

JOURNAL OF AFRICAN ARTS & CULTURE

AESTHETICS OF THE RAMPAGEOUS BODY: INVESTIGATING BODY IDOLISATION AMONG GHANAIAN YOUTH

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CITATION: deGraft-Yankson, P., & Essuman, J. (2025). Aesthetics of the rampageous body: Investigating body idolisation among Ghanaian youth. *Journal of African Arts and Culture*, 8(3), 1-14

Abstract



This study investigates the phenomenon of body idolisation among Ghanaian youth, exploring its underlying motivations, cultural influences, and broader societal implications. Adopting a phenomenological approach, the research examines how young people perceive their bodies as instruments of empowerment, self-expression, and social validation. The analysis highlights the growing dominance of visual-centric paradigms, the loosening of traditional cultural norms, and the impact of global influences in shaping contemporary body aesthetics. These evolving practices generate tensions between individual self-expression and societal expectations, reflecting a broader negotiation between tradition and modernity. The findings contribute to the global discourse on body image and aesthetics, offering valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and other stakeholders. The study underscores the need for a balanced approach that acknowledges youth agency while fostering informed aesthetic considerations. It advocates for a deeper societal understanding of body idolisation, enabling constructive engagement with the trend and guiding young people in navigating the complexities of bodily self-presentation.

Keywords: body idolisation, aesthetics, body image, cultural dynamics, phenomenology, youth trends.

1. Introduction

The practices of body care and maintenance in Ghana, much like in many regions worldwide, have evolved over centuries, reflecting a rich tapestry of cultural, historical, and aesthetic transformations. Historically, these practices ranged from the simple application of pomades and powders for skin care to more intricate forms of body beautification, such as makeup and elaborate makeovers. These trends, once steady and gradual in their evolution, have experienced a rapid and aggressive escalation in the past decade. This shift has not only garnered admiration and attention but has also raised concerns about its broader implications. In the current cultural milieu, Ghanaian youth increasingly prioritise the physical body as central to their self-expression and self-esteem. The traditional notion that body image

and self-worth are mental constructs is giving way to a belief in the body as the ultimate canvas of identity. This belief, rooted in modern visual-centric paradigms, posits that self-esteem is contingent on an individual's perception of their physical reflection. This trend reflects global influences, societal expectations, and a heightened awareness of individual rights to self-expression. Over time, these factors have expanded the scope of body care, occasionally pushing it into the realm of body idolisation. This study aims to examine the motivations behind body idolisation among Ghanaian youth, focusing on psychological, social, and cultural influences. It explores the historical and societal factors shaping body aesthetics in Ghana, contrasting traditional norms with contemporary trends. In this regard, the research provides a broader contextual understanding. Additionally, the study offers recommendations for stakeholders to balance cultural preservation with evolving aesthetic trends, contributing to global debates on body image within diverse cultural frameworks.

2. Review of Related Literature

Throughout history, the human body has been subjected to varying forms of perceptions, recognitions, and treatments. The adherents of the Holy Bible, which traces the origin of the human body to the creation of the first man, view the initial state of the body as one of nakedness, devoid of any constraints on its exposure. According to this perspective, the body enjoyed complete freedom because the first sinless human beings had no reason to conceal it. The first instance of body covering occurred subsequent to their consumption of the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, an act that, in turn, "opened their eyes" and made them cognisant of their nakedness. In essence, the realisation of their naked state resulting from their disobedience to the divine command constituted the primary impetus for the initial couple to clothe themselves. Consequently, the act of covering the body became the initial consequence borne by Adam and Eve for their disobedience against their Creator.

This narrative synthetically implies that the initial attempt to conceal and deny the body from remaining in its natural state was evidently contrary to the innate inclinations of the body itself. Considering the premise that the first man and woman were naked when they were sinless but became "clothed" following their disobedience to God, one could syllogistically conclude that the body, in its unadulterated form, perceives "clothing" as a form of punishment. Since that moment, perhaps without the consent of the body, the prevailing conception of the ideal body has been one that is confined within an unalterable form. Just as humans have learned to live with sin, they have also grown accustomed to the enduring punishment and, consequently, imprisonment that the body has endured over time.

Apart from the Biblical account, there is scepticism regarding any assertion within the realm of evolutionary theory that suggests our ancient hominid relatives, who transitioned from the genus *Australopithecus* to *Homo*, were initially clothed. According to Huxley (1942), it was not until approximately 200,000 years ago that modern humans took inspiration from *Homo Erectus*, often referred to as the "upright man," and emerged as the preeminent hominid species on Earth. The distinctiveness of modern humans can, therefore, be attributed to their overcoming of four significant evolutionary challenges: the transition from arboreal (tree-dwelling) to terrestrial (ground-dwelling) lifestyles, the shift from quadrupedal to bipedal locomotion, the development of an enlarged brain (encephalisation), and the establishment of tribes, cultures, and civilisations (Huxley, 1942). Considering these factors, one can infer that it took a considerable amount of time for humans to adopt the clothing practices prevalent in contemporary society.

