Code-mixing by Malaysian Influencers for Product Endorsement on Instagram

Nur Farah Ain Adnan[1], Dr. Nik Soffiya Nik Mat[2]
Universiti Malaya, Malaysia
U2103882@siswa.um.edu.my

Abstract

Social media spaces have expanded their function to become a platform for advertising and marketing. This study investigates the phenomenon of code-mixing by Malaysian influencers on Instagram in the context of product endorsements. This study aims to analyze the types of code-mixing practices employed and the underlying reasons for their use. The study adopts a qualitative research design, collecting data from five Malaysian influencers across various niches. Interviews were conducted with two of these influencers to gain insights into their language use strategies and corroborate the findings. The analysis, guided by Muysken's (2020) framework, identifies insertion, alternation, and congruent lexicalization as the primary code-mixing categories. Findings indicate that influencers strategically use code-mixing to tailor their content to a multicultural audience, fostering a more personal connection and enhancing engagement. The study concludes that code-mixing is an effective linguistic strategy for influencers to connect with their diverse audience on a personal level, thereby improving the impact of their product endorsements. The research contributes to understanding language dynamics in digital marketing and the role of code-mixing in influencer marketing.

Key words: code-mixing, influencers, Instagram posts, product endorsement, social media

Introduction

The prevalent marketing customs in televised advertisements on channels like TV1 in Malaysia, the national TV channel, typically adhere to a monolingual strategy, using only one language to promote products. This practice may stem from the desire to uphold the dignity of the national language and communicate a national ideology, influencing the target audience (Ashabai, 2015).

The significance of this research lies in understanding how Malaysian influencers use code-mixing in their product endorsements on Instagram. Code-mixing, which involves the combination of two or more languages in a single message, can be an effective strategy for reaching a broader audience and enhancing the impact of marketing messages. However, there is a lack of research on how Malaysian influencers employ code-mixing in their product endorsements, particularly on Instagram. This study aims to address this gap by examining the code-mixing practices of Malaysian influencers on Instagram and their impact on product endorsement.

Product endorsements by social media influencers have become a popular research subject among the many scenarios in which code-mixing occurs. This pattern illustrates the increasing power influencers have in determining the behaviour of users online. Certainly, there is a scholarly interest in this area, particularly in the Indonesian context.

There are different types of code-mixing in product endorsements, as demonstrated in Anggarini et al. (2022). In that study, code-mixing among Indonesian top selebgrams on social media was explored. The study also provided the justifications supporting the use of different code-mixing strategies. While it provides insightful information, the study's findings' generalisation to a larger population of influencers and products is called into question due to its reliance on a single sample.

Another similar study was carried out by Hardini et al. (2019) to investigate the phenomena of Indonesian millennials code-mixing on Instagram. Their investigation highlighted the rationale for these behaviours and how they affect users. By elucidating the incentives behind

code-mixing behaviours and their consequences for social media users, this research advances our comprehension of language usage in digital communication environments.

This study aims to carry out a similar type of study in the Malaysian context. The objective of this study is to explore the code-mixing strategies used by Malaysian influencers for product endorsement on Instagram and the reasons behind their use of code-mixing.

Methods

This study is qualitative research. The data was obtained from five celebrities' Instagram reels (short videos) and were later classified based on Muysken's (2000) types of code-mixing. A written interview was conducted to determine the motivations behind using code-mixing for product endorsement on Instagram. Informed consent was obtained from the interview participants whereas the social media data was available for public access.

Five Malaysian Instagram influencers from various niches, including skincare and electronics, are chosen. First, @itsfarahdilah showcases skincare products from @valentskinshop, @lailynasutionn introduces the Easyiron spray, @azfarheri promotes the Asus Zenbook S13 OLED, @aidayaticy endorses @maryam.khadijah hijab and finally, @unicornbling endorses @haneul.my skincare products. Each influencer and the Instagram reel were selected based on their follower count, engagement levels, and niche interests, ensuring a well-rounded representation of product categories and audience sizes.

