

Five for Two Dollars: Multilingual Performance, Survival, and Linguistic Capital in Tourist Street Markets

Norazimah Binti Allawaddin¹, Elansegaran Thangamani²
Thayalen Ramasamy³, Joclyn Leong Fong Yi⁴, Janakumari Vanalagan⁵
Pradip Kumar Mishra⁶, Isai Amutan Krishnan⁷

¹UNITAR International University Tierra Crest, Jalan SS 6/3, Ss 6, 47301 Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia

Email: zimah.nora06@moe.gov.my

²UNITAR International University Tierra Crest, Jalan SS 6/3, Ss 6, 47301 Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia

Email: elansegaran1974@gmail.com

³Singapore (Cambodia) International Academy, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, One Park, Phnom Penh City Center, No. 58 Street R8, Sangkat Srah Chak, Khan Daun Penh, Phnom Penh.

Email: thayalen.ramasamy@scia.edu.kh

⁴UNITAR International University Tierra Crest, Jalan SS 6/3, Ss 6, 47301 Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia

Email: mc240929315@student.unitar.my

⁵UNITAR International University Tierra Crest, Jalan SS 6/3, Ss 6, 47301 Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia

Email: jana_kumari@yahoo.com

⁶UiTM ASASI Dengkil, Selangor, Malaysia

Email: pradip@uitm.edu.my

⁷UNITAR International University Tierra Crest, Jalan SS 6/3, Ss 6, 47301 Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia

Email: isai.krishnan@unitar.my

ABSTRACT

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR (*):

Azrulizam Amat Sayuti
(Azrulizam.sayuti@unitar.my)

KEYWORDS:

Multilingualism
Linguistic Capital
Code-Switching
Street Vendors
Tourism
Economy

CITATION:

Norazimah, A., Elansegaran, T., Thayalen, R., Joclyn, L. F. Y., Janakumari, V., Pradip Kumar, M., & Isai, A. K. (2026). Five for Two Dollars: Multilingual Performance, Survival, and Linguistic Capital in Tourist Street Markets. *Malaysian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities (MJSSH)*, 11(6), e004039.
<https://doi.org/10.47405/mjssh.v11i6.4039>

This study aimed to examine how multilingualism functioned as a survival and business strategy in informal tourist-market interactions. It specifically explored how a group of children from Cambodia, the Netherlands, and India, working as street vendors selling souvenirs, used multiple languages to engage international tourists and negotiate sales in a viral video context. A qualitative method was adopted, and four video transcriptions were analysed using thematic analysis. Data coding was conducted in NVivo, focusing on patterns of language choice, switching, and interactional strategies. The analysis was guided by Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital as the sole theoretical framework. The findings revealed that the vendors strategically mobilised a wide range of languages (including Mandarin, English, Thai, Japanese, French, Spanish, and others) to align with tourists' linguistic backgrounds. Language switching was flexible and context-driven, prioritising communicative effectiveness, persuasion, and rapport-building rather than grammatical accuracy. Three key themes emerged: multilingualism as economic capital, language performance as identity construction, and emotional appeal as a

persuasive marketing strategy. The study concluded that multilingualism functioned as a form of survival capital in informal tourism economies, enabling access to economic opportunities through linguistic resources. It challenged traditional notions of proficiency by demonstrating that communicative value outweighs formal correctness in real-world interactions. The findings further suggested that multilingual street interactions represent a form of embodied linguistic capital that is dynamically deployed for economic and social mobility.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributed to multilingualism research by showing that language functions as a form of linguistic and economic capital in informal tourism settings. It demonstrates that communicative effectiveness, rather than grammatical accuracy, supports social mobility and business success, while extending Bourdieu's theory to real-world multilingual interactions among street vendors.

1. Introduction

Tourist street markets represent dynamic spaces where language, culture, and commerce intersect, often requiring vendors to navigate multilingual interactions to attract and serve diverse international customers. In such settings, linguistic ability is not merely a communicative tool but a form of economic and cultural capital that directly shapes livelihood opportunities. Recent scholarship emphasizes that multilingual skills are increasingly essential in tourism contexts, particularly in meeting the expectations of global travelers and enhancing service quality (Khan & Khan, 2023). Similarly, multilingualism has been widely recognized as a key factor in strengthening tourism competitiveness and supporting sector development in multilingual destinations such as Malaysia (Nur Izzati & Abdullah, 2017).

