

A Diachronic Corpus Linguistic Analysis of Nigerian Queer Sexuality Narratives on Twitter (2011-2020)

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Abstract

People of queer sexuality exist on the margins in many African states. The marginalisation relies mainly on the tripod of religious-moral-cultural antagonism and this has morphed into strengthening legal opposition to and criminalisation of queerness. In Nigeria, the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act of 2014 criminalises not only same-sex relations but also actions that are deemed to foster same-sex practices. Studies which explore queer discourses online have identified that the digital media space has become a veritable platform within which queer agency is performed. In this article, my focus is linked to the assumption that the portrayal of queerness on Nigerian digital media has evolved. I interrogate this by undertaking a 10-year (2011–2020) linguistic analysis of a corpus of purposively extracted tweets by Nigerian Twitter users. The data is analysed using Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis and Corpus Linguistics methodologies. I posit that while early representations of queerness were mostly homophobic and acerbic, denying space to pro-homosexuality narratives, more contemporary representations reveal a more balanced perspective since digital platforms have democratised opinions while still affording a form of anonymity. I submit that the metamorphosis may provide insights into future more accepting attitudes to same-sex relations in Nigeria.

1. Introduction

Representation is power and visibility provides a platform for self-assertion. This is most apposite in the interrogation of sexual practices wherein minoritised sexual groups look to contest the inhibiting spaces which closet their identities. Navigated through the appropriation of the concept of sexual ideology which Corredor (2019, p.613-614) identifies as a hierarchization of sexualities as well as sustained 'antigender mobilizations' which are used as 'salient counterstrategies to feminist and LGBTQ+ social movements', people who identify as non-normative

sexualities or of gender-variant identities have drawn attention to the fluidity of gender and the multiplicities of sexual identities. Arguments however subsist on the validity of the naturalness of such variegated sexual representations with Alzamora Revoredo (2003, p.465) stating that gender ideology 'affirm[s] that differences between men and women, beyond the obvious and not anatomical ones, do not correspond to a fixed nature, but are products of the culture of a certain country or epoch.' Consequently, there is the need to interrogate portrayals that challenge the status-quo, which represent the systems of gender oppression, especially from the perspective of language use (Borba, 2019).

According to Calder (2020), linguistic practices are central to interrogating attitudes and perceptions towards LGBTQ communities. This submission is hinged on the conviction that such language-based explorations yield ethnographic and context-sensitive insights. Such interrogations become even more apposite when one considers the widespread negativity that continues to pervade social engagements of queer identities. Although queer advocacies have culminated to legal recognition in some parts of the world, there are only 29 nations, as at 2020, that allow and recognise same-sex unions (www.businessinsider.com, 2020). On the African continent, six countries – South Africa, Angola, Botswana, Mozambique, Lesotho and Republic of Seychelles – recognise same-sex marriages while a total of 22 have some forms of legal protection for people of queer sexual orientation (Rakhetsi, 2021). In the remaining 32 countries, there exist varying degrees of outlawing, repression and outright criminalisation, sometimes with death penalty (Hussain, 2020). It is interesting that many of the laws which criminalise same-sex relationships are relics of colonialism (Onanuga, 2021). What is also interesting is that apart from South Africa which legally recognised and constitutionally protected its citizens against discrimination based on sexual orientation since 2006, the other five countries legalised same-sex relationships within the last 10 years. One can assume that the current wave of same-sex activism, couched in human rights narratives, is gradually having an impact on the African continent. Can this trend be used to predict the future in terms of acceptance of sexual minorities? Another valuable resource is the visibility which digital social media platforms continue to provide for hitherto closeted queer people. The digital space has given voice and representation to the queer community who had had to navigate their sexual orientations from the

margins. Through these digital spaces, queer people contest existing negative portrayals and accentuate their identities as human beings.

It is from this tumultuous background that I interrogate same-sex narratives on Twitter. I examine how Nigerian users have engaged queerness and its agency, and how this negotiation online has evolved within the last 10 years. My exploration intersects corpus linguistics, critical discourse analysis and digital humanities as I seek to provide empirical evidence on the evolution of the representations of same-sex relations as well as the manifestations of ideological leanings in the narratives. I assert that these narratives 'potentially create meanings and create subjectivity against a contradictory background' (Ombagi, 2019, p. 410). The contradiction is hinged on Ombagi's (2020) observation of queer livability and queer visibility which, although applied to Kenya, echo the realities within the Nigerian physical space. Ombagi's terms reveal the cultural and legal hindrances which attempt to conceal the lived experience of Nigerian queers and the affordance of visibility and queer agency which digital platforms avail. The potentials which the intersection of language, sexuality and corpus linguistics affords especially in examining the representations of sexual minorities in public discourses have been foregrounded in several existing studies (Baker, 2018; Motschenbacher, 2021). The current study however provides insights to an under-researched domain of digital humanities – sexuality on digital platforms. The study centralises language as a critical resource through which humans not only communicate but also understand the world and through which they construct and invoke identities towards distinct purposes. Bucholtz and Hall (2004, p. 471) succinctly capture this viewpoint when they submit that queer linguistics 'puts at the forefront of linguistic analysis the regulation of sexuality by hegemonic heterosexuality and the ways in which nonnormative sexualities are negotiated in relation to these regulatory structures'. Through a diachronic engagement, I empirically detail the trend on digitised queer discourse within the Nigerian context.

2. Documenting the Context: Being Queer in Nigeria

Nigeria's recognition among the most homophobic nations globally is predicated on its criminalisation of same-sex relations through the 2014 Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act (subsequently SSMPA) as well as documented widespread repression by both state and non-state actors.

