





Undergraduate Students' Perceptions and Attitudes towards Abortion in the University of Calabar, Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria

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Abstract	Article History
<p>Background: The premeditated termination of pregnancy is a complex and highly debated phenomenon with moral, social, cultural, ethical, and legal considerations. Strong anti-abortion laws have not translated into a reduction in the incidences of induce abortions, instead, they have increased the scale of unsafe abortions. Even so, empirical studies on the perceptions and attitudes towards abortion in regions where abortion is illegal remains scanty.</p> <p>Objective: This study determined the perceptions and attitudes towards abortion among undergraduates in the University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria.</p> <p>Methods: The study was a cross-sectional descriptive survey of 339 undergraduates selected using the multi-stage, simple random and convenience sampling techniques. Data was collected using a validated semi-structured questionnaire, and analyzed using the IBM SPSS Statistics. Descriptive statistics of the data was expressed as frequency and percentages. The association between selected socio-demographic variables of the undergraduates and their attitudes toward abortion was tested using Chi square statistical test at 0.05 significant level.</p> <p>Results: Findings of the study revealed that majority of the respondents, 265(78.20%) had positive perceptions of intentional abortion and positive attitude towards abortion 306(90.30%). The findings of this study also revealed that age, gender, and religious affiliation were not significantly associated with the undergraduates' attitudes towards abortion.</p> <p>Conclusion: The findings of this study indicate a significant shift in public attitude towards the support for the legalization of abortion, especially among young people.</p> <p>Keywords: Undergraduate students, Perceptions, Attitudes, Abortion</p>	<p>Received: 14 Apr 2026 Accepted: 18 May 2026 Published: 30 May 2026</p> <div style="text-align: center;">  Scan QR Code to view¹ </div> <p>License: CC BY 4.0 ²⁴</p> <div style="text-align: center;">  Open Access article. </div>
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Introduction

The premeditated termination of pregnancy, referred to as induced abortion, is a complex and highly debated phenomenon with moral, social, cultural, ethical, and legal considerations (Dolgushina *et al.*, 2025). Even so, the decision to undergo induced abortion is usually predicated on certain factors such as the circumstances of the pregnancy, health considerations, socioeconomic circumstances among other factors (Wollum *et al.*, 2024).

As reported by the World Health Organization (2024), about 73 million induced abortions occur globally each year, with 29% (3 out of 10) of all pregnancies ending in induced abortion and 61% of all unintended pregnancies ending in induced abortion. Furthermore, 45% of all abortions are unsafe, with 97% of such unsafe abortions taking place in developing countries. Nationally, an estimated 760,000 abortions occur in Nigeria annually (Olumodeji *et al.*, 2023).

The world health organization defines unsafe abortion as any procedure that involves the termination of an unintended

pregnancy that is carried out either by individuals that lack the necessary skills or in an environment that does not conform to the set minimum medical standards or both (Wang *et al.*, 2025). Unsafe abortion is a serious public health issue that accounts for about 14% of the global pregnancy-related deaths (Bell *et al.*, 2020) and a leading cause of maternal deaths and morbidities. The healthcare costs associated with treating complications from unsafe abortions are substantial. For instance, the WHO estimated that in 2014, the cost of treating such complications amounted to 232 million US dollars. Furthermore, the WHO highlighted that the cost would have reached 562 million US dollars if all those in need of treatment for unsafe abortion-related complications had received it (Mkulichi, 2017).

However, induced abortion remains a highly contentious issue, with debates centring around the rights of the pregnant individual, the moral status of the foetus, and the role of government in regulating reproductive healthcare. Advocates for reproductive rights argue that individuals should have the autonomy to make decisions about their own bodies and

reproductive futures, including the option to terminate a pregnancy if desired. They emphasise the importance of access to safe and legal abortion services to protect the health and well-being of pregnant individuals. (Keegan, 2023). Even so, induce abortion draws strong protestations that are reinforced by certain religious, moral, ethical, socio-cultural, and medical concerns. Cultural and religious intolerance to abortion, among communities and service providers—manifesting most saliently as abortion stigma, as well as the cost of care—continues to drive abortion seekers to seek abortion clandestinely from unqualified providers. This situation has resulted to high levels of severe maternal outcomes usually manifesting as sepsis, cervical and uterine ruptures, hemorrhage, and death (Ushie *et al.*, 2019).

