Original Article

Street Language and Social Survival in Gulu City: Insights from Aguu, the Socially Excluded Youth

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of street language as a survival skill among the street children 'Aguu', a socially excluded youth in Gulu City, who continuously face stigmatization and discrimination in the community. The study used a qualitative research approach and historical design, involving participant observation, life history interviews and in-depth one-on-one oral interviews as data collection methods. Key findings from recent studies indicate that, over time, street language has emerged as a significant marker of social identity, particularly among marginalized and alienated groups. This linguistic phenomenon is especially prevalent among the youth, often derogatively referred to as "Aguu" by mainstream society. The study argues that street language fosters unity and identity among its speakers, acting as a form of resistance to societal exclusion. The study also contends that the culture of the youth, urbanization and post-conflict recovery have intensified and extended linguistic perspectives and forms of street communication, as economic and social transformations that reshape language use in Gulu City. This paper maintains that street language plays a crucial role as a means of identity and resilience for the socially excluded youth in Gulu City, as it allows them to navigate life on issues related to security, relationship-related inclusion, daily needs, conflict resolution, employment and medical needs. The paper concludes that the experiences of street children in Gulu City illustrate their resilience, adaptability, and determination to survive amidst systemic exclusion and societal neglect. Accordingly, the study recommends community-based support systems in order to create safe spaces and support networks for street children, provision of accessible and affordable mental health care and substance abuse counselling, as well as collaborative inclusive language and reduced stigma efforts to humanize experiences of these children, and foster greater community empathy and understanding within Gulu City. Above all, the study argues that both social institutions and government agencies should abandon the use of the term 'Aguu' to refer to street children, as it serves as a primary mechanism of social exclusion. This term, which has been adopted by both society and governmental bodies, carries derogatory connotations and reinforces the marginalization of these individuals.

INTRODUCTION

As explained by Divon and Owor (2020), the term *Aguu* can be understood from multiple perspectives. They may be seen as children and youth who, as victims of extreme socio-political circumstances, have been forced to survive on the streets of the city. Alternatively, they may be viewed as young individuals who, for various personal reasons, consciously chose to leave their homes and migrate to Gulu's urban environment. Another interpretation is that they are individuals who have turned to illicit activities as a means of subsistence—engaging in theft, preying on passersby, or forming organized gangs involved in coordinated criminal behaviour.

Additionally, the Aguu may be seen as mercenaries or criminals-for-hire, used as tools in conflicts of various scales for purposes ranging from coercion to revenge. From a theoretical standpoint, the Aguu represent a group that occupies a liminal space, existing on the boundary between what is considered normative and non-normative behaviour within Acholi society and Gulu town, challenging the established social order. As already mentioned, street children are often linked to violence, crime, and social unrest. As a result, they become socially vulnerable, exposed to both perpetrating and falling victim to the negative influences within their environment (Bajari & Kuswarno, 2020).

In recent years, the study of youth languages has emerged as a significant area of research, particularly focusing on how social dynamics influence the formation and usage of language. This line of inquiry has gained traction as scholars recognize that language is not merely a system of communication but a complex social construct deeply intertwined with identity and power relations. One concept frequently referenced in this context is the idea of 'anti-language,' a term which describes the linguistic practices of a group that stands in opposition to the dominant societal norms (Halliday, 1976). This notion emphasizes that youth languages often serve as expressions of unique social constructs that reflect specific relationships to broader forms of social organization and hierarchy. Unlike other forms of specialized language, such as jargon or argot, youth languages are characterized by the degree of manipulation of their underlying base languages and the various contexts in which they are employed. As outlined by Kießling and Mous (2004), this manipulation elevates youth languages to a somewhat exceptional status, highlighting their role in both linguistic innovation and social commentary.