These assertions become particularly complex when other age-old viewpoints about the body are put into perspective. For instance, Plato's emphasis on the distinction between the body and the mind laid the foundation for the idea in Western thought that the body exists to serve the soul. Plato posited that there are two distinct types of existence: the soul, which is rational and superior, and the body, which is irrational and subordinate. According to this view, the body functions merely as the servant of the soul (Zhuang & Liu, 2023). This sheds light on some of the practices in the eighteenth century, such as the exertion of power over the human body in a repressive manner. Punitive measures involving

physical torment were employed when individuals deviated from prescribed laws. Society demonstrated its authority over the human body explicitly by showing its capacity to inflict harm and destruction upon it (Garland, 1986).

A variant dimension of this viewpoint was offered by Anton Wilhelm Amo in his 1734 thesis, "On the Impassivity of the Human Mind" (published as "On the Absence of Sensation in the Human Mind and its Presence in our Organic and Living Body"). Amo argued for a dualist view, asserting that while both mind and body exist, it is the body, not the mind, that perceives and feels (Lewis, 2018). In other words, sensation is a function of the body, not the mind. He wrote:

Whatever feels, lives; whatever lives, depends on nourishment; whatever lives and depends on nourishment grows; whatever is of this nature is in the end resolved into its basic principles; whatever comes to be resolved into its basic principles is a complex; every complex has its constituent parts; whatever this is true of is a divisible body. If therefore the human mind feels, it follows that it is a divisible body (Anton Wilhelm Amo, Wikipedia 2025, para.6).

Amo's viewpoint is supported by Foucault's framework for studying the feelings of the body, which is built on three interconnected concepts: power, knowledge, and the body. Foucault uses these concepts to analyse the foundations of any structure of domination.

According to Foucault, similar to Nietzsche, Amo, and more recent authors such as Deleuze and Guattari, the human body represents the ultimate material seized and shaped by all political, economic, and penal institutions. Systems of production, domination, and socialisation fundamentally rely on effectively subjugating bodies. Specifically, they necessitate mastering and subjecting bodies to training in order to render them docile, obedient, and useful to varying extents (Foucault, 1973).

Duncum and Springgay (2007) explore the historical representation of bodies in visual arts by drawing on distinctions articulated by Bakhtin (1968) and Miglietti (2003). Bakhtin's concept of "closed vs. open bodies," paralleled by Miglietti's "classical vs. extreme bodies," underpins their analysis. These distinctions are illustrated through contrasting examples: Michelangelo's "David" epitomises the closed, classical body, while Fra Angelico's "Christ with Crown of Thorns" represents the open, extreme body (Miglietti, 2003, as cited in Duncum and Springgay, 2007).

The "closed body" is described as an idealised, self-contained entity embodying perfection, calmness, and stability. It represents a monumental and private figure, resistant to external influences. This body type aligns with classical ideals of power and reason, as noted by Miglietti (2003).

In contrast, the "open body" is depicted as fluid, permeable, and interconnected with its surroundings. It is characterised by its visceral and leaky nature, often associated with extreme pain and wounding. This concept challenges the notion of bodily privacy and highlights the impact of societal and external forces on the individual's physicality.

These concepts of closed and open bodies are significant in ongoing discussions about bodily privacy, treatment, and the limits of societal influence on physical autonomy. They invite a deeper examination of how the representation of bodies in art reflects and influences cultural attitudes towards not only the human form but bodily perception as well.

While the foregoing perspective may reflect the viewpoints of individuals who seek to examine the body through various lenses, including religion, metaphysics, philosophy, and art, there exists a discernible alignment between this viewpoint and the contemporary societal stance regarding matters pertaining to the human body. According to Foucault (1973), the individual's perception of their own body diverges from their perception of the external world, resulting in a sense of separation between the self and the body. Foucault also posits that a tension exists between the individual's subjective experience of their body and society's systematic regulation of the body, reinforcing the notion that the body has not acquiesced to societal control throughout history. Consequently, the contestation over the

treatment and ownership of the body persists in many societies, with some advocating for the philosophy that regards the body as a somatic entity exclusively owned by individuals, while others firmly adhere to the philosophy of communal ownership of the body (Foucault, 1973).

In Ghana, these historical and global influences converge to shape a unique narrative around the body. As youth embrace modern aesthetics, they simultaneously negotiate their place within traditional frameworks that often view such trends with scepticism. The result is a dynamic interplay between cultural heritage and contemporary self-expression.

