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Exploring Cultural Perceptions and Fashion's Role in Women Body Diversity and Presentation in Ghana

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper examines cultural perceptions of women's body diversity in Ghana and explores fashion's role in shaping the presentation and representation of women's bodies within different socio-cultural contexts. Ghanaian body ideals are informed by ethnic traditions, communal values, and aesthetic norms that increasingly intersect with globalised beauty standards. The study investigates how Ghanaian women perceive their bodies in relation to cultural expectations and how fashion is employed to align with, negotiate, or resist these ideals.

Methodology/Design: Using a qualitative approach, the research draws on in-depth interviews with women across different Ghanaian cultural groups, alongside insights from fashion designers and stylists. This is complemented by a content analysis of fashion media, cultural festivals, and events that highlight the interaction between body diversity and fashion in Ghana.

Findings: Traditional Ghanaian aesthetics tend to value fuller, well-proportioned figures as markers of health, fertility, wealth, and social prestige. However, younger generations are increasingly influenced by slimness and Westernised beauty ideals, largely transmitted through digital and global media. Fashion functions as a strategic tool, used to celebrate culturally valued attributes, conceal features deemed less desirable, and showcase individuality. It also provides a platform for resistance, enabling women to challenge body stereotypes while maintaining cultural pride and identity.

Practical and Social Implications: The findings underscore the importance of body-inclusive fashion design, culturally grounded media representation, and community-based initiatives that promote body positivity. Strengthening awareness of body diversity through fashion can improve self-esteem, cultural belonging, and social cohesion among Ghanaian women.

Originality: This study moves beyond generalised notions of African body image by situating women's body perceptions within Ghana's diverse cultural landscape. By integrating cultural anthropology, fashion studies, and body image theory, it highlights how Ghanaian women navigate tensions between traditional and global beauty standards, offering fresh insights for scholarship and inclusive fashion practice across African societies.

Keywords
Culture, female body diversity, cultural perceptions, body image, identity, self-expression.

1 | INTRODUCTION

In Ghana and across many African societies, the female body is not simply a biological entity but a deeply symbolic and cultural construct, carrying meanings about identity, social worth, fertility, and beauty (Owusu, 2025). Body size, shape, and presentation are used to communicate respectability, status, and moral standing. These cultural ideals are dynamic: they evolve under the influences of modernisation, globalisation, and the circulation of foreign media (Xudayberganovich et al., 2025). Fashion is a central channel through which these changing perceptions of the body are negotiated. Clothing makes visible the ways in which women align with or resist cultural norms; dress serves not only as adornment but as a form of semiotic and embodied communication (Siaw et al., 2025). In Ghana, textiles such as kente, smock (batakari/fugu), and African wax prints carry symbolic weight, linking dress

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to lineage, status, and cultural memory (Adeloye, 2026). Fashion thus becomes a site where tradition and modernity intersect, where cultural continuity meets negotiation with new ideals. In Ghana, discourses around body image often reveal tension between traditional appreciation for fuller, curvaceous forms and the growing influence of global, especially Westernised, norms favouring slimness. A qualitative study in low-income communities in Accra found that larger body size is cherished, partly for social acceptance, partner attraction, and avoiding mockery or stigma (Afrifa-Anane, 2025). Meanwhile, studies of university students show significant dissatisfaction with body size/shape and weight among students, particularly on urban campuses (Shavers, 2026). These dynamics suggest what might be termed a "hybridised beauty paradigm," where cultural and global ideals overlap and sometimes clash. Within this negotiation, fashion has a dual role. It can magnify marginalisation by reinforcing narrow body norms, but it can also provide tools for resistance: women may choose garments to emphasise culturally valorised curves or to conceal features they see as less desirable. In youth fashion in Ghana, especially among the 18–30 age group, studies have shown that global media, peer influence, and social media strongly shape fashion trends, often blending Western and local aesthetics (Daitey et al., 2025). Thus, fashion acts as both adaptation and transformation, enabling Ghanaian women to assert agency in how their bodies are presented and perceived.

This study explores these dynamics in Ghana's fashion and body image sphere. By examining how women from varied Ghanaian cultural backgrounds perceive body diversity and use fashion to manage presentation, the research contributes to debates on body image, representation, and inclusivity in African fashion. It underscores the need for culturally responsive fashion practices that recognise local aesthetics while resisting homogenising global beauty standards. The research offers two main contributions. First, it advances understanding of how local cultural aesthetics and global influences intersect in the Ghanaian context of female embodiment. Second, it frames fashion not merely as stylistic practice, but as a potentially transformative cultural terrain capable of challenging exclusionary norms and fostering more inclusive, body-positive representation.

