

Gendered Preferences at an Early Age as Affecting Choice of Fields of Study in South- South Universities in Nigeria

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Abstract

The study investigated if gendered preferences made at early age among students can influence their choice of fields of study in the Universities in the South- South region of Nigeria. The Universities studied were the private, state and federal institutions of higher education. The objectives set for the study were to: ascertain if the students of Western Delta University (WDU), University of Benin (UNIBEN) and Rivers State University understand gendered preferences made at an early age entails, identify whether students from Western Delta University (WDU), University of Benin (UNIBEN) and Rivers State University choice of study were influenced by gendered preferences made at an early age and determine whether students from Western Delta University (WDU), University of Benin (UNIBEN) and Rivers State University choice of study were influenced by other factors in the South- south region of Nigeria. The theories used for the study were Gender role, Gender Schema and Social constructionism theories with a population of 132,700 from the University of Benin, Benin City, Edo State (Federal – owned University), Western Delta University, Oghara, Delta State (Private – owned University) and Rivers State University, Rivers State (State – owned University). A sample size of 384 was determined by Krejcie and Margan sample size determination .In conclusion, the study discovered that, students in private Universities are more prone to getting gendered on their choice of field of study than their counterparts in the public Universities in South- south, Nigeria. As a result, the study recommends that, parents and other persons in charge of the nurturing of children should endeavor to avoid influencing their children through gendered actions.

Keywords: Gendered Preference, Gender, University, South- south Nigeria and Students

Introduction

Gendered preferences have been a source of concern for feminists and scholars in the academic environment. The resultant influence that gendering as a concept has on reality in terms of the inhabitants of a particular environment can be very much noticeable. Gender as a term simply means the social construction of behavior, norms and actions that defines men and women in the society which becomes reality overtime (Okeke, 2005; Curran & Sue, 2010).

Getting gendered in any society involves a reshape of norms, behaviours and roles of an individual to suit the society's wants whether in a male or female child and even an adult (Nwokoro & Ekwunife, 2020). This boils down to finding out the knowledge gap that revolves around deciphering if a student's preference for a particular field of study is tied to the gendering role plays assigned to a given academic context within a particular society like the South- south region in Nigeria.

It is important to note that, this line of study is very relevant to Africa and Nigeria in particular as it has raised arguments in diverse places. According to researchers in the field of gender studies, Africa is a very volatile continent filled with diverse cultural influences, gender- specific treatment effect, gender stereotypes and other motivational factors that most times guides an individual in whatever course of life to operate from (Lopes & Vogel, 2020). Like the pursuit of academic knowledge, the kind of course of study taken in schools is determined by certain factors in the wider society. But if gender is part of this influence on what university students in South-south region of Nigeria choose as their choice of field of study, it is yet unknown, hence this study.

Statement of the Problem

It is been the trend that students in Nigeria face pressures from parents, family members, peers, work environment, stereotypes of masculine and feminine ideology and availability of employment opportunities associated with particular disciplines are on the high and

noticeable virtually anywhere one looks. But do these people influence these young minds on choice of study in South- south, Nigerian Universities? These raises concerns as it has come to the point that, students in Tertiary institutions often times make their choice of study before gaining admission in to the University. During the periods of reading and sitting for WAEC, UTME and Post- UTME examinations which are prerequisites to gaining admissions in to the University, there are factors like peer pressure, financial considerations, family influence or the parents- choose - for- me syndrome, religious background and the ideology that some course of study that are Mathematics-related are meant for the boy child and not the girl child among other factors leads to the question on whether gender preferences has a way of influencing a child's choice of study or if it is the child that makes such choice by his/ herself. This research gap is what this study is out to fill.

