

University Students' Perception on the Influence of the "Ideal" Media Body Image on their Choice of Clothing in Kenya

Nguchara Nancy*, Serem J. Dorcas and Were M. Gertrude

Family and Consumer Sciences Department, University of Eldoret, Kenya

Email: ngucharanancy369@gmail.com

Abstract

The study focused on examining the perception university students have concerning their body appearance in relation to what the media portrays as 'ideal body image'. University students spend most of their time on social and mainstream media where they get to observe, like and share images portrayed by the media as 'ideal image'. Studies have shown that the unrealistic body images portrayed as 'ideal' by the media causes individuals to develop negative body images on themselves which eventually results into body image dissatisfaction therefore, this study focused on determining students perception on what the media portrays as ideal body appearance; establishing the extent to which students are satisfied with their body appearance in relation to what the media portrays as ideal body appearance: examining the influence of the media body appearance on the students' choice of clothing; and finally investigating ways used by the students to achieve their desired body appearance. The study was conducted in four universities; that is, University of Eldoret, Kirinyaga University Egerton University and St. Paul's University. From each university, a sample of 132 students was randomly selected to participate in the study. This gave a total of 528 study respondents. A self-administered questionnaire and focus group discussion were used to collect data. In terms of body weight, Chi square statistics showed that there was a significant difference among the students in relation to their perception towards their body weight, at $p < 0.05$ level of significance. In particular, among the students who perceived their body weight was very far from the ideal body image, majority of them were from university of Eldoret, followed by those from Egerton University and then Kirinyaga University College. St. Paul's University had the least number of students who felt that their body weight was very far from the ideal image. This implies that most of the students from University of Eldoret were not comfortable with their body appearance compared to those from other universities. However, further analysis indicated that a significant number of the students from the four sampled universities were psychologically affected by people's judgment in relation to their body appearance. Media and peer pressure were major influencing factor in student's choice of clothing as such, majority of these students reported to have ever considered buying products to assist them in losing weight and achieving ideal body image. Among them, the highest number of the students was from University of Eldoret, followed by those from Kirinyaga University and then Egerton University. The study therefore concludes that most of the university students were not satisfied with their body appearance which eventually affects their self-esteem and academic performance. The study recommends that there is need for the media to use women and men of different body images during fashion events and advertisements. This will promote positive thinking and create a sense of pride.

Key Words: University Students, Perception, Ideal Body Image, Clothing

INTRODUCTION

Body image is a multifaceted psychological experience which is more related to physical appearance (Cash, 2005) and attitudes (Dohnt, & Tiggemann, 2006b) encompassing perceptual, effective, cognitive and behaviours aspects (Frisby, 2004). According to Klein & Shiffman (2005), 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 (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002).

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 (Jung and Lee, 2006). 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 (Cash, 2005).

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 (Caldwell, 2008). The different forms of media use images of beautiful women during fashion events (Cash, 2005). According to Tiggemann (2009), the mass media is the most powerful way of spreading these images. The mass media portrays ultra-thin women as ideal beauty and attractive (Hawkins et al., 2004).

The ideal body image portrayed by the media has created a standard of women attractiveness that is difficult to achieve by female students. Tiggemann (2009) noted 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 student thereby creating the need to conform to media's ideal body image and definition of beauty (Wykes & Gunter, 2005).

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 (Liebermann *et al.*, 2001). Body image is a common theme in print media and electronic media. Photos published in the media only consist of models that are thin and emphasizing on ways in which women achieve such a perfect thin body (Wykes & Gunter, 2005).

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 (Jarry & Kossert, 2006).

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 (Jarry & Kossert, 2006). 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 (Bessenoff, 2006). This therefore creates a misconception amongst the university students who would engage in all manner of activities just to achieve the ideal body image (Grabe & Hyde, 2006).

Self-esteem has been described as a measure of how one feels about oneself (Hawkins *et al.*, 2004) and it affects how individuals perceive their appearance. According to Bessenoff (2006), individuals with high self esteem are less susceptible to negative images created by the media as compared to individuals with low self esteem. Researcher have demonstrated that high media exposure on the unrealistic thin ideal body images lowers individuals self esteem while increasing the need for being thin (Hawkins *et al.*, 2004; Hobza *et al.*, 2007).