Beyond functional communication, language in tourism is also deeply tied to commodification processes, where linguistic practices become part of the tourism product itself (Luo, 2022). In informal tourist markets, vendors often engage in "performance" of language—shifting between languages, mixing linguistic resources, and adapting speech styles to increase sales and customer engagement. This aligns with broader understandings of multilingualism as both social and economic capital within tourism ecosystems, where language proficiency can influence access to income-generating opportunities (Najamudin et al., 2026). Furthermore, studies on tourism stakeholders highlight how multilingual communication serves not only economic purposes but also reinforces cultural exchange and adaptability in diverse tourist environments.

However, despite growing recognition of multilingualism in formal tourism sectors, less attention has been given to how language operates in informal street-market contexts, where communication is often spontaneous, strategic, and survival-oriented. While tourism research has explored language diversity and methodological approaches to multilingual studies (Seraphin et al., 2021), there remains a gap in understanding how street vendors actively use multilingual performance as a business strategy in everyday transactional interactions. Additionally, perceptions of multilingualism are often linked to career advancement and professional opportunities in tourism, yet informal vendors

may rely on these skills for immediate economic survival rather than long-term career mobility (Misno et al., 2024).

Therefore, this study examined how multilingualism functions as a survival and business strategy in informal tourist-market interactions.

2. Literature Review

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study was grounded in Pierre Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital, which conceptualised language as a form of cultural capital that could generate social, symbolic, and economic advantage within specific social fields (Bourdieu, 1991). Linguistic capital referred to the accumulated linguistic resources individuals possessed, which shaped their ability to gain legitimacy, access opportunities, and exercise power in social interactions (Bourdieu, 1991). In tourism contexts, this framework was particularly relevant because language functioned as a strategic resource used by actors such as street vendors to attract attention, build rapport, and facilitate economic exchange with international tourists.

In this study, linguistic capital was used to explain how multilingual children in informal tourist street markets mobilised different languages as performative tools to increase their chances of successful transactions. Drawing from Bourdieu's broader theory of capital, linguistic competence was not treated as neutral but as socially valued depending on context and audience (Bourdieu, 1991). In tourist settings, the ability to switch between languages such as English, local languages, and fragments of tourists' languages became a form of symbolic power that enhanced visibility, persuasion, and credibility in commercial interactions. This aligned with tourism scholarship that emphasised language as a commodified resource within global tourism economies (Luo, 2022; Najamudin et al., 2026).

By applying this framework, the study interpreted multilingual performance not merely as communication but as a strategic practice embedded in unequal power relations within tourism encounters. Thus, linguistic capital provided a lens to understand how language functioned as both a survival tool and a business strategy in informal street-market economies where success depended on communicative adaptability and interactional competence (Khan & Khan, 2023; Misno et al., 2024).

2.2. Past Studies

Previous research has widely established multilingualism as a key competence in the tourism industry, particularly in relation to employability, service quality, and global communication. Božinović and Sindik (2013) found that tourism students across different levels of study consistently perceived foreign language proficiency as essential for career success, highlighting those multilingual skills increased confidence and job readiness in tourism-related professions. Similarly, Batenova (2026) emphasized that learning multiple foreign languages enhanced career opportunities in tourism by improving adaptability and intercultural communication. Abdul Zalil and Pek (2024), through a scoping review, also confirmed that English remains the dominant language in tourism, while additional languages further strengthen service delivery and tourist satisfaction. In the same line, Ai and Khan (2024) demonstrated that multilingualism

positively influenced tourism development by improving communication efficiency and enhancing visitor experiences across destinations.

Beyond individual competence, several studies have focused on multilingualism as part of destination development and linguistic landscapes. Nur Izzati and Abdullah (2017) highlighted that multilingual practices significantly contributed to strengthening Malaysia's tourism sector by improving accessibility and communication between tourists and service providers. Diana et al. (2022) examined linguistic landscapes in Sumenep tourism destinations and found that multilingual signage and communication practices shaped tourist navigation and perception of place. Similarly, Tian and Tian (2023) showed that multilingual tourism spaces such as Great Tang All Day Mall and Hui Min Street reflected linguistic diversity that supported tourism consumption and cultural representation. Chen et al. (2024) further argued that linguistic diversity contributes to destination sophistication and positively influences destination personality in tourism marketing contexts. Al-Sofi (2024) reinforced this by showing that multilingual landscapes are closely linked to cultural heritage representation and sustainable tourism development.

