

Research Article

Negotiating “Glocal” Identity Through Cantonese–English Translanguaging: A Qualitative Study of Hong Kong Youth’s Instagram Posts in Leisure and Academic Contexts

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Abstract

Globalization, localization, and post-1997 socio-political change has jointly reshaped Hong Kong’s linguistic ecology, yet little qualitative work has examined how young Hongkongers negotiate these tensions on image-centred platforms such as Instagram. To address this gap, this qualitative multimodal study explores how Hong Kong youth negotiate a “glocal” identity on Instagram through the strategic interplay of Cantonese and English languages and multimodal symbols (emojis, hashtags, images) to balance the inheritance of local culture, the demands of globalization, and the resistance to cultural homogenization. Focusing on two contrasting domains: leisure life (e.g., diet and entertainment) and academic life (e.g., exam pressure and graduation ceremonies), the study employs critical discourse analysis and multimodal social semiotics methods to analyze 15 purposefully selected posts by Hong Kong youth users. The findings reveal that in leisure contexts, Cantonese–English translanguaging innovates local symbols through cultural translation, reinforcing local belonging. In academic contexts, English terms internalize global academic hegemony, while Cantonese emotional expression and humorous symbols deconstruct its oppressiveness. Users systematically avoid Mandarin and strategically deploy the international legitimacy of English and the local authenticity of Cantonese to negotiate the dual pressures of mainland cultural infiltration and global academic norms. The study offers a fine-grained qualitative insight that complements existing large-scale work on Hong Kong digital multilingualism, and indicates that translanguaging is not merely a communicative tool but a micro-political practice of identity negotiation, providing a new perspective for digital identity work in multilingual societies.

Keywords

Identity Negotiation, Translanguaging, Glocal Identity, Hong Kong Youth, Instagram, Cantonese–English Mixing

1. Introduction

At the intersection of globalization and localization, young people in Hong Kong have constructed a fluid “glocal” identity through the social media platform Instagram, using unique language practices. This identity is rooted in Cantonese culture

while strategically appropriating English symbols to participate in transnational discourse, forming a creative resistance to cultural homogenization. As a trilingual city with a complex historical context (Cantonese, English, and Mandarin), Hong

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Kong's language ecology has always been a microcosm of identity politics - the language choices of the younger generation in the digital space (such as systematically avoiding Mandarin and mixing Cantonese and English vocabulary) not only concern communication efficiency but also carry an implicit defense of cultural sovereignty. This study, based on 15 posts by Hong Kong youth on Instagram (9 about personal leisure life and 6 about academic life), combines the translanguaging theory [1] and multimodal critical discourse analysis [2], and the framework of identity negotiation in multilingual contexts [48, 49] to address the following three research questions:

RQ1: How do Hong Kong youth negotiate a “glocal” identity through Cantonese–English translanguaging on Instagram?

RQ2: How do their negotiation strategies differ between leisure and academic contexts?

RQ3: What roles do multimodal resources (emojis, hashtags, images) play in these identity negotiations, particularly in relation to the systematic avoidance of Mandarin as a response to the dual pressures of mainland cultural infiltration and global academic hegemony?

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

This section is organized around four strands of scholarship that together frame the present study: (i) identity negotiation in multilingual contexts; (ii) translanguaging and Cantonese–English code-mixing research in Hong Kong; (iii) multimodal social semiotics and digital multilingualism on image-centred platforms; and (iv) critical perspectives on language ideology, identity politics, and Mandarin avoidance in post-handover Hong Kong.

2.1. Identity Negotiation as a Theoretical Lens

This study takes identity negotiation as its overarching theoretical lens. Pavlenko and Blackledge [48] argue that in multilingual contexts, identities are not fixed attributes but dynamically negotiated through linguistic choices in response to competing ideologies, power asymmetries, and shifting audience configurations. Extending this view, Darwin and Norton's [49] model of investment conceptualizes language users as social agents who negotiate legitimacy, belonging, and symbolic capital by investing in particular linguistic varieties within specific communities of practice. Complementing these perspectives, Bucholtz and Hall's [3] sociocultural linguistic approach treats identity as a relational and interactional accomplishment that emerges in, rather than precedes, discourse. Taken together, these frameworks direct analytic attention to how Hong Kong youth's Instagram practices are not simply instances of “mixing” or “hybridity”, but ongoing acts of negotiation through which young users position themselves between local, national, and global scales of belonging.

