

## SILENCE AS A COMMUNICATIVE STRATEGY IN NIGERIAN SOCIAL INTERACTION

**Dr. Cynthia Adaeze Onuegwunwoke,**

Department of English Language and Literature,

Faculty of Arts,

Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education,

Owerri, Imo State.

[cynthia.onuegwunwoke@alvanikoku.edu.ng](mailto:cynthia.onuegwunwoke@alvanikoku.edu.ng)

**and**

**Dr. Anuonye, Florence Dakoru**

Department of English language and literature,

Faculty of Arts,

Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education, Owerri.

### **Abstract**

This study investigated **silence as a form of communication in the Nigerian social context**. The aim is to examine its meanings, functions, and sociocultural interpretations across different social settings. While traditional communication studies have largely prioritized spoken language, this study foregrounded silence as a meaningful and strategic communicative resource within Nigerian society. Anchored on Speech Act theory, the study adopted a **descriptive survey design** complemented by qualitative insights. The population of the study comprised 600 individuals drawn from diverse Nigerian social contexts, from which a sample size of 300 respondents was selected using multistage sampling techniques. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire and semi-structured interviews.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were thematically analyzed to enrich interpretation. Findings revealed that silence in Nigerian social interaction performs multiple communicative functions, including expressing respect, managing emotions, maintaining social harmony, signaling agreement or disagreement, and subtly negotiating power relations. The study further showed that the use and interpretation of silence are significantly influenced by sociocultural factors like age, gender, cultural norms, and power structures. Silence was also found to function as a deliberate communicative strategy, particularly in conflict management and contexts where direct verbal expression may be socially constrained. The study concludes that silence is not a communicative deficiency but a culturally embedded and purposeful form of communication in Nigerian society. The study contributes to Nigerian sociolinguistics and communication studies and underscores the need for culturally sensitive interpretations of communicative behavior in educational, institutional, and interpersonal contexts.

**Keywords:** Silence, Communication, Speech Act, Nigerian Social Context, Non-verbal Communication

## Introduction

Communication is a fundamental aspect of human social existence. It enables individuals to share ideas, negotiate meaning, and maintain social relationships. According to Nzeakor et al (2024), “Communication skills refer to the abilities and competencies that enable an individual to convey, receive, and interpret messages effectively in various contexts” (p. 148). Adler and Proctor (2017) add that “the

capability to express thoughts and ideas clearly while also understanding and interpreting the messages of others” (p. 12). While communication is often equated with spoken or written language, scholars have increasingly acknowledged that meaning is also conveyed through non-verbal means like gestures, facial expressions, pauses, and silence. Silence, in particular, has emerged as a significant yet, under examined communicative resource in linguistic and sociocultural studies. Rather than representing an absence of meaning, “silence functions as a meaning-laden communicative act whose interpretation depends largely on context, culture, and social relationships” (Ahmadu & Zulfa’a, 2017, pp. 41–42).

In many African societies, including Nigeria, communication is deeply rooted in cultural norms, values, and social hierarchies. Nigeria is a multilingual and multicultural nation with over 250 ethnic groups, each possessing distinct communicative practices. These practices influence not only how speech is produced but also how silence is interpreted in social interaction. As Chukwuma (2024) observes, “silence in Nigerian discourse often performs communicative functions that spoken language may not effectively achieve, especially in sensitive social situations” (p. 6). Consequently, silence operates as an integral component of communicative competence within Nigerian societies.

Traditional linguistic studies in Nigeria have largely focused on spoken discourse, neglecting silence as a communicative phenomenon. Silence and non-verbal community are synonymously related in that “the transmission of messages without the use of words. But body language like gestures, posture, and facial expressions. Maintaining appropriate gaze to show confidence and engagement” (Nzeakor et al, 2024, p.

149). However, recent sociolinguistic and pragmatic studies have begun to challenge this limitation by foregrounding silence as a deliberate and meaningful communicative choice. According to Ahmadu and Zulfa'a (2017), "silence in Nigerian communicative settings functions as a message-conveying process shaped by cultural expectations, social roles, and situational demands" (pp. 44–45). Their study of Hausa and Yoruba communicative patterns demonstrates that silence can signal agreement, disagreement, respect, caution, or emotional restraint depending on the communicative context.

In many Nigerian cultures, silence is strongly associated with respect and deference, particularly in interactions involving elders or authority figures. For example, among the Igbo, it is considered culturally inappropriate for younger interlocutors to interrupt elders or engage in excessive verbal expression during serious discussions. Silence in such situations is interpreted as politeness, maturity, and good upbringing. Ikegwuonu and Aliyu (2024) explain that "in the Nimo community of Anambra State, silence is often employed by younger speakers as a pragmatic strategy to acknowledge authority and maintain social harmony" (pp. 18–19). Thus, silence functions as a culturally sanctioned communicative response rather than communicative failure.

