

Assertiveness and Ethnicity: Assertiveness Training for Sustainable Peace and Security in Nigeria

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Abstract

Background: Youth restiveness has become a global phenomenon. This tends to escalate to violence, terrorism, and unwarranted social perils. The study examines assertive, passive and aggressive behaviors in three major ethnic groups in Nigeria vis-à-vis the growing insecurity in the country, presenting assertiveness training as an intervention. **Method:** In a survey research, analyzed with analysis of variance, Assertive Behavior Inventory was employed in collecting data from 1,690 respondents across the three major ethnic groups: Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba, age 16-76 years. **Results:** Significant ethnic variations existed in that Igbo respondents scored highest in assertiveness, Yoruba in passive behavior, and Hausa in aggressive behavior. **Conclusion:** The authors observe that the violence in the country is multifaceted in that the young as well as the elderly are involved. The authors emphasize assertiveness training as pivotal in promoting peace building - equipping all and sundry with social communication and interpersonal skills to resist manipulation, and constructively solve the problems of society.

Keywords: *Assertive, Passive, Aggressive Behavior, Ethnicity, Peace.*

INTRODUCTION

The pervasive youth engagement in armed violence has created an unprecedented height of insecurity around the world. The violent activities are even dire in Nigeria in the wake of widespread terrorist mayhem. Since the end of the civil war in 1970, the country has not seen the present level of insecurity. The different regions of the country are variously beset by terrorism, kidnapping for ransom, banditry, cultism, armed robbery, farmers-herders conflict, religious clashes, and ethnic clashes. Although the country is not in a conventional war, it is plagued by grave patterns of armed violence including ethnic killings, land grabbing, religious persecution, and political repression. These have directly led to the loss of about 61,937 lives between May 2023 and April 2024 (Adeniyi, 2025), and the internal displacement of about 3.3 million people by the end of 2023 (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2024). The North-Central region of the country is facing massive, targeted killings, which is graduating to genocide. The insecurity in the country is quite severe. The severe insecurity poses a great threat to people's lives, economic activities, and national integration.

Culture is cognitive, behavioral, and social artifacts. Culture affects people's actions. Scholars (e.g., Eskin, 2003; Furnham, 1983; Yoshioka, 2000) have acknowledged the role of culture in social behavior. This work looks at the major cultural groups in the country with regards to their assertive, passive and aggressive behaviors. Communication plays a role in harmonious relationships (Immanuel, 2020; Immanuel et al., 2017;). Assertiveness is a social and communication skill. It has three dimensions: assertive, passive and aggressive behaviors

(Immanuel, 2019). Assertive behavior entails confident and honest self-expression to secure one's rights when it is threatened, while respecting other people's rights and boundaries. Assertive individuals value themselves, their time, and their emotional, spiritual, and physical needs and are strong advocates for their rights, while being very respectful of the rights of others. The impact of a pattern of assertive communication is that these individuals feel connected to others, feel in control of their lives, they are able to mature because they address issues and problems as they arise, and they create a respectful environment for others to grow and mature. Immanuel (2022a) reported gender and age differences in assertive behavior, with higher assertive behavior associated with the feminine gender and older persons. Religion influences assertiveness, with Christians being more assertive than Moslems (Immanuel & Muo, 2022).

Assertive behavior has great benefits. Research have shown that assertive behavior is associated with self-Esteem/confidence (Parray & Kumar, 2022); low Anxiety (Immanuel, 2019); low depression (Immanuel et al., 2023a); low brain fag (Immanuel et al., 2025); low suicidal rumination (Immanuel et al., 2025); low stress (Parray & Kumar, 2022) rejection of peer pressure (Almeida & Rocha, 2022; Bishop & Houghton, 2008; Rashid et al., 2011); low laziness (Immanuel et al., 2025), job satisfaction (Immanuel, 2017); academic performance (Ahmad et al., 2025; Kalzhanova et al., 2022; Parray & Kumar, 2022; Rashid et al., 2011); inner peace (Immanuel, 2022b), and psychological wellbeing (Immanuel et al., 2023b; Parray & Kumar, 2022), among others. Studies have reported ethnic group differences in assertive behavior. Furnham (1979) observed that European nurses were more assertive than the African and Asian nurses. Florian and Zernitsky-Shurka (1987) observed that Jewish students were more assertive than their Arab counterpart. Zane et al. (1991) found Caucasian American students to be more assertive than the Asian Americans. Likewise, Niikura (1999) reported that Caucasian Americans were more assertive than the Asians. Rodriquez et al. (2001) found that English American students scored higher in assertiveness than the Hispanic students. Parham et al. (2015) reported that white Americans scored highest in assertiveness compared to the other groups. Eskin (2003) reported that Swedish adolescents scored higher in assertiveness than their Turkish counterparts. However, Van Heerden (2017) found no differences between blacks and whites in their assertiveness. Passive behavior is a negative behavior in which individuals lack the confidence to express their reality. They are afraid of what people will feel about them. Consequently, they endure silently unruly behavior from people. Passive behavior is akin to non-assertiveness. It is associated with anxiety/fear/worry (Noble & McGrath, 2005; Zimmerman et al., 2014), depression (Allan & Gilbert, 2011; Kohler et al., 2019; Malatynska & Knapp, 2005; Schanz et al., 2021; Schanz et al., 2022; Yilmaz & Sardoğan, 2015), hostility (Allan & Gilbert, 2011; Incekar et al., 2021), low self-compassion (Eraydin & Karagozoglu, 2017), low self-confidence (Eraydin & Karagozoglu, 2017) and hypertension (D'Antonio et al., 2001). One who is passive hardly asserts oneself. This is supported by research (Gilbert et al., 2003).