2.2. Translanguaging, Code-mixing, and Hong Kong Bilingual Identity

Building on the identity-negotiation lens outlined above, Translanguaging theory [1, 12] reconceptualises bilinguals' language use as the fluid deployment of a single integrated repertoire across named languages, scripts, and other semiotic resources, rather than a switch between discrete codes. Creese and Blackledge [13] further show that the simultaneous, purposeful use of two languages functions as a meaning-making and identity resource rather than as interference, a principle that extends from bilingual classrooms to the informal digital settings examined here. Complementing this perspective, Myers-Scotton's markedness model of code-switching [9] holds that language choice is a strategic act of social positioning, with speakers choosing marked or unmarked codes to signal identity or negotiate power. In Hong Kong's trilingual context, Cantonese often serves as the unmarked code for in-group solidarity, while Mandarin or English may be marked choices to assert cosmopolitanism or respond to external pressures [10]. Similarly, Auer's contextualization cues theory [11] emphasizes that code-switching dynamically constructs the context of interaction. Such theoretical positions have been consistently supported by empirical work on Hong Kong digital communication. Empirical studies of WhatsApp and other Hong Kong digital corpora confirm that intra-clausal Cantonese–English mixing is frequent and used to fill conceptual gaps, sound casual, and negotiate bilingual/Hongkonger identities, with Cantonese generally serving as matrix language [4, 7, 14, 15]. Chan [16] further argues that such spontaneous mixing can be reconceptualized as translanguaging, while showing that speakers still “*linguagise*” words as Cantonese or English, highlighting the relevance of both concepts for analyzing Hong Kong data. Survey work on trilingual code-switching suggests that although Cantonese–English bilingual mixing is strongly linked to Hong Kong identity, the acceptance of including Mandarin is low, which helps explain youth's tendency to avoid Mandarin in informal digital practices [15]. However, this body of work is dominated by chat-based corpora (WhatsApp, LIHKG, Facebook), and rarely engages with the image–caption–hashtag assemblage that characterises Instagram self-presentation.

2.3. Multimodal Social Semiotics and Digital Multilingualism

Multimodal social semiotics [2] holds that text, images, emojis and other sign systems jointly participate in meaning construction. Existing research has often treated multimodal elements as secondary to linguistic choice [17], but more recent digital-multilingualism scholarship argues for a coequal and collaborative relationship between language and other modes [44]. Broader digital-multilingualism studies find that Instagram's image–caption–hashtag assemblage encourages dense translanguaging, with emojis, memes, and visual design

working together with language choices to negotiate identity and stance [19-23, 44]. Within a systemic-functional perspective, Zappavigna [45] further demonstrates that hashtags are not merely topic markers but perform experiential, interpersonal, and textual functions simultaneously, enabling “ambient affiliation” among geographically dispersed users — a theoretical resource particularly relevant to hashtags such as #hku, #studentstruggle, and #deadlinehell. Instagram-focused research on the Umbrella Movement shows that multilingual hashtags in Cantonese, mixed code, and English not only categorize content but also index emotions of pride, love, hate and solidarity, turning Cantonese and mixed codes into affective symbols of Hongkonger unity [18]. In a more recent Hong Kong-specific study, Leung and Lin [46] show how local food influencers on Instagram strategically combine bilingual captions, food photography, and locational hashtags to negotiate a local Hongkonger identity within a global gourmet culture, a pattern directly relevant to the leisure posts examined in the present study.

2.4. Critical Discourse, Language Ideology, and Mandarin Avoidance in Post-handover Hong Kong

Critical Discourse Analysis [24] provides the theoretical tool for this study to expose the power relations in language practice. Prior research on Hong Kong language attitudes has consistently documented that, despite the promotion of “bilingualism and trilingualism” policies after 1997, the post-colonial generation retains a strong local identity and evaluates Mandarin less positively than Cantonese and English [10]. This ideological configuration is amplified online: studies of Kongish Daily and “fake ABC” practices on Facebook show how mixed-code varieties are enregistered as recognizable styles that circulate ideologies of authenticity, Westernization, linguistic purity and in-/out-group boundaries [5, 8, 25]. Research on LIHKG and online higher education in Hong Kong further underscores how digital platforms function as crucial

spaces where users negotiate place-based identities, accumulate Cantonese linguistic capital, and negotiate “virtually translocal” academic selves through translanguaging [6, 26]. Taken together, these studies suggest that Mandarin avoidance and Cantonese-English mixing in digital Hong Kong are not simply stylistic habits but ideologically loaded practices — a theoretical premise that the present analysis seeks to extend to the under-explored domain of Instagram self-presentation.

