



Cultural Dynamics of Beauty: Deconstructing Perceptions of Feminine Bodily Ideals in Contemporary Nigeria

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Abstract: Beauty is a social and gendered construct, embedded in the cultural milieu of societies and stratifies people according to varying categories like age, race, class and other forms of social identity. This is an area that has been neglected by mainstream sociological research. This study problematizes the facade created by western beauty ideals. The purpose of this study is to examine the changing cultural representations of beauty by deconstructing the perceptions of feminine bodily ideals in contemporary Nigeria. An Intersectional approach was employed to explain how the pragmatics of beauty intersects with multiple social identities that shape its meaning to create benefits and disadvantages. A field research method was used and data were collected through narratives that provided deeper historical understanding and perspectives of the dynamics of beauty in some cultures in the southern region of Nigeria. This article explored the cultural images and representations of beauty across Africa with rotundity as a common index of measuring beauty. The paper argues that rather than the prevalence of a single beauty ideal there exist multiple and competing standards of beauty within different cultural contexts. The article demonstrated how cultural norms of feminine beauty are constantly shifting with the meanings associated to them as a result of the growing appeal for aesthetic procedures and cosmetic surgeries.

Keywords: Beauty; Cultural dynamics; Beauty ideals; Intersectionality; Social identity

1. INTRODUCTION

Beauty has become a “moral imperative” (Widdows, 2018) as the rise of fashion to global prominence had impacted on beauty standards and peoples’ perception of their social value (Kuipers & Ghedini, 2021). This is a universal concept that is of interest to both academics and industry experts especially, artists, scientists, philosophers, sociologists, psychologists, media experts, and others. Kuipers & Ghedini (2021) acknowledges a dearth of research on the social influence of beauty standards; a feature neglected in mainstream sociological research. Feminine beauty culture studies date back to the 1970’s and the discourse on beauty practices had centred on “the dualism of oppression and liberation” (Hua, 2022). In sociological thought and research the notion of beauty is embedded in social inequality (Hakim, 2010; Hamermesh, 2013; Kuipers & Ghedini, 2021) and an aspect of social identity that stratifies people based on their physical appearance, age, time, race, ethnicity, class, amongst other social identities. Hakim (2010) identifies beauty as a form of capital due to its foundation on the global beauty industry. Figueroa, (2013), on the one hand defines it as embodied affective process that confers benefits such as fame, opportunities, status (Kuipers & Ghedini, 2021). Beauty is described by Coleman and Figueroa (2010) as “temporalities” that show inclination towards a temporal state that is either in the past or the future but not the present.

Extant scholarship and popular discourse in beauty studies have sought to question the biological and social factors that drive the quest for feminine physical attractiveness and the cues for assessing beauty (Colebrook, 2006). Evolutionary theorists hold the view that beauty standards are universal, elemental and physical attractiveness is an important index of health and reproductive state. Academic and cultural context of feminism shaped the discursive framework of beauty culture (Hua, 2022), from the first wave through second and third wave to post feminism. Other feminists tend to explore the ways women’s choices and agencies in beauty practices are negotiated and limited (Braun, 2009; Crann, Jenkins, Money & O’Doherty, 2017).

Matters of appearance and beauty practices had been a recurring feminist concern because of the perceived costs associated with these engagements (Brownmiller, 1984; Hilman, 2013, Wolf, 1991; Rhode, 2016). From the male gaze view, conformity to unrealistic ideals, costs, discrimination, and inequality constitute some of the concerns of the proponents of beauty as domination instituted and perpetrated by patriarchy (Wolf, 1991; Chapkis, 1986; Rhode, 2010). On the other hand, proponents of the liberation perspective perceive beauty as a mechanism of attaining power and recognition (Davis, 1991; Cahill, 2003; Craig, 2006; Felski, 2006). Sentilles & Callahan, 2012 assert the import of beauty as a means of understanding and controlling women's power in society. This increasing body of research and discourse on feminine beauty had been dominated by studies in media, art, philosophical, and psychological perspective.

The set of qualities that society deems beautiful within a given period (Konstan, 2012 in Speranza, 2022) are dependent on cultural contexts. Elements of beauty are constructed as a result of social and cultural interactions. It is a commonplace knowledge that Eurocentric ideals pervade contemporary constructions of beauty and that beauty practices in western culture are harmful to women and girls (Calogero, Boroughs & Thompson (2007). Zones (2000), highlights the contemporary standards of female beauty to include attributes of youthfulness, whiteness and flawlessness. The media sets unrealistic beauty standards with idyllic mediated imagery but the societal pressure to conform to these are more on women than men (Gorran, 1999). As an unnatural phenomenon, females consistently negotiate these standards to achieve the idyllic state of beauty dependent on practices that enhance skin, face and body image. Stakeholders that influence cultural ideas about beauty include industries engaged in the production of body image enhancers, hair products, skin care, fashion, media and pornographic industries.

