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Strategic Ambivalence and Cultural Consciousness: Nigerian Youths, Decoloniality and the Challenge of National Development

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ABSTRACT

This study advances the discourse on postcolonial development by investigating the complex interplay between cultural consciousness and strategic ambivalence among Nigerian youths. While existing literature predominantly frames cultural engagement through binary narratives of preservation versus globalization, this research identifies a more nuanced reality where discursive cultural allegiance coexists with practical preferences for globalized alternatives. Through a survey of 450 university students at Obafemi Awolowo University, integrated with decolonial theoretical analysis, we examine four key domains of cultural practice: fashion, cuisine, language, and music. Our findings reveal a consistent pattern of strategic ambivalence, youth recognize and value indigenous heritage while simultaneously privileging globalized forms perceived to offer modernity, convenience, and prestige. The article argues that this unresolved tension represents more than cultural erosion; it constitutes a significant barrier to the culturally-grounded agency required for sustainable national development. We propose that brokering an effective relationship necessitates moving beyond awareness campaigns toward educational and policy interventions that foster critical cultural consciousness, enabling youth to navigate and synthesize global and local elements as innovative architects of Nigeria's developmental future. This reconceptualization offers a more productive framework for understanding youth agency in postcolonial contexts and contributes to broader debates about culture-driven development.

Keywords: Cultural agency; cultural consciousness; decoloniality; national development; Nigerian youths; postcolonial development; strategic ambivalence; youth identity.

INTRODUCTION

The quest for authentic development pathways in postcolonial societies inevitably confronts the fundamental question of culture's role in national progress. In Nigeria, Africa's largest economy and most populous nation, this question takes on particular urgency given its demographic reality, over 60% of the population is under 25, positioning youths as both the subjects and potential architects of the nation's developmental future. Prevailing academic and policy discourse has frequently framed the relationship between Nigerian youth and indigenous culture as one of progressive disconnection, attributing this alleged rift to globalization, colonial legacies, and the pervasive influence of Western media. This narrative of cultural erosion typically concludes with warnings about national identity fragmentation and calls for cultural revival as a prerequisite for meaningful development. However, this conventional framing often relies on binary oppositions, local versus global, traditional versus modern, that fail to capture the nuanced, often contradictory realities of contemporary youth cultural engagement.

A closer examination reveals a more complex phenomenon: what we term strategic ambivalence. Many Nigerian youths express genuine affective allegiance to cultural symbols, participate selectively in traditional practices, and discursively affirm the importance of indigenous heritage, while simultaneously demonstrating marked preferences for globalized alternatives in their everyday lives. This apparent contradiction, between professed cultural values and practical cultural consumption, represents a significant yet under-theorized dimension of the culture-development nexus. Specifically, existing scholarship has not adequately addressed three interrelated questions: (1) How does this ambivalence manifest across different domains of everyday cultural practice? (2) What logic and rationales do youths themselves invoke to explain their preferences? (3) What are the consequences of sustained ambivalence for national development, and how might it be transformed into productive cultural agency? This article addresses these gaps directly.

Understanding this ambivalence, rather than simply lamenting cultural loss, is essential for developing frameworks that genuinely engage youths as agents of sustainable national development. We argue that current approaches fail because they misdiagnose the problem: it is not cultural ignorance but unresolved ambivalence; not resistance to heritage but constrained negotiation within enduring hierarchies of cultural value.

This research is situated at the intersection of three important scholarly conversations. First, it engages with critical development studies that have effectively deconstructed the Eurocentrism of modernization theory and advocated for endogenous, culturally-grounded development models (Ake, 1982; Rodney, 1982). Second, it contributes to the decolonial turn in social theory, particularly its emphasis on epistemic freedom and the necessity of overcoming coloniality in knowledge production (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; de Sousa Santos, 2015). Third, it dialogues with contemporary youth studies that recognize young people as active negotiators of identity within globalized cultural economies rather than passive recipients of cultural influence. While these literatures provide valuable foundations, they have yet to adequately theorize the specific mechanisms through which cultural ambivalence operates among educated youth in African contexts, or to systematically connect these mechanisms to concrete developmental outcomes. This study bridges these literatures by operationalizing the concept of strategic ambivalence and grounding it in empirical data.

This investigation proceeds from the premise that cultural consciousness encompasses more than awareness or appreciation, it involves the capacity for critical engagement with one's cultural heritage and the agency to deploy cultural resources for developmental ends. We define cultural consciousness as the ability to critically recognize, evaluate, and selectively deploy indigenous cultural frameworks as resources for innovation and problem-solving. The study is guided by three specific research questions:

1. In what material and symbolic domains (fashion, cuisine, language, and music) is the tension between cultural awareness and practice most pronounced among Nigerian university students?
2. What rationales, convenience, prestige, modernity, identity, do youths themselves provide for their preferences, and what do these rationales reveal about their underlying cultural logics?
3. How might understanding this complex cultural positioning inform more effective strategies for fostering the culturally-grounded agency necessary for sustainable development?

By addressing these questions through an integrated analysis of quantitative survey data and decolonial theoretical frameworks, this article aims to move beyond deficit models of youths' cultural engagement and toward a more productive conceptualization of how strategic ambivalence might be transformed into developmental agency.

