

ENHANCEMENT TECHNOLOGY AND AFRICAN PERSPECTIVES ON BEAUTY: EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF GLOBAL BEAUTY STANDARD ON AFRICAN CULTURAL IDENTITY

Fasiku, Gbenga Cornelius PhD* & Stephen, Emmanuel**

Abstract

The concept of beauty has always been deeply intertwined with cultural, social, and historical contexts. In African societies, traditional views of beauty are not merely about physical appearance but are also reflective of cultural identity, communal values, and social norms. This paper therefore examines the intersection of enhancement technologies and traditional African perspectives on beauty, highlighting the impact of globalization on beauty standards in contemporary African societies. As cosmetic procedures, body modifications and other technology and enhancement products become more accessible, the perception of beauty is increasingly influenced by globalized ideals, which are often at variance with traditional African concepts of beauty. The paper analytically explores how enhancement technologies challenge these indigenous beauty ideals and calls for a redefinition that synchronizes modern innovations with African cultural aesthetics. The ethical, cultural, and social implications of beauty enhancement in African contexts are also addressed, emphasizing the importance of conserving cultural genuineness while embracing change.

Keywords: Enhancement technology, African beauty, cultural identity, body modification, ethical implications

Introduction

The concept of beauty has always been deeply intertwined with cultural, social, and historical contexts. In African societies, traditional views of beauty are not merely about physical appearance but are also reflections of cultural identity, communal values, and social norms. These ideals highlight natural physical features, such as skin tone, body shape, and hairstyles, which are often seen as expressions of cultural heritage (Akoyun, 2020). Nonetheless, in recent decades, the increasing availability and influence of enhancement technologies, such as cosmetic surgery, skin-lightening products, and body modification procedures, have introduced new dynamics into the discourse on beauty. These technological advancements, while offering individuals the opportunity to modify their appearance, are also reshaping beauty standards, often aligning them with Western ideals. This has led to growing tensions between modern enhancement practices and traditional African perspectives on beauty. As a result, there is a pressing need to reconsider and potentially redefine the concept of beauty within African cultural milieus.

Traditional African Perspectives on Beauty

In many African cultures, beauty has historically been viewed as more than just physical appearance; it is a reflection of cultural identity, community values, and spiritual well-being. Traditional beauty standards often emphasize natural physical traits that are closely tied to one's ethnicity and cultural heritage. For example, in Yoruba culture, a fuller body shape is traditionally associated with health, fertility, and prosperity, while hairstyles, such as intricate braiding or the wearing of natural afros, are seen as expressions of cultural pride and identity.

(Adetunji, 2021). Similarly, in many East African communities, darker skin tones are celebrated as symbols of strength, vitality, and connection to one's ancestry (Mutua, 2020). These traditional notions of beauty are deeply rooted in African belief system, which often prioritizes the communal over the individual. Beauty, in this sense, is not just about personal enhancement but about reflecting one's role within the community and maintaining a connection to one's cultural roots (Omoniyi, 2018). Thus, one can say that the African perspective of beauty is deeply rooted in cultural, spiritual, and communal values. Unlike Western ideals that often emphasize individualism, physical attractiveness, and symmetry, African conceptions of beauty traditionally focus on holistic representations of character, social roles, and the expression of cultural identity. These cultural ideals of beauty vary significantly across the African continent, reflecting the diversity of ethnic groups, languages, and traditions. However, a common theme is that beauty in African cultures is not only about physical appearance but also about a person's moral character, social standing, and their connection to the community (Gyekye, 1997; Mutua, 2020).

In many African cultures as pointed out earlier, physical appearance is seen as an extension of one's identity and connection to their cultural heritage. For example, hairstyles are an important aspect of beauty and often serve as a form of communication or status symbol. Braided hair, dreadlocks, and the use of head wraps or adornments have long been significant in African societies as markers of age, marital status, or spiritual beliefs (Adetunji, 2021). The intricate and elaborate hairstyles of women in some West African societies, such as the Yoruba, are not just aesthetic choices but symbols of cultural pride and personal expression (Eze, 2020). Similarly, skin tone has cultural implications in African beauty standards. While Western beauty standards often endorse lighter skin as ideal, many African cultures traditionally celebrate darker skin as a symbol of strength, vitality and connection to the earth (Blay, 2019). In some communities, darker skin is considered a marker of beauty and authenticity, representing a connection to the ancestors and the natural world (Mutua, 2020). However, with the increasing influence of Western media and globalization, these traditional views of skin tone have been challenged, leading to contentious practices such as skin bleaching, which has become predominant in some African countries (Blay, 2019).

