

African Literature in the Digital Age: Social Media, Identity and Literary Expression in Francophone Africa

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Abstract

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This paper examines how social media and digital technologies are transforming literary production, circulation, identity construction, and linguistic expression in contemporary Francophone Africa. It argues that the digital turn has created a hybrid literary ecology in which print culture, oral performance, African languages, French, audiovisual media, and networked communication interact. Drawing on postcolonial theory, cultural identity studies, and digital literary scholarship, the study investigates the changing relationship between writers and readers, the construction of transnational identities, linguistic hybridity, digital literary forms, feminist agency, political expression, and the colonality of data. The paper contends that social media can reduce dependence on conventional publishing gatekeepers and expand access to literary publics, while simultaneously producing new forms of algorithmic, commercial, and technological gatekeeping. In Francophone Africa, digital writing therefore represents neither an unqualified liberation nor a simple continuation of colonial domination. Rather, it constitutes a contested cultural space in which writer's appropriate digital technologies to negotiate language, identity, memory, belonging, and power. The study concludes that the future of Francophone African literature will be increasingly multimodal and transnational, requiring literary scholarship to address both the creative possibilities and structural inequalities of digital culture.

Keywords: Francophone Africa; African literature; social media; digital humanities; identity; literary expression; linguistic hybridity.

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Introduction

The history of African literature has always been inseparable from changes in the technologies through which stories are preserved, circulated and encountered. Before the dominance of print, African societies relied extensively on oral performance, memory, praise poetry, storytelling, proverbs, songs and other communal forms of cultural transmission. Colonial modernity introduced new systems of literacy and publishing that profoundly altered the

relationship between author, text and audience. In the twenty-first century, digital technologies have produced another decisive transformation. Computers, smartphones, blogs, online magazines, messaging applications and social networking platforms have created new literary environments in which the boundaries between writing, performance, publicity, criticism and everyday communication are increasingly porous. Shola Adenekan (2021) observes that digital African literature can renew



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forms of interaction between writers and readers that were difficult to sustain within the conventional book culture (Adenekan, 2021). Recent scholarship likewise describes the digital turn as a transformation of literary production and circulation rather than a simple technological supplement to print.

Francophone Africa occupies a particularly productive position within this transformation. The region's literary traditions are shaped by the historical presence of French as a colonial and postcolonial language, by the persistence of African languages and oral cultures, by migration between African and European cities, and by increasingly transnational publics. Contemporary writers do not encounter French as a neutral medium. They inherit it as a language marked by colonial history while simultaneously appropriating it as a vehicle for African experience, experimentation and intellectual intervention. Digital communication intensifies this process because online writing allows authors to combine French with local languages, slang, images, emojis, audio, video, hyperlinks and conversational registers. The resulting literary forms challenge the older distinction between a literary text and non-literary communication.

The central argument of this paper is that social media has become an important cultural and literary arena in Francophone Africa because it enables writers to negotiate three interconnected questions: Who am I in a networked world? In what language can I speak? And what does it mean to produce African literature when the boundaries between author, reader, performer and commentator are increasingly fluid? Social media can democratize access to publication and readership, but it also introduces new forms of gatekeeping through algorithms, platform policies, unequal connectivity and datafication. James Yékú's concept of the "coloniality of data" is particularly useful because it reminds scholars that digital infrastructures are not politically innocent; literary participation online occurs within economic and technological systems that collect, classify and monetize user activity (Yékú, 2022).

This study therefore approaches digital Francophone African literature as a contested space of cultural

production. It examines the transformation of the literary public sphere, the construction of digital identities, linguistic hybridity, new literary forms, author-reader relations, activism and the political economy of platforms. The objective is not to declare the death of the printed book, but to demonstrate that African literary culture now operates across interconnected media. The digital age has expanded the repertoire through which African writers represent themselves and their societies, while simultaneously creating new questions about authority, authenticity, ownership and visibility.

