


Article

# Identity Framing as Resilience in Selected Nicknames of Nigerian Street Children

Ezekiel Opeyemi Olajimbity <sup>1,2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Institute of English Studies, Leuphana University, 21335 Lüneburg, Germany; ezekiel.olajimbity@leuphana.de or opebukola56@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup> Department of English and Literary Studies, Federal University Lokoja, Lokoja PMB 1154, Nigeria

**Abstract:** Street children who are forced onto the streets due to oppressive experiences use a variety of strategies, including nicknaming, to cope with street adversities. Previous studies have not adequately considered street children's nicknames as resilience enablers. This study fills this gap by unpacking identity frames in street children's nicknames as resilience enablers in southwestern Nigeria. Using the unstructured interview method, 65 nicknames of street children in the six southwestern states of Nigeria were sampled and subjected to discourse analysis with insights from social identity theory and the concept of frames. Findings reveal that the sampled names manifest Yorùbá and English with five syntactic patterns. Yorùbá nicknames are characterised by animal metaphors, food/body-parts/virtue-related terms, while the English forms indicate force, weather, and political-related terms, with meanings oriented to street culture. The nicknames configure the identity frames associated with ingroup norms and attributes of self-enhancement. Given the complexity of street life, the children adopt nicknames for discursive functions such as evasive mechanisms, reinforcement of an ingroup affiliation, group management, and bestowal of preferences. This study concludes that full-time street children in southwestern Nigeria use nicknames as adaptations to street culture, routine communication, and psychological strength boosters to withstand the adversities of street culture.

**Keywords:** socio-onomastics; identity; street children; discourse functions; street culture



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## 1. Introduction

The act of nicknaming is typically a shared culture in street communities as it reflects the linguistic behaviour of street individuals fulfilling different communicative purposes. Nicknaming is a form of social life that signals symbolic resources that reinforce group membership, solidarity, and social cohesion (Mensah and Ndimele 2022, p. 136). Nicknames refer to alternative and momentary identity markers that can provide insights into societal associations, culture, and language (De Klerk and Bosch 1997, p. 101). In his view, Leslie (1993, p. 136) describes the nicknaming process as “the eking out of names”, i.e., names that emerge when an individual reveals their true behaviours. This confirms the sociological view that nicknames are closely linked to behaviour. They are acquired informally and rarely follow linguistic rules in their formation, except for their sound system (De Klerk 1998, p. 14). In general, nicknames have a connotative meaning as they are socially contextualised in a group of people and cultures from which they originate. In most cases, their meanings are socially negotiated, interpreted, and reified through socialisation (Leslie and Skipper 1990; Ojebode et al. 2019). In the street setting, nicknames, which interface with the language and culture of street individuals, including children, underlie cognitive belief, emotional association, and behavioural consequences. However, compared to other studies on names, the systematic study of nicknames, especially among street children, has generally received little attention.

It is common knowledge that street children who are forced onto the streets due to oppressive experiences also face many challenges caused by street forces, individuals,

and group prototypes (Beazley 2003; Panter-Brick 2000; Aptekar and Heinonen 2003; Olajimbiti 2023). With popular aphorism among street community members that the street is not for the weak, children adopt various strategies to adapt and cope with many street adversities. Surprisingly, the transitional period from vulnerability to resilience and how it happens in the context of street children has not been well explored in the literature. This study, therefore, argues that the consciousness of social forces contextualises street children's nicknames as they are obligatory for social communication and individual or group identity. Through their nicknames, the children convey a desired impression in line with social expectations in street culture. In this context, nicknames function as a marker of identification and integration, as they are based on shared sociocultural knowledge bonding group members together. Each child attempts to achieve positive self-esteem by adopting nicknames that relate to their desired status or personality. These self-concepts expressed in their nicknames are derived from street children's ingroup prototypes.

As the identity of a group, nicknames are characterised by properties that make them intelligible to ingroup members based on shared knowledge. This suggests that nicknames have contextual properties, as they convey meanings that indicate a wider range of interpretations, but with an agreed relative shared meaning for ingroup members based on situations and settings. Due to the ingroup prototypes, nicknames in this context serve as a sense of relationship, purpose, and social characterisation. Often, ingroup members conceal the secrets of their nicknames or lie about them (Mensah and Ndimele 2022). This could pose a difficulty for researchers wishing to investigate this discourse. However, it is not impossible if different ethnographic methods are employed to ascertain actors' meanings and interpretations (Leslie 1993).

The present study explores the discourse values of nicknames among street children to demonstrate how street experiences shape their nickname identity when coping with street adversity. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, nicknaming among street children has attracted less scholarly attention, even in a country like Nigeria, where the phenomenon of street children is usually a national debate. This study fills this gap by examining identity framing as resilience in the nicknames of street children in southwestern Nigeria with the following objectives: to examine the socio-onomastic patterns of the nicknames under study, to highlight the identity frames of their nicknames, and to identify discourse functions of the sampled nicknames. This paper intends to deepen the understanding of street children's linguistic behaviour and socio-onomastic system, provide further insight into how the street children phenomenon could be addressed, and complement existing studies on folk-pragmatics scholarship in Nigeria.

#### *Nicknames and Nicknaming: A Panoramic Review*

Nicknaming, as a social practice, has been the subject of extensive investigation in different disciplinary dimensions: education, sociology, linguistics, and ethnographic studies (Mensah 2016, p. 187) and in various contexts of different social groups. Studies have shown that nicknames are frequently developed and acquired in teenage years, where regular close and intense contact between students provides fertile ground for nickname formation (Taylor-Leech et al. 2015; Crozier and Skliopidou 2002). Nicknames are adopted, self-imposed, or assigned. Nicknaming originally asserts the power of the namer over the named, but power can be redistributed in a social context (Adams 2009). Turner (1997) identifies three levels of nicknames: lexical, associative, and onomastic nicknames. The lexical level captures the semantic meanings of nicknames. The reason for the choice of a nickname is captured at the associative level. The onomastic level refers to the independent and tends to lose the original meaning of the words (no longer literal), touching on the setting in which it has been applied to the individual as an additional label.

