

# Digital Communication and The Erosion of Indigenous Language and Culture in African Society

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact of digital communication on the preservation and transmission of indigenous languages and cultural practices in African societies. While digital technologies enhance connectivity and access to information, they also contribute to the marginalization of local languages and cultural expressions. Unlike prior studies that rely predominantly on conceptual argumentation, this research adopts a qualitative design integrating conceptual analysis with illustrative empirical evidence drawn from Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa, and Ghana. Data were obtained through a structured review of scholarly literature, policy documents, and selected digital content, including a small-scale content analysis of social media posts. Findings indicate that digital platforms structurally privilege global languages through algorithmic visibility, interface design, and infrastructural limitations, thereby constraining the use of indigenous languages. However, case-based evidence demonstrates that these same platforms can support cultural revitalization through targeted initiatives such as language-learning applications, indigenous-language podcasts, and digital archiving projects. The study concludes that the effects of digital communication are contingent rather than deterministic. It recommends a coordinated, multi-level approach involving policy reform, technological inclusion, and community participation to strengthen indigenous languages and cultural sustainability in Africa.

**Keywords:** African culture, Cultural preservation, Digital communication, Digital platforms, Indigenous languages, Technological influence

## INTRODUCTION

Language and culture are central to identity formation and social continuity in African societies. Indigenous languages, in particular, function not only as means of communication but also as repositories of collective memory, traditional knowledge, and cultural values. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) argues, language embodies cultural identity and serves as a medium through which communities define themselves and preserve their heritage. Similarly, Kwesi Kwaa Prah (2009) emphasizes that meaningful development in Africa is closely tied to the vitality of indigenous languages.

However, the rapid expansion of digital communication technologies has significantly transformed the linguistic and cultural landscape across the continent. The widespread use of mobile devices and social media platforms has facilitated access to global information and interaction, particularly among younger populations. At the same time, these digital environments are largely dominated by global languages such as English and French, limiting the visibility and functional use of African languages in online spaces. As Walter J. Ong (1982) observes, shifts in communication technologies can fundamentally reshape patterns of thought, expression, and identity.

The marginalization of indigenous languages in digital contexts raises important concerns for cultural sustainability. Language loss is not merely a linguistic issue but a cultural one, as it entails the erosion of values, traditions, and worldviews embedded within those languages. Chinua Achebe (1975) underscores this point by highlighting the role of language in preserving a people's history and collective consciousness. Contemporary trends indicate that many young Africans exhibit declining proficiency in their mother tongues, reflecting a growing disconnection from cultural heritage.

According to UNESCO (2010), Africa is home to over 2,000 languages, many of which are now endangered. This situation reflects a broader tension between global digital culture and local cultural traditions. While digital platforms often reinforce dominant linguistic and cultural norms, they also provide opportunities for the preservation and revitalization of indigenous languages through innovative and community-driven initiatives.

Against this background, this study examines the role of digital communication in shaping language use and cultural expression in African societies. Specifically, it analyzes how digital platforms contribute to the marginalization of indigenous languages, explores their impact on cultural practices, and highlights emerging efforts to promote linguistic and cultural preservation in digital spaces. The study argues that digital communication is not inherently detrimental; rather, its impact depends on how it is structured, accessed, and utilized.

By integrating conceptual analysis with empirical illustrations, this research seeks to contribute to ongoing debates on language, culture, and technology in Africa. It provides a more grounded understanding of the challenges and possibilities associated with digital communication, with the aim of informing policy, educational practice, and future research on cultural sustainability in the digital age.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretivist research design to examine the relationship between digital communication and the erosion and preservation of indigenous languages in African societies. It integrates conceptual analysis with illustrative empirical evidence, enabling a balanced exploration of theoretical perspectives and observable digital practices.

### Data Sources

Data were obtained from three purposively selected sources. First, theoretical literature including key works on language, culture, and digital media provided the conceptual framework for the study. Second, documentary sources, particularly reports from international organizations and language policy bodies, were used to contextualize the status of indigenous languages and digital inclusion in Africa. Third, empirical illustrations were drawn from selected cases in Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa, and Ghana, chosen for their regional diversity and relevance to digital language practices.

### Content Analysis

To support the empirical dimension, a small-scale qualitative content analysis was conducted on 100 publicly available posts on X (formerly Twitter) tagged with #AfricanLanguages. Posts were selected purposively and categorized based on language use (indigenous, global, or mixed), content type (cultural, political, or educational), and identifiable geographic context. This enabled the identification of patterns in language use and representation in digital spaces.

### Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, focusing on recurring patterns such as linguistic marginalization, code-switching, and digital preservation initiatives. Conceptual insights from the literature were iteratively compared with empirical observations to enhance analytical coherence and depth.

### Ethical Considerations

All data used were publicly accessible and did not involve identifiable personal information. The study adhered to standard ethical guidelines for digital research.

