# Chapter 2 - Using Twitter to Maintain and Strengthen Cultural Identity: A Case Study of Young Sierra Leoneans in the Diaspora

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## Abstract

International migration often leads to the loss of the familiar such as language (particularly colloquial), viewpoints, values, social structures, and support networks, affecting one's sense of self and cultural identity. To address this, migrants create communication networks and engage in activities that enable them to connect with other people from their home country to sustain their cultural identity. This endeavour has been made easier by the unprecedented rise of social media and its ease of access. This article explores how young Sierra Leoneans in the diaspora (aged 18 - 35 years) use the social media app Twitter[1] to establish and maintain cultural identity. #SaloneTwitter is a popular interactive hashtag used by Sierra Leoneans at home and abroad to tweet about trends in values, language, music, food, and debate current affairs. The findings reveal that young Sierra Leoneans use Twitter to maintain their cultural/national identity by celebrating and highlighting their homeland's culture and building an online community and networking opportunities for young Sierra Leoneans. Overall, this paper contributes to the literature on contemporary migration and cultural issues by amplifying the voices of youth migrants in the new era of using social media to give visibility to cultural identities.

**Keywords:** Cultural identity, diaspora, social media, young migrants, Sierra Leone

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[1] The data was collected when the social media app X was still known as Twitter.

# Introduction

Culture can be defined in myriad ways, but one common definition is culture as a specific group's 'way of life,' based on shared dynamic practices, values, and norms (Gsir & Mescoli 2015). This paper focuses on the cultural practices, norms, and values associated with Sierra Leone, the country of origin of the migrants who participated in this study. Gsir and Mescoli (2015) assert that culture should be viewed as an active belonging, as it continues to have a real meaning in the lives of people who shape and affirm their identity through various cultural practices. According to Daniels (2020), because cultural identity operates within a cultural context, cultural practices such as language, ceremonies, and cuisine, among others, are ideal indicators of identity, implying that one can claim identity through association or dissociation. Diyaiy and Saleh (2013) concur that individuals seek an identity that gives meaning to their lives.

This study focuses on young Sierra Leoneans in the diaspora as users of the social media platform Twitter. The major destinations for most Sierra Leonean migrants include neighbouring African countries (Guinea, Liberia & Nigeria), the UK, the USA, and Australia (Office of Diaspora Affairs Sierra Leone 2018). Though migration often involves the loss of the familiar such as language, attitudes, and values, social media's influence plays an important role in creating and maintaining identity through shared experiences and enabling relationships and connectedness (Niemandt 2013).

Over the last decade, Twitter has been an important space for cultural conversations. With its emphasis on public accessibility and real-time content production, the social media app has become a hub for communities of all types and sizes (Freelon *et al.* 2018). The ability to post and share 'tweets' is a powerful force for preserving and enhancing cultural autonomy and particularity (Freelon *et al.* 2018). For example, 'Black Twitter' an online articulation of black culture (predominantly African American), illustrates how culture can shape online social interactions and how Twitter can be utilised to frame perceptions of black culture (Brock 2012). Friedman (2005) concurs that social media enables the collective power of individuals and communities to create content around their own self-generated experiences and to be producers of culture.

In the case of the Sierra Leonean diaspora, Twitter is a key platform for experiencing belonging by participating in and keeping up with conversations about the homeland using the hashtag #SaloneTwitter. When Twitter

users include a hashtag in their tweets, it is linked to all other tweets that include words or phrases in the hashtag, making it easier for people to follow a topic of interest (Twitter Business 2022). Salone is an informal term used by Sierra Leoneans to refer to their country; thus, the Twitter interactive hashtag was named 'Salone Twitter.'

Twitter has transformed notions of belonging and identity; therefore, it is important to explore how it facilitates and shapes the possibilities of diasporic affiliation, thus motivating this research. The theory and concept of identity in a digital and interconnected world are discussed below.

## Theoretical Framework
### Identity Negotiation Theory

Identity derives from the Latin words 'identitas' and 'idem', which mean 'sameness' (Daniels 2020; Leurs 2015). In other words, identity can be defined as being/feeling similar to someone or a community. According to Bhurga and Becker (2005), identity is the sum of one's perception of oneself or how individuals perceive themselves to be distinct from others.

The Identity Negotiation Theory (ITN) underpins this research. It posits that 'an individual's multifaceted identities of culture, ethnicity, religious, social class, gender, professional, family/relational role, and personal image(s) is based on self-reflection and other social construction processes' (Ting-Toomey 2015; 1). In other words, individuals can affirm their identity through self-reflection, relational roles, and group membership. Sociocultural identities can encompass ethnic membership identity, social class identity, and family role; personal identities may also include unique attributes related to the individual (Ting-Toomey 2015).