While traditionally, issues on sexuality are not encouraged to be publicly shared or discussed in many Nigerian cultures (Izugbara, 2004) and 'homophobia and heterosexism had obviously been problems in Nigeria before the SSMPA legislation' (Okanlawon, 2018, p.461), the widespread use of digital media has fuelled a participatory demand. Within this context, users have become more expressive and open to sharing information on their sexuality. Although the physical space constrains the expression of non-heteronormative sexualities, the online space has become a liberating platform. Despite the presence of more studies on how Nigerian queers negotiate their lived realities, most of these studies have been based on representations in literary texts or from films. In addition, many of these studies have been by scholars in the Global North (Okanlawon, 2020, 2021; Green-Simms, 2016, Green-Simms and Azuah, 2012; Osinubi, 2016, 2018). This serves as motivation for a diachronic linguistic analysis of the direct comments by Nigerian Twitter users as these represent 'live' data through which I can make inferences on the attitudes towards same-sex relations and how these are remarked. Twitter is a microblogging and social network service which enables what Boyd (2010, p.39) calls 'networked publics' since it involves an 'imagined collective' of users. These users seek to enjoy the open social space (Bohman 2004, p.139) which digital media provide. There, users share information and also network with other users. Such networking aids user-to-user exchanges and conversationality – crucial resources which facilitate the creation of the data for this study.

According to a TIERS survey, support for the Same Sex Marriage Prohibition Act in Nigeria dwindled from 75% in 2017 to 57% in 2019. This statistic corroborates Nwaubani's (2017) submission that there was a growing acceptance of LGBT persons despite the promulgation of the SSMPA. The implication is that more Nigerians, particularly the young, are more ambivalent, even if not outright pro-queer. This is worth exploring especially when one relates this result with the widespread and national support which culminated in the promulgation of the prohibitive law in 2014. The TIERS survey also draws attention to the hyper-visibility which has been witnessed in Nigerian queer practices and advocacy. Not only have literary writings been appropriated as media for centring queer lived realities, Nigerian movies have also contributed to the narratives (Onanuga and Alade, 2020). Even the social media has thrust up overnight queer celebrities like Bobrisky and James Brown who leverage on

transvestism while popular comedians also dress up like the opposite sex in many of their comedies. Although these have not reduced the tendencies of oppression within the Nigerian physical space, the platforms have granted visibility to a marginalised community, bringing to fore their experiences.

With respect to methodological approach, Leech (2011), Potts and Baker (2012) and Schmied (2016, 2018) have applied corpus analysis to the analysis of linguistic data. These studies assert the empirical feedback which corpus analysis provides. Schmied (2018, p.40) asserts that corpus analysis enables a researcher to 'see patterns where constant participatory observation and even deep immersion may not have been enough in the past'. Combined with Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis, one is able to infuse the mediation of contextual and social events to the texts being analysed. This is because texts are not produced in a vacuum; there are always realities which influence text production. The current study is limited to a diachronic analysis of Twitter narratives on queer sexuality in Nigeria between 2011 and 2020. The central assumption is that digital representations of same-sex relations in Nigeria constitute mappings through which one can identify and remark the evolution of attitudes to non-heterosexual orientations. Thus, studying these narratives from a linguistic perspective provide interesting results on emergent queer discourse in Nigeria.

3. Detailing the Evolution of Queering: Perspectives from Diachronic Studies

Diachronicity involves an interrogation or evaluation of events in terms of how such events relate over time. It affords historical navigation of portrayals and viewpoints. Diachronic studies also allow for a correlational engagement, especially of the manifestations of changes within the context of study. Such studies, especially within the specific context of this study – queer sexuality –, constitute a documentation of “minority history”: the effort to recover the histories of groups previously overlooked or excluded from mainstream historiography' (Boswell, 1989, p.1). The implication is that hither-to closeted narratives become open and more familiar as the searchlight of critical engagement is provided either by in-groupers, allies, or even from oppositional perspectives. With regard to scholarly inquiries into queer sexuality narratives, diachronic engagements have focused on diverse representations and challenges

facing the LGBTQ community. Baker (2013), using keyword analysis, interrogated the linguistic representations and framing of queer sexuality. The study contrasted data from abstracts at the Lavender Languages and Linguistics Conference (1994-2012) against Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) using Wordsmith in order to identify the extent that linguistic practices around language and sexuality were reflected in wider society. The study identified the recurrence of topics around language and identity, and an evolution of 'sexual identity labels which were separating, collectivising and hierarchical in favour of more equalising and differentiating terminology' (Baker, 2013, p.179). More insightful is the observation that the conception of 'language' has shifted from being a perception that queer people had peculiar, esoteric and specific type of language to an understanding of 'the meaning and function of linguistic practices' (Milani, 2017, p.408) within narratives around sexual minorities.

Jones (2021) pays attention to even more contemporary advancements within the spheres on queer linguistics in the last ten years. The study employed data from *Lavender Languages and Linguistics Conference* abstracts as well as publications in relevant and representative journals. The study noted an increasing influence of queer theory in academic publications and also highlighted trends in research into language and queer identities. In addition, Mendelsohn, Tsvetkov and Jurafsky (2020, p.1) focus on a computational linguistic analysis of dehumanising language within 'discussions of LGBTQ people in the *New York Times* from 1986 to 2015'. The study observed progressively humanising descriptions of queerness and also documented the evolution of negative connotations and attitudes to the expression 'homosexual', as against other referents like 'gay' or 'lesbian'. Interestingly, as against the American context, Nigerians and the Nigerian media simply represent 'homosexual(ity)' as sexual attraction to a person of the same gender. This is without the negative perception as identified in the US.

