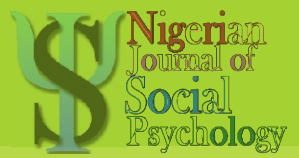


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Beauty and Sexuality in African Setting

¹Balogun, Shyngle Kolawole

²Nwankwo Barnabas Ekpere

¹Okehie Henry Uchenna

¹Aruoture Ezekiel

¹Department of Psychology, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria

²Department of Psychology, Caritas University, Enugu State, Nigeria

Correspondence: banniewankwo@yahoo.com

Abstract

African beauty and sexuality are deeply embedded in the continent's diverse cultural, historical, and social landscapes, reflecting a rich array of traditions and values. This essay looks into the concepts of beauty and sexuality within African settings, revealing unique cultural diversity, historical influences, and contemporary dynamics. Beauty standards in African settings vary significantly, with different communities valuing unique physical traits such as facial features, body shapes, and skin tones. Skin tone preferences can also differ, with some cultures influenced by colonial legacies favoring lighter skin, while many others celebrate darker skin as a sign of heritage and identity. Adornments like jewelry, scarification, and body painting play significant roles in expressing beauty, status, and identity. Sexuality in African settings is equally diverse and shaped by a variety of factors including traditional beliefs, religious teachings, and contemporary influences. Practices and expressions of sexuality are influenced by rites of passage, marriage customs, and community norms, with some societies placing a strong emphasis on modesty and others celebrating more overt expressions of sexuality. However, Colonialism has significantly reshaped understandings of beauty and sexuality in Africa, with colonial rulers often imposing Western standards of beauty, marginalizing traditional African aesthetics and practices. This has led to a pervasive preference for Eurocentric features in many African societies today. This has resulted in a complex blending of traditional and colonial values, creating a contemporary landscape where African beauty and sexuality are continuously renegotiated. Finally, through this exploration, the essay uncovers the intersections of tradition and modernity, resilience and adaptation, and the ongoing dialogue between cultural heritage and global influences in defining beauty and sexuality across Africa.

Keywords: Afro-centric view, African, Beauty, colonialism and Sexuality

Introduction

Exploring the concepts of beauty and sexuality within African settings unveils a rich cultural diversity, historical influences, and contemporary dynamics. In these vibrant and varied societies, beauty transcends mere aesthetics, embodying deeply rooted traditions, values, and expressions that reflect unique cultural identities (Rice, 2020; Onibere, 2023). Similarly, sexuality in Africa encompasses a spectrum of beliefs, practices, and norms that are shaped by traditional customs, colonial legacies, and evolving global influences. Throughout history, African communities have celebrated diverse forms of beauty, where ideals are often intricately tied to notions of health, fertility, and communal identity (Balogun, 2023). From the adornments of the Maasai in East Africa to the scarification patterns of the Yoruba in West Africa, beauty rituals and practices serve as markers of cultural pride and heritage. These traditions not only define physical attractiveness but also symbolize social status, age, and rites of passage within the community.

Sexuality in Africa is a complex and dynamic terrain, influenced by rich historical narratives and contemporary realities. Traditional beliefs and rituals surrounding sexuality often integrate

profound spiritual dimensions, emphasizing harmony with nature and ancestral connections (Agbaje, 2021; Mbasalaki, 2020). These traditional views regard sexuality as an integral part of the community's fabric, intertwined with social roles and spiritual well-being. For example, various African cultures celebrate sexuality through rites of passage and communal ceremonies, highlighting its significance in maintaining social cohesion and spiritual balance. However, the advent of colonialism introduced new paradigms and societal structures that significantly reshaped indigenous understandings of beauty, gender roles and sexual identities (Onojieruo, 2024; Pant, 2024). Colonial powers imposed their moral frameworks, often condemning and suppressing native practices and beliefs. This led to a hybrid cultural landscape where traditional values were either diluted or forced underground, creating a dichotomy between indigenous practices and the imposed colonial ethos (Blair, 2020).

