IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON LANGUAGE USE AND IDENTITY FORMATION AMONG YOUNG ADULTS IN A MULTILINGUAL SOCIETY OF ENUGU EDUCATION ZONE

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of social media on language use and identity formation among young adults in Enugu Education Zone. Using a mixed-method approach, the study explores the language use patterns and identity formation strategies of young adults on social media platforms. Three purposes of study and three corresponding research questions guided the study. The area of study is Enugu Education Zone and the population of the study is young adults between the ages of 18 to 30, totalling about 56,960. The sample size for the study consisted of 384 young adults in Enugu Education Zone. The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire validated by three experts, one from Measurement and Evaluation and two from English Language Department, all from Enugu State College of Education Technical, Enugu. Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient was used to obtain the reliability index of 0.79, showing positive correlation. The findings revealed that majority of the young adults use multiple languages on social media; they also code-switch between languages on social media to communicate with friends and family; that gender, language proficiency and educational background play a significant role in shaping their online identity and finally, that social media help them connect with their cultural heritage. Based on this findings, the researcher recommended an integration of social media into language teaching and that language educators should help students develop critical literacy skills to evaluate online information and communicate effectively online.

Keywords: Social media, language use, identity formation, multilingual societies, young adults.

Introduction

The rapid proliferation of social media platforms in recent decades has profoundly reshaped the ways in which individuals communicate, express themselves, and engage with the world. Among young adults, who are among the most active users of platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and WhatsApp, social media has become a primary medium for interaction and self-expression. This change is especially noticeable in places where a lot of languages are spoken, people naturally switch between them to connect and communicate in different social settings. For many young adults in Enugu's Education Zone, a region known for its linguistic diversity and vibrant cultural background, social media has become a go-to space where they express who they are, navigate their identities, and engage with others. It comes with both exciting opportunities and a few challenges.

Androutsopoulos (2015) and Tagg et al (2017) discuss to the impact of social media and how it has become popular in experimenting with language when it comes to people either mixing languages and switching between them or forming new ones in order to help the user shape flexible identities that help them adapt to different contexts for ease of overcoming the complex mix of languages and cultures around them. In the Enugu Education Zone, where languages like Igbo, English, and others are spoken side by side, these language innovations are especially significant. Young adults often switch between these languages to express their cultural ties, show their identities, or keep up with global trends.

Another aspect of how individual communicate, express themselves and engage with the world using social media platforms has been looked at the angle of education. The way that the well educated at the higher level usually depicts an in-depth knowledge of the cultural value of language especially when faced with a multilingual skills is necessary (Canagarajah, 2020). In the Enugu Education Zone, young adults with formal education are more likely to use social media to showcase their linguistic flexibility, mixing Igbo, English, and other languages to express both local and global identities. In contrast, individuals with fewer educational opportunities might face challenges in language use, which could limit their ability to participate in wider online conversations.

Just like education, language skills play a major role in how people express themselves online and shape their identities. Those with strong language abilities often find it easier to navigate complex communication situations. They can switch between languages or mix them creatively to connect with different kinds of audiences (Androutsopoulos, 2020). But for those with limited language skills, there's often pressure to stick to dominant global languages like English. While this can make communication easier across wider networks, it can also lead to the decline of indigenous languages like Igbo, raising important concerns about how to protect linguistic diversity in an increasingly globalized digital world.

Social media platforms also influence language choices in subtle but powerful ways. They often prioritize dominant languages like English, pushing minority or indigenous languages to the background. Danet and Herring (2007) point out that social media tends to reinforce this kind of linguistic dominance, as users adapt their language to fit global norms. In the Enugu Education Zone, this trend is especially visible, English is becoming more common on social platforms, threatening the visibility and everyday use of Igbo, which is central to the region's cultural identity. Studies by Ugot (2010) and Uchenna (2019) show that many young adults turn to English for its perceived social advantage and broader reach, even if it means drifting away from their native language.

