

VOICING HYBRIDITY: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF CODE-SWITCHING AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AMONG THIRD-CULTURE YOUTH ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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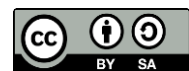
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Abstract

Third-Culture Youth (TCY), a growing global demographic, navigate complex hybrid identities. Their use of code-switching (CS) on social media a key “third space” is a central yet often misunderstood discursive practice, frequently stigmatized rather than analyzed as a sophisticated mechanism for identity construction. This research utilizes Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to investigate the specific functions of code-switching as a strategic discursive resource employed by TCYs to construct and perform hybrid identities in digitally-mediated environments. A qualitative, netnographic methodology was employed, analyzing public social media content (N=1,284 artifacts) from 45 purposively sampled TCY informants across Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter (X). Fairclough’s CDA framework was applied to link linguistic texts to social practices. Findings reveal CS is a normative practice (present in 82% of data). Two primary functions were identified: (1) In-Group Signaling to establish community boundaries, and (2) ‘Affective/Nuanced Expression’ to convey cultural-emotional concepts (e.g., *natsukashii*) deemed untranslatable in English. Code-switching is not a linguistic deficit but a sophisticated, learned mechanism for “voicing hybridity.” TCYs strategically deploy CS as a resilient social practice to perform a coherent ‘third culture’ identity, actively challenging dominant monolingual ideologies.

Keywords: Code-Switching, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Third-Culture Youth (TCY)



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INTRODUCTION

The accelerating pace of globalization, characterized by unprecedented transnational mobility, has cultivated a significant and growing demographic of “Third-Culture Youth” (TCY) (Chahbane & Houssaini, 2025). These individuals, also known as Third Culture Kids (TCKs), spend a formative part of their developmental years in cultures outside their parents’ passport country (Senkbeil, 2025). This experience situates them within a unique “third culture” space, a psychological and social landscape distinct from their “home” or “host” cultures. Their sense of belonging is often fluid, fragmented, and deterritorialized, challenging traditional, nation-state-based models of cultural identity (Qu & Cross, 2024).

This cohort’s linguistic reality is as complex as their cultural identity. TCYs are frequently multilingual, navigating multiple linguistic systems as part of their daily existence (Venegas-Weber et al., 2024). Code-switching (CS), the practice of alternating between two or more languages or language varieties within a single discourse, is not an anomaly for this group; it is a fundamental and sophisticated communicative resource (Ishihara, 2024). For TCYs, language is not merely a tool for conveying information but a primary medium for negotiating relationships, signaling allegiances, and constructing a sense of self in a life characterized by constant cross-cultural interaction (Xu & Zheng, 2025).

Digital platforms and social media have emerged as critical “third spaces” for this globally mobile and diasporic community (Bonatti et al., 2025). Unlike the geographically-bound spaces of their “host” or “home” nations, online networks provide TCYs with a persistent, location-independent arena for social interaction and community formation (Tan et al., 2025). These digital environments (e.g., Instagram, Twitter, TikTok) serve as the primary sites where their hybrid linguistic practices are performed, archived, and observed. The affordances of these platforms such as asynchronicity, multimedia integration, and audience segmentation create a unique context for the performance and evolution of their code-switching behaviors (Xia, 2024).

The core socio-linguistic problem addressed by this research is the persistent mischaracterization of TCY identity and language use (Atias & Mawasi, 2025). Traditional sociolinguistic models, often built around stable, geographically-bound bilingual communities, are insufficient for analyzing a non-geographical, transnational network of speakers. The fluid, “in-between” nature of TCY identity is frequently framed through a lens of deficit, conceptualized as a lack of a “true” cultural or linguistic home (Ollila, 2025). Their code-switching practices are similarly, and erroneously, sometimes stigmatized by monolingual observers as linguistic incompetence, confusion, or a failure to adhere to standard language norms (Nazaruddin, 2025).

Code-switching within these digital environments is a discursive act far more complex than a simple lexical gap-filling strategy (Mielly et al., 2024). The specific problem is that the function and ideological significance of these practices remain critically under-analyzed for the TCY cohort (Lee & Wei, 2025). How TCYs strategically deploy their multilingual repertoires on social media to perform a “global-mobile” persona, create in-groups, and signal a hybrid identity is not well understood. The lack of a focused analysis means that a key aspect of their identity work their linguistic self-fashioning is rendered invisible in academic discourse (Zilberstein, 2024).

