

IMPACT OF MULTILINGUALISM ON YOUTH IDENTITY FORMATIONS AT FEDERAL UNIVERSITY OF TRANSPORTATION, KATSINA STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Multilingualism in Nigeria plays a critical role in the formation of youth identity within a linguistically dense and socially stratified environment. Drawing on Bonny Norton's theory of language and identity, this study examines how Nigerian youth conceptualise language as a form of social investment through which inclusiveness, power, and recognition are negotiated. Using evidence from the Federal University of Transportation, Katsina State, the study explores how students deploy indigenous languages, Nigerian Pidgin, and the English language to construct fluid and hybrid identities across ethnic, national, and global affiliations. Data were collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews from ninety (90) participants across all Departments. Quantitative data were analysed using percentages, while qualitative responses were analysed thematically. The study investigated patterns of language use across social contexts, the extent and motivations of code-switching practices, perceptions of identity, the influence of multilingualism on social interactions and inclusiveness, and challenges arising from language hierarchies and social expectations. Findings reveal that multilingual competence functions as a strategic identity resource, enabling youth to negotiate prestige, inclusion, and participation through context-sensitive language choice and code-switching. However, identity formation remains constrained by institutional hierarchies, social pressure, and discrimination, which limit full linguistic expressions. A gap was also identified in the limited institutional recognition of everyday multilingual practices. The study recommends inclusive language and educational policies that legitimise youth multilingualism as a resource for identity development and social inclusion.

Keywords: Multilingualism, Identity Formation, Nigerian Youth, Language and Identity, Sociolinguistics

Introduction

Multilingualism is a defining characteristic of Nigeria. As Eberhard et al explain, Nigeria “is home to five hundred and twenty living indigenous languages,” reflecting one of the highest levels of linguistic diversity in the world. This linguistic diversity shapes not only communication but also cultural identity, social interactions, and individual self-perception. In a country where English serves as the official language among a rich tapestry of local languages, the interplay between these languages presents unique opportunities and challenges for the youth. Understanding how multilingualism impacts identity formations in Nigerian youth is crucial, as this demographic represents the future of the nation, navigating a complex landscape of cultural and linguistic influences.

Multilingualism in Nigeria is not merely a practical tool for communication; it is deeply connected with cultural heritage and social dynamics. For many young people, the ability to speak multiple languages can enhance their social capital, allowing them to connect with diverse communities and access various opportunities. However, this linguistic diversity can also lead to challenges, such as language shift, where dominant languages overshadow indigenous ones, potentially affecting cultural identity. Exploring the impacts of multilingualism on identity formation enables a deeper understanding of these dynamics, particularly in a globalised world where cultural exchanges are increasingly prevalent.

As Nigerian youth engage with multiple languages, they are simultaneously constructing their identities in a context marked by cultural hybridity. The constant negotiations between local languages and English reflect broader societal changes and influences, including

globalisation and urbanisation. This study seeks to unravel how these linguistic practices shape young people's sense of self and inclusiveness, providing insights into the complexities of identity formations in a multilingual setting. By highlighting the multifaceted nature of language and identity, the study aims to contribute to the existing literature on sociolinguistics and youth studies in Nigeria.

Finally, the findings from this study have practical implications for educators, policy makers, and community leaders. By understanding how multilingualism influences identities, stakeholders can develop strategies that support cultural preservation, enhance social cohesion, and empower youth in their linguistic and cultural identities. This study is therefore vital for fostering an environment where Nigerian youth can thrive, embracing their multilingual backgrounds as a source of strength and identity.

Statement of the Problem

This study explores how multilingualism influences identity formation among Nigerian youth, a group navigating a complex linguistic landscape that includes many indigenous languages along with English. Despite Nigeria's rich linguistic and cultural diversity, there is limited academic understanding of how daily multilingual practices shape young people's self-views, social interactions, and feelings of community inclusion. Most existing research has focused on language distribution, policy, and educational results, offering little insight into the identity negotiations through which youth create meaning and social roles in multilingual environments. Consequently, the implications of multilingualism for Nigerian youth's identity are under-theorised, affecting both language and identity studies as well as the development of inclusive language policies and youth programs.

