LANGUAGE, TECHNOLOGY, AND SOCIAL MEDIA

ISSN: 3026-7196

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To cite this article. M. S. Ya'u and M. Muhammad, "Name Tags and Net Tags: Investigating Username Construction as Identity Markers among Nigerian TikTok Creators," *Lang. Technol. Soc. Media*, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 36–53, 2026.
DOI: https://doi.org/ 10.70211/ltsm.3026-7196.187

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Language, Technology, and Social Media Vol 4 No 1 (2026) https://doi.org/ 10.70211/ltsm.3026-7196.187

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Research Article

Name Tags and Net Tags: Investigating Username Construction as Identity Markers among Nigerian TikTok Creators

Mohammed Sani Ya'u* and Mustapha Muhammad

Received: 23 July 2025	Revised: 11 September 2025	Accepted: 18 October 2025	Online: 22 October 2025

Abstract

In Nigeria's active digital space, TikTok has become a popular platform where creators express their identities using carefully chosen usernames. This study investigates how Nigerian TikTok creators use usernames as identity markers, reflecting cultural, linguistic, and social affiliations in a multicultural context. Drawing on a manually compiled list of 200 top Nigerian TikTok influencers, ranked by follower count in April 2025, the research employs qualitative content analysis to examine username patterns. This aligns with the study's objectives to identify linguistic and cultural elements, analyze usernames as identity markers, and infer influencing factors. Findings reveal that 15% of usernames reference Nigerian names or cultural figures, 2.5% incorporate national symbols like the Nigerian flag emoji, 25% include emojis or symbols, 40% use authenticity conventions such as "official" or "real", and 20% reflect entertainment or trendy nicknames tied to content niches. These patterns highlight how creators blend cultural pride, linguistic creativity, and social engagement to navigate global digital spaces while celebrating Nigeria's diverse heritage. The primary limitation of this study is the absence of survey data, meaning inferences about creators' motivations are based solely on content analysis and existing literature, rather than direct input from the creators themselves. This study uniquely addresses an important gap in research by specifically looking at how Nigerian TikTok creators intentionally create usernames as clear identity markers. It offers new insights into how digital identity is formed in non-Western settings, highlighting how cultural representation and language diversity interact online.

Keywords: TikTok; Usernames; Identity Markers; Nigerian Creators; Cultural Expression; Digital Identity.

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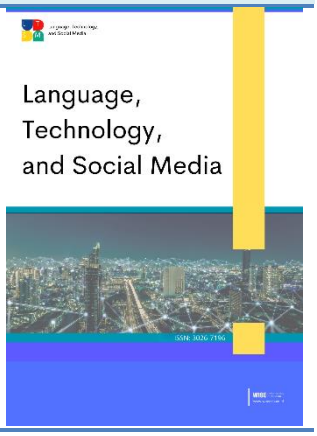

INTRODUCTION

In today's digital world, social media platforms have become essential spaces for individuals to craft and share their identities. Users share personal stories and connect with others in online communities. TikTok, one of the fastest-growing platforms, offers a unique avenue for self-expression through short videos, hashtags, profile pictures, and most notably, usernames. TikTok provides a novel way for users to express themselves and celebrate their heritage, especially in Nigeria, a country rich in linguistic and cultural diversity, with more than 500 languages and a wide array of traditions [1], [2], [3]. Nigeria offers a compelling context for this study. As the most populous country in Africa, with a rapidly growing youth population and high social media engagement, Nigeria has become a major influencer in the online culture space. Nigerian TikTok creators often draw upon local languages, cultural expressions, humor, and trends that diverge from Western norms. Investigating how these creators select their usernames allows us to explore the intersection of local identity, creativity, and global influence online [4], [5]. Thus, this study examines how leading Nigerian TikTok influencers use usernames to shape their digital identities, focusing on the linguistic, cultural, and social elements embedded in these identifiers.

Usernames are not just simple labels; they are deliberate choices that communicate personal, cultural, or social identities, acting as digital calling cards in online spaces [6], [7], [8]. For Nigerian creators, usernames often incorporate local languages such as Yoruba, Igbo, or Hausa, and may include Nigerian Pidgin, a widely spoken creole that bridges ethnic divides [9], [10]. These usernames function as "name tags," reflecting real names or culturally significant terms. Additionally, they can be regarded as "net tags," encompassing handles or keywords linked to online trends or affiliations [11]. By analyzing these usernames, this study seeks to understand how Nigerian creators express their identities in a global digital context.

While numerous studies have explored digital identity on platforms like Instagram and Twitter [12], [13], [14], [15], most of this research has concentrated on Western users [10], [16]. Limited attention has been paid to how digital identities are constructed in non-Western contexts, particularly in Africa. This study fills that gap by focusing on Nigerian TikTok influencers and examining how they use usernames to express their unique identities. Furthermore, existing research tends to focus on broader online behaviors or general linguistic trends, often overlooking usernames as important cultural and linguistic artifacts [6]. Because this area has been underexplored, the thoughtful and creative ways Nigerian creators incorporate their cultural backgrounds, language choices, and social affiliations into their usernames remain insufficiently understood.

The focus on TikTok usernames is crucial, as they serve as prominent and immediate representations of a creator's identity on a platform renowned for its visual and expressive nature. This study directly addresses the existing research gap by conducting a focused qualitative content analysis of usernames from 200 top Nigerian TikTok influencers, ranked by follower count in April 2025. This approach goes beyond general observations, offering novel and incisive insights into the specific patterns through which cultural pride, linguistic creativity, and self-presentation are reflected and intentionally used to shape digital identity. By elucidating these previously underexplored patterns, this research contributes uniquely to the understanding of digital identity formation in a dynamic, multicultural, non-Western context. It provides valuable empirical

perspectives on cultural representation and the preservation of linguistic diversity within the interconnected online world [17], [18], [19], [20].

