

Cultural compliments fuelling obesity in Cameroon

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Dear Editor

As an essential element of social interaction, the fat human body is subject to perceptions and representations. Overweight and obesity fall within the realm of beauty standards, body care practices, and power relations tied to the body. Society conveys the image that economic success is embodied in overweight, whose care gives rise to the current physical state, thus creating a power dynamic, ostentation, and demonstration between those lacking weight and those with excess. As a symbolic disposition, the outsized body signifies social distinction. Less a biomedical fact in public opinion, the body is a social construct, shaped by norms and physiques signified through doxa, which thereby takes precedence over medicine and public health policies. A deviance in medicine, obesity becomes a value in public opinion, upheld and popularized by the social norm of largeness. Obesity thus enters the category of positively valued social inequalities, as an individual's social position defines their body: the wealthier they are, the heavier they become.

The cultural glorification of obesity in Cameroon and other sub-Saharan countries poses a barrier to public health efforts aimed at reducing obesity. In Cameroon, multiple expressions compliment individuals based on their weight, particularly among youth. Overweight and obesity give rise to a language valorising fat body state. « Apouchou » signifies a plump person with attractive body shapes; « Ventre administrative (administrative belly) » denotes someone pot-bellied like an administrative executive, or on the level of a « DG » (general director) of a major institution; « La bosse (The bump) » more specifically refers to women with prominent hips and buttocks; and « Tu vis bien » often links weight gain to a luxurious life. The rise on social networks such as Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, etc., with short videos and web series prominently featuring young « Apoutchou » women, through scenes portraying this body image as most appreciated by males, represents channels that render overweight and obesity positive in Africa. Other borrowed vocabularies include terms like : « Bien nourrit » mean you are well-fed; « le pititi », mean the best, « le Président ou Prési (president) », « le Pacha », mean a person who is successful and has power in a social group; « l'héritier ou le successeur (the heir) »; « le porteur », mean the carrier of money ; « le bailleur (the lessor) », or simply « ta vie dose, mean your life is well balanced. This folkloric language, borrowing words from languages other than official language in Cameroon, constructs body valorization through

connotations. The denotations or primary meanings of these expressions are stripped away to convey everyday realities of obesity. It is a communication model that does not offend actors but cajoles them to boast excess weight. Overweight serves as a verbal indicator of enrichment, even as affected individuals expose themselves to health risks.

Obesity remains a public health issue in Cameroon, with a prevalence of 13.35% in 2022 [1] and higher rates in urban areas overweight at 33.1% and obesity at 42.2% [2]. The death rate attributed to high body mass index stood at 103.7 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2021 [3]. Although weight gain and obesity concern public health, particularly among young women, a striking countercurrent emerges in social media, streets, and families that may reinforce overweight and obesity in Cameroonian society. This culture of glorifying or complimenting visibly corpulent or obese individuals could hinder public health efforts and nutrition programs. At first glance, these expressions might appear to reduce stigma toward overweight or obese people, but they dilute awareness of the negative impacts of excess weight and obesity, thereby diminishing anti-obesity initiatives. They lead to intentional weight gain among young women experiencing body dissatisfaction and pursuing an idealized body image [4].

This is not a problem unique to Cameroon or recent, but a phenomenon experienced for years across Africa. According to Africanews (2025), « In many African cultures, a round belly has long been seen as a sign of wealth. », with expressions sometimes similar like « Boss »), and sometimes different like « Mkubwa », meaning big man, in Kenya [5]. Overweight and obesity have negative health impacts. They drastically increase the risk of chronic diseases. Obesity raises the risk of type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular diseases, impairs bone health and fertility, and promotes certain cancers. It also degrades daily quality of life, particularly sleep and mobility [6]. Other studies have shown that obesity is not only a beauty criterion but also often perceived as a sign of wealth and even good health. These representations and beliefs promote intentional weight gain. In recent years in Cameroon, obesity prevalence has risen from 9.57% to 10.91% then 13.35% between 2010, 2015, and 2022 respectively [1]. Death rates attributed to high body mass index have also increased over the years, from 102.9 to 103.7 per 100,000 inhabitants between 2010 and 2021, respectively [3].

Increasingly numerous young women labeled « skinny » (denoting very thin; having little body fat) already harbor a negative body image and resort to dietary supplements sold on social networks, clandestine counters for pharmaceutical and food products, for intentional weight gain, with all the dangers this entails. Cultural norms valorizing overweight through expressions like « Apoutchou », « Ventre administratif », or « La bosse », etc., represent a key yet neglected social determinant. Media glorification on social networks, along with familial and street compliments, promote intentional weight gain among youth, particularly young women dissatisfied with their slim bodies (« skinny »). Ignoring this cultural glorification condemns anti-obesity efforts to failure amid an epidemic already killing 103.7 Cameroonians per 100,000 inhabitants. Urgent collective interventions must account for cultural perceptions and beliefs about weight gain to maximize the effectiveness of obesity control measures.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

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