

# **Analysis of the ideal body features for Zimbabwean women for the achievement of the better fitment of fashion products**

Rufaro Sharon Komichi<sup>1</sup>, Felisia Chimbindi<sup>2</sup> & Tarirai Dandira<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>MPhil Student, Chinhoyi University of Technology

<sup>2</sup>Senior Lecturer, Chinhoyi University of Technology

<sup>3</sup>Senior Lecturer, Chinhoyi University of Technology

---

## **Abstract**

The research paper explores the Zimbabweans' view of ideal woman's body features to provide a comprehensive overview of what is considered an acceptable silhouette in Zimbabwe's cultural groups in order to achieve better fitment of fashion products by clothing manufacturers. The study used a qualitative research approach in which participants for the interview were purposively selected based on assumed knowledge of cultural norms, values, and beliefs. The study participants comprised both men and women of above 56 years from different cultural groups in Zimbabwe, drawn from the ten provinces namely Matebeleland north, Matebeleland south Bulawayo Harare Mashonaland central, Mashonaland west, Mashonaland east, Masvingo, Midlands, and Manicaland. The study sample consisted of ten elderly participants, 5 males and 5 females purposively selected from one district per province. These were subjected to in-depth face-to-face interview and observations to get their perspective on the ideal body features of an ideal woman according to their cultural norms, values and beliefs. The study findings revealed that the ideal body features for the Zimbabwean woman are large nicely curved hips, narrow waist and well-shaped burst area, conforming to pear-shaped silhouette, giant and averagely built body. These ideal features are molded onto the girl child through traditional medicinal consumption and physiological intervention at a tender age from birth to six years.

**Keywords:** Silhouette, ideal body, culture.

## **Background of study/ Introduction**

According to Waugh (1999) in the origination of fit can be traced back as far as the twelfth century Europe where the evidence of well-cut fitted clothing through the model was interpreted as an image of nobility. It was then, that fit began to influence fashion. Evidently, clothes provide body cover and body protection, but there are other social and emotional aspects attached to them. Nkambule (2010) concurs with Waugh (1999) stating that clothes need to have a proper fit and at the same time be fashionable and aesthetically pleasing to the eye. This research paper explores the Zimbabweans' view of ideal woman's body features to provide a comprehensive overview of what is considered an acceptable silhouette in Zimbabwe's cultural groups in order to achieve better fitment of fashion products by clothing manufacturers. The researchers examined the Zimbabwean woman ideal body features, how the body features are achieved, and desired

clothing characteristics to get the basis for obtaining anthropometrics and sizing systems that may enhance the fitment of fashion products and the shopping process among women consumers. Issues related to the current sizing systems and challenges faced by apparel manufacturers wishing to produce apparel for this niche market are discussed with reference to perceived ideal body features among the cultural groups in Zimbabwe.

Over the years Zimbabwean clothing manufacturing companies are using borrowed sizing charts such as those from Britain, France, America and Sweden. The country does not own a standardized sizing chart yet Zimbabweans have different body silhouettes due to different cultural backgrounds which are influenced by the environment and dietary cultures. Pound (2018) stipulates that the silhouette of a woman is a malleable entity, something molded according to the dictates of complex social codes. McClendon (2018), purports that women in the 18th century were believed to be inherently weak and in need of support hence the need for wearing corsets that nipped-in waist and have voluminous crinoline, which drew attention to the upper body which was considered "the most precious". Bruna in Pound (2018) states that in the Western culture the lower body parts of the woman are considered unworthy, which is why women's legs have been hidden for centuries underskirts and petticoats. As opposed to the African belief of the ideal woman's silhouette, the ideal female body in Western countries is thin with very little body fat or no fat at all (Reynolds & Fletcher-Janzen, 2007). On the contrary, African countries including Zimbabwe have always considered a full-figured body to be ideal (Wykes & Gunter 2005). Ellis (2008) states that African women generally have protruding buttocks and mostly fall within the full-figured category. In most African countries it is still a common belief that thin individuals are not attractive. Cogan, Bhalla, Sefa-Dedeh, & Rothblum, (1996) and Johnson & Foster (2001) concur that until the 21st century, full-figured women were considered attractive and were respected since their bodies represented wealth, fertility and good health. In the majority of African countries, a full-figured woman is seen as spousal material and is mostly envied by both men and women (Johnson & Foster, 2001). Berry (2008) reports that some African women are encouraged to gain weight and young thin girls are force-fed in countries such as Mauritania, some parts of Nigeria and Niger. There are fattening houses used specifically to fatten women in West African countries, highlighting the fact that some African countries still value and idolize full-figured women (Murphy 2003, Johnson & Foster, 2001). A study conducted by Johnson and Foster (2001) revealed that Ghanaian women considered a full-figured woman to be more attractive than a thin woman. Rosen (1993) argues that an African woman's body silhouette is plumper and its ideal features are at the bottom, larger hips, narrow waist and rounded bust. Chatterjea (2004) and Mastameson- Mason (2012) concur with Rosen (1993) that the female body shape of black women in Africa can be connected to Saartjie Baartman of the 19<sup>th</sup> century whose lower torso was disproportionately larger than her upper torso.

In spite of exaggerated body features one's body cannot be changed and cannot be forced to fit into the ideals of other cultures although some people from other cultures may feel they are superior to others. This study is of paramount importance as its end results shall help fashion designers and industries take cognizance of diverse body shapes and provide clothing that is appropriate for their customers. All body configurations have a right to be properly dressed in well-fitting clothing. The sections below present the research question and the conceptual framework that guided this study.

