

A Sociolinguistic Analysis of the Use of Slang Expressions by Nigerians on the Internet

Kikelomo Adeniyi

Dept of English, Lagos State University of Education, Oto-Ijanikin

Favour Olajide

Dept of Languages and General Studies, Covenant University, Ota

Abstract

In contemporary Nigerian digital culture, slang has become a vibrant tool for expression, reflecting not only linguistic innovation but also deep-rooted social realities. As citizens navigate complex socioeconomic and political challenges, internet slang emerges as both a coping mechanism and a form of commentary. This study investigates how Nigerian internet users employ slang expressions to articulate lived experiences, negotiate identity, and respond to national issues. It specifically aims to analyse the relationship between these slang expressions and the prevailing economic and political climate in Nigeria, with attention to the events and trends that inform their usage. Using a qualitative research approach, data were drawn from Nigerian online publications such as Zikoki, *Punch*, and *The Guardian*. The study adopts thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns in slang expressions and applies Conceptual Metaphor Theory to uncover the cognitive structures shaping their meaning and usage. The findings reveal that Nigerian internet slang encapsulates themes of resilience, social aspiration, discontent, and critique. Expressions such as *japa*, *sapa*, and *no gree for anybody* illustrate how slang serves as a mirror to national frustrations and collective sentiment. By analysing the intersection of language, culture, and digital expression, this research contributes to the understanding of how everyday linguistic practices function as cultural commentary and identity-making tools in the digital age. It offers insights valuable to the fields of sociolinguistics, digital culture, and communication studies.

Keywords: Nigerian Internet Slang, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Social Commentary, Digital Culture, Sociolinguistics

Introduction

Slang represents one of humanity's most enduring expressions of linguistic creativity, serving diverse communicative and social functions across cultures throughout history (Davie, 2019). The origin of the word 'slang' itself only dates back to two centuries ago, but the phenomenon predates its naming. In 16th-century England, *thieves' cant* was a popular coded language, first used by criminals, and which allowed marginalised groups to communicate in secrecy. By the 19th century, *Cockney rhyming slang* became a hallmark of working-class Londoners. Similarly, in the United States, the jazz era of the 1920s gave rise to vibrant African-American slang that reflected cultural shifts (Coleman, 2012). In these examples, slang is associated particularly with marginalised groups and 'disreputable' people as language used to establish secrecy and confidentiality within those groups, to the exclusion of disapproving outsiders.

Contemporary globalisation has fundamentally transformed slang from localised subcultural phenomena into transnational linguistic currency. For instance, African-American

Vernacular English (AAVE) has heavily influenced internet slang worldwide, and terms such as *on fleek*, *bae*, and *turnt* are now accepted as standard expressions (Laing, 2021). Likewise, Korean youth slang, driven by the global popularity of the K-pop music genre, has introduced expressions like *oppa* and *unni* to international audiences, all facilitated via internet communication (Khedun-Burgoine, 2022).

Despite slang's obvious vitality and cultural significance, linguistic scholarship historically relegated it to what Labov (1972) memorably described as “outer, extra-linguistic darkness.” This marginalisation has gradually given way to sustained academic interest, as researchers increasingly recognise slang as a rich linguistic resource that reflects cultural shifts and creativity in language use. Slang studies enable linguists to gain insights into how speakers negotiate in-group and out-group boundaries as well as adapt language to changing social contexts. Slang expressions are colloquial uses of language that have not entered into the mainstream lexis of a language. Therefore, research on slang highlights its influence on mainstream vocabulary, demonstrating how marginalised expressions often permeate standard usage over time (Keidar *et al*, 2022).

Often considered informal and nonstandard language of a particular sub-culture (Muhammad, 2016), slang usage pervades cultures and sub-cultures across the world. So, it is not uncommon for people within certain professions, religions, age grades, regions, countries, and other cultural sub-groups to adopt certain slang expressions unique to their sub-group. To this end, slang comprises conversational code (Odogwu, 2018). Being informal speech, they include single words, a group of words, or even entire sentences. Regardless of their form, though, slang expressions are created either by forming entirely new terms or by existing lexical items acquiring a new meaning within a group. According to Odogwu (2018), slang exists because humans are not just capable of, but must, as a matter of necessity, invent new expressions with time. Therefore, the use of slang is a testament to the creative tendency and dynamism of human language. While young adults are particularly adept at creating and using slang expressions, people of diverse age ranges, leanings, and beliefs, also use creative language.

Moreover, it is a feature of slang expressions that, while their meanings are often restrictively coded at the initial stages of their development, the more they are used, the more inclusive the range of meanings is. This gives slang expressions the ‘trendiness’ effect they want to have, rendering them more favourable to language users as against static expressions that have become obsolete. However, slang expressions can also fall into disuse with time. Sometimes, they may be merely transitory and have a very short lifespan. At other times, they become increasingly common until they become the dominant way of expressing the associated meaning, thus gaining acceptance in mainstream speech (Muhammad, 2016).

In sum, each slang term is a miniature cultural artifact, carrying within it layers of historical, social, emotional, and communicative significance. As stated earlier, while some slang expressions eventually wane, others tend to acquire wider usage and thus are more likely to be formalized. With the rise in the popularity of social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, internet slang has become prevalent since the early 2000s.

Social media platforms are enabled by the internet and the invention of the internet has revolutionized communication system and also expanded the vocabulary of languages

(particularly English) through several morphological processes (Maledo & Edobor, 2023). Moreso, without doubt, communicating online has come to dominate the lives of a number of people over the world (Idehen & Taiwo, 2016). Easy access to the internet has allowed people to spend a great amount of time online, even preferring online communication over the offline mode.

One of the impacts of internet culture on language is how it has encouraged expansion in the variety and creativity of language (Crystal, 2006). Thus, the word ‘netizen’ was coined from ‘citizens’ and ‘internet’ to describe internet users as belonging to and owning a unique sub-culture. As with every culture, the use of slang is a dominant feature of online communication, and this demands academic attention. Moreover, a proper examination of internet slang requires some knowledge of the basic rules around which the internet culture functions.