Motschenbacher (2019, p.1) explored keyword analysis in 'a corpus of news reports about Ricky Martin, comparing two sub-corpora, one with texts published before and another with texts from after Martin's public coming out as a gay man in 2010'. The study interrogated the discursive shifts that follow the portrayal of a celebrity figure when the issue of their sexuality is non-heteronormative. Leaning on the peculiarities of Martin's Latino background as well as the overarching

public perception of gender ideology, the study analysed representative texts from 1998-2010 and 2010-2018. Motschenbacher (2021) explored studies that intersect language and sexuality since the mid-1990s. The study engaged the shifting semantic implications and attitudes to the word 'homosexual' within non-heteronormative language use. Milani (2017) drew attention to the implications of linguistic labelling of people who identify as queer and how language becomes a tool for either the continued repression or empowerment of marginalised communities/groups. It also engaged the historical roles of language in re-signification – an appropriation and positivisation of hitherto resisted expressions by marginalised groups. Milani (2017, p.403) centralised the word *queer* as a positively laden in-group marker, one that sought to overcome the gendered splits created by the categories “gay” and “lesbian” and as a way of taking hold of normalised hierarchies of representation. These demographics undertake what Warner (1993, p.xxvi) tags as 'resistance to regimes of the normal'. In addition, Koller (2013, p.572) analysed 'two texts written from a lesbian subject position at different points in recent history'. The study identified how authors use nomination and predication to construct in- and out-group representations.

What is obvious across these studies is that cross-temporal studies within the domain of queer sexuality have drawn attention to the diversity of linguistic practices and hitherto uncharted topics and themes. These studies have also employed innovative methodologies and theoretical frameworks to an assessment of their data and have presented a cocktail of perceptions to the portrayal of queer identities. Unsurprisingly however, especially because of the current very conservative and unwelcoming attitudes to same-sex orientations in many African societies, very few diachronic linguistic studies have been undertaken within the context. Most of such similar existing works are also sociological or historical in orientation (Gaudio, 1998; Epprecht, 1998). Epprecht for instance demystifies the oft-repeated contemporary claim of a singularly straight African past in terms of sexuality as he identifies a historical past in which fluid sexual practices and identities were acceptable and commonplace. The current study is thus an attempt to enrich this understudied domain through recourse to digital narratives from Nigerian Twitter habitués.

4. Method

The corpus for the study is self-collected between March, 2021 and July,

2021. This was through keyword searches using expressions like *Nigeria, homosexuality, gay, Lesbian, LGBTQ* as well as *year specification* (2011-2020) on the *Orange Data Mining* application, a software which automatically culls tweets. I complement the automated data collection procedure with manual searches and copying using the same keywords. The saved tweets are 'cleaned' with JusText in order to expunge repetitive tweets and unnecessary web links. The resultant corpus was saved in .txt form and processed using AntConc (2018).

In view of the diachronic orientation of the study, I split the corpus into two time periods, determined by the 2014 date of the promulgation of the SSMPA. Consequently, 2011 to 2014 preceded the SSMPA. It is important to contextualise that while the name of the Act suggests a prohibition of same-sex marriage, it actually forbids same-sex cohabitation, bans public show of same-sex relationships, and imposes a 10-year prison sentence on organisations and people perceived to be in support of same-sex relationships. Paying attention to the intervening years – before and immediately after the presidential assent to the Act – allows for insight into the prevailing circumstances which necessitated the law, and gives a clear picture of the lived realities of the Nigerian queer community. The second time period is 2015-2020. This period witnessed invigorated digital activism, contesting the marginalisation of queerness in both the physical and digital spaces. These two periods afford a systematic comparative analysis. I subject the corpus to keyword analysis since, to Baker (2006, p.22), keywords are 'lexical items which occur statistically more frequently in one text or set of texts when compared with another (often a larger 'benchmark' corpus)'.

Alongside the corpus linguistic tools, I integrate text-excerpts from the data in discussing the evolution of linguistic representation of queer sexuality on Nigerian Twitter. I apply tenets of Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (henceforth CMDA). CMDA is an adaptation and extension of Critical Discourse Analysis which in itself is interested in how linguistic resources are used to establish, maintain or challenge power relations (Wodak, 1997). CMDA examines the processes and outcomes of digital social interaction and group processes, addressing issues such as how people express and construe self-identity, form and manage impressions, develop and maintain relationships, build communities, collaborate at a distance, and make collective decisions (Baym, 2010; Masroor et al, 2019). Consequently, paying attention to the description,

interpretation and explanation of linguistic features in context will avail a critique of social structures of inequality with a view to changing them. Applying CMDA and Corpus Linguistics to queer sexuality narratives, according to Baker (2018), is 'ideally positioned to examine questions around discourses and representations of sexuality'. In applying these theoretical orientations, I adopt a strongly text-based approach to uncovering how the representations of queer sexuality (broadly lesbianism and gay since these are the dominant non-heterosexual categories by which many queer Nigerians go by) have progressed. I incorporate the interconnectedness of the social, political, economic and cultural contexts which mediate in their production, and bring to bear my knowledge – in terms of familiarity with the situational context of Nigeria and the topic of homosexuality – in providing ethnographic basis to the analysis.