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media and Identity in Nigeria

TikTok, one of the leading social media platforms, has transformed identity construction by providing spaces for self-expression and community engagement [12], [13]. TikTok's use of visuals and sound allows users to express themselves in creative ways and build identities that appeal to a wide range of audiences. This makes it a powerful tool for identity performance [21]. In Nigeria, where social media penetration is high among youth, TikTok has become a cultural hub where creators blend local traditions with global trends [5], [11]. Nigeria, with over 500 languages such as Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, and Nigerian Pidgin, offers a rich linguistic diversity that influences how creators use and engage with social media platforms. They often use language as a tool to assert their identities [22], [23], [24], [25]. This multicultural context makes Nigeria an ideal setting for studying digital identity, as creators draw on rich linguistic and cultural resources to define their online presence [25], [26].

Usernames as Identity Markers

Usernames are not merely identifiers; they are linguistic artifacts that encapsulate various aspects of a user's identity, such as cultural heritage, personal interests, or social affiliations [6], [27], [28]. While some recent studies have explored TikTok usernames in Asian and Western societies, African creators have received limited attention. In non-Western digital spaces like Nigeria, where cultural expression, local languages, and global trends intersect, TikTok usernames provide unique insights into how individuals shape their online identities [29]. This study contributes to the literature by focusing on Nigerian TikTok influencers and examining how they use usernames to reflect their personal, cultural, and social identities.

Nigeria is particularly relevant for this study due to its large youth population, increasing internet usage, and active presence on TikTok. Nigerian TikTok creators are not only popular within their local communities but are also gaining international recognition. They use language creatively, blend cultures, and engage with both local and global audiences. In Nigeria, usernames often incorporate local languages or Pidgin, reflecting the country's multilingual landscape [5], [10]. For example, a username like “NaijaVibes” might signal national pride, while terms such as “Oga” or “Baba” in Pidgin denote familiarity or authority within local contexts [16]. The blending of English with indigenous languages is a common feature in how people in Nigeria communicate on social media. This linguistic hybridity creates new modes of expression that resonate with local users and hold significant cultural meaning [10], [11]. These practices position usernames as cultural markers, enabling creators to assert their identities in global digital spaces.

Digital Identity Construction and Youth Culture

Digital identity construction involves crafting online personas that may align with or diverge from offline identities, shaped by factors such as authenticity, social interaction, and a sense of community belonging [13], [29]. Social media platforms enable users to shape how they are perceived by allowing them to create profiles and choose usernames that reflect a particular image

or identity [21]. In Nigeria, digital identities are influenced by both local cultural norms and global trends, with creators using usernames to signal affiliations with ethnic groups or popular culture, such as Afrobeats or Nollywood [11], [16]. Authenticity plays a significant role, as users strive to present their "real" selves in online communities, often through usernames that reflect their cultural backgrounds [5], [13]. This dynamic interplay of local and global influences highlights the complexity of digital identity within Nigeria's multicultural context.

Young people in Nigeria, who constitute a large portion of TikTok's user base, are strongly influenced by social media in their identity formation [11]. Platforms like TikTok provide opportunities to explore identities, experiment with self-presentation, and seek peer validation, although they also present challenges, such as exposure to idealized images [12], [21]. Nigerian youth often express their cultural identities through creative content and usernames, using terms that reflect ethnic heritage or national pride [16]. For example, a young creator might choose a username like "YorubaStar" to celebrate their heritage, which can foster connections with like-minded audiences [5]. This trend underscores how social media plays an essential role in helping youth understand and express their identities in a global digital space.

Despite extensive research on social media identity [7], [8] and Nigerian digital culture [5], there remains a significant gap in studies specifically examining how Nigerian TikTok creators use usernames as identity markers. Existing research often focuses on broader communication patterns or language mixing, with limited attention paid to usernames as rich cultural and linguistic artifacts [3]. This study addresses this gap by analyzing usernames from 200 top Nigerian TikTok influencers, offering new insights into digital identity construction within Nigeria's vibrant online landscape.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by an integrated theoretical framework that combines Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS) and Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA). CADS merges the quantitative precision of corpus linguistics with the qualitative depth of discourse analysis to examine patterns of language use in large datasets. It helps uncover ideological and rhetorical structures that may not be directly visible through manual analysis [15]. In this study, CADS is used to identify patterns in TikTok commentaries and captions, focusing on how certain lexical items are used repeatedly to reinforce ideas. A key concept here is self-correlation, which refers to the repetition of specific words or phrases within the same text or speech act, indicating emphasis or thematic focus. For example, if a speaker on TikTok repeatedly uses words like "freedom" or "truth," it often reflects an intentional attempt to persuade or highlight core values.

In addition, this study adopts Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) to account for the visual and auditory elements that shape meaning on TikTok. MDA allows for the examination of not only language but also how images, sounds, emojis, and text styles work together to convey messages. A crucial concept here is co-occurrence, which refers to the frequent appearance of two or more words together in the same context. This helps demonstrate how meaning is constructed through associations. For example, the repeated use of strong adjectives with modal verbs like "must act" or "brave leader" suggests an effort to mobilize or persuade viewers. By combining CADS and MDA, this framework enables the study to interpret both the linguistic and multimodal strategies used in persuasive TikTok content. It also supports the use of heatmap visualization. This

form of visualization shows the frequency of specific words or word combinations, making it easier to identify patterns that support persuasive intent.

