

Determinants and Effects of Public Attitudes Towards Aging

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ABSTRACT

Background and Objective: The attitude of the public regarding aging and the aged plays a pivotal role in shaping the mental and physical health of older adults. Negative perceptions often perpetuate stereotypes that lead to various forms of discrimination and marginalization against older adults, while positive perception tends to improve the well-being of older adults in our society. Thus, this study aimed to investigate the determinants and effects of the attitudes of the public towards aging and the aged.

Materials and Methods: The survey design was adopted and 300 participants were employed in Yenagoa Metropolis, Bayelsa State, Nigeria as validated by G-power sample size software. The study also employed a simple percentage and Chi-square method of data analyses at 0.05 levels of significance on an SPSS version 23. **Results:** The findings showed that 40.3% of the public that participated in the study said, cultural norms influenced their attitudes positively or negatively towards aging and the aged; 23.3% said, their personal experiences influenced their attitudes positively or negatively towards aging and the aged; while 36.3% said, media portrayal influenced their attitudes positively or negatively towards aging and the aged. The inferential statistics also depicted that cultural norms, personal experiences and media portrayal have significant effects on the public's attitudes towards aging and the aged in Bayelsa State, Nigeria.

Conclusion: The study, therefore, recommended advocating for accurate and positive portrayals of older adults in media to foster more respectful attitudes towards the aged, facilitate meaningful interactions between younger generations and older adults through intergenerational programs and develop interventions and policies that create respect for elders and reflect diverse cultural norms related to aging.

KEYWORDS

Cultural norms, personal experiences, media portrayal, aging and the aged, public attitudes

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INTRODUCTION

Perceptions held by the public regarding aging and the elderly play a pivotal role in shaping societal attitudes and behaviors toward older adults. Negative attitudes of society towards the elderly are deleterious. This could affect the productivity and health of the elderly. Studies have shown that this phenomenon may be exacerbated by cultural norms, personal experiences and media portrayals often depicting older adults as weak, dependent and wicked (witches or wizards) or older persons as sources of wisdom¹.



These stereotypes contribute to social exclusion, where older adults may feel isolated or undervalued within their communities². For instance, older individuals may be overlooked for social and economic inclusion despite possessing valuable skills and experience³. These social and economic marginalizations can lead to depression, financial insecurity and reduced access to healthcare services, as older adults may face barriers to receiving adequate medical attention⁴.

Cultural norms play a pivotal role in shaping public attitudes toward aging. Different societies have varying perceptions of old age, which influence behaviors and expectations towards older individuals. For instance, in cultures where elders are respected and considered sources of wisdom, the public's attitudes may tend to be more positive and respectful towards the elderly^{5,6}. Conversely, in societies where older individuals are seen as weak, economically not viable, financially dependent and spiritually wicked; older adults may face marginalization and negative tendencies by the public⁷. These cultural norms are transmitted through socialization processes, including family dynamics, educational systems and religious institutions, thereby influencing individuals' perceptions towards aging and the aged from a young age.

Personal experiences with older adults may also contribute significantly to attitudes toward aging. Positive interactions, such as close relationships with grandparents or mentors, tend to foster empathy and appreciation for the elderly⁸. Conversely, negative experiences, such as witnessing age-related discrimination or experiencing caregiving challenges, can lead to more negative attitudes of the public towards aging and the aged⁹. These personal encounters shape individuals' beliefs about aging and influence their behaviors toward older adults in various contexts, including healthcare, financial care, social interactions and the entire well-being of older adults.

Similarly, the media, including television, films, advertising and news outlets, play a crucial role in shaping societal attitudes toward aging. Often, media portrayals perpetuate pictures that either reinforce or challenge existing cultural norms about aging¹⁰. For example, older adults may be depicted as feeble and dependent, which would strengthen negative assertions¹¹. These portrayals may not only reflect societal attitudes but also influence public opinion and policy-making decisions related to aging and older adults^{12,13}.

Despite facts of public attitudes towards aging and the aged, knowledge gaps still existed in this nexus and hindered the understanding of the intricate interplay of cultural norms, personal experiences and media portrayals as determinants influencing public attitudes towards aging and the aged. These gaps also hindered the development of targeted interventions and policies aimed at fostering positive perceptions of aging and combating ageism. Thus, this study intends to fill the knowledge gaps by investigating the determinants and effects of the attitudes of the public towards aging and the aged.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study area/sample size: The study was conducted across the towns and villages of the Yenagoa Metropolis. Bayelsa State was created in 1996 with its capital at Yenagoa. It is the hub of crude oil exploration and exploitation. The study employed the G-Power software to determine the sample size. A total of three hundred participants were recruited for the study after granting informed consent. The duration of the study was one year spanning from July, 2023 to July, 2024.

Ethical approval/selection criteria: The ethical clearance and experimental protocol were approved by the Bayelsa State Ministry of Health after a thorough evaluation of the study proposal. All the participants recruited for the study granted consent and participated without any form of inducement. International best practices established for human research were followed.

