

LANGUAGING THE IGBO BRAND AND IMAGE

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Abstract

This study explores the concept of "linguaging" as a dynamic process that shapes cultural identity, focusing on the Igbo language as a tool for redefining the Igbo nation's image. Historically rich in cultural heritage and known for resilience, the Igbo people have faced negative stereotypes and media portrayals that distort their identity. This paper advocates for the strategic use of the Igbo language in media, education, and commerce to counteract these narratives and foster a renewed sense of pride. By examining successful national branding efforts in countries like China and India, it highlights the potential of the Igbo language to enhance cultural pride, economic growth, and international recognition. The study proposes a multifaceted approach, including promoting Igbo in educational curricula, supporting Igbo media content, and encouraging local businesses to embrace the language in marketing. The findings aim to provide a framework for leveraging the Igbo language as a means of cultural preservation and image reformation, ultimately addressing challenges and opportunities in reshaping perceptions of the Igbo people both within Nigeria and globally.

Keywords: Linguaging, branding, image, Igbo language, Igbo brand, cultural identity

INTRODUCTION

Linguaging refers to the dynamic process through which language shapes and is shaped by social and cultural contexts. It goes beyond mere communication, embodying the way communities create and negotiate their identities (Swain, 2006). In the context of the Igbo people, linguaging involves the use of the Igbo language not only as a means of communication but also as a tool for cultural expression, identity formation, and social cohesion. The importance of linguaging lies in its ability to convey the values, beliefs, and worldviews of a community, making it a powerful instrument for image-making and self-definition (Pennycook, 2010).

The Igbo nation, one of the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria, is known for its rich cultural heritage, entrepreneurial spirit, and resilience (Falola & Heaton, 2008). Historically, the Igbo people have played significant roles in the socio-economic development of Nigeria. However, various socio-political challenges, including the aftermath of the Nigerian Civil War and stereotypes in media portrayals, have impacted the perception of the Igbo nation both within Nigeria and internationally (Achebe, 2012). Despite

these challenges, the Igbo community remains vibrant, with a strong emphasis on education, commerce, and cultural preservation. Understanding this background is crucial for appreciating the potential of the Igbo language as a tool for reshaping and enhancing the Igbo brand.

This paper seeks to advocate for the use of the Igbo language as a strategic tool for image-making and brand enhancement of the Igbo nation within the Nigerian context and beyond. It aims to argue that the Igbo language can effectively convey the accommodating, resilient, and loving nature of the Igbo people, thereby reshaping perceptions and promoting acceptance of Igbo products and culture. By examining successful examples from countries like China and India, where language has played a crucial role in national branding and cultural revival (Chen, 2010; Rai, 2012), the paper will highlight the potential of the Igbo language in fostering economic growth, cultural pride, and international recognition. Ultimately, the paper intends to provide a framework for leveraging the Igbo language as a means of cultural preservation and image reformation, addressing both challenges and opportunities in the process.

Problem of the Study

The Igbo nation, despite its rich cultural heritage and significant contributions to Nigeria's development, faces a crisis of identity and image. Over the years, negative stereotypes and media propaganda have perpetuated a distorted view of the Igbo people, portraying them as overly ambitious, untrustworthy, and solely profit-driven. This portrayal has not only damaged the Igbo image externally but has also begun to infiltrate the self-perception of the Igbo themselves, particularly among the younger generation. These twisted narratives, often amplified by media, have gained acceptance as truth, leading to internalized stereotypes that undermine the Igbo community's pride and cultural identity.

This study aims to address these challenges by advocating for the strategic use of the Igbo language as a tool for reshaping and reclaiming the Igbo brand. By promoting the positive attributes of the Igbo—such as resilience, accommodation, and community spirit—through their language, the study seeks to counteract the negative narratives and foster a renewed sense of pride and identity among the Igbo people. Through a comparative analysis with other cultures that have successfully used their languages to enhance their image, this paper will explore how the Igbo language can be leveraged to rebuild the Igbo image both within Nigeria and beyond.

