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Family and Peer Influences as Predictors of Body-Image Insecurity among Secondary School Adolescents

Oluokun, Temitayo Abimbola; Adeleye, Adeolu Akintunde; & Fehintola Victor Ayodeji

Department of Educational Psychology, Federal College of Education (Special), Oyo.
Corresponding Author: oluokuntemitayo@gmail.com
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Abstract

This study was undertaken to investigate the correlation of family attitude to children, peer relationships and body image insecurity among secondary school adolescents in Cross River State. Correlational survey design was adopted as two research questions and two hypotheses were presented to guide the study. The independent variables include family attitude to children and peer relationships while the dependent variable is body-image insecurity. Data were collected using the researcher constructed Adolescent Body-Image Security Status Questionnaire (ABISSQ). The instrument was validated by experts both in the Educational Psychology and Measurement and Evaluation units. Cronbach Alpha reliability estimate method was adopted to establish the reliability of the instrument. A sample size of three hundred and eighty-six (386) students from 11,702 Senior Secondary School 2 (SSS 2) and one hundred and sixty-nine (169) schools from two hundred and ninety-four public secondary schools in Cross River State were selected into the study using the stratified random sampling technique. Independent t-test and Simple Regression Analysis were used to test the two hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance. Results from the study indicated that both family attitude towards children and peer relationships had significant contribution in predicting body-image security status of adolescents in Cross River State. In view of this, it was recommended among others that schools should be intentional in teaching students the art of developing empathy in relating with other. This will help in fostering the building of deeper, more trusting and more meaningful relationship with themselves thereby enhancing better learning outcome among the adolescents. By so doing, this would help alleviate the psychological burden these adolescents bear in order to ensure the development of emotionally competent and mentally healthy adolescents with positive body-image security status in public secondary schools in Cross River State.

Keywords: Attitude of family to children, Peer relationships, Body image insecurity, Adolescent and Secondary schools

Introduction

As adolescents transition from childhood into adulthood, usually between ages 10 and 19 years, they experience significant and intense physical, emotional, cognitive and social changes (Ukpong, 2020). Biological changes in this regard refers to the development of primary and secondary sex characteristics, rapid growth spurts in height and weight. Cognitive changes reveal an increase in adolescents' ability to reflect on either their own or their friends' bodily changes while social changes are demonstrated by their affinity towards their peers and the media (traditional and social) which predisposes them to interacting with the media body ideals, comparison of the way they appear with those depicted by the media as well as comments what makes for the ideal body appearance (Maes, Trekels, Tylka & Vandenbosch, 2021).

Before the media crept in and took over our air space, different cultures and societies had their beauty ideals. For example, what represents beauty for the Maasai tribe who predominantly live in Kenyan and Tanzania in East Africa comprises intricate adornment whereas, scarification patterns are some of the major beauty ideals of the Yoruba ethnic group from Southwest, Nigeria (Balogun, et al., 2024; Balogun, 2023). Ancient Philosophers like Socrates, Plato and Aristotle analyzed beauty from their individual perspective thereby making the concept more of a subjective than an objective term (Gbadebo, 2011). For instance, Plato described beauty as something that is in order; a quality of a thing that is symmetrical which provokes desire in the pleasure it excites.

However, with the evolving and pervasive influence of the media, the narrative of beauty ideals has been forced to become more subjective than ever, thereby, setting narrower standards across board on the global platform as dictated by the Western world. For the male folds, the ideal beauty standard includes being tall, with well-toned muscles, broad-chested as well as having six-packs while in the female category, the lady must have slim body and plump breast, shapely legs and in some instances, perfectly rounded buttocks which in many instances are viewed by these adolescents following their editing which is especially common with Instagram users (Gradesfixer, 2023).

Body image refers to perceptions, feelings and attitudes individuals have about their physical appearance. Rush and Brazier (2024) describe it as how an individual sees their body and their feelings with this perception. The perception of one's body image can either be positive or negative. Positive body image among others is characterized by having a sense of confidence in one's appearance, acceptance of ongoing changes in one's physical body as well as resilience against unrealistic beauty standards while negative body image is characterized among others by frequent checking on one's body, constant validation seeking as well as thinking or actually seeking changes to one's physical appearance usually through surgical procedure (Jaliman,

2024).

Following their increased interaction with the media, be it social or traditional, the awareness of what ideal body is, becomes more entrenched in their psyche. As a result, they begin to make comparison of their own body with the ideal beauty standard set by the society and propagated by the media, their peers as well as those close to them. As long as their perceived body image falls within the ideal standard, the perception of their body image will remain intact and positive. However, if on the other hand, the perception they have of their body falls below the ideal standard, their perception of their body image will begin tilting to the negative. This negative perception of their body image creates a feeling of inadequacy particularly among adolescents whose physical bodies are going through continuous changes and their minds going through maturation process. With all these that the adolescent may be facing, the family, which is one of the strongest agents of socialization presents opportunity to help stabilize the adolescent if their roles are well played as well as the quality of relationship adolescents develop with their peers.

