Constructing Identity and Communality on a Social Media Platform: An Exploration of #Igbotwitter Tweets

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ABSTRACT

Social media have a burgeoning on our lives as they have become avenues for the exhibition of life experiences, and they also a variety of dimensions regarding our position in the online and offline social life. These factors make individuals play certain characters in the social arena. Expanding on Vogel et al.'s (2014) idea of "fulfilling belongingness", this paper explores to what extent Igbos in diaspora use the Twitter hashtag to construct the Igbo identity and how the Twitter hashtag #Igbotwitter reflects a complex transnational dialogue about Igbo identity markers in a globalized media landscape. Adopting an interpretive thematic analysis and Dowdall and Golden's (1989) method for image analysis, the study analyzed 47 #Igbotwitter tweets shared by diaspora Nigerians. The analysis revealed some overarching themes like "The Igbos as Business-Minded People", "Cultural/Traditional Enthusiast", among others. This study draws attention to how social media provide users with a unique space to address cultural and socio-economic discourse, reconstruct identities, and refute cultural misconceptions on a transnational level. It further highlights how the users attempt to preserve and protect the Nigerian Igbo identity and also fulfil a sense of belongingness in the current networked media environment. This study contributes to the literature on identity construction on digital platforms, and by implication points to the intentional and positive use of social media to promote culture on a global scale.

Keywords
Identity, Nigeria, Igbo, Twitter, hashtag, nationality

INTRODUCTION

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have evolved at a phenomenal pace in the current millennium, with concomitant implications on society (Ramelb, 2016). Like the Internet and devices like smartphones, tablets, and laptops, these technologies have also ensured that information and communication are transmitted at high speed, regardless of the geographical distance (Papacharissi, 2002; Volkmer, 2003; Praptiningsih and Kurnia, 2020). Social media is one of the offshoots of the digital revolution, and it has evolved in an era of user-generated content (UGC), with users creating, disseminating and consuming messages (Udenze and Ugoala, 2019). According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, as cited in Udenze and Aduba, 2020), social media builds on the technological bases of Web 2.0, which allows for collaboration in the creation and exchange of

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user-generated content. Arens, Weigold and Arens (2011) assert that social media platforms are called *social* mainly because they connect like-minded individuals in ways that have never been experienced before. Ramelb (2016) explains that social media is the collective of online communications channels dedicated to community-based input, interaction, content-sharing, and collaboration.

The construction of identity has been explored through different methodological traditions and approaches, especially through the qualitative angle. (Androutsopoulos and Georgakopoulou, 2003; Pavlenko and Blackledge, 2004; de Fina, Schiffrin and Bamberg, 2006; Benwell and Stokoe, 2006; Dolon and Todoli, 2008; Garzone and Archibald, 2010; Page, 2012a; Du Bois and Baumgarten, 2013). Findings from these studies have revealed that identity is produced and portrayed discursively, that is, that identity always appears as a process; that is, identity in use. More precisely, studies have explored how people construct identity on social media. Davis (2012) argues that social media provide means of self-expression for users but having these outlets of expression creates an issue of balancing multiple selves and their respective audiences.

The scholar avers that the use of social networking creates a space in which the user feels freer to express themselves online and provides the user with chances to work through certain issues they might be dealing with in their daily lives. Besides, social networking sites permit users to make changes to themselves and identity online that they would not necessarily make offline due to confidence issues (Davis 2012). For instance, Gündüz's (2017) study of the effect of social media on identity construction found that social media enable us to portray ourselves to others and help us determine the way we would like to be perceived, and help us connect and interact with people and participate in activities of choice. Similarly, Jeewa and Wade (2015) argued that with the help of social media, people could imagine themselves in roles they want to be in this world through the aid of virtual reality. More precisely, Smutradontr and Gadavanij (2020) analysis of fandom and identity construction by Thai fans' on Twitter revealed how the Twitter fans engaged in hypothetical interpretations, expression of personal opinions/identity and feelings, and fan parody. Pearson (2010) opines that Twitter enables its user to create identities by connection people into communities of interest that may have little similarity to make-up their traditional meet-ups.

In the Case Study of #IranJeans by Yadlin-Segal (2017), the scholar draws attention to how hashtag tweets provide users with a unique space to address global political discourse and reconstruct their identities and refute cultural misconceptions on a global level. This preceding assertion is in tandem with Chamourian (2017) that Twitter provides layers of features that help people to connect and reach more like-minded globally. Besides, the interaction made between the participants may affect the identity the person wants to portray. By exploring the hashtag #muslimcandyheartrejects, Will and Fecteau (2016) investigate how members of Muslim digital diaspora communities use the Twitter hashtag to construct and reinforce a Muslim diaspora identity. They found that Twitter creates the possibility for such a temporary conversation to appear and develop, and its specific architecture allows for a variety of forms of participation to evolve. The scholar talks about what a hashtag is and people who shared the same hashtag or were posting it could create an identity. The paper further describes how such tweets build a community and create an identity within that online community.

Berns (2013) stated that an identity that works as performance might be influenced by the story the person tells or write. Berns (2013) further elaborated that narrative serves as initial roles in presenting identity in mediated spaces. Moreover, social media like Twitter is also an open channel that presents the narrative identity publicly (Micalizzi, 2013, p.219). This reflects that social media is so pervasive for adolescents that it has become part of their identities.

Scholars have also studied how social media affect users' attitudes. Vogel et al. (2014) explain how social media allows users to construct identity, fulfil their belongingness needs, and express their beliefs, preferences, and emotions. When users' fulfil belongingness' online, they construct an identity based on their target audience. Mainly, the paper expands on Vogel et al. work by studying #Igbotwitter tweets on Twitter by investigating to what extent Igbos in diaspora use the Twitter hashtag to construct the Igbo identity. This is especially necessary for the view of perceived threats to Igbo identity (Igbo, 2006; Kanu, 2019), as well as predictions that the Igbo language and culture will atrophy if nothing is done to appropriately document its practices and performances.