In addition, Luo (2022) argued that language in tourism is not only functional but also commodified, where linguistic resources become part of the tourism product itself. Khan and Khan (2023) further supported this by stressing that multilingual skills are necessary for meeting the needs of global travellers and enhancing communication effectiveness in tourism guiding. Misno et al. (2024) added that students in tourism-related fields view multilingualism as an important factor for career advancement and professional growth. Seraphin et al. (2021), through a methodological review, also emphasized the importance of linguistic diversity in tourism research and the need for more nuanced analytical approaches to multilingual data.

2.3. Research Gap

Although existing studies have extensively examined multilingualism in formal tourism settings, destination marketing, linguistic landscapes, and tourism education, most of the findings are grounded in structured and institutional contexts. These studies primarily focus on tourism professionals, students, signage, and destination-level communication, where multilingualism is planned, institutionalised, and regulated. However, there remains limited understanding of how multilingualism operates in informal and unstructured tourism economies, particularly within street-market environments where communication is spontaneous, unpredictable, and survival-driven. Very few studies have explored how multilingualism is actively performed by vulnerable groups, such as child street vendors, as a direct strategy for economic survival and immediate business negotiation. Therefore, a clear gap exists in understanding multilingualism as a lived, interactional, and survival-based business strategy in informal tourist-market interactions, which this study specifically addresses.

3. Research Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore multilingual interaction in informal tourist street markets. According to Creswell (2024), qualitative research is appropriate for examining how individuals construct meaning through social interaction, particularly when language use, context, and lived experience are central to the inquiry. The study focused on children from Cambodia, the Netherlands, and India

who appeared as street vendors selling souvenirs in a viral video context. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select four videos that clearly demonstrated multilingual exchanges between vendors and international tourists. The use of four videos is justified in qualitative research as it enables in-depth interpretation and comparison of interactional patterns while maintaining rich contextual detail rather than statistical generalisation.

Data were collected through systematic transcription of the selected videos. Each video was repeatedly viewed to ensure accurate capture of spoken language, code-switching, and interactional sequences. Non-verbal cues were included only when they contributed to meaning-making. The transcripts were imported into NVivo for systematic coding and organisation. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) was used to identify patterns in language choice, switching behaviour, and communicative strategies. Initial open coding was followed by categorisation into broader themes such as multilingual adaptation, persuasive language use, and negotiation strategies in sales interactions. NVivo supported consistent coding and enabled comparison of linguistic patterns across cases. The analysis was guided by Bourdieu's (1991) concept of linguistic capital, treating language as a resource that generates social and economic advantage in tourism contexts. To ensure reliability and validity, the study followed Creswell's (2024) principles of qualitative trustworthiness, including repeated data review, coding refinement, and peer debriefing to reduce interpretive bias. Ethical clearance was obtained in accordance with institutional guidelines, and permission was obtained via email from YouTube for the use of the four selected videos. Although publicly available, all identities were anonymised to protect minors, and the data were used strictly for academic purposes.

4. Analysis and Findings

This analysis examined multilingual interactions in tourist street markets using Bourdieu's (1991) linguistic capital across four videos to understand how language functioned as a survival and business strategy in informal economies.

Table 1 presents extracted interaction data and analysis from Video 1, focusing on multilingual performance and linguistic capital.

Table 1: Extracted Interaction Data from "Khmer Boy EB" Video

Interaction Type	Data Extract (Verbatim)
Multilingual claim	"I know how to speak in Cantonese, Chinese, English, Thai, Japanese, Korean, French, Spanish..."
Informal learning	"I learn from tourists"
Price statement	"Five for USD\$2" / "One dollar for one flute"
Sales persuasion	"Please buy one from me" / "I can sing for you"
Emotional appeal	"I don't have enough money to go to school" / "No money, no future"
Tourist interaction	"Do you speak Spanish?" / "Can you speak Thai?"
Tourist response	"You are so clever" / "Wow, how about speaking in Cantonese?"
Language switching	French: "Oui", Spanish: "Sí", Thai counting, Mandarin negotiation

The extracted data demonstrates how linguistic capital is actively performed and converted into economic advantage within the informal tourist market. The boy's explicit claim of speaking multiple languages reflects a high accumulation of linguistic capital, which functions as a strategic asset in attracting and engaging international tourists. According to Bourdieu (1991), linguistic capital gains value only within specific social fields; in this case, the tourist market operates as a linguistic marketplace where multilingual ability becomes a competitive resource.