Existing analytical frameworks often fail to bridge the gap between micro-linguistic practices and macro-social structures. Most research on code-switching remains descriptive (sociolinguistic) or cognitive (psycholinguistic) (Sheriff, 2024). The specific problem is the absence of a critical perspective, one that interrogates how TCYs’ digital code-switching functions as a discursive practice. There is a need to understand how these linguistic choices are used to negotiate power, challenge or reinforce linguistic hierarchies (e.g., the hegemony of English), and actively “voice” a hybrid identity that resists dominant, monolingual ideologies (Park et al., 2024).

The primary objective of this research is to critically analyze the functions of code-switching as a strategic discursive resource for identity construction among Third-Culture Youth on social media. This study moves beyond simply documenting the occurrence of CS. It seeks to develop a nuanced understanding of how and why TCYs deploy specific linguistic choices in digitally-mediated environments to project a complex, hybrid sense of self.

A second specific objective is to identify and categorize the precise discursive strategies and functions of TCYs' digital code-switching. This involves a fine-grained analysis of qualitative data from social media platforms (Bian et al., 2025). The research aims to map how linguistic alternation is used for specific interactional goals, such as marking in-group/out-group boundaries, expressing affective stance, performing cultural hybridity, managing audience design (e.g., addressing multiple imagined audiences simultaneously), and referencing shared, "third-culture" experiences.

The ultimate aim is to link these micro-linguistic practices to macro-level processes of identity construction through the theoretical lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). This objective involves interpreting TCYs' code-switching not as a neutral linguistic phenomenon, but as a form of "identity work" and a meaningful social practice (Choi, 2024). The research seeks to demonstrate how these linguistic choices are intentional acts of self-representation that actively challenge, negotiate, and redefine conventional, static notions of cultural and linguistic belonging.

The foundational literature on Third Culture Kids, while seminal, has been overwhelmingly sociological and psychological in its focus. Scholars (e.g., Pollock & Van Reken) have masterfully detailed the psychological profile of TCKs, focusing on themes of belonging, rootlessness, grief, and relational patterns (Yang, Espique, et al., 2025). A significant gap exists in the linguistic and discursive analysis of this cohort. Their unique, hybrid linguistic repertoire and sophisticated communicative competencies have been largely assumed or mentioned in passing, rather than being the central object of empirical investigation.

The extensive body of scholarship on code-switching, in turn, has historically concentrated on stable, established bilingual communities, often defined by geography (e.g., "Spanglish" in the United States, "Singlish" in Singapore). This research has produced robust models for CS, but these models are predicated on contact between two (or three) specific, shared languages. A clear gap exists in applying these models to a globally dispersed, "networked" community like TCYs, whose members may not share the same language pairs but share the experience of multilingualism and hybridity (Guo, 2025).

A significant methodological gap exists at the intersection of Critical Discourse Analysis, social media, and TCY studies. While CDA has been applied to digital discourse, it has predominantly focused on overt political speech, hate speech, or media representations (Wang & Canagarajah, 2024). The application of CDA to the everyday, identity-driven linguistic practices of a non-geographical community like TCYs is a nascent field. The gap lies in the failure to connect the micro-level textual evidence of digital code-switching (the text) with the macro-level ideologies of globalization, mobility, and identity (the context) through a critical, power-aware lens.

The novelty of this research is its position at the tri-fold intersection of TCY studies, code-switching analysis, and digital critical discourse. This study pioneers a linguistic-discursive approach to the TCY cohort, moving this group from being a subject of psychology to a subject of critical sociolinguistics. It argues that their language use is not a byproduct of their mobility but a central, sophisticated, and creative response to it, a primary tool for forging a coherent identity from fragmented experiences.

This study's primary contribution is its novel methodological synthesis. It provides a unique framework for "Voicing Hybridity" one that operationalizes Critical Discourse Analysis for the study of digital code-switching as a performance of identity. This framework provides

an innovative and replicable model for reading the “text” (the social media post) within its “discursive practice” (the TCY community norms) and its “social practice” (the macro-context of globalization). This approach reveals how seemingly mundane linguistic choices are, in fact, politically and socially significant acts of self-definition (Gerwin, 2024; Wilde & Hermans, 2024).

