Attitudes, Perceptions and Sexual Discourse of Tertiary Institutions Students in Lagos State

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Abstract

In this paper, we examine the attitudes, perceptions and language of sexual discourse amongst tertiary institution students in Lagos State. Both quantitative and qualitative methodology were used. For the qualitative data, naturally occurring conversations were recorded and transcribed using standard orthography with pseudo names for the interactants. The conversations were analysed using aspects of Mey's(2001) pragmeme theory. The quantitative analysis involves the use of questionnaire. The first section of the questionnaire was analysed using frequency graphs in order to group the percentages of the subjects against the responses received. The second section of questionnaire was analysed using Pearson product moment correlation (PPMC). The quantitative analysis of the data reveals a significant positive correlation between students' attitudes and perceptions on sexual discourse ($r = 0.443$, $N = 760$, $P < 0.01$). Additionally, the results showed significant differences in the attitudes and perceptions of male and female students towards sexual discourse ($P < 0.05$). While there were significant differences in the attitudes of Muslim and Christian students towards sexual discourse ($P < 0.05$), no significant differences were found in their perceptions ($P > 0.05$). Also, attitude to and perception of tertiary institutions student to sexual discourse as indicated by their use of language reveal that the students have positive attitude towards pre-marital sex and favour multiple partners.These findings provide valuable insights into the complex and multifaceted nature of sexual discourse among tertiary institution students in Lagos State.

Key words: sexual discourse, attitudes and perceptions, Mey's pragmeme, Lagos state, Tertiary institution students

1.0 **General Introduction**

Perceptions and attitudes are relevant factors that affect one's disposition to something. Perception has to do with one's understanding of a thing after a careful observation. According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, attitude is the way that you think and feel about somebody or something. Attitude shows one's general feeling about something or somebody. Irvine (2001:24) notes that attitudes "include participants' basic understandings of what the sociolinguistic systems consists of, not just emotional dispositions". In modern social psychology, perception is an important theme in understanding certain human behaviours. Edwards and Lopez (2006) define perception as "the filter through which sensory data are strained, and the establishment and maintenance of this filtering is culturally specific and- within social groups- individualised to a greater or lesser extent". What this means is that out of all the experiences and beliefs that an individual grows up with, the individual is expected to sieve out those beliefs that showcase his/her understandings of his/her beliefs. There are individual beliefs, group beliefs and cultural beliefs. In this paper, our focus is on the group beliefs. We consider the undergraduate students in the selected Tertiary Institutions in Lagos State as a group and we look at their attitudes and perceptions to sexual discourse as it relates to its "tabooness". At this group level, the important feature is the acceptance of shared understanding (Edward 2006:417). In the words of Pang (2009:9), "linguistic items can gain or lose their "tabooness" depending on the perception of the general public in the society." But we would like to deviate a bit from this view and assert that sometimes the perception of the general public may not be in contention but a speech group may feel the need to challenge existing norms – this is the case with the youth culture which undergraduate students exhibit.

Salami (2006) notes that the Nigerian society is becoming more and more assimilated into the global village, college and university students are increasingly influenced both by the cultural values from the west and the middle east. No doubt, the global influence on the youth sub culture is an important factor to consider in issues relating to discussions on their perception of the language of sex – this is what we term sexual discourse. Specifically, we define sexual discourse as context-constrained sex-related verbal activities encountered in human interaction

which is guided by certain norms and principles that are almost exclusively group and context-determined.

1.1 Aim and objectives

In this paper, we examine how attitudes to and perceptions of sex influence tertiary institutions students in Lagos State in their discourse on sex-related conversations?

The specific objectives are as follows:

1. To identify the relationship between attitude to and perception of tertiary institution students to the language of sex
2. To examine the relationship between attitude of male and female students in tertiary institutions in Lagos state to the language of sex.
3. To evaluate the difference in the perception of male and female students in tertiary institutions in Lagos state to the language of sex
4. To identify the difference in the attitude of Christian and Muslim students to the language of sex.
5. To explain the difference in the perception of Christian and Muslim students to sexual discourse.
6. To discuss the beliefs that are indexed by the students use of language.