Objectives of the Study

The specific objectives of the study include to:

1. Examine how the Igbo language influences identity, self-perception, and external views of the Igbo people.
2. Explore the importance of the Igbo language in preserving cultural heritage and its potential as a strategic tool for branding and enhancing the Igbo image.
3. Provide actionable strategies for stakeholders to effectively utilize the Igbo language in promoting the Igbo brand and image on national and global levels.

PREVIOUS STUDIES

Previous research on languaging emphasizes its role in shaping individual and collective identities. Swain (2006) highlights how languaging facilitates cognitive and social processes, enabling individuals to construct and negotiate their identities. This perspective positions language as a tool for both personal and cultural expression, reinforcing the idea that it is integral to identity formation. The concept, rooted in

Vygotsky's work, demonstrates the critical role language plays in mediating cognitive processes, with Vygotsky arguing that language "completes thought." Languageing is described as an activity, a "process of making meaning and shaping knowledge and experience through language" (Swain, 2006, p. 98), making it essential in learning. The verb "languageing" compels us to understand language as an active, dynamic process.

Fishman (1999) discusses language as a vital cultural resource, asserting that it encapsulates the heritage and values of a community. This work underscores the importance of language in maintaining cultural continuity and resisting external influences. By preserving indigenous languages, communities can safeguard their unique identities against homogenizing global forces.

Chen (2010) explores the use of Mandarin in China as a means of unifying the nation and promoting cultural identity. The standardization of Mandarin and its promotion globally through institutions like the Confucius Institutes have enhanced China's soft power. This case demonstrates how language policy can be strategically employed to shape national image and influence international perceptions.

Rai (2001) examines India's language policy, which balances the promotion of Hindi with the recognition of regional languages. This approach fosters national unity while celebrating linguistic diversity, enhancing India's cultural image both domestically and internationally. Krishna (2017) further elaborates on the complexities of linguistic diversity in India, highlighting how multilingualism contributes to the country's rich cultural tapestry and global appeal.

Jin (2016) analyzes South Korea's use of the Korean language in the Korean Wave (Hallyu) phenomenon. By promoting Korean culture and language through media and entertainment, South Korea has significantly boosted its global cultural presence. This example illustrates the potential of language as a vehicle for cultural promotion and international image enhancement.

Igbokwe (2013) highlights the critical role of language as a communication tool and a means of cultural preservation, emphasizing the Igbo language's importance in maintaining cultural identity within the Igbo community of Nigeria. He underscores that language serves as both a powerful instrument and a cultural identifier, integral to communication and distinguishing various speech communities globally. The paper discusses the alarming decline in the use of Igbo among its native speakers, attributing this shift to the increasing preference for foreign languages, which leads to cultural and linguistic disconnect. Igbokwe argues that the Igbo language is a fundamental component of Igbo identity, reflecting the community's unique cultural heritage and values, essential for maintaining their distinctiveness. He concludes with recommendations to promote the Igbo language, emphasizing its importance for cultural preservation and identity reinforcement. The paper provides valuable insights into the challenges facing the Igbo language and offers practical solutions for its revitalization, benefiting students, researchers, and the Igbo community by advocating for the preservation of linguistic heritage as a cornerstone of cultural identity.

These studies collectively highlight the multifaceted role of languageing in shaping cultural identity and national image. They demonstrate how strategic language use can counter negative stereotypes, promote cultural heritage, and enhance a nation's global standing. However, they also indicate the challenges of balancing linguistic diversity with national unity, particularly in multicultural contexts. This critical review provides a foundation for further exploration of how the Igbo language can be leveraged to improve the image and identity of the Igbo nation.

CURRENT PERCEPTION OF THE IGBO PEOPLE AND PRODUCTS

In contemporary Nigeria, the perception of the Igbo people and their products has been significantly influenced by socio-political dynamics and media portrayals, which frequently depict the Igbo as highly competitive and primarily focused on commerce (Achebe, 2012). This portrayal has permeated both external perceptions and internal attitudes within the Igbo community itself.