Abortion is illegal in many countries. Even so, Strong anti-abortion laws have not translated into a reduction in the incidence of abortion; instead, they have increased the magnitude of unsafe abortion (Guillaume & Rossier, 2018). In Nigeria, abortion is governed by two laws that differ depending on geographical location. Northern Nigeria is governed by the Penal Code (Ekwunife, 2023) while the Southern Nigeria is governed by the Criminal Code, with abortion laws contained in sections 232, 233 and 234. The sections of the penal code parallel the Criminal code, which prohibits abortion of all sorts but for the purpose of saving the life of the mother. (Okorie & Abayomi, 2019).

Available statistics shows that despite the criminalisation of abortion, a lot of women still surreptitiously seek abortion from unlicensed medical persons resulting in a lot of complications and maternal mortality (Ekwunife, 2023). These women, especially in countries where abortion is illegal, seek unsafe abortion services to avoid criminal and socio-cultural consequences (Chigbu *et al.*, 2018). This situation has led to the complete and unanimous conclusion that anti-abortion laws, no matter how strong they may be, do not translate into a decrease in the incidence of abortion, instead they have increased the magnitude of unsafe abortion and its concomitant high levels of severe complications and maternal mortality (Guillaume & Rossier, 2018).

People hold various judgements and views when it comes to abortion and the judgement people hold towards abortion do not only produce felt stigma in other people, it also affects social systems as it has to do with the establishment and maintenance of norms, as well as impacting on the provision of healthcare, especially post abortion care, and making of laws that shape and regulate the reproductive lives of the people (Adair *et al.*, 2024). As Adamczyk *et al.* (2020) concludes, healthcare institutions such as healthcare service providers and legislations can shape or influence the opinions people hold and the opinion people hold can shape these institutions. This notion is also supported by the cultural evolution framework, which posits that the attitudes people hold towards a particular behaviour are established and maintained by the norms surrounding that behaviour (Gelfand *et al.*, 2024). In the same vein, Mahmoodi *et al.* (2026) concluded that negative attitudes towards abortion usually create and maintain norms that opposes abortion. On the other hand, according to Elkind *et al.* (2020) positive attitudes

towards abortion can establish and maintain legislations that supports abortion care services.

The critical relevance of people's attitudes towards abortion to the structural and social systems that shape abortion legislations and abortion care provisioning makes it vitally important to determine individuals and community's attitudes towards abortion. By understanding how the negative and positive attitudes is moulded by individuals' values and the prevailing social and structural norms, we can identify the potential strategies for ensuring the enjoyment of reproductive freedom by all. However, research on the determination of the perceptions and attitudes towards abortion in regions where abortion is illegal seems to be limited. This study provides new insights into the perceptions and attitudes towards abortion in a region where the social and structural norms forbid abortion, an area that has received limited attention in previous studies.

Methods

Study design, Study population and Study setting

A cross-sectional descriptive study design with quantitative method of data collection was used to collect data from undergraduate students in university of Calabar, Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria. The University of Calabar has a population of about 40,645 students

Sample size determination

The sample size was determined using fisher's formula: $n = \frac{z^2 pq}{d^2} = \frac{z^2 p(1-p)}{d^2}$;

$z = 1.96$ (i.e. 95% confidence interval); $p = 30\%$ (0.30): estimated proportion of the population's attitudes towards abortion (28%/30%) (previous study by Fróes *et al.*, 2021), $q = (1-P = 0.70)$; $d = 5\%$ (0.05).

$$n = \frac{1.96^2 0.3 \times 0.7}{0.0025} = 322.8 \approx 323$$

The sample was increased by 10% to account for the anticipated non-response giving a total minimum sample size of 339

Sampling procedure

Multistage, simple random, and convenience sampling techniques were used to select the respondents for this study. In stage 1, simple random sampling technique was used to select 10 faculties from the 20 faculties in the University of Calabar. In stage 2, simple random sampling technique was used to select two (2) departments from each of the selected faculties making a total of 20 departments (i.e. $2 \times 10 = 20$). In the last stage, convenience sampling technique was used to select 17 undergraduate students from each of the selected departments giving a total of ($17 \times 20 = 340$ respondents).

