

## Investigation into Nigerian Undergraduates' Preferred Expressions for HIV/AIDS Eradication Campaigns

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**ABSTRACT** The simple survey was conducted to find out what types of expressions are most effective in the campaign against the spread of HIV/AIDS among Nigerian undergraduates. This is against the backdrop of the legitimate alarm being raised in different quarters about the prevalence of the virus and the disease it causes which calls to question the appropriateness of the languages and expressions being used in the eradication campaigns. A total of five hundred undergraduates (250 males and 250 females) were selected through purposive random sampling from five universities in five western states of Nigeria. Four research questions and one null hypothesis were raised. A self-constructed nineteen-item questionnaire was validated and used to gather data. The analysis of data revealed that both harsh and mild expressions are effective with the undergraduates in making them desist from acts that could expose them to HIV but the former are more effective. It was also revealed that gender plays a significant role in the undergraduates' preference for either scary expressions or mild ones. Appropriate recommendations were then made accordingly.

### INTRODUCTION

The scourge of HIV/AIDS has been globally acknowledged as pandemic. Legitimate alarm has been, and is being sounded in various quarters about the grave situation that has claimed millions of lives and turned many more widows or orphans prematurely (Obadara 2009). According to WHO/UNESCO/UNAIDS/Education International (1998), an estimated 42 million people are infected with HIV or have AIDS worldwide. The children and young people who had become infected worldwide by 2002 were estimated at 2.9 million. It is noteworthy that this is the period when people are daring and adventurous. About 8,000 children and young people become infected with HIV each day – approximately six per minute. In many countries, over 50% of all infections are among 15 – 24 year-olds. The Joint United Nations Programme on AIDS/World Health Organisation (2005) reported a sentinel surveillance of nine Nigerian states that revealed that 3.3 million adults or 5.4% of the adult population was living with HIV, being the highest in the whole world after South Africa and India.

That the sixth of the eight much publicized UN Millennium Development Goals is “to combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases” (<http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/goals.html>) is a

proof of the enormity of the need to halt the spread of the notorious killer agent called HIV and its attendant disease known as AIDS. Both locally and internationally, a lot of effort and heavy monetary investments have gone into HIV/AIDS eradication campaigns. But while some levels of positive impacts are recorded in some countries, the epidemic seems to be too powerful for the national response mounted against it in many others, in Botswana, for example (Letamo 2003; Ntshebe et al. 2006). Facente (2001) too observed that the incidence of HIV infection has continued to rise. Even where the intervention has recorded some degrees of positive result, such success has not always justified the massive investment.

Apart from mother-to-foetus/baby transmission over which a prospective victim has no control, every other avenue through which one can contract the virus is such that could be controlled. For example, by simply avoiding such acts as taking unscreened blood, sharing of unsterilized sharp skin piercing or shaving objects and risky sexual behaviours, one could be sure of an HIV-free life (WHO/UNESCO/Education International 1998). Such are the acts that HIV/AIDS eradication campaigns warn people against.

The continued spread of HIV is unarguably an indication that the acts or behaviours that the

campaigns are supposed to stop have continued unabated. Ajuwon et al. (2007), for example, reported that the Campaign against Unwanted Pregnancy of Nigeria estimated that about 760,000 abortions occur annually in Nigeria. Both the acts that result in unwanted pregnancy and the abortions are potential HIV spreading behaviours. Bacchus (2002) too observed that the alarming infection and death rates among people of all age brackets from HIV/AIDS is an indication that increase in HIV/AIDS knowledge has not effected a positive change in attitudes and behaviours. Since language, in its various forms, is the instrument employed in such campaigns that have not yielded the desired level of success, it would be logical to probe the appropriateness of the words and expressions being used to warn people against the risky behaviours.

Ntshebe et al. (2006) subscribed to the idea of tracing the effectiveness of HIV messages to the language used from a cultural perspective. They conducted a survey which revealed that different people interpret and react to particular messages advocating behaviour change differently for cultural reasons. While some people see certain verbal as well as pictorial expressions as culturally acceptable, others see same as repulsive and react to them accordingly.