The significance of this study is threefold. Empirically, it provides systematic, domain-specific data on cultural preferences among a strategic segment of Nigerian youths, university students who represent future leaders and professionals. Theoretically, it advances the concept of strategic ambivalence as a more nuanced alternative to binary frameworks of cultural connection versus disconnection, and demonstrates its utility as an analytical lens for postcolonial development studies. Practically, it offers evidence-based insights for policymakers, educators, and cultural practitioners seeking to engage youth in development processes in ways that acknowledge rather than dismiss their complex cultural realities. By examining how cultural consciousness intersects with developmental agency in the Nigerian context, this research contributes to broader global conversations about how postcolonial societies might forge authentic development pathways that honor cultural heritage while embracing innovation and global engagement.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: DECOLONIALITY, STRATEGIC AMBIVALENCE, AND THE CULTURE-DEVELOPMENT NEXUS

This study is grounded in a theoretical framework that synthesizes three critical perspectives: decolonial theory's critique of knowledge and culture, the concept of strategic ambivalence in cultural identity formation, and the reconceptualized relationship between culture and development in postcolonial contexts. Together, these perspectives provide the analytical tools to move beyond binary understandings of cultural loss and instead interrogate the complex negotiations that characterize contemporary youths' engagement with heritage.

The Decolonial Imperative and Cultural Consciousness

Our primary analytical lens draws from the robust tradition of decolonial thought, which argues that the political independence of former colonies has not been accompanied by epistemic or cultural liberation (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Mignolo, 2011). The colonial project systematically devalued indigenous knowledge systems, languages, and cultural practices, establishing a global "hierarchy of being and knowledge" that privileges Western modernity as the universal standard (de Sousa Santos, 2015). This historical process

established what is termed *coloniality*, the enduring patterns of power that survive colonialism and continue to define culture, labor, and knowledge production in ways that marginalize the non-West (Quijano, 2000).

Within this framework, cultural consciousness is reconceptualized not as passive awareness, but as an active, critical awareness of one's position within these enduring hierarchies. It is the first step toward what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) terms *epistemic freedom*, the right to think from one's own historical and cultural perspectives. For the purpose of this study, we define cultural consciousness as *the capacity to critically recognize, understand, and evaluate the value of one's indigenous cultural systems while simultaneously comprehending the forces that have shaped their marginalization*. This moves beyond the simplistic definition of cultural consciousness as mere appreciation (Pérez & Albert, 2012) and frames it as a prerequisite for authentic agency in development.

Strategic Ambivalence as a Negotiated Position

To explain the gap between this ideal of critical consciousness and the observed practices of youths, we introduce the concept of strategic ambivalence. This term bridges the macro-level critique of decoloniality and the micro-level reality of everyday cultural choices. Ambivalence here is not indecision, but a calculated, often subconscious, negotiation between competing value systems.

Sociologist Homi Bhabha's (1994) work on hybridity and the "third space" informs this concept, suggesting that colonial subjects navigate identity in the interstices between imposed and indigenous cultures. We extend this to argue that Nigerian youth operate within a *marketplace of cultural value* where indigenous heritage holds affective and identity-based capital, while globalized (often Western) cultural forms hold capital associated with modernity, prestige, and economic opportunity (Pierre, 2020). Strategic ambivalence is the psychological and social posture of simultaneously affirming cultural allegiance (for identity, belonging, and sometimes resistance) while adopting globalized practices (for social mobility, convenience, and participation in a perceived modern world). This framework allows us to analyze survey responses not as evidence of hypocrisy or "disconnect," but as traces of this ongoing negotiation.

Reconceptualizing Culture in Development Theory

The third pillar of our framework re-examines the link between culture and development. We reject both the modernist paradigm that viewed traditional culture as a barrier to development and the romantic nationalist response that posits an unproblematic return to a pristine past (Matunhu, 2011). Instead, we align with the emergent "cultural turn" in development studies, which posits culture as the *foundational medium* through which development is imagined, contested, and enacted (Radcliffe, 2017).

Development, in this view, is inseparable from the cultural resources and frameworks of a people. As Táíwò (2005) argues, well-being is contingent on an entity becoming the best of its type. For a nation, this requires development to be an *immanent* process, emerging from and resonating with its unique cultural logic, rather than an *imposed* blueprint. Therefore, the strategic ambivalence identified above has direct developmental consequences. When youths are caught between valuing and devaluing their own cultural resources, it creates a form of agency constraint. They may lack the frameworks or confidence to deploy indigenous knowledge, aesthetic systems, and social practices as resources for solving local problems or innovating within global systems. Development becomes something to be *received* from external models rather than *built* from internal capacities.

