

## **PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF THE USE OF WAIST BEADS BY WOMEN IN AWKA SOUTH L.G.A, ANAMBRA STATE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study investigated public perception of the use of waist beads by women in Awka South Local Government Area, Anambra State. It also examined the extent of usage, the reasons for wearing waist beads, prevailing perceptions, and measures that could be implemented to improve public perception of their use among women. Three theories were reviewed in this study: cultivation theory, symbolic interactionism, and phenomenology. Symbolic interactionism was adopted as the theoretical framework. The sample size comprised 204 respondents. A questionnaire and an in-depth interview guide were used for data collection. The quantitative data collected during fieldwork were processed using SPSS and analyzed using descriptive statistics, such as simple frequency distribution tables. The qualitative data were analyzed using the thematic method of data analysis. Two hypotheses were tested using the Chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) test statistic. The findings show, among other things, that the use of waist beads is not widespread. The reasons for wearing waist beads include beauty and fashion, maturity and sexual attraction, weight awareness, cultural identity, femininity, and fertility. Based on these findings, it was recommended, among other measures, that radio and television programmes be sponsored to counter negative perceptions held by some residents regarding the wearing of waist beads. Furthermore, policies should be developed to promote cultural heritage practices such as the wearing of waist beads.

Keywords: waist beads, fashion, culture, stigmatization, misconception.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Over the years, the use of waist bead has become more rampant. We see it spreading around the globe for so many reasons. While some wear waist beads for fashion, others put it on for reasons best known to them (Adeyemo Adedolapo, 2020). These beads come in different sizes and colours. Waist beads are traditional accessories or small jewelry made of seeds, glass, crystal stone, bone, wood, and even metal adorned around the stomach or waist (Njideka Agbo, 2020). Originally, these beads were made from seeds. The beads are customarily strung on a thread or string, tied or secured with a clasp, and designed to fit around the waist of a woman or man. Waist beads have been worn by African women as a symbol of femininity and prosperity for centuries. Waist beads are popular across Africa.

There is so much history behind waist beads, the existence and traditional custom of waist beads dates back all the way to the 15th century. The majority of the scholars' state that it began in Egypt, where women would wear the waist beads as a status symbol. Women wearing waist beads were illustrated in paintings in Egypt's pyramids, and while this is some of the earliest evidence of their existence, it's likely that women began wearing them even earlier. They were worn by all the women, and they were a standard for pre-pubescent females with no negative intent. At that time, they were referred to as "girdles" in Egypt. The beads would be passed across different members of the family and certain beads would be associated with different families. These beads are recorded to have been worn to serve many celebratory purposes including rite of passage (Sheinata Carn-Hall, 2017). Although the history of the waist beads dates back to the 15th Century, the styles of adornments have changed significantly over the last few centuries. These beads can now be made from many and different materials, and some even include precious stones and crystals.

Recently, the waist beads have acquired a lot of popularity among the people of the west. Most of them are buying beads for beauty purposes. People also use them for weight awareness. For women intending to stay in shape and avoid any weight, waist beads are a perfect solution. When one gains weight, the waist beads become tight on the waist. Ideally, the waist beads do not stretch, hence with the additional weight; they will feel tighter on the skin. As a wearer, this will alert you on the weight gain and hence you will take appropriate measures to lose the added

weight. The main focus nowadays is on the aesthetic value of the beads. Among the different types of beaded accessories, waist beads have become the most common accessory among women. They come in attractive color combinations and designs that make them a beauty to behold.

The use of waist beads has become predominant among women not minding their tribe or culture despite the many different beliefs, stereotypes, criticisms, superstitions, admonishments etc. held against the use of waist beads. It is within this context that the study is created to examine the public perception of the use of waist beads by women in Awka South L.G.A, Anambra State. Two specific objectives namely: 1.To find out the extent of the usage of waist beads among women in Awka South LGA and 2.To investigate the reasons for the use of waist bead among women in Awka South LGA.