In today's globalized world, African beauty and sexuality continue to evolve amidst a backdrop of rapid urbanization, pervasive media representation, and vigorous advocacy for gender equality and sexual rights. The proliferation of digital media and global beauty standards exerts considerable pressure on traditional notions of beauty and sexuality, often leading to the commodification of beauty and the imposition of homogenized ideals (Women, & Leipoldt, 2023; Enyinnaya, 2022). This global influence is visible in the increased emphasis on physical appearance and body image, which sometimes conflicts with traditional African values that prioritize holistic beauty and inner qualities. These changes prompt critical reflections on how traditional practices intersect with modern challenges, such as the commodification of beauty, body image pressures, and the quest for sexual empowerment. The rise of feminist movements and LGBTQ+ advocacy in various African countries shows a growing demand for inclusivity and the dismantling of patriarchal structures. This push for progressive change is often met with resistance, reflecting a broader tension between maintaining cultural heritage and embracing modernity.

This exploration seeks to delve deeper into the complexities of beauty and sexuality in African settings, highlighting the intersections of tradition and modernity, resilience and adaptation, and the ongoing dialogue between cultural heritage and global influences. By examining these themes, this paper aims to uncover the shade that defines and redefines notions of beauty and sexuality across the diverse landscapes of Africa.

Societal Definition of Beauty

Societies around the world have diverse perspectives and values when it comes to sexuality and beauty. While some view them as sacred and tied to group norms and traditions, many others see them as highly personal matters with little relevance to collective standards, especially in more developed nations. Beauty can be understood as a subjective and culturally contingent concept that encompasses both aesthetic and qualitative aspects (Knoll, et al., 2024). It often refers to qualities or features that are pleasing to the senses, emotions, or intellect. In different contexts, beauty manifests through physical appearance, behaviours, artistry, and cultural practices. It is influenced by societal norms, historical traditions, and individual preferences (Adisa, et al., 2024; James, 2023). Across various cultures, beauty standards evolve, reflecting ideals of health, symmetry, youthfulness, and cultural markers such as skin tone, body shape, and adornment. Beauty is not only about physical attractiveness but also includes qualities like grace, charisma, and inner qualities that enhance a person's allure and appeal within their community.

Relational Theory of Beauty

In the realm of Afro-centric theoretical perspectives on beauty, there exists a relational concept that posits objects derive their aesthetic appeal not in isolation, but through dynamic interactions with their proximate surroundings. This perspective challenges the notion of beauty as a static attribute inherent to an object, proposing instead that beauty emerges from the relational interplay between objects within a cultural context. Central to this perspective is the idea that an object's beauty is contingent upon its relationships with others. As the adage goes, "A tree does not make a forest beautiful"; in other words, individual objects derive their beauty meaningfully only in comparison to and about others. This relational framework suggests that the aesthetic quality of an object is mirrored and shaped by its interactions with neighbouring entities, whether human, natural, or cultural.

Moreover, this relational theory emphasizes the significance of context and cultural axiom in defining beauty. It shows that an object's beauty is not merely an intrinsic quality but is co-constructed through its connections and interrelations within a specific cultural milieu. In this way, beauty becomes a gradient that emerges from the comparative and interdependent relationships between objects, rather than an absolute attribute. Furthermore, the theory posits that the perception of beauty is contingent upon the cultural norms, values, and aesthetics prevalent within a community. Objects or individuals are considered beautiful to the extent that they harmonize or contrast meaningfully with these cultural references. Thus, beauty is a matter of appearance and how an object or person embodies and reflects cultural ideals and values through its relational dynamics.

This relational concept of beauty invites exploration into how cultural narratives, social practices, and historical legacies shape perceptions and constructions of beauty within diverse African contexts. It prompts critical inquiry into how beauty is negotiated, contested, and affirmed through relational interactions within communities, thereby revealing the complexities inherent in aesthetic judgments and cultural identities.

The Notion of Beauty in African Settings

African conceptualizations of beauty are in feminine terms, and perhaps every usage of the word "beauty" or "beautiful" is usually constructed to celebrate womanhood or feminine spirit. Beauty connotes celebration of worth, value, quality, essence, and desirability. Hence, the concept of beauty in Africa is quite broad and varies from one cultural community to another. However, as Sisti, et al., (2021) rightly observe, the concept of beauty in Africa tends to speak of external and internal qualities of a person or object. Moreover, the concept of beauty in Africa bears some moral intonations. Njiofor, (2018) stated that beauty is found in "good behaviour, skills, knowledge, dress" as well as in "physical features". There cannot be beauty for its own sake; beauty must be intended to serve society. The concept of beauty in Africa is objective in that it communicates a communal standard, but it is also subjective in that the standard of beauty is different from community to community.

