

DOCTORAL THESIS

"I want to be like Beyonce": Body Work among Middle Class Ghanaian Women

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ABSTRACT

Research in body work, that is, work performed on one's body for aesthetic modification or maintenance has particularly received increased attention due to its linkage with a presentation of self-identity in a consumer culture. In recent years, globalization characterized by the increasing dispersing of capital, a global media culture, accelerations in travel and communication technologies, increasing rates of migration among others, has led to a formation of mixed cultured identities where local meanings of body work are practised alongside a global culture (Callero 2003). Yet, scholarship in body work has mostly focused on countries in the Global North. This study, therefore, explores how globalization is indigenized and negotiated in reference to the body ideal and subsequent body work among urban middle-class women in Ghana, a country in the Global South.

This research project moves beyond the reductionisms of the structure/agency divide of past studies and uses corporeal realism as a theoretical frame. This is pertinent as corporeal realism offers an analysis that prioritises the body key in how individuals create meanings for the body (Shillings 2005; 2012). Corporeal realism recognises the body as possessing agency and capacities that cannot be reduced to social structures but capable of mediating these structures as an enfolded entity. Here the body is read as a source of body work, as a location of body work and having generative capacities (Shillings 2005; 2012).

A grounded theory approach was adopted for data collection and analysis. Data was collected qualitatively through in-depth interviews with 35 (thirty-five) urban middle-class Ghanaian women. Participant observation was done at a gym for 3 (three) months as well as online ethnography in an all-women's Facebook group for 6 (six) months. Findings indicate that while it may seem that there is not a unified

ideal, the overarching feature of an ideal body is one with prominent curves and a significant emphasis on the backside. This body is described as one that is “toned”, “smart and curvy” and, “not too slim, not too fat”. While there is an influence of the Western ideals of thinness, middle class Ghanaian women draw on specific famous female celebrities associated with the African American culture with regard to how they construct their body ideals. Middle-class Ghanaian women resist the archetypal Western ideal of the slim and slender body while constructing their ideal body type. Subsequently, various body work activities such as dieting, use of corsets, slim teas and, other supplements were engaged in by the middle-class Ghanaian woman to achieve this ideal. Social media use fueled by internet penetration, class status and, gender roles played varying roles in how these women engaged and negotiated body work practices. Even though some women embodied agency in navigating social norms and structures in creating meanings of body work for themselves, others were malleable and were strongly influenced by social norms and structures in the way they practised body work. Corporeal realism allowed for an understanding of bodywork that went beyond a binary approach.

This study makes theoretical contributions to body work studies by extending corporeal realism and proposing glo-corporeal realism. Glo-corporeal realism calls for attention to how the body is worked upon by centering globalization as well as racial affinities; a closeness to similar others present in specific geographies in how body work is practised.

Table of Contents

Declaration	i
Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iv
Table of Contents	vi
List of Tables	xi
List of Figures	xi
Chapter One: Introduction	1
1.1 The Body in a Globalized Culture	1
1.2 The Ghanaian Setting and Problem Statement	4
1.3 Conceptualising Body Work	11
1.4 Theoretical Background of the Study	15
1.5 Research Objectives	17
1.6 Organisation of the Thesis	18
Chapter Two: Body Work in a Global Context	20
2.1 Body Work Studies	20
2.1.1 The Body as a Commodity in Consumer Culture	21
2.1.2 Objectification of the Body in the Media	24
2.1.3 The Body, Healthism and Social Class	25
2.1.4 Studies on Gender and Body Work	29
2.2 Empirical Gap	31
2.3 Conclusion	33

Chapter Three: Theoretical Approach: Corporeal Realism	34
3.1 Structural Perspective	36
3.2 Post-structural Feminists and the Agency Perspective	37
3.3 Post-structural Feminists and the Deleuzian Approach	39
3.4 Theoretical Perspective and Framework: Corporeal Realism	40
3.4.1 The Body as a Source of Body Work	42
3.4.2 The Body as a Location of Body Work	43
3.4.3 The Body with Generative Capacities	44
3.5 Theoretical Gap	45
3.6 Conclusion	47
Chapter Four: Research Methods	49
4.1 Research Approach: Grounded Theory	49
4.2 Research Area	51
4.3 Selection of Participants	52
4.4 Participants	55
4.5 Data Collection Methods	60
4.5.1 Semi-Structured Interviews	60
4.5.2 Participant Observation	61
4.5.3 Online Ethnography	65
4.6 Data Analysis	66
4.7 Ethical Clearance	67
4.8 Field Experiences	67
4.9 Personal Reflection	69
4.10 Conclusion	72