This theoretical synthesis, linking the decolonial condition (macro), strategic ambivalence (micro), and immanent development (outcome), provides a powerful lens for our analysis. It allows us to interpret the data on food, fashion, language, and music not as isolated preferences, but as symptoms of a deeper structural negotiation. It posits that a “brokered healthy relationship” is one that transforms ambivalence into critical consciousness, enabling youths to selectively and innovatively synthesize cultural elements to drive an authentic, sustainable national development.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: DESIGN, IMPLEMENTATION, AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs a descriptive survey design with integrated theoretical analysis, grounded in a critical realist philosophical orientation. The research is primarily quantitative in its empirical phase, capturing patterns of cultural awareness, preference, and practice across four domains. These empirical patterns are then interpreted and contextualized through systematic engagement with decolonial theory. This approach is chosen to establish the empirical scope of cultural ambivalence among the target population and to deepen understanding of its underlying logics through theoretically-grounded interpretation. The study does not seek universal laws but rather identifies socially constituted patterns within a specific context, acknowledging that the realities observed are shaped by enduring historical structures of coloniality.

Study Setting, Population, and Sampling Strategy

The research was conducted at Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU), Ile-Ife, a premier federal university in southwestern Nigeria. OAU provides a strategic critical case study (Flyvbjerg, 2006) of Nigeria’s educated youth elite. As students at a top-tier institution, participants represent a segment of youths who are most exposed to global academic discourses, are forming professional identities, and are likely to assume future leadership roles. Their cultural orientations thus offer crucial insights into emergent national trends.

The target population was penultimate and final-year undergraduate students (levels 300-500), deemed to have had sufficient university socialization and proximity to transition into professional society. A mono-method, single-stage sampling approach was used for the survey component.

Sampling Strategy

A total of 450 students were recruited using purposive convenience sampling across the university’s 13 faculties. The sample size was determined based on feasibility and the objective of capturing sufficient variation across faculties rather than statistical representativeness. No power calculation was performed; this is acknowledged as a limitation. The sample distribution by faculty was weighted to approximate the relative size of each faculty’s upper-level student population.

DATA COLLECTION AND INSTRUMENTATION

Primary data were collected via a self-administered, semi-structured electronic questionnaire deployed using Open Data Kit (ODK) software on tablet devices. The instrument comprised five sections:

1. **Section A:** Socio-demographic variables (age, gender, ethnicity, religion, faculty).
2. **Sections B-E:** Domain-specific modules measuring awareness, preference, practice, and rationale regarding:

- I. **(B) Cuisine** – awareness of traditional dishes, frequency of consumption, preference rationales
- II. **(C) Fashion** – awareness of traditional attire, daily wear patterns, event-specific preferences, deterrent factors
- III. **(D) Language** – home language use, perceived proficiency, influences on language choice, attitudes toward indigenous languages
- IV. **(E) Music** – genre preferences, influences on music choice, attitudes toward indigenous music and development

Instrument Validity and Reliability

The questionnaire was developed based on a review of existing instruments in the literature and was content-validated by two senior researchers in cultural studies and survey methodology. A pilot study was conducted with 30 undergraduate students who were excluded from the final sample. Ambiguous items were reworded based on pilot feedback. Internal consistency for the attitudinal scale (Section F) yielded a Cronbach's alpha of $\alpha = 0.78$, indicating acceptable reliability. For the domain-specific preference items, test-retest reliability was assessed with a subset of 20 pilot respondents after two weeks, yielding a stability coefficient of $r = 0.82$.

DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

Data analysis proceeded in three integrated stages, combining statistical description, selected inferential testing, and thematic interpretation.

Descriptive Analysis

Frequencies and percentages were calculated to summarize socio-demographic profiles and baseline distributions of responses across all cultural domains. These descriptive statistics constitute the primary empirical contribution of the study, establishing the prevalence and patterns of cultural awareness, preference, and practice within the sample.

Inferential Analysis

To explore whether preferences varied systematically by academic discipline, a Chi-square test of independence was conducted examining the association between faculty type (grouped as STEM vs. Humanities/Social Sciences) and daily attire preference. This test was selected because fashion emerged from preliminary analysis as the domain with the most pronounced variation, and faculty type was hypothesized to reflect differential exposure to professional global norms. No other inferential tests were conducted; exploratory factor analysis was not performed as the sample size and item structure were not optimized for this technique.

Thematic-Discursive Analysis

All open-ended responses were transcribed verbatim and imported into NVivo 12 for thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Two researchers independently coded a subset of 50 responses to establish inter-coder reliability ($\kappa = 0.81$). Discrepancies were resolved through discussion. Codes were then organized into emergent themes, which were subsequently interpreted through the lens of decolonial theory. This phase transformed raw rationales into the four analytical themes presented in the Results section: "prestige and modernity," "convenience and accessibility," "affective allegiance versus practical practice," and "peer and social mediation."

Ethical Considerations

Verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to questionnaire administration. The study's purpose was explained, anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any point without consequence. No identifying information was collected. Data were stored on a password-encrypted device accessible only to the research team and were aggregated for analysis to ensure no individual could be identified.

RESULTS: MAPPING THE TERRAIN OF STRATEGIC AMBIVALENCE

Of the 450 questionnaires administered, 438 were fully completed and included in the analysis, representing a 97.3% completion rate. Twelve questionnaires with substantial missing data were excluded.