African Standards of Beauty

Before European colonization, African societies held diverse beauty standards that were deeply rooted in cultural practices and beliefs. These standards often celebrated features that were distinct from Eurocentric ideals, such as darker skin tones, fuller figures, and unique facial or body markings. For instance, in some West African cultures like the Karo people of Ethiopia, the Fulani people in Nigeria, the Ndebele people of South Africa and the Surma people of Ethiopia, scars were considered marks of beauty and symbols of identity, indicating lineage, bravery, or social status. Hairstyles were also significant, with intricate braiding

techniques and adornments reflecting cultural heritage and social roles. Beauty was not solely about physical appearance but encompassed qualities such as character, wisdom, and community contribution.

From the European point of view, a slim, tall and light woman is considered to be a very beautiful lady and a model. Instead in Africa, a huge woman with big breasts and big buttocks is considered to be an ideal beautiful African woman, beauty is believed to be about being curvaceous; traditional African beauty celebrates a woman's curvy yet voluptuous figure. A girl's ability to bear and conceive a healthy baby is very much associated with the broadening of her hips. A woman's lustrous round body implies her desirability and value in being a suitable pick for a wife. Many African societies celebrate natural features, viewing dark skin, textured hair, and distinct facial markings as expressions of cultural pride.

Variation Across Different Regions and Ethnic Groups

Beauty standards in Africa exhibit significant variation across different regions and ethnic groups, reflecting diverse cultural practices, historical influences, and environmental factors (Lowy et al., 2021). For example, in West Africa, among the Yoruba people of Nigeria, beauty may be associated with facial scarification patterns that signify tribal affiliations and family lineage. In contrast, among the Maasai of East Africa, beauty ideals are often linked to elongated earlobes adorned with intricate beadwork, symbolizing wisdom and social status. These regional variations show the quality of aesthetic traditions that define beauty within distinct African communities.

Physical features, adornment, and attire play integral roles in defining beauty across Africa. Traditional hairstyles, such as elaborate braids or intricate weaves, are often considered markers of beauty and cultural identity (Nwigwe, 2023). Adornments like jewellery, body paint, and tattoos serve not only decorative purposes but also convey social status and spiritual significance (Odhiambo, 2022). For instance, among the Ndebele people of South Africa, women adorn themselves with colourful beaded necklaces and brass rings worn around their necks and legs, symbolizing marital status and cultural pride. Attire, including traditional clothing made from vibrant textiles or animal skins, further enhances perceptions of beauty and identity within African societies.

Age, marital status, and social roles exert significant influence on perceptions of beauty in African societies (Mady, et al., 2023). In many cultures, elders are revered for their wisdom and life experiences, and ageing is often associated with beauty and respect. Among the Fulani people of West Africa, for example, older women with facial tattoos and intricate hairstyles are considered paragons of beauty and wisdom within their communities. Marital status also shapes beauty ideals, with ceremonial attire and body adornments often signalling eligibility and desirability for marriage. Social roles, such as motherhood or leadership positions, may enhance perceptions of beauty by embodying cultural values and responsibilities (Idumwonyi, 2023). Although there is no singular standard of feminine beauty that is attached to the entire continent!

In Yoruba culture, largely centered in South-western Nigeria certain body parts are focal points in traditional sayings and perceptions of beauty. Parts such as the *eyinjú* (eyeballs), *eyín* (teeth), *omú* (breasts), and *idí* (buttocks) are frequently referenced, with specific aesthetic values ascribed to them through adjectival modifiers. For instance, the phrase "*el-éyinjú-egé*" describes someone with delicate, graceful eyeballs, demonstrating how the eyeballs are adorned linguistically. Similarly, complexion and overall appearance are rhetoricised through

various names and expressions. The Yoruba use vivid language, including similes and metaphors, to embellish these body parts and imbue them with cultural meaning and beauty ideals. This linguistic ornamentation reflects how physical attributes are deeply intertwined with Yoruba concepts of attractiveness and identity. The central focus on these body parts, and the ways they are described and venerated in Yoruba speech, reveal the culturally-specific understandings of beauty that exist within this West African society.