The theoretical creativity that underpins these languages acts as a catalyst for linguistic change and is central to the ideologies surrounding language use and the identities that they help forge. Researchers such as Kießling and Mous (2004), Storch (2011), and Nassenstein and Hollington (2015) have explored how these languages not only facilitate communication but also function as vehicles for cultural expression and social resistance. The act of inventing new words and employing innovative linguistic strategies carries significant social prestige among speakers, marking these practices as more than mere tools for interaction; they transform into what Blommaert (2005) refers to as "cultural commodities." This characterization underscores the importance of these linguistic practices in shaping identity, especially within rapidly changing social environments. Consequently, it raises critical questions about the adequacy of current theoretical frameworks in capturing the underlying social dynamics that inform these languages. Specifically, the term 'street language or youth language' invites scrutiny regarding its effectiveness in representing the complexity and nuance of these linguistic practices. To delve deeper into these inquiries, this article will detail the emergence and evolution of Leb pa Bwulu, drawing on qualitative field research conducted between 2014 and 2016. Through this exploration, the study aims to shed light on how youth languages reflect and respond to the socio-cultural landscapes from which they arise. The study therefore in this section aimed at establishing the historical evolution of slang, exploring the dynamics of street language, and the different strategies adopted to enhance effective communication between the street children and the community.

The Historical Evolution of Street Language in Gulu City

Gulu City, the largest urban centre in Northern Uganda, has experienced profound historical, social, cultural and economic changes, each of which has left its mark on the language practices of its residents. From its early days as a colonial town, through the brutal Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) conflict, and into its post-conflict recovery and urbanization, Gulu has been shaped by a complex interplay of cultural, political, and economic forces. Being an urban hub where diverse groups, including local residents, returnees, migrants, and refugees, interact and communicate in a rich linguistic environment, street language has evolved alongside these historical developments, serving as a reflection of Gulu City's changing identity. This article explores the historical evolution of street language in Gulu City, drawing on sociolinguistic theory and examining key periods of transformation from colonial rule to the present.

This unique dialect, filled with specific vocabulary and expressions, acts as more than a communication tool, as it fosters identity and community among its speakers. However, in formal environments like schools, workplaces, and government offices, street language is often looked down upon as informal. Such settings typically favour standardized language, leaving street language speakers stigmatized as uneducated or unqualified, further reinforcing social exclusion (Labov, 1972; Bourdieu, 1991). Clearly, language can act as both a unifying tool and a barrier, depending on societal perceptions and usage contexts (Hymes, 1974; Blommaert, 2010). In Gulu City, street language symbolizes resilience against prevailing social structures, offering speakers a shared identity rooted in their experiences. However, in formal spaces, this same dialect becomes a sign of exclusion, restricting access to opportunities and reinforcing the marginalization of its speakers as emphasized by Blommaert (2005).

Also, factors like urbanization, youth culture, and Gulu's ongoing post-conflict recovery have further complicated the role of street language. Urbanization has deepened social divides, with language acting as a boundary marker. Youth culture, which embraces street language as an expression of identity, is impacted by these changes,

as street language remains a source of both connection and exclusion (Eckert, 2000). Additionally, post-conflict recovery has introduced new opportunities, but those who cannot adopt formal language are often left out, worsening socio-economic disparities (Mbembe & Nuttall, 2004). The exclusion of street language has far-reaching implications for social inclusion policies. By marginalizing street language speakers, formal institutions perpetuate existing inequalities that disadvantage these communities (Gal, 1989). The exclusion of non-standard linguistic forms also limits Gulu's linguistic diversity, undermining the potential for richer cultural and social interactions (Irvine & Gal, 2000).

The history of street children in Gulu City

According to Divon and Owor (2020), the street youth, a distinct group of street youth in Gulu can trace their origins to two main sources shaped by the traumatic backdrop of conflict and displacement. The first group comprises children and young people who were uprooted from their homes due to the ongoing violence, losing access to their lands and traditional livelihoods. Many of these individuals became night commuters, travelling to camps in search of safety from the brutal attacks and abductions perpetrated by the Lord's Resistance Army (Thomsen and Bjerngaard, 2008). The widespread displacement during this period led to a significant number of births within the confines of internally displaced persons (IDP) camps. Many of these children were left orphaned due to the war or the illness of their caregivers, while others were abandoned as a result of early pregnancies and the associated stigma faced by young, single mothers as observed by Hoem (2008). Consequently, these children often grew up without knowledge of their parents or a strong cultural identity, leaving them adrift and disconnected from traditional Acholi social structures and support systems. This sense of rootlessness and alienation has significantly influenced the formation of the street youth identity,

reflecting a shared struggle for survival among those who found themselves on the streets.