Beyond respect, silence also serves as a tool for conflict management and emotional regulation in Nigerian social contexts. In interpersonal conflicts, silence may be used to avoid escalation, express dissatisfaction indirectly, or allow time for reflection. Udeze, Ekwe, and Chukwuma (2025) found that "residents of Enugu metropolis frequently deploy silence during disagreements as a means of controlling

emotions and negotiating meaning without overt confrontation” (pp. 9–10). This strategic use of silence underscores its communicative value in maintaining social cohesion within Nigerian communities.

Silence in Nigeria also performs communicative functions related to power and resistance. In situations where individuals lack the social power to speak openly like in political, institutional, or familial settings, silence may become a subtle form of protest or dissent. Utulu and Bello (2023) argue that “silence, particularly in leadership and political communication, is often interpreted by the public as a deliberate message rather than mere absence of speech” (pp. 55–56). In some cases, silence from leaders may signal indifference or tacit approval, while silence from followers may indicate suppressed resistance or fear of repercussions.

Gender is another important variable influencing the interpretation of silence in Nigerian social interaction. Cultural expectations often shape how men and women are socialized to communicate, including when to speak and when to remain silent. Some Nigerian scholars note that women are more likely to use silence as a politeness strategy or as a response to patriarchal power structures, while men may interpret silence as defiance or emotional withdrawal. Chukwuma (2024) highlights that “silence among women in Nigerian societies often reflects sociocultural conditioning rather than communicative incompetence” (pp. 11–12). This gendered dimension of silence underscores the need for culturally sensitive interpretations of communicative behavior.

In educational settings, silence carries multiple and sometimes conflicting meanings. Nigerian classrooms are traditionally teacher-centred, with students expected to listen attentively rather than engage in frequent verbal participation. Silence in this context may indicate respect, concentration, or fear of making mistakes. However, silence may also signal disengagement or lack of comprehension. According to Ikegwuonu and Aliyu (2024), "... the interpretation of silence in institutional contexts requires an understanding of cultural norms surrounding authority and knowledge transmission" (p. 21). Failure to recognize the communicative value of silence may lead to misinterpretation of learners' attitudes and abilities.

Despite growing scholarly interest, studies on silence in Nigeria remain fragmented and limited in scope. Much of the existing research focuses on specific ethnic communities or isolated communicative contexts, leaving a gap in the understanding of silence as a broader sociocultural phenomenon across Nigerian society. Adebayo (2017) notes that "... silence is often treated as peripheral in Nigerian sociolinguistic research, despite its pervasive role in everyday interaction" (pp. 3–4). This gap highlights the need for more comprehensive studies that examine silence across diverse Nigerian social contexts.

Furthermore, globalization and digital communication have begun to reshape communicative norms in Nigeria. Younger generations exposed to Western communication styles may interpret silence differently from older generations who adhere more strictly to traditional norms. This generational shift raises important questions about the evolving meanings of silence in contemporary Nigerian society. Ahmadu and

Zulfa'a (2017) suggest that "while cultural norms remain influential, the meanings attached to silence are increasingly negotiated and context-dependent" (p. 47).

Given the cultural, social, and pragmatic significance of silence in Nigeria, a systematic study of silence as a form of communication is both timely and necessary. Understanding how silence functions in Nigerian social contexts will contribute to sociolinguistic theory, enhance intercultural communication, and promote more nuanced interpretations of communicative behavior. Such a study will also provide insights into power relations, social identity, and cultural values as they are negotiated through both speech and silence.

Therefore, this study seeks to examine silence as a form of communication in the Nigerian social context, with a focus on its meanings, functions, and interpretations across different social settings. By foregrounding silence as a meaningful communicative resource, the study aims to bridge existing gaps in Nigerian sociolinguistic research and contribute to a more holistic understanding of communication in Nigerian society.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Communication plays a central role in the organization of social life. It enables individuals and groups to share meanings, negotiate relationships, and sustain cultural values. In linguistic and communication studies, emphasis has traditionally been placed on spoken and written language as the primary vehicles of meaning. As a result, non-verbal communicative resources, particularly silence, have often

been marginalized or treated as communicative gaps rather than meaningful acts. This overemphasis on speech has created a significant gap in understanding how silence functions as an intentional and culturally governed mode of communication, especially in societies with strong oral and communal traditions like Nigeria.

In the Nigerian social context, silence is not merely the absence of speech; rather, it is frequently a deliberate communicative choice shaped by cultural norms, social hierarchies, power relations, and contextual expectations. Across Nigeria's diverse ethnic and linguistic communities, silence may signal respect, obedience, disagreement, resistance, contemplation, fear, or emotional restraint. Despite its pervasive presence in everyday interaction, silence remains under-theorized and insufficiently documented in Nigerian sociolinguistic and pragmatic scholarship. Consequently, the communicative meanings attached to silence are often misunderstood, misinterpreted, or completely overlooked.

One major problem arises from the tendency to interpret silence using frameworks derived largely from Western communication models, where silence is often associated with communicative failure, lack of participation, or disengagement. Applying such models to Nigerian social interaction, risks distorting the meanings of silence within indigenous communicative systems. In many Nigerian cultures, for instance, silence in the presence of elders or authority figures is not indicative of ignorance or passivity but rather of respect and cultural competence. However, without adequate scholarly attention to these culturally

embedded meanings, silence continues to be wrongly perceived as negative or deficient, leading to flawed interpretations of communicative behavior.