A feature of internet slang is that they not only impact digital communication, but they influence how language is spoken, even in offline settings. For instance, one notable result of the pervasiveness of internet slang is the blurring of the lines between formal and informal pieces of writing. Slang is being used not only in casual online communication, but also imported into professional language. This is particularly true with the expansion of mobile phone access, and their increasing use in work environments. In summary, beyond doubts, the internet has radically changed global communication, with instant messaging and other features of digital communication having a huge influence on spoken and written language (Barseghyan, 2013).

This paper narrows the focus to Nigerian internet culture, by examining pervasive slang expressions in Nigeria arising from digital forms of communication. Nigerian slang expressions are like slang across the world in that they are characterised by creativity, humour, and the ability to capture the essence of current events and social issues. Indeed, slang expressions are often coined as responses to specific situations, cultural references, and social developments, with those expressions serving to conceptualise cultural happenings. These expressions, thus become associated with the unique language of that particular sub-culture. In Nigeria, for example, internet slangs are a huge component of the lexicon of language referred to as ‘Nigerianisms’, which is not limited to English only, but also includes local languages such as Nigerian Pidgin, Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, Edo, etc.

To this end, this study is an exploration of the various dimensions of selected slang expressions of the Nigerian internet sub-culture, focusing on the origins of the expressions as well as their relationship with the broader Nigerian context.

Our research connects recent Nigerian internet slang with the nation’s prevailing socioeconomic and political realities. Nigeria grapples with challenges such as poverty, corruption, insecurity, unemployment, and political unrest. In this atmosphere, language has become a powerful tool for expression, coping, social commentary, and even resistance. Previous studies have explored Nigerian slang in various contexts but a gap exists in understanding how contemporary online slang, particularly in its most recent forms, mirror the lived experiences of Nigerians amidst current social challenges. Hence, this study aims to bridge the gap by systematically examining how internet slang expressions mirror the Nigerian society.

To achieve these results, the research focuses on slang expressions that have gained prominence within the past two years. Specifically, by applying a conceptual metaphorical analytic approach, the study seeks to identify and analyse the dominant themes expressed in recent Nigerian internet slang, examine the connection between specific slang expressions and the socio-economic and political events that they reflect, explore the circumstances in which the slang expressions evolved as well as the factors influencing their popularity, and determine to what extent these slang expressions function as social commentary or critique

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do recent Nigerian internet slang terms reflect current socioeconomic and political issues in the country?
2. What are the dominant themes and concerns expressed in these slang terms, and how do they relate to specific events or trends in Nigerian society?
3. What events and circumstances motivated the coinage of Nigerian internet slang?
4. To what extent do these slang terms serve as a form of social commentary or critique, and how do they challenge or reinforce existing power structures?

Studies on Nigerian Internet Slang

As exemplified in the literature on Nigerian internet slang, studies exploring the language of slang expressions can be approached from different perspectives. Applying J. L. Austin's famous Speech Acts Theory (Austin, 1975) to study the use of slang among 200 undergraduates of the University of Ibadan, Osisanwo (2009) found that slang expressions, which are mostly drawn from the entertainment industry, perform an exclusionary role. In essence, the youths who use the slang belong to a unique sub-culture and the invention of slang expressions serve to reinforce markers of in-group identity and uniqueness, to the exclusion of non-members, which include instructors and lecturers, as well as parents out of the conversation.

Reinforcing observations of the function of slang as a medium for secrecy and confidentiality, Muhammad (2016), applying the Referential Theory of Meaning (Ogden et al., 2013), conducted a classificatory analysis of slang expressions among students at the University of Maiduguri. The study noted the high frequency of sex- and sexuality-related slang expressions, with salutation slang coming in the least frequency. He attributed this disparity to the need for users to discuss sensitive topics without breaching social norms. Applying the same theory, Odogwu (2018) carried out participant observation of conversations in Delta State (Warri-Ughelli-Sapele axis). Combining this with data from presenters at private radio stations as well as lyrics of popular Nigerian songs, the study examined the communicative and social function of slang as a creative use of language. Precisely, the study found that speakers use different slang expressions depending on specific social situations to ensure intelligibility among in-group members. This demonstrates slang performing the dual functions of exclusion (of outsiders) and inclusion (of insiders).

The infusion of local Nigerian languages with English slang used in the country has received considerable attention in slang studies. Abdullahi-Idiagbon's (2007) study on the sociolinguistics of Nigerian Pidgin in selected campuses of higher institutions observed generous use of code-mixing in the use of slang expressions, with statements interspersed with

words and phrases from English, Nigerian Pidgin, Yoruba, Igbo, and other Nigerian indigenous languages. This reflects the dynamic multilingualism of Nigerian society. Also, regardless of explicit borrowing of words and phrases from indigenous languages, Nigerian slang do reflect cultural values and attitudes in the country. This is prominent in Odebunmi's (2010) study of how Nigerian university students use slang for sexual organs, from the theoretical standpoint of the conceptual metaphor theory. Also, by examining the sociolinguistic perspective of slang usage in political discourse through the lens of Hausa slang used by politicians in and around Kano, Yusuf and Isma'il (2017) found that the slang expressions are drawn from everyday Hausa words and expressions. The words themselves may not be secretive or vulgar, but they are used in an exclusionary way, while still drawing upon cultural nuances and attitudes.

The rise of internet media and communication has expanded the scope of slang research in Nigeria. A morphological and pragmatic analysis of slang expressions in Yoruba home videos discounted the association of slang expressions with 'irresponsible youths' and non-conformists (Asiru & Ogutu, 2018). Contrary to such popular sentiments, the study concluded that slang expressions permeate every strata of society and have made their way into Yoruba vocabulary. More recently, another morphological analysis of slang, this time, internet-based slang expressions documented how slang invention and use align with the evolving communicative needs of internet users (Maledo & Edobor, 2023).

