

Male Gender And Body Image Perception: A Quantitative And Qualitative Survey Of School-Attending Adolescent Males In Benin City, Nigeria

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Abstract: *Despite the rise in body image concerns among males, there is a dearth of data on body image perception among them. Consequently, we evaluated subjective self-perception, appearance orientation and overweight preoccupation construct of body image perception among school attending adolescent males, using quantitative and qualitative methods. The participants were senior secondary school (SSS) students aged 14 to 19 years in Benin City, Nigeria. The result showed that majority of those who perceive themselves as too thin were of normal weight. The emphasis for the respondents was on muscular-built and this has implication for the evaluation of male adolescents in developing countries.*

Keywords: *Body image perception, adolescent males, Nigeria.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Research evidence indicates that body image dissatisfaction in males has increased in recent years (Choi, Pope Jr, Olivardia, 2002). The nature of this dissatisfaction is not so much a desire for smaller and thinner bodies as is the case with women, but larger and more muscular ones (Choi et al, 2002). In addition, males experience socio-cultural pressures for both leanness and the development of defined musculature early in their development. This is evidenced by trends in commercial advertising which portrays the muscular male body as hallmark of masculinity while also promoting feminism. In a longitudinal study of exposed male and female bodies used in advertisements between 1958 and 1998 in two leading American women's magazines by Pope, Olivardia, Borowiecki & Cohane (2001), the findings revealed that the proportion of undressed women in the advertisements changed a little over the last 40 years, while the proportion of undressed men had increased dramatically especially since the early 1980s. This trend calls for concern as many of today's media images of muscularity are unattainable for most men.

The psychological and socio-cultural impact of this pressure for muscularity has been an upsurge in the number of young males taking to weight-lifting or body-building as the means to this end (Pickett, Lewis & Cash, 2005). The extreme consequences of this pursuit is found among males with muscle dysmorphia (MD), a subtype of body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) characterized by obsessionality and compulsivity directed toward achieving a lean and muscular physique (Pope, Gruber, Choi, Olivardia, & Phillips, 1997). Individuals develop a pathological preoccupation with their muscularity and engage in problematic behaviors including use of appearance and performance enhancing drugs (APEDs) such as anabolic-androgenic steroids (AASs) (Hildebrandt, Langenbucher, Carr & Sanjuan, 2007). A study of men in Austria found that their ideal bodies were about 28lbs more muscular than their actual bodies. The authors suggested that this discrepancy may be a contributory factor in the apparent rise in eating and body dysmorphic disorders, including MD in men (Pope Jr & Gruber, 2000). Pickett et al. (2005) noted that although relatively little research has examined body image perception in body builders, a few studies suggest that they

have higher levels of body image disturbance and thus cautioned that some individuals who are unhappy with their physical size, or have low self-esteem may gravitate towards body building to achieve personal or societal standards of attractiveness. The demands for competitive bodybuilding necessitate behaviors such as intense weightlifting training, and a combination of aerobic exercises and dietary manipulations to gain lean muscle mass and achieve intentional fat loss.

There is paucity of data on BIP among males in Nigeria. The fact that males also experience body image dissatisfaction necessitates the exploration of its occurrence, prevalence rate and characteristic variables among school-attending male adolescents in Benin City, Nigeria. Also, most studies of BIP have tended to focus on quantitative measures which do not unmask the inherent complexities of attitudes and experiences of the study participants. This study adopts a combination of qualitative and quantitative design in order to make up for this possible lapse in the majority of previous studies. Qualitative exploration by means of a focus group discussion is needed to help unravel the male adolescents' understanding of the 'ideal body image' construct, its effect on an individual's wellbeing as well as the conflict and ambivalence it engenders (Ahern, Bennett, Kelly & Hetherington, 2011).

II. METHODS

The method of participant recruitment has been described in a previous study. (Otakpor & Ehimiabai, 2016). The total senior secondary school student population in the city is 91,977, with a sex distribution of 47,955 males and 44,022 females; thus giving a male to female ratio of approximately 1:1.

The students aged 14 to 19 years in the selected schools who assented to participate in the study and who or whose parents gave consent were recruited.

MEASURES

A questionnaire which consisted of two sections was used for the study:

Section A: Socio-demographic data collection sheet focusing on some socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents.

Section B: The appearance orientation and overweight preoccupation subscales of the 34-item Multi-dimensional Body-Self Relations Questionnaire (MBSRQ), a self-report inventory used with adults and adolescents for the assessment of the body-image construct. It assesses attitudes towards the different aspects of body image (Cash, 2000, Cash, 2005, Untas, Koleck, Rasclé & Borteyrou, 2009).

