



Research Article

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Conversations and Marketing of Women's 'Thick' in African Social Media Spaces: Implications for Health Communication on Overweight

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Abstract

A captivating advert for a body enhancement pill ran as "Get thick" potent weight gain pills with enhancement herbs for bigger butt". This advert captures the frenzy for 'thick' bodies that has gripped most African youths and self-mediated on social media platforms for various reasons that may include getting views, gaining popularity, enhancing sexual attractiveness and enhancing self-confidence, among many others. It is within this context that this social media ethnographic study explores the social influence of 'thick' body trends on X, focusing on African bloggers and their audiences. The study further explored the implications of the social influence of body enhancement posts on efforts by the World Health Organisation (WHO), African Union and its affiliated countries to address overweight among their populations. The findings revealed that illicit weight gain remedies were sold on X, facilitated by disinformation. In countering this disinformation, medical experts and enlightened individuals educated their audience about the risks of taking illicit body enhancement remedies.

Keywords: Body enhancement; weight gain; social media; social influence; health communication

1. Introduction

Social media has become a powerful tool for communicating health-related information in the global North and Global South. To date, numerous social media platforms have become tools for expression and engagement in everyday life. Some of the most popular social media platforms include Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Tumblr, X, YouTube, Reddit and TikTok. Apart from their traditional social function, social media platforms have become potent communication platforms, utilised for both formal and informal communication (Christensen & Khalil, 2023; Du Preez & Lombard, 2014; Jiang et al., 2023; Pekkala & van Zoonen, 2022). During public health emergencies such as floods (Matandirotya, 2022), earthquakes (Jirapa & Qunying, 2021), and COVID-19 (Cho et al., 2023), social

media has been useful in disseminating official health communication.

Social media has also been increasingly used by influencers for health, wellness and lifestyle marketing (Anand & Bagla, 2020). The influencers range from fitness models, physical workout online coaches, and nutrition and wellness bloggers (Lepesheva & Khlomogorova, 2021). They utilise their social influence to inspire, motivate, and sway the health and wellness decisions of their audiences (Crosswell, 2019). In recent years, there has been increasing interest in body image among the young generation of women and men. Celebrities like Kim Kardashian, Beyonce, and Kylie Jenner are beauty influencers who have popularised a full body type (McComb & Mills, 2022). A combination of the social influence of celebrities and cultural factors has resulted in a surge in the number of African black women and men who embrace a larger body size. From a cultural perspective, black African men prefer women with heavier body weights (Chithambo & Huey 2013). This stems from the belief that heavier women represent fertility, good health and wealth. On the other hand, being underweight is associated with less attractiveness and self-confidence.

Extant literature indicates that social media platforms have been used as platforms to exhibit and discuss thick body images. A thick body is a conventional term used by the young generation to refer to a large body size but with a slim waist (Kengne et al., 2017). Social media influencers, including those bloggers with a huge following, propagate the thick female body image as the ideal of a modern woman while body image dissatisfaction is associated with slimness. Body image dissatisfaction with slimness pushes women to desire weight gain, which may be one of the key drivers of the obesity epidemic in African women and adolescent girls. As a result of information-seeking behaviour, women turn to social media platforms to gain inspiration, insights and strategies to achieve a thick body image. Unfortunately, not all information shared on these platforms is true and approved by health experts (Moore et al., 2021).

Globally, online misinformation is seen as a significant cause for concern, with more than half of internet users worrying about encountering false material (Joyner et al., 2023). The World Health Organisation (WHO) (2020) described the current state of disinformation as “an over-abundance of information, some accurate and some not, that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it (WHO, 2020). As a result of body image disinformation spread on social media, there are several cases in sub-Saharan Africa where many young women are turning to prescription pills to gain weight (Elbagir, 2017). In South Africa, and many parts of Africa, women are abusing Apetamin, a supplement used to relieve symptoms of allergies as well as treat anorexia (Mdayi, 2018). There is also a growth in black market body and buttock fattening procedures that involve injecting the body using silicone intended to be used for metal or plastic lubrication (Lucas, 2015).

