

SELF-CONCEPT AND BODY DISSATISFACTION AS PREDICTORS OF FEAR OF NEGATIVE EVALUATION AMONG UNDERGRADUATES

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Abstract

This study examined self-concept and body dissatisfaction as predictors of fear of negative evaluation among undergraduate students of a Nigerian University. A total of 243 undergraduates aged 16-27 years ($M = 21.78$, $SD = 2.39$) were conveniently selected from two departments across the faculties. Data were collected using the Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale, a self-concept questionnaire, and a body dissatisfaction scale. A predictive research design was adopted and data were analyzed using multiple linear regression. The results revealed that self-concept significantly predicted fear of negative evaluation ($\beta = -.267$, $p < .001$), indicating that students with poorer self-concept reported higher levels of fear of negative evaluation. Body dissatisfaction showed a positive but non-significant relationship with fear of negative evaluation ($\beta = .107$, $p = .085$). These findings suggest that students' perceptions of themselves play a crucial role in shaping their sensitivity to social judgment. The study recommends psychological interventions within university counseling centres aimed at improving self-concept and promoting healthy body image among students. Such interventions may reduce anxiety related to social evaluation and enhance students' psychological well-being and academic engagement.

Keywords: self-concept, body dissatisfaction, fear of negative evaluation, social anxiety, undergraduate students, Nigeria

Introduction

University education represents a critical developmental period during which young adults experience increasing academic demands, expanded social networks, and heightened exposure to interpersonal evaluation. During this stage, students often become highly sensitive to how they are perceived by others, including peers and lecturers. This heightened concern about social judgement can contribute to various forms of psychological distress.

One psychological construct that captures this concern is fear of negative evaluation (FNE). FNE refers to the apprehension and distress individuals experience when anticipating negative judgement from others (Leary, 1983; Watson & Friend, 1969). It is considered a central component of social anxiety and is associated with avoidance behaviour, reduced self-confidence, and heightened self-consciousness (Weeks et al., 2005). Among university students, high levels of FNE may interfere with classroom participation, academic performance, and social interaction.

Research suggests that individual self-perceptions play an important role in shaping vulnerability to fear of negative evaluation. Self-concept, defined as the set of beliefs and evaluations individuals hold about themselves, influences how people interpret social situations and respond to interpersonal feedback (Marsh & Martin, 2011). Individuals with negative or unstable self-concepts are more likely to perceive themselves as inadequate and may therefore anticipate criticism or rejection from others. Such expectations can heighten anxiety in evaluative situations.

Another psychological factor associated with social evaluation concerns is body dissatisfaction, which refers to negative attitudes and feelings about one's physical appearance (Cash & Smolak, 2011). Body dissatisfaction has been linked to reduced psychological well-being, lower self-esteem, and increased social anxiety, particularly in cultures where physical appearance is highly valued (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). Individuals who feel dissatisfied with their appearance may become overly concerned about how others judge their bodies, thereby increasing their fear of negative evaluation.

The relationship between anxiety and cognitive functioning also provides insight into how fear of negative evaluation may influence students' academic experiences. According to Attentional Control Theory, anxiety consumes cognitive resources required for efficient information processing, thereby impairing concentration and executive functioning (Eysenck et al., 2007). Consequently, students experiencing high levels of evaluative anxiety may demonstrate reduced efficiency in academic tasks despite maintaining adequate performance accuracy.

Despite increasing global research on these constructs, relatively few studies have examined the combined roles of self-concept and body dissatisfaction in predicting fear of negative evaluation within African university

contexts. Cultural expectations, social comparison processes, and changing media influences may shape students' self-perceptions in ways that differ from those observed in Western populations. Investigating these relationships within Nigerian universities is therefore important for expanding the cross-cultural understanding of social evaluative anxiety.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Self-Objectification Theory proposed by Barbara Fredrickson et., (1997). The theory proposes that individuals living in appearance-focused cultures may internalise an observer's perspective of their bodies, evaluating themselves primarily based on how they appear to others. This process, known as self-objectification, encourages individuals to prioritise appearance over competence or personal attributes. Within this framework, individuals who internalise societal appearance standards may develop dissatisfaction with their bodies when they perceive a discrepancy between their actual appearance and culturally valued ideals. Such dissatisfaction can influence overall self-concept, particularly when physical appearance becomes a central component of personal identity.

