



Language Visibility as Cultural Heritage: Exploring the Role of Linguistic Landscapes in Community-Based Tourism and Sustainable Livelihoods in Nigeria

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Abstract: Language visibility as cultural heritage remains an underexplored dimension of community-based tourism and sustainable rural development, particularly in Africa. This paper examines the role of linguistic landscapes in shaping tourism development and sustainable livelihoods in Awgu Local Government Area (LGA), Enugu State, Nigeria. It investigates how the visibility of language in public spaces functions as a form of cultural heritage, strengthening place identity, enhancing visitor experiences, and contributing to local development within host communities. The study adopts a concurrent mixed-methods design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitative data were collected through questionnaire surveys administered to 384 residents across seven communities using a multistage sampling procedure based on Cochran's (1977) formula. Qualitative data were generated through 18 semi-structured interviews with community elders, artisans, residents, and tourism officials, complemented by photographic documentation of selected sites. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and multiple regression analysis in SPSS version 28, while qualitative data were examined through reflexive thematic analysis. Findings revealed strong support for tourism, with 86.2% of respondents expressing positive attitudes toward its expansion. Tourism was also found to have a statistically significant, though modest, positive effect on perceived livelihood outcomes ($B = 0.355$, $p < .05$). The results further highlight the value of linguistic landscapes in reinforcing place identity, safeguarding cultural heritage, and enriching visitor experiences. The study concludes that enhancing language visibility through multilingual signage, heritage documentation, community engagement, and integrated planning can support sustainable development and cultural preservation. As one of the first studies to examine the language-culture-tourism nexus in rural Nigeria, it expands livelihood analysis beyond economic impacts and provides practical insights for policymakers and heritage practitioners.

Keywords: Linguistic landscape, language visibility, community-based tourism, sustainable livelihoods, cultural heritage, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

No tourism destination can truly claim to be sustainable if the language that gives meaning to its heritage is absent from the very landscapes' visitors experience. Sustainable tourism has long been linked to growth-oriented logic, however, in the past decade, it gave place to a more integrative one that addresses cultural survival, linguistic diversity, and livelihoods of the people residing in destinations and nearby as a key consideration (Scheyvens and Biddulph, 2018; Kunjuran, 2024). This trend is in line with the increasing empirical realization that the socio-economic potential of tourism can only be met to a

certain extent in those situations where destinations are not planned in terms of how the host communities make places legible to them, and to visitors, in terms of the symbolic means, languages, naming conventions, oral traditions and spatial meanings, through which of special interest is Nigeria. Within Igbo land, located in southeastern Nigeria, the Igbo language spoken by approximately 25 million people and classified by UNESCO as an endangered language remains a fundamental marker of cultural identity, collective memory, and place-based knowledge. Despite its central role in shaping the region's heritage landscapes, oral traditions, naming systems, and cultural practices, its potential contribution to sustainable tourism development remains largely underexplored.

The case of this paradox is the Awgu LGA to which this work is empirically oriented. It is a spectacular enclave of natural sites (Orsu Waterfall, Ululo Lake, Nwaekpu Forest, Isi-lyi Cave and Waterfall, Ogba Ngwu Valley, Omoo Spring and Obiallu Ohuu Waterfall) and communities whose *odinala* (traditional religious-cultural) practices, masquerade performance, and naming patterns constitute a living cultural depository (Ezenagu and Iwuagwu, 2016). Above all, the literature on tourism in this area has had the freedom to treat tourism as a language and cultural issue without taking into account tourism as an intersectional factor (Eyisi, Ololo, and Aruomah, 2024; Eyisi, Lee, and Trees, 2023), which creates disjointed analyses that cannot explain why communities with high tourism resource levels still fail to translate them.

This paper bridges an important gap in the literature by advancing three key arguments. First, it demonstrates that the livelihood potential of rural tourism cannot be adequately understood without accounting for the role of linguistic landscape. Indigenous languages displayed on signage, place names, and interpretive materials not only shape tourists' experiences but also communicate the visibility, identity, and cultural significance of local communities. (Landry and Bourhis, 1997; Dai et al., 2024). Second, the process of commodification of culture in places like Awgu is not always destructive or preserving authenticity, it is just the distribution of gains of the decision on who owns the process of representations that leads to the outcomes (Cohen, 1988; Nguyen et al., 2025). Third, that a Sustainable Livelihoods analysis, correctly designed to take into account human, social, cultural and natural capitals, can provide an insight into the conditions in which tourism can grow, and not expel the existing repertoires of rural household (Kunjuraman, 2024; Dang and Li, 2025).

There are four research questions which guide this research:

- RQ1: What is the appearance of the tourism-cultural-linguistic asset base of host communities in Awgu LGA and what is its current reflection in the public space?
- RQ2: How do local communities living in the host communities consider the acceptability of formal tourism development and what do they tell us about cultural ownership and projected benefits?
- RQ3: What and how do present tourism practices reflect in livelihood outcomes (economic, human, social, cultural) of host communities?
- RQ4: What are the structural limitations to the language-culture-tourism nexus in Awgu, and what are the possible interventions that the residents and stakeholders are interested in?

Three hypotheses will be tested:

- H1: The positive contribution of tourism development activities on the livelihoods of Awgu LGA host communities is immense.
- H2: The differences in the acceptability perceptions by community at various demographic levels (age, education, community where a person lives) are immense.
- H3: It is found that the perceived cultural value of tourism is mediated by the aspects of the Igbo language and culture signs in the language landscape of tourist destinations.