Instrument for data collection and data collection procedure

A semi-structured questionnaire was used to collect data for this study. Face and content validity of the instrument was determined by test and measurement experts. The questionnaire was administered face-to-face to respondents.

Method of data analysis

Data collected data were analyzed using the IBM Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS version 22) software. Undergraduate students' perceptions of abortion consisted of

five items on a dichotomous scale (with “yes” or “no” options). Each correct answer to a question was awarded one mark. A respondent can get scores within the range of 0-5. Similarly, attitudes of undergraduate students towards abortion had four items, which were measured on a four-point Likert scale with strongly disagree = 1, disagree = 2, agree = 3, and strongly agree = 4. A cut off point of 70%, and <70% was regarded as negative attitude while ≥70% was regarded as positive attitude. The association between the selected socio demographic characteristics of the respondents and their attitude towards abortion was determined using chi square test of analysis at 0.05 significant level

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the ethics and research committee of the Department of Public Health, University of Calabar, Calabar (UC/CM/PUH/ETH/2378). The principles of informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity were ensured throughout this study.

Results

Sociodemographic characteristics of respondents

A total of 340 copies questionnaire were distributed and 339 copies were correctly filled and returned giving a response rate

of 99.9%. Results for socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents is presented in table 1. The result showed that majority of the respondents, 141(41.6%) were in the 25-30 age group. Regarding the sex of the respondents, 187(55.2%) of the respondents were males, while, 152(44.8%) were females. Regarding the religion of the respondents, the result showed that 240(70.8%) were Christians.

Perceptions of abortion among undergraduates

The result of the respondent’s perceptions of abortion is presented in table 2. As the table shows, majority, 230(67.8%) of the respondents were of the opinion that abortion is morally acceptable, while 208(61.4%) where of the opinion that abortion should be legal. Furthermore, majority of 240(70.8%) respondents believes that abortion should be accessible to all women regardless of their circumstances. Finally, majority, 240(70.8%) respondents were of the opinion that decisions to have an abortion should not be regulated by the government, while 99(29.2%) of the respondents indicated that the decision to have abortion should be regulated by the government.

A summary of the respondent’s perceptions of abortion is presented in figure 1. As shown in the figure, majority of the respondents, 265(78.20%) had positive perceptions while 74(21.80%) had negative perceptions of abortions.

Table 1: Socio Demographic Characteristics of the respondents (n=339)

Variables	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age		
15-19	63	18.6
20-24	84	24.8
25-30	141	41.6
31-35	51	15.0
Sex		
Male	187	55.2
Female	152	44.8
Religion		
Christianity	240	70.8
Muslim	82	24.2
Traditional religion	17	5.0

Table 2: Undergraduate students’ Perceptions of abortion (n=339)

Variable	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
I think abortion is morally acceptable		
No	109	32.2
Yes	230	67.8
I think abortion should be an individual choice		
No	95	28.0
Yes	244	72.0
I think abortion should be legal		
Yes	208	61.4
No	131	38.6
Abortion should be accessible to all women regardless of their circumstances		
No	99	29.2
Yes	240	70.8
The decision to have an abortion should be regulated by the government		
No	240	70.8
Yes	99	29.2