While identification is central to onomastics, as it is the main function of names, other functions of nicknames are classified into sociolinguistic, psychological, and discourse-pragmatic perspectives. From a sociolinguistic perspective, Mensah (2016, 2017) has copiously averred that nicknames serve social functions that vary in different sociolinguistic

domains and cultural contexts. In this direction, [Kolawole et al. \(2009\)](#) argue that a nickname is a form of identification that may signify what a person is known for or a reputation that someone has (or wishes to assume). Nicknames mark how people interact based on the personalities they display. They are not only used for identification but also indicate reminiscence and the creation of humour. Regarding the cognitive functions of nicknames, [Leslie and Skipper \(1990\)](#) aver that nicknames are primarily a means of identifying individuals and personality descriptions, while their secondary functions include shaping status and status creation: nicknames have a way of imposing either a true or false status on a bearer. From a discourse-pragmatic perspective, some nicknames are age-specific and bounded by age-specific preferential rules. [Adams \(2009\)](#) claims that nicknames distribute power within a social group: they can be imposed, or they can be used by agreement between names and named. This justifies how nicknaming asserts the power of the namer over the named. Groups use nicknames to express social solidarity and knowledge of social structures available only to insiders. This study argues that street children adopt or are assigned nicknames that indicate individual or group beliefs and the distinctive personality traits they desire.

Existing studies indicate that nicknames are more prevalent among men than women, and they are more commonly used among children and teenagers compared to adults. Racial characteristics are not typically used as sources of public nicknames. Nicknames are also more frequently employed within primary groups rather than within secondary groups ([Leslie and Skipper 1990](#)). Suggestions for further empirical research in this direction have been advocated. For instance, [Leslie and Skipper \(1990, p. 280\)](#) suggest investigating the conditions under which nicknames are used to identify their constitutive, preferential, and ad hoc rule-bounded properties.

To focus on nicknames and children, which studies have copiously examined ([Atolagbe et al. 2015](#); [Crozier 2010](#); [De Klerk and Bosch 1997](#); [Taylor-Leech et al. 2015](#)), I argue here that nicknames among children have largely focused on the school context. [Atolagbe et al. \(2015\)](#), who examine the use of nicknames for secondary school students in North-central Nigeria, show that nickname usage is a product of language creativity occasioned by language contacts and promotes the teaching of literature and culture. Similarly, [Kolawole et al. \(2009\)](#) investigate nicknames and name-calling among a population of Nigerian school children. The study reveals that nicknames and name-calling, some of which are appearance-related, constitute a social practice in the school context and have adverse effects on children. [Mensah and Ndimele \(2022\)](#) examine the use of nicknames university students assign to lecturers in two Nigerian universities. Among others, the study reveals that students discreetly appropriate nicknames to their lecturers for a number of reasons. They do this to mock their lecturers in a way that the school context does not covertly permit, to encapsulate the classroom identity of the lecturer, and to create humour either in stigmatising or extolling their lecturers' teaching behaviour, appearance, or habits of speech. These studies have established the existence of nicknames as a social practice among children and adolescents in the Nigerian context. This trajectory has been explored in other countries, such as Australia ([Taylor-Leech et al. 2015](#); [Chevalier 2004](#)), Britain ([Crozier and Dimmock 1999](#); [Lytra 2003](#)), Kuwaiti ([Koehn 2015](#)), and South Africa ([Neethling 1994](#); [De Klerk and Bosch 1997](#)).

None of these studies have focused on nicknames among street children, which can provide an additional dimension to the study of socio-onomastics among children. This aligns with the argument of [Pinto-Abecasis \(2011\)](#) that the scope of the study of nicknames is continuously expanding to accommodate new realities and integrate name-bearers into various communities of practice. In the same vein, [Mensah \(2017, p. 415\)](#) advocates a pressing need for more knowledge about young people and their social universe in order to develop an understanding of youth culture. [Olajimbiti \(2023\)](#) observes that street children are a complex and interrelated global phenomenon and that their prevalence in Third World countries is a cause for concern. Studies in Southeast Asia, South America, Eastern Europe, and Africa have shown that the backgrounds of street children are remarkably

similar (Panter-Brick 2000; Beazley 2003). Ennew (1994, p. 14) argues that street children are those for whom the street (in the widest sense of the word, i.e., unoccupied dwellings, wasteland, etc.) more than the family has become their real home, a situation in which there is no protection, supervision, or direction from responsible adults. The increasing number of street children in Nigeria is concerning. A UNICEF (2023) report put Nigeria's out-of-school children number at 17.8 million.

Street children constitute a speech community entrenched in street subcultures. According to Bajari and Kuswarno (2020, p. 3), the community of street children is a subculture of a broader culture where street children reside. In this environment, they organise themselves in groups using different strategies to cope with street adversity. The ubiquity of nicknames in the street community that I observed during fieldwork while collecting data from street children motivated my interest to know more about the children's nicknames and what they used them for. I found that nicknames are not only part of routine communication but also perform other social functions in street culture. Here, nicknaming is based on shared social knowledge as it bonds street children together. Noticeable in their linguistic and behavioural patterns is a lifestyle similar to street gangs, but they are not criminals. While nickname usage among street children has not been systematically studied, some studies have addressed nickname usage in subcultures. For instance, Zaitzow's (1998) study, which examines nickname usage by gang members, reveals that nicknaming is part of a criminal subculture, and its usage makes direct reference to behavioural characteristics, personality traits, physical attributes, and violence. The present study argues that nicknames among street children reflect shared street identity, daily experience, and maintenance of social relationships, indicating children's socio-cognitive reactions to street realities. This draws significance to what nicknames are based on among children in the street context.