Aim and Objectives

This study aims to examine how multilingual practices influence identity formation among Nigerian youth, with particular attention to

language investment, identity negotiation, and social positioning within Nigeria's multilingual landscape.

Objectives of the Study

The specific objectives of the study are to:

- (a) Identify the patterns of language use among Nigerian youth across different social contexts, including educational, social, and community settings
- (b) Examine the extent and motivations of code-switching practices among Nigerian youth and how these practices relate to identity expressions
- (c) Explore how Nigerian youth perceive and negotiate their identities using multiple languages
- (d) Analyse the influence of multilingualism on social interactions, inclusiveness, and peer relationships among Nigerian youth
- (e) Investigate the challenges Nigerian youth encounter in expressing identity within multilingual contexts, particularly in relation to language hierarchies and social expectations.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study

- (a) What patterns of language use do Nigerian youth exhibit across different social sectors, such as school, peer interaction, home, and online spaces?
- (b) How do Nigerian youth deploy code-switching in everyday communication, and what motivates these choices?
- (c) How do Nigerian youth perceive and negotiate their identities using multiple languages?
- (d) In what ways does multilingualism influence social interaction, inclusiveness, and peer relationships among Nigerian youth?

- (e) What challenges do Nigerian youth encounter in expressing identity within Nigeria's multilingual environment, particularly in relation to language hierarchy and social expectations?

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to sociolinguistic scholarship by applying Bonny Norton's theory of language and identity to the Nigerian multilingual context, where youth navigate complex language hierarchies. It provides empirical insights into how Nigerian youth strategically use English, indigenous languages, and Nigerian Pidgin to negotiate identity, inclusiveness, and social positioning. By focusing on lived multilingual practices rather than language distributions alone, the study addresses a gap in existing Nigerian language research. The findings have practical relevance for language and education policy, highlighting the need to recognise multilingualism as an identity resource rather than solely an instructional tool. Overall, the study supports more inclusive approaches to language planning and youth development in Nigeria.

Scope and Limitations of the Study

The study focuses on the impacts of multilingualism on identity formations among Nigerian youth at the Federal University of Transportation, Daura, Katsina State. It examines patterns of language use, code-switching practices, motivations for language choice, and perceptions of identity across social, academic, and digital contexts. The study is theoretically grounded in Bonny Norton's language and identity framework. It draws on questionnaire and interview data from undergraduate youth within the university's multilingual setting. The findings are limited to a single federal university and may not fully represent the experiences of Nigerian youth in other regions or institutional contexts. Reliance on self-reported data may also introduce subjectivity, while the cross-sectional design captures identity practices

at one point in time, limiting insights into longitudinal identity development.

Review of Related Literature

This section focuses on the review of related literature from the conceptual perspective, empirical review, and the theoretical framework adopted for the study.

Conceptual Review Multilingualism

Multilingualism, defined as the ability to communicate in multiple languages, has garnered considerable attention in linguistic and sociolinguistic research, particularly in culturally diverse contexts. As a prevalent phenomenon in Nigeria due to its diverse linguistic landscape, it significantly influences identity formation among its youth. Nigeria's multilingual context, with over five hundred languages, did not primarily develop through migration, unlike Western settings, but inherently due to the amalgamation of diverse ethnic groups in 1914. Scholars like Oyetayo (2006) have identified many living languages in Nigeria, while Yusuf (2012) estimates around five hundred and five languages spoken, with Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa as major languages. This linguistic diversity creates a complex interplay between language, culture, and identity, where mastering multiple languages can offer educational, professional, and social advantages.

The English language, introduced through British colonialism, has become the official language, facilitating communication across diverse ethnic groups. However, the preference for English and other languages also has sociolinguistic implications, influencing multilingual identities and potentially endangering indigenous languages. Scholars such as Adegbija (2004), Bamgbose (1991), Akinnaso (1993), and Brann (1994) have explored multilingualism in Nigeria, categorising

languages based on ethnic groups and examining language policies. This body of work highlights the need to understand how actual linguistic practices shape the sociolinguistic phenomenon of Nigerian multilingualism and how language choice and attitudes are inseparable from political arrangements and power relations.

