

Evaluating the Clothing Interest and Mental Health of Undergraduate Students in the University of Nigeria

Nnubia, U.I.¹, *Oluah E.B.¹, & Gabriel C.D.¹

¹Department of Home Science and Management,
University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

*Correspondence: ekwutosi.oluah@unn.edu.ng

Abstract

The study determined the relationship between clothing interest and undergraduates' mental health at the University of Nigeria. A descriptive cross-sectional research design was employed for the study. A multi-stage sampling technique was used to select 696 undergraduates from five faculties in the university. Three specific objectives guided this study. Clothing Interest Questionnaire and Mental Health Continuum short form were used to collect data. The instruments were validated by three lecturers in the Department of Home Science and Management, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The instruments were reliable with Cronbach alpha values of 0.78 and 0.86 respectively. The data were analyzed using SPSS version 23.0. Frequency, percentage, and Chi-square were used for data analysis. Results showed that 61.5% of the respondents had an interest in clothes that make them unique, 54.6% were interested in clothing for appearance enhancement, 54.3% had an interest in clothing for experimenting, 59.1% had interest in clothing for security, and 65.7% of the respondents had an interest in clothing that conforms to fashion in vogue. The respondents could belong to more than one clothing interest category. A greater proportion (69.5%) of the respondents had poor mental health. The finding showed that clothing interests for Security ($\chi^2 = 15.49$, $p = .000$) and Uniqueness ($\chi^2 = 12.0$, $p = .002$) were significantly ($p < 0.05$) associated with positive mental health. Clothing interests in appearance, experimenting, security, and fashion were not associated with mental health ($p \geq 0.05$). Although the mental health of the respondents was generally suboptimal, it was not mostly associated with their clothing interests. Mental health services such as counseling services and support groups should be made readily available to the students.

Keywords: Clothing interests, mental health, undergraduate students, University, Nigeria

Introduction

Clothing interest refers to an individual's attitude, beliefs, knowledge, attention, and curiosity about their own and others' clothing (Cham et al., 2018). Clothing interest relates to an individual's preference for clothing as a fundamental component of self-expression which has a huge impact on one's identity, culture, and fashion sense (Manglani et al., 2023). An individual's clothing interest is indicated in the degree to which people use clothes experimentally, the amount of time, money, and energy they are prepared to

sacrifice for clothing, and their knowledge of current fashions (Cham et al., 2018).

Clothing interest is multidimensional, encompassing individual's concern with physical appearance, experimentation with appearance, increased knowledge of clothing, improved personal security, and enhanced uniqueness (Gurel & Gurel, 2009). Several factors affect young people's clothing interests such as verbal promotion of the clothing items, perceived quality, originality, self-concept, and brand image (Cham et al., 2018). Chandel et al. (2019) identified four types of clothing

interests among young people which are clothing for appearance, experimenting, security, and uniqueness. Appearance is the type of clothing interest characterized by a focus on how one's clothing enhances their physical appearance and attractiveness. Individuals with a strong appearance-based clothing interest prioritize clothing choices that help them feel confident, attractive, and in line with societal beauty standards. Experimenting clothing interest involves trying out new and diverse clothing styles, trends, and looks. People with this interest enjoy exploring different fashion choices, breaking away from their usual style, and being open to creative expression through clothing. Clothing interest related to security centers around comfort, practicality, and a sense of protection. Individuals with a security-based interest prioritize clothing that provides physical comfort and emotional security, choosing items that make them feel safe and at ease in various situations. Uniqueness clothing interest is characterized by a desire to stand out and express individuality through clothing. People with this interest seek clothing items that set them apart from others, focusing on pieces that are unconventional, rare, or personalized (Chandel et al., 2019). While it may appear trivial, a one's interest in what he or she wears is a strong tool for identifying and addressing mental health concerns (Fraser, 2022).

Mental health is a state of balance between the individual and the surrounding world; state of harmony between oneself and others and a state of co-existence between the realities of the self and that of other people and the environment (WHO, 2013). A person in good mental health is in a balanced relationship with the outside world, with others and with themselves, and with the realities of their own life coexisting with those of others and the surroundings (WHO, 2022).

