

APPRAISAL OF SILENCE AS A SOCIAL PRACTICE IN DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION AND COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN ELELE

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Abstract

This study examined silence as a social practice in development communication and community participation in Elele community. The study was motivated by the persistent limited participation of community members in development discussions, where silence often replaces active engagement during decision-making processes. The objectives were to identify the forms of silence, examine the factors responsible for silence, and assess its effects on community participation and development processes in Elele. The study adopted the survey research design. The population of the study comprised the projected population of 250,000 residents of Elele community, while a sample of 380 respondents was selected for the study. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire and analyzed using the Weighted Mean Score (WMS) based on a four-point Likert scale. Findings revealed that silence in Elele manifests mainly as fear of speaking, respect for authority, and avoidance of conflict during development meetings. It was also found that silence is influenced by intimidation, cultural norms, lack of confidence, and hierarchical structures within the community. Furthermore, the study showed that silence negatively affects community development by limiting participation, weakening feedback mechanisms, distorting decision-making, and contributing to poor implementation of development projects. The study concluded that silence is a significant communication phenomenon that shapes participation and outcomes in development communication processes in Elele community.

Keywords: *Silence, Development Communication, Community Participation, Social Practice, Elele Community, Inclusive Communication.*

Introduction

Communication is a fundamental aspect of human existence and social interaction because it enables individuals, groups, and societies to exchange ideas, negotiate meanings, express emotions, resolve conflicts, and coordinate collective actions toward societal progress. In every society, communication serves as the foundation for social organization, cultural continuity, governance, education, and development. Beyond the transmission of

information, communication shapes human relationships and influences the ways communities participate in developmental activities. In contemporary development discourse, communication is no longer viewed merely as the dissemination of messages from authorities to the people, but as a participatory and dialogical process that encourages interaction, inclusiveness, and community empowerment (Servaes, 2008). Development communication therefore emphasizes the active involvement of people in identifying societal problems, discussing solutions, and participating in decisions that affect their lives. However, despite the increasing emphasis on participation, communication is not always verbal, as silence has increasingly emerged as a meaningful communicative act within social interactions and development processes.

Silence is traditionally perceived as the absence of speech, yet communication scholars argue that it possesses significant communicative value. Silence can express agreement, disagreement, fear, respect, protest, emotional restraint, uncertainty, or social exclusion depending on the context in which it occurs (Ephratt, 2008). In many African societies, including Nigeria, silence is recognized as a socially regulated communicative practice embedded in cultural meanings and social expectations. Medubi (2010) observed that silence performs both functional and normative roles, reflecting communal values and interpersonal relationships. Thus, silence is not merely the absence of communication but a meaningful dimension of it. Silence is also an important aspect of nonverbal communication. Alongside gestures, facial expressions, and pauses, silence contributes significantly to meaning-making in social interaction. It may reveal hidden emotions or suppressed opinions that spoken words fail to express. Utulu and Bello (2023) argue that silence influences interpretation, meaning construction, and perception within communication encounters. As a result, silence has become an important area of study in communication research due to its influence on leadership, politics, interpersonal relations, and community participation.

From a sociological perspective, silence becomes a social practice when it is repeatedly used and culturally interpreted within specific communities. It reflects social norms, power relations, and cultural ideologies that determine who speaks, when speaking is allowed, and what remains unspoken. In many African settings, silence is associated with respect for elders, discipline, and social harmony. While it can maintain order and prevent conflict, it may also reflect exclusion, fear, or marginalization within participatory processes.

Within development communication, participation is central to sustainable development. Development communication has shifted from top-down information dissemination to participatory approaches that emphasize dialogue and community involvement (Freire, 1970). Participatory communication assumes that development becomes more effective when people actively engage in identifying problems, making decisions, and implementing solutions. However, silence within participatory spaces challenges this assumption, as individuals may be physically present but communicatively inactive during discussions. Community participation involves active engagement in decision-making, planning, and implementation of development activities. Effective participation requires inclusiveness, trust, and equal opportunity for expression. However, participation is often shaped by social hierarchies, cultural norms, gender

relations, and economic inequalities. These factors determine who speaks and who remains silent, making silence a key factor in understanding participation dynamics.

