Impact of digital media on language revitalization: the case of *BBC News Igbo*

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The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has identified the Igbo language as critically threatened. The language has low linguistic and social profiles, which make it unappealing to producers and advertisers and limit its access to the mass media. Given the growing effectiveness of digital media to revitalize threatened languages, this research examines the impact a new media platform might have on Igbo language revitalization. The study adopts a mixed methods approach to specifically explore the extent to which *BBC News Igbo* has enriched the prestige of the Igbo language. These findings indicated that the medium has significantly enhanced the linguistic and social values of the language through restoration of pride, digitization, revival of interest, global access and visibility, attitudinal shift, domain expansion, and social media presence. The cumulative impact of the findings on the Igbo language is confidence in its greater use, which is renowned for abetting the revitalization of endangered languages.

Introduction

The Igbo language is used by the Igbo people, who are found mainly in the southeast of Nigeria. Although the country is highly ethnically diverse with languages numbering up to 470, Igbo is one of the three most widely used languages. The language is therefore notable, with around 25 million native speakers (Uwechia, 2016). Per Ugwuona (2015), around 25–40 million people speak the language in Nigeria, and about 150 million people use it worldwide. According to Ugwuona (2015), the Igbo language is categorized among the new Benue-Congo range of languages; it is thus classified in the *Kwa* family, notably Idoma, Yoruba, Edo, Akan, Nupe-Ebira, Gbe, and Igala.

Beyond Imo, Abia, Enugu, Anambra, and Ebonyi, the five southeast states where the Igbo language is predominantly used, Nnabuihe and Ikwubuzo (2006, see also Onuzulike, 2014) write that the Igbo are also found in some south–south states, such as Rivers, Akwa Ibom, Edo, Bayelsa, Delta, and Cross River. The Igbo, writes Oji (2014), are also found in Benue State, and per Okoro (2021), Igbo people have an ancestral base in Kogi State. Kogi and Benue are in the north-central zone. According to a UNHCR report, Igbo is a minority language in Equatorial Guinea (Nwammuo and Salawu, 2018).

Igbo people are famous for being itinerant; they take extreme delight in traveling, so they are found across the length and breadth of most Nigerian cities and towns. Owing to their liberal worldview, Igbo people travel to every part of the world primarily for economic interests (Agozino and Anyanike, 2007). Underscoring this, Nwammuo and Salawu (2019), who quoted the editor of *BBC News Igbo*, Adline Okere, write that "… the Igbo man is popular for his spirit

of entrepreneurship as they are scattered across borders" (p. 93). All this makes the prospect of losing the Igbo language disturbing. Sadly, the Igbo language is endangered today, and loss of prestige has been identified as a leading cause of this (Igboanusi, 2006). The language has a negligible presence in the mass media because it is unappealing to its speakers, producers, and advertisers. This has further denied it the opportunity to confer prestige. This study explores how the steady digital presence *BBC News Igbo* now offers in the Igbo language has enhanced its prestige and the impact of this on the overall health of the language.

The report by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in late 2006 that the Igbo language could be extinct by 2050 if its threat were not checked (Asonye, 2013; Ani, 2012) has heightened research into Igbo language endangerment (see Adegbija, 1998; Igboanusi, 2006; Kuju, 1999; Ohiri-Aniche, 1997). However, the mass media can help to revitalize endangered languages through diverse means (see for instance, Ayenbi, 2014; Ekwueme, 2011; Igbokwe, 2013; Moriarty, 2009; Moring and Husband, 2007; Vulchanova et al., 2017); they have not checked the decline of the Igbo language because of some unfavorable considerations (see Salawu, 2006; Garba, 2015; Oso, 2006; Igboanusi, 2006).

Interestingly, recent studies have established that digital media is effective in revitalizing endangered languages (see Billock, 2015; Cassels, 2019; Huaman and Stokes, 2011; Kelly-Holmes and Atkinson, 2017; Leslie, 2016; Outakoski et al., 2018; Stern, 2018; Williams, 2007). Curiously, these studies mostly concern minority languages in the Global North, which substantiates Salawu's (2015) assertion that there remains a palpable dearth of investigation into the impact digital technologies have on African languages. This study thus examines how *BBC News Igbo,* a digital media organization, has enhanced the prestige of the Igbo language. In other words, to what degree has *BBC News Igbo* enhanced the linguistic and social values of the Igbo language? This is significant because although the mass media can confer prestige on a minority language, the Igbo language has lost the print media domain (Igboanusi, 2006) and is rarely used in the broadcast media (Garba, 2015).