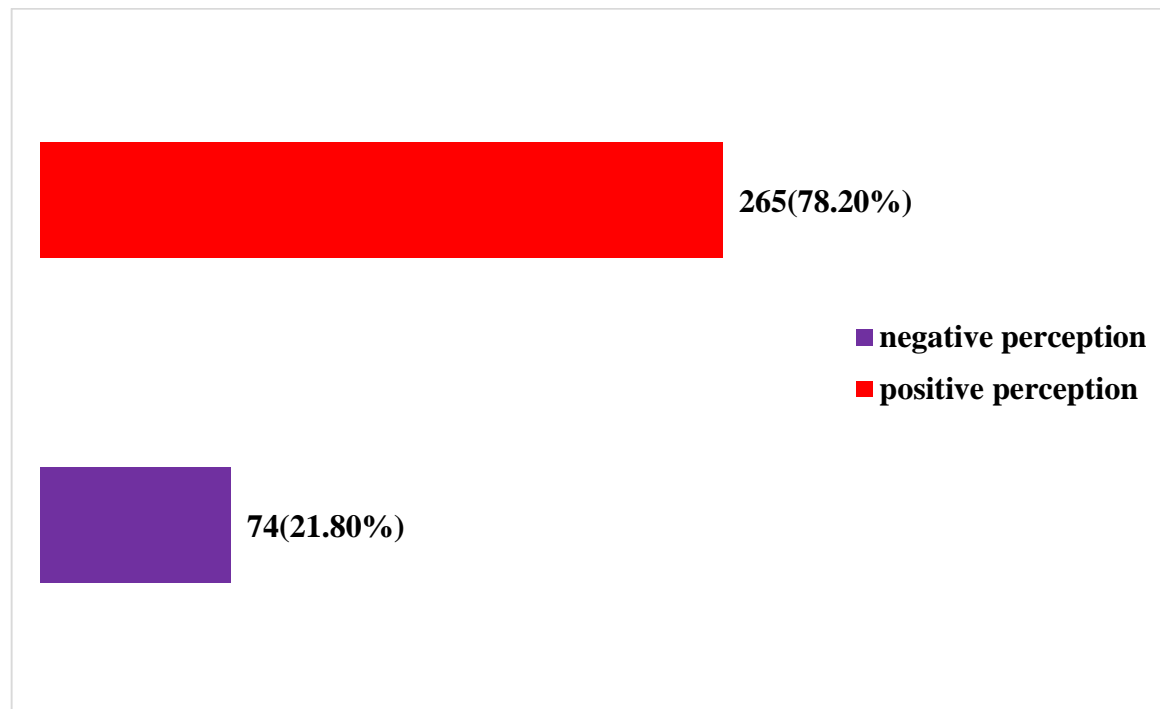


Figure 1: Undergraduate students’ perceptions towards abortion

Attitudes towards abortion

The result of the respondents’ attitude towards abortion is presented in table 3. The table shows that majority, 193(56.9%) of the respondents agreed that a woman should have the right to choose whether or not to have an abortion, minority, 12(3.3%), strongly disagreed. A majority, 155(45.7%) of the respondents strongly disagreed that abortion should be illegal no matter the circumstances, and a minority of 6(1.8%) strongly agreed. Also, majority, 152(44.8%) of the agreed that abortion should be allowed in cases of medical necessity or when the pregnancy poses a threat to the woman’s life, and a minority, 2(0.6%) respondents strongly disagreed. On their feelings towards abortion being legal and accessible to all individuals who need it, majority of the respondents 142 (41.90%) and 144(42.50%) strongly agreed and agreed respectively, while 2(0.6%) and 51(15.0%) strongly disagreed and disagreed respectively.

A summary of the respondent’s attitudes towards abortion is presented in figure 2. The results showed that majority,

306(90.30%) of the respondents had positive attitude towards abortion, while 33(9.70%) had negative attitude.