Theoretical Framework: Postcolonialism, Identity and Digital Literary Studies

A postcolonial approach is particularly appropriate for understanding Francophone African digital literature because language, representation and cultural authority remain deeply connected to colonial history. Frantz Fanon's analysis of language demonstrates that linguistic competence can become associated with social power and recognition (Fanon, 1986). Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o later extended the argument by emphasizing the relationship between language and cultural memory, insisting that language is not simply a neutral instrument but a carrier of historical experience (Ngũgĩ, 1986). Francophone African writers complicate any simple opposition between French and African languages. Many have appropriated French, transformed its rhythms and syntax, inserted African lexical resources into it and used it to articulate experiences that colonial discourse once attempted to silence.

Identity theory also illuminates the digital environment. Stuart Hall (1990) argues that cultural identity should not be understood as a fixed essence but as a position formed through representation, history and difference (Hall, 1990). This insight becomes particularly significant on social media, where users continually construct public selves through photographs, biographies, textual posts, videos, comments and interactions. The literary author in the digital sphere is therefore simultaneously a writer and a public persona. The authorial identity that once emerged primarily through books, interviews and institutional literary

networks can now be constructed through continuous online performance.

Digital literary studies adds a third dimension. Digital literature is not merely literature converted into electronic form. It may incorporate interactivity, multimedia, seriality, hyperlinks, reader participation and networked circulation. Adenekan (2021) demonstrates that African literature in cyberspace can create communities in which writers and readers interact more directly, while Yékú warns that digital literary cultures are embedded in data-driven capitalist systems. These perspectives allow us to avoid two simplistic assumptions: first, that technology automatically liberates African writers; and second, that digital media merely reproduce old colonial inequalities.

The theoretical position adopted here is therefore dialectical. Social media simultaneously expands and constrains literary agency. It can reduce dependence on conventional publishers while creating dependence on privately owned platforms. It can enable African languages to circulate more widely while algorithmic systems may privilege globally dominant languages. It can allow writers to address audiences directly while exposing them to surveillance, harassment and commercial pressures. The digital literary field is consequently a site of negotiation rather than an inherently emancipatory or oppressive space. (Yékú, 2022).

From the Printed Page to the Networked Literary Public

The traditional literary system is organized around relatively identifiable institutions: publishers, editors, booksellers, libraries, universities, literary journals and critics. Digital platforms complicate this structure by allowing texts to circulate without passing through all of these institutions. Zahrah Nesbitt-Ahmed (2017) notes the growth of online African literary platforms and identifies the digital sphere as an increasingly important location for publishing and consuming African literature. This development has implications for Francophone Africa because writers can circulate short fiction, poetry, essays, serialized narratives and literary

commentary to audiences that are geographically dispersed.

The most important transformation is not simply speed. It is the restructuring of literary communication. In the print economy, the author typically produces a manuscript, a publisher mediates its production, and readers encounter the finished book. On social media, publication can be immediate, iterative and conversational. A writer can post a poem, receive responses, revise an idea, share a recording of a performance, respond to readers and continue the conversation across several platforms. Literary meaning becomes partly dialogic.

This environment also challenges the boundaries of genre. A social media post may contain poetic language; a photograph may operate as a visual narrative; a video may combine spoken-word performance and political commentary; a thread may function as an essay; and a sequence of posts may constitute a serialized story. Adeoba's study of African digital publics demonstrates how networked platforms generate new literary practices, including crowdsourced and ekphrastic forms. Such practices are important for Francophone African literary studies because they show that literary expression is no longer confined to forms recognized by the conventional publishing system.

The networked literary public also changes the relationship between center and periphery. Historically, writers from African societies often confronted publishing structures concentrated in European metropolitan centers. Digital publication can allow writers to bypass some of these structures and reach African and diasporic audiences directly. Yet this should not be exaggerated into a narrative of complete independence. Visibility on social platforms is governed by algorithms, advertising economies and platform policies. A writer may therefore escape one gatekeeping institution only to encounter another. (Adeoba, 2024).

Social Media and the Construction of Francophone African Identity

Identity is one of the most significant themes in Francophone African literature, and social media

provides a new environment in which identity is continuously performed. Hall's understanding of identity as a process rather than an essence is particularly useful here. Digital identities are assembled through language, images, geographical references, affiliations, cultural symbols, literary quotations and interactions. For Francophone African writers, such identity work frequently involves negotiating African belonging alongside transnational and diasporic experiences.

