

“I'M TIRED OF BEING A DOCTOR'S LAB RAT”: METAPHORISING INFERTILITY IN NIGERIAN ONLINE TRYING TO CONCEIVE (TTC) DISCUSSION FORUM

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Abstract

Trying to conceive (TTC), a hitherto covertly expressed experience in many cultures has been brought to the public view through open discussions on internet message boards. The kind of discursive engagements in which metaphor is seen to be constructed in these online forums is the focus of this study. Investigating the metaphorisation strategies in these discussions by TTC persons through the lens of Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Cultural Linguistics, this study discusses how participants metaphorise their experiences. The findings revealed that the physical and emotional experiences and medical procedures were constantly metaphorised in the discussions, thereby simplifying complex, often abstract medical issues to construct resilience and hope in the process of trying to conceive. The findings specifically showed that TTC is commonly metaphorically constructed as A JOURNEY, characterised by unforeseen twists, obstacles, and disappointments; a LONG SLOW PROCESS of waiting for a complex series of steps that have to align perfectly; a mental and spiritual BATTLE often fought in isolation; AN INVESTMENT, considering the emotional, physical, and financial demands, and a SHAFEFUL EXPERIENCE, due to the impression of failure and isolation TTC couples often have to face. The perceived experimental nature of assisted reproduction is also captured in the metaphorical depiction of TTC women as LABORATORY SPECIMENS, given the constant trials, monitoring and testing of different medical procedures on their bodies during fertility treatments. Other conceptual metaphorical construals include FERTILITY IS A WINDOW and MENSTRUATION IS UGLY IN TTC. The study concludes that the metaphors engender resilience and hope, and foster communal identity, as these TTC persons create shared

social space for expressing commonalities and the construction of alterity in the discourse of infertility online.

Keywords: metaphor, trying to conceive, infertility, discussion forum, emotion, discourse.

Introduction

Infertility, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO), is “a disease of the male or female reproductive system defined by the failure to achieve a pregnancy after 12 months or more of regular unprotected sexual intercourse” (<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/infertility#>). Infertility is often a stigmatised condition globally, with its impact more acute in many developing societies, such as Nigeria. While medical data shows that infertility affects men and women equally (Taebi et al., 2021, Azize Dialo 2024), Nigerian tradition often places the entire burden on women (Okonofua et al., 1997). Infertility is often associated with a feeling of shame and secrecy, which is more directed at women (Dimka and Dein 2013, Okoro 2020, Oluwole et al., 2020, Lee, et al., 2025). In many developing societies, childbearing is deeply intertwined with social identity, marital stability, and cultural legacy (Lei et al 2025, Sani 2025). The level of societal pressure experienced by infertile couples often makes the discourse of infertility shrouded in secrecy and silence. However, with the rise of the internet culture, anonymous vital spaces have been created for expression and support for people trying to conceive (TTC). Within the digital ecosystems, individuals navigating infertility find communities and platforms to articulate their experiences that remain largely unspeakable offline. Language is a powerful tool in navigating the discourse of infertility. It serves as a critical means for the negotiation of the discourse, most especially in online settings. It frames the emotional, social, and medical experiences of those trying to conceive, as they participate in online discussions. A critical linguistic tool in discussions of (in)fertility online is metaphor, which is an unconscious, cognitive means of shaping users' perceptions, and understanding of issues being discussed. Metaphors serve as a fundamental cognitive mechanism through which abstract, challenging, or sensitive experiences are structured and made sense of using more concrete terms.

Within the purview of online TTC discourse, which is often characterised by

medical unpredictability, emotional anxiety, trauma and despair, participants often deploy metaphors to frame their struggles, treatments, and aspirations in ways others can relate to (Bialkó-Marol and Benezes 2025). This study approaches the shared linguistic world of online TTC virtual communities with the goal of systematically analysing how Nigerian participants use metaphorical language to conceptualise infertility within the Nigerian worldview. This study set out to identify and interpret these recurring metaphors, with the aim of uncovering the underlying socio-cultural meanings and shared coping mechanisms prevalent within this specific digital subculture. This research therefore attempts to make sense of the nexus between discursive conceptualisations and TTC people's experience of longing for reproduction of children of their own.

Trying to conceive (TTC) Discourse

The term TTC is an acronym rooted in the rise of online, user-generated health communities, which focus mainly on fertility and are designed to provide opportunities for groups of people who are trying to get pregnant. Participants in such groups discuss their experiences and seek solutions to their infertility challenges. While it was not clear the precise time this term started being used, it gained popularity in the early 2000s (with evidence of its use on the web appearing as early as 2004) on fertility message boards and web forums (<https://shop.miracare.com/en-int/blogs/resources/ttc-meaning?country=NG>). The discourse of online TTC communities typically reflects the emotional journeys of participants, often characterised by hope, anxiety, and grief. In many cultural contexts, TTC online forums have evolved to become spaces for community support for participants (Morzy, 2012).