The second group of street children consists of former abductees who endured harrowing experiences at the hands of the LRA, with an estimate of over 20,000 being children. According to the Human Rights Watch (2003) report, these young people faced extreme trauma during their abduction, including separation from their families, exposure to violence, and profound psychological distress. When many of them escaped or were released, they returned to communities that often viewed them with suspicion and stigmatized them as collaborators with the enemy. This societal rejection compounded their challenges, pushing them further into the streets and reinforcing their sense of isolation. The street language known as Leb pa Bwulu emerged as a vital means of communication and identity among these youth, symbolizing their resilience and solidarity. Divon and Owor (2020) observed that as the conflict officially ended in 2006, those who were once street children had grown into teenagers or young adults, yet the presence of these street children remains palpable in Gulu. This raises important questions about their current identities and realities, which will be explored through interviews, participant observations, and discussions with both current and former members of the 'Aguu', to examine their evolving experiences and the ongoing impacts of their past.

Pre-Colonial and Early Colonial Period: The Foundation of Language Use

Before the arrival of colonial forces in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Acoli people, the dominant ethnic group in Uganda's Northern region, had developed rich linguistic and cultural traditions. Much as Amone and Okullu (2014) argue that Acholi was a British creation, the evolving Acholi language with time was however central to communication, ritual practices, and social organization. Language was not only a means of communication but also a vehicle for passing down

oral traditions, proverbs, and songs that expressed communal values. This period was marked by a stable linguistic environment, with little external influence on the Acholi language.

However, with the advent of British colonialism, new languages entered the region. English, the language of administration, law, and education, began to filter into Gulu, creating a bilingual society. At this stage, the relationship between Acholi and English was highly hierarchical, with English holding a higher status as the language of power and modernity. While English was largely confined to formal settings, its introduction set the stage for the future development of linguistic practices that blended local and colonial influences. Consequently, language variation and the early seeds of code-switching emerged during this period, as certain groups particularly those involved in missionary education or colonial administration began to incorporate English into their daily lives (Trudgill, 2000). The introduction of new concepts through English created a lexical gap in Acholi, which was filled by borrowing, a precursor to the later evolution of street language.

Post-Colonial Era: Independence and the Rise of Urbanization

Uganda's independence in 1962 marked a significant turning point in the country's political and social landscape, and this was also reflected in language practices. As Gulu grew as an administrative and commercial centre, urbanization brought people from different ethnic groups and regions into contact. Luganda, the language of the Baganda people, and Swahili, a lingua franca across East Africa, began to influence everyday communication in Gulu, particularly in the marketplaces and urban centres.

This period also saw the beginnings of street language, as informal social networks grew in Gulu's expanding urban spaces. As Milroy & Milroy (1992) discuss in their work on social networks and language, urban environments encourage the development of linguistic innovations due to the constant interaction between diverse groups. In Gulu, street language began to emerge as a result of these urban interactions, with young people, traders, and workers blending Acoli, English, Luganda, and Swahili to create a dynamic linguistic repertoire. As a result of these multiple languages in post-colonial Gulu City, code-switching and the development of localized slang arose, as people from different linguistic backgrounds engaged in everyday economic activities. This marked a significant shift toward a more fluid, multilingual urban identity (Labov, 1972).

Conflict Era (1986–2006): The Impact of the Lord's Resistance Army Insurgency

The period of conflict from the mid-1980s to the mid-2000s, driven by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) insurgency, brought profound disruptions to social and linguistic life in Gulu. During the insurgency, many people were displaced from their rural homes and forced into internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, where they encountered people from various linguistic backgrounds. In the confined, high-stress environments of the camps, language became a tool for survival, solidarity and identity.

As explored in Divon and Owor (2021), communication among the street youth is normally recognized as *Leb pa Bwulu*, a linguistic phenomenon specific to Gulu, a city in Northern Uganda, and is recognized as the local "youth language" among the Acholi-speaking population. This language emerged in the context of the civil conflict between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Ugandan People's Defence Force (UPDF), particularly during and after the war. It was developed by young people who, having been displaced by the violence and subsequently forced to live on the streets, created a new mode of communication as a means of survival. The term "Aguu," which these youths initially adopted to refer to themselves, signifies a marginalized group

struggling to navigate a society marked by social isolation and disruption. In its literal translation, *Aguu* refers to individuals who are willing to do whatever is necessary to survive in difficult circumstances, highlighting their resilience and adaptive strategies in the context of profound social upheaval (Divon & Owor, 2020).