Identity Formation

Identity formation is a complex process influenced by various social, cultural, and linguistic factors, particularly in Nigeria's multilingual contexts. According to Erikson, identity development is a critical aspect of adolescence and young adulthood, where individuals explore different roles and affiliations. In a multilingual environment, language plays a pivotal role in shaping self-perception and social positioning. As Norton argues, the relationship between language and identity is deeply intertwined; individuals often use their linguistic abilities to negotiate their identities and align themselves with specific cultural groups. For the Nigerian youth, who navigate multiple languages and dialects, this negotiation becomes crucial in defining their social affiliations and personal narratives.

Moreover, the concept of social identity theory, as articulated by Tajfel and Turner, provides a framework for understanding how group memberships, such as linguistic and ethnic affiliations, impact self-identity. Within Nigeria's diverse linguistic landscape, multilingual youth often identify with multiple linguistic communities, which can enrich their identities while also presenting challenges related to inclusiveness and acceptance. Research by Okoro further demonstrates that language choice in different contexts, such as home, school, and social settings, can either reinforce or complicate identity formations. This dynamic interplay underscores the importance of examining the specific experiences of Nigerian youth as they navigate their multilingual identities, revealing how language serves as both a marker of cultural affiliations and a tool for self-expression in a rapidly changing sociocultural landscape.

Empirical Review

An empirical review on multilingualism in Nigeria demonstrates that language use is deeply implicated in the constructions of social and personal identities, particularly among young people navigating ethnic, national, and global affiliations. This section reviews key studies relevant to the present study, focusing on their empirical concerns, methodological orientations, and contributions to understanding the relationship between multilingualism and identity formations among Nigerian youth.

Bamgbose (1991) provides one of the earliest and most influential scholarly examinations of language in Nigeria and Sub-Saharan Africa more broadly. His work interrogates the relationship between language, nationhood, and identity in post-colonial states, with particular attention to the coexistence of indigenous languages and English. Although largely theoretical and policy-oriented, Bamgbose's study is grounded in empirical observations of language use across African societies. He argues that multilingualism in Nigeria is not a transitional phase but a permanent sociolinguistic reality that profoundly shapes social identities. For young people, this linguistic complexity produces layered identities, as they must constantly negotiate between ethnic loyalty expressed through indigenous languages and the socioeconomic capital associated with the English language. Bamgbose's key contribution lies in framing identities as fluid and negotiated within competing linguistic hierarchies. However, his study does not focus explicitly on youth identity practices, leaving a gap that subsequent empirical studies attempt to address.

Building on this foundational perspective, Igboanusi (2008) offers a more empirically grounded investigation into multilingualism through his study of Mother Tongue-based bilingual education in Nigeria. Drawing on survey data from teachers, parents, and students across different regions, he examines language attitude and actual

classroom practices. His findings reveal strong support for bilingual education that maintains indigenous languages alongside the English language, suggesting that local languages play a crucial role in cultural continuity and self-identification. From an identity perspective, Igboanusi demonstrates that when indigenous languages are marginalised within the educational system, young people may develop a negative attitude toward their linguistic heritage, which in turn affects their sense of self-inclusiveness. Unlike Bamgbose's macro-level analysis, Igboanusi provides micro-level empirical evidence of how institutional language practices influence identity formations. Nevertheless, his work remains largely educational, with limited exploration of youth identity constructions in informal domains such as peer interactions and digital communication.

Akindele and Adegbite (2015) further enrich the empirical discourse by examining the sociological and political dimensions of English usage in Nigeria. Their study situates English within Nigeria's multilingual ecology as a language of power, prestige, and social mobility. Using sociolinguistic data and observational analysis, they illustrate how English functions not merely as a communicative tool but as an identity resource, particularly for young people seeking upward mobility. Nigerian youth, they argue, often deploy English and localised varieties such as Nigerian English to project modernity, education, and global connectedness, while indigenous languages are reserved for in-group ethnic identification. This dual linguistic practice highlights identity as performative and context-dependent. In contrast to Igboanusi's education-focused approach, Akindele and Adegbite emphasise everyday language use and social stratification. However, their work does not systematically isolate youth as a distinct analytical category, treating identity formations more broadly within Nigerian society.