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 '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 (Jung and Lee, 2006).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was carried out in four universities that is University of Eldoret, Kirinyaga University Egerton University and St. Paul's University. All the three universities are public universities while St Paul is private university and has religious background. Most of the students were from different counties with different socio-economic background. At the time of the study, there were 14,750 students at the University of Eldoret, 3,400 students at Kirinyaga University, 6,320 students at St. Paul's University and 19,400 students at Egerton University. This gave a cumulative students' target population of 43,870. Simplified version of Cochran equation Mugenda (2003) was used to come up with 132 respondent and total of 528 students aged between 16-27 years for this study.

The study employed stratified sampling technique to collect data (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003) where students were stratified into four strata based on the level of study (1st year, 2nd year, 3rd year and 4th year). From each stratum, 33 students were randomly selected to participate in the study.

The study employed a structured questionnaire and focus group discussions (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003). Questionnaires require less personnel and it's also less costly (Carvajal, 2008) thereby making it a suitable means of data collection. The questionnaire design included both close and open ended questions. The researcher also engaged into focus group discussion to get in-depth information focusing on students' perception of the influence the ideal media body appearance had on their clothing choices.

Data collected from the field was both quantitative and qualitative in nature. Quantitative data was coded and entered into the computer using Statistical Package for Social Science version 21 for analysis. The statistics used included frequency counts, percentage and Chi-square test. On the other hand, qualitative data was analyzed thematically in line with research objectives the results of the analysis were then presented using tables.

RESULTS

The study focused on determining students' perception of the influence the "ideal" media body appearance has on their clothing choices. Presented below is background information of the study respondents.

Table 1: University students' gender

University name	Gender				Total	
	Male		Female		F	%
	F	%	f	%		
University of Eldoret	59	11.2	73	13.8	132	25.0
Kirinyaga University College	54	10.2	78	14.8	132	25.0
Egerton University	42	8.0	90	17.0	132	25.0
St. Paul's University	72	13.6	60	11.4	132	25.0
Total	227	43.0	301	57.0	528	100.0

As shown in Table 1, among the 528 students who participated in the study, 227 (43.0%) were male students while 301 (57.0%) were female students. This shows that the proportion of female participants was higher compared to that of male participants. The researcher selected more female students than male students because matters related to body image were given more attention by female compared male counterparts. Table 2 shows age bracket of university students

Table 2: University students' age bracket

University name	Age in years				Total	
	16-20		21-25		f	%
	f	%	f	%		
University of Eldoret	53	10.0	79	15.0	132	25.0
Kirinyaga University College	58	11.0	74	14.0	132	25.0
Egerton University	64	12.1	68	12.9	132	25.0
St. Paul's University	78	14.8	54	10.2	132	25.0
Total	253	47.9	275	52.1	528	100.0

Results presented in Table 2 indicate that out of the 47.9% of the students who were aged between 16 and 20 years, 10.0% were from University of Eldoret, 11.0% were from Kirinyaga University College, 12.1% were from Egerton while 14.8% were from St. Paul's University. Among the 52.1% of the student aged between 21 and 25 years, 15.0% were from University of Eldoret, 14.0% were from Kirinyaga University College, 12.9% were from Egerton while 10.2% were from St. Paul's University.

Students' Satisfaction with their Body Appearance in Relation to What the Media Portrays as Ideal Body Appearance

The study sought to establish the extent to which students are satisfied with their body appearance in relation to what the media portrays as ideal body appearance. To meet this objective, the researcher first asked the study respondents how important they think their body appearances are. Presented in Table 3 are results obtained.

