


# Digital Linguistics in Human Resource Management: Code-Switching, Emojis, and Hashtags in Employee Engagement

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## A B S T R A C T

This study examines the role of digital linguistics –emoji use, code-switching, and hashtags –in shaping employee engagement within a private logistics company in Medan, Indonesia. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with employees actively engaged in internal digital communication, and were analyzed thematically. Findings indicate that emojis help soften messages, reduce tension, and foster warmth in workplace interactions. Code-switching between Indonesian, English, and local dialects functions as a social adaptation strategy and professional identity marker. Hashtags, though less frequent, act as symbolic tools for uniting teams, reinforcing collective identity, and emphasizing project goals. Together, these practices enrich digital communication and support the dimensions of vigor, dedication, and absorption in employee engagement. Grounded in Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Media Richness Theory (MRT), this research underscores digital linguistics as a strategic HRM tool for enhancing engagement, while highlighting organizational reputation and governance as crucial supporting factors.

**Keywords:** *Digital Linguistics, Workplace Interaction, Symbolic Expressio, Employee Engagement.*

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## INTRODUCTION

In the digital era, organizational communication has undergone a profound transformation, shifting from traditional formats to more interactive digital media. Enterprise social media (ESM), collaborative applications, and interactive email not only accelerate the exchange of information but also reshape patterns of workplace interaction. These platforms allow organizations to integrate professional messages with digital symbols such as emojis and hashtags, serving both as tools of emotional expression and markers of collective identity. Prior studies show that ESM can enhance thriving at work, defined as the experience of vitality and learning in everyday tasks (D. Liu et al., 2021) This underscores that employee engagement is not solely cultivated through formal instruction but also through symbol-rich digital communication.

Digital symbols such as emojis, code-switching, and hashtags are more than ornamental elements in online interactions; they enrich text-based communication with emotional and social dimensions. In digital collaboration, emojis expedite participation, for instance, within software development teams (Zhou et al., 2024). Emoji usage patterns can even predict user engagement or dropout rates in online platforms, highlighting their importance in sustaining digital interaction (Zhou et al., 2024). Similarly, user-generated content studies indicate that emotional emojis increase audience engagement, although the effect depends heavily on contextual alignment (Ko et al., 2022). These findings position digital linguistics as a bridge connecting cognitive, affective, and social aspects of organizational communication.

In the logistics industry, effective communication is critical to operational success. The focal company in Medan faces complex challenges such as supply chain management, fleet coordination, and customer relations—all requiring strong employee engagement at emotional and professional levels. Engagement has long been considered a vital resource for operational stability, productivity, and workforce retention. Research in Indonesia confirms that company reputation and internal control significantly affect employee engagement within the logistics sector (Haryanto et al., 2023). Therefore, the implementation of digital communication strategies that incorporate modern linguistics can strengthen engagement by fostering trust, solidarity, and a collective identity within the organization.

The phenomenon of code-switching has become increasingly relevant in multilingual workplaces, such as logistics companies in Medan. Employees frequently switch between English, Indonesian, and even local dialects to adapt to their interlocutors and work situations. Code-switching functions not only as a linguistic strategy but also as a form of social adaptation and professional identity formation. Research by Nguyen and Boateng emphasizes that this practice can enhance interpersonal connectedness while promoting inclusivity within organizations. In the context of human resource management (HRM), understanding code-switching is essential, as it can strengthen team collaboration, enhance the sense of belonging, and ultimately contribute to employee engagement (Nguyen & Boateng, 2021).

In addition to code-switching, the use of emojis and hashtags in internal communication has also become increasingly prominent in modern organizations. Emojis serve to soften written messages, convey emotional nuances, and foster interpersonal closeness. Research by Liu et al. demonstrates that digital symbols can enhance message clarity while simultaneously cultivating familiarity, thereby exerting a positive influence on employee engagement (S., Liu et al., 2021). Meanwhile, hashtags function not only as digital markers but also as a means of grouping conversations, building collective identity, and expanding internal communication networks (Highfield & Leaver, 2022). In the context of logistics companies, hashtags can be used to unify discourse around specific projects, such as #OnTimeDelivery or #TeamLogistics, which in turn foster a sense of togetherness and reinforce focus on shared goals.