2.5. Remaining Gaps

Although existing literature has thoroughly documented Cantonese-English code-switching on chat platforms (e.g., WhatsApp [4, 14]), the ideological work of Kongish on Facebook [5, 8], political hashtag practices on Instagram during the Umbrella Movement [18], and translanguaging in Hong Kong online higher education [6, 26], relatively few studies have examined everyday, non-political Instagram self-presentation by Hong Kong youth in both leisure and academic domains, with a specific focus on the systematic avoidance of Mandarin and on how identity is actively negotiated. These gaps map onto the three questions set out in Section 1 in a fairly direct way. The paucity of Instagram-focused work on everyday self-presentation motivates the first concern of this study: how young Hongkongers negotiate a glocal identity beyond the chat and activism contexts already well studied. The absence of systematic leisure-academic comparisons speak to the second: how negotiation strategies shift across life domains. And the tendency to treat emojis and hashtags as decorative, rather than as coequal semiotic partners, underpins the third RQ: the joint work of multimodal resources and Mandarin avoidance, a combination that earlier literature has flagged but seldom analyzed together. This research addresses these gaps through a qualitative, multimodal close reading of 15 Instagram posts.

To clarify how this study is positioned, Table 1 synthesizes major strands of existing research and the specific gaps they leave with respect to Instagram-based, everyday posts by Hong Kong youth.

Table 1. Key strands of related research and remaining gaps.

Research Area & Data Source	Key Findings	Gap relative to the present study	Key Citations
Cantonese-English code-switching on WhatsApp	Cantonese is the matrix language; English is embedded mainly as nouns/academic items.	Chat corpora only; no image-centred platform analysis.	[4, 7, 14, 15]
Kongish Daily / “fake ABC” on Facebook	Kongish is constructed as a critical and local hybrid variant with disruptive potential.	Public page discourse; not ordinary Instagram self-presentation.	[5, 8]
Multilingual hashtags on Instagram (Umbrella Movement)	Tags index affect and political stance (pride, solidarity, hate).	Social-movement topic; not everyday leisure/academic life.	[18]
Hong Kong Online Higher Education and platforms such as LIHKG	Users build “virtually translocal” academic identity via translanguaging.	Classroom/forum context differs from personal Instagram timelines.	[6, 26]

Research Area & Data Source	Key Findings	Gap relative to the present study	Key Citations
Global Digital Multilingualism and Instagram Study	Different platforms shape different code-mixing patterns, and Instagram is conducive to enriching cross-language practices.	Limited engagement with HK trilingual politics and Mandarin avoidance.	[19, 20, 22]

3. Data and Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive case-study design appropriate for in-depth analysis of identity negotiation in digital multilingual settings [47]. In terms of data collection, 15 posts with research significance from the accounts of 10 young people in Hong Kong were selected through purposeful sampling [31, 47]. After collecting the posts, they were divided into two domains: personal leisure and academic aspects. Among them, 9 posts were related to the first domain (such as food and leisure activities), and 6 posts were related to the second one (such as exam pressure and graduation ceremonies). All posts had to meet the following three screening criteria during the selection process: 1) mixed use of Cantonese and English (excluding posts containing Mandarin to focus on local language practices); 2) at least one multimodal element (such as emojis, hashtags, or images); 3) the content theme clearly belonged to either personal life or academic categories, avoiding politically sensitive topics to ensure the coherence of the analysis. For the convenience of providing examples during the analysis in this article, the 15 posts in the data file are numbered sequentially from 1 to 15. Regarding research ethics, all personal information involved in the data collection and presentation process (such as user IDs and profile photos) was anonymized, and only the textual content was retained for analysis. If the selected posts contained personal photos, the faces would be covered with a cartoon pattern to protect privacy. Since this study did not involve other participants and the anonymization process was carried out during the research, it complies with research ethics norms for publicly posted, observational social-media data [47] and does not require an ethics application.

