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FEATURE

**Globalization and Self-Perception of Women
of Asian and African Descent**

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***Abstract.** There is an increasing tendency for some races to adopt values that are foreign and may be detrimental to their self-esteem and indigenous or ethnic identities. This research examines the relationship between globalization and the way women of Asian and African descent perceive themselves both autonomously and status-wise in terms of physical beauty. Further, it explores aspects of globalization that relate to self-perceptions, such as stereotypes presented in the media and the Internet culture, and describes evolving processes that shape beauty practices and preferences of women of Asian and African descent. The study follows the critical theory paradigm and takes an approach that utilizes two focus group interviews, six one-to-one interviews, Internet observations, and artifact analysis.*

She gently stroked her right forearm with her left hand and laughed softly and almost apologetically as she stated, "White is beauty, ma'am." It was the most forthcoming response I had heard thus far and I stood transfixed as the young woman of African descent with whom she conversed then inquired, "So am I ugly?" Though I had not posed the question, I was deeply interested in the response, which turned out to be verbally non-committal, yet very telling. She laughed again, hesitated, then stated, again apologetically, "It's okay for you, ma'am." Then in the manner of offering consolation, she added "But you have a good body." The conversation continued with some pressure from the woman of African descent for a more concrete response, but she offered only alternatives for the lack of fairer skin. In the end, I was left with the firm impression that in her estimation the woman of African descent was indeed ugly. This was not my first encounter of this nature, and as I left her behind in the clothing store at the

mall, I determined to investigate how far-reaching her belief was and from where it stemmed.

Review of the Literature

Beauty—it is something human beings crave in themselves and admire in others, and achieving this seemingly ever elusive trait consumes much of the time of women globally, at times even at risk to their health such as with the neck-stretching customs practiced by some Asian and African peoples (Abraham, 2002). Personal experience has shown that, whether healthy or not, beauty enhancement practices have been largely determined by the perceptions of beauty of any given culture. Moreover, before the onset of globalization, cultures were generally more distinct and, despite some overlaps, had differing ideas of beauty, but that distinction is changing (Alibhai-Brown, 2012).

It is evident that globalization, in addition to divergences, is forging connections between cultures and that these connections are acting as catalysts that are producing a converging of cultures in terms of values and practices (Seita, 1997). An examination of some emerging values and practices in non-European countries will testify to the global nature of this trend. Further advertising to promote these practices has been launched on a global scale. Given its magnitude, researchers have been examining this phenomenon for some time and have written extensively about the various practices and implications for both individuals and cultures on a whole. This review examines some of the research conducted and has been divided into three categories: the practices in relation to self-perception and the concept of beauty, the role of the media, and health implications.

Perceptions of Beauty

Much of the research in this area has focused on women's perceptions of self and beauty. To examine how women perceive themselves and their identities, Lewin (2005) conducted a qualitative study with 26 Anglo-Indian women in Western Australia. She discovered that skin color and shades of darkness or lightness were important to status in the Anglo-Indian community. Lighter skin tones were more desired as were other features traditionally related to the Caucasian race, such as blue eyes. Although she credits some of these preferences to the Indian caste system, she primarily attributes the cause to the influences of colonialism, asserting that the colonial experiences helped to shape the Anglo-Indian identity. Caucasians were the colonizers, holding power, while Indians were the colonized, less powerful. Thus to be associated with Caucasian elements meant to be more powerful or have greater status—to be fairer was to be better. She further posits that complexion is still tied to status and identity and, in an

effort to preserve that status; fairer Anglo-Indian women will endeavor to hide their Indian heritage.

Lamkin (2011) adds that appearance matters, stating that there is a strong correlation between skin tones and opportunities—that societies provide more opportunities for success to those deemed attractive by its standards. He investigates the subject from a different perspective to other researchers—the possible existence of is a societal obligation to provide beauty enhancement services such as skin lightening treatments to those who ostensibly “need” them to conform to what he calls “racist appearance standards,” or whether enhancements should be regulated and restricted (p. 185). Lamkin’s research, conducted in the United States, is built on the premise that sexism and racism permeate existing standards of beauty. He supports this view with research that shows a correlation between skin tones and income level and quality of health services, where lighter skin tones relate to higher incomes and better health care. Although he concludes that society has no obligation to provide beauty enhancement services either through subsidies or insurance, he recognizes a need to mitigate the disparity in opportunities that exists because of variances in skin tone.

