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Investigating the body self-relationship in young Black South African women.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

> "Every woman knows that, regardless of all her other achievements, she is a failure if she is not beautiful" (Greer, 1999, p.23).

This quote from Germaine Greer's book *The whole woman*, captures the value that is placed on female beauty as well as surfacing the notion that in a patriarchal society, a woman's physical appearance is more important than anything else she may do or aspire to be. What this quote implies is that a woman's internal attributes are never afforded the same importance as her 'outer-beauty' or lack thereof.

Indeed, beauty in and of itself is a concept which does not remain stagnant as what was regarded as 'beautiful' in a previous era may not currently be regarded as so in modern society (Patton, 2005; Wolf, 1990). In any given society, cultural messages about beauty standards are transmitted which women then aspire to. According to Sutton (2009) the criterion of beauty for women has changed from the "youthful, cosmeticized, slimmed, urban" to the "highly sexualised, wrinkle free and anorexic woman" (p. 47). Patton (2006) argues that the body is somewhat malleable and can be altered to a form that is considered beautiful in one's culture, she gives the extreme example of Chinese foot binding- a traditional practice dating back to the 18th century whereby Chinese girls had their feet painfully bound, reshaping the foot in a manner regarded as highly attractive in those times in that culture. A bound foot was regarded as sexually appealing to men thus reinforcing patriarchal dominance. The appalling consequence of this cultural practice was that these women could not walk away as a result of foot binding (Patton, 2006).

European women of the sixteenth century practised superficial body modification by wearing constricting corsets which accentuated their waists and breasts (Patton, 2006). Some even had ribs surgically removed to reduce their waists. In another example, the Paduang tribe, a subgroup of the Karenni nation who originate from the border region of Burma and Thailand (Greenberg, 2010), women wear layers of neck rings which permanently elongate their necks. In other African tribes, such as the Mursi tribe in Ethiopia, there is the practice of lip stretching which is

common for women. This is an important qualifier for marriage because the bigger the lip, the more desirable the woman becomes and the more eligible she becomes for marriage (Greenberg, 2010). Thus wanting to be seen as beautiful within her culture often necessitates that women should be prepared to endure painful and permanently disfiguring procedures.

Against this backdrop, the current research forms part of a broader study that aims to gain a nuanced understanding of body-image and body related opinions and behaviours in contemporary Black[1] females, in this case University students. The concept of body-image is "complex and relates to perceptual, affective, and cognitive aspects of body experience" (Tiggemann& Lynch, 2001, p.243). In contemporary society, the concept of body image encompasses body shape, weight and over-all appearance. The way people see themselves contributes to their sense of self which is often derived from salient attributes (Waller & Barnes, 2002). The angle which this study chose was to try to ascertain how these women's feelings about bodily appearance related to and if it is influenced by their social milieu.

Thus the focus of this research is about the ways that contemporary social constructions of beauty affect Black South African women, specifically how they affect these women's perceptions of self in relation to physical appearance.

[1] [1]In this research paper, the words 'Black' and 'White' are capitalised in order to politically dignify these difficult constructs by this usage, in light of the malignant manner these concepts have been used historically.

RESEARCH AIMS

The aims of this research were to investigate contemporary conceptions of beauty and resulting behavioural practices of young, Black, South African women. As mentioned previously, physical appearance can be modified and there are many different parts of the body that can be transformed (Patton, 2006). For instance, one woman can choose to wear make-up to make herself prettier while another might not choose not to. Similarly, in contemporary South Africa, many urban Black women choose to chemically relax their hair so that it becomes silky and easy to comb while other Black women can take this a little further and choose to wear hair weaves, still others opt for natural hair (Smith, 2011). Some women spend most of their lives dieting while other women who are unhappy with their body might undergo plastic surgery (Skamel, 2003). It is important to understand the meanings attached to these bodily modificatory practices in the sample. Such practices are understood to be underpinned by women's deep rooted beliefs and feelings about themselves. In South Africa, acculturation to Western norms and standards, including beauty standards, is occurring rapidly. This acculturation has deep gender political and socio-political significance with regards to how individuals and groups perceive themselves in relation to normative socio-political standards.

Beauty as a social construct is based on common attributes, in a particular time in a particular society (Patton, 2006). Thus this study aimed to look at the socio-cultural messages that participants might internalise regarding how they should look. The degree to which these concepts affect the way each participant sees herself and other women and the meanings participants generate from their perceptions are of primary interest for this project.

RATIONALE

The purpose of this research was to investigate the relationship between perceptions about physical appearance and the body-self relationship in young, Black, female South African university students. The concept of body self-relationship pertains to how one feels about one's body in relation to ones sense of self-worth (Shavelson, Hubner & Stanton, 1976). Given the increasing exposure to Western media representations of female beauty and local transitions related to class mobility and acculturation, South African women are potentially faced with a particular challenge in identifying and dis-identifying with both culturally informed and global images of beauty (Shaw, 2006). As mentioned previously, research in the socio-cultural and feminist realm informs us that notions of beauty are ever changing (Patton, 2006). In line with changing beauty standards, the body can be altered in order to fit the beauty stipulations or measures of a particular culture. This indicates that women might go to extreme lengths to conform to current socio-cultural standards of beauty. Feminists have argued that the pressure on women to be beautiful and thus modify their bodies is rooted in patriarchal ideologies which serve to dominate women and a tool to sustain masculine dominance (Wolf, 1990).

Existing research informs us that acculturation to Western ideals of beauty frequently occurs in societies that were previously non-Western cultures and many indigenous cultures have become exposed to western cultural influence (Kelly, Bulik & Mazzeo, 2011). The beauty constructs of thinness, light skin-tones and the possession of straight, silky hair embraced by Western societies often come to be aspired to by non-Western and non-White societies (Patton 2005). Therefore this research was undertaken to explore whether young contemporary Black South African women do in fact embrace Western standards of beauty. These beauty standards might affect how Black women view themselves and may also include beliefs about how men and women judge them. It is important to understand the significance of the markers of beauty aspired to by this cohort because these bodily ideals and aspirations may not be entirely superficial in their effects, indeed they may also have deep psychological significance for the individual. Therefore the importance that contemporary Black women place on their appearance in relation to their self-concepts will be investigated both on the inter-personal and intra-personal levels.

In my own experiences as a young Black South African woman from the Zulu culture, I have been faced with the challenges of conforming to the traditional beauty ideals that are set out in

my culture of origin which conflict with the broader westernised urban beauty ideals. I live in Johannesburg, Soweto - an urban background where 'fat' is seen as almost a 'sin'; I am told by older women in my urban community that my weight is not appropriate for my age. I am fairly voluptuous but these women have remarked that I am fat. I have found that their opinions about my body have a somewhat negative bearing on my sense of self. They seem to equate my feminine curves with laziness and see thinness to be a sign of youthful vitality. It seems as though these women are conveying the message to me that young girls should be skinny. The message is different when I go to visit my family in rural Kwa-Zulu Natal where notions of beauty are almost opposite to those held in my urban community. In the rural areas, a plump curvy woman is considered fertile, healthy and wealthy. A thin woman is assumed to be either suffering from disease or malnutrition. These conflicting messages confirm the notion that there are vastly different views with regards to body-shape and size in different settings (Baturka, Hornsby & Schorling, 2001). In some of the conversations I have had with my peers it appears that the pressure to conform to contemporary beauty standards is immense and it has become important for young Black women to fit in with these Westernised or modern stereotypes. This seems to be different for young White university students who seem to receive only one message, albeit an unhealthy one. Some of the Black female contemporaries have confirmed my experience agreeing that society places pressure on them to have a certain body type. These dualistic, oppositional cultural communications can cause emotional turmoil due to their inherent bipolarity. Therefore Black women have to navigate their way around opposing, confusing world views.

