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The Change of Body Image in Ghana due to Westernization of Media

“Whale,” “balloon,” “fat ass”; these are slurs that have been thrown at me for as long as I can remember. They all carry the idea that, for some reason, people of larger body sizes deserve less respect – more fundamentally, being large is bad. I never thought that I would escape those ideals until I actually did.

My senior year of high school I decided to take a gap year in Ghana. My friends joked that I would be revered as a queen by African men – that my body was the epitome of what Africans (specifically, Ghanaians) regarded as beautiful. Beautiful. It’s a simple word, but it carries so much meaning. The vividness of the first time a stranger called me beautiful illustrates just how powerful this word is.

I was walking through a bustling market, full of Ghanaian women sitting on stools selling rainbow colored vegetables, carrying large, round trays on their heads, weighted down by everything from dried fish to colorful fabrics. I was wearing an army green tank top and multi-colored shorts. We hadn’t had water for a week, so my hair was in a disastrous knot that I’d pulled into a pathetic excuse for a ponytail. I was drenched in sweat and couldn’t tell what scents were mine and what scents belonged to the bush meat surrounding me. In the US, I wouldn’t dare step foot out of the house without makeup, much less looking like this. I felt slightly ashamed and less-slightly disgusting, but then a gentle looking shop owner called to me,

“Obroni (foreigner), you are beautiful!”

I stopped dead in my tracks, a bit confused, turned around and smiled back at her and waved. Over the course of the next hour several men and shop owners stopped me to tell me I was beautiful. The other volunteers I was with looked confused – why was I being complimented
and they weren’t? I remembered my friends’ jokes that I would be applauded for my weight, and I realized that all of my fellow volunteers were what Americans would quickly describe as skinny; I was the only fat one of the group. However, I was hesitant to believe that was the reason I was receiving so much attention and carried on.

This kind of treatment continued whenever I was in the rural village or the market. Men stopped me to tell me I was beautiful. Our local cook said I was a “real, fat African woman.” When I told her that her oily cooking was making me fat, I received the response “Yes! You don’t like it? Why? It’s good, very nice.” When I travelled to the capital of Ghana – Accra – however, this treatment disappeared. I was suddenly a larger body among a crowd of people and I carried on without being stopped and hailed. It felt like I went from being Beyoncé in a Walmart to being my normal self again. It was alarming… what caused this sudden change? I was less than three hours from the village; how could opinions shift so dramatically in such a small space?

The more time I spent in Accra, the more I began to notice how Westernized it was becoming. There were billboards and ads, all featuring stereotypically thin models, mainly white women, obviously from Western countries. Shopping malls were developing with Western stores. There was access to more Western media than I could imagine ever being available in my small village. Within 50 miles, the attitude toward bodies shifted from accepting and loving larger bodies to the beginnings of a more Westernized idea of thin as the only type of beauty. I was not shamed for my larger body in Accra, however, which led me to believe that body shaming is still more prevalent in the USA than in Ghana. I believe this is caused by increased levels of media portraying just one idea of beauty in the US. However, the rapid Westernization of Ghanaian media is creating a new idea of beauty within the country. American media tends to
portray a narrow beauty ideal, and Ghana is reshaping its beauty standards to conform to the ideal American female body – thin. The contrast of the degree of exposure to Western media in urban and rural areas creates a gradient of body image and acceptance – urban areas more quickly accepting a Westernized body image than rural areas.

The Westernization of Ghana is happening rapidly and forcefully. Shopping malls in Ghana demonstrate this process. Since 2000, eight shopping centers have been opened or are set to be completed by 2017, the most notable of which being the Accra Mall, built in 2007 at a cost of $36 million, and the West Hills Mall, built in 2014 at a cost of $93 million. The West Hills Mall claims to be the largest mall in West Africa (Ghana Voice) and is complete with marble walls, a large movie theater, and western stores such as Mango, Payless, Adidas, and the Sunglass Hut (West Hills). The mall also comes complete with Western advertisements featuring thin, white women. There are few stores advertising African-made goods or featuring African women.

The prevalence of Western stores in large cities is not the only evidence of Westernization in Ghana. Cultural erosion occurs through the vehicle of various media. In an opinion piece in Modern Ghana, a popular news source, Dr. Kwame Osei asserts that, in the past 20 years, Ghanaian values and culture have been eroded by Westernization through media sources such as “films, music videos, magazines, newspapers, fashion magazines and the like through their most popular vehicle – the Internet or multi-TV channels.” Osei continues, claiming that the youth of Ghana now believe that Western values and belief systems are superior to their own. He relates this back to the new fashion sense of Ghanaian women; many now sport tight, short clothing as opposed to the traditional, more conservative wear made of local fabrics. He observes that many women now relax their hair and bleach their skin. Grace
Amey-Obeng, a prominent Ghanaian business woman, studied beauty therapy in the UK, and when she returned to Ghana in the 80’s, she witnessed an “alarming amount of skin-bleaching” occurring. Amey-Obeng observed that “the level of damage - in this climate - bleaching does is irreparable.” She now owns a multimillion dollar beauty school that helps to repair the skin of women who have harmed their skin through bleaching, claiming that it needs to be stopped “otherwise, it will become a social problem” (The Ghanaian). These views can be substantiated when observing firsthand Ghanaian women all over the country.