In the context of cultural identity formation, the Identity Negotiation Theory posits that humans are socialized within a larger cultural group, and through cultural and family socialization experiences, they acquire the values, norms, and ways of behaving of their cultural or ethnic group. Cultural identity can therefore be understood as the emotional significance we attach to our sense of belonging or affiliation with the larger culture, e.g., the larger Sierra Leonean culture (Ting-Toomey 2005).

The following underscore the key tenets of identity negotiation, firstly, cultural or ethnic identities and personal identities are formed in communication settings; secondly, humans in all cultures desire identity security, including inclusion, connection, and positive group-based identity. Thirdly,

individuals are likely to experience emotional identity security in culturally familiar situations and experience vulnerability in culturally unfamiliar contexts (Ting-Toomey 2005). Additionally, the goal of identity negotiation is for people to feel that their respective person-based and group-based identities are affirmed, understood, and valued (Ting-Toomey 2005).

In the case of migrant populations, many factors can influence the identity negotiation process, such as the receptivity of the host culture, migrants' expectations, and interpersonal factors, such as the formation of social networks (Norohnha & Papoutski 2014; Leurs 2015). This current study will explore how young Sierra Leoneans in the diaspora negotiate their identity through various sociocultural and personal experiences and inter-group and interpersonal interactions on Twitter.

Social media platforms such as Twitter indicate a continuing shift from people being represented by the media to people asserting their identities (Leurs 2015). The 'platform' becomes a symbolic construct that enables users to articulate and perform identity alignments within, across or against the lines of ethnicity, class, gender, and religion (Gillespie 2010). According to Freelon *et al.* (2018), social media provides a space for minorities and marginalised communities to discuss issues that they say are either not covered by mainstream media or are not portrayed in the appropriate cultural context. For example, #BlackLivesMatter raised awareness about widespread incidences of police violence against black people and mobilised Twitter users to take action.

As key identity-formation processes such as coming of age, gender, diaspora, and youth cultural expectations become increasingly digitalized, it is critical to examine how Sierra Leonean Twitter users in this study perform actions online that manifest their identities.

# Literature
## *Complexity around Identity in Sierra Leone*

Sierra Leone is a small country with a population of 7 million but exhibits considerable ethnic diversity (Glennerster *et al.* 2013). The population comprises eighteen indigenous ethnic groups, and the two dominant groups include the Mendes and the Temnes. In addition, the Krio ethnic group (descendants of freed and repatriated African slaves) and a sizeable number of Lebanese and other non-indigenous Africans also make up the country's population (Glennerster *et al.* 2013).

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One of the main legacies of Sierra Leone's settlement by formerly enslaved people is their language, Krio. Krio, a dialect of English with many other linguistic influences, has served as a national lingua franca for decades (Glennerster *et al.* 2013). The language is spoken by 95% of the population (mainly as a second language) and is increasingly taught in schools (Oyetade & Luke 2008). The widespread knowledge of Krio in Sierra Leone facilitates trade, communication, and cooperation across ethnic lines.

Ethnic divisions have also been less damaging in Sierra Leone compared to many neighbouring countries (Glennerster *et al.* 2013). Krio's ubiquity in Sierra Leone has aided in the promotion of a shared sense of national identity that transcends tribes (Ngugi 2009). Aside from the lingua franca, other significant practices such as cuisine, clothing, and ceremonies help to unite Sierra Leoneans. Rice is the country's staple food, and it is cooked daily in most Sierra Leonean homes, with a different soup served each day, such as cassava leaves, potato leaves, or groundnut soup. Furthermore, while there may be variations in how ceremonial occasions are conducted among ethnic groups, most Sierra Leoneans participate in similar ceremonies. One of these common ceremonies is the naming ceremony for a newborn, which in Krio is called *'pul nar do'* (take outside the door).

## *Understanding the 'Digital Diaspora'*

Mobility and international migration are becoming defining characteristics of the twenty-first century. In 2000, 173 million people lived outside of the country where they were born; by 2020, this had reached 281 million (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2021). Migration is more than just a demographic phenomenon; it is also a socially constructed process in which cultural identity, economic, and political strategies play important roles. While migration (primarily from the global south to the north) is associated with the promise of a better life, such as employment and educational opportunities, as well as political stability, it also comes with the trade-off of loss of the familiar, such as language, values, and social structures. This can negatively impact one's sense of self and cultural identity (Bhurga & Becker 2005).

