
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Functions of Arabic-English Code-Switching in Advertising Posters in Saudi Arabia

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| ABSTRACT

This study investigates the functions of Arabic-English code-switching in advertising posters in Saudi Arabia, a predominantly Arabic-speaking society in which English nevertheless occupies an increasingly visible place in commercial discourse. Grounded in a qualitative case-study design, the study draws on semi-structured interviews with thirty Saudi participants, ten poster designers, ten sellers, and ten consumers, to explore why advertisers alternate between Arabic and English in poster advertisements and what communicative purposes this alternation serves. Interview data were analyzed through qualitative content analysis, involving verbatim transcription, in vivo coding, and iterative thematic categorization. The findings show that Arabic-English code-switching in Saudi advertising posters serves four interrelated functions: cognitive (familiarity, ease of processing, and clarification), marketing or business-related (modernity, marketing appeal, and trendiness), social (audience reach and cultural relevance), and psycho-affective (prestige and impression management). These functions rarely operate in isolation; rather, they overlap and reinforce one another, reflecting the layered interplay of language, commerce, and identity in the Saudi advertising landscape.

| KEYWORDS

Code-switching, advertising posters, Arabic-English bilingualism, Saudi Arabia, functions of code-switching, bilingual advertising

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

English is the dominant language in code-switching across multilingual societies, frequently used alongside local languages. Code-switching—alternating between languages within a single discourse—is common in bilingual communication and widely studied. In advertising, especially posters, this practice is highly visible and intentional due to space and design constraints. In Saudi Arabia, despite being primarily Arabic-speaking, English is increasingly present in daily life and advertising, creating a bilingual environment where both languages often appear together. However, while previous research has focused mainly on spoken code-switching, little attention has been given to its use in advertising posters. This study addresses that gap by examining the functions of Arabic-English code-switching in Saudi advertising posters. It draws on the perspectives of designers, sellers, and consumers to understand why this language mixing is used and what purposes it serves, offering both theoretical insights and practical implications in a rapidly changing sociolinguistic context.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Status of English in Saudi Arabia

English entered Saudi Arabia primarily for economic reasons following the discovery of oil in the 1930s (Alhojailan, 2015), although its formal place in the school curriculum was not established until the 1950s (Al-Johani, 2009). Faruk (2013) argues that the introduction of English into Saudi schools was itself part of a broader effort to accelerate the country's globalization. Reliance on international companies from the late 1970s onward made English proficiency increasingly important for economic advancement (Al-Braik, 2007), and the emergence of "Saudisation" policy in the 1990s required Saudi citizens to develop strong English skills in order to compete for positions in the service and core industries (Looney, 2004).

The 2000s brought a further expansion of English in Saudi education. English was introduced in the fifth and sixth grades in 2003, in the fourth grade in 2012, and in the first grade in 2021 (Elyas, 2008), while nearly all Saudi universities now maintain English departments or language centers, and English has become the medium of instruction in fields such as medicine, engineering, and computer science (Faruk, 2013). Al-Seghayer (2014) describes English as occupying a prestigious position in the Kingdom as the most widely taught foreign language in both public and private education. Beyond the classroom, English is now understood by many Saudis as essential to career advancement, international business, and participation in global digital culture (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015), as well as to religious life, since English serves as the primary language of communication with the millions of pilgrims who visit Mecca and Medina each year and as a vehicle for translating and explaining Islamic sources to non-Arabic speakers (Rahman & Alhaisoni, 2013; Osailan, 2009). This layered history helps explain why English, despite Saudi Arabia's officially monolingual status, now circulates so freely through Saudi commercial and public discourse, including advertising.

2.2 Code-Switching: Concept and Types

Code-switching is commonly defined as the alternating use of two languages within a single discourse, conversation, sentence, or phrase (Montes-Alcalá, 2000; Poplack, 1980). Poplack's (1980) influential typology distinguishes three main types: intersentential switching, which occurs between sentences expressed in different languages; intrasentential switching, which occurs within a single sentence and requires the speaker or writer to maintain grammatical coherence while moving between languages; and tag or extrasentential switching, in which a short phrase, interjection, or tag from one language is inserted into an utterance otherwise composed in another. Scholars have debated the relative complexity of these types: some argue that intrasentential switching is cognitively and grammatically the most demanding form because it requires simultaneous command of two grammatical systems within a single clause (Hamers & Blanc, 2000; Jalil, 2009; Zirker, 2007), while others, such as Al-Mansour (1998), contend that intersentential switching can be equally demanding because it depends on maintaining cohesion between whole sentences produced in two distinct linguistic systems. This typology, developed primarily from spoken data, provides the foundation on which later research, including studies of code-switching in advertising, has built.