1.1| Cultural Constructions of the Female Body in Ghana

The female body in Ghana is understood within cultural frameworks that tie appearance to social, spiritual, and moral values. For many Ghanaians, body size, shape, and physical presentation are more than personal aesthetic choices; they are embedded in identity, community belonging, and moral worth. Osei Mensah et al. (2026) report that in low-income communities in Accra, larger body size is cherished, especially for women, as a sign of social acceptance, attractiveness, and avoidance of mockery. Historically, fuller figures have also been valorised in many Ghanaian societies, often associated with fertility, health, wealth, and marriageability. These ideals are reinforced in community norms, oral traditions, and peer expectations. However, these traditional constructions are increasingly in tension with modern influences: urbanisation, globalisation, and exposure to international media bring into view slim or toned body ideals.

1.2| Fashion as a Mediator of Body Image

Fashion in Ghana acts as both a reflection of cultural aesthetics and a space for negotiation. It is not neutral; styles, fabric, cuts, and dress codes can reinforce or challenge existing body norms. The study "The Influence of Youth Culture on Fashion Trends in Ghana: A Sociocultural Analysis" (Daitey et al., 2025) shows that youth fashion is influenced by a mixture of global, traditional, peer, economic, and media forces. Youths may adopt Western-inspired styles but also retain traditional fabrics, especially for significant cultural occasions. Fashion is used to emphasise what is culturally valued, for example, fabrics and garment styles that accentuate curves, or to conceal what individuals or society considers less desirable, such as parts of the midsection. Although no single study in recent years focuses entirely on concealment vs enhancement in Ghana, the trends from youth fashion research implicate this kind of body management (e.g. choice of fit, fabric, silhouette) in how young women present themselves.

1.3| Media Influence and Global Beauty Standards

Media in Ghana, including television, social media, celebrity culture, and fashion blogs, play a large part in circulating beauty ideals. These often tilt toward Western standards: slimness, sometimes lighter skin, toned bodies. For example, in the youth fashion study by Daitey et al. (2025), participants acknowledged being influenced by global icons and media. However, there are also local counter-narratives. Some Ghanaian designers, fashion events, and social media personalities are foregrounding

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curvaceous bodies, natural hair, and darker skin tones as positive, authentic forms of beauty. Also, community studies (such as Afrifa-Anane, 2024) indicate that traditional ideals continue to retain strength in many local settings.

1.4| Body Diversity and Inclusivity in Ghana's Fashion Industry

Despite strong cultural support for fuller bodies in many communities, the Ghanaian fashion industry shows mixed levels of inclusivity. Size inclusivity in garment manufacturing, model representation, and marketing is still quite limited. Economic constraints, supply chain limitations, and Western sizing norms continue to marginalise larger body types in fashion production and retail. The "Make Fashion Inclusive" program launched by the Youth Employment Agency (YEA) in partnership with GIZ is an example of a policy-level response aimed at increasing inclusion and empowerment for persons with disabilities; while this is about disability, it signals increasing attention to diversity in fashion in Ghana. Research also shows that fashion entrepreneurship, youth culture, and formal fashion education are expanding, which could open more space for inclusive practices. The youth fashion study (Daitey et al., 2025) notes that young people value local materials and designs when these reflect their body and identity experiences.

1.5| Theoretical Frameworks on Body and Fashion

Two key theoretical perspectives underpin discussions of body and fashion. First, Feminist body theory highlights how women's bodies are sites of power, control, and resistance, shaped by cultural norms and patriarchal structures (Moreno Figueroa et al., 2025). Second, cultural fashion theory by Entwistle (2015) emphasises the embodied experience of fashion, arguing that clothing mediates how individuals understand and present their bodies. Applying these frameworks to the Ghanaian context helps illuminate the dual role of fashion as both a cultural artefact and a transformative practice in body politics.

2 | METHODOLOGY

2.1| Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design grounded in the interpretivist paradigm to explore cultural perceptions of women's body diversity in Ghana and fashion's role in shaping bodily presentation. The interpretivist approach was considered appropriate because issues of body image, beauty, and dress are socially constructed and best understood through individuals' subjective meanings rather than quantifiable variables (Rakesh et al., 2026). These studies demonstrate that interpretivist designs enable researchers to capture nuanced, context-specific realities that would otherwise be obscured in quantitative frameworks.

2.2| Study Population and Sampling

The study population consisted of three main groups within Ghana's fashion ecosystem: women as consumers of fashion, fashion designers and stylists, and fashion media practitioners. Purposive sampling was used to select participants directly engaged with body image and fashion representation, while snowball sampling was employed to reach stylists and media figures who were less visible in formal networks (Karakavak & Özbölük, 2023). The sample included thirty (30) participants: twenty (20) women aged between eighteen and fifty-five drawn from urban and peri-urban settings such as Accra, Ho, and Keta; seven (7) fashion designers and stylists of both sexes; and three (3) fashion media practitioners, including bloggers and editors. The sample size was adequate to ensure data saturation, as recommended by Bouncken et al. (2026), while still allowing for in-depth exploration of each participant's experiences and perspectives. This sampling approach aligns with other Ghanaian interpretive studies that emphasise depth, context, and meaning over statistical generalisation (Alaba et al., 2026).