Review of related literature

Understanding *BBC News Igbo*

BBC News Igbo is a digital news medium owned by the BBC World Service. It was established in 2018. While it is not a language revitalization program, per se, the editorial lead of *BBC News Igbo*, Peter Okwoche, told the *Premium Times* newspaper that his organization aims to help in reversing the Igbo language shift: "We are trying to attract a young audience… So, if they visit our website and say Oh! The BBC has an Igbo website; maybe it is cool to speak Igbo" (Ibekwe, 2018). The medium also aims to produce programs in Igbo for Igbo people worldwide; the programs are published via two social media outlets: Facebook and Instagram. The content of *BBC News Igbo* is also available on its website, https://www.bbc.com/igbo. The content typically comes in four main categories: question, written, pre-recorded video, and live video.

A study shows that some of the collateral objectives of the news media are already being accomplished. Nwammuo and Salawu (2019), for instance, have found that *BBC News Igbo* could be effective in

making the Igbo language popular once more, in promoting aspects of Igbo culture, and in encouraging people to use the language more. They conclude that the news medium might help to "strengthen the language in the long run" (p. 96). The study was conducted about 7 months after *BBC News Igbo* was established, hence its focus on *potential.* This study comes 2 years after the establishment of the organization, so it focuses more on actual deliverables.

Language endangerment and revitalization

Languages go through shifts. They suffer poor vitality, poor attitude, and even death. Languages that have undergone significant shifts, low vitality, or negative attitudes are endangered, and if the factors that endanger a language are not reversed, the language could die. Per UNESCO (2003), language loss happens when a language is no longer in use, when it is used in inadequate communicative spaces, and when its users fail to transmit it intergenerationally. Despite being the most linguistically diverse continent, Africa accounts for 60% of languages under threat (wa Thiong'o, 2009). Fortunately, an endangered language can be maintained, revitalized, or revived.

A language facing opposition from a dominant language can be strengthened through certain language activities, known as language maintenance. Language maintenance, therefore, is a pushback mechanism against a dominant language. On the other hand, language revitalization is defined as "counter-balancing the factors that cause language shift" (Maseko and Moyo, 2013, p. 250). Lastly, language revival refers to efforts to restore an extinct language; it is a taxing procedure primarily undertaken by experts. Therefore, endangered languages can be revitalized, and even extinct languages can be revived.

Igbo language endangerment and its causes

In late 2006, UNESCO had reported that the Igbo language could go extinct in 50 years if its mitigating factors were not reversed (see Asonye, 2013; Ani, 2012). Earlier, Igboanusi (2006) had reviewed three language situations, viz., Crystal's (2000), Kincade's (1991), and Wurm's (2003), to ascertain the true state of Igbo language endangerment. The study found the Igbo language to be "viable," "endangered," and "potentially endangered" in Kincade's, Crystal's, and Wurm's categories, respectively. The researcher would, therefore, conclude that the "very life" (p. 446) of the language had not been threatened. It is the language's prestige and functional roles that were eroded. This is consistent with the UNESCO prediction. It suggests that though the Igbo language is endangered, it has not yet been threatened to the point of death. What UNESCO did was to predict when "endangerment" can become "extinction." Unsurprisingly, Ugwuona's (2015) study, which concludes that the Igbo language is "currently under severe threat of extinction," seems to be a direct confirmation of the UNESCO prediction (p. 212).

The endangerment of the Igbo language was not coincidental. Colonialism, for instance, was the first main affront on the culture of the Igbo, because with colonialism came new religious, educational, commercial, political, and communication systems. When, therefore, the missionaries, along with colonialists, came up with the print media

to effectively share meaning with Africans and have Africans share meaning effectively with one another, the unintended (or maybe even intended) consequence was erosion of the pre-colonial Igbo communication systems that had been in use (Asakitikpi and Akujobi, 2009).

Another factor that endangered the Igbo language was the loss of the Nigerian Civil War by the Igbo. Losing the war stunted the growth of the Igbo language beyond its main geographical base. It "also has an obvious psychological impact on many first language users of the language who have continued to associate the language with low status" (Igboanusi, 2006, p. 445). Intra- and international migration are other factors endangering the Igbo language. Although Igbo people have been known to travel far and near (Nwammuo and Salawu, 2019), that penchant was further heightened by the many economic marginalizations they faced during and after the war. They emigrated in their numbers all over the world to search for economic opportunities (Agozino and Anyanike, 2007). As part of efforts to survive in their new countries, Igbo migrants would embrace the languages of their hosts, resulting in reduced use of the Igbo language.