According to Wenger's (1998) concept of community of practice, shared activities and struggles lead to the development of new linguistic practices. In the IDP camps, where people from diverse regions and ethnic backgrounds lived together, new forms of communication emerged. This included slang that reflected the hardships of life in the camps, such as terms for food rations, aid distributions, and security risks. The interaction between displaced communities, aid workers, and the military brought further linguistic influences into Gulu, contributing to the evolution of street language.

Youth who grew up during this period played a crucial role in shaping the emerging street language. Isolated from formal education and traditional cultural practices, many young people created new identities rooted in urban resilience. Music, particularly reggae, hip-hop, and later Afrobeat, became an important medium for expressing these identities. Youth slang reflected a mixture of Acoli, English, and musical jargon, and many of these terms would later become part of Gulu's urban lexicon. Therefore, the conflict era solidified Gulu's street language as a tool for survival and social identity, particularly among the displaced and marginalized. The shared experiences of trauma and displacement fostered linguistic innovation, as people sought to create a sense of community in the face of adversity (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992).

Post-Conflict and Urbanization (2006 - Present): The Rise of Gulu City's Modern Street Language

Following the end of the LRA insurgency, Gulu entered a period of rapid urbanization and economic recovery. This period saw a significant influx of returnees, migrants, and refugees from South Sudan, as well as increased economic activity and interaction with the rest of Uganda and the global economy. As Gulu transformed from a war-torn region into a thriving urban centre, its linguistic landscape shifted dramatically.

One of the key drivers of street language evolution in this period has been youth culture, particularly the influence of global popular culture. As Pennycook (2007) discusses, urban youth are often at the forefront of linguistic innovation, borrowing terms from global music, social media, and fashion. In Gulu, terms from hip-hop and Afrobeat music such as *swag* (style or confidence), *hustle* (working hard to succeed), and *vibes* (positive energy) have become part of the city's street language. Social media platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook have further accelerated the spread of slang across geographic and social boundaries.

Despite these global influences, Gulu's street language remains deeply rooted in local Acoli culture. Proverbs, idiomatic expressions, and metaphors from the Acoli language are frequently incorporated into urban slang, creating a blend of the old and the new. As Blommaert (2010) notes, this linguistic fusion reflects the complex identity of post-conflict urban spaces, where people navigate both traditional and modern realities. Eventually, the post-conflict era saw the rise of a highly dynamic and innovative street language in Gulu, driven by urbanization, youth culture, and globalization. Code-switching between Acoli, English, and slang has become a key feature of urban communication, reflecting the city's growing diversity and connection to the wider world (Myers-Scotton, 1993).

To conclude, the evolution of street language in Gulu City is closely tied to the region's historical trajectory, from pre-colonial traditions through colonial rule, post-independence urbanization, the LRA conflict, and post-conflict recovery. Each period of Gulu's history has contributed to the

development of a unique linguistic environment where local, national, and global influences intersect. Street language in Gulu reflects the city's complex social and cultural identity, serving as a tool for negotiating urban life, expressing youth identity, and adapting to changing economic and political conditions. As Gulu City continues to evolve, this study contends that its street language will remain a dynamic and fluid aspect of its urban culture.

Problem Statement

In Gulu City, street language has become a crucial tool for social survival among the "Aguu," a group of youth who are marginalized by urban poverty, social exclusion, and the lingering effects of post-conflict recovery. For these youth, street language is not only a means of communication but also a key marker of identity and solidarity, helping to establish a sense of belonging within a community often overlooked by mainstream society. While street language plays a vital role in fostering resilience and social cohesion, it also acts as a barrier in formal settings such as schools, workplaces, and government institutions, where it is frequently stigmatized as informal or unrefined. This creates a paradox in which street language simultaneously enables survival in the face of adversity while reinforcing social divides that hinder upward mobility and access to opportunities. This study seeks to investigate how street language functions as both a survival mechanism and a source of exclusion for the street youth, exploring its impact on their socio-economic integration, the reinforcement of marginalization, and the broader implications for social inclusion policies in Gulu City.