In Nigeria and many other developing countries, societal expectations surrounding fertility and childbearing place intense pressure on those who are trying to conceive. TTC online forums have provided avenues for such people to navigate the key subjects, such as cycle tracking and ovulation, two-week wait, medical conditions and infertility, testing and results, and assisted reproduction. TTC platforms serve as vital support systems where individuals are able to share their experiences, seek and exchange advice on fertility tracking and treatments, and find solidarity among peers away from societal stereotyping and judgment.

Literature Review

Since the migration of citizens to online spaces to seek medical consultations, thereby making cyberspace to become a significant space for navigating infertility, a great deal of scholarships, mostly in psychology sociology, and language have emerged focusing attention on how the participants negotiate the emotional and social complexities of infertility online (Ancheta 2016, Burns 2018, Johnson et al. 2019, O'Connell, et al. 2021, Taiwo and Adebayo 2022). Studies typically address the construction of social life, as well as the commitment and emotional support participants receive in such groups. For instance, Ley (2007) describes the kind of presence of commitment identified in these forums as "architecture of commitment". These sites are therefore not just for information sharing, but also for deep social and identity work. Other scholars (Johnson et al. 2019, Stenström and Winter 2023, van der Meij and Declercq 2025) investigate how women undergoing fertility treatment construct their identity and experiences on their Instagram accounts. These studies show that these women's foregrounding of individual experiences has an implicit and explicit community-building function, which consequently generates and shapes collective identities (De Rose 2016, Stenström and Winter 2021)

Central to the present study is the deployment of figurative language to construct experiences of TTC participants, which has not received much attention to date in Nigeria. Metaphors are widely recognised as essential cognitive tools that shape human understanding of complex and abstract experiences. The frequency of their employment in medical communication focuses on translating clinical concepts into relatable terms, most especially for patients, thereby helping the latter to make sense of diagnosis and treatment processes (Khoshnaw et al 2024, Semino et al 2017). In the context of infertility, however, metaphors help individuals to structure their narratives, and express their feelings and attitudes on infertility, which in many social contexts is often a topic shrouded in secrecy and taboo.

The use of metaphors, a fundamental cognitive mechanism that structures how humans understand abstract concepts through concrete experiences, has been investigated in a number of studies (Hobbs 2007, Palmer-Wackerly and Krieger (2015). Ho 2020, Kirca and Celik 2022, Vargas-Sierra 2024, Delaunay and

Gouveia 2025, Bialkol-Mrol and Benczes 2025). These studies stress that metaphors are frequently employed in the context of uncertainty and emotional distress often faced by persons trying to conceive. These metaphors are deployed to conceptualise the complex biological experiences encountered by participants in TTC forums. In a corpus-assisted study, Ho (2020) investigates how women use metaphor to frame different gestational issues across the trimesters of pregnancy, such as, foetal development, pregnancy discomforts, and birth-giving stages. The author observed that these metaphors were mixed with humour and hyperbole to convey the attitude of pregnant women towards their pregnancy discomforts. Similar to this is Kirca and Celik (2022), whose investigation reveals metaphorical depictions like a dry and fruitless tree, an empty tin can, a slowly filled lake, and a disease that is very difficult to treat. Focusing specifically on Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART), Delaunay and Gouveia (2025) explore the construction of figurative discourse in ART in Portugal with a view to understanding the influence of metaphors on users' perception and interpretation. The recurrent metaphors frame the reproductive processes, the embryo's potential, and naturalisation of the strangeness experienced during ART. The metaphors identified emerged from the interplay of biological, technological, sociocultural, personal, emotional, and conceptual factors and are deeply entrenched in cultural models. This relates to the present study which views metaphors as fundamental cognitive mechanisms that derive their structures, meaning, and power from shared values and understanding within cultural domains of the users.

Palmer-Wackerly and Krieger (2015) in a study of narratives of 22 women and men with the experience of infertility, assert that cognitively framing the infertility experience using certain metaphors is more likely to enhance personal and relational well-being. In the process of trying to make sense of the complex medical experience of infertility, people who suffer from infertility struggle to make sense of their diagnosis, while professionals also try to explain infertility to them in a socially appropriate way. Metaphors come in handy to frame understanding between people when meaning is shared and negotiated. Medical professionals use metaphors to accelerate patients' comprehension of complex medical concepts and procedures and to facilitate the ease and speed at which they can communicate with patients.