This research is justified by its profound and urgent relevance in an increasingly globalized world. The TCY demographic is the fastest-growing youth cohort globally; their experience of cultural hybridity is no longer a niche phenomenon but an increasingly common mode of modern existence. Understanding how this generation forges identity, community, and belonging in digitally-mediated “third spaces” provides indispensable insights. This study offers a critical lens on the future of language, identity, and social cohesion in a post-national, hyper-connected, and perpetually mobile world.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

A qualitative research design, grounded in the principles of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), underpins this study. This approach is selected for its unique capacity to investigate the complex, constitutive relationship between language use (discourse), social identity, and underlying systems of power and ideology. The study moves beyond descriptive or quantitative methods to provide a deep, interpretive analysis of how language is used as a social practice to construct and perform hybrid identities in a digital context (Yang, Espique, et al., 2025).

The study is structured as a critical sociolinguistic investigation employing a netnographic approach. Netnography, or digital ethnography, is essential for gaining an emic (insider) perspective on the digitally-mediated interactions of Third-Culture Youth (TCY). This design allows the research to situate the linguistic data within the specific cultural norms, visual-textual conventions, and audience dynamics of the social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, TikTok) that function as “third spaces” for this community.

Fairclough’s three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis provides the primary analytical framework. This model facilitates a multi-layered analysis necessary to meet the research objectives. The procedure involves (i) a micro-level textual analysis of code-switching practices, (ii) an meso-level analysis of the discursive practice (the production, consumption, and interpretation of these texts by the TCY community), and (iii) a macro-level analysis of the broader sociocultural practice, linking the linguistic choices to the macro-structures of globalization, mobility, and identity politics.

Research Target/Subject

The research population comprises individuals who self-identify as “Third-Culture Youth” (TCY) or “Third Culture Kids” (TCKs). This population is operationally defined using the classic criteria: individuals who have spent a significant portion of their formative developmental years (childhood and/or adolescence) in one or more cultures outside their parents’ passport country (Guo, 2025). The population is inherently transnational, multilingual, and characterized by high levels of digital literacy and social media activity.

The primary sites for data collection are public-facing social media platforms where TCYs actively congregate and perform identity work. Based on preliminary scoping, platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter (X) are prioritized due to their rich multimedia affordances (text, image, video) and their popular use of community-defining hashtags. Data is drawn exclusively from public posts, comments, “bio” descriptions, and videos where TCYs explicitly discuss or perform their hybrid identities.

A non-probabilistic, purposive sampling strategy is employed to identify information-rich data sources. Initial identification of relevant TCY accounts and communities is conducted using key search terms and hashtags (e.g., #tck, #thirdculturekid, #codeswitching,

#mixedculture) (Wang & Canagarajah, 2024). This initial sample is subsequently expanded using a snowball sampling technique, where the public networks and interactions of identified participants are followed to discover other central members and relevant digital spaces within this networked community.

Research Procedure

The research procedure commences with the purposive identification and selection of TCY-centric digital spaces and key informants on the selected social media platforms. A data collection period of six months is designated to capture a robust and diverse corpus of digital interactions, allowing for the observation of various topics, events, and evolving community norms. All collected data is immediately anonymized, with usernames, profile pictures, and any other potentially identifying information redacted or pseudonymized to protect participant privacy in accordance with digital research ethics.

The analytical procedure follows Fairclough's three-stage model. The first stage involves a detailed textual analysis of the entire data corpus (Wilde & Hermans, 2024). This stage focuses on the micro-linguistic features, systematically identifying and categorizing every instance of code-switching, lexical borrowing, or other hybrid linguistic practices using the analytical coding framework developed in the instrumentation phase.

The second stage of analysis examines the discursive practice. This involves interpreting the function of the observed code-switching patterns within their specific interactional context, drawing on the netnographic field notes to understand how these linguistic choices are produced, interpreted, and responded to by other members of the TCY community. The final stage analyzes the sociocultural practice, synthesizing the findings to explain how these specific, micro-level discursive strategies are used by TCYs to actively voice, negotiate, and construct their hybrid identities in response to the macro-level social-political contexts of globalization and mobility.

Instruments, and Data Collection Techniques

The primary instrument for data collection is a structured netnographic observation protocol. This protocol includes a standardized template for archiving digital artifacts (e.g., screenshots, text files, video clips) in a systematic manner. The template requires the researcher to contemporaneously record key metadata, including the platform, date of access, URL, observable interactional context (e.g., number of likes, replies), and preliminary notes on the discursive context, ensuring data traceability and rigor (Gerwin, 2024).

