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**Title: “You have to be fine too”: Body Work among Urban Ghanaian Women**

**Abstract**

Research in body work, that is, work performed on one’s body for the purposes of aesthetic modification or maintenance has received increasing attention in recent years. This follows a rise of mass production and consumer culture which enable individuals to express themselves through consumption. This paper proposes an alternative perspective to the social structure/agency approach of past studies and seeks to study body work practices by theorizing through corporeal realism. Corporeal realism argues that bodies are simultaneously shaped by social structures such as gender, consumer culture, media across numerous social spheres as well as through the agency of individuals. Corporeal realism presents a framework for studying the relationship between the body and society that is irreducible to either structures or agency (Shilling 2005; 2015). Using body work as a lens, this paper focuses on body work practices towards a certain body shape ideal. Body shape is focused in this paper as it’s the most salient part of beauty for most African societies. Social media use has also become very popular in Ghana with increasing internet penetration and phone ownership. In this regard, this study specifically explores the confluence of social media use and body work practices of urban Ghanaian women using a corporeal realism approach. Through in-depth interviews and online ethnography on social media site, Facebook this paper explores the meanings urban Ghanaian women attach to body work. Preliminary findings from in-depth interviews with middle class urban Ghanaian women and online ethnography indicates that social media use promotes body work practices in three ways. First, social media networking sites serve as a platform where products and services are scrutinized and bought for the purposes of body enhancement. Second, social media sites serve as support systems for body work practices engaged in by these women. Thirdly, social media spaces are a place where participants flaunt their new bodies to gain validation. Evidence from the online ethnography from an all-women’s Facebook group also shows evidence that increasingly, urban Ghanaian women are taking conscious steps to shape their bodies. Individual agency and social media use intertwine in varying degrees to influence how urban Ghanaian women engage in body work. Body work is not just a construct of a patriarchal society as posited by several studies, rather, it is also a means for women to express agency through a conscious disciplining of their bodies. The societal context in which this takes place however, cannot

be ignored. Theorizing body work practices through corporeal realism allows for new understandings of the relationship between body and society that goes beyond the dualism of agency and structure.

Keywords: body work; social media, body ideal, corporeal realism

### **Biography of Emelia Afi Agblevor**

Emelia Afi Agblevor is a PhD Sociology student, from Ghana currently studying at the Hong Kong Baptist University. She earned her MPhil degree in Sociology as well as her B.A degree (Sociology and Classical History) from the University of Ghana. Her MPhil thesis was on “Self-medication Practices among Families in Accra”.

Emelia’s PhD work focuses on body work among urban Ghanaian women at the intersection of gender, health and social media under the supervision of Professor Gina Lai. Emelia has a keen interest in the evolution of body shape ideals in Ghana especially within the context of the increasing accessibility to the internet and social media applications in Africa as well as the interrelations of the phenomenon to gender, social capital and globalization. During her MPhil studies, Emelia was attached to the Noguchi Memorial Institute for Medical Research at the University of Ghana where she gained hands-on experience with various data collection and analyses tools. She also has done some mainstream journalism work and as a result is very passionate about improving how academics communicate their research to the broader society for a stronger impact.

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