Results and Discussion

RQ1: Types of code-mixing

a.   Insertion

A: "*Apa yang* best?" (@itsfarahadilah)

B: "*Jom pergi tengok, sama ada* laptop *ni*, fact or cap?" (@azfarheri)

C: "*Nak pakai* moisturiser *dia*," (@unicornbling)

D: "I *dah lambat ni, bagi* I *bersiap kejap.*" (@lailynasutionnn)

E: "*Mak cik* is not impressed." (@aidayaticy)

English adjective "best" is used in Malay question A. Bilingual speakers find that switching between languages they are fluent in facilitates more accessible talks, leading them to prefer speaking in two languages rather than just one (Jang et al., 2024). Incorporating English slang and trendy phrases within Malay conversations reflects the influence of popular culture and

social media on language usage. The slang "fact or cap" in B originates from the African American Vernacular English (AAVE) word "cap," which means "lie". Therefore, "fact or cap" is another way of expressing "fact or fiction". The expression has gained popularity on social media as a way to see if their claim is "fact or cap" on social media (Carey, 2021). Bilingual speakers adeptly blend elements from different languages to create a sense of relatability and modernity in their communication, showcasing how code-mixing reflects 'show identity' and group belonging (Marzieh Hedei, 2016).

Integrating the English noun phrase "moisturiser" into the Malay utterance in C reflects the influence of global beauty trends on language usage. This code-mixing instance indicates how bilingual speakers incorporate English terms related to beauty and personal care into their Malay conversations, reflecting the impact of cross-cultural influences on language expression. In C, the beauty jargon is not explained with the assumption that the audience already knows the term themselves. The beauty jargon used is not explained with the assumption that the audience already know of the term themselves. According to Bhatia (2018), this is one of the strategies to show credentials, which is by using 'professional' terms and assuming the audience's knowledge is on the same wavelength. The use of "moisturiser" in a Malay utterance also underscores the role of code-mixing, which reflects social identity and addresses different audiences (Marzieh Hedei, 2016), as speakers mix elements from different linguistic repertoires to connect with their peers and express shared cultural references.

The sentence structure in both Malay and English follows the Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) pattern. This similarity allows the seamless insertion of the pronoun "I" to replace "*saya*" in Malay. It could be seen in B where "*saya*" is replaced with its English counterpart, "I". In B, "I" serves as the subject, "*dah lambat ni*" as the predicate, which means "already late". Here, the speaker uses "I" instead of the Malay pronoun "*saya*," indicating a code-mixing instance where an English word is inserted into a Malay sentence due to its similar SVO structure in both languages. From the example, the sentence structure is predominantly in Malay but includes the English pronoun "I" as a replacement for "*saya*". Another example from the SVO phenomenon is "Mak cik is not impressed." The insertion of the Malay term "*Mak cik*" ("aunty" in a more casual tone) into an English utterance follows the same structure and remains the same for both languages. This instance

suggests that bilingual speakers utilise cultural and relational markers from their native language to convey familiarity within an English conversation.

b.   Alternation

A: "It feels so expensive, *rasa mahal gila*." (@unicornbling)

B: "So, I want to wear this oversized clothes *tapi tengoklah kedut kedut selekeh betul*." (@lailynasutionnn)

C: "First impression, I think cool *teruk design dia* and how convenient so I *boleh bawa pergi travel*." (@azfarheri)

D: "Plus, *macam mana I nak tahu yang* you all is my real fan?" (@aidayaticy)

E: "I tried all sorts of moisturisers *tapi I tak boleh pakai* moisturiser *sebarangan sebab kulit* I *ada* redness, dry, and acne, and the worst part, skin barrier." (@itsfarahadilah)

Malaysians can use both Malay and English in one utterance due to the use of English as a common language and Malay as the national language (Broadbent & Vavilova, 2015). In A, the first clause is in English, and the following is in Malay, which is semantically similar. As both clauses essentially convey the same meaning, the code-mixing utterance here emphasises how 'expensive' it feels. The Malay clause, with its colloquial tone and the use of slang "*gila*" (directly translated as "crazy", i.e., "crazy expensive"), leaves a more significant impact than the English clause. According to Malik (1994, as cited by Marzieh Hedei, 2016), code-switching is employed in spoken and written advertisements in India to grab consumers' attention, which occurred in A.