The digital writer may present herself simultaneously as African, Francophone, multilingual, professional, activist, intellectual, mother, and migrant or member of a global literary community. These positions need not be mutually exclusive. Indeed, the digital environment makes their simultaneity visible. A writer in Dakar can address readers in Abidjan, Paris, Montréal and Yaoundé within minutes. The literary public therefore becomes transnational.

This transnationalism is particularly significant because Francophone identity itself is complex. The French language connects diverse African societies to one another and to France and other parts of the Francophone world, but it also carries the memory of colonial domination. Digital writers can expose this contradiction by appropriating French rather than merely reproducing metropolitan norms. The language becomes a site of creative negotiation.

The digital persona can also challenge stereotypes of Africa. Social media enables writers to represent ordinary life, urban modernity, youth culture, political frustration, humour and intellectual debate without waiting for external media institutions to define the continent. Digital self-representation thus becomes a form of cultural agency. At the same time, the pressure to perform an attractive or recognizable identity can reproduce stereotypes. The online African subject may feel compelled to satisfy expectations of authenticity, exoticism, political relevance or cosmopolitanism.

The question of authenticity is therefore central. Digital identity is mediated identity. What appears spontaneous online is often selected, edited and strategically presented. The literary author who constructs an online profile is producing a narrative

of the self. Social media can consequently be read as a form of autobiographical performance, in which identity is repeatedly rewritten in response to changing audiences.

French, African Languages and Digital Linguistic Hybridity

The politics of language becomes particularly visible in digital Francophone Africa. French remains a major language of literary production across numerous African countries, but its dominance is continually negotiated through African languages. Digital communication provides an especially flexible environment for this negotiation because users can move rapidly between languages and registers.

Code-switching is not simply a linguistic failure or evidence of incomplete mastery of French. It can be a deliberate aesthetic and cultural strategy. African writers may insert indigenous words, expressions, proverbs, greetings and speech patterns into French to reproduce local realities and challenge the expectation that African writing in French must conform to metropolitan linguistic standards. Such practices resonate with broader scholarship on African literature, which has repeatedly examined the appropriation and transformation of colonial languages.

The digital environment intensifies this multilingual creativity. Social media encourages short forms, conversational language and rapid switching between linguistic codes. A post can contain French, an African language, English, abbreviations, emojis and visual references without requiring the writer to explain each transition. Such hybridity represents the multilingual reality of contemporary African urban life. (Adjirakor, 2025; Reuster-Jahn & Bosch Santana, 2025).

This is also a question of power. Linguistic hybridity can make African French more visibly African, but digital platforms may still privilege languages with greater computational resources and larger online populations. The problem is not only whether an African language is spoken; it is whether that language is adequately represented in search

systems, keyboards, speech technologies, translation systems and content moderation. Digital literary culture therefore raises a new form of linguistic politics: the politics of technological visibility.

Recent scholarship on Afrophone digital literature demonstrates that social media can function as a space for literary activism in marginalized African languages. Adjirakor's work on Ga literature, for example, emphasizes how digital technologies can allow writers to intervene in linguistic and cultural power structures. Although Ga is not a Francophone literary language in the narrow sense, the broader insight is relevant to Francophone Africa: digital media can help writers challenge the hierarchy that places European languages above African linguistic repertoires.

Francophone African literary expression in the digital age should consequently be understood as multilingual rather than simply French. French remains important, but it is increasingly surrounded, interrupted and transformed by other languages.

New Literary Forms: Poetry, Microfiction, Performance and Visuality

The architecture of social media encourages literary experimentation. Traditional novels and printed poems remain important, but digital platforms encourage forms characterized by brevity, seriality, immediacy and multimedia composition. The resulting forms may include microfiction, digital poetry, spoken-word performances, literary threads, audiovisual narratives and image-text combinations.

This transformation has roots in African oral traditions. Digital literature can revive elements of performance by combining written language with voice, music, and gesture and audience response. Adenekan (2021) argues that African digital literature can reprise aspects of orature through new media technologies. The digital environment therefore does not necessarily represent a rupture with African literary traditions. In some respects, it offers a new technological environment for practices that were already participatory and performative.