This paper therefore seeks to explore the phenomenon of body idolisation among Ghanaian youth, delving into the motivations, societal tensions, and global influences that define this trend. By examining this issue through cultural, historical, and philosophical lenses, the study aims to contribute to broader debates on body image, aesthetics, and identity, while offering insights into the evolving relationship between tradition and modernity in Ghanaian society.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study integrates multiple theoretical perspectives to examine body idolisation as a dynamic interplay of personal expression, cultural identity, and societal expectations. Foucault's power dynamics explain society's regulation of body aesthetics alongside the growing emphasis on individual autonomy. Spinoza's concept of the adaptable body highlights its fluidity and responsiveness to cultural and environmental influences (Gatens, 2000). The theory of embodiment by Merleau-Ponty (1962) positions the body as central to lived experience, where aesthetic choices reflect deeper personal and cultural identities. Kant's notion of disinterested judgment suggests that aesthetic appreciation transcends personal desires, while Schopenhauer's (1969) perspective on transcendence underscores the ability of aesthetics to bridge subjective and objective realities. These theories provide a comprehensive framework for understanding body idolisation as both a philosophical and cultural phenomenon.

4. Methodology

The study began with desk research to compile and review relevant literature on body-related studies, providing foundational insights into the research focus. To explore the lived experiences of Ghanaian youth regarding body idolisation, the study adopted a phenomenological approach. Participants, aged 18-30, were purposively sampled from diverse backgrounds, including urban and rural areas, to capture a broad range of perspectives. Data collection involved informal conversations, allowing participants to express their views freely on body aesthetics, cultural influences, and personal motivations. Key themes explored included physical fitness, makeup, cosmetic surgery, and societal expectations. Discussions also covered general perceptions of physical beauty among youth, self-perceptions of their bodies, and how bodily ideals and modern societal expectations shape their sense of fulfilment in an increasingly visual culture. This qualitative approach was chosen to deepen understanding of how contemporary trends in body idolisation are reshaping young people's embodiment experiences and worldviews. Ethical considerations were prioritised. Participants provided informed consent, anonymity was ensured, and sensitive topics were handled with care to minimise discomfort. Data analysis followed a thematic approach, identifying recurring patterns and linking them to theoretical frameworks and global trends.

5. Discussion of Findings

5.1 Cultural and historical influences on bodily expression in Ghana

The study revealed that bodily expression in Ghana is deeply embedded within a complex web of cultural and historical legacies that continue to shape, influence, and sometimes contest contemporary

practices, especially among the youth. At the heart of this dynamic is the tension between inherited cultural values and emerging ideologies that prioritise individual autonomy and self-definition.

Traditionally, Ghanaian cultural frameworks, particularly among the Akan, placed significant emphasis on modesty, decorum and communal identity, principles that were especially evident in gendered expectations surrounding bodily conduct. For instance, one respondent indicated this:

A central example is the ideal of the Akatasia, a term rooted in the phrase “kata wo ho sie”, which translates as “conceal your body.”

This moral code was more than just a call for physical modesty; it embodied a broader societal philosophy where the body, especially the female body, was perceived as a bearer of family honour, societal virtue, and personal dignity. To uncover the body outside of sanctioned circumstances was to risk undermining both personal and communal integrity.

Yet, within these same cultural systems, the research uncovered rituals and practices that disrupt a singular, restrictive reading of bodily visibility. The *Bragoro* and *Dipo* rites of passage, celebrated among the Akan and the Krobo to mark a girl's transition into womanhood, provide a compelling example. During these ceremonies, the body is intentionally revealed and aesthetically enhanced with beads, cloth, and body paint, not to provoke shame but to announce status, maturity, and communal blessing. One other respondent said this, connecting it to maturity:

Such rituals affirm that bodily exposure, when culturally sanctioned, was historically regarded as sacred and celebratory rather than immoral.

This duality reveals an indigenous understanding of bodily expression that accommodates both modesty and celebratory visibility that can simultaneously value concealment and visibility, depending on context and cultural framing.

The study further found that the advent of globalisation, media liberalisation, and digital technologies has introduced new paradigms of bodily self-expression that increasingly diverge from these traditional codes. Western media portrayals of beauty, the rise of social media influencers, and the proliferation of digital imagery have created new standards for appearance and behaviour. For instance, one respondent said:

One Young Ghanaians, in particular, are navigating this cultural shift by reinterpreting their bodies as instruments of identity, creativity, and empowerment. For many, bodily self-presentation is not merely about aesthetics but about asserting autonomy in a rapidly changing social landscape.

However, these shifts have not been without controversy. The research indicates an ongoing societal debate, often generational, about the perceived erosion of cultural values. Older generations, and some traditional authorities, view these new bodily practices as transgressive or indicative of moral decline. Yet, the youth themselves often challenge this view, suggesting instead that their practices are informed by a conscious negotiation with cultural heritage. Rather than rejecting tradition outright, they are reworking its symbols and meanings to suit contemporary realities.