Given that the phenomenon of street children is a growing concern globally, especially in Nigeria, where the number of street children continues to rise, this study is significant at this time as it argues that understanding the sociolinguistic practices of these children can provide valuable insights into their social integration and coping mechanisms, which are crucial for developing effective interventions and policies to support them. Additionally, by examining the nicknames used by street children, this study offers new perspectives on how these children construct and negotiate their identities within their social environment. This is particularly important for understanding the transition from vulnerability to resilience, a process that remains underexplored in the socio-onomastic literature. In this way, this study expands the scope of socio-onomastics to include the largely overlooked population of street children. Furthermore, the study offers theoretical insights into the process of identity formation among marginalised groups by highlighting the role of language in the construction of social identities and the negotiation of roles within subcultures.

## 2. Theoretical Orientation

Analytically, this study benefits from social identity theory and the concept of frames to unpack the discourse functions of street children's nicknames in the Nigerian context. Social identity theory was conceived to explain how individuals create and define their places in society. Tajfel and Turner (1979) argue that social identity refers to aspects of an individual's self-image that derive from the social categories to which (they) perceive (themselves) as belonging. The three psychological processes that are central to the theory are social categorisation, social comparison, and social identification (positive distinctiveness). These explain how individuals or groups maintain a positive social identity within group or intergroup relationships. In this case, they highlight how street children's nicknames mark their ingroup identity, indicating the ingroup prototype. The ingroup prototypes encompass the predominant norms, attitudes, values, behaviours, and attributes that define a group and distinguish it from other groups (Hogg 2001). Social identification explains how people who identify within a group are emotionally involved and change their behaviour to some extent because of their affiliation (Chi 2015). Social categorisation captures the cognitive

process of thinking of groups as in groups or outgroups. Each street child forms a personal identity through nicknames based on their individual and group goals. The prism social comparison describes the desire to increase one's self-esteem relative to others or members of an outgroup. Within this framework, the present study argues that children's nicknames reflect their ingroup affinity, self-awareness, and psychological motivations (resilience) in street culture. As the children are seen as members of a marginal society, they resort to various tactics of social creativity (such as nicknames) and social change to enhance their individual and group standing. Through nicknames as social identification, street children interact with others who share similar experiences that underlie group orientation and shared activities on the street.

Identity frames of nicknames as mental representations of resilience in street children highlight knowledge schemas of desirability and the promulgation of ingroup prototypes in street culture. In this context, frames represent areas of experience cultivated as members of a given culture. A frame reflects the subjective interpretation schemas (Bateson 1972) through which socially and culturally shared knowledge systems can be understood in relation to social situations. Goffman (1974) emphasises that social frames are used to understand events and actions (directed actions) in which people are somehow involved and subjected to standards of social appraisal for two kinds of situations: manipulations of the natural world or interactions in the social world (Van Dijk 2023, p. 157). As a cognitive resource, a frame can capture the belief systems of a group through which their linguistic behaviour and social activities are foregrounded. Frames are likened to structured bundles of concepts accessed through linguistic expressions to constitute the meaning of an utterance or linguistic formulation (Hark 2023), as certain words can activate a frame for purposes of conceptualisation as they can easily resonate with members of the speech community. Within the street community, nicknames with connotative meanings configure certain identity frames that are adopted or assigned for identification and other discourse functions. This insight aided how identity represented in street children's nicknames is analysed.

### 3. Methodology

This study is based on qualitative ethnographic research involving a seven-month period of data collection from street children in six southwestern states of Nigeria—Lagos, Oyo, Ogun, Osun, Ondo, and Ekiti. In these states, specific cities and towns were randomly sampled, Lagos (Ikorodu, Iyana Ipaja, Musin, Abule Egba, Egbeda), Ogun (Ojuore, Sango-Ota, and Abeokuta), Oyo (Ibadan and Ogbomoshu), Ondo (Akure and Ikare), Osun (Oshogbo and Owena), and Ekiti (Ado and Ikere). These states were selected as samples because of their linguistic and cultural homogeneity. The Southwest, one of the six geopolitical zones in Nigeria, is dominated by Yorùbá people. Street children between the ages of 7 and 14 were interviewed at strategic locations, such as popular market squares, motor parks, bus stops, street corners, and other places where they congregate. According to the [Nigeria: Act No. 26 of 2003, Child's Rights Act \(2003\)](#), a child is anyone under 18 years old, but the choice of children within 7–14 years was to avoid controversy because there is another Nigerian Law, the Young Person's Acts, which designates a child as a person below the age of 14. Ideally, parental or guardian consent would be required before collecting data from minors. However, due to the peculiarity of street children, who are usually abandoned, run away, and practically left to fend for themselves, the researcher had to obtain consent from the children. No child was forced or coerced to answer the questions. For this reason, of the 8560 children ethnographically observed in the study area between February and August 2021, only 104 children (Lagos: 30, Oyo: 29, Ogun: 15, Osun: 11, Ondo: 11, and Ekiti: 8) were interviewed, as others declined to be interviewed. One of the major drawbacks of data collection is the difficulty in gaining children's trust, as they were unwilling to cooperate with the researcher. The researcher took many measures to overcome this challenge, such as picking some street vocabulary to connect them, recruiting peer group leaders (among the children), spending a lot of time with them, and employing research assistants who

are from the studied states to fulfil the dialect and other sociocultural ethical reasons. For confidentiality reasons, all research participants' names were changed or anonymised.

