

A qualitative investigation of body image and food choice decision-making among Junior High School students in urban Accra, Ghana

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Objective

To explore how attractiveness and body image are conceptualized among urban Ghanaian adolescents and how various sociocultural messages regarding body image influence food choice.

Methods

- Qualitative, semi-structured interviews (n=48)
- Recruitment – through school headmasters or designee
- Eligibility – must be final year junior high student (< 18 years)
- Thematic analysis using Nvivo 12 software (QSR International)



Results

- Participants described attractive and unattractive characteristics, some conflicting with traditional African standards valuing larger body sizes.
- Male students emphasized “muscularity,” “tall stature,” and “broad shoulders.”
- Female students favored “wide hips” and “a Coca-Cola shape”
- Both sexes preferred a “flat stomach” and “stylish clothing and hair” and thought “overweight” was “unattractive” and “unhealthy.”
- Most students expressed a need to attain a certain body type to attract romantic partners, reduce physical limitations, and avoid social stigma.
- Most participants admitted changing diets to the chagrin of their elders who preferred that they ate traditional foods in larger quantities.



Conclusion

- Urban Ghanaian adolescents' conceptualizations of attractiveness and body image were influenced by both traditional African and modern values obtained from messaging within social networks and media.
- Future interventions might use social marketing to promote nutritious diets and reduce stigma about body size.

