

Free Speech Attitudes of Nigerian University Students at National Universities Games Association Event in Benin, Edo State, Nigeria

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This research adopted a descriptive survey design with the use of self-reported instruments to generate data and responses from the research participants. The setting of the study was the main campus of the University of Benin, Edo State, Nigeria where the 23rd edition of the Nigerian Universities Games (NUGA) took place in 2011. The independent variables of the research were socio-economic status, political orientation, age, and gender. The dependent variable was desire for freedom of speech or free speech attitudes (FSA) and this was measured in line with each of the respondent's score on a 20-item, 3-point Likert questionnaire which measured Freedom of Speech. One hundred and fifteen (115) Nigerian athletes consisting of 70 males and 45 females and aged between 18 and 38 were involved in the study. Males constituted 60.87% while females accounted for 39.1%. Their mean age was 23.57 (SD = 5.34). Due to the fast pace of activities and time pressure at the venue of the games, it was not easy to get hold of athletes to participate in the study, hence the accidental sampling method was used. Thirty four of the respondents reported being liberal in political orientation, 36 reported being moderate, and 45 reported being conservative in political orientation. Political orientation was assessed by Peterson (2007)'s political orientation scale. Participants were of different socio-economic backgrounds. In relation to the variables studied, four hypotheses were tested using simple Pearson correlation, independent t-test, and one-way ANOVA. Results showed that age positively correlated with FSA significantly while political orientation significantly influenced FSA. Results also showed that gender and socio-economic status did not significantly influence FSA. Discussion centered on the way and manner that FSA and factors influencing it can be studied, understood and put to productive use. Specifically, age and political orientation identified as very important factors influencing FSA. It was concluded that age and political orientation are important variables in shaping FSA and a better understanding of them will partly lay a good foundation for citizens' contribution to democratic growth and good governance.

Key words: Free speech, attitudes, athletes, spectators, Nigerians

Liberty to speak free of government interference and political equality are both essential to democracy (De Luca, 2007). But free speech is illusory unless each individual has an equal opportunity to speak (Ma, 1995). Individuals and institutions such as universities cherish free speech. Indeed, universities need free speech to make their most valued contributions of generating new knowledge through science and other methods of inquiry (Kneipp, Canales, Fahrenwald, and Taylor, 2007). Yet political equality requires

governmental regulation of resources needed for political speech (De Luca, 2007). There is a debate regarding the delicate balance between the need for national security and the pursuit of academic freedom (De Luca, 2007). In academic institutions, it is desirable for scholars or intellectuals to, while promoting and maintaining academic freedom, balance free speech with protection of national security.

Although academic freedom can be defined in many ways, there are four

primary tenets of freedom in an academic environment: freedom to research, freedom to publish, freedom to teach, and freedom to speak (Lynch, 2006). Ivie (2006) describes John Dewey's conceptualization of academic freedom as entailing the principle of unfettered intellectual inquiry. On the other hand, Barry (2007) defines workplace freedom of expression as the ability to engage in acts of expression at or away from the workplace, on subjects related or unrelated to the workplace, free from the threat of discipline or discharge. Stemming from the foregoing definition, Barry (2007), referred to freedom of expression here as the ability to engage in acts of expression on issues, free from the threat of discipline or personal loss. Barry (2007) also critically assessed the state of freedom of expression in the workplace, arguing that it is excessively and unnecessarily limited in both law and management practice. But one of the strongest defenses of free speech holds that autonomy requires the protection of speech (Moles, 2007)

Redish and Finnerty (2002) have noted the troubling paradox that the intersection of democracy and education gives rise to. They note that, on the one hand, a viable democratic system requires an educated electorate, so that its citizens may make informed decisions as they participate in the process of self-government. On the other hand, Redish and Finnerty (2002) note that an educational system is an inherently authoritarian institution in which agents of the state are provided a unique opportunity to shape the values of impressionable students. Through an educational system, government can effectively mold the minds of its citizens before they enter the adult world. This is a strategy commonly employed by governments in totalitarian societies. It is noted, therefore, that the educational system gives rise to an indirect but nevertheless serious threat to the freedom of thought that is so essential to the successful operation of any democracy (Redish and Finnerty, 2002).

Although the past few decades have produced gains for political freedom, there has emerged series of worrisome trends

such as growing authoritarian "push back" against organizations, movements, and media which combine with a systematic effort to weaken or eliminate pro-democracy forces in authoritarian regimes throughout the world (Puddington, 2007). However, an increase in freedom of expression promotes societal peace and government accountability while a decline in freedom of expression and freedom of the press brings about a weakness in the rule of law which results in an upsurge in violence, and pervasive corruption and lack of government transparencies ranked as a crucial impediment to democratic governments (Puddington, 2007).