Socio-Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 2 presents the socio-demographic characteristics of the 438 respondents. By age, the majority (71.5%, n=313) were between 21 and 25 years, reflecting the typical age range of penultimate and final-year undergraduates. Slightly more than half were male (53.9%, n=236), while 46.1% (n=202) were female. Ethnically, the sample was predominantly Yoruba (86.5%, n=379), with Igbo (6.6%, n=29), other ethnic groups (5.5%, n=24), and Hausa (1.4%, n=6) constituting smaller proportions. Religious affiliation was predominantly Christian (74.9%, n=328), followed by Muslim (23.3%, n=102), with traditional religion (1.4%, n=6) and others (0.5%, n=2) minimally represented.

Respondents were drawn from all 13 faculties of the university. The highest representation was from the Faculty of Technology (17.8%, n=78), followed by Arts (14.2%, n=62), Sciences (11.9%, n=52), Administration (8.9%, n=39), Agriculture (8.2%, n=36), Social Sciences (7.5%, n=33), Education (6.2%, n=27), Law (5.9%, n=26), Basic Medical Sciences (5.0%, n=22), Clinical Sciences (3.7%, n=16), EDM (4.3%, n=19), Pharmacy (4.3%, n=19), and Dentistry (2.1%, n=9). This distribution broadly reflects the relative size of upper-level student populations across faculties.

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N=438)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
Age	Less than 20 years	44	10.0
	21-25 years	313	71.5
	26-30 years	71	16.2
	Above 30 years	10	2.3
Gender	Male	236	53.9
	Female	202	46.1
Ethnicity	Yoruba	379	86.5
	Hausa	6	1.4

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
Religion	Igbo	29	6.6
	Others	24	5.5
	Christianity	328	74.9
	Islam	102	23.3
	Traditional	6	1.4
	Others	2	0.5
Faculty	Administration	39	8.9
	Arts	62	14.2
	Basic Medical Sciences	22	5.0
	Clinical Sciences	16	3.7
	Dentistry	9	2.1
	Education	27	6.2
	EDM	19	4.3
	Law	26	5.9
	Pharmacy	19	4.3
	Sciences	52	11.9
	Social Sciences	33	7.5
	Technology	78	17.8
	Agriculture	36	8.2

Table 2: Justification of Sample Characteristics as a Strategic Case

Sample Characteristic	Prevalence in Study	Interpretation as a Research Boundary
Ethnicity (Yoruba)	86.5%	Reflects the university's geo-cultural context; findings are most directly indicative of trends among southwestern educated youth.
Educational Stage	100% (300L-500L)	Focuses on youth at a critical identity-formation and pre-professional juncture.
Institution Type	Elite Federal University	Captures attitudes of youth within Nigeria's highest tier of educational privilege and global exposure.

We explicitly acknowledge that this sampling strategy does not yield a nationally representative sample. The findings are contextually specific to educated, southwestern Nigerian youth in an elite university setting and should be generalized to the broader Nigerian youth population with caution. However, the depth of insight into this strategically influential demographic subgroup provides significant analytical value for theory building (Schwandt, 2015).

Domain-Specific Patterns of Cultural Awareness and Preference

Before presenting the four analytical themes, we first report the descriptive findings for each cultural domain to establish the empirical foundation for the thematic analysis.

Cuisine: Awareness, Preference, and Rationales

Near-universal awareness of traditional Nigerian dishes was reported (99.1%, n=434). Despite this awareness, 12.1% (n=53) indicated a general preference for foreign foods over local alternatives. Among those preferring foreign foods, the primary rationales were “more delicious” (35.8%), “easy to prepare” (28.3%), and “just like anything local” (35.8%). Among the majority who preferred local foods (87.9%, n=385), the dominant rationale was “more delicious” (67.3%), followed by “more exposed to local foods” (43.1%) and “just like anything local” (37.7%). When asked to choose between local and foreign dishes at a social event, 73.3% (n=321) selected local dishes, while 26.7% (n=117) selected foreign dishes. These findings reveal a pattern of high cultural valuation coexisting with a nontrivial minority expressing foreign preference and a substantial gap between stated preference and practical choice in social contexts.

Fashion: Awareness, Wear Patterns, and Deterrents

Awareness of traditional attire was nearly universal (98.4%, n=431). However, a striking inversion was observed between daily wear and event-specific preferences: 79.5% (n=348) reported wearing Western fashion most often in daily life, while only 20.5% (n=90) wore traditional fashion regularly. For special events and parties, the pattern reversed, with 69.6% (n=305) preferring traditional Nigerian attire and 30.4% (n=133) preferring Western corporate wear.

Respondents identified multiple factors discouraging young people from wearing traditional attire. “Modern fashion trends” was the most frequently cited deterrent (47.5%, n=208), followed by “social stigma” (31.3%, n=137), “comfort and convenience” (15.3%,

n=67), and “lack of awareness” (5.9%, n=26). An overwhelming majority (87.9%, n=385) believed that Western fashion has replaced traditional Nigerian attire among youth.

Among those preferring local attire, the primary motivations were “traditional consciousness” (62.6%, n=273), “promoting local products” (45.2%, n=197), and “gives more confidence” (30.3%, n=132). Among those preferring foreign attire, the dominant rationales were “makes one feel corporate” (48.4%, n=211), “to have a sense of being modern” (47.0%, n=205), and “gives more confidence” (20.2%, n=88). A minority (6.2%, n=27) cited perceived inferior quality of local products.