During my stay, I made friends with our local cook, Gloria, mentioned earlier. She had much more Western exposure than many of the villagers surrounding us did. Gloria grew up in a city, Kasoa, slightly outside the capital, Accra. She went to a vocational school and took a job as the cook for our volunteer program. Gloria was paid much more than other locals in the area (about ten times more) and had access to Western media and actual Westerners. Over my stay there, I noticed that Gloria had her hair done much more often than the villagers, who couldn’t afford it or preferred their hair natural. She also used creams to lighten her skin. The people from Gloria’s city looked a lot like her. They looked more urbanized and less like inhabitants of a village with low exposure to Western media. By the time my journey in Ghana came to an end, Gloria, who is overweight, was being introduced to exercise and the idea of losing weight to look more like the thin volunteers passing through every few months.

Increased levels of skin bleaching can be seen throughout West Africa, and Al Jazeera reports that “According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), 77 percent of women in Nigeria use skin-lightening products, the world’s highest percentage. That compares with 59 percent in Togo, and 27 percent in Senegal.” The reasons for skin lightening could be argued, but many see it as a reflection of the glorification of lighter skinned women in West Africa – often,
lighter women are considered more likely to succeed and more likely to find marriage. The process of lightening includes deathly consequences; many creams include substances such as mercury and can cause blood, kidney, and liver cancer (Adow). Similarly, weight shaming and the lengths many women are going to in order to fit Western ideas of body image can have deathly consequences.

While many people see fat-shaming as a method to encourage people to be healthy and change their eating or workout habits, this is not the effect that it actually has. A recent study by the Centre for Advancing Health stated that high school students who are overweight or believe they are overweight are more likely than their peers to commit suicide or suffer from depression (Gavin). The pressure to fit into the Westernized ideal body image can cause mental health problems, including eating disorders. Around 50% of people with eating disorders fit the criteria for depression, and up to 30 million people in the US suffer from an eating disorder. The mental illnesses with the highest mortality rate in the United States are eating disorders, but many people who suffer from eating disorders also die from organ failure, malnutrition, or suicide – the statistics are not exact because eating disorders cause such a large span of illnesses, but, nevertheless, they are staggering (Eating). While the amount of eating disorders caused by media influence is nearly impossible to quantify, the National Eating Disorder Association says that “research is increasingly clear that media does indeed contribute and that exposure to and pressure exerted by media increase body dissatisfaction and disordered eating.” There are currently no studies published on the rates of eating disorders of West African or Ghanaian women, but it can be assumed that the Westernization of Ghana will include the consequences we see of body image in the United States.
Gloria was an urban exception in a rural village that consisted mainly of women who wore cloth dresses and fabric hair wraps, women who didn’t fuss with their hair, didn’t wear bras, and didn’t seem to consider exercising to become “thin”. Gloria was also the only Ghanaian in the village with a constant, high exposure to Westerners. While, stated previously, few studies have been done by credible sources on the effect that Western media really plays on body image in Ghana, I’ve found a few that correlate urban, Westernized areas with the trend of the Western beauty ideals more than rural areas with a low exposure to media. The first addresses the body image of women in rural areas vs. urban areas Ghana; the second addresses the body image of women in urban Accra.

In the first, a study done by Benkeser, Biritwum and Hill of the Harvard School of Public Health, 2,814 women over the age of 18 living in the Accra, Ghana Metropolitan Area were surveyed. Researchers were trying to determine “if the perceived ideal body size of urban women in Accra, Ghana influences current body size.” Data was collected on the women’s current body image, their ideal body image, and the healthiest body image. Benkeser states that, “in theory, urbanization and Westernization lead to decreased physical activity and increased food supply.” Their review found a “direct relationship between obesity prevalence and increased socio-economic status.” Although obesity is on the rise in Ghana and their society has, historically and traditionally, valued female bodies in relation to attractiveness, social status, and fertility (Frederick), 72.2% of women in this study were dissatisfied with their body size and 41.8% preferred smaller figures over larger ones (Benkeser). The idea is presented that women who spent their first twelve years of life in an urban area were less likely to desire a larger figure than women who grew up rurally. This supports the idea that our idea of body image is engrained
from a young age, especially by media, which women in urban areas are more likely to be exposed to.

It’s still important to acknowledge the effect media has on Ghanaians who encounter Western media later in life, which is the case for the women in this study who grew up rurally and moved to the Greater Accra area after 12 years of age. While 39.4% of women who grew up in urban areas desired to be slimmer, a larger 42.3% of women who grew up in rural areas desired the same. This tells us that while media has a profound effect on children, it’s influential when encountered for the first time, even later in life. These statistics, however, disregard the quarter of women in the study, urban and rural combined, who were happy with their body image. 61% of the women included in this quarter were obese. This is, in my opinion, a hopeful statistic of women who are not ashamed of their bodies but realize their worth and don’t feed into the Western media surrounding them.

