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Research Article

The Interplay of Languaging, Identity, and Culture on TikTok: A South African Perspective

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Abstract

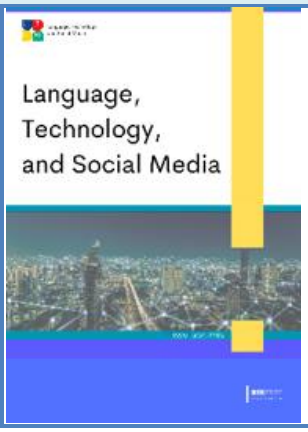
This study investigates how South African TikTok creators mobilise multilingual and multimodal resources to negotiate language, culture, and belonging. It employs ethnographically informed qualitative digital discourse analysis of a purposively assembled corpus of 228 TikTok videos collected between April 2023 and July 2026, with selected audience comments examined alongside video content. Using Visual-Verbal Video Analysis, the study considers spoken language, captions, performance, cultural artefacts, and observable audience responses. The cases address cross-racial Afrikaans use, code-switching and accent ideologies, intergenerational language transmission, and mixed-heritage affiliations. They show how digital performances may challenge established linguistic boundaries while also attracting judgements about language ownership and authenticity. Because selection was platform-mediated and purposive, findings describe situated meaning-making rather than the prevalence of social attitudes or causal educational effects. The study contributes to digital sociolinguistics by relating linguistic repertoires and cultural histories to platform affordances and public evaluations of identity.

Keywords: Multilingualism; TikTok; Identity; Digital Ethnography; Translanguaging; South Africa; Sociolinguistics.

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INTRODUCTION

Language is never simply a vehicle for transmitting information. In multilingual societies, the language varieties people select, combine, defend, or resist also signal where they belong and how they wish to be recognised. This relationship is especially consequential in South Africa, where colonialism and apartheid institutionalised linguistic hierarchies and where the democratic era has made cultural pluralism central to public life. The country recognises 12 official languages, yet formal recognition alone does not remove inequalities of access, prestige, and visibility. As a result, everyday language choices continue to register tensions between national belonging, cultural inheritance, social mobility, and the right to represent oneself [1], [2], [3].

These tensions cannot be reduced to a simple opposition between inherited languages and global English. South Africans draw upon overlapping repertoires shaped by family trajectories, schooling, migration, race, class, neighbourhood, and popular culture. The post-apartheid ideal of a "rainbow nation" has encouraged a shared imagination of unity in diversity, while the lived experience of that ideal remains uneven and contested. Young people, including the "born-free" generation, may affirm national affiliation while simultaneously foregrounding Indigenous languages, Afrikaans, English accents, diasporic heritage, or identities that do not fit inherited racial categories. Studies of youth identity and multilingual interaction therefore encourage attention to identity as situated negotiation rather than a stable attribute attached to a particular language [4], [5], [6].

Digital media make these negotiations unusually visible. A person who alternates between isiZulu and English in ordinary conversation may, on TikTok, also combine captions, music, facial expressions, visual editing, and an audience's responses to perform a recognisable social position. Such practices create opportunities to observe language not only as text or speech but as part of multimodal action. Social media scholarship shows that platforms are social environments in which interaction, circulation, and technological design shape how identities become public and contestable [7], [8], [9]. Nevertheless, visibility on a digital platform should not automatically be equated with a representative picture of national language use: the content available to researchers is filtered through platform recommendations and users' decisions about self-presentation [10], [11].

TikTok is particularly significant because its short-video format brings together speech, written overlays, memes, music, performance, and comment-based interaction. Its design makes imitation and remixing common modes of participation; creators can employ shared sounds and formats while expressing distinctive local identities [12], [13]. In the South African setting, these affordances allow familiar linguistic boundaries to be exposed to new audiences. Videos featuring Black Afrikaans musicians, multilingual children, migrant families, accent imitation, and mixed-heritage creators can become sites where viewers endorse, question, or dispute who may legitimately use a language or claim a cultural identity. Research on TikTok activism in South Africa also demonstrates that global platform formats can be repurposed to express locally situated political and racial concerns [14].