Blasi (1999), in agreement with early proponents of the freedom of speech, such as John Milton, John Stuart Mill and Louis Brandeis, avers that expressive liberty plays an important role in strengthening the character of persons entrusted with such freedom. Thus, it is argued that individual character traits such as civic courage, independence of mind, and the capacity to learn from experience and adapt are dividends of guaranteed free speech (Blasi, 1999).

However, freedom of speech is not an absolute condition (Sivanandan and Shanmugaratnam, 2006). Indeed, there is occasionally a great price to be paid for freedom of speech. For instance, in September 2005, the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*, seemingly in exercising its freedom of expression, published 12 specially commissioned cartoons that were judged, by Muslims and many non-Muslims, to be racist and offensive. In January 2006, this resulted in an explosion of angry mass protest in Muslim countries (Codina, 2007).

Conceptual and Theoretical Review

Freedom of speech, though generally desirable and theoretically problem-free, has been observed to be idealistic. Peterson (2007) observes freedom of expression as a liberal fantasy. While observing that 'freedom of expression' is constructed as a core American liberty, Peterson further argues that this construction is an example of ideological fantasy, which relies on a fetishization of individual expression as

proof of freedom . The constructed, according to her, is that of exaggerated 'freedom' that focuses on individual and sexual elements of speech and ignores economic constraints on speech (Peterson, 2007).

In a multifactorial experimental survey of 1,004 randomly selected faculty members from top-ranked institutions, Ceci, Williams, and Mueller-Johnson (2006) observed few differences in freedom of speech related either to gender or type of institution, and behavioral scientists' beliefs were similar to scholars from other fields. In another study designed to investigate the conceptions of freedom of speech in youth and college students, Hasegawa (2001) noted among other findings that the participants recognized the importance of freedom of speech; and that they understood its features in general. Hasegawa (2007) also noted that there were age differences in some aspects of the participants' judgments.

A person's political orientation is also assumed to influence his or her free speech attitudes. Lakoff (2002) has noted conservatives' belief in personal responsibility, limited government, free markets, individual liberty, traditional values and a strong national defence. They also believe the role of government should be to provide people the freedom necessary to pursue their own goals. Policies, conservatives also believe, should generally emphasize empowerment of the individual to solve problems. An example of a conservative orientation will be the belief that human life begins at conception and consequently abortion is the murder of a human being, hence nobody has the right to murder a human being.

Liberals, according to Lakoff (2002), believe in governmental action to achieve equal opportunity and equality for all, and that it is the duty of the State to alleviate social ills and to protect civil liberties and individual and human rights. They also believe the role of the government should be to guarantee that no one is in need. Liberals further believe people are basically good; therefore, liberal policies generally emphasize the need for the government to solve people's problems. A

liberal belief, for instance, will be that a fetus is not a human life and that the decision to have an abortion is a personal choice of a woman regarding her own body and the government should stay out of it. In this wise, women, according to liberals, should be guaranteed the right to a safe and legal abortion, including partial birth abortion. Moderate political orientation favours some conservative beliefs as well as some liberal beliefs at the same time. This is to say that moderates are midway between conservatives and liberals (StudentNewsDaily.com, 2005).

So much attention is obviously paid to freedom of speech in developed countries of the world. However, very limited attention is paid to the same issue in developing countries, including Nigeria. More specifically, very minimal or no literature sources exist on freedom of speech among Nigeria University students in spite of the importance of this population in the development of a nation. Thus, it becomes necessary to fill this research gap. Indeed one will be interested in knowing if the threat to freedom of speech that was reportedly orchestrated by military leadership (Redish and Finnerty, 2002) has left some traces even with the coming of civilian government in Nigeria.

In an attempt to fill the research gap reported hitherto, this study surveyed free speech attitudes of 115 university students (aged 18-38) who were athletes at the 23rd edition of the Nigerian Universities Games (NUGA) held at the University of Benin, Edo State. It was hypothesized first that age will significantly correlate positively with free speech attitudes of Nigerian university students. Secondly, it was hypothesized that political orientation will significantly influence free speech attitudes of Nigerian university students. Thirdly, it was predicted that gender will significantly influence free speech attitudes of Nigerian university students. Lastly, it was also hypothesized that socio-economic status will significantly influence free speech attitudes of Nigerian university students.

