

Eating disorders amongst university female students

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Objective: The study was conducted to look into the prevalence of eating disorders among female students in Ghana.

Method: 300 participants at the University of Ghana were used as samples for the study. The study adopted the Eating Disorder Diagnostic Scale as a standard questionnaire adjusting it to include particular variables the study

was measuring. The data was then analyzed and reported the findings.

Result: The study found the prevalence of eating disorders among the students, even though the majority of it was present in international students. There was however the notion that Ghanaian female students did not have a problem with being fat all stages of the health care system.

Key Words: *Eating disorders; Psychiatry; Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder*

INTRODUCTION

The National Institute of Mental Health (2018) has defined eating disorders as serious medical illnesses marked by severe disturbances to a person's eating behaviors. Research on eating disorders has received growing attention from the public sector, various health disciplines, and sports organizations. There is a consensus that they are no longer rare disorders, but rather they are prevalent in Western societies, with a marked dominance in young women [1]. A study conducted [2] revealed that there is a higher prevalence of eating disorders in females than in males, with estimates ranging from 11% to 17% among female students and 4% in males [3,4].

Most researches on Eating disorders are done on adolescents, this is due to the fact that it is at that age that most people become conscious of their weight [3], and experience more emotional upsurges and wants to generally be presentable amongst peers and the public.

Aside females being at a greater risk of eating disorders, several studies have reported differences in eating disorders risk across racial and ethnic identities [4,5], with no consistent patterns emerging [2]. There is the prevalence of the disorder among athletes [6,7], with a major prevalence among physically active women [1].

Eating disorders have been associated with the Western world with little research done in Africa. Eating disorders have a strong female middle-class bias and have been virtually unknown outside the developed West [8,9]. Eating disorders are serious health problems affecting college students. Nine percent of college students screen positive for ED symptoms [4], and Eating Disorders often emerge during the traditional college years [10,11]. Since eating disorders has been sparsely looked at the outside of the Western world, this study resorted to investigating the prevalence of the disorder in Ghana. The University of Ghana which records the highest number of students in the country

was used as a study area for this research. We sort to discover the prevalence of the disorder amongst both undergraduate and graduate female students at the University of Ghana. The study focused on female students because most studies done in the West and Asia described females to be more susceptible to these conditions [12,13]. This paper studied variations with regards to the age, academic degree or level, citizenship and extracurricular characteristics. The aim of the study is purposely for the investigation of the prevalence of eating disorders in Ghana, with the university taken as a study sample.

METHOD

Study area

The study was conducted in the University of Ghana, Legon which is located in the Greater Accra Region. According to the University's website, it currently has a student population of a little over 40,000. There is also a growing number of international students that come from over 70 countries to join both undergraduate and graduate programs.

Sampling and data collection

The current study is designed to have a quantitative background. The Eating Disorder Diagnostic Scale which was developed in the year 2000 by Stice [14] and his colleagues was modified to include the academic level or degree of the participants, the citizenship and sports and extracurricular activities, and administered to all participants. A convenience sampling method was used to select 300 female students for the study. 50 students were selected each from all four levels for the undergraduate. 50 students were selected each from the masters and doctoral level.

Ethical principles

To ensure animosity no one was required to give out her name and any detail that will reveal her identity, a consent sheet was also administered and explained to all participants before the questionnaires were given.

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RESULTS

Age

The ages of the participants ranged from 17 to 45 years. Most of the participants were within the ages of 21 to 24 as shown in Table 1. Due to the inclusion of the doctoral students higher ages were recorded. The reason for the inclusion of all levels of students was so that we could measure if the disorder had anything to do with age advancement. It was noticed that there was no correlation between the age and the prevalence of eating disorders.

Citizenship

The study included 48 international students, 26 in the undergraduate level, 8 in the master's level and 14 in the doctoral level. From the study, White students were 23, Asian students 8 in number and other African students accounting for 17 as shown in Table 1. It was noticed there were higher scores of eating disorders amongst the international students as compared to the local student. It was also more prevalent in the White and Asian students as compared to African international students.