This problem is particularly evident in institutional settings such as education, governance, and the workplace. In Nigerian classrooms, students' silence is frequently interpreted as lack of understanding, low confidence, or poor academic ability. Such interpretations may ignore the cultural expectation that learners should listen attentively rather than challenge authority figures through frequent verbal contributions. As a result, students who adhere to culturally appropriate silent behavior may be unfairly judged or marginalized. The lack of a nuanced understanding of silence as communication therefore poses serious implications for teaching, assessment, and learner participation within Nigerian educational institutions.

Similarly, in political and leadership contexts, silence often generates public debate and speculation. When leaders remain silent on critical national issues, their silence is interpreted variously as indifference, tacit approval, incompetence, or strategic restraint. Conversely, silence among citizens may be construed as apathy, when in reality it may reflect fear, repression, or silent resistance. The absence of empirical studies that interrogate these interpretations leaves a gap in understanding how silence operates as a communicative strategy within Nigerian power structures and public discourse.

Another dimension of the problem relates to interpersonal and familial communication. In many Nigerian homes and

communities, silence plays a significant role in conflict management, emotional expression, and relationship maintenance. Individuals may choose silence to avoid confrontation, preserve harmony, or express displeasure indirectly. However, the lack of explicit verbalization often leads to miscommunication, unresolved conflict, or emotional strain. Without scholarly frameworks that explain how silence functions communicatively in these contexts, such interactions remain poorly understood and inadequately addressed in communication studies.

Gender further complicates the communicative interpretation of silence in Nigeria. Cultural norms often dictate different expectations for male and female communicative behavior, including when to speak and when to remain silent. Women's silence, in particular, may be socially enforced through patriarchal structures, making it difficult to distinguish between silence as choice and silence as constraint. Yet, existing studies have not sufficiently interrogated the gendered meanings of silence within Nigerian social interaction. This gap limits the ability of scholars to understand how silence intersects with power, identity, and agency, especially for marginalized groups.

Moreover, Nigeria's rapidly changing sociocultural landscape presents additional challenges. Globalization, digital media, and increased exposure to Western communication norms are reshaping how silence is perceived and practiced, particularly among younger generations. In online and digital spaces, silence may take the form of delayed responses, unread messages, or deliberate non-engagement, all of which carry communicative meanings.

However, there is limited research examining how traditional interpretations of silence interact with contemporary modes of communication in Nigeria. This lack of attention raises questions about whether silence retains its traditional meanings or is being redefined in modern Nigerian society.

Despite the growing recognition of silence as a meaningful communicative resource globally, Nigerian-focused studies remain relatively scarce and fragmented. Existing research tends to concentrate on specific ethnic groups, isolated communities, or narrow communicative domains, making it difficult to generalize findings across broader Nigerian social contexts. There is a clear need for a more comprehensive and culturally grounded investigation that examines silence across diverse social settings, including interpersonal, institutional, educational, and public domains.

The absence of such studies has practical and theoretical consequences. Theoretically, it limits the development of indigenous communication models that reflect Nigerian sociocultural realities. Practically, it contributes to persistent misunderstandings in social interaction, misjudgments in educational and professional settings, and ineffective communication policies. Without a systematic understanding of silence as communication, Nigerians themselves may struggle to interpret silent behavior accurately, leading to breakdowns in interaction and social cohesion.

Therefore, the central problem this study addresses is the lack of a comprehensive, culturally informed understanding of silence as a form of communication in the Nigerian social context. By neglecting silence as a meaningful

communicative act, existing scholarship fails to capture the full complexity of Nigerian communicative practices. This study seeks to address this gap by examining how silence functions, what meanings it conveys, and how it is interpreted across different Nigerian social contexts. In doing so, the study aims to contribute to Nigerian sociolinguistics, enhance communicative competence, and promote more culturally sensitive interpretations of interaction in both traditional and contemporary Nigerian society.

### **Objectives of this Study**

The aim of this study is to examine silence as a form of communication in the Nigerian social context, with a view to understanding its meanings, functions, and interpretations across different social and cultural settings. The specific objectives of the study are to:

1. Identify the communicative functions of silence in Nigerian social interactions, including interpersonal, institutional, and public contexts.
2. Examine the sociocultural factors (such as age, gender, power relations, and cultural norms) that influence the use and interpretation of silence in Nigerian society.
3. Analyze how silence is interpreted by different social groups in Nigeria and the implications of these interpretations for effective communication.
4. Assess the role of silence as a communicative strategy in maintaining social harmony, managing conflict, and

expressing agreement, disagreement, or resistance within Nigerian social contexts.

## **Research Questions**

1. What communicative functions does silence perform in Nigerian social interactions across interpersonal, institutional, and public contexts?
2. How do sociocultural factors such as age, gender, power relations, and cultural norms influence the use and interpretation of silence in Nigerian society?
3. How is silence interpreted by different social groups within the Nigerian social context?
4. In what ways does silence function as a communicative strategy for maintaining social harmony, managing conflict, and expressing agreement, disagreement, or resistance in Nigerian social interactions?