According to Ponzanesi (2020), the diaspora, a post-national space, plays a key role in fostering bonding and strengthening national ties in migrant cultures abroad. When applied to migrant culture, the media has become a powerful tool to help migrants relive feelings of nostalgia, maintain

ties with their homeland and co-nationals and strengthen intra-group solidarity (Noronha & Papoutski 2014).

This feature of contemporary migration issues has given rise to the concept of 'digital diaspora' (NurMuhammad *et al.* 2016). Though its definition is not precise, Alonso and Pedro Oiarzabal (2010: 11) attempt to define it as 'the distinct online networks that diaspora populations use to recreate identities, share opportunities, spread their culture, influence homeland and host-land policy, or create debate about common-interest issues via means of electronic devices.' Before the emergence of social media, broadcast media such as radio, television and magazine were typically the main media platforms used by migrants in the diaspora to stay connected. Noronha and Papoutsaki (2014) provide an example of how Radio Tarana, established in 1996, caters to the Indian community in New Zealand.

While migrant media cultures are not a new phenomenon, the unprecedented rise of social media and its ease of access has transformed how migrants create 'communities of belonging' and stay connected with their homeland (Ponzanesi 2020). Internet users in the diaspora align themselves with identities they feel connected to by creating a nickname, retweeting, or following a hashtag, among other actions. Furthermore, users in the diaspora can build online communities by participating in chat rooms, engaging in conversations about issues concerning the homeland, or following news and pages about home.

Another way diaspora populations connect to their homeland is through their social media monikers or handles. According to Leurs (2015), digital diasporas are not only defined by having conversations with people at home and in the diaspora but also by engaging in self-branding practices. By doing so, social media users communicate to their audiences that they belong to a homeland while simultaneously indicating that they are outside of this homeland. For example, young people of South Asian descent use the term 'Desi' in their names on social networking sites like Instagram and Twitter; the term 'Desi' means 'those from the homeland' in Sanskrit (Mallapragada 2006: 217).

## Sierra Leonean Diaspora

Sierra Leoneans living abroad have been reported to form different diaspora associations and engage in activities that allow them to connect with other members from their country of origin to maintain their cultural identity. For

example, the organisation, Krio Descendants Union has 11 branches, the majority of which are in states across the USA, with one in London and another in Freetown. The organisation's goal is to provide a forum for cultural expression and to ensure that descendants, particularly those living outside the country, are aware of and appreciate the Krios' rich culture and heritage (Krio Descendants Union 2021).

Former students at the Annie Walsh Memorial School for Girls in Freetown have a diasporic organization called the Annie Walsh Old Girls' Association (AWOGA). The organization has a Facebook page for alumni to connect, raise funds for the school's upkeep and engage in various other activities. In 2013, the government had plans to relocate the school from its present premises for the construction of a market. However, the decision was rescinded as old girls across the diaspora protested to keep the school grounds, emphasising that it is a heritage site in Sierra Leone (Rashid-Thomas 2013). This demonstrates the importance of social media in establishing relationships and providing a platform for communication across transnational spaces.

## Research Methodology

This study employed qualitative research methodology. This methodology is especially effective in obtaining culturally specific information about populations' values, opinions, behaviours, and social contexts (Mack 2005). In addition, the strength of qualitative methods is that they provide complex textual information about how people experience the research issue and help to create meaning out of those experiences (Bhattacharya 2017).

The study aimed to gain a rich understanding of a complex social phenomenon, which entails how Sierra Leoneans use Twitter to affirm their cultural identity. As such, qualitative research was befitting for this study as the research questions can be best answered with experiences, personal insights, and opinions.

In-depth semi-structured interviews comprise one of the most common qualitative methods, and they are ideal for collecting information on individuals' personal histories, perspectives, and experiences (Mack 2005). This method was therefore used to collect data for this research as it evoked meaningful and culturally relevant responses from the participants and provided nuances to the study that were unanticipated by the researcher. Nine young Sierra Leoneans living outside their home country were inter-

viewed to understand their experiences using #SaloneTwitter and how they maintain ties to their homeland. The following questions were posed to the participants. (Follow-up questions were also asked based on their responses):

1. What struggles have you faced in maintaining your identity while abroad?
2. What is your understanding of #SaloneTwitter?
3. What role do you think #SaloneTwitter, plays in building a community of belonging and strengthening identity?
4. How do you use #SaloneTwitter to maintain ties with your homeland and sustain your Sierra Leonean identity?