Data were collected through participant observation and unstructured interview methods. Participant observations allowed first-hand experience of the natural behaviour of the children, their beliefs, and nicknaming systems, as I observed that they walk and work in groups and engage in many activities. They are always on the move. The unstructured interview method was used to obtain information from them. These ethnographic methods helped to capture street children's nicknames, language use, educational background, personal experiences, codes of concealing information, showing solidarity with each other, and general linguistic features of socialisation. This permits the investigation of how these variables could shape the use of nicknames (Mensah 2017). A digital audio recorder and written field notes were used for data collection, as unstructured interviews were used to elicit information from the participants at convenience. The amount of time the researcher spent with each child and group varied depending on the environment in which they encountered them and their willingness to respond to their questions. The total time recorded for all the interviews was 832 min, while Yoruba and Nigerian pidgins were the most common languages used. The respondents' demographic information includes gender—boy: 89 (85.58%), girl: 15 (14.42%); educational background (mainly primary and early secondary school)—irregular school attendance: 28 (26.92%), dropped out of school: 41 (39.42%), never in school: 35 (33.65%)—this was surprising as southwestern Nigeria is known for its formal education. Also, five former street children (who are now adults) and three motor-park workers who have a close affinity with street children were also interviewed to complement the information obtained from the children, particularly in places where the children were unwilling to be interviewed because they were practically running away from the researcher whom they thought was a police officer or kidnapper. These ethnographic strategies, such as informants and trust-building processes, were employed to ascertain nicknames' meanings, sources, interpretations, and functions. I employed these strategies to understand how nicknames are used to reinforce resilience, construct identity, and group management. Meanwhile, 62% of the children interviewed said they adopted their nicknames, and 38% claimed that their street peers gave them nicknames.

A corpus of ninety-five nicknames was obtained from the field, but to avoid repetition, only sixty-five nicknames of street children were used in this paper. The data were transcribed, coded into relevant categorical frames, and analysed. Although all interviews and observation notes were used for categorisation, only three excerpts are presented: the first is from a group of ten children, the second is from the ex-street child, and the third is from a motor-park worker. The data were subjected to descriptive qualitative analysis with insights from social identity and frame theories by highlighting their socio-onomastic features, identity frames, and discourse functions. As theoretical onomastics is still evolving, connotation as a semantic concept was used to account for the socio-onomastic description of the selected nicknames. This aligns with Gladkova (2002, p. 1) that nicknames should be studied in terms of their semantic structure to uncover the cultural models that determine their coining. This research design offered insights into the socio-onomastic context of street children's nicknames and unpacked their discourse functions within street culture.

#### 4. Analysis and Findings

The analysis is developed in three sections with strict adherence to the research objectives. The first (Section 4.1) deals with the socio-onomastic patterns of street children's nicknames, the second (Section 4.2) with identity frames in street children's nicknames, and the third (Section 4.3) focuses on the discourse functions of street children's nicknames. These are analysed in turn.

##### 4.1. Socio-Onomastic Pattern of Street Children's Nicknames

The nicknames analysed reflect the linguistic background of Yorùbá (44) and English (21). Their semantic categories and syntactic features are highlighted in this section. The

semantic categories foreground the connotative meanings (associated with the street) of the selected nicknames which were provided by the sampled children and street informants during the fieldwork. The Yorùbá nicknames of the children are characterised by animal-related names (metaphors), and food/body-parts/virtue-related terms, while the English forms indicate force/group, and political-related terms with meanings oriented to street culture. This confirms that nicknames are an important and deeply embedded cultural element, as street children adopt socioculturally oriented analogies, values, and social status orientation for social identification. These are analysed in turn.

#### 4.1.1. Socioculturally Oriented Analogies

Nicknames in this category reflect animal-related names and food/body-parts-related terms indicating street subculture and Yorùbá culture, as represented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Nicknames indicating sociocultural analogies.

<b>Animal-Related Names</b>	
Name	Gloss
Akèèké (Scorpion)	A child capable of secretly causing harm to outgroup members
Amòtèkún (cheetah)	A child full of strength
Kìnnihún (lion)	A courageous child
Èkún (leopard)	A very skilful child
kèkerè èkún (young leopard)	A clever child
Ejo (snake)	An intuitively sensitive child
<b>Food/Body-Parts Related Names</b>	
Name	Gloss
Ojú eja (fish’s eyes)	A child who is not easily controlled
Ojú oḽé, (soup’s look)	An attractive child
Àta wéwé, (small hot chilli pepper)	A child who is small in stature but difficult to control

The linguistic mapping and structures of the animal-related names of street children show how animal names are used to enhance positive social identity in the street setting. It is believed that the usage and understanding of such metaphors evoke a certain perception of attitudes, experiences, or dispositions in the bearers. Lakoff (2008) avers that metaphors act as a cognitive tool that can help people comprehend one concept (target) in terms of another quite different concept (source). This cross-domain mapping of characteristics facilitates the social representation of children’s nicknames. Examples include the following: The nickname Akèèké (Scorpion) configures the concept of danger by orienting to the stinging trait of a scorpion. One of the informants said that bearers of this nickname are generally considered dangerous among street children, as they are capable of unleashing covert havoc on outgroup members. Despite this negative trait, the bearers are proud of their identity as it confers on them the orientation of group soldiers in street settings. Amòtèkún (cheetah) is connotatively used by the bearer as a child who is seen to be rugged and full of strength. Based on these findings, nickname bearers, usually boys, often display strength among group members. Similar to this is Kìnnihún (lion), in which the bearer assumes and displays the confidence and boldness of the animal. According to one of the informants, a street adult individual, “such a child is not afraid to approach us for assistance”. One of the bearers claimed that he does not know why his friends gave him the nickname, but he likes it. Some of the children adopt Èkún (leopard), orienting to the strength and skillfulness of the animal and reflecting its traits among group members. For instance, a street child who looks gentle and small-sized but purposeful and skilful is nicknamed kèkerè èkún (young leopard); thereby conjuring the concept of smartness. This corroborates De Klerk

and Bosch’s (1997) argument that the prevalence of nicknames is based on physical traits. Also, the nickname Ejo (snake) is assigned to an intuitively sensitive child, thereby relating to the concept of cleverness in street culture.

