

Publicizing a University Department to African Audiences Using Pidgin English: A Digital Media Ecosystem Approach

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Abstract

This paper presents the design, rationale, and outcomes of a digital media ecosystem developed to promote the Department of Media and Communication at Swansea University to prospective African students, with particular focus on Nigeria. The project leverages African Pidgin English as both a communication tool and a cultural bridge, deploying content across YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and a WordPress blog. Grounded in the Uses and Gratifications Theory and Media Richness Theory, the study examines how linguistically inclusive digital content can challenge colonial biases against Pidgin English while simultaneously enhancing international student recruitment. The methodology combined qualitative secondary research on university social media strategies with primary content creation in Nigerian Pidgin English. Results demonstrate that Pidgin-language digital content generates authentic cultural resonance, improves accessibility for non-standard English speakers, and positions Swansea University as an inclusive global institution. The paper concludes that higher education institutions can effectively leverage marginalised lingua francas as strategic tools for international engagement, and recommends further empirical study into the measurable impact of Pidgin English content on application rates.

Keywords: Pidgin English; Digital Media Ecosystem; International Student Recruitment; African Higher Education; Uses and Gratifications Theory; Social Media Marketing; Linguistic Inclusion.

1. Introduction

The global competition for international students has intensified substantially in the digital age, compelling universities to rethink their outreach and communication strategies. Traditional promotional materials, brochures, prospectus documents, and physical open days; no longer suffice for institutions seeking to attract students from geographically and linguistically diverse regions. Digital media platforms now constitute the primary information channels through which prospective students research, evaluate, and select universities (Camilleri, 2020).

Africa represents one of the fastest-growing sources of international student mobility globally. Nigeria, in particular, has consistently ranked among the top ten countries sending students abroad for higher education. Yet outreach efforts by UK universities rarely account for the linguistic and cultural nuances of African audiences. African Pidgin English; spoken by an estimated 75 million people across Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon, and the diaspora, remains conspicuously absent from university digital communications despite its widespread informal use.

This paper documents a practical research project that addressed this gap by constructing a multi-platform digital media ecosystem for the Department of Media and Communication at Swansea University, delivered primarily in Nigerian Pidgin English. The project pursued two intertwined objectives: first, to increase awareness of the department

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among African, particularly Nigerian, prospective students; and second, to challenge the colonial stigma attached to Pidgin English by demonstrating its viability as a medium for authoritative academic and institutional communication.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews relevant literature on Pidgin English and digital media in higher education contexts; Section 3 presents the theoretical framework; Section 4 details the methodology; Section 5 reports the digital ecosystem outputs; Section 6 discusses findings in relation to existing literature; Section 7 concludes; and Section 8 offers recommendations for future practice and research.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Historical Background and Stigmatisation of Pidgin English

Scholarly attention to Pidgin English spans multiple decades, though it has historically been marked by deficit-oriented perspectives. Hall (1967) characterised pidgin as a transitional 'stable jargon' on a developmental continuum towards Creole and eventually post-Creole, framing it as linguistically inferior to its lexifier. This hierarchy was reinforced by Bloomfield (1933), who viewed creolisation as the outcome of a contact language becoming a community's sole tongue; an implicit relegation of Pidgin to the status of linguistic insufficiency.

More recent scholarship has contested these frameworks. Mufwene (2015) disputes the linear Creole Life Cycle model, citing Berlin's (1998) evidence that Black Creole speakers in North American colonies were often fully fluent in standard English, suggesting that Pidgin use was not merely a deficit but a deliberate sociolinguistic choice. Faraclas (2012) similarly argues that Pidgin speakers' multilingual competence has been systematically undervalued. A survey by Hancock (cited in Bickerton, 1976) identified over 200 pidgin languages globally, yet only six; including Haitian Creole, Sranan, and Neo-Melanesian; received substantive academic coverage at the time, reflecting a profound literature gap.

Today, Nigerian Pidgin English is spoken across West Africa and diasporic communities. Its integration into popular culture, from Afrobeats to Nollywood films, demonstrates communicative richness and cultural pride (Echezona et al., 2022; Rukaye & Ebele, 2021). However, institutional settings continue to penalise Pidgin use: Akutaekwe and Ochuba (2023) document calls to ban Nigerian Pidgin in university environments, echoing a colonial legacy that equates standard English proficiency with academic capability (Phillipson, 2000).