2.3| Data Collection Method

Two complementary data collection methods were employed: semi-structured interviews and content analysis. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participants to explore perceptions of beauty, cultural values associated with body image, and experiences related to fashion practices. Each interview lasted between forty-five and sixty minutes and was conducted in English, Ewe, or both, depending on participant preference. With consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. This approach provided participants with the flexibility to articulate their views freely while

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allowing the researcher to probe emerging themes, consistent with qualitative practices in Ghanaian social and gender studies. The content analysis examined Ghanaian fashion media, specifically magazines, blogs, and social media platforms, spanning the period 2018 to 2024. Both visual and textual representations of women's bodies were analysed, focusing on body types, fashion choices, and the articulation of beauty ideals in relation to cultural and global influences. This method mirrored earlier work on Ghanaian fashion and digital media (Osei & Bosro, 2024), who demonstrated that visual and textual narratives in media serve as critical sites for the representation of the body and identity.

2.4| Data Analysis

Data were analysed thematically following the six-phase framework (Rosen et al., 2023). The researcher began by immersing herself in the data through multiple readings of interview transcripts and media texts to achieve familiarity. Initial codes were generated to capture essential ideas related to body diversity, cultural perceptions, and fashion practices. These codes were then organised into broader categories and refined into themes such as the valorisation of curves as cultural capital, the influence of Western slimness ideals, and the use of fashion as resistance and self-assertion. NVivo software was used to code, categorise, and manage the qualitative data, facilitating systematic analysis and traceability of findings. The final interpretation of themes was guided by feminist body theory (Pérez Huber et al., 2023) and cultural fashion theory, which emphasise the interrelationship between embodiment, dress, and social meaning. Similar analytical strategies have been applied in recent Ghanaian qualitative studies addressing cultural and identity-related issues (Dwomoh, 2025).

2.5| Trustworthiness and Rigour

To ensure methodological rigour and trustworthiness, the study followed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) framework. Credibility was achieved through triangulation of data sources, namely the interviews and content analysis, and through member checking, which allowed participants to review and validate summaries of their contributions. Transferability was strengthened by providing detailed descriptions of participants and cultural contexts, enabling readers to determine the applicability of the findings to similar settings. Dependability and confirmability were ensured through a transparent audit trail documenting all stages of data collection, transcription, coding, and analysis. These strategies are consistent with best practices in interpretive qualitative research and have been effectively employed in recent Ghanaian social inquiry (Mensah et al., 2025).

2.6| Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to established ethical guidelines for qualitative research in Ghana. Informed consent was obtained from all participants after the aims, procedures, and voluntary nature of participation were clearly explained. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained by using pseudonyms and storing data securely in password-protected files. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Given the sensitive nature of body image discussions, the researcher ensured that conversations were conducted respectfully, avoiding judgmental or leading questions. These ethical practices were consistent with the standards applied in contemporary Ghanaian qualitative research (Mensah et al., 2025).

3 | RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1| Results

The findings of the study reveal a complex interplay between cultural aesthetics, Westernised beauty ideals, and the role of fashion in shaping women's presentation of their bodies. Four major themes emerged from the interviews and content analysis: (1) curves as cultural capital, (2) Western slimness ideals and generational differences, (3) fashion as a tool of concealment and enhancement, and (4) fashion as empowerment and resistance.

3.1.1| Curves as Cultural Capital

Across interviews with older women and several designers, curvaceous bodies were consistently described as markers of beauty, health, and respectability. Fuller hips, thighs, and busts were associated with fertility and marriageability. One participant from Ho explained:

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> *"In our culture, if a woman is too slim, they say she is not well taken care of, or she is not strong enough for family life. A woman with curves is respected."* (Consumer, 38 years)

This preference was also reflected in traditional fashion styles such as the kaba and slit, which were often tailored to accentuate the waist and hips. Designers confirmed that clients frequently requested outfits that "bring out" their curves, reinforcing the enduring value of voluptuousness within aesthetics.

3.1.2| Western Slimness Ideals and Generational Differences

At the same time, younger women, especially those in urban areas like Accra, expressed aspirations toward slimmer body shapes, heavily influenced by global fashion icons and social media. The content analysis of Ghanaian fashion blogs revealed frequent use of Western models and images that highlighted lean, toned figures. One young participant noted:

> *"When I follow fashion pages on Instagram, I see all these slim girls in trendy clothes. Sometimes I feel I have to diet or dress in a way that makes me look smaller."* (Consumer, 21 years)

This indicates a generational divide: while older participants upheld cultural admiration for fullness, younger women often struggled to reconcile these ideals with globalised slimness standards. Designers also observed that younger clients increasingly requested "slimming" styles, such as high-waist trousers or dark-colored dresses, to appear leaner.