Theoretically, this study is grounded in Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Media Richness Theory (MRT). SET explains that social relationships within organizations are built on reciprocity, suggesting that the use of digital symbols that enrich communication can enhance trust and employee engagement (Graso & Grover, 2017). Meanwhile, MRT emphasizes that the effectiveness of communication depends on the level of media richness employed. Emojis, code-switching, and hashtags enrich digital communication by adding emotional dimensions, contextual cues, and social identity markers that are often absent in plain text (Dennis et al., 2020). Thus, digital linguistic practices can be viewed as strategies to enhance media richness in organizational communication, which in turn has implications for employee engagement.

Despite the growing body of literature on emojis, code-switching, and hashtags in public digital platforms and educational contexts (Highfield & Leaver, 2022; Ko et al., 2022; Nguyen & Boateng, 2021; Zhou et al., 2024), research remains scarce on how these digital linguistic practices operate within internal workplace communication, particularly in Indonesia. In the field of HRM, most studies have emphasized structural determinants of employee engagement such as corporate reputation, organizational culture, and internal control systems (Haryanto et al., 2023), leaving a critical gap in understanding the micro-level dynamics of digital communication in shaping engagement. This absence is especially pronounced in the Indonesian logistics sector, where digital coordination across teams and multilingual interactions are integral to daily operations. Addressing this gap, the present study is necessary to empirically demonstrate how digital linguistics can serve as a strategic HRM instrument, enriching employee engagement through practices that are often overlooked in organizational research.

This study focuses on employee engagement, defined as the extent to which employees are emotionally, cognitively, and behaviourally involved in their work. While prior studies have widely examined the role of emojis, code-switching, and hashtags in public social media contexts ((Highfield & Leaver, 2022; Ko et al., 2022; Zhou et al., 2024) and in educational

settings (Nguyen & Boateng, 2021). Limited attention has been given to how these digital linguistic practices function within internal organizational communication, particularly in the logistics sector of Indonesia. In the field of HRM, most research has predominantly emphasized structural determinants of employee engagement, such as corporate reputation, organizational culture, and internal control systems (Haryanto et al., 2023), while overlooking the micro-level dynamics of digital communication as a strategic tool for fostering vigor, dedication, and absorption. Addressing this gap, the present study examines how digital linguistic practices, namely code switching, the use of emojis, and the use of hashtags, interact with organizational factors to influence engagement. By integrating Social Exchange Theory (Eisenberger et al., 2020; Graso & Grover, 2017) and Media Richness Theory (Dennis et al., 2020) to demonstrate that emojis, code switching, and hashtags are not merely symbolic expressions but can be leveraged as strategic HRM instruments to strengthen employee engagement in multilingual, digitally mediated workplaces.

Taking into account global developments, the specific needs of the logistics sector, and strong theoretical foundations, this research aims to provide an empirical contribution to the growing literature on digital linguistics within HRM. Furthermore, it is expected to serve as a practical reference for logistics companies in Medan to optimize their internal digital communication, thereby sustaining high levels of employee engagement in the face of industry disruption.

## METHOD

### Research Design

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to capture employees' interpretations of digital linguistic practices, such as emojis, code-switching, and hashtags, in organizational communication. A private logistics company in Medan served as the research site, with the focus on how digital linguistics influences employee engagement.

According to Yin, qualitative case studies are effective for investigating contemporary phenomena within complex real-life contexts, particularly when boundaries between phenomenon and context are blurred (Schoot & Miočević, 2020).

### Participants and Setting

Participants in this study consisted of 15 employees from a private logistics company in Medan, Indonesia. They were selected using purposive sampling to ensure rich and relevant insights into digital communication practices. The participants represented a variety of organizational roles, including administrative staff, customer service officers, field coordinators, and supervisors, allowing for perspectives from both operational and managerial levels. Selection criteria required that participants:

- had at least one year of tenure at the company.*
- were active users of internal digital communication platforms such as enterprise social media (ESM), instant messaging applications, and collaborative email, and*
- had experience in cross-functional teamwork, which made them familiar with the linguistic dynamics of multilingual and digitally mediated communication.*

This composition provided a balanced view of how digital linguistics operates across hierarchical levels and functional divisions within the logistics sector.

### Data Collection

Data were gathered through semi-structured in-depth interviews. This method enabled exploration of employees' personal experiences while maintaining sufficient flexibility to capture authentic narratives (Awlia, 2020). In addition, internal digital documents (e.g., ESM conversations, official emails, and records of digital interactions) were reviewed to strengthen triangulation (Creswell, 2014).