2.2. Media Literacy and the Digital Ecosystem

Livingstone (2003) defines media literacy as the ability to access, analyse, evaluate, and create messages across diverse contexts. In contemporary higher education marketing, media literacy is inseparable from digital fluency. Prospective students increasingly rely on digital platforms to make university selection decisions, making it imperative that institutions produce content that is both informationally rich and culturally resonant (Potter, 2018).

The concept of a digital ecosystem; an interconnected network of platforms that together create a coherent communication environment, has emerged as a best-practice model in institutional digital communication (Petrova et al., 2021). McMullan (2020) identifies immediacy, breadth of distribution, and global reach as the defining advantages of such ecosystems. For African-focused outreach, an ecosystem that integrates Pidgin English is uniquely positioned to convert passive audiences into engaged prospective students.

2.3. Social Media Platforms in University Recruitment

Research consistently demonstrates the effectiveness of platform-specific strategies in university recruitment. Pham et al. (2017) analysed 150 YouTube videos from universities in Anglophone and Asian clusters, identifying two dominant strategies: institutional attribute promotion (rankings, history, mission) and 'pull factor' communication (education quality, facilities, environment). Their findings point to a deficit in two-way interactive communication, which represents a strategic opportunity.

Instagram's visual affordances make it particularly effective for younger demographics (Kreling et al., 2022). Fatoni (2021) analysed KTH Royal Institute of Technology's Instagram strategy, noting that regular posting schedules, interactive captions, and personal curator attribution grew the account from under 16,000 to over 30,000 followers in approximately four years. On Facebook, Bamberger et al. (2020) found that universities targeting international students employed both prestige-focused and community-focused strategies, with the latter proving particularly effective for students seeking holistic university experiences.

Blogs occupy a distinct niche, enabling longer-form content that establishes intellectual authority and provides detailed programmatic information. Analyses of Cambridge and Oxford university blog strategies reveal that academic depth, categorical content organisation, and personal testimonials collectively build institutional credibility among prospective international students.

2.4. Pidgin English in Digital Media

The BBC's pidgin digital news platform, BBC Pidgin, is the most prominent example of institutional investment in Pidgin English digital content, demonstrating both market demand and communicative viability (Oyebola & Ugwuanyi, 2023). Durodola (2013) traces the rise of Pidgin-language radio in Nigeria, establishing audience engagement metrics that justify institutional Pidgin content strategies. Adebayo (2023) argues that content creators deploying Pidgin English can leverage its informal register to foster deeper engagement with African audiences. Despite this, significant stigma persists: Romaine (2017) notes that Pidgin and Creole languages are widely perceived as less prestigious than official languages, a perception that affects both content trustworthiness and audience willingness to engage.

Table 1 Comparison of Digital Platforms in University International Recruitment

Platform	Primary Audience	Content Format	Key Strength	Evidence
YouTube	Prospective students (all ages)	Long-form video	Storytelling, campus tours	Pham et al. (2017)
Instagram	18–25 age group	Images, Reels, Stories	Visual appeal, community	Fatoni (2021)
Facebook	Parents & mature students	Posts, Events, Groups	Community building	Bamberger et al. (2020)
Blog (WordPress)	Research-oriented students	Long-form articles	Academic credibility	Cambridge/Oxford analysis

3. Theoretical Framework

Two complementary theories underpin the project's communication strategy.

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), as elaborated by Habes et al. (2022), posits that audiences actively select media based on their needs; including personal identity formation, social interaction, and integration into desired communities. For African prospective students, digital content delivered in a familiar, culturally resonant language fulfils both informational needs (understanding programme offerings) and identity needs (feeling seen and valued by the institution).

Media Richness Theory (MRT), applied by Hsu et al. (2020) and Tseng & Wei (2020), suggests that different media vary in their capacity to convey complex messages effectively. Rich media, such as video, communicates nuance, emotion, and institutional character far more effectively than text-only formats. Applied to this project, MRT informed platform selection: video was prioritised for complex information (programme descriptions, campus tours) while text and image platforms handled shorter, more frequent engagement content.

Together, UGT and MRT justify a multi-platform ecosystem in which each channel is optimised for a specific communication function, and in which language choice, Pidgin English, is positioned not as a limitation but as a strategic amplifier of cultural resonance and audience engagement.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design

This project adopted a practice-based research methodology combining qualitative secondary research with primary digital content production. The secondary research phase involved a systematic review of academic literature on Pidgin English, university social media strategies, digital ecosystem design, and media literacy. Platform-specific case studies,

KTH Royal Institute of Technology (Instagram), and Cambridge and Oxford universities (blogs), were examined to derive best-practice principles transferable to the Swansea context.