The statement "I learn from tourists" highlights that linguistic capital is socially acquired through interaction rather than formal education. This reinforces Bourdieu's argument that capital is unevenly distributed and shaped by social exposure. The boy's ability to switch between languages such as French, Spanish, Thai, and Mandarin during sales interactions shows strategic deployment of linguistic resources, allowing him to adapt instantly to different tourist identities and maximize communicative effectiveness.

Economic phrases such as "Five for USD\$2" demonstrate direct conversion of linguistic capital into economic capital through transactional negotiation. At the same time, persuasive and emotional expressions such as "No money for school" function as symbolic capital, designed to evoke empathy and increase the likelihood of purchase. Tourist responses such as praising the boy as "clever" or engaging in multilingual interaction provide symbolic validation, reinforcing the value of his linguistic performance. Overall, the data illustrates that multilingualism in this context operates not only as communication but as a survival-driven business strategy embedded in everyday market exchanges.

Table 2 presents extracted interaction data and analysis from Video 2, highlighting multilingual performance and linguistic capital dynamics.

Table 2: Extracted Interaction Data from 'Dutch Polyglot Speaks 18 Languages'

Interaction Type	Data Extract (Verbatim)
Multilingual claim	"I can speak 18 languages" / "I learned most languages from tourists"
Informal learning	"I learned it from tourists here" / "I watch Chinese animations"
Code-switching	Rapid switching across Mandarin, Russian, French, Thai, Hebrew, etc.
Economic activity	"It's 28 euro" / selling drawings, juice, souvenirs
Tourist engagement	"You are awesome" / "You speak very good..."
Social bonding	"Can we be friends?" / "Let's hug" / "I want a picture"
Emotional/personal talk	"I don't have money, I'm a poor artist"
Cultural talk	discussions about food, beer, culture, countries
Language performance	counting, greetings, jokes in multiple languages
Identity framing	"I love my job here" / "I'm a drawer (artist)"

The data from Video 2 demonstrates a highly dynamic performance of linguistic capital within a tourist market environment. The speaker's claim of speaking "18 languages" represents an extreme accumulation of linguistic capital, which is strategically displayed to attract attention, establish credibility, and enhance interaction with diverse tourists. According to Bourdieu (1991), linguistic capital only gains value when it is recognised within a social field; in this case, the tourist space functions as a linguistic marketplace where multilingual performance is socially rewarded and economically useful.

A key feature evident in the data is informal language acquisition, as the speaker repeatedly states that languages were learned “from tourists” and through exposure such as media consumption. This reflects the Bourdieusian idea that capital is socially produced and embedded in interactional environments rather than formal institutions. The tourist site becomes a space of continuous learning and reinforcement of linguistic capital through real-time exchange.

The extensive code-switching across languages such as Mandarin, Russian, French, Thai, Hebrew, Vietnamese, and others illustrates the strategic mobilisation of linguistic resources. Language is not used in a fixed or grammatical sense but as a flexible tool for engagement, persuasion, and rapport-building. This reinforces linguistic capital as a performative resource rather than static competence.

Economic exchanges (selling drawings and items like juice and souvenirs) demonstrate the conversion of linguistic capital into economic capital. The ability to communicate in multiple languages increases sales opportunities and strengthens customer relationships. At the same time, emotional and relational expressions such as “Can we be friends?” and “I’m a poor artist” function as symbolic capital, used to create intimacy and encourage purchase or social support.

Tourist responses such as praise (“You are awesome”, “You speak very good...”) provide symbolic validation, confirming the legitimacy of the speaker’s linguistic capital. Overall, the interaction shows that multilingualism in this context operates simultaneously as a survival strategy, economic tool, and identity performance within informal tourism economies.

Table 3 presents extracted interaction data and analysis from Video 3, examining survival-based multilingualism and linguistic capital use.