Aggressive behavior is an overbearing social behavior where one overreacts, interrupts another person, monopolizes social interaction, and tramples on other people's rights. It is a non-assertive behavior. Unassertiveness is associated with aggression (Noble & McGrath, 2005). Problems associated with aggressive behavior include: substance abuse (Legas et al., 2022; Mauri et al., 2022; Shabbir et al., 2020; Wang & Crook-Rumsey, 2021; Zhong et al. (2020); delinquency (Shabbir et al., 2020); terrorism (Parker & Nick, 2016). Studies have reported cultural differences in aggressive behavior (Katsantonis, 2021; Maydeu-Olivares et al., 2019; Pörhölä et al., 2016).

METHOD

Participants

Those who participated in the study are one thousand, six hundred and ninety persons (men=808, women=850, and non-binary=32), age range = 16-76 (mean=29.44; standard deviation=9.15). They responded from across the country through an online survey by filling the Google form prepared for this purpose. Those who were single=880, married=547, cohabiting=160, divorced=85, widowed=18. Those who had elementary school education=51, high school=343, undergraduates=733, graduates=450, postgraduate degree=90, and others=23.

Instrument

The scale used to measure assertiveness is the Assertive Behavior Inventory (ABI). The ABI was developed by Immanuel (2019). The scale assesses individual's capacity to express one's feelings and needs in a candid fashion, without fretfulness, and aggression. It has 15 items with a 5-point response - 1 (Never) to 5 (Always). The ABI is designed to assess assertive behavior in both the young and older adults. It has three sub-scales, namely: Assertive Behavior (AB) – “When my intimate friend is displeasing me, I mention it to her/him”; Passive Behavior (PB) – “I find it difficult to tell a friend that I am not disposed to honour an invitation”; and Aggressive Behavior (AGB) – “When my need is not met, I fight (physically) to get what I want”. The Full scale (15 items) has alpha of .84; Assertive Behavior = .74, Passive Behavior = .75 and Aggressive Behavior = .79. The scale is scored directly when the sub-scales are used in research and clinical assessment (if one uses the ABI as a whole, then, passive and aggressive behavior items are reversed scored). In this work, all the dimensions are direct scored. The higher the score on each sub-scale, the more likely the respondent is exhibiting the behavior pattern in that behavior dimension.

Procedure

Participants responded to the Assertive Behavior Inventory items and the demographic data online. Before participating in the study, each person indicates the willingness to be a part of the study by endorsing the consent item.

Design/Statistics

The study is cross-sectional. One-Way Analysis of Variance is used for data analysis.

RESULTS

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics Summary of Ethnic Group Differences in Assertive Behavior

Ethnic Group	N	Mean	SD	SE	CILB	CIUP
Hausa	515	15.12	3.82	.17	14.79	15.45
Igbo	593	17.28	4.23	.17	16.94	17.62
Yoruba	582	15.84	3.17	.13	15.58	16.09
Total	1690	16.13	3.87	.09	15.94	16.31

Note: SD=Standard Deviation; SE=Standard Error; CILB=Confidence Interval, Lower Bound; Confidence Interval Upper Bound

Table 1 shows that the Igbo group scored the highest in assertive behavior (Mean = 17:28; SD = 4.23), followed by Yoruba (Mean = 15:84; SD = 3.17), and Hausa (Mean = 15.12; SD =

3.82). The difference is significant, $F(2,1687) = 47.91, p < .000$. This is graphically illustrated in figure 1.

