

Original Paper

Do gender and age moderate the association between self-esteem and fear of success?

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Abstract

Fear of success is a negative experience which influences satisfaction with life and overall wellbeing. Socio-demographic factors (e.g., age and gender) and self-esteem have been found to be associated with fear of success. However, whether gender and age influence how self-esteem is linked to fear of success has received little attention. We examined the moderating roles of gender and age moderate in the relationship between self-esteem and fear of success. Participants were 350 Nigerian adults who completed the Index of Self-esteem and the Fear of Success Scale. Hayes regression-based PROCESS macro results indicated that those with low self-esteem reported higher fear of success. Neither age nor gender was associated with fear of success. Gender and age did not moderate the association between self-esteem and fear of success. Interventions to boost people's self-esteem should be considered in

efforts to reduce fear of success.

Keywords

Academic engagement, achievement motivation, adulthood, attention, life satisfaction, sociodemographic determinants of health

1. Introduction

Human beings desire to succeed in most of the things they do. However, there are several factors that may hinder people from taking the steps towards success. One of such factors is the fear of success. For more than half a century, this paradox that there are individuals who are afraid of achievement has generated significant research interests (Pappo, 1972; Canavan, 1989; Miller, 1994; Stanculescu, 2013). Those who fear success do so because they perceived the aftermath of success to be threatening (Miller, 1994); and the avoid success due to the anxiety to manage the impending challenge that comes with sustaining the achievement of something new. Fear of success predicts anxiety, depression, fear of being different, fear of failure, self-defeating behaviour and dissatisfaction with life (Bramante, 2015; Faturahman & Dwiyanti, 2021; Helms, 1981; Yilamz, 2018). Among students, fear of success leads to rejection sensitivity and poor academic performance (Ekler & Yalçın Tılfarlıoğlu, 2020). It is also a formidable barrier to career development due to its implications in imposter syndrome (Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2016; Tsatiris, 2021).

There are two dominant historical perspectives in the fear of success literature. The first is grounded in the psychoanalytic view in which irrational thoughts emanating from the unconscious results to powerful and quite predictable negative consequences for those who hold them. This is the neurotic fear of success (Freud, 1959; Horney, 1937, Menninger, 1938). The second view of fear of success is represented by Horner's (1969, 1972) elaboration of the McClelland-Atkinson model of achievement motivation (Atkinson, 1957; Atkinson & Feather, 1966; McClelland et al., 1976). The basic tenet of McClelland-Atkinson model of achievement motivation is that everyone has an inherent motive to achieve success and some motive to avoid failure. The model delineated three major influences on the determinants of a person's "tendency to approach success", namely, motive to achieve success, the probability of success and the incentive value of the success. Given that efforts to attain career success is assumed to require the personal characteristics of aggressiveness and competitiveness, which are typically considered to be masculine attributes, Horner (1969, 1972) suggested that most women have a motive to avoid success. Essentially, the motive to avoid success is what Horner regarded as fear of success. Our aim in the present study is to examine the association between self-esteem and fear of success, as well as whether gender and age influences such association.

1.1 Self-esteem and Fear of Success

While suggesting that fear of success is more of a manifestation of psychological-developmental deficits rather than a person's social situation, Miller (1994) highlighted the profound impact of self-esteem.

Self-esteem refers to one's positive and negative attitude in connection to oneself and the overall evaluation of one's own thoughts and feelings in relation to oneself (Rosenberg, 1979). It is the extent to which people feel valuable, satisfied with themselves, and worthy of respect (American Psychological Association, APA, 2021). Those with low self-esteem may doubt their ability to succeed, thereby becoming hesitant to engage in learning tasks or take the right academic growth risks (APA, 2021). Empirical studies have demonstrated that self-esteem was associated with fear of success among adults in Iran (Honarmand et al., 2005) and Romania (Stanculescu, 2013), as well as managers in a multinational company in India (Kaur & Kaur, 2018). Persons with lower self-esteem also have lower self-efficacy—which have been found to be associated with fear of success in a Kyrgyzstan mixed sample (Yilmaz, 2018). Research on fear of success in the African socio-cultural setting is scarce and there is even more limited attention to the contributions of self-esteem in fear of success among adults in the sub-Saharan African educational setting. The present study aims to fill this gap in knowledge. We hypothesize that adults with high self-esteem will have reduced levels of fear of success.

