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Reactions of Social Media Users to Trendsetters' Code-Switching: An Exploration of Linguistic Choices in Digital Spaces in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the perceptual features of code-switching employed by social media trendsetters and their impact on followers' engagement, trust, and communication effectiveness. Using the Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), the researcher investigates whether switching between languages enhances relatability and credibility, particularly within South Africa's multilingual digital landscape. A quantitative survey method was employed, collecting responses from 163 participants through structured questionnaires that measured perceptions of trendsetters' code-switching practices. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics and independent sample t-tests to assess gender- based differences in perceptions. Results show that followers view code-switching as a strategic communication tool that boosts trendsetter confidence, facilitates the expression of complex ideas, and strengthens audience trust and engagement. TikTok, Facebook, X/Twitter and YouTube were identified as the primary platforms where code-switching takes place. The study also found no statistically significant gender differences in perception, indicating a shared appreciation of code-switching among both male and female followers. These findings support the convergence principle of CAT, where linguistic adaptation diminishes social distance and fosters relational closeness in online settings. While contributing to our understanding of multilingual digital discourse, the study acknowledges certain methodological limitations, such as convenience sampling and the absence of longitudinal data. Additionally, the potential exclusion of monolingual audiences and cultural differences in the

acceptance of code-switching suggest caution when generalising the results. The research offers practical recommendations for trendsetters, advocating for a culturally sensitive and audience-specific approach to linguistic flexibility. Overall, the study emphasises the nuanced role of code-switching in digital communication and highlights its importance as a tool for inclusivity and strategic audience engagement.

Keywords: Code-switching; Social Media; Trendsetters; Followers; Language Use; Lingua Franca; Digital Spaces

1. Introduction

The internet has been transforming the concept of social interaction since it makes it easier for people to engage digitally and shapes the way social relationships are formed. These changes have a significant impact on how we share our identities and communicate with one another across all social media platforms. It should also be taken into consideration that language plays a crucial role during these social media interactions. Given its status as one of the most widely spoken languages online, English enables individuals to connect to the internet. However, some people face language barriers in the English language.

This research contributes to scholarship on language, identity, and digital communication by situating code-switching within the uniquely multilingual context of South Africa, where 11 official languages coexist in everyday interaction[1,2]. While global research has explored how code-switching functions as a marker of identity or solidarity in online communication[3,4], there remains limited empirical evidence on how followers in multilingual South African contexts perceive and respond to these practices. Drawing on Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT)[5], this study examines how followers interpret trendsetters' linguistic choices as strategies of convergence, divergence, or maintenance in digital spaces. Using a survey of South African social media users (96.3% of the sample), the analysis provides new insights into follower perceptions of code-switching, thereby extending CAT's application into digital sociolinguistics. Specifically, the paper highlights how language accommodation in online influencer–audience interactions reflect broader patterns of cultural identity, social belonging, and digital discourse in South Africa[1,3]. Code-switching as a variable that shapes the effectiveness of digital interactions between trendsetters and their followers also drawing on Communication Accommodation Theory, the investigation tests the proposition that language fluidity cultivates

trust, deep-seated emotional connection, and the intention to engage again. Situated within the South African and the Pan African context, the inquiry examines whether switching between languages enhances relatability and credibility, for establishing online influence. The outcomes aim to provide trendsetters and content creators with empirically grounded recommendations for leveraging linguistic variety to foster lasting community bonds and brand loyalty within multicultural digital environments.

2. Background of the Study

The advancement of digital communication technologies has transformed human connectivity, enabling instant interaction among speakers of multiple languages and diverse cultural traditions. In multilingual nations like South Africa and across the African continent, social media has become a powerful platform for expressing identity and negotiating social status between followers and trendsetters. Trendsetters are defined as people that adopt and spread new ideas influencing other people before these ideas become popular[6]. At the same time, not all early adopters are trendsetters because only few of them have the ability of propagating their ideas by their social contacts through word-of-mouth these online spaces, choosing a specific linguistic code carries significant pragmatic importance; it is a purposeful decision. While followers on the other hand, are defined as social media users who have subscribed to see another user's posts and updates in their feed, often forming part of a digital audience or community around that user's content[7]. Code-switching is seen as the blending of words, phrases, and sentences from two or more distinct languages across sentence boundaries within the same speech event[8–10]. Additionally, code-switching is used as a theoretical framework to explore how trendsetters skillfully navigate the diverse contexts in which they engage with their followers, adjusting their behaviour and languages as needed[11]. Digital trendsetters, who often establish cul-

tural standards and influence public opinion, deliberately employ code-switching as a rhetorical device to connect with a diverse audience. By alternating between languages or regional dialects, these trendsetters position themselves within the emotional and cultural frameworks of their followers.

Such practices are most evident on semi-public networks, such as TikTok, Instagram, X/Twitter and Facebook, where relatability and perceived inclusiveness significantly influence the strength of social engagement. Thus, using multiple languages within a single post or interaction functions both as a communication tactic and a means of social influence. Thus, Sociolinguists call this transition "code-switching" which is defined differently by different linguists. Slimane[10] define code-switching as "the investigation of an individual's use of two or more language varieties in the same speech event or exchange." As a result, code-switching happens inside a single speech or conversation. The word "code-switching" is not the same as other phenomena of language interaction, such as lexical borrowing.

Using South Africa as an example, in 1994, due to the country's diverse language landscape, all 11 official languages were declared official, including sign language. The multilingual nature of South Africa might lead social media trendsetters to switch between any of these official languages during their interactions to accommodate followers who find English challenging. The public's perception and reception of trendsetters are significantly affected when this flexible code-switching communication style is employed. Moreover, trendsetters must navigate a complex and dynamic environment where relatability and credibility are crucial in today's world. However, the exchange of information between these virtual selves and diverse audiences results in the fascinating and complex phenomenon of code-switching, prompting trendsetters to consider the subtleties of their followers' opinions. Although there have been previous investigations into the code-switching tactics utilised by savvy on social media, such as the study by J. Kim and M. Kim[12], titled "Socio-Linguistic Study of Code Switching of Arabic Language Speakers on Social Networking," The study demonstrates that many Facebook users employ code-switching as a tool to enhance their interaction on Facebook. A significant gap exists in our understanding of how the public perceives and responds to these code-switching techniques. The objective of this research is to bridge this disconnect by examining the complexities of perceptions of social media trendsetters and followers regarding code-switching and how they navigate social media's linguistic and cultural flexibility.