1.2 Research questions

1. What is the relationship between attitude to and perception of tertiary institution students to the language of sex?
2. What is the relationship between attitude of male and female students in tertiary institutions in Lagos state to the language of sex?
3. What is the difference in the perception of male and female students in tertiary institutions in Lagos state to the language of sex?
4. Is there a difference in the attitude of Christian and Muslim students to the language of sex?
5. What is the difference in the perception of Christian and Muslim students to sexual discourse?
6. What beliefs are indexed by the students use of language?

1.3 Research Hypotheses

We present below the hypotheses that were used in eliciting the information on the relationship between attitudes and perceptions (Research questions 1-5):

1. There will be no significant relationship between attitude to and perception of tertiary institution students to the language of sex.
2. There will be no significant relationship between attitude of male and female students in tertiary institutions in Lagos state to the language of sex.
3. There will be no significance difference in the perception of male and female students in tertiary institutions in Lagos state to the language of sex.
4. There will be no significant difference in the attitude of Christian and Muslim students to the language of sex.
5. There will be no significant difference in the perception of Christian and Muslim students to sexual discourse.

2.0 Review of relevant literature

Biji (2023), highlights the critical need to investigate men's attitudes towards sexuality from a gendered perspective. The study investigated the attitudes of male university students towards sexuality, drawing upon gender-specific patriarchal theories to contextualize and understand these attitudes. The study employs a descriptive research design, conducting interviews with a sample of 396 male university students from a chosen university in Gujarat, India. The participants were selected using a systematic sampling method, ensuring representation across different academic streams. The study revealed how gendered power inequality significantly influences the participants' sexual entitlement and sexual constriction attitudes, offering a deeper understanding of the underlying mechanisms shaping these attitudes.

Judith et al (2022) while investigating Adolescents' perception of their sexual self, relational capacities, attitudes towards sexual pleasure and sexual practices, suggested that positive psychosexual development during adolescence is crucial for sexual health as this development is influenced by factors like the sexual self-concept, relational skills, attitudes towards sexual pleasure, and sexual practices. The results showed that most youth are sexually active through autoerotic or partnered sexual practices, and that positive perceptions of the sexual self, relational capacities, and pleasure increased with age. Compared to girls, boys had

a more positive sexual self-concept but less positive perceptions of their relational skills, and were more likely to report autoerotic sexual practices.

Omodara & Idowu (2021) examined the perceptions and attitudes of OAU students towards Alternative Sexual Relationships (ASRs) as well as the influence of their background characteristics on these perspectives. The existing literature suggests that OAU students generally hold negative perceptions and attitudes towards ASRs, with female students being more tolerant compared to their male counterparts. However, the influence of students' background characteristics on their views towards ASRs remains an area that requires further investigation.

Feleke (2018), while examining the discourses on sexuality and sexual health perspectives among Wachemo University Students in Ethiopia discovered that the topic of sex remains uncomfortable and often avoided in conversation despite the increasing attention given to women's sexuality. She explained that there still exists a pervasive societal taboo that discourages women from openly discussing their own sexual behaviour, desires, or problems. The research study conducted in-depth interviews with a diverse group of 95 women ranging in age from 20 to 68. The study revealed that the majority of women expressed discomfort when it came to discussing sex in general. They feared judgment and negative perceptions if they were to openly communicate their desires or talk about their sexual experiences.

Montemurro et al (2015) highlight the complex dynamics surrounding women's discussions about sex. They posit that youths are increasingly exposed to diverse social contexts, such as school, extracurricular activities, and media, where they interact with peers from various backgrounds. These interactions provide opportunities for them to learn about and incorporate a wide range of gender norms and values into their self-concept. Consequently, the influence of peer group norms on gender attitudes and roles is now recognized as being as strong as that of role modelling observed within the nuclear family.

From the review of existing literature, it is evident that attitudes and perceptions of selected tertiary institutions in Lagos state is sparse in the literature. Hence, this study fills this gap in the literature from a linguistic perspective.