The appearance orientation, (AO) assesses the amount of time and resource investment on one's appearance. High scorers place much importance on how they look and engage in extensive grooming behaviors. Low scorers cared less about their looks or appearance, and invest less time and resource to "look good", while the over-weight preoccupation (OWP) assesses a construct reflecting fat anxiety, weight vigilance, dieting, and eating restraints. The MBSRQ-AS has been

adapted for body image research studies (Rucker & Cash, 1992, Cash, 1994). Items are rated on a five-point Likert scale (1-5); the different items are grouped together and used in the measurement of the various subscales. The subscale scores are the means of the constituent items with contra-indicative items scored in the reverse order (Cash, 2000). The normative scores for the different subscales have been established in the United States; for instance, on the appearance evaluation subscale, the means and standard deviations for males and females are 3.60 (0.68) and 3.91 (0.60) respectively, and the Cronbach alpha is 0.88 (Cash, 2000). In a French-adapted version of the scale, the internal consistencies for the subscales ranged from 0.66 to 0.88 (Untas et al, 2009).

Since there is no literature report of its previous use in this environment, the instrument had to be validated in a pilot study prior to its use. The adapted culturally sensitive version of the scale (MBSRQ-AS -ad) was thus used for the current study. The concurrent validity of the adapted Multidimensional Body-Self Relations Questionnaire – Appearance scale (MBSRQ-AS-ad) was established by correlating the scores of the 34-item MBSRQ-AS with the MBSRQ-AS-ad in the pilot study. The MBSRQ-AS-ad recorded a significant positive correlation with the MBSRQ-AS-34 ($r = 0.908$, $p = 0.000$).

PROCEDURE

Each school was visited at least twice. The first visit was to distribute the consent forms after explaining the study to the students; subsequent visit was to administer the questionnaires to those students who fully met the recruitment criteria. Instructions for filling the questionnaires were explained at the beginning and on request subsequently, and it took an average of 8 minutes to complete. The questionnaires were administered to the students in their classrooms during the 30 minutes break period. Each student's weight and height were measured with a Seca weighing scale (Model 220 CE 0123 with a sensitivity of 100g) and a stadiometer (calibrated up to two meters) respectively. The body mass index (BMI) was subsequently calculated as weight in kilograms divided by height in square meters.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Ethics and Research Committee of the University of Benin Teaching Hospital; permission was obtained from the authorities of the schools and written informed consent from the participants who were 18 years and above, and from parents/ guardians of those below 18 years. Anonymity and confidentiality were also observed.

DATA MANAGEMENT AND ANALYSIS

The data was analyzed using IBM SPSS statistics for windows version 21.0 (Armonk, NY: IBM Corp, 2012). Univariate analysis and chi-square tests were performed to determine the relationship between variables, with the confidence interval set at 95% and a P-value of <0.05 adopted for the tests of significance.

QUALITATIVE METHODS

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION (FGDS)

Qualitative method (focus group discussions) was used to identify the male adolescents' perception of an 'ideal body image' and how it relates to their psychological well-being. Sampling was purposive (Peyman & Oakley, 2011). The discussion guide included (1) introductory remarks outlining the purpose of the session and overview of informed consent; (2) six open-ended questions designed to stimulate discussion about knowledge and perception of body image, the societal and cultural perception of an ideal body image and how these affect their wellbeing. The same discussion guide was used with all groups.

Two focus group sessions were held in each of the two secondary schools (one public and one private). Each group (session) was comprised of 6 adolescents who were purposively selected from the three arms of Senior Secondary School (SSS) classes with the assistance of the teachers. They were male adolescents within the age group 14-19 years. One of the authors acted as the main discussion facilitator, took notes, while a trained assistant did the audio recording. No name was collected from the participants, they responded anonymously and each of the discussion sessions lasted 30-40 minutes each. The sessions (meetings) were held in the schools' general assembly hall. The facilitator induced participants' responses in each group with the prepared questions and probes. The audio recordings and notes taken during the session were reviewed, transcribed and analyzed using qualitative content analysis. Text segments were compared across the groups, seeking similar or repeated ideas.

III. RESULTS

From table 1 below, the mean age of the respondents was 15.6 years (SD = 1.44) and the modal age was 15 years (25.6%). The majority of the respondents (82.3%), were from a monogamous family setting and 12% of the participants perceive themselves as too thin.