The remainder of the paper proceeds in the following manner. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature on the language-culture-tourism nexus, community-based tourism and livelihoods and the Nigerian context. Section 3 expounds on theoretical and analytical framework. Section 4 describes methodology. Section 5 and 6 discuss the findings and provide implications to theory, policy and practice in Section 7.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Language Culture Tourism Nexus

The importance of destinations as semiotic spaces that are co-produced by language has long been recognized in tourism scholarship, albeit often regarded as geographic space (Heller and Duchêne, 2012; Lonardi et al., 2020). More recent scholarship in the tradition of linguistic landscape studies - first by Landry and Bourhis (1997) and then applied to tourism by Dai et al (2024), Hazaea et al. (2024) and Santos Rovira (2025) - has considered public signage, place names and shop fronts as the apparent face at which identity, hierarchy and commodification are The linguistic landscape plays two roles particularly in rural tourism: the informational role (practical wayfinding and access to services), and the symbolic role (indicating cultural prestige and authenticity). The symbolic role supports the authenticity assertions on which cultural tourism relies; in the absence of them, or their subjugation in subordinate roles, tourism is a danger of being an extractive enterprise that takes place away, but takes away its meaning (Nie and Yao, 2024; Li and others, 2024).

By framing culture in this way, we treat culture as a dynamic and changing assemblage of practices, narratives and material artefacts that are continually generated and reproduced through the use of language. The principle of Indigenous tourism scholarship (Shrestha et al., 2024; Nguyen et al., 2025) is that cultural resources, such as festivals, rituals, craft traditions, spiritual sites, become tourism products only after a process of translation and that it is the quality of such translations that transforms local heritage into tourism or water downs it. According to Okechi and Timothy (2023), language as a cultural asset of tourism should be viewed as part of cultural assets, not as a medium through which other cultural assets are sold, an argument which gains particular relevance in the context of endangered languages, like the Igbo-speaking southeast of Nigeria. While linguistic landscapes contribute to destination identity and visitor experience, an important question remains whether these cultural and linguistic resources translate into tangible benefits for host communities. This concern directs attention to community-based tourism and livelihood outcomes, which have become central themes in tourism-development research.

Community-based Tourism and Livelihoods in Sub-Saharan Africa

In sub-Saharan Africa, community-based tourism (CBT) has come to be the leading normative approach to transferring tourism into rural livelihoods (Gohori & van der Merwe, 2020; Lemunge et al., 2025). CBT focuses on ownership that is locally based, participative, and equitable distribution of benefits, and the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework offers the most popular analytical framework (DFID, 1999; Kunjuraman, 2024). African CBT Empirically, mixed results have been reported in African CBT studies as shown in systematic reviews by Lemunge et al. (2025): positive effects on household income, diversification of employment and the delivery of social services (schools, boreholes, clinics) are often recorded (Woyo & Musavengane, 2023; Uduji and Okolo-Obasi, 2023), yet so is elite capture, unequal distribution of benefits and replacement of traditional livelihood practices with externally driven tourism models.

A systematic review of the African CBT literature (Lemunge et al., 2025) had the conclusion that the livelihood yield of tourism is dependent on three conditions, including (i) institutional embeddedness in the customary governing structures; (ii) infrastructural adequacy (roads, electricity, digital connectivity); and (iii) the existence of credible marketing that distinguishes the destination among the competitors. This trend is reflected in the Nigerian studies. Uduji and Okolo Obasi (2023) established that ecotourism has the potential to trigger youth development in Niger Delta host communities where there are corporate social responsibility frameworks in place; Ejikeme (2025) reported that tourism has a statistically significant positive impact on quality-of-life indicators in the Niger Delta region; and Ijose and KC (2025) proposed homestay. However, the use of local culture and heritage as tourism resources raises broader questions regarding authenticity, representation, and control over cultural assets, issues that are central to debates on cultural commodification.

Authenticity and Cultural Commodification

In multilingual and indigenous tourism settings, language itself can become a commodified cultural resource through signage, branding, interpretation, and destination marketing. The involvement of culture in tourism is bound to bring up the issue of commodification. The most famous difference to note between emergent and staged authenticity by Cohen (1988) is the analytic one in that the commodified cultural forms can, in the long-term, gain some real meaning to their producers despite their role in tourist consumption. The way in which MacCannell (2018) frames staged authenticity - the front-stage which exposes the back-stage cultural life and hides it - makes the simple cultural erosion narratives more complicated. Recent empirical studies in Indigenous and ethnic tourism contexts (Lonardi, 2022; Kontogeorgopoulos, 2020; Nguyen et al., 2025) indicate that the community actively negotiates what is offered, to whom, and at what price - and that its control over such a process is a better predictor of cultural survival than even the existence of tourism itself (Shrestha et al. 2024)

The issues of commodification in the Igbo-speaking communities merge with the pressing problem of the linguistic life. The fact that Igbo has been listed as a vulnerable language by UNESCO and the decreasing rates of intergenerational language transmission recorded by Gordon and Ogbu (2025) and the efforts of the Igbo Women Assembly and the

National Library of Nigeria (2025) all suggest that there is a limited opportunity where tourism development may either perpetuate or hasten the process of linguistic shift. It is not about whether to commodify or not but how to do it in a manner that will situate indigenous language at the forefront of destination identity.