Existing research provides important but dispersed insights. Studies of multilingual youth in Johannesburg and Soweto describe fluid repertoires and the social work performed through language choice [2], [15]. Investigations of immigrant learners, heritage-language practices, and language policy explain how inequalities and family histories shape access to linguistic resources

[1], [6]. Meanwhile, scholarship on TikTok has examined algorithmic self-presentation, identity performance, translingual creativity, and digital publics in contexts outside South Africa [10], [16], [17]. What is less developed is an integrated, context-sensitive account of how South African creators' multilingual speech, cultural performances, and viewer responses intersect within the same short-video environment. The gap concerns the relationship among these dimensions rather than an absence of research on any one dimension alone.

The present study addresses this gap through ethnographically informed qualitative digital discourse analysis of South African TikTok videos and associated comments. The corpus was purposively assembled from April 2023 to July 2026, a period during which selected creators were also followed across successive posts. Rather than treating platform content as a statistically representative sample of the country, the inquiry examines how linguistic repertoires, cultural artefacts, personal histories, and publicly visible audience responses mediate possibilities for belonging. This orientation attends both to cross-community recognition and to the policing of accents, authenticity, and perceived cultural ownership [9], [18], [19].

The inquiry is organised around three connected questions expressed here as an integrated research problem. It asks what South African TikTok videos reveal about the distinctiveness, diversity, and complexity of identities performed through language use and cultural expression; how these videos may provide opportunities for cultural awareness and cross-group understanding; and how audiences respond to content associated with their own cultural experiences or those of other groups. These questions guide a contextual interpretation of the video examples and visible comments; they do not presume that exposure to TikTok content causes a measurable improvement in intercultural attitudes. The study contributes an empirically grounded thematic account of digitally performed identity, an illustration of the value of multimodal video analysis for sociolinguistics, and a discussion of implications for multilingual language education and cultural inclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Multilingualism, Translanguaging, and Linguistic Repertoires

In multilingual settings, named languages are socially meaningful categories, but individuals do not necessarily keep their linguistic resources apart in practice. Translanguaging directs attention to how speakers mobilise features of their overall communicative repertoires to make meaning in particular situations. It therefore extends beyond classifying every alternation as a switch between bounded linguistic systems [3], [18]. In South African research, youth language practices demonstrate how codes, styles, and multimodal resources may be brought together to negotiate proximity, status, and difference in interaction [2], [15]. The interpretive task is to ask what speakers accomplish socially through these choices, including solidarity, playfulness, resistance, and the defence of linguistic legitimacy.

Language ideologies remain central because the same form of speech can attract admiration from some viewers and suspicion from others. Beliefs about who should speak Afrikaans, which English accent sounds authentic, or whether an Indigenous language has been maintained appropriately are themselves evidence about power and belonging [8], [20]. The literature cautions against equating apparent linguistic fluency with ethnic membership or assuming that code-switching always signals deficiency. On TikTok, spoken words must be interpreted alongside performance, implied audience, subtitles, and the comments that evaluate them [17], [19].

Digital Identity, Performance, and South African Cultural Hybridity

Poststructuralist approaches describe identity as multiple, historically situated, and continually negotiated through discourse. Individuals may mobilise different self-descriptions and social affiliations depending on the people, institutions, and audiences with whom they interact. Sociocultural approaches complement this perspective by foregrounding the social practices and cultural tools through which identity becomes meaningful [5], [21]. These perspectives are particularly useful in South Africa, where the aspirational language of collective nationhood coexists with persistent hierarchies and contested histories of race, language, and education [1], [4].

