



TECHNIUM
SOCIAL SCIENCES JOURNAL

Vol. 27, 2022

**A new decade
for social changes**

www.techniumscience.com

ISSN 2668-7798



9 772668 779000

Factors Influencing Body Image Perception of University Students in Ghana

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Abstract. This study aimed to find out the perception of University of Cape Coast students about their body image and the factors which influenced their body image perception. Cross-sectional descriptive survey design was adopted for the study. A sample of 380 students was used for the study through the proportional stratified random sampling technique. Data were collected by using questionnaire adapted from the instrument of Pop (2016). A Cronbach co-efficient alpha of 0.821 was obtained indicating that the instrument was reliable. Mean and standard deviation were used in analysing the data. The study revealed that the respondents did not see themselves as having the perfect body shape, were not satisfied body shape and size and were not satisfied with their weight. Overall, the respondents had poor body image. The study revealed also that media and peer influences were the main factors which influenced body image perception among the students. The other identified factors were society and cultural background, family members and partners. It was recommended that university authorities should organise outreach programmes for students on how to improve their self-esteem and self-image so that the incidence of poor body image can be reduced.

Keywords. Body Image, Perception, University Students

Introduction

With the beginning of puberty, physical appearance and body image become vital to the overall self-image of young people. This is because according to Gupta (2011), puberty is a period of major transition in forming a positive attitude towards one's body image among adolescents. These physical changes could impact critical outcomes on the overall development of young people. These physical changes can even affect students; perceptions of their body image even as young adults in the university (Ramberan, Austin, & Nichols, 2006).

Body image has thus been defined by Borzekowski and Bayer (2005) as the internal representation of one's own outer appearance which reflects physical and perceptual dimensions. Body image emphasizes on both how one feels about the size and shape of ones bodies and how precisely one perceives body size. Perception is key in an individual's body image. Perception has been viewed by Mancillas (2004), as impression formations individuals have of certain objects, events, or concepts. Perceptions may therefore differ markedly from actual events among different people (Gamble & Gamble, 2002).

It should be pointed out that body image perception can be influenced by several factors within the environment among which can be the media. Body image perception has long been influenced by the media and so Anderson and DiDomenico (1992) found that the media representation of the 'thin ideal' has been connected to the predominance of body image dissatisfaction and dieting disorders. There has also been suggestions that there may be age and gender differences in body dissatisfaction. This implies that age and gender could influence the body image perception of individuals. The dual process of sociocultural and peer pressure may contribute to such gender differences (Nicholls, & Thompson, 2004). For instance, among females, even normal-weight individuals are often concerned about body shape, and the vast majority wants to be thinner (Wertheim, Paxton, Blaney, & Thompson, 2004).

Body image perception can sometimes create body dissatisfaction. Body dissatisfaction is the discrepancy between an individual's perceived current body size and perceived ideal body size (Wertheim et al., 2004). Such dissatisfaction with the body has been associated with a plethora of psychological ills such as eating disorders, obesity and other bad lifestyles (Chisuwa, & O'Dea, 2010; Mogre, Mwinlenna, & Oladele, 2013; Chung, Perrin, & Skinner, 2013; Farah, Mohd, & Hazizi, 2011). Again, body image dissatisfaction has been linked to depression, low self-esteem and low social functioning (Field, & Thompson, 2004). All of these imply that body image perception can affect most aspects of the young person's life.

The issue of body image is more complicated because today's youth face a barrage of media messages explaining how they should look when it comes to body shape and form. Globally, the health of young people has mostly been ignored in global public health issues because this age group is assumed to be healthy (Gore, Bloem, Patton, Ferguson, & Joseph, 2011) and so little research is done on them. However, the significance of this age group is that many serious diseases in adulthood have their backgrounds in what happens in adolescence and young adulthood (Khuwaja, Khawaja, Motwani, Khoja, & Azam, 2003) which makes it a critical and fertile time to intervene in order to reduce disease burden in adulthood.

In Ghana, some studies have been conducted on the relationship between body image and lifestyle practices such as the studies of Amissah, Nyarko, Gyasi-Gyamerah and Anto-Winne (2015) and Ntim and Sarfo (2015). Specifically, Amissah et al. (2015) found a significant positive relationship between body image and eating behaviour. Similarly, Ntim and Sarfo (2015) also found a positive correlation between body image and eating disorders. Even though most of the studies that have been carried out in Ghana have focused on university students, they mainly focus on female students. This study focuses on both males and females. Therefore, the largely ignored males will be considered in this study.

Again, in the University of Cape Coast, specifically, it appeared that no study of this nature had been carried out. This is an issue of concern because the researchers have observed that, among students, there is a huge trend to have some ideal body shape or type leading most of these students to adopt some bad dietary practices. Carrying out this study will therefore help to obtain empirical evidence on the actual situation so that recommendations can be made to help reduce the negative effects of body image perception on students. This study thus aimed to find out the perception of University of Cape Cost students about their body image and the factors which influence their body image perception.