The Igbo language also suffered from the orthography dispute that ensued between the Roman Catholic Mission (RCM) and the Church Missionary Society (CMS). The dispute had lingered for about 32 years before it was resolved through the introduction of the compromise Onwu orthography. Furthermore, there were equally protracted issues around the standardization of Igbo dialects. Although the Onwu Committee had recommended the use of the Standard Igbo, it seems the RCM had held on to its Onitsha, or Onicha, Igbo. Similarly, owing to over a century of existence, the Isuama Igbo/Union Igbo had also endured. Ida Ward, a British linguist, had also introduced the Central Igbo in 1941. These issues underscore Crystal's (2000) submission that the adoption of a single dialect in a multi-dialect community can sometimes be pyrrhic: "Ironically, the very process of selection can be a factor leading to the loss of the diversity it [introduction of literacy] was designed to safeguard" (p. 140).

Now, the effect of these causes, whether it is colonialism, loss of the civil war, or dialect dispute, is the gradual devaluation of the Igbo language, which decreased its use significantly and eventually endangered it.

Role of the mass media and digital media in language revitalization

The mass media play crucial roles in the maintenance, revitalization, and revival of endangered languages by elevating social status (Kperogi, 2006), preserving linguistic values (Dega, 2015), and expanding roles and vocabularies (Garba, 2015). The media also save endangered languages from dying prematurely (Salawu, 2006; Ohiri-Aniche, 1997), provide them with language input (Sallabank, 2010), give them visibility and expand their domains (Cormack, 2004), and help them to grow and develop (Prah, cited in Garba, 2015).

Despite these benefits, Igbo speakers' apathy leads them to disregard texts created in their language (Salawu, 2006). "One consequence of the preference for English as a media language by Igbo MT [mother tongue] speakers is the fact that… Igbo has virtually no newspaper or magazine published in the language" (Igboanusi, 2006, p. 448).

The situation is no different from that of broadcast media, in which the majority of FM stations and privately owned television stations primarily use the English language (Salawu, 2006). In fact, as Garba (2015) notes, no broadcast station in Nigeria uses only Igbo. The difference between the print media and the broadcast media in terms of Igbo language use is that while no print medium uses only Igbo language, or even a mixture of the language and another one, the broadcast stations allocate grossly insufficient airtime to Igbo language programs (Akanbi and Aladesanmi, 2014; Garba, 2015).

Conversely, the digital media holds great promise for the Igbo language. Crystal, cited in Cunliffe (2007), postulates that an endangered language whose speakers make use of electronic technology will progress. While "electronic technology" encompasses a variety of media, contemporary Internet-based media play a crucial role in sustaining minority languages. Cunliffe (2007), quoting UNESCO, notes the benefits of digital media over traditional media in content production: more minority-language content will be created online than in traditional media. Virtual social networks, therefore, have become crucial in maintaining endangered languages (Sallabank, 2010).

The social media platforms on which *BBC News Igbo* publishes its stories have been found to provide thriving spaces for endangered languages. It does this by ensuring that language communities disintegrated by migration stay connected and maintain their linguistic identities (see Abu-Irmies and Al-Khanji, 2019; Cunliffe, 2007; Belmar Viernes, 2020). Social media also holds massive appeal for youth, who represent an indispensable demography in language revitalization (Belmar and Glass, 2019; Emmanouilidou, 2014; Riagáin et al., 2008). The other ways social media strengthens endangered languages include the provision of a framework for experimenting with new registers, increasing knowledge of language diversity, boosting speakers' confidence in using their language outside their immediate milieu, and conferring a positive image on minority languages (Belmar Viernes, 2020).

There are many other ways in which digital media can foster maintenance and revitalization of threatened languages (Austin and Sallabank, 2011; Austin, 2013; Garba, 2015; Jones, 2013). From the foregoing, one can safely submit that the digital media has enormous potential to maintain, revitalize, and revive endangered languages. However, minority language researchers have not utilized its potential enough (Buszard-Welcher, 2001; Cunliffe et al., 2013; Crystal, 2000; Welcher, 2012), especially in Africa (Salawu, 2015).

Theoretical framework

In a 2000 book entitled *Language Death*, David Crystal espouses a theory of language revitalization, and among its postulates is, "An endangered language will progress if its speakers increase their prestige within the dominant community" (p. 130). According to Crystal, this has to do with public profile and visibility. It is about making the presence of a language felt. It entails exploring the opportunities inherent in the media to publicize a language. These opportunities could come from newspaper stories and radio and television programs created in the minority language. If sustained, these media texts would enhance the visibility and public profile of a minority language whose prestige has been rarefied by a dominant language.

Crystal also theorizes, "An endangered language will progress if its speakers can make use of electronic technology" (p. 141). He concedes that this is hypothetical, arguing that access to information technology is still not common among many endangered languages. For a minority language that has been written down, however, access to electronic technologies offers many opportunities to develop. For instance, access to the Internet, which is far easier and cheaper than access to the mass media, can raise a language's social and linguistic profile. Another benefit for speakers of an endangered language using the Internet is borderless visibility and access, ensuring the language will be available to members of the community separated by migration.