Existing studies in the literature on Nigerian slang emphasise its multifaceted functions in Nigerian society, particularly its roles in identity construction, group exclusion, and cultural expression. However, while earlier studies often focus on offline interactions and traditional media, fewer have examined internet slang, especially considering its implications for Nigerian socio-economic and political discourse. Maledo and Edobor's (2023) work on internet-based slang marks a step in this direction, but there remains a gap in understanding how internet slang reflects and shapes commentary on contemporary issues in Nigeria. By focusing on abstracted metaphorical domains of internet slang to explain its role in popular discourse, our study contributes to the growing body of research on Nigerian slang while highlighting its relevance in digital communication and contemporary Nigerian society.

Methodology

The methodology of the research is primarily qualitative. The slang expressions were obtained from Nigerian online newspapers and blogs, specifically Zikoko, Vanguard, Punch, Guardian and online BBC on their discourse on trendy slangy expressions. Twenty-three (23) trendy/recent slang items relating to socioeconomic and political issues were specifically selected.

For the conventional meaning of the slang expressions, we relied upon publicly available explanations of the various expressions, as well as native speaker intuition of Nigerian English, and the knowledge of indigenous languages from which many of the slang expressions originate, including Nigerian Pidgin and Yoruba. We then employed a thematic analytic approach to identify patterns and recurring motifs within the slang expressions, categorising them based on their meanings and underlying conceptual metaphors.

For certain expressions, such as 'sapa,' the underlying conceptual metaphors of the words themselves are difficult to determine because their ('literal') meanings are uncertain.

However, their conventionalised meanings can still evoke certain metaphorical concepts. We also evaluated the sociolinguistic expressions of the slang expressions, including fostering solidarity, providing a means of coping, signalling group membership, social aspirations, and so on.

Theoretical Framework

According to the Conceptual Metaphor Theory, metaphors are formed by cross-domain mappings between conceptual domains, with one domain as the ‘source’ and another as the ‘target.’ In English, the abstract notion of time is often conceived as a commodity, which can be ‘wasted,’ ‘saved,’ ‘spent,’ ‘budgeted,’ or ‘invested.’ In the conceptual metaphor TIME IS MONEY, money is the source domain from which concepts are mapped to the target, time. As Lakoff (2006) puts it, the cross-domain mappings that make up metaphors are not algorithmic but are ‘fixed ontological correspondences,’ which eventually become conventional conceptualisations in language use. For instance, the LOVE IS A JOURNEY metaphor features the following correspondences (Mácha, 2016):

- Travellers → lovers
- Vehicles → love relationships
- Journey → events in a relationship
- Destinations → goals of the relationship
- Decisions about directions → choices about what to do

These, in turn, give rise to more specific metaphorical language used in talking about love relationships: “Where are we?,” “We are stuck,” “We need to go our separate ways,” “Our relationship is a dead-end street,” etc.

A key theoretical assumption of CMT is the embodiment hypothesis. According to this perspective, metaphorical mappings are rooted in embodied universal human experiences. The implication of this is that certain metaphorical concepts are shared by all human cultures. For instance, HAPPY IS UP is a cross-culturally pervasive metaphor that is derived from the human perception of the erectness of the body. At the same time, CONTAINER schemas influence the use of prepositions such as ‘in’ and ‘out’ in describing emotions, such as being ‘in love,’ ‘full of anger,’ etc. Notwithstanding the universality of conceptual metaphors, there are obviously variations in surface linguistic realisations of the metaphorical concepts across cultures, as Ansah (2010) shows, among others. Additionally, for (Kövecses (2020), metaphorical concepts are established in the human mind due to contextual factors in real discourse situations. So conceptual systems may vary cross-culturally even though cognitive operations and fundamental experiences are universal.

Since its introduction, CMT has emerged as the prevailing theory of metaphor analysis among scholars, with its influence extending beyond linguistics and into psychology, education, philosophy, communication studies, cultural anthropology, and so on.

Analysis

The data features three broad thematic categories of slang expressions, depending on whether an expression communicates resilience in the face of struggle, social status, or some kind of discontent or critique. Below, each slang expression is presented alongside its literal and slang meanings, as well as the underlying conceptual metaphor at play. For some expressions, such as “sapa,” which typically denotes financial hardship and whose semantic origins cannot be ascertained, it is challenging to determine the underlying conceptual metaphor.

Resilience and Struggle

The use of slang expressions for resilience and struggle in everyday conversations serves multiple sociolinguistic functions. First, it fosters a sense of solidarity among speakers. Shared language about common struggles can create a bond and a collective identity. Secondly, it provides a means of coping, especially through humorous and ironic means. In these ways, these expressions acquire connotative meanings that transcend their literal interpretations. So, ‘japa,’ for instance, is not merely about physical migration but also about the broader theme of seeking and seizing opportunities.

	Expression	Literal Meaning	Meaning as Slang	Underlying Conceptual Metaphor
1	Japa	To flee or escape	Migration to foreign countries for better opportunities	LIFE IS A JOURNEY
2	Sapa	-	Being broke or financially strained	-
3	We move or we meuvve	To take a step /steps forward	Moving forward despite challenges	LIFE IS A JOURNEY
4	Las Las na everybody go chop breakfast	"Breakfast" is a meal	Everyone will eventually face a setback or disappointment	EATING BREAKFAST IS DISAPPOINTMENT
5	Trenches	Long, narrow ditches, typical feature of warzones	Struggling or living in a tough environment	POVERTY IS WAR
6	Groceries-Garri	"Garri" once used to be a cheap staple food	Gentrification of a traditional staple meal	WEALTH AS VARIETY
7	No panic	“Don’t panic”	Stay calm or don’t worry	CALMNESS IS CONTROL

"Japa" originates from the Yoruba language. The first part, "ja" means to flee, and "pa" is an intensifier, and both collectively mean to escape hurriedly. It is obviously a verb phrase, but it is often used as a nominal, as the term has become popular in recent times. The rise of "japa" in popular discourse correlates with Nigeria's economic instability and political challenges. High unemployment rates and other suboptimal life outcomes drive many Nigerians, particularly the youth, to seek better opportunities abroad. "Japa" encapsulates this widespread aspiration for a better life. The use of "japa" also invokes the common conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY (Liu, 2023), where emigration is seen as moving forward in one's life journey due to domestic failures. In this context, emigration is conceptualized as a significant move or change of direction in one's life path. So, the slang isn't just about migration but symbolizes a broader escape from a broken system.