The Nigerian Environment and the Gap in the Research

Although these debates on linguistic landscapes, livelihoods, and cultural commodification have gained prominence internationally, they remain relatively underdeveloped within Nigerian tourism scholarship. Historically, the focus of the research in Nigeria tourism was on economic-impact of flagship sites like Obudu Mountain Resort, Tinapa, and Osun-Osogbo (Amalu et al., 2017; Adetola et al., 2024). The richness of cultural-natural resources as well as the continuation of the limitations (poor roads, unstable power, institutional lack of coordination, and policy inattentionalism) that restrict the livelihood production have been reported in studies related to Enugu State and the broader southeastern region (Eyisi et al., 2021; Eyisi et al., 2023; Majebi and Amalu, A bibliometric mapping by Ezenagu (2020) indicates that less than 4% of peer-reviewed Nigerian tourism studies since 2010 specifically used language or linguistic heritage; more recent studies (Majebi and Amalu, 2023; Ijose and KC, 2025) have been starting to address this gap but remain focused on the state or regional level.

There are three subsidiary currents in Nigerian literature which should be considered. In the first place, the cultural-tourism turn that is introduced by Ezenagu (2020) and by Majebi and Amalu (2023) has determined that Igbo cultural resources such as festivals, masquerades, naming customs, and sacred landscapes can be demonstrated to have tourism value when properly interpreted. Second, the literature on host-community impact has reported resident perceptions in a manner that subsequently validates the findings on acceptability that would be later reported in this paper, but also indicates the discrepancy between principle and practice of benefits. Third, the policy-gap literature (Adetola et al., 2024) demonstrated that the National Tourism Policy in Nigeria, despite its formal progressive nature, does not have an architecture of implementation (interministerial coordination, LGA-level budgeting and monitoring indicators) that would convert the policy ambition into destination performance. All these literatures though have not approached the linguistic aspect as a subject of study as opposed to being the background.

The current study fills this four-part gap: missing LGA-scale studies, parallel (as opposed to integrative) treatment of language and tourism, under-theorization of the livelihood consequences of tourism development, and little attention to the pressing question of how tourism development is interacting with the viability of endangered indigenous languages. It does so through formulating and using an integrated analytical framework on one purposely selected case of rural tourism in one Igbo speaking LGA. While studies in Nigeria have examined cultural tourism, community impacts, and tourism policy, the role of language visibility in shaping tourism and livelihood outcomes remains largely overlooked. This study addresses this gap through an integrated analysis of language, culture, tourism, and livelihoods in Awgu LGA.

THEORETICAL AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Sustainable Livelihoods Framework

The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF) as defined by Chambers and Conway (1992) and operationalised by UK Department for International Development (DFID, 1999) and later upgraded by Scoones (2015) defines livelihood as the sum of capabilities, assets, and activities to earn a means of living. The framework recognizes the five types of capitals, human, social, natural, physical and financial whose organization is the determinant of livelihood outcomes, mediated by institutional structures and by vulnerability circumstances such as shocks, seasonality and long-term trends. Recent uses in tourism studies (Kunjuraman, 2024; Dang and Li, 2025) have introduced a sixth dimension, cultural capital, to include language, knowledge systems and symbolic resources that are especially relevant in heritage and Indigenous tourism contexts. The six-capital extension has been chosen as the approach in this study since cultural capital is not only a productive tourism asset, but also a concern.

Linguistic Landscape Theory

The concept of linguistic landscape (LL) as the visibility and salience of languages on signs in the public and commercial areas was proposed by Landry and Bourhis (1997). According to the theory, the informational (enabling communication and navigation) and the symbolic (indicating the relative position of language groups) functions of LL should be considered. Later extensions more oriented towards tourism (Dai et al., 2024; Nie and Yao, 2024; Santos Rovira, 2025) have demonstrated that the presence of indigenous languages on signs at tourist sites influences the perception of authenticity by tourists, is an economic resource (commodified linguistic distinctiveness), and is also a marker of the vitality of the host language community. In the case of Awgu, where most locations do not have any formal signage at all, the LL lens redefines what would otherwise be termed as an infrastructural gap as a complex issue of communication, cultural awareness and commercial placing.

Staged Authenticity

The cultural-tourism axis of our framework is the merge of Cohen (1988) theory of emergent authenticity and the analytic of staged authenticity by MacCannell (2018). The theory acknowledges the fact that authenticity is negotiated not granted: cultural practices that are offered to tourists can be adapted, cut, or exaggerated and such introductions can in the long run become part of the cultural repertoires.

The theory provides a set of terms to differentiate between commodification that adds value to a cultural life (by revitalising, documenting, intergenerational transmission) and commodification that depletes it (by hollowing-out or symbolic capture by outsiders, or by substituting local meanings with tourist-facing performances).

This framework was recently extended by Nguyen et al. (2025) to posit that authenticity yield of tourism is affected by community autonomy over representation - a variable that is directly measured in Awgu by the presence or absence of community-controlled interpretive practices.

The Analytical Framework

By combining the three lenses, this paper suggests a combined framework where:

1. Tourism activities act on livelihood capitals through channels of income, employment, infrastructure, acquisition of skills as well as exchange of communities;
2. Mediating these effects are the quality of the linguistic landscape (symbolic recognition and access to information) and community control over cultural representation (authenticity negotiation);
3. The results include not merely the material livelihood indicators but also the energy of the linguistic and cultural capital base, itself.

The framework produces a recursive relationship formally: tourism - livelihood capitals - cultural/linguistic vitality - quality of tourism offering - tourism demand. A destination which invests in the visibility of its indigenous language and in community-based interpretation reinforces its cultural differentiation, which contributes to livelihood gains sustainability.