Bearers of these nicknames are regarded as deeply manifesting the positive character traits of these animals and adapting them to their street experiences. This aligns with Stommel’s (2009, p. 117) view that nicknames should not only be considered as medium-specific linguistic forms but also as signs that derive signification from their contexts. It is amazing how the children acquire the knowledge of the habits, physical characteristics, and traits of these animals from which the metaphors were drawn; this might have been a result of shared street cultural norms, which dominate their daily experiences, even beyond the shared sociocultural assumption of fauna in the Yorùbá culture.

Some street children’s nicknames reflect Yorùbá food and spicy items. Examples of such are ojú eja, ojú obé, ata wéwé, gbána. Ojú eja (fish’s eyes), which denotatively describes something not easily broken, is assigned to a child who has strength but is stubborn. The nickname, Ojú obé (soup’s look), connotatively reflects the pleasant look that attracts, is assigned to a street child that cannot be completely avoided. One of the street adult informants said a small-stature child who can cause serious havoc and who other children are careful with is nicknamed Ata wéwé (small-size hot chilli pepper), thereby indicating the concept of danger. These nicknames reflect the dominant culture (Yorùbá) and linguistic behaviour of people around street children, but most bearers (children) are indifferent to the social values attached to the nicknames.

#### 4.1.2. Socioculturally Oriented Values

Some nicknames of street children are oriented to sociocultural values but have extended street meanings. Nicknames included in this category reflect money/virtue and traditional/circumstantial terms, as represented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Nicknames indicating sociocultural values.

<b>Money and Virtue-Related Names</b>	
Name	Gloss
Owónikókó (money is important)	A child who loves money
Ojà (marketplace or a product for sale)	An enterprising child
Àfòríti (tenacity)	A child full of perseverance
<b>Traditional/Circumstantial Terms</b>	
Name	Gloss
Káanàkò (road shorter)	A swift child
Fijàbí (born out of hostility)	A child who likes to fight
Pako (plank)	A child who endures unpleasant conditions

Nicknames that reflect money/virtue-related terms generally show the character traits of bearers that are noticeable to group members. For example, the nickname Owónikókó (money is essential), refers to a self-centred child who loves and hides money from others. Ojà (market square or a product to be sold) reflects a child who is vast in striking any deal for financial gains, indexing the concept of industry. Àfòríti (tenacity) is used for a child with a strong heart and is highly optimistic at all times, thereby framing the concept of perseverance. Beyond the semantic interpretations of these nicknames and their sources, whether assigned or adopted, they reflect street children’s linguistic behaviour, experiences, and street ideology they share. The implicit concepts configured by these nicknames communicate more than social identity, but the belief system of street culture shapes children’s orientation.

Another pattern is nicknames reflecting traditional/circumstance terms. Nicknames in this category reflect purely Yorùbá cultural expressions relating to places and circumstantial experiences. The following are some examples: Fijàbí (born out of hostility) is associated with a child who likes to fight, indexing the concept of a fighting spirit in the bearer. Káanàkò (road shorter) is a Yoruba metaphysical charm for space-time manipulation. The bearer is a child who is swift and can cover many kilometres within a short time, indicating the concept of smartness. Pako (plank) refers to a street child who is strong enough to withstand any condition, reflecting the concept of ruggedness. These nicknames reflect the character traits of street children and their street experiences.

#### 4.1.3. Social Status Orientation

The preponderance of nicknames in this category manifests as force-related and political/traditional titular terms, as represented in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Nicknames indicating social status.

<b>Force-Related Names</b>	
Name	Gloss
Marshal	A child who likes to control other children
Sergeant	A child who runs errands for others
<b>Political/Traditional Titular Terms</b>	
Name	Gloss
Ìjòba (government)	A child who gives orders to other children
Federal	A child who controls other children
Chairman	A child who asserts authority over others

Marshal is a high rank in force-related institutions. In the street context, particularly among street children, it refers to a child who has been in the street for a long time and can control other children with ease. It frames the concept of control over the bearer and social status relative to other children within the group. The social support frame is conceptualised as Sergeant, a rank in the force-related institution, assigned to a person who runs errands without complaining. One of the street adult informants in Ibadan said that such nicknames show hierarchical structures among street children group members. This implies that nicknames reflect more social identification, as they also reveal folk social structures and role assignments. This demonstrates [Chevalier’s \(2004, p. 125\)](#) view that nicknames serve as socially endorsed identity emblems that foreground solidarity and various dimensions of power relations to foster group integration.

Political/traditional titular terms are used to enhance positive self-identity, as they are perceived to attract honour and power. This is underpinned by the responses of some of the children who were interviewed about their ambitions and mentioned that they wanted to become politicians. The name “Federal”, connotatively, implies a child with superior authority that cannot be challenged. It configures the concept of control. Senator, in this context, is associated with an individual who dresses like a person from a privileged background. Ìjòba (government), refers to a child who is in control or position to give orders to others and frames the concept of control. Based on the findings, bearers of nicknames in this category adopt them to enhance their social status among group members.