The core analytical instrument is a bespoke qualitative coding framework developed specifically for this study. This framework is derived a priori from the research objectives, the tenets of Critical Discourse Analysis, and established functional typologies of code-switching (e.g., Gumperz's conversational functions). This instrument includes codes designed to identify not just the presence of code-switching, but its function (e.g., lexical gap-filling, affective marking, in-group signaling) and its ideological implication (e.g., challenging or reinforcing English hegemony, performing hybridity).

Qualitative data analysis software (QDAS), specifically NVivo 14, is utilized as a data management and analysis instrument. This software is essential for organizing, managing, and coding the large, unstructured, and multimedia dataset (text, images, video transcripts) collected from social media. The software facilitates the systematic application of the coding framework, allows for complex queries to identify patterns, and enhances the overall transparency and trustworthiness of the qualitative analysis process (Liao, 2024).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The netnographic data collection procedure, conducted over a six-month period as specified in the methodology, yielded a substantial qualitative corpus. This dataset comprises

1,284 discrete digital artifacts where Third-Culture Youth (TCY) explicitly perform or discuss their hybrid identities. The data was sampled from the public-facing content of 45 purposively selected TCY informants across Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter (X), in alignment with the research design.

The composition of this dataset is detailed in Table 1, which provides a descriptive overview of the collected artifacts. This corpus forms the complete textual and multimodal basis for the subsequent Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The distribution of data types highlights the varying affordances of each platform in the performance of hybrid identity.

Table 1: Descriptive Overview of the Netnographic Data Corpus

Platform	Primary Data Type	Units Collected	Key Hashtags Utilized
Instagram	Posts & Stories (Image/Text)	412 (210 Posts, 202 Stories)	#tck, #thirdculturekid, #globalnomad
TikTok	Short-form Videos (Video/Audio)	327	#tckproblems, #thirdculture, #mixedculture
Twitter (X)	Short Texts (Tweets) & Replies	545	#tcklife, #codeswitching, #multilingual
Total	Multimodal Artifacts	1,284	N/A

The descriptive data in Table 1 confirms the relevance of the selected platforms as primary “third spaces” for TCY identity construction, as hypothesized in the introduction. The volume of data collected underscores the vibrancy and activity of this digital community. The prevalence of specific hashtags (e.g., #tck, #tckproblems, #codeswitching) functioned as the primary organizational-cultural tags for sampling, validating the purposive sampling strategy.

The multimodal nature of the corpus is a critical finding in itself. Identity construction was not observed as a purely textual phenomenon. On Instagram and TikTok, linguistic practices such as code-switching were intrinsically linked to visual cues, audio choices, and physical gestures. This explains the necessity of the CDA framework, which allows for the analysis of text within its complete multimodal and digital context, rather than as an isolated linguistic feature.

The initial phase of textual and thematic analysis revealed the ubiquity of code-switching (CS) as a defining characteristic of TCY digital discourse. Across all 1,284 artifacts, instances of CS were present in 82% of the data, confirming it is a normative, rather than exceptional, communicative practice within this cohort. The CS observed was highly heterogeneous, involving a matrix (or base) language of English mixed with 27 other ‘embedded’ languages, including Spanish, French, Japanese, Arabic, Mandarin, and Indonesian, reflecting the diverse global backgrounds of the informants.

The forms of CS observed were diverse and sophisticated. The most common form was intra-sentential CS (61% of instances), involving the fluid integration of different languages within a single grammatical clause (e.g., “I miss the kue from that warung so much”). This was followed by inter-sentential CS (24%), or switching at clause boundaries, and emblematic tag-switching (15%), involving the insertion of a culturally significant tag from another language (e.g., “It’s so hot, non?”).