Examples

Adúmáadán (dark shiny-smooth)

Apoǐnbéporé (“smooth, palm-oil red”).

Eleǐyinjú egeǐ (“one with graceful eyeballs”)

Eyinfunjowo (“teeth whiter than money” – cowrie shells being the previous medium of exchange)

Funfun niyì eyín (“whiteness is the beauty of teeth”) Gígúnrégé niyì orun (“straightness is the beauty of the neck”).

Irun l’ewa obinrin (“hair is the beauty of a woman”)

E ku ewa (“beauty greetings” - standard Yoruba greeting at the traditional hair stylist’s.

Gele o dun bi ka mo o we,

ka mo o we o dabi ko ye ni

Irun l’ewa obinrin (“hair is the beauty of a woman”)

However, this has indicated that indeed what we call ‘beauty’ has always been culturally codified. While facial attractiveness is a general desideratum for beauty, plumpness or roundness as well as a jutting backside is also a pervasive image in traditional Nigerian African construction of female beauty. Among other expressions, the ancient Yoruba proverb, *Tēni ni tēni: Omọ ẹni kò s’èdì bẹ̀bẹ̀rẹ̀ ka f’ileke sidi omo elomii* (“Ours is ours, even if our child does not possess rounded buttocks, we would not therefore wear beads on the buttocks of someone else’s daughter”) strongly suggests that a lot of cultural value is placed on female jutting backside.

Sexuality in the African Settings

Sexuality refers to a broad spectrum of characteristics and behaviours related to sexual attraction, identity, expression, and intimacy. It encompasses biological, psychological, and social dimensions. Sexuality includes aspects of gender identity, sexual orientation, desires, practices, and norms that shape individuals' relationships and interactions (Olali, 2022). Within different cultural contexts, attitudes towards sexuality vary significantly, influenced by religious beliefs, societal expectations, legal frameworks, and historical traditions (Okpokwasili, & Dukor, 2023). Sexuality is integral to human identity and can be expressed through various forms, including but not limited to, intimate relationships, cultural rituals, artistic expressions, and personal narratives. Sexuality in African cultures often transcends the physical, intertwining with sacred rituals and ceremonies that imbue intimate relationships with spiritual significance (Taylor-Seymour, 2022). Rites of passage and ceremonies surrounding marriage contribute to the sacred nature of sexuality.

The communal nature of African societies plays a role in shaping perceptions of sexuality, with community and family actively involved in guiding individuals through the complexities of intimate relationships. Distinct cultural norms and taboos act as guiding principles for sexual behaviour, influencing practices like initiation rites, courtship rituals, and expectations within marital relationships (Balarabe, 2022; Baraki & Thupayagale-Tshweneage, 2023). These norms, though diverse, serve as foundations for maintaining social order and cohesion. For

example, among the Igbo people of Nigeria, the "mmuo" spirits embodied both male and female characteristics, challenging Western notions of gender roles. Sexuality was often integrated into religious and communal rituals, with ceremonies marking life transitions and fertility rites emphasising the importance of procreation and lineage.

Before the incursions of European influences, traditional African societies had nicety and collective understandings of sexuality deeply rooted in their folktales, oral traditions, and cultural practices. However, communal expressions of sexuality, which often manifested publicly through ritual ceremonies, songs, and dances across diverse communities like the Zulu, Kikuyu, Yoruba, Maasai, Mende, Bechuana, Pondo, and Lokele, among others. In many traditional African worldviews, sexuality was primarily framed within the context of procreation and familial roles. However, there was also a rich heritage of celebrating sensuality, intimacy, and the pleasures of the body. Sexuality was not solely an individual or private affair, but rather deeply woven into the social, spiritual, and communal fabric of life. This holistic, collective understanding of sexuality stood in stark contrast to the more narrowly individualized Western conceptualizations that would later be introduced. As African societies have grappled with the influences of globalization and changing values, particularly among younger generations, there are sometimes internal conflicts and disconnects emerging between traditional perspectives on sexuality and the encroaching Western media-driven beauty standards and views on intimacy.