Needless to say, the family, one of the strongest agents of socialization has the important role in giving psychological stability to the child. The term family is defined as a group of persons united by the ties of marriage, blood or adoption, constituting a single household and interacting with each other in their respective social positions, usually those of spouses, parents, children and siblings (Alburkani, 2024). The purpose of the family is to maintain the well-being of its members and of society. The most important function of the family is the provision of emotional and psychological security, particularly through the warmth, love and companionship that living together generates between spouses and in turn between them and their children. Rodgers et al. (2024) revealed that, although parents in the family are key players in the socialization process of children, there seems to be a dearth of programmes available to help position and involve them in this intervention through the identification of major domains to enable patents address the body image concerns of their adolescents.

Apart from the family, relationship of adolescents with their peers is another strong agent of socialization. As adolescents transition into adulthood, their affinity to their peers become stronger as observed by changes that culminate into romantic relationships (Demaria et al., 2024). Unfortunately, some adolescents are often teased by their peers based on some physical attributes of these adolescents, thereby negatively affecting the way these adolescents perceive themselves. Relating with peers by adolescents is important in the daily activities which enables them develop different social skills (Wang et al., 2024). Negative peer relationships like social pressure regarding appearance tend to incline adolescents into unwholesome behavioural practices that could be detrimental to their overall well-being (Chng & Fassnacht, 2016). This is why Thompson et al's, (2002) Tripartite Influence Model of Body Image proposed that the three socio-cultural forces of family, peer and media have a strong influence on body image.

Purpose of the study

The main purpose of this study was to examine the relationship of family and peer influences as predictors of body image insecurity among secondary school adolescents in Cross River State, Nigeria. Specifically, this study sought to determine how

i. family attitude towards children influences body-image insecurity among adolescents in secondary schools.
ii. peer relationship predicts body-image insecurity among adolescents in secondary schools.

Statement of hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were formulated to guide the study:

i. Family attitude towards children does not significantly influence body-image insecurity among adolescents in secondary schools.
ii. Peer relationship does not significantly predict body-image insecurity among adolescents in secondary schools.

METHODS

The study adopted a correlational survey research design. Correlational design aims at examining the relationships between or among two or more variables in a single group, which can occur at several levels. It is a type of non-experimental design that examines the relationship between two or more variable. This design does not test the cause-and-effect relationship but rather investigates the relationship between variables without the researcher controlling or manipulating any of them. In correlational design, there is the descriptive correlational design in which the researcher seeks to describe the relationship among variables without attempting to infer causal relationship. There is also the predictive correlational which examines causal relationships between the variables. For the purpose of this study, the researchers adopted the descriptive correlational survey design which seeks to examine the degree of relationship that exists among variables (Devi, Devi, Pradhan, Giri, Lepcha & Basnet, 2022).

The population of this study comprised 11,702 Senior Secondary School 2 (SSS2) students in all public secondary schools in the state which list was obtained from the Planning, Research and Statistics Department, Secondary Education Board, Calabar in 2023.The SS2 class was used for the study because students in SS2 class are all assumed to have attained adolescence. Also, in order to obtain an adequate representation of the adolescents for the study, the researcher needed to use adolescents who are currently enrolled in schools, particularly, the public secondary schools because many of the enrolled students are catered for by guardians who may not necessarily be their biological parents. As a result, they may not have access to the most conducive home support that may support positive body-image security status. Stratified random sampling was adopted by the researchers in drawing a sample. The reason for the stratification was to give equal chance (probability) of selecting each unit from within a particular stratum (group) of the population when creating the sample while the Taro Yamane's sample size determination formula that was discovered in 1967 was adopted to select the sample (both number of schools and number of students). The sample for the study was therefore made up of 386 students representing 3.3% of the study population. Of this number, 183 were males while 203 were females. The sample of schools was 169, representing 58% of number of schools.

Adolescent Body Image Security Status Questionnaire (ABISSQ) was used as the instrument for data collection. This scale was designed by the researchers to measure the independent and dependent variable of the study. ABISSQ was constructed with constructed with 62 items which were grouped into seven sub-scales among which there is the family attitude to children scale having six items (25-30), peer relationship sub-scale has six items (37-42) while the dependent variable which is the adolescent body image insecurity scale was measured with twenty items (43-62). All of the items were measured using the revised four-point Likert scale of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (d) and Strongly Disagree (SD).

The instrument was validated by an expert in test and measurement and another expert in the Educational Psychology while the Cronbach Alpha reliability was used to establish the reliability following a pilot test of the instrument using 40 students from four secondary schools that were part of the population but were not selected as part of the study's sample. The reliability estimates of .88, .78 and .76 that were obtained for the two independent variables and the dependent variable respectively were sufficient evidence that confirmed that the instrument was internally consistent for measurement.

The data for this study were collected from primary sources using the instrument. The data obtained from the field were coded on a person-by-item matrix and were scored on the basis of the respondents' ratings. The analyses of the data were performed using the SPSS 22 software.

RESULTS

Results of this investigation were presented according to the formulated hypotheses as shown below.