Current literature on thick body image and mediation focuses on social motivations for a thick body among women (Kengne et al., 2017; Pradeilles et al., 2022). However, literature is scarce on the mediation of thick female bodies on social media and its influence on young women in Africa. To that end, this study sought to answer the question: how is social media influencing behaviours to attain thick body image among women in Africa? What are the implications of the social influence of thick body mediation on health communication to mitigate overweight?

1.1 Social media influence on wellness and health lifestyle marketing

Social media has been positively used to influence healthy lifestyles. A study conducted by Laroche, spérance and Mosconi (2020) found that social media platforms facilitated social networking through which a healthy lifestyle is shared with a wider audience. Social media platforms such as Facebook have been used to conduct weight loss intervention programmes (Pattanapongsa et al., 2020). Extant literature shows that social media platforms are used to educate, and communicate with health and wellness specialists (Alanzi et al., 2021; Januraga et al., 2021; Laroche et al., 2020).

There is a growing body of literature on health information-seeking behaviour on social media. Consumption, re-sharing of health information and personal healthcare habits are influenced by

information credibility, trust on the social media platform, and peer influence (PI) (Riaz et al., 2021). Although social media plays a huge role, some studies argue that social influence plays an even bigger role in influencing healthy lifestyles. For example, in Indonesia, Rini et al. (2021) found that family members' social capital. Similarly, social media has been credited for influencing users to start medication or treatment (Kachapong et al., 2024). In Africa, social media has been found to bridge the information gap on health and wellness (Abubakar et al., 2023).

1.2 Social influence of body image mediation on social media

Extant literature shows that when people make social media posts of themselves, they are concerned about of their physical appearance. As a result, they try to be perfectionistic as much as possible (Stoeber & Stoeber, 2009). The physical appearance of perfectionism is driven by two factors, worry about imperfection and hope for perfection. Worrying about imperfection is also related to dissatisfaction with body image not widely favoured in a particular society. The worry about the imperfection domain captures the concern that one's appearance will never be good enough and deep dissatisfaction with one's appearance; this domain is similar to the perfectionistic concerns subcomponent of general perfectionism (Yang & Stoeber, 2012). The hope for perfectionism domain captures a striving for a perfect appearance and hope that other people admire one's appearance; this domain is similar to the perfectionistic strivings subcomponent of general perfectionism. Physical appearance perfectionism has been associated with many negative body image outcomes, such as disordered eating symptoms, appearance social anxiety, appearance and body shape dissatisfaction, unhealthy weight control behaviours, low appearance self-esteem, high impression management, high appearance management behaviours, and perfectionistic self-presentation (Stoeber & Yang, 2015, Yang & Stoeber, 2012).

2. Theory

The transactional model for social media impact was the lens used to understand the motivations behind women's consumption of information relating to body image enhancement and body image enhancement remedies thereof (Perloff, 2014). The model presented in Figure 1, indicates that several factors contribute to women's feeling dissatisfied with their bodies, motivating them to look up to their social influence on remedies to enhance their body image (Pop, 2016; Shin & Shin, 2008). In the case of this study, most African women are dissatisfied with thin body appearance as being thick is the popular trend. Therefore, when they go on social media platforms they look for information on how they can gain weight to have a thick body image like the models and social media influencers they admire (Parackal et al., 2021).

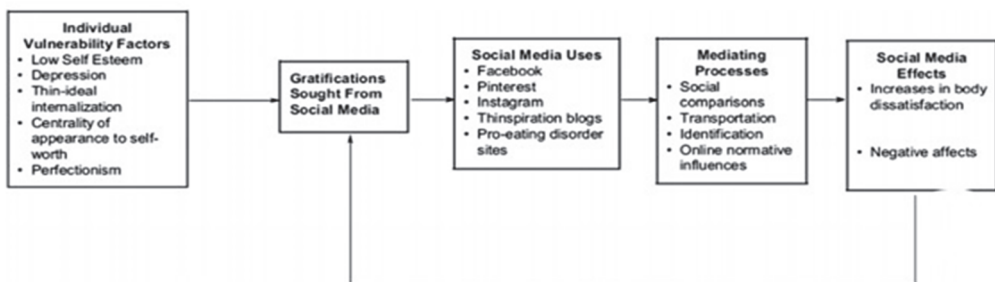


Figure 1: Transactional model for social media impact
Source: Perloff (2014).