Interview questions were guided by established indicators :

- Digital Linguistics (Highfield & Leaver, 2022; NGUYEN et al., 2019; Zhou et al., 2024), use of emojis to express emotions, clarify messages, and*

*Digital Linguistics in Human Resource Management: Code-Switching, Emojis, and Hashtags in Employee Engagement strengthen closeness; code-switching between Indonesian, English, and local dialects to adapt socially and professionally; and hashtags as tools for grouping discourse, building collective identity, and unifying organizational narratives.*

*Employee Engagement (Schaufeli & Wilmar B, 2021), vigor (energy and resilience at work), dedication (emotional involvement, pride, and inspiration), and absorption (deep focus and immersion in tasks).*

## Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was applied through six phases: familiarization with data, generation of initial codes, theme searching, theme review, theme definition, and reporting (Awlia, 2020; Creswell, 2014). Employees' experiences were mapped to identify how digital symbols (emojis, code-switching, hashtags) relate to engagement dimensions. Data validity was ensured through triangulation and member checking, where participants reviewed interpretations to confirm accuracy.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Finding

Interviews with employees of a private logistics company in Medan revealed that digital communication has become an integral part of everyday work activities. From the process of open coding, several recurring expressions emerged among respondents. For example, Respondent 3 stated: "When I use a smile emoji, the chat feels less tense, even if we are discussing deadlines." This was coded as emoji as a tension reducer. Similarly, Respondent 5 noted: "An emoji feels like a quick thank you, less stiff than just saying 'ok'." This was coded as emoji as a form of brief appreciation. Through axial coding, these codes were grouped into a broader theme, namely emojis as tools for warmth and interpersonal appreciation. This theme illustrates how simple symbols can foster a positive emotional atmosphere amid work pressure. These findings align with (D. Liu et al., 2021) who demonstrated that emojis enhance message clarity and add warmth to workplace communication.

Beyond emojis, code-switching also appeared as a common practice in the multilingual workplace. Respondent 7 explained: "When I talk to my supervisor, I usually mix in English to appear more formal." Meanwhile, Respondent 2 shared: "With peers of the same level, I often use local dialects to feel closer." Axial coding revealed two main functions of code-switching: as a marker of professionalism and as a means of building social closeness. These findings confirm (Nguyen & Boateng, 2021) who emphasize that code-switching in the workplace functions not only as a linguistic strategy but also as a tool for strengthening interpersonal connectedness and inclusivity.

Meanwhile, hashtags, though not used as frequently as emojis, carried significant symbolic value. Respondent 2 remarked: "When we use #OnTimeDelivery, everyone immediately understands the target, so it's easy to remember." This was coded as a hashtag as a team goal anchor. Another respondent highlighted the use of #TeamLogistics as a way to "make us feel like one group." This led to the theme of hashtags as collective identity markers and project commitment binders. These findings are consistent with (Highfield & Leaver, 2022) who noted that hashtags function as networked practices that connect individuals within digital spaces.

Furthermore, employee engagement was reflected in three key dimensions. First, **vigor**, expressed as high energy, when digital communication felt clear and supportive. Respondents reported greater enthusiasm when interactions flowed smoothly through appropriate use of emojis or code-switching. Second, **dedication**, visible when digital symbols were used to celebrate achievements or appreciate colleagues, such as clapping emojis or project-specific hashtags. Third, **absorption**, reflected when employees became deeply immersed in digital conversations that were enjoyable and helped them stay focused on tasks. These three dimensions align with the engagement framework developed by (Schaufeli & Wilmar B, 2021).



However, interviews also revealed that engagement remained grounded in structural organizational factors, such as corporate reputation and internal control systems. Several respondents stressed that although emojis and hashtags fostered a positive atmosphere, their commitment was strongly influenced by confidence in the company's credibility and the clarity of organizational rules. This indicates that while digital linguistics contributes meaningfully, it cannot be detached from broader structural dimensions. (Haryanto et al., 2023) support this by showing that corporate reputation and internal control remain critical in shaping employee engagement in Indonesia's logistics sector.