### **Literature Review**

Waist beads are a type of jewellery worn around the waist or hip area. Scholars such as Burkhard, Felix and Eva (2020) posit that waist beads originate from Africa and are traditionally worn by women as a symbol of waist size, beauty, sexuality, femininity, fertility, well-being and maturity. Waist beads are commonly made of glass, metal, crystals, gemstones, charms, wooden beads, or plastic beads. They are typically strung on cotton thread, twine, wire, clear cord or elastic cord. The colours and materials used may hold symbolic, cultural or personal significance for the wearer. According to Bowen (2020), there are distinctions between traditional Nigerian beads and western beads. A traditional bead signifies which ethnic group one belongs to, and can indicate one's gender, class, religion and region. The Nigerian traditional beads have reflected the cultures of hundreds of ethnic groups. As such, various ethnic groups have their different types, colours and appearance of waist beads (Emeji, 2020; Bowen, 2020; Huyhoa, 2022).

To a large extent waist beads are now common among women in Nigeria (Ibebabuchi, 2022). These beads strung on fine fishing lines or carefully threaded ropes have adorned the waists of numerous African women. Whether hidden under clothes, peaking out at intervals or carefully arranged to show over clothes, the mesmerising sounds these beads make as the wearer moves and their vibrant colours keep peoples' eyes glued. In some African societies such as Northern Nigeria, female children are adorned with waist beads by their mothers once they get their period to mark their rite of passage into womanhood. These beads symbolise the female child's transition from childhood to adulthood, serves as a proof of her fertility and sexuality (Ibebabuchi, 2022).

In some cultures, these waist beads signify purity and are only to be taken off by the husband on the wedding night (Orabueze, Okoye, Ohaeto, 2021). Traditionally, waist beads are considered private, not to be seen by anyone except the wearer's partner. They possess an intimate appeal that provokes one's desire for another. In some cultures, these beads are laced with charms and fragrances, which are irresistible to the opposite sex (Uju, 2021). They are also viewed as traditional lingerie, wearing waist beads during intimacy is believed to enhance the sexual experiences of the wearer and her partner. Adding precious stones to these waist beads adds healing qualities, treating ailments or other issues like love and balancing, that need enhancement (Uju, 2021; Moroney, 2022).

Bolajoko (2020) carried out a study on the use of beads in contemporary fashion industry of South-Western Nigeria. The aim of the study was to evaluate the extent of waist beads usage among women in Ogbondoroko and Afon in Asa Local Government Area of Kwara State. The study participants were 300 women comprising single and married women living in Ogbondoroko and Afon in Asa LGA of Kwara State. Data analysis showed that there is high usage of beads among the locals. In other words, many women in the study areas make use of waist beads in Kwara State. Hence, the extent to which women make use of waist beads in the study area was described as high. However, the study also found that there were women who detest the use of waist beads due to religious and fetish reasons. Data showed that despite the traditional and aesthetic use of waist beads by women, waist beads in this present day are very much frowned upon by some people who deem waist beads as being fetish and wayward.

In a related development, Adiji (2021) examined the fashion industry of Southern Nigeria. The descriptive study was borne out of the recognition of the fact that there is increasing trend in the use of waist beads in Ikare-Akoko, Ijare and Akunga communities in Ondo State. The study used of a simple random sampling technique, primary and secondary data. Structured questionnaires were the primary sources of data collection whereas journals and books represent the secondary sources. Findings revealed that to a reasonable extent, a good number of women in area make use of beads. Conversely, there are women who have superstitious beliefs and often describe the use of beads as bad because some of them contain charms to attract favours from rich men. The study further found that many residents of Ikare-Akoko, Ijare and Akunga associate waist beads with waywardness and mark or sign

of irresponsibility. This assumption often leads to the stigmatization of women who wear waist beads in the selected communities.

According to Njideka (2020), various reasons and counter reasons have been identified by scholars as necessitating the use of waist beads among Nigerian women. Some of these reasons include the desire to look good for one's husband or partner, love for traditional beliefs and practices, sexual prowess, peace of mind, fashion, among others. In modern times, many only wear the traditional beads on special occasions and also for religious gatherings such as the "Ofala festival" and traditional weddings (Njideka, 2020). However, the Nigerian fashion has been greatly influenced due to westernization, individual preference and social status, but the fact still remains that despite all this rich culture, Nigerian culture and practices is still in existence through changes in terms of colour combination, texture, durability among other factors (Yusuf & Ahmed, 2022).