The theory indicates that consistent exposure to what is assumed as the perfect body results in body dissatisfaction in women who do not have those traits (Perloff, 2014). As a result, they are vulnerable to body image problems that include depression, low self-esteem, perfectionism, internalization of the body thickness ideal, and centrality of one's appearance to self-worth (Fomiatti et al., 2023). Social media uses and gratifications allow for social comparisons as female social media users search for posts that celebrate female body thickness and conversations around the idea (Hossain, 2019; Qin, 2020). Women who feel dissatisfied about their bodies tend to gravitate to appearance-focused social media content, seeking particular gratifications, such as posts and conversations on how to gain weight and body thickness (John et al., 2020). It is reasonable to conclude that women's body dissatisfaction and negative affective reactions are largely influenced by continuous exposure to social media where popular celebrities and other social media users glorify female thickness and weight gain. As a result young women selectively expose themselves to social media content on female body thickness ideals, then engage in upward and downward comparisons, ruminate about parts of their bodies that make them look bad, and in some cases end up feeling unhappy about their bodies once again (Swami et al., 2010).

Body dissatisfaction and negative affective reactions can then lead to increases in eating disorder pathologies, consumption of destructive social media content marketing illicit and unhealthy weight gain and butt enlargement remedies (Christina & Ruth, 2020). Participation in social media conversations on female body thickness enhances perceptions that the African female body ideal is thick, heavy and curvy and indirectly, via conformity-inducing perceptions that peers will be influenced by appearance-focused posts (Dalley et al., 2009). To that end, the transactional model for social media impact emphasises that particular vulnerability characteristics will predispose women social media users to turn to appearance-based content, producing social comparison and perceived norm-mediated effects.

3. Method

The ontological foundation for this study is constructivism, which holds that social reality is subjective and multidimensional (Bogna et al., 2020). In addition, constructivism was chosen since it allowed for the comprehension of social media posts and conversations relating to the female body image by paying attention to the meanings they ascribed to them (Bacud et al., 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 2013). The study employed a qualitative approach to address the key questions. Qualitative research helped in obtaining rich information from social media posts and conversations (Creswell, 2016). The study population were X bloggers whose content focused on African female bodies and marketing posts and conversations around weight gain, butt enlargement and thick body. Therefore, purposive sampling was utilised in selecting the posts of interest. Hashtags popularity used to promote conversations about thick bodies were harvested from X accounts using hashtags: #hashtags #weightgain, #appetamin and #butt enlargement.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the study's data. Thematic analysis is a qualitative data analysis method used to investigate a phenomenon through rigorous data coding and analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). As primary material, one examines the text's topics and main ideas (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Several steps were taken to undertake the data analysis. The initial stage was to organise and prepare data for analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). We prepared the harvested posts (images, videos and texts) for analysis after transcribing them (Wheeler, 2022). The data was then subjected to coding which involved segmenting the data for categorisation and creating units of meaning (Guest et al., 2012). The codes were grouped into major and minor themes, which informed the findings. The harvested data and use thereof did not infringe on the privacy and rights of the bloggers and their followers.

4. Findings

As indicated in the methodology section, this ethnographic study targeted Twitter microblogs identified using the hashtags #weightgain, #apetamin and #butt enlargement. After searching for relevant Twitter microblogs and screening posts that addressed the research objectives, 17 Twitter blogs were subjected to synthesis.