## **Purpose of this Study**

The purpose of this study is to investigate silence as a form of communication in the Nigerian social context. Specifically, the study seeks to explore how silence is used, interpreted, and understood in different Nigerian social interactions. It aims to examine the communicative functions of silence and the sociocultural factors that shape its meanings across interpersonal, institutional, and public settings.

The study also intends to identify how silence operates as a communicative strategy for expressing respect, disagreement, resistance, emotional restraint, and social solidarity. By analyzing the interpretations of silence among different social groups, the research seeks to highlight the role of cultural norms, power relations, age, and gender in shaping communicative behavior in Nigerian society.

Ultimately, the study is designed to contribute to sociolinguistic and communication studies by providing a culturally grounded understanding of silence as a meaningful communicative resource. It also aims to promote more effective and culturally sensitive communication practices in educational, social, and institutional contexts within Nigeria.

### **Theoretical Model**

The theoretical framework for this study is anchored on Speech Act Theory (SAT). Saeed (2007) notes that “Speech act theory was developed by the Oxford philosopher J. L. Austin, whose 1955 lectures at Harvard University were published posthumously as *How to Do Things with Words* (1975).... One of the most important writers on speech acts has been the philosopher John R. Searle” (p.222). Speech Act Theory is a pragmatic theory of language which holds that language is not only used to describe reality but also to **perform actions**. The theory was first proposed by the British philosopher **J. L. Austin** and later developed by **John R. Searle**. According to this theory, “whenever people use language, they are not merely producing sounds or sentences; they are performing social actions such as requesting, apologizing, commanding, promising, or warning” (Austin, 1962, p. 94).

Although, Speech Act Theory traditionally focuses on spoken utterances, contemporary pragmatic scholars argue that **non-verbal acts, including silence**, can also perform communicative actions when they occur within recognized social conventions. This makes the theory particularly relevant for analyzing silence as communication in culturally grounded societies such as Nigeria. Austin (1962) proposes that every speech event consists of **three interrelated acts**: The locutionary act refers to the **production of a linguistic form** with a particular sense and reference. It involves the actual utterance of words and sentences. Mey (2006) stresses that “first, we have the locutionary aspect: this is simply the activity we engage in when we say something, e.g. It’s cold here” (p. 95). Traditionally, silence appears to challenge this notion since no words are produced. However, in culturally structured interactions, silence can function as a **meaningful locutionary substitute**, especially where non-verbal conventions are well established. In the Nigerian social context, silence often replaces spoken language in situations governed by cultural norms like when a younger person listens quietly to an elder. Although no words are spoken, the silence itself is recognized as a meaningful communicative act. Opara (2011) describes it as “an investigation into the aim of the speaker by virtue of his utterance and a determination of the effect of the perlocutionary force of any utterance on the hearer’s action. The objective behind speech acts analysis is to interpret the actions performed or embedded within the illocutionary acts” (p. 29). The illocutionary act is the **intended social function** of an utterance, what the speaker is doing in saying something. This includes acts such as asserting, questioning, ordering, or apologizing.

When applied to silence, the illocutionary force lies not in spoken words but in the **intention behind the silence**. In Nigerian society, silence can perform various illocutionary acts, including:

- **Act of respect** (e.g. silence before elders),
- **Act of refusal or disagreement** (e.g. silence in response to a proposal),
- **Act of acceptance** (e.g. silence signaling consent in communal meetings),
- **Act of warning or disapproval** (e.g. prolonged silence from an authority figure).

Thus, silence functions as an **illocutionary act** whose force is culturally determined.

The perlocutionary act refers to the **effect** an utterance has on the listener, such as persuading, intimidating, calming, or offending. Silence often produces strong perlocutionary effects in Nigerian social interaction. For example:

- Silence from an elder may instil fear, reflection, or compliance.
- Silence from a leader may provoke public anxiety or speculation.
- Silence in interpersonal conflict may calm tension or deepen misunderstanding.

These effects demonstrate that silence, like speech, can produce significant communicative consequences. John Searle expands Austin's framework by classifying illocutionary acts into five major categories:

1. **Assertives**
  2. **Directives**
  3. **Commissives**
  4. **Expressives**
  5. **Declaratives**
- (Searle, 1969, pp. 66–67)

Silence can perform functions within each of these categories in Nigerian social contexts.

Assertives commit the speaker to the truth of a proposition (Searle, 1969, p. 67). In Nigerian discourse, silence can function assertively by **affirming or confirming** a shared understanding. For instance, silence during communal deliberation may assert agreement with the prevailing opinion.

Directives are attempts to get the hearer to do something. Silence can operate as an indirect directive. For example, a parent's silence may signal disapproval and implicitly direct a child to change behavior. The directive force is understood culturally rather than verbally stated.

Commissives commit the speaker to a future action. In some Nigerian traditional contexts, silence may indicate acceptance of responsibility or commitment, especially where verbal commitment is culturally unnecessary or discouraged.