The Interplay of Beauty and Sexuality in African Settings

In many African cultures, the concept of beauty is closely tied to notions of fertility, health, and social status (Akinwumi, 2010). Physical attributes such as skin tone, body shape, and hair texture are often viewed as indicators of an individual's desirability and social standing. These cultural ideals can have a significant impact on an individual's self-perception and sexual expression, leading to complex psychological and interpersonal dynamics (Okafor & Duru, 2010). Moreover, the role of traditional practices, such as scarification, body modification, and ritual adornment, further highlights the intricate relationship between beauty and sexuality in African settings (Nkuru, 2005). These practices can serve as means of enhancing physical attractiveness, communicating social and cultural identity, and facilitating sexual and romantic relationships.

The Role of Rituals and Customs

Rituals and customs played a crucial role in shaping both beauty practices and expressions of sexuality in pre-colonial Africa. These rituals were often deeply embedded in spiritual beliefs and cultural traditions, serving to reinforce social cohesion and transmit cultural values across generations. For instance, initiation ceremonies for young men and women not only marked their transition into adulthood but also included teachings on beauty, sexuality, and social responsibilities. In some societies, dances, music, and storytelling were integral to these rituals, celebrating the beauty of life and the interconnectedness of individuals within the community. Furthermore, rituals were central to the regulation of sexual behaviour and relationships. Marriage customs, for example, varied widely but generally involved elaborate ceremonies that symbolized union, fertility, and community approval. In some matrilineal societies like the Akan of Ghana, inheritance and familial lineage were traced through maternal lines, influencing concepts of marriage and family structures.

Sexuality in African cultures is deeply influenced by diverse cultural norms and taboos that vary across regions and ethnic groups. For instance, in the Zulu culture of South Africa, discussions about sexuality are often guided by respect for cultural taboos regarding public

displays of affection and explicit discussions about sexual matters (Zibane, 2017). These taboos serve to maintain social order, uphold moral values, and preserve community cohesion by regulating sexual behaviour within acceptable boundaries. Gender roles and expectations play a significant role in shaping attitudes towards sexuality in African societies (Enaifoghe & Idowu, 2021). Traditional gender norms often prescribe distinct roles and responsibilities for men and women, influencing their sexual behaviours and interactions. Among the Igbo people of Nigeria, for example, men are traditionally expected to demonstrate virility and fertility through their ability to father children, which is closely linked to notions of masculinity and social status. Women, on the other hand, are valued for their reproductive capabilities and roles as caregivers within the family structure.

Practices related to sexuality in African cultures encompass a range of rituals, ceremonies, and customs that reflect community values and beliefs. Initiation rites, such as the male circumcision rituals among the Xhosa people of South Africa, symbolize the transition from adolescence to adulthood and are often accompanied by teachings about sexual responsibilities and cultural values (Schroeder & Bakaroudis, 2022; Ndamase, et al., 2024). These rites not only mark significant life stages but also reinforce gender roles and expectations within the community. Marriage customs also play a crucial role in regulating sexual relationships and family dynamics. Among the Yoruba people of Nigeria, marriage is often viewed as a social institution that strengthens community ties and ensures the continuity of lineage and traditions (Omotayo, 2023; Alozie, 2024). Ceremonial practices, including bridewealth payments and elaborate marriage festivities, shows the importance of marital stability and the fulfilment of familial obligations in shaping sexual norms and expectations.

Impact of Colonialism on Beauty Standards

Colonialism had a profound impact on African beauty standards by imposing European ideals and undermining traditional aesthetics. European colonizers often viewed African features such as dark skin, traditional hairstyles, and body adornments as primitive or inferior compared to Eurocentric norms. This perspective was reinforced through colonial policies that promoted Western fashion, grooming practices, and beauty products, which led to a gradual erosion of indigenous beauty ideals. For example, in South Africa under apartheid, discriminatory laws and social norms privileged lighter skin tones and European hairstyles, perpetuating colourism and influencing beauty perceptions among Africans.

Globalization and Media Representation

Globalization has introduced Western beauty standards through mass media, fashion industries, and advertising campaigns, influencing how beauty is perceived and pursued across the continent. For instance, the prevalence of global fashion magazines, television shows and social media platforms like TikTok, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube has created a global marketplace for beauty products and trends, showcasing idealized images that often prioritize Eurocentric features such as light skin and slim figures. This exposure has contributed to a shift in beauty perceptions among many Africans, often leading to the adoption of beauty practices aimed at aligning with these Western standards. For instance, the popularity of skin-lightening products has surged in countries like Ghana and Nigeria, where advertisements promote fair skin as a symbol of beauty and social status (Archibong, 2019). Similarly, the influence of global celebrities and beauty influencers on platforms like Instagram has popularized Western beauty routines, including the use of makeup and cosmetic procedures.