The African perspective on beauty also extends to the body, where body shape is often viewed through the lens of health, fertility, and communal values. In many African societies, fuller body shapes have traditionally been associated with affluence, fertility, and prosperity. For example, in Yoruba culture, a woman with a fuller figure is often considered more attractive and a symbol of good health and social status (Adetunji, 2021). This stands in contrast to Western ideals of beauty, which often promote slimness as the ideal body type (Akinsanya, 2019). The preference for fuller bodies in African cultures is rooted in the importance of fertility and community well-being. In many African traditions, a woman's ability to bear children is highly valued, and a fuller figure is often associated with fertility and the ability to nurture (Gyekye, 1997). This ideal body shape reflects not only personal beauty but also a person's perceived ability to contribute to the continuity and health of the community. As Akinsanya notes, "in African cultures, beauty is often tied to one's ability to fulfill social roles, such as reproduction and caregiving, which are seen as central to community life" (Akinsanya, 2019:89).

In African thought, beauty is not only about physical attributes but also encompasses one's character and moral responsibility. In many African cultures, beauty is closely linked to moral behavior and social conduct, hence, the saying: "character is the ornament of beauty". The Yoruba concept of *Omoluabi* (a person of good character and moral integrity) clearly exemplifies how beauty is also a reflection of one's virtues and ability to contribute positively to society (Gbadegesin, 1991). Being beautiful in this context means embodying qualities such as respect, honesty, and social responsibility, all of which enhance one's standing within the community. In African society, beauty is also tied to social harmony and communal relationships. Beauty is viewed not just in terms of how a person looks, but how they behave and how they are perceived within the context of their family and community. The communal nature of African societies means that beauty is relational, reflecting one's ability to maintain harmonious relationships and contribute to the well-being of others (Omoniyi, 2018). This contrasts with the more individualistic and physical-centric view of beauty in Western cultures, which often emphasizes personal achievement and aesthetic appeal over communal relationships.

The Rise and Types of Beauty Enhancement Technologies in Africa

The rise of beauty enhancement technologies is closely tied to the growth of the global beauty industry and the increased acceptance of cosmetic interventions as a means of self-expression and body modification. Cosmetic procedures, once the domain of the wealthy or celebrities, have become more mainstream as technological advancements have made them safer, less invasive, and more affordable (Henderson & Thomas, 2021). The global beauty market, which includes cosmetic surgery, skin care, hair care, and body enhancement products, is projected to continue growing, with technological innovations playing a significant role in this expansion (Euromonitor, 2020). In Africa, the demand for beauty enhancement technologies has been influenced by both local and global factors. Traditionally, African beauty standards celebrated natural features, such as darker skin tones, fuller body shapes, and cultural hairstyles (Mutua, 2020). However, with the growing influence of Western media, advertising, and the global beauty industry, there has been a move towards more Eurocentric beauty ideals, which emphasize lighter skin, slimmer body shapes, and specific facial features (Blay, 2019). This shift has fueled the demand for beauty enhancement technologies that can help individuals modify their appearance to meet these evolving standards.

Cosmetic surgery is one of the most rampant forms of beauty enhancement technology. It includes a variety of surgical procedures aimed at altering or enhancing specific body parts to improve physical appearance. Common cosmetic surgeries include rhinoplasty or nasoplasty (nose reshaping), liposuction (fat removal), breast amplification, and facelifts (Henderson & Thomas, 2021). These techniques have become progressively more popular as advances in medical technology have reduced recovery times and improved safety outcomes. In African countries, cosmetic surgery is growing in popularity, particularly among urban middle-class individuals seeking to modify features such as the nose, hips, lips, and body shape to align with global beauty standards (Akinsanya, 2019). Non-invasive cosmetic procedures have also seen a significant increase in popularity due to their minimal recovery time and lower cost compared to surgical interventions. These include treatments like Botox (which reduces wrinkles by temporarily paralyzing facial muscles), dermal fillers (used to add volume to areas such as the lips and cheeks), and laser treatments (for skin resurfacing and hair removal). Non-invasive procedures have become a preferred choice for many individuals who want to enhance their

appearance without undergoing surgery (Blay, 2019). In Africa, these technologies are increasingly available in urban areas, where beauty clinics offer a range of non-invasive options for skin and body enhancement.