The participants reside in the following countries: South Africa, the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Germany, Cyprus, Denmark, and Ireland. Most participants moved to their host countries as children. The researcher employed a non-probability sampling technique- purposive and snowball sampling-respectively. Purposive sampling is selecting participants with key demographic characteristics that are useful to the research's purpose. While snowball sampling entailed the researcher requesting the initial participants to identify other potential participants who met the criteria (Mack 2005). To meet the participant criteria, the participants had to be born in Sierra Leone but living in another country; in addition, they had to be under the age of 35 years. The researcher found some participants via Twitter by posting a Tweet about the intended study. After that, those interested participants recommended other Sierra Leoneans in the diaspora who agreed to participate after the researcher contacted them.

The study participants were provided an informed consent form before the interviews, which described the research and their rights as participants. Furthermore, all the participants freely consented to participation. The interviews took place via Zoom, and the discussions were recorded. Moreover, participants were given a participant number to guarantee anonymity and confidentiality in the study.

Thematic analysis was the method used to analyse the data. Bricki (2007) describes a thematic analysis as looking across all the data to identify recurring issues and categorising them into main themes that summarise all the views collected. The steps the researcher took included an initial reading of the interview transcripts, coding the data and then identifying themes across the data.

The main themes that emerged were as follows: 1) the importance of belonging for young people; 2) #SaloneTwitter as an online community platform; 3) #SaloneTwitter as a cultural learning and promotion tool; and 4) #SaloneTwitter as a networking tool.

## Findings
### *The Importance of Belonging for Young People*
In all societies, many young migrants or descendants have been reported to face the problem of belonging 'neither here nor there' in addition to experienceing various forms of social exclusion in the form of bullying, teasing or generally a feeling of being marked as different (Fangen *et al.* 2012).

This study found that cultural differences between Sierra Leone and host countries, and weak social networks following migration shaped the participants' sense of belonging. According to the participants' responses, belonging is a social process related to integration in important social spheres for young people, such as friendships, peer groups, and community activities. Based in Ireland, Denmark, and the USA, these participants discussed their struggles with integrating and relating to people in their host communities.

> *In terms of conversations, you'll find out that when you speak to other people, they have a whole different perspective and that's because of cultural differences and upbringing and social institutions that you grew up within. For you to be able to explain yourself it becomes a herculean task. Sometimes you really struggle with a sense of relationship, sense of identity because you don't understand each other (Participant 2).*

Participant 4 shared similar sentiments:

> *It is so easy to have an identity crisis when you are living away from home. Here I am always seen as a foreigner because Denmark is very white. If I was in a bigger cosmopolitan city like London this wouldn't be a problem because there are many Sierra Leoneans there.*

While participant 9 had this to say:

> *I had some struggles growing up as an African kid in America, to the*

> *black kids, I am African and to the white kids, I am black. I didn't have a group that I fit into. I wondered all the time what it would be like to be around kids who don't think my name is strange or to eat Crain at lunch and no one looked at me in a funny way.*

Identity has a strong relational dimension, as indicated by the Identity Negotiation Theory. These participants struggled to affirm their Sierra Leonean identity as they struggled to relate to others in their society due to a lack of shared understanding, language, and cultural heritage with those they interacted with in their respective host countries.

Some participants also expressed a sense of disconnection from both societies due to barriers to meaningful engagement in both the home and host societies. The Identity Negotiation Theory offers some insights into the complex way participants negotiate their identities based on their experiences of belonging. The participants quoted below have multifaceted identities that their socialized environments have influenced. They grew up in their host countries, so they can better relate to the respective cultural influences of those societies, making them feel at home. However, they still feel they do not fully belong in the host country as they are perceived as different. Despite this, they face a similar experience in Sierra Leone, where they are considered not to be 'fully Sierra Leoneans' because their identities have been influenced by the cultures of their respective host countries. Jardim and Da Silva (2020) confirm that positive and negative interactions in a locality can provoke an ambiguous and contradictory sense of belonging and non-belonging.

These were the reflections from participant 1 and participant 6, respectively.

> *I'm a British citizen – but in the UK I am more Sierra Leonean than anything else. However, anywhere else in the world I am considered more British – including Sierra Leone. Too foreign for here but too foreign for home.*
> *While I can say I am more South African, I can't speak any of the local languages here. I don't know how people would react to me when I go back home. Here they think I am weird for not speaking an African language, If I were to go home maybe I would get a similar reaction – that I am from there but can't speak Krio very well.*

Some of these young Sierra Leoneans in the diaspora revealed findings con-

sistent with the literature and the Identity Negotiation Theory, indicating that migrants' identification with their cultural heritage is critical in constructing and re-negotiating their identity. For instance, in a study among young people with migrant backgrounds in Portugal, participants from Cape Verde expressed a preference for the Cape Verdean culture and socialised in neighbourhoods where Cape Verdeans were dominant (Jardim & da Silva 2020). Similarly, in this study, participants reechoed the importance of socializing with other Sierra Leoneans to affirm their cultural identity.