Additional empirical insights are provided by scholars such as Omoniyi (2006) and Taiwo (2010), who explicitly link multilingual practices to identity negotiation in Nigerian contexts. Omoniyi's work

on language and identity argues that multilingual speakers actively construct identities through language choice, code-switching, and discourse strategies. His empirical observations suggest that Nigerian youth strategically select languages to align with particular social identities, whether ethnic, national, or global. Similarly, Taiwo's study of code-switching among Nigerian youths in urban settings demonstrates that multilingual practices serve symbolic functions, enabling young people to express solidarity, resistance, or sophistication depending on contexts. These studies complement earlier works by highlighting the active role of youth in shaping their linguistic and social identities.

A comparative analysis of these studies reveals both similarities and differences in scholarly approaches. Collectively, they agreed that multilingualism is a defining feature of Nigerian society and a central factor in identity formations. English consistently emerges as a language of prestige and opportunities, while indigenous languages serve as markers of cultural rootedness. However, the studies differ in scope and emphasis. Bamgbose adopts a macro-level, policy-driven perspective; Igboanusi provides empirical evidence from educational settings; Akindele and Adegbite focus on sociopolitical and stratification dimensions of language use, while Omoniyi and Taiwo foreground everyday multilingual practices and youth agency. These differences highlight the multifaceted nature of identity formations within socially and linguistically diverse environments,

Despite their contributions, existing empirical studies reveal notable gaps. While these studies make valuable contributions, empirical evidence indicates persistent gaps. Few studies integrate educational, social, and interactional domains to provide a holistic account of how Nigerian youth construct identities across contexts. Moreover, much of the literature treats identity implicitly rather than as a central analytical construct. The present study addresses these gaps

by examining multilingualism as it is enacted in the everyday linguistic practices of Nigerian youth, with particular attention to how language choice and interactions shape identity formation across institutional and informal spaces.

Theoretical Framework: Bonny Norton's Theory of Language and Identity

The theory that guided this study is Bonny Norton's theory of Language and Identity, which conceptualised language not as a neutral communicative tool but as a social practice through which individuals negotiate their identities within historical, cultural, and institutional contexts (Norton 1997; 2000). Norton argues that identity is multiple, dynamic, and continually constructed through interactions, shaped by relations of power that determine who is heard, who is silenced, and whose language practices are legitimised.

Central to Norton's framework is the notion of investment, which explains why individuals commit to languages and language practices. Unlike the traditional concept of motivation, investment is socially grounded; learners invest in a language because it offers access to symbolic and material resources such as education, employment, social status, and membership of valuable communities (Norton 1997). In the Nigerian context, youth invest differently in English, Nigerian Pidgin, and indigenous languages as each indexes distinct identities and promises different forms of capital, thereby shaping how multilingualism influences identity formations.

Norton further introduces the concept of imagined communities, referring to the future-oriented social groups that learners aspire to belong to, even when these communities are not immediately accessible (Norton 2001). Nigerian youth's multilingual practices can therefore be understood as identity work directed toward desired futures-global citizenship through English, urban solidarity through Pidgin, and ethnic belonging through indigenous languages.

By adopting Norton's theory, this study frames multilingualism as a site of identity negotiation, where Nigerian youth continuously

construct and reconstruct who they are in relation to power, opportunity, and social recognition. The framework thus enables a critical analysis of how multilingual language practices both reflect and produce youth identities in contemporary Nigeria, making it particularly suited to investigating the impact of multilingualism on identity formations.

Methodology

The study adopts a cross-sectional mixed methods design grounded in Bonny Norton's theory of language and identity. The participants comprised Nigerian youth aged 18-35, consistent with the age classification of youth adopted by the National Youth Policy of Nigeria (Federal Ministry of Youth and Sports Development). Data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to Nigerian youth drawn predominantly from Hausa linguistic backgrounds, alongside a smaller number of Igbo, Tiv, and Yoruba speakers. The instrument comprised closed-ended items designed to capture demographic information, language use patterns, and frequency of multilingual practices, alongside open-ended questions that elicited participants' reflections on identity, language choice, and social interactions. While the closed-ended responses provided contextual patterns of multilingual behaviour, the open-ended responses constituted qualitative data analysed thematically as narratives of identity negotiation and language investment. Selected responses were used as illustrative cases to exemplify recurrent themes within Nigeria's complex linguistic ecology. This approach enabled the study to examine both patterned tendencies and lived identity experiences, ensuring methodological coherence with the study's theoretical orientation and research objectives.