One could conjecture that perhaps if the campaigns were loaded with fear-instilling expressions, people would run away from acts that could expose them to the risk of contracting the virus, thereby increasing the success rate of curbing the spread of the menace. Ray (n.d.) corroborated this with the report that HIV infections dropped drastically in Thailand from 143,000 in 1991 to 29,000 in 2001 because the campaigns mounted emphasized the seriousness of the epidemic and convinced people of their personal risk. The corollary is that if the expressions are too mild, neutral or indirect, the target audience may not take the message serious. Facente (2001) found in a study that 30% of those who admitted engaging in risky behaviour such as keeping multiple sex partners or having sex without condoms also felt they were not personally at risk of HIV, though they were aware of HIV/AIDS and its means of transmission.

In a similar case, Owolabi et al. (2005) found that the median age at first sexual intercourse of secondary school students in Ilesa in Nigeria is 12 years, and many of the respondents to their study instrument had multiple sex partners in

spite of the massive campaigns to discourage such risky practices. The words and expressions used in the awareness campaigns must have been too weak, then. This is in line with Gray and Saracino's discovery that a high knowledge level of HIV/AIDS does not necessarily translate into safe sexual practices.

Ntshebe et al. (2006) were, however, of the opinion that such messages like "AIDS kills" would rather intensify negative perception and stigma than reduce HIV risky behaviours. WHO/UNESCO/UNAIDS/Education International (1998) too endorsed only campaigns that provide education to reduce fear about HIV/AIDS and foster caring, respect, self-efficiency, self-esteem and decision-making. They unequivocally condemned any campaigns that "generate unwanted fear" about HIV/AIDS. Pisani (2009) too is of the conviction that HIV prevention campaigns should not employ expressions portraying the virus as bad agent that inevitably leads to AIDS, arguing that HIV is no longer a mass murderer in rich countries where pills are readily available to prevent HIV cases from developing into full blown AIDS for decades, and even in some cases for life. She thus suggested such expressions as "HIV increases your tax bills. Protect yourself" because the availability of the drugs is at the instance of taxpayers' money.

### Statement of the Problem

HIV/AIDS situation in Nigeria and world over has been described as pandemic in spite of serious campaigns mounted to arrest the situation. Reckless sexual behaviours, especially among the youths, have been blamed for this. The study thus aimed at discovering the type of expressions that could sensitize Nigerian undergraduates and effect positive behavioural change in them in matters regarding the risk of contracting HIV/AIDS.

### Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. Do fear inducing words and expressions make the undergraduates in south-western Nigeria avoid HIV/AIDS risks?
2. Do pleasant and persuasive words and expressions make the undergraduates in south-western Nigeria avoid acts that could expose them to HIV/AIDS?

3. Do the undergraduates in south-western Nigeria prefer fear inducing campaigns against HIV/AIDS to mild, pleasant and persuasive expressions?
4. What particular catch-phrases or expressions for HIV/AIDS awareness campaign are most acceptable to the undergraduates?

**Research Hypothesis**

H<sub>0</sub>: There is no significant effect of gender on the undergraduates' expressions preference for HIV/AIDS campaign.

**METHODOLOGY**

**Population**

All undergraduates in five different south-western states of Nigeria (namely Oyo, Ogun, Osun, Ondo, and Lagos) constitute the study population.

**Sample and Sampling Procedure**

A university was randomly chosen from each of the five states. Fifty male and fifty female students were purposively sampled to have one hundred from each university. The study sample thus comprised five hundred undergraduates, two hundred and fifty of whom were males and the other two hundred and fifty being females.