Hybridity is therefore not merely a blend of two cultural labels. It may be lived as conflict, interpreted as an opportunity for connection, or subjected to demands that someone prove the authenticity of a particular identity. Studies of multilingual immigrant learners and younger language users show how belonging can become conditional on local language competence and how flexibility enables new forms of affiliation [2], [6]. TikTok scholarship likewise demonstrates that users may adapt shared trends, audio, and visual signs to perform national or cultural positions while also resisting assumptions encoded in the platform's dominant conventions [9], [22].

TikTok Affordances, Algorithmic Visibility, and Audience Interaction

A short video is simultaneously an expressive artefact and a platform-dependent act of communication. TikTok's recommendation infrastructure can circulate content beyond an existing network of followers; its editing features, sounds, duets, and replicated formats influence what creators choose to make [12], [13]. Research on the algorithmised self and algorithmic personalisation suggests that users are not merely expressing pre-existing identities but are also learning how those identities may be amplified or categorised by platform systems [10], [11]. A researcher's "For You" feed is thus a changing, curated environment, not an objective random frame of all TikTok content.

The audience dimension is equally important. Comments can affirm a creator's self-description, question a claimed identity, or produce new language ideologies in response to a video. Across short-form video research, engagement may take the form of support, parody, correction, contestation, or appropriation; high visibility alone cannot establish intercultural understanding [14], [19], [23]. An analytically adequate account attends to what is visible in both video and comment interaction while avoiding claims about viewers' internal beliefs that would require additional methods.

Digital Ethnography, Multimodal Analysis, and Educational Relevance

Digital ethnography studies sociocultural activity as it unfolds through technologically mediated environments and seeks to reconstruct the contexts in which online practices acquire meaning [7], [24]. Video-based qualitative analysis adds access to speech, gaze, posture, humour, pacing, clothing, sound, and visual symbols, enabling a closer consideration of identity performances than a verbal transcript alone can provide [25], [26]. The Visual-Verbal Video Analysis (VVVA) framework is useful here because it makes the steps from footage selection to transcription, coding, interpretation, and reporting more explicit [26].

Digital multilingual practices also matter for language education. When multilingual children or learners present language combinations as everyday social resources, their practices challenge pedagogies that treat only one language variety as legitimate. Research on language

contact, social identity, and Indigenous-language maintenance suggests potential links to belonging and educational inclusivity, although digital examples by themselves do not demonstrate classroom effects [3], [21], [27]. The contribution of the present analysis lies in making such practices and tensions visible and developing research questions that can be tested in educational settings rather than claiming pedagogical impact from TikTok viewing alone.

Related Social-Media Scholarship and Interpretive Boundaries

Broader research places the relationship between TikTok, language, and identity within a longer transformation of networked social interaction. Reviews of social-media research describe digital platforms as consequential sites of communication, information exchange, and cultural circulation [28], while cross-platform analyses show that interaction patterns can persist despite differences in platform design [29]. Work on virtual social interaction also demonstrates the importance of studying perceived relationships without conflating online participation with a single social outcome [30]. Studies of user-generated video viewing identify heterogeneous motivations for watching video content [31]. These bodies of work support the relevance of short-form video as a research site but cannot by themselves establish how particular South African users interpret language or cultural membership.

Youth identity scholarship provides an additional comparative perspective. Research on TikTok and gendered cultural literacies [32] and broader analyses of youth, family, and class [33] warn against treating young users as a homogeneous generation. Theoretical accounts of youth studies likewise emphasise multiple and sometimes contradictory paths of identity development [34]. For South Africa, research on immigrant experiences points to structural and social circumstances shaping incorporation [35], while studies of language shift in migrant communities identify tensions between maintaining inherited resources and adapting to local repertoires [36]. Debates surrounding multilingualism, equity, and social justice caution against assuming that linguistic mixing necessarily produces inclusion [37].

Methodologically, digital sociolinguistic research has long recognised that apparently large online datasets do not automatically contain reliable contextual metadata about their contributors [38]. Digital methods research presents social platforms as potential sites for ethnographic observation but calls for attention to how researchers construct and interpret their field [7], [39]. The rise of short videos also encourages distinctions between popularity and social benefit: research has separately examined online audience opinion, prosocial behaviour, and potentially problematic platform use [40], [41], [42]. These studies address different questions and populations, so their findings should not be imported as evidence of a direct TikTok effect in the present qualitative corpus.