In Nigerian Pidgin, "sapa" broadly denotes severe financial stress, echoing widespread poverty and lack of purchasing power in the face of inflation and unemployment. The term has evolved from its original meaning to encompass a broader range of financial difficulties, including temporary cash flow issues and general economic strain. Aji (2023) explores the subject from the themes of excessive craving for wealth, destabilized emotions, instruments of political dereliction, and illegal migration. The etymology of 'sapa' is not known, but innovative youths have formed backronyms such as 'Special Attack from Poverty Assistant' and 'Serious Absence of Purchasing Ability' to portray worsening economic conditions in the country (Okeregbe, 2023). This slang encapsulates a shared experience of economic despair and serves as a humorous yet bitter coping mechanism in the broken economy of Nigeria.

The statement 'we meuve' became a popular slang expression as an imitation of Victoria 'Vee' Adeyeye who starred in the reality TV show, Big Brother Naija in 2020. In an apparent quarrel with another contestant, she kept telling him to '*meuve* from the door' as the latter seemed to obstruct her (The Nation, 2021). This distinct phonetic identity of 'meuve' as against 'move' makes it instantly recognisable. The statement itself indicates psychological resilience and social solidarity. The journey metaphor encapsulated in 'we meuve' aligns with the cultural narrative of perseverance through socio-economic and political adversities. In short, to 'meuve' is to let go of the past and forge ahead (Asemah et al., 2022). As Amobi (2021) puts it, it is "a means of carrying on with our daily activities while a wound heavily bleeds on our legs". Nigerian sociopolitical issues like hunger, insecurity, lack of basic facilities, corruption etc. are some impediments to forging ahead, making this particular saying a coping strategy, expressing the determination to move on despite systemic issues.

"Last Last," which usually becomes "las las" (a stylized form that makes it more catchy, trendier and funnier) in spoken conversations, is a phrase that roughly translates to 'ultimately' or 'eventually.' 'Everybody go chop breakfast' means 'everybody will eat breakfast.' This idiomatic phrase is generally taken to mean "eventually, everyone will move on" (Oyewale, 2024). A narrowed sense, which has become more popular, and which is evoked by artiste Burna Boy in his hit song 'Last Last,' is the domain of relationship heartbreaks or disappointments. Breakfast, a routine part of daily life of several people, represents an event that is inevitable. This metaphorical conception suggests that just as everyone eats breakfast, everyone will inevitably face emotional pain which of course exists in abundance as a result of the challenges in the Nigerian polity.

In Nigerian Pidgin, ‘trenches’ is a slang expression used to describe tough or challenging situations and specifically referring to underprivileged or rough areas like the ghetto or on the streets. So, a person who says “I dey live for trenches” often means I live in a poor area, while someone who says “Na trenches I grow” means that they had an economically challenging upbringing. Nigeria has the second-largest poor population (individuals living below the poverty line) in the world, after India (World Bank, n.d.). So, the feeling of growing up or living in a socially challenging environment is not unfamiliar to many Nigerians. In literal terms, ‘trenches’ refer to long, narrow ditches and are a typical feature of war zones. By referring to poverty as the ‘trenches,’ Nigerian speakers are employing the POVERTY IS WAR conceptual metaphor. In essence, poverty is not just a state of being but a relentless fight for survival and betterment.

Garri is a popular, once affordable, staple food in Nigeria. It is made from cassava tubers and is consumed in various forms, especially as cereal when mixed with cold water and sugar or as a dough-like swallow meal when mixed with hot water and then taken with a soup. It used to be inexpensive and widely accessible, making it a daily dietary staple for many Nigerians. In recent months, though, a trend arose with many Nigerians starting to humorously refer to Garri as ‘groceries’ (Progress, 2023). The term ‘groceries’ generally refers to a range of food items one might purchase at a store, and it is more commonly used in Western varieties of English than in Nigerian English. Thus, the application of ‘groceries’ to ‘Garri’ could be described as a form of linguistic gentrification. Garri, typically a Nigerian meal is ‘rebranded’ to see its status elevated. So, something that was once seen as a basic necessity is rebranded as something more luxurious and desirable. In a way, this could reflect a broader cultural movement towards embracing and celebrating local foods and traditions through humorous means. It might also reflect aspirations of social mobility, with speakers perhaps subtly expressing a desire for a more affluent lifestyle or a broader variety of food options, even if those are not currently accessible. In this sense, the WEALTH AS VARIETY conceptual metaphor comes in, as having a broader range of options (essentially, abundance) is associated with a luxurious lifestyle.

“No panic” literally means “don’t panic.” It has become a popular phrase among Nigerian speakers, especially within the youth and urban communities. It is often used to reassure someone or to downplay a situation that might otherwise cause concern or anxiety. The phrase gained traction on social media and is often used in memes and other online content to convey a sense of calm and control. It tends to be used to admonish individuals to ‘take heart’ no matter the existing challenges. Typically, the phrase is used immediately after a statement of the construction “X go wan whine you”. Examples below show X posts of such constructions:



Source: (Amobi, 2024)

The ‘...go wan whine you’ part of the construction is interpreted to mean “...will want/try to deceive/trick/mislead you”. This gives us the CALMNESS IS CONTROL conceptual metaphor, with maintaining calmness considered a stabilising attitude when faced with deception or trickery. Here again, this particular saying is to be a coping strategy.