4.1 Marketing of illicit weight gain miracle remedies

Most of the female weight gain bloggers were quite aware of the desperation that women are to gain weight and achieve a 'thick' body or figure enhancer that they see in celebrities and conversations on social media. One of the remedies was the use of the apetamin drug. In most countries, apetamin is available by prescription as an off-label treatment for a wide range of psychiatric conditions. However, women on social media seeking to gain a thick body figure regard the drug as a weight gain supplement. The harvested Tweets indicate that the use of apetamin was popular in Nigeria despite the drug being banned. The Twitter bloggers who marketed the drug sold it to their audience as a miracle weight gain remedy which could show results in under two weeks. The bloggers sold apetamin and other drugs using the following expressions:

"You want to add weight in the right places? this weight gain powder is for you remember I am a food scientist of ladoke Akintola university of technology. I am a chef.in my final year. this weight gain is in my field of study. The only side effect is sleeping and eating" (Rina Obekpa, @RinaObekpa, Nigeria, 4 April 2020)

"Hip up cream at clicks pills to balance hormones at clicks curves pills at clicks botcho cream at clicks spirulina weight gain pills weight gain pills for females in south Africa amino 3000 for weight gain at clicks weight gain tablets for female." (Hips Bums Enlargement Cream, @hips_bums_pills, South Africa).

"Ultimate Maca is the best natural pills available that gives you that big, bouncy booty you've always wanted in just a few weeks. Results begin to show as early as 2 weeks." Apetamin Ultimate Maca @ApetaminM, 25 April 2020).

*"Ultimate Maca Plus. Ultimate Maca is the best pills that gives that big buncy booty and wider hips in just a few weeks. 20K. Lagos, Port Harcourt." (Simply Natural, @_Natureville, Nigeria, 4 July 2024).
"I started a weight gain journey 3 days ago! (At 51kg, I'm aiming at getting to 62kg, I have never been 60kg). With this APPETON WEIGHT GAIN and of curse CYPRIGLOD SYRUP! Please note, if you can't afford Apetamin, buy Cyprigold. It's just 300 Naira for the big size." (Audi, @audi115, Nigeria, 30 Dec 2018).*

Although appeton is an approved weight gain supplement, there is disinformation to equate appeton to apetamin. The implication is that appeton is an alternative to apetamin yet this has no scientific support. What easily stands out in the promotional texts is the health disinformation. The bloggers create a rosy picture of apetamin as a miracle figure enhancement remedy. Central to the message is the unsubstantiated claim that the drug is capable of delivering weight gain in two weeks. In addition, the bloggers depict themselves as medical authoritative voices with expert understanding of the weight gain subject. In Rina Obekpa's tweet, the blogger commits disinformation by claiming association with a reputable "ladoke Akintola University of Technology" where she claims to be a "food scientist" and "chef". These associations imply that the audience may uncritically accept the "weight gain powder" certified by an expert, thus influencing customers' buying intentions.

The health disinformation about the misuse of licensed drugs is sometimes cast through humour on social media. In some African countries, such as South Africa, Apetamin and Apetito are legally sold in pharmacies. However, most young women abuse these medications and use them for

figure enhancement. On social media spaces, it seems that most social media users believe that *Apetito* is made specifically for weight gain. Users make jokes about slim women in their social network, encouraging them to take *apetito* as indicated in the following post:



Figure 1: A joke promoting the use of *Apetito* for weight gain

Source: Paparazzi @MAHOMS_SA, 2 March 2024

The message, written in isiZulu, a widely spoken South African language “*take Apetito....see the results*”, seems to be a reply to an ongoing conversation on how women can gain weight. Although the message comes through humour, the suspense in the message lures young women, desperate to have the trending ‘thick’ body.

Apart from the sale of prohibited drugs for weight gain, some of the posts indicate the popularity of traditional weight gain or figure enhancement remedies. Most of the posts marketing traditional weight gain solutions were from South Africa. The central message in the posts is that the traditional solutions were permanent.

“I am a traditional & spiritual healer. I also make chunky blankets & I sell breast & booty enlargement kit with a permanent result without having to eat to gain weight. I am based in South Africa.” (Madam Muzel, @umamaomhambayo, South Africa, 22, Jan 2024).

“What should I eat to gain weight in 7 days? | Sandton Johannesburg South Africa | Herbal Nutrition Lifestyle.” (Miracle Wonderherbs, @HerbsWoder, 9, 9, 2021).

“Lose / Gain Weight Now Ask Me How | Organic Herbal Tea Merchant Store Sandton, Greater Johannesburg, Gauteng, South Africa | Made From Most Powerful Medicinal Plants. Miracle Wonder Herbs (EST 1989)” (Miracle Wonderherbs, @HerbsWoder, 25 May 2022).