## **Research question**

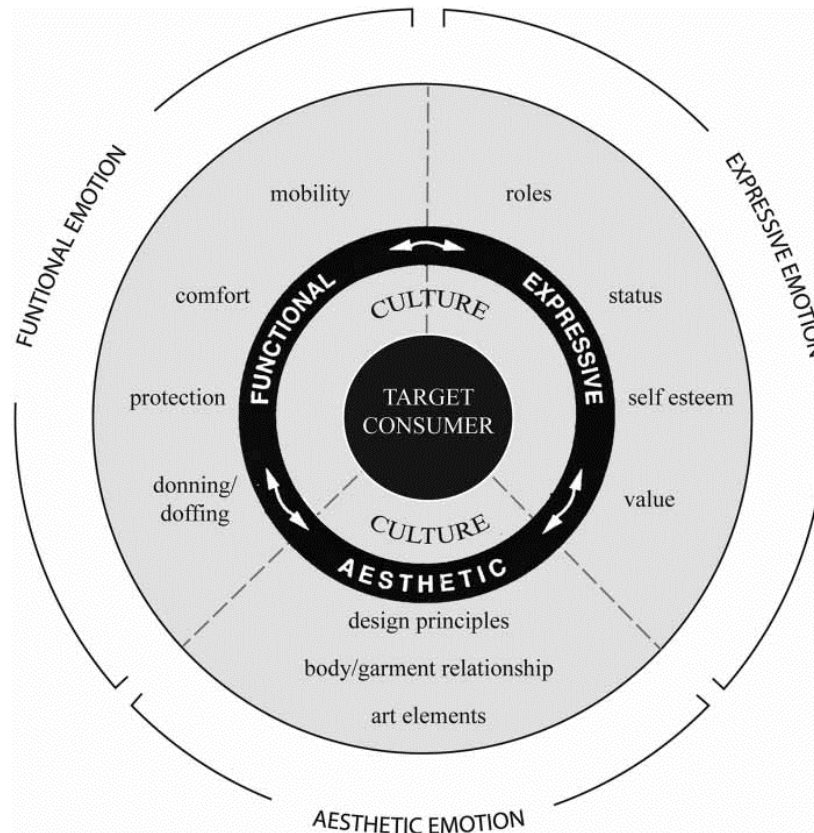
What are the ideal women's body features for the Zimbabwean women?

### **2.1. Conceptual Framework**

This study follows the approach outlined in Lamb & Kallal's (1992) Functional, Expressive and Aesthetic (FEA) Consumer Needs Model to examine the target customer's ideal body features and identify the underlying issues preventing the Zimbabwean woman from acquiring the desired fitting apparel. Figure 1 below illustrates the various components of the model through the problem identification stage and review of literature in the context of the FEA model. The model begins by identifying the target customer and proceeds to consider the culture surrounding the target customer as a basis for exploring the customer's functional, expressive, and aesthetic wants and needs based on the perceived ideal body features. Once a full understanding of the target customer is gained, the problem identification phase begins by clarifying issues that limit the designer's ability to provide apparel that meets these wants and needs.

The target customer is located at the core of Lamb & Kallal (1992) FEA model. In order to provide the target customer with apparel that satisfies her wants and needs, the fashion designers should develop a profile of their ideal body features and anthropometry. The researchers intend to attain this information by visiting various provinces and having one-on-one interviews. The FEA model proposes that the target customer is encircled by a culture that influences and moulds their apparel desires and style preferences. Consumers judge products from within their cultural surroundings. Culture acts as a mediator and buffer between the intended users of apparel and their requirements and desires in their apparel items (Lamb & Kallal, 1992). As such some African cultures have some prescribed measures taken to modify their women figures for desired shapes (Murphy, 2003; Johnson & Foster, 2001).

Functional, expressive, and aesthetic apparel concepts are not viewed as separate or mutually exclusive, but as interrelated three continuums of relative importance. Functional-expressive acknowledges that apparel must be useful while providing the wearer the opportunity for self-expression. Expressive-aesthetic is concerned with the symbolic message conveyed by apparel while providing a sense of beauty and pleasure to observers; and aesthetic function considering that apparel should be visually appealing while fulfilling its specific purpose (Lamb & Kallal, 1992). Therefore, ideal body features should be emphasized among different cultural groups through dress to encompass the three qualities of the FEA model. It is critical for designers to have a deep understanding of consumers' figure characteristics to effectively input such features in the designing process. Next is the FEA model figure that guided this study.



**Figure 1. FEA model by Lamb & Kallal (1992)**

### **Western View of the ideal body features**

Kirby (2016) stipulates that the preferred ideal body for western women consists of a tall, slender physique known as the thin-ideal. This idealized image that has been constructed by the media via magazines, movies and advertising campaigns is having adverse effects on the lives of many women. The preoccupation or obsession with their physical appearance has trapped Western women into subscribing to unhealthy narratives such as "I must be thin to be accepted and loved", "A thin body will make me happy", "DiETING will help me lose weight" or "Thinness equals beauty". According to Diedrichs (2015) epidemiological evidence points towards concurrent increases in the Western cultural idealization of thinness. One of the ways in which they do so is through the common use of very thin and attractive models in print and other media. Often termed the 'thin ideal', they communicate the way people believe they should look in order to be attractive and desirable to others. For women in Western culture, a very common attitude is that thinness is beauty (Mills, Shannon & Hogue, 2017). This becomes a challenge as their sizing charts are designed specifically to suit slender figures with great differences of drop values because most of Zimbabwean women are more voluminous in all parts of the body.