Therefore the researcher wishes to understand how young Black urban women perceive beauty standards in relation to themselves and other women on an interpersonal and intrapersonal level. The research aimed to examine the way each Black female participant regards her own appearance as related, or not, to Western beauty ideals and whether this has any psychological effects. This investigation has social-cultural and gender-political significance. It is crucial to "challenge the ideology that defines minority women's appearances as inferior and that encourages minority women to engage in time-consuming and painful disciplines to conform to dominant appearance norms" (Weitz, 2001, p.679). In South Africa, Black women are certainly not the minority but might feel marginalised by the White majority's Western beauty standards, as espoused by global media via television programmes and advertising.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Female Attractiveness

The determinants of female attractiveness seem to be based on physical characteristics such as body-size, weight, skin colour, breast size and facial symmetry (Voracek & Fisher, 2005). Historically, it is believed that beautiful people have more advantages in life such as marriage, social mobility and in the professional arena (Wolf, 1991). These ideas about physical beauty are likely to permeate some societies, however more pressure seems to be put on women to be attractive than on men because women are often judged more on their looks than on any other personal aspects or qualities (Baron, 2005). For this reason, women may be affected by how they look and by the way they perceive themselves (including how they interact with other women's beauty) because "a women's body image is at the core of who she is" (Baron, 2005, p.363).

Culture is defined as the characteristics shared by a group of people in a given community (Gykeke, 1996). Culture includes its own tradition, language, rituals and customs (Gykeke, 1996). Each culture is influenced by the groups of people that make up that nation. Cultural perceptions of beauty can be seen in the conceptualisation of beauty as linked to different time periods in all societies (Greer, 1991). In the 21st century, Western culture has come to permeate the cultures of most societies which have then been influenced by Western standards of living. In parallel, conceptions of beauty have typically changed over time depending on the changing images of physically attractive women (Sarwer, Grossbart & Didie, 2003). The image of the ideal, 'beautiful' woman is thus disseminated by cultural messages. For example in the 1980's, the "Gibson Girl" appeared on the covers of magazines. This beauty ideal promoted a thin body frame with large breasts and hips. In the 1920's, a new type of beauty was introduced. This beauty ideal promoted a 'boyish' sort of look. Over time, the bodies of models have become thinner. Lesley Lawson, widely known as Twiggy, one of the first supermodels of the 1960's, was a successful model because of her distinctively thin body size (Lawson & Denning, 1998). She appeared on the covers of many magazines as a fashion icon of the 1960's (Lawson & Denning, 1998). The thin trend has somewhat endured, however there are additional 'sub-trends'

from time to time for example the idealisation of a larger back-side due to the influence of celebrities such as Kim Kardashian and Jennifer Lopez (Sarwer, 2003).

However, not all women subscribe to these hegemonic beauty constructs and there are social groups that differ in their thinking about physical appearance. Indeed, homosexual women may have different beauty standards to heterosexual women in the same region (Krakauer& Rose, 2002). Krakauer and Rose (2002) found in their study that there were physical characteristics adopted by homosexual women with regards to body appearance, which served to convey messages about group membership as well as to serve as a sexual signal to potential partners. Some of these changes included shorter hair, baggy clothes, and so forth. Some recently 'out' lesbians reported not wearing earrings anymore and there was less concern about body-weight and size in this group (Krakauer& Rose, 2002). Therefore general standards of beauty may not necessarily be adopted by all the women in any given society, but seemingly have a more profound influence on heterosexual women. Indeed, the role of female physical attraction has been an area of interest in the study of beauty (Sarwer et al, 2003). Beauty has been synonymous with all that is good, as good looking people have been described as kind, interesting, socialable and to have a good quality of life.

The Evolutionary Psychology perspective offers a different understanding of the role of a woman's physical beauty based on the premise that mate selection is based on physical characteristics (Sarwer et al, 2003). The physical appearance of a woman is suggested to be a crucial determinant regarding her reproductive ability. Sarwer et al (2003) propose that for men, fertility, health and youth are important indicators for partner selection; therefore, men might unconsciously look for markers of fertility which are then translated into physical features. Physical features identified by Sarwer et al (2003) which were determinant for mate selection included: face and body symmetry; averageness; fuller figure and youthfulness. Facial and bodily symmetry has been regarded as significant characteristics in the selection of a sexual partner. Thus an attractive person has higher chances of finding a partner than a person who is not attractive (Sarwer et al, 2003). Sarwer et al (2003) also suggest the possibility of an early, innate ability to distinguish what are considered attractive versus non-attractive people based on facial symmetry (Sarwer et al, 2003). This conclusion was based on the findings of a study in

which infant's responded differently to attractive versus less-attractive female faces. The infants were less withdrawn and played more with attractive females when compared to the less-attractive females. This led the authors to conclude that perceptions of beauty may also be shaped by biological wiring in humans (Sarwer, 2003).

According to the study, the concept of averageness is linked with the normal and what is accepted in society. Facial features associated with averageness include: a small mouth, full lips, narrower chin, tiny jaw-line and pronounced cheek bones (Sarwer et al, 2003). With regards to body size, the Waist-Hip-Ratio (WHR) is crucial in mate selection as a women's body size serves as an indication of her reproductive ability. WHR is judged on a woman's body structure, that is, her hips and breasts. Youthfulness is closely linked with prolonged reproductively, thus there is a higher preference for women who look younger. In terms of pathogen resistance, physical attraction is a marker of good health and an indication that one is healthy as there is a perception that an attractive person is healthy and disease free. The authors argue that these physical features were considered to be the most 'reliable' indicators of fertility and thus perceived as beautiful because of their genetic advantage (Sarwer et al, 2003). The authors reflect the finding that since women's bodies are the site of reproduction, these visible markers of fertility attract partners to them. The Evolutionary perspective helps us understand the importance of female physical attraction and that physically attractive women are more likely to be selected by men as sexual partners.

It seems then that the way in which female physical attraction is perceived is based on cultural standards of beauty which in the 21st century, to a large extent, seem to mirror Western culture. The mass media promotes the beauty ideal through selecting idealised images of contemporary notions of beauty. The counter argument states that the media is a reflection of society (Sarwer et al, 2003). Nonetheless, the media's emphasis on and transmission of the beauty ideal has significant influence. Women are confronted with images of the idealised face and body and those who are unable to conform are encouraged to adopt measures to attain the beauty ideal. We now turn to the role of the media and its influence on the perception of beauty.