2.3 Functions of Code-Switching

A central debate in the code-switching literature concerns whether language alternation is a conscious, purposeful act or an unconscious, habitual one. Some scholars describe code-switching as a largely unreflective behavior that speakers are often unaware of (Wardhaugh, 2006; Holder, 2009; Gafaranga & Torras, 2002). A larger body of work, however, treats code-switching as a deliberate communicative strategy. Nilep (2006) argues that speakers switch codes consciously to achieve goals such as signaling group membership, and Holmes (2013, p. 60) insists that "code-switching is not random; it is a purposeful activity to achieve various communicative goals." Mahootian (2006) similarly holds that intentional switching can mark topic shifts, changes of interlocutor, or shifts in social relationships, a view supported by Li Wei (1998), Gumperz (1982), Myers-Scotton (1993), and Hoffman (2014).

Empirical studies across a range of settings have identified a wide array of specific functions. Albirini (2011) found that switching between Standard and Dialectal Arabic served to differentiate topics, add emphasis, express identity, and manage social distance and formality. Safi (1992) found that Saudi speakers narrating personal experiences in the United States switched to Arabic for reasons of identity and solidarity, and to English when discussing personal interests or opinions. In the classroom, Metila (2009) and Momenian and Samar (2011) found that code-switching served pedagogical functions such as seeking equivalents, commenting on tasks, and building group membership, while Alrasheed (2022) found that Saudi bilingual children switched languages to reduce social distance, seek vocabulary help, and express feelings not easily conveyed in a single language. A recurring theme across several of these studies is prestige: Almulhim (2014) and Bullock and Toribio (2009) both report that bilingual speakers switch to a prestige-associated language, often English, to signal education, modernity, or elevated social status, while Alsbai (2011) found that this motivation applied more strongly to female than to male Saudi speakers. Taken together, this literature establishes that code-switching, far from being random noise in bilingual speech, typically performs identifiable social, cognitive, and psychological work, though the precise mix of functions varies by context, speaker group, and domain.

Research specifically on Saudi speakers reinforces several of these functional patterns while also revealing context-specific nuances. Al-Qudhaieen (2003) found that Saudi students studying in the United States relied heavily on intrasentential switching between Saudi Arabic and English in everyday communication, while Ismail (2015) found that female Saudi bilinguals code-switched more frequently than males and that switching was more common in same-sex than mixed-sex conversation. Alsbai (2011) similarly found gender differences in motivation, reporting that Saudi women code-switched partly to appear more sophisticated, while men were less influenced by this prestige-related motivation. Al-Enazi (2002) found that Arabic-speaking adults and English-dominant children living in the United States code-switched for different social and psychological reasons despite sharing the same culture, religion, and first-language background, while Alatawi (2015a) found that code-switching occurred in Arabic-language fashion, medicine, and entertainment television programs but was largely absent from religious programs, whose specialized and slowly evolving terminology offered fewer opportunities for switching. Collectively, this body of work confirms that Arabic-English code-switching is a well-established feature of Saudi bilingual life across many domains, which

makes its extension into the specifically commercial and visual domain of the advertising poster a natural, if underexamined, next step.

2.4 Code-Switching in Advertising and Advertising Posters

Advertising is defined by Kotler et al. (2008, p. 793) as "paid form of non-personal presentation and promotion of idea, goods or services by an identified sponsor," and functions, in Forceville's (2002a) terms, as a form of one-to-many communication. Bishop (2006, p. 17) argues that code-switching allows communicators "to negotiate a meaning that is better or more easily expressed using multiple languages rather than remaining within a single language," while Kotler (2003) similarly holds that code-switching in advertisements can foster more effective communication between advertisers and consumers by allowing the message to integrate multiple linguistic codes within a single, locally resonant text.

Empirical research on code-switching in advertising suggests that its effectiveness is far from uniform. Luna and Peracchio (2005) found that bilingual consumers evaluated advertisements more positively when the switch moved from a minority to a majority language, while Lin, Wang, and Hsieh (2017) found that the effect of code-switching depends on brand origin: monolingual Taiwanese consumers preferred single-language advertisements for local brands but showed a stronger preference for code-switched advertisements, particularly those containing familiar words, when the brand was global. This distinction between local and global brand contexts is directly relevant to advertising in a predominantly monolingual market such as Saudi Arabia, where both types of brands compete for the same audience.