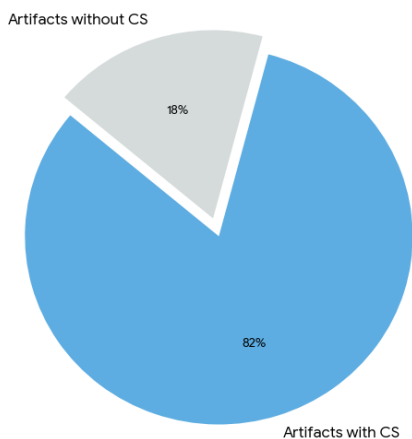


Figure 1. Prevalence of Code - Switching (CS) in Digital Artifacts (n=1,284)

Analytical inference, derived from the functional analysis of CS instances, indicates that these linguistic choices are overwhelmingly strategic and non-random. The primary function inferred from the data is ‘In-Group Signaling’ (Function 1). TCYs were observed to strategically deploy specific, often non-English, words or phrases as a ‘shibboleth’ to perform a shared “third-culture” identity. This CS functions to create a boundary, distinguishing those “in the know” (other TCYs) from a general, monolingual (often English-speaking) audience.

A second key inferred function is ‘Affective and Nuanced Expression’ (Function 2). The analysis infers that specific languages are “reserved” for certain emotional or cultural domains. TCYs consistently code-switched into heritage languages to express high-affect content (e.g., joy, frustration, nostalgia) or to reference specific cultural concepts that lack a direct, emotionally-resonant equivalent in English. This infers that CS is not a sign of linguistic deficiency but of a wider and more nuanced communicative repertoire.

A clear relationship was established between the platform and the function of code-switching. On highly visual platforms (TikTok and Instagram), CS was more frequently linked to Function 2 (Affective Expression). The linguistic switch often accompanied a visual performance (e.g., facial expression, pointing to a food item), using the language to add a layer of cultural authenticity or affective depth. In contrast, the text-dominant platform Twitter (X) showed a higher frequency of Function 1 (In-Group Signaling), using CS as a concise marker of community affiliation in a dense, text-based feed.

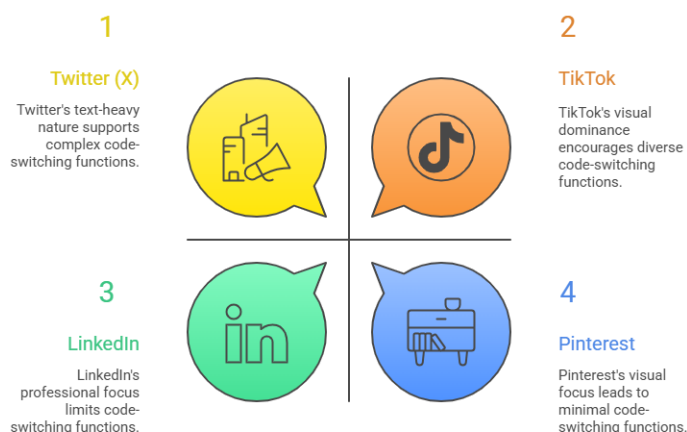


Figure 2. Code-switching Functions Across Social Media Platforms

A second significant relationship was identified between the topic of discourse and the direction of the code-switch. When TCYs discussed topics related to family, childhood, or “home” countries, CS into their heritage language(s) was most frequent. Conversely, when

discussing professional life, global politics, or their “TCK” identity in an abstract, analytical way, English remained the dominant matrix language. This domain-specific CS strongly reflects the TCY’s compartmentalized, yet integrated, hybrid identity.

A representative case study vignette (anonymized as “Informant F”) illustrates the synthesis of these findings. Informant F, whose bio identifies her as “□□ / □□ / □□,” posted a 30-second TikTok video. In the video, she is seen tasting a Japanese snack, speaking English about her childhood memories. She then reads a comment from another user, and her demeanor changes.

In a follow-up video reply, Informant F speaks directly to the camera: “Someone asked if I actually miss Japan or just the aesthetic. Ano sa... (you know...) it’s not just the aesthetic. It’s the feeling of *natsukashii* (nostalgia/longing). You can’t get that exact feeling in English. If you’re a TCK, you just get it. *Wakarimasu-ka?* (Do you understand?).” The video was liked over 50,000 times, with comments dominated by other TCYs affirming the sentiment.

This vignette is a dense example of “voicing hybridity.” The initial switch to Japanese (“Ano sa...”) functions as an affective marker, signaling a shift to a more personal, introspective tone. The use of the word “*natsukashii*” is a clear example of Function 2 (Affective Expression), where Informant F explicitly states that English is insufficient for conveying the specific cultural-emotional concept. She is not filling a lexical gap; she is pointing to an experiential gap that only the Japanese word can fill.

