

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **Ghanaian students' attitude towards homosexuality: a study among students of Ghana Technology University College**

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**The study examined Ghanaian students' attitudes toward homosexuality. Three hundred and twenty eight students of the Ghana Technology University were selected with the stratified random sampling technique and administered with questionnaires to find out their attitude towards homosexuality. The study adopted the attitudes toward lesbian and gay men (ATLGM) scale. Results indicate that Ghanaian students show high levels of negative attitudes towards homosexuality. Generally, attitude towards homosexuals did not improve irrespective of the number of years of study at the university. Gender did not have a significant influence on attitude towards homosexuality, though female, Year one and two students expressed slightly higher negative attitude than their male, Year three and four students. Religion however, significantly influenced attitude towards homosexuality. Christian and Moslem students showed greater negative but similar attitudes compared to those who belonged to the Traditional African religion. Implications of these findings for attitude reformation and future research were discussed.**

**Key words:** Attitudes, homosexuality, students.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Accumulating evidence has shown that homosexuals have historically experienced negative attitudes from people all over the world (Herek, 1994; Herek and Glunt, 1993; Harper and Schneider, 2003; Lewis et al., 2003; Schope and Eliason, 2000). In many African countries, including Ghana, there is a strong negative societal attitude towards homosexuals (Bunting, 2010; Dionne, 2013; Mabvurira, 2012; Mellstrom, 2012). In fact, available statistics indicate that more than 50% of African countries have made conscious efforts to criminalize same-sex relationships including gays and lesbians, and 36 out of 54 countries have laws criminalizing homosexuality (ILGA, 2011). Research has shown that in sub-Saharan Africa alone, the percentage of society's rejection of homosexuality is pegged at 98% in Nigeria; 96% in Senegal; 96% in Ghana; 96% in Uganda; 90% in Kenya, and 61% in South Africa where homosexuality has been legalized (Pew Research Center: The Global

Divide on Homosexuality, 2013).

The peak of such negative attitudes towards homosexuality could be associated with comments made by some African presidents such as Presidents of Liberia, Ghana, Senegal and Zimbabwe just to mention but a few. For instance, the president of Liberia, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf has been cited as supporting her country's enactment of laws that seeks to criminalize homosexuality (Ford and Allen, 2012). She is quoted to have said that "we have traditional values in our society that we would like to preserve" (Ford and Allen, 2012).

In Ghana, discussions on homosexuality have been on the airwaves in recent times and many people have shown strong opposition to accepting homosexuality into the Ghanaian society and further admonish the government not to endorse the legalization of homosexuality. In furtherance to the strict opposition to homosexuality, the late President of Ghana, John Mills in

an interaction with the press indicated that he will not support the enactment of any law that attempts to legalize homosexuality in Ghana. This response was given in the wake of pressures from the Western world to suspend aid to countries that refuse to legalize homosexuality (Ghana Broadcasting Corporation, 2011). These negative reactions from society and a lack of clearly defined legislation on same sex relationships have resulted in many lesbians and gays remaining inconspicuous. In recent times, though, some human rights activists are calling for the enactment of laws to protect the rights of lesbians and gays in Ghana.

Recently, the issue of Africans accepting homosexuality as another form of sexual orientation was revisited by Barack Obama, President of the United States of America when he paid a visit to Africa. He made a statement in Dakar, Senegal that was captured in the digital journal: "My basic view is that regardless of race, regardless of religion, regardless of gender, regardless of sexual orientation, when it comes to how the law treats you, how the state treats you – the benefits, the rights and the responsibilities under the law....people should be treated equally. And that's a principle that I think applies universally" (Smith-Asinyanbi, 2013). In a reply, the Senegalese president also stated that they are not ready to decriminalize homosexuality (Smith-Asinyanbi, 2013).