The relationship between oral tradition and digital

culture is particularly important because the Western literary model has often privileged the printed book as the highest form of literary expression. Digital African literature complicates this hierarchy. A spoken-word video can be literary even when it does not resemble a conventional poem on the page. A serialized WhatsApp narrative can have literary value even when it is not packaged as a commercially published novel.

The visual dimension is equally significant. Social media allows words to interact with photographs, typography, drawings, memes and video. The literary text becomes multimodal. Meaning may be generated not only by sentences but by the relationship between words and images. Such practices challenge conventional methods of literary criticism, which are often based on stable textual objects.

The implications for Francophone African literary scholarship are substantial. Critics must increasingly ask how a literary work is structured by its medium. A poem posted on social media is not identical to the same poem printed in a book. Its meaning may be affected by comments, reposts, hashtags, accompanying images and the temporal sequence of its publication. Digital literature therefore requires an expanded concept of textuality.

Author–Reader Relations and the Democratization of Literary Space

One of the most significant effects of social media is the reduction of distance between authors and readers. In conventional literary culture, readers encounter authors through books, interviews, festivals or institutional events. Online platforms can make author-reader interaction continuous. Musa's recent study of Hausa fiction on digital platforms demonstrates how serialized online publication can produce active engagement between authors and readers. Although the study concerns Hausa rather than Francophone literature, its model helps explain the wider African digital literary ecology. (Musa, 2025).

For Francophone African writers, direct reader interaction can create new forms of literary

community. Readers can comment on a poem, recommend a novel, debate a political position, share a passage or invite an author into a discussion. Literary authority becomes more distributed. The reader is no longer simply a consumer; the reader can become a promoter, critic, collaborator or even co-creator.

This democratization, however, has limits. Social media metrics such as likes, shares, views and followers can create a new economy of literary visibility. A writer whose work is aesthetically complex but difficult to consume quickly may receive less attention than content designed for immediate engagement. The logic of virality can therefore influence literary production.

The author may also become pressured to maintain constant visibility. Instead of writing privately and publishing periodically, the digital author may be expected to post regularly, respond to comments and build a personal brand. Literary identity becomes entangled with promotional labour. This creates a tension between literature as artistic expression and literature as digital content.

Nevertheless, the expanded interaction between writers and readers represents a significant development. It can make literary culture more participatory and create communities across geographical boundaries. In Francophone Africa, where readers may be dispersed across national borders and diasporic networks, this capacity for sustained interaction is particularly valuable.

Social Media, Literary Activism and Political Expression

African literature has a long tradition of political engagement. From anti-colonial writing to postcolonial critiques of dictatorship, inequality and social injustice, African writers have frequently treated literature as a form of public intervention. Social media extends this tradition by providing immediate channels for commentary and mobilization.

Digital literary expression can therefore become political without being reducible to conventional

political writing. A poem can respond to state violence; a novelist can comment on censorship; a literary collective can circulate a campaign; and a spoken-word performance can challenge gender inequality or xenophobia. The boundaries between literature and activism become increasingly porous.

Digital literary activism also allows writers to contest dominant narratives. When mainstream media organizations frame African societies through particular political or humanitarian narratives, writers can offer alternative accounts grounded in local experience. The digital sphere becomes a counter-public in which marginalized voices can circulate.

However, political expression online involves risk. Governments and other powerful actors may monitor digital spaces, while writers may encounter harassment, censorship or coordinated attacks. The freedom of online expression is therefore uneven. The platform itself can also remove content according to policies that users do not control.

The digital environment extends the longstanding political function of African literary practice by allowing writers to intervene in public debate through networked and participatory forms. Recent scholarship on African digital publics shows that social media can enlarge literary publics and create new forms of literary activism (Adeoba, 2024; Reuster-Jahn & Bosch Santana, 2025).

The digital age thus strengthens an established tradition: the African writer as witness, critic and public intellectual. Yet the speed of social media changes the temporality of intervention. The writer can respond almost immediately to events, but immediate response can also reduce the time available for reflection. Digital literature consequently oscillates between urgency and durability.

The Coloniality of Data and the Limits of Digital Freedom

The celebratory narrative of digital liberation must be balanced by an analysis of digital power. Yékú (2022) argues that digital African literatures are

entangled with datafication, neoliberal capital and algorithmic systems. This insight is indispensable because social media platforms are not neutral public squares. They are commercial infrastructures that collect data, rank content and shape visibility.