The rationale for adopting purposeful rather than random sampling is fourfold, and is grounded in recent methodological work on qualitative research with digital data [31, 47]. Firstly, focusing on naturally occurring public social media content ensures ecological validity: these are authentic communicative acts rather than elicited responses [19, 22, 47]. Secondly, by requiring both code-mixing (Cantonese-English) and multimodal elements (emojis/hashtags/images), this corpus captures how linguistic hybridity interacts with visual/semiotic resources, which is a key feature highlighted in contemporary studies on digital translanguaging [27-29]. Thirdly, excluding Mandarin systematically allows for targeted investigation into how language choice indexes local identity boundaries — a phenomenon repeatedly noted as central to

Hong Kong youth's online self-presentation [30]. Finally, covering both leisure/personal life and academic domains directly operationalizes RQ2 and enables comparison across everyday affective expression, lifestyle branding, nostalgia, peer humor, academic stress, and ceremonial moments. This breadth reflects the sampling logic of “diversity plus typicality” recommended in qualitative digital-multilingualism research [19, 22, 31], which privileges linguistic and multimodal richness over large-scale scraping. It also responds to calls for micro-level qualitative work that can reveal nuanced identity negotiations often missed by big-data quantitative studies [22, 30]. However, 15 posts cannot support claims to statistical generalizability; rather, the analysis aims at analytical depth and theoretical contribution, as is standard in interpretive sociolinguistic case studies [47].

To further enhance representativeness within this qualitative frame, the corpus deliberately spans heterogeneous sub-profiles. For instance, a local street-interview blogger showcases emotional connections with the local community (Post 1); a Hong Kong youth who has lived abroad performs an identity of “Hong Kong internationalization” with bilingual posts (Post 5); a local Hong Kong female user foregrounds nostalgia and innovation for local culture (Post 9). Academic-life data focus on the university student group in Hong Kong, covering both stress narratives (Posts 12, 14, 15) and ceremonial moments (Posts 10, 11).

The three screening criteria and the fourfold rationale set out above govern which individual posts could be admitted into the sample, and the sub-profile description just given documents the heterogeneity of the posters. A further set of considerations — three in number, each anchored in the literature reviewed in Section 2, governs the composition of the 15-post set as a whole at the level of post content, ensuring that the corpus collectively spans the variation the analysis requires rather than piling up on a single pattern. The first of these is thematic coverage within the 9: 6 leisure-to-academic distribution already stated. The nine leisure posts were selected to span follower-milestone talk (Post 1), small-business/community announcement (Post 2), everyday commercial food cultures (Posts 3, 5, 6), co-present friendship leisure (Post 4), encounters with global brands in local space such as the Apple Park Visitor Centre (Post 7), meta-cultural explanation of local practice to a non-Hong Kong audience such as yum cha seating etiquette (Post 8), and participation in traditional local festivals such as the Tai O Tin Hau celebration (Post 9). The six academic posts in turn move from graduation celebration and nostalgia (Posts 10, 11, 13), through peer-directed student-life humour (Post 12), to deadline-driven