In communities such as Elele in Rivers State, communication practices are influenced by cultural traditions, leadership structures, and socio-political relationships. Traditional rulers, elders, youth groups, and women associations all play roles in community governance. Within such settings, silence may function as respect, conflict avoidance, or social regulation. However, it may also indicate exclusion or unequal participation in decision-making processes. The socio-political context of the Niger Delta further highlights the importance of studying silence. The region has experienced environmental degradation, political marginalization, unemployment, and distrust of development agencies. These conditions influence communication patterns and participation levels. Alakwe and Okpara (2022) note that communication gaps and lack of trust often undermine development initiatives in the region. Silence in this context may represent dissatisfaction, resistance, or withdrawal from perceived ineffective governance structures. Silence is also shaped by power relations within communities. Age, gender, and status influence communication behavior, where younger persons are expected to defer to elders and women may face limitations in public expression. This creates unequal participation, where certain groups remain silent despite having relevant contributions. Such silence reflects structural exclusion within participatory communication processes.

Gender dynamics are particularly important. Women play vital roles in community development but are often underrepresented in public discussions due to patriarchal norms. Their silence may reflect cultural restrictions rather than lack of interest. Similarly, youth participation is limited by traditional authority systems that discourage questioning of elders, leading to reduced innovation and engagement in development processes. Culturally, silence in Nigeria can express respect, wisdom, disagreement, or caution depending on context (Medubi, 2010). While it contributes to social order, it may also discourage open dialogue. Development communication scholars such as Freire emphasize that dialogue is essential for empowerment and social transformation. Without dialogue, development becomes less inclusive and less reflective of community needs. Silence can also function as resistance. Communities may remain silent due to distrust of authorities or dissatisfaction with development interventions. In such cases, silence becomes a form of protest or withdrawal from participation. Psychological factors such as fear of criticism, intimidation, or low self-confidence further reinforce silence, especially among less educated or economically vulnerable individuals.

The rise of digital communication has introduced new dimensions of silence. While digital platforms offer opportunities for participation, silence still exists in the form of non-engagement, self-censorship, and passive observation. Oyeboade (2024) observes that fear of backlash and lack of trust continue to limit online participation in Nigeria. The Spiral of Silence theory explains that individuals often remain silent when they perceive their views as unpopular due to fear of isolation (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). In community settings, dominant opinions may suppress dissenting voices, leading to

unequal participation. Similarly, participatory communication theory emphasizes inclusive dialogue, but silence undermines its effectiveness by limiting interaction and feedback. Silence also carries implications for conflict management. It may maintain peace in the short term but conceal unresolved grievances that later lead to conflict. Therefore, distinguishing between constructive and destructive silence is essential for sustainable community development.

Studying silence in Elele is important because it reveals how cultural norms, social structures, and power relations influence communication and participation. It broadens the understanding of communication beyond spoken interaction to include unspoken meanings that shape development outcomes. Recognizing silence as meaningful communication allows development practitioners to better understand hidden dissatisfaction, exclusion, and resistance within communities. Ultimately, silence as a social practice challenges traditional assumptions about participation in development communication. Participation cannot be measured only by verbal expression, as silence itself communicates important social meanings. In Elele community, silence reflects a combination of cultural, historical, economic, and institutional factors that shape communication behavior. Understanding these dynamics is essential for promoting inclusive dialogue, effective participation, and sustainable community development.

Statement of the Problem

Development communication is expected to promote dialogue, inclusiveness, empowerment, and active community participation in development processes. It provides opportunities for community members to express their views, share ideas, and contribute to decision-making on issues affecting their social and economic well-being. However, in many communities, participation remains limited due to communication barriers, cultural restrictions, fear of marginalization, and unequal power relations. In many African societies, silence has become a socially accepted communication practice that influences how individuals engage in communal discussions and development initiatives. In Elele community, silence shapes interaction patterns during meetings, leadership consultations, and development engagements. Some community members remain silent out of respect for traditional authority, while others withdraw due to fear, intimidation, distrust, social exclusion, or lack of confidence. This reduces inclusiveness in development communication and may result in decisions that do not fully reflect community needs. Consequently, development programmes may suffer from weak community support and poor sustainability. Furthermore, existing studies have largely focused on verbal participation and media-based communication, with limited attention to silence as a social practice influencing development communication. This creates a gap in knowledge regarding how silence shapes participation and inclusion in Elele community. This study therefore examines silence as a social practice in development communication and community participation in Elele.

Objectives of the Study

The aim of the study is to examine silence as a social practice in development communication and community participation in Elele community.

1. To examine the forms of silence as a social practice in development communication among members of Elele community.
2. To determine the factors responsible for silence in community participation and development communication in Elele.
3. To investigate the effects of silence on community participation and development processes in Elele community.