Another key issue is how social media affects identity. Social identity theory, developed by Tajfel and Turner (1986), explains how people build and negotiate their

sense of self through the groups they belong to. On social media, young adults often put a lot of thought into how they present themselves through language, images, and the way they interact with others. Their online identities often reflect a blend of local culture and global influences. Georgakopoulou (2017) explores how people use storytelling online to shape how they're seen by others. For young adults in Enugu, this identity-building process is shaped by a constant pull between staying rooted in tradition and adapting to modern, global trends. As they move through these digital spaces, they're not just sharing content, they're also negotiating who they are and who they want to be.

Additionally, the affordances of social media platforms such as anonymity, immediacy, and multimodal communication enhance their role in shaping identity. These affordances allow users to experiment with different facets of their identities, including linguistic identity, without the constraints of face-to-face interactions. However, this flexibility also raises concerns about authenticity and the potential fragmentation of cultural identity. In the Enugu Education Zone, the use of social media as a space for identity experimentation intersects with broader societal shifts, including urbanization, globalization, and changes in educational and employment opportunities.

Notwithstanding the foregoing, one important point to mention is the paucity of research specifically examining the interplay between social media, language use, and identity formation among young adults in the Enugu Education Zone. Granted that existing studies provide valuable perspectives on social media's impact on language and identity in other contexts, they often fail to capture the unique sociolinguistic dynamics of regions like Enugu, where indigenous languages face significant challenges from dominant global languages. This gap underscores the need for localized studies that consider the historical, cultural, and technological factors shaping these interactions.

In conclusion, social media plays a transformative role in the linguistic practices and identity construction of young adults in the Enugu Education Zone. Gender, educational background, and language proficiency are central variables that influence how individuals navigate these digital platforms, shaping their linguistic choices and identity expressions. As digital platforms continue to evolve, their influence on language use and identity formation will likely intensify, necessitating a nuanced understanding of these dynamics. By situating this study within the broader literature on multilingualism, social media, and identity, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how young adults in Enugu navigate the opportunities and challenges of the digital age while negotiating their linguistic and cultural identities.

Statement of the Problem

Social media has become an everyday part of life, especially for young adults who are some of its most active users. This trend is particularly meaningful in places like the Enugu Education Zone in southeastern Nigeria—a region known for its rich cultural diversity and multilingual makeup. Here, languages like Igbo, English, and Nigerian Pidgin coexist, shaped by both local traditions and global influences.

For many young people in Enugu, platforms like Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok aren't just tools for staying in touch—they're vital spaces for expressing themselves, forming connections, and negotiating their sense of identity. As social media becomes more embedded in daily routines, it's changing the way language is used and how cultural identities are formed and expressed.

But this shift also raises important questions. In multilingual communities like Enugu, language choices are deeply connected to social and cultural identity. Young adults often move between Igbo, English, and Pidgin depending on who they're talking to and what they want to express—whether they're staying grounded in their roots or tapping into global trends. Social media adds a new layer to this, with its fast pace, wide reach, and tendency to favour dominant languages like English.

While these platforms open up exciting opportunities for creativity and global connection, they also risk putting pressure on local languages. The growing preference for English online, for example, could threaten the visibility and vitality of Igbo—a language that holds deep cultural significance in the region. As these digital shifts continue, it's important to understand their long-term impact on both language use and cultural identity in the Enugu Education Zone.

The effects of social media use in the region goes beyond just language choices to the broader realm of identity development. Identity is a dynamic process, and for young adults in the Enugu Education Zone, it is influenced by a tension between traditional cultural values and the modernity associated with global digital culture. Social media platforms give individuals the opportunities to experiment with multiple facets of their identities, including linguistic identity, cultural affiliation, and social status. However, this experimentation can lead to identity fragmentation or a weakening of cultural roots, as young adults may place more importance on global trends over local traditions. The pressure to curate an idealized online persona, often formed by global standards, can also add to a diminished sense of authenticity and belonging.