Current studies on virtual interaction suggest that instances of code-switching appear in digital contexts as tag, intersectional, and extrasentential shifts[13], which are likely motivated by factors such as topic realignment, prestige-related calibration, and responses to trending digital vernaculars. Nonetheless, most investigations primarily use qualitative content analyses of individual social media screenshots, which limits the broader applicability of the findings to larger populations[13]. Trollip et al.[13] analysis of code-switching in comments on Instagram and TikTok achieves notable descriptive depth but faces methodological limitations; the narrow sampling prevents robust statistical generalisation. Furthermore, while the study effectively delineates the operational forms of switching and the asserted motivations, it does not quantitatively link the identified forms to measurable outcomes such as user trust and engagement. This omission constitutes a critical gap in understanding the differential communicative effectiveness of code-switching in online environments[13,14].

Although the practice of trendsetters' code-switching continues to grow, empirical research has yet to examine how their audiences interpret and react to this linguistic strategy. Current studies focus on the structural aspects and macro-level power relations of code-switching, while largely neglecting the subjective responses to this phenomenon online. As a result, it remains unclear whether followers perceive code-switching as genuine, strategic, engaging, or distant. Adding to the complexity, the interactional roles of demographic factors, such as the follower's gender, the social media platform used, and the cultural background of the followers, have not been systematically assessed. Without this comprehensive understanding, both trendsetters and digital marketers may struggle to create messages that genuinely resonate with their audiences. This study further attempts to explore how the adaptive communication techniques that occur during code-switching affect followers' trust, relatability, and general impression. Consequently, the paper sought to find answers to the following two research questions:

- How do followers perceive and interpret the code-switching practices employed by social media trendsetters?

- What effect does code-switching have on trust and engagement between trendsetters and followers?

3. Literature Review

3.1. Defining Code-switching

Code-switching in digital environments rarely occurs in isolation; it is typically embedded within multimodal communicative contexts that include captions, on-screen text, emojis, filters, and sound[14]. From a multiliteracies perspective, these semiotic resources interact with linguistic choices to shape how messages are interpreted and how accommodation strategies are perceived. For example, a code-switched phrase paired with supportive visual cues or explanatory captions may amplify convergence effects, signalling inclusion and solidarity, whereas ambiguous or conflicting multimodal cues could mitigate accommodation, creating confusion or social distance. Recognizing these co-occurring modes of meaning-making allows the study to generate hypotheses about how multimodal scaffolding interacts with language alternation, providing a richer account of follower perceptions in digital spaces.

Literature identifies code-switching as the purposeful variation between linguistic codes during a single discourse[15]. This phenomenon is analytically separated from lexical borrowing by the criterion of deliberate selection rather than lexical deficiency[16]. In this regard, researchers argue that code-switching should not be classified as a linguistic pathology; rather, it functions as a systematic, contextually calibrated resource that enhances interpretive precision and facilitates the negotiation of sociocultural identities[16].

According to Poplack[16], speakers who code-switch have a genuine option, but those who borrow lexically do so because they lack lexical phrases in their repertoire. Myers-Scotton[17] suggests that code-switching is an effective strategy that facilitates the systematic processing of information, particularly when accompanied by strong arguments. Moreover, code-switching has long been studied as a sociolinguistics practice with both grammatical and social dimensions. Foundational work such as Zeng et al.[18] equivalence constraint emphasises structural regularities in code-switching, while Myers-Scotton[17] markedness model highlights speakers' strategic negotiation of social identities through language choices, extending this by conceptualising code-switching as part of conversational organisation, treating it as an interactional resource shaped by context, hence the study.

Schlenkrich and Sewry[19] emphasizes a media ecology and multiliteracies perspective, highlighting how digital platforms actively reshape literacy practices. Applying this perspective to code-switching in social media, platform such as TikTok's short-form, rapid, participatory videos; Facebook's threaded comments and mixed-content feeds; and YouTube's combination of short and long-form formats, mediate how linguistic alternation is perceived and enacted. The study reinforces the idea that code-switching operates not in isolation but as part of multimodal semiotic bundles, including captions, emojis, filters, and sound. Building on Ayako et al.[20], "technology as pharmakon" concept (via Lo[21]), these considerations have dual potential, such as, they can enhance convergence and foster rapport among multilingual audiences but also risk exclusion for monolingual users unless supported with features like bilingual captions or glossed hashtags. Integrating this media ecology lens strengthens both the framing and interpretation of code-switching by situating it within digitally mediated literacy practices and highlighting the role of platform design in shaping accommodation outcomes.

Therefore, language competency should always be present, even despite the various definitions of code-switching that are offered. Below are the reasons why social media trendsetters code-switch articulated by Slimane and El Nahal[10,22]. namely, influencers may switch from one code to another either to show solidarity with a social group, to distinguish themselves, to participate in social status, to influence the linguistic and cultural adaptations on audience trust and relatability, to encourage social media followers in digital space, and to express feelings and affections, These reasons are briefly explained in the succeeding sections.

3.2. Showing Solidarity

A speaker may switch to another language as a signal of group membership and shared ethnicity with an addressee[20]. Social media influencers frequently utilise their platforms to express their support for a cause, movement, or community. This can take various forms, depending on the nature of the issue and the influencer's style. Here are some common ways trendsetters show solidarity with their followers, including posting relevant content, participating in campaigns, making

charitable contributions, creating educational content, engaging in dialogue, and updating profiles and biographies[23]. trendsetters should note that all their followers are catered to when posting about any of the issues mentioned above, which in turn leads to mutual understanding, interpretation, and solidarity. This means that the choice of language(s) used by trendsetters during code-switching should accommodate all their followers, thereby increasing solidarity and understanding[16].