Research instrument/data analysis: This study adopted a survey design by adopting 300 participants in Yenagoa metropolis, Bayelsa State, Nigeria; by employing a structured questionnaire to obtain data for the study. The data obtained was analyzed by using a Chi-square data analysis technique at 0.05 significance levels with the aid of SPSS software version 23.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows that 127 (42.3%) of the respondents were males while 173 (57.7%) were females. However, the female counterpart participated more than the males. In Table 2, 70 (23.3%) of the respondents were within the age bracket of 18-25 years, 82 (27.3%) were within the age bracket of 26-33 years, 48 (16.0%) were within the age bracket of 34-41 years, 60 (20.0%) were within the age bracket of 42-49 years, while 40 (13.3%) were within the age bracket of 50 years and above. Table 3 shows that 115 (38.3%) of the respondents were students, 75 (25.0%) of the students were civil servants, 65 (21.7%) were businessmen and women and 45 (15%) of the respondents were farmers. In Table 4, 121 (40.3%) said, that cultural norms influence their attitudes towards aging and the aged, 70 (23.3%) said, the personal experiences they had with older people influence their attitudes towards aging and the aged, while 109 (36.3%) said, media portrayal influenced their towards aging and the aged. In Table 5, the null hypothesis of "no significant effect of cultural norms on the attitudes of the public towards aging and the aged" was rejected as the

Table 1: Gender of the respondents

Sex	Frequency	Percentage
Male	127	42.3
Female	173	57.7
Total	100	100.0

Table 2: Age of the respondents

Age (years)	Frequency	Percentage
18-25	70	23.3
26-33	82	27.3
34-41	48	16.0
42-49	60	20.0
50 and above	40	13.3
Total	300	100.0

Source: Researcher's SPSS computation

Table 3: Occupation of respondents

Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Students	115	38.3
Civil servants	75	25.0
Business	65	21.7
Farmers	45	15.0
Total	100	100.0

Source: Researcher's SPSS computation

Table 4: Determinants of the attitudes of the public towards aging and the aged

Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Cultural norms	121	40.3
Personal experiences	70	23.3
Media portrayal	109	36.3
Total	300	100.0

Table 5: Chi-square results showing the determinants and effects of the attitudes of the public towards aging and the aged

Variables	Chi-square value	p-value	Significant status
Cultural norms	33.21	0.000	Significance
Personal experiences	28.33	0.000	Significance
Augmented reality	46.50	0.000	Significance

p-value (0.000) is less than 0.05. This means there is a significant effect of cultural norms on the attitudes of the public towards aging and the aged in Bayelsa State, Nigeria. Again, the second null hypothesis of “no significant effect of personal experiences on the attitudes of the public towards aging and the aged” was rejected as the p-value (0.000) was also less than 0.05. This means there is a significant effect of personal experiences on the attitudes of the public towards aging and the aged in Bayelsa State, Nigeria. Similarly, the third null hypothesis of “no significant effect of media portrayal on the attitudes of the public towards aging and the aged” was also rejected as the p-value (0.000) is less than 0.05. This means there is a significant effect of media portrayal on the attitudes of the public towards aging and the aged in Bayelsa State, Nigeria.

DISCUSSION

The demographic presentations of the study revealed an unbiased balance as the subjects were not induced or compelled to participate in the study (Table 1-3). In addition to the above stance, all sectors of the public as per this discourse were included, hence ruling out bias or compromise.

In a similar vein, the findings of this study depicted that cultural norms, personal experiences and media portrayal have significantly influenced the attitudes of the public towards aging and the aged, which in turn affect the mental and physical health of the older persons in Bayelsa State, Nigeria (Table 4-5).

Furthermore, cultural norms significantly affect or influence the attitudes of the public towards the aging and the aged in Bayelsa State (Table 4-5). This depicts that cultural norms, shaped by societal values and beliefs, play a crucial role in defining expectations and attitudes toward aging. For instance, cultures that adore elders would foster more positive attitudes and respect towards the aged, whereas cultures that see the aged as economically vulnerable and wicked and emphasize youth and productivity would perpetuate negative stereotypes about aging which in turn would affect their mental and physical health. The findings of this study are in line with the findings of Barker¹⁴, who revealed the importance of cultural context in shaping attitudes towards aging across European countries.

Also, the findings portrayed that personal experiences significantly influence the attitudes of the public towards aging and the aged (Table 4-5). This means that individuals’ interactions with older adults, whether through family relationships, caregiving roles or community engagement, shape their perceptions. Positive experiences, such as kindness from the part of the aged as well as witnessing active and healthy aging, tend to cultivate more favorable attitudes towards the aging and the aged, whereas negative experiences, such as encountering age-related health issues or dependency and wicked attitudes from the angle of the aged individuals would portray negative attitudes of the public towards aging and the aged that invariable influence their mental and physical health. The findings of this study conform with the findings of Hassing¹⁵, who opined that higher engagement in leisure activities, particularly intellectual and social activities, was associated with better mental health of the elderly populations in South Korea.

In addition, media portrayal also has a significant effect on the attitudes of the public towards aging and the aged (Table 4-5). That is, media portrayal amplifies and reinforces societal perceptions of aging. The media, including television, film, advertising and news outlets, often depict older adults in stereotypical roles as dependent, frail or burdensome. These portrayals not only reflect cultural norms but also contribute to the formation of public attitudes. Negative media representations can lead to ageism, discrimination and marginalization of older adults in society, while positive media would lead to positive attitudes of the public towards aging and the aged, which in turn affects their mental and physical health. The findings of this study are in line with the findings of a handful of researchers who posited similar opinions¹⁶⁻¹⁸.

CONCLUSION

The findings revealed that cultural norms, personal experiences and media portrayal as determinants of public attitudes toward aging and the aged are statistically significant. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing interventions and policies that promote positive aging attitudes and combat ageism in diverse cultural contexts. Promote positive media representations of older adults to combat ageism and encourage respect for aging. Foster intergenerational interactions and develop culturally sensitive policies that celebrate diverse aging experiences and contributions.

SIGNIFICANCE STATEMENT

The findings highlight the significant role of cultural norms, personal experiences and media portrayals in shaping public attitudes toward aging and the elderly. These factors are crucial for designing interventions and policies that foster positive aging attitudes and address ageism across different cultural contexts. Promoting positive media representations of older adults, encouraging intergenerational interactions and developing culturally sensitive policies are essential strategies to celebrate diverse aging experiences and contributions.

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