Table 3: Extracted Interaction Data from ‘Ravi – Lingo Kid (Mumbai Hanging Garden)’

Interaction Type	Data Extract (Verbatim)
Multilingual ability	“English, French, Italian, German, Chinese, Japanese, Spanish”
Informal language acquisition	“I picked up the languages from foreigners who visit the park”
Economic activity	“selling peacock feather fans... 15 rupees”
Survival discourse	“I have to earn a living... I don’t have a choice”
Educational limitation	“I don’t know English well... English is needed for a good job”
Aspirations	“I wanted to become a guide”
Family responsibility	“I have to look after my granny... my dad is unwell”
Emotional appeal	“We were very poor... I regret I was not able to get education”
Code-mixed selling talk	“air-conditions very good pressure fans...”
Tourist feedback	“People tell me I’m talented... I’m famous on YouTube”

Interpretation Based on Bourdieu’s Linguistic Capital (1991)

The case of Ravi (“Lingo Kid”) illustrates a strong intersection between linguistic capital, economic survival, and structural inequality within informal tourism labour. His multilingual ability in languages such as English, French, Italian, German, Chinese,

Japanese, and Spanish represents an accumulated form of linguistic capital gained informally through repeated interaction with tourists. In Bourdieu's (1991) terms, this capital is only valuable when it is recognised within a social field, and in this case, the tourist space in Mumbai's Hanging Garden functions as a site where linguistic skills can be partially converted into economic survival.

Ravi's statement that he "picked up languages from foreigners" highlights the informal and experiential nature of linguistic capital acquisition. Unlike institutional learning, his language skills are developed through necessity-driven interaction, where communication is directly tied to selling fans and earning income. His code-mixed sales talk reflects strategic but non-standard linguistic performance, showing that linguistic capital in informal economies does not require grammatical accuracy but functional effectiveness for persuasion and transaction.

A key dimension in this case is the strong presence of survival discourse. Ravi's repeated emphasis on poverty, family responsibility, and lack of education demonstrates how linguistic capital is embedded within broader socioeconomic constraints. His multilingualism does not function primarily as upward mobility capital but as survival capital, enabling him to continue informal work due to limited alternatives. This contrasts with formal tourism literature where multilingualism is often associated with career advancement (Khan & Khan, 2023; Misno et al., 2024).

Tourist reactions, including praise for his talent and encouragement to study, provide symbolic validation of his linguistic capital. However, this recognition does not necessarily translate into structural change, highlighting the gap between symbolic appreciation and material opportunity. Overall, Ravi's case demonstrates that linguistic capital in informal tourist markets is deeply unequal, simultaneously functioning as a tool for survival, identity performance, and limited economic mobility within structurally constrained environments.

Table 4 presents extracted interaction data and analysis from Video 4, focusing on interview insights into linguistic capital and survival.

Table 4: Extracted Interaction Data from 'Ravi Interview (Lingo Kid)'

Interaction Type	Data Extract (Verbatim)
Multilingual claim	"I learned English, German, Chinese, Japanese, Spanish"
Informal learning	"I learned everything from tourists, drivers, guides"
Survival selling	"I sell fans every day... I have to earn a living"
Family responsibility	"I support my family of 12"
Early work entry	"I started selling from a young age (around 5-6 years)"
Code-mixed speech	Mixed English-Hindi sentences in selling explanations
Economic exchange	"50 rupees / 1 dollar / 5 dollar per fan"
Tourist learning process	"I copy what tourists say" / "I learn from accent"
Validation from tourists	"People tell me I'm talented"
Education limitation	"I don't have proper education, I regret it"
Cultural exposure	Mentions tourists from USA, Germany, Italy, Spain, etc.
Identity framing	"I am just selling to support family business"

Interpretation Based on Bourdieu's Linguistic Capital (1991)

The interview with Ravi provides a deeper insight into how linguistic capital operates as a survival-based resource within informal tourism economies. His multilingual ability is not the result of formal education but is acquired through repeated exposure to tourists, taxi drivers, and guides. In Bourdieusian terms, this demonstrates that linguistic capital is socially embedded and accumulated through practice within a specific field—in this case, the tourist marketplace. Ravi's claim that he "learned everything from tourists" shows how linguistic capital is directly produced through interaction rather than institutional learning.

A central feature in the data is the strong presence of survival discourse. Ravi repeatedly emphasizes that he must work to support his family of twelve, indicating that his linguistic capital is tied to economic necessity rather than upward professional mobility. His early entry into work further highlights structural constraints that shape his limited access to formal education. This positions his multilingualism as survival capital, where language functions primarily as a tool for earning daily income rather than long-term career advancement.

The data also shows how Ravi actively converts linguistic capital into economic capital through code-mixed selling language and price negotiation. His ability to adjust language based on tourists' accents and responses reflects adaptive linguistic competence. However, this competence is functional rather than standardized, showing that effectiveness in communication matters more than grammatical accuracy in informal tourism markets.