5. Outing the Data: The Linguistic Landmine of Nigerian Queer Narratives (2011-2014)

According to Cameron and Kulick (2003, p.12), the exploration of sexuality using linguistic tools 'encompasses not only questions about how people enact sexuality in their talk, but also questions about how sexuality and sexual identity are represented linguistically in a variety of discourse genres'. Consequently, it is unsurprising to identify that the narratives which frame the perceptions and reactions to queer sexuality between 2011 and 2014 in Nigeria are largely from heterosexual and hegemonic masculinity orientations. The result is the representation of homosexuality and other forms of queer sexual orientations as negative, despicable and unwelcome. In fact, the presence of anti-gender narratives which witness the projection of prejudice, bigotry and sexual resentment and the manipulation of such social realities into geopolitical matters are not surprising in the data. This is because religious and cultural sentiments as well as legal impediments continue to make queer lived experiences a tortuous one in Nigeria. Consequently, one identifies moral crusades which attempt to relegate non-heteronormative identities. One can conclude that the SSMPA gave authorization and impetus to the subsequent upsurge in abuse, assault, extortion and detention of LGBTQ-identifying Nigerians. The legalisation of homophobic attitudes finds expression in the data as there are recurring references to the reality that same-sex relationships have been outlawed in the country. Homophobes

used this discriminatory reality to silence and invalidate the comments by queer activists and their allies.

In Images 1, 2 and 3, three keywords 'criminal', 'illegal' and 'law' were examined in the data. These keywords resonate the alterity which queer sexual orientations are subjected to. They also reinforce the marginalisation by the dominant sexual ideology in rejecting and obliterating any form of visibility of minority sexual identities. In Image 1 hit 1, being 'gay' is represented as being equivalent to criminality. The anti-gay agenda persists in Hits 2 where 'HOMOSEXUALITY IS NOW CRIMINAL IN NIGERIA' and in Hit 3 in which same-sex marriage is equated with criminal activity. By criminalising non-heterosexual behaviours, one identifies a leaning towards what Nyong'o (2012) refers to as protogenocidal, which involves using legislation to victimise queer people and to pursue death-driven politics of sexuality.

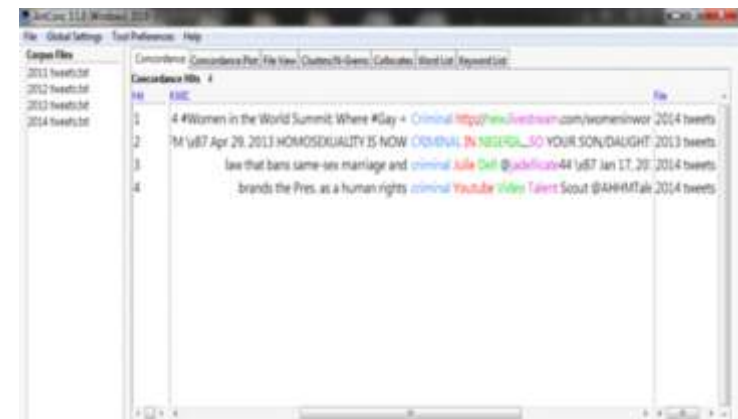


Image 1: 'Criminal' in the data (2011-2014)

The necropolitical leaning (Mbembe, 2003) which is further engendered through the use of laws to declare queer sexualities as illegal continues in Images 2 and 3. While the most frequently realised collocate for 'illegal' were 'gay' and 'homosexuality', 'new' and 'against' constituted the dominant collocate for 'law' (Image 3). These realisations have implications. First, being gay or identifying as homosexual has been declared as illegal in Nigeria, through the anti-same-sex act. Indeed, before the legislation, homophobic reactions were navigated within the denunciations from religious and cultural viewpoints. The result of the

intersection of the legalisation of same-sex hate and religious-cultural ostracisation is the further closeting of homosexual-identifying Nigerians. In addition, the frequent identification of 'new' presents a re-validation of hitherto existing shackles which assert the unAfrican-ness and immorality of queer sexual orientation. Indeed, these realisations are contributory to the outbreaks of homophobic violence, state agent extortions, and the life-and-death reality of daily existence for queer Nigerians.

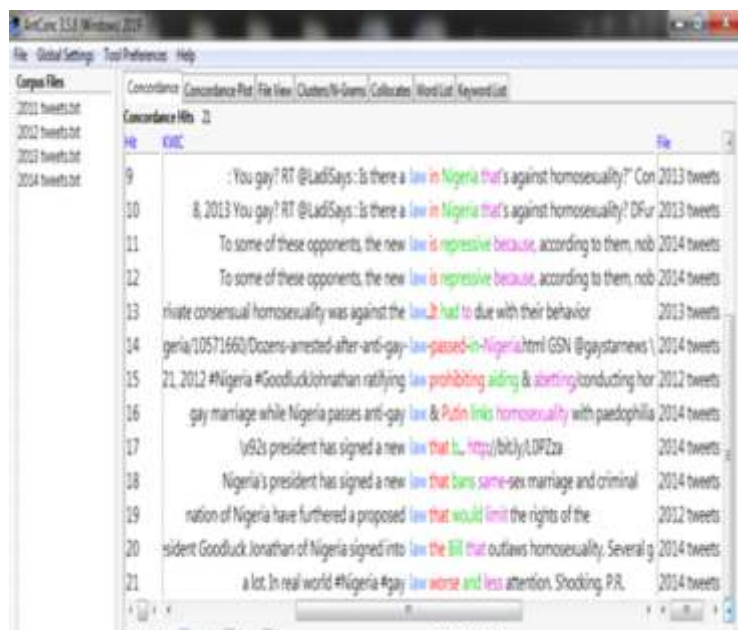


Image 3: 'Law' in the data (2011-2014)