Physical appearance borders on characteristics associated with good health and youthful look. In an age where advances in medicine and digital technologies create enhanced physical appearances (Elias, Gill, & Scharff, 2017) leading to an increasing commodification of beauty (Vartabedian, 2018) the notion of beauty has become an embodied concept that is constantly negotiated and its definition expansive. The façade created by beauty standards has placed the body as an important vehicle of social mobility. The resultant effect is a psychological impact that evokes a feeling that one's worth is dependent on their physical appearance (Tseelon, 1993) hence, Wolf (1991) opines that beauty ideals prescribe behaviour and not appearance. The pervasiveness of beauty and the agency of women about beauty practices have been at the heart of scholarly, industry and media debates. This is an area that has been neglected by mainstream sociological inquiry. The purpose of this study is to examine the changing cultural representations of beauty by deconstructing the perceptions of feminine bodily ideals in contemporary Nigeria. In order to achieve this broad objective, the study explored the discourse on beauty with a view to review the cultural constructions of beauty in Nigerian society. In addition, it critically appraised the cultural milieu that influences the changing ideals of beauty.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This article deployed an Intersectional approach to explain how the pragmatics of beauty intersects with multiple social identities that shape its meaning to create benefits and disadvantages. Intersectionality is a feminist model of analysis put forward by Crenshaw (1991) to explain how overlapping identities such as age, gender, race, and other identities intersect to create a new identity that is different from the constituent identities. Research in this vein shows the inter-relatedness of multiple categories that result in complex systems of social inequality. Intersectional approach to beauty underscores the role of complex identities in shaping its meaning and perception. This approach provides insight into the ways in which race, gender, age, time, and others combine to determine the meanings assigned to beauty. Intersectionality recommends that all aspects of one's identity such as beauty, gender, race, age, and others should be examined as relating with each other at the same time and affecting one's privilege and perception in society (Cooper, 2015).

This paper argues that Eurocentric beauty standards are not true representations of feminine bodily ideals since beauty is socially constructed. Notions of beauty and the meanings associated to it are largely influenced by age, gender, race and class. In other words, skin colour (black, white), body image (thin, slender, curvy, voluptuous, facial features, breast, butts, hips) and hair (natural, blonde, wig) affect the standards or set of qualities that describe beauty. There is no singular experience of the social

identity beauty since the cues for determining it varies in time, culture and place. Situating beauty in intersectional analysis brings together a range of discussions on how the boundaries of beauty set by cultures and the industry stakeholders interact with multiple identities to create benefits and disadvantages for people. In other words, to gain a nuanced understanding of the notion of beauty, there is need to examine the cultural constructions of beauty, beauty practices, engagements and feminine standards of beauty shaped by other categories like age, period of time, race, gender and ethnicity. Women may often enjoy the agency of negotiating with beauty standards but such engagements or aesthetic choices could be influenced by media imagery and exclusionary beauty ideals.

3. METHOD

This study is field research; one of the commonest types of qualitative method in social research. Data were collected through narratives to provide deeper historical understanding and perspectives of the dynamics of beauty in some cultures in the southern region of Nigeria. The researcher worked with small sample of participates from Yoruba, Kalabari, Andoni and Igbo societies with the view to gain a richer and in-depth knowledge of these cultures. The participants were interviewed on the interpretations of beauty, their beauty ideals and indicators of feminine beauty in each culture represented.

4. BEAUTY AND DISCOURSE

The quest to understand human beauty is old and dates to ancient Greeks who sought to explain beauty through mathematical permutations (Bovet, 2018). Ideals, beliefs and perceptions of beauty have evolved over time and space (Abid, Nagina and Malik, 2021) and vary considerably from culture to culture. Physical characteristics perceived as beautiful in time past may no longer be desirable in contemporary society (Patton, 2006; Wolf, 1991). Just like fashion and fad, feminine beauty criteria are in a constant state of flux and re-appear after a short while. Who is considered beautiful by one may not be delightful to another hence the notion that “beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder” as popularized by Margaret Wolfe Hungerwood. All cultures have their set bodily ideals of feminine beauty. This paper aligns with the thoughts of Oloruntoba-Oju (2007) that beauty lies in the race, ethnic orientation or culture of the beholder therefore should not be viewed ethnocentrically. Both the spectator’s gaze and the bodily ideals are shaped by internalized normative standards of feminine beauty set by society within a given historical period.