### Limitations

The study relies on illustrative case examples and a small content sample, which limits generalizability. However, the aim is to provide analytical insight rather than statistical representation.

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## Digital Platforms: Origins, Definitions, and Cultural Implications

A digital platform constitutes an internet-based environment where individuals interact, communicate, share ideas, conduct commerce, and engage in learning through various technological tools. Common exemplars include social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Telegram, X (formerly Twitter), and video-sharing applications including YouTube and TikTok. Unlike traditional broadcast media, wherein communication flowed predominantly in one direction—from producers to passive audiences—digital platforms enable users to simultaneously consume and generate content in real-time. These platforms have become integral to daily existence for millions across Africa and throughout the global community.

The term "platform" historically denoted a raised surface from which speakers addressed audiences or performers presented their artistry. In the digital context, however, this meaning has undergone significant transformation. Contemporary digital platforms represent complex online architectures facilitating diverse activities. These spaces are far from passive; they actively shape communicative practices, behavioral patterns, and even cognitive processes. Tarleton Gillespie (2010, p. 352) elucidates this dynamic, observing that "platforms are curiously powerful and deceptively neutral—they organize how we engage with others and with information while appearing as open, equal-access spaces." This observation underscores that platforms not merely host communication but fundamentally structure what users see, say, and do within these environments.

Digital platforms achieved widespread adoption during the late 1990s and early 2000s, coinciding with internet expansion and the emergence of Web 2.0 technologies. Prior to this period, internet usage primarily involved passive consumption of information from static websites. However, the advent of social media, blogs, and video-sharing services transformed users from passive consumers into active content contributors. José Van Dijck (2013, p. 43) characterizes this evolution as platforms transitioning "from facilitating user-generated content to organizing its circulation through algorithms and data flows." In essence, while users generate content, platforms exercise considerable influence over the visibility, frequency, and reach of that content through algorithmic curation.

Contemporary digital platforms occupy central positions in how Africans connect with one another and with the wider world. These spaces facilitate messaging, photo sharing, e-commerce, news access, and opinion expression. For young Africans particularly, these platforms serve as sites of identity formation, cultural exploration, and exposure to novel ideas. Nevertheless, significant concerns persist regarding the cultural influence exerted through these spaces. Given that major platforms originate from Western technology corporations, they inevitably reflect and promote Western values, lifestyles, and linguistic norms. Shoshana Zuboff (2019, p. 93) warns that "the digital future is being shaped by corporate interests that extract behavioral data to influence human behavior at scale." This suggests that user experiences are mediated by opaque systems designed primarily for profit generation rather than cultural preservation.

This situation presents both challenges and opportunities for African societies. Platform architectures and operational logics do not inherently support African languages or cultural content. For instance, most platforms lack adequate tools for typing in African scripts or translating content into indigenous languages. Simultaneously, these platforms can serve as powerful vehicles for cultural preservation and promotion when deployed intentionally. John Perry Barlow (1996), in his foundational reflections on cyberspace, declared that "cyberspace is where people now meet, think, and express themselves, free from the limitations of the physical world." If Barlow's observation holds true, Africans must ensure their stories, songs, and traditions occupy meaningful space within this new environment.

Understanding digital platforms' nature and origins thus becomes essential. These entities represent not merely websites or applications but social spaces with tangible effects on linguistic practices, social relationships, and collective memory. For Africa, these platforms can function as instruments of transformation when employed judiciously. They possess the potential to sustain indigenous languages, disseminate traditional knowledge, and safeguard cultural values. Realizing this potential, however, requires conscious awareness of platform power dynamics and deliberate efforts to shape these spaces from within.

## Digital Platforms and Language Use: Empirical Insights

### Structural Marginalization

Analysis of digital content under the hashtag #AfricanLanguages indicates that over seventy percent of the sampled posts contained either partial or complete use of English, even when the posts discussed topics related to indigenous cultures. Posts written entirely in African languages were much less frequent and generally received lower engagement in terms of likes, comments, and shares. This trend suggests that indigenous languages are structurally marginalized in digital spaces and reflects broader social and technological factors that privilege global languages (Prah 42; Bamgbose 1991).

In Nigeria, online communication largely occurs in English and Nigerian Pidgin. Major indigenous languages such as Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo appear less frequently in formal or professional online discussions, even though they remain widely spoken in everyday life (Eme and Mbagwu 88). Similarly, in Ghana, languages such as Akan and Ewe are primarily used in informal exchanges, whereas English dominates media, education, and public discourse (Aiseng 54). In South Africa, indigenous languages including Zulu, Xhosa, and Sepedi are commonly used in informal chats and private communication, but they rarely feature in structured digital content such as news reporting or educational platforms (Motsamai).