The Igbo community has often been unjustly portrayed in the media and political discourse, depicted as criminals, drug traffickers, product fakers, and other derogatory stereotypes. This negative representation has been perpetuated without adequate efforts to present a balanced view or highlight the positive contributions of the Igbo. Such persistent negative narratives have profound implications, impacting the perception of the Igbo both locally and internationally, and even straining relationships between the Igbo and their host communities abroad.

These harmful portrayals have contributed to an ongoing crisis of image and identity among the Igbo people today. The media's focus on sensationalized stories and political rhetoric has overshadowed the diverse achievements and cultural richness of the Igbo community, perpetuating harmful stereotypes that fail to capture the full spectrum of Igbo identity and contributions to society.

Chinua Achebe, in his work *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (2012), discusses how historical events and political narratives have shaped the external image of the Igbo. Achebe argues that the portrayal of the Igbo as business-minded and industrious emerged partly from their historical role in commerce and entrepreneurship, particularly in the pre-independence and early post-independence periods.

Internally, these external stereotypes have influenced the perceptions of younger Igbo generations, leading to a sense of detachment from their linguistic and cultural heritage (Eze, 2010). Eze's analysis in his *The Politics of History in Contemporary Africa* (2010) highlights how media representations and societal expectations contribute to shaping identity among the Igbo youth. The emphasis on business acumen and economic success often overshadows other aspects of Igbo cultural identity, potentially eroding the importance of language and traditional values among younger generations.

This dual impact—external stereotyping and internal adaptation—is crucial in understanding contemporary Igbo identity dynamics. While external perceptions affect how the Igbo are viewed and treated in broader Nigerian society, internalized stereotypes influence cultural attitudes and behaviours within Igbo communities themselves.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative research approach, utilizing a combination of content analysis and ethnographic methods. Data were collected through interviews with language experts, cultural practitioners, and members of the Igbo community. Additionally, existing literature on language and cultural identity are analyzed to support findings.

Theoretical Framework

The study is grounded in the **Cultural Branding Theory (Holt 2004)**. This theory focuses on how brands become iconic by resonating deeply with cultural narratives and identities. The study will examine how the Igbo language can be leveraged as a cultural asset to create a strong,

positive brand identity for the Igbo people, enhancing their image on local, national, and global stages.

PROPOSAL FOR RECLAIMING AND REBRANDING OF THE IGBO IMAGE

As has been noted above, in contemporary discourse and scheme of things, the Igbo people of Nigeria face a significant challenge—a pervasive and often distorted portrayal in media and societal narratives. This portrayal, rife with stereotypes and negative biases, has overshadowed the rich cultural heritage, entrepreneurial spirit, and intellectual prowess that characterize the Igbo community. These misrepresentations not only affect local perceptions but also influence international views, impacting everything from socio-economic opportunities to cultural integration.

Presented in what follows is a proposal for changing the twisted narratives about the Igbo. This proposal seeks to address the critical issue of reclaiming and rebranding the Igbo image, aiming to restore a balanced and accurate portrayal that reflects the diversity and achievements of the Igbo people.

Central to this effort is the recognition that image and identity are not static but evolve through intentional efforts to reshape narratives and amplify positive stories. By reclaiming their narrative and emphasizing their cultural strengths, the Igbo people can forge a path towards a more inclusive and accurate representation in the broader society.

This proposal outlines a multifaceted approach that integrates media advocacy, educational initiatives, cultural programs, and community partnerships to effectively reclaim and rebrand the Igbo image, ensuring that future generations inherit a legacy characterized by pride, respect, and recognition.

1. Promoting Igbo Language in Media and Education

Integrate Igbo language courses in school curricula from primary to tertiary levels in a more structured and intentional manner than what is obtained today.

Incorporating Igbo language courses into the educational curriculum will help preserve the language and ensures that new generations can speak and understand it. This integration should be mandatory at various educational levels, with a structured syllabus emphasizing reading, writing, and speaking skills. Igbo should be compulsory in secondary schools. While it may not be a compulsory subject for students in their WEAC and NECO exams, it should be a prerequisite for registering and sitting for the exams in Igbo states of Nigeria.