Socio-demographic characteristics (age, gender, and religion) associated with undergraduates’ attitudes towards abortion

In Table 4 is presented the results of the Chi-square statistical test carried out to test for the association between selected socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents (age, gender, and religion) and their attitudes towards abortion. As shown in the table, there was no statistically significant association between respondents age and their attitudes towards abortion ($\chi^2 = 7.394$, $df = 3$, $p\text{-value} = 0.060$), no statistically significant association between the respondents’ gender and their attitudes towards abortion ($\chi^2 = 0.438$, $df = 1$, $p\text{-value} = 0.508$), and no statistically significant association between respondents’ religion and their attitudes towards abortion ($\chi^2 = 5.239$, $df = 2$, $p\text{-value} = 0.073$).

Table 3: Undergraduate students’ attitudes towards abortion

Variables	SD	D	A	SA
I feel that a woman should have the right to choose whether or not to have an abortion	12(3.6%)	54(15.6%)	193(56.9%)	81(23.9%)
I feel that abortion should be illegal no matter the circumstances	155(45.7%)	37(10.9%)	141(41.6%)	6(1.8%)
Abortion should be allowed in cases of medical necessity or when the pregnancy poses a threat to the woman’s life	2(0.6%)	43(12.7%)	152(44.8%)	142(41.9%)
Abortion should be legal and accessible to all individuals who need it.	2(0.6%)	51(15.0%)	144(42.5%)	142(41.9%)

Note: SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree

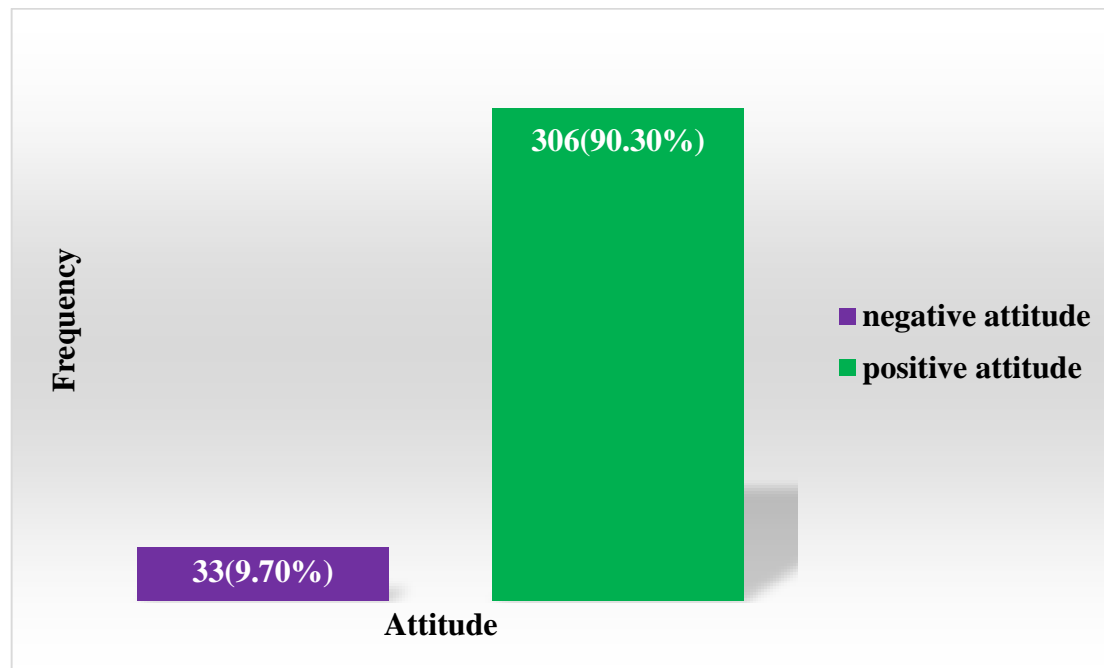


Figure 2: Undergraduate students' attitudes towards abortion

Table 4: Socio-demographic characteristics (age, gender, and religion) associated with undergraduates' attitudes towards abortion.