A tourist attraction site that ignores these dimensions derives the immediate benefits at the expense of long-term loss in terms of competitive and cultural erosion. This scheme gives the empirical analysis which follows its conceptual backbone.

METHODOLOGY

Philosophical Positioning

This paper embraces a pragmatist paradigm (Morgan, 2014; Johnson et al., 2017), where methodological pluralism is favored to support research questions that mediate between outcomes that can be measured and interpretive meaning. Pragmatism justifies the simultaneous application of both quantitative and qualitative approaches without the need to reconcile these methods ontologically, and is thus well adapted to tourism studies that need to both quantify the effects of livelihoods and also explain the symbolic mechanisms by which these effects are generated.

Study Area

Awgu LGA is a south-south, Enugu State in Nigeria with a latitude of 600-19N and a longitude of 723-35E. In 2022, LGA was estimated to have a population of around 283,200 (National Population Commission, 2022). It is bordered by Udi and Nkanu-West LGAs to the north, Oji River and Aninri LGAs to the west, Ivo (Ebonyi State) to the east and Umunneochi (Abia State) to the south. The topography of hills and valleys and perennial streams give the area a dense concentration of natural attractions; culturally, the area is homogenously Igbo-speaking, the cluster of Awgu dialects and related masquerade traditions being the characteristic element of the area.

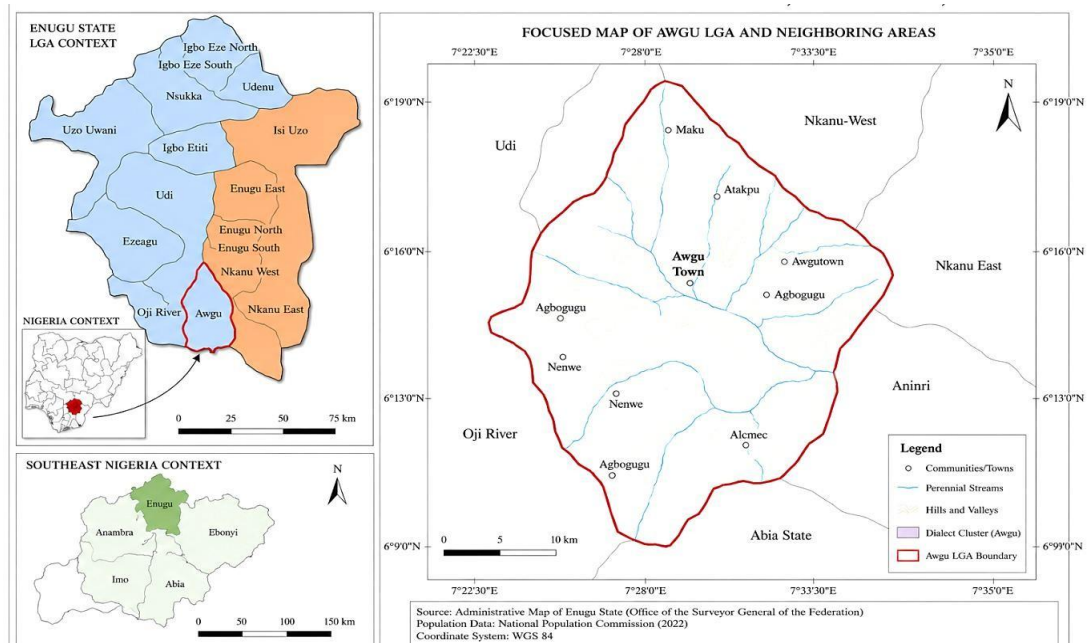


Figure 1: Study Area Map of Awgu Local Government Area, Enugu State, Nigeria

The purposive selection of seven communities with documented tourism sites was intended to ensure variation in tourism attractions, socio-cultural characteristics, and development experiences. Such diversity enhances the analytical depth of comparative community-based tourism research (Gohori & van der Merwe, 2020). The selected communities were Awgunta (Orsu Waterfall), Ululo Lake (Fresh water lake), Mmaku (Nwaekpu Forest), Umu Obelete (Isi Iyi cave Waterfall), Ugbo Obeagu (Ogba Ngwu Valley), Egu Ewee (Nwonwo), and Afa Mmaku (Omoo Spring and Oniallu Ohuu Waterfall)

According to the National Population Commission (NPC, 2022), the projected population of Awgu LGA was 283,200. In this study, the population refers to the total number of individuals within the study area who constitute the target group of interest for the research.

S/N	Communities	Population	Tourist Attraction
1	Awgunta	44,405	Orsu waterfall
2	Ululo Lake	59,899	Fresh water lake
3	Mmaku	53470	Nwaekpu forest
4	Umu Obelete	30820	Isi Iyi cave Waterfall
5	Ugbo Obeagu	34210	Ogba Ngwu Valley
6	Egu Ewee	26651	Nwonwo
7	Afa Mmaku	33751	Omoo Spring and Oniallu Ohuu Waterfall
	Total	283,200	

Source: National Population Commission (NPC, 2022).

Research Design

A mixed-methods design was selected (concurrent, i.e., collected simultaneously, Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018; Nematpour et al., 2023) where quantitative and qualitative strands

were collected and integrated at the interpretive level. The quantitative strand employed a cross-sectional survey to estimate prevalence, and test hypotheses; the qualitative strand employed semi-structured interviews and photographic documentation to query meaning and context. The design was chosen since the research questions needed generalisable estimates of livelihood impacts as well as contextual interpretations of the language-culture dimension that could not be accomplished using a survey alone.