affective release (Posts 14, 15). Taken together, these themes cover what is most visible on the Instagram feeds of this demographic without collapsing the corpus into a single register, and they ensure that neither sub-sample is dominated by one topic. The second consideration is that more than one Cantonese–English mixing pattern should be represented in the corpus, in line with translanguaging theory's emphasis on fluid repertoire deployment rather than a single fixed configuration [1]. Post 7 exemplifies full parallel bilingual address, with a complete English paragraph mirrored by a complete Cantonese one — the clearest available instance of writing to two audiences simultaneously. Post 4 illustrates inter-sentential alternation, with English sentences followed by a Cantonese sentence. Posts 14 and 15 exemplify dense English-lexical insertion into Cantonese syntactic frames (“assignment”, “deadline”, “midterm”, “presentation”, “low quality”), the configuration most directly relevant to how academic power asymmetries enter the linguistic texture of a post. Post 8 occupies a rarer but theoretically important position — meta-linguistic cultural translation for a non-Hong Kong readership (“有很多台灣朋友問我甚麼是最正宗的港式飲茶”) — which makes the “glocal” work of explaining local practice to an outside audience unusually visible. Posts 5 and 9, by contrast, are Cantonese-dominant with only light English insertion (“chill”, “bad mood”, “heavy”, “vibe”), representing a configuration that Kongish research has repeatedly foregrounded [5, 8]. The corpus as a whole therefore spans near-balanced bilingualism as well as both Cantonese-dominant and English-dominant configurations, so that the findings cannot be attributed to a single mixing style. The third consideration concerns multimodal and addressee variation, since this study treats emojis, hashtags, and images as coequal semiotic partners rather than as decoration. Hashtag practices in the retained posts run from near-absence (Posts 1, 4, 5, 6), through locality tags such as #hk and #hkg (Post 3), to institutional-affiliation tags such as #HKU and #nursingstudent (Posts 10, 12, 14) and affect-laden genre tags such as #studentstruggle and #deadlinehell (Posts 14, 15). A single analytically revealing case of simplified-character tags (#香港大学 #毕业季 #毕业论文 in Post 13) was deliberately retained as a counter-example to the corpus's otherwise consistent avoidance of Mandarin-associated forms; its deviance is precisely what makes the surrounding regularity visible as a rule rather than a coincidence. Emoji density varies comparably across the set. The addressees written to are likewise heterogeneous: the posts speak, at different moments, to a follower base (Posts 1, 2), to named co-present friends (Post 4), to non-Hong Kong readers being inducted into local culture (Post 8), and to classmates sharing the same academic condition (Posts 12, 14, 15), so that claims about “glocal” identity negotiation are not inferred from a single audience configuration. Beyond the compositional logic outlined above, the exclusion of overtly political content flagged in the screening criteria also carries a scholarly rationale worth making explicit. The decision is both ethical and analytical: it allows the findings to speak to everyday, non-activist identity practice rather than the protest-era discourses already well studied [5, 25,

37]. This narrowing is a deliberate complement to, not a replacement for, that literature, and its implications are revisited in Section 5.

This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis [24] and multimodal social semiotics [2], in combination with translanguaging theory [1] and the identity-negotiation framework [48, 49], to explore how Hong Kong youth negotiate their identities on Instagram through language mixing and multimodal symbols. The data coding and analysis procedures will be carried out in three stages. The first stage involves language mixing coding, based on Li's translanguaging theory [1], to identify patterns such as “lexical insertion” and “syntactic alternation”. This step draws on established frameworks for identifying intra-sentential vs inter-sentential code-mixing as well as emblematic switching, which practices widely observed among multilingual youth online [32, 33]. Secondly is multimodal semiotic analysis guided by Kress & van Leeuwen's visual grammar theory, which is to interpret how emojis, hashtags, and images work together with text to construct meaning. Recent studies highlight that such multimodal resources are not merely decorative but play an active role in affective stance-taking, audience design, and solidarity signaling, especially among Asian youth on Instagram [28, 29, 34, 45]. The final stage is critical discourse analysis decoding power relations and identity negotiations behind language practices. This triangulated approach allows linking micro-level linguistic choices to macro-level ideological tensions — a key recommendation from recent reviews of CDA applied to online platforms [35]. Taken together, the three analytical moves track the three guiding questions without being reduced to any one of them: translanguaging coding surfaces the repertoires through which a “glocal” identity is assembled, cross-domain comparison traces how that assembly shifts between leisure and academic scenes, and multimodal-semiotic reading, triangulated with CDA, foregrounds what emojis, hashtags, and images do alongside, and in lieu of, words, including in the empty space left by Mandarin.

4. Results

This section presents the empirical findings in two complementary steps. Section 4.1 traces the corpus-wide patterns that cut across all 15 posts — most visibly the leisure–academic divide at the heart of the study's second question and the systematic Mandarin avoidance that runs through the first and third. Section 4.2 then zooms in on three posts whose richness allows each to be read primarily through one of the questions opened in Section 1 while still illuminating the other two. Post 7 (Case 1) is most revealing about how a “glocal” identity is architecturally negotiated through bilingual parallel address; Post 14 (Case 2) throws the leisure–academic contrast into sharp relief by showing how academic stress reshapes translanguaging strategies; and Post 15 (Case 3) puts the multimodal question into focus by demonstrating how emojis and hashtags work

alongside language choice, rather than behind it, to make Mandarin's absence unremarkable rather than conspicuous.