1.2 Gender, Age, and Fear of Success

Gore et al. (2016) stressed the need to recognize a person's gender and other social factors when investigating fear of success. Several years ago, Horner (1969) concluded that women have a higher level of fear of success than men, which impedes the motivation and performance of women under competitive conditions. College female students exhibit higher levels of fear of success than male college students (Pedersen & Conlin, 1987). Similar reports of higher fear of success in women than men also exist in other studies (André & Metzler, 2011; Forbes & King, 1983), Kaur & Kaur, 2018). This fear of success hinders the career development of women as most women believed that fear of success will make them lose their femininity and social self-esteem or even experience social rejection (Faturahman & Dwiyantri, 2021). These findings have not remained entirely consistent, with some either finding that men had higher fear of success than women (Hyland & Mancini, 1985) while other studies showed no gender difference (e.g., Brenner & Tomkiewicz, 1982). These inconsistent findings may be due to differences in settings. Thus, the association of fear of success and gender is relative to the cultural background of study (Gore et al., 2016; Faturahman & Dwiyantri, 2021; Kuh et al., 2018).

Although things are changing, there is a general societal assumption in Africa that the female gender predisposes them to home care, even when they may occupy responsibilities in their place of work (Dogo, 2014; Ifeagwazi et al., 2019; Kobayashi & Fukushima, 2012). In the African context, the struggle for the survival of the family rests more squarely on the male child. For instance, African families prefer to invest more in formal academic training their male children than the female, especially where there are limited resources (Glick & Sahn, 2000; Santos & Rubiano-Matulevich, 2019). Such traditional preferential treatment orchestrates two developmental trajectories for males and females, and thus male children may be more oriented to success than females (Ezeliora & Ezeokana, 2011). However, there are some shreds of evidence supporting the idea that women and men have

success-driven motives, especially when given equal opportunities (Yoder, 1999; Deeter-Schmelz, & Ramsey, 2014).

In non-western cultures, regardless of any achievements that women have in their occupation, their effort is downplayed if they are not successful in the home front (Kandiyoti, 1988). The teachings of the dominant religious groups in Africa (Christianity and Islam) also preaches subservience and submission thereby reinforcing the characteristic patriarchy in the society. This patriarchal system may wield great influence on African (Nigerian) women to the point that women may be scared of developing or optimizing their potential. The present researchers have seen some ladies who have master's degrees but were reluctant to enroll for doctorate degrees because they were not married yet. They have the fear that climbing higher in the academic ladder would be intimidating to potential suitors (men). Thus, an empirical evaluation of gender differences in fear of success in the sub-Saharan African socio-cultural context is very germane to the advancement of knowledge on the construct. We expect that women will report higher fear of success than men.

Beyond the direct association of gender and fear of success, we also considered whether being a male or female would strengthen or weaken the association between fear of success and self-esteem. Extant research has shown that there are more positive extrinsic incentives of a self-esteem nature for success at male-oriented than at female-oriented activities, and that women who score highly in the motive to avoid success are more likely to pursue these additional incentives than women who score low in the motive (Sorrentino & Short, 1974). Likewise, self-esteem and sex-role identification interact in a mutually reinforcing way to predict outcomes (Stericker & Johnson, 1975). Although self-esteem was significantly associated with fear of success in male and female Americans (Stericker, 1976), self-efficacy, which is related to self-esteem, has been found to be more strongly associated with performance for Kenyan boys than girls (Gor et al., 2020). A closer observation shows that the earlier exploration of this gender influence on self-esteem and fear of success was conducted in the western cultural setting. There is need for re-examination of the moderating role of gender in the association of self-esteem and fear of success as the current modernization may, to a large extent, have impacted on the fear of success syndrome among adults. We hypothesize that self-esteem will be more strongly associated with fear of success for men compared to women.