Variables	No of respondents	Frequency (%)
N=316		
Age		
14	69	21.8
15	81	25.6
16	77	24.4
17	41	15.5
18	24	7.6
19	16	5.1
School		
Public	135	42.7
Private	181	57.3
Class		
SS1	96	30.4
SS2	117	37.0
SS3	103	32.6

Family Type		
Monogamous	260	82.3
Polygamous	34	10.7
Sep/divorced	22	7.0
BMI status		
Underweight	28	8.9
Normal weight	267	84.5
Overweight	19	6.0
Mildly Obese	1	0.3
Moderately obese	1	0.3
Self-perception		
Too thin	38	12.0
Just alright	257	81.3
Too fat	21	6.7

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents

From table 2, about two-third of the respondents (65.5%) were high scorers on the appearance orientation subscale of body image perception while (60.2%) were low scorers on the Overweight preoccupation subscale.

BIP subscales	Frequency (N=316)	Percentage	Mean (SD)
Appearance orientation			4.20(0.76)
low scorer	109	34.5	
high scorer	207	65.5	
Overweight preoccupation			2.99(1.19)
low scorer	192	60.2	
high scorer	164	39.8	

Table 2: Frequency Distribution of Respondents on Body Image Perception (BIP) Subscales

Table 3 showed that 71% of those who perceive themselves as too thin and 57% of those who see themselves as too fat are of normal weight. There is a significant association between self-perception and body mass index.

Variable	UW F (%)	NW F (%)	BMI MI OB F (%)	MO OB F (%)	SE OB F (%)	Total	Sig
S/Percept							
Too thin	11(28.9)	27 (71.1)	0(0.0)	0(0.0)	0(0.0)	38(100)	$\chi^2=77.6$ df=8 P=0.000
J/alright	17(6.6)	228 (88.7)	11 (4.3)	1 (0.4)	0 (0.0)	257(100)	
Too fat	0	12 (57.1)	8 (38.1)	0(0.0)	1(4.8)	21(100)	

UW =underweight; NW= normal weight; MI OB =mild obesity; MO OB =moderate obesity; SE OB= severe obesity; F= frequency; Sig=significance test; S/percept = self-perception; J/alright= just alright

Table 3: Association between Self- perception and BMI class

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION RESULTS

Two sessions each of focus group discussions were held in two schools representing a public and a private school. The students were open and willing to express themselves from the very beginning of the discussion sessions to the end. The themes that achieved saturation across all four sessions are presented below, with illustrative quotations.

A. KNOWLEDGE OF BODY IMAGE PERCEPTION AND PERSONAL VIEWS ABOUT RESPONDENTS OWN BODY IMAGE

In order to understand the respondents' knowledge of body image perception and how they perceive their own body image, the following questions were asked:

- ✓ *What do you know about body image perception?*
- ✓ *What is your own perception of your body image?*

In response to the first question, most of the respondents understood it to mean how one views oneself- looks, weight, shape and height. Some understood it to mean the physiological make up and the structure of the body. Two respondents said that body image perception refers to the way one dresses, thinks and behaves. One remarked that body image perception concept mostly affects the teenagers whose physical bodies are constantly changing. The majority of the students were generally contented with their body image; a few knew their weight and height. Their contentment/discontentment were based on subjective assessments of their body image. Some of the students in the different groups had this to say:

Responses to question 1: *What do you know about body image perception?*

The respondents had these to say:

"It means the way you view yourself."

"It refers to your physical appearance". The other respondents had this to say:

"It means the way you see yourself"

"It means your physical body structure, your weight and height"

"It refers to the way you look"

"It has to do with your body shape, weight and height"

"Body Image Perception is your physiological make up and your appearance".

"Our body image is the structure of our body".

"I agree with my mates" (colleagues)

"It means the way we see our shape and appearance".

Responses to question 2: *What is your own perception of your body image?*

"I feel too short. What is your height? I don't know; What is your weight? I don't know"

"I feel too tall and people say I am too fat. I don't really think I am fat, but because people are saying it I am conscious of the food I eat. I try to watch my weight. I weigh 80kg but I do not know my height".

"As for me, I think I'm not too tall or too fat, I am just average, I eat food that will give me body strength. What do you mean by food that will give you body strength? "I mean mostly carbohydrate foods like cassava and yam"

"I think I am average and okay. My friends say I am somehow wide and huge. I am okay with that".

"As for me, I feel too tall and too thin for my age. Because when people see someone who is tall and thin, they mock at the person and give the person names. What do you weigh? I don't know my weight and my height."

"I think I am okay. How much do you weigh? I weigh 55kg but I don't know my height".

"I am alright but my friends say I am too fat. I don't wish to reduce my weight. I don't feel bad about it, I weigh 62kg and my height is 1.6metres".

"I am alright but my mum said I'm overweight, my dad said I eat too much, my friends say I am too tall.

