



Age And Gender Differentials in Body Image Perception Among Nigerian Samples

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Abstract

The thought about body image is a normative developmental task that cuts across different age groups. While some may be satisfied with their body, others may get trapped in the negative thoughts about their bodies and may become dissatisfied. To probe this phenomenon, the study examined ages and gender differentials in body image perception among $N = 270$ participants selected from Awka metropolis, Anambra state Nigeria. Their gender consists of male = 137, 50.7% and female = 133, 49.3%. Three different age groups were selected: adolescents consisted of $n = 90$ participants whose age ranged from 14-18 years, early adults $n = 90$, 22-37 years and middle adults $n = 90$, 40-55. Body self-image questionnaire was used for data collection. The design of the study was cross-sectional survey, and one way Analysis of variance was used for data analyses. The results showed mean scores and standard deviation of the groups (adolescents, $m = 123.5778$, $sd = 14.5$; early adults $m = 130.1333$, $sd = 14.26$; middle $m = 127.5222$, $sd = 13.39$). The ANOVA summary results showed that body image concern was significant at all age groups at $F(df 2; 269) = F 6.279$, $P = .002$. However, there was no gender difference in body image perception. Based on the findings of the study, the researchers recommended measures that will reduce body image dissatisfaction and increase self-esteem, well-being and social approval and optimum cognitive functioning.

KEYWORDS: Age Differential, Gender, Body Image, Perception, Dissatisfaction

Introduction

Critical observations showed that large percentage of Nigerians engage in behaviours aimed at improving their body images. The behaviours cut across different age brackets especially from adolescence to middle adulthood stages (Olumide, 2016; WHO 2019). While some behaviours are normal, others may be negative. Such negative behaviors may range from excessive use of body whitening cream and soaps, insertion of silicon in the breasts, use of waist pad, use of tattoo, spray of colour on the head, multiple piercing of nose, ear and mouth, wearing of multiple nose rings, anklets, enlargement of the penis, use of vaginal tightening lubricants, enlargement of the hip and plastic surgery. The increasing usage of such products may be pointers to body image dissatisfaction among users (Gottario, 2013). Olumide (2013) found that such behaviour has both short and long-term impact on psychosocial stability and cognitive wellbeing. This finding was collaborated by World Health Organization (2019), which asserted that excessive use body whitening cream may negatively affect kidney and other vital human organs.

Body dissatisfaction informs engagement in behaviour that people involved erroneously have the impression that it will improve their body image and physique (Olumide, 2016; Piaget, 1954). World Health Organization (2019) maintained that enhancement of sexual attraction and self-satisfaction motivates use of body whitening substances and other related negative activities. How satisfied an individual feels about his/her body is critical to self-efficacy, self-esteem, socio-emotional functioning and general well-being (WHO, 2019). Body image appraisal may be related to interpersonal relationship, intrapersonal harmony and goal achievement. This may be

due to the fact that body image is about self-evaluation and self is at the center of individual cognitive stability. Blurred cognitive appraisal of physical appearance affects self and impairs the individual health and psychological well-being. The cognitive impairment may be responsible for the sustained usage of whitening cream and aversive substances on the body despite the well-known short-term and long-term consequences (Johansson, Marcusson & Wressle, 2015).

Worrisomely, the behaviour has gained traction globally. Literature showed that people from different climes engage in body whitening and adopt different psychologically soothing names (for example, body toning, colour enhancement, organic) that will help in reducing the aversive nature of the behaviour. The use of pseudo names in its description helps to assuage cognitive conflicts (Festinger, 1954). WHO (2019) averred that 25-80% of African women use bleaching cream, while more than half of Indians use it. The prevalence is high because it cuts across different ages. Other scholars have found paradigm shift in the gender variable of body image dissatisfaction (Dlova, et al, 2015; Lester, et al 2016; Olumide, 2016). The high prevalence may be described as a mirror of the level of low self-esteem and self-worth of the people engaging in this behaviour. The perception of self-determines how an individual assesses themselves. Different research findings confirmed that what an individual thinks about themselves is critical to the manifestation of various forms of psychopathologies such as shyness, aggression, social anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, psycho-somatic symptoms, among others (Nwafor, et al., 2016; Ugwu, et al., 2020).