Role of the media

In her article "*The politics of black beauty*", Smith (2011) argues that Black models are gradually making their way into the 'White magazine market' as there is an increase in Black models that have graced the covers of formerly 'White' magazines. In the 1960's, citizens of America gradually endorsed the idea of Black beauty with Naomi Sims as the first Black model on the cover of *Life And Cosmopolitan* magazine (Stewart, 2009). Beverly Johnson was the first Black model to be on the cover of *American Vogue* magazine in August of 1974 (Stewart, 2009). Some of the challenges that she faced as a Black model in a White dominated industry was the fact that there were not enough hair-stylists and make-up artists who knew how to work with Black women's physical features, thus, she had to teach them how to do her make-up and hair (Stewart, 2009). Sutton (2009) draws our attention to the idea that Black women's magazines are very similar to White women's magazine in that Black models in these magazines seem to fit the stereotype of White beauty because they had 'White features' such as light skin and long, silky hair. The only difference between White women's and Black women's magazines was in the content (Sutton, 2009). The contents of these magazines dealt with issues of race which Black women could relate to. However, this was not achieved as the cultural messages about beauty embedded in the models found on the covers of these magazines sent a contradictory message to the reader because the Black models in these magazines were not representing the conventional standards of Black beauty (Sutton, 2009). The image of Black beautiful women looked as if they fitted the stereotype of White women, strengthening the "superiority of the White race as beautiful" (Sutton, 2009, p. 62). This new image of the Black woman served to replace the image of 'the mammy', tragic mulatto, etc.

Within the South Africa context, a number of Black models are ambassadors and spokespersons of beauty products that were formerly targeted at White women. Examples include Terry Pheto who become a spokesperson for L'Oreal Paris in 2008 and Nonhle Thema who was the face of Dark 'n Lovely (Smith, 2011). Although it has apparently been a difficult task to convince the Westernised public that 'Black is beautiful', this can be attributed to the fact that the beauty ideology is supported by globally dominant White Western culture where Black models were largely absent from the media as the media was controlled by the dominant ideology (Odhiambo, 2008).

Odhiambo (2008) argues that the role of the media is to circulate information. Thus, repeated exposure of certain types of bodily aesthetics by the media very likely has an influence on the body conceptions of women (Sutton, 2009). As mentioned previously, some might argue that the media reflects reality, but in the case of female appearance the media appears to 'drive' the beauty ideal in an unrealistic manner to sell products. For instance, there are television commercials and magazine adverts advertising 'anti-aging' creams that claim to prevent or cover wrinkles, for example an advert in Edgars Club magazine (2008) advertising *Olay's Regenerist Replenishing Cream* which claims to keep skin looking younger and has been compared to plastic surgery (Edgars Club magazine, 2008). Similar products are found in other magazines. Another illustration of a television commercial targeted at women is an advert for hair-dyes that stay on for longer periods, covering grey hair. These commercials are often directed at women as women are usually the models advertising these products. The implicit message behind these advertisements is that women should try by all means to prevent the physical signs of the natural aging process. In reality, beauty wanes with age but the message conveyed is that women must try to stay beautiful, by youthful standards, regardless of their age (Sichterman, 1983).

A similar sort of media message seems to operate with dieting products which are largely targeted at women. The 'thin' trend is prevalent to the point that there is pressure on all women; even women who have recently given birth are expected to return to their 'post' pregnancy, slim bodies almost as soon as they give birth (Greer, 1999). Indeed, women are confronted with images of celebrity mothers who look like they never gave birth a few months after they have (Greer, 1999). The latent message is that women have no excuse to be 'fat'- even motherhood does not warrant a larger, more generous body shape or size (Greer, 1999). This expectation is troublingly at odds with normal human biological processes.

Although women's physical appearance seems to be given more emphasis than men's in the media, a 'double pressure' has been exerted on Black women when compared to White women (Francois, 2012). Black women are expected to conform to the beauty ideals of Western standards which value 'White physical' features over 'Black physical' features (Fujioka, Ryan, Agle, Legaspi & Toohey, 2009). This denies the difference between what is represented as possible and what is realistic. The 'Black' *Barbie* can be used to illustrate the pressures exerted

on Black women from childhood. *Barbie* is a fashion doll produced by company Mattel. The doll has become something of a cultural icon promoting an impossible body ideal for young girls (Greer, 1999) - *Barbie* is thin, tall and has long silky hair, the 'Black' *Barbie* has a darker skin tone than the conventional 'White' Barbie doll although she still has 'White features' such as long silky hair, blue-eyes and a thin body shape. This promotes the idea that Afrocentric features are not as beautiful as western features; this then positions the White beauty ideal as the norm (Young, 1996).

Depictions of desirable Black beauty in the media have ironically led some non-Black women to want features which are regarded as features that are more often associated with Black women (Thompson, 2009). For instance White women tan their skin or visit tanning salons to attain a darker golden-brown skin tone. Also, the contemporary trend to enlarge breasts and buttocks surgically has become very popular with White women but these have historically been associated with Black women's bodies (Thompson, 2009). Therefore it seems that is not only Black women who seem to emulate White body standards, but also White women who aspire to aspects and body parts formerly regarded as characteristic of so-called "Black beauty". As mentioned previously, in the 1960's Western culture tended to idealise very thin, pre-pubescent female bodies introduced by the model 'Twiggy' while the celebration of female curves was an African cultural concept. (Sarwer et al, 2003). Of course, in reality there are no 'Black' or 'White' just ideas that promote this fallacy.

Thus the role of the media and culture are understood to be influential in conveying to society how women *should* look (Odhiambo, 2008). This is likely to have created the idea that the White beauty ideal is an ideal that has so much value over other beauty ideals. Next we examine how feminists responded to the social constructions of beauty.

Beauty and Socio-Political Power

The Feminist Movement was established with the aim of defending, establishing and promoting equal rights for men and women (Collins, 1989). The Movement began in the United States in the 19th century (Collins, 1989). This was known as the first-wave of Feminism which was focused on attaining basic legal rights for women, such as the right to vote. The second-wave of

Feminism occurred during the 1960's and early 1970's and aimed at alleviating more general social inequalities between men and women (Collins, 1989). Before the Feminist Movement was established, human rights essentially protected masculine dominance and this allowed for the differential treatment of men and women. The tension about advocating for equal rights between men and women lies in how the existing anatomical differences between the sexes are politically and ideologically emphasised. The emphasis and interpretation of biological differences may therefore make it difficult for women to achieve a state of equality with men (Sichterman, 1983). The differential gendered spaces of men and women were such that men dominated the public – 'masculine' - sphere while women dominated the private –'feminized' - sphere. Thus, a man's place was in the public domain while a woman's place was in the home. The only area were women had some measure of power was in the private domain (Sichterman, 1983). The ideology of the two different spheres was in accordance with gendered roles. Women were educationally, socially and financially disadvantaged (Sutton, 2009). Even though their place was in the home, the financial decisions rested with men. The role of women as mothers was given precedence over the roles they could play in the public sphere (Sutton, 2009). The conflicting demands on motherhood and careerism made it difficult for women to juggle the two.