"I am satisfied with my body image. I weigh 52kg and my height is 5 feet 7 inches".

"I am alright but my friends said I am thin. I weigh 58kg and my height is 1.8m, I don't feel depressed about it".

"As for me, I think I am okay for my age; I tend to eat more proteinous food to make me taller and to help build my body".

B. CULTURAL AND SOCIETAL PERSPECTIVE OF THE IDEAL BODY IMAGE

Questions to stimulate discussion on this predetermined theme included the following:

- ✓ *What is the society's ideal body image?*
- ✓ *In your culture, what is the ideal "body image"?*

The responses revealed differences between individuals in the construct of the ideal body image. A few think that there is no ideal body image. They indicated that the ideal body image varies with different occupations and that what is ideal for males is different from the ideal for females. For males, tall, muscular and average weight was the most reported ideal. The 'too slim' and 'the fat' were not ideal in their opinions. Illustrative responses are as quoted below:

RESPONSES TO QUESTION 1: *What is the society's ideal body image?*

"It is muscular people for males, fat a little, tall and huge especially for those that want to be in the army force"

"Average weight and tall is the ideal for males"

"The ideal body image depends on the profession. It varies with different occupations. For instance, wrestlers have huge 'body build,' politicians are mostly fat and pot-bellied, while sportsmen are slim. Basketballers require tall people and military men are tall and muscular".

"I think it is average, not too tall and not too short and not fat. If you are fat, the society will laugh at you and that shows that the society does not like fat people. Also if you are short, the society will also laugh at you, meaning they don't like short people. Average is the ideal".

"Somebody that is not too tall or too short, but has "body build". What is 'body build'? It means your muscles and your height. People that are too tall, too thin or fat are laughed at in the society".

"Females like guys that have "six packs". What is 'six packs'? Six packs means muscles in the abdomen. Six is the highest. Some can have one or two. Explain more. It means somebody that has flat abdomen with muscles with different lines, thin waist and a broad chest. Such a person is appreciated in the society, especially by the opposite sex".

"The boys should be tall, handsome, muscular and manly. He should have muscles in the arms and "abs". What is the meaning of abs? "Abs" is muscles in the abdomen. Is it the same thing as 'six packs'? Yes. It is the same thing as 'six packs'."

"Different people have different point of view. It is only boys that do "work outs" that have 'abs'." What do you mean

by 'work outs? It means muscle training in the gym. Whether you have abs or not, I think the society accept you. It depends on you or what you want. Some people like to imitate others and fake their identity in terms of body image, height and weight".

"The society prefers people that are of average height and weight, i.e. not too tall and not short and not fat".

"The society is divided in this matter. One man's meat is another man's poison. There are still some people who prefer fat people, while others prefer people that are slim. Also, "body building" does not fit short people."

"From the religious perspective, they see average weight and height as ideal".

"For teenagers, when they are too big, they appear older than their age, they should however not be too small so that they are not looked down on".

QUESTION 2: In your culture, what is the ideal "body image"?

The responses were as follows:

"I am Urhobo. In my culture, I don't think there is any particular body size or image that is acceptable. They don't have the "body build" sense. They are farmers and the farm exercise builds their muscles, this is not intentional. Whether someone is too short or huge or too thin does not really matter so long as you can work and take care of your family".

"I am Ishan. There is no particular body structure. It is God that create, so everyone is accepted the way he is."

"I am a Bini boy. I think we have a particular body structure. The males that are huge and tall are seen as having strength and are separated from those who are of small 'body build' who are regarded as weaklings, and are seen as not able to fend for their families. Those who have a huge body build are usually given a higher place in Bini culture".

"I am Ijaw by tribe. People that have good height and huge body build are given more attention and even more opportunities in job placement hence I can say that this is the preferred body image in my culture".

"I am Yoruba. Tall, dark in complexion and muscular is the ideal body image.

"I am Urhobo. I agree with my mates".

"I am Isoko; the boys should be fitted, slim and not overweight. He should be manly, hardworking and strong".

"I am from Edo North. The boys should just be average, not too fat or slim, not too tall; he should be 'fitted'. What do you mean by fitted? Fitted means when you are not too fat or slim".

"I am Bini, he should be tall, not too slim or too fat".

"In my tribe, the boys work a lot and go to the farm. Not too tall, average weight with muscles is the ideal. What tribe? Urhobo".

"Tall, slim and physically fit is the ideal. I am from Esan".

"He should be tall and muscular. I am Bini".

C. ACHIEVING THE IDEAL BODY IMAGE

What do people do to achieve the ideal body image?