Finally, online multilingualism must be interpreted within wider cross-cultural processes. Scholarship on language in mediated environments underscores that hybrid practices and platform communication are situated rather than culturally neutral [43]. Research on cross-cultural interaction offers a general rationale for studying how shared digital spaces shape intercultural contact [44]. Early methodological work on TikTok's algorithmised interaction [45] and subsequent studies of platform-dependent self-presentation [10] illuminate why visibility, self-representation, and audience response need to be analysed together. This synthesis clarifies the study's scope: it investigates observable performances and interpretations, not the prevalence of particular identities or measurable changes in viewers' attitudes.

Integrated Analytical Framework

The study combines the poststructuralist view that identities are discursively produced and contested with the sociocultural view that people make meaning through mediated social practices. Linguistic and cultural repertoires interact with TikTok affordances to create publicly visible performances whose meanings are subsequently negotiated in audience responses. Figure 1 represents the conceptual relationships guiding interpretation; it does not imply causal links estimated from quantitative data.

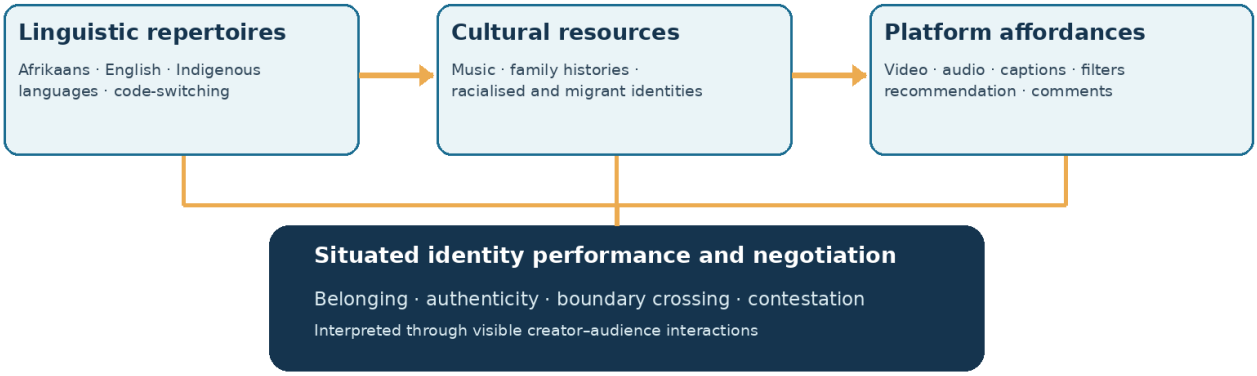


Figure 1. Integrated analytical framework for linguistic, cultural, and digitally mediated identity negotiation.

METHODS

Research Design and Corpus

The study used ethnographically informed qualitative digital discourse analysis to investigate language- and identity-related performances on TikTok in the South African context. The corpus comprised 228 publicly accessible videos curated between April 2023 and July 2026; selected creators' posts were followed at more than one point during that period. Videos, associated comments, captions, audio, visual material and publicly visible contextual profile information constituted the available empirical resources. The approach draws on digital ethnography but does not claim sustained participatory fieldwork or direct engagement with creators. Its object of analysis is publicly performed and evaluated identity, not creators' unobserved offline language practices or private intentions [7], [24].

Collection began with material encountered through the researcher's personalised TikTok "For You" feed. The researcher then followed related creators and suggested videos and conducted directed searches from an account located in South Africa. Reported search terms included "isiZulu", "#Afrikaans", and the handles of known South African creators. Videos were eligible when their publicly available linguistic, visual or interactional material was pertinent to language practices and the performance or negotiation of social and cultural identities. Posts without such relevance were excluded. This combined purposive, snowball and directed-search strategy was not random: recommendation histories, hashtags and search rankings affect which posts become visible. The 228 videos therefore form an interpretive corpus rather than a basis for national prevalence estimates [10], [11].