Method

Design and setting

The independent variables in this study are

socio-economic status, political orientation, age, and gender. Socio-economic status was categorized into low, medium, and high; political orientation was categorized into conservative, liberal, and moderate. The dependent variable is desire for freedom of speech or free speech attitudes (FSA) and this was measured in line with each of the respondent's score on a 20-item, 3-point Likert questionnaire developed by the researcher. The scale was similar to Oyetayo (2001)'s freedom of speech scale. The research adopted a descriptive survey design with the use of self-reported instruments to generate data and responses from the research participants. The setting of the study was the main campus of the University of Benin, Edo State, Nigeria where the 23rd edition of the Nigerian Universities Games (NUGA) took place.

Sample and procedure

Questionnaires were administered to each of the participants after a rapport had been established with them and they were told to respond to the items truthfully. There was no time limit but the average time spent was 20 minutes. Due to the fast pace of activities and time pressure at the venue of the games, it was difficult to get the athletes to participate in the study; hence the accidental sampling method was used. Participants were sampled individually and accidentally at different spots on the University of Benin's main campus in Benin where most of the sporting events of the 23rd Nigerian University Games (NUGA) were held.

Entry to all the events sites was free throughout the Games. There were an estimated 6,000 accredited athletes and officials, and an estimated 80,000 spectators at all the spots for the games. It was among this pool of athletes and spectators that 115 participants were accidentally drawn. There were 70 male and 45 female participants aged 18 to 38. Males constituted 60.9% while females accounted for 39.1%. Their mean age was 23.57 (SD = 5.34).

Thirty four of the respondents reported being liberal in political orientation, 36 reported being moderate, and 45 reported

being conservative in political orientation. Participants were of different socio-economic backgrounds. Participants were of different ethnic backgrounds in Nigeria.

Measures

Free speech attitudes were measured using a 20-item self-developed questionnaire. The 3-point Likert scale, similar to Oyetayo's (2001) Free Speech Scale, had "Strongly Disagree," "Neutral," and "Strongly Agree" response options with a total of 100. Strongly Disagree options were on the left end of the continuum with lower points while Strongly Agree options were on the right end of the continuum with higher points. The mid points on the continuum indicated a neutral position.

While 12 items in the questionnaire were positively worded, 8 were negatively worded. Examples of positive items are "A government that allows and encourages its citizens to speak freely is a better one" and "As far as I am concerned, conflicting views are beneficial views. Examples of negative items are "It is unacceptable for an employee to disagree with his boss" "All said and done, people who are wealthy should be allowed to express themselves more than poor people." Political orientation was assessed by Peterson (2007)'s political orientation scale. This is an 8-item, 3-point Likert scale. All the items in the scales were considered adequate and relevant by experts. An individual who scored within the mean or above the mean was regarded as on freedom of speech, while those who scored below the mean were said to be low on freedom of speech.

During analysis, scores on all negative items were reversed to rhyme with scores on positive items. An item total correlation that was done with the questionnaire items yielded a coefficient alpha of .77 while a split-half reliability analysis yielded coefficient alpha of .67 for part 1 and .70 for part 2. Pearson product moment correlation, independent t-test and one-way ANOVA were employed to analyzed the data collected and test hypotheses formulated for the research.

Results

The correlation between age and free

speech attitudes of university students was examined by Pearson Product Moment Correlation. Result of the Pearson Correlation in Table 1 confirm this

hypothesis ($r = .22$, $df=113$, $P<.05$). It means that as university students are increasing in age their desire for freedom of speech also increases.

1: Table Summary of Pearson Product Moment Correlation Showing the Relationship between Age and Freedom of Speech Attitudes (FSA)

Variables	N	\bar{X}	SD	Age	FSA.
AGE	115	23.57	5.34	-	
FSA.	115	58.64	10.45	.22*	-

FSA = Free Speech Attitudes

*Significant

Political orientation was assessed by Peterson (2007)'s political orientation scale. This is an 8-item, 3-point Likert scale. The influence of political orientation on FSA Nigerian university students was assessed by one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). Result of the ANOVA in Table 2 show that political orientation indeed significantly influenced free speech attitudes of Nigerian university students ($F = 3.24$, $df=113$, $P<.05$). However, observation of the mean scores further revealed that, university students with conservative political orientation ($\bar{x}= 62.83$) had more desire for freedom of speech than university students with liberal political orientation ($\bar{x}= 61.85$) or university students with moderate

political orientation ($\bar{x}= 56.84$). Furthermore, multiple comparisons test (Least Significant Difference) again showed that, university students with liberal and moderate political orientation ($\bar{x}= 5.01$; $P < .05$) significantly desired freedom of speech than university students with liberal and conservative political orientation ($\bar{x}= -.98$; $P > .05$). There was no significant difference between university students with conservative and liberal political orientation ($\bar{x}= .98$; $P > .05$) and university students with conservative and moderate political orientation ($\bar{x}= 5.99$; $P > .05$ regarding desire for freedom of speech.