Several studies have shown that younger persons were more likely to fear success than older people (Froelich, 1996; Hoffman, 1977; Ishiyama et al., 1985; Orpen, 1989; Popp & Muhs, 1982). Among Canadian adolescents, younger age was also associated with fear of success (Ishiyama & Charassol, 1984). Even though the type of success may become the bone of contention, fear of success may likely reduce with age. Zuckerman and Wheeler (1975) hypothesized that age differences should exist if fear of success is a learned disposition and should, therefore, increase with age. However, their results revealed no age differences in fear of success. Given that exposure to a new task at an early age will incite anxiety due to inexperience and eventual fear of success unlike exposure to (perhaps) the same

tasks at an older age, we hypothesize that younger people would report greater fear of success than older people.

There is dearth of empirical studies on moderating role of age in the relationship between self-esteem and fear of success. More empirical inquiry into this relationship is very germane, as further studies will strengthen the evidence base. For prevention and intervention programs to ameliorate fear of success, understanding critical moderators of the association between self-esteem and fear of success has the potential to help direct limited resources to groups of individuals who are most likely to benefit from them. This direction offers tremendous potential to yield important information relevant to the advancement of theory and interventions to ameliorate fear of success. We expect that the relationship between self-esteem and age will be stronger for younger people compared to older people.

2. Method

2.1 Participants and Procedure

We adopted a cross-sectional design to recruit 350 staff (34.3% men and 65.7% women) from a Nigerian university. Demographic characteristics of the participants were presented in Table 1. Approval for the study was obtained from the psychology research ethics committee of the University of Nigeria Nsukka. Participants were approached in their offices by trained research assistants. The research assistants explained the nature of the study to the participants and what they were required to do. Those who accepted to take part in the study were given the questionnaire for completion. All participants provided written informed consent prior to enrolment in the study. There was no incentive for participation in the study. The research assistants thanked those who completed the survey.

2.2 Instruments

2.2.1 The Index of Self-Esteem (ISE)

The ISE (Hudson, 1982) is a 25-item scale consisting of 12 negatively and 13 positively worded items, with the negative wordings designed to offset response set bias. The negatively worded items are reverse scored, then added to the total of the positively worded items, and a value of 25 is then subtracted from the total score to produce the participant's true ISE self-esteem score. Each item is answered using a 5-point Likert-type response anchor numbered: 1= Rarely or none of the time, 2 = A little of the time, 3 = Some of the time, 4 = A good part of the time, 5 = Most of the time. Sample items included: "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself", "I am able to do things as well as most other people", "I wish I could have more respect for myself". Hudson (1982) obtained a coefficient of .92. Higher scores indicate low self-esteem (Hudson, 1982). For the current study, we obtained a Cronbach alpha of .79 which is an acceptable reliability coefficient.

2.2.2 Fear of Success Scale (FoSS)

The 15-item FoSS was adapted from the scales of Canavan-Gumpert et al. (1978). The response options were: 5 = Definitely yes, 4 = Yes, 3 = Not sure, 2 = No, 1 = Definitely No. An example of items

on the scale are: “Do you feel uneasy being the center of attraction in a group”, “Instead of celebrating, do you often feel let down after completing an important task or project”. We conducted a Principal Component Factor analysis and found that a unifactorial structure was best suited for the scale. The Cronbach alpha of the selected FoSS items was .80, which suggested that the item had good internal consistency reliability.