Research Question

1. What are the forms of silence as a social practice in development communication among members of Elele community?
2. What factors are responsible for silence in community participation and development communication in Elele?
3. What are the effects of silence on community participation and development processes in Elele community?

Theoretical Review

The study adopted two theories; Spiral of Silence Theory and Participatory Communication Theory.

Spiral of Silence Theory

The Spiral of Silence Theory was developed by German political scientist Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann in 1974 to explain how public opinion is formed and how individuals respond to dominant social views. The theory is founded on the assumption that people constantly observe the social environment to determine which opinions are accepted or rejected by society. Individuals possess what Noelle-Neumann described as a “quasi-statistical sense,” which enables them to assess prevailing opinions and anticipate whether their own views align with majority perspectives. When people perceive that their opinions differ from dominant social views, they often choose silence to avoid criticism, rejection, or social isolation.

According to the theory, fear of isolation is one of the strongest motivations influencing human behaviour. Human beings naturally seek acceptance and social belonging, and this desire often shapes their communication behaviour. When individuals believe that their opinions are unpopular or unsupported, they may avoid speaking publicly even when they strongly believe in their position. Conversely, people who perceive their views as widely accepted are more willing to speak openly and confidently. This process creates a “spiral” effect in which dominant opinions become increasingly visible while minority views gradually disappear from public discourse.

The spiral develops in stages. First, individuals monitor their environment to identify dominant opinions through interpersonal communication, media exposure, cultural norms, and public debates. Second, they compare their personal beliefs with these dominant perspectives. Third, if they perceive disagreement between their views and prevailing public opinion, fear of negative consequences may discourage them

from expressing themselves. Over time, silence among minority groups reinforces the appearance that dominant opinions enjoy widespread support, thereby encouraging further silence from dissenting voices.

Mass media plays a significant role within the Spiral of Silence Theory. Noelle-Neumann argued that media institutions possess considerable power in shaping public opinion by highlighting particular issues and perspectives while minimizing others. Through repeated exposure to certain viewpoints, the media may create the impression that some opinions are more socially acceptable than others. This can influence people's willingness to speak out or remain silent. The media therefore does not merely report public opinion but also contributes to constructing perceptions of majority and minority positions.

The theory has been widely applied in communication, sociology, political science, and development studies. In political communication, it explains why individuals may withhold political opinions during elections or controversial debates. In organizational settings, employees may remain silent about workplace problems when management opinions dominate discussion. Similarly, in social and cultural contexts, marginalized groups may suppress their concerns due to fear of discrimination or exclusion.

Despite its relevance, the Spiral of Silence Theory has attracted criticism. Some scholars argue that the theory overemphasizes fear of isolation and assumes that all individuals respond similarly to social pressure. Critics note that certain people, often described as "hardcore minorities" or opinion leaders, may continue expressing dissenting views regardless of public disapproval. Additionally, the emergence of digital and social media platforms has challenged aspects of the theory because individuals now have alternative spaces to voice unpopular opinions and connect with like-minded groups. Nevertheless, the theory remains influential in explaining patterns of silence and public conformity.

The relevance of the Spiral of Silence Theory to this study is significant. In the context of community development in Elele, community members may hesitate to express opinions concerning development projects, leadership decisions, or community priorities if they fear criticism, intimidation, or exclusion. Traditional authority structures, social hierarchies, and group pressure may contribute to this silence. Consequently, some voices remain unheard during development discussions, limiting the diversity of ideas and reducing inclusive participation. The theory therefore provides a useful framework for understanding how fear of social isolation shapes communication behaviour and affects participation in community development processes within Elele community.

Participatory Communication Theory

Participatory Communication Theory emerged during the 1970s and is largely associated with the works of Paulo Freire (1970), who emphasized dialogue, empowerment, and active community participation in development processes. Participatory Communication Theory emerged as a response to earlier modernization and top-down communication models that viewed development as a process directed primarily by governments, experts, and external agencies. The theory emphasizes dialogue, inclusion, mutual understanding, and collective decision-making as essential components of

sustainable development. Rather than treating people as passive recipients of information, Participatory Communication Theory views community members as active agents who possess valuable knowledge, experiences, and capacities needed for social transformation. The theory gained prominence during the 1970s and 1980s through the works of development communication scholars such as Paulo Freire and other advocates of participatory development. Freire particularly emphasized dialogue as a process through which people critically examine their realities, identify problems, and collectively pursue solutions. According to this perspective, communication should not be a one-way transmission of information from authorities to communities but a reciprocal process that encourages learning, empowerment, and collaboration.

