Students' Perception of the Influence of the Ideal Media Body Image on Choice of Clothing: The Case of Kirinyaga University, Kenya

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Abstract: This paper is premised on the findings of a study that focused on examining the perception university students have concerning their body appearance in relation to what the media portrays as an 'ideal body image'. University students spend most of their time on social and mainstream media where they get to observe, like and share the 'ideal images' portrayed by the media. Studies have shown that the unrealistic body images portrayed as 'ideal' by the media causes individuals to develop negative body images which eventually results into depression, low self-esteem and eating disorder. The study was conducted in Kirinyaga University, Kenya, where a convenience sample of 251 students was used. The university population was divided into four strata according to the year of study i.e. first, second, third and fourth year. From each stratum, 63 students were randomly selected to participate in the cross-sectional survey. A self-administered questionnaire and structured interview questions were used to collect data concerning media influence, body image perception and its influence on the individual body dis/satisfaction. The data was coded and entered into Statistical package for Social Science (SPSS Version 21) for analysis. From the results, 52% of the respondents strongly felt that the media portray an ultra thin body image as beautiful and attractive. The study also established that 78% of the respondents strongly prefer being thin while, on the other hand, 46% of the respondents were not satisfied with their body image. The discussions in this paper show that individuals who are not satisfied with their body appearance tend to develop negative body image which eventually affects their self-esteem and promotes eating disorder. This paper recommends that there is need for the media to use women of different body images during fashion events and advertisements. This will promote positive thinking and create a sense of pride in women who feel that the standards of beauty and attractiveness are set too high hence cannot achieve them.

Keywords: Body Image, Self-Esteem, Clothing, Media, Kirinyaga University, Students.

INTRODUCTION

Body image is a multifaceted psychological experience which is more related to physical appearance [1] and attitudes [2] encompassing perceptual, effective, cognitive and behaviors aspects [3]. According to Klein and Shiffman [4], body image is the picture we have in our minds providing the description of our size, shape and body forms and how we feel about our appearance. Individuals, especially women, tend to utilize clothes so as to make their bodies social and in some form of identity, thereby explaining why women are more concerned by their body appearance than men [1].

University students pay attention to their body appearance and how they dress so as to conform to their peers or rather 'fit in' according to societal norms [5]. At this stage, the individuals are more concerned about appearance thereby become more occupied with appearance related characteristics such as body weight and dressing pattern [1].

Influence of the Media

The media industry has experienced rapid growth in the 21st century i.e. the transition from analogue media to digital media and the development and growth of the social media [6]. The different forms of media use images of beautiful women during fashion events [1]. According to Tiggermann the mass media is the most powerful way of spreading these images [7]. The mass media portrays ultra-thin women as ideal beauty and attractive [8].

The ideal body image portrayed by the media has created a standard of women attractiveness that is difficult to achieve by female students. Tiggermann [7] notes that 16% of the women portrayed in the media as being attractive and beautiful are below the accepted average weight. The society has also been forced to believe that ultra-thin women are beautiful. This has further put more pressure on female students thereby creating the need to conform to media's ideal body

image and definition of beauty [9].

The Relationship between Perceived Body Image and Self-Esteem

Body image is perceived to be closely related to self-esteem, psychological health, eating habits and exercise habits [10]. Body image is a common theme in print media and electronic media. Photos published in the media only consist of models who are thin and emphasizing on ways in which women achieve such a perfect thin body [9].

Several studies have been conducted to measure the level of body dissatisfaction by determining the effect of the media on body image. The level of acceptance and satisfaction with one's body image is also a key factor in determining the likeliness of individuals to develop an eating disorder or emotional disorder [11]. As time changes, the population changes how it compares its own image to the evolving media portrayals of perfection. Print and electronic media has changed its standards on what should be published in terms of body size [11]. This could be attributed to the fast changing fashion industry. Statistics indicate that most of the women in America are obese which actually the reality is, but the media portrays the American woman as being tall and thin [12]. This therefore creates a misconception amongst the university students who would engage in all manner of activities just to achieve the ideal body image [13].

Self-esteem has been described as a measure of how one feels about oneself [8] and it affects how individuals perceive their appearance. According to Bessenoff [12] individuals with high self-esteem are less susceptible to negative images created by the media as compared to individuals with low self-esteem. Researchers have demonstrated that high media exposure on the unrealistic thin ideal body images lowers individuals' self-esteem while increasing the need for being thin [8, 14].