Objectives of the Study

The main aim of this study was to investigate whether gendered preferences at an early age affects students' choices of study in the Universities in South- south region of Nigeria. Specific objectives that guided this study were:

1. To ascertain if the students of Western Delta University (WDU), University of Benin (UNIBEN) and Rivers State University (RSU) understand what entails gendered preferences made at an early age.
2. To identify whether students from Western Delta University (WDU), University of Benin (UNIBEN) and Rivers State University (RSU) choice of study were influenced by gendered preferences made at an early age.
3. To determine whether students from Western Delta University (WDU), University of Benin (UNIBEN) and Rivers State University (RSU) choice of study were influenced by other factors in the South- south region of Nigeria.

Research questions

This work was guided by the following questions:

1. Does students of Western Delta University (WDU), University of Benin (UNIBEN) and Rivers State University (RSU) understand what entails gendered preferences made at an early age?
2. Were students of Western Delta University (WDU), University of Benin (UNIBEN) and Rivers State University (RSU) choice of study influenced by gendered preferences made at an early age?
3. What other factors in the South- South region of Nigeria influenced students from Western Delta University (WDU), University of Benin (UNIBEN) and Rivers State University (RSU) choice of study?

Scope of the Study

This study focused on three Universities in the South- South region of Nigeria. The selected Universities are: University of Benin, Benin City, Edo State (Federal – owned University), Western Delta University, Oghara, Delta State (Private – owned University) and Rivers State University (State – owned University). The reason for this is to ensure that the Universities chosen for the study cuts across the three types of University system operating in South- south region of Nigeria in order to give room for diverse opinions from students in these institutions (Private, State and Federal). The essence was to find out from them if gendered preferences promoted their choice of study in their various disciplines in their Universities.

Justification of the Study

This study will be relevant to scholars in media studies, psychology, Education and Ministries of information, Culture and Policy makers in South-south region of Nigeria and beyond as it is a very important area of concern regarding early

upbringing, gender and its possible influence on a child or a potential student.

Gender is an interesting area that has been an arguable field for decades in Nigeria and beyond by scholars and academics. As a result, these researchers deem it fit to study what necessitates a students' choice of study in the University especially being the fact that Nigeria is a multicultural country (Jimoh, 2017; Chinyere, 2005) with diverse views, ethnicities and religions all geared towards shaping a child's view to living, education been part of it. It is the hope of this study to help solve this gap in knowledge.

The research area hopes to be a relevant guide on children, parents, guardians and especially young children who have the hope of furthering their education beyond the elementary stages in to the tertiary unit of learning like the University.

Theoretical Framework

The three theories that were employed for this study were: Gender role, Gender Schema and Social constructionism theories.

Gender Role Theory

Gender role are socio- culturally defined prescriptions and beliefs about the behavior and emotions of men and women (Anselmi & Law, 1998). As a result, it is perceived by many authors and theorists that, perceived gender roles form the bases for the development of gender identity (Buss, 1995; Shield, 1975).

The emergence of Gender role theory goes back to the work of Money, John and co- researchers (1955) and Goldie (2014). These scholars provided the principles that guide the understanding of gender as a socially constructed norm with regards to sex categorization of individuals in society which emphasizes the notion of males and females as a distinct gender identity whose actions and inactions are subsumed (Odia- Osazee & Nwokoro, 2021).

Gender role theory explains the differences in role playing between men and women in the

society and the way individuals' attributes unfold in a particular group behavior and relationship possibly at the level of influencing students in a University setting. Simply put, the gender role theory provides a theoretical basis in explaining how men and women are perceived differently as leaders, students, workers, family relationships among others since, individuals have role expectations on which they are known and identified with (Blackstone, 2003; Gauntlet, 2008 & Enwefah, 2018).

This theory discusses the gender roles centred on conceptions of masculinity and femininity. Instances are abound on this. Men and women in a non- traditional gendered occupations includes a male midwife, women sworn in as combatants in the Army, a woman who is a construction worker and a male kindergarten teacher. Gender roles influence a wide range of human behavior, including the outfit or the job one is employed in to.

Gender role is not the same thing as gender identity. The former originates from the internalized identities that forms the core of a human being while roles are assigned by the expectations drawn from the external environment by the members of the society (Wikipedia, 2022).

