depth, particularly in multilingual settings. Educators, media practitioners, and digital literacy advocates should promote critical awareness of how language, ideology, gender norms, political attitudes, and social inequalities are represented and reinforced through online discourse. Such efforts can help users engage more critically and responsibly with digital communication while fostering inclusive and reflective online communities.

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