This theoretical structure also draws on key principles of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), particularly Mair and Fairclough [30] view that language both reflects and influences social power. Although political content on TikTok may appear informal and performative, it often involves deliberate language choices aimed at shaping opinions, dividing groups, or encouraging action. Therefore, identifying recurrent patterns of co-occurrence and self-correlation is not merely a linguistic exercise but helps reveal the deeper messages and strategies used to persuade people in digital spaces.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative content analysis approach to explore how Nigerian TikTok influencers construct their digital identities through usernames. This method is well-suited for interpreting textual data to uncover patterns and meanings [17]. The focus was on identifying patterns in language use, cultural expression, and social positioning as reflected in the selected usernames. This approach enabled the systematic examination of textual data to draw inferences about identity construction, without relying on direct interaction with the creators. Content analysis was chosen because it allows researchers to interpret meaning from written or visual content within its social and cultural context. Due to logistical constraints, a survey component was not included; however, insights from existing literature on social media identity were used to infer potential motivations for username choices [18].

Population and Sample

The population of the study consists of Nigerian TikTok influencers who have gained significant visibility and followership on the platform. A sample of 200 TikTok usernames was selected based on a ranking of Nigerian creators with the highest number of followers as of April 2025. The list was compiled by searching for Nigerian creators using relevant keywords (e.g., “Naija,” “Nigerian TikTok,” “LagosVibes”) on platforms like TikTok and influencer databases such as Heepsy. This purposive sampling approach was employed to ensure that the study focused on creators who actively shape their online presence and influence a broad audience.

Research Instrument

The instrument used for data collection was a structured online search protocol based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. This protocol guided the selection of usernames from public TikTok profiles of Nigerian creators. Profiles were manually screened for relevance, ensuring that only those clearly associated with Nigerian identity and content creation were included. The PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1) illustrates this process in detail, showing how usernames were identified, screened, and selected for analysis. This systematic approach ensured consistency and transparency in data collection. All usernames were gathered from publicly available data, with no private or personal user information being accessed.

Data Collection Procedure

The criteria for selecting these influencers focused on their prominence, as indicated by their follower count, to ensure that the usernames analyzed were likely to be intentionally crafted and reflective of established online identities. This purposive sampling approach allowed for the examination of a rich dataset from creators who have a significant impact on the Nigerian digital landscape. The inclusion criteria required creators to be identifiable as Nigerian through their names, usernames, or cultural references in their profiles. The sample was designed to represent a range of linguistic backgrounds (e.g., Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, Pidgin English) and cultural references (e.g., ethnic names, national symbols), in line with purposive sampling practices that prioritize relevance and diversity [19], [20]. The dataset included details such as rank, name, username, and follower count, ensuring a robust foundation for analysis [21].

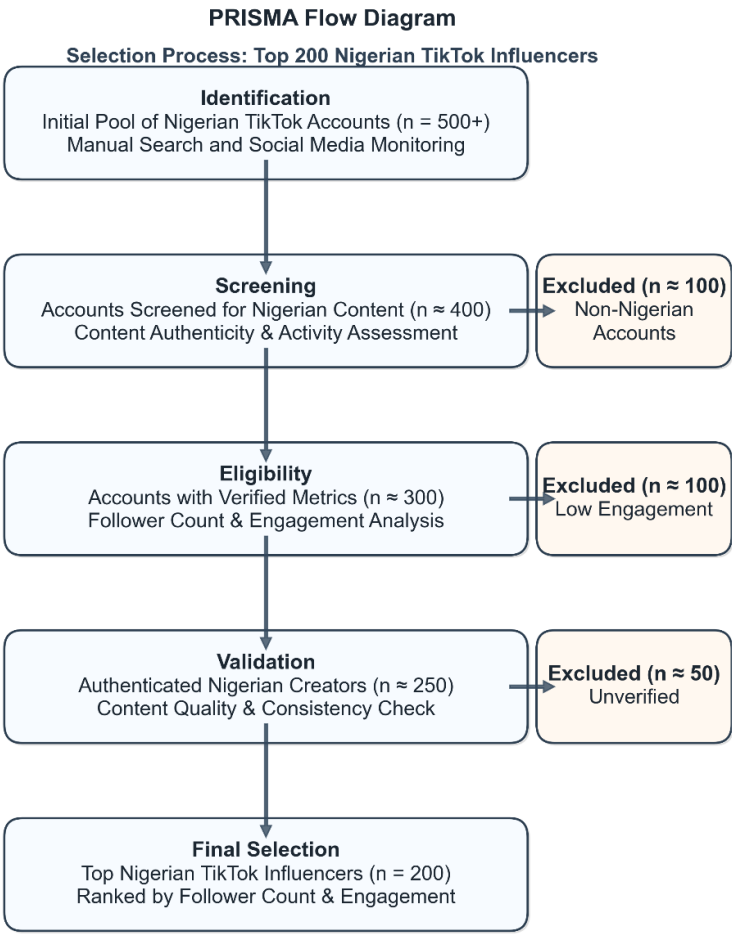

Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram showing sample selection process

From the PRISMA flow diagram above, the selection process began with the identification of an initial pool of over 500 Nigerian TikTok accounts through manual search and social media monitoring. During the screening phase, approximately 400 accounts were assessed for content authenticity and activity, with around 100 non-Nigerian accounts excluded. At the eligibility stage, 300 accounts were evaluated based on their follower count and level of engagement. Approximately 100 accounts with low engagement were removed. In the validation phase, 250 verified Nigerian creators were reviewed for the quality and consistency of their content, and 50 unverified accounts were excluded. In the end, 200 leading Nigerian TikTok influencers were selected, ranked by

follower count and engagement. Data collection took place in April 2023, following a systematic selection methodology with multiple validation stages.