There are many reasons that combine to explain why waist beads are worn by women. The first reason has to do with cultural identity. According to Njiuba (2021), there are a variety of meanings attached to the use of waist beads in different cultures such as maturity and sexual attraction. The three major ethnic groups in Nigeria (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) traditionally make use of waist beads. There is also a spiritual reason to the wearing of waist beads. According to Yates (2022), those who are practicing the awareness of the spirit and many other spiritual incantations make use of waist beads to commune with the spirit world for extraordinary powers, personal performances and demonstration of power.

Furthermore, waist beads are used or worn to make a fashion statement (Adiji, 2021). Many Nigerians including female celebrities wear waist beads to display their natural endowments and also to attract rich men. There are several reports of celebrities who wear waist beads for fashion statement and beauty, but overall, Nigerian women wear waist beads as a piece of body jewellery or an accessory. Oreoritse (2022) added that there are women who wear waist beads for weight control. These are women who wear waist bead to measure their size and over time this waist bead could fall or roll up due to weight loss or weight gain.

Uju (2021) carried out a descriptive study on the topic titled African waist beads – Meaning, significance and uses. The study was conceived to identify reasons for the use of beads among women in Umu-Menyi, Bende State. The study disproportionately sampled 255 women aged 18 years and above. The findings showed that many women in the study area embrace the use of waist beads for the following reasons: intimacy (60.0%), cultural heritage and pride (30.0%) and posture (10.0%). The qualitative findings revealed that many women in the area use waist beads in intimate settings to enhance their sexuality. Waist bead was also closely associated with fertility. Thus, some women in the study area wear special beads during sex when they are trying to conceive. More findings also indicated that waist beads are sometimes worn by natives whenever they want to travel abroad for the purpose of showcasing their African heritage and pride. The study also found that waist beads can help a person become aware of their stomach and posture. The beads fit quite differently depending on how one is sitting and breathing. They can also serve as a reminder to sit up straight, engage stomach muscles, relax one's back, and breathe properly. The study hypothesis confirmed that there are women who use waist beads to gauge their stomach size and weight.

### **Theoretical Orientation**

Symbolic interactionism is relevant to this study because it is able to explain the recent trends in the beads making and beads wearing industry in Awka South Local Government Area of Anambra State. Symbolic interactionism tries to draw our minds to the deeper meanings, interpretations, insights and symbols that propel human actions such as encouraging women to wear beads. Symbolic interactionism offers an explanation to the diversity of several patterns of thoughts, symbols, importance, meanings and interpretations which are built into the human mind that pushes women to enjoy wearing of waist beads. The theory revealed that weight awareness, beauty, love-making, cultural identity, femininity, fertility, posture and fashion statement are some of the key reasons or factors responsible for waist bead wearing among women in Nigerian societies such as Awka South LGA. It is for the above reasons that many residents of Awka South LGA have embraced wearing of waist beads with joy and fulfilment because they have positive views about them. It follows therefore that cultural messages about the benefits and beauty of wearing waist beads are important and key enablers for the use of waist beads by women in the study area. Hence, these theoretical assumptions and postulations make symbolic interaction theory most apt, appropriate and suitable for the subject of this investigation.

### **Methodology**

This study adopted concurrent mixed methods research design because it is a research tool that makes use of quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection to gather information simultaneously. The essence of the mixed methods research design is to gain a deeper knowledge into the issue of discourse and to achieve a high

level of certainty. It is instructive to note that by integrating both quantitative and qualitative data, the researcher gains both depth and breadth. Therefore, by leveraging on the advantages of the quantitative and qualitative methods, this approach will balance the downsides of each. The quantitative instrument will be used to collect data through questionnaire while the qualitative component will elicit information through in-depth interview (IDI) that will be collected from a few research participants.

According to the National Population Census (2006), Awka South Local Government Area has a total population of 189,049 persons. The population is made up of 96,297 males and 92,752 females. Therefore, the target population for this study are men and women between the ages of 18–60 years living in Awka South LGA as at the time of conducting this study. The projected population of persons aged 18 years – 60 years according to NBS (2021) is 192,273; and that happens to be the target population for this study. The above target population is chosen because they fall within the range of people who are supposed to be familiar with the subject of this investigation.