Table 2: Summary of One-way ANOVA Showing Influence of Political Orientation on Free Speech Attitudes

Source	SS	df	MS	F	P
Between Groups	681.89	2	340.95		
Within Groups	11254.37	107	105.18	3.24	< .05
Total	11936.26	109			

Gender was predicted in hypothesis 3 to influence free speech attitudes of Nigerian

students significantly. The results in Table 3 did not confirm this hypothesis.

Table 3: Summary of Independent t-Test Showing Influence of Gender on Free Speech Attitudes

Sex	N	\bar{X}	df	t	P
Male	80	59.09	110	.73	> .05
Female	32	57.47			

Contrary to the statement in hypothesis 4, socio-economic status did not significantly influence free speech attitudes of Nigerian university students as seen in Table 4. University students who were reportedly from the upper socio-economic class did not more significantly desire freedom of speech than university students who were

reportedly from the lower socio-economic class or university students who were reportedly from the middle socio-economic class. This means that, there was no significant difference among university students from the upper, middle, and lower socio-economic status in their desire for freedom of speech.

Table 4: Summary of One-way ANOVA Showing Influence of Socio-economic Status on Free Speech Attitudes

Source	SS	df	MS	F	P
Between Groups	288.31	2	144.16	1.32	> .05
Within Groups	12129.48	111	109.28		
Total	12417.79	113			

Discussion and implication

The confirmation of hypothesis one is an indication that age was a significant factor in the FSA of Nigerian university students. This means that there are age differences in FSA among Nigerian university students. Specifically, as age increases, the desire for free speech also increases. This finding suggests that as university students' ages increase, they are more likely to get exposed to different life experiences that will in turn increase their desire for free speech. This finding is in line with Blasi's (1999) conclusion that people learn from experience and experience shapes free speech. This finding also supports Hasegawa's (2001) view that there are age differences in some aspects of people's judgments.

Political orientation also influenced free speech attitudes of university students Nigerians significantly. Specifically, conservatives desired more free speech than, followed by liberals, and moderates. This finding in respect of hypothesis 2 is in

line with Lakoff's (2002) observation that a person's political orientation is assumed to influence his or her free speech attitudes. Conservatives may seem to desire more free speech as an instrument for helping them conserve social values they so much cherish (maintain status quo). However, liberals favour free speech more than moderates because of the former's belief in the protection of civil liberties and individual and human rights. Moderates may cautiously cherish free speech to maintain their middle position between liberals and conservatives.

The failure of gender to predict FSA as stated in hypothesis 3 does not support the findings of Ceci, Williams, and Mueller-Johnson (2006) who observed few differences in freedom of speech related either to gender or type of institution. We presume, however, that it is not unlikely to corroborate Ceci's aforementioned position if a similar study is done involving a larger sample of Nigerian men and women of more diverse cultural and institutional

backgrounds.

As well, it is worth noting that socio-economic status did not significantly influence free speech attitudes of young adult Nigerians significantly as predicted in hypothesis 4. To a reasonable extent, Nigeria is a class conscious society and one expects that this class consciousness would reflect in FSA of young Nigerians. Again, it is hoped that when similar studies are done in the future involving larger samples educated Nigerian with more diverse educational and socio-economic backgrounds, the influence of socio-economic on free speech may be significant.

Conclusion

This study established a significant correlation between age and FSA among young adult Nigerians. Therefore, it is suggested that more opportunities should be made available to Nigerians, especially those who are still growing up, to express their opinions on diverse issues that may interest them. This entails creating effective communication channels within and outside educational systems for students and young people to express themselves on issues that interest them. For this to be effective, age-specific needs and considerations should be identified and recognized.

Political orientation was also identified as a significant factor influencing FSA of Nigeria university students. It is further suggested that Nigerian governments and institutions at all levels should take deliberate steps towards recognizing and according due respect to university students and young people, especially those of divergent political orientations. Imposing preferred political views on the citizenry and persuading or coercing people to 'think in the box' are steps that are likely to be resisted first by citizens, especially young and educated citizens, due to their volatility. Further research is indicated in the area of the connection between gender and FSA on the one hand and the connection between socio-economic-status and FSA on the other. Freedom of speech is an important ingredient in the development of democracy and the advancement of society. Thus there is serious need for

freedom of speech attitudes to be understood deeper and better.

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