Positive mental health refers to a sense of well-being, emotional equilibrium, and the ability to manage one's life, maximize potential, and contribute to society, thus encompassing the psychological, emotional, intellectual, social, and spiritual development (Barry, 2009). The concept of positive mental health is based on the idea that mental health is not simply the absence of mental illness, but rather a positive state of well-being that includes a range of positive emotions, thoughts and behaviors (Keyes & Simoes, 2010). Positive mental health is crucial for managing stress, relating to others, and making positive choices, therefore maintaining good mental health boosts feelings of usefulness, happiness, and satisfaction, leading to a fulfilling life (Sutton, 2019). Positive mental health is closely linked to physical health, as poor mental health is associated with several health and social outcomes such as higher alcohol, tobacco and illicit substance use, adolescent pregnancy, school dropout and delinquent behaviors (WHO, 2012).

Clothing interest and mental health are intricately connected, as one's clothing choices can have a significant impact on their psychological well-being. Clothing attributes can significantly impact moods and emotions, because of the multi-sensory aspects, social factors, and symbolic associations (Moody et al., 2010). Dressing in a way that helps a person feel confident and empowered may boost mood and alleviate anxiety and negative affect. Wearing clothes that make an individual feel good about their body boosts their self-esteem and promotes positive body image which in turn can contribute to better mental health outcomes (Entwistle, 2015). In addition to being symbolic of the self, clothing interests are significant in enhancing the self. When used positively, clothing contributes to feelings of self-acceptance and self-esteem. For instance, while some students might prefer

wearing outfits that enhance their physical appearance, some look up to celebrities or significant people and try to identify with their fashion styles, while others are interested in outfits that will make them stand out among their colleagues (Chandel et al., 2019). The way students choose their outfits for school represents their different personalities and identities (Noh et al., 2015). Poor clothing interest can have psychological consequences such as negative body image, low self-esteem, and other mental health disorders (Ajwani, 2020).

Mental health issues among young people particularly university students are currently of global concern. Various studies across the globe have highlighted the high prevalence of mental health challenges among university students (Eisenberg et al., 2009; Keyes et al., 2012; Nnubia et al., 2020). Mental health problems can affect a student's energy level, concentration, dependability, mental ability, and optimism, hindering performance. Poor mental health can have important effects on the wider health and development of adolescents and is associated with several health and social outcomes such as higher alcohol, tobacco and illicit substance use, adolescent pregnancy, school dropout and delinquent behaviors (WHO, 2014)). Mental health of students has been found to be intricately connected with various facets of their lives, ranging from their personality to their choices. Hence, this study seeks to assess clothing interests and mental health status of undergraduates in the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and the association between the variables.

Objectives of the Study

The specific objectives of the study were to:

1. identify the clothing interests of undergraduate students in the University of Nigeria;

2. assess the mental health of the undergraduate students; and
3. determine of the relationship between the clothing interests and the mental health of those students.

Methodology

Study Design: The study used a descriptive cross-sectional survey design. A cross-sectional study is a type of observational study that analyzes data from a population or a representative subset at a specific point in time (Simkus, 2023).

Study Population: The study population consists of 39,295 undergraduate students studying in the 17 faculties in the Nsukka and Enugu campuses during the 2021/2022 session.

Sample Size and Sampling Technique: The study adopted a multi-stage random sampling technique in selecting the samples. The first stage involves the random sampling of three (30%) out of ten faculties in University of Nigeria Nsukka and two (30%) out of seven faculties in University of Nigeria Enugu Campus. The three Faculties selected from the University of Nigeria Nsukka were Pharmacy, Education and Agricultural Sciences while the two Faculties selected from the University of Nigeria Enugu Campus include Basic Medical Sciences and Environmental Sciences. In stage two, online sample size calculator by Survey Monkey was used to determine the sample size for each university using this formula:

$$n = \frac{z^2 \times p(1-p)}{e^2} \div \frac{1 + [z^2 \times p(1-p)]}{e^2 N}$$

Where n = sample size
z = level of confidence (1.96)

p= baseline levels of the indicators (0.5 or 50%)

e = margin of error (0.05 or 5%)

N = population size

The sample size calculation gave a total of 696 undergraduate students, 368 from University of Nigeria Nsukka and 328 from University of Nigeria Enugu Campus. In stage three, a simple random technique was used to select 50% of the departments in each faculty. The sample size computed for each faculty were selected from the chosen departments. Students who gave their consent participated in the study.