Here, 'law' is consistently used to affirm anti-homosexual attitudes and actions while those who are against the legislation are tagged 'opponents'. In fact, Hit 13 remarks that the legislation was 'due with their behaviour' – a veiled reference to the non-acceptance of even 'private consensual homosexuality' between adults. In Hit 16, there is also an attempt to provide validation of the appropriation of 'law' in the context of homosexuality as it states that 'while Nigeria passes anti-gay law & Putin links homosexuality with paedophilia'. This form of deprecation is a recognised trope in Nigerian homophobic digital practices (Onanuga, 2021) where homosexuality as a gender identity and sexual practice are

often equated with criminal actions like paedophilia, incest, rape, etc. Through the reference to Putin, the superpower status of Russia and the 'strongman personality' of Putin are superimposed on Nigeria, with Goodluck Jonathan equally hailed as someone who dared the supremacist push of the West to legalise homosexuality.

In addition, there is an observance of a nationalistic trait, one which foregrounds the territorial integrity of Nigeria and asserts the need for the nation to take its stand against perceived undue external influences. Hoad (2007, p.77) acknowledges this when he asserts the presence of 'African nationalism as a site of displaced resistance to a perceived encroachment on neocolonial nationalism by the forces of globalization'. Exemplifying tweets are:

Tweet 1: Alabo Roland @Roland_speaks: Jan 15, 2014

Someone will be blindly supporting homosexuality for what, as long as Nigeria exist Gay/Lesbianism is a crime against the state.

Tweet 2: BEN @bencubical: Apr 30, 2013

@MssLiberty @mrbenz7 @jeromewilson43 we in Nigeria understand that homosexuality can destroy our nation,we passed an antigay law.

Tweet 1 represents supporters of homosexuality as being blind and wonders what motivates their support. The choice of the indefinite pronoun 'someone' is also significant. It is intentionally vague and becomes a blanket reference to everyone in support of homosexuality. The commenter even declares gayism and lesbianism as crimes against the Nigerian state. In Tweet 2, there is the sustenance of the antagonism to homosexuality based on perceived national ideology. The repetitive use of 'we' enervates the counter-discoursal orientation of 'we versus them' and suggests that the anti-gay law is a homogenous decision supported by all Nigerians. These perceptions navigate the trope of external interference and strengthen the widespread rumour that western superpowers, led by the United States of America, were bent on introducing the legalisation of queer orientation around the world. In some instances, there were claims that foreign aids and other forms of economic interventions were tied to the acceptance of queer orientations. Therefore, in addition to the need to protect national identities, the underlying rationale for the denunciation of

queer identities lies in the moral, cultural and religious tropes which have been used to represent these orientations as foreign to the Nigerian clime and which subsist in the discursive construction of homophobia. In fact, the tolerance of homosexuality is regarded as 'spiritual slavery' (Rubenstein, 2010) and this is alluded to in Tweet 2 where the commenter avers that 'homosexuality can destroy our nation'.

It is necessary to however point out that while the majority of the representations online between 2011 and 2014 ostracise queerness in Nigeria, a few voiced their opinion on the absurdity of the perceptions of homosexuality and the ban through the SSMPA. Some instantiations are:

Tweet 3: Taha @TahaAdam : Nov 30, 2012
@elnathan @AAABORODĒ @omojuwa
most of the top govt officials are gays too! I think
homosexuality and corruption are symbiotic in Nigeria!

Tweet 4: granny ganja @granny_ganja: Jun 15, 2013
now isnt that something..the 2 countries that outlaw
homosexuality Pakistan & Nigeria downloads the most gay porn.
Pray 4 Nigeria

Tweet 5: May 31, 2013
Even if they criminalize homosexuality, I'll still be out and proud.
I'd rather be jailed & gay, than oppressed & straight

Tweet 6: Eagle @iJerryJoe: May 31, 2013
NIGERIA!!!!!! 14 years in prison for homosexuality, 10 years in
prison for attending a gay wedding...LMAOOOO!! That's what's
popping!!!

Tweet 3 draws attention to the possibilities of classism in the witch-hunt of people of queer sexual identities. By making an obviously unfounded generalisation – 'most of the top government officials are gays too' -, the commenter relies on grapevine that not only are many notable male Nigerian political office holders homosexual, they also indulge in homosexual acts for diabolic purposes. The commenter then concludes that the anti-homosexuality law is just another manifestation of corruption. Tweet 4 drums its opposition to the SSMPA by referencing the

download metrics of gay porn. Through this, the commenter identifies the hypocrisy of the Nigerian environment. Tweet 5 is more assertively militant and activist as the commenter restates their commitment to staying true to their gender and sexual identity even in the face of opposition and criminalisation. Tweet 6 is sarcastic, mocking the dimensions of homosexuality which the SSMPA seeks to outlaw and punish.

6. 'Accept', 'Reject', 'Allow': Analyzing the Linguistic Projection of Attitudes

Language is never neutral and there are semantic and attitudinal implications to linguistic choices made by language users. As van Dijk (1995, p.243) points out, discourse structures enable and empower the proliferation of ideologies and 'some semantic structures of discourse do so more effectively than others'. It is with this in mind that three tokens – accept, reject and allow – are interrogated in the corpus. The underlying assumption is that these expressions may be used within homophobic discourse to deny queer agency and identities. Of course, the tokens also reference the ideological leanings of the language users on the topic and performance of non-heteronormative identities. Exemplifications are used in discussing how language is used to project attitudes in the narratives:

Tweet 7: Marcus Miller @TheDrFeelShow: Jun 10, 2013
No one ever spoke about gay issues in Nigeria; it was
simply an **accepted fact** that homosexuality was an
aberration...

