

Multicultural Identity Construction of Malaysian Chinese Youth on Social Media: A Multimodal Discourse Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The rise of social media has reshaped communication, generating new linguistic phenomena. Malaysian Chinese youth, immersed in Chinese family traditions and Malay and English social environments, leverage platforms like TikTok to construct their self-identity. Despite this complexity, the multilingual and multimodal dimensions of such practices remain understudied. This study, employing multimodal discourse analysis supported by systemic functional linguistics (SF-MDA), addresses this gap by investigating: What systemic functional linguistic and multimodal features do Malaysian Chinese youth employ on TikTok to construct their multicultural identity? The findings reveal firstly that two distinct patterns emerge: English-dominated multilingual practices, and code-mixing phenomenon (English-Chinese, or English-Malay mixing). Secondly, Malaysian Chinese youth online communication transcends Malay, English, and Chinese, integrating visual components such as signs, images, body language, and facial expressions. Non-linguistic visual aspects are utilised more often than non-linguistic auditory elements. And thirdly, five multimodal strategies are identified: visual-autonomous, visual-dominant, auditory-autonomous, auditory-dominant, and co-dominant, with co-dominant being the most frequently employed.

Keywords: Malaysian Chinese youth, multicultural identity construction, SF-MDA, social media, TikTok

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INTRODUCTION

The initial two generations of Malaysian Chinese prioritised their Chinese cultural legacy over their Malaysian national identification, whereas later generations increasingly identify as Malaysian (Gabriel, 2016). Social media has become an essential platform for the expression and negotiation

of identities, allowing young Malaysian Chinese to disseminate pictures and narratives that embody hybrid cultural experiences (Shafie et al., 2012; Soto et al., 2023).

Despite the recent expansion of research on multicultural identities (Hong et al., 2016; Miller & Collette, 2019), a notable gap persists regarding the influence of social media—especially visual and multimodal platforms—on the formation of these identities in transcultural contexts such as Malaysia. Current research on online identity formation frequently adheres to mono-cultural paradigms (Huang et al., 2020) or primarily emphasises textual discourse, overlooking the extensive semiotic capabilities of multimodal communication (Kress & Leeuwen, 2020; O'Halloran, 2023). Moreover, although certain scholars have explored digital identity performances in general (Georgalou, 2016; Schwartz & Halegoua, 2015), limited research has focused on how Malaysian Chinese youth strategically utilise multimodal resources to express intricate, context-specific identities that balance ethnic heritage and national affiliation.

This study seeks to fill these gaps by employing a multimodal discourse analysis methodology to investigate how young Malaysian Chinese utilise platforms such as TikTok to develop and express multicultural identity. This not only extends theoretical considerations of multicultural identity into digital and visual domains but also provides actual insights from an underrepresented sociocultural setting.

METHODS

This study utilises multimodal discourse analysis to examine how Malaysian Chinese teenagers on TikTok exploit systemic functional linguistic and visual resources to form their multicultural identity. This research examines the subsequent inquiries: Which languages (Malay, English, or Chinese) are utilised in these videos? Which modes, linguistic or non-linguistic, are favoured? How do the interactions between visual and auditory aspects enhance the representation of multicultural identity?

The sample comprises 285 TikTok videos produced by five Malaysian Chinese content creators. The creators were chosen via stratified random sampling, with each regarded as an individual stratum to guarantee diversity in content style, audience reach, and performance methodology. This strategy improves the sample's representativeness across diverse expressive methods and viewer engagements. Videos were restricted to those released between December 2020 and June 2024 to document contemporary multimodal practices, emphasising present identity performances above longitudinal progress. To guarantee cultural relevance and significant viewer involvement, only publicly accessible videos with a minimum of 1,500 likes were considered. Ethical considerations were mitigated by anonymising all usernames and identifiable metadata from publicly accessible TikTok videos. Despite the absence of a requirement for informed permission under existing

criteria for public material, we guaranteed that no private or sensitive information was incorporated into the study.

The analytical approach incorporates Halliday's (2000) Systemic Functional Grammar, Kress and Leeuwen's (2020) Visual Grammar, and O'Halloran's (2023) multimodal analysis methodology. This tripartite paradigm facilitates a detailed analysis of meaning construction across several modalities and their interaction in expressing identity. Coding categories were established to document language selection, modality preference, and visual-auditory interactions. Utilising Cohn's (2016) taxonomy of multimodal interaction, visual-auditory connections were categorised into two primary types—autonomous and dominant—each subdivided into five subtypes: auditory-autonomous, visual-autonomous, auditory-dominant, visual-dominant, and co-dominant.