Data Analysis

The study analyzed 200 usernames using qualitative content analysis, a method that helps identify patterns and themes in written data. The analysis followed a coding scheme based on key themes identified in the literature review, focusing on linguistic diversity and cultural identity markers, as discussed by Honkanen and Muller [5], Jowitt and Ogwuanyi [10], and Wilska et al. [31]. To ensure the coding scheme's applicability and robustness, a pilot study was conducted using 20 usernames. This preliminary analysis facilitated the refinement of the scheme, which led to the creation of three distinct categories for classification. These categories were informed by Cultural Linguistics, a theory that examines the connections between language, culture, and social identity [22].

The first category, Linguistic Markers, includes the use of non-Latin scripts, special characters, emojis, or symbols within usernames. This demonstrates how users employ diverse linguistic elements to construct their online identities. The second category, Cultural Markers, encompasses references to Nigerian names, cultural figures, or national symbols, reflecting users' cultural affiliations and heritage. The third category, Social Markers, captures the use of authenticity conventions (e.g., "official" or "real") or entertainment-oriented and trendy nicknames, which signify social roles or interests within digital communities.

To ensure the reliability of the coding process, two independent coders analyzed the usernames. Inter-rater reliability was assessed using Cohen's kappa statistic, targeting a value of 0.7 or higher to achieve substantial agreement, as recommended by Sauder and deMars [32]. This statistical measure helped quantify the level of agreement between the two coders. Discrepancies between coders were resolved through collaborative discussion to reach a consensus. Additionally, descriptive statistics, including frequency counts and percentages, were calculated to quantify the prevalence of each marker category, providing a quantitative complement to the qualitative analysis [21]. Since usernames can serve multiple purposes, the analysis allowed for classification under multiple categories, as supported by Lyhne et al. [33]. This approach enhanced the study's ability to capture the complexity of digital identity expression.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were central to the design of the study. Since TikTok usernames are publicly accessible, no consent was required for their analysis [34]. However, to protect creators' privacy, specific usernames were not linked to individual profiles in the findings, ensuring anonymity. The research was conducted with cultural sensitivity, acknowledging Nigeria's diverse ethnic and linguistic landscape and avoiding generalizations that could stereotype communities. This approach aligns with ethical guidelines for social media research, which prioritize respect for participants and their cultural contexts [26].

Limitations of Qualitative Content Analysis in this Context

Qualitative content analysis is valuable for identifying patterns and meanings in texts. However, in this study, it has some limitations, particularly due to the absence of direct user input through surveys or interviews. As a result, any interpretation of creators' motivations for choosing specific usernames is based solely on inferences derived from content analysis and existing literature. For

example, while usernames referencing Nigerian names, like @tiwasavage, may be interpreted as reflecting cultural identity and pride, or the inclusion of national symbols such as NG as patriotism, these interpretations remain speculative without direct confirmation from the creators themselves. Similarly, the inference that "authenticity conventions," such as "official" or "real," indicate a focus on personal branding to address credibility concerns is based on observed patterns and existing research on digital identity, rather than explicit statements from the creators. The absence of survey data means that the conscious intentions behind these choices cannot be definitively determined; other motivations, such as humor, irony, or simple aesthetic preference, also cannot be entirely ruled out. This inferential approach necessitates caution when generalizing the findings, as alternative interpretations are possible. Despite these constraints, the study's findings offer a clear understanding of digital identity construction within Nigeria's social media landscape, highlighting the interplay of cultural and linguistic elements in online spaces.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study analyzed usernames from a list of 200 top Nigerian TikTok influencers. These usernames were manually compiled in April 2025 to address three research objectives: identifying linguistic and cultural elements, analyzing usernames as identity markers, and exploring influencing factors. The qualitative content analysis revealed distinct patterns in username construction, reflecting Nigeria's rich linguistic and cultural diversity. Due to the absence of survey data, factors influencing username selection were inferred from content analysis and existing literature.

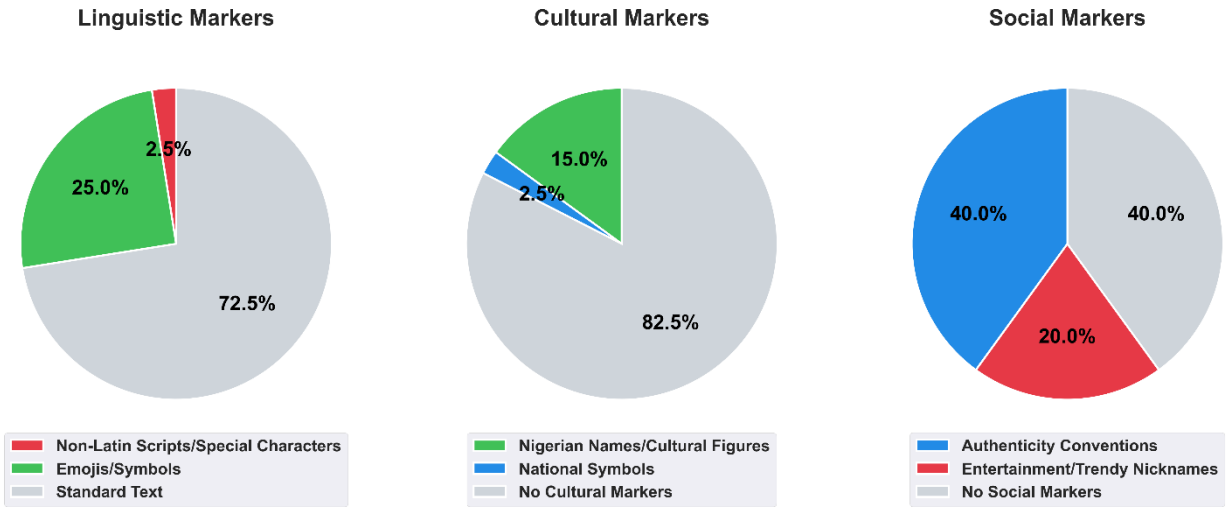

Figure 2. Three categories informed by Cultural Linguistics

Linguistic Markers

The analysis identified linguistic creativity in username construction, although most usernames were based in English or derived from English forms. Table 1 summarizes the frequency of linguistic markers observed in the dataset.