2.3 Statistical Analyses

Pearson’s correlation and the Hayes PROCESS Macro on SPSS were used for data analysis. Due to its robustness, PROCESS macro is preferable to ordinary regression analysis in tests of moderation hypotheses. It conducts regression-based path analysis and creates product terms to analyze interaction effects, automatically centering the predictor variables prior to analysis (Hayes, 2022). The Hayes PROCESS is presently recognized as the most suitable approach for moderation tests in the fields of psychological research and management sciences (Chukwuorji et al. 2024; Nwifo et al., 2023). The significance of a product term, which is the interaction of the predictor and moderator, indicates that the relationship between the predictor variable (self-esteem) and the criterion variable (fear of success) can either intensify or diminish when any of the moderators (age and gender) is present.

3. Results

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants (N = 350)

| | | |
|---|----------------------------|--------------|
| Gender, <i>n</i> (%) | Men | 176 (50.4) |
| | Women | 174 (49.7) |
| Age, <i>n</i> (%) | Emerging adults | 155 (44.3) |
| | Middle age | 195 (55.9) |
| Educational status, <i>n</i> (%) | Primary school completed | 24 (6.8) |
| | Secondary school completed | 57 (16.6) |
| | Higher education | 269 (77.1) |
| Marital status, <i>n</i> (%) | Never married | 232 (66.3) |
| | Married | 118 (33.8) |
| Self-esteem, <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>) | | 79.5 (9.37) |
| Fear of success, <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>) | | 44.48 (6.45) |

In Table 1, it was shown that men and women were almost equally represented in the sample. Participants in middle age were slightly more in number compared to the emerging adults. By education, most of the participants were graduates from higher institutions. Many of them were unmarried. The mean score for self-esteem was very high, above the norm of 30.89, which indicates that most of them, had lower self-esteem.

Table 2. Pearson's Correlations for Demographic Variables, Self-esteem, and Fear of Success

| Variables | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|----------------------|---------|--------|-------|--------|
| 1 Gender | - | | | |
| 2 Age | -.25*** | - | | |
| 3 Educational status | -.08 | .19*** | - | |
| 4 Self-esteem | .01 | .01 | -.02 | - |
| 5 Fear of Success | .03 | -.07 | -.12* | .22*** |

Pearson's correlations in Table 2 showed that gender was neither associated with self-esteem nor fear of success. Age correlated positively with educational status but was not significantly related to any of the major variables of interest in this study. Educational level was not significantly related to self-esteem, but it correlated negatively with fear of success, indicating higher fear of success for those who have a lower level of education.

To further clarify the influence of the demographic factors on self-esteem and fear of success, we conducted MANOVA tests of between-subjects effects for gender and age. Result showed that men did not significantly differ from women on self-esteem, $\{F(1, 345) = .04, p = .851, \eta^2 = .00\}$, and fear of success $\{F(1, 345) = .00, p = .953, \eta^2 = .00\}$. Self-esteem mean score was 79.68 ($SD = 9.37$) for men and 79.75 ($SD = 9.39$) for women. Similarly, the fear of success mean score was 44.32 ($SD = 6.82$) for men and 44.64 ($SD = 9.39$) for women. For the effect of age, emerging adults did not significantly differ from middle adults $\{F(1, 345) = .06, p = .803, \eta^2 = .00\}$, and fear of success $\{F(1, 345) = 1.78, p = .184, \eta^2 = .01\}$. The self-esteem mean score was 79.63 ($SD = 8.97$) for emerging adults and 79.84 ($SD = 9.70$) for middle-aged adults. Similarly, the fear of success mean score was 45.02 ($SD = 6.02$) for emerging adults and 44.06 ($SD = 6.75$) for middle-aged adults. Married persons ($M = 80.71, SD = 9.11$) did not differ from unmarried persons ($M = 79.22, SD = 9.48$) on self-esteem, $t(347) = 1.42, p < .157$. For fear of success, married persons ($M = 45.31, SD = 6.35$) did not differ from unmarried persons ($M = 44.06, SD = 6.46$) on fear of success, $t(347) = -1.84, p = .047$.