Literature Review

Social Comparison Theory

The social comparison theory propounded by Festinger's (1954) is of relevance to the study. In his social comparison theory, Festinger proposed that people strive to evaluate

themselves and in the absence of an objective criterion, they will compare themselves to others. When people compare themselves to others that they feel are worse off, they are likely to feel satisfied. However, when people compare themselves to others who they feel are better off, they are dissatisfied.

In the view of Farquhar (2007), if an individual compares themselves to a person with superior qualities, he or she is likely to feel worse about him/herself. Social comparison theory therefore implies that individuals are driven to evaluate themselves through the use of social comparison (Morrison, Kalin & Morrison, 2004). Thus, by comparing yourself with what is seen as socially ideal, an individual is likely to view him/herself in either a positive light or negative light.

In relation to the current study, it can be inferred that students in the University of Cape Coast would view their bodies in a negative light if they compare their bodies to some ideal body types they have observed in the media. This is likely to be the case since most of the things that young people do are learnt from what they see in the media and in the world around them. The Social Comparison theory is therefore appropriate for the study.

Body Image and Body Image Perception

In its general sense, body image has been described as an individual's perception, attitude, and feeling about his or her body and how others also view it (Yeng & Sedek, 2012; Wong & Say, 2013). According to Croll (2005), body image is the dynamic perception of an individual's body which involves how the individual looks and feels. Again, Grogan (2008) has opined that body image is a multidimensional, subjective and dynamic concept that encompasses an individual's perceptions, thoughts, and feelings about his or her body. Body image can be shaped by perception, emotions, and physical sensations and changes in relation to mood, physical experience, and environment (Croll, 2005).

Body image can be perceived in either a positive or negative way. Positive body image is manifested by realistic perception and acceptance toward person's size and shape (Wong & Say, 2013). However, a negative body image perception involves not having a realistic interpretation of body size and shape. The negative body image perception shows itself therefore in terms of shame, embarrassment, disappointment, or anxiety about appearance (Reynaga-Abiko, 2011). However, despite being relatively constant over time, body image does change depending on factors such as specific age vulnerabilities, health issues and media exposure (Neagu, 2015). Body image is therefore influenced strongly by self-esteem and self-evaluation, sometimes even more than by external evaluation by others.

In connection to the current study, it can be inferred that the way students of the University of Cape Coast perceive their bodies is important since young people are bombarded with images and models of the ideal body type through the media. If the way students in the University of Cape Coast perceive their bodies is established, several strategies can be put in place by all stakeholders concerned to ensure that students are not affected negatively. Again, the right practices could be adopted to keep the body in shape if the findings of the current study bring to light the actual body image perception of the students. Again, the body image of students of the University of Cape Coast could be positive or negative and usually depends on several factors like age, personal factors and most especially images from the media.

Body image perception is an issue of consideration among young people mainly because according to Madhavi, Nirmalie, Rajapaksa, Chandralatha, Kumari, and Chandana (2013), the period of adolescence and young adulthood, is a period during which individuals undergo rapid physical growth and body shape changes. As a result, most young people become concerned

about their body shape and form. One thing that makes body image perception important to study is that an individual's perception might not always reflect reality (Sijtsema, 2003). In this regard, an individual's perception of their body might be different from what is actually the case. Again, it is important to study body image perception because it helps play an important role in the management of body shape and form. This could be particularly crucial amongst female young people.

Pop (2016) conducted a cross-sectional study to determine the relationship established between self-esteem and body image dissatisfaction, as subjective variables among young, female Romanian university students. The data were collected using measurements and questionnaires from a random sample of 160 female students (19-21 y.o.) assumed to be healthy and educated, with constant physical activity and having an urban lifestyle. A prevalence of body dissatisfaction was reported, with 79% of girls reporting being displeased with their physical appearance.

In Ghana, Yahaya, Apaak and Hormenu (2021) investigated the relationship between body image, self-esteem and health behaviour and explored factors affecting body image among senior high school students in the Offinso Municipality of the Ashanti Region. In all, 561 students were selected using multistage sampling. The results showed that family influence was the strongest predictor of body image. Students who had body image concerns were more likely to have low self-esteem, while family could be important in helping students develop positive body image. In a similar light, Seo and Lee (2013) revealed that the development of body image dissatisfaction is more pronounced during adolescence. Banat (2016) also found a high prevalence of body image dissatisfaction among senior high school students in the Cape Coast Metropolis. In developing countries like Ghana, these body image concerns are increasing rapidly among the youth (Asumadu-Sarkodie & Owusu, 2015).