Within the specific genre of the advertising poster, Benson (2001) describes code-switching as the practice of incorporating multiple languages within a single advertisement in order to engage a diverse audience. Because posters rely almost entirely on visual and textual elements, rather than the audio and verbal cues available in broadcast media, the language they contain must work harder to inform, persuade, and remind (Bishop, 2006). Kelly-Holmes (2005) describes advertising language as a "functional dialect," selected specifically to serve the promotional purpose of the text, and identifies informative and expressive functions of advertising language: informing and describing on the one hand, and conveying feeling and emotion on the other. Leech (1966) similarly identifies attention value, readability, memorability, and selling power as the core design principles of advertising language, principles that a well-placed English word or phrase can serve simultaneously. Myers-Scotton (1993) and Kenechukwu et al. (2013) both frame code-switching as a strategic marketing tool through which advertisers draw on the linguistic and cultural associations of a second language to build a connection with bilingual consumers.

2.5 The Saudi Context and the Research Gap

In the Saudi advertising landscape specifically, Arabic typically functions as the matrix language while English is inserted as an embedded, marked code, appearing on shop fronts, menus, and, especially, advertising posters distributed across malls, streets, and social media. Despite the visibility of this practice, and despite a substantial body of research on code-switching among Saudi speakers in spoken and educational contexts (e.g., Al-Qudhaieen, 2003; Ismail, 2015; Alsbai, 2011; Al-Enazi, 2002; Alatawi, 2015a), remarkably little research has directly examined why Saudi advertisers code-switch in posters or what functions this practice is understood to serve by the people who design, sell, and view these advertisements. The present study addresses this gap by investigating the functions of Arabic-English code-switching in Saudi advertising posters from the combined perspectives of designers, sellers, and consumers.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative case-study design, with Saudi Arabia serving as the broader case and individual designers, sellers, and consumers representing embedded units of analysis within it (Yin, 2000). A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to explore participants' subjective views and experiences in depth (Robson, 2002) and to construct a nuanced understanding of a social phenomenon as it unfolds in its natural context (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with thirty Saudi participants: ten poster designers, ten sellers, and ten consumers, recruited through convenience sampling on the basis of accessibility, willingness to participate, Saudi nationality, and a balance of male and female participants. The interviews explored participants' perceptions of why and how Arabic-English code-switching is used in Saudi advertising posters. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process by assigning pseudonyms to every participant; written informed consent was obtained prior to data collection, and no participant was pressured to sign a consent form, in line with Creswell's (2014) caution that such pressure can compromise data quality.

The interview data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis, following the general procedures outlined by Mayring (2000). Transcripts were treated as individual cases, read multiple times, and coded using In Vivo coding (Manning, 2017), in which codes are drawn directly from participants' own words. Codes were then grouped into broader categories and sub-categories corresponding to the functions that participants attributed to code-switching, and the researcher examined similarities and differences across designers, sellers, and consumers to identify converging and divergent patterns (Hadley, 2017). This process yielded four principal functional categories, cognitive, marketing (business), social, and psycho-affective, each with

several sub-functions, which are presented in the following section together with illustrative excerpts from the interview transcripts.

4. Findings

Across the three participant groups, code-switching in Saudi advertising posters was consistently described not as an incidental or random linguistic feature but as a deliberate strategy serving multiple, often overlapping, communicative and commercial purposes. Analysis of the interview data identified four principal functions: cognitive, marketing (business), social, and psycho-affective.

4.1 Cognitive Functions

Participants described three related cognitive sub-functions: familiarity, ease of processing, and clarification. With respect to familiarity, participants explained that many English words have become so common in everyday Saudi usage that they are understood even by people with limited English proficiency. Omar, a consumer, explained that words such as "spicy" and "box" "have become familiar to us. Even those who don't know English understand them because they're used everywhere, on social media and in malls. They've basically become part of our everyday language". Mohammed, a seller, made a similar observation, noting that "people have become used to seeing English words in advertisements. So even if the word isn't translated, they still understand it because it has become widely known and frequently used". These comments suggest that advertisers rely on code-switching less to introduce unfamiliar vocabulary than to exploit words that have already entered everyday Saudi usage, thereby minimizing cognitive burden.

The ease-of-processing sub-function relates to the perception that English expressions are sometimes shorter and quicker to understand than their Arabic equivalents. Faisal, a consumer, observed that "the English word is sometimes shorter and easier to understand. For instance, the word code that always appears in advertisements, I feel it gets the message across quickly", while Reem, a designer, added that "English phrases are simple, and when we include them in ads, the customer gets the meaning instantly, unlike some Arabic terms which can be formal or slightly complicated".