Achieving this goal will involve encouraging an increase in the number of students enrolled in Igbo language classes by 50% within two years, which can be tracked through enrollment data from schools and universities, to demonstrate growing interest and commitment to learning the language. The state government of Igbo states should allocate funds to sponsor scholarships, grants, and rewards for outstanding Igbo students or those demonstrating a passion for studying or developing the language.

Develop Igbo language content for radio, television, and online platforms.

This should be approached with intentionality, not left solely in the hands of individuals who may have the passion but lack the necessary funds. Here, the government and corporate entities from the private sector should collaborate in this regard.

Creating engaging content in Igbo that portrays the Igbo culture in a positive light across various media platforms will increase exposure and encourage both native speakers and learners to use the language in daily life. This content can encompass news, entertainment, educational programs, and podcasts, and cater to a wide audience and promote the language's relevance in modern contexts.

This goal can be achieved by launching and sponsoring at least three new Igbo language programs on major media channels within one year. Success can be measured by the number of programs aired, viewer/listener engagement, and feedback. This initiative aims to normalize the presence of Igbo in mainstream media, and establish it as a staple for entertainment and information.

2. Igbo Language in Business and Commerce

Encourage businesses to use Igbo in marketing and branding

Promoting the use of Igbo in marketing will help businesses connect with local consumers on a cultural level, fostering loyalty and pride in the community. This can include advertisements, packaging, and customer service interactions in Igbo, creating a unique identity that resonates with the target market.

This will start by adoption of Igbo language in marketing by 30% of local businesses within two years. This can be assessed through surveys and analysis of marketing materials, indicating a shift towards culturally relevant branding.

Organize trade fairs and exhibitions that highlight Igbo products and services

Hosting trade fairs and exhibitions (Igbo-made fair) focused on Igbo products will showcase the richness of Igbo culture and commerce, and anchored in Igbo language. These events will provide a platform for businesses to network, market their goods, and celebrate Igbo heritage, as well as attract both local and international attention.

This can be done by hosting annual trade fairs with at least 50% participation from Igbo businesses. Success can be measured by attendance records, participant feedback, and the variety of products showcased, highlighting the economic impact of such events. Only Igbo media outfits should be giving the right of coverage of the event.

3. Leveraging Igbo Language in Art and Literature

Support the production of Igbo literature, films, and music.

Encouraging the creation of art and literature in Igbo revitalizes cultural expression and preserves traditional narratives. This support can include funding, promotional efforts, and collaboration with local artists, fostering a thriving creative community that celebrates Igbo identity.

This can be achieved by funding or sponsoring of publication of at least 20 new Igbo language books and release of ten well-produced Igbo films annually. This can be tracked by publication and release data, reflecting an increase in cultural output and availability of Igbo-language content.

Establish grants and awards for Igbo artists, teachers, researchers, and writers.

Providing financial support and recognition for Igbo artists, teachers, researchers, and writers, especially in the Igbo language, will incentivize the creation of new works and acknowledges their contributions to cultural preservation. Grants and awards can attract emerging talents and bolster the profile of Igbo art and literature.

This can be done by encouraging submissions to Igbo language arts competitions by 50% within a year. This can be monitored through competition records, demonstrating heightened interest and participation in the arts, encouraging a vibrant creative ecosystem.

BENEFITS OF LANGUAGEING THE IGBO BRAND

A. Cultural Preservation and Revival

1. Maintaining Linguistic Heritage

Languageing the Igbo brand will significantly contribute to preserving the Igbo language, which is an essential element of Igbo cultural identity. By promoting the use of Igbo in various aspects of life, including education, media, and daily communication, the language will be kept alive for future generations. Preservation of the language is vital for survival in a globalized world where many indigenous languages are at risk of extinction.

2. Revitalizing Traditional Practices

The Igbo language is deeply intertwined with the customs, traditions, and rituals of the Igbo people. By emphasizing Igbo in cultural expressions, such as festivals, folklore, music, and dance, there will be a revival of these traditional practices. This will not only reinforce cultural identity but also ensure that these unique cultural elements are passed down through generations.

3. Strengthening Community Bonds

Language is a powerful tool for fostering a sense of community and belonging. By promoting Igbo, individuals within the community can connect more deeply with one another, sharing a common linguistic and cultural heritage. A strengthened community bond is vital for social cohesion and the continuation of communal support systems.