B's alternation showcases how code-mixing can be used not only to convey emphasis, but also to complete an utterance in a way that captures the speaker's intended meaning more precisely. The speaker alternates to Malay which translates to "but look at how wrinkled it is, how sloppy." This alternation of English to Malay is significant because it allows the speaker to express a critique of the clothing's condition using colloquial terms that might not have equally impactful equivalents in English. B illustrates how speakers can draw from their diverse linguistic backgrounds to convey specific meanings that might be lost or less impactful if expressed in a single language.

C begins with "First impression," which is in English. The speaker then transitions to Malay utterance with English insertion "I think cool teruk design dia," where "cool *teruk*" is a mix of English

"cool" and Malay "*teruk*" (directly translated to "terrible" or "very bad"). However, in this context, "*teruk*" acted as an intensifier 'very' and this could only be understood by Malaysians because this is a nuanced Malay slang. "*teruk*" is one of the Malay words that has specific undertones that are hard to translate into English words (Tan, 2009).   It underscores how individuals draw from their linguistic repertoire to convey nuanced meanings, express identity, and navigate social interactions (Gardner-Chloros, 2009). Furthermore, it highlights the fluid boundaries between languages in contact, where the mixing of languages is not just a reflection of linguistic competence but also a tool for expressing identity, attitude, and intentionality (Li, 2011).

In D, the speaker employs alternation to navigate social relationships and express a personal inquiry. The utterance starts with the English word "Plus," then shifts to Malay and then alternates back to English, reflecting the speaker's linguistic versatility and the informal context of the conversation. The use of "macam mana" ("how") and "you all" in the same sentence shows a blend of languages that is characteristic of Malaysian bilingual speakers.

In E, the utterance begins in English, discussing their experience with various moisturisers before seamlessly alternating to Malay with "*tapi*" meaning "but," to introduce a contrast or exception. This switch to Malay is followed by "I tak boleh pakai moisturiser sebarangan," which translates to "I cannot use just any moisturiser," before returning to English to list specific skin conditions ("redness, dry, and acne"). Through the alternation, there are a choice of Malay words and phrases inserted in the English clause like "*tapi*," "*tak boleh*," "*sebarangan*," and "*kulit*" (meaning "but," "cannot," "any," and "skin," respectively) which could be seen as more natural for the speaker in conveying the precise meaning.

c.   Congruent lexicalisation

A: "And *nampak tak betapa* effective*nya* EasyIron Spray ni." (@lailynasutionnn)

B: "*Yang* best*nya* laptop *tak* lagging *pun*," (@azfarheri)

Congruent lexicalisation is when English and Malay are merged within the same grammatical framework. These instances show how shared grammatical features between English and Malay facilitate the blending of lexical items and produce sentences that sound natural in both languages (Tan, 2009). While "*-nya*" could be a Malay third-person possessive affix, as in

Treffers-Daller et al. (2022), the suffix "-*nya*" found in A and B does not refer to any object or subject. Nik Safiah et al. (2008, as cited by Mohd Noor et al., 2020) illustrated how "-*nya*" is used to stress how serious the issue is from this sentence, "*Lapisan ozon sesungguhnya semakin menipis.*". Similar to Nik's example, "-nya" in A and B acts as a function word which stresses the adjectives, "best" in A and "effective" in B.

RQ2: Reasons of code-mixing

a.   Localisation

The main factor is that the National Language Policy was introduced in Malaysia, which formalised Malay as Malaysia's official language while simultaneously allowing English for official matters (Noor et al., 2023). Thus, most Malaysians can comprehend Malay and English almost at the same level since the weight of speaking both languages are focused during education. Referring to example A in alternation, the meaning of both clauses is practically the same, but @unicornbling chose to say it in both languages; it shows how localisation affected the language used by influencers to promote product endorsement advertisements as the influencer finds that using both languages is needed to emphasise the message. An important thing to note is that when influencers mix Malay and English, the variety of English they use is usually Malaysian English or Manglish. As @lailynasutionn mentioned, the content seems more authentic if spoken in a Malay-English code mix. This, in turn, drives more engagement as the language usage aligns with the audience's natural speech patterns. This suggests that code-mixing creates a more accessible and relatable tone, leading to a better connection with the audience.