Results and Findings

Language Use Patterns across Social Contexts among Nigerian Youth

Figure 1a: Overall usage of language among students at the Federal University of Transportation, Daura.

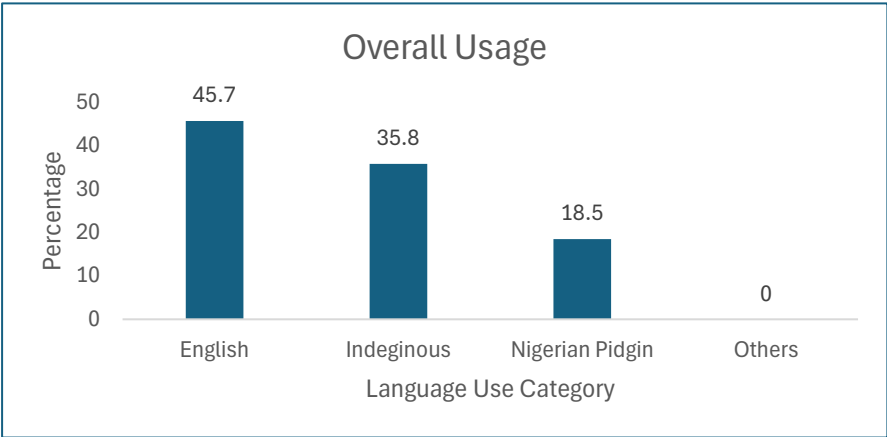
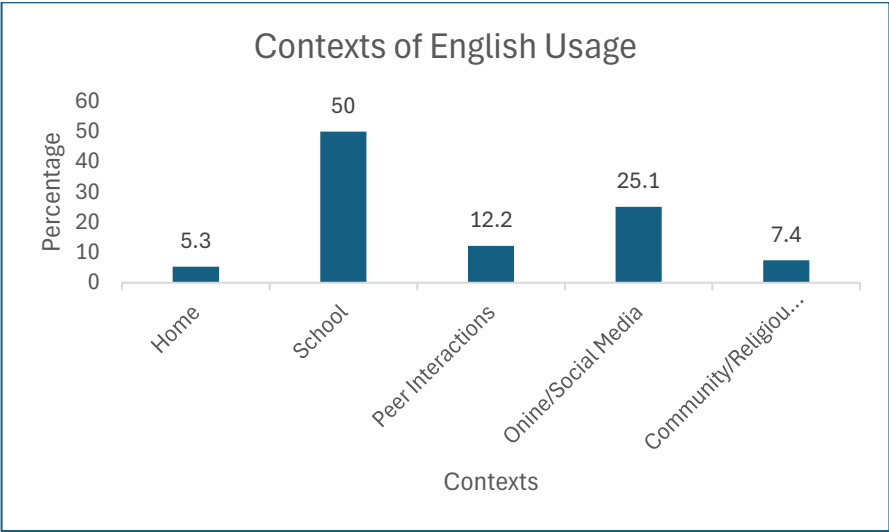


Figure 1a shows that English is the most frequently used language among students at the Federal University of Transportation, Daura (45.7%), reflecting its institutional dominance and role as the primary medium of instruction and academic engagements. Indigenous languages account for a substantial proportion of usage (35.8%), highlighting their continued relevance in informal interaction, cultural affiliation, and everyday communication among students. Nigerian Pidgin, though less dominant (18.5%), functions as a bridging code that facilitates peer interactions and social bonding across linguistic boundaries. This distribution illustrates a layered multilingual ecology in which students strategically deploy different languages according to context, purpose, and audience, reinforcing the view that multilingualism operates as a functional and identity-shaping resource within the university environment.

Figure 1b: shows the contexts in which the English language is used among the students at Federal University of Transportation, Daura.