The primary research phase involved the design, production, and deployment of multi-platform digital content. Six participants were recruited through purposive sampling to take part in interviews and content features: three African students at Swansea University, one alumnus, one academic staff member (Dr. Leighton Evans, Co-Lead of Media and Communication), and one university administrator. All participants provided written informed consent in accordance with Swansea University's GDPR-compliant consent procedures.

4.2. Platform and Content Strategy

Four platforms were selected based on audience demographics, content affordances, and evidence of effectiveness in international student recruitment (see Table 1). Content was produced primarily in Nigerian Pidgin English, with English subtitles provided where necessary. A phased deployment timeline was developed spanning September 15 to December 28, timed to coincide with Swansea University's January 2025 intake window.

4.3. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained through Swansea University's Media and Communication Department ethics process. All participants signed both a Participant Consent Form (Document B1) and a Media Release Form (Document B2). GDPR compliance was maintained throughout, with personal data processed solely for educational and promotional purposes. Participant anonymity was preserved where requested.

Table 2 Project Deployment Timeline (September–December)

Phase	Period	Platforms	Key Activity
Launch	Sep 15 – Sep 30	All platforms	Account setup, intro posts, alumni spotlight video
Engagement	Oct 1 – Oct 31	Instagram, Facebook	Pidgin English Challenge, virtual campus tour posts
Deep Content	Nov 1 – Nov 30	YouTube, Blog	Full interview videos, long-form blog posts
Conversion	Dec 1 – Dec 28	Facebook, Instagram	Live Q&A sessions, application deadline reminders

5. Results

5.1. Blog (WordPress: swansiuniversitipidgin.wordpress.com)

Three long-form blog posts were produced entirely in Nigerian Pidgin English, covering: (i) an interview with Dr. Leighton Evans on the department's media and communication programmes; (ii) a comprehensive guide to student mental health services at Swansea University; and (iii) a promotional overview of the Department of Media and Communication from an African student's perspective. WordPress was selected for its customisation capability, SEO functionality, Google Analytics integration, and multimedia support (Kumar et al., 2021).

The blog format allowed nuanced, long-form content that explicitly positioned Pidgin English as a legitimate medium for academic information dissemination; an approach aligned with BBC Pidgin's editorial model. Posts consistently integrated calls to action and personal testimonial elements to increase reader interaction.

5.2. YouTube

A flagship video, accessible at https://youtu.be/rWv_9XdI-Sw, was produced, featuring testimonials from African students, an alumni spotlight, and a virtual campus tour segment. Following Pham et al.'s (2017) recommendations, the video balanced institutional attribute promotion with pull factor communication, incorporating both rational appeals (programme rankings, facilities) and emotional appeals (student personal narratives, sense of belonging).

Video duration was calibrated to platform norms (under 10 minutes) to maximise viewer completion rates, consistent with evidence that shorter university promotional videos achieve higher engagement (Park et al., 2016).

5.3. Instagram

An Instagram account (@swanseauniverssitipidgin) was established and populated with: Story Highlights (academic programmes, student life, testimonials), Reel content featuring the Pidgin English Challenge, and image posts with bilingual (Pidgin/English) captions. Posts were scheduled at 12:00 noon GMT to maximise simultaneous reach across West African and UK time zones (Hootsuite, 2022). Captions incorporated interactive questions to stimulate community engagement, following the KTH model documented by Fatoni (2021).

5.4. Facebook

A dedicated Facebook page was created to host virtual events, webinars, and an alumni Q&A session. Content themes included: cultural celebration posts affirming Pidgin English identity; virtual campus tours; the Pidgin English Challenge; alumni success spotlights; and community engagement updates. Region-specific groups were initiated to facilitate targeted community building for Nigerian and broader West African audiences.

Table 3 Summary of Digital Content Produced Across Platforms

Platform	Content Type	No. of Items	Language	Engagement Feature
Blog	Long-form articles	3	Pidgin English	Comments, social share buttons
YouTube	Promotional/interview video	1	Pidgin (English subs)	Comments, Q&A prompts
Instagram	Posts, Reels, Stories	12+	Bilingual Pidgin/English	Interactive questions, hashtags
Facebook	Posts, Events, Groups	10+	Pidgin English	Event RSVPs, group discussions

6. Discussion

6.1. Pidgin English as a Strategic Communication Tool

The central finding of this project is that Nigerian Pidgin English functions effectively as a vehicle for institutional communication without sacrificing credibility or informational depth. This challenges the stigmatisation documented by Romaine (2017), Akutaekwe and Ochuba (2023), and Phillipson (2000), and supports Adebayo's (2023) contention that high-quality Pidgin content can shift audience perceptions of the language's legitimacy.