Going by the available literature as evident above, social media have attracted significant attention from scholars. However, how hashtags encode ethnic identity construction still needs more scholarly engagement. In addition, there is a considerable dearth in the study of social media and identity construction in Nigeria, especially the indigenous identity. This explains my examination of the online construction of Igbo ethnic identity on Twitter. Social media platforms enhance and strengthen the link among individuals who share similar ethnic origins or political opinions (Calhoun, 2004; Castells, 2001; Dahlberg, 2007). According to Noriss (2003), internet use correlates with different kinds of online engagement and engenders online identity construction. As stated previously, the primary aim of this study is to explore to what extent Igbos in the diaspora use the Twitter hashtag to construct the Igbo identity. Specifically, the objectives of the current study include: 1) to explore whether #Igbotwitter has reinforced the communication of the Igbo language, culture, and identity, 2) to investigate whether the #Igbotwitter has portrayed the Igbo in positive lights.

METHOD

The study purposively chose 47 #Igbotwitter tweets shared by Nigerians living in diaspora. These tweets encompassed both images and texts. The researcher screen-grabbed this images and texts, and also observed them online. In the analysis, I employed Braun and Clark (2006) method for conducting thematic analysis, and Dowdall and Golden's (1989) layered analysis approach for image analysis. Thematic analysis is a qualitative method for pinpointing and interpreting patterns of collective or shared meanings and experiences across data sets. As previously mentioned, using thematic analysis, I followed Braun and Clark (2006), steps for conducting a thematic analysis, first, I familiarized myself with the data: the researcher immersed himself in the data by repeatedly studying the images and text in order to grasp a deeper sense of it. Besides, the data was collected through interactive means; the author began the analysis with some prior knowledge of the data, and with some inceptive initial analytic interests and insights.

During this stage, the author took notes and made ideas for possible coding. Secondly, the researcher generated initial codes. At this stage, I addressed the data with the research objective in mind; each segment of data that captured something interesting about the research objectives were coded accordingly. It is pertinent to state that the coding was done manually; using pens and different color of highlighters to make through the transcript. Boyatzis (1998), states two levels to investigating codes- the semantic level and latent level. My thematic analysis focused on both levels, that is, the themes are identified within the explicit and hidden meanings of the data. Also, the coding process and procedure is an integral part of data analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994), as you are organizing your data into meaningful groups (Tuckett, 2005). Thirdly, I searched for themes. This stag re-focuses the analysis on a broader level of themes, rather than codes, it entails the sorting of the different codes into prospective themes and aggregating all the necessary coded data extracts within the identified themes. Precisely, the researcher analyzed the codes, and consider how different codes combined to form an overarching theme.

Further, after searching for themes, I refined, modify and developed the preliminary themes that were created in stage three. At this juncture, it was clear that some themes are not really fitted. For instance, separate themes were collapsed into one. In doing this, the researcher considered Patton's (1990) dual criteria for judging categories, that is, internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity. Haven got a satisfactory thematic map of the data, the researcher named the themes, and further refined the themes that were presented analysis, and these themes were analyzed within the data set. By "defined" and "refined", the author identified the import of what each theme is about, and determined what aspect of the data each theme captures. The researcher tried to maintain simple themes. Getting a theme to say or do too much might cause it to be diverse or complex. The author achieved this by going to and fro the collated data extracts for each theme and organizing them into a distinct and coherent account with accompanying narrative.

Finally, as with the tradition of research, the end of every study produces some sort of report. In this study, the author report of the analysis provides sufficient pieces of evidence of the themes within the data set. They chose vivid instances that capture the essence of the point they demonstrated, without unnecessary complexity. The analytic narrative went beyond the description

of the data to arguments in relation to the research objectives. Using thematic analysis in the current study, the researcher sought to identify the salient commonalities in a set of texts at different levels to uncover the common ways in which participants, individuals, or groups address different cultural occurrences (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Braun and Clarke, 2012).

Also, using Dowdall and Golden's (1989) layered analysis which is appropriate for image analysis, I investigated the tweets along the three-layered logical steps: appraisal, inquiry, and interpretation. Appraisal entails a comparison of visual and written information. The next layer is a thematic 'inquiry', looking at the images and appraisal as a whole, to find themes relating to the research question/objective. Dowdall and Golden's third layer of analysis adopted Geertz's (1973) concept of thick description and focused attention back on the individual images. This layer is known as interpretation; it involves a close, detailed, and probing reading of selected images and text to uncover phenomena. The aforementioned process enabled me to draw attention to the relationship between written and image texts and to have an in-depth understanding of each, offering a nuanced manner of addressing data sets that encompasses both image and text.

Then I moved to the inquiry stage by concentrating on the collection of images as a whole viz-a-viz appraising them in order to find themes that relate to the study's research question. Through an inductive approach, I permitted the categories of analysis to emerge from the texts themselves through reoccurring patterns. Cross-data repetitions were identified and categorized into clusters. Then, clusters of similar, yet not overlapping, issues were gathered into themes.

To create a robust text, I focused on an in-depth probing and reading of selected images and text to uncover phenomena that exemplified the study objective and the varying manifestations of characters through their tweets. First, I addressed the human characters featured in each image. Focusing on identity as the main concept in this study, I further analyzed the relation of Tweets with the #lgbotwitter, the apparent attributes of the Twitter account, and the identity markers associated with each account. Here, I address features that were visible in the images, like the state of origin, food, education, politics, tradition, personality, and gender, etc.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Twitter and Digital Research

Twitter is a social networking and microblogging site where users post brief updates with text, images and videos, and these posts are known as tweets (Ramelb, 2016). Twitter was launched in 2006 by Evan Williams and Biz Stone, former employees at Google. The platform has more than 300 million monthly active users around the globe (Yadlin-Segal, 2017). Allowing up to 280 characters, twitter users entertain, share their thoughts as well as relay news and other real-time information. Such tweets have a purpose or objective which the user is attempting to accomplish. Twitter incorporates features like retweets, replies, comments, and mentions, which further boost the information propagation, spread various ideas and synchronize information into the collective attention of the public. Such multiply shared tweets become trending topics (Zhang, 2016). In addition, Twitter functions as a cyber-social 'club' where people meet, socialise, find new friends, and also maintain existing connections (Diamond, 2010).