In the first study of this nature in Jordan (Hamed, Tayyem, Nimer & AlKhatib, 2010), researchers conducted a quantitative analysis of skin-lightening among women and discovered that the practice was prevalent to the extent that 60.7% of women used skin lightening products. They attribute the practice to the culture’s perception of beauty, which favors fairer skin, to the perceived increased opportunities for success, and to the belief that fairer women are considered more marriageable.

Swami, Furnham, and Joshi (2008) added to the knowledge base on the subject by conducting a study that included men. In this study conducted in the United Kingdom, they examined the role women’s skin tone, hair color, and hair length played in both the female’s and male’s perceptions of their beauty, health and fertility. One notable point of this study was the statement, based on the research of Aoki (2002) and Frost (2005), that many ethnicities tend to prefer women who are fairer than the average woman for that society, but men who are darker than the average. Another noteworthy point, identified in the findings, is that although participants showed a preference for fairer skin, the data indicated that hair color provided the greatest degree of variance in their determination of beauty, health and fertility. Still, while the study indicated that perceptions of beauty, health and fertility were determined by an interaction between the variables—skin tone, hair color, and hair length—in the final analysis for ratings of attractiveness, participants showed a preference for light-skinned brunettes.

Role of the Media

In a study on the role of the media in self-perception, Monro and Huon (2005) explored the effects of various idealized images depicted in the media on body shame and appearance anxiety in young women. The researchers used a pre- and post-testing method that employed Herman and Polivy's (1975) Restraint Questionnaire to assess body shame in terms of attitudes and behaviors in regard to weight and dieting. Similarly, they used Hart, Leary, and Rejeski's 12-item Social Physique/Appearance Anxiety Scale to measure anxiety levels resulting from participants having their bodies evaluated by others. Monro and Huon discovered that participants experienced increased levels of body shame and appearance anxiety when exposed to the images. The increased level of body shame was similar in women who were high self-objectifiers and those who were low self-objectifiers, where objectification meant valuing appearance above other qualities such as talent or character. Conversely, the increase in appearance anxiety was greater for women who were high self-objectifiers. The researchers maintain that while idealized images exert pressures to conform to some given ideal, their influences are regulated by pre-existing levels of self-objectification.

Bessenoff (2006) supported this conclusion after her exploration of the effects that the thin-ideal image presented in advertising has on women's body image. Her study of 112 female participants found that exposure to the thin-ideal image resulted in higher levels of depression and negative moods, increased discontent with body image, and lowered self-esteem. Although absent in women with low self-discrepancies, the phenomena were pronounced in women who possessed high self-discrepancy body images, that is, those who believed that their image fell far below standard. Reflective of Monro and Huon, she cautions against holding the media solely responsible, since existing self-discrepancy levels also play a role in the effects of thin-ideal images in advertising.

In an examination of four Asian societies—Hong Kong, India, Japan and Korea, Li, et al (2008) concluded that whiteness is an important determinant in concepts of beauty. They contended that this preference stems from traditional Asian values and Western influences, stating that while concepts of whiteness as beautiful predate colonialism, Euro-centric ideologies developed during the colonial period and current advertising images for beauty products featuring white models are making the concept more global. According to their report, skin-whitening product sales have increased dramatically over the past two decades and now constitute the bestselling beauty product in the Asian economy. In summary, these researchers claim that the desire for whiter skin is a global phenomenon, transcending Asia and extending into other non-white societies in Africa, South America and the Middle East.