Instrument for Data Collection: Data were collected using two instruments titled Clothing Interests Questionnaire and Mental Health Continuum Short-Form (MHC-SF). The Clothing interest questionnaire was used to obtain information on the clothing interests of the respondents. This questionnaire was adapted and modified from the instrument used by Chandel et al. (2019) in assessing clothing interests of young people in India based on four interest categories; Appearance, Experimenting, Security, and Uniqueness. An additional clothing interest; Fashion Conforming was added in this study. The questionnaire was divided into two sections. Section A was used to obtain information on the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the respondents. The section B was further divided into six sub-sections based on the clothing interests. Appearance and experimenting sub-sections each had 6 items while the rest contained 5 items. The instrument was rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5).

The Mental health continuum short form (MHC-SF) consists of 14 items that represent three components of well-being. Emotional well-being has three items, psychological well-being has six items and social well-being has five items. These response options assess the frequency with which respondents experienced each symptom of positive mental health within the past 30 days. The response

options consist of a 6-points ranging from 0 “never” to 5 “every day”.

Validation and Reliability Test of the Instrument: The standardized instruments were validated by three lecturers from the Department of Home Science and Management. Their suggestions and observations were used to improve the questionnaire items. The reliability of the test instrument was obtained using the Cronbach Alfa reliability test. The questionnaire was administered to 20 respondents from two departments. The 20 respondents were selected from the faculties which were not a part of the sample. The Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient values of the two instruments were 0.873 and 0.831 respectively and both were considered reliable.

Ethical Clearance: Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of Nigeria Teaching Hospital Ethical Committee on Research Projects with the approval number; NHREC/05/01/2008B-FWA00002458-1RB00002323.

Informed Consent: The researchers fully explained the study's protocol to the participants, and the questions were answered to the participants' satisfaction. The respondents were given an informed consent form to sign. Only willing participants were enlisted for the study.

Method of Data Collection: Two undergraduate students in Nutrition and Dietetics and Nursing Sciences of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and Enugu campuses respectively were recruited by the researcher, to serve as research assistants in administering the questionnaires. The researcher briefed them on the purpose of the research, the content of the questionnaire, and the data collection procedure. The instruments were administered to students in the different classes/ lecture halls of their departments by direct face-to-face contact and given by hand. The items were explained to them, and their

questions were answered immediately. It took about five minutes or less for the respondents to fill out and return the questionnaire. Six hundred and ninety-six copies of the questionnaire were distributed, and all (100%) were returned. The data collection process took a total of two weeks.

Data and Statistical Analysis: The data collected were coded and analyzed using the computer software package, Statistical Product for Service Solution (SPSS) version 23.0. The clothing interest of the respondents was determined by computing their total scores on all the categories. The total obtainable scores for Appearance and Experimenting are 6 -30, while the other clothing interest scores ranged from 5 to 25. For the Appearance and Experimenting sub-sections, all the respondents who scored 6 - 12 were grouped as low interest, 13 - 19 as moderate interest, and 20 -30 as high interest. For the Security, Fashion Conforming, and Uniqueness sub-sections, a score range of 5 - 10 corresponds to low interest, 11 - 19 was categorized as moderate interest and 20 -25 was the high-interest category. Respondents were categorized as “flourishing” and “not flourishing” mental health. Flourishing mental health was defined by responding “every day” or “5-6 times a week” on at least 1 out of 3 emotional wellbeing items, and 6

out of the 11 items of combined social and psychological subscales. Those who did not meet this criterion are classified as “Not flourishing.” Higher scores indicate greater levels of positive well-being. The results were analyzed using frequencies and percentages. Chi-square was used to define the relationship among variables at a 0.05 level of significance.