Participant 3, who resides in Germany shared this:

> *When I was in school, I didn't want to see myself as a Sierra Leonean because I didn't want to be perceived as different. On the other hand, when I would go to family gatherings or Sierra Leonean parties, I was proud to have somewhere I can call home and fit in.*

Participant 7, a UK resident, shared a similar sentiment.

> *Now that I'm older, I've gotten the opportunity to mix with other Sierra Leoneans and be able to strengthen my identity because I have met people that I can relate with and can understand the jokes that I tell or the way I do certain things.*

A sense of belonging is important for these young Sierra Leoneans in the diaspora. Most migrants, particularly youth migrants, construct and negotiate identity through social belonging and developing modalities of social relations in their new environment. Studies have found that forming a strong host-country identity aids in enhancing sociocultural adjustment while maintaining a strong country of origin identity is important for psychological adjustment (Bhurga & Becker 2005; Jardim & da Silva 2020). Other scholars agree that the ideal of integration for young migrants entails balancing active participation in the host society and embracing their cultural heritage (Berry & Sabatier 2010; Cooper & Smalls 2010). Similarly, the participants in this study discovered that having strong ties to their country of origin benefits their integration into the larger society.

## #SaloneTwitter as an Online Community Platform
People in the diaspora can play an important role in establishing relationships

between countries, mainly through bonding and bridging activities. The former pertains to groups of people associating themselves with a physical or imaginary 'homeland'– by birth, past residence, or merely through their identification (Ponzanesi 2020). The homeland is what community members have in common – where their roots are. The bridging aspect of diasporic life involves connecting with other groups and communities. Bonding and bridging can and often do occur concurrently. Diaspora networks have helped reinforce a sense of pride in national and cultural identities while fostering cosmopolitanism.

Digital media have caused physical distance to shrink through digital proximity, creating new forms of relations and belonging (Alinejad & Olivieri 2020). This was an account from participant 1 concerning the role of Twitter in bringing Sierra Leoneans closer.

> *Salone Twitter lets people know that there is a platform that they can belong to. I have spoken to Sierra Leoneans that are in places that I didn't even know existed. That's why having platforms like Twitter is important in bringing us closer together. You can connect with home, and you have home in the palm of your hands because of technology.*

Participants indicated that the creation of #SaloneTwitter has been useful in building an online community for young Sierra Leoneans in the diaspora to connect and maintain their Sierra Leonean identity. Feeling like part of a group is a key tenet of the Identity Negotiation Theory, and Twitter has allowed the participants to strengthen their identity through group membership. Though the Sierra Leonean diaspora is dispersed across transnational spaces, the shrinking of time and space through digital media has fostered a sense of community and helped people present and reinforce their Sierra Leonean identity as they remain connected to co-nationals.

These were the reflections from participants 7 and 8, based in the UK and the USA, respectively.

> *The founder of Young Salone started that hashtag. He made a list of Sierra Leoneans to follow, and he used the hashtag 'SaloneTwitter,' and that list grew as people started following each other. It basically increases Sierra Leoneans' visibility to one another because when you use that hashtag, anyone who follows that hashtag sees you.*

> *When I went home in 2018, I was trying to connect with people so I used the Twitter search and typed Sierra Leone – then I saw #SaloneTwitter and I see everyone who's associated with Sierra Leone – from the diaspora to those at home using the hashtag to talk about things related to the country.*

The participants also highlighted that they love celebrating the achievements of Sierra Leoneans on Twitter – these achievements include book publications, acceptance into graduate school and music release. Though they may not have met the individuals personally, they feel a bond with them as they share a common national identity.

> *In 'The Gilded Ones', there are phrases and even some of the characters' names have Sierra Leonean influence. As a Sierra Leonean – you see your culture being embedded in global media – that's why so many people love and support that book! The author is also part of Salone Twitter. Seeing her win is like seeing one of my friends that I have known for many years win (Participant 1, United Kingdom).*

Participant 2 mentioned seeing a Twitter post about a Sierra Leonean who attained a scholarship to study at the University of Oxford and how proud she was of the individual.

> *Seeing her get into Oxford as a Sierra Leonean woman I was so proud of her – I can't even remember her name!*

Communicating with co-national members worldwide emerges as one of the most important features of #SaloneTwitter. Through everyday conversations and sharing information, #SaloneTwitter enables Sierra Leoneans to build an online community, share their sense of self and express their Sierra Leonean identity on the platform.