Similarly, skin-lightening products have become one of the most controversial forms of beauty enhancement technologies in Africa. These products, which include creams, lotions, and pills, are designed to lighten the skin by reducing melanin production. While skin lightening has a long history in certain African cultures, its popularity has increased significantly with the rise of global beauty standards that often prioritize lighter skin as more desirable (Blay, 2019). Despite the prevalent use of skin-lightening products, they pose significant health risks, including skin damage, hormonal imbalances, and even cancer due to harmful chemicals such as hydroquinone and mercury (Mutua, 2020). The use of these products has sparked debates about cultural identity, health risks, and the influence of Western beauty ideals in Africa.

Body modification technologies encompass a range of procedures aimed at altering body shapes, including buttock augmentation, breast lifts, and the use of fat transfers to achieve desired body proportions. However, with the increasing exposure to Western media, where slimness is often portrayed as the ideal body type, there has been a rise in procedures aimed at altering body shapes to meet these competing beauty standards (Eze, 2020). Body modification technologies have also advanced to include waist trainers and other non-surgical methods that reshape the body over time. The growing popularity of cosmetic surgeries, including breast augmentation and buttock lifts, reflects the increasing pressure to conform to Westernized beauty standards. While these procedures offer individuals the ability to modify their appearance, they also raise questions about the commodification of the body and the influence of external beauty norms on personal identity (Henderson & Thomas, 2021). The tension between traditional African ideals of body shape and globalized standards undoubtedly illustrates the complex cultural impact of globalization on African beauty perceptions.

The globalization of beauty ideals has also affected hair aesthetics in African societies. The increasing exposure to Western beauty standards has led to the normalization of straightened hair, wigs, and weaves, which are often seen as more aligned with global beauty norms (Omoniyi, 2018). Straightened hair and the use of wigs and extensions have become popular across many African countries as women seek to adopt hairstyles that resemble those of Western celebrities and fashion icons. Hair straightening techniques, such as chemical relaxers, have been widely adopted in African beauty practices, with many African women opting to straighten their hair to conform to globalized beauty ideals. This trend has sparked debates about the loss of cultural authenticity and the pressure to imitate the western beauty standards. According to Akinsanya, "the pursuit of straightened hair reflects broader societal pressures to align with Western ideals of professionalism and attractiveness, often at the expense of traditional African hairstyles" (Akinsanya, 2019:88).

Cultural Identity and the Challenge of Global Beauty Standards

Globalization has profoundly influenced African beauty ideals, introducing new standards that often clash with traditional African notions of beauty. Through global media, advertising, and the growing accessibility of beauty enhancement technologies, Western beauty standards have increasingly permeated African societies. This shift has led to significant changes in how beauty

is perceived and pursued across the continent, affecting both cultural identities and personal body image. As a result, there is a tension between maintaining traditional African aesthetics and embracing globalized ideals that often prioritize Eurocentric features such as lighter skin, straight hair, and slimmer body types (Blay, 2019; Eze, 2020). However, this shift has sparked debate about the loss of cultural authenticity and the ethical implications of adopting Westernized ideals of beauty. As Eze argues, "African societies must critically examine how global beauty trends are reshaping local conceptions of beauty and consider the potential loss of cultural identity and values" (Eze, 2020:56).

Globalization has facilitated the widespread dissemination of Western media, which plays a key role in shaping beauty ideals across the globe. Television shows, movies, fashion magazines, and social media platforms predominantly feature Western beauty standards, which often prioritize Eurocentric features such as fair skin, thin body types, and straight hair over the diverse beauty standards found in African cultures (Blay, 2019). According to Mutua, the exposure to these Western ideals through media outlets has contributed to a "globalized hierarchy of beauty," where lighter skin and Western features are often considered more desirable than traditional African traits, such as darker skin tones and natural hair textures (Mutua, 2020:231). Social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook have further entrenched these globalized beauty ideals, as influencers and celebrities who conform to Western standards of beauty dominate these spaces. Research by Henderson and Thomas (2021) suggests that African youths, particularly in urban areas, are highly influenced by social media content that promotes lighter skin and slimmer body types. The constant exposure to these global beauty norms can create dissatisfaction with one's natural appearance, leading many Africans to alter their bodies through the use of beauty enhancement products or procedures in order to meet these standards. As such, global beauty companies have capitalized on these preferences by marketing skin-lightening creams and products in African markets. The demand for these products has created a multi-billion-dollar industry that profits from promoting lighter skin as a more desirable aesthetic.