Table 1. Frequency of Linguistic Markers in Usernames

Subcategory	Frequency	Percentage	Examples
Non-Latin Scripts/Special Characters	5	2.5%	@kiss_aka_me, @phunglai2222
Emojis/Symbols	50	25%	@symply_tacha NGGH, @abikearabmoney

Non-Latin Scripts/Special Characters

Five usernames (2.5%) incorporated non-Latin scripts or stylized text, such as @kiss_aka_me (using Cyrillic characters) and @phunglai2222 (featuring decorative Unicode). These choices reflect linguistic creativity, potentially aimed at standing out in a crowded digital space. This finding aligns with previous research on online self-presentation, where users employ unique typographical elements to enhance visibility and express individuality in digital environments [3]. The use of such scripts can be viewed as a form of digital literacy, leveraging platform features to create distinctive identifiers that capture attention beyond standard alphabetic conventions.

Emojis/Symbols

Fifty usernames (25%) included emojis or symbols, such as @symply_tacha NGGH (featuring a trident and national flags) and @abikearabmoney (with a money bag emoji). Emojis enhance visual appeal and emotional expression, aligning with global TikTok trends. The frequent use of emojis underscores their function as a universal visual language that transcends linguistic barriers, as noted by Honkanen and Müller [5] in their study on Nigerian online communication. These symbols not only express aspects of the user's personality but also add deeper layers of meaning, often tied to lifestyle, aspirations, or cultural identity, thus making usernames more expressive and appealing to a global audience.

Cultural Markers

Cultural markers were significant, with usernames referencing Nigerian names, cultural figures, or national symbols, emphasizing the importance of heritage in digital identity. Table 2 presents these findings.

Table 2. Frequency of Cultural Markers in Usernames

Subcategory	Frequency	Percentage	Examples
Nigerian Names/Cultural Figures	30	15%	@tiwasavage, @funkeakindele
National Symbols	5	2.5%	@mr.aphricaNG, @nengiofficial_NG

Nigerian Names/Cultural Figures

Thirty usernames (15%) directly referenced Nigerian names or cultural icons, such as @tiwasavage (Tiwa Savage, musician) and @funkeakindele (Funke Akindele, actress). These usernames anchor creators in Nigeria's cultural landscape, reinforcing their public personas [6]. This practice clearly reflects the tenets of Cultural Linguistics, which posits that language and culture are deeply interconnected, shaping how individuals perceive themselves and express their identities [22]. By

incorporating renowned figures or traditional names, creators not only identify themselves but also actively perform their cultural allegiance and connect with others who share that background. This aligns with Wang and Bhatt [7] view that naming on social media is integral to building one's identity, with usernames serving as powerful expressions of cultural connection and belonging.

National Symbols

Five usernames (2.5%) included national symbols, such as the Nigerian flag emoji in @mr.aphricaNG and @nengiofficial_NG. This signifies patriotism and national pride [2]. The deliberate inclusion of national symbols reflects a conscious effort to display national identity and pride on a global platform. This aligns with the findings of Honkanen and Müller [5], who observed the use of nationalistic emojis in Nigerian online communication to signify belonging and collective identity. Such practices help make Nigerian culture more visible worldwide by using digital platforms to highlight and celebrate national identity. They are often connected to popular cultural exports like Afrobeats and Nollywood, as noted by Jowitt and Ugwuanyi [10].

Social Markers

Social markers reflect engagement with social media conventions and trends, emphasizing creators' efforts to establish authenticity and connect with their audiences. Table 3 summarizes these findings.

Table 3. Frequency of Social Markers in Usernames

Subcategory	Frequency	Percentage	Examples
Authenticity Conventions	80	40%	@official_regina, @realpraisegeorge
Entertainment/Trendy Nicknames	40	20%	@ggbdancecrew, @xploit_comedy

Authenticity Conventions

Eighty usernames (40%) included terms like "official" or "real" to establish credibility, such as @official_regina and @realpraisegeorge. These conventions address concerns about impersonation, a common issue in digital spaces. This high percentage reflects a strong emphasis on establishing trust and credibility online, which is a critical aspect of digital identity construction, as discussed by Robles-Carrillo [13]. In an online space where impersonation is prevalent, these naming patterns help creators signal to their audience that their accounts are authentic. This supports the concept of presenting an "authentic self," as discussed by Kondakciu et al. [6]. For influencers, being perceived as genuine is particularly important, as their identity and success often depend on the level of trust their followers place in them.

Entertainment/Trendy Nicknames

Forty usernames (20%) reflected entertainment or trendy themes, such as @ggbdancecrew (dance crew) and @xploit_comedy (comedy), aligning with creators' content niches and youth culture. These usernames are strategically chosen to reflect the creator's content focus and to connect them with their target audience. This practice aligns with the concept of "net tags" [11], where online names are crafted to connect with specific trends or digital communities. Many of these nicknames are part of a larger effort to shape how the creator is perceived online. They help attract and engage

specific groups of followers, especially younger audiences, by clearly indicating the type of content the creator shares. As Bhandari and Bimo [35] explain, this process is integral to how people build their online identities in response to the dynamics of social media platforms.