2.1 Theoretical framework

Mey's (2001) Pragmeme is a context based theory. The textual part of the theory covers both textual and contextual considerations. These are captured in the features such as INF (inferencing), REF (reference), REL (relevance), VCE (voice), SSK (shared situational knowledge) and MPH (metaphor). We discuss reference and shared knowledge that are used as pointers to the beliefs identified in the transcribed conversations. Reference deals with the way listeners assign names to objects being discussed. In line with Yule (1996:22) "reference is not simply a relationship between a word or phrase and an object or person in the world. It is a social act, in which the speaker assumes that the word or phrase chosen to identify an object or person will be interpreted as the speaker intended". Hence, reference assignment may include (but not limited to) the use of personal names, address terms, use of deictic expressions and particularly indexicals.

Shared beliefs on the other hand refers to ideas and perceptions that align with interactants shared background knowledge. This aids access to the meaning of the linguistic choices that are used in any discourse. Invariably, a lot of assumptions are taken as given and there is economy in the use of expressions/words that relates to participants' subject of discourse. These two concepts are deployed and operationalized in our analysis of the transcribed texts.

3.0 Methodology

The descriptive research design is used in this paper. This comprises the following descriptive methods: Instrumentation (questionnaire). The questionnaire was divided into two sections: section 1 deals with personal information of the subjects. It involves the subjects providing information on age, sex, religion, place of residence on campus, year of study, and state of origin. All these social variables give certain background information about our subjects. For section 2, the Subjects were required to pick the best option that captures their opinion on a set of research questions. This closed- ended format makes it easier to correlate the set of answers provided with the same measure. The questions were basically used to gather information on the students' attitudes to and perception of language of sex. The questions were designed to reflect the hypotheses (see 1.3 above) that were developed in answering the research questions.

Research assistants were used to distribute the questionnaires to students in eight tertiary institutions in Lagos, Nigeria. The random sampling method was used in selecting the subjects from the various institutions on stratified and purposive bases. We distributed one thousand copies of the questionnaire to students in the following institutions in Lagos State: University of Lagos, Akoka, Lagos State University, Adeniran Ogunsanya College of Education (now Lagos State University of Education), Federal Technical College, Akoka, St Augustine College of Education, Akoka, Yaba College of Technology, Lagos State Polytechnic (now Lagos State University of Science and Technology), and Lagos City Polytechnic. In all, by the end of December 2011, we were able to gather 760 questionnaires. The quantitative analysis involves the use of information gathered from the questionnaire**.** The first section of the questionnaire was analysed using frequency graphs in order to group the percentages of the subjects against the responses received. The second section of questionnaire was analysed using PPMC.

We also used Participant observation. The researcher started her observations in 2007 and this ran through the earlier part of 2012. Places visited included student cafeterias, sit-out areas and shuttles. The benefit of this technique is that the data were being accessed without the students being aware of it or trying to withhold information.

4.0 Presentation and discussion of findings

In this section, we present the result of the questionnaire analysis and provide discussions based on the result.

4.1 Demographic information of subjects

The table below shows the demographic information of the subjects used for this paper.

Gender:	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Male	304	40
Female	456	60
Ages:		
16-20	268	35.3

20-25	355	46.7
25-30	112	14.7
30-35	23	3.0
40-45	2	3
Marital status:		
Single	709	93.3
Married	51	6.7
Religion:		
Xtian	560	73.7
Muslim	200	26.3
Languages spoken:		
Yoruba	585	77
English	22	2.9
Igbo	98	12.9
Hausa	20	2.6
French	25	3.3
Pidgin	6	.8
Isoke	2	.3

Table 1: Demographic information of subjects

The demographic information shows that the population of the female student is 456 which accounts for a total of 60% of the total number of population used for the study. The total number of male students is 304 with a percentage of 40%. The age variable reveals that the majority of the respondents are between ages 20-25 which accounts for 46.7% of the total number of the subjects. Followed by students between ages 16-20(35.3%), and students between ages 25-30(14.7%). The students between ages 30-35 and 40-45 are only 23 and 2 respectively in number. The age variable accounts for a representative distribution across all levels of students. The marital status shows that 93.3% of the respondents are not married. The remaining 6.7% are married students. A total number of 560 subjects are Christians while 200 are Muslims. The predominant language used by the students is Yoruba with a total of 77% while Igbo is 12.9% and Hausa accounts for just 2.6%. Other languages

spoken by the students include: French, pidgin and Isoko which account for 3.3%, .8% and .3% respectively.