In the context of online interactions among TTC peers who congregate online to share their experiences and assist themselves to cope, metaphors are deployed as essential means for navigating the complex medical, social, and psychological realities of infertility (Palmer-Wackerly and Krieger 2015). Existing Western-based studies have identified several recurring metaphors in infertility discourse. Popular metaphors include WOMAN'S BODY IS MACHINE capable of creating life and needing repair, WOMAN'S BODY AS A WARM OVEN, in which oven represents the womb, and the "warmth" refers to the literal increase in body temperature during pregnancy due to increased blood flow and metabolic changes; TTC IS AN EMOTIONAL ROLLERCOASTER characterised by experiences of hope, excitement, depression, and frustration within the same cycle. TTC IS A CROSS TO BEAR, signalling the pain of the waiting, that has to be borne with the hope of fruitfulness; and TTC AS A WAR ZONE, in which the womb becomes the "battlefield" (Mattingly 2011, Bratic and Vukovic 2017; Kinloch 2018; DeLacey 2002; Mumford et al. 2023). These metaphorical constructions are not accidental; rather, they often open up deeper sociocultural understandings of (in)fertility, gender roles, and resilience.

While scholarly studies exist on the use of metaphors in online discourse generally and specifically on TTC blogs, these studies have largely been carried out by Western and Asian scholars. It should also be noted that in spite of the growing body of literature on the sociocultural aspects of infertility in Nigeria, systematic linguistic analysis of the metaphors used within Nigerian online TTC forums remains underexplored. This may be due to the recency of the emergence of the culture of online medical consultations in the country, which is driven by increased internet accessibility and the persistent social stigma surrounding infertility in the country. This study aims to fill this gap by identifying how specific cultural norms and experiences in Nigeria influence the construction of metaphors within the digital community of Nigerians trying to conceive.

The present study examines the linguistic landscape of digital communities of TTC participants, as it aims to identify, categorise, and analyse the prevalent metaphors utilised by participants. In addition, it describes the constructions of the complex struggles, treatments, and aspirations that go with TTC. By exploring these shared metaphorical frameworks, we seek to gain insight into

the sociocultural dynamics that shape the infertility experience in Nigeria and the unique ways language is deployed within the online community to figuratively construct them. The study will specifically provide perspectives on the cultural basis for metaphorical constructions in TTC discussion by participants and how this assists participants to make sense of their experiences within the online support group.

Methodology

This study is a qualitative one which employs the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) and Cultural Linguistics framework to explore how participants in Nigerian online TTC forums conceptualise their experiences of infertility through metaphorical language. The research aims to identify, classify, and interpret the sociocultural meanings embedded in these linguistic choices. The data for the study were elicited from a topic generated in the health section of *Nairaland Forum*, the largest English language internet forum in Nigeria. The topic is: "Trying to Conceive a Child? TTC". It was started on September 2, 2009 and has been sustained to date, running up to 3064 pages. As at the time of doing this research (January 30, 2026), this topic has acquired 5901692 views. The topic can be found at: <https://www.nairaland.com/318334/trying-conceive-child-ttc>. The thread was started by one Arlington, who described it as a thread for "women waiting for a child, who have suffered miscarriages, stillbirths and are trying to find alternative ways of having a child". Arlington's goal was to create a support system for such women until they achieved their goal. Participants in the community claimed they had received the needed support.

A purposive sampling method was used to select posts that were rich in descriptive and figurative language and which explicitly discuss the challenges, medical procedures, emotional struggles and societal pressures related to infertility. This research focused on a corpus consisting of text-based posts and comments purposively collected for this study, totaling 11,597 words. In order to systematically track metaphorical expressions, the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) was applied to the corpus, which involved reading the text and identifying lexical units, determining their contextual and basic meanings, and deciding if they contrast. The identified linguistic metaphors are the expressions whose meanings contrast with the

basic, contemporary meanings in English dictionaries. The identified metaphors were also grouped and mapped onto their underlying conceptual metaphors, describing how the specific source domains resonate with Nigerian socio-cultural norms, beliefs, and values regarding procreation, marriage, spirituality, and extended family structures.

The analysis of the data was guided by two related approaches to the study of metaphor, the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and Cultural Linguistics by Sharifian (2017). CMT sees metaphors as a fundamental cognitive tool that structures human thoughts by mapping concrete and physical experiences (source domains) onto abstract concepts (target domains). Metaphors influence how daily lives and reasoning are structured. Metaphors may be construed with respect to spatial orientations, e.g., GOOD IS UP and BAD IS DOWN or GOOD IS RIGHT and BAD IS LEFT. It could also be construed as ontological, where abstract concepts are treated as if they were physical objects, thus allowing for quantification, identification, and categorisation of the concept, such as we have in the expression *life has cheated her*, where a human attribute is given to life. Metaphor can also be structural in an instance where one complex concept is used to structure another, as in TIME IS MONEY, which maps the concrete, limited domain of money onto the abstract concept of time. This conceptualisation treats time as a valuable, finite commodity that can be saved, spent, invested, or wasted.