Despite the 280 characters per tweet limitation of Twitter, Golbelk (2011) states that Twitter has some distinctive language features that make it stand out. For instance, one may use the @ symbol before a user name to mention another person or account in a tweet. When this is done, the user will be publicly notified that they were mentioned. The Direct Message, popularly known as DM, permits users to send private messages to an account. Users may also retweet (RT) messages to rebroadcast a tweet to one's followers. Retweeting is a good way of building connections and relationships. Pinned Tweets are Tweets that are fixed on the top of one's profile. When people visit a profile, the pinned Tweet is the first thing they see, regardless of when it was tweeted. If you want to save a person's tweet for later, you can like the tweet using the heart insignia below the tweet. A tweet with a hash sign (#) at the start is known as a hashtag. Twitter hashtags like #lgbotwitter help spread information on Twitter while also helping to organize it. Hashtags have regularly been used for a cause or event and for breaking news stories.

Studies on Hashtag Tweets

Chang (2010) submits that as of 2006, when Twitter was launched, the application did not have the hashtag feature. Then, users could only share messages by pre-cursing a name or Twitter ID with the symbol. Tweets prefixed with sign # are the principal medium by which Twitter users organize the information they tweet. The hashtags most widely used appear in the Twitter sidebar as trending topics. The hashtag enables tweets on a specific subject to be visible and easily searchable (Chang, 2010; Bruns and Stieglitz, 2013).

Hashtags are useful in promoting a cause, especially when the hashtag is promoted among community of users (Chang, 2010). A successful Twitter hashtag archive is the result of collaborative effort because the tweets can be aggregated into a single stream with a common #hashtag (Oh et al. 2010), and hashtags make it effortless for users to find and follow discussions (Ibrahim and Durugbo, 2017)

To further buttress identity and Twitter through the use of hashtags, only limited studies have attempted to add to the literature. In a research paper entitled 'Constructing National Identity Online: The Case Study of #IranJeans on Twitter', Yadlin-Segal (2017) explores social media users' circulation of a Twitter hashtag #IranJeans as it reflects a complex transnational dialogue about Iranian identity markers in a globalised media environment. The author conducted a thematic analysis of 140 tweets and photos shared under #IranJeans; the study draws attention to how hashtag tweets provide users a unique space to address global political discourse and reconstruct their identities and refute cultural misconceptions on a transnational level.

By exploring the hashtag #muslimcandyheartrejects, a one-time, short-term, joke hashtag used on Twitter among a group of Muslim tweeters in 2012, Will and Fecteau (2016), in their paper investigate how members of Muslim digital diaspora communities use the Twitter hashtag to construct and reinforce a Muslim diaspora identity. According to the authors, Twitter creates the possibility for such a temporary conversation to appear and develop, and its specific architecture allows for a variety of forms of participation to evolve. The scholar talks about what a hashtag is, and people who shared the same hashtag or were posting it could create an identity. The paper further describes how such tweets build a community, and they create an identity within that an online community.

By looking at these sources, we understand the significance the hashtag tweets hold, and that Twitter is used as a social space. People being able to define themselves based on the tweet gives them a sense of identity; hence, from the Nigerian perspective. This paper examines #Igbotwitter tweets and how people, especially individuals in diaspora, use the hashtag to construct the Igbo identity.

Social Media: Identity Construction and its Implications

It is critical to understand the concept of identity and how it relates to social media, precisely Twitter. Ramelb (2016) submits that identity is the condition or character of who a person or what a thing is; the qualities or beliefs of something or somebody that distinguishes or identifies a person or thing. The preceding assertion explains how an individual's character can consist of many factors based on the definition. Wahl & Scholl (2014 as cited in Udenze and Ugoala, 2019) argue that in order to understand identity, one has to first understand the 'self'. Self is a complex set of beliefs about one's attributes and memories that confirm such beliefs. These attributes and memories form a scheme of oneself or mental structures that contain information defining a person and ways of communicating with people around them (Udenze and Ugoala, 2019).

Nonetheless, within the historical evolution of the concept of identity, there are two common but opposite perspectives on what identity means and how it is constituted. In the conventional and traditional approach, especially prior to the industrial revolution, identity is described as a structure based on the recognition of familiar and shared derivatives which include but not limited to ethno-religious, historical, territorial, socio-cultural and political characteristics with other people, or groups (Hall, 1994, 1996). The concepts of familiarity and shared in the above description are also connected with the meanings of oneness, belongingness and unity. From this approach, cultural identity is a "one, shared culture, a sort of combined 'one true self,' residing within the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves,' which individuals with a mutual history and ancestry hold in common. Grossberg (1996) contends that the problematic belief in this analysis is that there

is some intrinsic and essential content to any identity characterized by either a familiar origin or a common structure of experience or both. One can be regarded to be born along with his or her identity that appears to act as the symbol of an identical harmony. In this regard, identity is regarded more likely as a natural and fixed formation that could always be sustained. This conventional view sees the individual as a unique, stable, and whole entity.

On the other hand, the discursive perspective explains identification as a procedure that is never completed and logged in contingency while not disapproving that identity has a past (Hall, 1996). Identity is always in the course of becoming rather than being; accordingly, it is continually metamorphosing within the historical, socio-political, economic and cultural developments and practices such as globalization, modernity, post-colonization, and new innovations in technology. It is not a thing to have or to be, yet a resource to use and an action to do. According to the constructionists and discursive view, an individual is a socio-historical and socio-cultural handiwork, and identity is not biologically pre-given to an individual, rather, he or she occupies it, and more fundamentally, this occupation may include different and multiple identities at different points of time and settings (Gergen, 1991; Hall, Held & McGrew, 1992). Furthermore, Udenze and Ugoala (2019) opine that identity has no stable core of the self which remains fixed or static or 'the same,' identical to itself across time; instead, identity is fragmented, fractured, and fluid, never singular, and constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses as we continually interact in the society. Besides, Hall cited in Udenze, and Ugoala (2019) writes that identity becomes a 'moveable feast' that is formed, constructed and reconstructed continuously in relation to the ways we are portrayed or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us. We should note that the conceptions of identity, to some extent, is simplistic. As the argument evolves, they will become more complex and qualified (Goswami, 2010).