4.1. Overview of the Corpus

Based on the initial coding, these posts can be roughly di-

vided into nine “leisure” posts mainly about friendship, entertainment, and daily check-ins (Posts 1–9), and six “academic” posts centered around academic pressure, the transition to graduation, and university ceremonies (Posts 10–15). The two types of posts show clear contrasts in language combinations, the avoidance of Mandarin, and the use of explicit symbols related to “Hong Kong”, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Language and Identity Patterns of Different Types of Posts.

Post Type	Language Type	Mandarin presence	HK-explicit symbols	Purpose/Theme	Extended Identity Orientation
9 Leisure Posts (No. 1-9)	Cantonese-English Mixing	Absent	Some HK flags, location tags, hashtags	Friendship, entertainment, self-presentation	Localized life identity + global popular culture
6 Academic Posts (No. 10-15)	Higher proportion of English	Absent	School/major hashtags (#HKU, #uni)	Academic pressure, achievements, study abroad imagination	Academic/global mobility identity + academic pressure

Overall, all posts systematically avoid Mandarin vocabulary, with Cantonese dominating the “underlying code” and embedding English elements of varying densities. This is consistent with the finding in the WhatsApp study that “Cantonese is the matrix language, and English is mostly inserted as nouns and academic vocabulary” [36]. Among the nine leisure posts, Cantonese-English mixture mainly serves to showcase consumption tastes, humor, and a “chill in HK” lifestyle: English often appears in opening slogan-like sentences or brand names, while Cantonese takes on the role of commentary and emotional expression, supplemented with Hong Kong flags or location tags, forming an aesthetic performance of “local identity in daily life + global popular culture” [21, 46]. In contrast, among the six posts related to university life, the proportion of English significantly increases and is concentrated on academic and institutional terms such as assignment, deadline, midterm, presentation, graduation, as well as tags like #HKU, #uni, reflecting the status of English as an authoritative code in higher education [6, 36]; while parts related to academic pressure and emotions are almost exclusively in Cantonese, using emojis and internet memes to construct a highly recognizable “stressed but self-mocking” college student subject. This distribution of “leisure = cool mix of Cantonese and English, academic = English institutional terms + Cantonese emotional teasing” indicates that Hong Kong youth’s Instagram discourse practice is not a random mixture but a context-sensitive negotiation fine-tuned to different life domains and audience expectations, highly consistent with the cross-platform pattern of “pragmatic translanguaging” among teenagers online [29, 38]. This is where the leisure–academic contrast begins to do real analytical work: the same bilingual repertoire is re-tuned for different life scenes, foregrounding stylistic

play in leisure captions and institutional terminology plus affective release in academic ones.

4.2. Case Studies

4.2.1. Case 1 (Post 7) — Negotiating Global Cosmopolitanism: English-dominant Bilingual Parallel Structure

I guess the Apple store that all the apple fans want to go is must be the visit center of apple park. Today I been here, and the coffee is very nice. #apple.

我估所有 Apple 嘅 fans 最想去嘅 Apple Store 肯定係 Apple Park 嘅 Visit Centre 而今日我嚟咗啦。仲有 Apple 嘅咖啡真係好唔錯。

This user negotiated a layered performance of globalized identity through a parallel English–Cantonese structure. The English part, with informal expressions like “I guess” and “Today I been here”, mimics the relaxed tone of the international community and conveys the image of a “tech pilgrim” to English-speaking audiences; the Cantonese translation, with localized expressions such as “我估” and “嚟咗啦”, re-tells the same event to local fans, emphasizing the sense of personal experience and local belonging. This pattern of syntactic alternation (rather than lexical mixing) differs from the Cantonese-English embedding seen in other leisure posts and is closer to a bilingual parallel narrative — English as the “front-stage language” for global participation, Cantonese as the “back-stage language” for cultural authenticity. The multimodal symbols further reinforce this layered identity: the coffee cup symbol and the tech tag #apple jointly point to the “high-end leisure” image of the Apple brand,

while the smile and the victory gesture downplay the commercial aspect. Research on Filipino domestic workers' TikTok practices in Hong Kong similarly shows how translingual captions plus visual memes and lifestyle imagery are used to negotiate classed, aspirational identities within global consumer cultures, even when users' offline lives are economically precarious [41]. Notably, the English part deliberately retains grammatical errors ("Today I been here"), which aligns with the non-native speaker identity to enhance authenticity, bridging the gap with ordinary international users. This strategic difference reveals sophisticated control over layered audience design [42]. In Darwin and Norton's [49] terms, the user "invests" simultaneously in English for global legibility and in Cantonese for local authenticity, negotiating membership in two communities of practice without fully subordinating to either. Read against the study's opening concern with "glocal" identity, Post 7 makes visible something that corpus statistics alone would miss: the "glocal" is not a lexical blend but a layered address, with each linguistic track speaking to a distinct audience and their co-presence producing the effect.