The table below shows the result of hypothesis 1 which relate to the relationship between attitude to and perception of the language of sex among the students:

Table 2

Variable	Mean	Std dev	N	R	P	Remark
Attitude to sexual discourse	16.3353	3.7269	760	.443	.000	Sig
Perception to sexual discourse	22.2684	5.0878				

Sig. at .01 level

Table 2: Result of hypothesis 1 on the relationship between attitude to and perception of the language of sex among the students.

It is shown in the above table that there was a significant relationship between attitude to and perception of the language of sex among the students ($r = .443^{**}$, $N = 760$, $P<.01$). This indicates that tertiary institutions students' perception had a significant influence on their attitude to sexual discourse.

4.2 Discussion of Findings

We discuss findings under three main sub headings: Gender and TISSD, Religion and TISSD and Beliefs in TISSD. These are discussed in turns**:**

4.2.1 Gender and TISSD

Various researches on language and gender have examined the differences in the language of men and women. (cf Lakoff 1992, Cameron 2006, Coates 1998, Tannen 2005, Edwards 2006, Salami 2007 etc). Although Lakoff and others have seen gender as influencing language use in profanity, we believe that the actual use of language in different interactional setting position selves differently (cf Eckert and McGinet 1999). We found out that within tertiary institution students, the concept of insiders and outsiders is a relevant factor in choosing whether to speak or not. Linguistic adaptability is invoked in interactions where the need for communication is established. Talking about sexual issues is done with the use of

coded forms and it is more of social bonding and group affiliation other than gender styling. By gender styling, we mean performing the normative gender stereotyping or playing out the dictates of 'gender order' (Eckert and McGinet, 2003).

Burnette (2006:198) after a careful investigation of the influence of sex and gender on interaction opines that "overall, men and women have more similarities than differences in how they behave, especially with respect to interpersonal and sexual relationships". However, in this paper, we affirm the fluidity in gender roles as it relates to sex discourse interpersonal encounters. We observe that gendered sexual scripts are not operative in tertiary institutions sexual discourse. Lorber (1994) defines "gendered scripts as the normative patterns of sexual desire and sexual behaviour, as prescribed for the different gender statuses". Sexual discussions as engaged in by tertiary institutions students show that both the male and female students use coded linguistic forms in talking about sex related issues. Although interactional styles vary across the groups, there is considerable evidence that both the male and female students are not constrained by their gender statuses in sex related discussions.

With respect to language and gender research, we believe that it is no longer fashionable to look at the relationship between language and gender strictly on the basis of the dominance and difference approach. Our use of the term fashionable is in tandem with the postmodern view. Paltridge (2006:33[Cameron 1998:451]) reports that "expressions of gender and power are always context-specific and need to be understood in relation to who the person is speaking to, from what position and for what purpose." This aligns with our position in this paper. However, this is contrary to the result obtained from the questionnaire. Results obtained from the questionnaire on the influence of gender on students' sexual discourse is presented below:

H02: There will be no significant relationship between attitude of male and female students in tertiary institutions in Lagos state to the language of sex.

Table 3

Attitude to Sexual Discourse	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Crit. T	Cal. T	DF	P
Male	304	16.9638	3.5286	1.96	3.706	75.8	.000
Female	456	15.9496	3.8034				

Table 3 : Relationship between attitude of male and female students in tertiary institutions in Lagos state to the language of sex.

The above table shows that there is a significant difference in the attitude of male and female students to sexual discourse. (Crit.t =1.96, Cal.t=3.706, df=758, p<.05 level of significance). The null hypothesis is rejected.

H03: There will be no significant difference in the perception of male and female students to sexual discourse.