Expressives reveal the speaker's psychological state (Searle, 1969, p. 68). Silence often functions expressively to convey emotions such as anger, disappointment, grief, or

satisfaction. In Nigerian culture, emotional restraint is often valued, making silence a preferred expressive strategy.

Declaratives bring about a change in social reality. While less common, silence by institutional authorities like refusal to respond can function declaratively by effectively ending discussions or signaling finality.

Applying Speech Act Theory to Nigerian social interaction reveals that silence is governed by **shared cultural conventions** that assign it communicative force. In many Nigerian communities, silence is learned through socialization and becomes part of communicative competence. Individuals understand when silence is expected, what it means, and how it will be interpreted. From a speech act perspective, silence in Nigeria:

- Has **intentionality** (illocutionary force),
- Produces **social effects** (perlocutionary outcomes),
- Operates within **culturally recognized rules**.

This aligns with Austin's notion that for a speech act to be successful, certain **felicity conditions** must be met. Saeed (2007) explains that "In Austin's terminology a performative that works is called felicitous and one that does not is infelicitous" (p. 224). In Nigerian contexts, silence fulfils these conditions when used appropriately within cultural norms. When silence violates expected norms like silence where speech is required, it may result in communicative failure or social sanction. Speech Act Theory provides a robust framework for analyzing silence as communication because it:

1. Moves beyond words to **actions performed through language and non-language;**
2. Explains how silence can have **illocutionary force;**
3. Accounts for **contextual and cultural interpretation;**
4. Supports the argument that silence is **intentional and meaningful**, not accidental.

## Methodology

**Research Design:** This study adopts a **descriptive survey research design** complemented with a **qualitative interpretive approach**. The design is considered appropriate because it allows the researchers to systematically investigate silence as a form of communication as it naturally occurs in Nigerian social contexts. The descriptive survey enables the collection of data from a relatively large number of participants, while the qualitative component facilitates in-depth understanding of the meanings and interpretations attached to silence in social interaction.

**Population of the Study:** The population of the study consists of **six hundred (600) respondents** drawn from selected Nigerian social settings. The population comprises adults from different sociocultural backgrounds, including varying age groups, gender, educational levels, and social statuses. This diverse population is considered suitable for capturing a broad range of perspectives on the use and interpretation of silence in Nigerian social interaction.

**Sample Size and Sampling Technique:** The sample size for the study is **three hundred (300) respondents**, representing

50% of the total population. This sample size is considered adequate for ensuring representativeness and reliability of the findings. A **multistage sampling technique** is employed in selecting the respondents:

**Stage One:** Purposive sampling is used to select social contexts relevant to the study, such as interpersonal, educational, institutional, and community settings.

**Stage Two:** Stratified sampling is applied to categorize respondents based on key variables such as gender, age, and social role, ensuring balanced representation.

**Stage Three:** Simple random sampling is used to select respondents from each stratum until the required sample size of 300 is attained.

This combination of sampling techniques ensures diversity, reduces bias, and enhances the generalizability of the findings.

**Instrument for Data Collection:** Data for the study are collected using two main instruments. They are **questionnaire, and semi-structured interview guide**

A structured questionnaire titled '*Silence as Communication in Nigerian Social Context Questionnaire (SCNSCQ)*' is designed by the researcher. The questionnaire is divided into four sections:

**Section A:** Demographic information (age, gender, educational level, and social role).

**Section B:** Situational use of silence in social interaction.

**Section C:** Interpretation of silence across different contexts.

**Section D:** Perceived communicative functions of silence.

Items in Sections B, C, and D are structured on a **four point Likert scale** ranging from *Strongly Agree* to *Strongly Disagree*. The questionnaire is administered to all 300 respondents.

A semi-structured interview guide is used to elicit deeper insights into respondents' perceptions and experiences of silence in communication. Interviews are conducted with a purposively selected subset of **30 respondents** from the sample. This qualitative component enriches the quantitative data by capturing contextual meanings that may not emerge from the questionnaire alone.

To ensure the validity of the research instruments, **face and content validity** are established. Draft copies of the questionnaire and interview guide are submitted to experts in linguistics and communication studies for evaluation. Their comments and suggestions are incorporated to ensure that the instruments adequately measure the communicative functions and interpretations of silence in Nigerian social contexts. The reliability of the questionnaire is determined using the **test-retest method**. The instrument is administered to a pilot group of **30 respondents** who are not part of the main study. After a two-week interval, the questionnaire is re-administered, and the responses are correlated using Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Coefficient. A

reliability coefficient of **0.70 and above** is considered acceptable for the study.

**Procedure for Data Collection:** The researchers personally administers the questionnaires. This approach ensures high return rates and allows respondents to seek clarification where necessary. Interview sessions are conducted at mutually convenient times and locations. Participants are informed about the purpose of the study, and their consent is obtained before participation.