Gender Schema Theory

This theory was developed in 1981 by Sandra Bem, a social psychologist in the United States whose major role was to study the US population particularly children (Starr & Zubriggen, 2017). The Gender Schema Theory (GST) was postulated to study how a child processes information with regards to gender. A gender schema serves essentially as a cognitive filter of a sort that guides individuals on how to decipher and choose masculine and feminine categories in any circumstance they get involved with (Davis & Wilson, 2016). A schema is the structure or an association that guides and organizes the perception of an individual or a child in any society. Sandra (2016) cited in Christine & Eileen (2016) adds that, a child grows up within a heterogeneous networks of sex- related themes in

other to assimilate any information based on evolving gender schema.

Been gender schematic simply refers to been able as an individual to sort information, process it and choose the categories to place the information received in to gender categories that suits the individual (Sandra 1981 cited in Starr & Zubriggen, 2017). To the founder of the theory, children specifically make schemas which guide them on what is masculine or feminine. This theory is closely related to the social learning theory by Albert Banduras with regards to a child's learning and development process. The slight difference between the two theories is that, the GST is concerned with how a child chooses the gender form (masculine or feminine) to stick through the aid of schematic categories while the social learning theory states that a child learns through observation from the society.

The GST theory is relevant to this study as it guides to the understanding of the concepts used in this study with regards to what influences a child's choice of study in the University based on gender schema.

Social Constructionism Theory

This theory stands on the notion that, people within a particular society develop meanings to any event based on the meanings drawn from the attached reality to such events (Wikipedia, 2022). According to Nickerson (2021), the social constructionism theory is based on how individuals in a society develop their knowledge and understanding of the world. The proponents of this theory further stated that, understanding the world is based on so many social constructions.

The founders of this theory, Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckman in 1966, made it clear that, as human we construct realities from those influences which we get from the social environment in which we find ourselves, with an emphatic look on social interactions which is responsible for the understanding of social reality.

This theory is relevant to this study as it is able to state that, gender preference on a choice of study in a University can be influenced by the social construct that an individual is exposed to. Critically, it is stated that, no phenomenon is entirely and objectively true.

Literature Review

Sources of Literature

This study reviewed related literatures from EBooks, textbooks, blogs amongst others in order to properly aid understanding of the key concepts of this study.

Conceptual Definitions

Gender

The term gender has to do with the social construction of behaviours and actions. Before the study of gender, the issue of gender simply meant the sex: male or female. The term took its new value from the 1970s when academic feminist started 'complaining' about the universal use of sex as an independent variable in determining one's behaviour and thinking. The word gender according to John & Ken (2005, p. 309), is the social aspects of differences and hierarchies between male and female. This is so because gender is evident throughout the world, shaping how we think about ourselves, guiding our interactions with others as well as influencing our work and family life (Nwokoro & Ekwunife, 2020).

Saul (2014), states that although biological differences are fixed, gender differences are the oppressive results of social interventions that dictate how men and women should behave in a given society. However since gender is mutable or changeable, it then means that it can be altered by a political or social reform (Curran & Sue, 2010). Such changes can either favour a particular sex or the other particularly in areas of education with regards to Nigeria.

Contextually speaking, the world of education is a choice made by the individual either early in age or while growing up. This can be influenced by a

special person of interest to the child in question. Getting gendered may be very early or later in the life of a child or a young adult.

Gender Preferences

Gender preferences is described as the sexual discrimination as practiced by parents in favouring one child to the disadvantage of the others based on sex (www.encyclopedia.com/2019). Preferences can be varied, individualized as well as influenced to guide a young child on what form of gender category to choose from. The society one grows in can be a major influence on the social development and educational advancement of the child, a youth or an individual as the case may be (Marcionis & Ken, 2005). But if gender influences the preferences made on the choice of study of a child towards gaining a degree in the University, is yet unknown, hence this study.

Sociologists and gender studies scholars are of the opinion that, no person grows outside the influence created by those around him or her which pre-determines a particular or an expected behavior (Marcionis & Ken, 2005).