Cultural linguistics (CL), propounded by Sharifian Farzaed identifies how language, culture, and conceptualisation interact, and how metaphors serve as key tools that reveal society's shared values, history, and, traditions. CL demonstrates that language is not just a tool for communication, but a vehicle for storing and transmitting cultural knowledge (Farzad 2017). Metaphors represent, social, experiences and shape cognitive frameworks, such as constructing TTC as AN INVESTMENT or as SHAMEFUL. The former is based on matters involving the cost of nutritional optimisation, lifestyle changes, tracking fertility, medical check-ups, artificial reproductive technologies and other high-stakes financial spending on infertility challenges. While the latter is based on the stigma associated with infertility in some societies, such as Nigeria. Infertility, in such societies, is often not necessarily viewed as a medical issue, but as a personal, moral, or physical failure. In

analysing the data, we explored how cultural schemas, categories and metaphors shape linguistic structures and usage. Cultural metaphors are the lens through which the values that drive action within cultures are typically viewed. A combination of these two approaches provides a robust, interdisciplinary framework for studying culture-specific conceptualisations in online discussions.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents findings on metaphorical constructions in participants' discussions in the TTC forum on *Nairaland*. Findings showed that metaphors derive from the cultural context of what infertility means to participants. The study shows that seven kinds of conceptual metaphors were engaged by participants in their discussions. These metaphors were deployed to express abstract and complex concepts such as (in)fertility, women's monthly period, and medical procedures, such as assisted reproductive technologies (ART), in terms of more concrete and familiar ideas. These metaphoric construals are further discussed in the following sections.

a. TTC IS A JOURNEY

The dictionary meaning of a journey is the act of travelling from one place to another, especially in a vehicle (*Cambridge Dictionary*, 2003). Conceptualising TTC as a journey contrasts with this meaning, as it structures and reframes the complex biological, emotional, and social complexities of infertility and maps them onto a familiar, linear narrative of movement. This is the most prevalent conceptual metaphor in the discussion and other metaphors revolve around it. This conceptualisation paints the picture of the physical and emotional processes of attempting to become pregnant. For people with infertility challenges, this metaphor is used to frame the experience as a journey, sometimes characterised by unforeseen twists, obstacles, and disappointments.

Excerpt 1

As for me... I'm still ttc. Yup. After 5 failed IVFs and 3 IUIs, I had to take a mental health sabbatical (because girl, this ttc journey can humble even the strongest warriors). I needed time to heal, recalibrate, and remind myself that I'm more than just follicles and two-week waits.

Re: Anyone Trying IVF/IUI/ICSI (Fertility Treatments)? by msrhema: 5:44pm On May 16, 2025

In Excerpt 1, there is an ontological construction of TTC which personifies the idea as one that has the ability to "humble even the strongest warrior". The scenario also constructs the person trying to conceive, especially after a failed attempt, as a "wounded" person, who needs time to heal from the wound sustained as a soldier in the infertility war. The series of medical procedures involving tests, treatments, and surgical processes may be seen as psychological and sometimes physical wounds to recover from. Other wounds may include the shame experienced by TTC persons, which is societal-induced, based on the perception of infertility as personal failure.

Excerpt 2

ttc journey is not an easy one, it can drain someone both physically and emotionally. I will try to be as brief as possible.

Health > Re: Male Infertility!!! Share Your Experience/success Story. by wemmy01(m): 10:50pm On Sep 26, 2024

The TTC journey is often seen as an uneasy one which has a toll on the psychological and social well-being of people experiencing it, especially women who bear the physical and emotional burden of infertility. *Wemmy01* in Excerpt 2 describes infertility as having the capacity to "drain" TTC persons. This draining metaphor constructs the picture of infertility consuming a person's mental, emotional, and physical energy, as well as financial resources and leaving them depleted. For instance, hormonal treatment and surgical procedures and the high cost of treatments constitute significant drains on people trying to conceive. However, overall, constructing TTC as a journey keeps infertile women hopeful, patient imbued with mental endurance that they have the capacity to navigate it and one day, arrive at their destinations.

Closely related to the journey metaphor is the construction of TTC as a long slow process. This construction depicts the experiences of some couples who have to wait for many years for a complex series of steps that have to align perfectly. Women are only fertile for about six days each cycle, with the highest chance of pregnancy occurring the day before or the day of ovulation. The perceived slow process is sometimes metaphorically expressed as seen in Excerpt 3 below.

Excerpt 3

We got married in 2020. We had our plans on childbirth. We wanted

to wait for 3 months before starting a family. After those 3 months, we started trying and nothing was forth coming. It was a loonnnnnngggggg journey!

Re: Pregnancy Are You Pregnant Or Going Through A High Risk Pregnancy,,lets Talk by LagracedeDieu(f): 5:09pm On Nov 01, 2023

In Nigeria, it is the wish and prayer of most married couples to be reproductive within the first year of the marriage. Anxiety sets in after a few months of unsuccessful pregnancy. In Excerpt 3, LagracedeDieu expresses the frustration after three months of trying to conceive. The writer uses non-standard expressive orthographic symbols to convey emphasis, emotion and tone, as well as mimic conversational emotional speech.