A contrast to the study done by Benkeser, Biritwum and Hill, a study by Frederick, Forces, and Berezovskaya of UCLA and Millikin University, seeks to answer the question “has extensive contact with the West led individuals in Ghana to adopt body preferences for slender bodies?” The study observes women from the United States, the Ukraine, and Ghana. For purposes of this paper, however, I will analyze comparisons between the USA and Ghana only. Frederick proposes that “traditional body and beauty ideals have been challenged, initially by colonialism and more recently by increasing exposure to, and acceptance of, Western fashion and beauty ideals.” Frederick supports the idea that while traditional body ideals of “big is beautiful” are still likely present, they’re probably diminishing due to Westernization. Through these ideas and questions, three hypotheses are posed.
The first hypothesis of the group was “stronger preferences for thin bodies in the US and for heavier bodies in Ghana by women,” the second “highest levels of perceptual body dissatisfaction in the US and lowest levels in Ghana,” and the third “strongest preferences for thinness among US men and weakest preferences among Ghanaian men.” Women and men from both countries were sampled and asked questions similar to the previous study. The women identified, out of 9 bodies from a body rating scale, which matched their current body, their ideal body, the typical body of a woman their age, and the body most men find attractive. The men were asked to identify which body was the most attractive and which was typical for a woman their age. The ideal woman in the Ghanaian sample was higher on the body rating scale and therefore heavier. The women in the US had the largest difference between their actual and ideal bodies than Ghanaian women and thought men liked women much smaller than their body size than the Ghanaian women did.

Most importantly, Ghanaian women and men rated the slender body most attractive, but both rated the heavy/very heavy bodies more favorably than the US women did. This shows a higher acceptance and appreciation of larger bodies from both sexes in Ghana, which implies some sort of the traditional values of body image are still being upheld. The data also show that Ghanaian men preferred women who were heavier than average, and Ghanaian women desired a heavier body. Frederick supposes that “broad cultural differences are contributing to the differences in body dissatisfaction and body preferences in our samples.” While these cultural differences most likely account for the preference of heavier bodies, I would also argue that the similarities that are arising among Ghanaian and Western culture are contributing to the sway we see toward preference of slimmer bodies, even in rural areas. At the same time, there are important similarities in the media between Ghana and the US that need to be taken into account.
There are many sources of fat shaming in the US, but, most recently, an especially cruel “Project Harpoon” has been posted on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Reddit (it’s continuously been kicked off of many social media platforms) in which photos of notable plus size models and celebrities are photo shopped to thinner women (Vagianos, Despicable). The aim of the website is to get these women to “realize” how much “better” they would look if they were thin. The US is not lacking, however, people who are ready to stand up for body acceptance. Recently, a woman named Amy Pence-Brown stripped down, blindfolded, to a bathing suit in the middle of a busy street. She wanted to make the point that all bodies are valuable and asked people to draw hearts on her as a sign of acceptance of all forms of bodies (Vagianos, Undressed). Similar fat acceptance campaigns are occurring in Ghana.

Lydia Forson is a notable actress in the Ghanaian and African community. She differs from many mainstream African actresses in her body size and shape – while many current African actresses are slim in shape, Forson is notably larger and curvier. Forson uses this to her advantage, however, and speaks out about body acceptance. Recently, Forson was the cover of *Glitz Magazine*, a rising African magazine that usually highlights thinner women (Addo). After the issue was released, Forson posted it on social media and said, “nothing is sexier than a confident woman” (Addo).

Since I was a child, I’ve been on the heavier side of the scale. I was always bigger than my peers (noticeably, females) and slurs and acts of hate like the ones mentioned at the beginning of this paper instilled in me the belief that I wasn’t as human, as worthy of positive attention, love, compliments, or success, as my thinner friends. The social norm of thin as the only kind of beautiful was engrained in me from childhood and had profound effects on my self-esteem and how I regarded myself as a human being and how I deserved to be treated. Thanks to
the Westernization of Ghana, many young women in urban and rural areas are having the same ideals engrained in varying degrees. The difference today, however, is that US media often includes fat acceptance campaigns. Hopefully, these campaigns will continue to translate to Ghanaian culture and enforce the idea that all bodies are beautiful. Westernization is powerful and can have negative impacts, but there is hope, in this case, that it will have a positive impact on body image in Ghana.


Vagianos, Alanna. "Woman Undressed In Public To Show That ‘All Bodies Are Valuable’"


Lydia Forson Covers Glitz Magazine (Ade-Unuigbe).
Stunkard Figure Rating Scale, used in the study by Benkeser, Biritwum, and Hill (Cardinal).

The Contour Drawing Rating Scale by Thompson and Grey used in the study by Frderick, Forbes, and Berezovskaya (The Extrastriate).