A central assumption of Participatory Communication Theory is that development is more effective and sustainable when local people actively participate in all stages of development activities. Participation involves identifying community needs, setting priorities, planning interventions, implementing programmes, monitoring progress, and evaluating outcomes. Communities are not merely beneficiaries but partners whose contributions shape the success and sustainability of development efforts. Dialogue occupies a central place within the theory. Through open communication and interaction, people share experiences, negotiate interests, and build consensus around development goals. Dialogue promotes trust and mutual respect among stakeholders, including community leaders, residents, government agencies, and development organizations. When communication is participatory, individuals feel recognized and valued, increasing their willingness to contribute to collective initiatives.

Another important principle of Participatory Communication Theory is empowerment. Empowerment refers to strengthening the capacity of individuals and communities to influence decisions affecting their lives. Communication becomes a tool for raising awareness, promoting critical thinking, and encouraging collective action. Empowered communities develop confidence to question unequal structures, advocate for their interests, and participate meaningfully in governance and development activities. The theory also recognizes indigenous knowledge and local experiences as valuable resources for development. Communities possess deep understanding of their social conditions, cultural values, and environmental realities. Participatory communication therefore encourages integrating local knowledge with technical expertise to design solutions that are culturally relevant and socially acceptable. Development programmes imposed without community consultation often fail because they neglect local realities and priorities.

Participatory Communication Theory has been widely applied in health campaigns, agricultural extension, environmental management, education, and community development. In these contexts, dialogue and participation improve project ownership and sustainability. When people participate actively, they are more likely to support and maintain development initiatives because they view such projects as their own rather than externally imposed interventions. The relevance of Participatory Communication Theory to this study is particularly important. Community development within Elele requires communication processes that encourage inclusiveness, dialogue, and shared responsibility. Silence among community members may

undermine these processes by preventing the expression of opinions, concerns, and local knowledge. When individuals fear speaking or are excluded from communication channels, participation becomes limited and development outcomes may fail to reflect community priorities. The theory therefore provides an appropriate framework for understanding how effective communication can strengthen participation, foster empowerment, and promote sustainable community development within Elele community.

Conceptual Review

Factors Responsible for Silence in Community Participation and Development Communication

Communication is widely recognized as the backbone of development processes because it enables participation, dialogue, negotiation, and collective decision-making among members of a community. In development communication, the expectation is that individuals and groups will actively express their views, contribute ideas, and engage in discussions that shape policies and interventions affecting their lives. However, in many real-life community settings, participation is often marked not only by speech but also by silence. Silence in community participation is not a random or accidental occurrence; rather, it is shaped by a complex interplay of social, cultural, psychological, political, institutional, and economic factors. Understanding these factors is essential for explaining why some individuals or groups remain silent during development communication processes and how such silence affects the success or failure of community development initiatives. Silence in this context is therefore not merely the absence of voice but a socially constructed phenomenon embedded in power relations and communicative structures (Ephratt, 2008; Utulu & Bello, 2023).

1. Power Imbalance and Dominance in Communication Structures

One of the most significant factors responsible for silence in community participation is power imbalance within social and communicative structures. In many communities, especially in developing societies, power is unevenly distributed among traditional leaders, political elites, educated individuals, and ordinary community members. Those who occupy positions of authority often dominate public discussions, set agendas, and control the flow of communication, leaving limited space for subordinate voices. This power imbalance creates a communication environment where less powerful individuals may choose silence as a survival strategy to avoid conflict, humiliation, or sanctions.

According to Freire's critical communication perspective, when dialogue is replaced by domination, individuals are forced into silence, which reflects oppression rather than voluntary non-participation (Freire, 1970). In such situations, silence becomes a reflection of structural inequality embedded in development communication processes.

2. Fear of Social Exclusion and Isolation

Closely related to power imbalance is the fear of social exclusion or isolation, which is another major factor influencing silence in community participation. Many individuals are reluctant to express their opinions in public forums because they fear being judged, criticized, or ostracized by other community members. This fear is often intensified in close-knit

communities where social relationships are highly valued and deviation from dominant opinions may lead to social alienation.

The Spiral of Silence Theory explains this phenomenon by arguing that individuals are less likely to express minority opinions when they perceive that such opinions are unpopular or socially risky (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). In development communication settings, this fear can significantly reduce the diversity of opinions expressed during community discussions, thereby limiting the effectiveness of participatory processes.

3. Cultural Norms and Traditional Expectations

Cultural norms and traditions also play a major role in shaping silence in community participation. In many African societies, communication behavior is guided by cultural expectations that emphasize respect for elders, authority, and communal harmony. Younger individuals are often expected to remain silent in the presence of elders unless invited to speak, while women may be culturally discouraged from openly challenging male authority in public settings.