Tourist validation plays an important symbolic role, as Ravi is frequently described as "talented" and "famous online." From a Bourdieusian perspective, this represents symbolic capital, where recognition from tourists enhances his social visibility but does not necessarily change his economic conditions. Overall, the interview illustrates that linguistic capital in informal tourism settings is deeply unequal, simultaneously functioning as a survival strategy, a communicative tool, and a form of symbolic recognition within global tourist encounters.

4.1. Summary of Findings

The analysis of four videos demonstrates that multilingualism in informal tourist street markets operates as a form of linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1991) that is actively performed, strategically used, and socially recognised within tourist interactions. Across all cases, participants displayed varying levels of multilingual ability, which were largely acquired through informal exposure to tourists rather than formal education, highlighting the social and experiential nature of language learning in these contexts.

A key finding is that multilingualism consistently functioned as a business strategy, where language switching, code-mixing, and multilingual claims were used to attract attention, build rapport, and increase sales. In Videos 1 and 2, language was strongly used as a persuasive and performative tool, with rapid switching between global languages enhancing customer engagement and reinforcing symbolic recognition from tourists. This shows that linguistic capital becomes most valuable when it is visibly performed in real-time interactions.

In Videos 3 and 4, multilingualism was more strongly connected to survival and socioeconomic necessity, particularly in Ravi's case, where language skills were directly linked to supporting family income and sustaining daily livelihood. Here, linguistic capital functioned less as upward professional mobility and more as survival capital, shaped by poverty, limited education, and structural constraints. Despite this, tourists frequently provided symbolic validation (e.g., praising talent or fame), which reinforced social recognition but did not necessarily lead to economic transformation.

Overall, the findings reveal that linguistic capital in informal tourist markets operates on a continuum between performance, persuasion, and survival. While it can generate economic benefits through sales, it is also deeply unequal and context-dependent. Multilingualism in these settings is therefore not only a communicative skill but a survival-driven and economically embedded practice shaped by global tourism interactions and power asymmetries.

5. Discussion

The analysis of the four video datasets demonstrates that multilingualism in informal tourist street markets operates as a form of linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1991) that is socially constructed, economically functional, and deeply embedded in survival contexts. Across all four cases, multilingual ability was not formally acquired but developed through repeated exposure to tourists, reinforcing the idea that language learning in tourism spaces is experiential and interaction-driven. This finding strongly aligns with Nur Izzati and Abdullah (2017), Khan and Khan (2023), and Misno et al. (2024), who emphasised the importance of multilingual competence in tourism. However, the present study extends their arguments by showing that such competence often emerges outside formal education systems, particularly among informal vendors and child workers.

A key cross-case pattern observed in Tables 1 to 4 is the conversion of linguistic capital into economic capital. In all videos, language was directly used for selling goods, negotiating prices, and persuading tourists. For example, phrases such as 'Five for USD\$2' (Video 1) and adaptive multilingual selling strategies (Videos 2-4) demonstrate how linguistic resources were strategically mobilised for transactional purposes. This supports Luo's (2022) argument that language in tourism is commodified; however, the present findings highlight that commodification occurs in highly immediate, informal, and survival-oriented conditions rather than structured tourism industries.

Another significant finding is the role of code-switching and multilingual performance as interactional strategies. Videos 1 and 2 particularly showed rapid switching across languages such as French, Mandarin, Spanish, Thai, and Russian, which enhanced communicative flexibility and tourist engagement. This aligns with Diana et al. (2022) and Tian and Tian (2023), who noted the visibility of multilingualism in tourism spaces. However, this study further demonstrates that multilingualism is not only a visible linguistic landscape feature but also a performative and embodied practice used for persuasion and identity construction in real-time exchanges.

The findings also highlight the importance of emotional and symbolic capital within multilingual interactions. In Videos 1 and 3, expressions such as 'No money for school' and 'I have to earn a living' functioned as emotional appeals that complemented linguistic performance. Similarly, tourist responses such as 'You are so clever' or 'You

are talented' provided symbolic validation. This supports Chen et al. (2024) and Al-Sofi (2024), who argued that linguistic diversity enhances positive perceptions of destinations and speakers. However, the present study reveals a critical limitation: while symbolic recognition is frequent, it does not necessarily lead to structural economic mobility, particularly for child vendors.