Results

Demographic characteristics of the respondents

The respondents comprised 56.6% females and 43.1% males, mostly (72.1%) between 18-25 years of age. A good number (65.1%) were Igbos, 18.1% were Yoruba, and 5.6% were Hausa. About a third (30.9%) of the respondents lived in the hostels and 69% lived off campus. The majority (81.6%) of the respondents were single, 14.4% were married, and 3.8% were divorced/separated/widowed. More than a third (38.6%) of the respondents were in the faculty of Agriculture, 20.3% were in Pharmacy, 15.8% in Education, 14.7% in Basic Medical Sciences, and 10.6% were in Environmental Sciences. A good number (32.5%) were final-year students, 22.3% were in the 100 level and 45.1% were in other levels.

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents

Variables	Frequencies	Percentage
Gender		
Male	300	43.10
Female	394	56.60
Age		
Less than 18 years	55	7.90
18-30years	628	90.20
Above 30 years	13	1.90
Ethnicity		
Igbo	453	65.10
Yoruba	127	18.20
Hausa	39	5.60
Others	37	11.10

Residence		
Hostel	215	30.90
off Campus	481	69.10
Marital status		
Single	568	81.60
Married	102	14.60
Divorced/Widowed	26	3.80
Faculty		
Pharmaceutical Sciences	141	20.30
Agricultural Sciences	269	38.60
Education	110	15.80
Basic Medical Sciences	102	14.70
Environmental Science	74	10.60
Year of study		
100 level	156	22.30
Other Levels	314	45.10
Final year	226	32.50

Table 2 shows the clothing interests of the students. From the table, greater proportions of the students were at moderate levels of all the clothing interest groups. Many (41.2%) of the respondents showed high clothing interest

for appearance, 39.5% for experimenting, 36.9% for security, 33.9% for uniqueness and only a few (9.6%) showed high interest for fashion-conforming clothing.

Table 2: Clothing interests of the respondents

Interest category	High Interest	Moderate Interest	Low Interest
	F (%)	F (%)	F (%)
Appearance	287 (41.20)	380 (54.60)	29 (4.20)
Experimenting	275 (39.50)	378 (54.30)	43 (6.20)
Fashion Conforming	67 (9.60)	457 (65.70)	172 (24.70)
Uniqueness	236 (33.90)	428 (61.50)	32 (4.60)
Security	257 (36.90)	411 (59.10)	28 (4.00)

F; frequency, %; percent

Figure 1 shows the mental health status of the respondents. From the figure, the majority (70.0%) of the respondents were not flourishing while 30.0% of them were flourishing.

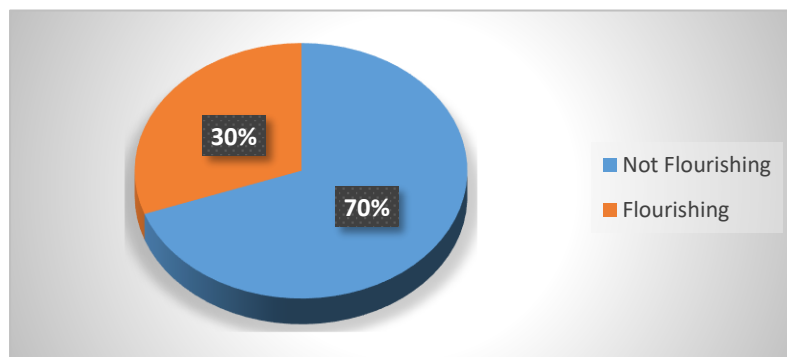


Figure 1: Mental health status of the respondents

Table 3 shows the relationship between clothing interests and the mental health of the respondents. From the table, clothing interests in security and uniqueness were significantly ($P < 0.05$) associated with mental health. Moderate security and uniqueness had the

highest proportion (35.8% and 35.0%) respectively of those flourishing in mental health. Appearance, experimenting, and fashion-conforming clothing interests were not associated with the mental health of the respondents.