Students are not left out in showing negative attitudes against homosexuals (Arndt and deBruin, 2006; Herek, 2000; Nelson and Kreiger, 1997; Schellenberg et al., 1999). University campuses have become dangerous habitations for lesbians and gays (Engstrom and Sedlacek, 1997; Herek, 1995; Lance, 2002; Schott-Ceccacci and Matthews, 2009) as many heterosexual students are fond of physically abusing and harassing other students because of their sexual orientation. In a study, Engstrom and Sedlacek (1997) found that heterosexual students showed more negative attitudes to their peers who were homosexuals than those who did not disclose their sexual orientation. In a more recent cross-sectional web-based study, Matharu et al. (2012) found that medical students of the University of California showed negative attitudes toward gay men and would even deny them their civil rights. Another study among Zimbabwean undergraduate social work students revealed that students show negative attitudes towards homosexuals and factors such as gender, religion and knowledge were all found to predict students' negative attitudes (Mabvurira, 2012).

Previous research findings have identified several demographic factors including gender, religion, and student's level of education in the university, as predictive of attitudes towards homosexuals. Studies have found significant gender differences in attitudes towards homosexuals with males having more negative attitudes than females (D'Augelli et al., 2002; Lehman and Thornwall, 2010; Lim, 2002; Schellenberg et al., 1999). In a sample of 365 students in Singapore, Lim (2002) found

that male students had negative attitudes towards homosexuals than female students. The study further revealed that females were quite comfortable working with male homosexuals.

Similarly, Arndt and deBruin (2006) found in their sample of eight hundred and eighty (880) university students of South Africa that male students tend to exhibit more negative attitudes towards lesbians and gays. Liebowitz et al. (2011) examined attitudes of four hundred and twenty-one (421) heterosexual Hispanic college students in South Texas toward lesbians and gay men. Findings from the study showed that Hispanic heterosexual males were more negative compared to Hispanic heterosexual females in attitudes toward both gay men and lesbians. However, studies have shown that the negative attitudes of heterosexual males are largely directed towards gays than towards lesbians (Herek, 2002; Kerns and Fine, 1994).

Studies have shown that adherence to traditional gender roles have consistently been linked to anti-gay and anti-lesbian prejudice (Davies, 2004; Herek, 2000; Goodman and Moradi, 2008; Schope and Eliason, 2000; Whitley, 2001; Whitley and Egisdóttir, 2000). Traditional gender roles refer to acceptable and unacceptable behaviours prescribed by society for both men and women (Whitley, 2001). Studies have shown that both men and women cannot adopt the status of each other in society and that any attempt to do that leads to stigmatization in society (Boateng et al., 2006; Dolphyne, 1991; Lim, 2002; Whitley and Egisdóttir, 2000).

Gender role conformity has been found to guide sexual prejudice and according to Herek (2000), this sexual prejudice particularly reinforces one's status as a heterosexual male. Some studies have shown that the strong negative attitudes exhibited by heterosexual males as compared to heterosexual females towards homosexuals can be attributed to traditional norms on what constitutes masculinity (Davies, 2004; Keiller, 2010; Vincent et al., 2011). According to Davies (2004), men have often viewed women as their natural sexual partners and not men, and this more often than not contributes to their extreme negative attitude towards homosexuals than females. Nevertheless, few studies indicated that no significant gender differences exist in attitudes toward homosexuals (Lippincott et al., 2000; Oliver and Hyde 1993; Tan, 2012; Whitley and Egisdóttir, 2000; Wilson and Medora, 1990).

Religion is another important factor that has been found to influence the formation of attitudes towards homosexuals (Berkman and Zinberg, 1997; Cotton-Huston and Waite, 2000; Hinrichs and Rosenberg, 2002). Studies done in both Western countries and non-Western countries have all revealed that religion serves as one of the strongest predictors of attitudes towards homosexuality (Adamczyk and Pitt, 2009; Arndt and De Bruin, 2006; Schulte and Battle, 2004; Tan, 2012). Research has shown that various religious affiliations

have categorized homosexuality as 'unnatural', 'ungodly' and 'impure' (Yip, 2005, cited in Adamczyk and Pitt, 2009) and this often informs and encourages peoples' strong negative attitudes towards homosexuality just because of their affiliation to a particular religious group. In examining the effects of religious practices on attitudes towards homosexuals, Olson et al. (2006) found that a person's religiosity and religious affiliation had a significant influence on their opinions about homosexuality.