From a sociological angle, Castells (1997, as cited in Koc, 2006) believes that identity serves as the origin of meaning and experience for people through self-construction and individuation, mainly based on cultural characteristics in a context marked by power relationships. He identifies three forms and origins of identity building, each of which leads to a different social association. First is by legitimizing identity. This is brought forth by the main institutions of society to extend and justify their dominance over social actors, and it generates a civil society, including organized and structured social actors. Secondly, resistance identity is produced by the actors who are in positions of being excluded by the logic of domination, and it leads to the building of communities as a response to conditions of oppression and reinforcing the boundaries between the dominant institutions and new ones. And finally, project identity is a new identity produced by social actors to redefine their position in society based on whatever cultural materials are available to them.

In other words, the sociological conception of identity argues that the subject of identity still has an inner core or essence, but it is formed or modified in a continuous dialogue with the cultural or outside world. In a nutshell, identity is formed in the interaction between self and society. Identity, in this sociological belief, bridges the gap between the 'inside' and the 'outside' – between the personal and the public worlds (Udenze and Ugoala, 2019).

According to Koc (2006), cultural identity is one, shared culture, a sort of combination of 'one true self,' residing inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves,' which persons with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Further, Cultural identity refers to the apperception or sense of belonging to a specific group situated on various cultural categories, including nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, and religion (Udenze and Ugoala, 2019). Udenze and Ugoala went further to state that cultural identity is created and maintained through sharing collective knowledge like traditions, heritage, language, aesthetics, and norms. As individuals typically interact with more than one cultural group, cultural identity is complex and multifaceted. While other scholars assumed identification with cultural groups to be evident and stable, today, most scholars view it as circumstantial and dependent upon temporal and contiguous changes. In the global world, with increasing intercultural encounters, cultural identity is continuously enacted, negotiated, maintained, and challenged through communicative practices.

This overcoming of cultural experience diminishes the socio-religious identity of a country as Castle (1996) submits that globalization is the proliferation of modernity, and modernity is the precursor of identity. In the context of globalization and cultural identity, Howes (1996) asserts that

cultural identity is not likely to be the natural casualty of globalization because identity is not merely some fragile communal psychic attachment, but a considerable dimension of institutionalized social life in modernity. It is worth mentioning that greater global interconnectedness has resulted in the breakdown of all strong cultural identities and produced a fragmentation of cultural codes and cultural pluralism on a global scale (Udenze and Ugoala, 2019).

The media has become an avenue for varied identity construction. Before the advent of social media, conventional mass media have been deployed to create and reinforce identity. Studies (Hall, 1996; Grossberg, 1996; Ginger, 2008) have emphasized identity, namely, national ones, as a constructed notion, are well established in the field of media studies. Nations use mass media to circulate national identity and construct a sense of belonging. Anderson (1983 as cited in Koc, 2006), writes about the imagined aspect of the nation, in which individuals build on mass media to imagine their own and others' membership in a nation-state. Carey (1989) stresses the cultural rituals facilitated by and through mass media. Media outlets are responsible for portraying and reinforcing a world image shared by communities and cultures. Media outlets thus operate as "national equipment": those socio-cultural tools that construct and maintain the boundaries and descriptors of a national community, constantly "flagging" the national markers in a public context to construct a shared reality and identity among its members (Billig, 1995; Deutsch, 1953). In turn, individual audience members formulate hybrid notions of self, constructing multiple, hybrid media texts (Kraidy, 2005).

As the cyberspace becomes a crucial sphere of conduct in our everyday lives, scholars have turned to study constructions of identity in the digital ecosystem. According to Jenkins, Ford & Green, (2013), the focus has shifted from consumption and passive spectatorship to active production and circulation of identities and cultures. Prior studies of identity construction in the cyberspace approached online and offline spaces as distinctly separate. The movement between the online and the offline avail users the chance to change their identity and become someone new (Dibbell, 1993; Markham, 1998). With the widespread use of Web 2.0 and mobile media outlets, scholars' fascination with identity has evolved from approaching experiences of disembodiment to studying how the Internet is embedded in everyday lives (Verschueren, 2006). By emphasizing users' experience online, scholars presently conceptualize identity as continuous between the online and the offline.

Online identity can also be expressed in relation to the offline world in that people's identities emerge from whom they know, their associations, and connections (Turkle, 1995). The self is disembodied online, and the consciousness becomes separated from the body, but while online, it becomes a body itself (Heivadi and Khajeheian, 2013). boyd (2008) argues that profiles can be seen as a form of the digital body on social media where people must write about themselves to express and represent salient aspects of their identity for others to see and interpret. Consequently, an individual's virtual activities can reflect their offline relations. Social media users negotiate their identities through an array of activities using the features and applications the platforms offer, and these activities are engaged with in relation to their offline experiences (Chatora, 2010).

Identities are also constructed and formed with an audience in mind, but this audience is invisible (Ginger, 2008). People are conscious of who is looking at their online constructions, and thus, they actively construct the ideal self-formation in line with how they want to be perceived. Therefore, the self's online construction is influenced by the individual's offline social identities or subjective positions (Chatora, 2010). Since identities have been discussed as constituted within, and not outside representation, new forms of media like social media, allow people to discover places to speak and construct identity. Twitter can be identified as a place where individuals create (and recreate) their identity and construct points of identification and positionalities. The preceding assertion is synonymous with Bhabha's (1994) conception of the third space: a sphere that ensures the ability to formulate oppositional hybrid identities.

Contextualizing the Data: Who are the Igbos?

The migration accounts of the Igbos have different stories regarding their origins. Nevertheless, one of the most widely researched studies on the history of the Igbos is Afigbo's (1981) "Ropes of Sand". There he argues that due to the dearth of written documents and many years of settlement in the areas they presently find themselves, many Igbo communities claim to have always been resident in

their present locations. Afigbo (1981) notes that a preliminary study into the glottochronology of the kwa language sub-family, of which Igbo is a member, suggests that most of the member languages of this sub-family (Igbo, Edo, Idoma, Yoruba, etc.) started diverging from their ancestral root between 5000 and 6000 years ago. Furthermore, other arguments that have emerged on Igbo's origin are the "Northern Centre Theory" and the "Centre Theory of Igbo Heartland". About the Northern Centre Theory, Onwuejeogwu (1987) argues that the Igbo migrated from five northern center areas, which include the Semetic Centre of the Near and Far East; the Hermatic Centre around Egypt and Northern Africa; Western Sahara; the Chadian Centre; and the Nok Centre. The 'Centre Theory of Igbo Heartland' theory, as posited by Isichei (1976), states that the early migrations of the proto-Igbo started from the areas known as the Igbo heartland, such as Owerri, Okigwe, Orlu, and Awka division.