3.1.3| Fashion as Concealment and Enhancement

The data revealed that fashion functions as a critical medium through which women actively negotiate their bodily appearance, simultaneously concealing what they perceive as flaws and enhancing features that align with cultural or personal ideals of beauty. This practice was not simply about following trends but was deeply embedded in strategies of self-presentation, identity management, and confidence building. For many participants, the midsection was identified as a common site of insecurity. Several women described feeling uncomfortable exposing their stomachs or wearing tightly fitted garments that accentuated perceived "excess fat." In such cases, they gravitated toward designs that offered coverage without entirely compromising on style. A 32-year-old consumer from Hohoe noted:

> *"I love wearing fitted dresses, but because of my tummy, I usually add a jacket or choose fabrics that are not too light. It helps me feel more put together."*

This aligns with observations from fashion designers who indicated that many clients specifically requested garments that "hide the tummy" while emphasising the hips or bust, features more widely celebrated within Ghanaian aesthetics. As one designer explained:

> *"Fashion is all about balance. My clients want clothes that shift attention away from where they feel less confident. So, I cut styles that flatten the waist but curve out the hips, and they always leave smiling."* (Designer, 29 years)

This balancing act was evident across both traditional and modern styles. Traditional garments such as the kaba and slit or wrapped kente cloth were frequently tailored to create the illusion of an hourglass silhouette, with waist-cinching seams and voluminous hip lines. Similarly, modern outfits such as peplum tops, high-waist skirts, and bodycon dresses with strategic panelling were employed to accentuate curves while providing concealment. These clothing choices demonstrate how women use fashion to reshape their visual bodies without resorting to invasive alterations. The role of fabric choice was also significant. Participants highlighted that certain materials, such as stiff wax prints, lace, or brocade, helped structure the body in ways that concealed perceived imperfections, whereas lighter fabrics like chiffon or silk could expose "too much truth." One stylist emphasised this point:

> *"Prints are a woman's friend. A busy pattern hides what you don't want people to see, but at the same time, it can draw the eye to the right places. That's why African prints are powerful."*

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Beyond concealment, fashion was equally understood as a tool of enhancement. Women actively selected garments that highlighted what they or their culture valued most, be it full hips, ample busts, or smooth skin tone. For instance, some women deliberately chose off-shoulder styles or deep necklines to accentuate the bust, while others preferred pencil skirts or slit dresses that emphasised hip movement. Accessories also played an enhancing role; waist beads, for example, were used not only as markers of femininity in culture but also to visually draw attention to the waistline and hips. These practices highlight a cultural negotiation where concealment and enhancement coexist as two sides of the same strategy. Women used concealment not as an act of shame but as a means to direct social attention toward preferred features, crafting a bodily image that aligned with both cultural expectations and personal aspirations. The interplay between hiding and highlighting underscores the agency women exercise in using fashion to curate how their bodies are read within public and private spaces. Ultimately, the findings suggest that fashion, in this context, operates as a form of soft body modification, allowing women to visually reshape themselves without permanent alteration. It functions as a socially acceptable and accessible method of navigating body ideals, empowering women to control their presentation while simultaneously reinforcing cultural scripts that privilege certain body types over others.

3.1.4| Fashion as Empowerment and Resistance

A final theme that emerged was the use of fashion as a form of empowerment and resistance. Several participants expressed that dressing stylishly allowed them to challenge stereotypes and assert agency over their identities. Some women deliberately chose bold or unconventional outfits as a way of resisting societal judgments. One participant described her style choices as a personal statement:

> "*People may think my size is too big, but when I wear what I like, I feel powerful. Fashion gives me that freedom."* (Consumer, 44 years)

The content analysis also highlighted a small but growing movement toward body-positive fashion in Ghana, with designers and influencers promoting inclusivity by showcasing models of varying body sizes. Although these representations remain limited, they signal a shift in fashion discourse that emphasises diversity and acceptance.

3.2| Discussion

3.2.1| Curves as Cultural Capital

Across interviews with older women and several designers, curvaceous bodies were consistently described as markers of beauty, health, and respectability. Fuller hips, thighs, and busts were associated with fertility and marriageability. One participant from Ho explained:

> *"In our culture, if a woman is too slim, they say she is not well taken care of, or she is not strong enough for family life. A woman with curves is respected."* (Consumer, 38 years)

This perception resonates strongly with the sociocultural concept of curves as cultural capital, where body shape serves as a form of social value that communicates moral and aesthetic worth (Sharma, 2024). In many Ghanaian societies, the female body is both a personal and communal asset, its fullness symbolising good health, nourishment, and family prosperity. deGraft-Yankson & Essuman (2025) note that within traditional Ghanaian body aesthetics, a "well-nourished" body connotes a life of abundance and proper social integration. Similarly, Odoi & Wong (2025) found that women in Accra associate a fuller figure with respectability and domestic stability, while thinness is sometimes interpreted as neglect or ill-health. This preference is visibly inscribed in traditional fashion forms such as the kaba and slit, which are intentionally designed to accentuate the waistline and hips, visually amplifying femininity and fertility (Akram et al., 2025). The tailoring process itself becomes an act of cultural performance, as the seamstress or designer shapes the garment to express local ideals of proportion, posture, and womanhood. In this sense, fashion functions as a "body-shaping discourse," reinforcing what (Owusu, 2025) describes as the embodied interaction between dress and cultural identity.