The impact of globalization on African beauty ideals extends beyond aesthetics, touching on deeper issues of cultural identity and authenticity. As African societies become more exposed to Western media and global beauty trends, there is a growing concern that traditional beauty ideals are being eroded. African beauty, which historically celebrated natural features and diverse body shapes, is increasingly being replaced by homogenized standards that reflect Eurocentric values. This shift raises questions about the preservation of cultural heritage in the face of global influences and the importance of promoting diversity in beauty ideals. As Mutua argues, "the adoption of globalized beauty ideals has led to the marginalization of indigenous African beauty standards, threatening the cultural diversity and authenticity that define African aesthetics" (Mutua 2020: 234). In response to these challenges, there have been calls for a redefinition of beauty that embraces both traditional African values and modern innovations, while promoting body positivity and self-acceptance.

Summary and Conclusion

The rise of beauty enhancement technologies in Africa no doubt reflects both the global influence of the beauty industry and local aspirations for self-expression through body modification. From cosmetic surgery and non-invasive treatments to skin-lightening products and body modification techniques, these technologies offer individuals new ways to alter their

appearance to meet evolving beauty standards. However, the increasing dependence on these technologies also presents cultural challenges, particularly regarding the preservation of traditional beauty ideals and the health risks associated with some practices. As African societies continue to engage with these technologies, there is a need for critical reflection on the balance between embracing technological advancements and maintaining cultural authenticity. Thus, given the growing influence of enhancement technologies on beauty standards in Africa, there is an urgent need for a redefinition of beauty that harmonizes modern practices with African cultural values. Enhancement technologies, while providing individuals with new ways to express themselves, risk perpetuating homogenized beauty ideals that undermine the diversity and richness of African beauty (Eze, 2020). Without a critical examination of how these technologies are shaping beauty norms, African societies may continue to adopt Westernized standards at the expense of their own cultural identity. One of the primary ethical challenges posed by enhancement technologies is their impact on self-esteem and body image. As more individuals turn to cosmetic procedures and skin-lightening products to meet perceived beauty standards, there is a growing concern that these technologies may contribute to feelings of inadequacy among those who cannot afford or choose not to undergo such enhancements (Blay, 2019). Moreover, the normalization of these technologies can lead to the erosion of cultural pride, as individuals may feel pressured to conform to Western beauty ideals rather than embracing their natural features and cultural heritage. In response to these challenges, scholars have called for a more nuanced understanding of beauty that integrates both modern enhancement practices and traditional African values. According to Akinsanya, “African beauty must be redefined in a way that allows individuals to engage with enhancement technologies while still preserving the cultural significance of natural beauty and traditional aesthetics” (Akinsanya, 2019:89). This redefinition would not reject the use of enhancement technologies outright but would instead encourage a more culturally sensitive approach to beauty that acknowledges the diversity of African aesthetics and promotes body positivity.

***Fasiku, Gbenga Cornelius PhD**

Department of Philosophy,
Prince Abubakar Audu Univeristy, Anyigba,
cfasiku@gmail.com or gbenga.fc@ksu.edu.ng
Tel:+2348169448844

&

****Stephen, Emmanuel**

Department of Philosophy,
Prince Abubakar Audu Univeristy, Anyigba,
emmanuelstephen864@gmail.com
Tel:+2347069125924

References

- Adetunji, A. (2021). “Traditional Aesthetics in Yoruba Culture: Perspectives on Body Image and Identity.” *African Cultural Studies*, 34(2), 112-126.
- Akinsanya, O. (2019). “The Evolution of African Beauty Standards in the Age of Globalization.” *Journal of African Studies*, 45(1), 77-92.

- Akoyun, M. (2020). "Cosmetic Practices in African Societies: A Reflection on Cultural Identity." *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 29(3), 189-204.
- Blay, Y. (2019). "Skin Bleaching in Africa: Global Aesthetics and Local Practices." *Journal of African Media Studies*, 11(4), 349-364.
- Eze, C. (2020). "African Beauty and the Ethics of Enhancement Technologies: A Critical Examination." *Philosophia Africana*, 22(1), 45-60.
- Gbadegesin, S. (1991). *African philosophy: Traditional Yoruba Philosophy and Contemporary African Realities*. Peter Lang.
- Gyekye, K. (1997). *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience*. Oxford University Press.
- Henderson, J., & Thomas, K. (2021). "The Rise of Cosmetic Surgery in Africa: Cultural Implications and Ethical Concerns." *Medical Humanities*, 47(3), 321-335.
- Mutua, M. (2020). "The Aesthetics of Blackness: Beauty, Skin Color, and African Identity." *African Philosophy Review*, 31(4), 231-249.
- Omoniyi, S. (2018). "African Conceptions of Beauty: A Cultural Analysis." *Journal of Contemporary African Art*, 14(2), 89-104.