### **African View of the Ideal Female Figure**

Over centuries, every society has had its own unique standard of feminine beauty, (Fox 1997). Mooij (2004) asserts that body image in the context of Africa has not been the topic of many

researchers. The majority of the studies on feminine beauty have been conducted in Western societies. Jackson & Shaw (2006) and Gourley (2007) argue that perceptions about beauty differ from country to country and from culture to culture. However, one common denominator that remains the same across cultures and countries is the desire to be accepted by society and to be adored by many. According to Zikalala (2019) in traditional African culture, a woman's body size was also an issue but may be to a lesser extent than in other cultures. It is thought and accepted that a woman with a rounder body and an overweight body is well provided for by her guardian, and male admirers would also enjoy being seen with such a woman. Men liked the idea of being married to women of fuller figures as this meant that they were good providers.

Ellis (2008) says African women generally have protruding buttocks and mostly fall within the full-figured category. In most African countries, it is still a common belief that thin individuals are not attractive. According to Johnson & Foster (2001) full-figured women are considered attractive, and respected, and their bodies represent wealth, fertility, and good health. In the majority of African countries, a full-figured woman is seen as spousal material and is sometimes envied by both men and women (Mastement, 2010). Berry (2020) highlights that some African women are encouraged to gain weight and young thin girls are force-fed in countries such as Mauritania, some parts of Nigeria and Niger. There are fattening houses used specifically to fatten women in West African countries, reflecting the fact that some African countries value and idolize full-figured women Johnson & Foster (2001) and Murphy (2003). A study conducted by Johnson & Foster (2001) revealed that Ghanaian women considered a full-figured woman to be more attractive than a thin woman. According to Mastemet- Mason (2008) lifestyle, cultural influence, age, body shape and current fashion trends sway personal fitment preferences, and changes in these fundamentals may result in changes in personal fitment preferences. Strydom & M de Klerk (2006) argue that ill-fitting garments have negative consequences on appearance management. The next section presents the research methodology that was used to conduct this study.

## **Methodology**

The study used a qualitative research approach in which participants for the interview were purposively selected based on assumed knowledge of cultural beliefs, habits and values. The study participants comprised both women and men from different cultural groups in Zimbabwe of the ages above fifty-six years. The study was carried out in all the Zimbabwean ten provinces namely Matebeleland North, Matebeleland South, Bulawayo, Harare, Mashonaland Central, Mashonaland West, Mashonaland East, Masvingo, Midlands, and Manicaland. The study participants were selected from ten cultural groups namely Tonga, Ndebele, Karanga, Zezuru, Samanyika, Nambia, Nyanja, Chewa, Venda, and Kalanga. In the ten provinces, the researchers selected one district to represent each of the ten provinces and cultural groups dominating the province. The researchers purposively selected ten elderly individuals from each district (5 women and 5 men) for interviews to get their perspectives on the ideal body features of an ideal Zimbabwean woman according to their cultural values and beliefs. The researchers include men in the study since they are the ones most influential in setting trends on characteristics of an attractive woman. To collect data for the study, the researchers sought permission from the district councilors, chiefs and headsmen for each district. The researchers visited the purposively selected homesteads to collect data on ideal

women's body features by recording interview sessions. The use of unstructured interview guide and observation methods enabled the researchers to frame questions that encouraged conversation leading to uncovering of personal context and stories that gave deeper insights on ideal features of a Zimbabwean woman body. The researchers made use of audiotapes and notes to prevent any information from being lost or missed during the interview. The researchers ensured confidentiality among the participants by disclosing information from other participants, and informing them that the data was going to be used for educational research purposes only. The next sections present the study findings.

### **Findings of the study**

The study focused on the analysis of the ideal body features for the Zimbabwean women for the achievement of improved garment fitment among women consumers,

#### **Demographic data of participants.**

There were more female participants than males in the study. The inclusion of both male and female participants enabled the researchers to get more information on the ideal figure from both sexes. It was of paramount importance to engage both sexes as both males and females are involved in the purchasing of fashion products. The participants' opinion on the ideal figure was of great importance as it helped the researchers to point out the key body areas of the Zimbabwean women to emphasize in clothing design to achieve optimum garment fitment. Most of the study participants were aged 66 to 70 years (38), and 61 to 65 years (31) with all participants' ages ranging from 56 years upwards. The researchers chose to interview the elderly because they are more mature and well versed of their cultural beliefs and values in modeling the women to obtain desired ideal body features and they have not been eroded by the western culture. These age groups are also more experienced in clothing consumption.

#### **Main body features of an ideal Zimbabwean woman.**

The researchers managed to get views of both women and men. The findings indicate that the women ideal body features include pear shaped silhouettes, averagely built, giant, and slender body shapes. Men depict what is attractive and desirable of the opposite sex and they assist in setting trends on women models. Women go to the extreme to impress the opposite sex, hence from the findings men freely gave their opinion to define the Zimbabwean woman ideal body features. The responses of the participants are discussed below in themes that emerged from their verbatim expressions.

#### ***Pear shaped silhouette***

Most of the male and female participants revealed that the most desired female body silhouette is pear-shaped which is characterized by large hips, narrow waistline and well-rounded breasts. The participants reasoned that such women are attractive and they appear well-fed and strong. One of the participants from one of the provinces said:

*"The woman should have protruding hips. Our women are very hipilicious (meaning they have very attractive large hips)" (MSN3).*

Another one from a different province pronounced that,

*"Women should not be straight like a tree trunk, instead they should have small waistlines, large hips and burst"* (MM5)

An elderly woman from the other province also said,

*"Their breasts should not be all over the chest but should be moulded at the centre of the chest. Breasts should be average not so big neither should they be too small"* (MZ2).