The type of body image improvement approaches an individual adopts often depends on affordability, age group, and gender (WHO, 2019). Observation has shown that while insertion of silicon in the breast may be a preoccupation of middle and early

adult women whose breasts have sagged, use of waist pad may be common among adolescents and early adult females, use of cream or medicine that grows bears may be prevalent among adolescents and early adult men, wearing of anklet cuts across women from early and middle adult women. Adolescents, early and middle adult women engage in multiple ear and nose rings piercing. Anorexia and bulimia nervosa seem prevalent at adolescents in both genders. Drawing of tattoos on the body is common in both genders and engaged by all from adolescents to late adults (Ackerman, 2021; Markey & Gillen, 2011). Due to the increasing availability and influence of social media, people tend to model any behaviour or body built that is labeled as the ideal body so as to feel belonged in the trendy world set by the social media. The labeled ideal body image is emulated irrespective of consequences.

According to Harris and Orth (2019) in-group conformity enhances subjective well-being, peer acceptance, confidence, self esteem, interpersonal relationship, and goal achievement. On the other hand, reduces anxiety, depression, shame and guilt. Hence, may be a reason for the increase in above listed negative body image enhancement approaches. When people see themselves as not looking as good as other group members or age mates; the thoughts of what to do to become like them emanates. This is in tandem with culturally labeled ideal body. Social media and other advertisement channels promote excessively the ideal body. Thus, exposes and instills acute body inadequacy to people who think that their bodies are not as good as the one advertised in the media. For examples, Africans perceive person with fair complexion as beautiful and handsome. Therefore, people that are dark in complexion may start using whitening body cream and soap to conform to socially labeled ideal body in the society. However, some people may not be influenced by the social labeling to engage in such negative behaviours irrespective of their complexion. The social labeling may cause body image dissatisfaction in some people.

The role of mass media in portraying body height and weight as the ideal contribute substantially to the existing body image dissatisfaction (Grabe, Ward & Hyde, 2008). Different mass media platforms are readily available to Nigerians of all ages, which shape peoples' opinion and influence their behaviours. Before the advent of social media, magazines, television, radio were the mainstay. But, currently, there are social media sites (eg snap chat, instagram) that dedicate their platform for pictures and videos. In such websites, thin body is glowingly praised as beautiful and sexy (Kwom, 2020). Such scenario activates social comparison and when an individual's body is not in tandem with ideal body, dissatisfaction erupts. The body dissatisfaction has consequences for several psychological functioning such as: development of mood disorder, depression, eating disorder, and engagement in other body altering behaviours (use of body whitening cream, enlargement of penis, hip, multiple piercing of nose, tongue and ear and wearing of anklet) (Ackerman, 2021).

Review of Related Theories

In a vigorous attempt to explain the importance of body image perception, socio-meter theory was reviewed (Leary & Downs, 1995; Leary, Tambor, Terdal & Downs, 1995). The theory was propounded by Leary, Tambor, Terdal and Downs, (1995). It postulated that self-esteem is a product of approval from others and serves as a gauge of interpersonal relationship. It further maintained that self-esteem monitors the extent of social acceptance an individual enjoys in their in-group and notifies them of any threat to belongingness to the social group that may arise. The approval results from the level of conformity to expected normative behaviours among the in-group. The theory further emphasized that self-esteem is used as a psychological assessment tool for acceptability or otherwise of individual among their people (Kirkpatrick & Ellis, 2001). From the tenet of this theory, one may assert that self-esteem need and

quest to belong to social group(s) predispose people into use of different negative body image enhancement approaches. For example, ladies that undergo hip enlargement processes are to be seen as beautiful and grown. With the tag of beauty to high-hip young ladies, ladies without heavy hips will be forced to do it in order to feel belonged to the group.