In Gulu City, street language has become a key identifier for marginalized groups, particularly among the urban poor (children inclusive) and youth collectively known as the "Aguu."

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research approach and a historical design. The qualitative approach facilitated an in-depth exploration of community opinions, views, emotions, attitudes, experiences, and perceptions related to street children in Gulu City. It seeks to address questions about the way of life of street children, their unique street language and how this has created some level of tension with the surrounding community, leaving them socially excluded. The study was conducted in Gulu City, purposively selected due to the ever-increasing number of street children and youth, compared to other urban areas in Northern Uganda. The study participants were purposively chosen to include both male and female street children and youth in Gulu City. A sample size of 40 participants determined by the saturation level were engaged in the study. These were spread throughout the four divisions that make up Gulu City, with 10 participants from each division.

Accordingly, data was collected using participant observation, life history interviews and in-depth one-on-one oral interviews. Specifically, the participant observation method was employed to collect data by immersing in various groups of street children and youth, allowing for observation of their daily lives, communications, and decision-making processes related to the issue under study. In-depth interviews allowed the researchers to delve into rich and personal narratives of how street children and youth perceive, interpret, and feel about street language, enabling a richer understanding of their attitudes, values, and beliefs about the phenomenon under study. It also allowed for better follow-up questions that clarified the underlying motivations and influencing factors to the usage of street language. Equally, life history interviews were used, to actively engage the identified participants in issues related to street language, while respecting their agency. This allowed the study to capture the various personal life histories of different street children and youth from their early experiences and encounters with street language, and how this has

shaped their personal growth and way of communication over time.

Due to the sensitive nature of the study, confidentiality was strictly maintained, with participants identified using coded labels. For instance, a street child was coded as **SC**, and the youth as **SY.**

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In the dynamic yet challenging environment of Gulu City, a powerful story emerges that focuses on the resilience and determination of street children working to achieve social inclusion. This analysis delves into the complex struggles these young individuals face as they navigate the complexities of a world often indifferent to their plight. With a keen awareness of the unambiguous division that separates them from the educated, well-off economically comfortable, and healthier segments of society, these children endeavour to forge connections that can bridge the gap between their realities and the opportunities that lie beyond. Related, according to Wacquant (2008), in industrialized nations throughout the post-industrial age, cities have emerged as the site of new forms of territorially based racial or class discrimination.

The analysis underscores some of the specific language they use to forge this relationship and strive to meet their dire life demands. This is presented based on four major perspectives: security, relationship, basic needs, conflict resolution, employment and medical needs.

On the Issues of Security (safety)

Findings from the interviews and FGDs conducted with the street children in various divisions of Gulu City unveiled the following jargon used and related to security matters and the life of the street children:

- Jess 'soldiers'
- Copsi 'police officer'
- Poto 'fight'
- Dawa 'a victim of theft"
- Password 'a key to a burglary'
- Wenja 'to steal'
- Fly 'escape from arrest's
- Password 'a secret code used during a robbery'
- Kai/zale 'weed'
- Fly 'escape'

The street language used by children in Gulu City reveals significant insights into their perceptions of security forces and the socio-political context they navigate. Terms like "Jess" for soldiers and "Copsi" for police officers underscore a complex relationship marked by mistrust and hostility. These borrowings from English illustrate how this category of youth and children on the street navigate with communication, despite their limited education, and integrate external influences into their vernacular. This suggests that even in marginalized communities, linguistic exchange with global languages is possible, although the integration may not always be seamless (Romaine, 2012). For instance, terms like "Copsi" represent a phonetic adaptation rather than a direct borrowing, indicating a localized understanding of authority figures.