**Method of Data Analysis:** Quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire are analyzed using **descriptive statistics**, including frequencies, percentages, and mean scores. Tables and charts are used to present the data clearly. Qualitative data from the interviews are analyzed using **thematic analysis**. Responses are transcribed, coded, and categorized into themes that reflect the communicative functions and interpretations of silence. The qualitative findings are used to complement and explain the quantitative results.

Ethical principles like **informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity** are strictly observed. Respondents are assured that participation is voluntary and that they may withdraw from the study at any time. No personal identifiers are included in the data analysis or reporting.

### **Presentation and Analysis of Data**

Out of the 300 questionnaires administered, all were duly completed and returned, representing a 100% response rate. This high return rate was achieved through direct

administration and follow-up. Of the 300 respondents, 162 (54%) were female, while 138 (46%) were male. This distribution suggests a fairly balanced gender representation, which enhances the credibility of the findings, particularly in examining gendered interpretations of silence in Nigerian social interaction. Respondents were categorized into four age groups. A total of 78 respondents (26%) fell within the 18–25 age range, 96 respondents (32%) were between 26–35 years, 72 respondents (24%) were between 36–45 years, while 54 respondents (18%) were 46 years and above. This distribution indicates that the study captured perspectives across different generational cohorts, which is relevant given that interpretations of silence may vary by age. In terms of educational qualification, 84 respondents (28%) had secondary education, 156 respondents (52%) possessed tertiary education, while 60 respondents (20%) had postgraduate qualifications. This suggests that a majority of the respondents were sufficiently literate to understand and respond meaningfully to the questionnaire items.

### **What communicative functions does silence perform in Nigerian social interactions?**

Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with statements relating to the communicative functions of silence. Analysis of responses reveals that 216 respondents (72%) agreed that silence is commonly used to express respect, especially towards elders and authority figures. Another 198 respondents (66%) agreed that silence can indicate disagreement without verbal confrontation, while 225 respondents (75%) believed silence is often used to manage emotions during tense interactions.

Furthermore, 204 respondents (68%) agreed that silence can serve as a sign of consent or acceptance in certain contexts, such as traditional meetings or family discussions. However, 63 respondents (21%) disagreed with this view, suggesting that silence does not always equate to agreement. The interview data further support these findings. Many interviewees noted that silence allows individuals to ‘speak without speaking’, especially when cultural norms discourage direct expression. One respondent remarked:

‘In my community, keeping quiet when elders speak is a sign that you understand and respect them, not that you have nothing to say’.

These findings indicate that silence in Nigerian social interaction performs multiple communicative functions, including expressing respect, disagreement, emotional control, and implicit agreement. Silence therefore functions as a **strategic communicative resource**, rather than a communicative void.

### **How do sociocultural factors influence the use and interpretation of silence in Nigerian society?**

Here, the influence of factors like age, gender, cultural norms, and power relations on silence is examined. Results show that 234 respondents (78%) agreed that age significantly influences who is expected to speak or remain silent in social interactions. Younger participants were more likely to remain silent in the presence of elders, while older respondents reported expecting such silence as a sign of respect.

Gender also emerged as a significant factor. A total of 186 respondents (62%) agreed that women are more socially expected to remain silent in certain contexts, particularly in traditional or marital settings. However, 72 respondents (24%) disagreed, citing changing gender norms and increased female assertiveness in modern Nigerian society.

Power relations were also found to strongly shape silence. About 249 respondents (83%) agreed that individuals with less social or institutional power are more likely to use silence strategically to avoid negative consequences. Interview participants explained that silence is often adopted when speaking openly could attract punishment, ridicule, or social sanctions.

Cultural norms were identified as the strongest determinant. An overwhelming 261 respondents (87%) agreed that cultural values largely determine when silence is appropriate or inappropriate. Interview data reveal that silence is culturally taught from childhood and reinforced through socialization processes.

These findings suggest that silence in Nigeria is not random but is deeply embedded in sociocultural structures, making it a culturally regulated communicative practice.

### **How is silence interpreted by different social groups within the Nigerian social context?**

Data analysis shows that silence is interpreted differently depending on social position and context. A total of 198 respondents (66%) agreed that silence from elders is often

interpreted as wisdom or deep reflection, while silence from younger people is more likely to be interpreted as respect or fear.

Additionally, 174 respondents (58%) agreed that silence in professional or institutional contexts are often interpreted negatively, suggesting lack of confidence or incompetence. However, in family or community settings, 231 respondents (77%) interpreted silence more positively, associating it with maturity and politeness.

Interview responses revealed generational differences in interpretation. Younger respondents reported that silence is sometimes misunderstood as indifference, especially in digital communication. Older respondents, however, maintained that silence remains a powerful communicative tool regardless of medium. One interviewee stated: ‘When someone keeps quiet, you need to know the situation before judging. Silence can mean many things in our society’.

These findings highlight the **context-dependent nature** of silence and underscore the risk of misinterpretation when cultural and situational factors are ignored.

### **In what ways does silence function as a communicative strategy in Nigerian social interaction?**

Responses indicate that silence is widely used as a strategy for maintaining social harmony. A total of 243 respondents (81%) agreed that silence helps to prevent conflict escalation, while 219 respondents (73%) agreed that silence is used to express dissatisfaction without direct confrontation.