The marketing texts indicate that the arena of female weight gain has attracted the interest of traditional healers and herbalists. However, just like those who market illicit weight gain drugs, the traditionalists rely on disinformation. They depict traditional weight gain remedies as “miracle wonder”, which can show results in one week. The reference to “powerful medicinal plants” as a key component of the traditional weight gain treatment is not scientifically proven but is meant to create

an impression that the treatment has no health risks. Such disinformation has been the key characteristic of the posts on female weight gain posts or figure enlargement on X.

4.2 Conversations about the health implications of illicit weight gain remedies

Some bloggers on X who demonstrated awareness of the dangers of using unapproved drugs for weight gain used their X platforms to educate their audiences on the dangers of unapproved drugs used for weight gain. One of the drugs that were widely referred to was apetamin. The bloggers indicated that the drug was banned in Nigeria, this it was illegally sold.

"Ha! Please, STOP TAKING APETAMINE! It's a dangerous drug. That's why it is illegal/banned in Nigeria, the USA and many other countries. The cyproheptadine hydrochloride it contains can lead to liver failure and death over prolonged use. See your doctor for advice please." (Arojinle, @aroinle, Nigeria, 11 July 2023).

"Say no to Apetamin. If you want to gain weight eat more Carb and Vitamin, Iron. Then take water frequently and always rest well all the time." (Lilian Ebere, @bouche_lilian, Nigeria, 16 April 2022)

Going through the comments, I learnt Apetamin has been banned in Nigeria. Are they the same thing? This is Apetabon. It's like they change the name. It was even prescribed, thank God for this thread. I'm trashing it immediately." (Zaynab, @Ham_zainab, Nigeria, 16 April 2022).

I hope our ladies who go for weight gain, weight loss and skin whatever injections can see this? (Dr. Goerge, @GoergeAnagli, Ghana, 15 September 2023).

The blogger shared a newspaper headline in which a beauty specialist educated the public that beauticians were not allowed to use body enhancement injections on their clients. Figure 2 below indicates a doctor's awareness post.



Figure 2: A doctor's awareness post on body enhancement injections

The body enhancement awareness posts presented above mark a clear departure from the posts on body enhancement remedies discussed earlier. The awareness bloggers were aware of the consequences of taking illicit weight gain remedies. It is reasonable to conclude that voices

highlighted the consequences of apетamin use for weight gain, the use of weight gain injections countering disinformation spread on X, and promoting the use of illicit remedies for female weight gain. In countering disinformation, the posts emphasised that apетamin was banned in many countries and that body enhancement injections were illegal.

5. Discussion

The aim of the study was to establish the role social media plays in promoting behaviours to gain weight among African women and further explore the implications of mediating illicit weight gain medications on health communication among overweight. Influenced by popular female celebrities and influencers who post their 'thick' bodies on social media, most African women have joined the bandwagon for marketing and acquisition of illegal weight gain enhancement or figure enlargement medications. The study found that African female bloggers are utilising X not just as a virtual platform to glorify the 'thick' body image, but also to provide illegal remedies through which women can have 'thick' bodies like those of the celebrities they admire. As a result, drugs such as Apетamin, Macca, Apетito and traditional herbs are marketed on X as miracle wonders which can transform the female body in a few weeks. The misuse of drugs for weight gain is documented in the literature. A study of the misuse of apетamin conducted by Betterly and Barghini (2022) found that the misuse of apетamin to enhance one's figure is a global problem but the victims are mostly young women with low education levels. The majority of African women have been duped by false information regarding the drug's ability to cause weight gain, and they have neglected to consider the negative health effects of abusing it, which include the development of autoimmune hepatitis (Garland et al., 2020), accidental overdoses of cyproheptadine, and anticholinergic syndrome, which manifests as flushing dilated pupils, and dry mouth (Lulebo et al., 2016). Furthermore, herbalists have taken use of social media channels to advertise age-old weight-gain cures. They portray them as harmless. However, according to a study, conventional goods that are freely accessible could contain large amounts of pharmaceuticals (Ozdemir et al., 2013). Furthermore, traditional weight gain treatments have a risk of being contaminated with hazardous metals since they do not pass health certification procedures. These products may result in a variety of health issues, some of which may be dangerous since individuals frequently take them without knowing the true contents of the items or with a doctor's advice or supervision (Kurele, 2015). Based on the findings, the study concurred with several studies which have observed that social media has become a useful tool for disseminating false information about science and medicine (Grimes, 2020).