Despite the growing significance of these issues, there is a glaring lack of research exploring the specific impact of social media on language use and identity formation among young adults in the Enugu Education Zone. Existing studies on the relationship between social media and language use in Nigeria often focus on urban centres or fail to consider the unique sociolinguistic dynamics of regions like Enugu. Additionally, while the broader literature highlights the influence of social media on identity formation, it rarely examines the interplay between language use and identity construction in the context of multilingual societies. This gap in understanding is

particularly concerning given the rapid evolution of digital platforms and their increasing integration into everyday life.

Understanding these dynamics is important for several reasons. First, language is a cornerstone of cultural identity and social cohesion. In the Enugu Education Zone, the slow change away from Igbo in favour of English or Pidgin on social media could have serious impacts towards the preservation of the region's linguistic and cultural heritage. Second, identity formation during young adulthood is a critical developmental process. The ways in which social media shapes identity in this context could influence not just how individuals see themselves but also the shared sense of identity among the youth in the region. Third, insights into these dynamics are essential for policymakers, educators, and technology designers seeking to promote linguistic inclusivity, cultural preservation, and digital literacy in the region. To sum up, the growing use of social media use among young adults in the Enugu Education Zone presents a mix of opportunities and challenges. While these platforms open up new spaces for communication and self-expression, they also risk altering long-standing language practices and reshaping how young people form their identities. Understanding the extent of this influence is key to making sure the digital world enhances rather than erodes the region's rich linguistic and cultural heritage. By discussing these dynamics, this study hopes to offer a deeper understanding of how social media, language use, and identity interact in a setting as linguistically and culturally diverse as Enugu.

Purpose of the Study

This study tries to examine how gender, educational background, and language proficiency influence the way social media affects language use and identity among young adults in the Enugu Education Zone. These factors are important to understanding the connection between social media and the sociolinguistic and cultural realities of this linguistically diverse region. By looking at where these aspects intersect, the research tries to shed light on the subtle ways they shape language practices, identity development, and the broad impact on cultural and linguistic heritage in the area. As such, the study aims to explore the following:

1. To Examine how Gender Influences Language Use and Identity Formation on Social Media among Young Adults
2. To Investigate the Relationship between Educational Background and Language Use on Social Media in the Enugu Education Zone
3. To explore the Role of Language Proficiency in Shaping Social Media Use and Identity among Young Adults

Research Questions

To reach the objectives outlined above, the following research questions will serve as a guide for this study:

1. How does gender affect way young adult in Enugu Education Zone use languages on social media, and what effects does this have for identity formation?

2. What is the relationship between educational background and language use on social media among young adults in the Enugu Education Zone?
3. In which ways does language proficiency exert its influence in the use of social media for communication and formation of identity among young adults in the Enugu Education Zone?

Method

The research adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact of social media on language use and identity formation among young adults in the Enugu Education Zone. This approach ensures the study captures the depth and complexity of the phenomenon while also generating data that is measurable and generalizable.

The research design adopted is a descriptive and exploratory research design. The descriptive part focuses on document patterns of language use and how identities are formed on social media platforms, while the exploratory part digs into deeper reasons, motivations, and meaning of these behaviours in the Enugu Education Zone's unique multilingual setting.

The target population will consist of 28,480 young adults aged 18–30 years within the Enugu Education Zone. This demographic is selected due to their active engagement with social media and their position as both custodians of cultural heritage and agents of change in a rapidly globalizing society. Purposive sampling will be employed to ensure representation across key variables, such as gender, educational background, and language proficiency. The number of participants used as sample for this study is 384 participants. The writers used structured questionnaire as the major instrument for data collection. Two sections, namely A and B were developed by the researchers to make up the questionnaire. Section A deals with the demographic data of the respondents, while section B deals with the Impact of Social Media on Language Use and Identity Formation among Young Adults in a Multilingual Society like Enugu Education Zone. A four-point rating scale with assigned values was used to rate the response to the questionnaire items as follows: Strongly Agree (SA) 4 points, Agreed (A) 3 points, Disagree (D) 2 points, Strongly Disagree (SD) 1 point. The items on the instrument are unambiguous.