The clarification sub-function concerns the use of English to convey meanings that lack a concise Arabic equivalent. Hend, a designer, stated that "we sometimes use code-switching to clarify a specific description that doesn't have a clear equivalent in Arabic", and Fahad, a seller, gave the example of the word "combo," explaining that "some English words are clearer and don't require a long explanation". Together, these three sub-functions indicate that code-switching in Saudi advertising is grounded in practical communicative concerns: advertisers draw on the bilingual repertoire that many Saudi consumers already possess in order to deliver messages that are familiar, quickly processed, and precise.

4.2 Marketing (Business) Functions

The marketing functions of code-switching, comprising modernity, marketing appeal, and trendiness, emerged as one of the most prominent themes in the data. With respect to modernity, participants across all three groups associated English with a contemporary, internationally aligned brand image. Adel, a designer, explained that "when we use certain English terms, the ad looks modern and up-to-date, especially when it comes to new product names", and Amal, a consumer, added that "an English word in the ad gives a sense of being global and new, it honestly makes me excited to buy".

The marketing appeal sub-function concerns the visual and stylistic contribution of English to poster design. Sarah, a designer, explained that "even if the word is simple and well-known in Arabic, its English form gives a different touch. Sometimes we include it even when it's not necessary, just because it looks nice on the poster", while Sadeem, a consumer, agreed that "advertisements that contain English just look more attractive, and I feel they catch my attention more than if they were entirely in Arabic".

The trendiness sub-function links code-switching to the fast-moving linguistic fashions of social media. Rasha, a designer, explained that she includes trending words from social media in her advertisements "because they're temporary and will fade, and I want the ad to feel relatable to people", and Khaled, a seller, similarly noted that "every now and then, some words become trendy, usually in English, so we include them in ads to stay in tune with the hype". These three sub-functions rarely operate independently: a single English word chosen for its modern connotation often simultaneously enhances the visual design of the poster and aligns with a current social media trend, so that one linguistic choice can serve several marketing purposes at once.

4.3 Social Functions

Participants identified two social sub-functions of code-switching: audience reach and cultural relevance. On audience reach, participants explained that English allows advertisers to communicate beyond a purely Arabic-speaking audience. Omar, a seller, noted that "some advertisements are meant for everyone, even those who don't speak Arabic, so we include English words to reach as many people as possible", and Salman, a consumer, added that "there are many foreigners here, and I think having English in the ad makes it easier for them to understand". Given that Saudi Arabia is home to a large population of foreign

residents, participants viewed this inclusive function as a practical necessity for many advertisers rather than a purely stylistic choice.

The cultural relevance sub-function concerns the alignment of advertising language with the linguistic habits of specific social groups, particularly younger Saudis, who frequently mix Arabic and English in everyday speech. Lama, a consumer, explained that "young people are now used to mixing Arabic and English in their speech, and an ad that contains this mix attracts them more because it resembles their style", while Majed, a designer, added that "sometimes young people understand English better, and if the ad targets them, we use simple English words that reach them more quickly". These accounts suggest that code-switching functions socially both to widen an advertisement's actual reach and to signal cultural and generational alignment with its intended audience.

4.4 Psycho-Affective Functions

The final category, psycho-affective functions, comprises prestige and impression management. Regarding prestige, participants consistently associated English with quality, sophistication, and luxury. Maha, a consumer, explained that "when I see an advertisement with English words, I feel their products are higher in quality and more luxurious" naming shapes perceived value: "I feel they must use English words in the ad, especially for product names. If they used *fustuq* instead of pistachio, for example, the product would feel less luxurious, and I honestly wouldn't buy it at a high price" .

The impression management sub-function concerns the effect of English on perceptions of the advertising brand itself. Seema, a consumer, stated that "an advertisement that includes English gives me the impression that the company is large and professional, not just a small shop", and Assaf, another consumer, added that "when I see an English ad I feel they care about their public image and try to present themselves at a global standard". Taken together, these excerpts indicate that English functions in Saudi advertising posters as more than an informational or stylistic device: it operates as a symbolic resource that shapes how consumers judge the quality, professionalism, and global standing of a brand.