The term "Poto," meaning to fight, captures the aggressive dynamics these children face in their daily lives. The use of such language illustrates not just the physical struggles they encounter but also the emotional turmoil stemming from their interactions with security personnel. Discussions with participants from the Bardege and Layibi Divisions highlighted a pervasive view that security officers act as barriers, hindering their daily pursuit of basic needs. This sentiment is echoed in the children's language, which serves as a form of resistance against perceived oppression (Bourdieu, 1991). Bourdieu suggests that acts of resistance are not merely reactions to oppression; they also serve as a means for individuals or groups to affirm their

agency, dignity, and cultural identity. He contended that resistance can manifest in various ways, from overt actions like protests and demonstrations to more subtle expressions, such as language use or other symbolic gestures. These acts can take place across multiple spheres, including economic, political, cultural, and symbolic realms. Historical examples abound that illustrate what Bourdieu would consider acts of resistance. As they navigate their reality, these children adopt and adapt language to articulate their grievances and experiences, thus reinforcing their identity within a marginalized community.

Another critical term, "Dawa," referring to a victim of theft, speaks to their lived experiences of loss and theft. This word reflects not only the reality of vulnerability but also the communal understanding of betrayal and injustice. The language here becomes a tool for expression and solidarity among street children, encapsulating shared experiences that foster a sense of belonging. Notably, Starlight Foundation (2024) emphasizes that governments play a significant role as agents of change, with the ability to make meaningful improvements in the lives of street-connected children through compassionate policies and a commitment to social justice. By focusing on initiatives that tackle the underlying causes of homelessness such as poverty, limited access to education, and insufficient healthcare, governments can foster inclusivity and empowerment. Therefore, the significance of such language expressions lies in their ability to forge connections among individuals facing similar adversities, creating a collective identity that stands in opposition to the societal structures they perceive as neglectful.

The street jargon "password" emerges as particularly significant within this lexicon. Used restrictively during discussions of burglary, the term symbolizes a coded language that serves to protect sensitive information among various units of street children. This selective communication indicates a strategic adaptation to their environment, where

sharing information could lead to greater vulnerability (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992). By reserving this term for specific contexts, the children not only maintain agency over their experiences but also craft an identity that is both resilient and resourceful. The effectiveness of this expression lies in its capacity to establish boundaries, allowing them to navigate a landscape rife with mistrust and danger.

Moreover, the word "wenja," meaning to steal, further illustrates the complexities of morality within their social interactions. This term is not merely descriptive; it embodies a culture of survival where theft can sometimes be a necessity. By incorporating such terms into their vocabulary, these children articulate a reality where conventional norms are often inverted as supported by Vigouroux (2015). This linguistic flexibility reflects their need to adapt quickly to shifting social dynamics, a skill honed through their experiences on the streets.

The term "fly," which denotes escaping from arrest, signifies a survival instinct prevalent among street children. This language reflects their constant negotiation with authority, revealing how they view security forces not just as protectors but as potential threats (Hirschfeld, 2019). The children's linguistic choices highlight a broader socio-political narrative where they are often criminalized for their circumstances, forcing them to develop strategies both linguistic and behavioural to evade capture and control. Their vocabulary becomes a survival toolkit, enabling them to navigate their precarious reality while asserting their existence.

Equally, the jargon *kai/zale* referring to weed, revealed various complex factors among street children. Specifically, the study revealed that the daily use of weed among street children is linked to environmental, psychological, economic and social factors. Participants from both Laroo and Pece Divisions generally agreed that weed is generally affordable on the streets and hence a normalized street culture, that not only enables them to escape

from trauma, stress and hardships but also unites them as peers on the street. Economically, the use of weed is a survival strategy to cope with hunger and hardships, while psychologically, it is used and regarded as an immediate self-medication for emotional pain. Openly, one of the participants (SY) who now boasts of being the chief supplier of weed within Acholi Road in Pece Division confessed that;

> *I have chewed weed since I joined the streets during the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020. At first, it was because of peer influence, but with time, I realized it is part of our daily life. To us, weed is food. Personally, I take it twice or three times a day, but I have seniors who chew it the whole day. The feeling is appealing. We know weed is not the solution to our daily struggles and problems, but the majority of us have generally experienced that it is a quick and temporary escape from pain especially when you are hurt, hungry and alone on the streets. This is our general view, feeling and practice, and I am sure, it is the reason why Christians and other sections of society isolate us and view us as bad characters and a threat to security.*