This tension between inherited moral codes and emerging personal freedoms underscores what the study identifies as a broader sociocultural paradox. In traditional Ghanaian society, the body was a communal entity, inscribed with symbolic meaning and subject to social regulation. In contrast, contemporary youth increasingly perceive the body as a personal domain, governed by individual choice and reflective of one's identity and values. This shift, while sometimes perceived as cultural disobedience, is better understood as a recalibration of the relationship between the self and society.

Importantly, the study confirms that Ghanaian youth are not wholly abandoning traditional values. Instead, their bodily practices show a thoughtful and ongoing interaction with the past. Elements of traditional adornment, ritual symbolism, and cultural pride are often incorporated into modern expressions of style and identity. This is consistent with the proposition by Duncum (2005) that the body continues to assert its presence despite historical and institutional efforts to regulate or suppress its significance. In this light, the Ghanaian body becomes a hybridised space, a site where historical memory and contemporary aspiration intersect.

The findings, therefore, suggest that bodily expression in Ghana is not static or unidirectional but represents a dynamic continuum shaped by cultural memory, historical practice, and contemporary reinterpretation. The body operates as both a canvas and a conversation. A medium through which individuals articulate belonging, challenge norms, and affirm evolving identities. As such, bodily identity in Ghana today exemplifies the fluid interplay of tradition and modernity, resistance and adaptation, continuity and transformation.

5.2 Contemporary Body Practices among Ghanaian Youth

The study revealed that contemporary Ghanaian youth increasingly conceptualise their bodies as social and aesthetic capital. Participants demonstrated a heightened awareness of evolving beauty standards and actively engaged in practices aimed at enhancing physical appeal. These practices are deeply embedded in the shifting cultural and media landscape, reflecting both global influences and local reinterpretations of beauty ideals.

A key finding was the generational shift in perceptions of the ideal female body. Until the late 1990s, Western ideals, particularly those favouring a slim, waif-like figure, dominated local perceptions of beauty. During this period, participants noted that features such as large buttocks and wide hips were often associated with unattractiveness or obesity. Consequently, many women pursued drastic weight-loss measures, including the use of chemical and herbal products, to attain slender physiques.

However, from the early 2000s onward, the study found a significant transformation in body ideals. A renewed appreciation emerged for curvier body types, typified by the hourglass figure, featuring full hips, large buttocks, and a slim waist. This "butt and hip craze" aligned with a broader global shift in beauty standards, influenced by the media visibility of celebrities such as Beyoncé, Jennifer Lopez, and Kim Kardashian. The global valorisation of such features helped reframe physical traits historically considered undesirable into celebrated symbols of beauty.

Participants frequently used metaphors such as the "Coca-Cola bottle," "guitar shape," "curvy", "barbie" and the "figure eight" to describe the contemporary ideal female body. These metaphors reveal a body aesthetic focused on curvature, symmetry, and visual impact. This preference underscores the dominance of **ocular-centric** culture, where visual appearance is prioritised as the primary mode of bodily valuation. The influence of *ocularcentrism*, a concept which is also rooted in Western epistemology, was found to have permeated Ghanaian visual culture, reinforcing the importance of physical presentation in social settings.

The study thus confirms that the rise of digital platforms, particularly social media, has drastically transformed how the contemporary Ghanaian youth engage with bodily aesthetics. In an era dominated by visual culture, the body has increasingly become a curated spectacle and a visual product that must conform to idealised standards to gain approval, attention, and validation. Influencers, celebrities, and lifestyle personalities have emerged as powerful agents in this cultural shift, continuously shaping and reshaping beauty norms through meticulously edited photos, filtered videos, and open endorsements of body enhancement procedures. Through their persistent presence on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, they model aspirational lifestyles and physiques, thereby influencing the body-related decisions of many young people.

Television programmes, such as *telenovelas*, and *Time with the Kardashians* were also identified as major sources of inspiration for contemporary body practices. Participants cited celebrity endorsements, visual body transformations, and beauty tutorials as key motivators for engaging in practices such as body sculpting, waist training, skin enhancement, and even surgical modification. These visual cues often served as both aspirational targets and instructional guides for achieving desired body types.

This proliferation of visual media has intensified the youth's perception of their bodies not merely as vessels of physical function, but as aesthetic projects requiring constant surveillance, discipline, and enhancement. To the contemporary Ghanaian youth, the body is not simply biological. It is also existential.

The study also found that body visibility is not merely a form of self-expression but also a marker of social prestige. Many participants viewed the exposure and enhancement of their bodies as a form of empowerment and agency, allowing them to challenge traditional moral codes that regulate bodily modesty. This assertion of bodily autonomy reflects a broader cultural shift, wherein youth no longer feel bound by inherited values that prioritise concealment and restraint.

Finally, contemporary body practices were understood by participants as part of a wider historical continuum. Drawing on philosophical perspectives such as Spinoza's conception of the body as a dynamic and composite entity, participants demonstrated an awareness that body modification, whether through tattooing, piercing, or cosmetic enhancement, has long served as a medium for expressing identity, status, and belonging.