Interviews with designers revealed that clients often requested styles that "bring out" their curves, particularly for social events such as weddings and festivals. Such requests reflect how the female body continues to serve as a visual index of both personal pride and family reputation. Mensah et al. (2025) observed similar dynamics in contemporary Ghanaian fashion photography, where models with fuller hips

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and defined waists are frequently chosen to project "African femininity" and elegance. This aesthetic continuity demonstrates how cultural memory is preserved and re-expressed through the fashioning of the body.

However, this cultural valorisation of curves is not without ambivalence. As Odoi & Wong (2025) argue, globalisation and exposure to Western media have introduced competing ideals of slimness and toned figures. Younger women, particularly those in urban centres, often navigate between the prestige of traditional voluptuousness and the aspirational modernity of slimness. Despite these hybrid influences, the symbolic power of curves persists as a marker of authenticity and self-assurance within Ghanaian womanhood. In this context, curves function not merely as aesthetic traits but as cultural capital, a socially recognised form of value that enhances women's social standing, attractiveness, and perceived moral worth. The continued prominence of curvy body ideals in Ghanaian fashion underscores how bodily form operates as both a medium of identity and a repository of cultural heritage (Odoi & Wong, 2025).

3.2.2| Western Slimness Ideals and Generational Differences

While cultural aesthetics in Ghana have historically celebrated curvaceousness as a symbol of health, wealth, and social prestige, younger generations, particularly urban women in cities such as Accra, Kumasi, and Takoradi, are increasingly drawn toward slimmer body ideals. These aspirations are largely mediated by global fashion culture, celebrity imagery, and digital media consumption. Content analysis of Ghanaian fashion blogs and Instagram accounts revealed frequent incorporation of Western models and visual narratives centred on lean, toned physiques, often presented as the pinnacle of modern elegance. One young participant noted:

> *"When I follow fashion pages on Instagram, I see all these slim girls in trendy clothes. Sometimes I feel I have to diet or dress in a way that makes me look smaller."* (Consumer, 21 years)

This sentiment underscores what is described as the "aesthetic globalisation" of body ideals, in which transnational beauty standards are diffused through digital fashion platforms and social media influencers. Exposure to Western media correlates strongly with increased body dissatisfaction among Ghanaian university students, particularly young women who internalise slimness as a marker of sophistication and cosmopolitan identity (Pedroni, 2023). The generational divergence in body ideals reflects broader sociocultural transformations driven by urbanisation, education, and media exposure. Older women, grounded in traditional aesthetics, continue to valorise fullness as cultural capital, associating it with social stability and femininity (Owusu, 2025). In contrast, younger women are negotiating hybrid identities that combine globalised beauty norms with localised expressions of self-presentation. This aligns with the notion of a "hybrid beauty paradigm," where traditional admiration for voluptuousness coexists with aspirational slenderness, creating internalised tensions between cultural authenticity and modern aspiration.

Fashion designers corroborated these patterns, observing an increased demand for garments that create the illusion of slimness. Popular "slimming" design requests included high-waist trousers, body-shaping corsets, peplum tops, and dark-colored dresses that streamline the silhouette. Such fashion choices are emblematic of what Akram et al. (2025) term the disciplining of the body through dress, a process where fashion mediates social expectations by shaping bodily appearance. Similarly, deGraft-Yankson & Essuman (2025) notes that the global spread of body-focused digital imagery has intensified self-surveillance among young women, influencing how they diet, style, and perform femininity in public spaces. Importantly, the preference for slimness is not merely an aesthetic shift but also a reflection of class aspirations and global mobility. Urban middle-class women often associate slenderness with professionalism, modernity, and self-control, values increasingly tied to neoliberal ideals of productivity and self-fashioning (Mensah et al., 2025). Yet, as several participants revealed, this pursuit of slimness can produce anxiety, body dissatisfaction, and ambivalence toward their natural physiques. The coexistence of these contrasting ideals, voluptuousness as cultural pride and slimness as cosmopolitan aspiration, illustrates the dynamic negotiation of identity that characterises Ghanaian women's contemporary body politics.

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3.2.3| Fashion as Concealment and Enhancement

Findings revealed that fashion functions as a vital medium through which Ghanaian women actively negotiate the visibility and meaning of their bodies. Rather than passive adherence to trends, women engage in a conscious process of concealment and enhancement, strategically selecting garments that obscure perceived bodily "flaws" while accentuating features that align with cultural or personal ideals of attractiveness. This practice reflects both aesthetic intention and embodied agency, illustrating how fashion becomes a tool for self-presentation, identity management, and emotional confidence (deGraft-Yankson & Essuman, 2025).