For African writers, this means that digital participation takes place within systems largely designed and governed outside the continent. The user may feel empowered to publish independently, but the platform determines many of the conditions under which that publication becomes visible. Algorithms can privilege certain languages, formats and patterns of engagement. Content that does not fit dominant platform expectations may remain invisible.

This problem is especially serious for African languages. If a language has limited digital resources, its literature may be less easily searchable, translated, moderated or recommended. Digital inequality can therefore reproduce linguistic inequality.

Access also remains uneven. Smartphones have expanded connectivity, but disparities in internet affordability, electricity, broadband infrastructure and digital literacy continue to shape who can participate consistently. The digital literary public is consequently not a universal public. It is structured by class, geography, gender, age and technological access.

The challenge is therefore to avoid replacing the old myth of colonial technological dependence with a new myth of digital emancipation. African writers have gained significant new tools, but those tools operate within global structures of technological power. The most productive interpretation is to see digital literary culture as a field of negotiation in which user's appropriate available technologies while also confronting their limitations.

The Digital Diaspora and Transnational Francophone Identity

Francophone African literature has long been shaped by migration and diaspora. Writers move between African cities and metropolitan centers such as Paris,

Brussels, Montréal and other global locations. Digital media transforms this geographical separation into a form of continuous networked presence.

A writer can maintain cultural and literary relationships across borders without being physically present in each location. Diasporic readers can participate in literary debates, attend virtual events, share texts and communicate directly with authors. The digital sphere thus strengthens transnational literary communities.

This development has consequences for identity. Diasporic identity is often characterized by negotiation between multiple cultural contexts. Digital communication makes these negotiations visible. A writer may use French to communicate with a broad Francophone audience while incorporating African linguistic and cultural references to maintain local specificity. The resulting identity is neither entirely national nor entirely metropolitan.

Such transnationalism also challenges the traditional geographic classification of African literature. If an African writer lives in France but writes about Cameroon, or a Senegalese writer lives between Dakar and Paris, where should the literature be located? Digital networks make this question even more complex because literary production itself becomes distributed.

The digital diaspora therefore encourages a conception of Francophone African literature as a network rather than a geographically bounded category. Its defining characteristic is not simply where the writer lives but the cultural, linguistic and historical relationships through which the text circulates.

Gender, Visibility and Digital Literary Agency

Gender is another important dimension of digital literary culture. Social media can provide women writers with platforms through which they can speak publicly, form communities and challenge patriarchal representations. The ability to publish without institutional permission can be particularly

significant for writers whose voices have historically been marginalized.

Digital platforms can support feminist literary expression by facilitating discussions of sexuality, marriage, motherhood, violence, work, education and bodily autonomy. Women writers can create communities that challenge silence and normalize conversations that conventional institutions have sometimes suppressed.

At the same time, visibility can produce vulnerability. Women writers may face online harassment, sexualized attacks and attempts to delegitimize their intellectual authority. The digital sphere can therefore reproduce patriarchal power even while providing tools for resisting it.

The question of agency is consequently central. Digital participation should not be measured only by the number of women who publish online. It should also be evaluated in terms of who controls representation, who receives attention and whose speech is treated as authoritative. Social media creates opportunities for female literary agency, but those opportunities remain contested.

Francophone African women's writing is particularly relevant because it has long challenged patriarchal structures through narrative. Digital media extends that tradition into a more immediate public sphere. The contemporary woman writer can use literary expression not only to represent women's experiences but also to construct a public identity as an intellectual and cultural actor.

Challenges of Digital Literary Preservation and Academic Scholarship

The digital turn creates a paradox: texts become easier to circulate but potentially harder to preserve. Printed books can survive for generations in libraries, while social media posts may disappear because of deleted accounts, platform changes, broken links or corporate decisions. Digital literary scholarship therefore faces an archival problem.

What should future scholars preserve? A single post is rarely sufficient. The literary event may include the original text, comments, reposts, images,

hashtags and responses. The archive must therefore preserve not only textual content but also relationships and contexts.