Multimodal Analysis, Coding, and Audience Responses

The analysis followed the six stages of Visual-Verbal Video Analysis (VVVA): (1) collecting, organising and reviewing video material; (2) transcribing verbal content; (3) determining the units of analysis; (4) extracting and coding material; (5) organising, describing and interpreting patterns; and (6) reporting findings [26]. Speech was transcribed verbatim, multilingual expressions were retained in their original languages, and English translations were presented alongside rather than substituted for the originals. Transcriptions were checked against source videos. Spoken turns were interpreted together with contemporaneous captions, music, gestures, filters, visual symbols, and available duet or stitch features. A discourse segment integrating these resources served as the principal unit of interpretation, consistent with the understanding of discourse as socially recognisable meaning-making [46].

The analytic framework distinguished creator-level identity performances from platform-mediated resources and audience uptake. Poststructuralist coding addressed performed or self-ascribed identity, language hierarchies and authenticity claims, and the co-presence of multiple affiliations. Sociocultural coding addressed the use of language, music, captions or other cultural artefacts to mediate these performances, and commenters' observable ratification, questioning, resistance or reclassification of identity claims. Five top-displayed comments per selected video were gathered and linked to the corresponding video identifier for interpretation. Comment content, rather than likes or aggregate engagement metrics, informed the analysis. An audience reaction was not taken as evidence of the creator's changed self-understanding unless a subsequent observable creator response supported that narrower interpretation.

Coding followed explicit observable criteria. Performed identity was coded when speakers named an affiliation or stylised a socially associated variety; discourse and power when posts evaluated or challenged hierarchies among languages, accents or groups; and multiplicity when more than one identity category appeared in the same segment. Mediation was assigned to relevant platform tools or cultural artefacts, including captions, sounds, filters, dress and music. Audience uptake was coded where comments or remixes endorsed, questioned or contested the identity claim. Co-construction was interpreted only when a creator visibly responded to that uptake. When affiliation or intention remained ambiguous, the analysis retained the uncertainty rather than assigning an identity from voice or appearance.

Trustworthiness, Researcher Position, and Ethical Boundaries

The researcher's position as a multilingual South African TikTok user informed the selection and interpretation of examples. Interpretive consistency was supported by comparing transcriptions with the original videos, analysing speech alongside visual and textual cues, and distinguishing creators' self-described affiliations from characteristics that could not be established from the material. The study drew on publicly accessible videos and comments without direct interaction with their creators. Privacy-oriented reporting followed the principles of South Africa's Protection of Personal Information Act 4 of 2013: searchable usernames and verbatim audience comments are omitted, and cases involving children or sensitive personal circumstances are described without identifying details. Public accessibility is not treated as proof of individual consent, and observations are restricted to self-disclosures and visible interactions rather than inferred private identities or intentions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Overview of the Qualitative Corpus

The findings arise from the purposively curated corpus of 228 TikTok videos collected between April 2023 and July 2026. Analytic attention focused on observable language choices, cultural references, creators' explicit descriptions of their experiences, and a selection of audience comments. Case numbers appearing below are internal identifiers rather than sample ranks or denominators. The examples demonstrate mechanisms through which linguistic affiliation is asserted, endorsed or disputed; they do not quantify the prevalence of these practices among South African users.

Music and dance provide one additional context for situated digital identity performance. Short videos referencing Amapiano place a recognisable South African cultural form within platform trends, showing how sounds and embodied performance can index belonging. On their own, however, such videos cannot demonstrate changes in intercultural understanding or viewers' attitudes.