The study established the existence of two groups of participants in weight gain or figure enhancement conversations on X. These groups were those less education, who were primarily the target market for the illicit weight gain remedies. This group participate in conversations about weight gain to seek information about ways to develop a 'thick' body. Among those groups were also bloggers who shared (dis)information about the availability of weight gain solutions such as apетamin, apетito, maca, creams and herbal solutions. The bloggers lure young women seeking information about weight gain through unproven successes of their weight gain remedies and pictures of the remedies as well as images of 'thick' women. On the other hand, the second group were individuals who demonstrated awareness about the devastating health effects of misusing medications for weight gain. Some of the bloggers were practising medical personnel, as shown by their autobiographical information on their X accounts. It can be concluded that educated bloggers on X used their voices and knowledge to counter disinformation by educating their social network about the health effects of illicit weight or figure enhancement remedies. The findings concur with previous studies which highlight the important role experts and educated community members play (Chewe et al., 2022; Danielson et al., 2010; Rubin, 2019; Trethewey 2020). Rubin (2018) further suggested that health professionals who encounter health disinformation on social media are better positioned to counteract the disinformation by fact-checking medical content utilizing their social media presence and clinical experience. In addition, O'Connor and Murphy (2020) indicate that

medical professionals as well as individuals with health awareness can advise and refute false information about health on social media and cite their sources. Therefore, the study concludes that healthcare professionals serve as role models for others when it comes to correcting health misinformation on social media.

6. Implications of Health Communication Policy on Social Media

The study highlighted that despite the presence of mechanisms to mitigate disinformation, social media platforms are still susceptible to manipulation by users who seek and share information about figure enhancement and illicit body enhancement treatments. Several countries have instructed social media companies such as Instagram, X, Facebook and YouTube to pull down posts that promote the misuse of drugs such as apertamin for weight enhancement. For example, in England, the National Health Service (NHS) called upon Instagram to restrict accounts that sell unlicensed body enhancement drugs targeting young women and girls (Collision, 2021). Similarly, in several African countries such as Nigeria, the Food and Drug Agency has not approved the sale of apertamin. However, most countries in Africa do not have a specific social media policy that mitigates the marketing of illegal weight-enhancement treatments. As a result, conversations around 'thick' body image and illegal treatments for weight gain occur unrestrained. This study suggests that African countries re-visit their social media policies so that they make online disinformation punishable by law. In addition, in collaboration with social media service providers, mechanisms to identify and report accounts that promote unlicensed weight gain treatments should be enhanced (Wang et al., 2021). Comprehensive digital literacy programs are a significant policy tool that enables people to distinguish between reliable and misleading news sources (Guess et al., 2020). It is, however, crucial to caution that in implementing these mechanisms, authorities strike a balance between policing social media and allowing media freedoms to flourish.

7. Conclusion

The growth in social media usage in Africa facilitates online conversations on social, economic and political issues. One of the trending social issues is the perceived value of 'thick' bodies among young African women. The social influence of social media conversations about 'thick' bodies has promoted information-seeking behaviours for weight gain treatments. Accounts which sell weight enhancement treatments lure their desperate clients using promises of quick body transformation after taking the illicit treatments.

This study highlighted that social media does not only provide a discursive platform for the celebration and glorification of the 'thick' female body but also provides a platform for social influence that results in the marketing, consumption and conversations on illicit weight gain treatments. The findings provide insight into the health communication problem facing African states and other countries where conversations around the attractiveness of a woman's 'thick' figure are promoting the marketing and use of illicit weight gain treatments, thus defeating the global call to mitigate overweight and efforts to prevent needless suffering from preventable diseases and premature death (Sustainable Development Goal 3).

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