Factors Influencing Body Image Perception

Several researchers have sought to find the factors which influence the body image perception of young people. Different findings have been made as to what make young people perceive their bodies in different ways. Pruneti, Fontana and Bicchieri (2007) found that young people especially females perceived their body image based on values shared by peer groups. Thus, the body image perception of adolescents in the study of Pruneti et al. was based on the views of their peers. Similarly, Wills, Backett-Milburn, Gregory, and Lawton (2006) found that young people adopted behaviours and attitudes that prevail among their peers and the pressure from their peers to be thin had a negative impact on their body image perception. Peers are therefore influential in the body image perception of young people. This is probably true of Ghana, since young people are usually impressed with their peers and like to be seen as having the ideal body shape among their peers.

Aside the influence of peers on body image perception, messages from the media has also been cited as being influential on the body image perception of young people. The study of Khor (2009) found that young people try to imitate the body shape and image of socially appreciated persons such as artists, singers or popular persons in the media. In a similar vein, Madhavi et al. (2013) found that more than half of the participants in their study were dissatisfied with their body shape due to the influence of the media. However, the rest of the participants in their study were influenced by family members and peer groups in their poor body image perception. Further, the influence of the media has been reported because the media constantly depicts images of slender women and muscular men leading to the acceptance of these figures as a social norm (Ziebland, Robertson, Jay, & Neil, 2002). The images depicted

in the media may be predictive of body image overestimation or underestimation. Moreover, body image perception has been found to be influenced by several factors such as age, gender, family, peers, media, and ethnicity (Gregory, Blanck, Gillespie, Maynard, & Serdula, 2008; Kim, 2007).

The implication of all these studies is that, several factors contribute to the body image perception of young people. Most of these factors are present in every environment regardless of the country or society type. For instance, the media in Ghana (both digital and print) portray in several forms both direct and indirect the 'ideal' body type and as such young people are faced with the struggle of screening which media messages to pay attention to and which ones to ignore. Establishing the actual factors that influence the body image perception of students of the University of Cape Coast is therefore necessary.

Methodology

In carrying out this study, the cross-sectional descriptive survey design was adopted. Cross-sectional studies provide a 'snapshot' of both the outcome and exposure, at a specific point in time (Levin, 2006). Thus, the study will cover a specific group of people at a specific time. Osuala (2005) revealed that descriptive research gives a picture of situation or a population and it is basic for all types of research in assessing the situation as a prerequisite to inferences and generalizations.

The population for the study was regular undergraduate students in the University of Cape Coast which was 30,000. Out of this, a sample of 380 was used based on Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) Sample Determination Table. Proportional stratified random sampling technique was used to select the sample. Gibson (2014) defined proportional stratified sampling as the procedure in which population is divided into strata (groups) and then respondents are selected randomly from each stratum. The respondents were stratified on the basis of their colleges and their levels of study.

Data were collected by using questionnaire adapted from the instrument of Pop (2016). The questionnaire was on a four-point Likert type of scale, made up of Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree and Strongly Disagree. In terms of scoring, Strongly Disagree was scored as 1, Disagree scored as 2, Agree scored as 3 and Strongly Agree scored as 4. The validity of the questionnaire was established by experts in the Department of Guidance and Counselling and Department of Education and Psychology. The reliability of the questionnaire was however ascertained by calculating the Cronbach co-efficient alpha after pre-testing the instrument with 50 students from the Cape Coast Technical University (CCTU). A Cronbach co-efficient alpha of 0.821 was obtained indicating that the instrument was reliable.

Data were collected within a period of three weeks by the researchers. Consideration was given to ethical issues such as informed consent, anonymity, autonomy and confidentiality. The data collected were coded and entered into the Statistical Product and Service Solution (SPSS) version 22 software. Mean and standard deviation as well as independent samples t-test were used in analysing the data.

Results

Body Image Perception of Students

The study aimed to find out the body image perceptions of students. The data were scored on the scale: "1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Agree and 4=Strongly Agree". The data were analysed using mean and standard deviation. Mean scores of 2.5 and above were deemed to be high implying that most of the respondents held that view. However, mean scores

below 2.5 were deemed to be low which implied that the respondents disagreed to the specific statements or views. The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Body Image Perceptions of Students

Statement	Mean	SD
I feel physically attractive	2.53	0.86
I am satisfied with my weight	2.41	0.91
I am satisfied with my body shape and size	2.35	0.76
I feel satisfied with my physical appearance	2.43	0.89
I feel like I have the perfect body shape	2.03	0.76
My physical appearance is like the average person's appearance	2.55	0.88
I am confident in my physical body make-up	2.44	0.92
Average of Mean/SD	2.39	0.85

Source: Field Survey (2021)

From Table 1, it is shown that only two statements recorded mean scores above 2.5. Even these mean scores were slightly above 2.50. This means that the respondents agreed to slightly to the view that their physical appearance was like that of the average person (M=2.55, SD=0.88) and to the view that they felt physically attractive (M=2.53, SD=0.86). This means that to some extent the students in the study felt their physical appearance was average.