Kanu (2012) avers that the Igbo are a single people, fragmented and scattered, occupying a geographical area stretching from Benin to Igala and Cross River to Niger Delta in the South Eastern region of Nigeria (Njoku, 1990 cited by Kanu, 2019). They speak the same language, which gradually metamorphosed into different dialects but understood among all the groups. As a cultural area, it comprised of Anambra, Enugu, Imo, Abia, and parts of the Delta, Cross River, Akwa Ibom, and Rivers States (Kanu, 2019).

According to Kanu (2019), socio-politically, unlike the other tribes in Nigeria, who evolved a centralized system of governance, the Igbo distinguished themselves with a complicated republican socio-political structure which is egalitarian in nature. The Igbo ethnic group is broken into clans, each clan is made up of towns, and each town is comprised of villages. The village as the central social unit is constituted of families or kindred. Politically, the ancestry system is the matrix of the social units or organization and proffers grounds for political and religious structures. The traditional notions of political power and authority are ordered and determined by the idea of "Umunna" and being a member of the association is based on an elaborate title system (Kanu, 2019). The Igbos believe in a universal Supreme Being known as *Chukwu* or *Chi*, and their cultural practices are closely related, based on similar cults and social institutions. Historically, Aligwekwe (1991) asserts that, economically, the Igbo are predominantly sedentary agriculturists. As stated in the introductory part of this paper, there have various misconceptions about the Igbos, and besides, the Igbo have been, in the quest to revive their dying cultural practices and language, appropriating the social media to portray themselves positively to the world. I extend this through the critical study of the use #Igbotwitter trend.

Henri Tajfel propounded the Social Identity Theory (SIT) in 1978. According to Hogg and Williams (2000), the theory emerged from Tajfel's early work, which attempted to apply cognitive grouping and gestalt principles to social groups. Social Identity Theory asserts that individuals define their identities with regard to social groups and that such identifications work to guard and bolster self-identity. The formation of group identities entails both the cataloguing of one's "in-group" with regard to an "out-group" and the propensity to view one's own group with a positive bias (Islam, 2015). This justifies the Igbo users who use Twitter as a platform to express themselves.

Schmalz, Colistra and Evans (2014) further affirm that individuals are encouraged by the need for high self-esteem and being a member of a social group fulfils this need. Because of the need for a sense of belongingness, the theory is linked to a social media platform like Twitter, and precisely, the #Igbotwitter that is used to create identity, develop friendship, and sustain existing ones. In applying the theory to the examination of ethnic identity construction on Twitter, I adopt an interpretive thematic analysis of tweets and images shared on Twitter under #Igbotwitter Tweets.

Discussion primary, this study explored e to what extent Igbos in the diaspora use the Twitter hashtag to construct the Igbo identity. Precisely, the objectives of the study include: to ascertain whether #Igbotwitter has reinforced the communication of the Igbo language, culture, and identity, and to also investigate whether the #Igbotwitter has portrayed the Igbo in positive lights. Findings from the current study corroborated previous studies reviewed in the literature, albeit there are some differences. By engaging the 47 Twitter accounts, I was not only able to gain a better understanding of their identity; I was also able to examine how the tweets reinforce these identities in the online ecosystem. After the analysis of data, the researcher uncovered three dominant themes. These themes are in relation to the research objectives of the current study: "*The Igbo as*

Business-Minded People", "*Traditional Enthusiast and "Rein forcers of the Igbo Language*", "*International accomplishments in Different Endeavors*".

Through the emergent of the above-mentioned themes, overall, the study found that to a considerable extent, the diaspora Igbo Nigerian use the #Igbotwitter tweet to construct and enhance the Igbo identity. Specifically, the study agrees with Golbeck, Roble, Edmondson and Turner (2011) argument that users on Twitter reveal a lot about themselves in the manner they dish out information through the use of hashtags. In the tweets analyzed, through the instrumentalities of hashtags, the users asserted and reinforced their cultural identities and collaborated with other people who identify as Igbo, regardless of their locations. Similarly, with respect to the use of #Igbotwitter to portray the Igbo in positive lights and reinforce Igbo language and culture, the current study revealed that the users of the Twitter accounts through the use of hashtags reinforced the Igbo language and culture and portrayed the ethnic group in positive lights, thereby refuting cultural misinterpretations and stereotypes.

This aforementioned finding is in tandem with to Iqbal's (2017) study of the use of social media to promote national culture which found that social media makes it easier for people to connect and promote their respective culture on the global stage. Besides, Ohiagu (2010) opines that the impact of new media on society may be negative; however, the scholar found that through social media African society developed, enriched and preserved its cultural values and ensure that it is conspicuously represented in the emerging global culture. Through hashtags, the Twitter users conglomerated on a common platform, creating some commonality and findings agree with Bainums (2010) findings that the use of social media has the power of linking people of similar ethnicity into a closely knitted online community. The themes from the analysis of data are extensively discussed below.

The Igbo as Business-Minded People

A predominant theme from the data is the assertion of a business-oriented identity about the Igbos. In Nigeria, the Igbo are regarded business-oriented. Unfortunately however, some persons equate the tribe's love for business or trade as avarice. Exemplifications of this are commonplace in the data. For instance, a tweet *like Ego bu ndu, nwata kwoo aka ofuma osoro eze ribe nri* (Money is life; if a child washes his hands very well, he eats with the king) has a deeper meaning. It suggests that if one is industrious in their endeavor, they shall enjoy the fruit of their hard work. Not only does the tweet highlight the business-oriented identity of the Igbo people, it also encourages other people to follow suit.

Another tweet from an Igbo based in Russia expresses the same focus: *Nothing can separate Igbo people from business, even person wey no get shop dey hustle real-time.* The first clause in the tweet reiterates that the Igbo people cherish business a great deal. The other part of the tweet written in Pidgin English - *even person wey no get shop dey hustle real-time* - portrays the spirit of hard work and love for business in the Igbo people. In plain Language, the tweet suggests that the Igbo spirit of entrepreneurship transcends physical stalls. It is a common sight to meet Igbo business owners in popular markets around the country. While some own shops, some others front like business owners and make brisk money through such opportunities. The tweet is further reinforced with an image, of someone obviously counting a wad of notes. The Igbo attitude to money is reinforced by the text, *Don't just joke with money and come near Igbos*.