Multilingualism and Cross-Community Language Claims

The selected videos show that multilingualism can serve as a valued repertoire and as a basis for judgments about social membership. In Video 316, a creator expresses disapproval of Black South Africans who use only English or Afrikaans without speaking Indigenous African languages, framing broader multilingual proficiency as a normative expectation. Video 251 presents the ability to use several South African languages as a source of collective pride. Comments on the latter post debate stereotypes about isiZulu speakers, with some viewers referring to classmates who also speak Sesotho or other local languages. These interactions reveal publicly expressed language ideologies rather than an agreed national norm.

Other sampled videos depict White South Africans using Indigenous African languages and younger speakers crossing familiar community and language boundaries. Such examples challenge an automatic correspondence between race and language choice, while leaving open questions about language learning histories, frequency of use, and audience interpretation.

Afrikaans, Cross-Racial Affiliation, and Migrant Language Practices

English and Afrikaans have historically held unequal positions within South African language hierarchies, but the selected posts demonstrate that affiliation with Afrikaans is not restricted to one racialised community. Video 100, for example, features a Black creator who describes Afrikaans-medium schooling and university study, alongside a repertoire including English, Setswana and Sesotho. She presents proficiency in Afrikaans as useful linguistic capital and encourages learning additional languages. The significance of this account lies in how the speaker connects educational experience, competence and social affiliation rather than treating Afrikaans as an exclusive ethnic marker.

Several posts connect Afrikaans to music, school experience, community relationships and cross-racial identification. Video 192 presents a Black Afrikaans-language musician who appeals for unity across racial divisions and describes linguistic exchange as a way of relating to others. The surrounding responses reported in the source material contain both approval and criticism, illustrating competing claims about cultural affiliation rather than unanimous acceptance. In Video

317, another Black creator describes Afrikaans as his first language and as the language used in schooling, dreaming and everyday thought, while also identifying isiZulu and siSwati among his resources. Considered together, the cases make visible the multiple pathways through which Afrikaans becomes part of an individual repertoire; they do not establish the prevalence of those pathways.

Afrikaans-medium educational settings provide a related context. Posts involving Black learners show the language used in social interaction and online trends, not only in formal instruction. Another family account describes a Venda-speaking mother's initial concern about an English-speaking child entering an Afrikaans-medium school and a later positive account of his emerging proficiency. These reported experiences suggest questions about language-of-instruction choices and belonging, but do not support conclusions about educational attainment or long-term language outcomes. The discussion of children is intentionally paraphrased and omits identifying account details.

Immigrant and migrant-background creators provide additional routes into Afrikaans through school, work, neighbourhood relationships, and family life. The source cases describe users from varied national backgrounds, including Somali, Chinese and Korean creators, who explain when and why they use Afrikaans. Their practices complicate simple assumptions about language ownership or ethnicity. The observed accounts are discussed as situated examples, not as evidence that any one migrant community commonly uses Afrikaans.

Code-Switching, Accents, and Language Ideologies

Code-switching is another visible means of positioning oneself in relation to home languages and social expectations. One creator humorously describes running out of English words and completing an utterance with home-language expressions, thereby enacting the very multilingual flexibility being described. Another creator interprets code-switching in parts of the Coloured community through the historical pressures of apartheid and continuing memories of racialised survival. These are distinct speaker interpretations: the first frames switching as an everyday communicative resource, whereas the second treats it as connected to historical experience. Neither account demonstrates that one explanation applies uniformly across a population.

English and Afrikaans accents also become objects of public evaluation. In one exchange, a Coloured creator responds to criticism that her English accent resembles a White English variety, while other posts describe accent variation learned through media or education. A further example involves criticism of a Coloured speaker's Afrikaner-accented Afrikaans. Such reactions show how commenters attach evaluations of authenticity, status and racial affiliation to speech styles. Claims about the speakers' motivations belong to those commenters and should not be treated as independently verified psychological explanations.