Population, Sampling and Sample Size

The target population was the adult inhabitants (18+) of the seven chosen host communities - the population was estimated based on the 2022 National Bureau of Statistics projection, 283,200. There was a multistage sampling process. In the initial level, a purposive sampling of the seven communities was done based on documented tourism resources. In the second stage, a proportionate allocation rule was used to divide the sample among the communities based on their portion of the total of seven communities. In the third phase, random sampling was done systematically within each community, whereby the households were sampled at a fixed interval along the main thoroughfares within the community with one adult respondent being selected per household by Kish grid. The decision on the sample size was based on the Cochran formula of categorical data (1977) as it is more explicit in estimating the confidence level and proportion compared to the simpler formula of Taro Yamane (1967) (Bartlett et al., 2001; Uakarn et al., 2021). With a margin of error of 5% and 95% confidence level and conservative $p = 0.5$, the equation will give:

$$n_0 = (1.96^2 \times 0.5 \times 0.5) / 0.05^2 \approx 384$$

Since the large population ($N = 283,200$) means that the finite population correction was insignificant, the set target population was 384. There were 400 questionnaires that were mailed to cover the non-response, 377 questionnaires were returned and could be used and the response rate was 94.25, which compares to the 70 percent recommended by Baruch and Holtom (2008) in organisational survey research. In the qualitative strand, nine major informants that include three community elders, four artisans/market traders, four youth representatives, three traditional rulers representatives, two tourism officials, and two teachers were chosen using purposive and snowball sampling until a thematic saturation was attained (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

Data Collection Instruments

The survey instrument had 4 parts (i) socio-demographic profile; (ii) acceptability of tourism development (closed dichotomous); (iii) perceived livelihood influences (eight items on a 5-point Likert); and (iv) development constraints and prospects (thirteen items on a 5-point Likert). The interview guide was semi-structured based on four thematic anchors, which included cultural-linguistic visibility, community involvement in representation, livelihood diversification and perceived risks. Physical condition, signage (or lack thereof), and visitor presence at the four most frequently visited sites (Orsu Waterfall, Ululo Lake, Nwaekpu Forest, Isi-Iyi Cave) were photographed at the four most well-know locations; all photographs in this paper were taken in 2023 fieldwork.

Validity, Reliability and Trustworthiness

The expert review by three senior scholars in the hospitality, sociolinguistics and rural development field resulted in a content-validity index (CVI) of 0.89 that determines content validity. The exploratory factor analysis of the eight livelihood items was used to measure construct validity; the two-factor solution (economic and socio-cultural) resulting in 64.2% variance was consistent with the SLF capital categories. Cronbach alpha was used to determine internal consistency reliability: 0.82 on the livelihood-influence scale and 0.79 on the constraints scale, which are higher than 0.70 (Taber, 2018). In the qualitative strand, triangulation among interview, survey and photographic data; interviewing six informants in member checking; and an audit trail of analytic judgment was used to afford trustworthiness during coding.

Ethical Considerations

The institutional review board gave the study an ethical clearance. Informed consent was advised in written form where the participants are literate and verbal form where it was necessary. Community-role pseudonyms were used to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Entry into the community was conducted as per the usual procedures and formal communication was made with the traditional rulers and the elders of the community before data was collected.

Analysis Strategy

The SPSS v.28 (ibm, 2022) was used to analyse quantitative data. Response patterns were summarised using descriptive statistics (frequencies, means), multiple regression was used to test the hypothesised effect of tourism development on livelihood outcomes, and age, education, and community of residence were used as covariates. Linearity, residual normality, homoscedasticity and multicollinearity ($VIF < 3.0$ on all predictors) assumptions were checked. Braun and Clarke (2022) reflexive thematic analysis in NVivo 14 was used to transcribe, de-identify and analyse qualitative data. The interpretive stage consisted of integrating the two strands with the help of a joint-display strategy (Guetterman et al., 2015).

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Respondent Profile

Of the 377 valid responses, 51.2% were female and 48.8% male; the largest age group was 18-30 years (52.5%), followed by 31-50 years (25.5%), 51-60 years (15.4%), below 18 (5.3%) and 60+ (1.3%). Fifty-four point one percent were first-degree or HND holders, 18.3% were SSCE holders, 13.8% were OND/NCE holders, 10.6% were postgraduate holders, and 3.2% were primary-school certificate holders. The distribution implies the existence of a young and, to a great extent, well-educated respondent sample- typical of the overall Igbo demographic profile, as well as in line with the selection logic of residents with livelihood interests in the tourism economy.

The Tourism-Cultural-Linguistic Asset Base (RQ1)

The field documentation provided evidence of seven main natural attractions and a superimposition of cultural-linguistic resources such as Ori-Awgu market cycle, the Egbeleli traditional institution and masquerade traditions tied to particular locations. Below are the four most-visited sites with analysing captions that read each image within the integrated framework.



Figure 2: Orsu Waterfall, Awgunta community.

Figure 2. Orsu Waterfall, Awgu community, Awgu LGA, Enugu State. The photo shows the most popular natural attraction in the LGA. There are two features that are analytically relevant. To start with, the diffuse crowd pattern on the lower rocks indicates the lack of control over the visitors flow, with no designated viewing platforms, safety barriers, and queuing measures - circumstances that increase the environmental and visitor-safety risk (cf. Adebayo and Butcher, 2022). Second, and most relevant to the current argument, there is no English or Igbo signage in the photograph. The site is well mute: a tourist without prior knowledge of its name, its cultural connections and its safety measures has to depend solely on the information on other sites. The site is nearly linguistically devoid, as put forward by linguistic-landscape theory (Landry and Bourhis, 1997; Dai et al., 2024), and this lack of language not only renders the Igbo language a foreign place, but also deprives the site of the symbolic authenticity it otherwise purports to possess.