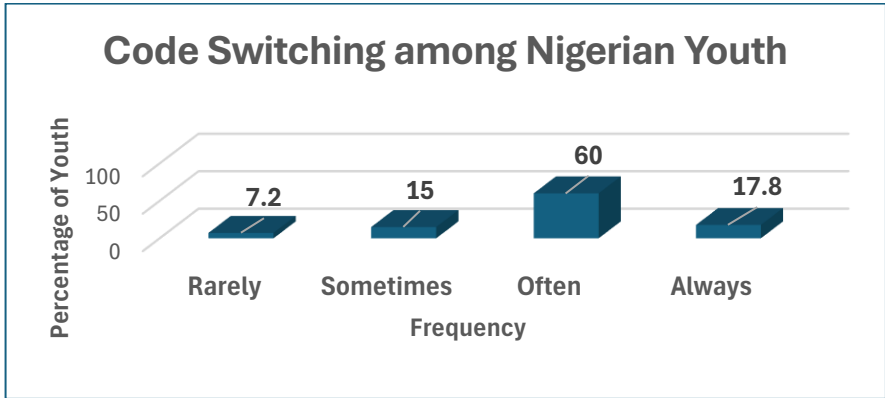
From Figure 1b, it is revealed that 50% of respondents reported using English predominantly in academic contexts, 25.1% reported using English predominantly in online spaces, 12.2% reported predominant English usage at Peer Interactions level, 7.4% reported predominant English use at Community/Religious settings, while 5.3% reported predominant English use at home level.

This reflects English use as an institutional authority, a source of prestige, and a means of access to educational and global domains. Its limited use in home and community settings highlights its association with formality rather than intimate interactions.

Open-ended responses and interview accounts indicate that communication needs, educational demands, and social prestige shape language choices. In contrast, indigenous languages and Nigerian

Pidgin function as key resources for informal interactions, cultural affiliation, and peer bonding, demonstrating strategic multilingual identity negotiations across contexts.

Code-switching Practices and Motivations among Nigerian Youth
Figure 2a: Frequency of Code-Switching



The distribution of responses in Figure 2a indicates that code-switching is a pervasive communicative practice among Nigerian youth, with a clear majority reporting frequent engagement. While a small proportion of respondents rarely (7.2%) or sometimes (15%) switch between languages, most participants report doing so often (60%) or always (17.8%). This pattern suggests that code-switching is not incidental but a regular and purposeful feature of everyday interactions. Within Nigeria’s multilingual context, such frequent code-switching reflects youths’ linguistic flexibility and their strategic negotiations of meanings, identity, and social relationships across different communicative settings.

Figure 2b: Situations of Frequent Code-Switching

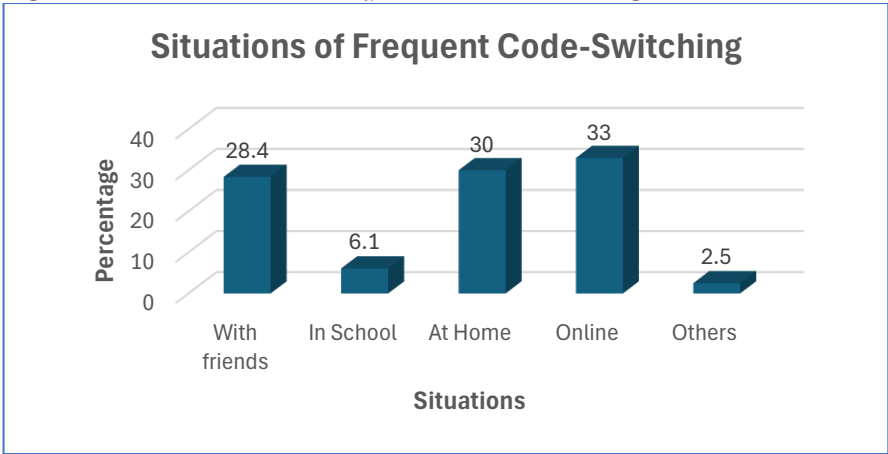


Figure 2b shows that code-switching occurs most frequently in informal and digitally mediated contexts, with online interactions (33%), home settings (30%), and conversations with friends (28.4%) accounting for the highest proportions. These spaces allow greater linguistic freedom and reduced institutional regulations, encouraging flexible language use. In contrast, code-switching is least reported in school settings (6.1%), reflecting the dominance of English and formal language norms within academic environments. The minimal occurrence in other contexts (2.5%) further underscores the context-sensitive nature of code-switching. Overall, the findings indicate that Nigerian youth deploy code-switching primarily in settings that support relational closeness, identity expression, and communicative ease.