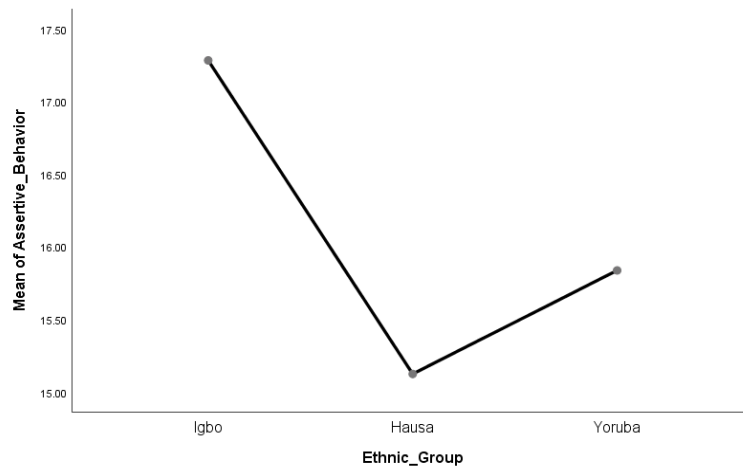


Figure 1: Graph Illustrating the Differences Between the Ethnic Groups in Assertive Behavior

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics Summary of Ethnic Group Differences in Passive Behavior

Ethnic Group	N	Mean	SD	SE	CILB	CIUP
Hausa	515	15.11	3.82	.17	14.77	15.45
Igbo	593	13.28	4.39	.18	12.93	13.63
Yoruba	582	15.37	3.39	.15	15.10	16.65
Total	1690	14.56	4.04	.10	14.37	14.75

Note: SD=Standard Deviation; SE=Standard Error; CILB=Confidence Interval, Lower Bound; Confidence Interval Upper Bound

Table 2 shows that the Yoruba ethnic group scored the highest in passive behavior (Mean = 15.37; SD = 3.39), followed by Hausa (Mean = 15.11; SD = 3.92), and Igbo (Mean = 13.28; SD = 4.39). The difference is significant, $F(2,1687) = 49.13, p < .000$. This is graphically illustrated in figure 2.

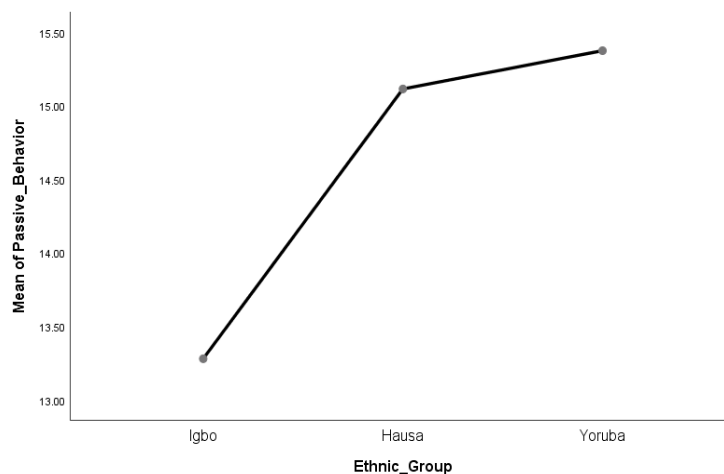


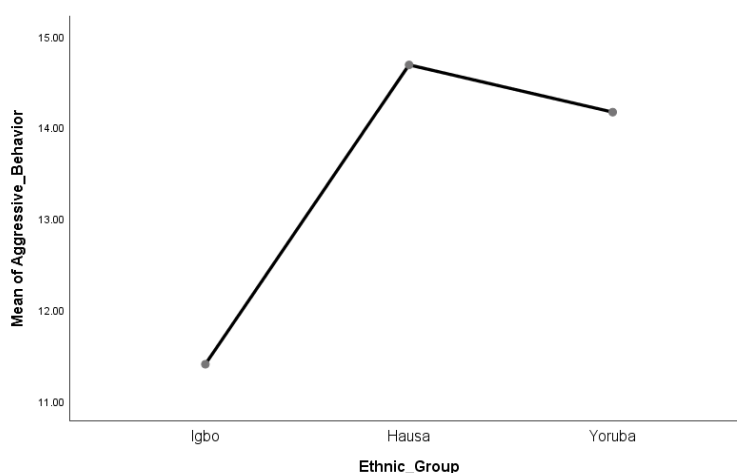
Figure 2: Graph Illustrating the Differences Between the Ethnic Groups in Passive Behavior