## #SaloneTwitter as a Cultural Learning and Promotion Tool

According to the Identity Negotiation Theory, one can claim an identity by association. In this research, the participants negotiate their identity by associating themselves with Sierra Leonean culture. In addition, a primary

goal of identity negotiation is for people to feel that their respective person-based and group-based identities are affirmed, understood, and valued. The participants found #SaloneTwitter useful in learning more about their culture, and additionally, they have found novel ways to promote Sierra Leonean culture on Twitter. There is a general feeling of preventing the loss of culture and identity; as such, these members of the Sierra Leonean diaspora engage in activities to maintain and develop the culture.

Participant 2 highlighted how people in the diaspora could prevent cultural loss:

> *When people move away, you lose a generation, and you also lose language, traditions and other things that concern the culture. Twitter helps the young people in the diaspora to be able to connect with young people back at home. It keeps our culture alive.*

Other participants highlight how Sierra Leoneans keep their culture alive on Twitter. The following excerpts illustrate that, even though these participants are far from home, they can maintain their Sierra Leonean identity by continuing cultural customs and practices from their home country on the Twitter platform.

Participants 3 and 7, respectively, expressed the following:

> *Something that I really love about Sierra Leone is that we embrace Christians and Muslims equally – I love seeing that being transferred on Twitter. When it's Eid, the Christians would say Eid Mubarak and post pictures dressed up.*
> *I tweet in Krio as much as possible.*

Furthermore, Twitter pages have been created to promote and teach Sierra Leonean culture. According to the Identity Negotiation Theory, people seek positive group-based identity affirmation in various communication situations. In this study, this is underscored by young Sierra Leoneans using Twitter to promote and celebrate positive aspects of their culture, such as idiomatic phrases, music, and literature – in this way, these become part of the cultural scope within which participants construct and negotiate their identity.

> *It is amazing to be part of and see Salone Twitter's growth – over the past 4 to 5 years, it has grown so much and we have dedicated*

> pages sharing our culture and teaching our language like 'Salone Idioms' (Participant 1).

Participant 5 shares how he uplifts Sierra Leonean arts:

> I created a Twitter page called 'Afere' which was started with the purpose of promoting Sierra Leonean arts and culture. I just want to help people to reach a broader audience and I think arts and culture is where a lot of young people find their voice.

Moreover, participant 6 highlights her interest in Sierra Leonean literature.

> I follow a Twitter page called 'Poda Poda' that promotes Sierra Leonean literature and shares short stories of Sierra Leonean authors.

Sierra Leoneans also use popular devices in media and Twitter culture, such as memes[2], to strengthen their Sierra Leonean identity. In this sense, these young people are connected to global media culture, and their identity is socially constructed in ways that have never been possible through everyday online communication.

> On Independence Day on April 27th, the hashtag 'the flag and the face' was going around – Sierra Leoneans in the diaspora and at home would post a picture of their face and a picture of the flag, it was so beautiful to see. We ended up trending because of that (Participant 4).
> There was a time when someone was putting together memes that are associated with Sierra Leone sayings or slangs – that was something that I found very interesting (Participant 2).

Salone Twitter is also used as a forum to debate cultural norms. Many Sierra Leoneans in the diaspora are part of global culture, and their identity is often a hybrid of various cultures. They embrace some aspects of Sierra Leonean culture according to their personal preferences while rejecting others.

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[2] An image, video, piece of text, etc., typically humorous in nature, that is copied and spread rapidly by internet users.

Participant 1 shared a photo of the popular Sierra Leonean dish Cassava leaves on Twitter. However, it was served with pasta rather than rice, as is customary in Sierra Leone. This image sparked a heated debate among Sierra Leoneans.



**Figure 1: Cassava leaves served with pasta (Participant 1's Twitter account, 2020 - consent given to share the photo)**

> *This is why I love #SaloneTwitter – arguing over miniscule things like that! It's so interesting because there are so many people that eat pasta and Cassava leaves now – so, that's where the whole globalisation thing comes in. The reason I did that is because I was in Sierra Leone for 3 months and I grew tired of rice – there's even a saying 'if the meal doesn't have rice, it is not a meal but a snack'. So, I was like let me just try something else.* customary in Sierra Leo

The findings suggest that the cultural identity of these young Sierra Leoneans is constructed through an ongoing connection between the diaspora and the homeland. The Sierra Leonean diaspora demonstrates this by sharing aspects of their culture and creating a sense of solidarity in their collective love for their homeland. Overall, Sierra Leoneans' identity construction in the diaspora encompasses several dimensions, including self-identifying as a Sierra Leonean, representing, preserving the culture, and influencing the culture with cosmopolitan perspectives.