8.2 Social Status

There is no doubt that language is a powerful tool for social navigation and identity construction. Slang expressions used in popular parlance in Nigeria can signal group membership and social aspirations in alignment with contemporary issues and trends. Such slang expressions are examined in this sub-section.

	Expression	Literal Meaning	Meaning as Slang	Underlying Conceptual Metaphor
1	Opor	“It’s plenty”	Living large or showing off	
2	Butty	No direct literal meaning	Well-off or posh	SOCIAL STATUS AS FOOD
3	Ment	Short for "mental"	Impressive or extraordinary	
4	We outside	We are outside	Being out and about socially	OUTSIDE IS FREEDOM
5	Aza	No direct literal meaning	Refers to one's bank account	
6	Idan gangan	"Idan" can mean "magic"	Genuine or real; describes someone who is authentic	MYSTERY IS TRUTH

‘Opor’ is derived from the Yoruba statement ‘o po,’ which translates to ‘it is plenty’ or ‘it is a lot.’ The popularity of this statement as slang can be attributed to artiste Naira Marley (BBC

News Pidgin, 2020). In popular parlance, ‘opor’ is used to convey abundance in various contexts, such as wealth and enjoyment. It could be used to jocularly praise achievements, evens as menial as being able to buy a full bag of sachet water. Nigerians are known as people who ‘suffer and smile’ (cf Fela Anikulapo Kuti’s ‘Suffering and Smiling’). The insertion of ‘r’ to transform ‘o po’ into ‘opor’ follows the current trend of the anglicization of Yoruba words. Ojo et al., (20022) report the insertion of ‘r’ after the vowels [a] and [ɔ] at word-final positions of Yoruba words. This trend used to be primarily associated with Yoruba anthroponyms, as shown by Ajileye (2011) and later Eze et al., (2020), but have, apparently, now being carried over into common words and expressions.

"Butty" emerged as a contraction of "ajebutter", from which is also derived "ajebo". "Ajebutter" integrates Yoruba "aje," which means 'someone who eats' with the smooth, edible, fatty substance known in English as "butter." Combined, "ajebutter" means someone who eats butter. The idea this communicates is that of a pampered, spoilt person, who typically comes from a wealthy family. It stands in contrast to "ajepako," which means someone who eats wood (*pako* means wood). An 'ajepako' is someone who comes from a less privileged background. So, the term "butty" can be analyzed through metaphorical frameworks that conceptualize social status and identity. One prevalent metaphor is the "Social Status as Food" metaphor, where different food items symbolize varying social strata. In this framework, "ajebutter" (and by extension "butty") represents a refined, privileged segment of society—much like how certain food items signify luxury and exclusivity. However, this does not mean being called 'butty' or 'ajebutter' is a compliment. In fact, it is a sarcastic, derogatory word used to mock someone who is perceived to be inefficient in one area of life – such as being reserved in social situations – due to having been apparently spoilt and shielded by privilege.

The adaptation of "mental" to "ment" represents a common linguistic phenomenon where words are abbreviated or altered for ease of use or stylistic effect. In Nigerian Pidgin, "ment" functions as a slang term to denote mental instability or irrational behaviour, reflecting a nuanced shift from the formal medical or psychological connotation of "mental." In short, "ment" is used to question someone's sanity or rationality. A criticism of the term "ment" is that it is often used in a derogatory manner, which can contribute to the stigmatization of mental health issues. So far, Nigeria's economic woes have worsened the already terrible mental health situation in the country, resulting from the shortage of mental health professionals, inadequate infrastructure, social stigma and other challenges (Fadele et al., 2024).

The expression "We outside" literally means "we are outside" or "we are out." It is often used to indicate that someone is out and about, away from home, or participating in social activities. It gained trendiness due to its frequent use in social media posts to announce one's presence at social events, often accompanied by photos and videos. Its Yoruba version "italawa" ("outside is where we are") has been further popularised through Nigerian hip-hop songs, not in the least artiste Burna Boy's verse on a remix version of South African hit song "Tshwala Bam." Beyond its literal meaning "we outside" implies a sense of being socially engaged and making the most of the moment." The outside world is, thus, associated with enjoyment and being free and coming outside to catch fun is a coping strategy especially when ten people have to share a wrap of shawarma with 'pure water' (Nigerian usage for sachet water)!

The origins of the slang expression “aza” are unclear, but it is used by Nigerians speakers to refer to a bank account number. So, “send me your aza” is short for “send me your bank account number.” Like many other Nigerian slang expressions, “aza” gained widespread popularity on social media, and many Nigerian musicians and artistes have played significant roles in popularising it and giving it a mainstream appeal. Notably, it has gained significant traction amidst the increasing prevalence of mobile banking and digital transactions in Nigeria and the word is a convenient way of sharing such important information. It could have also emerged as a coded way of requesting information on money in the face of insecurity and could also be a play on word to create fun.

In Yoruba, “idan” translates to “magic” while “gangan” is an intensifier that means “exactly” or “precisely.” Therefore, “idan gangan” can be interpreted as “true magic” and it is often employed to describe someone who is exceptionally talented or skillful, or someone who simply commands respect in some way. So, it is not uncommon to see the term frequently used on social media to praise celebrities and other influential figures, although it could also be used to compliment or tease peers.

8.3 Social Discontent and Interpersonal Critique

In furtherance to its role as a marker of group identity, slang allows speakers to align themselves with specific social groups, such as youth or marginalised communities. Thus, it can serve as a form of resistance against authority and mainstream societal norms while expressing solidarity with marginalised groups. Many slang expressions used by Nigerian speakers employ humour, irony, satire, etc. to critique social conditions or interpersonal behaviour in various ways, some of which are examined below.