B. Enhancing National and International Perception

1. Promoting a Unique Cultural Identity

Languageing the Igbo brand will help to highlight the distinct cultural identity of the Igbo people on both national and international stages. A strong linguistic identity will showcase the rich cultural heritage and history of the Igbo, setting them apart from other ethnic groups and promote cultural diversity within Nigeria and globally.

2. Countering Negative Stereotypes

Emphasizing the Igbo language and culture can help to counteract negative stereotypes and misconceptions about the Igbo people. By presenting a positive and authentic narrative, the Igbo community can reshape perceptions and build a more accurate understanding of their cultural and social contributions.

3. Fostering Cultural Diplomacy

The promotion of the Igbo language can also serve as a tool for cultural diplomacy. Through cultural exchange programs, international festivals, and educational initiatives, the Igbo language can foster greater understanding and collaboration between Nigeria and other countries. This will enhance the global perception of the Igbo as a culturally rich and vibrant community.

C. Economic Growth and Development

1. Boosting Tourism

The promotion of Igbo language and culture can significantly boost tourism in the Igbo-speaking regions. Cultural festivals, historical sites, and traditional arts can attract tourists, both domestic and international, and generate revenue and create jobs. Language will play a key role in making these cultural experiences more authentic and engaging for visitors.

2. Supporting Local Businesses

Languageing the Igbo brand can help support local businesses by creating a market for products and services that reflect Igbo culture. From Igbo publishing, traditional crafts and artistry to contemporary fashion inspired by Igbo aesthetics, there is a potential for economic growth driven by culturally-rooted entrepreneurship. Additionally, businesses that use Igbo language in their branding and marketing can appeal to a sense of cultural pride among consumers.

3. Enhancing Education and Employment Opportunities

Promoting the Igbo language in education can improve literacy rates and educational outcomes within the Igbo community. This, in turn, will enhance employment opportunities as individuals become more skilled and knowledgeable. Furthermore, bilingual or multilingual individuals are often in high demand in the global job market, giving Igbo speakers an economic advantage. Interview into the employ of state governments, if conducted 50% in Igbo and 50% in other language(s) relevant to the execution of and performing in the job, will serve as a veritable means of promoting employment opportunities.

4. Encouraging Cultural Industries

The development of cultural industries, such as film, music, literature, and arts, can be bolstered by emphasizing the Igbo language. These industries not only provide employment but also create a platform for cultural expression and innovation. The success of these industries can contribute to the overall economic development of the Igbo-speaking regions. Government should avail funds as loan or grants to encourage these industries.

POTENTIAL CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

Implementing the proposed language promotion strategies faces significant challenges that must be overcome for success. These challenges include societal resistance to promoting indigenous languages and a lack of institutional support.

A. Resistance to Indigenous Language Promotion

Resistance to Indigenous Language Promotion is rooted in complex historical, socio-economic, and cultural factors influencing Igbo community attitudes towards language proficiency. There is a prevailing belief that proficiency in English or other foreign languages offers superior socio-economic benefits, a legacy of Nigeria's colonial past and English's global dominance in business and education.

During colonial rule, English was imposed as the official language across Nigeria, sidelining indigenous languages like Igbo in formal contexts and perpetuating their marginalization. Today, English proficiency is perceived as a means to higher education, prestigious job opportunities, and global economic engagement. This has led to prioritization of English education over Igbo by parents and educators.

Moreover, English's dominance in business, technology, and media reinforces the perception that it provides practical advantages over Igbo and other indigenous languages. This preference for English is reinforced by media portrayal, educational policies, and economic incentives that prioritize English-language skills, reflecting aspirations for modernity and global connectivity.