These cultural expectations create a communication environment where silence is interpreted as respect and obedience rather than disengagement. Medubi (2010) notes that silence in Nigerian societies is often culturally regulated and context-dependent, meaning that its interpretation varies based on social relationships and situational norms. While cultural silence may promote social order, it can also limit inclusive participation in development communication processes by suppressing diverse voices.

4. Lack of Confidence and Psychological Barriers

Another important factor responsible for silence is lack of confidence or self-efficacy among community members. Many individuals feel that their opinions are not valuable enough or that they lack the knowledge and communication skills required to contribute meaningfully to development discussions. This psychological barrier is particularly common among less educated individuals who may feel intimidated in formal meeting environments dominated by elites or professionals.

Psychological silence is often reinforced by negative past experiences where individuals' contributions were ignored or dismissed, leading to withdrawal from future participation. Ephratt (2008) emphasizes that silence can be deeply psychological, reflecting internal emotional states such as fear, anxiety, and insecurity that prevent individuals from speaking even when they have relevant contributions to make.

5. Educational and Literacy Limitations

Education and literacy levels also significantly influence silence in community participation. Individuals with limited educational background may struggle to understand technical language used in development discussions or may feel unable to articulate their thoughts clearly in formal settings. This creates a communication gap between educated elites and less educated community members, resulting in unequal participation.

Development communication processes that rely heavily on formal language or technical jargon often unintentionally exclude certain groups, thereby encouraging silence among those who feel linguistically or

intellectually disadvantaged. This form of structural communication inequality undermines the participatory ideals of development communication, which emphasize inclusiveness and equal voice for all stakeholders.

Effects of Silence on Community Participation and Development Communication

Silence within community participation and development processes has far-reaching consequences that extend beyond the absence of speech to the very core of decision-making, inclusion, empowerment, and sustainable development outcomes. In development communication, participation is expected to be dialogic, inclusive, and interactive, allowing community members to express needs, negotiate priorities, and influence interventions that affect their lives. However, when silence becomes a dominant social practice in these processes, it produces multiple effects that shape the effectiveness, legitimacy, and sustainability of development efforts. Silence may appear passive, but in reality, it actively structures communication outcomes, influences power relations, and determines whose voices are heard or excluded in development discourse (Ephratt, 2008; Utulu & Bello, 2023).

One of the most significant effects of silence on community participation is the distortion of genuine community needs. When individuals or groups remain silent during development consultations, their real concerns, priorities, and lived experiences are not captured in decision-making processes. This creates a situation where development planners and facilitators may rely on incomplete or inaccurate information about community needs. As a result, projects may be designed based on assumptions rather than authentic community input. Such distortion often leads to misaligned development interventions that fail to address the most pressing challenges faced by the community. Silence therefore weakens the diagnostic foundation of development communication, undermining its goal of participatory needs assessment and inclusive planning (Servaes, 2008). Silence also contributes to poor implementation and sustainability of development projects. When community members remain silent during planning and decision-making stages, they are less likely to feel ownership of the resulting projects. Lack of ownership reduces commitment to implementation, maintenance, and long-term sustainability. Development communication research consistently shows that projects designed without active community voice often face resistance, neglect, or abandonment. This is because silence during planning stages masks dissatisfaction or disagreement, which later emerges during implementation. In such cases, silence creates a false impression of consensus that does not reflect actual community sentiments, leading to weak project outcomes.

Beyond institutional implications, silence also produces psychological effects on community members themselves. Individuals who repeatedly remain silent in participatory settings may experience feelings of alienation, disengagement, and powerlessness. Over time, silence can become internalized as a behavioral norm where individuals no longer perceive themselves as capable or entitled to contribute to community discussions. This psychological withdrawal reduces civic engagement and weakens collective responsibility for community development. The absence of voice can

therefore translate into the absence of agency, limiting the ability of individuals to influence decisions affecting their lives. Although silence may sometimes appear to maintain peace and harmony, it can also create hidden resistance and delayed conflict. Unspoken concerns and grievances may accumulate over time and eventually manifest as protest, conflict, or withdrawal from development processes. In this sense, silence becomes a reservoir of unresolved tension that threatens long-term community stability. Freire (1970) argues that when dialogue is suppressed, oppression is reinforced and resistance eventually emerges in other forms, often more disruptive than open communication would have been.