	Expression	Literal Meaning	Meaning as Slang	Underlying Conceptual Metaphor
1	Oversabi	"Oversabi" means overly knowledgeable	Someone who tries too hard to show off their intelligence	KNOWLEDGE IS UP
2	Gbege	No direct literal meaning	Trouble or conflict	
3	No gree for anybody	"Gree" means to agree or accommodate	Refusing to accommodate or give in to others, especially oppressors	SOCIAL INTERACTION IS NEGOTIATION
4	Shey you dey whine me ni?	"Whine" means to deceive or trick	Asking if someone is deceiving or playing tricks on them	

5	Dem don dey carry me wia I no know	"Wia" means where; "carry me" means lead	Indicates confusion about one's direction or situation	LIFE IS A JOURNEY
6	God abeg	"Abeg" means please or beg	A plea to God for favour or assistance	
7	Let Di poor breathe, no suffocate them	"Suffocate" means to prevent breathing	Advocates empathy towards poor people, not putting extra pressure	EMPATHY AS VENTILATION
8	Bolo		A slow person or fool	INTELLIGENCE IS SPEED
9	Kolo	"Kolo" means to be crazy	To be crazy or mentally unstable	

"Oversabi" is a Nigerian Pidgin term derived from the combination of "over" and "sabi," with "sabi" being thought to have come from the Portuguese 'saber/sabir', which means 'to know'(Mensah et al., 2021). "Oversabi" in Nigerian Pidgin means the same as the English expression "know-all." It carries a negative connotation, implying that the individual is pretentious or intrusive in their display of knowledge. The term "oversabi" operates within a metaphorical framework that equates knowledge with a form of excess or overflow. In this metaphor, knowledge is conceptualized as a liquid that can be contained or overflow. The idea of being "oversabi" suggests that one's knowledge is so abundant that it spills over, becoming excessive and unmanageable. It can also be used to mock whistleblowers trying to reveal cases of corruption rampant in the polity.

In Nigerian Pidgin, "gbege" colloquially refers to trouble, confusion, or a problematic situation. It is used to describe scenarios that are complicated, distressing, or out of control. One conceptual metaphor underlying "gbege" is the notion of trouble or confusion as a physical object. When people refer to a situation as "gbege," they often imply that it is something tangible, cumbersome, or burdensome. This metaphor draws on the physical experience of handling or being encumbered by objects, thereby rendering abstract troubles into more manageable, concrete terms. Another prevalent metaphor is that of "gbege" as a disturbance or disruption. In this view, "gbege" represents a disruption to the normal flow of events, akin to an unexpected interruption. It can be used in a context where police officers are disrupting peaceful protests which are becoming prevalent as a follow up to economic hardships.

Breaking down 'no gree for anybody' into its constituent parts, 'no' is a negation particle, 'gree' derives from the English word 'agree,' and 'for anybody' serves as a prepositional phrase indicating the subject. Collectively, the sentence translates to 'do not agree with anyone' or 'do not give in to anyone.' According to (Udoudom et al., 2024), this slogan became popular in January 2024 among Nigerian users of social media, beginning with X (formerly Twitter) and spreading to others. They further posited that it evokes frames related to activism, protest, and empowerment. This is a narrowing down of its broad pragmatic

function of conveying a sense of resilience and determination in any setting. Urging someone by saying ‘no gree for anybody’ reinforces the importance of personal resolve and autonomy. It was extremely popular in early 2024 to the extent that the Nigeria Police Force Public Relations Officer had to warn against its usage as intelligence on the slogan is said to come from a revolutionary sector that may cause problems in the country (Adeduyite, 2024).

In “Shey you dey whine me ni,” “shey” is a Yoruba word often used at the beginning of an interrogative question to indicate that a question is being asked. “Ni,” at the end of the expression is a question tag used to add emphasis and another Yoruba word. The entire expression means roughly “Are you kidding me,” “Are you for real,” or “Are you trying to fool me” in standard English. The phrase gained significant popularity through a viral song by Nigerian artiste Austine Emmanuel, also known as Austine De Bull. The song, which blends street slang with expressions in local dialects became a hit on TikTok and then spread to other social media platforms. It is a saying often uttered in annoyance with the user getting ready to fight for justice.

“Dem don dey carry me go wia I no know” means “They are already taking me to a place I don’t know.” It is often used to describe a situation where someone feels confused, lost, or manipulated, typically by circumstances or people around them. It conveys a sense of being involved in something without full awareness or control. The expression started trending as a slang from a video of a police officer, Helen Uabor, apparently while trying to arrest an erring driver, being driven about roughly by the driver in question and reveals the non-adherence to laid down rules and regulations by some drivers. A passenger apparently recorded the event as the officer screamed “help me, help me, dem don dey carry me go wia I no know.” Later on, the phrase gained significant popularity through infusion in hip hop songs, such as “Otilo (Izz Gone)” by Poco Lee and HotKid. In pop culture as a slang expression, it is a vivid expression that captures the essence of feeling lost or manipulated.

It is not clear how “God abeg” came to become a popular slang expression among Nigerian speakers. The phrase translates to “God, please,” or literally, “God, I beg,” and it is used to express a fervent plea or request for divine intervention or assistance. It can be used in moments of desperation or urgency, in mundane, everyday requests, or even in humorous and sarcastic forms. The trendiness of the statement can be attributed to its relatability and the way it captures the everyday struggles and hopes of many Nigerians. Thus, it has become a popular expression on social media, in music, in comedy, and in everyday conversations. It also shows the religious nature of Nigerians and the desire for a change to a better condition of life.

“Let the poor breathe, don’t suffocate them” or “Let di poor breathe, no suffocate them” captures a sentiment of social and economic justice. The phrase was first used by President Bola Tinubu during the 2023 election campaign period and has since become a common catchphrase. It is also often used ironically or sarcastically, especially in addressing the government to consider the plight of the poor in their decision-making. Many Nigerians resonate with the sentiment behind the phrase, given increasing economic challenges faced by the masses in recent years. It aligns well with the EMPATHY AS VENTILATION conceptual metaphor. Ventilation, the process of supplying fresh air and removing stale air, is essential for healthy breathing and overall well-being. In the context of empathy, it suggests society giving

the poor and struggling a space to thrive. Interestingly, despite the statement, the condition of living is getting worse, and people tend to use the expression to ridicule the powers that be!