Aikhenvald (2002) has, however, critiqued Crystal's argument that electronic technologies can be beneficial to endangered languages as "hard to accept" (p. 444). For Aikhenvald, a language community that has access to the Internet will inevitably be exposed to extensive globalization, which could be detrimental to its language. Nevertheless, Crystal has identified the steady growth of localization—"the adaptation of a product to suit a target language and culture" (p. 143)—as crucial in checking the adverse impact of globalization and internationalization on minority languages. He, therefore, argues strongly that electronic technologies, although not yet fully utilized in language revitalization projects, have appreciable potential to help a language in decline.

Methodology

The study explores the status-conferral impact of digital media on the revitalization of the Igbo language. Therefore, the researcher sought to ascertain the extent to which *BBC News Igbo* has enhanced the prestige of the Igbo language among its audience. The mixed methods approach, also known as triangulation, was adopted for the study. Per Bryman and Bell (2003), the mixed methods research approach involves using more than one method or data source to study a social phenomenon. The methods used were a web survey and a semi-structured interview.

The population of the web survey, roughly 71,164, was all the *BBC News Igbo* users who had commented on its stories published in August 2020. At the time, the medium was 2 years old. To draw the sample, the researcher selected the story with the highest number of comments from each of the broad genres of *BBC News Igbo* stories, viz., pictorial question, written, pre-recorded video, and live video. The total number of commenters across the four sampled stories was 23,632, but only the first 500 commenters from each story were selected for analysis. However, because the story that had the highest comments in each of the pictorial question and written story genres had only 455 and 177 comments and meta-comments, respectively, the total number of sampled commenters was 1,632. Furthermore, 104 users (24 for the written story and 80 for the pictorial question) were invalidated because they were second-time commenters on one story, or their comments were made by *BBC News Igbo*. In the end, the total number of respondents was 1,528. After contacting, soliciting, and obtaining the respondents' agreement through their respective Facebook Messenger accounts, the web link to the questionnaire was sent to them. Finally, 125 participants completed and returned their questionnaires.

All *BBC News Igbo* presenters/producers and all Igbo language enthusiasts who actively promoted Igbo on the Internet formed the population of the semi-structured interview. The six purposively sampled participants, three from each population set, were asked to express their opinions on how *BBC News Igbo* could help to revitalize the Igbo language. All interviews were conducted via mobile telephone because the target population was dispersed. Before data collection, institutional review board approval (NWU-00642-21-A7) was obtained from the North-West University's (Mahikeng, South Africa) Basic and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee.

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze data collected from the questionnaire, and thematic analysis was used to analyze data gathered from the semi-structured interview. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), the thematic analysis method usually involves the identification, analysis, and reporting of the patterns or themes in a data set. Although the stories of *BBC News Igbo* are primarily published on Instagram and Facebook, only stories published on Facebook were sampled for this study, as, according to Emmanouilidou (2014), Facebook is the social media platform most trafficked and most popular in the world; it is, for instance, used by one in ten people (Huaman and Stokes, 2011).

Data presentation and analysis

This section displays the study's findings in tables and figures. The findings were first analyzed briefly but were discussed fully later on to show how they answered the research question and related to theory and literature.

Table 1 suggests that more men than women use *BBC News Igbo,* and that most of the respondents are still in their active years.

Figure 1 shows that the respondents cut across three continents, which attests to the global nature of the digital media.

Table 2 indicates that the respondents have their negative and indifferent attitudes to the Igbo language changed to positive. Their notion of the language as difficult gave way to the courage to use it. Furthermore, their misimpression of the language as one for only the aged as well as fit for select domains changed to the understanding that the youth used the language and that it could be used in domains

TABLE 1 Respondents' sex and age.

