

LINGUISTIC IDENTITY AND EMOTIONAL COMMUNICATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE: FOREIGN LANGUAGE USE AMONG ALBANIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract: The digital age has transformed the ways in which individuals communicate, establish social relationships, and construct their identities in online environments. Social media platforms have evolved into spaces where language serves not only as a means of communication but also as a key marker of personal, cultural, and emotional identity. Within this context, the use of foreign languages among university students represents an important phenomenon for understanding the interplay between language, identity, and emotional communication.

This study investigates how Albanian university students use foreign languages on social media and explores the relationship between language choice, digital identity construction, and emotional expression. The research adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining a questionnaire administered to 80 university students, a content analysis of 240 public social media posts, and semi-structured interviews with 10 participants.

The findings reveal that English is the predominant foreign language used in digital communication, followed by Italian, French, and German. The use of foreign languages extends beyond practical communication purposes, serving functions related to professional self-presentation, a sense of international belonging, and emotional expression. The results further suggest that communicating in a foreign language can create a symbolic distance that enables individuals to regulate emotional exposure in public digital spaces.

The study highlights that multilingual communication on social media contributes to the development of hybrid identities, where local experiences, global orientations, and emerging forms of self-presentation intersect.

Keywords: linguistic identity; emotional communication; foreign language use; social media; multilingualism; digital identity.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, digital technologies have transformed the ways individuals communicate, interact, and construct their social identities. Social media platforms have evolved beyond interpersonal communication into spaces where users actively shape how they are perceived. Every post, caption, comment, or shared image contributes to the construction of a digital identity that reflects personal experiences, cultural values, professional aspirations, and emotions.

Within this digital environment, language functions not only as a means of communication but also as a symbolic resource through which individuals express belonging, negotiate identity, and communicate emotions. Linguistic choices often reflect how users wish to present themselves to different audiences, making language an essential component of digital self-representation.

These developments are particularly evident among university students, one of the most active groups on social media. Continuous exposure to international education, academic literature, and global digital communities has normalised the use of foreign languages in online interaction. English expressions, bilingual captions, and multilingual communication frequently appear even when the intended audience is primarily Albanian.

The use of foreign languages extends beyond linguistic competence. Students often use English to project an international academic or professional identity, Italian to express cultural affinity, or French to convey aesthetic and emotional meanings. Consequently, language choice reflects identity, aspirations, and social positioning as much as it conveys information.

Globalisation has accelerated these trends by expanding opportunities for intercultural communication, international education, and participation in transnational online communities. For Albanian students, foreign language proficiency has become closely associated with educational achievement, career opportunities, and social mobility, making multilingual communication both a practical necessity and a symbolic expression of global participation.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, language and identity are inseparable. Norton (2013) argues that identity is continuously negotiated through social interaction, while digital communication enables users to deliberately select linguistic forms that reinforce particular aspects of their identities. Language also plays an important role in emotional communication. Research suggests that emotions are experienced and expressed differently across

languages, with foreign languages often providing greater psychological distance that facilitates emotional regulation in public communication (Pavlenko, 2005; Dewaele, 2010).

The Albanian context provides a valuable setting for examining these relationships due to rapid technological development, increased international mobility, and growing multilingualism among young adults. Despite the visibility of multilingual practices on social media, limited research has explored how Albanian university students use foreign languages to construct digital identities and express emotions online.

The present study addresses this gap by investigating how Albanian university students use foreign languages across social media platforms and how language choice contributes to digital identity and emotional communication. Drawing on sociolinguistic, psycholinguistic, and digital communication perspectives, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. Which foreign languages are most frequently used by Albanian university students in digital communication?

RQ2. What motivates students to use foreign languages on social media?

RQ3. How does language choice influence emotional expression in online environments?

RQ4. How does multilingual communication contribute to the construction of digital identity?

By addressing these questions, the study contributes to research on multilingualism in digital environments and provides empirical evidence from the Albanian context. It demonstrates that language functions not only as a means of communication but also as a strategic resource through which individuals negotiate identity, regulate emotional expression, and participate in increasingly globalised online communities.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Linguistic Identity in Digital Environments

Language is widely recognized as a key resource through which individuals construct and negotiate identity. Beyond communication, it reflects social affiliation, cultural values, educational background, and personal aspirations, making language choice an important means of positioning oneself within particular communities (Norton, 2013).