Language: Proficiency, Preferences, and Influences

The majority of respondents (84.5%, n=370) preferred to speak their local language at home with parents and siblings, while 15.5% (n=68) preferred foreign language in domestic settings. However, when asked about language use with friends, the proportion preferring local language declined to 63.0% (n=276), while 37.0% (n=162) preferred foreign language in peer interactions. A substantial majority (86.1%, n=377) believed that inability to speak indigenous languages negatively affects national identity and development. Almost all respondents (97.9%, n=429) agreed that the younger generation is losing touch with indigenous languages. Furthermore, 80.1% (n=351) affirmed that “language lost is identity lost.”

Despite these beliefs, only 11.9% (n=52) reported making intentional decisions to promote indigenous languages. When asked about the primary influence on their language preferences, respondents most frequently cited “educational status” (53.9%, n=236), followed by “friends and peer groups” (34.2%, n=150), and “intentional decisions to promote indigenous languages” (11.9%, n=52). Self-reported fluency in local language was high (83.1%, n=364), though this contrasts with the widespread perception of generational language loss.

Music: Genre Preferences and Influences

Afrobeat/Nigerian pop was the most preferred music genre (55.0%, n=241), followed by Western/foreign music (18.7%, n=82), traditional Nigerian music (16.7%, n=73), and other genres (9.6%, n=42). The most influential factor shaping music preferences was “global trends” (41.6%, n=182), followed by “family background and culture” (26.5%, n=116), “social media” (24.0%, n=105), and “friends and peer groups” (8.0%, n=35).

An overwhelming majority (92.5%, n=405) agreed that the promotion of indigenous music can strengthen national unity and development. This high level of attitudinal support for indigenous music stands in notable contrast to the relatively low proportion (16.7%) who prefer traditional Nigerian music as their primary genre.

Analytical Themes: The Logics of Strategic Ambivalence

The descriptive patterns reported above, when read alongside the qualitative analysis of open-ended rationales, reveal four cross-cutting logics that explain how and why strategic ambivalence operates among Nigerian university youths. These themes are presented below.

The Prestige and Modernity of the Global

Data across domains consistently revealed an association between foreign/globalized cultural forms and perceptions of modernity, corporate identity, and social prestige. This was most pronounced in the domains of fashion and language.

Fashion as Social Capital: While 69.6% preferred traditional attire for special events, 79.5% reported wearing Western fashion most often in daily life. The rationale was revealing: for those preferring foreign attire, the top reasons were “makes one feel corporate” (48.4%) and “to have a sense of being modern” (47.0%). A Chi-square test of independence revealed a significant association between faculty type and daily attire preference, $\chi^2(1, N=438) = 12.85, p < .001$, with students in STEM and Administration faculties disproportionately favoring Western fashion, suggesting a perceived alignment with professional global norms.

Language and Educational Elitism: Although 86.5% loved speaking their local language, educational status was cited as the strongest influence on language preference (53.9%). The qualitative data illuminated this: open-ended responses frequently linked fluency in English with being “educated,” “exposed,” and “able to compete globally,” while indigenous languages were often confined to “home” and “ethnic sentiment.” One respondent stated: “English is the language of success in Nigeria. You cannot be taken seriously in professional settings if you cannot speak perfect English.” Another noted: “My local language is for my parents and relatives. English is for my career.” This creates a diglossic hierarchy where English holds institutional prestige.

Table 3: The Logic of Prestige and Modernity Across Domains

Domain	Indicator of Global Preference	Associated Rationale (Top Factors)	Implied Hierarchy
Fashion	79.5% wear Western fashion often	Corporate feel (48.4%), Modernity (47.0%)	Western > Traditional for daily/professional life
Language	Educational status as primary influence (53.9%)	English as language of education & global competition	English (H) > Indigenous Languages (L) in formal spheres
Music	Global trends as primary influence (41.6%)	Association with being “up-to-date” and “cosmopolitan”	Global pop > Indigenous genres for social currency

Note: H = High-prestige variety; L = Low-prestige variety in diglossic relationship.

The Rationale of Convenience and Accessibility

A second powerful logic driving practical choices was grounded in perceived convenience, ease, and accessibility, particularly salient in cuisine and daily fashion.

Culinary Practicality: While 87.9% professed a preference for local food, 28.3% of those who chose foreign foods cited “easy to prepare” as a key reason. The qualitative data expanded on this, with respondents describing local dishes as “time-consuming,” “requiring special ingredients,” “difficult to cook for one person,” and “not suitable for a busy student schedule.” Foreign options like noodles, pasta, and sandwiches were

framed as “fast,” “easy,” “convenient,” and “suited to hostel life.” One respondent explained: “I love *amala* and *ewedu*, but I cannot prepare it in my room. Noodles takes five minutes.”

Fashion and Comfort: For daily wear, 15.3% cited “comfort and convenience” as a deterrent to traditional attire. *Agbada*, *Gele*, *iro* and *buba* were described in open-ended responses as “heavy,” “too much stress to wear,” “hot,” and “not for everyday movement.” Western jeans, t-shirts, and sneakers were characterized as “comfortable,” “functional,” and “easy to move around in.”