This has methodological implications for scholars of Francophone African literature. Traditional close reading remains necessary, but it may need to be combined with digital ethnography, discourse analysis, multimodal analysis and archival methods. Scholars must also consider ethical questions concerning public posts, privacy, consent and the vulnerability of users.

The instability of digital texts also complicates citation. A social media post can be edited or deleted after it has been cited. Researchers must therefore document dates, platform information and stable identifiers whenever possible. Digital scholarship requires greater methodological transparency.

African literary studies should consequently expand its archival imagination. Universities, libraries and cultural institutions have an important role to play in preserving digital African literary production. Without deliberate preservation, significant parts of contemporary literary culture may become inaccessible to future generations.

The Future of Francophone African Literature in the Digital Age

The future of Francophone African literature will likely be increasingly hybrid. Print books will remain important, but they will coexist with social media, online magazines, digital archives, podcasts, video performances, messaging applications and emerging forms of artificial intelligence. The literary field will therefore become more multimodal and more networked.

Artificial intelligence introduces additional questions. Digital systems can translate, summarize and generate texts, but their training data often reflect unequal linguistic representation. Francophone African literary cultures risk being reproduced inadequately if African languages and culturally specific contexts remain underrepresented in digital datasets. The future of African digital literature therefore requires not only access to technology but

also African participation in the design, ownership and governance of technological systems.

The most promising direction is not the abandonment of traditional literary institutions but their transformation. Universities can teach digital literary criticism; libraries can preserve online archives; publishers can develop hybrid publication models; literary festivals can combine physical and digital participation; and writers can use multiple media without surrendering literary autonomy.

Francophone African literature is especially well positioned for this future because its history already involves linguistic and cultural negotiation. Writers have long worked between African cultural traditions, French linguistic structures and global literary systems. Digital media adds another layer to that negotiation.

The future literary text may therefore be less stable, less solitary and more interactive than the traditional book. But its fundamental concerns will remain recognizable: memory, identity, power, belonging, injustice, love, migration and the search for human meaning. Technology changes the conditions of literary expression; it does not eliminate the human need to tell stories.

Conclusion

The digital age has fundamentally altered the ecology of African literary production. In Francophone Africa, social media has become a significant arena for literary circulation, identity construction, linguistic experimentation, reader engagement and political expression. The transformation is not simply technological. It is cultural and epistemological because it changes what counts as a literary text, who can participate in literary culture and how authors relate to their audiences.

This paper has argued that digital Francophone African literature should be understood through the interaction of postcolonial history and contemporary technological change. French remains a powerful literary language, but digital writers increasingly manipulate it through multilingualism, code-

switching, African idioms and multimodal expression. Social media also strengthens the relationship between African literary production and oral-performance traditions by allowing text, voice, and image and audience interaction to coexist.

At the level of identity, digital platforms enable writers to construct transnational and multidimensional selves. African identity online is neither fixed nor singular. It is negotiated through language, geography, memory, culture and interaction. Diasporic networks further destabilize the boundaries between Africa and the global Francophone world.

Yet the digital turn must not be romanticized. Platform capitalism, algorithmic visibility, unequal access, linguistic marginalization, surveillance and data extraction constitute serious limitations. Yékú's concept of the colonality of data is particularly valuable because it reminds us that digital spaces are embedded in global structures of power. African writers may gain new forms of agency while simultaneously becoming dependent on infrastructures beyond their control.

Ultimately, the significance of social media for Francophone African literature lies in its capacity to transform literary relationships. The writer is no longer only an author of books; she may also be a performer, commentator, activist, curator and networked public intellectual. The reader is no longer only a consumer; he or she may become a critic, promoter, participant or collaborator. Literature itself becomes increasingly mobile, interactive and multimodal.

The digital age should therefore not be understood as the end of African literature in its traditional form. It is better understood as another stage in the long history of African adaptation, appropriation and creative transformation. Just as African writers appropriated the colonial language and transformed the novel, contemporary writers are appropriating digital technologies and reshaping them for African cultural purposes. The future of Francophone African literature will depend on how successfully writers, readers and institutions negotiate the opportunities and contradictions of this new environment. Its central challenge is to ensure that

technological innovation expands African literary agency rather than reproducing older structures of cultural and economic dependency.

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