## #SaloneTwitter as a Networking Tool

Salone Twitter has become an important platform for people with similar interests to network and share opportunities. The participants are in diverse fields, including the arts, technology, and humanitarianism; however, they all desire to use their skills to help build a better Sierra Leone. The sense of shared national identity and cultural background has encouraged participants to deepen their interactions with other Sierra Leoneans by connecting on other shared identities - in this case, personal values, and professional interests/roles. Twitter has allowed these young people to become more immersed in Sierra Leonean culture and current issues. As a result, they have developed a stronger sense of belonging to the country, which encourages them to participate in efforts to help develop the country they call home.

The accounts from Participant 6 and participant 7 adequately capture this sentiment.

> *I am interested in writing and art and finding people who are from the same country as you are and also interested in the same things as you are helps build a community within a community where you can all relate. As Sierra Leoneans we should help each other -I want to hear people's stories and I think Twitter is a good place to start. One day I want to open an animation studio back home and share knowledge in order to build a thriving animation industry.*

> *I have learnt so much from the Sierra Leoneans in the IT community on Twitter. I am also creating a show with the founder of Regent Tech which we want to put on YouTube – we want to keep it authentic and talk about normal life in Sierra Leone, so we are looking to collaborate with people back home.*

Nonetheless, participant 5 expressed skepticism about meaningful collaboration between those in the diaspora and those at home.

> *I do think that the diaspora population has a disconnect with the realities back home, they have this sort of romanticized perspective of Sierra Leone - things are very difficult in Sierra Leone. It doesn't make a difference no matter how much you tweet or talk about things.*

Twitter profile pages have also branched out from #SaloneTwitter to establish connections among Sierra Leoneans interested in a niche industry. The pages are created to bring together like-minded people to increase exposure, share opportunities, and facilitate potential collaborations. Young Salone and Salone Linkup are popular Sierra Leonean network pages.

Participant 1 founded 'Young Salone,' this is how he described the purpose of the Twitter page.

> *We are a hub for young Sierra Leoneans at home and in the diaspora who are in the creative industry. As a creative Sierra Leonean in the UK, the best service I can do is to make Sierra Leone art more creative by looking out for artists in Sierra Leone and try to build a relationship with them so when the funds allow, to collaborate with them and put them on. Most importantly, it is about building a network. For example, there might be people doing a small poetry event and I am part of a bigger network in the UK as I am part of a UK poetry circuit, then I could collaborate with this event in Sierra Leone.*

Participant 8 is the founder of an engineering company called Regent Tech, and he has found Salone Linkup beneficial to put his business in the spotlight. Salone Linkup was established to connect Young Sierra Leonean professionals and entrepreneurs from various industries and backgrounds to encourage progress and promote prosperity.

> *I used to be disconnected from the Sierra Leone community but thanks to platforms like Salone Linkup I now can connect with people from other sectors, and I have been able to receive support for Regent Tech. With my software engineering education, I decided to teach young people how to code. It is no cost to the students, the*

> *way we make money is if a start-up company needs engineers, we match them with our graduates and we take a recruitment fee from the company. So how Twitter comes in, I highlight the company's progress and I have been lucky to have people contact me and send money to support the programme.*

#SaloneTwitter contributes to promoting networking opportunities while simultaneously reinforcing identity. According to Lalley and Hawkins (2005), representation in the media is important for migrants as it can help them gain a greater sense of public investment in their community. This current study highlights the significant potential of Sierra Leone diaspora media. There exists an opportunity to support various initiatives that contribute to developing Sierra Leoneans and the country through collaborative efforts.


## Discussion

This qualitative study aimed to explore how young Sierra Leoneans negotiate their identity on Twitter using the Identity Negotiation Theory as a theoretical framework. In a time where anti-immigration sentiments and nationalism movements are gaining traction, as exemplified by the Brexit vote in the UK and the growing support for radical-right populist parties in many countries (Besley & Persson 2019), many cultural groups in the diaspora are using social media platforms to build connections and promote a positive identity of their communities (Leurs 2015; Daniels 2020). Settling into a new environment presents several challenges and stressors for migrants, affecting their sense of belonging in the host nation's population (Bhurga & Becker 2005). It is widely acknowledged that identities are primarily constructed during adolescence for young people. However, those with migrant backgrounds, such as the participants in this study, require additional negotiations to incorporate their cultural identity as they assimilate into a new society (Berry & Sabatier 2010).