Economic Factors and the Beauty Industry

The growth of the beauty industry in Africa is another significant modern influence on beauty standards. Increased urbanization and rising disposable incomes have expanded access to a wide range of beauty products and services. Major cities like Lagos, Nairobi, and Johannesburg have seen a boom in beauty salons, cosmetic stores, and fashion boutiques catering to a diverse clientele. This economic boom has led to the proliferation of locally produced beauty products that blend traditional ingredients with modern formulations. Brands like Ghana's "Nourish" and Nigeria's "House of Tara" have gained popularity by promoting products that cater to the unique skin and hair needs of African consumers. This trend shows the role of economic development in shaping beauty practices and preferences, fostering a local industry that responds to both traditional and contemporary beauty ideals.

Modern Sexuality in Africa

Modern sexuality in Africa is characterised by evolving social attitudes that reflect both traditional values and contemporary influences, shifts in sexual norms and behaviours, reflecting broader social, economic, and cultural transformations. In many urban areas, there is greater acceptance and openness towards premarital sex, cohabitation, and non-traditional relationships. This shift is partly driven by increasing exposure to global media, changing gender roles, and the influence of youth culture (Kanth, et al., 2024). For instance, in cities like Nairobi and Lagos, it is becoming more common for young adults to date openly, engage in casual relationships, and discuss sexual matters more freely than in previous generations. However, these changes are not uniform across the continent, with rural areas often maintaining more conservative sexual norms.

Comprehensive sexual education programs in schools have led to increased awareness about sexual health, contraception, and consent. Countries like South Africa, Ghana, Nigeria and Kenya, have implemented such programs to address issues like teenage pregnancy and HIV/AIDS, resulting in more informed and empowered youth sexual health education programs and campaigns aimed at reducing the spread of HIV/AIDS have contributed to greater awareness and destigmatisation of issues related to sexuality (Christmals & Aidam, 2020). These efforts have encouraged more progressive attitudes towards sexual health and rights, particularly among younger generations.

Influence of Global Movements

Global movements advocating for LGBTQ+ rights and gender equality have also had a significant impact on modern sexuality in Africa. Despite facing considerable resistance in many countries, these movements have gained traction, leading to increased visibility and advocacy for sexual minorities. South Africa is notable for its legal protections, including the right to marry and adopt children, making it a beacon of hope for LGBTQ+ rights on the continent (Dayal, 2022). However, pride events and organizations like OUT LGBT Well-being provide support and visibility for the LGBTQ+ community.

Meanwhile, Legal and policy changes have also played a crucial role in shaping modern sexuality in Africa. Countries like Mozambique and Botswana have made significant strides by decriminalizing same-sex relationships, reflecting a shift towards more inclusive legal frameworks. These changes are often the result of sustained advocacy by civil society organizations and international pressure. In other countries, LGBTQ+ communities face harsher realities. For example, in Uganda and Nigeria, laws criminalizing same-sex relationships have led to widespread discrimination and violence against LGBTQ+ individuals. Activists in these countries work under difficult and often dangerous conditions to advocate

for their rights and provide support to their communities. Despite these challenges, there is a growing movement across the continent advocating for LGBTQ+ rights, visibility, and acceptance. The contrast between progressive and conservative regions highlights the complex and varied landscape of modern sexuality in Africa.

The rise of technology and digital platforms has revolutionized the way sexuality is expressed and discussed in Africa. Social media and online forums have provided spaces for individuals to explore and express their sexual identities more freely, connect with like-minded communities, and access information about sexual health and rights (Yue & Lim, 2022; Döring, et al., 2022). However, platforms like Twitter and Facebook have been used to organize and promote LGBTQ+ rights campaigns, as seen with the #Repeal162 campaign in Kenya, which aimed to decriminalize homosexuality. Additionally, dating apps like Tinder and Grindr have become popular among young Africans, offering new ways to form romantic and sexual connections.