Wolf (1991), a contemporary feminist writer, argues that the notion of beauty should be analysed through a gendered lens because this notion still has the power to hold women captive as they struggle to have a sense of freedom in relation to the physical self. Since women's liberation only took place in overtly political power struggles and not in the realm of physical struggles, the expectations for women to be beautiful has if anything, seem to have only increased (Wolf, 1991). Wolf (1991) argues that even though women have transcended power struggles, the way in which women feel about their bodies has not improved. Thus women are not free to do what they want with their bodies because they still feel the need to conform to the standards of beauty promoted within different societies. Wolf (1991) also offers the metaphor of the 'iron maiden' which represents a standard of beauty that is out of reach for most women and which also affects them physically and psychologically. The iron maiden is "a medieval instrument of torture consisting of an iron frame in the form of a person in which the victim was enclosed and impaled on interior spikes." (Urban Dictionary, 2011). Wolf (1991) uses this metaphor to argue that

women have been imprisoned psychologically and physically by society because of the pressures placed upon women regarding physical appearance. Through the feminist movement, women seem to have not been completely liberated, decades after the inception of the initial Feminist movement; women are still dealing with the pressure to be beautiful because the fight for liberation has only resulted in emancipation in the public sphere and not the private sphere of women's lives (Wolf, 1991).

Sutton (2009) argues that the beauty of a woman was achieved from aesthetics and not moral behaviour as "it was the 'feminine mystique' which first made attractiveness an obligatory attribute for every woman rather than just for the exceptional case such as the model or film star" (Sichterman, 1983, p.41). Thus, women had to be pretty, smart, sexy and look young at any age. Sichterman (1983) argues that paradoxically, sexuality is the only sphere where women have power and that beauty is the most formidable power that women possess over men. Thus by making themselves attractive, women may be able to 'control' men. Men are already in the position of power and women are only in power when they are desired by men. The feminist movement was successful in advocating women's rights; however it did not take the same form and shape for other non-White women. We now look at the Black feminist movement as it was guided by the politics of race, sexism and oppression.

Black Feminism

> "Feminist scholars...assert that women share a history of patriarchal oppression through the political economy of the material conditions of sexuality and reproduction. These shared material conditions are thought to transcend divisions among women created by race, social class, religion, sexual orientation, and ethnicity and to form the basis of a women's standpoint with its corresponding feminist consciousness and epistemology" (Collins, 1989, p.756)

The above quote serves to illustrate that all women share a history of patriarchal oppression and this is the driving force behind the Feminist Movement. However, Collins employs a non-essentialist view arguing that not all women's experiences are the same (Collins, 1989). Some Black feminists have argued that the experiences of Black women are in many ways different from the experiences of White Women and that theirs is in fact linked to a triple oppression

regarding race, gender and class (de la Rey, 1997). These layers of oppression make up the experiences of Black women. It is of importance to note that earlier forms of feminism took into consideration the lived experiences of White, middle class women. Therefore under the civil rights movement and the collapse of colonialism in Africa, South America and Asia, women of other races proposed a new form of feminism which took into account the experiences of non-White women (Collins, 1989). Black Feminism did not emerge in the same way as it did in the West as White women were advocating to occupy a space in the public sphere in terms of working outside the home, while Black women had already done so (de la Rey, 1997). White women were in a different social position than Black women (Collins, 1989).

The Black population in South Africa has been the object of oppression for a long time as a result of the apartheid regime (de la Rey, 1997). Although there have been massive political changes, Black women more than Black men still seem to be struggling to have political and personal potency in contemporary South Africa (Odhiambo, 2008). Historically, there was inequality between Black women and Black men; this inequality was further exacerbated by the country's racial policies at the time. Additionally, Black women do not enjoy the same privileges as White women -indeed White women have begun to assert their power in South African society (Thompson, 2008). They have had a racial advantage because Black women, as part of the Black population, were doubly oppressed in terms of both gender and race (Thompson, 2008). Although White women were not seen to be equal to White men in patriarchal South Africa, White women's political empowerment was not directly affected by the abolition of apartheid but more to do with the feminist movement globally. Hence White women have been able to move to the upper professional echelons of society and claim their power outside the home to a greater extent than their Black counterparts (Greer, 1993). Black women have been socio-politically disadvantaged on the grounds of both gender and on race (Collins, 1989).

<u>The representation of Black women's sexuality</u>

In contemporary African society, there is a pervasive perception that White values, culture and lifestyle are superior to that of other racial groups (Marshall, 1996). This has often meant that African cultures and traditions have been devalued and side-lined. In the past, when Black

women were compared with White women, Black women were often seen as promiscuous and morally loose in relation to the purported chastity of White women (Marshall, 1996). Under colonialism, Black women were viewed as hyper sexual because "images of black women as hypersexual have been used to justify [their] sexual exploitation" (Marshall, 1996, p.5). Young (1996) explains that the image of the Black woman as sexual originated during slavery as it was common for White male slave owners to have sexual relations with Black female slaves. This served two purposes: to increase the labour force through the production of more slaves and to exert control over Black female slaves (Young, 1996). Black female slaves were sexually exploited and they were blamed for luring White male owners as the slave owners did not assume any responsibility over their actions. It seems that the image of the Black woman as morally loose has endured and over time these images have become embedded in culture (Young, 1996). Patton (2006) argues that women are held to hegemonically defined standards of beauty. A striking example was Sarah Baartman[2] whose body was used to reinforce the idea that Black women's voluptuous bodies are primarily designed for sex. Due to the negative connotations attached to the erotic-ness of Black women, Black women were portrayed in a negative light (Thompson, 2008). Negative terms were attached to Black women at the time such as: the 'oversexed jezebel' which referred to Black women as generally morally loose and promiscuous; the 'tragic mulato' which refers to women of mixed race - although White men did find them sexually attractive even though sex across racial lines was illegal so it was practiced in secrecy; and the 'mammy figure' which is a racial caricature of African American women (Patton, 2006). These terms served the political, social and economic interest of the racial ideologies supported by a broad social movement.

For a long time, African American women were dehumanized and they only qualified as women because of their reproductive ability (Young, 1996). Thus, the notion of femininity was not applicable to Black women. The sexuality of White women was idealized while Black female sexuality was denigrated. This had an adverse effect on Black women more than it did in Black men (Young, 1996). An illustration used to prove this point was put forward by Hooks (1996)

[2] Sarah Baartman, also known as the 'Hottentot Venus', was one of the two Khoi-khoi women who were exhibited in the European museums in the 19th century, displaying to her audience what was thought of as unusual female body features (Thompson, 2008)

who noted that Vanessa Williams was dethroned of her crown shortly after she posed nude for a photo-shoot but once she started playing 'exotic' roles in films, this 'image' of her was accepted by the public (Hooks, 1996). This suggests that Black women were only regarded as suited for roles that represented them in a marginal light, in line with their prescribed sexual identity. Although the events mentioned above occurred in a different context, because of the Western influence in Africa, especially South Africa due to colonialism, the negative representations of Black women seem to have striking significance in South African society, past and present.

The obsession with Black female body parts in music videos and lyrics is likely to give the impression that Black women are hypersexualised and that Black women's sexuality has been portrayed as aggressive and 'loose'. Hooks (1992) offers a different perspective and argues that this is not an indication of inferiority, rather it is through these mediums where there is appreciation of the Black female body. However, the construction of Black female sexuality as available to men may have likely served to reinforce the notion of Black women as sexual commodities. The representation of Black women as available for male consumption threatens their liberation because it sends the message that "the black female body gains attention only when it is synonymous with accessibility, availability, when it is sexually deviant" (Hooks, 1992, p.66).