Tweet 8: Flag of Nigeria @Dasilvanno: Sep 24, 2013
No matter what happens, 3 things will **never be
accepted** in #Nigeria; terrorism, homosexuality and gay
marriage..we are #Africans

Tweet 9: Lavish @iampavillavish: Jul 28, 2013
WILL NIGERIA SURVIVE THE **PRESSURE TO
ACCEPT** HOMOSEXUALITY? PM DAVID
CAMERON VOWS TO EXPORT GAY MARRIAGE
AROUND THE WORLD

Tweet 10: Nigeria MovieNetwork @NigeriaMovieNet:
Apr 16, 2012
Any Nollywood actor against homosexuality in Nigeria will

definitely reject a gay movie script.

Tweet 11: A. @LovePrayListen: May 8, 2012

That gay bill shows that Nigeria isn't ready to grow. In the heat of BH & subsidy scandals, our main concern should not be homosexuality....

Tweet 12: Mads @mads_pierce: May 29, 2012

In Nigeria, Homosexuality is **illegal** and for being gay you can serve up to 14 years in prison. WHAT IS THIS WORLD?!

Tweets 7 to 12 are from the 2011-2014 tweets. Tweets 7, 8, 9 and 10 are anti-homosexuality and they frame the keywords – accept and reject – in oppositional constructs within Nigerian queer discourse. Tweet 7 regards homosexuality and homosexual existence as an aberration which is unacceptable in the Nigerian context. This viewpoint is sustained in Tweet 8 which assertively submits that homosexuality and same-sex unions 'will never be accepted'. The keyword 'accept' and its lemma 'accepted' are further contextualised within an ideological field which suggests that there are pressures from the international community towards the legalisation of same-sex relations in Nigeria. Tweet 9 legitimises this viewpoint by stating that the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, had vowed to export gay marriage around the world. The lexical choices here are insightful. For one, 'vow' suggests a solemn pledge while 'export' implies a wilful transfer. These realisations connote that sexual identities are not natural and that the West is complicit in the globalisation of non-heteronormativity. Tweet 10 extends the narrative to popular culture, alluding to a perception that actors who participate in homosexual-themed movies betray a homosexual leaning. As Onanuga and Alade (2020) and Okpadah (2020) identify, more Nigerian movies are exploring homosexual-themed films while queer advocacy organisations are also providing useful and insightful filmic representations of a hitherto silenced queer community.

Tweets 11 and 12 however provide queer-positive feedback. Tweet 11 equates the criminalisation of same-sex relations to backwardness as they insist that 'Nigeria isn't ready to grow'. By referencing 'the heat of BH [Boko Haram] & subsidy scandals', the commenter draws attention to the penchant of politicians to use anti-queer narratives for publicity purposes and to whip up sentiments in many African nations (van Klinken, 2020).

Tweet 12 mocks the illegality of homosexuality and the punishment of imprisonment.

Tweet 13: Amah @ama_ilami Sep 14, 2020 Replying to @Chydum1 and @Laxix6:

That's exactly why countries that have left religion behind and **accepted** the lgbtq+ communities are thriving WAYY more than Nigeria that has carried religion on top of your heads.

Tweet 14: odogwu @DiKachii Oct 18, 2020 Replying to @DiKachii:

From what I understand, you can be gay or whatever...but it is not **allowed** to marry one of the same sex. How does that translate to LGBT being illegal?

Tweet 15: MyLastTweet @dont_follow_me Mar 2, 2015

Replying to @AfricaFactsZone
fight boko haram leave people's bedrooms alone sick government

Tweets 13 to 15 were between 2015 and 2020, and add to the ideological ecology of Nigerian queer narratives. Tweet 13 contextualises 'acceptance' as equal to development. It submits that by accepting the humanity of queers and integrating them, the entire society thrives. This is contrasted to the Nigerian reality where religion takes centre-stage. The realisation of 'allowed' in Tweet 14 foregrounds the denial of agency to the Nigerian queer community. The implication is that by asking for the legalisation of the performance of queerness – one which heterosexuals do not need to demand –, people of queer identities navigate the margins of social acceptability and are at the mercy of the society. Finally, in Tweet 15, the commenter perceives the policing of homosexuality as invasive. Again, there is a construct which reveals the government as unserious since it leaves issues that are deemed more important – the fight against insurgency and terrorism – to censoring 'people's bedroom'.

The engagement of these keywords – 'accept', 'reject' and 'allow' – serves as platform to further interrogate the place of linguistic and discourse structures in the perpetuation, and contestation, of ideologies. As identified in the tweets, these expressions yield insightful feedback on the representations and perception of queer agency in Nigeria.