Variable	Negative attitude	Positive attitude	χ^2	P-Value	df
Age					
15-19	11(17.5%)	52(82.5%)	7.394	0.060	2
20-24	10(11.9%)	74(88.1%)			
25-30	9(6.4%)	132(93.6%)			
31-35	3(5.9%)	48(94.1%)			
Sex					
Male	20(10.7%)	167(89.3%)	0.438	0.508	1
Female	13(8.6%)	139(91.4%)			
Religion					
Christianity	29(12.1%)	211(87.9%)	5.239	0.073	2
Muslim	3(3.7%)	79(96.3%)			
Others	1(5.9%)	16(94.1%)			

Significant at 0.05

Discussion

This study's finding revealed a positive perception of abortion among undergraduates with majority of undergraduates having the view that the decision to have an abortion should be an individual's choice, and that abortion should be made legal. The findings of this study differ with the finding of a study by Vongxay *et al.* (2020) carried in Lao, South East Asia, where majority of the participants had poor perceptions of abortion. Several contextual factors, such as regional and socio-cultural differences may have been responsible for these discrepancies.

Regarding attitude towards abortion, the findings of this study showed that majority of the respondents held positive attitude towards abortion with most of the respondents feeling that a woman should have the right to choose whether or not to have an abortion. This finding differs from the findings of previous studies carried out by Saadeh *et al.* (2017) where the overall attitude towards abortion was negative, Debela *et al.* (2018) in which 41.9% felt abortion should not be legalized, and Frões *et al.* (2021) who reported negative attitude towards abortion among the respondents. The differences may have been influenced by variations in the sociodemographic and psychographic characteristics of participants, stigma surrounding abortion in the study area, timing and method of data collection, and the sample size.

The study's finding on the socio-demographic factors associated with the respondents' attitudes towards abortion showed no statistically significant association between respondents age, gender, and religious affiliation and their attitudes towards abortion. This finding is different from the findings of Olaitan *et al.* (2011) and that of Grace and Sunday (2011) who reported that both gender and religious affiliation were significantly associated with the university students' attitudes towards abortion. However, the finding of this study is line with that of Olaitan *et al.* (2011) in terms of association between age and undergraduates' attitude towards abortion. These contrasting findings regarding sociodemographic factors influencing attitudes towards abortion is indicative of the fact that psychographic characteristics and the prevailing stigma surrounding abortion in a particular region are more important determinants of individuals' attitudes towards abortion. Further, surprisingly, these findings have revealed the widening gap between sociodemographic characteristics, particularly religious affiliation and abortion. Furthermore, the findings strengthen the notion that views and attitude towards abortion are increasingly becoming complex, multilayered and context dependent.

Generally, these findings may suggest a generational shift in public attitudes towards support for abortion. The positive

perceptions and attitudes towards by undergraduate students do not only reflect their real sex life but also indicates their quest for sexual freedom, bodily autonomy and access to abortion that is legal and free of judgement by the society. The supportive perceptions and attitudes towards abortion by these young people is a warning to the gate keepers of abortion that these young people are very likely going to seek abortion when situations of unintended pregnancies arise. Despite the illegality of abortion in Nigeria, the positive perceptions and attitudes among undergraduates suggest a disconnection between personal beliefs and legal constraints and national morality. The lack of alignment between personal attitudes and legal position is what has resulted and contributed to high rates of unsafe abortions in the country.

Despite this study providing valuable contributions to the body of knowledge by providing scientific data on the perceptions and attitudes towards abortion among undergraduates in a setting where abortion is illegal, this study was carried out among a relatively small sample size which may limit the generalizability of the findings as the findings may not fully apply to the entire undergraduates. More so, the study focused on the general perceptions and attitudes towards abortion. Future studies should explore a larger sample size that is rich enough to capture the diverse perceptions and attitudes towards abortion as well as specifying the conditions in which abortion should be permissible.

Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed positive perceptions and attitudes towards abortion among undergraduates without any association between the selected socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents age, gender and religion and their attitudes towards abortion. Thereby indicating undergraduates strong backing for abortion rights. These findings provide empirical data that will guide policy makers and other stakeholders in sexual and reproductive health. The findings of this study reiterate the need to hold open discussions about abortion aimed at reducing the incidence of unsafe abortions.

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