b.   Target Audience

They stated that their target audience is the main consideration when choosing which language to utilise. @unicornbling mentions that the choice of language depends on the client's niche, focusing on reaching a higher engagement. For instance, more English is used if the target audience is not specifically Malays and the socioeconomic group is T20 (income ranging from RM11,820 and above) and vice versa. People from households with higher socioeconomic status are exposed to English earlier in life and begin their language development process earlier (Huang et al., 2018, as cited by Ashcraft, 2023); thus, English is more natural and relatable for them. Likewise, @lailynasutionn prefers using English in her content as it allows her to reach more people

from other races and countries. These responses reveal that the influencers consider their target audience's language preferences and content reach when making language choices for their Instagram posts. There are also cases where certain brands are international brands; thus, if the influencers post in English, not only in their native language, but people from other countries can understand (Sutrisno & Ariesta, 2019).

c.   Strategic Engagement

Both influencers stress how code-mixing positively affects audience engagement by utilising this language strategy in their content. According to @unicornbling, code-mixing makes content appear more casual, resonating with the conversational style of everyday Malaysians. Similarly, @lailynasutionn notes that code-mixing increases audience engagement by fostering a stronger connection with the audience and establishing a more approachable online persona. According to Rosmiaty et al. (2018), code-mixing can attract consumers' attention by using language that resonates with their cultural and linguistic background, highlighting the various forms of code-mixing, such as mixing words, phrases, and clauses.

Conclusion

Malaysian influencers use various types of code-mixing to endorse products on Instagram. The three types of code-mixing are found, which is insertion, alternation, and congruent lexicalisation. Based on the written interviews, it was found that Malaysian influencers strategically use code-mixing to tailor their content to a multicultural audience, fostering a more personal connection and enhancing engagement. Future studies should consider a more extensive and diverse sample of Malaysian influencers across various niches and follower sizes to understand code-mixing practices better. Incorporating quantitative methods and getting numerical results could help identify the impact of code-mixing on the effectiveness of product endorsements. While employing mixed-methods, a longitudinal study should be done to track the evolution of code-mixing practices among Malaysian influencers over time, which could reveal trends and shifts in language usage for product endorsements.

References

Ahmad Bukhari, Azu Farhana Anuar, Khairunnisa Mohad Khazin, & Aziz, A. (2015). English-Malay Code-Mixing Innovation in Facebook among Malaysian University

Students. Researchers World, 01-10. https://doi.org/10.18843/rwjasc/v6i4/01

Anuar, A. F., Paramasivam, S., & Ismail, M. J. (2020). Malay-English code-mixing insertion: Why 'lepaking' in preference to 'hanging out'? Quantum Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities, 1(5), 69–84. https://doi.org/10.55197/qjssh.v1i5.34

Ashabai, D. (2015). Language choice and ideology: Examining the use of the Malay language in English newspaper advertisements in Malaysia. Language & Communication, 43, 87–101. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langcom.2015.05.004

Ashcraft, A. (2023). Effects of Socioeconomic Status on English Language Learners' Success in School. UW Tacoma Digital Commons. https://digitalcommons.tacoma.uw.edu/med_theses/19

Bhatia, A. (2018). Interdiscursive performance in digital professions: The case of YouTube tutorials. Journal of Pragmatics, 124, 106–120. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2017.11.001

Brake, D., Gammelby, A., Heise, N., Henriksen, A., Hongladarom, S., Jobin, A., Kinder-Kurlanda, K., Lim, S., Locatelli, E., Markham, A., Reilly, P., & Tiidenberg, K. (2019). Internet research: ethical guidelines 3.0 association of Internet researchers. Association of Internet Researchers. https://aoir.org/reports/ethics3.pdf

Broadbent, J. T., & Vavilova, Z. (2015). Bilingual identity: Issues of self identification of bilinguals in Malaysia and Tatarstan. The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies, 21(3), 147.