From the era when beauty was enacted as consisting of slender body with high waist through the period of voluptuous, sensual, full bodied and fair complexioned feminine to the post- modern beauty canons of flat stomach, large breasts and butts, beauty standards and preferences are dynamic. Beauty has been variously conceptualized as a socially constructed and gendered phenomenon (Tseelon, 1993; Wolf, 1991; Steinberg, 2015; Erickson & Turner, 2016; Konstantinovskaia, 2020; Abid et al, 2021) and its meaning and perception are dependent on the dominant cultural values. It constitutes ideas, thoughts or physical attributes that appeal to the human senses (Erickson & Turner, 2016). As a commodity with a high price it holds consequences (social, health, transient, economic) for the feminine. It is ambiguous, personal, universal, and subjective, like many other social science concepts lack a generally accepted definition. Beauty is a multifaceted concept that is ephemeral, transient, superficial, temporary, precarious good and entails making aesthetic choices that enhance people’s appearance. Beauty preferences are prone to change and are moulded by cultural, biological, psychological and social factors. In this study, beauty is explained as a utopian aspect of human reality that perpetrates and reinforces pervasive forms of social inequality, racism, prejudices and stereotypes.

Beauty is a status marker (Abid et al, 2021) that is based on norms or cultural standards and intersects with age, gender, race, colour, class, identity, modernity, religion and ethnic orientation. Whereas there is a general emphasis on bodily ideals of beauty, there is a presumed relationship between physical feminine bodily beauty and a woman’s character (Matiza, 2013). This bipartite dimension to beauty involves the external/physical and the internal/moral aspects (Abid et al, 2021) symbolic of the African conceptualization. According to Tseelon (1993), the concept of beauty is an ideology and a fantasy model which regards the natural body as ugly (stigma) that must be controlled through beauty practices. Similarly, the feeling and quest to look beautiful even among “travestis” drive the construction of a continuous negotiation with beauty standards and femininity (Vartabedian, 2018). These practices

include skin bleaching, removal of body hairs, dieting, mastectomy, surgeries, Liposuction, cosmetic surgeries, butt lifting, etc.

5. CULTURAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF BEAUTY

Generally, beauty in Africa and Nigeria in particular is construed as feminine (Matiza, 2013) and used in celebration of feminine bodily ideals. Beauty is a value common to all human societies that depicts what is desirable. It is a concept embedded in the cultural milieu of societies (Lewis, 1958) an embodiment of cultural values in African social thought and transcends attractive physical appearance. Studies resoundingly show that good social behaviour or moral virtue validates good looks (Osaghae, 2019; Nwala, 1985; Njiofor, 2018; Matiza, 2013; Muhammad, 1993; Ette, 2016; Abid et al, 2021; Haselmann, 2014). These scholars share the view that moral virtue, intelligence and good manners are priced over physical attractiveness. Whereas external beauty is mundane inner beauty symbolizes good character and individual behaviour. Inner beauty perspective represents the patriarchal gender norms and expectations of society on females that are internalized from childhood and reinforced through adulthood. Gendered practices of grooming and dressing to mark local constructions of femininity exist in different cultures. Brass ring wearing is a local beauty norm of the Karen women, upland Burma, foot-binding in China are cross cultural evidence supporting the association between subordination of women and adherence to beauty ideals (Sentilles & Callahan, 2012).

Certain beauty enhancements peculiar to some traditional cultures around Africa include gum dyeing among Senegalese women, Mursi women of Ethiopia wear lip plates while Massai women of Kenya are adorned in heavy earrings made of stones or elephant tusks to widen the ear lobes because the wider the hole the more attractive (Haselman, 2014). Body scarification is a unique practice common to many African cultures from north, south, west, east, and central Africa with different inscription patterns varying in shape, size and body area where it is made. Others include, hair plaits, weaves, braids, waist beads, tattoos, henna on the body, fattening etc.

In the same vein, cultural images and representations of beauty across Africa vary with rotundity as a common index of measuring beauty. Most African cultures favour plumpness marked by full breasts, and big and rounded butts based on their belief that the essence of beauty is fertility (Gbadebo, 2011). This underscores the rationale for the adoption of the fattening rite of passage for girls and women of varying ages and statuses. There were exceptions to this rule of fat and fleshy as few cultures like in North Africa preferred slim figure, fair complexion, and long hair due to their natural features. The following are some other indicators of beauty common to African cultures such as wide gap in the frontal teeth, hazel eye colour, eye balls, pointed nose, body hairs, wrinkled neck, thick lips, and so on.