Digital communication has further expanded this role by enabling users to shape their online self-presentation through both the content they share and the language they use. Recent studies on social media communication demonstrate that linguistic choices in digital environments contribute to the construction and negotiation of collective and individual identities. Research also indicates that identity significantly influences users' online behaviour, patterns of interaction, and self-presentation, with social media providing opportunities to reinforce both personal and group identities through communication practices (Taylor et al., 2023). Delle Chiaie (2024) shows that language use in social media discourse is closely connected with identity representation, as digital communication combines linguistic and symbolic resources to express belonging and social positioning. Research suggests that multilingual users strategically employ their linguistic resources to negotiate belonging, participation, and identity rather than selecting languages randomly (Canagarajah, 2013; Norton, 2013). Digital communication also provides spaces where linguistic choices reflect broader social meanings and identity positions. Research on French-language practices in university social media publications demonstrates that online language use can function as a marker of institutional identity, social values, and audience-oriented communication strategies (Golda, Żywicka, & Ferreira Vieira, 2021). In the Albanian context, increasing access to international education, digital media, and intercultural interaction has made the use of English and other foreign languages a common feature of university students' online communication. Studies on digital communication in French-language contexts further demonstrate that social media environments encourage new forms of linguistic creativity and identity construction, where language choices reflect both individual positioning and participation in online communities (Simoniello, 2021).

Foreign Language Use and Emotional Communication

Psycholinguistic research shows that multilingual individuals experience and express emotions differently across languages. The native language is generally associated with family, childhood, and autobiographical memory, whereas foreign languages often provide greater psychological distance (Pavlenko, 2005). Dewaele (2010) argues that this emotional distance enables multilingual speakers to regulate emotional expression more effectively without reducing authenticity.

Recent research has extended these findings to digital communication. Jiang (2025) found that multilingual students intentionally combined languages in digital narratives to manage emotionally challenging experiences and control self-disclosure. In social media environments, where communication is publicly visible, language choice therefore becomes an important strategy for balancing emotional expression and privacy.

Multilingualism and Code-Switching In Online Communication

The widespread use of social media has normalized multilingual practices such as code-switching and translanguaging. Rather than reflecting incomplete language competence, these practices are now recognized as sophisticated communicative strategies through which multilingual speakers draw on their full linguistic repertoire to construct meaning (García & Wei, 2014).

In digital environments, users frequently combine Albanian and foreign languages within the same posts or conversations to adapt communication to different audiences and purposes. Recent research further suggests that multilingual speakers strategically integrate their linguistic resources to negotiate multiple social identities in online contexts (Canagarajah, 2013; García & Wei, 2014).

Overall, multilingual communication should be understood not simply as a linguistic phenomenon but as a dynamic interaction between language, identity, emotional communication, and digital culture. This framework provides the basis for examining how Albanian university students use foreign languages for self-presentation and emotional expression on social media.

3. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods research design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to investigate foreign language use among Albanian university students in digital environments. The quantitative component examined the frequency of foreign language use and students' reported motivations, while the qualitative component explored perceptions of language, identity, and emotional expression. The integration of both approaches enabled data triangulation and enhanced the credibility of the findings.

Participants

The study included 80 undergraduate and graduate students from several public and private universities in Albania, selected through convenience sampling. Participants were aged 18–25 years ($M = 21.4$), including 52 women (65%) and 28 men (35%). All reported proficiency in at least one foreign language and regular use of social media. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and all data were anonymised.

Data Collection Instruments

Three complementary data collection techniques were employed.

Questionnaire

A 20-item questionnaire examined demographic characteristics, social media use, foreign language practices, and perceptions of digital identity and emotional communication. Most items used multiple-choice and five-point Likert-scale formats.

Content Analysis

A total of 240 publicly accessible posts from Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok were analysed, focusing on language choice, communicative purpose, emotional content, and multilingual practices, including code-switching and translanguaging. No identifying information was collected.

Semi-Structured Interviews

To obtain deeper insights into students' motivations and experiences, ten semi-structured interviews were conducted. Participants were selected from the questionnaire sample to ensure variation in gender, academic background, and frequency of foreign language use.

Interview questions explored participants' reasons for choosing particular languages online, perceptions of digital identity, emotional experiences associated with multilingual communication, and the perceived influence of audience on language choice.

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Data Analysis

Questionnaire data were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages). Interview transcripts and social media posts were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke (2022), with codes organised into broader themes related to identity, emotional communication, multilingual practices, and audience awareness. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings strengthened the trustworthiness of the results through methodological triangulation.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to internationally recognized ethical principles for social science research. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and anonymity was guaranteed throughout the research process. Public social media content was analyzed exclusively for research purposes without collecting usernames or other identifiable information. Interview transcripts and questionnaire responses were stored securely and used solely for academic analysis.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The integration of questionnaire data, content analysis, and semi-structured interviews showed that foreign language use among Albanian university students extends beyond functional communication. Across all data sources, language emerged as a symbolic resource for expressing professional aspirations, cultural belonging, emotional expression, and digital identity.

Patterns of Foreign Language Use

Multilingual communication has become a common feature of students' online behaviour. Most participants reported using at least one foreign language on social media despite communicating mainly with Albanian-speaking audiences, suggesting that language choice is driven by identity-related motivations rather than communicative necessity.