Figure 1. Igbo's attitude towards money (*source*: Twitter.com)

Still, on the business-oriented identity, the image below shows the historical entrepreneurial/apprenticeship model of the Igbo people. The tweet emanated from a user based in the United Kingdom. Through this tweet, one identifies that the commenter is proud of the Igbo economic model. This motivated their sharing the information. Onwuka (2015) argues that this economic/business model has been with the Igbo from ancient times. The Igbos have used and continued to use this unique approach, which entails entrepreneurial training under a particular mentor for several years (Iwara, Ameachi and Netshandama, 2019). The arrangement is made with the hope that the trainee would acquire necessary entrepreneurial skills. This apprenticeship model is popularly called *Igba-boi* in Igbo parlance.

In fact, scholars (Ukaegbu, 2003; Igbo, 2006; Agozino and Anyanike, 2007; Maliga, 2011; Orugun and Tunde, 2014; Onwuka, 2015; Lady-Franca, 2016) have argued that this apprenticeship model has transformed the economic fortunes of the Igbos, and that it remains a backbone of Nigeria's economy. Similarly, Kanu (2019) asserts that the Igbo apprenticeship model is built around Igwebuike philosophy. Igwebuike means majority or population equates power/strength; there is power in the crowd. Furthermore, this system has created wealth for many Igbo families over the years, making them the most successful business people in Africa, despite their abysmal economic status immediately after the civil war (Agozino and Anyanike, 2007; Kanu, 2019). The underlying ideology is further explored in Figure 2:

Figure 2. Underlying ideology of tweets (*source*: Twitter.com)

Traditional Enthusiast and "Reinforcers" of the Igbo Language

One way to identify a person's identity is through their culture and tradition. There are different carriers of culture. For instance, an ethnic group or tribe may be identified through their food, attire, mode of greeting, and language. These find representation in the data for this study, as exemplified by Figure 3.
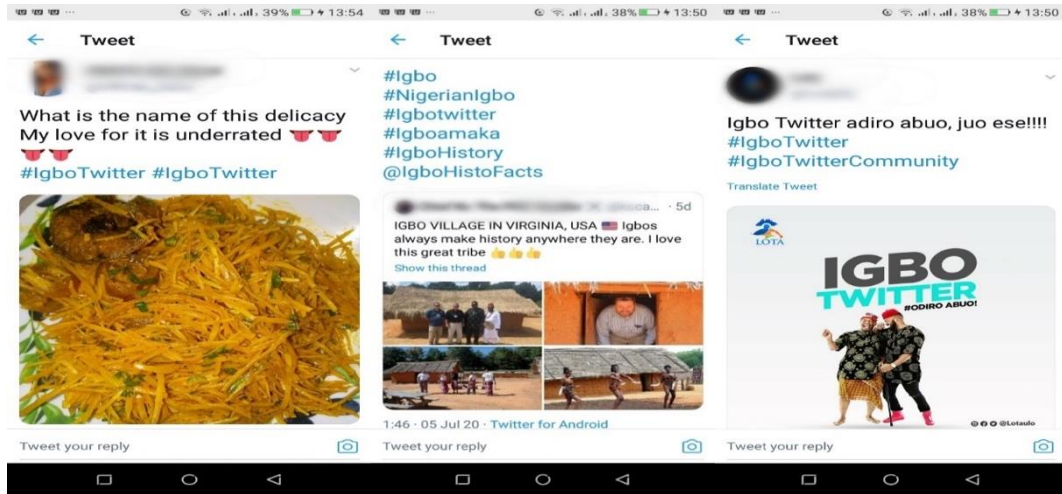
Figure 3. Igbos as tradition enthusiasts (*source:* Twitter.com)

Figure 3 is a collage of several images and tweets that portray the Igbos as tradition enthusiasts. The text in the first frame attempts to elicit responses from other users to the question: *What is the name of this delicacy, my love for it is underrated*. The responses from the comment section of this tweet could be described as engaging and educating. The many responses to this question are *Abacha, Ncha, Tapioca, Jigbo, Abacha agworagwo, African salad,*" etc. In the general Igbo language, the delicacy is known as Abacha, but the responses exemplified the different Igbo dialects. In the English Language, the dish is called African salad or Tapioca. In some parts of Igbo land, for instance, in Oji-River local government area of Enugu state, precisely, among the Akpugoeze, Inyi, Achi, and other neighboring communities *Abacha* is a revered delicacy. It is the first food that is served when one visits any home, and symbolizes a warm welcome. Today, *Abacha* is a popular food in urban areas. It is a common sight to see people, predominantly women that operate *Abacha* joints.

The text from the second frame extols Igbo Twitter - *Igbo Twitter adiro abuo, juo ese!!!*. When translated into English, it means 'there is no Twitter like Igbo Twitter, go and ask'. The two men in the frame are clothed in the known traditional Igbo apparel known as *Ishiagu* and the famous red cap. Historically, these clothing symbolize something. They are not worn in emptiness. *Ishiagu*, also known as Chieftaincy, is a pullover-tunic-shirt. This attire has an adult lion's head patterned on it. This attire symbolizes honor and wealth. In the early years, it is predominantly worn by respected chiefs and titled men. One of the most respected fragments of Igbo clothing is the traditional red cap. The red color signifies the agony and stresses the Igbo tribe went through for their people to progress. Historically, only the most distinguished members of the ethnic group mainly chiefs and titled men, were considered to be honored to wear the red cap. But today, the fashion industry has made these clothes stylish and readily available to anyone who could afford it. This has popularized these cultural and traditional practices, especially among youths who are more likely to then assert their identity on the cyberspace.

The third shows the replica of the traditional Igbo house in the olden day when slavery is still practiced. This location is in Staunton, Virginia, United States. This tweet has the value of educating young Igbo people of their heritage. #Igbotwitter made this traditional piece to spread wide. Originally, the tweet got 87 retweets and comments.