Studies have shown that Muslims had more negative attitudes towards homosexuals than Catholics and Protestants (Yuchtman-Yaar and Alkalay, 2007; Finke and Adamczyk, 2008). According to Tucker and Potocky-Tripodi (2006, cited in Tan, 2012), Muslims hold a very strong negative attitude toward homosexuality. Tan (2012) also found in a study on Peninsula Malaysia university students attitudes towards homosexuals that Moslem students had significantly negative attitudes towards homosexuals than Buddhist students. However, Adamczyk and Pitt (2009) noted that no differences exist between Moslem and Christian attitudes towards homosexuals.

Students' year of study in school have been found as predictive of positive attitude towards homosexuality (Lambert et al., 2006; Schellenberg et al., 1999; Wills and Crawford, 2000). Lambert et al. (2006) found in their study among three hundred and sixty-four (364) students at a Midwestern university that juniors and seniors had statistically significant more positive attitudes towards gays and lesbians than did freshmen and sophomores. In a longitudinal study, Lottes and Kuriloff (1992) found that college students in their fourth year were more positive in their attitude towards homosexuality than they were during the first year in school. Schellenberg et al. (1999) also examined attitudes toward homosexuals among undergraduates (101 men; 98 women) attending a Canadian university. They found that attitudes toward gay men also improved with time spent at college, but only for male students and not females or the faculty.

A review of the literature has revealed that a plethora of research have been done in Europe and the United States on attitudes towards homosexuality with results showing that while some people continue to show negative attitudes towards homosexuals, other documentary evidence are showing that some people are showing positive attitudes towards homosexuals especially in the United states of America (Davies, 2004; Herek, 2002; Lambert et al., 2006; Loftus, 2001; Schellenberg et al., 1999; Werum and Winders, 2001).

It is unclear whether findings from European and American samples can be generalized to the Ghanaian context. The current study seeks to determine whether variables such as gender, religion, and students' year of study in the university influences Ghanaian attitude towards homosexuality. Based on the literature review, hypotheses were formulated about attitude of Ghanaian

students in Ghana Technology University College towards homosexuals. First, it was hypothesized that, female students will have less negative attitudes towards homosexuals than male students. Secondly, Moslem students would have more negative attitude towards homosexuals than Christian and traditional African religion students. Thirdly, students in third and fourth years would have less negative attitudes towards homosexuals than students in first and second year.

## METHODOLOGY

### Population and sample

The participants in the study were students of the Ghana Technology University College. This is a university located at the center of Accra, the capital of Ghana which admits students from across the country and beyond. A cross-section of three hundred and twenty-seven (327) students was selected to participate in the study. Participants were selected using the stratified random sampling technique where students were identified in the various years of study and were then randomly selected to participate in the study. Demographic data on the sample showed that 200 (61%) were females and 127 (39%) were males. The religious background of the sample was 150 (46%) Christians, 110 (34%) Moslems, and 67 (20%) represented other Traditional African religion. In terms of year of study in school, the sample comprised of 98 (30%) Year one, 100 (31%) Year two, 64 (19%) Year three and 65 (20%) and Year four students. Participants were between the ages of 18 and 46 with the mean age of 23.10.

### Measures

The main measure used in the study was the attitudes toward lesbian and gay men (ATLGM) (Herek, 1988). The scale includes ten (10) statements that produce two subscales: one measuring attitudes towards lesbians and another measuring attitude towards gays. Statements such as "Lesbians are Sick" and Male homosexual is a sin" are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5) were used to measure the intensity of the respondents' attitudes towards homosexuals. Though several studies have confirmed the good psychometric properties of the scale (Herek, 1994), researchers of the current study piloted the measure to ascertain its reliability in the Ghanaian population. The scale showed a Cronbachs alpha of 0.86 indicating good reliability for use in this study. Positive worded statements were reverse coded such that higher scale scores indicate more negative attitudes. In addition to the ATLGM, a set of demographic questions were added to obtain information regarding age, gender, and

**Table 1.** Univariate analysis of effect of gender, religion and year of study on attitudes toward homosexuality.

Variable/group	Mean	Std. Dev.	df	F	Sig	Eta	Bonferroni
<b>Gender</b>							
Male	4.11	0.76					
Female	4.18	0.85	1.308	0.750	0.230	0.018	-
<b>Religion</b>							
Christian	4.13	0.78					
Moslem	4.29	0.64					
Traditional African religion	3.28	1.12	2.308	4.170	0.020	0.239	1=2>3
<b>Year of study</b>							
Year One	4.10	0.69					
Year Two	4.24	0.65					
Year Three	3.95	1.15					
Year Four	4.07	0.81	3.308	1.170	0.130	0.024	-

Std. Dev., standard deviation; df, degrees of freedom; sig, significance.

religious affiliation of students. These questions formed the basis of the comparative analyses conducted.