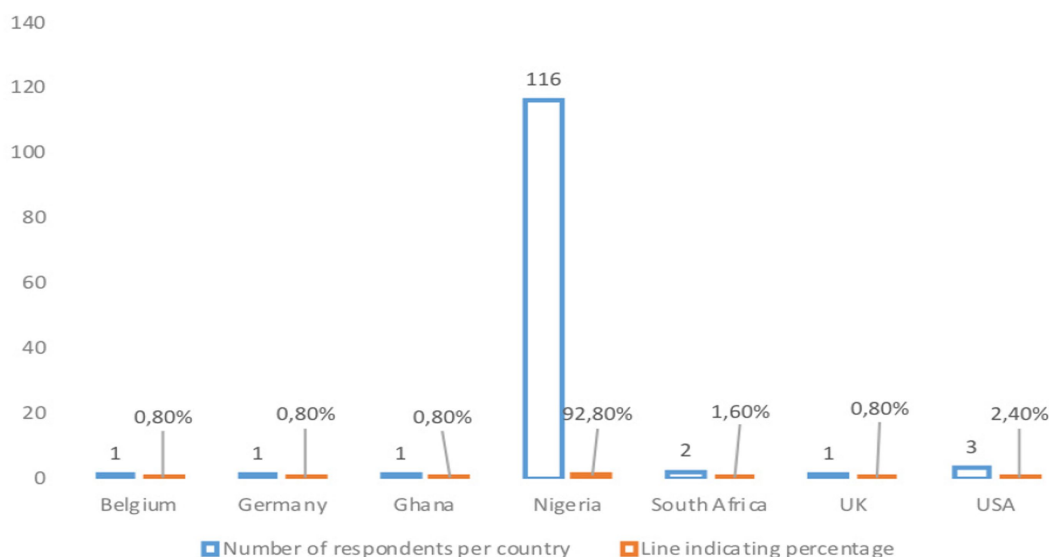|	No.	(%)
Sex		
Male	79	63.2
Female	44	35.2
Prefer not to say	2	1.6
Total	125	100
Age		
13–25	38	30.4
26–38	54	43.2
39–51	29	23.2
52–64	3	2.4
65 years or older	1	0.8
Total	125	100

FIGURE 1
Survey respondents' countries of residence.

they hitherto shied away from. Although some respondents' attitudes remained indifferent, no respondent had a negative attitude toward the Igbo language after using *BBC News Igbo*.

Table 3 indicates that *BBC News Igbo* encourages the use of Igbo language, and that even the young and influential people use it in socially prestigious domains.

As shown in Table 3 and Figure 2 depicts *BBC News Igbo* to encourage the use of the Igbo language even in domains of pride: school, social media, and work. "Others" were responses like "All of the above," "Everywhere," "Not applicable," "Anywhere Igbo comes," and the like.

In Table 4, respondents (41.1%) who perhaps had also commented on *BBC News Igbo* stories, had posted stories on social media using Igbo language or commented on other posts on social media using the language.

Table 5 indicates that the use of *BBC News Igbo* made the respondents proud to use their language outside of social media.

Table 6 explains that some themes, except "Indifferent," indicate that the respondents seemed to recognize that having an online presence might give Igbo language visibility and therefore prestige.

Except "Indifferent," Table 7 shows themes that generally suggest that *BBC News Igbo* enhances the linguistic and social values of Igbo language within and outside Nigeria.

Discussion

The linguistic and social value of a language is referred to as prestige. It is the total of esteem that a language commands. Similarly, language attitude refers to the feelings members of a speech community have toward their language. These feelings are either indifferent, positive, or negative. Language attitude and prestige are, therefore, crucial indices of language health. Not surprisingly, therefore, prestige takes center stage in the Theory of Language Revitalization enunciated by David Crystal. "An endangered language

will progress if its speakers increase their prestige within the dominant community," says Crystal (2000, p. 130). Based on this postulate, this study investigated the degree to which *BBC News Igbo* has impacted Igbo language's prestige.

"Domain Shift," "Courageous," and "Now Positive" are the themes found in Table 2, and they indicate that *BBC News Igbo* has enriched the prestige of the Igbo language. In the themes, respondents had their attitude to Igbo language change from negative to positive, had their courage to use the language renewed, and had their perception that their language should only be used at home among the elders altered: they realized that the youth fancied the language and made use of it in a notable digital media organization.

These findings are vital for many reasons. One of which is the fact that the bastardization of Igbo language through colonialism (Asakitikpi and Akujobi, 2009) and its introduction of the English language that eroded the prestige of Igbo language (Igboanusi, 2006) made Igbo people accord a negative attitude to their language. The other reason is the fact that having the courage to use an endangered language is one benefit of its presence in the media. The findings thus validate Nwammuo and Salawu's (2019) submission that *BBC News Igbo* could potentially encourage people who use it to speak the Igbo language. The findings also prove that making a language steadily available in a recognized mass medium makes its speakers want to use it more (Crystal, 2000). Moreover, when respondents said that their notion of Igbo language as one ideal for older adults only and the phatic domains changed to the realization that the language was written and spoken by young people in elite domains such as the media, that marks hope that the key operational roles, whose loss to the Eglish language Igboanusi (2006) notes as a major cause of Igbo language endangerment could be regained. This corroborates the assertion by Kperogi (2006) that the social status of an endangered language could be elevated by the media. That finding equally supports Crystal's (2000) theoretical submission, which argues that the prestige media presence accords a language usually increases the language's "visibility in more and more sectors of the public domain" (p. 131).