Moreover, 207 respondents (69%) agreed that silence functions as a form of resistance, particularly in situations where open speech is restricted. Interview data revealed that silence is often used as a coping mechanism in oppressive or hierarchical environments.

Respondents also identified silence as a strategic response in negotiation and decision-making processes. Silence allows time for reflection, signals seriousness, and sometimes pressures the other party to speak.

## **Discussion of Findings**

Overall, the findings indicate that silence is an intentional and calculated communicative strategy in Nigerian social contexts, employed to achieve specific interactional goals. The analysis reveals that silence in Nigerian society:

1. Performs multiple communicative functions beyond the absence of speech;
2. Is shaped by sociocultural factors such as age, gender, power, and cultural norms;
3. Is interpreted differently across social groups and contexts; and
4. Functions as a strategic tool for managing relationships, conflict, and power.

These findings reinforce the view that silence is a meaningful and culturally embedded form of communication in Nigeria.

The findings from this study clearly demonstrate that silence performs multiple communicative functions in Nigerian social interactions. Contrary to the assumption that communication is only achieved through speech, the study reveals that silence serves as an expressive and intentional communicative resource. Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that silence is used to convey respect, manage emotions, signal agreement or disagreement, and regulate social relationships.

This finding aligns with pragmatic theories which posit that meaning is not limited to spoken utterances but also resides in what is left unsaid. In Nigerian contexts, silence often functions as a pragmatic substitute for speech, particularly in situations where direct verbal expression may be culturally inappropriate. For instance, silence used by younger individuals in the presence of elders communicates respect, submission, and cultural competence. This supports the ethnography of communication framework, which emphasizes that communicative behavior must be interpreted within its cultural context.

Furthermore, silence was found to function as a mechanism for emotional regulation. Respondents indicated that silence is commonly used during conflict or emotionally charged interactions to prevent escalation. This suggests that silence plays a stabilizing role in Nigerian interpersonal communication, promoting social harmony and cohesion. In such contexts, silence communicates restraint, maturity, and self-control, values that are highly esteemed in many Nigerian cultures.

The study also found that silence can communicate disagreement or dissatisfaction without verbal confrontation. This indirect mode of expression reflects the high value placed on politeness and face-saving strategies in Nigerian society. Rather than openly challenging others, especially those in authority, individuals may choose silence as a safer and socially acceptable alternative. Thus, silence functions as a communicative strategy that balances personal expression with cultural expectations.

### **Influence of Sociocultural Factors on Silence**

Another major finding of the study is that the use and interpretation of silence in Nigeria are significantly influenced by sociocultural factors such as age, gender, power relations, and cultural norms. Age emerged as a particularly strong determinant. The findings indicate that younger individuals are socially conditioned to use silence more frequently in interactions with elders, while elders are granted greater communicative authority.

This age-based hierarchy reflects traditional Nigerian social structures, where respect for elders is deeply ingrained. Silence, in this context, becomes a culturally encoded symbol of respect and obedience. Any deviation from this expectation like excessive verbal expression by younger individuals, may be perceived as disrespectful or ill-mannered. This finding underscores the importance of understanding silence within culturally specific frameworks rather than universalizing its meaning.

Gender also plays a significant role in shaping silence. The study reveals that women are often socially expected to be more reserved and less verbally assertive in certain contexts, particularly in traditional or patriarchal settings. While some respondents acknowledged shifts in gender norms due to education and urbanization, silence remains a gendered communicative behavior in many Nigerian communities.

Power relations further influence silence, especially in institutional and professional contexts. Individuals with less power like students, junior staff, or subordinates are more likely to remain silent in the presence of authority figures. This silence may communicate compliance, fear, or strategic restraint. The findings suggest that silence in such contexts is not necessarily indicative of agreement or incompetence but may reflect structural inequalities and power imbalances. Overall, these findings reinforce the idea that silence in Nigerian society is not an individual communicative choice alone but a socially regulated practice shaped by deeply rooted cultural norms and social structures.

### **Interpretation of Silence across Social Groups**

The study further reveals that silence is interpreted differently across social groups and contexts. One significant finding is that silence does not carry a fixed meaning; rather, its interpretation depends on who is silent, where the silence occurs, and the social relationship between interlocutors.

For example, silence from elders is often interpreted positively as wisdom, thoughtfulness, or authority. In contrast, silence from younger individuals may be interpreted

as respect, fear, or lack of confidence. In professional and institutional settings, silence is more likely to be interpreted negatively, often associated with incompetence or disengagement. However, in family and community settings, silence is more likely to be perceived positively.

Generational differences in interpretation were also observed. Younger respondents, particularly those accustomed to digital communication, tended to interpret silence like delayed responses as indifference or rejection. Older respondents, however, maintained traditional interpretations of silence as reflective or respectful. This generational gap highlights the evolving nature of silence in contemporary Nigerian society.

The findings underscore the risk of miscommunication when silence is interpreted without sufficient contextual awareness. Misinterpretation of silence may lead to strained relationships, conflict, or unfair judgments, particularly in educational and professional settings.