In the same vein, about seven decades ago, Leon Festinger conceptualized social comparison theory, which explained that human beings have innate tendency to compare themselves to other people in their environment. In the course of the evaluation in relation to others in the individual's ecology, a lot of judgments are made (Festinger, 1954). Such comparison cuts across different facets of peoples' lives including: body image, attitudes, belief systems, ideas, traits, and social competence. Festinger (1954) further asserted that social comparison is done in two ways: upward comparison (the tendency of an individual to compare themselves to an individual that is believed to be better than them) and downward comparison (the tendency of an individual to compare themselves to a person that they believe are better off). According to Festinger, upward comparison has the potential to expose individuals to psychological distress while downward evaluation has psychological-soothing potentials. This may be because an attempt to evaluate ourselves with people whom we believe are better than us can make us think of ourselves as failures. It is the core belief of this theory that the image an individual holds of his body emanates from evaluation in relation to other people. Previous studies in body image concerns were centered on adolescents and early adults. The over concentration of previous empirical studies on adolescents was due to long-held view that one of the problems of adolescents is body image dissatisfaction (Gillen & Markey, 2016; Wertheim, Paxton, & Blaney, 2009).

In an attempt to ascertain the impact of body image dissatisfaction on different domains of human functioning, some previous empirical studies were reviewed. Studies of adolescents' body image concerns by Gattario (2013) found multiple results related to adolescents' body image perception. Study one, which compared 887 Swedish and 358 Argentinean adolescents' body image found that they were the same in their body esteem. Study two compared 758 Swedish adolescents' gender differences on body mass index, body ideal internalization, pubertal timing, peer appearance teasing, and weight loss attempts. The results showed that the body image perception in relation to the predictive factors were more prevalent in girls. In study three, the researcher examined relationship between adolescents' positive body image perception and exercise influence of family and friends on body image. The result showed that positive perception of body image enhances exercise, wellbeing and engagement on health-promoting behaviour. The result further indicated that family and friends played significant roles in positive perception of body image.

Meland, Haugland and Breidblik (2007) studied relationship between adolescents' perceived negative health and body image as moderated by age and gender among 5026 pupils whose ages ranged from 11, 13, and 15 years. The results showed that girls were more likely to report negative health than boys and likely to increase with age. Girls and older age groups reported dieting and dissatisfaction with weight and appearance more often than boys. They further found that body dissatisfaction was related to an increased risk of perceived negative health and behaviour.

Wallis (2005) examined the role of social media on the body satisfaction of adolescents and early adults in online survey conducted among 357 participants whose ages ranged from 14-18 adolescents and 19-25 early adults. The results revealed that participants who accessed their social media accounts frequently daily were more

likely to engage in social comparison behaviour to models and peers. It further showed that the more people compare themselves with models and peers, the higher the tendencies for body dissatisfaction. Younger participants were more satisfied with their body than older participants.

Present Study

In a bid to ascertain this behaviour development trajectory, the current study conceptualized age into three levels: adolescents, early adults and middle adults. Samples were drawn from the three age brackets for the study. This study is important given the increasing engagement in behaviours that have potential for short and long-term adversities (Olumide, 2016; WHO, 2016). Ascertaining the age, which body image concern is prevalent will be helpful in concentrating psychological resources within the age bracket. This is due to the fact that body image perception is intricately related to self-esteem, resilience, social participation, and well-being (Ackerman, 2021; Johansson, Marcusson, & Wressle, 2015; Markey & Gillen, 2011).

Hypotheses

- (1) There will be significant age differences in body image perception among adolescents, early adults, and middle adults' participants in the study.
- (2) There will be significant gender differences in body image perception among adolescents, early adults, and middle adults' participants in the study.

Method and Materials

Participants

A total of two hundred and seventy (270) participants were selected for the study. Their gender consisted of male (137, 50.7%) and female (133, 49.3%). Ninety (90) adolescents were selected from two secondary schools and their age ranged from 14-18 years. Ninety (90) early adult participants were selected from final year undergraduate students of two departments in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State and their ages ranged from 22-37 years. The third group also, ninety (90) middle adults whose ages ranged from 40-55 years were selected from workforce of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka and Jerome Udoji state secretariat, Awka, Anambra state.

Instrument

One instrument was used for the study, namely body self-image questionnaire. Body Self Image Questionnaire has 39 items questionnaire originally developed by Baugartner and colleagues but calibrated and validated by Chung and Baugartner (2005). It assesses how people perceive their bodies and it is scored in 5-point likert response pattern 1 = Not at all True of Myself, 2 = Slightly True of Myself, 3 = About Halfway true of Myself, 4 = Mostly True of Myself, 5 = Completely True of Myself. Pilot study of the instrument conducted yielded Cronbach Alpha coefficient of 0.72. The questionnaire was administered in English language.