3.3. Reflection of Social Status

Shin[23] argue that social status and code-switching are intertwined aspects of social interaction. Trendsetters occasionally employ various languages to allude to a certain social standing or set themselves apart from other social classes. Therefore, making code-switching seem sophisticated or elite motivates it. The phenomenon of code switching is widespread and is considered prestigious, as well as a sign of education and competence in more than one language[24]. Thus, code-switching and social status can be viewed to distinguish oneself[25].

3.4. The Impact that the Linguistic and Cultural Adaptations have on Audience Trust and Relatability

Several variables, such as the trendsetter's cultural background, the formality of the situation, and the individuals participating in the conversation, may influence code-switching. It is worth noting that social media interactions encompass a range of language variations. That is, the language can be either formal or informal, including jargon or technical terms. Formal or Informal language occurs when people's language usage might change depending on how formal the environment is[14]. People who are conscious of social conventions may adopt a standard dialect or language associated with higher status in more formal settings[26].

Trendsetters must ensure that their language usage (whether formal or informal) caters to their followers, prevents confusion, and enables most of them to understand and interpret what their followers are saying. On the other hand, jargon and technical language are often used by individuals with advanced degrees or specific professional backgrounds, who may employ industry-specific jargon or specialised ter-

minology to demonstrate their social standing and level of competence is[14]. In ethnic and cultural code-switching, people from diverse backgrounds may alternate between dialects or languages that are connected to various facets of their identities. They may use this to convey various aspects of their cultural upbringing. Finally, social group accommodation involves individuals modifying their language to conform to the standards and conventions of various social groupings. This accommodation may help forge relationships within those groups and raise social standings, trust and relatability[27].

Recent sociolinguistic research confirms that code-switching plays a crucial role in identity negotiation, social cohesion, and the exploration of subtle expressive possibilities[14]. However, the continued reliance on historical and static analytical frameworks has left the question of how code-switching functions within the fluid structures of digital social spaces unanswered[28]. This creates a clear analytical and methodological gap: how do code-switching practices develop moment by moment amidst the changing cycles of online production and the rhythmic exchanges of audience engagement?

3.5. Perception of Social Media Followers in the Digital Space

According to Dragojevic et al.[29], technology is pervasive and impacts society at every rapid stage of social change. The landscape of technology has switched to the digital and internet era. In today's online environment, face-to-face interactions no longer require a shared geographic space but are generated in a digital environment. One of the most powerful drivers of social media users' digital content consumption behaviour is to bring them pleasure, happiness, and enjoyment. This will be possible through code switching. For example, if the digital content created by social media influencers fails to fulfil social media users' motivations, it will not be able to accommodate them, communicate with them, and switch codes during interactions. In addition, social media users are likely to enjoy interacting with their favourite influencers on social media platforms and consuming the influencers' digital content to escape from everyday life and/or relieve boredom, as well as sharing information with their followers[13].

Code-switching has long been studied as a sociolinguis-

tic practice with both grammatical and social dimensions. Foundational work such as equivalence constraint emphasizes structural regularities in code-switching, while Lo's[21] *Markedness Model* highlights speakers' strategic negotiation of social identities through language choice. Creswell and Plano Clark[30] extend this by conceptualizing code-switching as part of conversational organization, treating it as an interactional resource shaped by context.

3.6. Express Feelings and Affections

The rise of social media has allowed billions of people to share their content, influencing and being influenced by others[30]. On social media, influencers and their followers communicate a wide range of emotions and affections that are constantly changing. Trendsetters and followers should maintain a reciprocal relationship that fosters a sense of community, support, and shared experiences. The genuineness of these expressions helps to foster the growth of an enthusiastic and devoted online community. Social media influencers play a significant role in shaping and influencing consumer behaviour, particularly among young people and teenagers[31]. Mushaathoni[31] further state that social media interactions aim to strengthen social ties, express one's feelings and increase a person's sense of emotional belonging to a social media community.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study relies on the Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) developed by Mushaathoni[31]. The theory elaborates that the social environment in which individuals interact also affects their communication behaviour, which reflects the extent to which the socio-historical context influences social media users.

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) has traditionally been the main perspective for understanding how linguistic convergence and divergence occur. Research based on this theory shows that code-switching can help strengthen relationships when speakers adapt to the language styles of their conversational partners[31]. However, modern digital contexts introduce new challenges. For example, digital code-switching can unintentionally marginalise monolingual users or fragment audiences into separate interpretive groups[30]. The ongoing tension, where convergence gives

way to divergence, remains largely unexplored. Existing studies do not clearly identify the situational factors that differentiate effective, convergence-fostering code-switching from cases that unintentionally lead to divergence, especially when cultural or regional differences are not addressed.

This theoretical framework thoroughly explains how social media influencers and followers view code-switching by integrating communication accommodation[30]. Furthermore, the framework acknowledges the complex interplay between language, identity, power, and social dynamics in online communication. At its foundational level, the CAT emphasises the cognitive and effective processes that are fundamental to speech convergence or divergence, which are linguistic moves to increase or decrease communication distance, respectively[31]. CAT relates to cases where communication is influenced by the communicators' accommodative orientation and tendencies, such as interpersonal or intergroup dynamics or a combination of the two[5,25,27]. The researcher chose this paradigm because it exposes individuals to the patterns of convergence (that is, when people's sharing ideas in social media interactions coincide, they stop being different, and become similar to each other by switching code to accommodate each other) and divergence (that is, when people's ideas move or extend in different directions from a common point perhaps due to language barriers). Patterns of convergence and divergence explain why social media speakers are either able to interact toward one point or another, or, on the other hand, move in different[5]. It is known that code-switching is a tactic used by followers and influencers on social media to accommodate each other and match their language use to the expectations of their followers or the larger online community.