Table 3: University students' body appearance

University name	Body appearance						Chi-square statistics
	Very important		Less important		Not concerned		
	f	%	f	%	F	%	
University of Eldoret	93	17.6	19	3.6	20	3.8	$\chi=9.174$
Kirinyaga University College	88	16.7	17	3.2	27	5.1	
Egerton University	80	15.2	25	4.7	27	5.1	df=6
St. Paul's University	89	16.9	28	5.3	15	2.8	
Total	350	66.3	89	16.9	89	16.9	Sig. =0.164

Not significant at $p < 0.05$ level

Chi-square test results illustrated that university students did not differ significantly in their views towards individual's appearance, at $p < 0.05$ level of significance. Majority of the students (66.3%) from the four sampled universities reported that their body appearance was very important, 89 (16.9%) felt that their appearance was less important while another similar proportion (16.9%) indicated that they were not concerned about their body appearance. This implies that most of the university students valued their body appearance.

To verify this finding, the researcher conducted a focus group discussion with students from the sampled universities. One of the students said *"My physical appearance matters most because people judge individuals from the appearance. In addition, my appearance helps me to fit in my social groups"*. Another one revealed that *"Anytime I feel as if I have added my body weight, I always wear fitting clothes to look thinner, am so much concerned about my appearance and how my friends see me"*.

Table 4 illustrates students' perception towards their ideal body weight.

Table 4: Students' perception towards their ideal body weight

Ideal body image	University name								Total	Chi-square statistics
	University of Eldoret		Kirinyaga University College		Egerton University		St. Paul's University			
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%		
Very far from the ideal	71	13.4	48	9.1	53	10.0	30	5.7	202	$\chi^2=68.383$
Far from the ideal	2	0.4	29	5.5	11	2.1	27	5.1	69	
Near the ideal	22	4.2	14	2.7	10	1.9	21	4.0	67	df=12
Very ideal	23	4.4	16	3.0	19	3.6	16	3.0	74	
I don't care	14	2.7	25	4.7	39	7.4	38	7.2	116	Sig. =0.000*

*Significant at $p<0.05$ level

Chi-square statistics revealed that there was a significant difference among the students in relation to their ideal body weight, at $p<0.05$ level of significance. In particular, among the students who perceived their body weight was very far from the ideal body image were students from university of Eldoret, followed by those from Egerton University and then Kirinyaga University College. St. Paul's University had the least number of students who felt that their body weight was very far from the ideal image. In addition, results in the table further indicated that in general, 38.3% of the students perceived that their body weight was very far from the ideal, 13.1% felt that their weight was far from the ideal, 12.7% said near the ideal whereas 22.0% perceived their body This implies that majority of the students were not comfortable with their body appearance. Weight as very ideal as cited from one of the student during focus group discussion "*when I compare myself with the body images shown in the media, I look so big than my age, I eat a lot and hence keep on adding body weight. I will look for a way of changing my eating habit because am not happy with the way I look today*". This finding concurred with the results by Mulgrew & Volcevski-Kostas (2012) who emphasized that idealized images in the media are recognized as external trigger of body dissatisfaction especially among females.

Table 5 below depicts students' perceptions towards people judgement in relation to their body appearance.

Table 5: People's judgement in relation to your body appearance

People's judgement	University name								Total	Chi-square statistics
	University of Eldoret		Kirinyaga University		Egerton University		St. Paul's University			
	College									
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%		
Very thin	10	1.9	24	4.5	14	2.7	3	0.6	51	$\chi=26.991$ df=12 Sig. =0.008*
Thin	12	2.3	13	2.5	11	2.1	17	3.2	53	
Average	77	14.6	67	12.7	68	12.9	83	15.7	295	
Overweight	30	5.7	27	5.1	33	6.3	26	4.9	116	
Very overweight	3	0.6	1	0.2	6	1.1	3	0.6	13	
Total	132	25.0	132	25.0	132	25.0	132	25.0	528	

*Significant at $p < 0.05$ level

As shown in Table 5, 51 (9.7%) students felt that other people judge them as being very thin, 295 (55.9%) felt that they were judged as being average, 116 (22.0%) overweight and 13 (2.5%) very overweight. This implies that a large proportion of the students (over 40.0%) perceived that they were judged by other people as either being very thin, overweight or very overweight. In particular, most of the students who felt they were judged as being very thin were from Kirinyaga University College whereas most of the students who felt that other people judge them as being overweight were from Egerton university. This shows that people's judgement have led to university students' lack of satisfaction with their body appearance which eventually have influenced them to look for ways of maintaining the "ideal body image" as portrayed by media.