In sum, the findings suggest that contemporary body practices among Ghanaian youth are complex, multifaceted, and reflective of both global trends and local cultural shifts. These practices highlight the body as a living canvas of modern identity, negotiated between tradition and transformation, cultural pride and global aesthetics, visibility and resistance.

5.3 Tensions with Traditional Norms

The tension between individual body ownership and traditional societal expectations was a recurring theme. The growing assertion of bodily autonomy among Ghanaian youth frequently comes into conflict with long-standing communal and traditional norms. Elders and custodians of cultural values continue to advocate modesty, restraint, and adherence to inherited customs that define acceptable bodily presentation and behaviour. These values, rooted in communal identity and collective morality, often clash with modern expressions of individuality, self-love, and aesthetic enhancement that are increasingly prevalent among younger generations. While some elders, teachers and traditionalists continue to uphold conservative views on bodily presentation, these views hold decreasing authority among contemporary youth. Participants who included the youth in tertiary institutions articulated a strong desire to claim full agency over their bodies, often disregarding communal or moralistic constraints.

These intergenerational tensions are most visible in everyday critiques of youth appearance and conduct, ranging from the wearing of revealing clothing, elaborate makeup, and adoption of foreign beauty standards to engagement in strenuous body enhancement procedures. For elders, such practices are viewed as signs of moral decline and cultural erosion, while for the youth, they represent empowerment, self-expression, and the right to redefine beauty on their own terms. This divergence reveals a deeper societal conflict between inherited moral constructs and evolving interpretations of bodily freedom and self-worth.

When interrogated about their affection for their bodies, nearly all respondents, across gender lines, responded affirmatively. This widespread sense of body appreciation manifested in diverse ways. While some prioritised balanced diets, consistent physical exercise, and attentive skincare routines, others connected bodily care to spiritual nourishment and moral discipline. For this group, the body is not only a physical vessel but also a spiritual entity deserving of reverence and preservation. Avoiding behaviours deemed spiritually or morally compromising was seen as an extension of this self-love.

However, within this consensus, gendered differences emerged in how body affection was understood and practiced. Male respondents often defined their care for the body in terms of strength, fitness, and physical capability. Their commitment to bodily upkeep was generally tied to performance and visual appeal, particularly muscularity and the maintenance of features such as abdominal muscles, commonly referred to as a "six-pack." This focus reflects a functionalist and performative understanding of the male body, often driven by societal expectations of virility and dominance.

Female respondents, on the other hand, articulated a more profound emotional and aesthetic relationship with their bodies. Many described their bodies as "divine gifts" that must be nurtured, protected, and in some cases, enhanced. For numerous young women, body love transcended all other affections, sometimes even prioritised above familial or communal obligations. Their physical appearance was not only a source of personal pride but also a symbol of self-worth and agency. Whether through natural care or aesthetic modification, the female body was viewed as central to identity and social presence.

These contrasting yet overlapping narratives illuminate the body as a site of intense cultural negotiation. On one hand, traditional society continues to assert authority over how bodies, particularly female bodies, should be presented and disciplined. On the other hand, the youth, empowered by contemporary global discourses and digital exposure, are challenging these constraints and reconfiguring their bodies as instruments of personal narrative and freedom.

This complex dynamic aligns with the philosophical position by Schrag (1989) that the body is not experienced as a neutral object but as a concrete, deeply personal reality. From this view, the lived body cannot be prescribed or fully understood from an external standpoint. Each individual engages with their body through subjective experience, resisting imposed norms and external definitions. In the Ghanaian context, this resistance manifests as a generational pushback against cultural directives that attempt to homogenise body image and constrain bodily expression.

In sum, the study highlights a growing tension between traditional norms and contemporary body practices. While cultural elders seek to maintain control over communal definitions of morality, modesty, and propriety, young people are increasingly asserting the right to redefine and live their bodily identities in ways that reflect personal beliefs, global influences, and changing aesthetics. The body, therefore, becomes a contested terrain—a space where identity, culture, power, and resistance converge.

5.4 Gender Dynamics in Body Idolisation

The findings revealed distinct gendered differences in the ways young Ghanaians perceive and treat the body. Among male participants, the body was primarily viewed as a functional entity, one to be developed for strength, endurance, and virility. Physical exercise for men was associated with building muscularity, particularly the development of "six-pack" abs, biceps, and broad shoulders, which were seen as markers of masculinity, dominance, and attractiveness. This desire for a robust physique was often driven by social validation and peer recognition, reflecting a performance-oriented engagement with the body.

Conversely, female participants expressed a more aesthetic and expressive relationship with their bodies. The body was treated as a visual project, an object to be adorned, sculpted, and enhanced in line with prevailing beauty ideals. For many women, gym attendance was less about physical fitness and more about achieving culturally desired curves, particularly through the enhancement of the hips, buttocks, breasts, and waistline. These findings reflect a shift in aesthetic preferences among Ghanaian youth, where curvaceous and voluptuous forms are celebrated as markers of beauty and femininity. The "butt and hip craze," often reinforced through global celebrity culture and social media, emerged as a prominent theme among female respondents.