Table 4

Perception on sexual discourse	N	Mean	Std. Dev	Crit-t	Cal-t	DF	P
Male	304	22.8224	4.t7507				
Female	456	21.8991	5.2735	1.96	2.459	758	.014

Table 4 – Result on the perception of male and female students to the language of sex.

The above table shows that there is a significant difference in the perception of male and female students to sexual discourse (Crit.t=1.96, Cal.t = 2.459, df=758, p<.05 level of significance). The null hypothesis is rejected.

4.2.2 Religion and TISSD

There are three main religious groups in Nigeria: Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional religion. From the researcher's personal observation, there are more Christians and Muslims than the traditional believers. This is evident from the number of churches and mosques and their patrons than we have for ATR.

No religion tolerates lewd talk. Believers are expected to be righteous in deeds. In the Christian religion, there are both positive and negative attitudes towards sex. The positive attitude is that sex is pleasurable in marriage because it was created by God. Negative attitude to sex in the Christian faith is marked by sexual deviations that are condemned in the holy bible and at different teachings in the churches. Such deviations include: "homosexuality (Leviticus 18:22, Romans 1: 26-27 and 1corinthians 6: 9-10), adultery (Exodus 20:4; Deuteronomy 22 vs. 22), prostitution (proverbs 7:1-27, proverbs 29:3 and fornication (1 Corinthians 6: 9-10)" Green field(1991). The fact about sexuality in Christianity is that it is only in marriage that sex should be experienced.

Also, in Islam sex is largely reserved for marriage. All forms of sexual deviations are strictly forbidden in Islam: "adultery (qur'an 17:32), fornication (qur'an 24:2), homosexuality(qur'an 7:80-84; 11:69-83, 29:28-35) and prostitution (Sahih al-Bukhari 3:34:439)" (Wikipedia). Essentially, in Islamic law, it is only marriage that legalises sexual intercourse between husband and wife.

With respect to this background information on religion in the Nigerian society, we discuss the students' religious inclinations with their attitude and perception to sexual discourse. The result is presented below:

Ho4: there will be no significant difference in the attitude of Christian and Muslim students to sexual discourse.

Perception on sexual discourse	**N**	**Mean**	**Std. Dev**	**Crit-t**	**Cal-t**	**DF**	**P**
Xtian	560	16.5393	3.6895				
Muslim	200	15.8400	3.7916	1.96	2.284	758	.023

Table 5 : Result on the difference in the attitude of Christian and Muslim students to the language of sex

The above shows that there is a significance difference in the attitude of Christian and Muslim students to Sexual Discourse. (Crit-t=1.96, Cal-t=2.284, df=758, p<.05 level of significance). The null hypothesis is rejected.

Ho 5: There will be no significant difference in the perception of Christian and Muslims students to sexual discourse

Table 6

Perception on sexual discourse	**N**	**Mean**	**Std. Dev**	**Crit-t**	**Cal-t**	**DF**	**P**
Xtian	560	22.0875	5.0392				
Muslim	200	22.7750	5.2009	1.96	1.642	758	.101

Table 6 : Result on the perception of Christian and Muslims students to the language of sex

The above table shows that there is no significant difference in the perception of Christian and Muslim student to Sexual Discourse. (Crit-t=1.96, Cal.t=1.642, df=758, p<.05 level of significance). The null hypothesis is accepted.

The result shows that both Christians and Muslims have different perceptions to sex and its related phenomena but their attitude to it seem to be the same. As observed by Izugbara (2004:19) 'sexual fore-play is frowned upon as un-Islamic and intercourse usually occurs in the dark or semi-dark', but now 'things seem to be a bit different with changing perception and attitudes of young ones to sexual discourse'.