5. Discussion

The findings show that Arabic-English code-switching in Saudi advertising posters performs four principal and interrelated functions: cognitive, marketing, social, and psycho-affective. This multifunctionality is consistent with the broader sociolinguistic claim that code-switching is a purposeful, rather than random, communicative strategy (Holmes, 2013). Rather than operating as discrete categories, these functions overlap, so that a single English word inserted into a poster can simultaneously ease comprehension, project modernity, widen audience reach, and confer prestige. The cognitive functions identified here, familiarity, ease of processing, and clarification, converge closely with Almoaily's (2023) analysis of code-switching in Saudi Snapchat advertisements, in which "switching for availability," the use of an English term because it is more readily available than an Arabic equivalent, emerged as the single most common function, accounting for seventy-eight of one hundred and two coded instances. At the same time, this cognitive ease should not be treated as universal: Lin, Wang, and Hsieh (2017) found that monolingual consumers actually preferred non-code-switched advertisements for local brands, and Mainake (2021) cautioned that excessive English insertion in Indonesian food advertisements risked confusing viewers. Because many of the advertisements examined in the present study promoted local Saudi food and beverage brands, these contrasting findings raise a genuine question about whether the cognitive ease reported by participants reflects a general property of code-switching or a familiarity bias specific to certain product categories and audiences. The marketing functions, modernity, marketing appeal, and trendiness, are particularly salient in the context of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 reforms, which have accelerated the country's engagement with the global economy and, participants suggest, made English a marker of participation in that global marketplace. This interpretation is consistent with Almulhim's (2014) finding that Saudi speakers associate English with modernity and social prestige. However, Rice and Al-Mossawi (2002) offer an important counterpoint, arguing that abandoning Arabic-rooted terminology can alienate consumers who value religious and cultural alignment in their purchasing decisions, particularly for brands with a strong local or Islamic identity. This suggests that the marketing benefits of code-switching identified by the present study's participants are moderated by brand positioning, and that English does not universally signal superior quality in the way that several participants assumed. The marketing appeal sub-function, meanwhile, extends Kelly-Holmes's (2005) concept of advertising language as a "functional dialect" into the visual domain: designers in this study treated English not only as a linguistic resource but as a design element capable of breaking the visual monotony of Arabic script.

The social functions identified in this study, audience reach and cultural relevance, align with Myers-Scotton's (1993) argument that code-switching allows speakers, and by extension advertisers, to navigate multiple social identities and audience segments simultaneously. Saudi Arabia's large expatriate population lends practical weight to the audience reach function identified by participants. Yet Almoaily's (2023) finding that many Saudi Snapchat advertisers targeted predominantly Arabic-speaking audiences while still code-switching extensively suggests that this function may sometimes be more symbolic than literal, projecting an image of global inclusivity even where the practical audience remains largely Arabic-speaking. The cultural relevance sub-function, linked by participants to the linguistic habits of Saudi youth, is consistent with Alrasheed's (2022) finding that Arabic-English mixing among young Saudis reduces social distance and fosters closeness, though Binmahboob's (2020)

finding that Saudi English teachers view code-switching as an obstacle to language learning is a reminder that not all Saudi professionals regard it favorably. Finally, the psycho-affective functions, prestige and impression management, align closely with Bullock and Toribio's (2009, p. 12) observation that bilingual speakers "switch to a language associated with prestige to increase their social standing." The participant who reported that the Arabic word "fustuq" would feel less luxurious than "pistachio" illustrates how directly language choice can shape perceived product value, a pattern consistent with Luna and Peracchio's (2005) finding that code-switching shapes consumer evaluations more broadly. It is also worth noting that the three stakeholder groups did not always emphasize the same functions to the same degree. Designers tended to foreground the cognitive and marketing functions, reflecting their professional concern with the craft of advertisement design. Sellers were more inclined to emphasize marketing and social functions tied directly to commercial outcomes. Consumers, by contrast, offered the most layered and ambivalent accounts, readily acknowledging the appeal of English while also raising concerns about authenticity and cultural fit that surface in the contrasting literature discussed above.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to answer a focused question: what functions does Arabic-English code-switching serve in advertising posters in Saudi Arabia? Drawing on interviews with poster designers, sellers, and consumers, the findings show that code-switching operates simultaneously as a cognitive aid, a marketing tool, a social bridge, and a psycho-affective signal of prestige and professionalism. These functions overlap and reinforce one another, allowing a single English word or phrase to perform multiple kinds of communicative work within the tight spatial and attentional constraints of the advertising poster. While the effectiveness of code-switching is clearly moderated by factors such as brand origin, product type, and audience, the overall picture that emerges is one in which English has become an integral, multifunctional resource in Saudi advertising, reflecting the Kingdom's ongoing negotiation between global commercial engagement and its Arabic linguistic and cultural identity.

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