One notable feature of the tweets that were shared under the #Igbotwitter is the use of the hashtag in strengthening the learning of the Igbo language. Since the accounts under the current

study are based abroad, precisely Europe and America, these individuals still connect with their homeland through Twitter.
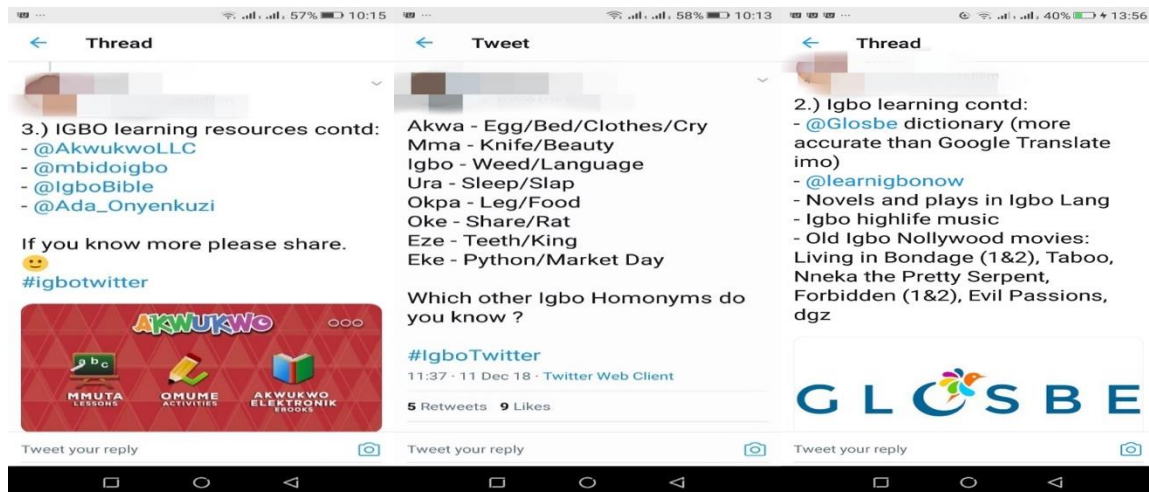

Figure 4. #Igbotwitter for Igbo language (*source*: Twitter.com)

Through the hashtag, the members of this online community can learn their language. This is specifically important in this era when there are predictions that the Igbo language is likely to go into extinction soon, if its users continue to under-use it (UNESCO, 2006). However social media platforms, like Twitter, allow young Igbo people to learn and communicate in their indigenous language, hence furthering their identities in diverse ways.

International accomplishments in Different Endeavours

In a time when people perceive Nigerians as fraudsters, some of the tweets and images in the #Igbotwitter trend identify the accomplishments, in diverse spheres of endeavors, by people of Igbo extraction. From owning their own businesses to achieving landmark accomplishments, these tweets celebrate Igbo people. The first frame in Figure 5 exemplifies the achievement and popularity of Bradley Ogbonna, a New York-based photographer and cinematographer. In the frame, the dreadlocked photographer is shown working with the former United States president, Barak Obama. Aside from working with the former United States president, Brad, as he is popularly called, has worked with renowned organizations like the *New York Times, The Fader, The Atlantic, Fortune, Forbes, Bloomberg BusinessWeek, BET, and New York* magazine. He has also worked another famous Nigerian artist Kehinde Wiley and other notable individuals like activist Linda Sarsour, curator Thelma Golden, rapper Lil Yachty and actress Gabby Sidibe.
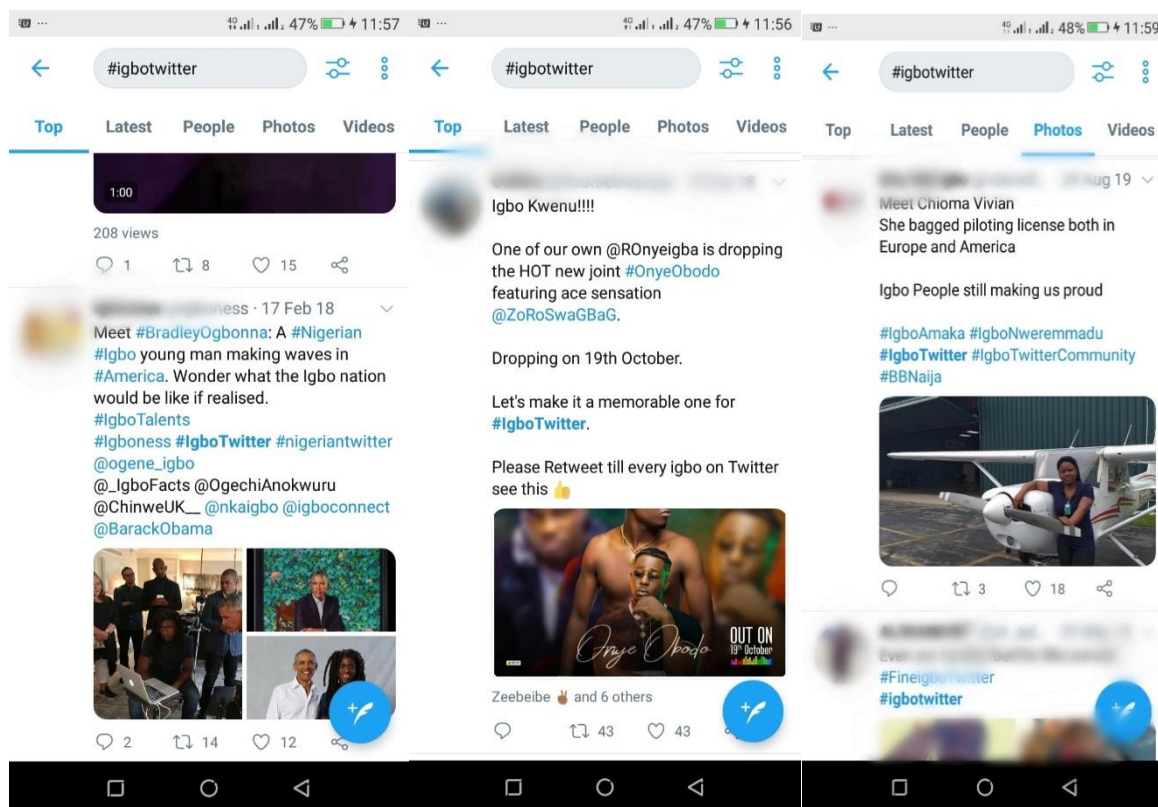
Figure 5. The diverse spheres of endeavors of #Igbotwitter (*source*: Twitter.com)

Similarly, the second frame shows the musical accomplishment of an Enugu-based musician, Onyeigba. The text which accompanies the image reads, "One of our own @ROnyeigba is dropping the HOT new #Onyeobodo featuring ace sensation @ZoRoSwaGBaG…." The latter music artist is very popular and accomplished. He equally started his music career in Enugu state, Nigeria. He has collaborated with highflying musicians like Phyno, Mayorkun, Davido, and Illbliss. The last frame shows the accomplishment of an Igbo lady, Chioma Vivian. The tweet claims that the lady bagged piloting licenses in both Europe and America.