Although literature on code-switching in digital discourse has expanded, critical gaps persist. Primarily, existing analyses remain mainly descriptive, relying heavily on qualitative comment datasets without triangulation through surveys, experimental methodologies, or psychometrically validated tools[5]. Such a methodological monoculture weakens the robustness of claims regarding user awareness, emotional response, and strategic intent. A second gap arises from the limited contextual sampling typical of many studies, which often focus on a single social platform or a narrow geographical area, thereby overlooking the diverse communicative affordances of Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat, as

well as the varying sociolinguistic profiles of transnational user populations. Third, the frequent reference to Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) remains largely superficial, with existing studies mainly framing code-switching as a conciliatory adaptation while ignoring equally plausible outcomes such as social distance, misinterpretation, or withdrawal[31]. Lastly, research continues to overlook emerging, platform-specific semiotic resources, such as emojis, memes, and hybrid visuals, which, alongside code-switching, modify meaning in culturally layered yet seldom codified ways. Collectively, these oversights limit a comprehensive understanding of multilingual exchange within the current social media environment.

5. Research Method

5.1. Research Design

The study used a quantitative, cross-sectional survey approach to explore perceptions of code-switching among social media followers of influencers. This research design was chosen because it enables the collection of data from a large sample at a single point in time, allowing for the identification of patterns and relationships between variables[5]. A Likert-scale questionnaire that included demographic questions and perception-based statements related to trust, relatability, and communication effectiveness was used to collect data. While this approach is suitable for capturing general trends in user attitudes, the scale enabled the researcher to obtain information on the participants' perceptions of the research problem, by asking questions that required participants to provide strongly disagree/disagree/agree/strongly agree responses, this study utilised the direct social media outreach method, using Facebook, X, Instagram, TikTok, through questionnaire completion invitations shared by the researcher to both the trendsetters and the followers.

5.2. Sample and Sampling Technique

The target population comprised social media users based in South Africa and across African neighbouring countries who follow online trendsetters. This population was selected to ensure diversity in cultural and linguistic backgrounds, thereby enhancing the generalisability of the findings, Respondents were recruited through purposive and convenience sampling techniques, which allowed the researcher to access active social media users willing to share their perceptions. Convenience sampling is defined as a non-probability sampling technique where participants are selected based on their availability, accessibility, or ease of contact rather than random selection[27]. Convenience sampling is often used when time, resources, or access to a population are limited. the survey was shared online via social media and messaging apps without a structured random selection process. The final sample consisted of 163 respondents, with 96.3% residing in South Africa, The sample age range was between 18 to 30 years old. The participants reside in South Africa. They have to at least follow one social media trendsetter on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Twitter/X or Facebook. The participants should demonstrate English proficiency since the survey instrument was administered in English.

Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained electronically prior to survey completion. Respondents were assured of anonymity, and no personally identifying information was collected. Data were stored securely on password-protected servers and handled in compliance with the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA) of South Africa. Participants retained the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the measurement instruments, the study employed a pre-tested 24-item questionnaire developed based on constructs derived from Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) and previous empirical studies on digital language practices. A pilot test was conducted with 20 participants to assess item clarity, internal consistency, and construct alignment. Based on feedback, minor revisions were made to enhance the precision of wording and the relevance of items. Reliability testing using Cronbach's alpha yielded acceptable values above the 0.70 threshold for all major subscales, communication effectiveness ($\alpha = 0.78$), trust ($\alpha = 0.81$), and engagement intention ($\alpha = 0.75$), indicating strong internal consistency. Furthermore, construct validity was assessed through exploratory factor analysis (EFA), which confirmed that items loaded appropriately on their intended factors, with factor loadings exceeding 0.60, supporting the instrument's dimensional coherence. These steps ensured that the questionnaire was both psychometrically sound and contextually relevant for mea-

suring followers' perceptions of code-switching on social media.

6. Findings

This section of the study presents the quantitative results that shed light on social media followers' perceptions of trendsetters code-switching. Based on survey data from 163 respondents, the chapter begins by summarising demographic distributions, preferred social media platforms, and evaluative judgments regarding the communicative value attributed to code-switching. The interpretation of code-switching in digital spaces was enriched by integrating Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) with an analysis of platform-specific affordances. CAT posits that convergence and divergence reflect speakers' strategies to reduce or accentuate social distance [5]. In digital environments, these strategies are shaped and constrained by platform design. For example, TikTok's prominence stems from its low production barriers, informal tone, short-form video loops, and highly participatory comment exchanges, which collectively facilitate convergence by normalizing linguistic alternation and multimodal scaffolding [19]. Facebook, with its threaded comments and mixed content feeds, allows for both sustained engagement and selective divergence depending on audience composition. YouTube's mixed formats—ranging from short clips to long-form tutorials—enable code-switching to function as a convergence tool in multimodal storytelling, but divergence may arise if viewers lack proficiency or context. By linking CAT's theoretical lens to these affordance-driven interaction patterns, the study demonstrates that the effectiveness of code-switching as an accommodative strategy is contingent on the interplay between linguistic choices, multimodal cues, and the technical features of each platform.

Using descriptive statistics and independent sample t-tests, the analysis identifies prevailing views about how code-switching affects influencers' confidence, message clarity, and perceived relatability. Afterwards, the section examines the moderating role of gender on these perceptions, thereby placing the results within broader frameworks of communicative practice and multilingualism in digital influencer environments. The present study used the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, version 30.0) to analyse the demographic characteristics of the respondents and to generate descriptive statistics reflecting the perceptual features of code-switching. Participants consisted of both males and females. **Figure 1** presents the gender of respondents.
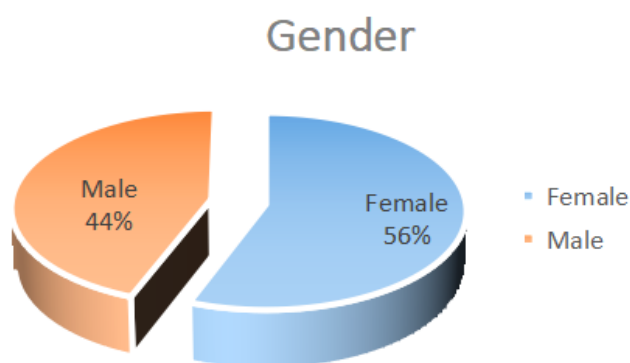
Figure 1. Gender of respondents.