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics Summary of Ethnic Group Differences in Aggressive Behavior

Ethnic Group	N	Mean	SD	SE	CILB	CIUP
Hausa	515	14.68	4.04	.18	14.33	15.03
Igbo	593	11.40	4.59	.19	11.03	11.77
Yoruba	582	14.16	4.30	.18	13.81	14.52
Total	1690	13.35	4.56	.11	13.14	13.57

Note: SD=Standard Deviation; SE=Standard Error; CILB=Confidence Interval, Lower Bound; Confidence Interval Upper Bound

Table 3 shows that the Hausa group scored the highest in aggressive behavior (Mean = 14.68; SD = 4.04), followed by Yoruba (Mean = 14.16; SD = 4.30), and Igbo (Mean = 11.40; SD = 4.59). The difference is significant, $F(2,1687) = 94.97, p < .000$. This is graphically illustrated in figure 3.

**Figure 3: Graph Illustrating the Differences between the Ethnic Groups in Aggressive Behavior**

DISCUSSION

It was found that the ethnic groups studied were diverse in their social-communicative behaviors. Igbo group scored the highest in assertive behavior. This is in alignment with scholarly reports that Igbo people tend to be self-directed, and progressive people. They tend to express themselves. Hence, they thrive in business, organizations and industry. Studies have shown that assertive behavior is associated with performance and achievement (Ahmad et al., 2025; Kalzhanova et al., 2022; Parray & Kumar, 2022). This social skill, when inculcated in the populace, it will facilitate the nation to mature, peaceful co-existence, and national development. This is plausible since assertive behavior is an honest interpersonal behavior which builds trust.

On the other hand, the Yoruba group scored the highest in passive behavior. Yoruba people has deference to authority (Agwuele, 2024). Deference to elders, though it has some merits, can be problematic in terms of youth empowerment. Where a person may not take decisions based on the merit of the matter, but has to bow to the directives of 'elders' is problematic. Research reports that passive/submissive behavior is associated with hostility (Allan & Gilbert, 2011; Incekar et al., 2021). Passive people lack the confidence to express

their authentic needs. However, they bear grudges, and may become hostile when their interests are not thwarted.

Equally, the Hausa group scored the highest in aggressive behavior. Historically, North of Nigeria is noted for violent eruptions (Albert, 2014; Atoi, 2022; Forsyth, 1977; Olawale, 1994). The aggressive tendency could be due to religious intolerance. Forsyth (1977) told the story. Whereas in principle, the country is pluralistic, but in practice, there are ethnic suspicion, which breeds aggression, tension and violence. This affects the people, inter-ethnic relations and co-operation, as well as the development of the region. This work calls for peaceful co-existence of diverse ethnic groups.

Peace is concord. Peace is people living in harmony. Harmony presupposes honest communication. Honest communication engenders trust. In any multiethnic society, honest communication is pivotal. However, communication is learned. Just as in infancy a child learns to walk and talk, one needs to learn to communicate socially. It is part of social finesse. Incidentally, in many instances, young people are left untended. They are left on their own without guidance. Under this vagabondage, they mingle with anyone with whom they come in contact. Being impressionable, they emulate the speech of their associates, even when they are incongruent with civilized way of speaking. Whereas passive communication demeans the passive person, as one lets others have their way at all cost – which can be very costly, aggressive communication unduly elevates the aggressive person, as one lords it over others. None of these communication modes has value. This is because they are anchored on fear, timidity, and insincerity, on the one hand, and self-centeredness on the other hand. No person or society can progress with such communication mode. Insincerity and selfishness are antithetical to progress. They retard progress since they generate mistrust. How can one work together with persons who say something which they do not really mean? How can one associate with people who are always after their own personal interest? However, there is hope. People can be trained to communicate right. This is where assertiveness training is vital.

Assertiveness training equips people to communicate well. Via role-play and behavior rehearsal, people are coached to speak out adaptively in matters concerning them. It is devoid of self-abnegation and self-aggrandizement. People learn to speak the truth about themselves with courage. In such atmosphere, there is trust. Since one communicates honestly, others are forced to pay attention. When all the parties in a dialogue speak honestly, there is genuine concern, give and take, respect for one another, and peace reigns. Peace is a social phenomenon. This is buttressed by Rummel (2021). Peace built on truth and respect is sustainable. It is important to note that with peace comes happiness (Webel & Kaba, 2020), flourishing and well-being (Leckman, 2024). Without peace there is no progress. No country will progress without peace. When there is peace, development efforts and projects proceed without interruption. In the climate of lasting peace, there is security.