**Instrumentation**

A self-constructed nineteen-item questionnaire named *Questionnaire on Undergraduates' Preferred Expressions for HIV/AIDS Campaign (QUPEHC)* was used to collect data. The questionnaire has four sections: Section A introduces the exercise while Section B comprises two items requiring information about each respondent's sex and age; Section C is made up of seven Yes/No items probing the respondent's preference between scary words/expressions and mild ones in matters of HIV/AIDS campaign. Section D has ten items made up of five mild

expressions commonly used by Nigerian media houses for HIV/AIDS awareness campaign and five other scary ones being used by the same media houses. Each respondent was to rate the effectiveness of each expression on a four-point likert scale of *Very Effective = 4, Effective = 3, Ineffective = 2, and Grossly Ineffective = 1*.

**Validation of Instrument**

Thirty copies of the questionnaire were administered to undergraduates other than the ones in the study sample. The data collected were subjected to an SPSS validation that yielded 89.4 Cronbach alpha.

**Administration of the Instrument**

Copies of the questionnaire were taken to the sampled university campuses and personally administered to the sampled students from different departments by the researchers. The questionnaire copies were collected on the spot to prevent loss.

**Data Analysis**

Descriptive statistics of frequency counts and simple percentages as well as inferential statistics of chi square were used to find answers to the research questions and test the hypothesis raised.

**RESULTS**

Table 1 shows that 45 of the males and 51 females in the study were within the age range of 15 to 20 years while 113 of the males and 157 of the females were in the age range of 21 to 25 years. Also, 71 of the males and 35 of the females were in the age range of 26 to 30 years while 18 of the males and 7 of the females were in the range of 31 to 35 years. Furthermore, 2 and only 1 of the males were in the ranges of 36 to 40 years and 41 years and above respectively while none of the females belonged to such categories. This is because

**Table 1: Demographic description of the respondents**

Sex	Age range						Total
	15- 20yrs	21-25yrs	26-30yrs	31-35yrs	36-40yrs	41yrs & above	
Males	45	113	71	18	2	1	250
Females	51	157	35	7	-	-	250
Total	96	270	106	25	2	1	500

most females in these last two categories must have given up all hopes of going for mainstream tertiary education, if they have not got so far.

### Answering the Research Questions

**Research Question 1:** Do fear-inducing words and expressions make undergraduates in south-western Nigeria avoid HIV/AIDS risks?

Table 2 shows that fear inducing words and expressions are effective in making the undergraduates decide to avoid HIV/AIDS risks. This is clear from the fact that 432 (86.4%) of the respondents agree that scary expressions make them avoid HIV/AIDS risky habits while only 68 (13.6%) of them claimed that such expressions have no such effective impacts on their behaviours. The implication of this is that the use of scary expressions in HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns needs to continue so that more hearts may be touched to decide against risky habits.

The answer to Research Question 1 is that fear inducing words and expressions really make the undergraduates in south-western Nigeria avoid HIV/AIDS risks. Thus, the current practice of employing only mild, pleasant and euphemistic expressions for HIV/AIDS campaigns among Nigerian undergraduates must be reviewed. The situation in which youths demonstrate high rates of sexual practices that place them at risk for HIV infection in spite of adequate general AIDS knowledge and sensitization (Facente 2001) should be discouraged.

**Research Question 2:** Do pleasant and persuasive words and expressions make undergraduates in south-western Nigeria avoid acts that could expose them to HIV/AIDS?

Table 3 reveals that 441 (88.2%) of the undergraduates agreed that mild and pleasant expressions encourage them to avoid HIV risks while only 59 (11.8%) claimed otherwise. This

shows that the undergraduates also find pleasant and mild expressions useful facilitators of their decision to abstain from habits that could make them victims of HIV infection.

A thorough consideration of the findings from tables 2 and 3 would reveal that both mild and harsh expressions are to be included in the total package of HIV/AIDS campaign. Whether both types of expressions would be better combined in a single jingle or separated in different campaign sessions could be the focus of another study. The answer to Research Question 2 is that pleasant and persuasive words and expressions certainly make the Nigerian undergraduates avoid acts that could expose them to HIV/AIDS.