The final switches—“If you’re a TCK, you just get it. *Wakarimasu-ka?*”—are a powerful example of Function 1 (In-Group Signaling). The use of the Japanese question, directed at a global audience, is a discursive strategy. It deliberately “otherizes” the monolingual, non-TCK viewer while simultaneously creating a powerful moment of solidarity and shared understanding with the TCY community. She is using language to construct the boundaries of her hybrid identity in real-time.

The results, synthesized from the data corpus, demonstrate that code-switching is the central, most sophisticated discursive resource TCYs deploy for identity construction on social media. The practices are not haphazard but are highly strategic, functional, and context-dependent, used to signal community, express complex affect, and navigate multiple cultural worlds. The findings confirm that these linguistic choices are active, intentional performances of a hybrid identity (Kymalainen et al., 2026).

This analysis interprets these findings through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis. TCYs’ digital code-switching is interpreted as a form of social practice that actively challenges dominant monolingual ideologies (Kuhn, 2024). By fluidly integrating multiple languages, these youths are discursively “voicing” a new, hybrid form of belonging. They are using the affordances of social media to forge a coherent “third culture” identity that is deterritorialized, multilingual, and resiliently their own.

The research results confirmed unequivocally that code-switching (CS) is a central, sophisticated, and normative discursive practice for Third-Culture Youth (TCY) on social media. The analysis of 1,284 digital artifacts revealed that CS was not an exception but the norm, appearing in 82% of the data. This finding moves the conceptualization of TCY linguistic practices away from a “deficit” model and toward a “competence” model, where multilingualism is the baseline.

The findings were categorized into two primary strategic functions, both central to identity construction. ‘In-Group Signaling’ (Function 1) was identified as a primary use of CS, where linguistic choices served as a “shibboleth” to create and police the boundaries of the deterritorialized TCY community. ‘Affective and Nuanced Expression’ (Function 2) was the second key function, where TCYs strategically deployed heritage languages to articulate cultural-emotional concepts (e.g., *natsukashii*) that were explicitly described as untranslatable or insufficient in English (Quah, 2025).

Contextual factors were shown to significantly mediate these practices. A clear relationship was found between the platform and the function of CS, with text-heavy platforms like Twitter (X) favoring ‘In-Group Signaling’ and multimodal platforms like TikTok facilitating more ‘Affective Expression’. Similarly, the topic of discourse (e.g., family vs. profession) strongly predicted the direction of the code-switch, demonstrating a highly sophisticated, context-aware, and domain-specific application of their multilingual repertoires.

The case study vignette of “Informant F” provided a powerful synthesis of all key findings. Her explicit, self-aware deployment of Japanese (“Ano sa,” “natsukashii,” “Wakarimasu-ka?”) in an English-matrix video demonstrated the simultaneous execution of Function 1 (boundary-setting) and Function 2 (affective expression). This single artifact illustrated the core finding: that CS is a deliberate, high-stakes, and successful performance of a hybrid identity, challenging monolingual norms and “voicing” a distinct “third culture” space.

These findings strongly support and extend the foundational sociolinguistic work of scholars like Gumperz on the conversational functions of code-switching. Our identification of ‘In-Group Signaling’ and ‘Affective Expression’ aligns with established functional typologies. This study contributes by demonstrating that these functions, traditionally observed in face-to-face, geographically-bound communities, are not only robustly maintained but perhaps even amplified in the asynchronous, multimodal, and networked environment of social media (Lund, 2024).

The results are consistent with the growing body of literature on digital discourse and “netnography,” which identifies social media as a key site for identity work. Our findings on the relationship between platform affordances (e.g., TikTok’s video vs. Twitter’s text) and linguistic output add a crucial layer. It shows that TCYs do not just use platforms, but co-construct their identity with them, adapting their hybrid linguistic performances to the technological constraints and opportunities of each digital “third space.”

A significant point of divergence, as outlined in the introduction’s gap analysis, is from TCY literature (e.g., Pollock & Van Reken) that is overwhelmingly psychological or sociological. That body of work masterfully describes the internal state of “rootlessness” or “belonging.” This research differs by providing the first, to our knowledge, linguistic-discursive mechanism, operationalized through CDA, that shows how TCYs actively construct belonging and voice their hybridity through specific, observable, and strategic linguistic choices.