Gender preference is a matter of concern for countries in Western countries particularly as it relates to child and parenting where specifically parents choose to love a particular child over the other (Lee & Gerald, 2013). Gender preferences results from macro- societally 'family- survival mechanism' in which kin, particularly children use members of their families for their own personal interests (Lee & Gerald, 2013).

Conceptually speaking, gender preferences can best be described as the difference between the value placed on sons and daughters. The way a child is trained by the parents – whether mother or father goes a long way in influencing the outcome of the gender patterns exhibited by the child (www.simplypsychology.org/2021) hence the need for these researchers to find out if gendered preferences at an early age of a child influences the choice of study in the Universities in the South- south region of Nigeria.

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Children and Early Gender Preferences

According to Social Learning theory is of the opinion that, children learn through models in the society (Banduras, 1977 cited in Saul, 2016). To this end, it is not out of place to find children copying from their parents, peer groups, media, teachers, environment and friends. In this regard therefore, children are bound to 'copy' from a person who they look up to. In addition, the theories used in this study also aids in emphasizing the place of influence of social constructs on the living patterns of an individual. Studies on www.encyclopedia.com/ 2020 have proven that, there are gender preferences for sons than daughters in the continents of Africa with particular reference to Nigeria (Ndu & Uzochukwu, 2011). It is also interesting to note that, children get to understand their sex as different from the age of 2years and exposed to gender cues from those around them at a very early age (www.encyclopedia.com/ 2020). A child's idea of gender roles can impact on their lives socially and educationally. In this regard therefore, it will not be out of context to assume that, gender preferences could influence a particular sex of children on the choice of study.

Empirical Review

The study by Ndu & Uzochukwu (2011) entitled- 'Child and Gender preferences in an Urban and rural community in Enugu State, investigated if there is the preference of son to having a daughter by women in urban and rural communities in Enugu State. The objective of the study was: to ascertain the child gender preferences in an urban and rural community in Enugu State. A

multistage sampling method was employed to select 245 urban and 243 rural women for households in Enugu State, Eastern Nigeria. A structured questionnaire was used to ascertain child gender preferences in an urban and rural area.

The results from the findings showed that, there is a son preference in both urban and rural areas where 74.7% and 71.6% of women would prefer to have a male child if they could have only one child. In conclusion, son preference exists in the rural and urban community in Enugu State. The study recommended that, family education especially on achieving gender equality of both sexes.

Methodology

Research Design and Population of Study

This study made use of survey research design. This was to give room for the diverse opinions of students from the three Universities to be represented. The population of the study totals; Western Delta University (WDU) = 1,200, University of Benin (UNIBEN)= 77,000and Rivers State University= 54,500 (Source: Edeh, 2020)

Sampling techniques and sample size

The sampling technique used for this study was the convenience and stratified sampling techniques. Since the population of students from these three Universities in the South- south are high in number for a study of this nature, the researchers employed the use of a sample frame as shown on the table 1 below:

Table 1- Sample frame of the population of students in the three Universities

Name and Location of Universities	Population of Students
Western Delta University, Oghara, Delta State	1,200
University of Benin, Benin City, Edo State	77,000
Rivers State University, Rivers State	54,500
Total	132,700

Source: Adams, 2021

From the sample frame which totals 132,700 as the number of the students in the three

Universities used for the study, the sample size according to Krejcie and Margan (1970) cited in

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www.kenpro.org/2012, is 384 with 0.5% sampling error. The students are homogenous since they are from Universities in the South-south, hence the allotment of the sample size to the three Universities. The sample size was proportionally distributed among the students in the three Universities used for this study.

Instrument for Data Collection

The instrument for data collection is the structured questionnaire where the students in each department in the three Universities were administered copies of the questionnaire.