Table 6 presents proportion of students who are psychologically affected by people's judgement in terms of their body appearance

Table 6: Proportion of students' psychologically affected by people's judgment

University Name	Students' psychologically affected by people's judgment								Chi-square statistics
	Very much		Not much		Somehow		Not affected		
	f	%	f	%	f	%	F	%	
University of Eldoret	26	4.9	18	3.4	39	7.4	49	9.3	$\chi^2=14.028$ df=9
Kirinyaga University College	33	6.3	28	5.3	30	5.7	41	7.8	
Egerton University	30	5.7	20	3.8	36	6.8	46	8.7	
St. Paul's University	27	5.1	37	7.0	34	6.4	34	6.4	
Total	116	22.0	103	19.5	139	26.3	170	32.2	
									Sig. =0.121

Not significant at $p < 0.05$ level

Of the 528 students who participated in the study, 116 (22.0%) were psychologically affected by people's judgment in relation to their body appearance, 103 (19.5%) were not much affected, 139 (26.3%) were somehow affected while 170 (32.2%) were not affected at all. This shows that a significant proportion of students were psychologically affected by people's judgment in relation to their body appearance. Chi-square test results did not show any significant difference among the university students, at $p < 0.05$ level of significance. Further analysis showed that through focus group discussion, one of the students lamented that *"I feel so bad when people call me "Wanjipee" which means slender person"*. Another one cited that *"I am psychologically affected because some of my friends always give me negative comments about my body size and dressing code. They always tell me I wear clothes which do not fit my body well and am not fashionable"*. According to Body Image Facts (2006) and Sparhawk, (2003), negative body image could even lead to other conditions such as anxiety, depression, lowered self-esteem, sexual dissatisfactions, and less satisfaction at work and in relationships. When women feel bad about their bodies, their satisfaction and mood can plummet.

The researcher further sought to find out the proportion of students who were depressed/ not depressed when they realized they were not fashionable

Table 7: Students who were depressed when not fashionable

University name	Depressed when not fashionable				Chi-square statistics
	Yes		No		
	f	%	f	%	
University of Eldoret	96	18.2	36	6.8	$\chi^2=4.090$
Kirinyaga University College	89	16.9	43	8.1	
Egerton University	82	15.5	50	9.5	df=3
St Paul University	94	17.8	38	7.2	
Total	361	68.4	167	31.6	Sig.=0.252

Not significant at $p < 0.05$ level

Table 7 shows that majority of the university students (68.4%) from the four sampled universities were depressed when they were not fashionable. As noted from one of the students, *"I feel so bad anytime I watch TV shows and magazines advertising fashionable clothes in the market and I can't afford them. I also feel deceived because the media don't present what is real in their advertisement"*. According to Turbin (2003), clothing preferences are the product of how ones feel about his/her body size, image and societal influence including media projections of what is acceptable. As such a state of being unfashionable can have a great impact among the individuals.

Table 8: Factors influencing university students' choice of dressing

University name	Factors								Chi-square statistics
	Print media		Electronic media		Social media		Peer pressure		
	F	%	f	%	f	%	F	%	
University of Eldoret	4	0.8	24	4.5	49	9.3	55	10.4	$\chi^2=21.514$ df=9 Sig.=0.011*
Kirinyaga University College	9	1.7	16	3.0	55	10.4	52	9.8	
Egerton University	6	1.1	29	5.5	55	10.4	42	8.0	
St. Paul's University	17	3.2	31	5.9	41	7.8	43	8.1	
Total	36	6.8	100	18.9	200	37.9	192	36.4	

*Significant at $p < 0.05$ level

As depicted in Table 8 chi-square test results revealed that university students differed significantly in relation to the factors influencing them while selecting their dressings. In particular, while most of the students from Kirinyaga University and Egerton University indicated that they were influenced by social media, a notable number of students from university of Eldoret and St. Paul University cited peer pressure as the major factor influencing them. From this finding, it is clear that the major factors influencing university students' choice of dressing were social media and peer pressure. This can be explained by the fact that most of the university students have smart phones, from which they can access the internet, and also the fact that they are more likely to borrow ideas from each other on what to wear.