A slightly different slant in the examination of ideals of beauty and self-concept (Gurari, Hetts & Strube, 2006) measured the susceptibility of implicit

and explicit self-evaluation to exposure to idealized images in advertising. Affirming that previous studies focused on explicit measures, they endeavored to measure implicit or unconscious perceptions and determined that while explicit self-evaluations were unaffected by exposure to the images, implicit self-evaluation was influenced to the extent that it resulted in changed behaviors during the study—participants snacked less and spent more time reading health magazines. The researchers further claimed that due to the absence of implicit measures, prior research might have underestimated the impact of idealized advertising images on women's self-perception.

Given the relationship between self-esteem and behavior, Karelis (2011) proposed that public health campaigns utilizing social marketing be used to help build self-esteem. He stated that social marketing can foster change on the premise that the "media can shape popular perceptions" (p. 591). In an effort to reduce skin tanning and whitening practices, he recommended campaigns with slogans like "Natural is Beautiful" to build self-esteem and change public opinions of beauty. He offered that increased levels of self-esteem would cause a reduction in what he termed health-threatening behaviors.

Health Implications

In a study on mercury exposure from skin-lightening products produced in Mexico, Copan et al. (2012) ascertained that both users and non-users of the products in the same household were exposed to inorganic mercury, which can be inhaled into the body. This finding widens the scope of injury from these products whose mercury content can lead to kidney disease, insomnia, depression, memory loss, and decreased cognitive ability. The report indicated that mercury levels from usage of these creams were so high that the health department advised immediate discontinuance of their use.

In the examination of the practice of blepharoplasty (eye widening surgery) performed on Asian children, Oullette (2009) suggested that the risk of some beauty enhancement procedures might extend beyond the physical. In addition to hematoma, asymmetry, and the general risk inherent in surgery, blepharoplasty presents the danger of infringing on personal identity. This risk is receiving more attention as Caucasians, such as one father described in the article, who adopt Asian children, are electing to have this surgery performed on them, the implication being that the child could perceive that something was wrong with the original feature. The author referenced one case in which a young woman equated having this more Western, less Asian feature with having a high-quality degree from a better college.

In summary, while these studies concentrate on differing aspects of the perceptions of beauty, they present compelling evidence of a movement toward a

converged concept of beauty in several spheres based on Euro-centric or Caucasian ideologies fuelled by the media. Li, et al, (2008) categorically states that mass media is playing a vital role in reinforcing the desire for whiter skin, while Bessenoff (2006) concurs with similar findings that images in advertisements affect self-esteem in women. Karelak (2011) later adds that self-esteem influences perceived beauty-enhancing behaviors, including whitening practices. Moreover, either directly stated or implied in several of the reports was the fact that many cultures show a growing trend toward desiring whiter skin.

In light of this review, the current study can add to the wealth of existing knowledge on this subject. It extends beyond examination of the role of globalization in self-perception of beauty to an additional examination of perception of status in relation to other races. The findings of this study can be used to verify existing research, give an alternative view, and add another dimension, the race-status perception.

Two questions set the parameters for this study. 1) How do women of Asian and African descent perceive themselves in terms of physical beauty? And 2) how do women of Asian and African descent rank their race in relation to other races in terms of beauty?

Methodology

Research Approach and Rationale

The nature of this investigation mandated qualitative research since it would be extremely difficult to quantify perceptions of beauty, and any transference of physical traits into numbers would be imprecise at best. The subjective nature of the topic also suggested multiple realities that could not be reduced to simple variables, but rather required open-ended questions that allowed depth of expression. In addition to the element of difficult-to-measure variables, Creswell (2013) adds that qualitative research is vital for studies requiring exploration of an issue to facilitate a complex and detailed understanding. Qualitative research provided a deeper understanding and more holistic picture of the perceptions and their underlying beliefs, and facilitated an exploration of the sources of those perceptions and beliefs.

The research method selected for this qualitative study was critical theory because of the racial undertones of stereotypical concepts of beauty. Any limited view of beauty or physical attractiveness, in terms of skin color, for example, can lead to various levels of disenfranchisement of entire groups of persons, possibly based on race. Since according to Fay (1987) critical theory aims at empowering persons to transcend limitations imposed on them based on race, class or gender, this approach can offer alternatives to any existing limitations. It is this desire for

transcendence of stereotypical views of beauty that can undermine self-identity that motivated the study.