To guarantee analytical transparency and reproducibility, two independent coders were instructed using a pilot sample of 30 videos. Inter-coder agreement was assessed using Cohen's kappa, resulting in satisfactory reliability ($\kappa \geq 0.80$ for all principal categories). The use of TikTok is justified by its popularity among youth and its inherently multimodal structure (Madianou, 2020; Shuter, 2012), which enables intricate identity formation through the combined use of video, audio, text, and effects. This methodological rigour enhances the validity of the coding process and the subsequent interpretation of the semiotic construction of multicultural identities in digital contexts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of TikTok short videos indicated that subjects employed English-dominant multilingual practices, with English comprising 51.01% of written language and 33.93% of spoken language (Table 1). Malay was documented in writing form at a rate of 15.4%, however Chinese was predominantly utilised in oral communication, accounting for 23.66% of verbal expressions. The patterns indicate that subjects strategically utilised multilingual resources to improve communication with their target audience and to convey an internationalised, diverse representation of Malaysian Chinese youth in digital environments, aligning with research on identity performance in digital multilingual contexts (Albury, 2017; Gabriel, 2016). Moreover, code-switching between languages within a single sentence was common, happening in 24.75% of written English and 16.96% of spoken English segments. This linguistic blending of Chinese, Malay, and English demonstrates a deliberate initiative to promote cultural integration and articulate a hybrid identity that resonates with both local Malaysian and global youth cultures (Hong et al., 2016; Pekerti & Thomas, 2016).

Malaysian Chinese youth had a stronger preference for non-linguistic visual features over non-linguistic auditory components. Of the five subjects, three (samples 1, 2, and 4)

exhibited a distinct inclination for visual modalities, with usage rates of 50.00%, 51.67%, and 15.83%, respectively (Table 2). Visual symbols are typically more immediate and globally accessible, facilitating faster understanding and wider engagement across varied audiences (Kress & Leeuwen, 2020). This preference highlights a deliberate application of visual media to traverse multicultural environments, affirm self-identity, and offer an open, inclusive portrayal of Malaysian Chinese youth. This corresponds with research on identity expression via visual indicators on social media (Schwartz & Halegoua, 2015) and the significance of multimodal resources in constructing digital identity (Kress & Leeuwen, 2020).

Table 1
Language use distribution in TikTok videos of Malaysian Chinese youth

Language Type	Written Language (%)	Spoken Language (%)	Primary Function
English	51.01%	33.93%	Projecting an internationalised image, primary tool for communication
Malay	15.40%	21.88%	Local cultural embedding, communication with domestic audiences
Chinese	6.57%	23.66%	Ethnic cultural identity, communication within the Chinese community
Code-switching	24.75% (within English)	16.96% (within English)	Constructing a hybrid identity, enhancing cultural integration
Other	2.27%	3.57%	--

Table 2
Preference for non-linguistic modalities (Sample analysis)

Sample ID	Non-linguistic Visual Modality (%)	Non-linguistic Audio Modality (%)	Explanation
Sample 1	50.00%	30.00%	High reliance on visual symbols (e.g., text labels, effects)
Sample 2	51.67%	15.00%	Visual as the dominant modality for rapid information and emotional delivery
Sample 3	19.15%	38.29%	--
Sample 4	15.83%	5.00%	More balanced but still skewed towards visual elements
Sample 5	15.83%	25.00%	--
Overall Trend	Dominant (average: 30.50%)	Secondary (average: 22.66%)	Visual modalities are more intuitive and facilitate cross-cultural understanding and resonance

The analysis of multimodal relations revealed that auditory-autonomous and auditory-dominant categories were the least prevalent (Table 3), indicating that sound assumes a secondary role in these TikTok videos. In contrast, visual features were utilised more extensively to communicate meaning and construct identity (Bateman, 2014; O'Halloran, 2023). Furthermore, co-dominant multimodal relationships—where visual and aural components function synergistically—constituted 49.48% of the content. The combined utilisation of both modalities enhances meaning-making, facilitating improved representation, interaction, and compositional equilibrium, as discussed in multimodal discourse analysis (Cohn, 2016; Kress & Leeuwen, 2006).

Table 3
Multimodal relationship types and their functions

Type	Importance	Primary Function in Identity Construction
Visual-dominant	19.51%	Independently conveys core information, shapes intuitive identity image
Audio-dominant	3.83%	Plays a weak auxiliary role in the selected samples
Co-dominant	49.48%	Audio and visual complement each other for complete meaning-making, effectively constructing a multicultural identity
Audio-autonomous	3.48%	Has limited significance in meaning transmission

CONCLUSION

These findings highlight the substantial influence of multilingual and multimodal activities on TikTok, demonstrating how Malaysian Chinese youth actively curate their heterogeneous identities. This indicates that for digital natives, multiculturalism is experienced and articulated the daily, creative combination of global and local semiotic resources, transcending conventional demographic classifications. The ramifications pertain to educators and politicians, underscoring the necessity to acknowledge these digital practices as legitimate and intricate forms of cultural expression. Future research should investigate the interaction between online identity performances and offline social networks to enhance comprehension of the comprehensive identity formation among this diverse youth group.

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