With respect to tertiary institutions students in this study, our observation from the interviews, recorded conversations, questionnaire and focused group discussion is that tertiary institutions students share common attitude and perception towards sex and other related phenomena. These attitudes and Perceptions are listed and discussed below:

4.3 Beliefs in TISSD

Beliefs refer to inference deduced from the language used by the students in their conversations on sexual discourse. In doing this, we analyse how language index these beliefs. We discuss our findings under two headings:

4.2.3 Positive attitude toward pre-marital sex

Contrary to the teachings in both Islam and Christianity, tertiary institution students do not see anything wrong in having pre-marital sex in a heterosexual relationship. The prevailing idea is that it is simply impossible to have a relationship without sexual relationship. Consider the result of Ho4 and Ho5. This also shows in samples of the recorded conversations. I illustrate with two examples:

Ex. 63

A: This guy, they've been going out, and he finally gave her kondo olopa. So she started crying because she has lost it.

B: Why was she crying?

A: Not crying like uh uh uh, but she felt somehow sha…

B: Okay,

⟶A: And I told her that in a relationship, something like that was bound to happen, if not now maybe later.

The female student in this encounter express the belief that sex before marriage is something that is bound to happen in a relationship and it only depends on the time that both sexual partners decide to engage in such act. Invariably, she does not see anything wrong in the girl engaging in pre-marital sex. The phrase, "something like that" when taken with the co-text, "was bound to happen", instantiate sense indicative euphemisms. In this context, the expressions indicate the speaker's positive attitude to pre-marital sex.

Another interaction example that reveals students' belief on pre-marital sex is discussed below:

Ex. 64

⟶A: See, in this part of the world, there's no more girlfriends and boyfriends… what

we have are sexual partners or bed mates!

B: Hmmmnn.
A: when I'm in the mood, I'll just flash her and she has to come. She doesn't need to talk
All laughed
B: No question!
A: she just comes, lie on the bed and we go!

The male students in this interaction were fascinated by the narrator's bravery and confidence over the way he handles issues relating to sexual relationships, particularly because he does not even have to spend any money on his 'bed mate; none of the interactants see anything wrong in his sexual attitude. The utterance, "she just comes, lie on the bed and we go" when taken with the co-text, "sexual partners or bed mates", instantiate metaphorical conceptualisation of sex as journey. In this context, the expressions indicate the speaker's positive attitude to pre-marital sex without any emotional attachment to the sexual partner in question.

4.2.4 The students favour multiple sexual partners

Despite the risk of contracting sexual transmitted diseases, some of the students still keep multiple sexual partners. There is thus every tendency for individuals to be encouraged in continuing with such illicit acts. Below are two interaction examples of non-denial of practices involving multiple sexual partnerships.

Ex. 65
A-Wale won't take it easy if you trespass!
→ B -Abeg leave story, Wale sef dey do runs. [wale too do runs]

In this extract, B's utterance features a presupposition trigger – *too.* In this context, "too" behaves more like a discourse marker (DMs) presupposition trigger (cf Jayez 2004). Jayez (2004: 89) explains that "Dms presuppose the existence of a proposition @ and presuppose that it is connected to the current proposition U through a certain consequence discourse relation". In relation to the above interaction, we can infer that "B" agrees and confirms that he is involved in pre-marital affairs which is indexed by the use of the slangy word "runs". The use of "too" connects the two people to the same act of indulging in pre-marital affairs with different female students.

Another instance where the belief relating to students' positive attitude to multiple partners feature in the distinction that is often made between the type of sexual partner that is being talked about. An interaction example is given below:

Ex. 66

A- The first one is a maga, as in Aristo girl. She goes to party and if the guy can buy her phone or digital camera or something like that, fine. And she still maintains a boyfriend but the guy is not in Nigeria; the guy is abroad.

In this female student narration, as it also reflected in the female students' discussions, there is a difference between a boyfriend and an 'Aristo'. The male students also make a distinction between a girlfriend and a bed mate. This practice of having multiple sexual partners necessitates the various names that the students coin in discussing their sexual partners.

5.0 Conclusion

Language use provides a valuable means of accessing peoples' attitudes and perceptions and these continue to change based on different variables. Hence, it is only by examining current trends in sexual discourse that one can ascertain prevailing attitudes and perceptions of undergraduate students. Doing this can provide comprehensive and inclusive sexual education language that can help cater for the diverse needs and perspectives of students.

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