Usernames as Identity Markers

Usernames served as identity markers by reflecting cultural heritage, linguistic creativity, and social affiliations. Cultural references, such as @tiwasavage and @funkeakindele, functioned as digital assertions of Nigerian identity, connecting with audiences familiar with these cultural symbols. National symbols, like the Nigerian flag emoji in @mr.aphricaNG, expressed pride and were often associated with content celebrating Nigerian culture, such as Afrobeats or Nollywood-inspired videos [10]. These findings highlight the active "identity performance" [16] occurring through username selection, as creators deliberately shape how they are perceived online to reflect their cultural roots. This resonates with Gündüz's [12] assertion that social media plays a crucial role in identity construction. In terms of language use, emojis and special characters, as seen in @symply_tacha NGGH, added a unique visual style to the usernames, helping to connect local identity with global online trends. Social markers, such as “official” in @official_regina or content descriptors like @xploit_comedy, signified authenticity and connected creators to specific communities. Consequently, this reflects strategic branding.

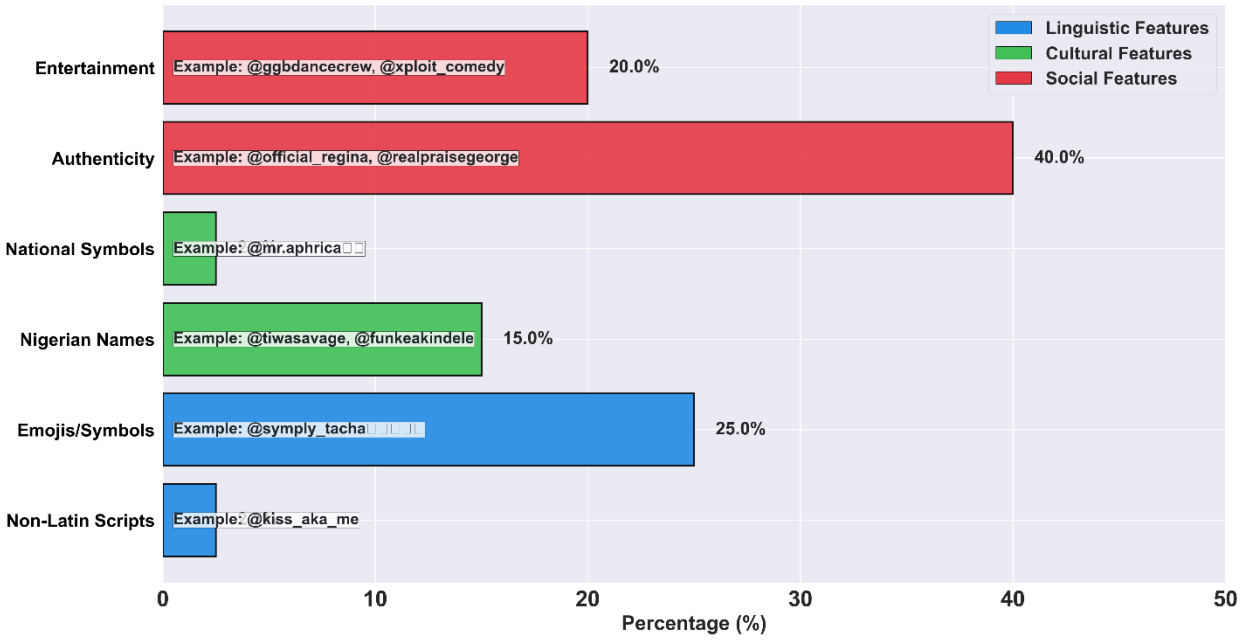

Figure 3. Detailed Analysis of Username Features

Factors Influencing Username Selection

Since no survey data were collected, the reasons behind username choices were inferred from content analysis and existing research. Cultural references, found in 15% of the usernames, suggest that cultural pride is a primary motivator. This is evident from creators who use names like @tiwasavage to celebrate their heritage. This inferred motivation aligns with research emphasizing the role of cultural identity in self-expression on social media, particularly in diverse contexts like Nigeria, where linguistic and ethnic heritage are significant markers of belonging [16], [36]. The

deliberate inclusion of culturally specific names or figures can be seen as a way to reinforce local connections and build a community around shared cultural values. Authenticity conventions (40%) indicate a focus on personal branding, addressing credibility concerns in digital spaces. Trendy nicknames (20%) reflect social connection, as creators like @ggbdancecrew aim to engage youth audiences [35]. These inferences highlight the multifaceted nature of username construction, balancing cultural, personal, and social goals.