Table 3. Hayes PROCESS Macro Results for Testing the Moderating Role of Gender on Self-esteem and Fear of Success

| Variables | <i>B</i> | <i>SE</i> | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> | 95% <i>CI</i> |
|----------------------|----------|-----------|----------|----------|---------------|
| Self-esteem | .15 | .04 | 3.91 | .000 | [.07, .22] |
| Gender | .17 | .68 | .25 | .801 | [-1.16, 1.51] |
| Self-esteem X Gender | -.04 | .08 | -.47 | .638 | [-.19, .11] |
| Educational status | -.62 | .28 | -2.20 | .029 | [-1.18, -.07] |

Note. *SE* = Standard error of *B*

In Table 3, it was shown that self-esteem was significantly associated with fear of success. Given that higher scores on the Index of Self-esteem (which was the measure of self-esteem in this study) indicate low self-esteem, the B indicated that for each unit rise in low self-esteem, fear of success increases by .15 units. Gender was not significantly associated with fear of success. The association between self-esteem and fear of success was not moderated by gender as the interaction effect of the two variables was not significant. The association of self-esteem and fear of success was significant for men ($B = .17, p = .007$) and women ($B = .13, p = .004$). Educational status was included in the regression model as a control variable due to its significant relationship with fear of success in the correlations. It was found confirmed that higher educational status was associated with reductions in fear of success.

Table 4. Hayes PROCESS Macro Results for Testing the Moderating Role of Age on Self-esteem and Fear of Success

| Variables | B | SE | t | p | 95%CI |
|--------------------|------|------|-------|------|--------------|
| Self-esteem | .15 | .04 | 4.02 | .000 | [.08, .23] |
| Age | -.74 | .67 | -1.09 | .275 | [-2.06, .59] |
| Self-esteem X Age | -.06 | .08 | -.79 | .432 | [-.21, .09] |
| Educational status | -.56 | .29 | -1.95 | .052 | [-1.12, .01] |

Note. SE = Standard error of B

In Table 4, age did not moderate the association between self-esteem and fear of success as the interaction effect of the two variables was not significant. The association of self-esteem and fear of success was significant for both emerging adults ($B = .19, p = .002$) and midlife adults ($B = .13, p = .011$).

4. Discussion

Our study investigated the association between self-esteem and fear of success as well as the moderating roles of gender and age in the relationship between self-esteem and fear of success among workers in a Nigerian university. Consistent with our earlier hypothesis, result showed that participants with low self-esteem reported higher fear of success. This result corroborates previous findings that those with low self-esteem may doubt their ability to succeed, thereby becoming hesitant to engage in learning tasks or take the right academic growth risks (APA, 2021; Honarmand et al., 2005; Kaur & Kaur, 2018; Stanculescu, 2013). People must feel appreciated to develop a healthy, aspiring, accomplishing, sense of self (i.e., high self-esteem) to be able to surmount fear of success. Since self-esteem is a global, personal judgment of worthiness that is characterized by an evaluative component of the self, those high in esteem do not usually fear success because success has been positively evaluated in line with their esteem (Carl & Rabstajnek, 2015; Crocker & Major, 2009).

We expected that women would report higher fear of success than men. This hypothesis was not supported as our result showed that mean did not differ from women in fear of success. This finding is inconsistent with findings of extant research showing that women reported higher fear of success than men (André & Metzler, 2011; Forbes & King, 1983; Pedersen & Conlin, 1987), Kaur & Kaur, 2018). However, some other findings support the lack of gender differences in fear of success (Brenner & Tomkiewicz, 1982). Perhaps, the recent developments in women empowerment and support for career development of female folks may have helped to reduce the tendency of women to be afraid of success. Moreso, the contemporary Nigerian society does not seem to provide ample opportunities for the realization of personal goals by many people who live in the country. Hence, no gender may be favoured to climb higher than the other in such difficult and highly challenging situation.