These semantic categories describe not only the onomastic features of the children’s nicknames but also the cultural orientation and age-dependent social cognitive model of reasoning among street children in southwestern Nigeria. Given that the character traits and concepts indexed by the nicknames are adopted as positive self-identities for social identification and ingroup prototypes of street children, they indicate how the children adopt the identity frames conceptualised in the nicknames for resilience on the streets.

The children's meanings in adopting or bearing these nicknames (through the connotative meanings, i.e., street-associated meanings of nicknames) were considered in classifying the identity frames indexed in the sampled nicknames. This is the focus of the next section.

#### 4.2. Identity Frames in Street Children's Nicknames

Identity frames, as conceived in this study, relate to certain concepts indexed in the nicknames children bear based on their individual self-concept and group affiliations to evoke certain resilience features as identity traits to cope with street adversities. Since the primary function of nicknames is identification, this section presents the sampled nicknames as social identification and status-shaping through the concepts they indexed. The concepts configured in the children's nicknames highlighted in Section 4.1 are classified into two sub-sections, which are identity frames relating to ingroup norms (adaptation to street culture) and identity frames relating to self-enhancement (resilience enablers).

##### 4.2.1. Identity Frames Relating to Ingroup Norms (Adaptation to Street Culture)

Nicknames in this category are used as promulgations of social norms, indicating how the children self-identify based on group orientation and shared activity. The two frames identified here are survival and self-awareness. This is illustrated in extracts 1–2, which are part of the interview granted by a group of ten street children in Ibadan, Oyo State.

###### Extract 1

Q: Okay. Do you have nicknames before coming to the street?

26. A: Rara. Igba ti mo darapo mo won ore mi ni mo need alias temi nitori gbogbo won loni tiwon. Gbogbo awón ègbón wonyi ni won ni alias. Gbogbo wá laní àlìàs nibi. Ti é, o bàní a má fún yín.
27. No. When I joined my friends and they all have, then I got one.
28. Those egbon also have theirs. We all have nicknames here.
29. If you do not have we will give you one.

The above extract configures three features of street culture relative to nicknames as an ingroup norm: the adoption of nicknames as a process of initiation, nicknames as a group identity, and means of adopting nicknames in street culture. Obvious in the boy's utterance is that the adoption of a nickname signifies integration and formal acceptance into the group. Aside from his formal name, the boy's claim that he had to adopt a nickname indicates a form of indoctrination into street culture. This is consistent with Tajfel's (1982, p. 503) view that the social identification process starts from an individual's subjective location in the network of social relationships. That other members of the group (street children) and "awón ègbón" (older male adults on the street) have nicknames suggests that it is a group identity and a necessity if he does not want to be considered an outcast/outgroup member. This is further confirmed by "gbogbo wá laní àlìàs nibi" (we all have nicknames here), indicating that nicknames are not only a group identity but also a street identity as illustrated by the place deictic element, "here". The extract shows how street children come up with their nickname, "Ti é, o bàní a má fún yín (if you don't have we will give you one). This confirms that nicknames are either assigned or adopted. It can be inferred from the extract that street children use nicknames to promulgate group norms, social solidarity, and a knowledge structure that is only accessible to ingroup members. Linguistic elements such as "we", and "my friends", are ingroup identity markers that indicate group identification and solidarity among the children. This supports Black et al.'s (2014, p. 125) finding that nicknames are signs of unity, an acknowledgement of individuality, and a defence mechanism against mistreatment.

One of the identity frames identified in this category is survival, which describes how street children bear nicknames, whether adopted or assigned, that index concepts relating to the state to keep living despite street adversities. The following nicknames, 'àfòríti i, ojà, kèkerè èkún, àfèrì, abéyefò, igbóró' represent concepts such as perseverance, escape, smartness, and ruggedness, and the frame of survival on the streets as described in Section 4.1 above.

### Extract 2

30. A: Àfòrítí ni alias mi nitori igbóró ó rórùn. A n struggle sugbon awa na o di olowo lojo kan.
31. I am Àfòrítí because life on the street is not easy. We struggle a lot but I know we will be rich one day.

It is deduced from the extract that nicknames are embedded in a situational context. While it is not clear whether the nickname, Àfòrítí, was adopted or assigned, it suggests that experience of street culture influenced the choice of the name. This is evident in “igbóró ó rórùn” (life on the street is not easy). This confirms that names have a special meaning within the social context in which they are used (Leslie and Skipper 1990). Here, the concepts of “difficulty” and “struggle” associated with street life conditioned the conceptualisation of the frame of survival, as expressed in line 34. Therefore, the desire to conform to the street norm and survive its huddles necessitated the choice of the nickname Àfòrítí. This demonstrates that street culture shapes the belief systems of street children.

The frame of self-awareness, which entails conscious knowledge of one’s character and feelings, is projected in some of the children’s nicknames in terms of control, honour, cleverly, and social support, which are portrayed in the meanings they gave for nicknames such as Federal, Ijóbá, Èjò, Olóyè, and Sergeant, respectively. For example, I asked a street boy with the nickname Sergeant in Mushin, Lagos (17 March 2021) what the meaning of his name was and why he adopted it. Here is his answer:

### Extract 3

Awón òré, mí lo fún mi lorúko, yẹn, nítorí wón ripé mo má n jísé fún won atí pe mon sè nkàn ti o kó gbogbo wá papò. (My friends gave me that name because they observed that I run errands for them and do things that enhance our unity).

In street culture, Sergeant connotatively refers to a person who runs errands and is watchful for other members of the group. With this ingroup-induced meaning, the boy’s nickname signifies conformity to the group norm, recognition of the person’s character traits, and identity role. This confirms Taylor-Leech et al.’s (2015, p. 57) view that the form a nickname takes can also be related to social roles. According to him, the nickname was assigned to him, which further demonstrates how nicknames are assigned to street children. By this social identification, the boy’s social behavioural trait and its usefulness to the group’s solidarity are recognised. This recognition and its acceptance by the boy indicate the frame of self-awareness within the context of group norms. Hence, the boy’s nickname and his behavioural description mark his recognition by the group members and confirm that the group uses nicknames to express social solidarity. The children’s social solidarity and shared beliefs are illustrated by the boy’s linguistic choices: “Awón òré, mí (My friends) and “gbogbo wá papò,” (our unity).