For many participants, the midsection emerged as a focal site of insecurity. Several women described discomfort with exposing their stomachs or wearing tightly fitted garments that accentuated perceived excess fat. As one participant from Hohoe explained:

> *"I love wearing fitted dresses, but because of my tummy, I usually add a jacket or choose fabrics that are not too light. It helps me feel more put together."* (Consumer, 32 years)

This sentiment was echoed by fashion designers who reported that clients frequently requested designs that "hide the tummy" while enhancing hips or bust features traditionally celebrated within Ghanaian aesthetics. One designer noted:

> *"Fashion is all about balance. My clients want clothes that shift attention away from where they feel less confident. So, I cut styles that flatten the waist but curve out the hips, and they always leave smiling."* (Designer, 29 years)

Such strategies demonstrate what Odoi & Wong (2025) describe as aesthetic self-engineering, the use of dress and styling techniques to visually manage the body's proportions. In the Ghanaian setting, this process draws on both indigenous and global influences. Traditional garments like the kaba and slit or wrapped kente cloth are often constructed to enhance the waist-hip ratio, creating an hourglass silhouette that signals beauty, fertility, and respectability (Mensah et al., 2025). Modern fashion trends, including peplum tops, pencil skirts, high-waist trousers, and bodycon dresses with side-panelling, extend this aesthetic logic, blending cultural ideals with contemporary styles (Akram et al., 2025).

Fabric selection also played a significant role in shaping appearance. Participants consistently mentioned that structured materials such as wax print, lace, or brocade provided bodily control and concealment, while lighter fabrics like chiffon or silk "showed too much truth." This insight aligns with Akram et al.'s (2025) argument that African fashion, where materiality itself contributes to the shaping and disciplining of the body. One stylist explained:

> *"Prints are a woman's friend. A busy pattern hides what you don't want people to see, but at the same time, it can draw the eye to the right places. That's why African prints are powerful."*

Beyond concealment, enhancement was equally central to women's fashion choices. Garments and accessories were used to celebrate and accentuate features culturally regarded as beautiful: ample hips, full busts, smooth skin, and defined waistlines. Off-shoulder blouses, slit skirts, and waist beads were popular not only for their aesthetic appeal but for their symbolic power in highlighting femininity and sensuality within Ghanaian cultural expression. Waist beads, in particular, served dual purposes: as traditional adornment and as a subtle visual cue emphasising the hips and waist, blending cultural heritage with contemporary fashion sensibility (Mensah et al., 2024). These embodied practices illustrate a cultural negotiation where concealment and enhancement coexist as interdependent strategies. Concealment is not necessarily an act of shame but a means of redirecting visual attention, shaping how the body is socially read. Enhancement, in turn, celebrates agency and self-assurance, allowing women to perform versions of beauty that align with both societal expectations and personal aspiration. Together, these strategies reflect what Mensah et al. (2024) call the creative pragmatics of dress, how individuals use fashion as an adaptive resource to navigate bodily norms and aesthetic hierarchies.

Ultimately, fashion in this context functions as a form of "soft body modification", a non-invasive, socially acceptable, and culturally grounded mechanism for altering visual proportions and asserting bodily confidence. While such practices can empower women by offering control over self-presentation,

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they also reinforce cultural scripts that privilege certain body shapes over others. The dual role of fashion, as both a liberating and regulating force, reveals its complex position within Ghanaian gendered aesthetics and broader global body politics.

3.2.4| Fashion as Empowerment and Resistance

A final theme that emerged from the data was the conceptualisation of fashion as both a site of empowerment and a vehicle for resistance. Participants articulated that dressing stylishly was not merely a matter of aesthetics but an intentional act of reclaiming agency and visibility. For many women, fashion served as a language through which they could challenge body-related stereotypes, confront societal judgments, and redefine what it means to be confident and beautiful within their own cultural framework (Mensah et al., 2025). Several participants emphasised that clothing enabled them to express individuality and self-assurance, particularly in social contexts where larger or unconventional body types were often stigmatised. One woman explained:

> *"People may think my size is too big, but when I wear what I like, I feel powerful. Fashion gives me that freedom."* (Consumer, 44 years)

This sense of empowerment aligns with deGraft-Yankson & Essuman's (2025) notion of the dressed body as a social agent, suggesting that style can become a performative act through which individuals negotiate power and self-definition. In Ghana, where traditional femininity often values modesty and social conformity, adopting bold or unconventional fashion choices can symbolise subtle resistance to restrictive norms surrounding women's bodies and behaviour (Mensah et al., 2025). Designers also echoed these sentiments, describing how they intentionally use clothing design to challenge narrow beauty standards and promote inclusivity. Some recounted efforts to create collections that feature curvy, plus-size, or differently shaped models to celebrate bodily diversity and normalise difference within Ghana's visual culture. These practices correspond with what deGraft-Yankson & Essuman (2025) identify as body-positive fashion activism, a creative movement where fashion becomes a platform for empowerment, solidarity, and visibility among marginalised body types.