Black Beauty

Beauty is a universal concept with cultural relevance (Sarwer et al, 2003). Different cultures have different conceptions of what constitutes beauty (Sarwer et al, 2003). In some traditional African societies, the notion of beauty encompasses physical appearance as well as non-physical characteristics (Gyekye, 1996). For instance, within the context of some African marriages, a wife has to possess the following characteristics: obedience, humility and model good moral behavior. In this context, a woman's beauty extends to non-physical characteristics since "moral behavior is considered an aesthetic value" (Gyeke, 1996, p.132). In most African societies, the perceived value of a woman's physical beauty depreciates when she has an unbecoming character; this means that a person's beauty is found in their character in as much as their outward appearance (Gyeke, 1996). These values appear to hold significance in contemporary, African societies (Gyeke, 1996). Husbands are expected to buy clothes and jewelry for their

wives so they appear stylish. If this is not so, the man is blamed for being stingy or accused of wasting his money on other women. Therefore husbands are also seen as contributing to the physical appearance of their wives (Gyeke, 1996). According to the Evolutionary perspective (Sarwer et al, 2003), one of the features that is believed to make a person beautiful is that they should be healthy and disease free. This is particularly relevant in the African culture where a beautiful, healthy body is taken as a sign that a person is free from illness. Selecting a healthy partner is equally important in rural areas in South Africa where the HIV pandemic is high where the assessment of potential mates is largely based on physical attributes (Ribane, 2006).

In South Africa the first crowning of the Black Miss South Africa in 1993 marked a new era that embraced the Black beauty ideal (Smith, 2011). This event marked a turning point regarding the visibility of Black beauty for the public. However, 'Black images' of beauty are becoming more 'White' as Black women have been seen to be emulating White standards of beauty (Poran, 2006). Here we see again how the 'Black *Barbie*' can paradoxically be used to convey the idea of the 'impediments' to Black beauty because of the adaptation of Western standards of beauty in the Black culture. These are understood to have been tied to historical processes which are unfortunately irreversible (Allan, Mayo & Michel, 1993).

Pertaining to the questions of Black women's engagement and modification their physicality, certain writers have cautioned against judging women who wear weaves as self-hating, or women who have natural hair as self-loving, rather we should be cognizant of the intricacies of Black beauty because not all Black speak with one voice (Smith, 2011). Thus when a Black woman opts to wear a weave, she should not be thought of as denying her 'Blackness' or as reserving her 'Blackness' when she wears her hair naturally. Rather, we should be cognizant of the reality that women can choose how to style their hair. Dark skin, natural hair, voluptuous and curvaceous body, big breasts and big buttocks, these features are all central to the aesthetics of 'Black beauty'. Now the conspicuous markers of 'Black beauty' will be discussed in more detail.

Markers of beauty

The Black Consciousness movement was created to promote the idea that Black people's physical features such as skin colour, hair and facial features could be conceptualized as beautiful (Thompson, 2009). This movement was in reaction to the view that conceptions of beauty were constructed around White people's physical features (Thompson, 2009). 'White' as a standard of beauty dates back to slavery where the constructions of beauty were based on the purity and chastity of White women while Black women were considered to be physically strong and as having an animal sensuality (Tate, 2007). The trend towards emulating Whiteness was a reflection of the White dominant culture which privileged White/light skin, straight silky hair and European facial features. Within the South African context, under colonialism, indigenous African societies were rendered barbaric and uncultured (Ribane, 2006). In those times, everything was "seen through 'White' eyes" (Ribane, 2006, p.11). This suggests that there was limited understanding of the ways of living of Black South Africans. With the rise of colonialism, Western culture began to influence the ways of living of Black South Africans. The changes in lifestyles meant that conceptions of womanhood were constructed around the aesthetics of White women (Gyeke, 1996). The move towards western beauty ideals seemed to have erased Blackness. Conventions of African beauty are based on the notions that a thin body shape is not desirable, that women should have big breasts. A thin body shape is not considered "sexy" as it is a sign of mal-nutrition and ill-ness (Ribane, 2006). It becomes difficult then to conceptualise this body shape as beautiful within the African concepts of beauty.

Body shape as a conspicuous marker of beauty

In an article for *Sowetan*, Eric Miyeni, a South African artist was thought to have verbally attacked Lebo Mashile, a South African poet, by the nature of the comments he made regarding her body size. Miyeni was quoted as saying that Mashile is beautiful despite her "large" body shape (Gqola, 2010). Mashile responded by declaring that she is proud of her body and that she represents women who are large (Gqola, 2010). A similar incident happened in the United States where Karl Lagerfelt, the creative director for Chanel, made similar comments about Adele Laurie Blue Adkins, an English singer, songwriter and musician. Lagerfelt, in an interview about women pop-stars, commented on the musician's body stating that she has a large body shape

despite her talent and beauty (McNally, 2013). Adele responded in the same way as Mashile, adding that she is proud of her body and that she has no ambitions to conform to the desired standards of beauty (McNally, 2013). These two incidents speak to the similar pressures placed on Black and White women globally to be thin.

The issue of body shape can arguably also be considered an important socio-cultural marker of beauty. In a sense, the media plays an active role in 'showing' women what their bodies should look like (Poran, 2006). The standard of beauty is often derived from media sources and both men and women reinforce this standard (Poran, 2006). The concept of body shape and how it is related to the concept of beauty will be discussed in light of the differences and similarities between the Black and White cultural depictions of a 'beautiful body'. Women in Westernised cultures are faced with the challenge of conforming to the standard body shape whereby there is an emphasis on thinness which is unattainable for some women (Hargreaves & Tiggeman, 2004). Existing research about body image (Kelly, Bulik & Mazzeo, 2011; Barturka, Hornsby & Schorling, 2000; Allan et al 1993; Wassenaar, le Grange, Winship & Lachenicht , 2000; Rucker& Cash, 1992) has revealed that there is an increased preference for a thin body shape among girls. The research participants for these studies included African American girls and White American girls as well as Black South African girls and White South African girls (Kelly, Bulik & Mazzeo, 2011; Barturka, Hornsby & Schorling, 2000; Allan et al 1993; Wassenaar et al, 2000; Rucker& Cash, 1992). The studies yielded similar results in that all the girls had a strong desire for a thinner body shape despite the participant's body shape. The researchers make a point that when girls are unable to attain an ideal body shape they are likely to have feelings of dissatisfaction about their bodies. Furthermore, they are at risk of developing unhealthy eating habits (Kelly, Bulik & Mazzeo, 2011; Barturka, Hornsby & Schorling, 2000; Allan et al 1993; Wassenaar et al, 2000; Rucker& Cash, 1992).