The statements from the study participants reflect that appearance of women is very important among cultural groups in Zimbabwe, reflecting that an ideal woman should possess such desired body characteristics for them to conform to the social settings. Most men and women participants preferred women who are very curvaceous and big in nature because such women arouse men and are mostly strong to perform house chores. Mastmet- Mason (2014) and Ellis (2008) stated that African women generally have protruding buttocks and mostly fall within the full-figured category. In most African countries it is still a common belief that thin individuals are not attractive. As such full-figured women were considered attractive, were respected, and their bodies represented wealth, fertility and good health (Zikalala, 2019; Johnson & Foster 2001). The study participants also revealed that they felt very proud and highly honored when they marry and walk around with their full-figured wives. They reasoned that it was a sign of their ability to take good care of their wives as alluded to by Zikalala (2019 and Johnson & Foster (2001). However, most of the women of the current generation are educated and go to work just like the males which means they are capable of taking good care of themselves. Their ability to take care of themselves means their ability to seek fashion products is high as they need more clothes to put on when going to work. They need to be highly presentable in well-fitting clothes.

The view that most men were proud and honored when seen walking with full-figured wives is in agreement with Murphy (2003)'s view that in the majority of African countries, a full-figured woman is seen as spousal material and is sometimes envied by both men and women. The idea of having a pear-shaped body shape is very common among most young generation women as they model out their figures through close-fitting dress to shoe out their body shapes. It is reported that some African women are encouraged to gain weight and young thin girls are forced to gain the desired levels of body weight (Murphy, 2003; Johnson & Foster, 2001). As such, most participants revealed that the most ideal body feature that was most attractive to both males and females was a pear-shaped silhouette with large hips, a narrow waist and well-rounded breasts.

The emphasis on the narrow waist and protruding bumps, as well as wide hips, were the most desirable features that came out of the study repeatedly. The men and women participants reasoned that the narrow waist and wide hips body characteristic was most desirable because the features reflect the most important body sections or body parts for the men when they seek life partners. For instance, back in the 19th Century, Saartjie Baartman's body shape was characterized by full breasts, a narrow waist and extra-large buttocks which made her a large spectacle being displayed by her masters in various places in Paris. Her body figure represented so much of the desirable African silhouette though it was viewed by Europeans as ugly, yet later on, the same body, though not acknowledged, was used to inspire the creation of Victorian bustle dress that

resembled her body in every aspect (Mastemet –Mason, 2014). Ironically, as she was viewed as half-ape, she was also seen as sexually provoking to Europeans who of course would not admit it. The latter points to the value attached to the African woman's silhouette even among the European people showing the need to emphasize the body shape through clothes, well designed to expose such an attractive body shape. An averagely built silhouette is another ideal body feature that was revealed by the participants.

#### *Averagely built*

The averagely built silhouette also points to the qualities of fully developed breasts, hips and bumps although moderately sized, of which the qualities are closely linked to the pear shaped silhouette. One of the participants mentioned that:

*"Averagely built women are quite portable hence, I have chosen such a wife in my life" (MS6).*

From the above statement, it shows that the averagely built woman is also favorable among men in Zimbabwe. The reason is that they are portable. Among the few participants who preferred an averagely built woman, there was no mention of aesthetic value which was highly valued by most participants who desired a full figure with pear-shaped body shape.

#### *Giant*

It was also found that the ideal woman among the Zimbabwean cultures is a giant figure with long legs, full thighs, and thick bottom. These characteristics are different from the above in the size of the body which is a full tall figure. The idea of being a giant was also reiterated by the participants as alluded to by one of the interviewees:

*"They should have round full thighs. In nature they are huge from top to bottom. Everything about these women is voluminous" (MS3).*

One of the male participants expressed his pride in having a giant wife saying:

*"I feel good when walking around with a giant wife with long legs giving the woman a tall figure" (MNM6).*

The statements above show that a giant woman is also desired by most Zimbabwean men and women. The quality of a full figure which was said to reflect strength seems a centre of attraction among the women in Zimbabwe. The response that the woman should be a giant, characterized by round full thighs and voluminous body reflects that most of the body features are aligned to those of the pear-shaped silhouette although the giant lacks the overall pear shape of the body. However, appearance is modified and revealed by the nature of clothing they put on which improved fitment of apparel is the core value of this study through analysis of the ideal features of the Zimbabwean woman.

Most men participants argued that these qualities among women aroused the men when in bed since it was found that the most body-built quality requirement for women is to be able to satisfy their husbands in bed and aesthetically. In a study by Mastemet –Mason (2014) Saartjie Baartman's body did not qualify as an hourglass body because her hips were exaggeratedly larger than the waist, the bust, and the shoulders. Her body would, therefore, be best described as Hourglass-



Pear shaped (Hourg-Pear), which combines large fleshy breasts with an exaggerated hipline. These characteristics typify a sexy woman in the African context as both the large buttocks and the full rounded breasts are sexually provoking. Zikalala (2019) also highlighted that men liked the idea of being married to women of fuller figures as this meant that they were good providers. It should be noted that men have always regarded themselves as the upholders of culture, which leads to the observation that it is actually not women who create the feeling that their bodies are fundamental problems. However, the need to belong to specified social groups motivates women to model their bodies to conform to acceptable and desired body features. The need to emphasize such desired features creates a need for clothing that would help the women to expose the desired features. For successful exposure of such features, clothing with good fitment qualities is needed for the women leading to the need for a sizing chart that would cater for their unique body shapes. A slender body shape was also indicated as an ideal body shape among Zimbabwean women by the study participants.