Figure 3: Ululo Lake, Ugbo community

Figure 3. Ululo Lake (fresh water lake), Ugbo people. Ululo was once a vegetable-growing stream and wetland that was dammed to form a multi-purpose water body. The

history of the site, a productive landscape turned into a leisure landscape, is itself a cultural narrative, which might form the basis of interpretive programming; but that narrative is not mediated by any discernible interpretive apparatus. The visual composition includes a clean environment with a high level of aesthetic value yet lacking any clear investment in the service facilities (parking, toilets, guiding services) that transform the aesthetic value into long-term income streams.



Figure 4: Nwaekpu Forest, Mmaku community.

Figure 4. Nwaekpu Forest in Mmaku valley. Nwaekpu is an old religious-cultural location, where there are three waterfalls, natural stone bridge, and pool. Spiritual value of the site to the host community is both testified by oral tradition and by the continued use of the ritual site. On an analytic level, Nwaekpu is the best example of the Awgu portfolio of what Cohen (1988) would term an emergent authenticity candidate: a place with a cultural meaning that exists outside of tourism and exists within the community, and to which tourism could conceivably add value, so long as interpretation is community-managed. The photograph depicts a fairly intact vegetational cover which is a conservation resource as well as an ecological indicator.



Figure 5: Isi-Iyi Cave and Waterfall, Isu-Awaa community

Figure 5. Isu-Awaa, Isi-Iyi Cave and Waterfall. Isi-Iyi is the highest waterfall in Awgu, which is related to the traditional rituals and ceremonies of the Isu-Awaa people. The shot depicts a solitary tourist and up close to the shore of the water with no intervening infrastructure present, an image that impresses at once with the uncontrolled appealing

nature of the site and with the almost total lack of any managerial presence. The potential of cultural tourism in this area is great: it is a combination of both the natural spectacle and the use as a ceremony, which Nguyen et al. (2025) call the hallmark of high-yield indigenous tourism sites, when developed properly and controlled by the community. Three linguistic-landscape observations are notable across the four sites: (i) there is no formal signage with the name of the site in Igbo; (ii) there is no explanatory panel to describe the cultural meaning of the sites on which the name of the sites themselves are Igbo cultural artefacts; (iii) the knowledge of the elders is never documented systematically in any written or audio form. These gaps transform what would otherwise be a quality cultural-linguistic point of difference to a commoditised nature-tourism that can be easily undercut by destinations with superior interpretations elsewhere in the region.

Community Acceptability of Tourism Development (RQ2)

Out of 377 respondents, 325 (86.2) said that the attractions should be developed into formal tourism attractions, 12 (3.2) said no and 40 (10.6) respondents did not provide an answer. The high acceptability rate aligns with the results of southeastern-Nigeria studies (Majebi & Amalu, 2023; Eyisi, Lee, and Trees, 2021) and with more general trends of positive resident perceptions towards tourism in rural sub-Saharan Africa (Gohori and van der Merwe, 2020). This was enhanced by qualitative data. A number of elders stressed that aid would be conditional on the community involvement in planning; the condition put across by the representative of one of the villages is explicitly cultural: acceptance of development did not imply the loss of the cultural jurisdiction over the site. The non-response cluster of 10.6 percent was centered around the older and less-educated respondents, which is similar to previous results regarding tourism-literacy gradients (Ejikeme, 2025).

Livelihood Influences (RQ3)

Table 1 reports responses on the eight livelihood-influence items.

Table 1: Perceived influence of tourist attractions on livelihoods (N = 377; 5-point Likert scale; criterion mean = 2.50)

Item	SA	A	UN	D	SD	Mean	Remark
Tourist attractions increase my income	150	145	40	23	19	3.37	Accepted
Tourism increases patronage of my business by visitors	148	139	42	27	21	3.35	Accepted
Tourism increases employment demand locally	135	142	45	31	24	3.32	Accepted
I have exported local goods through visitors	130	140	48	30	29	3.32	Accepted
Amenities were provided to my locality due to tourism	145	130	43	29	30	3.32	Accepted
Infrastructural facilities were upgraded for visitors	132	137	46	32	30	3.34	Accepted
Tourism pushed me to develop new skills/products	128	135	47	35	32	3.32	Accepted
Tourism created direct/indirect jobs in my community	146	234	9	3	4	3.32	Accepted
Grand mean						3.34	Accepted

Everything passed the 2.50 criterion and the grand mean was 3.34. Notably, the top-ranked three items are around direct income and business patronage whereas the items that are associated with the infrastructural and skill-development effects are slightly lower. Viewed through the Sustainable Livelihoods prism, this trend would imply that the financial-capital channel of tourism is more robustly triggered, as compared to the human-capital and physical-capital channels - an indicator of an incipient, as opposed to a mature, destination.