Self-objectification theory further suggests that when individuals base their self-worth on appearance, they become more sensitive to external evaluations. As a result, body dissatisfaction and negative self-perceptions may increase anxiety about how others judge them, thereby intensifying fear of negative evaluation. The theory therefore provides a useful framework for understanding how self-concept and body dissatisfaction may interact to influence students' concerns about social judgement.

Hypotheses

The following hypothesis was formulated to guide the study:

1. Self-concept will significantly predict fear of negative evaluation among undergraduate.
2. Body dissatisfaction will significantly predict fear of negative evaluation among undergraduate.

Methods

Participants

Two hundred and forty-three (243) undergraduates of NnamdiAzikiwe University participated in the study, they were selected from different departments in the university. The participants age ranged from 16 to 27 years with a mean age of 21.78 and a standard deviation of 2.9. The participants were selected using convenience sampling technique. Information about participants demographics such as age and department were obtained using the questionnaire.

Instruments

Three instruments were utilized to collect data for the study.

The Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale (Leary, 1983)

The brief fear of negative evaluation scale was developed by Leary (1983). This scale can be administered by the researchers and anyone with experience. This scale is designed to measure fear of negative evaluation. It uses a 5-point likert scale (1= Not at all characteristic of me, 2=Slightly characteristic of me, 3=Moderately characteristic of me, 4=Very characteristic of me, 5=Extremely characteristic of me. It typically consists of 12 items. Some of the items includes I worry about what other people will think of me even when i know it does'nt make any difference, I am afraid others will not approve of me etc. The developers of the scale report a high internal consistency alpha score of 0.89.

Questionnaire of Self-concept-18 (Dolejs et al., 2023)

The Questionnaire of self-concept was developed by Dolejs et al., (2023), it measures self-concept by using a 4-point Likert scale (1=Stronly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Agree, 4=strongly Agree). Some of the sample items include I see meaning in my life, I often get into trouble, others at home are bothered by the way i behave etc. The developers of the scale report a high internal consistency alpha score of 0.89 and a validity of 0.8.

Body image-dissatisfaction scale (Tariq &Ijaz, 2015).

The Body image dissatisfaction scale was developed by (Tariq &Ijaz 2015). It assesses body dissatisfaction using a 5-point rating scale (0=not at all, 1=rarely, 2=sometimes, 3=often, 4=always). The scale can be administered by researchers, psychologists or trained professionals. The test consists of 26 items. Some of the items of the scale includes "not having fair complexion, disliking the hair texture, body weight not in accordance with height etc. The developers of the scale reported a high internal consistency alpha score of .94

Procedure

The questionnaires were shared by the researchers with the aid of a colleague, the researchers was able to make himself friendly with the participants and they were assured that the exercise was strictly for academic purposes and that the information they released will be treated with utmost confidentiality. Participants were sampled using convenient sampling technique. The questionnaires were collected back from the participants after they were filled. Two hundred and fifty questionnaires were distributed. At the end of administering the questionnaires, two hundred and forty-three (243) questionnaires were returned which were properly filled.

Research Design and Statistics

The study adopted predictive research design because it examines the predictive effect of the independent variables on the dependent. Multiple linear regression was used as the statistics for the data analysis, SPSS version 2023 was used to manage raw data

Table 1: Regression Analysis on Self-concept and Body dissatisfaction as predictors of Fear of negative evaluation among undergraduate students

| Predictors | R ² | Df | F | Sig. | B | T | Sig. |
|-------------------------|----------------|--------|--------|------|-------|--------|------|
| | .083 | 2(240) | 10.909 | .000 | | | |
| Self-concept | | | | | -.267 | -4.316 | .000 |
| Body Dissatisfaction | | | | | .107 | 1.727 | .085 |

a. Dependent Variable: Fear of negative evaluation

The table 1 above showed the multiple regression analysis which examined whether self-concept and body dissatisfaction predicted fear of negative evaluation among undergraduate students. The overall model was statistically significant, $F(2, 240) = 10.91$, $p < .001$, explaining 8.3% of the variance in fear of negative evaluation ($R^2 = .083$). This indicates that the predictors jointly contributed significantly to explaining variations in students' fear of negative evaluation.

Individually, self-concept emerged as a significant predictor of fear of negative evaluation ($\beta = -.267$, $t = -4.316$, $p < .001$). The negative beta coefficient indicates that students with a more positive self-concept reported lower levels of fear of negative evaluation.