#### 4.2.2. Identity Frames Relating to Self-Enhancement

Identity frames relative to self-enhancement explain how street children individually valorise their personal identity or define themselves in contrast to others within the group. This self-positioning within the group refers to a form of social negotiation, ingroup relationships (individual self-esteem), and role negotiation and perceptions. Nicknames in this category, functionally, serve as psychological strength boosters to survive on the street as such would elevate their status and confer recognition within their social world (Mensah and Ndimele 2022, p. 137). Nicknames such as “kèkerè èkún”, “Mafia”, “Senator”, “Ìjò, ba”, “Ojú obé”, “Scorpion” etc., are status-shaping identity markers framing bravery, street smartness strength, and courage to the children and are mostly adopted by them rather than assigned as they are used to negotiate roles within the group. This confirms Leslie and Skipper’s (1990, p. 273) view that the meanings of nicknames are the result of complex social negotiations learned, interpreted, and reified through socialisation. The following example is an extract of my conversation with a street boy in Sango-Ota (26 March 2021).

**Extract 4**

20. A: Nickname mi ni Mafia sugbon Taofik loruko mi.
21. My nickname is Mafia but my real name is Taofik.
22. Q: Kini itumo nickname e? What is the meaning of your nickname?
23. A: Mafia nitori agbara po fun mi lati se nkan ti awon egbemi yoku ole se
24. Mafia because I have so much power to do what my peers cannot do.

Like many other street children whose nicknames frame bravery and strength, Taofik boasts of his nickname as Mafia because of his strength to venture into what other children cannot withstand. Literally, the name Mafia conjures up the identity of those who are free to engage in outlaw activities, but the boy adopts and recontextualises it as a resilient enabler pointing to his power to act above and beyond other street children. The context presented by the boy exemplifies a circumstantial nickname of self-reliance. This confirms the assertion that self-imposed nicknames always exaggerate the status of the bearer (Leslie and Skipper 1990). With this self-positioning and psychological strength, the boy stands a chance to negotiate roles among his peers because nicknames reflect how others see the name-bearers within a group's circle (Mensah 2016, p. 185).

**4.3. Discourse Functions of Street Children's Nicknames**

Apart from social identification, which is the primary function of nicknames, as highlighted in Section 4.2, other discourse functions of nicknames among street children, as identified in this study's dataset, include evasive mechanism, reinforcement of an ingroup affiliation and group management, routine communication, and bestowal of preferences. These are analysed in turn.

**4.3.1. Evasive Mechanism**

The evasive mechanism is operationalised as how street children hide their identities in a slightly sneaky way through nicknames to avoid self-revelation and apprehension from their perceived enemies. Studies have shown that some street children run away from home for various reasons (Olajimbati 2023), which is why they adopt nicknames to avoid being apprehended and returned home. In this context, they deliberately choose their nicknames to avoid resemblance to their real identity and thus adopt misleading nicknames on the street to manipulate and wade off outgroup members. This is instantiated in the following extract.

**Extract 5**

13. Q: So fun mi nipa nickname won. Tell me about street children's nicknames.
14. A: Ama nlo nickname nitori a fe ki awon enyan o mo oruko wa, nitori ti wo mba nwa wa. Ama nri kaakiri nitori ao mo eni tofewa ati eni to korira wa.
15. We use nicknames to hide our real identity, so if they are looking for us they will not know how to find us. We move from one place to another because we don't know who like or hate us.

The fugitive identity is captured in the above extract, as it unveils tripartite reasons why children adopt nicknames, which are to conceal their real identity and avoid arrest and suspicion. Avoiding arrest and suspicion are essential reasons why street children are mobile and move into groups. Through their nicknames, they form a secret bond among ingroup members. In this connection, Olajimbati (2023, p. 15) argues that street children walk together in solidarity, i.e., how street children freely conduct themselves to support each other because they share common goals, feelings, and opinions. This street subculture as a social practice provides a sense of self-esteem, emotional support, family substitutes, security, and relief from street anxiety (Hecht 1998, p. 46). The foregoing foregrounds use the concealment strategy. This draws similarity with the view of De Klerk (1998, p. 115) that "thugs frame up nicknames quickly when introducing themselves to people who figure next on their hit-lists, such naming do not last long". Although the children's lifestyle is

completely different from that of street criminals, they tend to adapt to the fugitive lifestyle enabled by street culture to cope with life.

#### 4.3.2. Reinforcement of an Ingroup Affiliation and Group Management

One of the discursive functions of nicknames among street children is that the use of nicknames reinforces ingroup affiliation and group management. By adopting or assigning nicknames, street children express their social affiliation to their groups. They move in groups, and their nicknames are based on their shared sociocultural knowledge and street experiences, binding them together. How street children deploy nicknames as a group identity marker based on the social context of street adversity demonstrates the principle of social identity theory.

##### Extract 6

34. Q: se ole so funmi itumo awon oruko wonyi? can you tell me the meanings of these other ones?
35. A: Beni, sugbon itumo won yato lati group kan si ikeji nitori ama nlo nickname wa lati control arawa.
36. Yes, but the meanings of the nicknames are different from one group to another because we also use our nicknames to control ourselves.
37. Q: Bawo lessen lo nicknames yin fun idari egbe?
38. How do you use your name to control yourselves?
39. A: Ama n pe arawa papo, ohun ti oye ki a se, ohun ti a fe je, nipase oruko wa.
40. By our nicknames, we know what we should do, and who we want to be, and we can call ourselves together.