There is evidence that youths spend a lot of their time on media more so on social media admiring the body images and clothing preferences that the media portrays as modern, attractive and beautiful. The urge to look like or wanting to be like the 'her' or 'him' encourages the youths to take necessary steps towards achieving their goals of satisfaction in terms of body shape and clothing. Failure to achieve the set goals results into low self-esteem and dissatisfaction [5].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A convenience sample of 250 students aged between 18-27 years was used as respondents for this study. Kirinyaga University College was established by the Kenya Government through the Kirinyaga University College Order, Legal Notice No. 108 of September 2011 as a constituent college of Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology.

The study employed the use of stratified sampling technique to collect data [15]. Students were stratified based on the level study (i.e. year of study). This ensured small subgroups are represented proportionally. Simple random sampling was then used to randomly select 63 respondents from each stratum as advocated for by Mugenda and Mugenda [15].

The study employed the use of structured questionnaires, interview questions and observations as the main means of data collection [15]. Questionnaires require less personnel and it is also less costly [16] thereby making it a suitable means of data collection. The questionnaire design included both close- and open-ended questions which provided for structured responses.

Other tools used to collect data we the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (SES), the Body-Esteem Scale (BES) and the Sociocultural Attitudes toward Appearance Questionnaire (SATAQ). The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (SES) is a 10-item scale that measures global self-worth by measuring both positive and negative feelings about the self [17]. The study used the Rosenberg scale to determine the level of self-esteem amongst the sampled university students. The responses to the questions were structured to have a 4-point Likert scale format which ranged from strongly agree to strongly disagree [8].

The Body-Esteem Scale (BES) is a measure of body self-esteem [18]. It refers to how people feel about themselves. The media is known to constantly use beautiful women with 'ideal body images' that are usually difficult to achieve. The inability of student to achieve the ideal body image usually portrayed by the media makes them lack confident in their own body image. The respondents were requested to rate their feelings on a 5-point Likert scale on how they perceive their body image i.e. having strong negative feelings to having strong positive feelings.

The Sociocultural Attitudes towards Appearance Questionnaire has a sub scale that is used to assess internalization of sociocultural ideas of each respondent [19, 20]. In the current study, the SATAQ was used to measure respondent's endorsement of societal perception of ideal body image portrayed by the media. The respondents were asked to state their level of agreement based on several statements such as "the media portrays a negative ideal body image'. A 5-point Likert scale whose options were strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5) was used. The higher the score indicated the highest level of internalization [8].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table-1: Age Group

Age Group	No.	Percent
18-19	59	24
20-21	88	35
22-23	63	25
23-24	41	16
Total	251	100

The study targeted respondents aged between 18-27 years, but the results obtained indicate that the respondents were aged between 18-24 years as indicated in Table 1 above. From this table, 24% of the respondents were aged between 18-19 years. The age group with the highest representation was 20-21 years while the least age group i.e. 23-24 years had a 16% representation.

Respondents Perception of the Ideal Body Image Portrayed by the Media

The Douty scale which contains different types of body images, was used as a reference for respondents to determine which of the shown body types is usually portrayed as an ideal body image by the media [21].
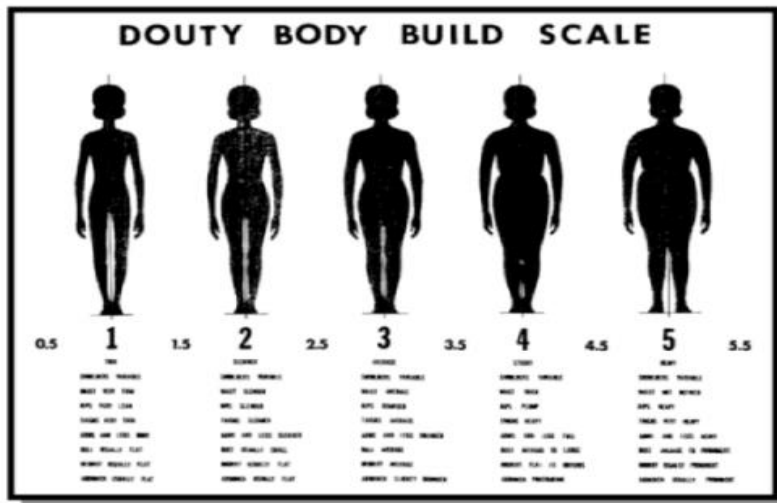

Fig-1: The Douty Scale
Source: Douty [21]

The above scale was used to state that '*image number 1 is frequently used by the media to portray unrealistic body image that it has characterized as beautiful and attractive'*. The respondents were asked to give their reaction to this statement. From the results, as illustrated in Table 2 below, 52% of the respondents strongly agreed that the first image is what is usually used as a reference for beautiful and attractive body images while 25% of the respondents agreed with the statement. On the other hand, 22% of the respondents were not sure whether to agree or disagree with the statement while only 1% disagreed and no respondent strongly disagreed with the statement.