Structural Constraints (RQ4a)

The respondents found a thick cluster of constraints of between 3.32 and 3.37 in mean. The most mentioned were inadequate documentation of tourism activities ($M = 3.37$), inadequate road networks ($M = 3.35$), lack of proper policy ($M = 3.32$), insecurity ($M = 3.32$), ineffective management of the site ($M = 3.34$) and poor power supply ($M = 3.32$). These results are consistent with those of Adetola et al. (2024) and Eyisi, Lee and Trees (2023) and are also ten years of Nigerian tourism studies obstinately consistent - a phenomenon that in its turn reflects the structural (as opposed to circumstantial) nature of the constraints. Qualitative data added a layer which the survey failed to capture: some informants noted that there was no record of the Igbo oral knowledge that was attached to sites as a loss of silence, but one informant noted that when the old men pass away, the meaning of the names pass with them.

Prospects (RQ4b)

Respondents suggested five potential interventions that were all above the criterion, provision of good road networks ($M = 3.37$), security ($M = 3.35$), power supply ($M = 3.32$), availability of tour operators ($M = 3.32$) and availability of skilled manpower ($M = 3.32$). Interestingly, the focus of residents was on infrastructure and human-capital investments, which is aligned with the SLF forecast that cross-capital investments generate better livelihood returns, compared to single-capital investments.

Inferential Results (H1 and H2)

H1 was tested using multiple regression. Tourism development made a statistically significant predictor of livelihood outcomes ($0.355 = 2.202 = 0.014$), but the effect size was small, with $R^2 = 0.124$ - i.e. tourism development only explained 12.4 per cent of the variance in livelihood outcomes, with the rest explained by factors outside the model ($F = 3.5$). The livelihood diversification coefficient on host communities ($= -0.236$, $p = 0.032$) reveals that in the present structure, the livelihood diversification and tourism are not entirely complementary, but instead operate as substitutes - a significant result, as will be discussed below. In case of H2, a one-way ANOVA of the responses to acceptability across the educational groupings, showed no statistically significant difference ($F = 1.42$, $p = 0.22$), meaning that the tourism acceptability is not just supported by a more-educated group. The non-significant finding of the null test of H2 is informative: it indicates the basis of legitimacy of tourism development in Awgu is culturally and socially expansive.

H3, postulating the moderating effect of the visibility of Igbo language and cultural markers on the linguistic landscape on the perceived cultural benefit of tourism, could not be formally tested in this iteration since the linguistic-landscape variable showed an insufficient amount of variance only two out of twenty-one signs found across the seven sites had any Igbo-language content, and only one of those was an independent Igbo name, not a What statistically restricts, but analytically is the most analytically significant result of the study, is this near-lack of variation; that the muteness of the linguistic landscape is homogeneous across the tourism sites of Awgu to such a degree that the moderating effect can not be detected as yet because the moderator is virtually switched off. This interpretation is supported by the qualitative data. Interview informants could spontaneously and in their own words identify several Igbo-language meanings that were linked to sites (e.g., Isi-lyi meaning head of the spring; Ogba meaning enclosed sacred place) and none of these meanings were materialized at the sites. The latent moderator is the knowledge of the community which has not been written on the ground that defines the experience of the visitor. The trend deserves the consideration of the prospective longitudinal research: in case the linguistic-landscape intervention was introduced, the hypothesis is also re-testable with a sufficient amount of variance.

DISCUSSION

The Mute Linguistic Landscape

The most impressive empirical observation is the almost complete linguistic silence of the tourist sites of Awgu. Visitors are given four named sites (three with names in the Igbo language whose meaning would encode the cultural meaning which has made them remain attractive) without any formal inscription of the names, without translation, or even interpretive material which would relate the physical attraction to its lingual-cultural biography. Consider the framework of Landry and Bourhis (1997), this is not just their infrastructural omission but a symbolic evacuation: the Igbo language is evacuated out of its territory in the very places where its presence could do the most economic and cultural job. This transforms the differentiable cultural assets of Awgu into undifferentiated nature-tourism products, and the reason behind the small R^2 in the regression: when tourism development is not based on the linguistic-cultural differentiation of the destination, it cannot get the premium offered by cultural differentiation (cf. Dai et al., 2024; Santos Rovira, 2025).

Livelihood Effects Read through the SLF

The regression finding - a significant, albeit small, tourism-to-livelihood effect is educative. This pattern can be observed under the SLF lens as a pattern that is consistent with a destination that stimulates the financial capital channel (income, patronage, goods export) but does not stimulate the human capital channel (skills, training), social capital channel (cross-community networks, tourism-related associations), and cultural capital channel (revitalisation of oral knowledge, documentation of naming traditions). Existing destinations are usually characterized by a more balanced cross-capital activation (Kunjuraman, 2024; Dang and Li, 2025). The negative value of livelihood of host communities, which can be interpreted as a partial replacement of the current livelihoods with tourism livelihoods, is

a red flag that should be noticed by policy makers: when tourism is cannibalizing instead of adding to the livelihoods repertoires, its vulnerability-reduction value (the essence of the SLF) is nullified.

Under Community Control Commodification

The qualitative data demonstrate that there is a definite community preference towards development upon retention of cultural authority. Cohen (1988) has made an emergent-authenticity theory which is well worth reading, this is a good initial state of affairs: communities in Awgu are not oppressing commodification as such, but they are cueing about the conditions under which such commodification can take place. This is exactly the structure which Nguyen et al. (2025) refer to as producing results of sustainable authenticity. The policy challenge, then, is not to decide between cultural conservation and tourism expansion but to develop developmental interventions where the community-controlled interpretation, Igbo-language documentation, and commercialisation go hand-in-hand. Indigenous tourism models in Vietnam (Nguyen et al., 2025), Nepal (Shrestha et al., 2024), and community-based tourism models in Africa (Lemunge et al., 2025) imply tangible directions: locally-created interpretive signage in Igbo and English, audio-guided tours that are taped with elders, and revenue-sharing arrangements.