**Research Question 3:** Do the undergraduates in southwestern Nigeria prefer fear-inducing campaigns against HIV/AIDS to mild, pleasant and persuasive expressions?

Table 4 shows that 908(60.53%) of the 1,500 responses to items on their preferences between harsh expressions and mild ones are in favour of harsh and scary ones while only 592(39.47%) show preference for mild expressions. The answer to Research Question 3 is that most Nigerian undergraduates prefer fear inducing expressions to mild diction for HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns. This should not be mistaken for aversion for mild expressions, as the result from table 3 shows clearly that the same set of respondents judged mild expressions good for such campaigns. Thus, the right conclusion is that while both types of expressions are acceptable to the students, they would prefer scary expressions that portray the harsh realities of HIV/AIDS if the two types cannot be combined.

**Research Question 4:** What particular catch-phrases or expressions for HIV/AIDS awareness campaign are most acceptable to the undergraduates?

Table 5 presents the expressions in descend-

**Table 2: Quantitative representation of the respondents' assessment of efficacy of scary expressions for warning against HIV/AIDS**

Item	Yes	No	Total
Scary expressions make me so afraid of HIV/AIDS that I avoid risking the infection.	432 (86.4%)	68 (13.6%)	500 (100%)

**Table 3: Quantitative representation of the respondents' assessment of efficacy of mild, pleasant and persuasive expressions for warning against HIV/AIDS**

Stimulus	Yes	No	Total
Mild and pleasant expressions give me impetus to avoid HIV/AIDS infection.	441 (88.2%)	59 (11.8%)	500 (100%)

**Table 4: Statistical presentation of Nigerian undergraduates' preference between harsh expressions and mild ones for HIV/AIDS eradication campaigns**

Item	Yes	No	Total
Fear inducing expressions help most of my friends to avoid HIV-spreading acts more than mild words do.	365 (73.0%)	135 (27.0%)	500 (100%)
Fear inducing expressions help me to void HIV-risky acts more than mild words do.	311 (62.2%)	189 (37.8%)	500 (100%)
Words used to warn people against HIV- spreading behaviours must be harsh and scary to make them effective.	232 (46.4%)	268 (46.4%)	500 (100%)
Total of Items	908(60.53%)	592(39.47%)	1500 (100%)

**Table 5: Hierarchical presentation of responses in favour of the selected HIV/AIDS eradication expressions**

Stimulus	Cumulative score
Life has no duplicate. Stop HIV.	1688
AIDS kills.	1664
AIDS can aid you to early grave.	1610
AIDS.- Danger.	1602
AIDS no get cure (AIDS is incurable).	1592
Protect your future; Avoid HIV.	1576
Zip up.	1278
HIV is not a death sentence.	1256
Stop HIV with free testing.	1170
Stop HIV with free drugs.	1133

ing order of rating by the respondents. It is noteworthy that the five consecutive expressions that got the highest rating by the respondents (from 1688 to 1592) are in the category of those that portray HIV/AIDS as deadly and without remedy while those that either merely encourage people to protect their great future by avoiding HIV infection or simply go for HIV test or just imbibe fidelity got the last five scores (from 1576 to 1133). To answer Research Question 4, the particular expressions most preferred for HIV/AIDS eradication campaigns by Nigerian undergraduates are: Life has no duplicate. Stop HIV; AIDS kills; AIDS can aid you to early grave; AIDS; AIDS no get cure (AIDS is incurable); Protect your future; Avoid HIV; Zip up; HIV is not a death sentence; Stop HIV with free testing; Stop HIV with free testing; Stop HIV with free drugs, in that consecutive order of acceptance.

**Testing the Research Hypothesis**

*Ho:* There is no significant effect of gender on the undergraduates' expressions preference for HIV/AIDS awareness campaign.