Sampling Procedure

Participants for the study were derived using purposive sampling to ensure representation of women of both Asian and African descent. Bernard and Ryan (2010) describe purposive sampling as simply selecting participants who fit the purpose of the study, adding that it is especially useful with “special and hard-to-find populations” (p. 365). The only criterion for this study other than race and sex was that the women be at least eighteen years old; however, the race and sex stipulations, as well as the challenges in finding participants who were willing to speak to this issue, necessitated purposive sampling procedures. Participants for one focus group were sourced on a private Christian university campus in Silang, Cavite, Philippines, while participants for the second group consisted of mall workers from the Robinson Mall in Pala Pala, Cavite, Philippines. The first group consisted of two Asian women, one East Indian and one Thai, and two women of African descent. The second group consisted for four Filipinas. One of the one-to-one interview participants was a Filipina sourced at the Robinson’s Mall in Pala Pala, one was a Japanese woman interviewed via Skype, and four were women of African descent, two sourced on the campus of a private, Christian university and two via Skype.

Setting

The research took place in different locations around Cavite, Philippines. The settings for the focus group interviews were the library of one of private Christian university in Silang and the other was the Robinson’s Mall. The one-to-one interviews were conducted at Robinson’s Mall, Pala Pala; on the university campus, and via Skype. Artifacts were collected from the SM mall in Pala Pala. Internet observations were done in the global community.

Data Collection

Data were collected via two focus group consisting of four participants each, and six one-to-one interviews, utilizing the peer reviewed, semi-structured interview protocol, observations of beauty-related themes and advertisement on the Internet, and artifact analysis at the SM Mall, Pala Pala, Cavite, Philippines. These methods of data collection allowed triangulation of data. To facilitate triangulation, Internet observations and artifact analyses were conducted first and the data collected from them helped to structure follow-up questions for the interviews.

Data collection began with the artifact analyses of products and beauty shop brochures in SM Mall. Brochures were collected from two beauty shops and examined to determine the kinds of services offered to clients. Similarly products on the shelves in health and department stores were examined to determine what benefits they offered. All the shelves in the department store holding face and body creams were examined, while health store attendants were asked to pinpoint beauty aids, which were then also examined.

Internet observations were conducted concurrently with the artifact analyses. These observations involved searches of beauty advertisements targeting women of Asian and African communities, as well as a general search. The Google search engine was used and searches were conducted using keywords and phrases such as “skin beauty products in Asia/Africa,” “beautiful hair products,” “the media and beauty,” “Hollywood beauty ideals,” and as a result of the artifact analysis, “skin lightening products” and “skin whitening products.”

The research then progressed to the focus group and one-to-one interviews. Participants were informed of the purpose for the interview and their rights as participants, and agreed to join. Group members were asked to sign two consent forms. One indicated their consent for participation in the interview and the other granted permission to audiotape the proceedings. The first focus group discussion lasted one and a half hours and the second one-hour. The one-to-one interviews lasted approximately twenty-five minutes.

Some of the ethical issues involved in this study were protecting the privacy of participants, providing anonymity and confidentiality for participants, and ensuring that data analysis was appropriate. Protecting the privacy of participants was an important consideration given the context of the study. Personal experience indicates that Filipinas and other Asians are sometimes unwilling to say “No” outright and may feel pressured into answering questions they would rather not, or into taking part in the interview altogether. Neuman (2004) affirms that social researchers can invade a participant’s privacy when examining beliefs and behaviours that reveal intimate details. It was vital to minimize these invasions so participants were comfortable with the revelations. Participants were offered privacy, anonymity and confidentiality as outlined in the consent for participation document.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Once the audio-recordings were transcribed, the data were analyzed using content analysis involving three interconnected examination procedures. First, codes were identified within the data and examined to derive categories and then themes. Then the themes were examined for connections. In reference to analyzing free-flowing text, Miles and Huberman (1994) recommend that when themes are identified, the researcher look for links among them and create visual

concept models. The researcher applied this third step by creating a simple, two-circle Venn diagram where each circle represented one research question, and subsequently matching the questions with themes. The data from the notes of the observations and artifact analysis were also incorporated into the Venn diagram. Finally, the data were interpreted to answer the research questions, and conclusions and recommendations were drawn.