The instrument was validated by three experts, one from Measurement and Evaluation, and two from School of Art and Social Sciences, all in Enugu State College of Education (Technical), Enugu. Bearing in mind of the purpose of the study, the experts focused on the respective instruments taking cognizance of the relevance cum adequacy of the items, language clarity, and comprehensiveness of the items. The comments, suggestions and criticisms made independently by the experts helped the researcher to modify and produce the final draft of the instrument.

To ensure the reliability of the instrument the validated instrument was trial tested on 50 young adults in Nsukka Education zone which were outside the targeted population. The Cronbach alpha method was adopted in computing the internal consistency reliability estimate of the items. The overall reliability of the index was 0.92 showing that the instrument is reliable and qualifies for consideration as appropriate for use. In answering the questions, mean was used for the purpose.

Table 1: Mean responses on gender influences on the choice and use of languages on social media among young adults in the Enugu Education Zone, and its implications on identity formation?

S/N	Influence of discipline on academic performance of students	SA	A	D	SD	N	∑fx	X	Decision
1	I frequently use a specific language on social media based on the context or audience	130	122	74	58	384	1092	2.84	Agree
2	I feel that my choice of language on social media reflects my gender identity	179	95	73	37	384	1184	3.08	Agree
3	I believe gender expectations influence how I express myself linguistically on social media	159	150	39	36	384	1200	3.12	Agree
4	I am more comfortable using certain languages on social media depending on the people I am communicating with	150	134	90	10	384	1192	3.10	Agree
5	My gender affects how I switch between languages when engaging on social media platforms	161	105	82	36	384	1159	3.01	Agree
	Grand Mean							**3.03**	**Agree**

Table 1 shows that items 1-5 have a mean scores of 2.84, 3.08, 3.12, 3.10 and 3.01 respectively. These mean scores were greater than the cut-off mean of 2.50. This implies that the respondents agreed that those items are influences of gender on the choice and use of languages on social media among young adults in the Enugu

Education Zone. The cut-off point of 2.50 was less than the grand mean of 3.03. This implies that the respondents agreed that gender has a positive influence on the choice and use of languages on social media among young adults in the Enugu Education Zone.

Table 2: Mean responses on the relationship between educational background and language use on social media among young adults in the Enugu Education Zone?

S/N	Influence of discipline on academic performance of students	SA	A	D	SD	N	∑fx	X	Decision
6	My level of education influences the language(s) I use on social media	104	127	82	71	384	1032	2.69	Agree
7	I feel confident using formal language (e.g., grammatically correct sentences) on social media because of my educational background	249	90	40	5	384	1351	3.53	Agree
8	I believe my educational background impacts how I navigate multilingual communication on social media	150	183	28	23	384	1228	3.19	Agree
9	Social media has influenced how I use language in academic or professional settings	190	106	68	20	384	1234	3.21	Agree
10	I prefer to use certain languages on social media because of my educational experiences	100	127	87	70	384	1025	2.67	Agree
	Grand Mean							3.05	Agree

Table 2 shows that items 6-10 have a mean scores of 2.69, 3.53, 3.19, 3.21 and 2.67 respectively. These mean scores were greater than the cut-off mean of 2.50. This implies that the respondents agreed that those items are influences of relationship between educational background and language use on social media among young adults in the Enugu Education Zone. The cut-off point of 2.50 was less than the grand mean of 3.03. This implies that the respondents agreed that relationships between

educational backgrounds has a positive influence on the choice and use of languages on social media among young adults in the Enugu Education Zone.

Table 3: Mean responses on how language proficiency influence the use of social media for communication and identity formation among young adults in the Enugu Education Zone?