### Procedure

Approval to conduct the study was sought from the institutional review board of the Ghana Technology University College which served as the setting for the study. Participants were recruited by obtaining permission from the lecturers of the various classes to allow the researchers to survey their students. The classes surveyed consisted of an Introduction to Psychology class, an Information Technology class and an Engineering class. Participation was voluntary. Participants were informed about the nature of the study and they were also told about their rights to participate or withdraw from the study. Completed questionnaires were immediately collected and packed in an envelope to assure students of confidentiality and anonymity. After the data collection, all data was vetted through cross-checking by the research team in order to ensure its accuracy and completeness. The data was coded, scored and analyzed using statistical product and service solutions (SPSS version 20). Descriptive statistics in the form of means and standard deviation were computed and univariate analysis was run to test three hypotheses.

### RESULTS

The study tested three hypotheses. The three hypotheses measured effects of students' gender, religion and year of study on attitudes toward homosexuals. This was tested using the univariate analysis and the result is presented in Table 1. Results in Table 1 showed that female students reported slightly

more negative attitude towards homosexuality [mean = 4.18, SD = 0.76] compared to their male counterparts [mean = 4.11, SD = .85]. The difference is however, not significant [ $F_{(1,308)} = 0.750$ ,  $p = 0.230$ ]. Gender controls 1.8% variability in attitude towards homosexuality [Eta = 0.018]. Therefore males and females are not different in their attitudes towards homosexuals.

Religion had a significant impact on attitude towards homosexuality [ $F_{(2,308)} = 4.170$ ,  $p = 0.020$ ]. Christians and Moslems reported more negative attitude towards homosexuality than students who belong to traditional African religion. Religion as a variable is responsible for approximately 24% changes in students attitude towards homosexuality [Eta = 0.238].

Students' year of study did not significantly influence attitude towards homosexuality [ $F_{(3,308)} = 1.170$ ,  $p = 0.130$ ] though students in Year two and Year one recorded slightly higher scores than those in Year four and Year three respectively. Year of study as an independent variable controls 2.4% variability in students' attitude [Eta = .024]

### DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to determine Ghanaian students' attitudes towards homosexuality from students in a private university in Ghana. The study sought to determine differences in gender, religious affiliation and students' level in school with regards to attitudes towards homosexuality. The first hypothesis stated that female students will have less negative attitudes towards homosexuals than male students. Results from the study indicate that, the authors' hypothesis of gender differences in attitudes towards homosexuals was not supported. This observation is inconsistent with a myriad of previous findings which have consistently found

gender differences in attitudes towards homosexuality with males having more negative attitudes than females (Arndt and deBruin, 2006; D'Augelli et al., 2002; Lehman and Thornwall, 2010; Liebowitz et al., 2011; Lim, 2002; Schellenberg et al., 1999). The results are however consistent with studies where no gender difference exists in attitudes towards homosexuality (Lippincott et al., 2000; Oliver and Hyde, 1993; Wilson and Medora, 1990; Tan, 2012). This means that among Ghanaian students, one's gender does not determine attitudes towards homosexuals.

A plausible reason for this finding might be that Ghanaian students highly acknowledge traditional gender roles where both males and females are supposed to behave in ways associated with their respective genders. Therefore, there is no justification for males representing as females and females representing as males in their sexual orientation. Thus, it could be reasoned out that cultural difference between western and non-western countries in gender role expectations may have accounted for the result of no differences between male and female attitudes towards homosexuality. In many non-western cultures like Ghana, men are expected to be breadwinners of the family while women are expected to nurture children and not vice versa (Boateng et al., 2006; Dolphyne, 1991). As such, any man or woman who is seen to be playing the others' role is seen as "*banyin-basia*" in Akan, meaning "man-woman" or "*babasia-kokonin*", in Akan, meaning "a woman-cock" or "male-woman" respectively (Adomako-Ampofo, 2001, cited in Boateng et al., 2006). Changes in the status quo are frowned upon in society and this might have led to the gender similarity in attitudes towards homosexuality since both genders do not want to be stigmatized.