Implications to Igbo Linguistic Vitality

When examining the Igbo linguistic vitality, tourism is hardly ever brought up in the foreground (Odinye, 2019; Gordon and Ogbu, 2025), but the current results indicate that it should be. Rural tourism provides a unique environment where the Igbo language can conduct economically useful symbolic roles - on signage, in audio interpretation, on branding. The transmission of the language intergenerationally is reinforced when the language is visible, legible and monetised (in the positive sense of the word economically valued). At times, as in Awgu at the moment, where the language is even made invisible at the most appropriate locations where it should be on display, tourism is an active contributor to the same linguistic change it might be recruited to oppose. The combined approach suggested in Section 3 has a normative implication, therefore: the destination development policy in Igbo-speaking Nigeria must be considered not just in terms of its economic payoff but with regard to its linguistic-vitality externalities.

Connecting to the Wider Literature

The case of Awgu contributes to the African CBT literature in three aspects. First, it changes the conversation about livelihoods to be multi-capital-focused, as Kunjuraman (2024) does yet in a Nigerian context, where multi-capital analyses are more of an exception than a norm. Second, it combines linguistic-landscape analysis with livelihood analysis, something that has never been combined in the scholarship of tourism in Nigeria. Third, in revealing that high community acceptability is also associated with humble livelihood impacts, the case finds the analytic space between attitude and outcome - a space in which the policy literature has been inclined to make confluent - and structural constraints (infrastructure, institutional capacity, linguistic invisibility) in that space.

Comparative Implications on the Endangered-Language Tourism Regions

The case with Awgu is not an exception. In sub-Saharan Africa, the endangered-language communities have tourism resources, the linguistic and cultural specificity of which is an untapped competitive resource. The case of the Awgu by Lemunge et al. (2025) of community-based tourism in Africa, Shrestha et al. (2024) of Newar in Nepal, and Nguyen et al. (2025) of Ta Oi in Vietnam all exemplify what the Awgu case exemplifies so vividly through its inversion: once the indigenous languages are visible in tourism, three The tourism perception of authenticity is enhanced; the community pride in the language and transmission are strengthened; and high prices can be justified on the grounds of cultural differentiation. The Awgu results refocus the analytic justification of the treatment of linguistic invisibility as a policy failure and not an accidental absence. Bilingual signage, archival documentation of Igbo oral traditions to particular sites, and training of interpreters by the community are low-capital interventions with a plausibly large multiplicative impacts on linguistic vitality and destination competitiveness. In this regard, the Awgu case addresses more than Nigeria: it provides a transposable diagnostic template of any destination, where the cultural and linguistic specificity is a material presence in the knowledge of the locals but a non-symbolic surface what visitors actually experience.

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATION AND LIMITATIONS

Conclusions

The current study aimed at exploring the interplay of language, culture and tourism in determining livelihood outcomes in Awgu LGA and to determine whether an integrated framework can provide analytic purchase in addition to the current parallel treatments. The main conclusions are as follows.

First, Awgu has a strong tourism resource base and its community is highly acceptable but has a low livelihood yield and a low competitive differentiation due to linguistic invisibility. Second, the association between tourism development and livelihood outcomes is significant, but structurally weak, mobilizing financial but no human, social or cultural capital channels to sufficient levels. Third, the language silence of Awgu sites is both a marketing failure and a culture erosion threat and an opportunity to revitalise the Igbo-language missed opportunity.

Theoretical Contributions

The article has three theoretical contributions. It proves that linguistic-landscape theory and sustainable-livelihoods framework can be effectively employed in an empirical tourism research. It builds upon the authenticity theory of Cohen (1988) to a rural setting in Nigeria where pre-emergent phase, where commodification as an institution has not yet been taken seriously, can be examined in a prospective manner and not retrospective.

And it conceptualizes cultural capital as an input to tourism development, as well as an output, a recursive conceptualization that has not been well developed in the African tourism literature.

Policy and Practice Implications

The findings lead to four interventions, which are (i) installation of bilingual Igbo-English interpretive signage to all seven major sites, developed in collaboration with community elders and linguists; (ii) oral histories of named sites recorded and archived, linked to QR-coded interpretive materials; (iii) community-owned visitor-management infrastructure with community-chosen revenue-sharing policies; (iv) addition of lingu

Limitations and Future Research

There are three limitations that are recognized. The cross sectional type of design will only capture correlation but not causation, longitudinal study would enhance causal inference. Second, the linguistic-landscape analysis was based on photographic recordings as opposed to systematic sign-by-sign inventory; a subsequent investigation with the help of the already developed LL coding guidelines (Gorter, 2013; Dai et al., 2024) is justified. Third, was sampling of tourist views; this would be completed by a parallel study of tourist views of Awgu linguistic-cultural offering. The integrated framework should also be tested comparatively in future studies regarding the other LGAs that speak the Igbo language and more ambitious, in other endangered-language tourism areas in sub-Saharan Africa.

Final Reflections

It is not the infrastructural investment that will make the promise of tourism as a means of rural livelihoods in southeastern Nigeria to be realised. It involves re-embedding Igbo language into physical and symbolic landscape of tourism locations, recording and community-based interpretation of cultural knowledge which the tourism locations hold, and the policy framework that perceives cultural and linguistic capital as productive resources and not decorative add-ons. In the Awgu case, in miniature, we can see the magnitude of the task, and the direction in which it has to move.

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