Table 3: Relationship between the clothing interests and mental health of respondents

Categories	Not Flourishing F (%)	Flourishing F (%)	Chi-square (χ^2)	P - Value
Appearance				
Low Interest	23 (79.3)	6 (20.7)	1.99	.371
Moderate Interest	258 (67.9)	122 (32.1)		
High Interest	203 (70.9)	84 (29.3)		
Experimenting				
Low Interest	35 (81.4)	8 (18.6)	3.76	.153
Moderate Interest	255 (67.5)	123 (32.5)		
High Interest	194 (70.5)	81 (29.5)		
Security				
Low Interest	25 (89.3)	3 (10.7)	15.49	.000*
Moderate Interest	264 (64.2)	147 (35.8)		
High Interest	195 (75.9)	62 (24.1)		
Fashion-Conforming				
Low Interest	126 (73.3)	46 (26.7)	1.49	.474
Moderate Interest	312 (68.3)	145 (31.7)		
High Interest	46 (68.7)	21 (31.3)		
Uniqueness				
Low Interest	27 (84.4)	5 (15.6)	12.0	.002*
Moderate Interest	278 (65.0)	150 (35.0)		
High Interest	179 (75.8)	5.7 (24.2)		

F; frequency, %; percent

Discussion

Clothing interests are significant in the enhancement of self. When used positively, clothing contributes to feelings of self-acceptance and self-esteem. It is evident from the research findings that clothing choices serve various purposes for the surveyed individuals. The most common clothing interest among the respondents was based on appearance. A substantial number (41.2%) of the respondents expressed a high interest for clothing that promotes an individual’s physical appearance. This indicates the importance of aesthetics in their clothing choices, reflecting a desire to present them in a

visually appealing manner. The prominence of appearance underscores the influence of societal standards and personal grooming in the respondents' clothing decisions. More than a third of the students also showed high interest in clothing for uniqueness, experimenting, and security. Having a high interest in clothing for uniqueness suggests that the individuals value clothing as a means of expressing their individuality and distinguishing themselves from others (Chandel, 2019). This inclination towards uniqueness highlights the role of clothing in shaping one's identity and personal style (Boomsma, 2020). The respondents who

displayed a high interest in clothing experimentation underscored the evolving nature of fashion in the contemporary world. Clothing, once constrained by societal norms, has evolved into a dynamic avenue for self-expression and individuality and experimenting with clothing opens doors to creativity and self-discovery. Additionally, the participants who preferred clothing for security indicate that clothing provides them with a sense of comfort and protection. This observation points towards the psychological aspect of clothing, where individuals seek garments that make them feel secure and shielded from external influences. Interestingly, only a few had high interest with the majority (65.7%) having a moderate interest for fashion-conforming clothing. This suggests that a small portion of the sample is influenced by current fashion trends and seeks to align with prevailing styles. Clothing does not just affect how others perceive us but also influences our cognitive processes and behaviors (Adam & Galinsky, 2012). This desire for fashion conformation highlights the role of societal norms and the media in shaping individuals' clothing choices. Clothing interest, a fundamental aspect of human behavior, plays a pivotal role in the way individuals express themselves, navigate social interactions and construct their identities (Oberhagemann, 2023).

Mental health enables individuals to develop their abilities and face the stress of daily life (WHO, 2013). The study's results shed light on the diverse spectrum of mental well-being among the participants. Notably, less than a third (31%) of respondents in this current research reported flourishing in mental health. Flourishing individuals exhibit a higher degree of psychological well-being, characterized by positive emotions, resilience, and a sense of purpose (Keyes & Simoes, 2010). This mental well-being of this subgroup could be attributed to various factors such as