#### *Slender*

A Few of the interviewees indicated that slender women are quite favourable. Their body shape is attractive and healthy and can be dressed easily as compared to the full-figured woman.

One of the male interviewees highlighted that:

*"For hardworking purposes, a woman who is slim and slender performs her chores better than a voluminous woman" (MS4).*

Another male participant argued that:

*"Big women can be very lazy and have poor performance in bed due their big bodies as compared to slender women" (MW2)*

These few participants considered the performance of house cores and performance in bed as the main aspects in women's body built reflecting that duty performance is affected by the nature of body weight and shape. However, women's performance in bed is linked to the fact that women are considered as spousal material (Mastement, 2010) in which most men link women's body features to sex performance. Since sex satisfaction is a basic need for both men and women, it is ideal for both men and women to consider molding their bodies to achieve improved sex performance. The link of pear-shaped and giant body shapes to sex performance was also emphasized by most men and women participants. The later desired body shapes characteristics were augmented by such qualities as highly attractive and that they appeared well-fed and strong. However, the view that the woman should be slender indicates that some Zimbabweans are appreciating western woman's silhouette since they admire thinness and tallness among other features of a western woman model. Some women in the western countries and even in Africa expose themselves to severe dieting and exercise in order to lose weight in an effort to attain thin skinny silhouettes with some ending up with severe adverse health effects such as anorexia nervosa (Diedrichs, 2015). Some women try to engage in various dietary and exercise interventions to lose weight without marked improvements and achievements due to cultural modeling and environmental exposure during early childhood development.

According to Nkambule (2010), the shapes and sizes of women have been changing over the past decade while sizing standards and garment proportions used by apparel industries have not changed. This has seen especially many women in Africa experiencing many problems with regard to the fit of ready to wear clothes (Wang Meng, 2007). The major problem mostly experienced by this group has been the inability to find well-fitting, fashionable clothes that fulfil their functional, economic and aesthetic needs. Nkambule (2010) explained fit as one important aspect of clothing that contributes to a good feeling and conformity to specific social settings. Well-fitting clothes bring out an attractive appearance, freedom of movement and comfort, which, in turn, creates positive feelings among the wearers. Full-figured women are generally stigmatized for being obese, thus some of them tend to have a negative image of their bodies. Furthermore, clothes fitment has been the most frequently reported problem experienced by apparel consumers as they do their shopping. The African women who possess body characteristics divorced from the western slender silhouette have been the most affected group in this respect. In Zimbabwe such women are a prevalent population hence greater population of dissatisfied fashion consumers. These problems do not give consumers the confidence to shop online with the fear of improper fit leading to high returns and in some instances, one is either forced to give away her garment to friends or relatives. The section below presents desirable features on the Zimbabwean women's body.

### **Desirable features on women's body**

According to the findings the researchers discovered the emphasis of the bottom body area was greatly pronounced. Majority of the participants were of the view that the wider the hip area the more appealing the woman becomes. The participants mostly said,

*"They should have protruding bumps together with full thighs. Their bodies develop big from top to bottom. The bottom area though should be bigger and well-shaped. That's the lower body area have to show a round figure", (MS4).*

*"It differs with the way God created us others have big upper bodies and smaller bottoms or vice versa. It all depends", (MN5).*

*"Proportional structure bust to hip measurement should be proportional although, hips should be wider" (M6).*

According to Mastmet (2013) the drop value for hip area of African woman and the European woman generally differs. The drop value for the standard European figure is 8cm whilst for the African figure is 23cm. Hence a particular size in Europe cannot be a same size for the African decency. This is why fit issues have become a prevalent matter among African women. It is of paramount importance that the researchers take note of the lower body area (waist, lower waist, hip and sit line) in an effort to accommodate the different African women body features. From the findings, it is apparent that most Zimbabweans aspire women who possess the above-mentioned desired features reflecting that they work very hard to attain such appearance characteristics, just like how some people engage in dietary habits and exercise to reduce weight to attain slim model effects. The next section presents procedures taken by the Zimbabwean women to achieve desirable features explained above.

### **How are the desirable features emphasized through dress?**

The study participants provided the desirable features for the Zimbabwean women and elaborated well on the emphasized body features. With the statements from the respondent, it is clear that there is a great desire in clothes that cling perfectly on the waist area and fit well on hip area. This response goes on to emphasize the areas in which measurements are to be focused on waist which can be subdivided into three parts (upper belly, natural waist and the lower belly) of which the two of them are not existent on the existing size charts. It is the proportions of such measurements that vary greatly. Considering that the desirable Zimbabwean woman is voluminous their waist in particular constitutes the upper belly and to produce perfect fitting garments, it is important that these areas are measured accurately. The researchers also discovered the importance of introducing the sit line measurement to accommodate the fuller part of the bump area which is not included on the adopted western sizing charts. This is why dissatisfaction has risen within the African, Zimbabwean consumers in particular. Hence, the need for gathering of the anthropometric data and create a size chart that will enhance fitness of women's clothes among Zimbabwean consumers. The male and female study participants gave their views on how the desired body forms can be emphasized through dress as they explained that:

"When we grew up we never used to dress the upper body, we wore Umnsinsi at the bottom that would flatter our figures. (MS10)

The above statement reflects that the lower body of a woman is critical being an area of emphasis since it was the part that was dressed. However, some of the respondents' highlighted that tight fitting clothing better emphasizes their large bumps/hip area.