Among the Kalabari people of south-south Nigeria, beauty (ibi) or goodness is construed in two ways namely; “akongi ibikon were” meaning beautiful waist and “ibikina erebo” which implies beautiful as a white woman (personal communication, 2023). The Kalabari people attach great importance to the feminine body shape in terms of big waistline as portrayed in their traditional dresses. This notion of feminine beauty is similar to other riverine cultures in south-south Nigeria. In traditional Obolo culture, feminine beauty “Uja” is interpreted to mean plumpness, tall, full chest and legs. A striking similarity in these Nigerian cultures is the description of a fair-complexioned beautiful lady as white beauty. Perhaps, this may be as a result of the pervasive influence of western beauty ideals internalized from colonization. “Ewa” is the Yoruba interpretation of beauty which shows preference for plumpness and roundness of the buttocks (personal communication). The Igbo construe beauty as “nma” symbolizing a fleshy or chubby look.

6. CHANGING BEAUTY IDEALS

Feminine bodily ideals are evolving rapidly and constantly redefining the way we perceive beauty with myriad ways of achieving it. They range from padded hips, corsets, fillers, beauty hacks, through butt lifts, botox injections, penciled jaws, surgeries- rhinoplasty, liposuction, implants, and other cosmetic procedures. In a recent study on the implication of liposuction and Brazilian butt lift for courtship behaviour in Nigeria, Nwakanma (2022), noted the rapid evolvment and redefinition of beauty standards through cosmetic procedures and surgeries. The study identified changing definitions of beauty as one of the predisposing factors for the growing adoption of cosmetic procedures and surgeries. There is a cultural shift in norms of feminine beauty and the representations of beauty in Nigerian

cultures. This shift does not tend towards the adoption of any standard rather a more expansive understanding of beauty that incorporates different standards. Being white or black, natural hair, weaves, braids or straight slender, sensual or curvy (figure 8 shapes) constitute the variegated forms of beauty.

Hegemonic beauty standards are binaries of discrimination, oppression and domination that denigrate features other than Caucasian. Considerable research in beauty studies has shown complex understandings of Black women's aesthetic choices and negotiation of beauty standards (Rowe, 2018; Tate, 2009; Craig, 2002; Dosekun, 2016). Bryant (2013) further revealed the vulnerability of Black women to the effects of European standards of beauty in their life trajectories in the form of self-hatred. Some scholars have argued that the pressure to meet the hegemonic beauty ideals predisposes Black women to the binary of pain and pleasure (Dosekun, 2016; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). The paper provides an emic understanding of beauty and feminine bodily ideals away from Eurocentric standards that privilege white femininity. Craig (2002) questioned the basis for assessment of Black women based on white standards of beauty and argued for the understanding of Black women's cultural experiences through multiple standards of beauty. Since beauty is a cultural construct that varies considerably from time and space that makes it imperative that a singular western standard of beauty cannot apply to other cultures. Indeed, there are competing standards (Vartabedian, 2018) arising from complex racial systems. Beauty ideals represent culturally listed and approved 'looks' that includes the different features of the face, body, and cultural indicators of physical attractiveness (Calogero et al, 2007).

Different historical periods were dominated by spectrum of Eurocentric body ideals. Exemplified by popular art of each period, the voluptuous ideal of the 15th century, faded into popularity through hour-glass ideal that promoted beauty practices like corsets, and internalization of thin ideals. Beauty ideals are shifting but the desire to conform to the trending standards remain unchanged. The drive to achieve the ideal status leads women to engage in practices that craft the body into desirable shape. Body work is an indication of the female body as a site of the contested nature of beauty. The female body has become an entity that can be shaped and perfected (Shilling, 2003). Dieting, work-outs and other weight-loss mechanisms have been embraced at the expense of fattening procedures observed in most traditional Nigerian cultures.

7. CONCLUSION

In the present work, we employed a qualitative method of data collection using narratives to explore the ways in which some cultures construe beauty. This study contributes to the understanding of beauty by deconstructing the perceptions of feminine beauty ideals in relation to the shifting representations of beauty in contemporary Nigeria. The study underscored the overarching influence of the growing adoption of aesthetic procedures and cosmetic surgeries in the changing representations of beauty. Based on its feature as a social construct shaped by intervening categories such as race, age, ethnicity, etc, the paper corroborated the views of Craig, 2002; Vartabedian, 2018. Rather than a single western standard of beauty, there exist multiple standards of beauty which vary in time and culture. In an era where digital technologies, aesthetic procedures and cosmetic surgeries shape feminine bodily ideals, norms of feminine beauty will continue to change.

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