strong social support systems, effective coping mechanisms, and favorable life circumstances. On the other hand, the research findings also point out a concerning 69.5% of respondents who were categorized as not flourishing in mental health. This majority group faces challenges that impact their overall mental well-being, possibly indicating experiences of distress, lack of positive emotions, and decreased life satisfaction. Identifying these individuals is crucial for tailoring targeted interventions and support mechanisms to uplift their mental health. The varying proportions of respondents falling within each mental health category reflect the complex nature of psychological well-being. A study by Eisenberg et al. (2009) found that university students have a higher risk of mental health problems than the general population. The study found that 30% of university students reported feeling overwhelmed, 15% reported experiencing symptoms of depression and 10% reported having suicidal thoughts. Mental health assessment is a systematic process that involves evaluating an individual's psychological well-being, emotional state, and cognitive functioning (Holly, 2022). Assessing the mental health of individuals plays a crucial role in diagnosing mental health disorders, monitoring treatment progress, and guiding interventions (Sokoll, 2023). The study underscores the need for comprehensive mental health strategies that cater to individuals across the entire spectrum, promoting both recovery and enhancement. The research findings advocate for the importance of promoting positive mental health outcomes, while also addressing the needs of those facing mental health difficulties. Mental health is integral to living a healthy, balanced life (Wani, 2023). People in good mental health could still feel sad, unwell, angry or unhappy, which natural human emotions are. However, mental health has been often conceptualized as a purely positive

effect, marked by greater feelings of happiness and a sense of mastery over the environment (Lamers, 2012). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, (2023) noted that mental health affects how individuals think, feel, and behave.

Clothing interest is multi-dimensional and consists of five components or dimensions: concern with physical appearance, experimentation with appearance, heightened awareness of clothing, enhancement of personal security and enhancement of individuality (Gurel & Gurel, 2009). This study highlighted various facets of the relationship between the respondents' clothing interests and mental health. Having a moderate interest in clothing appears to enhance mental health particularly in the aspects of security and uniqueness. These findings show that clothing interests have a discernible influence on the mental well-being of the surveyed undergraduates. The correlation between certain clothing choices and levels of mental health sheds light on the multifaceted interplay between self-expression, self-perception, and psychological state (Entwistle, 2015). While clothing choices can serve as a tool for self-expression and boosting self-esteem, they can also be influenced by societal pressures and internal perceptions (Chandel et al., 2019). Acknowledging these complexities are imperative when interpreting the findings and designing interventions to foster positive mental health outcomes.

Conclusion

The research findings show that the majority of the respondents showed moderate clothing interests in the dimensions of appearance, experimenting, security, fashion-conforming, and uniqueness. They also showed a high proportion of sub-optimal mental health. The study also showed that clothing interests at a moderate level have a possible influence on

the mental well-being of the surveyed undergraduates. The association between certain clothing choices and levels of mental health sheds light on the multifaceted interplay between self-expression, self-perception, and psychological state. The presence of a significant relationship underscores the importance of considering clothing interests as a potential indicator of an individual's mental health. While clothing choices can serve as a tool for self-expression and boosting self-esteem, they can also be influenced by societal pressures and internal perceptions. Acknowledging these complexities is imperative when designing interventions to foster positive mental health outcomes. As the academic and professional landscape evolves, the significance of mental health and its intersections with various aspects of life, including clothing interests, becomes more pronounced. This study emphasized the role of clothing choices as a potential avenue for promoting mental well-being. Its implications extend beyond the academic realm, serving as a foundation for initiatives aimed at raising awareness, guiding counseling interventions, and promoting a holistic approach to student well-being.

Recommendations

Considering the significance of the study's findings, several key recommendations can be drawn.

1. Universities and institutions of higher learning should consider integrating discussions on self-expression, body image, and mental health within their curriculum/programmes and support services. By fostering an environment that promotes positive self-perception and embraces diverse expressions of identity, institutions can contribute to the overall mental well-being of their students.
2. Workshops, seminars, and awareness campaigns could be organized to

empower students with knowledge about how clothing choices can impact self-esteem and overall mental well-being.

3. Resource Allocation: The university administration should allocate resources to support mental health services, workshops, and awareness campaigns that address the interconnectedness of clothing interests and psychological well-being

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