Excerpt 4

*Hi please I need help. I don't know what else to do. I have been **ttc** for years now. I opted for assisted methods after trying for **long** and running numerous test. I did 3 iui and took in the 3rd time of the iui but miscarried at 6 weeks.*

I moved to ivf and did 2 ivf all was successful but no fetal heartbeat at 7 weeks and 13 weeks both occasions. The last miscarriage at 13 weeks was a month ago.

I did some test after the ivf but nothing was confirmed. Now I don't know what else to do.

Health > Re: Trying To Conceive A Child? TTC by Curious345: 7:51pm On Jan 01, 2025

In expressing the slowness and length of the process of trying to get pregnant, frustration is also framed in Excerpt 4. The repetition of the statement "I don't know what to do" is an expression of emotional, physical and cognitive exhaustion, which signals reaching the breaking point after a prolonged period of medical interventions. The expression is a metaphor for a dead end. The writer had to lay all the cards on the table by revealing all the past attempts at conceiving. This is an invitation for community members to guide further on how to conceive. This tendency to share deeply emotional realities of infertility, moving beyond generalities to specific details, admitting the often-suppressed stark feelings typically characterises narratives in TTC discussion forums.

Members often are not careful to express their vulnerabilities and deep personal medical details, such as fertility treatment results, sexual activities, and social pressures in order to get their desired emotional support, counselling and direction.

Excerpt 5

***ttc** is not an easy journey, wallahi. It is the most strenuous and time consuming job ever, a man(DH) doesn't have much work to do other than during ovulation ☐, but we mama have to do series of mathematics calculations from when we are having our menses, down to when our fertile days start, down to our peak day, down to B a b y d a n c i n g .*

*It is not an easy journey at all. I've been on this journey for a **long** time directly and indirectly so, believe me when I say it is really Challenging and tasking.*

Health > Re: Trying To Conceive 2024 by Shuga31(f): 11:25am On Feb 28, 2024*

In Excerpt 5, Shuga3 conceptualises TTC as "the most strenuous and time-consuming job", especially during the long waiting – a cognitively tasking job for the couple, as it involves calculations, such as cycle tracking fertility window monitoring, irregular cycle calculations, monitoring total motile sperm count, and so forth. These tasks of calculations may produce both positive and negative effects in couples. Positively, the calculations act as a stabilising force and psychological anchor, while negatively, they turn sex to a chore or medical task, rather than a pleasurable act.

TTC women have, as part of their cultural schema, calculations and tracking practices, which help them to manage their fertility. They become active "data managers" of the biological processes of their bodies. They are also conscious of the cultural categories of time and waiting. For instance, the two-week wait (2WW/TWW), which is the highly stressful interval between ovulation and the expected period, is a distinct cultural period of hyper-vigilance.

Another cultural category identified in Excerpt 5 is the "Baby dance", a euphemism for timed unprotected sexual intercourse in which sex has been metaphorised as "dancing in order to have a baby". *Baby dance* targets a woman's fertile window, thereby stripping it of its intimacy and eroticism and

making it mechanical and goal-oriented. This metaphor frames sex as an activity with the explicit intention of conceiving a child.

b. TTC IS A BATTLE

Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines a battle as "a hostile encounter between opposing military forces". This meaning however contrasts with the metaphorical construction of battle in TTC. TTC is often metaphorically conceptualised as a battle owing to its emotional, physical, and mental effects on the people going through it. It is seen as a mental battle because of the isolation and stress that come with monthly waiting and unexpected losses. For instance, the two-week wait (TWW) is often described as a time filled with stress, anxiety, and obsessive checking for symptoms.

Excerpt 6

*Hello able mama, I first want to congratulate yourself and your husband for overcoming ttc. **The battle can be demanding.** We all have been waiting for the name of the drug your husband took to increase his semen count and quality. We are all here to help each other, everyone deserves to be happy kindly share the name of the drug your husband took to save my homes looking into the Lord for children. God bless you*

Health > by OLANIYI1985: 6:12pm On Feb 02, 2022

In Excerpt 6 above, infertility is depicted as a battle, which can be demanding. In the battle however, the TTC woman is constructed as one with the ability (*the able mama*), who simultaneously has to fight from different fronts – emotionally and spiritually. The emotional battle consists of combating the cycle of hope, anticipation, and subsequent despair with each negative pregnancy test. Other emotional battles include grief, shame, loss, anxiety, social stigma and depression.