In contrast, body dissatisfaction did not significantly predict fear of negative evaluation ($\beta = .107$, $t = 1.727$, $p = .085$). Although the relationship was positive, it did not reach statistical significance at the .05 level.

These results suggest that self-concept plays a more prominent role than body dissatisfaction in explaining fear of negative evaluation among the sampled undergraduate students.

Discussion

The present study investigated whether self-concept and body dissatisfaction predict fear of negative evaluation among undergraduate students at NnamdiAzikiwe University, Awka. The findings revealed that the regression model was statistically significant, indicating that the predictors jointly explained a modest but meaningful proportion of the variance in fear of negative evaluation.

The first hypothesis, which proposed that self-concept would significantly predict fear of negative evaluation, was supported. Specifically, self-concept negatively predicted fear of negative evaluation, indicating that students with a more positive perception of themselves tend to experience lower levels of anxiety regarding others' judgments. This finding is consistent with existing literature which suggests that individuals with a stable and positive self-concept are generally less vulnerable to social evaluative anxiety (Marsh & Martin, 2011; Leary, 1983). Individuals who possess strong self-beliefs and confidence in their abilities are more likely to interpret social interactions positively and are less likely to perceive evaluative situations as threatening. The finding also aligns with cognitive perspectives of social anxiety, which suggest that negative self-beliefs and maladaptive self-schemas increase sensitivity to perceived criticism or rejection (Clark & Wells, 1995). When individuals hold negative views about themselves, they are more likely to anticipate unfavourable judgments from others, thereby increasing fear of negative evaluation. Conversely, individuals with positive self-concepts are better equipped to cope with evaluative situations such as classroom participation, presentations, and peer interactions.

The second hypothesis, which proposed that body dissatisfaction would significantly predict fear of negative evaluation, was not supported. Although body dissatisfaction showed a positive relationship with fear of negative evaluation, the effect was not statistically significant. This finding suggests that dissatisfaction with physical appearance may not be a primary determinant of fear of negative evaluation within this sample of undergraduate students. This result contrasts with several studies conducted in Western contexts which have found significant associations between body dissatisfaction and social evaluative anxiety (Cash & Smolak, 2011; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). One possible explanation for this discrepancy may relate to cultural and contextual factors influencing body image perceptions. In many non-Western contexts, including parts of Africa, social evaluation may be influenced more strongly by competence, academic performance, or social behaviour than by physical appearance alone.

Another explanation may be that body dissatisfaction contributes indirectly to fear of negative evaluation through other psychological variables such as self-esteem or social comparison. Previous research has suggested that body image concerns often influence broader self-evaluative processes rather than directly predicting social anxiety (Cash & Smolak, 2011). Thus, body dissatisfaction may still play a role in students' psychological experiences but not as a direct predictor in this context.

Implications of the Study

The findings of this study have important implications for psychological practice and educational policy within universities. First, the results underscore the importance of promoting positive self-concept among undergraduate students. University counselling services should consider implementing programmes aimed at strengthening students' self-beliefs, resilience, and self-acceptance. Such interventions may include psychoeducational workshops, cognitive-behavioural counselling, and peer support programmes designed to help students develop adaptive self-perceptions and reduce sensitivity to negative social evaluation. Strengthening students' self-concept may enhance their confidence in academic and social settings, thereby improving participation, communication, and overall well-being.

Additionally, although body dissatisfaction did not significantly predict fear of negative evaluation in this study, body image education should still be incorporated into student support programmes. Promoting healthy body image and media literacy may help students develop balanced perspectives about physical appearance and self-worth.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings contribute to the literature by highlighting the central role of self-concept in social evaluative anxiety within the Nigerian university context. Future theoretical models of fear of negative evaluation may benefit from giving greater attention to broader self-perception processes rather than focusing solely on appearance-related concerns.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the sample consisted solely of undergraduate students from one university, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to other institutions or populations. Future studies should include participants from multiple universities and cultural backgrounds. Second, the study relied on self-report measures, which may be subject to social desirability bias or response distortion. Incorporating behavioural assessments or multi-method approaches could strengthen future research. Finally, the cross-sectional design of the study limits causal interpretation. Longitudinal studies would provide a clearer understanding of how self-concept and body dissatisfaction influence fear of negative evaluation over time.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Universities should implement self-concept enhancement programmes aimed at strengthening students' self-confidence and resilience in evaluative situations.
2. University counselling centres should integrate psychoeducational interventions that promote positive self-perception and healthy body image among students.

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