Research has consistently highlighted the vulnerability of street children to a range of social issues, including substance abuse (Bajari & Kuswarno, 2020; Situmorang & Herman, 2021; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992). In Gulu, as in other regions, many street children are exposed to drugs, with some actively using them as a means of coping with their harsh realities. This exposure is often driven by the lack of supportive social structures, economic hardship, and the pervasive influence of street culture. Drug use among street children is not an isolated issue; it is intertwined with other forms of exploitation and violence. These children are particularly susceptible to physical and sexual abuse, with many facing harassment, trafficking, and other forms of exploitation. The intersection of substance use and victimization reinforces the cycle of marginalization, making it

even more difficult for these children to break free from their precarious circumstances.

Consequently, their vulnerability is compounded by both their engagement in and exposure to drugs, which further entrenches their social exclusion and impedes their chances for recovery and reintegration into society. Generally, regarding the issue of security/safety, the street language in Gulu City serves as a powerful indicator of their relationship with security forces and the societal structures around them. Their vocabulary, rich with borrowed terms and localized adaptations, captures their struggles, aspirations, and identities. These linguistic choices highlight the significance of language as a vehicle for resistance and expression within marginalized communities. Through their words, these children articulate a narrative of survival, resilience, and an ongoing quest for recognition and security amidst adversity.

Relationship related inclusion

As we may know, unlike animals, humans are inherently social beings, and we strive to forge meaningful relationships. Accordingly, street children have created significant communication devices that, in their perception, would make them blend easily with the people who are already riding on the free ticket of social inclusion. Consequently, this study unveiled and considered the street vocabulary below:

- Ase 'girlfriend'

- Folio 'liking'

- Mamzo/zey 'mother/father'

- Twako lacede   'having sex intercourse'

- Kamule 'friend'

- Raw 'strong hearted'

- Darry 'misunderstanding'

- Fata-fata/aruba 'problem'

- Aguu 'street children'

Clearly, the language practices of the street children in Gulu City underscore crucial mechanisms for fostering social cohesion and emotional support with the general society. Terms like *ase* 'girlfriend' and *Kamule* 'friend' are essential for building connections in an environment where traditional family structures are often absent or dysfunctional. These words enable the socially excluded children to create surrogate familial bonds, fostering a sense of belonging and community amidst the challenges of street life. However, when these mechanisms of forging relationships by use of words, due to misunderstanding, miscommunication, or social exclusion, the consequences can be severe, often resulting in violence, which soils the relationship between this social group and those who live in a rather comfortable space. Nevertheless, this instantiation points out how language in one situation can be used for social inclusion and exclusion in another. For example, the study participants submitted that it hurts them to the core when society unnecessarily keeps calling them *aguu*, a term analyzed as derogatory. Comparably, *gypsy* as in the social exclusion in Turkey (Akkaya & Yılgür, 2019, p. 244) shows how the word is deployed to the designation of socially exclude wandering groups of people.

As articulated by one of the street youth (SY) within the market street, it was evident that they have missed parental love and guidance. She sadly narrated that: "*I was born in captivity, and without parents to guide me, I learned to fight for my place. When we try to make friends but fail, we feel we have no choice but to use force. It's like a shield against the world that doesn't accept us*." This statement captures the deep sense of alienation felt by these children who lack parental guidance and a supportive social network. In their attempts to forge relationships using terms that denote affection and companionship, failure to establish these connections can lead to feelings of desperation and hostility. Clearly, this tasks us to think where else would they learn the language of love and socialization when they are left to themselves?

Crucially, without effective communication, conflicts may arise that escalate into physical confrontations, as aggression becomes a means of asserting their identity and defending their space against perceived threats. The terms "darry" (misunderstanding) and *Fata-fata/aruba* 'problem' illustrate how miscommunication can lead to conflict. In an environment where children are already vulnerable, the inability to articulate grievances and feelings can push small misunderstandings into major disputes. For example, if one child feels excluded from a group and cannot express their emotions, it may lead to frustration and, ultimately, a violent reaction. This not only deepens the rifts within their community but also reinforces societal stereotypes that paint street children as inherently problematic or dangerous.