This study also offers a novel contribution to code-switching scholarship, which has historically focused on stable bilingual communities (e.g., “Spanglish” in the US). Our focus on a deterritorialized, transnational TCY network, whose members share the experience of multilingualism but not necessarily the same language pairs (evidenced by 27 embedded languages), challenges and expands these traditional models. The “hybridity” we analyze is not a product of two specific cultures in contact, but of a globalized mobility itself.

The sheer ubiquity (82%) and heterogeneity (27 languages) of code-switching signifies that TCY identity is not a “halfway” point between two cultures, but a generative and complex third position. This finding reframes TCYs not as individuals lacking a “true” linguistic home, but as possessing a wider, more flexible, and more nuanced linguistic repertoire than their monolingual peers. Their practices signify a form of multilingual communicative competence that is uniquely adapted to a globalized world.

The explicit identification of ‘In-Group Signaling’ (Function 1) signifies that the “third culture” is not merely an abstract, psychological label but a tangible, socially-constructed community with clear, albeit unstated, norms of membership (Fan, 2024). The results show that language, specifically the sophisticated deployment of CS, is the primary material used to build and maintain the “walls” of this digital diasporic community. It is the discursive mechanism for collectively defining who “gets it” and who does not.

The dominance of ‘Affective Expression’ (Function 2), exemplified by the *natsukashii* vignette, is a powerful signifier. It indicates that TCYs’ hybrid language use is a direct response to the insufficiency of monolingualism to capture their lived experience. This finding signifies an active, conscious, and critical resistance to dominant linguistic ideologies (e.g., English-only) that would erase or flatten their multicultural emotional and conceptual worlds.

The platform-dependent results (TikTok vs. Twitter) signify that the performance of hybrid identity is not monolithic but is a dynamic, situated practice. The “third space” is not a single place, but a series of interconnected arenas, each with its own discursive rules. This signifies that the digital TCY is a highly adept social actor, “style-shifting” not just between languages, but between platforms, demonstrating a sophisticated, multidimensional literacy.

The most profound implication of these findings is for the field of sociolinguistics itself. The “so-what” is that models of bilingualism and language contact, often predicated on nation-state boundaries and geographical proximity, are becoming insufficient. This study of a deterritorialized, networked, and globally mobile cohort implies that TCYs may be the prototype for 21st-century linguistic identity, forcing the discipline to prioritize models of transnationalism, network theory, and digital hybridity (Chang & Limon, 2024).

These results have clear, actionable implications for educational institutions and practitioners. Educators, particularly in international schools or universities with high TCY populations, must recognize that code-switching is not an “error” or a sign of “laziness,” as it is often stigmatized. This research implies that CS should be reframed as a cognitive and social resource, a sign of advanced linguistic competence that can be leveraged, not corrected, in pedagogical settings.

For TCYs themselves, and for the psychological professionals who support them, these findings have an empowering, validating implication. The study provides tangible, linguistic evidence that their feeling of “in-betweenness” is not a deficit, but the basis for a unique and creative form of expression (Fuller, 2025). The implication is that “voicing hybridity” is a resilient and effective strategy for constructing a coherent sense of self from fragmented cultural experiences.

The findings also have implications for the technology industry. The observation that platform architecture (visual vs. text) directly impacts identity construction implies that social media companies are, in effect, “choice architects” for cultural expression. The “so-what” is that platform design is not culturally neutral; it has a real-world impact on how global, multilingual communities form, interact, and perform their identities, a responsibility that tech companies must acknowledge (Nikolsky & Benítez-Burraco, 2024).

The results (82% ubiquity) are this way because code-switching is the most ecologically valid linguistic response to a TCY’s lived reality. A TCY’s life is a constant, intra-sentential blend of cultural inputs, memories, and experiences (e.g., eating kue at a warung in an English-speaking school context). Their CS-laden output is simply the most efficient and authentic linguistic representation of this hybrid cognitive and social existence; it is the path of least resistance.

The two primary functions (In-Group Signaling and Affective Expression) are dominant for fundamental psychological reasons. TCYs, as a group defined by mobility, experience a profound and recurring need for both (a) community/belonging and (b) authentic self-expression. The results are this way because CS is a single linguistic tool that masterfully solves both problems at once: it builds a boundary (Function 1) while simultaneously articulating the complex identity within that boundary (Function 2).