The research also found that contemporary Ghanaian youth largely associate workouts with aesthetic goals, diverging from traditional understandings of physical fitness as promoted by scholars like Allen (2009), who emphasised the role of exercise in fostering discipline, mental clarity, resilience, and personal growth. For most participants, workouts were hedonistic and visceral in nature, undertaken

primarily to shape the body in pursuit of personal and societal ideals, rather than long-term health or athletic performance.

Participants, particularly women, described using strict dietary regimens, slimming teas, herbal supplements, and non-prescribed medications to accelerate bodily transformation. These practices, although often perceived as effective, carried potential health risks that participants appeared willing to overlook in their quest for bodily perfection. Young men also reported engaging in hormone-boosting exercises and routines intended to elevate testosterone levels, believed to contribute to desired physical outcomes.

A growing number of participants, especially women, indicated undergoing or aspiring to undergo cosmetic procedures such as liposuction, tummy tucks, and breast enhancements. These procedures were seldom motivated by medical concerns; instead, they were seen as “treats” for the body, an investment in one’s appearance and self-worth. For some, cosmetic interventions were framed as necessary adjustments to align with prevailing beauty standards and to boost confidence and social esteem. This was particularly evident among women who expressed distress over physical traits like sagging breasts, which they felt diminished their attractiveness and self-image.

Findings also highlighted the commodification of the body through beauty practices, especially makeup. Female participants viewed makeup as an essential part of their self-presentation. Beyond concealing imperfections or enhancing features, makeup was described as a creative and transformative process that allowed individuals to reimagine their identities. While makeup usage was observed across genders, it was far more prevalent among women, who often invested significant time and resources into perfecting their facial appearance.

Additionally, the study uncovered the expansion of makeup and body enhancement practices beyond traditional occasions. Participants frequently applied elaborate makeup for events such as birthdays, church services, beach outings, and photoshoots, which they considered “special occasions” warranting heightened self-presentation. This phenomenon illustrates the extent to which bodily display has become embedded in everyday social rituals.

Collectively, these findings align with Michel Foucault’s theorisation of the body as a site of power investment. As Foucault (1973) observed, Mastery and awareness of one’s own body can be acquired only through the effect of an investment of power in the body. The youth in this study demonstrated this mastery through physical training, surgical enhancements, fashion, and cosmetic application, reinforcing the idea that the body is no longer just a biological entity, but a social project shaped by personal desire and cultural pressure.

The study concludes that the idolisation of the body among Ghanaian youth is not merely a reflection of superficial vanity, but a complex negotiation of identity, power, and visibility, shaped by gendered expectations, mediated imagery, and evolving cultural narratives.

6. Aesthetic Insights

This study has explored the growing phenomenon of body idolisation among Ghanaian youth, revealing a complex interplay between traditional cultural values and modern individualistic expressions of bodily autonomy. Historically, Ghanaian norms, particularly among the Akan, emphasised modesty and communal values. The concept of *Akatasia* (*kata wo ho sie* – “cover your body”) prescribed bodily concealment for women as a sign of virtue and social decorum. However, contemporary youth increasingly favour bodily visibility and self-expression, leading to generational tensions over what constitutes appropriate body aesthetics.

At the heart of these tensions lies a broader societal debate concerning body ownership. Traditional perspectives see the body as a communal symbol, regulated by moral expectations, while modern liberalisation supports bodily autonomy and self-styling. For many young people, treating the body as a site of empowerment represents a break from restrictive legacies, while others perceive this trend as a threat to cultural cohesion. Drawing on Spinoza’s notion of the adaptable body, this study conceptualises the human body as inherently fluid, capable of being shaped, reshaped, and recomposed

in response to its social environment. Practices such as body shaping/building, and cosmetic enhancement thus reflect broader societal ideologies.

The increasing visualisation of the body in contemporary culture has been accelerated by global trends, the fashion industry, and digital media. From television and movies to Instagram, Facebook, Tiktok and other social media influencers, Ghanaian youth are constantly exposed to curated beauty ideals. This ocular-centric culture places heightened emphasis on aesthetics, shifting attention from inner values to external appearance. Young people invest in diets, workouts, makeup, and even cosmetic surgery to align with idealised body standards. The gym culture, for instance, is less about physical health in the traditional sense and more about sculpting specific body shapes. Male youth pursue six-packs and muscular builds, while women aim for curvaceous figures, with motivations often rooted in self-image gratification and social validation rather than purely health-related goals.