### **Silence as a Communicative Strategy**

Perhaps one of the most significant findings of the study is the identification of silence as a deliberate communicative strategy. Respondents reported using silence intentionally to achieve specific interactional goals, such as maintaining harmony, expressing resistance, or negotiating power.

Silence was found to be particularly effective in conflict management. By choosing silence, individuals can de-escalate tension, allow emotions to cool, and create space for

reflection. This strategic use of silence reflects a culturally preferred approach to conflict resolution that prioritizes harmony over confrontation.

The study also found that silence can function as a form of resistance, especially in contexts where open speech is restricted. In such cases, silence becomes a subtle yet powerful form of communication, signaling dissent without inviting direct punishment. This finding challenges the assumption that silence equates to passivity and highlights its potential as an agentive communicative act. In sum, the findings demonstrate that silence in Nigerian society is purposeful, strategic, and deeply embedded in social interaction. Silence is not merely what happens when speech fails; rather, it is often what happens when speech is deliberately withheld.

## **Conclusion**

This study set out to examine silence as a form of communication in the Nigerian social context. Drawing on data from questionnaires and interviews, the study has shown that silence is a meaningful, multifunctional, and culturally governed communicative resource in Nigerian society. The findings reveal that silence performs a wide range of communicative functions, including expressing respect, managing emotions, signaling agreement or disagreement, and maintaining social harmony. Silence is shaped by sociocultural factors such as age, gender, power relations, and cultural norms, making it an integral part of Nigerian communicative competence. The study also demonstrates that silence is context-dependent and subject to multiple

interpretations. While silence may be positively interpreted in some settings, it may be misunderstood or negatively evaluated in others. This variability underscores the importance of cultural and situational awareness in communication. Importantly, the study challenges the notion that silence is a communicative deficiency. Instead, it positions silence as a strategic and agentive form of communication that individuals actively use to navigate social relationships and power structures. By foregrounding silence as a legitimate communicative act, the study contributes to Nigerian sociolinguistics and communication studies and calls for a more inclusive understanding of communication beyond speech. In conclusion, silence is not empty; it speaks volumes within Nigerian social interaction. Recognizing and interpreting silence appropriately is essential for effective communication, social cohesion, and mutual understanding in Nigerian society.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Linguistics and communication curricula in Nigerian institutions should explicitly include silence as a communicative resource. Teaching communication as both verbal and non-verbal will promote a more holistic understanding of interaction.
2. Educators should be trained to interpret students' silence within cultural contexts. Silence should not automatically be equated with lack of knowledge or participation, especially in culturally diverse classrooms.

3. Organizations and workplaces should provide training that recognizes silence as a communicative strategy. This will help managers and employees avoid misinterpreting silence and improve workplace communication.
4. Communication policies should address the gendered dimensions of silence, ensuring that silence is not imposed through structural inequalities but recognized as a choice.
5. Future studies should explore silence in specific Nigerian contexts such as digital communication, political discourse, religious settings, and multilingual interactions. Comparative studies across ethnic groups are also recommended.
6. Public discourse should promote awareness that silence can communicate meaning. This will foster tolerance, reduce miscommunication, and enhance social understanding.

## References

- Adler, R. B. & Proctor, R. F. (2017). *Looking out, looking in: Interpersonal communication*. Cengage Learning.
- Ahmadu, K. L., & Zulfa'a, Y. (2017). Silence as a message-conveying process: A Hausa–Yorùbá paradigm. *Journal of the Linguistic Association of Nigeria*, 20(2), 39–49.
- Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do things with words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Chukwuma, O. D. (2024). The sociolinguistic function of silence in communication in Nigeria: An ethnography of communication perspective. *International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews*, 5(12), 5–14.
- Ikegwuonu, C.N. & Aliyu, A.E.A. (2024). A sociolinguistic

- analysis of the role of silence in communication in Nimo community. *Journal of Linguistics, Language and Igbo Studies*, 3(1), 15-24.
- Mey, J.L. (2006). *Pragmatics. An introduction*. Blackwell Publishing.
- Nzeakor, C., Okoro, N., Onuoha, E. & Onuegwunwoke, C. (2024). *Survey of English language: An introduction for students in tertiary institutions*. TamTam Publishers
- Opara, S. C. (2011). *Topics in Discourse Analysis*. GabTony & Associates Ltd.
- Saeed, J.L (2007). *Semantics*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. Blackwell Publishing.
- Searle, J. R. (1969). *Speech acts: An essay in the philosophy of language*. Cambridge University Press.
- Searle, J. R. (1979). *Expression and meaning: Studies in the theory of speech acts*. Cambridge University Press.
- Udeze, S.E, Ekwe, O, & Chukwuma, O.C. (2025). The use of strategic silence in interpersonal communication. *New Media and Mass Communication*, 92, 7-13.
- Utulu, A.U. & Bello, D. (2023). Silence as leadership communication: Public perception, interpretation, and negotiated meaning. *European Scientific Journal*, 19 (4), 52-60.