Excerpt 7

*Some of this challenges (sic) could be spiritual. That is why we have/need to be very prayerful. It is a **battle** that has to be fought against from all angle.*

Health > Re: Male Infertility!!! Share Your

Experience/success Story. by Dfynboi: 10:25 am On Jun 02, 2021

The spiritual battle arises in the context of spiritual crises, which demand faith and prayers. The spirituality angle resonates well with TTC women in the Nigerian context, where everyday challenges are attributed to the spirit world and the devil, who has to be contended with. Spiritual battles are also based on the belief that God can "open the womb" as recorded in the Bible, and even create one, when it has been lost. Fighting spiritual battles "from all angles", as indicated in Excerpt 7, involves addressing all the possible obstacles to getting pregnant, which include perceived forces of darkness and human agents. Spiritual activities include fasting with prayers, vigils, consultation of spiritualists, mountain top prayers and so forth. Within the cultural schema of battle in the context of TTC are adversaries, prayer and faith. Cultural categories in TTC as a battle include the TTC persons as fighters; the body as the force to be contended with; battle as a strategic intervention, which includes biological counter-attack; and the expected ultimate outcome (pregnancy).

c. TTC IS AN INVESTMENT

TTC, especially when it has to do with fertility treatments involving the laboratory handling of eggs, sperm, or embryos to achieve pregnancy, is often viewed as a huge investment considering the emotional, physical, and financial demands. This conceptualisation contextualises the uncertainty of conception and frames it as a deliberate, purposeful project. The investments include the physical toll of hormone injections, surgeries, dietary changes, and the strict regimens of treatment cycles, as well as the high-stakes financial cost with no guaranteed return. This metaphor frames success (pregnancy) as the "return" on investment, while failure leads to feelings of intense, compounded loss.

Excerpt 8

*Another reason why I discontinued with him is the issue of money. I'm financially ok (irony) don't get me wrong; having children is a worthwhile **investment** and If I have, I won't mind spending millions to have them.*

Re: Trying To Conceive A Child? TTC by abiop: 11:08 am On Apr 22, 2010

Excerpt 9

Problem is I'm scared of ivf failing, d cost n d pain one has to endure. I won't want to experience that type of pain for nothing as my body has a low threshold

for pain.

Re: Anyone Trying IVF/IUI/ICSI (Fertility Treatments)? by
 Godmercies: 6:57pm On Aug 30, 2014

The high emotional and financial stakes involved in Artificial Reproductive technologies validate this metaphor. ART involves disciplined efforts of following strict protocols to get pregnant. This is sometimes likened to traditional portfolio investments which require close monitoring for performance, valuation, and risk mitigation. Due to the high financial costs and intense personal hope, TTC couples often regard fertility treatment as long-term investment, with a return on the investment, which is a healthy baby. *Abiop*, in Excerpt 8, expresses the view of an average TTC person's readiness to invest in having their own children. *Godmercies* expresses the "fear of IVF failing", a real fear of the loss of investment that TTC women face. De Lacey (2002) observes that women for whom in vitro fertilisation (IVF) was unsuccessful see themselves as "gamblers" or "lottery players". This lottery metaphor is instrumental in polarising TTC women into 'winners' or 'losers' in relation to the subjectivity of motherhood.

Fertility treatment is also sometimes framed as a game of chance with calculated risks, in which pregnancy produces a "winner" and failed cycles produce a "loser". Prayers can constitute a means of protecting the investment, the "bridge" that serves as the agency when medical outcomes get out of hand. As science handles the mechanics of infertility investment, prayer is deployed to secure it.

d. INFERTILE WOMEN ARE SPECIMENS

Metaphors depicting women trying to conceive as specimen objects of medical study, or passive receptacles are prevalent in the discourse surrounding infertility, especially when it involves assisted reproductive technologies. This metaphor stems from the lived experience of patients who feel their bodies have become sites for trackable data and constant experimentation with uncertain outcomes.

Excerpt 10

Me ke *lab rat* today for students to learn oh no God help me

I was at their mercy because procedures like HSG is not something you can just jump down from the bed and run
 Health > Re: Trying To Conceive A Child? TTC by *esthel(f)*:
 11:50am On Oct 24, 2025

This conceptualisation critically depicts the experiences and emotions of women going through assisted reproduction. The idea of "lab rat" is a vivid conceptualisation of the feelings of women involved in assisted reproduction. *Esthel* expressed the desire to "jump down from the bed and run", but was constrained by the procedure, so had to be at the mercy of the gynaecologists and their students. This probably paints the picture of a teaching hospital, where student doctors are present during medical procedures as part of their training.

Excerpt 11

Please, pardon me.

I want to encourage everyone. I'm a silent follower but posting for the first time.

I ttc for 18 months and decided to see a gynae. He wanted to turn me to a lab rat. Placed me on clomid twice and on the third attempt, i left. I reacted badly to it. I cried to God to help me and he led me to @fertilecorner on IG.

Health > Re: Trying To Conceive A Child? TTC by
 GreaterGraceGG(f): 7:48am On Aug 21, 2021

The perceived experimental nature of assisted reproduction is also captured in Excerpt 11, where *GreaterGraceGG* expressed the feeling of being turned into a *lab rat* after reacting negatively to Clomid, a fertility medication used to stimulate the pituitary glands to release hormones needed to induce ovulation in women. The constant trials, monitoring and testing of different medical procedures on their bodies make these women feel that they have lost their autonomy.

Excerpt 12

We've gone from clomid, to IUI, infact am tired of being a doctors lab rat. after several options we were left with the last option 2 months ago we tried inf. 3 eggs were fertilized and transferred but NO SHOW. we've prayed, fasted and at a point i went into an "i don't care" mode. I just couldn't understand. How is it possible for some to get pregnant without hassles and some have to wait like forever.