The data further revealed that empowerment through dress was linked not only to aesthetics but also to psychological liberation. Many participants described fashion as a means of feeling "seen" and "valued," transforming clothing into a tool of emotional resilience and social participation. This aligns with Mensah et al.'s (2025) idea that dress mediates self-worth and belonging, particularly in environments where appearance often shapes social inclusion. In this regard, fashion acted as both armour and voice: a protective layer against stigma and a communicative tool asserting self-acceptance. A notable development within the Ghanaian fashion landscape is the gradual emergence of body-positive movements and inclusive design practices. Local designers, stylists, and social media influencers have begun to foreground narratives that celebrate bodily diversity, often through digital campaigns and runway events that feature non-traditional body sizes. Platforms such as Ghana Fashion Week and Glitz Africa Fashion Week have in recent years incorporated more diverse models, marking an incremental but meaningful cultural shift (Pedroni, 2023). While these representations remain limited, they reflect a growing awareness of the need to challenge globalised beauty norms that marginalise African body types.

This transformation resonates with the work of Smelik & Kaiser (2026) who argues that fashion can operate as a politics of visibility, a means through which marginalised groups reclaim public space by embodying alternative aesthetics. In Ghana, this politics manifests not only in dress but also in attitude, as women use fashion to reject imposed ideals of thinness, fair skin, or Westernised beauty. By embracing vibrant colours, bold prints, and silhouettes that emphasise rather than conceal their natural bodies, participants reasserted ownership over how they are perceived and valued. Ultimately, fashion as empowerment and resistance illustrates the dynamic intersection of culture, identity, and social change. For these women, fashion was not simply a reflection of existing beauty standards but an active site of negotiation and transformation. It provided a medium for rewriting cultural scripts about womanhood and body image, fostering both personal empowerment and collective re-imagination of Ghanaian femininity.

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4 | IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS

The findings from this study on cultural perceptions and fashion's role in women's body diversity and presentation in Ghana hold significant implications for cultural identity, gender discourse, and the fashion industry. The results illuminate the complex ways Ghanaian women, particularly within Ewe and other cultural contexts, negotiate body ideals through clothing and self-presentation in a rapidly globalising society.

Cultural Implications - Reclaiming African Aesthetics in a Globalised World: The persistence of the preference for curvaceous figures as symbols of fertility, respectability, and health underscores the enduring strength of indigenous aesthetics in defining womanhood and beauty. Yet, the growing influence of Western slimness ideals highlights the cultural tension between traditional values and global media representations (Bhana & Basi, 2026). This duality calls for a more conscious engagement with local cultural heritage in defining beauty and body norms. It suggests that fashion can be a tool for cultural reclamation, empowering designers, educators, and media producers to foreground Ghanaian and African ideals of beauty as equally valid and desirable.

Social Implications - Fashion as a Medium of Empowerment and Identity Negotiation: The study reveals that Ghanaian women use fashion not merely for adornment but as a strategy of empowerment, self-expression, and resistance. By concealing, enhancing, or boldly displaying certain features, women demonstrate agency in curating how they are perceived in both private and public spaces. This finding challenges deficit-based narratives that view African women as passive recipients of cultural expectations. Instead, it positions them as active cultural negotiators who creatively use dress to balance tradition, modernity, and self-esteem (Hendra et al., 2025). This has broader gender and social implications: fashion becomes a language of empowerment through which women assert control over their bodies and challenge stigmatisation related to size, age, or appearance. Promoting inclusive beauty discourses within fashion education, community advocacy, and media representation could therefore contribute to body positivity, mental well-being, and social cohesion.

Practical and Industry Implications - Toward Inclusive and Culturally Responsive Fashion Practice: For Ghana's fashion industry, these findings highlight the need for body-inclusive and culturally grounded design practices. Designers, stylists, and brands have the opportunity to lead a paradigm shift by creating clothing lines that cater to diverse body types and reflect local aesthetics rather than replicating Eurocentric standards (Ofosu-Asare, 2025). Fashion education institutions could integrate modules on cultural body diversity, feminist aesthetics, and ethical representation, equipping emerging designers with the awareness to create garments that affirm rather than alienate women's identities. Media practitioners, in turn, bear responsibility to portray a wider spectrum of body images across fashion campaigns, editorials, and digital platforms.

Theoretical and Academic Implications - Theoretically, this study expands discourse on body image and fashion by grounding it within African epistemologies of beauty and embodiment. It bridges feminist body theory, cultural fashion theory, and postcolonial thought, showing how the "dressed body" (Entwistle, 2023) functions as both a personal and political entity in Ghanaian society. The findings invite further comparative research across African regions to explore how globalisation, media, and local customs intersect in shaping body politics.