Validity of the Research Instrument

1. Do you understand what entails gendered preferences made at an early age?

Table 2- The number of students who understand what gendered preference is

Options	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	377	98
No	5	1
I don't know	2	1
Total	384	100

Source: Field study, 2022

Out of the 384 respondents, 377 (98%) stated that they know what gendered preferences made at an early age is, 5 (1%) stated they are not aware of the practice while just 2 (1%) do not know what gendered preferences is.

2. Were your choice of study influenced by gendered preferences made at an early age?

Table 3- Students whose choice of study were influenced at an early age

Options	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	303	79
No	28	7
Partly	53	14
Total	384	100

Source: Field study, 2022

The table 3 above indicates that, 303 (79%) affirmed that some of these students were influenced by gender preferences on the choices of fields of study in the University compared to

The pre-test and post- test was carried out to ascertain the validity of the study with the aid of two research assistants that helped to distribute the questions to a few students to note if the set of questions are in line with the research questions.

Method of Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using frequency distribution tables in other to give meaning and interpretative value to the data that was collected.

Data Presentation and Analysis

In other to analyze data, the researchers discussed the data gathered based on the research questions raised for the study.

28 (7%) number of students that stated that, they were not influenced by gender preferences. Only 53 (14%) number of the students were partly influenced.

3. Which University students were majorly influenced by gendered preferences made at an early age?

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Table 4- The University with the most influenced students from gendered preference

Options	Frequency	Percentage (%)
UNIBEN	67	17
RSU	54	14
WDU	263	68
Total	384	100

Source: Field study, 2022

Table 4 above indicates that, the students from Western Delta (WDU) were mostly influenced by gendered preferences made at an early age which invariably informed their choice of study. This is

shown by the 263 (68%) above. This data gathered from the other two Universities: UNIBEN and Rivers State University were 67 (17%) and 54 (14%) respectively.

4. What other factors in the South- South region of Nigeria influenced these students on their choice of study?

Table 5- Other factors that influence gendered preference among students in South- south, Nigeria

Options	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Peer pressure	102	27
Societal/ environmental influence	73	19
Examination forces	171	45
Sex categorization of the child	38	9
Total	384	100

Source: Field study, 2022

Table 5 indicates that the respondents' field of choice of study were majorly influenced by examination forces which were 171 (45%) closely followed by peer influence who totaled 102 (27%). The societal/ environmental forces and the sex categorization of the child were 73 (19%) and 38 (9%) respectively.

Discussion of findings

The findings showed that, majority of respondents understand what gender preferences entails and how it influences them in their choice of studies. This findings corroborates with the Social Learning theory by Banduras, 1977 cited in Saul, 2016. According to Banduras, we get influenced from the factors in the environment and people we take as role models with only a few that stated that, they do not have awareness about gendered preferences made at an early age.

In addition, the number of students that stated that gender preferences influenced their choice of study were higher than those that opined

otherwise. Some of the students from these three Universities also stated they were partly influenced by gendered preferences made at an early age. This is in collaboration with the findings of Ndu & Uzochukwu (2011). The study also found out that, Western Delta University students were the most influenced on the choice of study which is a private University while the two public institutions were least influenced. This is in agreement with the work of Sandra 1981 cited in Starr & Zubriggen, (2017) who developed the Gender Schema theory that focuses on how a child processes information with regards to gender in other to determine what is a masculine or feminine character or in this case, a course of study to study at the University since to Blackstone, (2003) and Osazee & Nwokoro, (2021), in this part of the world, females are subjected to certain jobs or studies than their males counterparts.

Finally, the study discovered that, other factors that can influence gendered preferences made at an early age about choice of study were: peer

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pressure, societal / environmental pressure, sex categorization of the child and examination forces among the students of the three Universities in the South- south, Nigeria.

Conclusion

Gendered preferences influence many students' choice of course of study. Societal/environmental factors and sex categorization play key roles in determining the careers or disciplines students go for.

Recommendations

1. Parents, especially rich ones, should nurture their children in an atmosphere that allows them make their own choices with regard to their fields of study.
2. Emphasis on career prospects should be made from nursery and primary schools to enable pupils make informed career choices very early in life.

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