A sample size of 204 respondents is adopted for the quantitative component of this study. Taro Yamane's statistical formula (1967) was used to determine the sample size as follows. The formula was given as thus,  $n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$

$$\frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where:

n = sample size

N = population of the study

l = constant

e = level of precision

Thus,

$$n = \frac{192,273}{1 + 192,273 (0.07)^2}$$

$$n = \frac{192,273}{1 + 192,273 (0.0049)}$$

$$n = \frac{192,273}{192,273}$$

$$n = \frac{192,274 (0.0049)}{192,273}$$

$$n = \frac{192,273}{942.1426}$$

n = 204.0805712  
n = 204 (approximately). This figure is rounded up to two hundred and four (204) as the sample size for this study. The sample size is considered appropriate and adequate enough for statistical coding and analysis of the phenomenon under study. This sample size is believed to be true representative of the larger population because it is done in such a way that every element of the population had equal chance of being selected. The instruments that were used to collect data include questionnaire and in-depth interview guide. The essence of these two methods was to ensure that the researcher gains deeper insight into the subject of the study and to ensure certainty and precision in the validity and reliability of the data gathered. A uniform set of questionnaire schedule was administered to all the respondents. The questionnaire session was self-administered; the self-administration encouraged high return of the questionnaire. Moreover, it was expected that residents of Awka South LGA could include the ones that are literate and the ones that are not literate, and that was where the use of English and Igbo language simultaneously came in. All the instruments were thoroughly vetted for content and face validity by experts in the Department of Sociology/Anthropology to ensure uniformity in the interpretation of concepts and recording of responses.

The quantitative data was processed with the help of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 24. The data was analysed with descriptive statistics such as frequency distribution tables, percentages and graphic illustrations to present the characteristics of the research subjects. In analysing the qualitative data, the researcher commenced with careful coding and transcribing of the raw data. The transcripts derived from the in-depth interviews were thoroughly read and coded. However, illustrative quotes, expressions, ideas and coded ideas were identified and organized under distinct themes. Manual thematic method was used in the analysis of the qualitative data. These qualitative data were compared with the quantitative data to establish a synergy between the two findings.

### Data Presentation

Data from the field work is presented below starting with the personal data of the respondents

#### Personal Data of Respondents

This section deals with personal data of the respondents such as place of residence, age, marital status, educational qualification, religious affiliation and employment status. The personal data of the respondents are presented in the table below

**Table 1: Personal Data of Respondents**

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	60	37.5
Female	100	62.5
<b>Total</b>	160	100
<b>Age</b>		
20-25	8	4.3
26-31	23	12.3
32-37	84	52.5
37 and above	45	28.1
<b>Total</b>	160	100
<b>Income status</b>		
Low income earner	50	41.0
Average income earner	51	41.8
High income earner	21	17.2
<b>Total</b>	160	100
<b>Level of education</b>		
No formal education	0	0
FSLC	6	3.8
SSCE	50	31.3
OND/NCE	24	15
HND/BSc	68	42.5
Postgraduate	12	6.4
Others	110	58.8
<b>Total</b>	160	100
<b>Occupation</b>		
Unemployed	78	48.8
Business	57	35.6
Farming	2	1.3
Public servant	16	10.0
Civil servant	8	5.0
<b>Total</b>	160	100
<b>Religious affiliation</b>		
Christianity	149	93.1
African Traditional Religion (ATR)	2	1.3
Atheist	9	5.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>160</b>	<b>100</b>

**Field Survey, 2025.**

Table 1 shows that majority of the respondents (62.5%) are females. In terms of age, table 1 shows that majority of the respondents (52.5%) indicated that they are between the ages of 32-37. In terms of income level, table 1 shows that majority of the respondents (41.8%) indicated that they are average income earners. On level of education, table 1 shows that majority of the respondents (42.5%) are HND/BSc holders). Also, table 1 shows that majority of the respondents (48.8%) are unemployed. Finally, table 1 shows that majority of the respondents (93.1%) are Christians.

**Analysis of Research Objectives**

Two objectives were designed for the research and they are reproduced and addressed in this section.

**Objective One:** What is the extent of waist bead usage among women in Awake South LGA?. Findings are presented in tables 2 and 3.