Table-2: Body Types

Body Type	1	2	3	4	5
Response	52%	25%	22%	1%	0%

Preferred Body Image

Table-3: Preferred Body Image

Body Type	1	2	3	4	5
Response	78%	14%	7%	1%	0%

Using Douty scale (see Figure-1), the respondents were asked to select their preferred body image (the image they want or wish to acquire). As demonstrated in Table-3, 78% of the respondents preferred image 1 while 14% of the respondents preferred image 2. Image 3 and 4 were preferred by 7% and 1% of the respondents, respectively. None of the respondents preferred image 5.

The study also sought to determine whether the response in Table-3 was influenced by what the media portrays. From Figure-2 below, 74% of the respondents noted that their decision to select the preferred body image was influenced by what the media portrays as beautiful and attractive while 21% of the respondents made independent decisions without media influence. A small proportion of the respondents were not sure of whether their decision was influenced by the media or not.

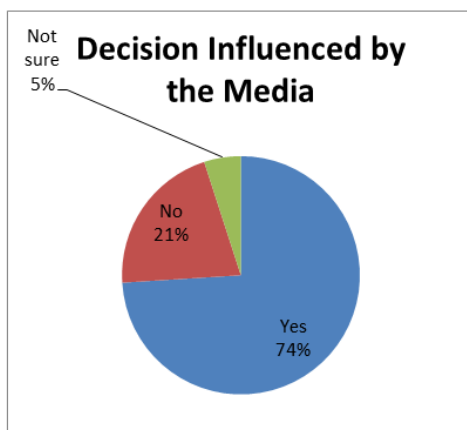**Influence of the Media on Respondents' Preferred Body Image**

Fig-2: Influence of the Media on Respondent's Preferred Body Image

Dis/satisfied with Body Image

The respondents were also asked to respond to the question: With reference to what the media and society portrays as an ideal body image would you consider yourself dissatisfied with your body image? As shown in Table 4, 46%, of the respondents strongly agreed that they are not happy with their body image while 25% of the respondents are also not happy with their body image. On the other hand, 10% of the respondents are not sure whether or not they are satisfied with their body image while 7% feel that they are satisfied with how they look. A proportion of respondent's i.e. 12% strongly feels comfortable with their body image.

Table-4: Dis/Satisfied with Body Image

	Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Response	46%	25%	10%	7%	12%

From the interview results, the study established that women dissatisfied with their body image have difficulties in finding clothes that would enhance their beauty. This is attributed to the fact that designer clothes are made for women with an 'ideal body image'. The frustrations associated with finding suitable clothes causes the women to be unhappy with their body image thereby developing a negative image about themselves.

The inability to meet the societal expectations of beauty and attractiveness has psychological effects on the respondents. The 46% of the respondents that strongly agree to the statement that they are dissatisfied with their body image, noted during the interview session that they psychologically feet fat and are more worried about how other people perceive their appearance.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The discussions in this paper have demonstrated that the media has contributed to negative body image between male and female students. This paper notes that both male and female students are influenced by the media; though differently. These influences have resulted into male and female students' focus on attaining the desired body shape through behaviors which in most cases are unhealthy. Men are trying hard to attain a 'six pack' while female on the other hand are paying more attention in attaining the tall thin American body image.

The 'size 8' figure in Kenya has become more popular and believed to be attracting the males. There have been reports of female undergoing plastic surgery to either enhance certain parts of their body such as the breasts and hips or even remove body fats so that they

can achieve a curvy body shape. The continued need to reach the ideal body image infects male and female students with a negative body image thereby lowering their self-esteem. These ideal unrealistic images are causing a major concern in our society and within the university institutions. Measures need to be taken by both the government, parents, society and education stakeholders to regulate the types of images used by the media.

It is also clear that the images we see on different types of media have impacted the way individuals view themselves. This is attributed to the fact that the society has put more emphasis on using the unrealistic images portrayed in the media as a reference for describing beauty. From the results of this work, it is conclusive that university students especially women are greatly influenced by the unrealistic 'ideal' images of the media. The female students are even taking more pressure considering that the male students admire these unrealistic ideal images and expect the female counterparts to somehow show some resemblance.

With the above conclusion in mind, this paper recommends that the media should be used positively to include into its advertisements sizes of female and male individuals who are of average size and portrays reality. In addition, the paper vouches for the need to use society role models in a bid to encourage other women on the need to appreciate their own body images and develop healthy ways of improving one's beauty.

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