Table 1: Motivations for Code-Switching

Motivations	Responses
Inadequate vocabulary	Dominant
Comfort and ease of expression	Dominant
Unconscious/automatic practice	Recurrent
Expressing hard-to-translate ideas	Recurrent
Accommodating the interlocutor's proficiency	Recurrent

Table 1 above describes the responses of respondents on motivations for code-switching. It shows that code-switching among Nigerian youth is primarily motivated by communicative efficiency rather than linguistic deficiency. Inadequate vocabulary in a single language and the need for comfort and ease of expression emerge as dominant factors, suggesting that speakers strategically combine languages to achieve clarity and fluency. Recurrent references to unconscious or automatic switching further normalise the practice as an ingrained communicative habit. Additionally, respondents highlighted the use of code-switching to express culturally nuanced or hard-to-translate ideas, as well as to accommodate Interlocutors' language proficiency, reinforcing its role as a socially adaptive and interaction-sensitive linguistic resource.

Perceptions of Identity and Self-Positioning in Multilingual Settings
Figure 3: Strength of Identity linked to Language Use

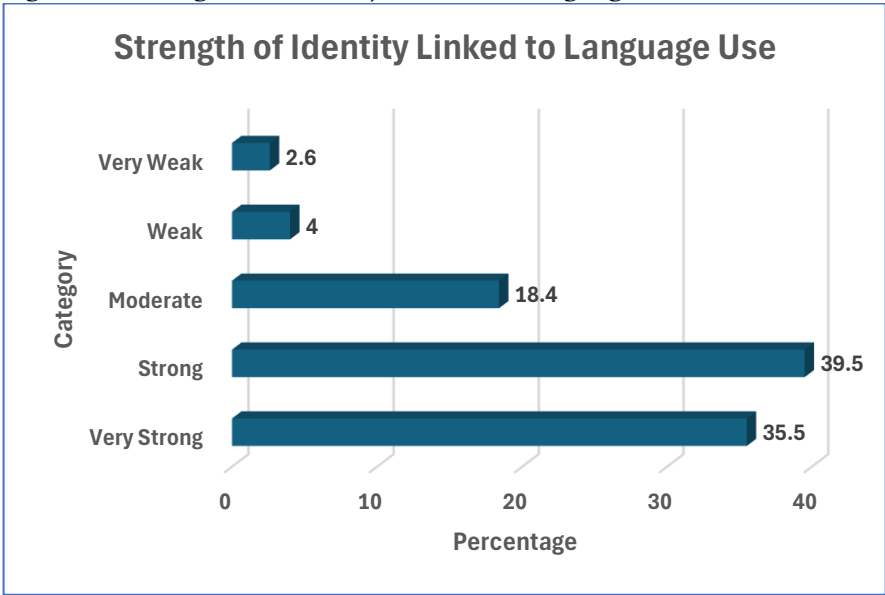


Figure 3 indicates a predominantly strong link between language use and identity among the respondents. A clear majority report strong (39.5%) and very strong (35.5%) identity attachment to their language practices, suggesting that language functions as a central marker of self-definition and social positioning among youth. The moderate category (18.4) reflects a smaller group for whom language contributes to identity in a more situational manner. In contrast, only marginal proportions report weak (4%) or very weak (2.6%) connections, indicating that detachment between language and identity is rare. In sum, the findings underscore language use as a powerful and enduring resource for identity construction in multilingual youth contexts.

Table 2: Influence of Multilingualism on Self Perception

Reasons for Perception	Responses
Positive/Good/High Sense of Self	Dominant
Normal Practice/Feeling Good	Majority
Indigenous Languages	Dominant
Context Dependent	Some Respondents

Discussion

In Table 2 above, the responses indicate that multilingualism exerts a largely positive influence on the youth’s self-perception. Most respondents associate multilingual ability with a positive or high sense of self, reflecting confidence, social competence, and perceived value within diverse interactional spaces. The description of multilingualism as a “normal practice” further suggests that language plurality is internalised as an everyday resource rather than an exceptional skill. The dominance of indigenous languages in these accounts highlights their role in affirming cultural rootedness and authenticity. However, the context-dependent responses show that self-perception shifts across settings, indicating that the benefits of multilingualism are mediated by social expectations and situational norms.