English was the dominant foreign language, accounting for 78% of multilingual posts, followed by Italian (12%), French (6%), and German (4%). English was used primarily for academic, professional, travel, and motivational content, reflecting its role in international education and digital communication (Norton, 2013; Jiang, 2025). Italian and French were associated mainly with culture and travel, whereas German appeared more frequently in posts related to academic mobility and professional development.

Motivations for Foreign Language Use

Participants identified multiple motivations for communicating in foreign languages online. Maintaining language proficiency represented the most frequently reported motivation (82%), followed by professional self-presentation (69%), a sense of belonging to international communities (63%), emotional expression (51%), and the influence of online trends (47%).

Interview data indicated that these motivations often overlapped. One participant explained:

"When I write in English, I feel that my message reaches a broader audience and reflects a more professional side of who I am."

Another participant commented:

"Some thoughts simply sound more natural in English. I don't consciously translate them anymore."

These observations reinforce Norton's (2013) argument that language choice reflects investment in particular identities rather than merely linguistic competence. Foreign language use therefore becomes part of a broader process of identity negotiation within digital environments.

Emotional Communication and Psychological Distance

A particularly important finding concerned the relationship between language choice and emotional expression. More than half of the participants indicated that they preferred using foreign languages when expressing gratitude, motivation, optimism, or personal achievements.

Examples extracted from social media posts included:

"I'm proud of how far I've come."

"Trust the process."

"Every challenge makes me stronger."

"Life goes on."

In contrast, participants reported that emotionally intimate experiences involving family relationships, grief, disappointment, or personal vulnerability were communicated primarily in Albanian or remained private.

These findings support Pavlenko's (2005) and Dewaele's (2010) observations that foreign languages may create psychological distance, allowing multilingual speakers to regulate emotional intensity while maintaining authentic communication. Within social media environments, where communication is publicly visible and potentially evaluated by others, such emotional distancing appears to facilitate controlled self-disclosure rather than emotional avoidance.

Code-Switching, Translanguaging, and Digital Identity

The content analysis further demonstrated that code-switching formed an integral part of students' online communication. Rather than alternating languages randomly, participants combined Albanian and foreign languages strategically according to audience, context, and communicative purpose.

Illustrative examples included:

"Today was exhausting, but I'm proud of myself."

"One more step towards my goals. Never stop believing."

"What a beautiful experience. La vie est belle."

These multilingual expressions enhanced both the stylistic quality and symbolic meaning of the messages. Participants frequently explained that certain quotations or motivational phrases sounded "more universal" in English than in Albanian.

These findings support García and Wei's (2014) concept of translanguaging, according to which multilingual speakers draw upon an integrated linguistic repertoire rather than separate language systems. Rather than representing linguistic inconsistency, multilingual communication appeared to be a sophisticated strategy for negotiating professional identity, cultural affiliation, and emotional expression.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that foreign language use has become an integral component of digital identity construction among Albanian university students. Different languages fulfilled complementary rather than competing functions, enabling participants to adapt their communication to diverse audiences and social contexts while simultaneously expressing both local belonging and global orientation.

5. CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between foreign language use, linguistic identity, and emotional communication among Albanian university students in digital environments. Using a mixed-methods approach, the findings demonstrate that multilingual communication on social media extends beyond practical interaction, functioning as a symbolic resource through which students negotiate identity, regulate emotional expression, and position themselves within local and global communities.

English emerged as the dominant foreign language, reflecting its central role in higher education, professional networking, and international communication. Italian, French, and German appeared less frequently but were associated with specific contexts such as culture, travel, and academic mobility, indicating that different languages fulfil distinct communicative and symbolic functions.

The findings also highlight the relationship between multilingualism and emotional communication. Participants preferred using foreign languages to express positive emotions, achievements, and motivation, whereas more personal or emotionally sensitive experiences were generally communicated in Albanian or remained private. This supports previous research suggesting that foreign language use provides psychological distance that facilitates emotional regulation without reducing authenticity (Dewaele, 2010; Pavlenko, 2005).

Furthermore, the study shows that students strategically combined Albanian and foreign languages to construct flexible digital identities adapted to different audiences and communicative purposes, supporting contemporary sociolinguistic perspectives on multilingual communication (García & Wei, 2014; Norton, 2013).

The findings have practical implications for higher education and foreign language teaching by emphasising the role of multilingual communication in identity development, intercultural competence, and digital literacy. Universities should encourage students to develop greater awareness of language choice in online communication.

The study is limited by its relatively small convenience sample and its focus on publicly available social media content. Future research should include larger and more diverse samples, examine private digital communication, and explore how multilingual digital identities develop across different contexts and over time.

Overall, foreign language use among Albanian university students represents not only multilingual competence but also a complex social and psychological practice through which young adults construct identities, communicate emotions, and participate in an increasingly interconnected digital world.

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