Carey, E. (2021). Here's what it means when someone says "fact or cap." Bustle. https://www.bustle.com/life/fact-or-cap-meaning-tiktok

Jang, D., Chen, L., Escobar, K., & Hong. A. (2024) Conversation Consistency: How Bilingual Speakers Code-switch to Communicate Effectively. Languaged Life. https://languagedlife.humspace.ucla.edu/bilingualism/code-switching-and-conversation-consistency-how-bilingual-speakers-code-switch-to-communicate-effectively/

Gardner-Chloros, P. (2009). Code-switching and language contact. In Code-switching (pp. 20–41). chapter, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Halim, N. S., & Maros, M. (2014). The functions of code-switching in Facebook interactions. Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences, 118, 126– 133. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.02.017

Hanis, S. (2023). Code-Switching in Selected Malaysian Celebrities' Instagram Posts. European Proceedings of Educational Sciences. https://doi.org/10.15405/epes.23097.66

Hardini, T. I., Widyastuti, T., & Awaliah, Y. R. (2019). Code Mixing in E-commerce on Instagram. Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research, Volume 257. https://doi.org/10.2991/icollite-18.2019.80

Li, W. (2011). Moment Analysis and translanguaging space: Discursive construction of identities by multilingual Chinese youth in Britain. Journal of Pragmatics, 43(5), 1222–1235. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2010.07.035

Marzieh Hadei. (2016). Social Factors for Code-Switching-a Study of Malaysian-English Bilingual Speakers. ResearchGate; Science Publishing Group. https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ijll.20160403.15

Mohd Noor, N. K., Mohd Noah, S. A., & Ab Aziz, M. J. (2020). Classification of short possessive clitic pronoun nya in Malay text to support anaphor candidate determination. Journal of Information and Communication Technology, 19(4), 513-532. https://doi.org/10.32890/jict2020.19.4.3

Nazman, N. N., Ting, S. H., & Chuah, K. M. (2023). Lexical innovation processes of youth netspeak on Malay Twitter posts. GEMA Online® Journal of Language Studies, 23(1), 40–59. https://doi.org/10.17576/gema-2023-2301-03

Noor Izzati Jamil & Khazriyati Salehuddin. (2023). The Different Types of Bilinguals and the Dominant Languages among FSSK UKM Students. 7(4), 1–14. http://journalarticle.ukm.my/22707/1/WE%207.pdf

Poplack, S., & Walker, J. A. (2003). [Review of Bilingual Speech: A Typology of Code-Mixing, by P. Muysken]. Journal of Linguistics, 39(3), 678–683. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4176843

Putu Ega Meliani, Ni Made Ratminingsih, & Gede Mahendrayana. (2021). CODE MIXING AS LANGUAGE STYLE IN COMMUNICATION THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA TWITTER. Yavana Bhasha: Journal of English Language Education, 4(2), 91–91. https://doi.org/10.25078/yb.v4i2.2775

Rosmiaty, Ratnawaty, & Asriani Muhri. (2020). INVESTIGATING CODE-MIXING AS

PERSUASIVE STRATEGIES IN ADVERTISING: A STUDY OF CODE-MIXING IN INDONESIAN... ResearchGate; Universitas Negeri Makassar. https://doi.org/10.26858/eltww.v7i1.15108

Tan, S. I. (2009). Lexical borrowing in Malaysian english: Influences of Malay. Lexis, (3). https://doi.org/10.4000/lexis.629

Treffers-Daller, J., Majid, S., Thai, Y. N., & Flynn, N. (2022). Explaining the diversity in Malay-english code-switching patterns: The contribution of typological similarity and bilingual optimization strategies. Languages, 7(4), 299. https://doi.org/10.3390/languages7040299

Science Publishing Group. (2016). Social Factors for Code-Switching-a Study of Malaysian-English Bilinguals. International Journal of Language and Linguistics, 4(3), 82-88.

Sutrisno, B., & Ariesta, Y. (2019). Beyond the use of code mixing by social media influencers in Instagram. Advances in Language and Literary Studies, 10(6), 143. https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.alls.v.10n.6p.143

What Is a Sponsored Post? (n.d.). Buffer: All-You-Need Social Media Toolkit for Small Businesses. https://buffer.com/social-media-terms/sponsored-post