Furthermore, the importance of language in this context cannot be overstated. The street children use these terms to navigate their complex social landscape, where affection and loyalty are vital for survival. When these linguistic tools fail, the breakdown of social cohesion can transform the community into a battleground, where violence becomes a misguided defence mechanism against further exclusion. The interplay of language and social inclusion reveals that the words they use not only reflect their experiences but also shape their realities. Thus, the failure to establish effective communication can have dire implications, reinforcing cycles of violence and further marginalizing these already vulnerable children in Gulu City. Understanding the intricacies of communication among street children is helpful in studying the idea of ghettoization because it highlights the effects of social exclusion and the implications it may have on both the excluded group and the general public (Stejskalová, 2013). At the same time, bringing these procedures to light helps decision-makers comprehend the problem and draft laws that will support halting the growth of these places. It is helpful to study the idea of ghettoization because it highlights the effects of social exclusion

and the implications it may have on both the excluded group and the general public. Following these procedures enables decision-makers to comprehend the problem and enact laws that will facilitate stopping the trend.

Daily needs and necessities of the street children in Gulu City

Regarding the daily needs and necessities of the street children in Gulu City, several common vocabulary were reported as an easy way of communication among the different street children groups. These included;

- Siba 'food'

- Dizzo 'clothes'

- Soo 'money'

- Poyi 'food'

- Kazi 'working at a construction site for food'

- Zembe 'digging on people's farms for money or in exchange for food'

- Nyach 'gonorrhea'

- Oyoke 'contracting HIV'

- Tye iboli cuup (literal meaning 'the person in savings group' vs. idiomatic meaning 'enrolled for ARVs'. Note that the literal meaning is always derogatory that is why they tie it to money being saved)

CONCLUSION

Clearly, the experiences of street children in Gulu City illustrate their resilience, adaptability, and determination to survive amidst systemic exclusion and societal neglect. Commonly referred to as *aguu*, these children rely on a unique street language to navigate challenges, assert their identity, and build solidarity within their marginalized communities. Their vocabulary serves as a powerful tool for addressing issues related to security, relationships, and basic needs, revealing both their struggles and

their strategies for coping with adversity. In terms of security, expressions like 'Jess," 'copsi,' and "fly" reflect the children's perceptions of authority figures and their methods for avoiding harm. These terms reveal a tense and distrustful relationship with law enforcement, emphasizing their need for self-protection and resilience. Similarly, words like *ase* (girlfriend) and *kamule* (friend) highlight their efforts to form social bonds in the absence of family support. However, societal labels such as *aguu*, often used in a derogatory manner, exacerbate their marginalization and can lead to conflicts.

Equally, the study highlights the dual nature of language as a means of fostering connection and reinforcing exclusion. While language can promote unity and a sense of belonging, miscommunication or societal stigmatization can deepen divisions and escalate tensions. This underscores the importance of addressing systemic barriers that perpetuate homelessness and marginalization, as well as fostering empathy and inclusion within society. Ultimately, the resilience of street children in Gulu City demonstrates their ability to adapt and thrive despite overwhelming challenges. Their linguistic innovations and social strategies showcase their potential for transformation if supported by compassionate and inclusive policies. Addressing the structural inequalities that drive their marginalization is critical to enabling these children to transition from mere survival to active and meaningful participation in society. This study calls for targeted interventions that amplify the voices of street children, paving the way for a future that recognizes their dignity and empowers their agency.

The study therefore recommends among others; community-based support systems in order to create safe spaces and support networks for street children. With community leaders, local organizations, and civil society groups on board, this could help to reduce stigma and provide resources that enhance the well-being of marginalized children. Equally, efforts should be made to provide accessible and affordable mental health care and substance abuse

counselling. These services could address the psychological and social factors driving the use of substances like weed among street children, offering healthier coping mechanisms. Lastly, collaborative inclusive language and reduced stigma efforts should be promoted within Gulu City, to educate society about the harmful effects of stigmatizing language and the importance of using respectful terms when referring to street children. This could help to humanize their experiences and foster greater empathy and understanding.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Authors' Contribution

Omara, J. C. participated in designing the study and designing the initial manuscript, Okello, S. Ochen, P. and Kabwijamu, P. collected, analyzed and presented the data, Alidri, A. reviewed the manuscript and made the final edits. All the authors participated in writing and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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