4.2.2. Case 2 (Post 14) — Negotiating Academic Hegemony: Cantonese-matrix Emotional Resistance

今次份 assignment 個 deadline 撞正 midterm, 啲 notes 多到爆, 真係想喊! 😭 有冇 U life 嘅同學同病相憐? #HKU #studentstruggle.

This post follows Cantonese syntax and incorporates English academic terms such as "assignment", "deadline", and "midterm". These terms index the user's forced internalization of international academic norms; through syntactic alternation, structural oppression is concretized into individual narratives ("撞正", "多到爆"). The English terms here are not merely functional borrowings but become explicit symbols of power relations: they point to the hegemonic status of English as the "authoritative language" in the Hong Kong higher education system, while the Cantonese complaint "真係想喊"(really want to cry) constitutes an emotional negotiation, using the emotional density of the local language to dissolve the cold instrumentality of English terms. This tension is further intensified at the multimodal level: the crying emoji externalizes pressure visually, transforming personal anxiety into a shareable emotional symbol; the hashtags #HKU and #studentstruggle respectively anchor local identity (Hong Kong University students) and global discourse (the universal plight of students), forming a tension between "local resistance" and "global empathy". The user thus negotiates the contradictory demands of being recognizable as a legitimate participant in a global English-medium academic system while preserving an emotionally authentic Cantonese voice — a clear instance of identity negotiation under asymmetric power relations [48]. Set against the leisure posts in Section 4.1, the shift is striking: the same bilingual repertoire that played stylistically in "Chill

afternoon in HK"-type captions is here put to work under pressure, with English bearing institutional weight and Cantonese bearing emotional relief. Post 14 is, in this sense, where the leisure-academic contrast moves from descriptive pattern to analytical point.

4.2.3. Case 3 (Post 15) — Negotiating Institutional Pressure: Cantonese-matrix Deadline Humour

聽日個 presentation 我仲未 prepare 好, 今次實俾阿 sir 話 low quality 啦! #ulifestylehk #deadlinehell.

(I haven't finished the preparation for tomorrow's presentation yet. This time I will definitely be told by the teacher that it was of low quality).

The post follows Cantonese syntax, with the classifier "個" (go3) and the prefix "阿" (aa3) marking local linguistic norms, while English nouns ("presentation", "sir"), verbs ("prepare"), and adjective phrases ("low quality") are inserted into Cantonese grammar, reflecting the normalization of English in academic contexts. This kind of intra-clausal Cantonese-English mixing is highly typical of Hong Kong youth's everyday digital communication, where English is mobilised for academic and institutional domains while Cantonese anchors interpersonal affect and local solidarity [5, 39]. Local identity is unmarked, with Cantonese dominating the post and "阿 sir" — a colonial-era term for teachers, signaling in-group familiarity. Academic prestige is marked, as English terms index educational formality. Survey work on WhatsApp code-switching among Hong Kong undergraduates similarly finds that English insertions are used to index formality, prestige, and "student" subject positions, while Cantonese is associated with intimacy and authenticity [4]. The crying emoji amplifies emotional vulnerability, while the hashtag #deadlinehell connects to global student subcultures, blending local stress with transnational relatability. Compared with Case 2, the negotiation here is comic rather than confrontational: self-deprecating humour is used to defuse the institutional pressure embodied by "阿 sir" and "low quality", showing that identity negotiation on Instagram is not only about resistance but also about affective survival. The crying emoji and #deadlinehell are not afterthoughts; they carry the comic register that the Cantonese-English caption alone would not quite deliver, and their cooperation with the text is what allows Mandarin's absence to feel unremarkable rather than conspicuous. In this respect, Post 15 is the clearest corpus example of the multimodal-Mandarin-avoidance interaction flagged in Section 1.

5. Discussions

Read through the overview in Section 4.1 and the three close readings in Section 4.2, the corpus tells a consistent but internally differentiated story about how Hong Kong youth negotiate a "glocal" identity on Instagram, which is the question that opened this study.