Health > Re: Trying To Conceive A Child? TTC by Aladunni(f): 6:12pm On Oct 01, 2010

This metaphor of lab rats highlights the intense bodily experimentation, which sometimes lacks transparency, coupled with the high-stakes emotional toll involved in infertility treatments. The description implies that, the often-disempowering nature of modern fertility treatments, which subjects these women to invasive procedures, hormonal manipulations, and unpredictable outcomes, has the ultimate goal of pursuing scientific advancement and financial gain, rather than helping the women.

TTC women deliberately categorise themselves as lab rats to reflect their experience and reinforce the growing cultural and feminist critique of the medicalisation of reproduction, which treats the TTC women's bodies as something to be controlled, monitored and optimised through medical procedures (Cindoglu and Saiyan-Cengiz 2010). The cultural schema of fertility in most of the developing countries sees fertility and biological productivity as the primary cultural duty of a woman. In a childless marriage, women are more often willing to undergo experimental medical procedures due to the societal pressure they undergo in order to achieve the cultural goal of motherhood.

e. FERTILITY IS A WINDOW

A window, in its dictionary meaning, is an opening in the wall or roof that lets in air and light into a building. However, metaphorically, it means a specific limited timeframe within a woman's menstrual cycle when pregnancy is possible. This meaning is metaphoric. The metaphor of a "window" in the context of fertility is primarily used to describe the "fertile window" of a woman.

This metaphorical framing equates reproductive capacity with female gender identity, as male fertility is not characterised by any window that only opens for a few days and then closes, marking the end of the opportunity to conceive. Women have to track their menstrual cycles (through calendars, apps, or physical signs like cervical mucus) in order to optimise their chances of conception. This window concept is part of the cultural schema of the conceptualisation of a woman's body in the fertility discourse. Others include the woman's body as a machine that produces and a soil, which can be barren or productive.

Excerpt 13

Please I have a little concern. I have been ttc for 8 months now. I live in the Eastern part of the country while hubby resides in the Southern part of the country. We visit each other as least in three weeks interval. This weekend is actually my fertile window and I have plans to travel to visit hubby this weekend. Is there any thing extra I should do or eat to improve the chances of getting a positive PT result in this cycle.

Sabi mamas in the house please help.

Health > Re: Pregnancy Are You Pregnant Or Going Through A High Risk Pregnancy, lets Talk by StarryV(f): 3:16pm On Dec 15, 2021

Excerpt 14

I got married to the love of my life on 10th April, 2021 although my husband was doing as if he's not interested in babies but me i was abeg. So I guess i was the only one TTCing and since na only me know my fertile window i always journey down to visit hubby with the hope of getting pregnant. I blamed my inability to conceive on the fact that i was living far apart from hubby because of work.

Health > Re: Pregnancy Are You Pregnant Or Going Through A High Risk Pregnancy,lets Talk by StarryV(f): 1:59pm On Mar 15, 2024

While the fertility window is inherently an intimate matter between couples, it is often brought to public forums to get peer validation and

navigate the challenges of infertility. The narratives in Excerpts 13 and 14 bring up issues about couples living apart and trying to conceive. In the two cases, the women were the ones to travel to meet their husbands, a reinforcement of the societal pressure women face, which makes them look like the desperate partner. as expressed by *StarryV* in Excerpt 14. This gendered aspect of infertility in which men feel less social pressure, is the reality of the fertility challenge for women in Nigeria.

f. MENSTRUATION IS UGLY IN TTC

For women trying to conceive, menstruation is often seen as a cruel, visceral metaphor for failure, loss, and shattering of hope. It is the physical manifestation of a failed, months-long, and emotionally draining attempt to create life. This conceptualisation is expressed in the following narratives:

Excerpt 15

For one week now I've been feeling as if I'm pregnant only for my period to show its ugly face yesterday. At first I thought it was implantation bleeding that I read about with this rush I know it's my period. I don't even know what to do. I just feel like committing suicide.

Re: Trying To Conceive a Child? TTC by *Tem01*(f): 1:16 pm On Jun 03, 2011

In Excerpt 15, *Tem01*, personifies menstruation as having an "ugly face" because it represents a heartbreaking and physical confirmation that the cycle was unsuccessful. Menstruation reminds a couple about the non-occurrence of pregnancy, and this often leads to feelings of sadness, failure, and frustration. It signals a disappointing end to the "two-week wait" (TWW). In spite of the emotional toll of failure to conceive, many members of the TTC community reframe this moment as an opportunity to reset, aiming for a fresh start with the next cycle.

Excerpt 16

Seeing my menstruation every month was something I dread. Then by September 2020 when I least expect, I started looking for my menstruation I didn't see not knowing that LO (another rainbow baby) has started baking.