TABLE 2 Respondents' attitude to Igbo language before and after using *BBC News Igbo*.

Theme	Description	Exemplar
Before (A)		
Positive	Respondents who said their attitude to the Igbo language was positive	"Positive and proud speaker but sad at its deteriorating state"
Indifferent	Respondents who expressed a noncommittal attitude to the Igbo language	"Not concerned about the language"
Negative	Respondents who said their attitude to the Igbo language was not good	"Wasn't that good"
Select domain/people	Respondents who said they felt the Igbo language was for a certain age or domain	"Was of the opinion that it's meant for the older ones and not for the young generation"
Difficult	Respondents who said they felt the Igbo language was difficult	"I felt it was difficult given I wasn't brought up with it, but I was open to learn"
After (B)		
Now positive	Respondents who said their attitude to the Igbo language became positive	"My approach to Igbo language now is that of taking pride in communicating with [in] my language"
Still positive	Respondents who said their attitude to the Igbo language was and remained positive	"It has remained as positive as it has always been"
Courageous	Respondents who said they found courage to use Igbo language	"The ability and courage to speak Igbo more often engulfed me"
Still indifferent	Respondents who said their attitude to the Igbo language remained indifferent	"I still do not have any urge to learn Igbo"
Domain shift	Respondents who started using the Igbo language in places where they did not use it before	After I started using BBC News Igbo, my use of the Igbo language transcended the realm of basic communication with family members to more complex and intellectual conversations across various other topics

TABLE 3 Interviewees' views on the impact of *BBC News Igbo* on Igbo language revitalization.

Question	Theme	Exemplar
Impact of *BBC News Igbo* on Igbo language revitalization	Digitization and promotion of the Igbo language	"Also, speaking about Google Translate, when we started, we noticed that the translations were quite poor, but it is getting better and more accurate with time, due to, I believe, the fact that more Igbo language texts are being published and consumed more regularly. Thanks chiefly to BBC Igbo." – Interviewee 4
	Revival of interest in *Igbo* language and culture	"The fact that we had a lot of people who could no longer speak Igbo because in their homes they no longer spoke Igbo as their first tongue or their mother tongue. They now started putting effort, they now started trying again to speak Igbo because all of a sudden they saw the importance of speaking again, and somehow BBC News came in and it seemed that there was this revitalization of even the culture, people now started identifying with the culture, a lot of people started springing up on social media." – Interviewee 3
	Conferment of prestige on the Igbo language	"So, for me, that's one of the gains of having BBC Igbo; the fact that people can see people they look up to being very, very confident in speaking their language; that helps a lot, so I think going forward, it's going to get better and the influence is going to spread more. Now, everybody knows that there is BBC Igbo; people respect it; people are willing to come on." – Interviewee 2
	Provision of access and resources for learning the Igbo language	"OK, like me, take for an example, when I have my classes, I encourage people, that's the learners, you know what? Watch Igbo movies, watch other people speak Igbo, and one of the great resources I told them to look at is BBC News Igbo; I direct them there because all their interviews, everything is in Igbo, even their subtitles are also in Igbo language, that will also help people to know how to spell, how to write Igbo language." – Interviewee 1