Contrary to these, the respondents indicated their disagreements with statements like "I feel like I have the perfect body shape" (M=2.03, SD=0.76), "I am satisfied with my body shape and size" (M=2.35, SD=0.76) and "I feel satisfied with my weight" (M=2.41, SD=0.91). From these results, it can be seen that the respondents did not see themselves as having the perfect body shape, were not satisfied body shape and size and were not satisfied with their weight.

The average of the mean scores was 2.39 and as such showed that the respondents generally disagreed with the statements in the Table. From all the results, there is the indication that the respondents had poor body image.

Factors Influencing Body Image of Students

The study again examined the factors which influence body image of the respondents. The data were scored on the scale: "1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Agree and 4=Strongly Agree". The data were analysed using mean and standard deviation. Mean scores of 2.5 and above were deemed to be high showing that respondents agreed to the said statement. However, mean scores below 2.5 were deemed to be low which implied that the respondents disagreed to the specific statements. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Factors Influencing Body Image of Respondents

Factor	Mean	SD
Media influence	3.86	0.68
Peer influence	3.76	0.77

Influence of family members	3.55	0.91
Society and cultural background	3.65	0.85
Influence of relationship partners	3.60	0.66

Source: Field Survey (2021)

Table 2 shows that the main factors which influenced the body image of the respondents. Specifically, media ($M=3.86$, $SD=0.68$) and peer ($M=3.76$, $SD=0.77$) influences were the main factors identified. The other identified factors were society and cultural background, family members and partners.

Discussion

The study revealed that the respondents did not see themselves as having the perfect body shape, were not satisfied body shape and size and were not satisfied with their weight. Overall, the respondents had poor body image. This means that the students surveyed did not view their body in a positive light. In other words, they were dissatisfied with their body shape, size and weight. This is not uncommon as several studies in the literature have confirmed this.

For instance, the study of Pop (2016) showed a prevalence of body dissatisfaction with majority of girls reporting being displeased with their physical appearance. Yahaya, Apaak and Hormenu (2021) also showed that most students were dissatisfied with their bodies. Similarly, the findings are in line with the findings of Seo and Lee (2013) that the development of body image dissatisfaction is more pronounced among young people. Banat (2016) also found a high prevalence of body image dissatisfaction among senior high school students in the Cape Coast Metropolis. Even though these studies were conducted among senior high school students, it has been established that in Ghana, body image concerns are increasing rapidly among the youth (Asumadu-Sarkodie & Owusu, 2015).

The study revealed also that media and peer influences were the main factors identified to influence body image perception. The other identified factors were society and cultural background, family members and partners. Thus, these factors led most of the respondents into dissatisfaction with their bodies. The social comparison theory propounded by Festinger's (1954) argues that people strive to evaluate themselves and in the absence of an objective criterion, they will compare themselves to others. When people compare themselves to others that they feel are worse off, they are likely to feel satisfied. However, when people compare themselves to others who they feel are better off, they are dissatisfied. In this sense, it is understandable for the media to influence the body image of students. This is because the media portrays images of ideal body shapes which make young people feel bad about themselves.

In line with the influence of the media, the study of Khor (2009) found that young people try to imitate the body shape and image of socially appreciated persons such as artists, singers or popular persons in the media. In a similar vein, Madhavi et al. (2013) found that more than half of the participants in their study were dissatisfied with their body shape due to the influence of the media.

Also, the study of Pruneti et al. (2007) found that young people especially females perceived their body image based on values shared by peer groups. Thus, the body image perception of adolescents in the study of Pruneti et al. was based on the views of their peers. Similarly, Wills, Backett-Milburn, Gregory, and Lawton (2006) found that young people adopted behaviours and attitudes that prevail among their peers and the pressure from their

peers to be thin had a negative impact on their body image perception. These were all confirmed in the current study.

Conclusion

From the results, it can be concluded that most students in the University of Cape Coast were dissatisfied with their body shape, size and weight. As a result, most of the students can be deemed to have negative or poor body image. Also, it is concluded that media and peer influence are the main factors which affect the views of students in the University of Cape Coast about their body shape and size. Thus, overall, the influence of media and peers led to students being dissatisfied with their body shape, size and weight.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made on the basis of the findings:

1. University authorities should organise outreach programmes for students on how to improve their self-esteem and self-image so that the incidence of poor body image can be reduced.
2. University Counselling Unit can organise guidance programmes for students on how to properly use information from the media so that they are not unduly influenced by the media in seeing their body shape in a negative light.
3. Peer influence should be treated by the Counselling Unit as a major topic during university orientation. This can help equip students with the skills needed to overcome any undue peer influence regarding some ideal body shape.

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