A further important insight is the contrast between survival multilingualism and professional multilingualism. In Video 3 and Video 4 (Ravi's case), multilingualism was strongly tied to survival needs, family responsibility, and economic necessity. Unlike studies such as Misno et al. (2024) and Batenova (2026), which associate multilingualism with career development and employability, this study shows that in informal markets, linguistic capital functions primarily as a survival strategy rather than upward mobility capital. Ravi's repeated emphasis on poverty and lack of education highlights how structural inequality shapes access to formal linguistic capital.

Additionally, the data reveal that identity construction and self-positioning are central to multilingual performance. In Video 2, the speaker framed himself as a 'drawer (artist)' and 'poor artist,' while in Video 1 and 3, children and vendors used multilingualism to construct identities as capable, entertaining, or socially engaging individuals. This supports Seraphin et al. (2021), who emphasised the need to understand language diversity beyond functional communication, incorporating identity and cultural expression in tourism research.

Overall, the comparative analysis of all four videos demonstrates that multilingualism in informal tourist markets is not a stable skill but a fluid, context-dependent resource. It simultaneously functions as economic capital, symbolic capital, emotional capital, and survival capital. While previous literature largely focuses on multilingualism as a positive asset for tourism development and professional advancement, this study reveals a more complex reality where linguistic capital is unevenly distributed and deeply shaped by socioeconomic constraints and informal labour conditions.

6. Implications of the Study

The study had important theoretical implications for understanding multilingualism in tourism. It extended Bourdieu's (1991) concept of linguistic capital by showing that it was not only associated with formal education or professional tourism settings but also operated within informal street markets. Linguistic capital was found to be informally acquired through interaction with tourists and was mainly used for immediate economic survival. The findings also challenged earlier studies (e.g., Chen et al., 2024; Misno et al., 2024) by showing that multilingualism did not always lead to upward mobility, but often remained within survival-based economic activities.

The study also had sociolinguistic implications. It showed that multilingualism functioned as a flexible and context-dependent resource. Code-switching, language mixing, and emotional expressions were used strategically in real-time interactions to attract tourists and support sales. This supported previous research (Luo, 2022; Tian & Tian, 2023), but further showed that language use in informal tourism was highly performative and shaped by necessity rather than formal competence. The study also highlighted that linguistic performance was closely linked to identity construction and social interaction in tourist spaces.

Practically, the study suggested that informal vendors, including children, were already using multilingual skills as part of their daily survival strategies. It indicated a need for policy support such as access to education, language training, and social protection to improve long-term opportunities. The findings also showed that viral digital content had increased the visibility of such vendors, but this visibility did not always lead to improved living conditions. Therefore, more ethical awareness was needed in representing informal workers in tourism media.

7. Conclusion

This study examined how multilingualism functioned as a form of linguistic capital in informal tourist street markets through the analysis of four video cases. The findings showed that multilingual abilities were not formally learned but were acquired through continuous interaction with tourists. In all four cases, language was actively used as a practical resource for communication, persuasion, and selling goods. The study confirmed that linguistic capital, as proposed by Bourdieu (1991), was not only socially constructed but also highly context-dependent, gaining value within specific tourist market interactions.

The analysis also showed that multilingualism was closely linked to economic survival. Vendors and child street sellers used code-switching, multilingual expressions, and emotional appeals to engage tourists and support sales. Although tourists often provided positive feedback and symbolic recognition, this did not always lead to improved economic or social conditions. Instead, multilingualism functioned mainly as a survival strategy within informal and unequal economic settings. This finding challenged earlier studies that mainly associated multilingual skills with career advancement and professional development in tourism contexts.

Overall, the study highlighted that multilingualism in informal tourism spaces was a complex phenomenon involving linguistic, economic, emotional, and symbolic dimensions. It demonstrated that language was not only a communication tool but also a resource shaped by inequality, necessity, and lived experience in street-market economies.

Further studies could explore a larger number of video cases or adopt ethnographic fieldwork to gain deeper insight into real-life multilingual interactions in different tourism destinations. Future research could also examine the long-term effects of informal multilingual learning on children's education and life opportunities. In addition, comparative studies between formal tourism workers and informal vendors could further explain how linguistic capital operates differently across structured and unstructured economic environments.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the relevant administrative authority before the research commenced. In addition, permission was obtained via email from YouTube for the use of the four selected videos in this study. The research adhered to established ethical standards, ensuring that all data collection, analysis, and reporting were conducted responsibly and in line with research integrity requirements.