Hypothesis one

Family attitude towards children does not significantly influence body-image insecurity among adolescents in secondary schools.

TABLE 1

Summary of Independent t-test analysis for the influence of family attitude towards children on body-image insecurity among adolescents

Family attitude towards children	n	X	SD	t	Sig
Positive	133	61.82	9.42	4.898*	.000
Negative	253	66.68	9.17		

*p < .05; df = 384; critical t = 1.96

The results in Table 1 shows that the calculated t-value of 4.898 is greater than the critical t-value of 1.96 at .05 level of significance using 384 degrees of freedom. This means that family attitude towards children significantly influence body-image insecurity among adolescents in secondary schools. The result shows that children whose families exhibited negative attitudes towards them (X=66.68) had higher body-image insecurity than their counterparts whose families exhibited positive attitudes (X=61.82). Based on this result, there is sufficient statistical evidence to reject the null hypothesis and uphold the alternate.

Hypothesis two

Peer relationship does not significantly predict body-image insecurity among adolescents in secondary schools.

TABLE 2

Summary of Simple Regression Analysis for the prediction of adolescent body-image insecurity using peer relationship

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig
Regression	5098.109	1	5098.109	65.547	.000
Residual	29866.888	384		77.778	
Total	**34964.997**	**385**			

Variable	B	Std Error	Beta	t	Sig
(Constant)	44.061	2.625		16.783*	.000

*p < .05

R = .382

Adjusted R Square = .144

Std Error of the Estimate = 8.819

Results in Table 2 show that the calculated F-ratio of 65.547 is greater than the critical F-ratio of 6.70 at .05 level of significance using 384 and 1 degree of freedom. This means that peer relationship significantly predicts body-image insecurity among adolescents in secondary schools. The coefficient of determination (adjusted R Square) was .146. This indicates that about 14.6% of the variation in adolescent body-image insecurity resulted from the effect of the independent variable of the study while the remaining 85.4% of the variation (1-R Square) resulted from variables extraneous to the study. Based on the level of significance of the F-ratio, the null hypothesis was rejected.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The first finding on the contribution of family attitude towards children among secondary school adolescents in Cross River State suggests that family attitude towards children significantly influence body-image insecurity among the adolescents. This finding implies that, children whose families exhibited negative attitudes towards them developed higher body-image insecurity than their counterparts whose families exhibited positive attitudes. It is important to understand that attitudes are beliefs or opinions that people hold about a particular issue. In this case, the issue is body-image insecurity. Family attitudes such as their personal beliefs, cultural background and previous experiences on children often interfere with the way they relate with their children. Therefore, positive attitudes towards children may lead to less body-image insecurity among adolescents while negative attitude towards children has the ability to increase body-image insecurity among adolescents. This finding corroborates with the study of Clark (2021) which suggests that the more positive messages that are being exchanged by mother to daughter, the more the overall positive body-image status the daughter manifests. This finding is also supported by the study of Liechty et al. (2016) which suggests

that families provide the primary context for self-concept formation among young children including how children perceive their bodies and those of their peers.

The second finding suggests a weak but significant positive contribution of peer relationship on body-image insecurity among secondary school adolescents in Cross River State. This finding implies that there is a slight tendency for peer-relationship to influence body-image security status among secondary school adolescents. Howbeit, the correlation is weak which indicates that there may be other factors that contribute to body-image insecurity among adolescents. For instance, cultural differences encountered in interaction of adolescents among themselves may support influence of body-image insecurity. It is also worthy of note that the psychological climate of adolescent school or home environment are more likely to influence body-image security status of adolescents. Finding from this study is consistent with that of van der Meulen et al. (2017) who found that the direction of peer feedback on adolescents tend to influence subsequent choices of adolescents based on the pronounced effect their interactions with their peers have on them. The finding is also in line with the study of Ursula et al. (2016) on how peers influence adolescent body-image.

CONCLUSION

Body-image is a subjective image that individuals have of their own body, irrespective of its actual appearance. It is a complex and multidimensional construct that comprises an individual's personal identity which encompasses thoughts, beliefs and feelings about their own body as well as evaluations and behaviours such as reviews and comparisons. When it tilts to the negative, adolescents' sense of security becomes threatened, making them develop a sense of heightened consciousness of that area they perceive as being problematic to them. Consequently, they tend to apply different coping strategies or by engaging in risky behaviours, some of which could be inimical to their physical as well as their psychological well-being. Family attitude towards children and peer relationship of adolescents play significant roles in the body-image security status of adolescents, both of which influence how adolescents adjust socially in their environment.

From the findings of this study, it is concluded that these independent variables significantly contribute in predicting body-image insecurity among secondary school adolescents in Cross River State, Nigeria.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

i. Members of family should develop deeper empathy when correcting each other in order to avoid, either consciously or unconsciously psychological wounds in their adolescents

ii. Schools should be intentional in teaching students the art of showing empathy while relating with themselves. This will help foster the building of deeper, more trusting and more meaningful relationship with themselves thereby enhancing better learning outcome among the adolescents.

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