The study's findings revealed that these young Sierra Leoneans desire belonging that brings meaning to their lives. As the Identity Negotiation Theory posits, people experience identity vulnerability in culturally unfamiliar contexts. This was true for some participants, who sometimes felt like outsiders or were perceived as different in their host nations. The study found that participants value opportunities that promote a

positive identity of the Sierra Leonean community and seek to build connections with other Sierra Leoneans in the diaspora. Over the past decade, social media have revolutionised how diaspora populations interact by removing the barriers of time and space. With real-time and ongoing content on users' Twitter feeds, the platform enables these young Sierra Leoneans to keep up with issues pertaining to the homeland and connect with people far away from them. In some instances, these online interactions are more meaningful than those with the nationals in their host countries as the people online understand the participants better, being that they are from the same cultural background. Through increased visibility of Sierra Leoneans on #SaloneTwitter and subsequent communication that follows, the participants find themselves in a culturally familiar context, which helps them to affirm their identity as Sierra Leoneans and experience identity security. This is likened to another study which found that Moroccan-Dutch youth form online discussion forums to publish alternative collective voices (against mainstream Dutch culture), and through this manner, they become the ethnic majority in their own digital space (Leurs 2015).

In this study, many participants have lived outside Sierra Leone for many years, but the research illuminates that these young Sierra Leoneans experienced obstacles to integrating into their host nations. Some participants mentioned feeling caught between two cultures as they cannot fully fit in in Sierra Leone since they have not lived at home for a long time. Still, on the other hand, affective disconnection in their current residence weakens their sense of belonging. In two separate studies, Afro-descendants in Portugal and African youths in Australia concurred that social exclusion impacted their assimilation in their host countries (Jardim & da Silva 2020; Mude & Mwanri 2020).

As key identity formation processes increasingly migrate to digital platforms, young migrants can better reconcile their heritage, and host-country identities as platforms like Twitter allow them to express their sense of self. In this study, the participants' sense of belonging to Sierra Leone is created through the relationships they establish with other Sierra Leoneans on Twitter and their shared interest in the socio-political situation of the homeland. The study found that the online Sierra Leonean diaspora also engage in cultural activities, using Twitter as a conduit, that help preserve and promote the culture of Sierra Leone. This is evidenced through Twitter pages that highlight Sierra Leonean arts and language. Finally, the study found that participants' sense of belonging to Sierra Leone, enhanced by

online diasporic interactions, fuels them to participate in activities that help their homeland. This is mainly achieved through professional networks created by Sierra Leoneans, also established on Twitter. Another study corroborates that sense of belonging to society can lead to civic and political participation (Jardim & da Silva 2020).

It is noteworthy to highlight that the influence of globalization shapes many online users' sense of belonging. By interacting on Twitter, these young Sierra Leoneans are exposed to new perspectives and ways of doing things. Within this myriad of different cultures, they further negotiate their identity.


## Conclusion

This study has highlighted the narratives of young Sierra Leoneans on how they use Twitter to experience belonging and negotiate their identity, with the Identity Negotiation Theory providing a framework for analysis. Overall, the findings suggest that social interactions on digital platforms and cultural identities play a significant role in young people's identity construction. This knowledge is especially important regarding Sierra Leoneans in the diaspora because the research on this population group is limited.

The young Sierra Leoneans in this study faced challenges in fully integrating into their host country, influencing how they construct and negotiate their identities. The participants revealed that they can now counteract feelings of not belonging by connecting with others from their cultural background and expressing their sense of self through digital platforms like Twitter. #SaloneTwitter has helped establish an online Sierra Leonean community by allowing people in the diaspora to connect with other co-nationals in previously impossible ways. Furthermore, #SaloneTwitter has allowed Sierra Leoneans at home and abroad to be visible to one another and communicate across geographic boundaries. Moreover, the Sierra Leonean diaspora uses Twitter as a common platform to maintain and strengthen their cultural identity, as evidenced by participants who follow or create Twitter pages that teach and promote aspects of Sierra Leonean culture, such as idioms, literature, and music. Additionally, young people construct and negotiate their cultural identity by fusing their cultural heritage with the global media culture.

Finally, this study adds to the body of knowledge about young people in the diaspora. The increased visibility of Sierra Leoneans on the

#SaloneTwitter platform has inspired many young people in the diaspora to form networks in their respective industries to help their home country develop. This could positively impact research into the young diaspora's contribution to sustainable development in their home country. In the current era of using social media to explore and develop cultural identities, this study contributes to the literature on contemporary migration and cultural issues by amplifying the voices of young people in the diaspora.

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