Table 6 shows the responses from males to the item that states that fear-inducing words and expressions help to avoid HIV-spreading acts more than mild ones do (Yes = 192, No = 58) and those of females (Yes = 173, No = 77). The responses to the statement that words used to warn people against HIV-spreading behaviours must be harsh and scary to be effective are also shown (Males: Yes = 171, No = 79; Females: Yes = 140, No = 110). The calculated  $\chi^2$  value is 8.175 while the table value is 3.84. The assumed significance value is 0.004. Since the calculated  $\chi^2$  value (8.175) is greater than the table value (3.84), the hypothesis that states that there is no significant effect of gender on the Nigerian undergraduates' expressions preference for HIV/AIDS prevention campaign is hereby rejected.

The male respondents' recommendation of the use of harsh and scary expressions for the campaign (363) outweighs those of the females (313). This thus shows that gender plays a significant role in determining whether a Nigerian undergraduate would recommend a harsh expression or a mild one for HIV/AIDS eradication campaign. More males than females prefer scary expressions while more females prefer mild expressions.

**Table 6: Chi-square comparison of Nigerian undergraduates' preference between fear inducing expressions and mild ones for HIV/AIDS campaigns by gender**

Stimulus	Sex	Yes	No	Total	$\chi^2$	Table value	df	P	Remark
Fear inducing words and expressions help me more to avoid HIV risky acts than mild ones do	Males	192	58	250	8.175	3.84	1	0.004	Significant
	Females	173	77	250					
Words used to warn people against HIV-spreading behaviours must be harsh and scary to be effective	Males	171	79	250	8.175	3.84	1	0.004	Significant
	Females	140	110	250					

## DISCUSSION

The findings from this study have revealed that scaring some undergraduates with words that paint the terrible pictures of HIV status or even the conditions of full-blown AIDS can really make them stay off risky sexual acts as well as other behaviours that can make them victims of HIV/AIDS. It is noteworthy that since preaching about the fire and brimstones of hell has not made all sinners to repent and run for salvation, scary words cannot make all people to avoid HIV/AIDS risks. However, the responses got from the undergraduates show that quite a percentage of them admit the helpfulness of such words and expressions.

Conversely, a majority of the respondents professed the efficacy of mild expressions in curbing acts that could expose them to the dangers of HIV/AIDS. Such words and expressions have the power of persuasion and reflect love and concern. It has also been revealed that a combination of both types of expressions would be appropriate for some people.

Gender too was found to play a significant role in determining what type of expressions the undergraduates find effective in discouraging HIV/AIDS-risky behaviours. More males than females find harsh and scary expressions more effective than mild and persuasive ones. This shows that whoever is designing a campaign needs to do audience analysis and take the issue of gender into serious consideration.

## CONCLUSION

The study has revealed that both scary expressions and mild ones are effective in arresting the spread of HIV/AIDS among Nigerian undergraduates but the harsh and scary ones are perceived more effective by them. While more males prefer and recommend harsh expressions, more females prefer mild ones. This could be taken to be instructive to designers of HIV/AIDS eradication campaign slogans and jingles within that section of the Nigerian population. There is need for a balanced mix of fear-inducing diction, persuasive slogans and simply informative expressions to take care of the varying psychological preferences that could engender positive and healthy sexual behaviours in the undergraduates.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Consequent upon the findings of this study, it is recommended that:

1. Designers of HIV/AIDS awareness programmes among Nigerian graduates should not concentrate on satisfying the school of thought that recommends words that are not scary (Ntshebe et al. 2006 and Pisani 2009) to the detriment of those for whom harsh expressions work. So also should the use of scary expressions not be embraced to the neglect of the teeming undergraduates that need pleasant words of encouragement to abstain from behaviours capable of exposing them to the dangers of HIV infection.
2. More research should be consistently encouraged to keep in tune with the linguistic preferences of this active section of the population at all times so that the linguistic components of such campaigns may be adequately appealing to and effective with them in the area of health and social campaigns.
3. It is hereby suggested that studies be done on the undergraduates' attitude to HIV/AIDS eradication campaign expressions in their indigenous languages.

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