This theme highlights how the material conditions and temporal rhythms of modern, urban-oriented student life create a practical bias toward cultural forms perceived as low-effort and time-efficient, irrespective of their cultural origin or symbolic value.

Affective Allegiance versus Embodied Practice

The core paradox of strategic ambivalence is clearest in the stark gap between discursive/affective allegiance and embodied practice.

High Awareness, Low Practice: Near-universal awareness of traditional dishes (99.1%) and attire (98.4%) coexisted with significant practical divergence. Only 20.5% wore traditional attire regularly; only 16.7% primarily listened to traditional music; and while 84.5% preferred local language at home, this declined to 63.0% in peer interactions.

Nostalgia versus Navigation: In open-ended responses, indigenous culture was frequently framed in terms of identity, nostalgia, and pride (“it connects me to my roots,” “it is who we are,” “our heritage must not die”). However, globalized culture was discussed in terms of utility, navigation, and social performance (“it helps me fit in,” “it is what works in the city,” “it makes professional life easier”). This suggests a compartmentalization where indigenous heritage holds symbolic capital for identity, while globalized forms hold practical capital for daily social, academic, and professional life. One respondent articulated this tension succinctly: “I am Yoruba in my heart, but I am a Nigerian professional in my dress and speech.”

Peer Influence and the Social Mediation of Choice

Youth preferences are not made in isolation but are powerfully mediated by social networks and digital ecosystems.

Social and Digital Influence: Friends and peer groups were a major influence on language preferences (34.2%) and music choices (8.0% directly). Social media influenced 24.0% of music preferences and was implicitly cited in the 47.5% who identified “modern fashion trends” as the main deterrent to wearing traditional attire. Open-ended responses frequently referenced Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube as sources of fashion and music trends, with one respondent noting: “What you see influencers wearing becomes what everyone wants to wear.”

Music as a Hybrid Space: The music domain best illustrates the **syncretic potential** amidst ambivalence. While only 16.7% preferred “Traditional Nigerian Music,” the most popular choice was “Afrobeat/Nigerian Pop” (55.0%), a genre that is itself a hybrid of local rhythms and global (often Western) production styles and marketing platforms. This suggests a pathway where cultural elements are not simply rejected but adaptively blended, though often on terms significantly shaped by the global cultural market

and its platforms. Several respondents described Afrobeats as “our music, but for the world,” indicating both pride in local origin and recognition of global mediation.

Summary of Key Findings

Four principal findings emerge from the analysis. First, Nigerian university youth exhibit near-universal awareness of, and affective attachment to, indigenous cultural forms across all four domains. Second, this awareness coexists with substantial practical preferences for globalized alternatives in daily life, particularly in fashion and language. Third, the logics governing these preferences are consistent across domains and center on three interrelated rationales: prestige/modernity, convenience/accessibility, and social/peer mediation.

Fourth, a significant minority, ranging from 12% to 30% depending on domain, express consistent preference for foreign cultural forms, suggesting not merely ambivalence but active cultural repositioning. These patterns collectively constitute the phenomenon we term strategic ambivalence: a negotiated posture of simultaneous cultural allegiance and practical disalignment, sustained by unresolved tensions between symbolic and practical capital.

DISCUSSION: INTERPRETING STRATEGIC AMBIVALENCE THROUGH A DECOLONIAL LENS

This study set out to investigate the complex relationship between cultural consciousness and national development among Nigerian youths, moving beyond binary narratives of cultural erosion versus preservation. The findings provide clear empirical answers to the three research questions that guided this investigation, while also raising important theoretical and practical implications for understanding youth cultural agency in postcolonial contexts.

Summary of Findings in Relation to Research Questions

Regarding RQ1 (domains of tension between awareness and practice): The data demonstrate that strategic ambivalence is most pronounced in the domains of fashion and language, where the gap between affective allegiance and embodied practice is widest. While 98.4% of respondents are aware of traditional attire and 69.6% prefer it for special events, only 20.5% wear it regularly. Similarly, 84.5% prefer local language at home, but this declines to 63.0% in peer interactions, and only 11.9% make intentional efforts to promote indigenous languages. Cuisine exhibits the strongest retention, with 87.9% professing local food preference and 73.3% choosing it at social events. Music occupies an intermediate position, with hybrid Afrobeats dominating (55.0%) while traditional music remains a minority preference (16.7%). These domain-specific variations suggest that ambivalence is not uniform but mediated by the perceived compatibility of each cultural domain with professional aspirations and daily practicality.

Regarding RQ2 (rationales governing preferences): Four cross-cutting logics were identified. First, the association of globalized forms with modernity, professionalism, and prestige, what we term the prestige logic, operates powerfully in fashion and language. The finding that 79.5% wear Western fashion daily, with STEM and Administration students significantly more likely to do so ($\chi^2 = 12.85$, $p < .001$), indicates that Western attire is perceived as the uniform of professional competence. This aligns with Bastian’s (2001) observation that Nigerian youth strategically deploy attire to signal cosmopolitan capability, but extends her analysis by quantifying the scale of this phenomenon and linking it to academic discipline. Second, the convenience

logic operates in cuisine and daily fashion, where foreign options are perceived as time-efficient and compatible with the temporal demands of urban student life. This finding complicates purely cultural explanations of preference, revealing that material conditions and infrastructural realities, hostel life without cooking facilities, tight academic schedules, actively shape cultural practice in ways that decolonial theory must account for.