Sports and extra-curricular activities

It was noticed that about 40% of the participants were involved in extracurricular activities and sports, with 65% doing sports as shown in the table. The prevalence of eating disorders could not be associated with extracurricular activities, though there was a little correlation between sportswomen and non-sportswomen, with a higher chance in it occurring in non-sportswomen as compared to sportswomen.

TABLE 1

Sample Characteristics

Age	Overall	Percentage (%)
17-20	75	25
21-24	138	46
25-28	57	19
> 28	30	10
Citizenship		
Ghanaians	252	84
International Students	48	16
Breakdown of International Students		
White Students	23	47.92
Asian Student	8	16.67
African students	17	35.42
Sports or Not		
Those in Not in Sports / Extracurricular Activities	180	60
Those in Sports/ Extracurricular Activities	120	40
Sports or Extracurricular Activity		
Sports	78	65
Extracurricular activities	42	35

Scores on EDDS test

It was realized that there was the prevalence of eating disabilities amongst female students; however, it was not a significant figure as it amounted to an average of 38% of the participants. This is to say that, though the study found the presence of eating disorders amongst students in the University of Ghana, the percentage was

not appreciable enough to generalize. Higher rates were recorded in international students as compared to Ghanaian students with higher rates in White and Asian citizens. The level or age of the participants had no correlation to the prevalence of eating disorders. It was however noticed that the Ghanaian students had no problem with their weight even though they considered themselves to be fat, those who did not see themselves as fat did not have a problem with becoming fat. The study noticed that some of the Ghanaian students in the questionnaire that asked if they have felt fat over the past three months choose "moderately" and "extremely", however, when asked in subsequent section if they have had a definite fear that they might gain weight or become fat, they choose not at all.

DISCUSSION

The study suggests that there is a relatively low level of eating disorder among university students in Ghana. It was realized that there was however a prevalence which needs further studies to look into to see the level of eating disorders among females in Ghana. The study employed participants from different educational levels and age groups, different citizens who were in the university and those who engaged in a form of extra-curricular activity, with sports being included.

The study, however, came up with no significant difference between the students when it came to age or educational level. Participants that showed scores of eating disorders were across levels and educational levels, and this shows that there is no correlation between the age or educational levels and eating disorder. This has been affirmed by the work of [15]. In their work, where they looked at the correlation between body image and eating disorders, they stated that both body image and eating disorders cannot be attributed to age differences, as compared to educational level. Previous studies have however hinted that eating disorders have a correlation to educational level [16,17] which was not so in this study.

There was a notable difference between local and international students. The study stipulates that there was a higher prevalence of eating disorders amongst international students as compared to African students. Though there were African students who had large body mass index, there were some that did not think they were fat and as such had no problem with their weight, and this was noticed most among the Ghanaian and Nigerian students. It was also noticed that those who admitted that they felt fat did not have any problem with it and did not do anything about it. It was however not the case with the international student. They were very much concerned about their weight and there was the prevalence of eating disorders, especially anorexia nervosa, which was also observed [2].

CONCLUSION

The association of sports and extracurricular activities and their effect on eating disorders was also analyzed. Participants were also assessed based on their participation in sports and extracurricular activities. It was noticed that most of the participants that engaged in extracurricular activities were doing sports with few in other clubs, which was usually political groups. A study have confirmed in their research, eating disorders are lower in person in sports as compared to those, not in sports, an exact correlation was not seen in the case of other extracurricular activities, the study was however contrary to the earlier submissions which said

there is a prevalence of eating disorders amongst sportswomen.

LIMITATION

Though the number of people was large, the findings of the study cannot be generalized, it is therefore recommended that a study that will look at all university female students will be done. The study will also recommend that further studies will be done to access the level of various eating disorders amongst students. The study will also recommend that a qualitative study should be conducted on this topic to find out the perception Ghanaian students have on eating disorders.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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