Procedure

The participants were selected in three phases. The first group, adolescent participants were selected from two senior secondary schools in Awka metropolis. The principals of the two secondary school granted approval for the study and assigned a staff of the

schools to assist the researchers. The written consents of all the participants were obtained before the administration of the questionnaires. They were addressed in a group where the intention of the researchers and how to fill the questionnaires explained. The second group, early adult participants were final year students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. The approval for the study was obtained from Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. The participants were addressed in lecture halls in group where the researchers explained the pattern of response to the participants. Oral consents were obtained from participants before administration of questionnaire. The third group, middle adult participants were selected from workers of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka and workers from Anambra state secretariat, Awka. Participants in this group were selected upon affirming that their ages ranged from 40-60 years of age. The meaning and purposes of the study was explained to the selected participants individually.

Design and Statistics

The study adopted cross-sectional survey design and One-Way Analysis of Variance statistics was used to analyze the data.

Results

Table 1

Mean and Standard Deviation of Age and Gender Differences in Body Image Perception

<i>Factors</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>St. D.</i>
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AGE

Adol	90	123,5778	14.51923
Early	90	130.1333	11.26813
Middle	90	128.8556	13.41772

GENDER

Male

Adol	47	121.70	16.09
Early	45	130.42	11.83
Middle	45	129.22	12.19
Total Male	137	127.12	14.01

Female

Adol	43	125.63	12.44
Early	45	129.84	10.80
Middle	45	128.49	14.67
Total Female	133	128.03	12.77

The table one showing mean and standard deviation scores among the three age groups and gender. Adolescents mean = 123.58, standard deviation =14.52. Early adults mean =130.13, standard deviation =11.27. Middle adults mean =128.86, standard deviation =13.5. On the other hand, there is no gender mean differences total male mean = 127.12 and total female mean is 128.03.

Table 2

Summary of the gender and age differences in body image perception

ANOVA Factors	Sum of Square	df	Mean Square	F	Sig
Gender	51.240	1	51.240	.296	.587
Age	9192.39	25	367.70	2.58	.000
Gender*Age	7605.04	16	437.82	3.07	.000

One Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted and the result showed that there were age differences in the participants perception of body image $F(2, 267) = 6.30, P = 0.1$. The results of the scheffe post-hoc analyses showed that there were significant mean differences between adolescents and early adults mean difference = - 6.56, standard error = 1.96, $P = .01$. Such that early adults have a significant higher (mean = 130.13, Standard deviation = 11.26) than adolescents (mean = 123.58, standard deviation = 14.52). Similarly, middle adults have a significant higher mean than adolescents (mean difference = -5.28, standard error = 1.96, $P = .03$). The mean score for middle adult (mean score =128.86, standard deviation = 13.4) than adolescents. However, the result further showed that there were no significant differences in body image perception between early and middle adulthood stages (mean difference = -1.28, standard error = 1.9, $P = .81$). The results further showed no significant gender differences in body image perception male ($m = 127.12$) and female ($m = 128.03$), $F = .296, Sig = .587$.

Discussion

The study compared age differences among three stages of human development trajectory (adolescence, early adulthood and middle adulthood) on self-body image perception. The study ascertained the stage at which self-body image concern was more prevalent. The results of the study showed that there were significant mean differences in the three stages of human development compared. It revealed that body image concerns were more prevalent at adolescence than early and middle adulthood stages. Though, the result did not show significant differences between early and middle adulthood stages.

The result of the study is at variance with Peck (1969) model of human development, which expanded Erikson's psychosocial theory of human development. The theory has three stages namely: (1) role preoccupation vs role transcendence, (2) body preoccupation vs body transcendence, (3) ego preoccupation vs ego transcendence. According to Peck, in human developmental trajectory, there is a time especially from middle adulthood stage when the second stage of the model (body preoccupation vs body transcendence) manifest. The theory maintained that people have the tendency to experience worry and become dissatisfied with their body. Given the tenet of the model about body preoccupation, does it mean that Nigerian adults, which are represented by the samples in this study achieve body transcendence milestone?