However, some of the participants wanted to bring out decency in a woman's way of dressing as they pointed out that loose fitting dresses that reach between the knees and ankles were desirable for women. Below another interviewee mentioned that

"Loose fitting dresses or skirts which reach between knee and the ankle" (MW2)

From the study findings, the researchers got the sentiment that decency was of importance in the way the women dress although fitness was said to be of greater importance since the silhouette is emphasized through the way one dresses. In this scenario some of the interviewees preferred apparel that just cover the body and not revealing the body parts. However, most men and women participants highlighted that loose fitting apparel would be best for the elderly but the younger generation would not be too happy and would rather opt for tight fitting clothes. The younger generation desire apparel that give a comfortable fit without the need for alterations. On this issue one of the interviewees highlighted that:

"Tight fitting for the young generation would be fine whilst loose fitting for us the elderly". (MW5).

The above statement shows that the young prefer tight fitting garments whereas the elderly goes for the loose-fitting clothing items. The option for the loose fitting by the elderly shows that they prefer modesty in dressing that does not accentuate the curves of the body. The young are

favoring the tight-fitting dress since they still need to be fashionable and for attracting the opposite sex.

### **What are your cultural beliefs pertaining to woman modeling?**

Each cultural group has a way of life, their behaviors, beliefs, values, and symbols that they accept, generally without thinking about them, and that are passed along by communication and imitation from one generation to the next. Various responses were presented with different ways of women modeling such as cooked medicine, use of medicines when bathing babies and physiotherapy,

According to Zikalala (2019) each cultural group has a way of life, their behaviors, beliefs, values, and symbols that they accept pertaining to woman figure modeling that are passed along through communication and imitation from one generation to the next. Various modes of modeling were presented by the elderly men and women interviewed from the regions of Zimbabwe.

#### *Cooked medicine*

The study participants said that they use traditional medicines to mold women into desired body shape and emphasize the desired body features. The medicine obtained from specific tree barks, roots and leaves is added to cooked porridge which is eaten by the girl child in the prescribed methods. This porridge is believed to have properties that aid in the development of the girl child molding their bodies to give the desired figure shape, in this case a narrow waist and wide hip appearance. The effort of giving the girl child something to ingest so as to produce an adult with a thick voluminous figure clearly shows the great idolization of a distinctive Zimbabwean woman silhouette. One of the participants explained that:

*"We use traditional medicines using various barks of trees that are cooked for them to drink to attain the desired pear-shaped woman figure during the early years of age, for example from the age of 6. These medicines help the girl child to have strong bones and obtain a nicely shaped figure that is very attractive. A porridge is cooked in which (mushonga) mudzi – unsambia (roots) / rutenda powder is added. After girls take the porridge, they do not shake hands. Their bodies will be hot and eventually their bodies expand proportionally to the large hips, well rounded burst area and small waist." (MN3).*

The above quote reveals the medicines that are used to shape women's bodies traditionally as desired. According to Zikalala (2019) in traditional African culture a woman's body size was also an issue, but maybe to a lesser extent than other cultures. It was believed that a woman with a rounder body or even an overweight body was well provided for by her guardian, and male admirers would also enjoy being seen with such a woman. Men indicated that they liked the idea of being married to women of fuller figures as this meant that they were good providers. The study results reflect that the human body can be manipulated to attain desired body features. The healthy field have also come up with artificial interrogation formula such as use of tablets and some physical means of controlling body bulkiness and introducing desired features like large burst and hips use of artificial breasts and bumps. However, these body modifications are done at will by grown up women willingly and are a further improvement of a previously molded silhouette during infancy. Some artificial interrogation procedures are done to replace body features lost through surgery after some illnesses like cancerous attacks and accidents. It is believed that the

traditional medicine courses applied to the body at birth would permanently shape the body and the body would be difficult to deform through exercise and dietary habits. Therefore, the great need to create a size chart that accommodates the nature of the figure in order for manufacturers to come up with satisfactory apparel. Some of the participants alluded to use of medicinal herbs when bathing their babies for achievement of desired body features as they said:

*"We use of medicines when bathing babies in order to shape their bodies" (MN7).*

The study participants also said that they bathed their girl children in water diluted with some traditional herbs for body modification into desired body shapes. One of the study participants said:

*"We bath young children with traditional medicines so they do not grow thin but develop a beautiful structure. Makwande cuttings are placed on the centre of the young girls' palms for them to eat. After that watch how they will grow big as the girls will grow nicely on the desired body sections to a well- built figure" (MW7).*

The other participant indicated that they also use cold water to make the girl body strong

*"We bath them with cold water early in the morning to strengthen their bodies" (MW9).*

The above points reflect that bathing babies in cold water strengthens the girl child, while traditional medicinal consumption was the main method used by most of the Zimbabweans to mold girl child into desired body silhouettes. Physiotherapy was also indicated as a way of shaping the body of the babies while they are still young to develop the ideal body shapes.