Health > Re: Pregnancy Are You Pregnant Or Going Through A High Risk Pregnancy,lets Talk by *Omakraid*(f): 6:45pm On Jun 13, 2021

In Excerpt 16, *Tem01* describes menstruation as "something I dread". *Aunt Flo*, as menstruation is often referred to in TTC discourse, is a metaphor for a relative (*an aunt*), who sometimes arrives when not expected or sometimes overstays her welcome. The monthly period for a person trying to conceive is often personified as an unwanted, mocking, or cruel visitor who forces her way into the home just when the person was preparing to welcome a baby. She brings with her not just blood, but grief and depression. The metaphor extends to the feeling of a woman being betrayed by her own body, an "ugly" act of sabotage where the uterus, meant to be a nurturing arena, turns into a cold space that sheds its potential, resulting in feelings of inadequacy. Menstruation makes the woman trying to conceive feel the death of a potential child and the idealised future being imagined for the next nine months.

g. TTC IS SHAMEFUL

While social pressure makes infertile women feel shameful because of the impression of failure and isolation they often have, a cultural way of constructing TTC as a shameful metaphorical is seen in the use of the Nigerian Pidgin in Excerpts 17 and 18. Using the Nigerian Pidgin, the two participants in two narratives deployed a powerful cultural metaphor that conceptualises shame as an active external force rather than an internal emotion.

Excerpt 17

I have done everything humanly possible to be a mother, na baba God hand I dey now. Make una please pray for me. If I tell una my former moniker, una go know me. But shame sef dey catch me, I no fit disclose my identity again. This is my second marriage. First one ended cos of infertility. Please don't pass without saying a word of prayer to me.

Health > Re: Pregnant After Trying To Conceive (ttc)?pls Come In To Chat/share With Others!! by *NwamakaHalie*(f): 4:17pm On Jul 10, 2022

The narrative of *NwamakaHalie* in Excerpt 17 reveals how infertility can transform women's identities and place significant strain on marital relationships. For the participant, infertility has challenged her sense of self, making her feel that the infertile label has made her to become

unknown by others and cost her the first marriage. The expression *shame sef dey catch me* is a depiction of the overwhelming embarrassment experienced by the commenter. A similar expression is used by *Omojudy* in Excerpt 18 below.

Excerpt 18

I understand sis. Na so many people no fit imagine if even if na 300k. shame dey catch me to talk about my babies self with one friend who runs a small provision shop who was ttc together with me after I did ivf. She once said to me "if I get money now, I for try wetin you do".

Health > Re: Anyone Trying IVF/IUI/ICSI (Fertility Treatments)? By Omojudy: 2:56 pm On Sep 21, 2021

Shame (sef) dey catch me personifies shame as an external force that can "grab" a person and force the person into a state of humiliation. This metaphor depicts the helpless state of TTC women, which does not stop even after they have achieved pregnancy, especially when they engage in assisted reproductive technologies like IVF. *Omojudy* narrates her experience of the inability to disclose to people that she did IVF. In many cultures in Sub-Saharan Africa, genetic and blood ties are prioritised and non-coital laboratory-based reproduction is seen as an unnatural means that carries immense social stigma due to religious and cultural beliefs.

Due to the general societal view that ties couples' worth to natural biological parenthood, couples who are trying or have tried IVF and other artificial reproductive technologies often keep it secret to avoid gossip, societal judgement and stigma.

The use of metaphors to construct experiences and feelings in TTC boards is just another means for participants to simplify the complex medical issues that surround infertility discussions. The prevalence of the journey metaphor is an indication of participants' perception of biological failure as a purposeful process where setbacks are considered normal, rather than definitive. This gives the courage to continue the journey with the hope of getting to the expected destination. This metaphor depicts TTC persons as explorers experiencing challenges which they need to fix to continue with the journey. The journey metaphor creates a shared experience of people on a journey, on the same

road/path in which each member alights at their different "bus stops" - the point at which they achieve pregnancy. TTC community discourse shows that some TTC women, even after "arriving at their destinations" either deliberately remain on the platform or visit to guide others on how best to navigate the journey to pregnancy.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated how participants in TTC boards construct their experiences through the use of metaphors. These experiences include their emotional struggles, investments in medical procedures and the role others play in their process of trying to conceive. Their use of metaphors helps them psychologically to cope with the infertility experience. These metaphors were observed in this study to serve as a bridge between their clinical experiences and the often-personal secret and tabooed experiences. The metaphors have also engendered resilience and hope, as well as fostered communal identity, as they create shared social space for expressing commonalities and the construction of alterity in the discourse of infertility online.

The study has also identified how online forums serve as safe havens for TTC subjects to move from social exclusion and form strong intimate group solidarity where they can construct alterity by building alternative public spheres, which exclude persons outside the infertility experience. TTC persons have developed their own digital counterpublic spaces, where media, language and communities are engaging metaphors to debate and circulate ideas on infertility outside of the prejudices of the dominant Nigerian culture.

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