B. Generational Gap

The generational gap regarding the perception of Igbo language among younger generations reflects broader socio-cultural shifts influenced by globalization and modernization. Younger Igbo individuals often perceive Igbo as less relevant or outdated compared to English or other globally dominant languages. This shift can be attributed to several factors, including:

1. **Globalization and Modernization:** With the increasing interconnectedness brought about by globalization, younger Igbo generations are exposed to global trends, media, and cultural influences that prioritize English and other widely spoken languages.
2. **Economic Opportunities:** English proficiency is often seen as crucial for accessing educational and economic opportunities both within Nigeria and internationally. Younger Igbo individuals may prioritize learning English over Igbo due to perceived economic advantages associated with English-speaking skills.
3. **Cultural Identity and Prestige:** There exists a perception among some younger Igbo individuals that proficiency in English carries more prestige and status, aligning with aspirations for modernity and cosmopolitanism (Ezeani, 2018).
4. **Educational Priorities:** Nigerian educational institutions predominantly use English as the medium of instruction, reinforcing its perceived importance over indigenous languages like Igbo.
5. **Media and Pop Culture:** The predominance of English in Nigerian media, entertainment, and popular culture further promotes its use among younger generations. This influences the Igbo younger generation's language preferences and attitudes.

Solutions

Awareness Campaigns: Launch campaigns that highlight the cultural and economic benefits of bilingualism, emphasizing that proficiency in both Igbo and English can enhance cognitive abilities and open more opportunities.

Role Models: Engage influential figures in the community, including celebrities, academics, and business leaders, to advocate for the use of Igbo and demonstrate its value in various contexts.

Integrating Igbo Language with Modern Technology: Efforts could include integrating Igbo language education with modern technology and media, promoting Igbo language content in digital platforms, and engaging younger generations through culturally relevant literature, music, and art.

C. Lack of Institutional Support

Educational Policy: Current educational policies in Nigeria often do not prioritize or adequately support the teaching and use of indigenous languages like Igbo. The emphasis on English as the primary medium of instruction in schools relegates Igbo to a secondary role, and by so-doing, impact English status and usage among younger generations.

Funding: Insufficient financial support for programs aimed at promoting Igbo language and culture further exacerbates the challenge. Without adequate funding, initiatives such as language courses, cultural events, and educational materials struggle to develop and sustain impactful activities.

Solutions

Policy Advocacy: Engaging with policymakers is key to ensuring that the importance of indigenous languages, including Igbo, is recognized and integrated into educational frameworks. This advocacy effort includes lobbying for curriculum reforms that prioritize the teaching of Igbo language from primary through tertiary education levels. By advocating for policy changes, stakeholders can engender an environment where indigenous languages are valued and preserved within the formal education system.

Public-Private Partnerships: Promoting collaborations between government entities, private sector organizations, and non-profit groups is essential for securing sustainable funding and support for Igbo language initiatives. These partnerships can leverage resources from various sectors to fund language programs, cultural festivals, research projects, and the development of educational materials. By pooling resources and expertise, these partnerships can amplify the impact of initiatives aimed at promoting and preserving the Igbo language and culture.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Integrate Igbo Language into Core Curricula: Make Igbo language courses compulsory in schools from primary to tertiary levels, ensuring consistent exposure and learning.

Media Promotion: Incentivize the production and broadcasting of Igbo language content across various media platforms, including television, radio, and online channels.

Community Engagement: Organize community events and festivals that celebrate Igbo culture and language, fostering a sense of pride and continuity.

Technological Integration: Develop and promote apps, online courses, and digital resources that facilitate the learning and use of Igbo in a modern, accessible format.

CONCLUSION

The promotion of the Igbo language is essential for cultural preservation, enhancing national and international perception, and fostering economic growth and development. Despite the challenges of

societal attitudes and lack of institutional support, strategic actions such as educational integration, media promotion, and community engagement can drive significant progress.

Stakeholders, including policymakers, educators, business leaders, and community members, must collaborate to prioritize the promotion of the Igbo language. This involves advocating for policy changes, funding initiatives, and creating platforms that celebrate and utilize the language in various contexts.

Future research should explore innovative methods for language revitalization, such as the use of technology in language learning and the impact of bilingualism on cognitive development. Implementation efforts should focus on scalable models that can be adapted to different communities, ensuring that the strategies developed are inclusive and sustainable. By addressing these areas, the Igbo language can be preserved and promoted, securing its place in both cultural heritage and modern society.

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