This finding is significant in light of previously held perceptions that traditional Black cultural norms 'protected' Black women from developing eating disorders and body dissatisfaction (Baturka et al, 2000). This is because the Black culture is known for endorsing larger body types hence Black females were considered immune from developing eating disorders (Rucker& Cash, 1992). However, it seems that the perception that Black women are more accepting of a larger

body no longer holds true (Baturka et al, 2000). It should be acknowledged that some level of body dissatisfaction may exist which can be in conflict with cultural messages of the accepted body size (Baturka et al, 2000). While these tensions may exist, Rubin, Fitts and Becker (2003) conducted a study which aimed to investigate the relationship between ethnicity, self-representations and body ethics among a group of female college students from different ethnic groups, including Blacks, Whites and Latino's. The authors found that participants endorsed a beauty ethic that promotes personal style, self-care and spirituality (Rubin et al, 2003). With regards to personal style, participants were more concerned about self-presentation than body type, thus, they expressed that how one presents herself has more value than their outward appearance. They gave illustrations of big bodied women who wear clothes that are appropriate for their bodies according to their body shape. For these participants, the value of the body is not tied to cultural standards of the ideal body, but to how they feel about their bodies as well as how they are comfortable in their own skin and content with their bodies. This then rejects the dominant ideologies that define beauty according to Whiteness and thinness. The results of the study point to the notion that for some Black women, the cultural values placed on their bodies may not much of a concern for them, rather we see that there is a small group who are beginning to develop their own strategies to deal with the pressure that women face with regards to aesthetics (Rubin et al, 2003).

In South Africa too it had been initially hypothesised that Black women were immune from developing eating disorders because the Black culture[3], which endorses larger body shapes, was believed to be a buffer against this (Poran, 2006). Szabo and Allwood (2006) conducted a study which sought to explore the relationship between body dissatisfaction and eating disorders in a sample of 1353 Black and White adolescent girls from an urban setting and 361 Black Zulu girls from a rural setting. The findings from this study revealed that within the urban sample, the girls had a strong desire to be thinner, however the desire to be thin was more pronounced among the White girls. Due to the desire to be thin, there was greater body dissatisfaction in the urban

[3] 'Black culture' is not homogeneous group; there are different ethnic backgrounds within each Black African racial grouping. There are some similarities in Black cultures even between Black African Americans and Black South Africans such as the shared history of oppression, however there are important socio-political, historical and cultural differences between Black South Africans and Black people living outside of South Africa and Africa itself.

sample than there was in the rural again, again this was more pronounced in White girls from the urban sample (Szabo and Allwood, 2006). The authors postulate that race and geographical locations influence body ideals in South African adolescent girls. Therefore there has been a trend for Black South African women to adopt 'Western' body shape ideals which often eclipse their prior cultural conceptions (Bartuka et al, 2000). The media and culture are influential in setting the standards that women should live up to as recent research indicates that Black and White adolescents have the same risk for developing eating related problems and body image dissatisfaction (Wassenaar, et al, 2000; Rucker& Cash, 1992).

A research study conducted by Wassenaar et al (2000) which aimed to investigate if socio-cultural factors had an impact on body shape and eating attitudes amongst adolescent girls from different ethnic backgrounds in South Africa. Results showed that participants from this study had a preference for a thin body shape and that the White girls scored much higher on body dissatisfaction as compared to girls from other ethnic groups (Wassenaar et al, 2000). The authors attribute the similarities of body preference in all the girls to acculturation and the media (Wassenaar et al, 2000). Acculturation is defined as a change of traditional values through the exposure to dominant culture (Caradas et al, 2001). This results in the change of value systems with regards to body shape. The same patterns of results were reported by Rucker and Cash (1991). The aim of the study was to compare the body images and eating behaviours of African American and White American female college students. The results were similar in that they refuted the hypothesis that the Black American culture is a buffer against the development of eating disorders.

The influence of the 'male gaze' is noted as being an important factor for women's feelings about bodily appearance (Poran, 2006). In the South African Black culture, Black men's general reported preference for a voluptuous body shape may still have a strong influence on Black women's perceptions of body shape because some Black women are aware of Black men's preference (Poran, 2006). Socio-cultural trends regarding female beauty are often regarded as being based on patriarchal ideologies and therefore in the Black culture larger body shapes might be more accepted because they are supported by patriarchal ideologies linked to ideas about

women's fertility and child-bearing capacities (Poran, 2006). However the preference for more generous female bodily proportions does not translate into body acceptance for Black women. We now see a trend of Black women developing eating disorders and a pre-occupation with body weight (Wassenaar et al, 2000). It seems that the dominant culture in South Africa, coupled with the media has been influential in promoting the desired western body shape. Eating disorders are not part of the current research endeavour, but the way that participants of this research feel about their bodies will help us gain insight into the elements of body image from a cultural perspective. Next we explore the concept of skin colour as a marker of beauty.

Skin colour as a conspicuous marker of beauty

Skin colour, as a marker of Black beauty, can be linked to historical periods of oppression and slavery (Neal & Wilson, 1989). In America and Europe, the Black population was subject to slavery and domination by the White population (Neal & Wilson, 1989). Lighter skinned Black American slaves worked closely with White American families: their duties were not as arduous as those of darker skinned slaves (Neal & Wilson, 1989). Furthermore, lighter skinned Black American slaves were given more privileges than darker skinned Black American slaves because their skin tone was taken as an indication of White ancestry (Neal &Wilson, 1989). These historical processes have unfortunately permeated modern society because White features, such as long, silky hair and light skin tones are strongly linked with attractiveness (Neal & Wilson, 1989). In certain contemporary societies, African-Americans with lighter skin tones were considered superior to those with darker skin tones (Neal & Wilson, 1989). Poran (2006) explains that 'colour caste' hierarchies are largely gendered in the African American population where women are judged more on their skin colour than men. This is to say darker skinned Black women are not equally desirable as darker skinned Black men because "Black men have been found to value lighter skin for Black women than Black women for Black men" (p.752). Therefore it appears that Black women are more affected by discrimination surrounding skin colour because of the general emphasis placed on physical attractiveness for all women (Neal & Wilson, 1989). It seems that the emphasis on skin colour influences how men relate to women and how women perceive themselves in relation to the social constructs of beauty that is in accordance to skin colour. Although attitudes about Black women's beauty have evolved, concerns about skin colour have not changed (Neal & Wilson, 1989).

There were and still are labels used to identify different skin tones in the Black culture which are synonymous with all that is good, pure and desirable (Poran, 2006). For instance, terms used to identify lighter skin tones include: fair, bright, half-white and yellow. While those that define darker skin tones are: jet-black, black, ink-spot or shine (Neal & Wilson, 1989). In keeping with the notion of beauty as understood in African culture, a SeSotho wedding which contains the lyrics "*Twsang, tswang, twsang, le boning, Ngwana o twsana le lecalati*" (Come out and see the bride, she is so fair she looks like a Coloured) (Smith, 2011). In contemporary South African culture, the word "yellow bone" has been coined in some *kwaito*[4] songs and the phrase highlights the idealisation of lighter skinned Black girls as the most beautiful. The absence of a similarly complimentary phrase about darker skinned Black girls further strengthens their invisibility and possible feelings of undesirability.

Another contemporary point of illustration is a Black South African popular artist and 'princess' of *Kwaito* music, Nomasonto "Mshoza" Mnisi, who has recently undergone skin lightning procedures (Drum magazine, 17 November 2011 issue). Her motives for undergoing surgery was to lighten her skin tone so that she looks White so that she can appeal to wider market as well as to accentuate her beauty (Drum magazine, 17 November 2011 issue). It is not clear whether the effects of her surgery have affected her popularity. Her young fans are likely to have received mixed messages from her actions about the value of being Black due to their idols body modification. Mshoza has undergone numerous procedures, proving Patton's (2006) statement that beauty indeed can be altered. In a post treatment interview that she did with Motswako, a talk show programme broadcasted on the South African Broadcasting Company, channel 2, she stated that she wanted to enhance her beauty as looking good boosts her self-confidence. She denied disliking her dark skin colour or being Black.