Body Image and Health in Africa

Body image and self-esteem are critical aspects of personal identity and well-being, and these issues are increasingly influenced by both traditional and modern factors in African societies. Traditional beauty ideals, which often celebrated fuller figures and natural hair, have been challenged by global and Western beauty standards that emphasize thinness, fair skin, and certain facial features. This shift has led to a growing prevalence of body image dissatisfaction and low self-esteem, particularly among young people. However, exposure to Western media and beauty ideals can negatively impact self-esteem and body image among African adolescents and young adults, leading to a preference for Eurocentric features over indigenous ones (Balogun-Mwangi et al., 2023; Greene & Wooden, 2024). In urban areas, where access to global media is more prevalent, the pressure to conform to these standards is particularly intense. Social media platforms, where idealized and edited images are rampant, further exacerbate body image issues. For example, the rise of Instagram influencers who often promote unattainable beauty standards has contributed to increased body dissatisfaction and the pursuit of unrealistic beauty ideals among African youth (Kaziga, et al., 2021). This pressure can lead to harmful behaviours such as extreme dieting, over-exercising, and the use of beauty products that promise drastic changes.

Health Implications of Beauty Practices

The pursuit of modern beauty standards has significant health implications, particularly concerning practices like skin lightening and cosmetic surgery. Skin lightening, also known as bleaching, is a widespread practice in many African countries, driven by the perception that lighter skin is more attractive and socially advantageous. This practice involves the use of creams, soaps, and injections that contain harmful chemicals such as hydroquinone, mercury, and corticosteroids. These substances can cause severe health issues, including skin cancer, kidney damage, and hormonal imbalances (Juliano, 2022; Olumide et al., 2020). Despite these risks, the demand for skin-lightening products remains high due to societal pressures and deeply ingrained colourism.

Cosmetic surgery is another growing trend in Africa, particularly in countries with expanding middle classes and increased access to medical facilities. Procedures such as liposuction, breast augmentation, and rhinoplasty are becoming more common as individuals seek to alter their appearance to fit modern beauty standards. While cosmetic surgery can improve self-esteem for some, it also carries significant risks, including surgical complications, infections, and psychological issues related to body dysmorphia (Al-Sarraf, 2022; Şenol, 2024). The

increasing popularity of these procedures highlights the profound impact of global beauty ideals on body image and health in Africa. In addition to these practices, the use of hair relaxers and weaves, which are prevalent among African women seeking to achieve straighter hair, also poses health risks. These products often contain harsh chemicals that can cause scalp burns, hair loss, and long-term damage to the hair follicles (Ndichu & Upadhyaya, 2019; Asbeck, et al., 2022). Furthermore, the cultural stigma associated with natural hair can lead to psychological stress and a sense of inferiority among those who feel pressured to conform to these beauty standards (Balogun-Mwangi et al., 2023; Mady, et al., 2023).

Conclusion

Beauty and sexuality in African settings are a complex interaction of traditional values, historical legacies, and modern influences. African beauty transcends physical aesthetics, embodied through practices like scarification, body adornment, and traditional hairstyles. These practices are deeply rooted in spiritual beliefs and communal rituals, emphasising the interconnectedness of individuals within their cultural milieu. The impact of colonialism and globalization has significantly transformed African beauty standards, introducing Western ideals that often conflict with indigenous concepts of attractiveness. This shift has led to a complex negotiation of identity, where traditional and modern influences coexist. The beauty industry in Africa has adapted by blending traditional ingredients with contemporary formulations, catering to both local and global beauty ideals. Sexuality in African settings reflects a dynamic interplay of tradition and modernity. Traditional views on sexuality often emphasize procreation, family roles, and spiritual dimensions, while contemporary influences introduce more liberal attitudes towards sexual identity, orientation, and behaviour. Global movements advocating for gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights have fostered greater visibility and acceptance in some regions, while resistance and conservatism persist in others. Conclusively, the notions of beauty and sexuality in African contexts are continually evolving, shaped by a complex interplay of historical traditions, cultural values, and global influences. Thus, the study of beauty and sexuality in African settings is a rich and multifaceted area of psychological inquiry. By understanding the cultural, social, and psychological factors that shape these concepts, researchers and practitioners can develop more holistic and inclusive approaches to addressing issues related to body image, sexual health, and overall well-being. This knowledge can contribute to the promotion of a more diverse and empowering understanding of human experiences across different cultural contexts.

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