The BBC Pidgin platform (Oyebola & Ugwuanyi, 2023) provides a significant precedent: institutional validation of Pidgin English as a news medium has demonstrably increased engagement among West African digital audiences. This project applies the same logic to higher education marketing, suggesting that universities willing to invest in culturally responsive communication stand to differentiate themselves meaningfully in the competitive international recruitment market.

6.2. Platform Synergies and Ecosystem Effectiveness

A single-platform strategy would have been insufficient to reach the full diversity of the target audience. Parents and guardians, who play a decisive role in Nigerian students' university choices (Adeyanju et al., 2020; Adefulu et al., 2020), are more effectively reached via Facebook, while prospective students themselves are primarily engaged through Instagram and YouTube. The blog serves a distinct function, providing depth and credibility that shorter social media formats cannot accommodate. This multi-platform logic is consistent with Petrova et al.'s (2021) digital ecosystem model and with Dirin et al.'s (2021) finding that social bonding across platforms influences study path decisions.

6.3. Addressing the Colonial Language Hierarchy

The project makes an explicit political and pedagogical argument: that Pidgin English deserves institutional recognition and investment. Balogun (2013) and Okon (2020) document the psychosocial harm inflicted by educational institutions that punish Pidgin use. By incorporating Pidgin into a university's own promotional voice, this project models a form of

linguistic decolonization, affirming that prospective African students need not suppress their language identities to participate in higher education.

Siegel's (2008) analysis of Hawai'i Creole provides a parallel: once perceived as 'broken English', Hawai'i Creole is now recognised as a distinct language, yet its absence from school curricula continues to marginalise speakers. The present project suggests that proactive institutional use of Pidgin, rather than passive tolerance, is required to effect meaningful attitudinal change.

6.4. Limitations

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the project was conducted within a single academic cycle, precluding longitudinal engagement analysis. Second, quantitative data on follower growth, engagement rates, and application conversions were not systematically collected during the project window, limiting the ability to draw definitive conclusions about impact. Third, the project focused exclusively on Nigerian Pidgin English; the broader diversity of African Pidgin varieties (Cameroonian Pidgin, Ghanaian Pidgin, etc.) was not addressed.

7. Conclusion

This paper has documented a practice-based research project that designed and deployed a Pidgin English digital media ecosystem to promote Swansea University's Department of Media and Communication to African prospective students. Grounded in Uses and Gratifications Theory and Media Richness Theory, the project demonstrated that a linguistically inclusive multi-platform strategy; combining YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and a WordPress blog, can effectively communicate institutional value while simultaneously celebrating and legitimising African Pidgin English.

The project contributes to an underexplored intersection of linguistic justice and higher education marketing. It provides evidence that Pidgin English is not merely an informal vernacular but a strategically powerful communication medium capable of building authentic audience relationships across digital platforms. More broadly, it argues that the international student recruitment landscape requires institutions to move beyond standard English-centric outreach if they are genuinely committed to diversity and inclusion.

Future research should examine audience reception through primary qualitative studies with African prospective students, quantify the relationship between Pidgin content exposure and application intention, and explore the applicability of this model to other marginalised contact languages worldwide.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this project, the following recommendations are made to university communication departments and to researchers in international higher education marketing:

- Universities seeking to recruit from West African markets should develop dedicated Pidgin English digital content strategies, beginning with a pilot campaign across at least two platforms (recommended: YouTube and Instagram).
- Institutions should invest in training or recruiting content creators with authentic Pidgin English fluency, as native-speaker content is more credible and engaging to the target audience than translated material.
- Future projects should implement systematic audience analytics from the outset, including follower growth tracking, engagement rate monitoring, and conversion-to-inquiry data, to enable robust evaluation.
- University alumni networks should be actively leveraged within digital ecosystems: alumni spotlights in Pidgin English provide both credibility and aspirational identity models for prospective African students.
- Higher education policy makers should review the systemic exclusion of Pidgin English from formal educational and marketing communications, recognising it as a legitimate and valuable linguistic resource rather than a barrier to academic achievement.
- Researchers should conduct empirical follow-up studies examining the causal relationship between Pidgin English digital content and international student application behaviour, employing mixed-method designs.

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