“Bolo” is another slang expression with unclear origins. What’s clear, though, is anyone referred to as ‘bolo’ is typically perceived as foolish, slow, and not very sharp. It could also be used in playful, though occasionally mocking tone. So, the context in which ‘bolo’ is used can range from light-hearted teasing to more serious criticism. In the latter sense, it can be emphatically derogatory and often used to highlight someone’s inability to handle basic tasks or navigate social situations. The relationship of the expression to the idea of cognitive slowness elicits the conceptual metaphor INTELLIGENCE IS SPEED. It suggests that a person’s cognitive abilities are like physical speed. Someone who is ‘quick’ or ‘fast’ in their thinking is considered intelligent and sharp, while someone with a ‘slow’ thought process is viewed as less capable of understanding things quickly. Nigerians tend to be smart and ‘sharp’ individuals to survive the existing conditions and deride individuals that are not smart.

The final slang expression in this section, ‘kolo,’ means to be crazy or insane. It is often used in a teasing manner to describe someone acting irrationally or doing something unexpected. Nigerian music has embraced this particular in its culture for many years. Artist Faze’s ‘Kolomental’ was released in 2006 and since then many other artistes have adopted the ‘kolo’ expression in their song titles or lyrics.

Summary of Findings and Conclusion

To a great extent, Nigerian internet slang acts as a linguistic mirror, reflecting the everyday struggles faced by many Nigerians. This is demonstrated in the prevalence of terms related to financial hardship (like ‘sapa’, ‘trenches’, and ‘japa’) or other forms of socio-economic frustration (such as ‘God abeg’, ‘let the poor breathe’) in popular culture. These terms are not simply ironic, casual slang; they are deeply rooted in the lived experiences of a significant portion of the population. The three overarching metaphorical themes in Nigerian internet slang from the study (resilience and struggle, social status, and social discontent/critique) reflect the broader concerns and aspirations of Nigerian society, particularly among the youth, who are the primary users of internet slang.

Moreover, the slang expressions provide a safe and socially acceptable way to express frustration and disappointment, in addition to direct criticism of authority. As such, they capture collective sentiments regarding the national climate. As the study shows, the slang expressions demonstrate a blend of linguistic creativity and cultural adaptation. In this way, slang can be read as key to creating a sense of community and shared identity among speakers especially as a function of ‘everyday activism’.

Another key observation from the study is the role that social media plays in the proliferation and mainstreaming of Nigerian slang expressions. Platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok have democratised language, giving young Nigerians the tools to create, disseminate, and popularise slang in real-time. This enhances the virality of slang expressions, causing many to reach mainstream popularity within a matter of months or even weeks. Often, by the time a slang expression reaches mainstream popularity, its meaning would have been extended beyond the original. For instance, the phrase “we outside” evolved from a casual expression of engaging in social activities to broadly signifying freedom.

Finally, slang expressions serve diverse sociolinguistic functions and this paper has demonstrated how Nigerian internet slang fosters the formation of a shared identity among Nigerian citizens. In the digital age, the internet is not just a platform for passive language use, but it is one that shapes *how* people use language, thereby making it an active artifact in shaping language and communication. Through this lens, slang is not merely another form of language use, but a profound expression of cultural identity, serving as a key tool for social commentary.

References

- Abdullahi-Idiagbon, M. S. (2007). The sociolinguistics of Nigerian Pidgin (English) on university campuses. *Sociolinguistics in the Nigerian Context*, 201–218.
- Adeduyite, O. (2024, January 11). ‘No gree for anybody’ slogan can cause crisis, police warn Nigerians. *Punch Newspapers*. <https://punchng.com/no-gree-for-anybody-slogan-can-cause-crisis-police-warn-nigerians/>
- Aji, I. S. (2023). The Ethical Implications of “Sapaism” to Nigerian Youths. *The Nuntius*, 1(1), 14.
- Ajileye, M. K. (2011). *A sociolinguistic investigation of Anglicisms in personal and business names in the Yorubá speech community* [PhD Thesis]. <http://repository.ui.edu.ng/handle/123456789/3694>
- Amobi, A. A. (2021, July 19). *Nigerians and the ‘We Meuve’ Culture*. Brittle Paper. <https://brittlepaper.com/2021/07/nigerians-and-the-we-meuve-culture-ahmad-adedimeji-amobi-essay/>
- Amobi, A. A. (2024, July 4). Get Savvy With the Popular Social Media Slangs of 2024. *BellaNaija*. <https://www.bellanaija.com/2024/07/the-popular-social-media-slangs-of-the-year-so-far/>
- Ansah, G. N. (2010). The cultural basis of conceptual metaphors: The case of emotions in Akan and English. *Lancaster University Postgraduate Conference in Linguistics & Language Teaching*. Retrieved On04-05-2015fromwww. Ling. Lancs. Ac. Uk/Pgconference/V05/Ansah. PDF.
- Asemah, E., Ajibulu, O., & Beli, B. (2022). *Analysis Of Select Nigerian Music Video Slangs* (pp. 14–21).
- Asiru, H. T., & Ogutu, E. A. (2018). Slang in Yorùbá Home Videos: A Morpho-pragmatic Analysis. In E. Hurst-Harosh & F. Kanana Erastus (Eds.), *African Youth Languages: New Media, Performing Arts and Sociolinguistic Development* (pp. 227–247). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-64562-9_11
- Austin, J. L. (1975). *How to do things with words*. Harvard University Press.
- Barseghyan, L. (2013). On some aspects of Internet slang. *Graduate School of Foreign Languages N*, 14, 19–31.
- BBC News Pidgin. (2020, December 28). End of the year quotes: Soro Soke, Wahala be like and oda trend tok wey Nigerian youths use. *BBC News Pidgin*. <https://www.bbc.com/pidgin/tori-55434559>
- Coleman, J. (2012). *The life of slang*. Oxford university press.
- Crystal, D. (2006). *Language and the Internet*. Cambridge University Press.
- Davie, J. (2018). *Slang Across Societies: Motivations and Construction*. Routledge.