7. Attitudinal Evolution and Counter-discursivity: How Queer Visibility Is Negotiated (2015-2020)

If pre-2015 Twitter narratives were mostly homophobic, justifying the closeting of non-heterosexuality through reference to legality, culture and religion while also using deprecating expressions to criminalise homosexual identities, discourses on queer sexualities on Twitter surged post-SSMPA. For one, this is attestable in the margins between the tokens retrieved from Nigerian Twitter queer discourses across the timeframe under inquiry. A total of 13,436 tokens were processed for the tweets from 2015-2020 as against the 5131 tokens from 2011-2014. Within the emergent narratives, multiple digital engagements of physical lived experiences are documented online. A critical identification is the enhanced visibility of members of the marginalised Nigerian queer community, occasioned by the need to contest the representations and portrayals of the Nigerian queer community by 'outsiders'. An examination of the contexts of the lexical item 'criminal' in the 2015 – 2020 data is evidential of the renewed vigour with which in-groupers seek to change the narratives around homosexuality in Nigeria:

Hit	Text	Date	Retweets
1	I want to be a part of criminal activities and @AjPN0	Dec 25, 2020	lots of
2	@Bosun In Nigeria LGBT is a criminal activity according to the law and y		2018 tweets
3	my toes does that make me a criminal ? Everyone has the right to do what		2019 tweets
4	Apr 2, 2018 Homosexuality as an act is not criminal in Nigeria for now. What is criminal		2018 tweets
5	criminal in Nigeria for now. What is criminal is homosexual marriages and public acts of		2018 tweets

Image 4: 'Criminal' in the Data (2015 - 2020)

Hits 3 and 4 – which are extracted below – contextualise the pro-queer advocacies on Nigerian Twitter. Both realisations are reactions to the

SSMPA and its criminalisation of non-heterosexual identities:

Tweet 16: Dadotman @Rabbitdot Dec 28, 2019 Replying to @francisigbru and @William_Ukpe: The analogy is flawed. I play piano with my toes, does that make me a criminal? Everyone has the right to do what they will with their bodies (as long as it “directly” affects no one.

Tweet 17: @A_Fenomeno Sep 2, 2018 Homosexuality as an 'act' is not criminal in Nigeria for now. What is criminal is homosexual marriages and public acts of homosexuality. It has a status akin to that of incest.

In Tweet 16, the commenter asserts that individual decisions on their sexuality should be personal since '[e]veryone has the right to do what they will with their bodies'. Through this assertion, what is foregrounded is that moral polices, who seek to censor sexual relations and identities, as well as state legislation should not intrude into individual privacies. Tweet 17 describes what is 'criminal' within the bounds of the SSMPA. The commenter clarifies that what is considered as criminal is not the 'act' of homosexuality but the public show of homosexuality as well as actions deemed to encourage or support homosexuality. One can identify within these discussions the politics of the human body. Harcourt (2009, p.23) remarks that the body is:

... a place for political mobilization interconnected with other sites of resistance and political action ... bodies are not external to political processes but firmly enmeshed in them, even if they are not necessarily the defining site for action. The lived experience of the body, the identity and definitions attached to bodies, inform and are connected to all political struggles.

The political implications of the body and the performances and rituals around it have culminated in the censoring of sexual practices and identities. They are also why marginalised individuals and othered groups always seek to assert their identities in the face of attempts to make them invisible.

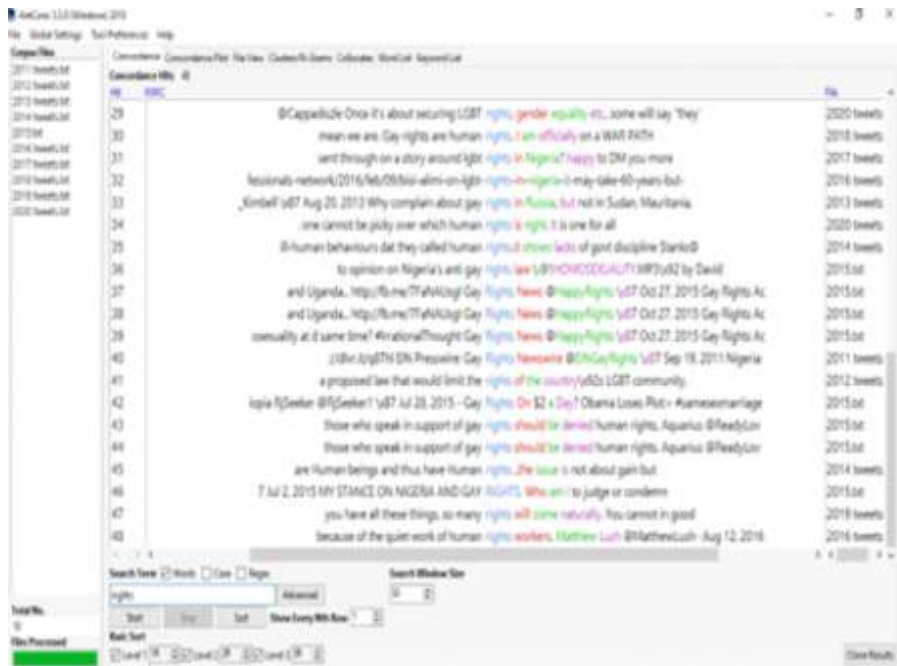


Image 5: 'Rights' in the Data

Five of the 20 Hits in Image 5 are between 2011 and 2014 while the others are from 2015 to 2020. This realisation is significant in exploring the thematic progression of same-sex narratives on Nigerian digital space. It signals the accommodation of human rights advocacies post-SSMPA in Nigeria. Hit 30 for instance is confrontational as it states that: 'Gay rights are human rights. I am officially on a WAR PATH'. Hit 34 also avers that: 'one cannot be picky over which human rights is right. It is one for all'. Beyrer and Kass (1994), Abrams (2009), Charlesworth (2005), Sobel (2008) have asserted the place of human rights in the acceptance and accommodation of sexual minorities who continue to face violence and marginalisation. These advocacies are hinged on the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights which affirms the 'recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family'. Consequently, what pro-queer commenters and activists challenge and seek to change are the socio-cultural narratives

which 'raise heterosexuality to the status of a largely unquestioned norm [and] privilege certain forms of heterosexuality over others' (Leap and Motschenbacher, 2012, p.9). It is thus unsurprising that the criminalisation of same-sex relations in Nigeria drew an outcry from the marginalised groups and their allies; it also stimulated a sense of activism and campaign, especially with recourse to the need to uphold human rights ideals. Nigeria is not only the largest African country in terms of population, it is also a significant economic powerhouse on the continent. Consequently, the declaration of non-heterosexual orientations as illegal was deemed to have grave implications on the global advocacy for the legitimisation of queer sexual orientations.