Figure 1 shows that the sample had a gender ratio of 44% men and 56% women. It reports a gender distribution of 44 per cent male and 56 per cent female respondents, indicating a modest female majority in the dataset. This disparity aligns with common patterns of social media use, where women are generally more active on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook, which are key areas in the trendsetter-audience relationships studied here. Although the sample includes both genders, the higher number of women may have influenced overall trends in emotional engagement and trust. Notably, the use of t-tests in later analyses found no significant gender differences in perceptions of code-switching, confirming that the results are broadly applicable across genders.

The geographic distribution of respondents in the study shows a heavy concentration of respondents from South African provinces, with 96.3% of the total sample residing within South Africa (**Table 1**). The highest response

rates were recorded in Mpumalanga (15.3%) and Limpopo (14.1%), followed by the Northern and Western Cape (both 9.2%), while KwaZulu-Natal had the lowest provincial representation at 3.7%. Notably, respondents from countries outside South Africa, including Lesotho (1.8%), Zimbabwe (1.2%), and Swaziland (0.6%), made up only a small minority (3.7%) of the sample. This geographic imbalance limits the generalisability of the study's findings across the African continent, reducing claims to pan-African relevance. The data indicate that, although there is some regional diversity, the sample is predominantly focused on South Africa, and further research would benefit from a more balanced cross-national representation to capture a wider range of linguistic and cultural perspectives on code-switching.

Table 1. Respondents' location.

Location	Frequencies	Percentage
Eastern Cape	11	6.7
Free State	11	6.7
KwaZulu-Natal	6	3.7
Lesotho	3	1.8
Limpopo	23	14.1
Mpumalanga	25	15.3
North-West	10	6.1
Northern Cape	15	9.2
Swaziland	1	0.6
Western Cape	15	9.2
Zimbabwe	2	1.2

Figure 2 presents respondents' perceptions of social media platforms used for code-switching by trendsetters. TikTok commands the largest slice, positioning it as the principal site for such practices. This prominence likely stems from TikTok's informal, bite-sized video format, which lowers conversational barriers and encourages users to seamlessly alternate languages and cultural references. A high proportion (n = 47, 28.83%) of respondents indicated that TikTok is the most used platform for code-switching. Facebook (n = 33, 20.24%) and YouTube (n = 32, 19.63%) were the next highest ranked platforms. Next was Twitter (n = 30, 18.40%), followed by Instagram (n = 21, 12.9%).
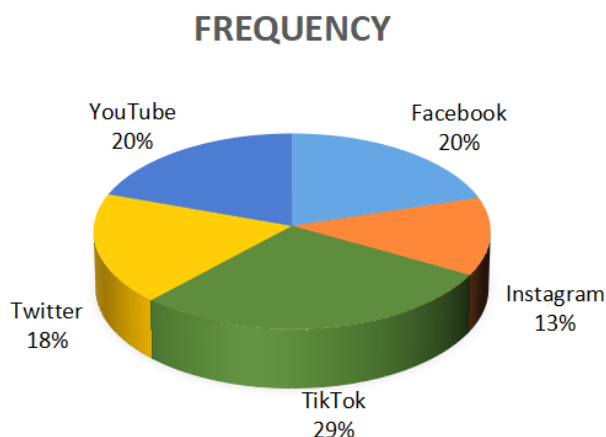
Figure 2. The most common social networking platform in which influencers use code-switching when chatting.

Twitter and YouTube occupy approximately equal portions, underscoring their concurrent appeal. Twitter's character-based interactions and YouTube's long- and short-form videos afford creators distinct yet equally flexible environments for playful and strategic language shifts. Facebook, although declining overall in youthful segments, retains a solid share, particularly in multilingual regions like South Africa, where its group and event features facilitate community-based code-switching. Instagram, by contrast, contributes the chart's smallest segment. This may reflect the platform's visually dominant layout, which foregrounds images and video captions in a way that either limits verbal

alternation or embeds it more discreetly, leaving the multilingual exchange less quantifiable.

Overall, the data illustrate that platforms designed for dynamic speech or text interactions, TikTok and Twitter serve as preferred contexts for code-switching, suggesting that the structural affordances of social media environments play a crucial role in shaping the evolution of digital multilingual practices.

Table 2 presents respondents' levels of agreement or disagreement with code-switching statements, revealing their perceptions. As can be seen, comfort and confidence had the highest value of 87.7%, which is the result of adding the values for agreement and strong agreement. This statement relates to statement 3 above. In interpreting the other perceptual attributes, the study followed a similar approach by adding the agreement and strong agreement scores. Expression of ideas that are difficult (82.2%, M = 3.93, SD = 0.787), future interactions with influencers who code-switch (82.2%, M = 3.91, SD = 0.834), intention to interact with trendsetters who code-switch (82.8%, M = 3.90, SD = 0.890) were the next perceptual features that respondents indicated. 74.9% (M = 3.82, SD = 0.962) of respondents believe that trendsetters can communicate new words more easily through code-switching. Only 73.6% (M = 3.84, SD = 0.929) of respondents believe that code-switching improves trendsetters' communication skills.

Table 2. Perceptual features of code-switching.