Third, the compartmentalization logic reveals that youth assign different forms of capital to different cultural reservoirs. Indigenous heritage holds symbolic capital for identity, nostalgia, and ceremonial belonging; globalized forms hold practical capital for navigation, social mobility, and professional credibility. This is not, as some critics might argue, evidence of cultural hypocrisy. Rather, it reflects what Bhabha (1994) theorized as the “third space”, a negotiated position produced by the impossibility of pure authenticity under conditions of coloniality. However, our data suggest this negotiation is often unconscious and constrained rather than deliberate and agential. Fourth, the social mediation logic demonstrates that preferences are not individual decisions but are powerfully shaped by peer networks and digital platforms. The 47.5% who identified “modern fashion trends” as the primary deterrent to traditional attire, and the 24.0% whose music preferences are shaped by social media, point to the contemporary mechanisms through which globalized cultural norms are transmitted and normalized.

Regarding RQ3 (implications for fostering culturally-grounded agency): The findings suggest that current approaches emphasizing cultural awareness or revival are insufficient. Near-universal awareness (98-99% across domains) coexists with low practice. The problem is not ignorance but unresolved ambivalence. Youth possess cultural knowledge and affective attachment but lack (a) frameworks to critically evaluate the colonial hierarchies that position their heritage as less modern, and (b) institutional support to translate cultural resources into professional and economic capital. This finding directly addresses Mkandawire’s (2011) critique that endogenous development paradigms remain abstract: we demonstrate concretely that the absence of institutional pathways for cultural valorization leaves youths caught between symbolic allegiance and practical necessity.

Theoretical Contributions

This study advances three theoretical contributions. First, we operationalize the concept of strategic ambivalence as an analytical lens for understanding youth cultural positioning in postcolonial contexts. Unlike binary frameworks of loss/preservation or resistance/acquiescence, strategic ambivalence captures the simultaneous, contradictory coexistence of cultural allegiance and practical disalignment. It bridges macro-level decolonial critique (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Mignolo, 2011) and micro-level analysis of everyday choice, demonstrating how coloniality is reproduced not through coercion but through the mundane, seemingly apolitical logics of prestige, convenience, and peer influence.

Second, we extend decolonial theory by foregrounding convenience and material infrastructure as vectors of coloniality. Decolonial scholarship has focused primarily on epistemology, knowledge production, and representation (de Sousa Santos, 2015; Quijano, 2000). Our findings demonstrate that the temporal and material demands of globalized capitalist modernity, fast food, fast fashion, compressed schedules, actively displace indigenous practices that operate on different temporal and infrastructural logics. This insight opens new directions for decolonial analysis beyond the symbolic and into the material.

Third, we contribute to the culture-and-development literature by demonstrating empirically how micro-level cultural ambivalence aggregates to macro-level developmental constraint. When a generation of future professionals perceives its own heritage as unsuited to modern professional life, the result is not merely individual identity struggle but systemic epistemic dependency. Development becomes something received from external blueprints rather than generated from internal capacities. This finding substantiates Radcliffe's (2017) assertion that culture is not a background variable but constitutive of development processes, while providing empirical specificity absent from much of the cultural turn in development studies.

Limitations

First, the sample is drawn from a single elite university in southwestern Nigeria and is predominantly Yoruba. Findings are most directly indicative of trends among educated, Yoruba-dominant youth and cannot be generalized to Nigeria's broader youth population, particularly non-university youths, northern regions, or other ethnic groups. Second, the study relies on self-reported preferences and practices, which may diverge from observed behavior. Social desirability bias may have inflated reports of cultural allegiance. Third, the cross-sectional design captures preferences at a single point in time and cannot track how strategic ambivalence evolves over the life course or in response to interventions. Fourth, while we theorize the link between ambivalence and developmental constraint, this study does not directly measure developmental outcomes. The connection, while theoretically and logically compelling, requires longitudinal or comparative research to establish causal direction. Fifth, our analysis of gender differences remains preliminary; although we collected gender data, we did not systematically analyze whether patterns of ambivalence vary by gender. This is an important direction for future research.

Implications for Policy and Practice

First, educational interventions must shift from cultural awareness to critical cultural literacy. Curricula should not merely teach indigenous languages, history, and arts as heritage subjects, but should equip students with analytical tools to deconstruct the colonial hierarchies that position these heritage forms as less modern or less professional. This requires integrating decolonial pedagogy across disciplines, not confining it to humanities departments.

Second, cultural policy must move from preservation to valorization. Youth will not wear traditional attire, speak indigenous languages, or prioritize local cuisine if these practices carry no economic or professional reward. Governments and private sector actors must create markets, platforms, and incentives that attach tangible value to cultural practice. This includes procurement policies that favor local textiles, certification systems for indigenous culinary skills, and media policies that promote indigenous language content.