²Universal Declaration of Human Rights, G.A. Res. 217A, at 71, U.N. GAOR, 3d Sess., 1st plen. mtg., U.N. Doc A/810 (Dec. 12, 1948).



Image 6: 'Illegal' in the Data (2015-2020)



Image 7: 'Legal' in the Data (2011-2020)

The legality or otherwise of queer existence in the Nigerian space was further contested in the tweets harvested between 2015 and 2020. In Images 6 and 7, the contexts of the realisations of 'illegal' and 'legal' are examined. Both Images have more realisations between 2018 and 2020 with 15 of the 20 hits occurring within the time frame. The queer-positive exemplifications draw attention to the denial of legal existence to members of the Nigerian queer community – Hit 3 of Image 7 remarks that '...they face both social and legal issues since they have no legal protection'. This reality contributed to the integration of queer advocacies during the 2020 #EndSARS protests as documented in Hit 4 of Image 6 which states: 'It goes against the core of constitution to claim that being gay, lesbian or any of the sexualities available is illegal. #EndSARS'. Chisom Peter Obi (2020) for instance in a piece with the Washington Post invigorates queer advocacy in Nigeria by drawing attention to the #EndSARS protest and the Nigerian queer community's attempts to intersect nationwide protest against police brutality with the prevailing homophobic realities. This became one of the very few times in which queer advocacies took place physically – away from the digital space – during which many non-closet queers protested their personal marginalisation and victimisation. Indeed, this has been remarked as a watershed moment as Obi (2020) notes from one of the respondents who testifies: "I am part of history. Not just pertaining to the SARS movement, but I am among those who defied queerphobia and joined people like me in the streets, letting the others know that we are going to be here for a long time."

From the foregoing, what one encounters in the 2015-2020 representations is the contestation of the prevalence of hegemonic heterosexuality within the Nigerian (online and offline) sexuality space as well as attempts to combat the repressive nationalist ideologies which are empowered by legislation, religious beliefs as well as cultural practices. What is interesting especially in the nationalist ideologies are that the refrains which 'other' same-sex relations as unAfrican and as relatively recent developments. For instance, the legislations which represent queer sexuality as illegal are outcrops of British colonial sodomy laws while the dominant religions – Christianity and Islam – which portray queers as immoral also negate the more accepting and liberal indigenous religious practices (Onanuga, 2021). Thus, the availability of the digital space and its affordances of anonymity, virality and sociality have allowed minoritised and marginalised communities to contest the erasure of their

existence. In these counter-discourses of identity and visibility, the Nigerian queer community recognises the need to provide alternative narratives and to take control of their representation.

8. Tying the Loose Ends: What the future holds

Public advocacies for the decriminalisation of same-sex practices continue to gain ground globally. This is because discrimination and ostracisation have negative outcomes on the lived experiences of this subaltern demography. By engaging and examining online Nigerian queer narratives diachronically, I have drawn attention to how the terrain has changed, especially in the construction of queer identities online. In projecting towards the future, one identifies an ambivalence in the attitudes towards the framing of sexuality in Nigeria. While digital media spaces have helped in the assertion of, and framed the dimensions of, queer advocacy in Nigeria positively, the digital experiences are punctuated by violation of spaces – digitally and physically – by homophobes who continue to advance sexual binarism – male and female – and conceive sexuality identity as limited to heterosexuality. In the Nigerian context, these realisations have significant impact on the possibilities of decriminalisation of same-sex relations in the nearest future. The changing attitudes to queer identities may be indicative of a more accepting younger generation of Nigerians. This may be explained as a situation in which more young Nigerians are willing to 'out' themselves, performatively assert their sexuality, and make calls for advocacy online. It must be reiterated that the transnationality of digital platforms (Ellece, 2020) also means that these users are able to connect with the lived realities of other national contexts, diasporic Nigerians as well as of other Nigerians who have sought asylum in more favourable climes. This iteration is corroborated by Appadurai (2001) who affirms that linguistic practices and sexual meanings reflect the globalization's disjunctive, transnational flows. Nigerian digital habitués are thus unrelenting in their pursuit of an equitable environment where they are able to express themselves without being judged or demonised. Thus while the rejection of queer relationships continue to be reinforced through hegemonic structures of culture, religion and legislation, pro-queer users either reject or manipulate these tools of reification in a bid towards projecting their agency.

The realisations from 2015 to 2020 suggest a rupturing of the mono-normative sexuality narratives where people of alternative

sexualities are minoritised and obliterated. Instead, through forceful assertion of agency, the appropriation of the affordances of the digital space, as well as reliance on the global advocacies for human rights and respect for identities, queer Nigerians intentionally make themselves seen and heard. While the physical space may yet be problematic, they use their online personas to challenge the socio-cultural and legal inhibitions which continue to restrict them to the margins. I believe that the results from this study will be useful to human rights advocacies, digital and cultural ethnographers, government agencies and international organisations who work on human rights especially among minoritised communities.

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