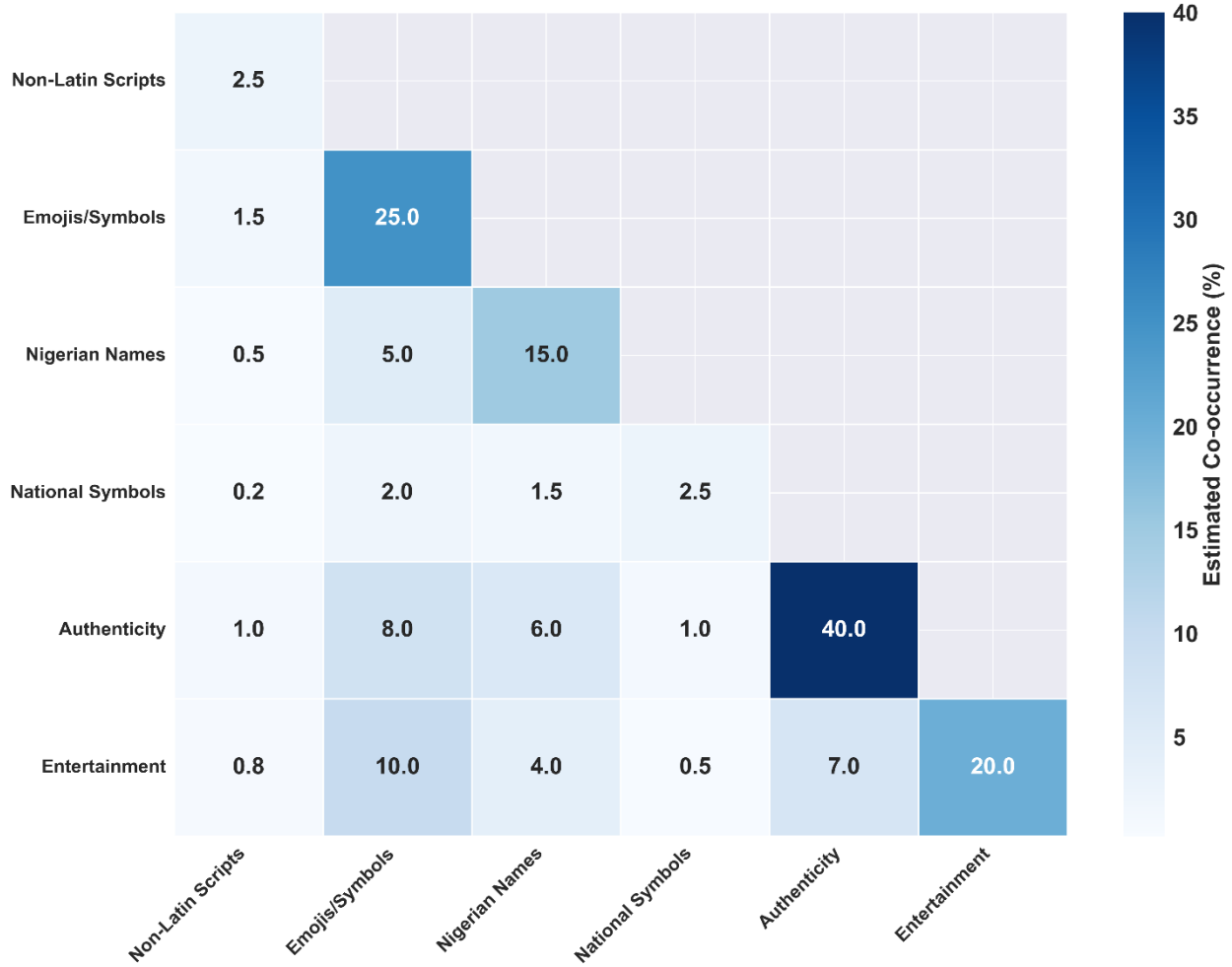

Figure 4. Patterns in Nigerian TikTok Influencer Profiles

The heatmap above reveals intriguing patterns in Nigerian TikTok influencer profiles, with authenticity markers showing the strongest internal consistency at 40%. This suggests that influencers prioritize authentic self-presentation through multiple reinforcing elements. Emoji usage demonstrates significant self-correlation (25%), underscoring their role as a visual communication tool among Nigerian creators. Entertainment content shows moderate internal consistency (20%), while Nigerian names exhibit notable co-presence patterns (15%), indicating that cultural identification remains central to online identity formation.

Interestingly, emojis frequently appear alongside both entertainment content (10%) and authenticity markers (8%), suggesting that these visual symbols serve dual purposes in conveying personality and enhancing engagement. The moderate co-occurrence between Nigerian names and authenticity markers (6%) highlights how cultural identifiers contribute to perceived genuineness. These relationships demonstrate how Nigerian digital creators skillfully blend cultural specificity

with global social media conventions, crafting distinctive online personas that resonate with their audiences.

Discussion

The analysis of 200 usernames from top Nigerian TikTok influencers, compiled in April 2025, reveals distinct patterns in how users construct their digital identities. About 15% of usernames include Nigerian names or cultural figures, such as @tiwasavage and @funkeakindele, indicating a strong link to cultural heritage. Approximately 2.5% of usernames feature national symbols like the Nigerian flag emoji (e.g., @mr.aphricaNG), which express patriotism. While most usernames are English-based, a few (2.5%) incorporate non-Latin scripts or special characters (e.g., @kiss_aka_me, @phunglai2222), and 25% use emojis or symbols (e.g., @symply_tacha 🔱NGGH) to add visual and emotional meaning. Socially, 40% of usernames include authenticity markers like "official" or "real" (e.g., @official_regina, @realpraisegeorge) to convey credibility, while 20% use entertainment or trendy nicknames (e.g., @ggbdancecrew, @xploit_comedy), connecting with youth culture and content themes. These patterns illustrate the different strategies influencers employ to craft their online identities.

These findings collectively provide a comprehensive picture of digital identity construction among Nigerian TikTok creators. They demonstrate how local cultural traditions are blended with global online trends. The prominence of cultural markers, particularly Nigerian names and national symbols, supports existing theories on the enduring importance of heritage in shaping how individuals present themselves online [10], [11]. This suggests that even while using a global platform, Nigerian creators actively leverage their usernames to assert and celebrate their unique cultural identities, build a sense of community, and express cultural pride. This aligns with Sharifian's Cultural Linguistics, which emphasizes the close connection between language and culture in shaping cognition and communication [37]. These digital identifiers are deeply rooted in shared cultural ways of thinking and expressing identity.

Furthermore, the findings align with the principles of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), particularly Mair and Fairclough [30] view that language reflects and influences social power. The intentional use of cultural markers in usernames can be seen as a strategic linguistic choice, a form of digital activism, to promote Nigerian culture and assert a distinct identity within a global digital space. In addition, the creative ways users design their usernames through emojis, special symbols, and non-Latin scripts demonstrate how they navigate the platform's features to stand out and express individuality, enhancing their visual distinctiveness. This reflects other studies on media aesthetics and linguistic hybridity in multicultural online environments [2], [9], [14]. The integration of these elements allows creators to go beyond conventional textual communication, adding layers of meaning that are both culturally significant and universally engaging.