#### *Physiotherapy*

Other cultural groups revealed that modeling of the child is more on the physical side and it is a practice that is being passed on to other generations. Their emphasis is on molding a small shaped waist with rounded bust, proportional hip and bump area. This process was said to be done regularly during infancy until a desirable body shape was achieved. The rubbing of the child's bumps was repeatedly mentioned across all the cultures in Zimbabwe. One of the participants revealed that:

*"We pull legs to avoid rickets. We rub up the bumps of the baby so that their bumps do not sag. At a young age every morning the mothers' hands are pressed on top of the bumps line and lift their bumps so as to shape their bumps. Whilst breastfeeding the mothers gently brush the girls' bumps to shape the baby's bump area into a curveous shape" (MS6).*

The study participants said it was done to prevent the bumps from sagging. Ellis (2008) who stated that African women generally have protruding buttocks and mostly fall within the full-figured category. Hence, all these efforts are in the bid to mold a woman with a distinctive structure. Besides, ingesting the traditional medicines some bath their children with the traditional medicines so they do not grow thin but develop a desirable silhouette. The participants defined a desirable silhouette as one that consists of a narrow waistline and wide hips. These traditional medicines are also believed not only to develop a desirable silhouette but also strengthen their

bones. Strengthening of the bones makes the attained shape difficult to deform through exercise except addition of artificial stuff around the body and through surgery.

Responses gathered by the researchers strongly portray the desired body figure as one that has well rounded bust, narrow waist and big hip/bump area as such responses were repeatedly noted. Such findings show that the Zimbabwean woman figure is the opposite of the western desirable figure which does not admire fat at all. They rather go to extra miles so as to burn every fat in the body. The western invests in gym programs and nutrition doctors so that they are careful of what they take in and carefully burn excess calories. The modern girl child in Africa who feels the need to gain weight in various parts of the body engages in specific dietary routines that aid in either hip development or bump enlargement. This is all in the bid to run away from the slender figure and become more curveous.

### **How the desirable features can be emphasized through dress?**

The study participants provided the desirable features for the Zimbabwean women and elaborated on how desirable features are emphasized on the woman body. From the statements from the participants, it is clear that there is a great desire in clothes that cling perfectly on the waist area and fit well on hip area. One of the study participants echoed that,

*“The women should wear flared skirts that have beads on the waist so as to emphasize the small waistline and flattering of their hips” (MW5).*

This indicates that the small waistline and hip line are centre of attraction for the Zimbabwean woman. Two of the interviewed participants reiterated that women should put on body-hugging dresses and skirts as they said, that:

*“The women need to wear clothes that cling to the body to show off their body features and to attract attention when they walk around. These types of dresses and clothes clearly show off the silhouette of the woman and they also pronounce the small waist” (MC6 & MN4).*

These responses emphasize the areas on which measurements are to be focused on such as the waist which can be subdivided into three parts (upper belly, natural waist and the lower belly) of which two of them are not existent on the existing size charts. Laitala, Klepp & Hauge (2011) argue that several studies have shown that there are disparities within clothing sizes used today by the clothing manufacturing industries globally since the consumers differ in body shapes. The most obvious disparities are the national labelling differences between countries and mismatch of measurements which lead to fitting problems among consumers and manufacturers. Considering that the desirable Zimbabwean woman is voluminous and their waist in particular constitutes the upper belly and lower belly, the existing size charts do not accommodate this unique figure. To produce well-fitting garments, it is important that these areas are measured accurately. The researchers discovered the importance of introducing the sit line to accommodate the fullest part of the hip and bump area which is not included on the adopted western sizing charts by the clothing manufacturers in Zimbabwe. The hip measurement is very important and is already included in the existing size chart but from the observation of the African body shape through the interviews it was discovered that the Zimbabwean woman body has a fuller and wider section that

is the sit position which affects fitment of clothes. The observations and information gathered through this study justifies the need for gathering of the anthropometric data among the Zimbabwean woman to create a size chart that may assist to improve fitment of fashion products by manufactures in Zimbabwe. Such size chart will help develop the economy of the country through improved fashion business avenues as consumers may confidently purchase products from the comfort of their homes considering this era of COVID pandemic experienced globally.

Based on the elderly experience, one of the woman participants argued that:

“When we grew up, we never used to dress the upper body. We used to have Umnsinsi at the bottom that would flatter our figures” (MW7).

The response above reflects that the lower body is an area of emphasis among the Zimbabwean women. However, some of the participants’ highlighted tight-fitting clothing would better emphasize their large bum/hip area.

Some participants indicated the idea of decency in a woman’s way of dressing as they pointed out that loose fitting dresses that reach between the knees and ankles were desirable for the women. These mentioned that:

“Loose fitting dresses or skirts which reach between knees and the ankles reflect some ubuntu (decency) in our culture” (MS7).

The researchers got the sentiment that decency was of importance in the way the women dress although fitness was said to be of greater importance since the body built/ silhouette is emphasized through the way one dresses. In this scenario some of the participants preferred apparel that just cover the body and not revealing at all. However, most men and women participants highlighted that loose fitting apparel would be best for the elderly but the younger generation would not be too happy and would rather opt for tight fitting clothes. The younger generation desire apparel that gives a comfortable fit without the need for alterations to get that proper fit. One of the participants indicated that:

“We would prefer tight fitting for the young generation and loose fitting would be fine for us the elderly” (MW8).

The younger generation may have the need to be appealing to the opposite sex as cited in an article by Johnson & Lennon (2014) that women can be deceptive with regards to their body image, exaggerating physical features in an effort to appear more attractive to their date. The so-called bandage dresses as the word ‘bandage’ are very tight and shaping dresses that reveal ones’ body structure. Such dress effect is highly favored by the younger generation. The younger generation highly purchase clothes and chase after fashion which is fast changing hence boosting the sales. Therefore, the need to satisfy the market with domestic products. It is of great importance to have size charts that enable production of body-hugging garments as well as size charts that have much ease allowance so as to cater for the elderly population. Johnson & Lennon (2014) stated that the social psychology of dress is concerned with how an individual’s dress affects the behavior of self as well as behavior of others towards the self. This shows the need for an accurate size chart that will render satisfactory results with no further hustles of garment alterations.