This marginalization is partly driven by the design of digital platforms. Algorithms often prioritize content in widely spoken global languages such as English and French because such content reaches larger audiences and generates higher engagement metrics. As a result, posts in indigenous African languages are less visible and are less likely to appear in trending topics or recommendations. Users therefore feel compelled to adopt global languages to maximize reach and participation, reinforcing existing linguistic hierarchies online (Van Dijck 43; Zuboff 93).

### Code-Switching and Linguistic Simplification

Code-switching, the practice of alternating between two or more languages within the same interaction is widespread across digital platforms in Africa. While this practice allows multilingual users to communicate effectively across linguistic boundaries, it often results in simplification of language and culture. Expressions rich in cultural meaning, such as proverbs, idioms, and traditional sayings, are frequently translated into simpler forms or omitted entirely when content is adapted for broader comprehension (Ngũgĩ 16; Achebe 105).

Empirical research supports these observations. Prah (42) notes that users often prioritize clarity and audience reach over the preservation of linguistic and cultural nuance, particularly in content intended for public sharing. Similarly, Nyamnjoh (145) argues that excessive code-switching may erode the transmission of cultural knowledge because simplified expressions fail to convey the complex meanings embedded in indigenous languages. Over time, this can diminish the cultural and cognitive richness that language carries, leading to gradual erosion of linguistic heritage and identity.

Additionally, the limited technological support for African languages contributes to this trend. Many digital platforms lack proper keyboards, spelling tools, predictive text features, and translation support for indigenous languages. Consequently, users often resort to mixing local and global languages to communicate efficiently, which further reduces the visibility and functional use of native languages online (Bamgbose 102).

### Digital Media and Cultural Identity in Africa

Digital platforms play a central role in shaping cultural identity, particularly among young Africans who constitute the most active online demographic. Exposure to global content on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and X, formerly Twitter, influences preferences in music, fashion, entertainment, and lifestyle, often privileging Western cultural forms over local practices (Babalola and Sedisa 1–20).

However, these same platforms can serve as sites of cultural negotiation and creative resistance. Digital activism in Nigeria, exemplified by movements such as #EndSARS, demonstrates how online spaces can be used to

articulate civic and cultural identities while fostering collective engagement around local concerns (Barber 55). In Kenya and Ghana, podcasts and storytelling platforms in indigenous languages show that local cultural expression can be adapted to contemporary digital formats, providing avenues for both preservation and innovation (Aiseng 56). These examples illustrate that digital media can function simultaneously as tools of cultural homogenization and instruments for cultural revitalization.

### **Protecting and Promoting African Languages through Digital Tools**

Digital technologies have been identified by scholars as both a challenge and an opportunity for the preservation of African languages. While digital platforms often privilege global languages such as English, recent research shows that purposeful digital initiatives can help sustain and revitalize indigenous linguistic and cultural practices. Studies highlight how digital media technology facilitates documentation, access, and community engagement that support language preservation in the contemporary era (Ajani et al.; Nzeaka and Ehondor).

Language learning platforms and digital applications are emerging as important tools for engaging youth with their native languages. For example, digital repositories and mobile applications that provide interactive content in languages such as Igbo or Swahili help users acquire linguistic skills in culturally meaningful ways. Research on digital media and indigenous language revitalization in Africa emphasizes how mobile technology can provide accessible, participatory, and sustainable language learning opportunities (Aiseng). These tools go beyond vocabulary and grammar instruction to include storytelling and culturally relevant examples, making indigenous languages more attractive to young, digitally connected users.

Podcasts and other forms of audio-visual digital content have also proven effective in amplifying local voices and cultural narratives. A recent study on indigenous language media found that digital broadcasting, such as regional language news and podcasts, contributes to increased language visibility and broader societal recognition of indigenous languages (Eke and Salawu). In the case of BBC News Igbo, researchers observed that digital media significantly enhanced the prestige of Igbo by expanding its visibility, promoting positive attitudes toward the language, and creating new opportunities for global engagement (Eke and Salawu).

Digital archives and storytelling platforms play a crucial role in preserving oral traditions and historical knowledge. Projects like the African Storybook initiative provide open access to folktales, proverbs, and educational stories in dozens of African languages. Such digital libraries support intergenerational cultural transmission by making traditional narratives freely available in formats that are easily shared and reused online. Other research on indigenous knowledge systems points out that digital archiving and repository creation are essential for safeguarding linguistic heritage in the Fourth Industrial Revolution, while also enabling communities to document and share their own histories (Ajani et al.).

Challenges persist, however, especially in contexts where access to digital technologies and linguistic resources remains uneven. A survey of students in Delta State tertiary institutions found that while digital media use is widespread, indigenous languages are rarely used in online interaction, with English dominating digital communication (Akporokah and Victor). This pattern underscores the need for digital tools that are specifically designed to support indigenous language use rather than replicate global linguistic hierarchies.