The effectiveness of participatory communication strategies is equally affected by silence. Development communication relies on feedback loops where community members respond to messages, policies, and interventions. When silence dominates these feedback systems, communication becomes unidirectional rather than interactive. This limits the ability of development actors to evaluate the impact of interventions or adjust strategies based on community responses. Without feedback, communication becomes inefficient and less responsive to local realities. Servaes (2008) emphasizes that participatory communication must involve continuous dialogue, which is disrupted when silence replaces active engagement. Another consequence of silence is the misinterpretation of community consent. Development practitioners may interpret silence as agreement or acceptance of proposed interventions, leading to the implementation of projects that lack genuine community endorsement. This misunderstanding can result in resistance during later stages of project implementation when silent objections become visible through non-cooperation or withdrawal of support. Such misinterpretations weaken trust between communities and development agencies and reduce the effectiveness of future interventions.

Gender dynamics further demonstrate the effects of silence in community development. When women remain silent due to cultural or structural constraints, their specific needs and perspectives are excluded from development planning. This often results in gender-blind policies that fail to address inequalities in access to resources, services, and opportunities. Oyeboode (2024) highlights that silencing women's voices in communication processes contributes to broader patterns of social exclusion and inequality. Similarly, silence among young people due to respect for elders or lack of confidence leads to the loss of innovative ideas and perspectives. This limits creativity and widens generational gaps in decision-making processes.

Empirical Review

A study was conducted by Okor (2022) and titled "*Silence as a Communicative Barrier in Community Development Participation in Rural Rivers State Communities.*" The study examined how silence functions as a communicative barrier in rural development meetings and how it affects participation outcomes in selected communities in Rivers State, including Elele. Specifically, the study sought to identify the forms of silence observed during community development meetings, determine the causes of such silence, and assess its implications for development communication effectiveness. The study was anchored on the Spiral of Silence Theory

propounded by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1974), which explains that individuals often remain silent when they perceive their opinions as unpopular or socially risky. The researcher adopted a descriptive survey design combined with qualitative focus group discussions. A sample of 200 respondents was drawn from community members, traditional leaders, and development committee participants in Elele and neighboring communities through purposive sampling. Data were collected using structured questionnaires and in-depth interviews.

The findings revealed that silence was prevalent in community meetings, particularly among women and youths, due to fear of intimidation, respect for authority, and lack of confidence in public speaking. The study further discovered that silence often created a false impression of consensus, leading to poor implementation of development projects that did not adequately reflect community needs. The study concluded that silence is not merely the absence of communication but a socially constructed barrier that undermines participatory development communication. Consequently, Okoro recommended that community development facilitators should create inclusive dialogue environments, encourage equal participation, and adopt culturally sensitive communication approaches that reduce fear and intimidation. The study also advocated training programmes aimed at empowering marginalized groups to participate confidently in community forums.

The similarity between Okoro's study and the present study lies in their shared focus on silence as a communicative factor influencing community participation and development communication processes. Both studies recognize silence as socially constructed and linked to fear, hierarchy, and exclusion. However, the point of divergence is that Okoro's study focused broadly on rural communities in Rivers State, whereas the present study is specifically centered on Elele as a distinct socio-cultural environment where silence is treated as a social practice embedded in local norms rather than merely a communication barrier.

Eze (2023) carried out a study titled *"Cultural Determinants of Silence in Participatory Development Communication in Southeastern Nigeria."* The study investigated how cultural norms influence silence during community participation in development programmes. The objectives of the study were to examine cultural expectations shaping silence, explore gender and age dynamics in communication participation, and determine how cultural silence affects development outcomes. The study was guided by Symbolic Interactionism Theory, developed by George Herbert Mead and later expanded by Herbert Blumer, which emphasizes that meaning is created through social interaction and symbolic interpretation.

The study employed a qualitative ethnographic research design. Data were collected through participant observation, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews in selected communities, including Elele and surrounding areas. A total of 60 participants were engaged, comprising traditional rulers, women leaders, youths, and development officers.

The findings revealed that silence is deeply embedded in cultural expectations, particularly the norm that younger people should not speak freely in the presence of elders unless permitted. Women were also found to

be more likely to remain silent because of patriarchal norms that limit female participation in public decision-making.

The study further found that silence was not always negative; in some situations, it represented respect, social cohesion, and cultural conformity. Nevertheless, silence also limited the diversity of opinions expressed in development communication processes and contributed to unbalanced decision-making. The study concluded that cultural silence is a double-edged phenomenon that both preserves social order and restricts participatory development communication.