Everywhere in the world today, security is an issue of utmost concern. There is insecurity because of social skills training gap. Those who passively allowed things to happen around them without speaking up responsibly are now angry, and they are using passive-aggressive means to create insecurity in the community. On the other hand, those who have very low self-esteem, such that they are not able to communicate their needs effectively, yet have a feeling of entitlement, go out of their way to harm other people in a vengeful manner. Something has to be done – and done quickly. Training in social skills of assertiveness.

The deep ethnic differences in modes of behavior indicate that intervention programs must be culturally adapted and specific: Igbo people, as more assertive, can take up leadership and civic activism roles but may need training in empathy and tolerance. Yoruba people, with greater passive tendencies, would benefit from assertiveness training. This will enable them express their individuality. Hausa people, with greater aggressive tendencies, require conflict resolution training, anger management, and emotional intelligence development to direct their energy toward constructive civic participation.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations can use this information to create community-focused peacebuilding programs, building on the utilization of assertiveness training as a tool for facilitating ethnic conflict mediation, encouraging peaceful communication, and reducing the susceptibility to political or religious manipulation.

Findings support integrating assertiveness, socio-emotional skills, and interpersonal communication into various levels of school curriculum to empower young people from an early age with non-violent conflict resolution skills. This would help young people develop conflict resolution, negotiation, and communication skills right from an early age. In addition, given the key role of social media in violent youth expression, assertiveness training can promote responsible digital citizenship by limiting hate speech and incitement on the web.

In many countries, youth empowerment initiatives target mostly vocational and financial assistance. Such programs remain incomplete without psychosocial skills. Policy guidelines must make it compulsory to incorporate social skills (such as assertiveness) in every youth intervention program.

Further, the deep differences in patterns of behavior among people from diverse ethnic and cultural groups require peacebuilding and prevention strategies to be ethnically and culturally sensitive and evidence-informed, rather than assuming homogeneity. Targeted programs responsive to ethnic and regional contexts will be more effective at reducing violence.

Equally, assertiveness training should be formally included in counter-terrorism and de-radicalization programs, particularly at high-risk zones. This will empower young persons to resist recruitment by extremist or separatist groups.

The situation of peace and security in many countries is deeply influenced by the behavior of her youth population. With the population of youth being substantial in almost every country of the world, the escalation or resolution of conflict rests centrally on the youth themselves. The role of assertiveness training in positioning the youths as agents of peace and security is inestimable. It will build in them confidence and sense of responsibility, and equip them with communication and conflict resolution skills to enable them to easily find a healthy balance in their interpersonal and social engagements. The history of elite manipulation of the youth into violence using ethnic, religious, and regional sentiments, can be halted if the youth are adequately immersed in assertive behavior.

Cross-cultural and structural determinants of assertiveness may be garnered from comparative studies that contrast assertive behavior among peoples across different countries, cultures or regions of the world confronting comparable insecurity challenges.

The study did not look at the influence of other key variables such as religion, family background, exposure to violence, drug use, peer influence, and so on, all of which may contribute to shaping assertiveness-ethnicity nexus.

CONCLUSION

This study explored assertive, passive, and aggressive behaviors of people belonging to diverse ethnicities, in the background of the insecurity prevalent in the country and around the world. Findings show broad behavioral differences. As insecurity around the world appears to be on an upward spiral, with young people goading it, we highlight the need for a shift away from strictly economic empowerment modalities to more integrative youth development models. Assertiveness training offers a compelling choice for equipping young people with interpersonal and social skills to de-escalate manipulations, engage in civic space productively, and be agents of sustainable peace and security. The policy, research, and pragmatic implications of the study call for strategic intervention. Reformulating development programs, introducing assertiveness and peace education into national policy, and encouraging culturally appropriate interventions in accordance with the behavioral tendencies of different groups concerned are called for. The world's future of peace and harmony hinges on providing its populace, not just with jobs and financial remuneration, but also with the attitude and ability to build bridges, resolve conflicts amicably, and exist in harmony with one another.

Credit authorship contribution statement

Euckie U. Immanuel: Research Funding, Data Collection, Data analysis and interpretation, Editing of the manuscript.

Nkechinyere O. Anyadike: Data Collection, Initial draft of the manuscript

Tochukwu S. Nwachukwu: Literature Review, Initial draft of the manuscript

Data availability statement

The data is available from the first author.

Ethical approval

Ethical Approval for the study is given by the Strategic Contacts, Ethics and Publications, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

Declaration of the use of AI: This research is not AI generated.

Declaration of competing interest - No interest to declare

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