**Table 2: Respondents' view on the meaning of waist bead**

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Jewellery won around the waist or hip area	124	77.5
Round perforated objects which are strong to form necklaces, bracelets etc	3	1.9

Material strung on cotton thread, twine, wire or elastic cord for fashion	15	9.4
All of the above	21	13.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>160</b>	<b>100</b>

**Field survey, 2025.**

Table 2 shows that majority of the respondents (77.5%) described waist beads as jewelry worn around the waist or hip area.

**Table 3: Respondents' view on the extent of waist bead usage among women in Awka South LGA**

<i>Responses</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Large extent	51	31.9
Mild extent	78	48.8
Low extent	31	19.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>160</b>	<b>100</b>

**Field survey, 2025.**

Table 3 shows that majority of the respondents (48.8%) indicated that the extent of waist bead usage in Awka South LGA is mild. This data is supported by findings from the IDI.

One of the interviewees stated that:

The usage is on the rise especially among young people. I know so many of them that use it. I believe it is on the increase and may keep increasing as the years roll by (Female, 24, single, student).

Another interviewee stated:

Waist bead is a piece of jewelry worn for fashion. It is very popular among young girls especially the single ones in the university. They wear them on their waist and flaunt them for people to see (Male, 33, single, civil servant).

**Objective Two:** What are the reasons for waist bead usage among women in Awka South LGA? Findings are presented in tables 4 and 5.

**Table 4: Respondents' view on whether they make use of waist beads**

<i>Responses</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Yes	45	28.1
No	115	71.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>160</b>	<b>100</b>

**Field survey, 2025.**

Table 4 shows that majority of the respondents (71.9%) indicated that they don't make use of waist beads. Data from the IDI however disagrees with this.

One of the interviewees stated:

Yes, I make use of waist beads frequently (Female, 24, single, student)

Another interviewee stated:

Waist beads are very beautiful on my waist so I make use of them every day. In fact, I go to bed with my waist beads too (Female, 27, married, unemployed).

**Table 5: Respondents' view on their reasons for using waist beads**

<i>Responses</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Maturity and sexual attraction	22	13.8
Beauty and fashion	102	63.7
Weight awareness	21	13.1
Cultural identity	11	6.9
Femininity and fertility	4	2.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>160</b>	<b>100</b>

**Field survey, 2025**

Table 5 shows that majority of the respondents (63.7%) identified beauty and fashion as the reasons for their usage of waist beads. This completely aligns with data from the IDI.

One of the interviewees stated:

I wear my waist bead for fashion and beauty. It looks so good on my waist and it brings out my beauty around the waist region. The way the beads dangle when I wear them looks so aesthetically pleasing that I admire myself most times on the mirror after putting on my favorite waist beads. It looks really beautiful and that is my major reason for usage (Female, 24, single, student)

Another interviewee stated:

I love waist beads because of fashion. Also, they are sexually attractive. There are men that get carried away by the sight of waist beads around the waist of a woman (Female, 31, married, unemployed).

### Discussion

The study examined public perception of the use of waist beads in Awka South Local Government Area (LGA). The findings revealed that waist beads are used among residents of Awka South LGA; however, their usage is not widespread. Although there is a growing interest in waist bead use, it has not reached a very high level. This finding is consistent with that of Bolajoko (2020).

Several factors may account for this pattern, including cost and moral considerations. It is possible that waist beads have become relatively expensive, thereby limiting their usage. Another plausible explanation relates to morality. Awka South is a predominantly Christian and conservative society, where individuals are often concerned about public opinion and social approval. Such concerns may influence usage, particularly if public perception of waist beads is generally unfavorable.

The study also examined the reasons for waist bead usage in Awka South LGA. The findings indicate that waist beads are primarily worn for beauty purposes. This aligns with the findings of Bolajoko (2020).

### Recommendations

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

1. Sponsoring of radio and TV programmes to counter all the negative views that some residents have about the wearing of waist beads.
2. Make laws to promote cultural heritages such as the wearing of waist beads.
3. Female children should be socialised at the family level to embrace the wearing of waist beads with pride as a mark of cultural heritage.
4. Traditional rulers should encourage wearing of waist beads among women.

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