Studies on digital language promotion in South Africa reveal similar barriers and opportunities. Research on digital technologies and indigenous South African languages shows that although technological strategies such as machine translation, online dictionaries, and crowdsourced localization can facilitate language preservation, limited access to technology and resource scarcity hinder their widespread use (Mlambo and Matfunjwa). These findings support the view that digital interventions must be coupled with broader infrastructure development and policy support to be effective.

Government policies and institutional support are also important in facilitating digital language preservation. National frameworks that promote local language use in media, education, and digital content create enabling environments for technological innovation and community participation. UNESCO's global digital initiatives toolkit highlights approaches that include education, community involvement, and resource sharing,

emphasizing the role of collaborative networks in supporting indigenous language preservation online (UNESCO).

In addition to institutional and technological strategies, community engagement remains essential. Research emphasizes that participatory approaches, where speakers of indigenous languages contribute to the development of digital resources and corpora, strengthen both language visibility and cultural pride (Mbogho et al.). By involving native speakers in the creation and curation of digital content, communities are better positioned to ensure that language preservation efforts reflect their own priorities and contexts.

Overall, the evidence demonstrates that digital platforms can be more than spaces of linguistic marginalization. When deployed thoughtfully and supported by policy frameworks and community initiatives, digital tools offer powerful avenues for preserving, promoting, and celebrating African languages. Such strategic engagement can transform digital environments into sites of cultural renewal rather than arenas of cultural loss.

## CONCLUSION

This study has shown that digital communication emerged as a transformative force shaping interaction patterns, learning processes, and self-expression across Africa. While facilitating community connections and global information access, it has simultaneously contributed to the gradual erosion of indigenous languages and cultural practices. The predominance of global languages such as English and French across social media and online content has rendered African languages and traditions increasingly precarious within digital environments. Consequently, numerous young Africans mature with attenuated connections to mother tongues and cultural heritage.

The study also demonstrates how indigenous language marginalization in digital spaces constitutes not merely a linguistic concern but a cultural and identity crisis of significant proportions. As Stuart Hall (1990, p. 223) explains, identity formation occurs through engagement with public and digital representations. When young Africans encounter predominantly foreign content, recognizing the value of their own traditions becomes progressively challenging. Simultaneously, however, the same digital tools contributing to cultural loss can, when deployed thoughtfully and creatively, serve to protect and promote African identity. The conclusion emerges clearly: Africa must not reject technology but rather reclaim it. Indigenous languages and traditions should not be abandoned in the digital age but actively integrated within it. African governments, educators, technology developers, and local communities must collaborate to construct digital spaces celebrating and preserving African identity. The future of African culture depends not merely on memory but on innovation—on the creative adaptation of traditional heritage to contemporary circumstances and technological possibilities.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To strengthen African languages and cultural heritage in the digital age, coordinated and innovative action is required from governments, educators, technology developers, and local communities.

First, a continental collaborative framework should be established to coordinate the documentation, digitization, and standardization of African languages. This initiative should bring together linguists, cultural scholars, and software developers to create digital language databases, standardized orthographies, and interactive resources that allow African languages to function fully in online environments (Bamgbose 102; Nyamnjoh 145).

Second, indigenous languages should be embedded into emerging digital technologies, including voice assistants, speech recognition, automatic translation, and text-to-speech systems. Integrating local languages into AI and smart technologies will enhance accessibility, digital inclusion, and cultural relevance while ensuring that users can interact with technology in their mother tongues (UNESCO 24).

Third, communities should be supported in developing intergenerational digital heritage projects. This could include collaborative digital archives where elders and youth co-create multimedia records of folktales, songs, rituals, oral histories, and local knowledge. Such archives would not only preserve endangered traditions but also allow them to evolve and remain relevant for younger audiences (Barber 55; Obiechina 121).

Fourth, educational platforms and mobile applications should be designed specifically for African languages, combining language learning with cultural content. Innovative features such as gamification, storytelling, augmented reality, and interactive quizzes can make learning engaging and culturally meaningful, fostering pride in heritage while building digital literacy (Eme and Mbagwu 88; Prah 42).

Fifth, digital campaigns and social media strategies should actively promote the visibility of indigenous languages. Initiatives could include hashtags, challenges, viral storytelling, and influencer-led campaigns that encourage posting in local languages, thereby normalizing their use and creating positive attitudes toward linguistic heritage. This approach combines cultural pride with modern digital trends, making indigenous languages appealing to younger, digitally savvy populations.

Finally, governments and private actors should invest in technological infrastructure and policy support that facilitates equitable access to digital tools for language preservation. Supporting rural and underserved communities with connectivity, localized software, and digital literacy training ensures that cultural preservation is not limited to urban populations but benefits all African communities.

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