Another theme (see Table 3) that directly relates to language attitude and prestige is digitization. Since Emmanouilidou (2014) identified the digital divide as a factor in the endangerment of indigenous languages, digitization will promote the Igbo language by making it readily available and reachable in the global information society (Moyo, 2017). Similarly significant is the respondents' report that using *BBC News Igbo* has stimulated their interest in their culture and language (see Table 3), especially considering the fact of having apathy for their language (Salawu, 2006). It also assuages the rather passionate disinterest in the Igbo language, which resulted in its low status (Igboanusi, 2006). In fact, this has manifested in the respondents' willingness to choose the language for use on social media (see Table 4), which, per Maseko and Moyo (2013), is empowering, and according to Belmar Viernes (2020), boosts people's
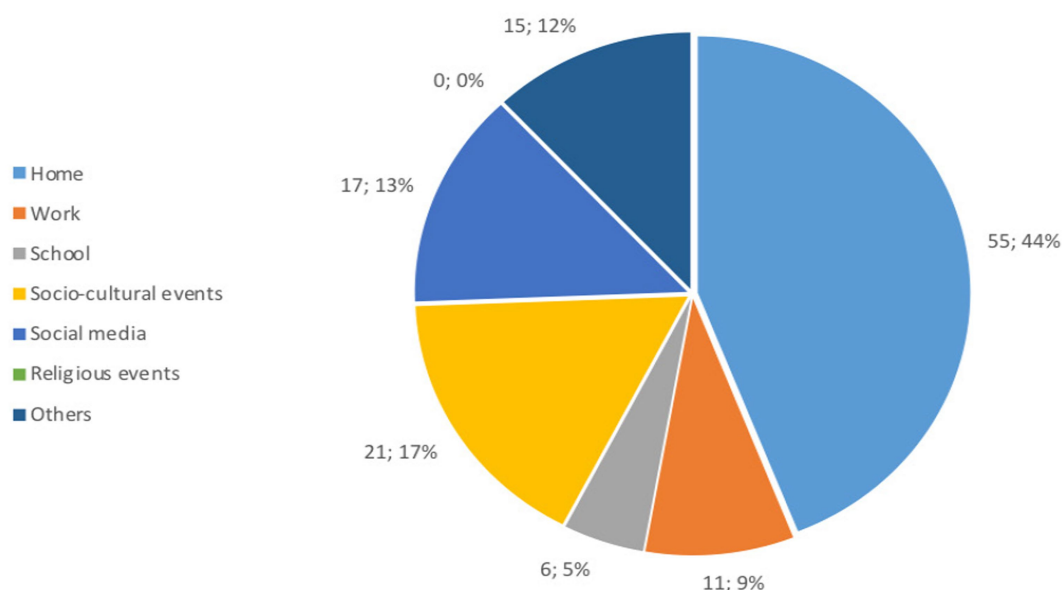
FIGURE 2
Respondents' preferred domains for using the Igbo language after using *BBC News Igbo*.

TABLE 4 Usage of the Igbo language on social media before and after using *BBC News Igbo*.

Response number	Percentage (%)
(A) Before using *BBC News Igbo*, did you use the Igbo language to post or comment on social media stories?	
Yes 56	44.8
No 63	50.4
I cannot remember 6	4.8
Total 125	100
(B) Now that you use *BBC News Igbo*, do you use the Igbo language to post or comment on other social media stories, different from *BBC News Igbo* posts?	
Yes 37	41.1
No 50	55.6
I do not know 3	3.3
Total 90	100

TABLE 5 Preferred language for discussing *BBC News Igbo* content outside of social media.

Response number	Percentage (%)
Do you discuss the content of *BBC News Igbo* outside social media?	
Yes 100	80
No 25	20
Total 125	100
With what language do you discuss *BBC News Igbo* content outside social media?	
Igbo 24	19.2
English 18	14.4
Igbo and English 77	61.6
Others 6	4.8
Total 90	100

confidence in using their language in various other domains. Moreover, when 80% of respondents (see Table 5) said they discussed *BBC News Igbo* content beyond the social media domain, that was empirical validation of Belmar Viernes' (2020) finding above.

When asked how they felt upon seeing *BBC News Igbo* on Facebook, a couple of themes—"Sense of Belonging," and "Awesome and Proud"—related to language prestige emerged (see Table 6). When, therefore, one respondent said, "[I am] Proud that the uniqueness of the Igbo language is made accessible to all and sundry, on social media," and another wrote, "I feel that we (the Igbo people) are not left out. I feel that we (the Igbo nation) are known to the rest of the world," they seem to recognize the prime place of agency and access, which Moyo (2017) flags to impede online use of African

languages. Like in the case of the Chechens of Jordan (see Abu-Irmies and Al-Khanji, 2019), this depicts a favorable disposition to revitalizing the Igbo language through the new media, which is, again, strikingly consistent with themes (see Table 7) yielded when the respondents expressed their attitudes the first time they saw *BBC News Igbo*. The themes, especially "International recognition," strongly support earlier finding that Igbo language could become popular again via the digital medium of interest in this study (Nwammuo and Salawu, 2019). The themes are also in agreement with the submission that a language gains prestige when more and more people take notice of it (Crystal, 2000).

"Conferment of Prestige on Igbo Language" (see Table 3) is another theme with significant implications for Igbo language revitalization. Dega (2015) has noted preservation of linguistic values

TABLE 6 Respondents' views on seeing *BBC News Igbo* on Facebook.

Theme	Description	Exemplar
Awesome and proud	Respondents who said they were elated	"It is awesomely great"/"Proud that the uniqueness of the Igbo language is made accessible to all and sundry, on social media"
Sense of belonging	Respondents who said they felt a sense of belonging	"The platform gives me joy and a sense of belonging"/"I feel that we (the Igbo people) are not left out. I feel that we (the Igbo nation) are known to the rest of the world"
Indifferent	Respondents who said they did not care	"Indifferent"/"Indifferent"

TABLE 7 Respondents' views on learning about *BBC News Igbo*.