[4]Kwaito is a music genre that emerged during the 1990's that is most popular among the black youth of South Africa. It is a derivative of music that features African sounds and samples. Kwaito contains catchy melodic beats, deep bass lines, and vocals.

Regarding product consumption, skin-lightening creams are likely to convey the message that dark skin is undesirable (del Giudice & Yves, 2002). Skin lightening creams have been around for a long time and they have been documented to be used by both men and females. They are beauty products which when used, reduce skin pigmentation for lighter toned skin (del Giudice & Yves, 2002). Within the African culture, there seems to be divisions on the basis of skin-tone. Ribane (2006, p.11) argues that "even if you weren't White, the lighter skinned you were, the better your chances in life would be. And the lighter you were in complexion the more beautiful you were perceived to be" (Ribane, 2006, p.11). It is evident that the terms 'yellow-bones' and 'black-berries' show that Africans are treated differently. The preference for lighter-skinned Black women than darker skinned Black women is evident in the myth that Black women with light skin tones are more beautiful than Black women with darker skin tones. In the article *The skin I live in* (Nkosi, 2012), the author gives an account of her experiences as a dark skinned girl growing up in contemporary South Africa. Because her skin was dark, she was encouraged to marry a light-skinned man so that her children have a fair complexion. Nkosi (2012) felt she was treated differently because of the colour of her skin: she was teased at school for being too dark and that people assumed that she was of another ethnic group because her skin tone was too dark to qualify her as South African. Nkosi's story is an illustration of the racial stereotypes in South Africa about skin colour that is too dark. These racial stereotypes have endured and they are likely to engender a negative self-esteem in young girls like Nkosi. Aesthetic values have been placed on women's bodies as well as the perceptions about the constituents of beauty differ across cultures. Next we explore the hair as and its relation to beauty.

Hair as a conspicuous marker of beauty

The importance of hair as a marker of race and beauty is tied to biological, political and historical processes, both in America and South Africa (Patton, 2006). Weitz (2001) argues that hair; especially hairstyles are culture-bound, public, personal and "highly malleable to suit cultural and personal relevance" (p. 667). Black people were brought as slaves to America and usually forced to engage in laborious work. However, there was a difference in the 'ranking' of slaves: Black slaves who had prominent 'White' features worked as house slaves in close

proximity to their masters, while Black slaves with prominent 'Black' features worked in the fields (Patton, 2006).

After the abolition of slavery, there was a preference for straighter, longer hair and lighter skin tones because these 'White' features were a ticket to better future prospects and hence of vital importance to life, something one could aspire to in practical terms and this perception still seems to predominate contemporary ideologies. This led to the development of hair crème relaxers that straightened hair which were used by Black people after slavery was abolished (Neal and Wilson, 1989). The length and texture of hair was a marker of beauty, as such, long and silky hair contributed to the idea of what was socially attractive (Thompson, 2009).

As mentioned above, slavery played an integral part in the aesthetics of hair (Thompson, 2009).When slaves were brought to the United States, there were no 'African combs' which they could use for their particular type of hair, therefore their hair became tangled. This led to Black women wearing scarves to cover their unkempt hair (Thompson, 2009). Ribane (2006) thus alerts us to the fact that the *doek* (head-scarf) has been assimilated into the Black culture due to these historical happenings. Within the context of the African culture, the *doek* was used to symbolise a woman's marital status but for Ribane (2006, p.15), the use of the *doek* as a covering up device "has been to kill any pride in showing off natural Black hair and inculcate the belief that Black hair is something that must be kept hidden".

In South Africa, during the apartheid era, the so-called pencil test (Powe, 2009) was employed in relation to an individual's hair to draw distinctions between Whites, Coloureds and Black people when there was doubt about racial classification. The law enforcers of that time were required to run a comb through the hair of the person in question - if the comb passed through smoothly, then that person was given a 'Whiter' status to the people in whose hair the comb got stuck as a result of their hair being curly (Powe, 2009). Black hair seemed to hold political and cultural meanings for men and women as the transformation of Black hair meant a renunciation of 'Blackness'. The 'kitchen', a term coined by Gates (cited in Erasmus, 1997, p.13) was used to describe "the very kinky bit of hair at the back of the head, where the neck meets the collar". This part of the hair could never be straightened, consequently it was cut away. This cutting

away was seen as an indication of discarding ‘Blackness’; as such ‘Black’ hair was considered unattractive and compared with ‘White’ hair. Advertisements of hair and beauty products centered on White features which encouraged Black people, especially Black women to buy products that would straighten their hair (Thompson, 2009). In this way, Black women could assimilate into the White culture. Weitz (2001) argues that according to the White standard of beauty, for women to be feminine and attractive, they should ideally have long, wavy, and blonde hair. Thus, in order for Black women to be thought of as feminine, they would have to transform their natural hair so that they could conform to the standards of femininity.

Smith (2011) argues that within the Black community ‘African’ kinky hair has become an issue for Black South African women as this has been linked to the fact that weaves have become “status symbol[s] for the aspirational Black elite and are a prerequisite for making it in the entertainment industry” (p.104). In this regard, hair is constructed as giving women access to attain their ideals: “that powerful social and political reasons compel women to don weaves” (Smith, 2011, p.104). Because hair conveys something about a person, weaves may convey the notion of success, power and Whiteness.

Butler (cited in Patton, 2006) argues that ‘gender is performative’. Hairstyling can be seen to be a performance of gender which is also linked to beauty. Butler (cited in Patton, 2006) stresses that hair is performed in such a way that the marginalised become the centre of attention in a world that rejects their beauty. This is likely to have an impact on self-esteem especially in women (Patton, 2006). We can see from the above that the troubled relationship of Black women and hair is laden with political overtones. There was, and still, is a preference for straight hair by Black women in contemporary post-apartheid South Africa (Smith, 2011). A dark skin tone and natural hair become significant markers of Black beauty.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

A qualitative research method was used to explore the research questions in the current research. Qualitative research methods provide thick, rich and nuanced descriptions that aim to capture social actions as they occur (Greenstein, Roberts, & Sitas, 2003). Qualitative research methods are an attempt at understanding underlying meanings drawn from the participants' narratives. This method involves producing a deeper understanding of the world through the lens of the participants eyes (Attride-Stirling, 2001). The primary objectives are to describe, understand and explain human behaviour (Greenstein et al, 2003). Since qualitative research is exploratory in nature, it is useful for producing in-depth and descriptive data.

Qualitative research is suited for the study of subjectivity and how this may influence behaviour that occurs within a natural context; there is no manipulation or control of events and actions, merely sensitive observation, meaning making emerges from the participant's experiences (Neuman, 2000). Qualitative research differs from quantitative research in that the latter starts with a hypothesis which then lays the ground for how data will be collected (Neuman, 2000). A qualitative research design is not pre-emptive but the methods and form of the research are obtained from the research questions and goals (Neuman, 2000). Qualitative researchers are interested in exploring why certain events occur in the ways that they do and how this affects individuals and their behaviour. Because qualitative research aims for an in-depth understanding of phenomena, smaller samples are used (Greenstein et al, 2003). Unlike quantitative research designs in which larger samples must be used, there is no intension to generalize findings from qualitative research to the population (Greenstein et al, 2003).