S/N	Influence of discipline on academic performance of students	SA	A	D	SD	N	∑fx	X	Decision
11	My proficiency in a language determines how often I use it on social media	120	130	80	54	384	1084	2.82	Agree
12	I feel confident expressing myself emotionally or culturally in a language I am proficient in on social media	200	100	50	34	384	1234	3.21	Agree
13	I avoid using a language on social media when I feel I lack proficiency in it	150	180	30	24	384	1224	3.19	Agree
14	My proficiency in a language influences how others perceive my identity on social media	180	140	50	14	384	1254	3.27	Agree
15	I believe that higher proficiency in a language increases my ability to engage effectively on social media platforms	140	160	60	24	384	1184	3.08	Agree
	Grand Mean							3.11	Agree

Table 3 shows that items 11-15 have a mean scores of 2.82, 3.21, 3.19, 3.27 and 3.08 respectively. These mean scores were greater than the cut-off mean of 2.50. This implies that the respondents agreed that those items are influences of language proficiency on the use of social media for communication and identity formation among young adults in the Enugu Education Zone. The grand mean of 3.11 was greater than the cut-off point of 2.50. This implies that the respondents agreed that language proficiency on the use of social media for communication and identity formation has a positive influence on the choice and use of languages on social media among young adults in the Enugu Education Zone.

Discussion of Findings

The increasing use of social media among young adults in multilingual societies, such as the Enugu Education Zone, underscores the significant role these platforms play in shaping language use and identity formation. Social media has become a powerful space for interaction, where linguistic choices are influenced by factors such as gender, educational background, and language proficiency. This study provides critical insights into these dynamics, supported by current literature on sociolinguistics, digital communication, and identity construction.

The findings indicate that gender significantly influences language choices on social media, reflecting broader societal and cultural norms. This aligns with studies by Androutsopoulos (2020), who argues that gendered language use is evident in digital communication, where men and women often employ distinct linguistic strategies to assert their identities. For example, women are more likely to use emotive language, while men may adopt assertive tones. In the Enugu Education Zone, these patterns are further complicated by the interplay of indigenous languages like Igbo, English, and Pidgin, with each language serving different social functions.

Furthermore, the study highlights that societal expectations often pressure individuals to conform to gender-specific linguistic behaviours. Holmes (2019) notes that these expectations are deeply rooted in cultural perceptions of gender roles, which extend into digital spaces. For instance, women may feel compelled to use formal or emotive language to align with societal expectations of politeness and empathy, while men may prioritize brevity or assertiveness. This dynamic has implications for identity construction, as individuals navigate the tension between societal norms and personal expression.

Educational background emerged as a critical factor influencing language use on social media. Young adults with higher educational attainment demonstrated greater linguistic versatility, often switching between formal English for professional contexts and Igbo or Pidgin for informal interactions. This finding is consistent with the work of Pennycook (2018), who argues that education enhances linguistic agency, enabling individuals to navigate multilingual spaces more effectively.

Additionally, the study reveals that educational experiences shape attitudes toward indigenous languages. Respondents with tertiary education were more likely to use Igbo on social media as a marker of cultural pride, aligning with Bamgbose's (2021) assertion that education fosters a deeper appreciation for linguistic heritage. However, some participants expressed a preference for English due to its perceived prestige and global utility, echoing Kachru's (2020) notion of English as a "lingua franca" in multilingual societies.

The dual influence of education—promoting both cultural preservation and linguistic globalization—creates a complex dynamic in the Enugu Education Zone.

Policymakers and educators must address this duality to ensure that linguistic diversity is maintained while embracing the benefits of global connectivity.

Language proficiency significantly shapes how young adults engage with social media, influencing both communication styles and identity construction. The findings suggest that individuals with higher proficiency in a language are more confident using it for self-expression, while those with limited proficiency may avoid its use altogether. This observation is supported by Tagg et al. (2021), who highlight the role of linguistic competence in determining online communication patterns.