Intergenerational Language Transmission and Heritage

Family-centred videos raise questions about the relationship between English, Afrikaans, and Indigenous heritage languages. In Video 324, a mother describes an adopted child's language repertoire as English-dominant, with Afrikaans as another language and isiZulu being learned. The comments include supportive reactions and reports from some parents about their own children's limited proficiency in a family heritage language. Another adult account describes feeling caught between racial and cultural identities after being raised within an Afrikaans-speaking family.

Together these cases show how language competence and expectations of belonging may diverge. The child-related material is summarised without reproducing direct quotations or identifying handles.

Other posts depict children moving between English and isiXhosa, children using English alongside isiZulu, and conversations in which a parent changes languages while a child responds in English. The videos show different configurations of exposure, alternation and family language use. They do not establish the rate of childhood bilingualism or prove a general shift toward or away from Indigenous languages. Their relevance is to the varied linguistic resources children are shown using in particular settings.

Further family accounts describe parents and grandparents helping younger generations reconnect with Indigenous home or heritage languages. These examples suggest that intergenerational transmission may be understood as a matter of affiliation as well as proficiency, mediated by school environments, family relationships, and choices about everyday language use.

Mixed-Heritage Identities and Contested Belonging

Accounts involving mixed heritage foreground the difficulty of locating identity within fixed cultural categories. The selected cases include a creator describing Xhosa and Indian heritage and another describing parental origins in different African countries alongside childhood residence in South Africa. The latter recounts uncertainty about belonging because she does not speak either parent's language or an Indigenous South African language. Other posts involve families with Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Somali, Chinese or Japanese backgrounds. One young adult describes representing South Africa in an international sporting event while expressing an emotional allegiance to both South Africa and Pakistan and using Urdu. Such accounts illustrate layered affiliations without showing how frequently they occur.

Posts concerning Coloured identity raise additional questions about ancestral affiliation, Khoi and San histories, cultural recognition, and expectations about legitimate language practices. Some creators use Indigenous African languages, including isiXhosa, while addressing labels that others apply to them. Statements about ancestry or racial belonging are treated here as participants' contested positions rather than scientific determinations of origin. Across these cases, identity emerges as something claimed, recognised, questioned, and negotiated in public interaction.

Table 1. Cross-case thematic synthesis of the original qualitative examples.

Analytical theme	Illustrative source identifiers	Interpretive significance
Multilingual norms and expectations	Video 316; Video 251	Multiple local languages as an expected repertoire; contested stereotypes
Cross-racial Afrikaans affiliation	Video 100; Video 192; Video 317	Language proficiency and music challenge racialised ownership
Migrants and Afrikaans	Other sampled migrant-background posts	Situated language adoption through school, work and family
Code-switching and accent policing	Other sampled accent and code-switching posts	Stylistic flexibility, survival narratives and authenticity judgments
Child and heritage language socialisation	Video 324; other family-language posts	Family priorities, bilingual interaction and heritage-language learning

Analytical theme	Illustrative source identifiers	Interpretive significance
Mixed-race and migrant-background identity	Other mixed-heritage posts	Hybridity, uncertainty of belonging and multiple allegiances
Coloured identities and Khoi-San heritage	Other Coloured identity and heritage posts	Disputes about origins, recognition and legitimate cultural membership

Source: Thematic synthesis of the TikTok videos and associated comments examined in this study. The nonconsecutive case labels refer to video identifiers, not to a frequency distribution or the number of videos analysed. Identifying account names and searchable comment text have been omitted to reduce traceability.

Discussion

Language Ownership and Authenticity

Read together, the video cases show that social recognition is frequently negotiated through the relationship between linguistic competence and presumed social category. Black creators' use of Afrikaans, Asian immigrants' Afrikaans repertoires, and disagreements over English accents destabilise expectations that an individual's race, family background, or appearance should determine which languages they may speak. The examples align with analyses of fluid language repertoires in South Africa [2], [20], but also extend them into a setting in which public comment threads make language ideologies visible to large, dispersed audiences [8], [9]. The evidence demonstrates negotiation and contestation; it does not allow the researcher to infer how common these responses are among South Africans generally.