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Dis-agree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	Standard Deviation
Code-switching via social media enhances the trendsetter's communication skills	1.2	9.8	15.3	50.9	22.7	3.84	0.929
Code-switching helps influencers convey new words easily	3.1	8.0	14.1	53.4	21.5	3.82	0.962
Code-switching makes trendsetters feel more comfortable and confident	0.6	3.1	8.6	58.9	28.8	4.12	0.735
Code-switching allows trendsetters to express ideas that are difficult	0.6	6.7	10.4	63.2	19.0	3.93	0.787
I have the intention to interact with the influencer	3.1	6.1	8.0	63.2	19.6	3.90	0. 890
I predict that I will interact with the trendsetter	1.8	6.1	9.8	63.2	19.0	3.91	0. 834

The analysis of perceptual responses regarding code-switching indicates that social media users endorse its communicative efficacy with significant enthusiasm:

The most widely endorsed belief is that code-switching makes influencers feel more at ease and confident; 87.7% of participants endorsed this idea (combining Agree and Strongly Agree), with a mean score of 4.12. This suggests that followers see code-switching as a form of empowerment that enhances the perceived authenticity and smoothness of digital expression. Next most prominent is the view that code-switching helps influencers articulate complex ideas (82.2%, M = 3.93, SD = 0.787), closely followed by the belief that it boosts the likelihood of engagement (82.8% for intent and 82.2% for predictive assessments, with mean scores around 3.9). Followers, therefore, see multilingual discourse as both a relational and strategic asset, strengthening mutual understanding while increasing the likelihood of further interaction. A further 74.9% agree that code-switching helps introduce new words (M = 3.82), and 73.6% believe it builds overall communication skills (M = 3.84). Although these numbers are slightly lower, they still show a strong consensus that the practice improves linguistic effectiveness. The standard deviations for all items are below 1.0, indicating a consistent level of opinion and little variation among participants.

Table 2 contributes to an understanding of the perceptual beliefs that respondents form when influencers code-switch. However, the table's results did not reveal the specific perceptions of code-switching towards influencers. This required a test of differences in followers' perceptions of code-switching towards influencers using a t-test. The following hypotheses were formed:

Ho. *There is no significant difference between perceptions of male and female followers towards code-switching.*

H1. *There is a significant difference between perceptions of male and female followers towards code-switching.*

The significance level for the t-test was set at 0.05 level of significance. The results of the null hypothesis are presented in **Table 2**.

Table 3 focuses on the independent t-test results. The independent t-test results revealed no statistically significant gender differences in perceptions of code-switching among social media trendsetters. Although minor variations in mean scores were observed—for example, males rated slightly higher on the belief that code-switching helps convey new words, while females reported marginally higher perceptions of comfort, confidence, and intention to interact—the differences were not significant, as all calculated *t* values fell below the critical threshold of 1.96. These findings suggest that both male and female participants hold broadly similar views on the communicative and interactive value of code-switching, indicating that gender is not a determining factor in shaping perceptions toward this practice.

Table 3. Independent t-test analysis of perceptions of males and females towards code-switching.

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T-test	Critical t-value
Code-switching via social media enhances the trendsetter's communication skills	Female	91	3.86	0.877	0.256	1.96
	Male	72	3.82	0.998	0.253	1.96
Code-switching helps trendsetters convey new words easily	Female	91	3.80	0.897	−0.296	1.96
	Male	72	3.85	1,044	−0.291	1.96
Code-switching makes trendsetters feel more comfortable and confident	Female	91	4.07	0.742	−1.109	1.96
	Male	72	4.19	0.725	−1.112	1.96
Code-switching allows trendsetters to express the ideas that I can't express	Female	91	3.99	0.753	1.031	1.96
	Male	72	3.86	0.827	1,020	1.96
I have the intention to interact with the social media trendsetter	Female	91	3.93	0.841	0.518	1.96
	Male	72	3.86	0.954	0.511	1.96
I predict that I will interact with the social media trendsetter	Female	91	3.98	0.774	1.100	1.96
	Male	72	3.83	0.904	1.080	1.96

Note: * *p* < 0.05; critical *t*-value = 1.966.

The independent t-test results, presented in the accompanying table, examine the presence of gender-related discrepancies in the attitudes of social media users toward code-switching employed by influencers. The following analytical points distil the principal conclusions:

6.1. Absence of Statistically Significant Gender Effects

For all six evaluative statements, the observed t-values remain decisively lower than the critical t threshold of 1.96 corresponding to a 0.05 alpha level. The data therefore offer no evidence of a statistically meaningful disparity between males and females in their attitudes toward code-switching. The prespecified null hypothesis (**H₀**)—which posits that gender has no influence on such attitudes—remains supported by empirical evidence.

6.2. Gender-Group Mean Scores Exhibit Close Convergence

Mean responses between men and women remain tightly clustered around the central tendency, with between-group mean deviations below 0.2 on every statement. For instance, regarding the belief that code-switching enhances communicative competence, females register an average of 3.86 and males 3.82, revealing a practically trivial gap. Likewise, elevated concordance characterises statements regarding perceived confidence and comfort (Females: 4.07; Males: 4.19) as well as intention to engage (Females: 3.93; Males: 3.86).

6.3. Comparable Variability in Responses

Standard deviations associated with each gender remain consistently analogous, suggesting that the degree of response heterogeneity is similar within both male and female subgroups. Such uniformity strengthens the inference that attitudes toward code-switching circulate with relative consensus across gender lines and without notable dispersion.

The findings collectively indicate that code-switching is regarded favourably and uniformly by both male and female respondents. This convergence underscores the strategic effectiveness of code-switching in inclusive digital discourse, particularly in multilingual environments where trust and relatability are crucial. Within the present dataset, gender appears to be a negligible factor in determining the interpretation or receptivity of followers toward linguistic adaptability in online interactions. The outcome of the analysis shows that the calculated T-values are lower than the critical t-values

of 1.96 at a 0.05 significance level. Therefore, the null hypothesis was accepted. This means that there is no significant difference in the perceptions of male and female followers towards code-switching.

7. Discussion

The results of this study indicate that, in line with the theoretical perspective offered by Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), followers generally perceive code-switching by social media influencers as a beneficial communication tool. Most respondents (87.7%) believed that code-switching enhances the comfort and confidence of influencers, while 82.2% stated that it helps them convey complex topics more clearly. These findings align with other studies, such as those by Dondolo and Mushaathoni[32]. who suggested that code-switching serves to convey emotions, communicate complex ideas, and foster social connections. The present investigation corroborates previous findings by Hasan and Benny[33]. of which highlighted the social and affective relevance of code-switching in online environments. The evidence collected here substantiates claims that bilingualism can enhance audience trust, relatability, and the perception of fluency. Similarly, Trollip et al.[13] argue that audiences primarily follow influencers for emotional resonance and entertainment, both of which are amplified when influencers utilise linguistic resources that resonate with their followers. Consequently, strategic linguistic flexibility appears to intensify the connective tissue of digital communities. Nevertheless, the current study advances the literature by introducing a systematic quantitative investigation of audience perception, an attribute of the scholarship that has relied predominantly upon content analysis or interview methodologies. The results contest the prevailing belief that code-switching remains context-specific, revealing, in the South African setting, a broad acceptance that transcends both gender and regional divides. This outcome implies that multilingual constituencies, assimilated as a communicative standard.