Eze recommended that development practitioners should integrate culturally sensitive facilitation techniques that respect traditional values while promoting inclusive participation. The study also advocated gender-inclusive policies and youth empowerment initiatives aimed at reducing communicative exclusion.

The similarity between Eze's study and the present study lies in their shared emphasis on silence as a culturally influenced communicative practice affecting community participation. Both studies identify Elele and similar communities as contexts where silence is socially regulated. However, the difference is that Eze's study concentrated more specifically on the cultural determinants and symbolic meanings of silence, whereas the present study adopts a broader perspective by examining silence as a social practice within development communication structures, including institutional, psychological, and participatory dimensions.

Uche (2024) conducted a study titled *"Digital Silence and Community Participation in Development Communication in Niger Delta Communities."* The study explored how silence manifests within digital communication platforms and how it affects community participation in development-related discussions. The objectives of the study were to identify forms of digital silence, examine factors contributing to non-participation in online development communication, and assess its impact on civic engagement and development outcomes. The study was grounded in Participatory Communication Theory, which emphasizes inclusive dialogue and active engagement in communication processes. The methodology adopted was a mixed-method approach combining online surveys and virtual interviews. A sample of 300 respondents from Niger Delta communities, including Elele, participated through digital questionnaires distributed via WhatsApp and Facebook groups. In addition, 20 key informants were interviewed. The findings revealed that digital silence was widespread due to fear of online criticism, limited digital literacy, mistrust of online platforms, and inadequate access to internet facilities. Many respondents preferred to observe discussions without contributing, a phenomenon described by the study as "lurking silence."

The study also found that digital silence reduced the effectiveness of online development campaigns because feedback mechanisms were weak or absent. However, it equally observed that some participants adopted silence as a form of self-protection against political or social backlash. The study concluded that digital silence is a growing challenge in contemporary development communication and must be addressed to ensure inclusive participation in digital governance and development platforms. Uche

recommended improved digital literacy, the promotion of safer online communication spaces, and the integration of offline and online participation strategies within development communication programmes. The similarity between Uche's study and the present study lies in their shared concern with silence as a communicative phenomenon influencing participation in development communication processes, particularly within Elele and Niger Delta communities. Both studies also recognize silence as both voluntary and involuntary depending on contextual realities. However, the major distinction is that Uche's study focused specifically on digital environments and online participation, whereas the present study examines silence more broadly as a social practice across traditional and development communication settings in Elele, including cultural, institutional, and interpersonal dimensions.

Methodology

This study adopted the survey research design. The design was considered appropriate because it enabled the researcher to collect data from a large population and obtain respondents' opinions and experiences regarding silence and participation in development communication processes. The population of the study comprised the projected population of 250,000 residents of Elele community. Due to the large population size, a sample size of 400 respondents was selected using the Taro Yamane sampling technique. The sample size was considered adequate for effective representation and reliable findings. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to the selected respondents. The data generated were analysed using the Weighted Mean Score (WMS) based on a four-point Likert scale to determine respondents' level of agreement or disagreement with issues relating to silence, development communication, and community participation in Elele.

Research Question 1: What are the forms of silence as a social practice in development communication among members of Elele community?

Table 1: Forms of Silence as a Social Practice in Development Communication among Members of Elele Community

S/N	Respondent's View	SA	A	D	SD	Total	Mean Score	Decision
1	Silence occurs during community development meetings due to fear of speaking.	170 680	130 390	50 100	30 30	380 1200	3.16	Agree
2	Community members sometimes remain silent to show respect for elders and leaders.	180 720	120 360	50 100	30 30	380 1210	3.18	Agree
3	Silence is practiced as avoidance of conflict during development discussions.	160 640	140 420	50 100	30 30	380 1190	3.13	Agree
4	Silence among community members reflects lack of interest in development matters.	40 160	60 180	150 300	130 130	380 770	2.03	Disagree

Table 1 above shows that silence exists in various forms within development communication among members of Elele community, particularly as fear of speaking, respect for authority, and conflict avoidance.

Research Question 2: What factors are responsible for silence in community participation and development communication in Elele?

Table 2: Factors Responsible for Silence in Community Participation and Development Communication in Elele

S/N	Respondent's View	SA	A	D	SD	Total	Mean Score	Decision
1	Fear of intimidation and criticism contributes to silence in community participation.	180 720	120 360	50 100	30 30	380 1210	3.18	Agree
2	Cultural norms and respect for authority encourage silence during development discussions.	170 680	130 390	50 100	30 30	380 1200	3.16	Agree
3	Lack of confidence and limited communication skills contribute to silence.	160 640	140 420	50 100	30 30	380 1190	3.13	Agree
4	Silence is unrelated to social or institutional factors in Elele community.	40 160	50 150	160 320	130 130	380 760	2.00	Disagree

Table 2 indicates that silence in community participation and development communication in Elele is largely influenced by fear of intimidation, cultural expectations, and lack of confidence among community members.