The second hypothesis which stated that Moslem students would have more negative attitudes towards homosexuals than Christian and other religious group students was partially supported in the current study. This is consistent with studies by Adamczyk and Pitt (2009), Finke and Adamczyk (2008) and Tan (2012) who found that Moslems have more negative attitudes towards homosexuals than people belonging to other religious groups like Buddhists. This is also consistent with findings from studies like Yuchtman-Yaar and Alkalay (2007) and Finke and Adamczyk (2008) where Moslems were found to be more conservative than Christians (that is, Catholics and Protestants) in their attitudes towards homosexuality.

Another plausible reason for this finding could be the religious nature of Ghanaians (Gyekye, 1996). Both Christianity and Islam have been found to constitute a major segment of the religious landscape of the country and this might have accounted for the no difference in attitudes since according to an article in the Ghanaian Chronicle, both Moslems and Christians strongly oppose homosexuality (Amoah, 2012).

The last hypothesis predicted that the higher the

students' year of study in school, the more positive their attitudes towards homosexuals. The hypothesis specifically stated that students in third and fourth years would have less negative attitudes towards homosexuals than students in first and second year. Results of the analysis showed that no significant difference was found between students in the various levels in the university. Therefore the third hypothesis was also not supported. This observation is inconsistent with findings that have shown that upper level students show more positive attitudes towards homosexuals (Lambert et al., 2006; Schellenberg et al., 1999; Schope and Eliason, 2000; Wills and Crawford, 2000) than lower level students. There is a clear indication from the analysis that students in all the years of study in the university have similar negative attitudes towards homosexuals in Ghana. Thus, higher year of study of students which has often been associated with improved attitudes towards homosexuality did not affect Ghanaian students' attitude towards homosexuals and this is an indication of their strong negative attitudes towards homosexuals.

## Conclusion

Overall, results of the study indicate that Ghanaian students have strong negative attitudes towards homosexuals. Moreover, with no legal position on homosexuality in Ghana, it is clear that the people do not approve of homosexuality and this might have led to findings of no differences in attitudes among all the groups towards homosexuality. Though, some civil society groups are calling for a definite law that will protect the rights of homosexuals, it appears that Ghanaians are not happy with the practice of homosexuality.

## Implications of the study

The study was limited in several ways which warrant attention. The cross-sectional nature of the study prevented the authors from making causal inferences. Secondly, the generalizability of our study findings is limited as the sample consisted of only students in Ghana Technology University College and not all students in Ghana. Data from other colleges and universities may have yielded different results. It is also not clear whether all the students who took part in the current study were heterosexuals as they were not made to indicate their sexual orientation. Future studies might examine attitudes of both homosexuals and heterosexuals towards homosexuality. Findings of this study must be interpreted within the limitations of the study.

The findings of this study have important implications for practice. The negative attitudes exhibited by the study's sample might be an indication of the people's

unpreparedness to accept homosexuals as part of the society. This warrant the need to organize programs which seek to modify these attitudes and to ensure that people of different sexual orientations feel safe in our universities and the larger society. Secondly, a qualitative design may be useful in future studies as it may provide a deeper understanding of prejudice against homosexuals. Within the Ghanaian cultural context, homosexuality is perceived as alien to the culture and heterosexuals do not want to have anything to do with homosexuals. Thus, a qualitative study may provide insights into linking cultural factors with attitudes of Ghanaians towards homosexuality. Thirdly, as most of the study's findings were inconsistent with previous findings, it is imperative that more studies are conducted in this area to establish an appropriate basis of Ghanaian students' attitudes towards homosexuals in order to promote appropriate sensitization programmes that prevents discrimination towards people involved in same sex relationships.

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