Acknowledgement

We sincerely thank UNITAR International University for its support, facilities, and academic environment for this research. Appreciation is extended to all researchers, colleagues, and contributors for their guidance, feedback, and assistance. Their expertise, encouragement, and collaboration were instrumental in the successful completion and publication of this manuscript.

Funding

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to UNITAR International University Malaysia for the financial support provided for this study.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest related to this study. They confirm that there are no financial, professional, or personal relationships that could have influenced the conduct, findings, or publication of this research.

References

- Al-Sofi, B. B. M. A. (2024). Linguistic landscape and multilingualism in tourist destinations: A sociolinguistic analysis. *Journal of Cultural Heritage Management and Sustainable Development*. Advance online publication, Emerald Insight. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCHMSD-02-2024-0034>
- Abdul Zalil, N. A., & Pek, L. S. (2024). English language in tourism industry: A scoping review. *Journal of International Crisis and Risk Communication Research*, 7(S2), 26-33. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14775325>
- Ai, S. K., & Khan, A. (2024). *Impact of multilingualism on the development of tourism*. *Journal of International Crisis and Risk Communication Research*, 7(S2), =15. <https://doi.org/10.63278/jicrcr.vi.1090>
- Batenova, I. (2026). The role and benefits of learning different second foreign languages in tourism careers. *World Scientific Reports*, 12. <https://ojs.scipub.de/index.php/WSR/article/view/782>
- Božinović, N., & Sindik, J. (2013). Importance of foreign languages for a career in tourism as perceived by students in different years of study. *Journal for Studies in Management and Planning*, 9(7), 1-13.
- Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power*. Harvard University Press. <https://www.scirp.org/reference/referencespapers?referenceid=3057021>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic analysis. In H. Cooper, P. M. Camic, D. L. Long, A. T. Panter, D. Rindskopf, & K. J. Sher (Eds.), *APA handbook of research methods in psychology: Vol. 2. Research designs: Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological, and biological* (pp. 57–71). American Psychological Association.
- Chen, H. (Y.), Wang, L., Zhang, X., Wei, W., & Lyu, J. (2024). Does linguistic diversity make destinations more sophisticated? Exploring the effects on destination personality. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*, 31, 100828. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdmm.2023.100828>
- Creswell, J. W. (2024). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (6th ed.). SAGE Publications.

- Diana, P. N., Wildaniyah, T., Oktavia, T. A. T., & Ekawati, R. (2022). Linguistic landscape of Sumenep tourism destination. *Prosodi*, 16(1), 70-81. <https://doi.org/10.21107/prosodi.v16i1.13379>
- Khan, A. S., & Khan, A. (2023). *The importance of multilingual skills in tourist guiding: Meeting the needs of global travelers*. Sunrise University.
- Luo, Y. (2022). The role of language and cultural commodification in tourism. In *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*.637,3-6.https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-494069-11-1_6
- Misno, N. F. B., Chew, B. H. Y., & Abdullah, N. B. H. (2024). Students' perception on multilingualism for career advancement in tourism sector. *UICELE Proceedings*.
- Najamudin, N., Putra, E., & Sukarddin. (2026). Multilingual communication as economic and cultural capital: An ethnographic study of tourism stakeholders in Moyo Island, Indonesia. *Tourism Recreation Research*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2026.2670294>
- Nur Izzati, B. S., & Abdullah, A. T. H. (2017). The role of multilingualism in enhancing tourism sector in Malaysia. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 7(7), 816–
- Seraphin, H., Kennell, J., Mandić, A., Smith, S., & Kozak, M. (2021). Language diversity and literature reviews in tourism research. University of Surrey. <https://openresearch.surrey.ac.uk/esploro/outputs/journalArticle/LANGUAGE-DIVERSITY-AND-LITERATURE-REVIEWS-IN/99679865602346>
- Tian, J., & Tian, J. (2023). A study of multilingual tourism language landscape in Xi'an under the perspective of linguistic economics-taking Great Tang All Day Mall, Hui Min Street and Big Wild Goose Pagoda as examples. *Journal of Social Science Humanities and Literature*, 6(4), 184-189. [https://doi.org/10.53469/jsshl.2023.06\(04\).34](https://doi.org/10.53469/jsshl.2023.06(04).34)