Third, the material conditions that bias youths toward foreign alternatives must be addressed. The preference for noodles over amala is not simply a taste preference; it is a response to hostel infrastructure that lacks cooking facilities. The preference for Western attire is partly a response to tropical climates and the impracticality of elaborate traditional wear for daily movement. Cultural policy must engage with urban planning, housing policy, and industrial policy, not remain isolated in ministries of culture.

Fourth, digital platforms must be recognized as primary sites of cultural socialization and strategically leveraged. The same social media platforms that currently transmit globalized fashion and music trends can be mobilized to showcase contemporary, innovative adaptations of indigenous cultural forms. This requires

investing in digital content creation that presents heritage as dynamic, modern, and aspirational, not static and archival.

Future Research Directions

This study opens several research frontiers. Comparative research across Nigerian regions, ethnic groups, and rural-urban divides is urgently needed to map variations in strategic ambivalence. Longitudinal studies tracking youth from university into professional life would reveal whether ambivalence resolves, intensifies, or transforms with career progression and geographic mobility. Intervention research using participatory action methods could test whether critical cultural literacy programs actually shift practice and developmental agency. Finally, gender analysis deserves dedicated attention: preliminary inspection of our data suggests female respondents may exhibit different patterns of ambivalence, particularly in fashion and cuisine, warranting systematic investigation.

CONCLUSION: FROM STRATEGIC AMBIVALENCE TO CULTURAL ARCHITECTONICS

This study began with a deceptively simple question: Why do Nigerian youths, who overwhelmingly express pride in and allegiance to their indigenous heritage, consistently privilege globalized alternatives in their everyday lives? The answer, we have argued, is neither cultural ignorance nor wholesale abandonment, but strategic ambivalence, a negotiated, often unconscious posture produced by the enduring structures of coloniality and sustained by the mundane logics of prestige, convenience, and social mediation.

Through systematic empirical investigation across four domains of cultural practice, fashion, cuisine, language, and music, we have demonstrated that this ambivalence is not uniform but patterned. It is widest where globalized forms are perceived to confer professional credibility and modern identity (fashion, language), and narrowest where indigenous practices retain strong affective and ceremonial attachment (cuisine, event-specific attire). Across all domains, however, a consistent tension persists: youths carry their heritage in their hearts but wear, speak, and consume their futures in globalized forms.

Our central contention is that this unresolved tension constitutes more than a personal identity struggle. It is a systemic constraint on national development. A generation that cannot deploy its own cultural resources as tools for innovation, problem-solving, and professional distinction is a generation dependent on external blueprints. The developmental consequence is not merely cultural loss but agency constraint, the inability to imagine and enact authentically endogenous pathways to prosperity. This is the true cost of strategic ambivalence.

Yet our findings also reveal seeds of transformation. The massive popularity of Afrobeats, a genre born of creative synthesis between local rhythms and global production norms, demonstrates that Nigerian youth are not cultural conservatives but cultural innovators. Their syncretic energy, however, has been largely confined to entertainment and consumption. The urgent task, therefore, is to channel this creative capacity from the margins of leisure to the core of development.

This requires a fundamental shift in how culture is conceptualized and operationalized in Nigerian policy and education. Culture must be reframed from heritage, something inherited from the past and preserved, to operating system, a living, dynamic toolkit for contemporary problem-solving. This reframing is not semantic; it is structural. It demands that indigenous knowledge systems, languages, and aesthetic traditions be integrated into STEM curricula, business incubators, urban planning, and public health campaigns, not as folklore, but as rigorous, legitimate frameworks for innovation.

The broker of this healthy relationship is not a single actor but an ecosystem. Universities must move beyond teaching *about* culture to teaching *through* culture, using indigenous epistemologies as analytical frameworks across disciplines. Government must move beyond funding museums to funding cultural innovation incubators that attach economic value to indigenous practice. Media and technology platforms must move beyond broadcasting global trends to showcasing contemporary, aspirational adaptations of Nigerian heritage. Parents and communities must move beyond lamenting language loss to creating everyday contexts in which indigenous languages carry practical, not merely sentimental, value.

We acknowledge the scale of this undertaking. Coloniality did not install itself overnight, and it will not be dismantled by isolated interventions. But we also recognize that strategic ambivalence is not irreversible. It is a posture produced by specific historical and institutional conditions; those conditions can be transformed.

This study, focused on a single elite university in southwestern Nigeria, is necessarily limited in its generalizability. Yet its conceptual contribution, the framework of strategic ambivalence and its linkage to developmental agency, offers analytical tools that can be tested, refined, and adapted across other postcolonial contexts. We invite scholars of youths, culture, and development in Africa and beyond to interrogate, critique, and extend these concepts through comparative, longitudinal, and participatory research.

In closing, we return to the youths who populate this study. They are not, as some narratives suggest, a generation that has abandoned its heritage. They are a generation caught between two worlds, navigating competing hierarchies of value with incomplete analytical tools and insufficient institutional support. They carry their culture in their memory and their aspiration in borrowed garments. The task of brokering a healthy relationship is the task of equipping them to see that these need not be separate, that the most authentic path to the future is often paved with the most resilient materials of the past.

A generation that can critically, creatively, and confidently synthesize its heritage with its horizons will not need to choose between identity and development. It will achieve both, not despite each other, but through each other.

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