The frequent use of authenticity conventions, such as "official" or "real," reflects a pragmatic response to the challenges of digital credibility and impersonation, which are common across social media platforms [6]. It highlights creators' understanding of the importance of appearing trustworthy and legitimate, especially for public figures and influencers who need to maintain their audience's confidence. At the same time, many creators choose fun or trendy usernames that reflect their content style. These names make it easier for young users to find and connect with them, aligning with how TikTok's algorithm promotes popular and engaging content [35]. These nicknames serve as direct signals of content focus and personal style. They help creators

connect with their audiences and support the performative aspects of identity in digital spaces [16]. In essence, the findings suggest that Nigerian TikTok creators employ a multi-layered approach to username construction. They balance the need to represent their cultural roots with the strategic demands of digital self-presentation and audience engagement. This careful blend contributes significantly to understanding digital identity, particularly from a non-Western perspective, and shows how cultural expression can adapt in response to new digital environments.

However, there are several limitations to consider. This study only analyzed usernames and relied on qualitative content analysis, inferring motivations without direct user input. Therefore, interpretations such as @tiwasavage reflecting cultural identity or @xploit_comedy indicating entertainment affiliations remain speculative. For instance, national symbols like NG might stand for patriotism, humor, or other unverified intentions. This inferential approach necessitates caution when generalizing findings, as alternative interpretations are possible. Nevertheless, the study's findings offer valuable insight into digital identity construction within Nigeria's social media landscape, highlighting the interplay of cultural and linguistic elements in online spaces.

This research offers several key implications for future studies and for social media platforms themselves. Future research could directly engage with creators through interviews or surveys to gain deeper insights into their motivations for choosing usernames, thus validating the inferences made in this study. Expanding the sample to include a broader range of influencers, beyond just the top-ranked, could uncover more diverse patterns of identity expression. Additionally, exploring platforms like Instagram or X could reveal how digital identity varies across different platforms, while comparisons with other African countries could enhance our understanding of digital identity across diverse contexts. From a theoretical perspective, this study enriches our knowledge of how language, culture, and technology intersect in online spaces where multiple cultures converge. Specifically, it demonstrates how Cultural Linguistics helps us understand that usernames are not random choices but are deeply shaped by a creator's cultural background and their intentions to communicate their identity online. From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest that social media platforms could develop features that better support multilingual and multicultural expression, fostering inclusivity and cultural preservation. These avenues highlight the potential for this study to inform both academic research and platform design in the evolving digital landscape. This framework helps explain why Nigerian names and symbols are so significant in these digital identifiers, reflecting shared cultural ways of thinking and expressing identity.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into digital identity formation, particularly in non-Western contexts, by examining the use of linguistic, cultural, and social markers in the usernames of Nigerian TikTok creators. The analysis revealed that linguistic creativity, such as the use of emojis and non-Latin scripts, reflects users' creative expression, while cultural markers, including Nigerian names and national symbols, highlight strong ties to cultural heritage. Social markers, like authenticity conventions and trendy nicknames, emphasize personal branding and connection to entertainment and social trends. These patterns illustrate the multifaceted nature of digital identity, suggesting that Nigerian creators skillfully blend local traditions with global online trends when constructing their online personas. The study contributes to the theoretical

understanding of how language, culture, and technology interact in digital spaces, particularly through the lens of Cultural Linguistics, which shows that usernames are not arbitrary but are deeply shaped by a creator's cultural background. Practically, the study suggests that social media platforms could foster inclusivity and cultural preservation by supporting multilingual and multicultural expression. Future research could validate these findings through primary data collection methods such as interviews or surveys and expand the sample to include less prominent creators or explore other platforms like Instagram or X. Comparative studies across African countries or cultural contexts could further enhance our understanding of digital identity in diverse settings. Overall, this study emphasizes that usernames on TikTok are meaningful expressions of cultural, linguistic, and social identity, and it lays a foundation for future research on how creators use language and culture to shape their online personas in an interconnected digital world.

LIMITATIONS

The primary limitation of this study is the absence of survey or interview data, which means that the motivations behind TikTok creators' username choices are inferred through content analysis and existing literature rather than direct input from the creators themselves. While this approach provides valuable insights into the patterns of cultural, linguistic, and social markers within usernames, it also means that any interpretations regarding the creators' intentions such as the significance of Nigerian names, cultural figures, or national symbols remain speculative. For instance, the inclusion of emojis, symbols, or authenticity markers may signal different motivations like cultural pride, humor, or a focus on personal branding, but these can only be inferred rather than definitively confirmed. Furthermore, the analysis focused solely on the top 200 Nigerian TikTok influencers, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to the broader TikTok community, particularly those from less prominent or niche segments. Future research should consider incorporating primary data from creators, such as interviews or surveys, to validate the findings and explore a wider range of TikTok users to better understand the diversity of identity expression across various subcultures and content niches.

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M.S.Y. and M.M. worked closely together throughout the development of this manuscript. M.S.Y. took the lead in shaping the research idea, developing the objectives, and designing the methodology. He also handled most of the data analysis and interpretation. M.M. played a key role in reviewing related literature, organizing the data collection process, and drafting the initial parts of the manuscript. Both authors contributed to refining the structure and content of the paper through multiple revisions. They discussed every stage of the work together, made joint decisions where needed, and approved the final version of the manuscript before submission.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declare no conflict of interest.

DECLARATION OF USE OF AI IN SCIENTIFIC WRITING

The author declares that ChatGPT 5 Plus was used to assist in proofreading and refining the language of the manuscript, specifically for improving clarity, readability, and academic tone. However, no generative AI tools were used in the writing, editing, data analysis, or graphic design processes of this manuscript. All content was independently developed by the authors, who assume full responsibility for the originality, accuracy, and integrity of the work.

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