Chapter Five: Body Ideals and Body Work in Ghana	74
5.1 Tracing the Body Ideal in Ghana	75
5.2 Globalization and the Body Ideal(s)	84
5.3 Negotiating the Body Ideal	90
5.4 The Significance of the Global South	95
5.5 Body Work	96
5.5.1 Dieting	97
5.5.2 Corseting and Waist Training	100
5.5.3 Gym Training	102
5.5.4 Exercising at Home	106
5.5.5 Herbal Products and other Supplements	107
5.5.6 Body Work and Medical technologies	108
5.6 The Body as a Source of Body Work	115
5.7 Conclusion	117
Chapter Six: Body Work and Gender	119
6.1 The Gendered Nature of Body Work	119
6.1.1 Real or Perceived Pressure from Partners	120
6.1.2 Getting Pre-pregnancy Bodies Back	126
6.1.3 Self-Presentation: Embodying femininity	128
6.2 Emergent Properties of the Body	130
6.2.1 Women as Active Agents in the Construction of Beauty Ideals	131
6.2.2 Resisting the Body Work through Religion	134
6.2.3 Sustaining Body Work through Religion	137
6.3 Conclusion	137

Chapter Seven: Body Work: Healthism and Class	139
7.1 Social Class and Body Work Activities	140
7.2 Social Class and Healthism	144
7.3 Pursuing a Middle-Class Lifestyle? “Fat to Fit” Programme	148
7.4 Conclusion	151
Chapter Eight: Body Work and Social Media	153
8.1 Social Media	153
8.2 Facilitation: Social Media as a Source of Body Work	154
8.2.1 Encountering Ideal Images	155
8.2.2 Knowledge from Social Media	157
8.3 Sustaining Beauty Ideals	157
8.3.1 Buying from Social Media	157
8.3.2 Support from Social Media	159
8.3.3 Validation from Social Media	160
8.4 Deception on Social Media	161
8.5 Agency on Social Media	162
8.6 Conclusion	163
Chapter Nine: Conclusion	166
9.1 Major Findings	166
9.1.1 The Body Ideal and Body Work	167
9.1.2 Body Work and Gender	168
9.1.3 Body Work and Class	168
9.1.4 Body Work and Social Media	169

9.2 Contribution to Knowledge: Theorising with Corporeal Realism	170
9.3 Limitations and Directions for Future Research	179
References	181
Appendix I: Interview Guide	200
Appendix II: Field Diary	202
Appendix III: Ethical Clearance from University of Ghana	203
Appendix IV: Ethics Application Form, HKBU	204
Appendix V: Protocol Consent Form, University of Ghana	212
Curriculum Vitae	216

List of Tables

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Details of Participants	57
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List of Figures

Figure 1: “The confident body u deserve”	4
Figure 2: A section of the gym	64
Figure 3: Adowa dancer	76
Figure 4: Advertisement of a football match by Citi Fm	80
Figure 5: “Don’t be skinny”	81
Figure 6: “Slim! Slim! Slim!”	82
Figure 7: A display of undergarments for achieving body shape and size	102
Figure 8: A display of products used for weight loss	108
Figure 9: “Resurrect my fallen breast”	111
Figure 10: “Transformations”	112
Figure 11: Moesha Buduong	113
Figure 12: Billboard for “Perfect Skin & Body Therapy”	114
Figure 13: “No pills, no diet”	126
Figure 14: Products for weight loss on Facebook	133
Figure 15: Herbalife® ad from an agent	146
Figure 16: Viva Divina Facebook post by a marketer	147
Figure 17: A TeDivina advertisement on Facebook	148
Figure 18: Weight Loss E-Flyer from Joy Fm	150
Figure 19: “Slim Tea Ad”	159
Figure 20: Slim Tea Bought	159
Figure 21: Conceptual Framework of Glo-corporeal Realism	178