Despite critiques of body idolisation as superficial or hedonistic, this study affirms that many young Ghanaians see their bodies as extensions of the self, both a means and an end of expression. Phrases such as *“If it’s beautiful, flaunt it”* or *“I’m aware”* reflect the pride with which they exhibit their appearance. This body consciousness manifests in fashion trends, body-revealing outfits, padded clothing, and elaborate makeup. These practices are no longer exclusive to celebrities but widely embraced across gender and class lines.

The study also acknowledges the historical influence of colonial Christianity, which demonised bodily exposure and promoted modesty, contributing to the repression of bodily expression. However, these influences are now being questioned, as the body reclaims its agency in both sacred and secular spaces. Philosophically, this phenomenon aligns with thinkers such as Kant, Schopenhauer, Merleau-Ponty, and Spinoza, who frame body idolisation not merely as a cultural trend but as an aesthetic phenomenon. The body becomes a site of symbolic meaning, caught between societal control and personal agency. As Merleau-Ponty suggests, individuals do not simply ‘use’ their bodies – they *are* their bodies, and actions performed on the body affect the self in profound ways.

The Aesthetic Paradigm of Body Consciousness

The findings of this study highlight how Ghanaian society, and many others worldwide, have gradually relinquished strict restrictions on bodily expression. Young people today are more aware than ever of the liberties permitted by society, affording them an unprecedented sense of freedom. For many, this era represents an opportunity for self-expression without the rigid constraints imposed by traditional norms.

However, as the body reclaims its autonomy, it occasionally does so to an excessive degree, challenging societal expectations. Norms that once dictated bodily presentation are now seen as contradictory or even irrelevant in the face of the body's assertion of freedom, an assertion that was, ironically, initiated by societal proclamations of modernisation and individual rights. This shift is evident in various societal changes. For instance, the same communities that once emphasised unwavering respect for elders now champion freedom of speech and self-expression, even when such expression contradicts traditional wisdom. Similarly, strict moral codes governing decorum and behaviour have been replaced by contemporary ideals of personal liberty and bodily autonomy.

A key aspect of this transformation is the increasing dominance of visual perception in contemporary culture. Society today places a lot of emphasis on the primacy of vision, *ocular-centrism*, where modern technology amplifies the significance of outward appearance. Social media platforms, in particular, have heightened this focus, encouraging individuals to cultivate and showcase an idealised image of themselves. As one social media user aptly put it,

*Social media has engendered a covetous disposition driven by illusions.
Some individuals covet things, relationships, and lifestyles that are
entirely fictitious.*

This growing emphasis on beauty and visual appeal has transformed the human body into a valuable asset, with individuals striving to enhance their appearance for both personal gratification and social validation.

This relentless pursuit of bodily perfection has led many young Ghanaians toward an increasingly virtual and unrealistic existence. The dominant moral framework among some youth appears to prioritise pleasure, earning more money (by any means necessary), maintaining an attractive body (sometimes at the expense of health), achieving high visibility, and enjoying life. This outlook aligns with the characterisation of stereotypical hedonistic individuals postulated by Weijers (2006), whose central focus revolves around indulging in pleasures aimed at achieving bodily gratification.

Towards a Philosophical and Artistic Understanding of Body Aesthetics

Understanding the phenomenon of body idolisation necessitates an aesthetic discourse that moves beyond traditional modernist aesthetics, which are often detached from daily life and focused solely on high art. Instead, an inclusive aesthetic framework must account for contemporary realities, where the idealisation of the body sustains an entire *body-centric* economy. This perspective should acknowledge that the body is no longer just a biological entity but a carefully curated and commodified form of expression, shaped by cultural, technological, and philosophical influences.

A deeper exploration of this trend through an aesthetic lens can offer valuable insights into its advantages and drawbacks. On one hand, the freedom to reshape and redefine the body fosters individuality and self-empowerment. On the other, it pressures individuals to constantly create and recreate their bodies to fit shifting ideals, often leading to excessive body worship and unrealistic beauty standards. Recognising this duality is crucial for a balanced discourse on body aesthetics in Ghanaian society.

Ultimately, this study underscores that the body is profoundly shaped by its environment. As members of a society deeply rooted in communal values, Ghanaians must acknowledge that physical well-being is interconnected with the well-being of the broader community. The rigid distinction between the individual body and society is an artificial construct, that needs be reconsidered in light of the cultural, ethical, and aesthetic implications of bodily expression.

This understanding would not only temper the intense focus on body image fuelled by social media, relaxed cultural regulatory frameworks, and increased cross-cultural interactions but also provide alternative approaches to body modification that remain within reasonable societal boundaries. It would remind young people that beyond the contested issue of cultural interference, the inherently mutable nature of the body itself challenges any absolute control over its form.