Table 3: Influence of Multilingualism on Social Interactions and Sense of Belonging

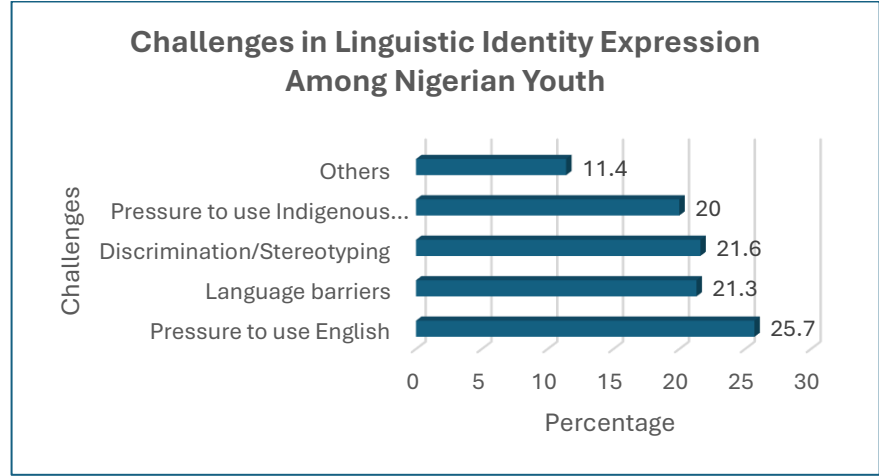
Dimension	Effects of Multilingualism	
Social Interactions	Responses	Percentage
	Positive	80.0
	Negative	15.6
	No noticeable effect	4.4
Social Connectivity	Responses	Percentage
	Yes	100
	No	0
Relational	Responses	Result
	Enhance socialisation, communication, and acceptance	Predominant

	Feelings of limitation/exclusion	Minority
Inclusion (Belonging)	<i>Responses</i>	<i>Result</i>
	Mostly helpful	Predominant
	Favoured	Majority
	Exclusion due to a limitation in language	Majority

Discussion of Findings

Table 3 indicates that multilingualism overwhelmingly enhances social interactions among Nigerian youth, with 80 percent reporting positive effects and universal agreement that it facilitates across cultural connection. Open-ended and interview data further show that multilingual competence supports socialisation, communication, and acceptance, reinforcing a strong sense of belonging. Conversely, limited language ability is associated with feelings of restriction and social inclusion. Experiences of inclusion through multilingual practices highlight language as a form of social capital, while exclusion underscores unequal access to interactional spaces. These findings align with Norton’s view of language as a resource through which individuals negotiate belonging and participation in social communities.

Figure 4: Challenges in Linguistic Identity Expression among Nigerian Youth



Discussion

Figure 4 reveals that Nigerian youth face layered challenges in linguistic identity expression, with pressure to use English, discrimination, and language barriers occurring at comparable levels. Open-ended and interview data reinforce these feelings, showing that language barriers are the most salient constraint on identity expression. Most interviewees report feeling judged or restricted based on language choice, which in turn limits communicative confidence and self-expression. These patterns reflect unequal linguistic power relations in multilingual spaces, supporting Norton’s view that identity is shaped by access to valued linguistic resources and that restricted access constrains participation and voice in social and institutional contexts.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that multilingualism among Nigerian youth functions as a dynamic resource for identity formation, social interaction, and self-positioning rather than a source of fragmentation. Across contexts, youth strategically deploy English, indigenous

languages, and Nigerian Pidgin to negotiate belonging, prestige, and cultural continuity. Code-switching emerges as a key practice through which identity is flexibly managed, enabling effective communication and inclusion. While multilingual competence enhances social connection and empowerment, institutional pressures, language hierarchies, and discrimination constrain full self-expression. Overall, the findings affirm that youth identities are fluid, negotiated, and shaped by unequal access to valued linguistic resources, underscoring the need for inclusive language policies and practices.

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