### Discussion

The findings of this study reinforce the view that digital linguistic practices play a strategic role in building employee engagement. Respondent 5, for instance, remarked that emojis are "like a quick thank you, less stiff than just saying 'ok'." This aligns with Media Richness Theory (MRT), as emojis add an emotional dimension to digital messages that are otherwise rigid. By incorporating these symbols, communication becomes warmer and easier to interpret. (Dennis et al., 2020) emphasize that the richer the medium, the more effective the transmission of messages and the development of shared understanding. In the logistics context, where cross-divisional coordination must occur rapidly, media richness becomes essential to avoid misunderstandings that could cause delays in distribution or service errors. Emojis, code-switching, and hashtags thus function as linguistic devices that transform lean communication channels into richer media by adding social cues, emotional tones, and contextual anchors.

the use of emojis or hashtags can be regarded as a form of *relational currency* – small but meaningful tokens of appreciation and recognition exchanged in daily communication. When managers use a smile emoji or recognition hashtag, employees interpret it as acknowledgment of their contributions. Respondent 3 illustrated this by noting: "When my supervisor sends a clapping emoji, it feels like appreciation, even if it is just through chat." This response highlights a mechanism of reciprocity: when employees feel valued, they respond with greater commitment and dedication. (Eisenberger et al., 2020) Confirm that such exchange based relationships strengthen employees' emotional engagement with the organization. Similarly, code switching operates as an adaptive exchange strategy: using English with supervisors signals professionalism, while switching to local dialects with peers fosters solidarity, thereby reinforcing mutual respect and inclusivity. Hashtags, when used to mark project goals such as #OnTimeDelivery, serve as symbolic resources that strengthen collective identity, further embedding reciprocity within the organization..

Code-switching was also shown to be more than a linguistic strategy; it functioned as an instrument for inclusivity. Respondent 7 admitted to intentionally using English with supervisors to "sound more professional," while switching to local dialects with peers to "feel closer." These findings indicate that code-switching is an important way to express respect while maintaining camaraderie. Over time, this practice strengthens employees' sense of belonging, which is closely linked to engagement.

Hashtags served a similar function. Respondent 2 observed: "When we use #OnTimeDelivery, everyone immediately understands the target, so it's easy to remember." This statement underscores the role of hashtags as anchors of collective narratives that unify team objectives. In this way, hashtags are not merely digital markers but instruments for sustaining shared organizational commitment.

Nonetheless, the study also highlights that the contribution of digital linguistics cannot be separated from organizational structures. Corporate reputation and internal monitoring systems remain the foundations of employee engagement. In other words, emojis, code-switching, and hashtags are more effective when embedded within a fair, transparent, and trustworthy organizational environment. This study stresses that digital linguistics in HRM must be understood as part of the broader organizational communication ecosystem rather than as an isolated practice.

The practical implications of these findings are clear. First, logistics companies can design digital communication guidelines that encourage contextually appropriate and professional

use of linguistic symbols. Second, multilingual communication training can help employees use code-switching as a means of fostering inclusivity. Third, HR departments can integrate hashtags into employee recognition strategies, such as creating specific tags to celebrate team achievements. In this way, digital linguistic practices become not only spontaneous expressions but also strategically managed instruments for reinforcing engagement.

Academically, this study extends the literature by providing evidence that, in the logistics sector, digital linguistic practices have a tangible impact on employee engagement. Whereas much prior research has focused on education or public social media contexts, this study demonstrates their relevance in performance-driven organizational communication. By integrating MRT and SET, the findings show that digital linguistics can be viewed as a form of relational capital that sustains organizational resilience in the digital disruption era.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that digital linguistic practices—emojis, code switching, and hashtags—are not mere online habits but strategic communication tools with significant implications for HRM, particularly in fostering employee engagement. Emojis act as relational currency that conveys recognition and support, code switching promotes inclusivity and mutual respect in multilingual settings, and hashtags strengthen collective identity around shared goals, collectively enriching digital communication channels to sustain vigor, dedication, and absorption among employees. For organizations, especially in the logistics sector, the findings highlight the importance of embedding digital linguistics within a transparent and credible organizational climate through clear communication guidelines, multilingual training, and project-specific hashtags as recognition strategies. Theoretically, this research extends HRM literature by showing how Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Media Richness Theory (MRT) explain the role of digital symbols as both relational capital and media enrichments, linking micro-level practices with macro-level outcomes. Practically, it offers a low-cost, high-impact approach to enhancing motivation, trust, and cohesion in digital workplaces, while future studies could expand the scope to industries such as banking, healthcare, or education and examine moderating factors like digital leadership and organizational culture to deepen understanding of digital linguistics as a strategic HRM instrument across diverse contexts.

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