An Artistic Approach to Body Aestheticisation

This study advocates for an artistic approach to understanding and appreciating body aesthetics, recognising that the artist's perspective on beauty is often regarded as natural and humanistic, capturing the world in its most authentic form. Several philosophical viewpoints provide valuable insights in this regard. Kant's aesthetic philosophy underscores the significance of disinterested judgment in appreciating beauty, asserting that true aesthetic appreciation arises from universal validity rather than personal desires (Duncum, 2005). Similarly, Schopenhauer (1969) argues that true art enables individuals to transcend personal desires and attain a deeper understanding of existence. Hermeneutics by Gadamer (2004) further enriches this discourse by integrating historical and cultural contexts into aesthetic interpretation, acknowledging art's universality while recognising the subjectivity of beauty.

These perspectives align with the artistic approach to body aesthetics, revealing that bodily expression among Ghanaian youth is not merely a transient trend but a reflection of deeper aesthetic principles. Rather than dismissing body idolisation as superficial, it should be understood as part of an ongoing negotiation between tradition and modernity; between control and autonomy. Through this lens, beauty emerges not as a fleeting obsession but as a meaningful expression of selfhood, identity, and cultural evolution.

7. Summary and Conclusions

The idolisation of the body among Ghanaian youth reflects broader global and cultural currents, illustrating how visual culture, modern identity politics, and bodily aesthetics converge in complex and dynamic ways. As demonstrated in this study, young people in Ghana are increasingly treating the body not merely as a biological vessel but as a social artefact, a site of expression, negotiation, and power.

Historical accounts show that body aesthetics have long held symbolic and material value in Ghanaian society. In pre-colonial times, physical traits such as strength and beauty influenced the valuation of individuals, even in the transatlantic slave trade. The colonial and postcolonial periods ushered in moral and religious discourses that often framed bodily exposure as immodest or shameful, leading to a repressed culture of body expression. However, contemporary youth appear to be resisting these inherited moral codes by reclaiming bodily visibility as a form of agency and empowerment.

The study uncovered a prevailing belief among Ghanaian youth that individuals should have absolute control over their bodies. This sense of bodily autonomy is exercised through intentional acts of self-presentation, body enhancement, and public display. In this context, the age-old adage "nobody hides their light under a bushel" acquires renewed meaning. The body is no longer hidden or subdued but put forth confidently, especially when it aligns with dominant standards of beauty and desirability.

Central to this body culture is the notion of *public gratification*. Attaining an "ideal" body, whether through exercise, diet, fashion, or cosmetic enhancements, is perceived as an accomplishment worthy of display. As one popular Ghanaian celebrity put it, "If it's beautiful, flaunt it." This ethos drives the evolving fashion trends in Ghana, particularly among the youth, where bodily exposure and contour accentuation are celebrated rather than condemned.

Styles such as the "I'm aware" fashion movement highlight how clothing becomes a medium through which individuals both acknowledge and assert control over their bodily image. What began as a cheeky response to social policing ("I'm aware") has matured into a broader aesthetic philosophy, where fashion deliberately reveals or accentuates bodily features. This is evident in the widespread use of tight-fitting garments, minimal fabrics, or even relaxed clothing designed to highlight movement and bodily rhythm. Notably, both men and women participate in these styles, using fashion to showcase abs, curves, and other physical features that conform to local and global beauty ideals.

Contrary to popular assumptions that such bodily display is driven solely by a desire to attract romantic partners, many young people, particularly women, assert that their efforts are motivated by self-love, confidence, and a sense of achievement. The aestheticisation of the body is, for them, not an invitation for external validation but an assertion of self-worth. This counters long-standing gendered narratives, especially those propagated by male observers, which frame female self-presentation as mainly attention-seeking or deceptive.

The rise of digital culture and social media has also amplified these dynamics. While some youth invest in physical makeovers for online visibility, many rely on filters, photo editors, and visual enhancements as temporary tools for self-expression. These digital modifications, though artificial, are not necessarily intended to deceive. Rather, they are symbolic of the desire to see oneself represented in ways that align with one's aspirations, visually appealing, digitally refined, and socially admired.

The findings reinforce the idea that the body is no longer passive or inert; it is active, expressive, and insistent. The youth perceive the body as having its own "will", a desire to be sculpted, appreciated, and displayed. Statements such as "What sense is there in concealing my hard-earned six-pack muscles?" illustrate how the body, once repressed by religious and cultural conservatism, now demands visibility and reverence.

This study situates these trends within broader philosophical and aesthetic frameworks. Drawing on Immanuel Kant's notion of *disinterested judgment*, Arthur Schopenhauer's ideal of *transcendence through aesthetic experience*, and Merleau-Ponty's theory of *embodiment*, it becomes evident that body idolisation is more than a superficial trend. It is both a personal and political act. It is an ongoing negotiation between the self and society, between internal desires and external pressures.

It could be concluded, therefore that body idolisation among Ghanaian youth should be understood as a complex cultural practice shaped by historical legacies, mediated imagery, gendered expectations, and philosophical aspirations. The body, in this context, functions as a canvas, personal, performative, and political, through which young people articulate their identity, challenge societal norms, and pursue self-realisation in an increasingly visual and competitive world.

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