Furthermore, this study extends CAT by situating convergence and divergence not only as linguistic strategies but as mediated by platform affordances and multimodal semiotic bundles. Henceforth, in digital environments, code-switching co-occurs with captions, emojis, filters, on-screen text, and sound, forming ensembles of semiotic resources that can either amplify or constrain accommodative effects from a media ecology perspective[19] , these platforms are not neutral conduits; their design and affordances actively shape interaction patterns, determining which forms of convergence facilitate rapport and which may inadvertently produce social exclusion. Woolard's[14] notion of the "pharmakon" highlights this duality: multimodal resources and platform affordances are simultaneously beneficial and risky, capable of enhancing understanding and engagement but if poorly aligned with audience expectations. This integrated framework helps explain why code-switching in digital spaces is not accommodating; its effectiveness is contingent on the interaction between linguistic alternation, multimodal scaffolding, and the technical features of the hosting platform.

In essence, Schlenkrich and Sewry[19] articulate how online media domesticate new literacy practices, reshaping how users engage with language and multimodal resources. TikTok's prominence exemplifies this process: its low production barriers, informal tone, and rapid, participatory exchanges create an environment that normalizes linguistic alternation and supports multimodal reinforcement through captions, stickers, emojis, and audio-visual cues. However, drawing on Woolard's[14] "technology as pharmakon" concept, as discussed by Schlenkrich and Sewry[19], these same affordances can have dual effects. While they facilitate convergence and rapport among multilingual audiences, they may also intensify divergence or exclusion for monolingual users unless mitigated through design features such as bilingual captions or glossed hashtags. This perspective highlights the necessity of platform affordances and multimodal scaffolding when analysing audience interpretations of code-switching.

Platform-specific affordances play a critical role in shaping how code-switching is perceived and enacted. Schlenkrich and Sewry[19] stresse how online media handle new literacy practices, demonstrating that technologies actively restructure communicative norms. TikTok, for example, has become a prominent site for linguistic alternation due to its low production barriers, informal tone, and rapid, participatory exchanges, which collectively normalize code-switching and support multimodal reinforcement through captions, stickers, emojis, and audio-visual cues. From Woolard[14] "technology as pharmakon" perspective,

these same affordances can have dual effects: while they may facilitate convergence and rapport among multilingual audiences, they can simultaneously exacerbate divergence or exclusion for monolingual users unless mitigated through design interventions, such as bilingual captions or glossed hashtags. This lens underscores the importance of analyzing platform affordances and multimodal scaffolding as mediators of communicative accommodation, rather than treating code-switching as a purely linguistic phenomenon.

For educators and brands, the effectiveness of code-switching and multimodal content depends on aligning design with users' digital literacies. Schlenkrich and Sewry[19] emphasize that Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) and telecollaboration demonstrate how informal, mobile-mediated spaces can support learning and engagement when content is designed with platform affordances in mind. This suggests that captions, hashtags, emojis, filters, and short-form video formats should be deliberately structured to scaffold comprehension and participation, rather than assuming that audiences will intuitively decode multimodal and multilingual cues. Thoughtful alignment of content with users' skills and literacies can enhance convergence, foster rapport, and reduce the risk of exclusion, while poorly designed content may amplify divergence or misunderstanding.

Following Schlenkrich and Sewry's[19] call to explicitly link technology and literacy practices, future research should move beyond cross-sectional surveys of perceptions to design-informed studies that experimentally manipulate platform affordances alongside code-switching. For example, researchers could vary the presence or absence of bilingual captions, the quality or clarity of subtitles, and the placement or timing of linguistic switches within videos to assess their impact on audience interpretations. Such experimental designs would allow scholars to systematically investigate how multimodal scaffolding, and platform features mediate convergence and divergence effects, providing more robust evidence of causality and offering actionable insights for educators, content creators, and brands. By integrating affordance-sensitive design with the study of code-switching, these studies can advance both digital literacy research and the practical understanding of audience engagement in multilingual digital spaces.

Platform differences are best understood through their affordances. As Schlenkrich and Sewry[19] observe, online media domesticate new literacy practices, shaping how linguistic resources are taken up, adapted, and normalized. TikTok exemplifies this domestication: its low production barriers, informal tone, and rapid, participatory exchanges encourage routine code alternation and multimodal reinforcement, where speech, text, sound, and visuals layer meaning. By contrast, Facebook affords extended commentary and meta-discussion, while YouTube privileges performative broadcasting with asynchronous feedback.

Woolard's[14] notion of technology as pharmakon (via Lo[21]) offers a useful balance to these claims. The very affordances that enable convergence—such as playful multilingualism, collaborative remixing, and participatory scaffolding of literacy—can simultaneously intensify divergence. For monolingual users, dense translanguaging streams may feel exclusionary or opaque, highlighting how platforms amplify both access and stratification. Yet practices such as bilingual captions, glossed hashtags, or subtitled remixes illustrate how users themselves can mitigate these tensions, softening the pharmakon effect.

In this sense, digital platforms both expand sociolinguistic possibilities and reconfigure boundaries of participation. Attending to affordances thus clarifies not only how convergence occurs but also how divergence emerges, underscoring the ambivalence of platformed multilingualism.

Following Lo's[21] call to link technology and literacy practices, research should move beyond cross-sectional perceptions toward design-informed studies that manipulate affordances alongside code switching. For instance, comparing versions of the same TikTok or YouTube clip—with versus without bilingual captions, with differing subtitle quality, or with strategic variation in the placement and timing of switches—would allow for systematic testing of how affordances mediate convergence and divergence. Such designs would not only document practice but also demonstrate causality, showing how platforms domesticate multilingual communication in ways that are both enabling and constraining.