However, findings have confirmed the previous empirical studies (Gottario, 2013; Meland, Haugland & Breidblik, 2007; Wallis, 2005) which found that body image concern is adolescence stage problem. Previous work in body image dissatisfaction, which were mostly focused on adolescents (Gottario, 2013; Meland, Haugland & Breidblik, 2007; Wallis, 2005) compared adolescents and early adults, and found that

adolescents were more preoccupied than early adults. Adolescents' higher body image dissatisfaction may be due to level of cognitive development at the stage (Piaget, 1954). According to social comparison theory, (Festinger, 1954) the more people compare themselves to others especially upwardly, the tendency to develop self body dissatisfaction. Such comparison and attempt to become better than others maybe one of the underlining causes of pathological behaviour as enumerated above. In the same vein, this work is in tandem with socio-meter theory (Leary, Tambor, Terdal & Downs, 1995), which averred that dissatisfaction results from inability to secure social approval from others. The theory further maintained that self esteem is intricately related to social approval. In other to seek approval, adolescents may resort to ruminating thought and self-defeating thought on self-evaluation. In a situation where approval is not obtained, dissatisfaction sets in (Leary, Tambor, Terdal & Downs, 1995).

On the other hand, the results further showed no gender differences among the three stages evaluated. At adolescence, both boys and girls manifest similar view about their body image. This finding is important to understanding adolescents and managing them effectively. Similarly, both genders have same body image perception at early adulthood (22 -37 years of age). In middle adulthood (40 -55 years of age) there is no gender difference in body image perception. This finding is in tandem with some previous studies (Gillen & Markey, 2016; Gottario, 2013; Meland, Haugland & Breidblik, 2007; Wertheim, Paxton, & Blaney, 2009).

Implications of the findings: The results of this study have shown the critical nature of body image in human lifespan. It buttresses that body image concern is a lifelong phenomenon. This line of thought was corroborated by Wallis (2005) in a comparative

study of adolescents and early adults. The study has both theoretical and practical implications.

Theoretically, the findings have yielded more empirical data to this area of knowledge. It has equally disproved Peck's (1968) advancement of Erikson theory of human development. An erroneous and long held view that body preoccupation is an experience that emerges from middle adulthood. The result showed that even at adolescence, some people are already dissatisfied with their body self-image. This study has expanded the frontier of body dissatisfaction given the effort in comparing three different ages (adolescents, early adults and middle adults).

Practically, the lifelong perspective of body image factor entails that human beings continue to pay attention to their body self-image. Though, result showed that body image dissatisfaction is prevalent at adolescence, which may emanate from negative comparison and unhealthy seek for social approval that does not always come the way of adolescents among peers.

Conclusion

Based on the outcome of this study, the researchers posit that body image concern is a lifelong, though prevalent at adolescence period. The research is critical to understanding the trendy phenomenon of body image perception and its attendant consequences across lifespan but restricted in this study to three age groups (adolescence, early adulthood and middle adulthood stages). One of the benefits of the study is that psychologists and therapists will utilize the findings in handling psychological issues that may arise from body image concerns across the three age groups explored. Given the relationship between approval and body image outcome (Leary, Tambor, Terdal & Downs, 1995), body image dissatisfaction and manifestation

of psychopathologies such as: anxiety, low self esteem, depression, bulimia and anorexia nervosa (Johansson, Marcusson & Wressle, 2015; Leary & Downs, 1995; Olumide, 2016) entails the need for psychologist to pay critical attention to overt and covert signs of body image dissatisfaction. In fashioning intervention, intrapersonal evaluation, belonging need and social support network should be considered.

Additionally, cognition is important domain necessary for reorientation (Piaget, 1954). An individual ability to understand that individual differences principle makes it difficult for everybody to look the same will be helpful in reducing self dissatisfaction (Murphy, Straebler, Cooper & Fairburn, 2010). It will equally help in making people understand that social media labeling/ stereotyping of ideal body is an advertisement meant to promote businesses.

Declaration of interest statement

The authors declare that there is conflict of interest.

Funding

No funding was obtained for the study.

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