We hypothesized that younger people would report greater fear of success than older people, but this hypothesis was not supported. There were no age differences in fear of success. Past research in western cultures reported that younger persons were more likely to fear success than older people (Froelich, 1996; Hoffman, 1977; Ishiyama & Charassol, 1984; Ishiyama et al., 1985; Orpen, 1989; Popp & Muhs, 1982). Ordinarily, exposure to a particular task at an early age will incite anxiety due to inexperience and eventual fear of success unlike exposure to the same tasks at an older age. However, our research agrees with Zuckerman and Wheeler's (1975) finding that there were no age differences in fear of success. Advancements in modern technology may have helped to provide the younger generation with some advantages that would help them feel well placed to attain their goals. While the older people may have more experiences in life, their limitations in the use of the pervasive modern technology in their daily lives may limit their sense of having an edge over the young people. Hence there may be equality in the fear of success for the age groups.

Gender did not moderate the association between self-esteem and fear of success. Specifically, low self-esteem was almost equally associated with fear of success in both men and women. We anticipated that self-esteem would be more strongly associated with fear of success for men compared to women. This finding is consistent with extant research showing that self-esteem was significantly associated with fear of success in male and female Americans (Stericker, 1976), but does not align with evidence that self-efficacy, which is related to self-esteem, was more strongly associated with performance for boys than girls (Gor et al., 2020). We earlier reported the lack of gender differences in fear of success, and this may be one of the reasons for the lack of differences in how self-esteem influences fear of success.

Age did not moderate the association between self-esteem and fear of success such that the association between self-esteem and fear of success was significant for the age groups. We anticipated that the relationship between self-esteem and age would be stronger for younger people compared to older people. This hypothesis was not supported. Hence the influence of low self-esteem on fear of success is potent for all age groups. This area requires further research explorations.

4.1 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Our study is not without limitations. For instance, the sample size of our study does not permit generalizations across cultures. In the same vein, individual differences and interests in terms of an aspect of success and socioeconomic status, which definitely would have ensured a more homogenous population, were not factored into the sampling process. Subsequent studies should consider such differences and perhaps capture other diversities that might impact fear of success. Again, being a cross-sectional study, our data did not allow for full inferences about causal directionality. As self-report measures were adopted in the study, there is the possibility of response biases as participants may either have made socially acceptable answers rather than being truthful or be unable to accurately assess themselves. Equally, the tools employed in this study, like the index of self-esteem and fear of success are merely screening tests to identify members of groups thought to have been predisposed to low self-esteem and fear of success but are not necessarily diagnostic tools. Therefore, future studies should consider making more causal inferences, perhaps from a more controlled experimental investigation as well as cross-cultural variances. We did not also take into account several ways people view successes as success seems to be relative and subjective. This area should be explored further. Finally, selection bias could have undermined the internal validity of the study. Nonetheless, this can only be ascertained when further studies are conducted while taking into consideration the issues raised. We acknowledge this as a limitation of the sampling technique adopted and advise the exercise of caution in making generalizations from these findings. As a result of these limitations stated above, it is recommended that future studies ensure adequate representativeness and increased homogeneity to enhance generalizations of the findings.

4.2 Conclusion

The present study provided explored moderation effects for the association between self-esteem and fear of success. Gender and age did not moderate the association between self-esteem and fear of success as the interaction of the two moderator variables were not significant. However, it is important to note that the associations between self-esteem and fear of success were significant for males and females as well as emerging adults and midlife adults respectively. Hence, our study recommended that boosting people's sense of esteem will help overcome fear of success.

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Declarations: All authors declare that they have no potential competing interests.

Ethics Approval and Informed Consent: This study was approved by the Psychology Research Ethics Committee of the University of Nigeria Nsukka. All participants provided written informed

consent prior to enrolment in the study.

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