Theme	Description	Exemplar
Very excited	Respondents who said they felt greatly excited to learn about *BBC News Igbo*	"Very excited"/"Elated"
Pleasantly surprised	Respondents who said they were surprised to learn about *BBC News Igbo*	"I was surprised because I did not think something like this existed"/"Surprised that such existed"
Proud and encouraged	Respondents who said learning about *BBC News Igbo* for the first made them proud and encouraged to use Igbo language	"I felt great about Igbo language"/"Proud and encouraged"
Promote and preserve Igbo	Respondents who said *BBC News Igbo* would promote and preserve the Igbo language	"I felt good because I see it as a platform to promote our language"/"I felt elated because it is a platform to preserve the Igbo language"
Indifferent	Respondents who said they showed no concern about *BBC News Igbo*	"To be candid, I was initially indifferent about it as I thought of it as just another news outlet"/"No feeling"
International recognition	Respondents who said they felt *BBC News Igbo* would help give Igbo global exposure	"To be honest, I actually felt excited knowing that Igbo language has gone globally. Initially, I wasn't happy seeing only BBC Hausa and Yoruba without Igbo but since the start of BBC Igbo you can be rest assured that Igbo language is no longer a local language spoken only in Eastern part of Nigeria. People all over the world gets to hear and learn our beloved language"/"I was so happy that Igbo language is been displayed worldwide"
Included	Respondents who said learning about *BBC News Igbo* gave them a sense of inclusion	"I believe BBC Hausa has been in existence for a while before BBC Igbo. I felt included and relevance accorded to my mother tongue"/"Sense of belonging in the society"

as a function of the media, to which Crystal (2000) adds enhanced visibility and public profile. Therefore, the digital media now accords the Igbo language the linguistic and social values that the mass media could not provide for several reasons (see Garba, 2015; Salawu, 2006; Nnabuihe and Ikwubuzo, 2006; Coker, cited in Oso, 2006; Nwammuo and Salawu, 2019). Per Salawu (2006), this will ensure the survival of the Igbo language.

Also significant is the finding that, aside from aiding increased use of the Igbo language (see Figure 2), *BBC News Igbo* equally made its users use the language in symbolically prestigious domains such as school (5%), socio-cultural events (17%), work (9%), and social media (13%). This represents substantial expansions of the language's domains and visibility, which, per Cormack (2004), are immensely beneficial to an endangered language.

Generally, findings show that *BBC News Igbo* could manifestly enhance the linguistic and social values of the Igbo language nationally and internationally. Theoretically, visibility is the prelude to prestige. To achieve a high prestige, the public profile of a language should be enhanced (Crystal, 2000). Thus, gaining access to the media, especially the digital media, is beneficial to an endangered language. Therefore, by its propensity to bestow enhanced visibility, digitization, recognized public profile, and predictable presence, the digital media could greatly enhance the prestige of Igbo language.

Conclusion

Drawing inspiration from the dearth of research on the impact of digital technologies on African languages (Salawu, 2015). Therefore, this study gaged the extent to which *BBC News Igbo* has enriched the prestige of the Igbo language. The study's main finding is that among its audience, *BBC News Igbo* has vastly promoted the linguistic and social values of Igbo mainly via the provision of a recognized agency and access to the Internet, enhanced attitude, diaspora inclusion, revival of interest, increased presence on social media, increased digitization, global exposure, improved visibility, and domain expansion.

Therefore, although some researchers have expressed doubts that access to the Internet (Aikhenvald, 2002), technology (see Salawu, 2006[1]), and globalization (Mufwene, 2004) might constitute additional impediments to the development of endangered languages, this study shows that when an endangered language that has achieved literacy gains access to electronic

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1 In Salawu (2006), a computer scientist and linguist expressed fears that technology would have adverse effects on African languages and perpetuate Anglophone imperialism.

technology, its chances of revitalization is enhanced (Crystal, 2000), especially if, as in the case of Igbo language, speakers of the language are favorably disposed to using their language on the Internet. Another key contribution of this study is to provide scientific evidence that digital media could specifically be highly effective in revitalizing the Igbo language. This is made more important by the failure of the mass media to revitalize it. Since Salawu (2015) has decried the worrying shortage of research on the impact of digital media on African indigenous languages, this study also contributes to the literature and knowledge on this.

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that Igbo language activists, linguists, and researchers, especially those working on indigenous language media, should expand the scope of this study and consider adopting the various opportunities for revitalization that the digital media offers to a language in distress. Similarly, media managers, producers, and advertisers interested in producing programs aimed at revitalizing the Igbo language should take a cue from *BBC News Igbo* programs, which are demonstrably appealing to users and encourage them to use the Igbo language more, a practice known to significantly facilitate language revitalization.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Basic and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, North-West University, Mahikeng, South Africa. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

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