The research further found that TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube were the most frequent sites for code-switching. This inclination reveals the informal, culturally dynamic nature of these platforms, where influencers are expected to represent their followers' language preferences and cultural identities. The research highlights the social roles of code-

switching, including showing solidarity, reflecting shared identity, and promoting relatability[19]. This is consistent with the focus in the research on influencers utilising many codes to reach multilingual audiences, especially in the South African setting where several official languages coexist. The high percentage of users (82.8%) who stated they would communicate with code-switching influencers supports the theory that linguistic flexibility can influence audience loyalty, enjoyment, and readiness to participate[19]. This also reflects Woolard's[14] claim that digital material that fits linguistic diversity promotes emotional belonging and user happiness.

Notably, the t-test results demonstrated no significant gender-based differences in the perception of code-switching, suggesting that this communication strategy is universally appreciated across demographic groups. This result is significant as it supports the idea that code-switching is a generally inclusive strategy, appealing to both male and female supporters. For influencers seeking to appeal to multiple audiences, the strategic importance of code-switching is heightened by the absence of gender bias in perception. These results reinforce CAT's concept of convergence and divergence; in digital communication, shared language practices, such as code-switching, act as a uniting factor. The research indicates that code-switching is a perceptual and strategic tool that helps influencers navigate the multilingual, multicultural reality of social media involvement, fostering relatability and trust.

Furthermore, the discourse acknowledges that code-switching is not universally celebrated in digital communication. Evidence from Woolard[14] shows that some environments may regard code-switching as disruptive, potentially damaging speaker credibility or alienating monolingual audiences, especially when the switching disrupts message coherence or appears inauthentic. Future research should investigate how factors such as audience language skills, cultural background, and platform-specific norms impact the reception of multilingual discourse. Moreover, content creators should be cautious about positioning code-switching as the only key strategy for engagement, instead integrating it within broader frameworks that respect and acknowledge the diverse linguistic realities of their audiences.

The study contributes to the scholarship on language, identity, and digital communication by positioning code switching within uniquely multilingual context of South Africa, where 11 official languages coexist in everyday interaction[1,2]. While global research has explored how code-switching functions as a marker of identity or solidarity in online communication[14]. There remains limited empirical evidence on how audiences in multilingual African context perceive and respond to these practices. Drawing on Communication Accommodation Theory[14], this study examines how housing followers interpret trendsetters' linguistic choices as strategies of convergence, divergence, and maintenance in digital spaces. Using the survey of South African social media users (96, 3% of the sample), the analysis provides new insights into follower perceptions of code-switching, thereby extending CAT's application into digital sociolinguistics. Specifically, the paper highlights how language accommodate in online influencer-audience interactions reflect broader patterns of cultural identity, social belonging, and digital discourse in South Africa[14].

8. Limitations and Future Research

In this instance, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional survey design precludes causal inference. While associations between code-switching and follower perceptions were observed, the directionality of these relationships cannot be established. Second, the reliance on non-probability sampling means the findings cannot be generalized to the wider South African population, and the sample's South Africa-centric composition limits cross-cultural comparisons. Third, although respondents reported high levels of multilingualism, the study did not control for first language (L1) background or levels of language proficiency, which may have influenced perceptions of code-switching. Fourth, the use of self-report measures raises the possibility of common method bias, as responses may be subject to social desirability or recall limitations. Finally, the analysis focused on item-level outcomes rather than composite constructs, which constrains the interpretability of broader psychometric patterns.

Future research should therefore adopt design-informed methodologies that move beyond description. Following Lo's[21] call to connect technology and literacy practices, studies could systematically manipulate affordances in controlled or quasi-experimental settings. Examples include testing the presence or absence of bilingual captions, comparing

different levels of subtitle quality, or varying the placement and timing of code switches within videos. Such interventions would provide stronger evidence for how convergence and divergence are shaped and identify strategies such as hashtags or multimodal scaffolds that mitigate exclusion.

9. Conclusions

This study aimed to investigate the perceptual features of code-switching in social media, specifically examining how followers respond to influencers' use of multiple languages in online communication. The results show that followers generally see code-switching as a useful and efficient tool that improves the communication abilities, relatability, and emotional expressiveness of influencers. Followers said that code-switching helps influencers communicate complex concepts more effectively, express their feelings more authentically, and earn trust with diverse audiences. These findings confirm the principle of Communication Accommodation Theory, which underlines the need to change communication techniques to fit social settings and interlocutor expectations. Code-switching on sites like TikTok, X/Twitter. Facebook, and YouTube underscores the importance of this approach even more in environments where informal, relational communication is most prevalent.

The findings revealed no notable gender-based variations in the perception of code-switching, suggesting a universal appreciation for linguistic flexibility across user groups. This emphasises the inclusive power of code-switching in overcoming cultural and language gaps inside online networks. The results not only confirm previous studies on the social and communicative purposes of code-switching but also highlight the role of digital influencers as language negotiators in multicultural settings. This research offers valuable insights for influencers seeking to establish trust and resonance with linguistically diverse audiences, as well as a deeper understanding of how language practices influence digital engagement.

The study contributes to the development of Communication Accommodation Theory by demonstrating how accommodation strategies manifest interactions, particularly on social media platforms. The findings also revealed that accommodation in digital spaces is not limited to linguistic convergence and divergence but also involves multimodal resources such as emojis, hashtags, and visual symbols. In this way, the study broadens the application of CAT beyond traditional face-to-face contexts and contributes to digital sociolinguistics by showing how online interactions reshape sociolinguistic practices and identity interactions. For follow-up research, think about adding qualitative data or verification. This study is numerically strong, but in-depth interviews or content analysis might boost it.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, M.M.; methodology, M.M.; validation, B.D.; formal analysis, B.D.; investigation, M.M.; resources, M.M.; data curation, M.M.; writing—original draft preparation, M.M.; writing—review and editing, M.M.; visualization, M.M.; project administration, M.M. Both authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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