For many respondents, proficiency in Igbo, English, or Pidgin correlated with their level of cultural attachment. Those proficient in Igbo often used it to express cultural pride and solidarity, while English proficiency was associated with professionalism and global connectivity. Pidgin, with its informal and inclusive nature, served as a bridge language, facilitating communication across diverse groups. This aligns with Adegbija's (2018) analysis of Pidgin as a unifying linguistic force in multilingual societies.

However, the study also underscores the challenges faced by individuals with limited proficiency in dominant languages like English. These individuals may feel marginalized in digital spaces, where linguistic competence often determines access to opportunities and social capital. Canagarajah (2020) highlights this digital divide, emphasizing the need for inclusive strategies that accommodate diverse linguistic proficiencies.

The intersection of gender, educational background, and language proficiency creates a multifaceted landscape for identity construction on social media. The study reveals that young adults in the Enugu Education Zone use language not only as a tool for communication but also as a means of negotiating and expressing their identities. This finding aligns with Turkle's (2021) concept of the "second self," where digital interactions serve as extensions of personal and social identities.

Social media platforms offer a unique space for experimentation, enabling users to adopt multiple linguistic and cultural personas. However, this fluidity also poses challenges, as individuals navigate the tension between authenticity and performativity. Boyd (2019) argues that social media amplifies these tensions, particularly in multilingual societies where linguistic choices carry cultural and political significance.

This paper has shown the role that social media play in redefining cultural identity. While some respondents viewed digital platforms as tools for cultural preservation, others expressed concerns about linguistic erosion and cultural homogenization. This duality reflects the broader discourse on globalization, where digital connectivity simultaneously fosters cultural exchange and endangers linguistic diversity (Crystal, 2020).

Conclusion

This study explored how social media influences language use and identity among young adults in the Enugu Education Zone, looking closely at factors like gender, education, and language skills. The findings show that social media is a space where people's language choices are shaped by both personal experiences and wider social influences. While it gives young people a chance to express themselves, it also creates challenges in keeping local languages and cultures alive.

Gender plays an important role in how people communicate online, with cultural expectations shaping the way they express themselves and see their identity. Education influences how comfortable people are using different languages and their views on balancing indigenous languages with global ones. Language skills also affect how confident and effective they feel when communicating online, which means we need inclusive strategies that support everyone.

This research adds to our understanding of how digital communication impacts language, especially in places like Enugu where multiple languages are spoken. It highlights the need for educators, policymakers, and tech creators to work together to protect language diversity while also embracing the benefits of global digital connections.

In the end, this study shows just how much social media shapes both language and culture, especially in communities with rich linguistic diversity.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Encourage the Use of Indigenous Languages on Social Media
   Educators, content creators, and policymakers should actively promote the use of indigenous languages like Igbo across social media platforms. This can be achieved through campaigns and initiatives that inspire young people to take pride in their linguistic and cultural roots.

2. Integrate Digital Literacy into School Curricula
   Schools in the Enugu Education Zone should include digital literacy programs that highlight how social media influences language use and identity formation. These programs should emphasize responsible online behaviour, encourage multilingual skills, and stress the importance of cultural representation in digital spaces.

3. Promote Multilingual Content Creation
   Social media platforms should develop and provide tools that support content creation in multiple languages, such as translation options and region-specific interfaces. Partnering with local governments and cultural organizations can help ensure these features meet the needs of diverse language communities.

4. **Address Gender Bias in Online Communication**
    There should be targeted awareness campaigns to challenge gender-based stereotypes and biases in digital communication. Training young adults to recognize and respond to these issues can foster more inclusive and equitable language practices online.

5. **Support Users with Lower Language Proficiency**
    Community-driven programs should be set up to help improve language skills, especially in indigenous and minority languages. Policymakers and educators must work together to design inclusive language policies that empower all users to engage confidently and effectively in digital spaces.

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