Overall, Nigerians are known for making landmark accomplishments in their endeavors. For instance, in the literary world, Professor Chinua Achebe and Professor Wole Soyinka are two personalities that are revered globally. In terms of business, Africa's richest person, Alhaji Aliko Dangote, is doing Nigeria proud. In finance and economy, the former World Bank Vice-President and Corporate Secretary, Ngozi Okonjo-Iwela is a powerhouse to be recon with globally. In the entertainment world, people like Chiwetel Ejiofor, John Boyega, Arinze Anozie, Sade Adu, Adewale Akinnuoye-Agbaje, Hakeem Kae-Kazim, Wale, Nnamdi Asomugha, Tenie Tempah, Dayo Okeniyi, Caroline Chikezie, Elizabeth Ejogo, Adepero Oduye, Jidenna only to name a few are doing great in Hollywood. Only recently, a Nigerian Professor Charles Egbu was elected Vice-Chancellor of Leeds Trinity University in the United Kingdom. Professor Charles Egbu had studied and taught at the University. He begins his new role on 1 November 2020. These accomplishments create a favorable global identity for the country despite the numerous challenges it faces.

This study's objective is an examination of how diasporic Igbo people use the hashtag #Igbotwitter to construct and assert Igbo identity. Through this, they refute cultural misconceptions, precisely the love for money, and construct an identity which fulfils a sense of belonging (Vogel et al. 2014). Golbeck, Roble, Edmondson and Turner (2011) argue that users on Twitter reveal a lot about themselves both in what they share and how they say it through the use of hashtags. In the tweets analyzed, the users assert their cultural identities and collaborate with other people who identify as Igbo, regardless of their locations.

As the findings reveal, the Igbo identity constructed by Twitter users under #Igbotwitter challenges some of the misconceptions of the readily used term about the tribe in the society. This

construction process works in the logic of the third space, as conceptualized by Bhabha (1994), allowing users to decontextualize the Igbo identity and fuse multiple identity markers and present them afresh. Besides, by understanding the essence of tweets, we can understand how people can market themselves online and create an image or identity they want. Kramer and Winter (2007) submit that today anyone can use the media to promote themselves in their desired manners. Social media, particularly Twitter as used in the current study, affords the research participants the opportunities to present themselves through tweets, thereby constructing their identity. This provides an ideal platform for furthering identity and fulfilling a sense of belongingness, as posited by Vogel et al. (2014) in the literature.

This study argues that #Igbotwitter engenders the conglomeration of persons with similar interests, a collection of an online community that is dedicated to promoting the Igbo identity. This argument is in synergy with Ramelb's (2016) assertion, as seen in the body of this study. According to Ramelb, social media is the collection of online communications channels dedicated to community-based input, interaction, content-sharing, and collaboration. Similarly, as posited by Jenkins et al. (2013), this community or conglomeration, through the hashtag is active in the production and circulation of its identity and culture, rather than passive spectators. This hashtag, that is, #Igbotwitter can be seen as a form of a digital body where these individuals write about themselves to express salient aspects of their identity for others to see and interpret.

Besides, this study argues that being tied to the Igbo ethnic group motivated the research population of the current research to tweet under the #Igbotwitter. Social Identity Theory, as postulated by Tajfel (1978), states that individuals define their own identities with regard to social groups and that such identifications work to protect and bolster their identity. The previous assertion is in tandem with the findings of the current study. As revealed in the study, the research participants are members of the Igbo social group, and they revealed and created identities within the context of the social group. Similarly, Schmalz et al. (2014) in a paper talked about the social identity in their article, and they affirm that individuals are motivated by a need for high self-esteem, and being tied to a social group fulfils this need; hence they tend to create identities. This high-esteem may be linked to Vogel et al. (2014), "fulfilling belongingness," which the main driver of this study.

CONCLUSION

The prevalence of social media use has become common; its adoption in diverse spheres of human endeavor is growing rapidly, and scholars are making efforts to ascertain the positive of social media in the lives of users. Mainly, this study explores to what extent Igbos in the diaspora use the Twitter hashtag to construct the Igbo identity. Specifically, it assesses whether #Igbotwitter has reinforced the Igbo language, culture, and identity and ascertains whether the #Igbotwitter has portrayed the Igbo in positive lights. Findings from the study show that to a significant extent, the research population employ the use of Twitter to construct the Igbo identity, and the use of the #Igbotwitter portray the Igbos in positive lights and significantly reinforced the peoples' language, culture and identity.

Identities are constructed, circulated, celebrated, and criticized online by individual users. The Igbo Twitter users' tweets analyzed are used to formulate a positive and proud image of their cultural affiliation. Individual users actively construct this identity, using hashtags to connect themselves with other like-minded users and make a broader cultural and socio-economic statements about their identity. The affordance of networking shows how social media platforms provide space to negotiate, reformulate, and evaluate identity construction. This study has shown that there is a correlation between peoples' tweets and their identity, and social media identity and offline identities seem to correlate in certain situation as seen in this study. However, to a deeper extent, people who tweet are not just tweeting to create an online identity; they also build their overall identity and promote themselves further. Hongladarom (2011) believes that social media seem to foster the emergence of a new kind of self in the online world. This is evident, as demonstrated by the different Twitter accounts the study has examined. As replicated through the use of the #Igbotwitter hashtag, such digital communities reveal the influence of social media on society. This study contributes to the literature on identity construction on digital platforms, and

by implication points to the intentional and positive use of social media to promote culture on a global scale.

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