Results

Analysis of the data primarily revealed agreement among the data sources—interviews, observations and artifact analyses—though some results were explicit, as in the expressed views of focus group participants, and some were implicit, as in the instances of advertisements and products that imply certain conditions such as a need for fairer skin.

How do women of Asian and African descent perceive themselves in terms of physical beauty?

The researcher addressed this question primarily by means of direct questioning during the focus group and one-to-one interview and four key themes emerged during the discussions. The women were unwilling to commit to any one specific list of criteria of beauty, they all recognized societal pressure to conform to some standard of beauty, and five women cited strong parental influence as having molded their positive self-concepts despite societal pressure. The fourth theme was very striking as all the women stated that in their respective countries whiter or fairer skin and other features associated with the Caucasian race were considered more beautiful than those of other ethnicities. Participant F1A1, for example, shared that persons would often refer to her as the “dark one” while commenting on how pretty and fair her sister was; while participant IB6 stated that “People were very direct in asking why I was so dark when my sibling were fairer. They would look like something was wrong with me. My sister once told me that the first thing she remembered about me is mummy bringing this black, black baby home. I didn’t have anyone to tell me that it was okay to be black, so I always wanted to be fair like my sibling.” The women agreed that in addition to these personal experiences, there was a pervasive preference for fairer skin.

How do women of Asian and African descent rank their race in relation to other races in term of beauty?

Interestingly while none of the eight Asian women ranked their race as having the most beautiful women, two of the six women of African descent did. Most of the participants (11) agreed that, though they may not share the view, many persons of their race valued Caucasian features more than their own. One participant articulated it as “I think that the white man has been very successful in making the entire world think white is beauty because they infiltrated most of the societies. From Africa going all the way to the west, most of the countries were colonized, whether it be by the French white man, by the English white man, by the American white man; it was a white man” (Participant F1B2).

Of the eight Asian women, two explicitly indicated that there is beauty in every race, including those of African descent, while six did not mention the African race in descriptions of beauty. Five of the six women of African descent were more explicitly inclusive of all races including the Asian race in expressions of concepts of beauty. One Filipino participant indicated a desire for whiter skin and “colored eyes,” (Participant F2A3), while one woman of African descent claimed she felt her life would have been easier if she had fairer skin and “different hair.” She expressed a desire to be of mixed race, indicating that they are the most beautiful people to her (Participant IB6).

Participants claimed that the far-reaching effect of the media is to reinforce stereotypical perceptions of beauty that include white skin and extreme thinness. Conversely, they indicated that globalization is also having the opposite effect of empowering minorities and increasing their presence in fields related to the beauty industry.

The Internet observation unearthed many beauty-related advertisements and articles promoting whiter skin. For example, one Tanzanian advertisement depicted a dark-skinned woman of African descent with a very unhappy expression on her face. Next to that picture was another picture of the same woman but with whiter skin as a result of the advertised whitening procedure and, in this picture, she was smiling and more confident. Similar techniques were prevalent in marketing to women of Asian descent, and offers of whitening products inundate the Internet. On the other hand, there are many sites that promote Asian and Black beauty, though these sites seem to be responding to the extensive marketing drive for fairer skin—more reactive than proactive.