Some of the things identified were exercise, dieting, use of pills and weight- watching beverages, surgery, skipping meals, watching horror movies and going for gym workouts.

They had this to say:

- ✓ Exercise
- ✓ Eat less food.
- ✓ Gym
- ✓ Dieting
- ✓ Intake of beverages like green tea to reduce weight.
- ✓ 'Weight watching' i.e careful not to eat food that has high calories.
- ✓ It could involve watching movies to reduce weight. How? Tension in watching horror movies could lead to weight loss.
- ✓ Skipping meals, Cutting down quantity of food and taking of liquid.
- ✓ 'push up' (which means press up). Some people can do 50 'push ups' every morning.
- ✓ Others are Starvation and Restriction of meals. 'Some avoid oily foods. In some professions like army, exercise is recommended.
- ✓ Some take Lipton tea.

D. HOW BODY IMAGE PERCEPTION RELATES TO PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING

Do the way people see their body image affect their psychological wellbeing or make them unwell? If yes how?

All the respondents agreed that the way someone perceives his or her body image can affect psychological wellbeing. Some of the psychological effects they identified included low self- esteem, anxiety, worries, depression and suicide. The illustrative statements are:

QUESTION: Can one's perceived deviation from the ideal body image affect his wellbeing? If yes how?

Responses:

"Yes, they may have 'inferiority complex' because of comments from people".

"A fat person wanting to be slim could be psychologically unstable especially if they tried to slim down and failed".

"It causes worries and anxiety especially if teased by others. The individual could seclude himself from other people and this can lead to loneliness".

"It can also lead to depression as the individual will feel downcast".

"Yes, for instance those who see themselves as short have inferiority complex".

"It can affect the frame of mind of some people, making them unhappy and can cause low self-esteem and even physical illness".

"Some individuals may be indifferent and in that case there will be no effect on them".

He will now starve and this can cause stomach ulcer, Anorexia, and Bulimia.

"They are always anxious about not being accepted the way they are. It will then affect their social life and cause them to be isolated".

"It can make somebody sad when he is mocked and it can make the person feel isolated, lonely and wanting to commit suicide".

IV. DISCUSSION

Historically, the research literature on body image has focused predominantly on women and girls. Body image disturbance (BID) among men has only recently become a phenomenon of clinical significance as male subjects increasingly also experience body image dissatisfaction. However, the nature of this dissatisfaction is not so much a desire for smaller and thinner bodies, as is the case with women, but larger and more muscular ones; males like to convert their fat into muscles (Meghan, Gillen, Eva & Lefkowitz, 2012). In this study, a higher percentage of the respondents were high scorers on the appearance orientation subscale of the body image perception (BIP) subscale. This implies that a higher percentage of the respondents invest appreciable amount of time and resources in their appearance. They place much importance on how they look and engage in extensive grooming behaviors, expending much effort to "look good". This is in support of studies which show that although males, compared to females, have less negative perception of their bodies, they have strong motive for improving their body appearance (Akhondi et al, 2011, Edwards & Launder, 2000). A higher proportion were low scorers on the over-weight perception (OWP) subscale, indicating less fat anxiety and weight vigilance among the males. The finding in this study supports previous reports that males have a preference for a more muscular physique and do not have much desire for weight loss and reduced overall body mass (Pope et al, 1997, Hildebrandt et al, 2007).

This study found 70% of those who perceived themselves as too thin to have normal weight, while about 11% of those who see themselves as normal weight were either under- or overweight. This lends support to previous studies which showed discrepancy between actual body size and desired body size (Pope Jr, Gruber & Mangweth, 2000).

The findings from this study revealed that the students from both public and private schools had some knowledge concerning body image perception. This implies that there is some awareness of the concept of BIP in this environment. Most of the respondents were satisfied with their body image, even though they did not know their weight or height. However, the case of body image in men appears more heterogeneous than initially thought. In this study, the FGD revealed individual differences in the perception of the ideal body image. The responses showed that the participants had the ideal body image varying with occupation and ethnicity; for example the ideal body image for a sports man was perceived to be different from that of a politician. This is in keeping with a previous study that showed that male models seek extreme leanness; film actors aim for moderate lean muscularity; fitness models aim for greater musculature; and body-builders/weight-lifters seek excessive muscularity (Cafri et al, 2005). Men do not pursue muscularity exclusively but in addition are concerned with achieving leanness using different types of behavior. In addition to exercise and dietary measures, watching horror movies was identified in this study as a means of losing weight. The phrase 'not fat and not too slim' was noticeable in the participants' responses, thus apparently 'too thin' and 'too fat' were being perceived as not

ideal. The emphasis for the respondents was on muscular-built.

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