Intergenerational Repertoires and Educational Relevance

The intergenerational examples bring a second dimension into view. Families appearing in the source material attach different practical and symbolic values to English, Afrikaans, and Indigenous languages. Some posts describe difficulties maintaining a heritage language; others show children who move fluidly between languages or adults attempting to rebuild intergenerational connections. These observations resonate with studies of Indigenous-language maintenance and translanguaging, while stopping short of demonstrating whether online viewing causes language learning [18], [27]. Their educational relevance lies in making learners' lived linguistic resources visible as potential starting points for inclusive teaching, rather than turning TikTok use itself into an established pedagogical intervention.

Hybrid Identity and Public Contestation

The mixed-heritage and Coloured identity cases also complicate an uncritical celebration of hybridity. Users may claim several inheritances simultaneously, yet receive demands to clarify which group they "really" belong to. In this sense TikTok is not merely a space where fixed identities are displayed. It is also a setting in which authenticity is publicly negotiated and challenged. The visibility generated by reusable sounds, short videos, and recommendation feeds can amplify these claims but cannot establish agreement or mutual understanding [11], [12]. The evidence is consequently best interpreted as a collection of situated examples revealing possible discursive mechanisms, not as proof of platform-wide social cohesion.

Analytical Contribution and Future Directions

The analysis connects three dimensions of digitally mediated identity negotiation: creators' multilingual and multimodal performances, the cultural histories and social hierarchies that make those performances meaningful, and audience responses that endorse or challenge them. The 228-video corpus, the April 2023–July 2026 collection period, and the VVVA-based coding of speech, image, textual overlays and comments provide a coherent basis for this contextual interpretation. Observed audience reception is distinguished from identity co-construction, which requires an observable response by the creator. These findings add context-specific evidence to digital sociolinguistics while recognising that platform selection does not permit generalisation to national patterns of language use.

CONCLUSION

In a purposively assembled set of South African TikTok videos, linguistic repertoires emerge as resources through which creators present, negotiate, and sometimes defend cultural belonging. Cases involving Afrikaans-speaking Black creators, migrant-background speakers, accent disputes, intergenerational language practices, and mixed-heritage affiliations demonstrate how familiar social boundaries can be crossed or reasserted in public digital interaction. Comments provide evidence of visible judgments about authenticity and language ownership but cannot establish what all viewers believe or how a creator understands these responses privately. By examining speech alongside captions, music, cultural references and observable interaction, the study contributes a contextual account of identity performance within platform-mediated discourse. The implications for education concern recognition of learners' heterogeneous linguistic repertoires and questions for further investigation, not established effects of TikTok viewing on language learning or intercultural attitudes.

LIMITATIONS

The corpus was purposively constructed through a personalised recommendation feed, directed searches and snowball exploration, rather than through a representative sampling frame. Its composition was therefore influenced by the researcher's account history and TikTok's changing recommendation and search systems. The use of five top-displayed comments per video captures selected public responses, not the complete range of audience views; comment visibility may also vary over time. Videos reveal performed identities and publicly available interactions, but cannot independently establish creators' offline language practices, private motivations or long-term educational outcomes. Although selected creators were observed across multiple posts, this design was not intended to measure changes in the wider population. To reduce privacy risks, examples involving children and sensitive personal situations are reported without searchable identifiers.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The empirical material consisted of publicly accessible TikTok videos and accompanying comments observed during the stated collection period. The curated material is presented in this article through anonymised case descriptions and thematic synthesis rather than a publicly shared list of usernames or transcripts. Availability of individual posts may change as users delete content or platform access conditions change.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

DECLARATION OF USE OF AI IN SCIENTIFIC WRITING

The author used Grammarly and ChatGPT (OpenAI) during manuscript preparation and editorial revision to support language editing, textual organisation, and clarification of methodological reporting. These tools did not independently collect, verify, or generate empirical observations. The author remains responsible for the accuracy of the data, sources, interpretations, and final manuscript.

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