The brochures from beauty parlors offered a total of 22 beauty services; 11 of them related to skin whitening. Sixty-three beauty products were identified in the SM Mall department store of which 56 offered whiter skin. The health store provided creams, soaps and oral medication for whitening, and the attendant, unasked, advised the dark-skinned researcher that injections, which can be had at hospitals, would be even more effective. The analysis of artifacts indicated a

dominance of whitening products above other beauty treatments such as acne prevention.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined the relationship between modern globalization, characterized in the study as beginning with early explorers and the resultant colonization and continuing to today, and perceptions of beauty among women of Asian and African descent. It led to the conclusion that modern globalization is reshaping concepts of beauty globally. Moreover it appears that the dominant Caucasian culture, whether actively or unconsciously, is setting precedents of beauty that are being adopted by Asian and African women to the detriment of their own ethnic identities. This phenomenon began because Caucasian colonizers had what Wise (2008) terms *cultural power*—the influence of a charismatic or stronger element to impact the identity of another. Colonizers were seen as powerful and this trait gave them influence.

In support of Li et al. (2008), the findings of this study indicate that today globalization, via the Internet, is strengthening stereotypical views of beauty. One new, emerging factor is that of shared perceptions of the Internet community. Shank (2002) explains that the Internet culture is fundamentally reshaping the thinking and practices of members as a result of their membership in the culture, which “continues to grow at an exponential rate . . . and [has] affected nearly every aspect of contemporary life” (p. 205). The last few years, with the introduction of Facebook, Twitter and other networking sites, have changed the Internet dramatically. It is no longer a tool that delivers data but one that interacts with the user and connects user to user in a manner that essentially creates shared perceptions—communities of one mind.

Another factor that emerged out of this study was that the globalized network is introducing new concepts of beauty that comprise what is termed “ethnic beauties.” Featured ethnic beauties include models of Asian and African descent as well as those of mixed race; however, this is a relatively new and small movement. Appreciation for these ethnicities has not yet permeated many Asian and African societies. The stereotypes derived from hundreds of years of colonization and strengthened in consecutive years by the media are hard to break. Moreover, many women of African and Asian descent do not rate their race on par with others in terms of beauty, and one way this perception shows itself is in increase whitening practices.

Issues associated with concepts of beauty can harbor limitations for women of Asian and African descent imposed both by self and the external environment. Self-imposed issues include low self-esteem or in extreme cases self-hate, and health risks involved in whitening procedures, while external issues include discrimination or loss of opportunities. As Lamkin (2011) states, “society rewards

people deemed attractive” (p. 185). To stop the discrimination, the limited views of beauty that automatically exclude entire races should be curtailed.

Efforts to strengthen minority self-concepts and self-acceptance in the global arena need to be implemented. As Karelis (2011) suggests, responsible social marketing should be promoted. The same media that promotes the stereotypes should be used to promote concepts of ethnic beauty. One example of a step in this direction is the Unilever’s Dove Real Beauty Campaign, which is built on the premise that beauty comes in various sizes, shapes and colors. In the interest of getting companies on board with the idea, it is notable that Unilever credits the campaign with increased sales and customer loyalty (Neff, 2006). This increased loyalty indicates that women need and appreciate being released from stereotypical concepts of beauty and being recognized as beautiful in their own right without having to conform to any one standard.

To further stop discrimination based on stereotypical concepts of beauty, governments should actively seek, through mandates, to regulate advertising and marketing strategies to reinforce a more holistic concept of beauty in the interest of health, retaining pride in diversity, and fostering tolerance and appreciation for differences. It is imperative that governments that represent minorities, such as women of Asian and African descent, invest in this venture. Moreover, given the representative numbers in these minorities and the possible health implications, the United Nations is not exempt from providing support. Changing stereotypical perceptions of beauty must be a global effort. Globalization has helped to promote these stereotypes and can also be a powerful tool in eliminating them.

The steps toward a solution must be conscious and proactive. The damage has been done and undoing it will not be an easy task, but it is a necessary one—in the interest of health, happiness, and the well being of our global and increasingly connected planet.

Given the damaging effects of an unhealthy self-concept, it would be beneficial to determine what measure these women would recommend to combat practices and perceptions that damage self-perception. In the interest of change, further research should be conducted to derive grass-root solutions to this issue and channels for self-empowerment. In addition, it may be beneficial to determine the role of men in how these women perceive themselves in this context.

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