- Eze, A. N., Aboh, S. C., & Eze, D. E. (2020). Linguistic formation patterns of anglicised traditional Yorùbá anthroponyms. *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies*, 38(4), 282–292. <https://doi.org/10.2989/16073614.2020.1850301>
- Fadele, K. P., Igwe, S. C., Toluwalogo, N.-O., Udokang, E. I., Ogaya, J. B., & Lucero-Prisno, D. E. (2024). Mental health challenges in Nigeria: Bridging the gap between demand and resources. *Cambridge Prisms: Global Mental Health*, 11, e29.
- Idehen, V., & Taiwo, R. (2016). Sentence typologies and civic engagement in Nairaland forum. *The Discourse of Digital Civic Engagement: Perspectives from the Developing World*. New York: Nova Science Publishers, 75–90.
- Keidar, D., Opedal, A., Jin, Z., & Sachan, M. (2022). *Slangvolution: A causal analysis of semantic change and frequency dynamics in slang*. arXiv preprint arXiv:2203.04651.
- Khedun-Burgoine, B. (2022). ‘How do I make Oppa Sarang Me?’: Resemiotisation and reconstruction of meaning in the global anglophone K-pop fandom [PhD Thesis, University of Oxford]. <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:785cb0d4-965a-4a30-88ba-2c50362cc7ad>
- Kövecses, Z. (2020). *Extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory* (1st ed.). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108859127>
- Labov, W. (1972). Some principles of linguistic methodology. *Language in Society*, 1(1), 97–120.
- Laing, R. E. (2021). *Who said it first?: Linguistic appropriation of slang terms within the popular lexicon*. Illinois State University.
- Lakoff, G. (2006). Conceptual metaphor. In D. Geeraerts (Ed.), *Cognitive Linguistics: Basic Readings*. De Gruyter Mouton. <https://doi.org/doi:10.1515/9783110199901>
- Liu, J. J. (2023). *Japa, or to flee or to run: Nigerian Youth and the Urgency of Departure*. <https://doi.org/10.48509/MOLAB.6432>
- Mácha, J. (2016). Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Classical Theory: Affinities Rather Than Divergences. In P. Stalmaszczyk (Ed.), *From Philosophy of Fiction to Cognitive Poetics* (pp. 93–115). Peter Lang. <https://philarchive.org/rec/MCHCMT>
- Maledo, R. O., & Edobor, H. O. (2023). A Morpho-semantic Analysis of Some Nigerian Internetbased Slangs. *KIU Interdisciplinary Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 4(1), 110–126.
- Mensah, E., Ukaegbu, E., & Nyong, B. (2021). Towards a working orthography of Nigerian Pidgin. In A. T. Akande & O. Salami (Eds.), *Current Trends in Nigerian Pidgin English: A Sociolinguistic Perspective* (pp. 177–200). <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781501513541-007>
- Muhammad, A. (2016). A classificatory analysis of students slang: A case study of the university of Maiduguri students. *Journal of Linguistics, Language and Culture*, 3(1). <http://journals.ezenwaohaetorc.org/index.php/JoLLC/article/view/3-1-2016-003>
- Odebunmi, A. (2010). Ideology and body part metaphors in Nigerian English. *Review of Cognitive Linguistics*, 8(2), 272–299. <https://doi.org/10.1075/rcl.8.2.02ode>
- Odogwu, C. N. (2018). A sociolinguistic analysis of slangy expressions in Nigerian pidgin. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 14(4), 32–43.
- Ogden, C. K., Malinowski, B., & Richards, I. A. (2013). *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of*

- the Influence of Language Upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism*. Martino Fine Books.
- Ojo, G. A., Omotunde, S. A., & Ogunrotimi, O. (2022). *A descriptive phonological study of consonant-insertion in the anglicisation of Yoruba names: An example of secondary school students in southwestern Nigeria*.
- Okeregbe, A. (2023). Contemporary African Condition (ing) and the Imperative of Street Philosophising: Reflection on Sapa and Other Existentialia. *SAPIENTIA*, 19, 179.
- Osisanwo, A. (2009). Slangy expressions as communicative tool among university undergraduates. *Sociolinguistics in the Nigerian Context*, 206–222.
- Oyewale, O. C. (2024). *Semantic Analysis of the Song Titled “Last Last” by Burna Boy*.
- Progress, O. (2023). *Meet new name for soaking garri according to Nigerians—Grocery drinking*. Pulse Nigeria. <https://www.pulse.ng/lifestyle/food-travel/meet-new-name-for-soaking-garri-according-to-nigerians-grocery-drinking/tr68w22>
- The Nation. (2021, October 26). 13 trending Nigerian slangs and their meanings. *The Nation Newspaper*. <https://thenationonlineng.net/13-trending-nigerian-slangs-and-their-meanings/>
- Udoudom, U., Obong, U., Etifit, S., & Idiong, E. (2024). *Social Media Activism and Sloganeering in Nigeria: Examining the Socio-Political Contexts in the ‘No Gree for Anybody’ Mantra*. 1, 12–27. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11301141>
- World Bank. (n.d.). *Nigeria Overview: Development news, research, data* [Text/HTML]. World Bank. Retrieved 30 July 2024, from <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/nigeria/overview>
- Yusuf, A. Y., & Isma’il, A. M. (2017). Slangs in Political Discourse: A Sociolinguistic Perspective. *Dutse. Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2(2), 30–43.