The clearest thread concerns translanguaging itself as a micro-political practice. In leisure posts, Cantonese–English mixing turns local symbols, slang, dishes, neighborhoods — into cross-cultural narratives via lexical insertion and cultural translation, so that local distinctiveness is preserved even as it enters the circuits of global consumption [21, 46]. In academic posts the balance tilts: English terms such as “assignment” and “deadline” carry the weight of an international academic system [6, 36], while Cantonese, routed through emotional outbursts, self-mockery, and colloquial exaggeration, works back against that weight [40]. The contrast between these two domains is precisely where the study’s second question finds its answer: far from being a uniform “mix”, the bilingual repertoire is re-tuned for different life scenes, with English serving as a ladder to climb the global system and Cantonese as an anchor to hold local culture in place. The resulting elastic network between dual loyalties is a concrete instantiation of what Robertson [43] calls the simultaneous universalization of particularism and particularization of universalism, and a clear example of the ideological negotiations theorised by Pavlenko and Blackledge [48].

What Hong Kong youth do not write turns out to be as revealing as what they do. Using “assignment” rather than “作业”, and Cantonese kin terms rather than “阿姨”, is not a neutral stylistic preference but a boundary-making resource that refuses the symbolic threat of mainland cultural infiltration [10] and aligns with the Kongish and LIHKG research that casts mixed-code practices and Cantonese linguistic capital as markers of “real Hongkonger” identity [5, 6, 8, 25]. In Darwin and Norton’s [49] vocabulary, avoiding Mandarin is itself an act of investment — an allocation of symbolic resources that simultaneously affirms membership in a local community and withholds legitimacy from a competing linguistic market.

Alongside these linguistic choices, the multimodal layer does heavy lifting of its own. Emojis, hashtags, and images are not decoration added after the linguistic work is done; they are part of that work. A crying emoji next to “真係想喊” amplifies the Cantonese affect without translating it; #HKU and #studentstruggle stretch a single experience of academic stress across a local and a global audience at once, mirroring Zappavigna’s [45] account of hashtags as ambient affiliation. The study’s third concern: the joint work of multimodality and Mandarin avoidance, becomes visible precisely here: when users refuse Mandarin, emojis and hashtags step in to carry affective and affiliative meanings that language alone, in this restricted repertoire, cannot.

Several limitations should nonetheless be acknowledged. As a qualitative case study based on 15 purposefully selected Instagram posts, this research does not aim to make generalizable claims about all Hong Kong youth; it offers, rather, an in-depth, context-sensitive account of identity-negotiation practices that can inform future larger-scale or mixed-methods studies. The 15-post sample cannot capture the full diversity of Hong Kong youth’s Instagram practices, and future re-

search could usefully combine large-scale computational analyses (as in [14]) with interpretive case studies to achieve both breadth and depth. Because this study also excludes politically sensitive posts, the findings may underestimate more overtly contested forms of linguistic negotiation and resistance.

6. Conclusions

This qualitative multimodal study has examined how a small group of Hong Kong youth negotiate a “glocal” identity through Cantonese–English translanguaging on Instagram in leisure and academic contexts. Taken together, the questions posed at the outset receive mutually reinforcing answers. “Glocal” identity here is not a static hybrid but an active accomplishment: Hong Kong youth deploy English for global legibility, reserve Cantonese for local authenticity, and treat the systematic avoidance of Mandarin as a boundary-making resource in its own right. This negotiation is moreover domain-sensitive rather than uniform — leisure posts foreground lifestyle and cultural translation, while academic posts foreground power asymmetry and emotional resistance, so that the same bilingual repertoire does quite different work in different life scenes. Running through both scenes, emojis, hashtags, and images turn out to be coequal partners rather than ornaments, carrying the affective and affiliative meanings that the refusal of Mandarin leaves implicit. In this sense, the language mixing of Hong Kong youth is not a passive compromise but an active boundary-shifting strategy: English is used as a ladder to climb the global system, Cantonese as an anchor to safeguard local culture, and the multimodal layer as the connective tissue that holds this elastic identity network together.

Abbreviations

CDA Critical Discourse Analysis

Supplementary Material

The supplementary material can be accessed at <https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ijll.20261403.11>

Author Contributions

Qiu Zikai: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study can be found at: <https://qfile.qq.com/q/CFY9mqDtXq>

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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