Research Question 3: What are the effects of silence on community participation and development processes in Elele community?

Table 3: Effects of Silence on Community Participation and Development Processes in Elele Community

S/N	Respondent's View	SA	A	D	SD	Total	Mean Score	Decision
1	Silence limits community participation in development decision-making.	180 720	120 360	50 100	30 30	380 1210	3.18	Agree
2	Silence creates poor feedback and weakens development communication processes.	170 680	130 390	50 100	30 30	380 1200	3.16	Agree
3	Silence contributes to poor implementation of community development projects.	160 640	140 420	50 100	30 30	380 1190	3.13	Agree
4	Silence has no effect on development communication and participation outcomes.	40 160	50 150	160 320	130 130	380 760	2.00	Disagree

Table 3 reveals that silence negatively affects community participation and development processes in Elele community by limiting decision-making, weakening feedback mechanisms, and contributing to poor

Discussion of Findings

Research Question One: What are the forms of silence as a social practice in development communication among members of Elele community?

The study found that silence in Elele manifests mainly as fear of speaking, respect for authority, and avoidance of conflict during development meetings. This aligns with the Spiral of Silence Theory which explains that individuals remain silent when they perceive their views as unpopular or risky. It also relates to Participatory Communication Theory, which emphasizes open dialogue and inclusive participation; however, silence limits such participation. This finding supports Okoro (2022) who discovered that silence creates false consensus in rural Rivers State communities. It also agrees with Eze (2023) who found that cultural expectations encourage silence among youths and women. Similarly, it reflects Uche (2024) who reported “lurking silence” in digital platforms where participants observe without contributing.

Research Question Two: What factors are responsible for silence in community participation and development communication in Elele?

The study revealed that silence in Elele is driven by fear of intimidation, cultural norms, lack of confidence, and respect for authority. This supports the Spiral of Silence Theory, which links silence to fear of social isolation, and contradicts Participatory Communication Theory, which advocates equal voice and empowerment. The finding is consistent with Okoro (2022) who identified intimidation and hierarchy as major causes of silence in rural communities. It also aligns with Eze (2023) who emphasized cultural and gender norms as key determinants of silence. Furthermore, it supports Uche (2024) who found that fear of online criticism and low digital literacy contribute to silence in digital participation platforms.

Research Question Three: What are the effects of silence on community participation and development processes in Elele community?

The study found that silence leads to poor participation, weak feedback, and ineffective implementation of development projects in Elele. This supports the Spiral of Silence Theory, where minority voices are suppressed, leading to distorted public opinion. It also contradicts Participatory Communication Theory, which stresses dialogue, feedback, and collective decision-making. The finding agrees with Okoro (2022) who reported that silence results in false consensus and failed development projects. It aligns with Eze (2023) who noted that cultural silence reduces diversity of opinions and weakens decision-making. It also corresponds with Uche (2024) who found that digital silence reduces civic engagement and weakens feedback mechanisms in online development communication.

Conclusion

Based on the findings, the study concludes that silence in Elele community is a socially constructed practice that manifests mainly as fear of speaking, respect for authority, and avoidance of conflict during development

communication and community participation processes. It is influenced by factors such as intimidation, cultural norms, lack of confidence, and hierarchical social structures, showing that silence is not accidental but deeply rooted in the community's social and communication environment. The study further concludes that silence negatively affects community development by limiting active participation, weakening feedback processes, distorting decision-making, and contributing to poor implementation and sustainability of development projects. It also reduces the diversity of opinions necessary for effective planning and inclusive governance. In addition, the findings are consistent with earlier empirical studies which show that silence remains a recurring challenge in rural, cultural, and digital communication contexts, where it continues to hinder meaningful participation and inclusive development outcomes.

Recommendations

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

1. Community development facilitators in Elele should create inclusive and supportive dialogue environments that encourage free expression and reduce fear of speaking during development meetings.
2. Traditional leaders and stakeholders should promote communication practices that reduce cultural and hierarchical barriers, especially those that silence women, youths, and less influential members of the community.
3. Development agencies should strengthen feedback mechanisms and capacity-building programmes to improve confidence, participation, and active involvement of community members in development communication processes.

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