Table 6 illustrates time spent by students on fashion sites and magazines.

Table 9 illustrates the number of students who have ever considered purchasing products to help with weight loss, dieting or exercise after viewing a media advert concerning the same.

Table 9: University students purchasing products to help with weight loss

University name	Purchase products to help in weight loss						Total
	Yes		Somehow		No		
	f	%	f	%	f	%	
University of Eldoret	79	15.0	16	3.0	37	7.0	$\chi^2=23.715$ df=6 Sig.=0.001*
Kirinyaga University College	55	10.4	31	5.9	46	8.7	
Egerton University	50	9.5	25	4.7	57	10.7	
St. Paul's University	48	9.1	37	7.0	47	8.9	
Total	232	43.9	109	20.6	187	35.4	

*Significant at $p < 0.05$ level

As indicated in Table 8, 43.9% of the students approved that they have ever considered purchasing products to help with weight loss, dieting or exercise after viewing a media advert, 20.6% had somehow considered whereas the remaining 35.4% of the students said that they have never considered purchasing products to assist in losing body weight. Chi-square test revealed that university students differed significantly in terms of purchasing products to assist with weight loss. Majority of the students who reported that they considered buying products to help with weight loss were from University of Eldoret, followed by those from Kirinyaga University and then Egerton University. St. Paul University had the least number of students who considered purchasing products to help with weight loss, dieting or exercise after viewing a media advert. It further emerged that majority of the students from the sampled universities have ever considered buying products to assist them in losing weight and achieving ideal body image. As revealed from one of the students, *"I consider using products that assist me in losing my body weight because am physically fit now and they have no any negative impact on my body"*. However, another student gave a negative remark in relation to the usage of products to assist in losing or adding body weight. *Products like steroids which are used for muscle building have a very negative effect towards the body once an individual stops using them. I can't personally use them or advise anyone to use them; they are very dangerous in our body.* In agreement with this finding, Pipher (1994) established that media portrays has created misconception amongst the university students who would engage in all manner of activities just to achieve the ideal body image.

CONCLUSION

From the study findings, it emerged that majority of the students from the four sampled universities reported that they admired media's ideal image and felt depressed when they were not fashionable. In terms of body weight, Chi square statistics showed that there was a significant difference among the students in relation to their perception towards their body weight, at $p < 0.05$ level of significance. In particular, among the students who perceived their body weight was very far from the ideal body image, majority of them were from university of Eldoret, followed by those from Egerton University and then Kirinyaga University St Paul had the least no of students who felt that their body weight was very far the ideal image this implies that most of the students from University of Eldoret were not comfortable with their body appearance compared to those from other universities. However, further analysis indicated that a significant number of the students from the four sampled universities were psychologically affected by people's judgment in relation to their body appearance. It was established a majority of the students were influenced by media Social media (37.9%) when choosing their mode of dressing. TV shows and magazines were also mentioned as the other major sources of influence among the students and notable number of students were not satisfied with their mode of dressing University of Eldoret followed Kirinyaga and Egerton university had majority of these students reported to have ever considered buying products to assist them in losing weight and achieving ideal body image. The study concludes that more than half of respondent admired media ideal image meaning media has influence on the students perception, (66%) of students were not satisfied with their body appearance in relation to medias ideal body image (63.5%) of the respondent were influenced by

media in their choice of clothing, (69%) of the respondent have ever used weight loss product,

RECOMMENDATIONS

After the analysis of the results, the study notes some recommendations concerning the unrealistic 'ideal' body media image. As much as the researcher would have wished to conclusive discuss all aspect of media influence, time was limited. Therefore the researcher recommends that;

- i. 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.
- i. The society role models should also be used to encourage individuals and especially women the need to appreciate their own body image and develop healthy ways of improving one's beauty.
- ii. The male students who are the biggest contributors to the unrealistic body image consumed by female students should start decreasing the comments and suggestions that are geared towards negative describing the females' body image and comparing them to the media 'ideal' body images.

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