## Conclusions

From the study findings it can be concluded that:

- Ideal women figure characteristics are determined by cultural norms and beliefs as outlined in the study findings among Zimbabwean cultural groups.
- Different cultures have various ways of molding women bodies at birth and at tender age to achieve perceived body features prescribed by cultural norms and values.
- The ideal body features for the Zimbabwean woman are large nicely curved hips, narrow waist and well-shaped bust area, conforming to pear shaped silhouette, giant and averagely built body.
- Improved garment fitment is achieved by using appropriate size charts developed from the target consumers' body measurements.

## Recommendations

Based on the study findings the researchers recommend that:

- Clothing manufacturers should consider analyzing the ideal body features for their consumers so that they can develop size charts to match consumers' body types and improve fitment of their products among the consumers.
- A comprehensive anthropometric survey be conducted among the women in Zimbabwe towards development of a sizing chart that may enhance dress fitment and appearance management.

## Suggestions for further research

- Further studies may be carried out among Zimbabwean women to come up with size charts that suit the women figures in Zimbabwe.
- Since this study was done among women, another study may be conducted among men in Zimbabwe to analyze men's ideal body features towards development of sizing charts to enhance fitment of men's clothes.
- This study was done utilizing the qualitative approach hence it can be conducted using the mixed methods approach to improve trustworthiness of results.

**Image Credit:** Creator: jacoblund | Credit: Getty Images/iStockphoto

## References

- Berry, B. (2020). *The Power of Looks: Social Stratification of Physical Appearance*. Routledge.
- Cogan, J. C., Bhalla, S. K., Sefa-Dedeh, A. & Rothblum, (1996). A comparison study of United States and African students on perceptions of obesity and thinness. *Journal of cross cultural Psychology*. 27, (1).
- Diedrichs, P. C. & Lee, C. (2015), 'Waif goodbye! Average-size female models promote positive body image and appeal to consumers. *Psychology & Health*, 26 (10), 12, 73–91.



- Ellis, H. (2008). *Studies in the psychology of sex. Bibliog, Bazaar, LCC.* New York.
- Fox, K. (1997). *Mirror, Mirror: A Summary of Research Findings on Body Image. Social Issue.*
- Gourley, C. (2007). *Flappers and the New American Woman: Perception of Women from 1918 through the 1920s. Images and Issues of Women in the Twentieth Century. 2, Twenty-First Century Books, Minneapolis.*
- Jackson, T. & Shaw, D. (2006) *The Fashion Handbook.* Routledge, London.
- Johnson, C. & Foster, D. (2001). *Self –Esteem Comes in all sizes: How to be healthy and happy at your natural weight. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Gurze books, Harvard University Press.*
- Johnson, K. K. P., Lennon, .S. J. Noh M., Zheng Z., Chae Y., Kim Y. (2014), *In search of a common thread revisited: what content does fashion communicate? International Journal of Fashion Design, Technology and Education;*7(3):170-178.
- Laitala, K., Klepp, I. G. & Hauge, B. (2011). 'Materialised ideals sizes and beauty', *Culture Unbound: Journal of Current Cultural Research*, 3(1), 19–41
- Lamb, J. M. & Kallal, M. Jo. (1992). *Conceptual Framework for Apparel Design. Clothing and Textile Research Journal.* 10 (2).
- Mastemet- Mason, A. (2008). *An Explication of the Problems with apparel fit experience by female Kenyan consumers items of their unique body shape characteristics. A PhD conssc (Clothing Management), University of Pretoria.*
- Mastemet- Mason, A. (2014). *The Saartjie Baartman's Body Shape versus the Victorian Dress: The Untold African Treasures. Open Journal of Social Science.*02 (08).
- McClendon, E. (2018). *The History of the ideal woman and where that has left us. CNN <http://editon.com>>2018/03/07/health>body-ima*
- Mills J, S., Shannon, A. & Hogue, J. (2017). *Beauty, Body Image, and the Media. Perception of beauty. 147-156.*
- Mooij, M. (2004). *Consumer Behavior and Culture: Consequences for Global Market and Advertising. Sage, Thousand Oaks.*
- Murphy, C. (2003). *In the Eye of the Beholder. BBC Online*
- Nkambule, M. T. (2010). *Apparel sizing and fit preferences and problems of plus-size Swazi Working women. University of Pretoria.* 1-133.
- Reynolds, R.C. & Fletcher-Janzen, E. (2007). *Encyclopedia of Special Education: A Reference for the Education of Children, Adolescents, and Adults with Disabilities and Other Exceptional Individuals. 3rd Edition, John Wiley, Hoboken.*
- Pound, C. (2018). *What is the 'ideal' female body shape. Explore the BBC.*
- Strydom, M. & De Klerk, H. M. (2006). *The South African clothing industry: problems are Experienced with body measurements.*
- Waugh, C.F. (1999). *Well-cut through the body: Fitted clothing in twelfth-century Europe. Dress, 26, 3-17.*
- Wykes, M. & Gunter, B. (2005). *The Media and Body Image: If Looks Could Kill. Sage, London.*
- Zikalala, F. (2019). *Body Size and Culture. Empowering Women for Gender Equity. Taylor & Francis, Ltd. on behalf of Agenda Feminist Media No. 23, Body Politics. (23), 19-22.*