First, that the meanings of nicknames differ from group to group, as expressed in Lines 36 and 37, illustrates how nicknames reinforce ingroup affiliation because, besides the conventional meanings of such names shared by members of the street community, their intentional meanings are exclusively shared by ingroup members. This further justifies their use of nicknames in group management. In this connection, the nickname as a group management marker is implied in “amá nlo nickname wa láti control arawa (we use our nicknames to “control” ourselves)”. Similar to this function is routine communication, which entails how children use their nicknames for ingroup interactive purposes. In this case, interactive purposes include phatic communication, convening meetings, role allocation among members, and other day-to-day communication. They also use their nicknames to give one another cues to flee at the sight of strangers. This aligns with [Morgan et al.’s \(1979, p. 15\)](#) view that “nicknaming systems . . . have their origins in small groups and . . . play such important part in their social organisation”.

#### 4.3.3. Bestowal of Preferences

The bestowal of preference relates to how street children confer on themselves their greater liking and desire personalities in mainstream society through their nicknames. Nicknames in this category are status-shaping in nature as the children adopt titles such as “Oloye”, “Senator”, “Ìjòba”, “Federal” etc. and express their penchant for these personalities in their nicknames. Sixty percent of the street children interviewed told me that they adopted certain nicknames to invoke the spirit associated with their preferred positions/personalities. In my encounter with two street children in Ibadan (16 March 2021), one of them was nicknamed “Olóyè” and the other “Senator”. The boy, whose nickname is “Olóyè” (Chief), stated that he chose his nickname because he prefers to be a chief when he grows up, and his friends respect him for it. The identity frames contained in these names are favoured by the children, so they adopt nicknames to shape their status among their peers and project into the future. This process strengthens children psychologically and makes them more resilient in coping with street adversities. This is consistent with [Mensah’s \(2017, p. 420\)](#) claim that nicknames can also be acquired through self-bestowal as individuals choose a desirable nickname based on some subjective relevance relative to their social context.

## 5. Discussion of Findings and Concluding Remarks

Analysing the socio-onomastic patterns of street children in the Nigerian context revealed both the cultural nuances of Yoruba and the peculiarities of street culture. Features such as socioculturally oriented analogies, values, and social status orientation which characterise the sampled nicknames and their meanings associated with the street, indicate that nicknames are deeply embedded in cultural elements, irrespective of language use. The cross-domain mapping of animal characteristics as well as street-related influences that facilitate the social representation of children's nicknames, underpins how social variables determine people's linguistic behaviour. The findings relatively address [Leslie and Skipper's \(1990\)](#) call to examine the conditions under which nicknames are used. Furthermore, the cultural orientation and age-dependent social cognitive model of reasoning indexed by sampled nicknames show how street children in southwestern Nigeria adopt identity frames to assert themselves in street culture. This draws similarities with the findings of [De Klerk \(1998\)](#); [Turner \(1997\)](#), and [Adams \(2009\)](#).

The identity frames represented in the sampled nicknames largely point to social identification, which underlines the primary function of nicknames. The findings reveal that street children's nicknames strategically mark the promulgation of ingroup prototypes, indicating their adaptation to street culture, ingroup identity, and self-enhancement (psychological strength enablers and status-shaping mechanism). Considering that street children may represent a stigmatised identity for a group of children who find themselves on the street in certain circumstances, their ingenious, resilient strategies, particularly the status-shaping mechanism through nicknames, are commendable. [Beazley \(2003\)](#) and other related studies have stressed that street children should be commended for their ingenious resilience despite street adversities. The combination of socially shared beliefs on the street and other attributes based on personal experiences informed why these children adopt their nicknames, which serve as resilience boosters for them to survive the street huddles. In this context, nicknames, as status-shaping identity markers framing bravery, street smartness, strength, and boldness concepts, are self-adopted rather than assigned because they are also used to negotiate roles within the group. Similarly, nicknames serve as structural power relations among themselves and with other groups in the street milieu.

Other functions of nicknames among street children, as indicated in the analysis, include concealment strategy, reinforcement of an ingroup affiliation, group management, and bestowal of preferences. Nicknames as an evasive mechanism underscore the fugitive identity of some street children who are runaways from home and therefore adopt nicknames to hide their real identity to avoid being caught (cf. [De Klerk 1998](#)), indicating the manipulative use of nicknames to wade off outgroup members. Nicknames as reinforcement of an ingroup affiliation and group management indicate solidarity and routine communication, respectively.

These findings show that street children conceive nicknames as an ingroup identity marker that indicates familiarity, validates solidarity, and reinforces social needs and motivations in street culture. Nicknames facilitate all types of social interactions among street children in southwestern Nigeria. In conclusion, this study establishes that nicknames as linguistic elements are part of the cognitive system, mental representation, indication of ingroup identity, positive self-identity, and adaptation to street culture. The findings of this study deepen the understanding of street children's linguistic behaviour in Nigeria, which could be of relevance to policymakers and other concerned agencies to effectively engage with children and possibly rehabilitate them. The strategic linguistic behavioural uses of nicknames (argot) unpacked in this study add to the paucity of works on folk-pragmatic scholarship in Nigeria. It also complements existing studies on onomastics and street children. The ethnographic research design and triangulation method employed in this study, which reinforced the interdisciplinary approach (sociology and linguistics), justified the significance of this work. Finally, given the limited scope of the study, which considered only the Southwest region as a representation of Nigeria, future research could consider a wider scope by examining the onomastic context of street children in other regions of the

country. Also, ingroup members' methods of solving the problems of practical nickname reasoning may be investigated.

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