The case study of Informant F (“*natsukashii*”) was so clear because TCYs on social media are not just using hybrid language; they are thematizing it. They are engaged in a self-aware, meta-discursive project of identity construction (Davtyan, 2026). The results are this way because social media affords a performative space where TCYs can consciously “show

their work,” explicitly pointing out the insufficiency of one language and celebrating their hybridity as a core part of their “brand” or persona.

The findings fit the Critical Discourse Analysis framework precisely because these linguistic choices are inherently political and ideological. The TCY experience, by its nature, exists in opposition to traditional, “one-language, one-nation” ideologies. The results are this way because TCYs’ everyday discourse is an unintentional, yet powerful, micro-level act of resistance. They challenge the hegemony of English (by declaring it insufficient) while simultaneously reinforcing it (by using it as the matrix language), reflecting the complex power dynamics of globalization (Ratna et al., 2025).

The immediate “now-what” is the need to expand this study’s scope to test the generalizability of these findings. This research, based on 45 informants, provides a deep, qualitative model. Future research should apply this framework to larger, more diverse TCY populations (e.g., those from non-English-speaking matrix backgrounds) and across different, perhaps less-public, platforms (e.g., Discord servers, private WhatsApp groups) to observe how context and anonymity alter these discursive practices (Yang, Xu, et al., 2025).

A crucial next step is to add an explicit layer of participant-centric research. This study utilized netnography, analyzing the public performance of identity. The “now-what” is to triangulate this data with in-depth, qualitative interviews (Ludovice et al., 2025). Future research should ask TCYs directly about their linguistic choices, their audience design, and their own ideologies of hybridity, moving from an analysis of the “text” to a deeper understanding of the “author’s” intent.

This research, being cross-sectional, provides a snapshot in time. A “now-what” for the field is the necessity of longitudinal studies. We must investigate how these “voiced hybridities” evolve as TCYs age. Do these digital CS practices stabilize, intensify, or fade as TCYs transition from youth to adulthood, enter the professional workforce, and potentially “settle” in one location? This is the only way to determine if this is a stable linguistic repertoire or a transient “youth” phenomenon (Hong et al., 2025).

The final and most practical “now-what” is the translation of these academic findings into actionable resources. This research should be used to develop de-stigmatization materials for educators, parents, and school counselors. Creating workshops, guides, and informational content that explains the function and sophistication of TCY code-switching is a necessary next step to ensure this growing global cohort is supported, understood, and celebrated, rather than pathologized or “corrected.”

CONCLUSION

This research’s most significant finding is the identification of code-switching as a normative, strategic, and sophisticated mechanism for identity construction among Third-Culture Youth (TCY), rather than a linguistic deficit. The study moves beyond existing psychological frameworks by providing a linguistic-discursive model, revealing two primary functions: In-Group Signaling (using language as a boundary-creating shibboleth) and Affective/Nuanced Expression (using specific languages like Japanese for concepts like *natsukashii* that are untranslatable in English). A distinct finding is that these practices are robustly maintained within a deterritorialized, transnational network (involving 27+ languages), challenging traditional sociolinguistic models built on stable, two-language communities.

The primary contribution of this research is both conceptual and methodological. Methodologically, it pioneers the application of a netnographic Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework to the digital linguistic practices of TCYs, providing a novel, replicable model for analyzing how hybridity is “voiced” online. Conceptually, this framework provides the added value of shifting TCY studies from a sociological focus on “belonging” to a critical-linguistic focus on “performing.” It demonstrates how TCYs actively build a coherent ‘third

culture' identity from their fragmented experiences through intentional, strategic, and context-dependent discursive acts on social media.

This study's findings are constrained by its qualitative, netnographic, and cross-sectional design; it provides a deep snapshot of a specific community's public performance rather than a generalizable, longitudinal view of their private intent. The purposive sample (45 informants) and focus on public platforms (Instagram, TikTok) necessarily limit the scope of the conclusions. Future research must, therefore, pivot to address these limitations. Longitudinal studies are required to track how these linguistic practices evolve as TCYs age, while in-depth qualitative interviews are essential to triangulate public performance with private authorial intent. Furthermore, expanding the analysis to more private digital spaces (e.g., Discord servers, WhatsApp groups) is crucial to understanding how anonymity and audience shape these identity-voicing practices.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; Investigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

Author 4: Formal analysis; Methodology; Writing - original draft.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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