5 | LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

While this study provides valuable insights into how cultural perceptions and fashion practices shape women's body diversity and presentation in Ghana, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the research relied on a qualitative design with a relatively small, purposively selected sample, which limits the generalizability of the findings to the broader Ghanaian population. The perspectives captured, though rich and contextually grounded, may not fully represent the diversity of experiences among women from different ethnic, socioeconomic, and regional backgrounds. Second, the data collection was geographically focused on urban and peri-urban centres such as Accra, Ho, and Keta. Rural populations, where traditional norms may be more strongly upheld, were underrepresented. This geographic concentration may have influenced the balance between traditional and globalised body ideals observed in the data.

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Third, the content analysis of fashion media primarily included online platforms and accessible digital archives. Print and broadcast media, which also play influential roles in shaping beauty standards, were not comprehensively analysed due to limited access. Finally, issues of self-presentation and social desirability may have affected participants' responses during interviews, particularly when discussing sensitive topics such as body dissatisfaction and beauty practices. Despite assurances of confidentiality, some participants may have moderated their views to align with socially accepted perspectives. Future research employing mixed-methods approaches, larger samples, and cross-regional comparisons could address these limitations and provide a more comprehensive understanding of how fashion and cultural perceptions interact to shape women's body image in Ghana.

6 | CONCLUSION AND FUTURE STUDIES

This study has illuminated the complex and evolving relationship between culture, body diversity, and fashion in Ghana. The findings reveal that the Ghanaian female body remains a powerful site of meaning-making, imbued with social, moral, and aesthetic significance. While traditional ideals continue to valorise curvaceousness as a symbol of beauty, fertility, and respectability, younger generations are increasingly exposed to globalised notions of slimness propagated through digital and fashion media. These contrasting ideals produce a dynamic negotiation in which women use fashion both as a tool of conformity and a medium of self-expression. Fashion, in this context, functions as a multifaceted language of the body. It allows women to conceal insecurities, highlight culturally valued features, and assert agency in shaping how their bodies are perceived. The study found that clothing choices, ranging from the traditional kaba and slit to contemporary bodycon dresses, serve as strategic tools through which women navigate personal confidence and social acceptance. Moreover, the emergence of inclusive fashion movements and digital platforms that promote body positivity reflects a subtle yet significant cultural shift toward broader representations of beauty. The broader implication of these findings is that fashion in Ghana operates not merely as an aesthetic practice but as a social instrument for empowerment and resistance. It mediates the dialogue between cultural continuity and modern transformation, allowing women to participate in redefining beauty standards from within their cultural frameworks. Recognising this dynamic underscores the need for culturally responsive and inclusive fashion systems that celebrate body diversity rather than reinforce exclusionary ideals. Ultimately, this research contributes to a growing body of African-centred scholarship that situates fashion as a lens for understanding identity, gender, and embodiment. By foregrounding Ghanaian women's voices, the study highlights fashion's potential to challenge restrictive body ideologies and foster more inclusive, empowering forms of self-presentation. Future studies that build upon these insights can further advance theoretical and practical understandings of how fashion operates as a transformative cultural force within African societies.

This study opens several avenues for future scholarly inquiry. First, while it focused primarily on women's experiences within selected Ghanaian cultural and fashion contexts, future research could expand the demographic and geographic scope to include rural communities and other ethnic groups such as Akan, Ga-Adangbe, and Dagomba. Such comparative studies would deepen understanding of how localised cultural aesthetics interact with national and global beauty discourses. Secondly, there is a need for quantitative and mixed-methods approaches to complement qualitative insights by measuring the prevalence and psychological effects of body image perceptions among Ghanaian women. Survey-based or experimental studies could explore correlations between media exposure, fashion consumption, and body satisfaction, providing broader statistical validation of the trends observed in this research. Third, intersectional analyses are needed to examine how variables such as class, education, religion, and digital engagement shape the negotiation of body ideals. For instance, younger women's adoption of Westernised slimness ideals might differ significantly across socioeconomic strata or access to global fashion media. Additionally, future studies could investigate men's perceptions of female body diversity and fashion, offering a more holistic view of gendered body politics in Ghana. Since male perspectives often influence societal beauty norms and consumer behaviour, including them would provide a fuller picture of how cultural values around women's bodies are reinforced or contested.

Finally, the growing influence of digital fashion spaces and social media in shaping contemporary Ghanaian beauty standards warrants longitudinal research. Exploring how online fashion influencers, virtual styling, and global fashion collaborations impact local body narratives would provide valuable insights into the evolving intersection of technology, fashion, and identity. Overall, continued research should aim to integrate cultural theory, feminist scholarship, and fashion studies to advance a distinctly

African-centred understanding of body diversity, one that recognises fashion as both a cultural archive and a medium of social transformation.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available. Access to the data may be provided by the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to ethical and confidentiality considerations.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT
The author declares no conflict of interest.

ETHICS APPROVAL STATEMENT
The Ethics Committee at Takoradi Technical University approved the set of questions before data collection started. Respondents were told of the purpose of the study; therefore, their consent was obtained before they answered the interview questions. The confidentiality and anonymity of respondents were also assured.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS
During the preparation of this work, the author(s) used the ChatGPT tool to support the grammatical construction of the study. After using this tool, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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