When using a qualitative research design, the researcher may use different methods to collect data, for instance in-depth interviews, structured interviews, semi-structured interviews and unstructured interviews; focus groups; focus group interviews; participant observations and

ethnography (Neuman, 2000). The data collection techniques allow for some level of interaction between the researcher and the participant(s). The role of the qualitative researcher is to encourage the participant to open up and share his/her experiences, ideas and feelings (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen & Liamputtong, 2007). The participant may only feel able to open up once rapport has been developed with the researcher. The researcher also provides the participant with the space to talk while they listen. The researcher's interest is important so as to encourage the participant to share their experiences and views (Dickson-Swift et al, 2007).

Different methods may be used to analyse qualitative data, for instance, grounded theory analysis, discourse analysis, content analysis, thematic content analysis, narrative analysis and so forth (Neuman, 2000). This will be discussed in more detail in relation to the current research project further on.

3.2 Research Questions

This research project was based on a primary research question and four secondary questions.

The primary research questions are:

1. How do young female Black South African university students perceive their appearance in relation to contemporary Western socio-cultural beauty ideals?
2. How do these perceptions affect their feelings about themselves?

The secondary research questions are:

a.) What are some of the conspicuous markers of beauty or beauty ideals as perceived by young Black female South African university students in Gauteng?

b.) How do these young Black South African women respond to pressures to conform to these conspicuous ideals?

c.) What sorts, if any, of bodily modifications or bodification practices do these young women engage in?

d.) What, if any, are the perceived psychological effects of contemporary beauty ideals for young, urban, Black South African women?

3.3 Data collection

3.3.1 Semi- structured interviews

Interviews are a method through which a researcher gathers information to enable him/her to see the world through the eyes of the participant (Maree, 2007). Interviews can provide valuable and rich data (Maree, 2007) and aim to examine social life and subjective experience in deep nuanced ways that quantitative methods cannot (Dickson-Swift et al, 2007). The researcher's role is to encourage the participant to talk about their experiences or views (Legard, Keegan & Ward, 2003). The researcher assumes an active role so that the topics are covered in depth, the researcher manages the interview so that the participant does not digress too much from the topic at hand- this means that the researcher asks follow-up questions or re-directs the narrative when a participant moves on to unrelated topics (Legard et al, 2003). For purposes of this research, 6 face to face semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to collect qualitative data.

The advantages and disadvantages of semi-structured interviews will now be discussed. The advantages of semi-structured interviews are that: they allow the researcher to uncover meanings that participants attribute to their experiences and for an in-depth exploration of social life (Dickson-Swift et al, 2007). Semi-structured interviews are flexible thereby permitting the interviewee to discuss whatever they wish to and for their responses to be fully explored by the interviewer (Kvale, 2006). When responses seem overly superficial, the interviewer can ask follow up questions to get more depth to the responses thereby allowing for interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee as the interviewer asks questions in such as way so that the interviewee can respond freely (Dickson-Swift et al, 2007; Legard et al, 2003).

The disadvantages of semi-structured interviews are that they are time consuming because participants' experiences are explored in depth which takes time (Legard et al, 2003). The demands placed on the interviewer are that they need to have good listening skills while at the

same time also observing the participants non-verbal responses (Legard et al, 2003). Interviewers may need to 'think on their feet' in such a way that when they process the data, they can make judgments about what to further explore and when to ask follow up questions (Legard et al, 2003). As previously mentioned, findings from qualitative research cannot be generalised to the broader population (Neuman, 2000).

Despite the disadvantages of semi-structured interviews, the following features make this data collection technique appropriate for the current research. The interviews allowed for the exploration of themes pertinent to the research questions (Legard et al, 2003). Due to the fact that semi-structured interviews are flexible; they permitted the exploration of topics that were of particular importance to the participants and to the research project. The interview format also allowed responses to be probed and explored and the researcher could respond to issues raised by the participant's. The interviews allowed for rapport and interaction between the participant and the researcher to develop (Leragd et al, 2003).

The interviews, in the current research project, ranged in length from 40 to 60 minutes. With participant's permission an audio tape was used to record participant's responses during the interview. According to Dickson-Swift et al, (2005, p. 67), audio tapes "provide a level of detail and accuracy not obtainable from memory or by taking notes". Therefore, audio-taping allowed the researcher sufficient time to note other non-verbal responses such as body language, facial expressions and non-verbal communication during the interview which she noted down after the interviews. The interviews were then transcribed by the researcher after data collection was complete.

The tape recordings will be kept for two years if the research is published and for six years if it is not. The tapes are kept in a password protected file accessible only to the researcher and her supervisor.

3.3.2 Instruments (Appendix A & B)

A semi-structured interview schedule (Appendix A) with a set of pre-determined open-ended questions was used. The questions in the interview schedule were developed by the researcher and her supervisor and were informed by the literature reviewed for the study. The questions asked were not of a leading nature. Participants were allowed to explore these issues in any direction that they wished to and thereafter the researcher made sure that she went back to the list of questions.

Participants were also presented with visual imagery of local and international female public figures (Appendix B). They were then asked their thoughts on these women.

3.4 Sample

Participants that were recruited for this research were young, Black, South African female Wits University students in the first year psychology class. First year students were selected in order to ascertain whether the effects of media and other factors had an influence on their body image as they are likely to be at a developmental stage where these issues preoccupy them as young adults. Participants were offered a 1% mark incentive through the first year programme for participation in this or any other Wits University research. There were a total of six participants. Thus this was a volunteer sample and this sampling method is suitable in cases where the sample is the relevant one for the research (Maree, 2007).

3.5 Ethics

The following measures were taken to safe-guard the confidentiality and welfare of participants who took part in this research:

Participation in the study was voluntary and participants were informed of the following: that they may withdraw from the study at any time; that anonymity will be guaranteed in the presentation of the results and that their responses will be held in the strictest of confidence. Only the researcher knew participant's names; they were informed that their responses were

likely to be quoted in the research report but that information that might identify them would be removed from the report. Additionally the researcher had to get student numbers for each participant in the study in order to give them credit so anonymity was not absolute but their material was treated with confidentiality. Thus informed consent was sought from participants as well as permission to be recorded (Appendix C & D). No mention of participant's names or any other identifying information used in the research report.

The participant information sheet (Appendix E) included details about a counselling organisation on campus, the Emthonjeni Centre since the researcher was aware that the research topic might bring up some distress in participants. One of the research participants expressed that she may have some issues with her body and that the interview had made her think a lot about how she feels about her body. This participant was encouraged to seek counselling services in order to work though her feelings about her body.

The participants were given 1% incentive for participation in the study which contributed towards their second semester marks (Appendix F). This was offered to first year students if they participated in any study undertaken by post-graduate students in the psychology department.

3.6 Procedure

Participants recruited for this research project were Black female students from the first year Psychology class at the University of the Witwatersrand. The researcher put up informational posters on the first year notice-board at the university. Posters were also uploaded on the student website, SAKAI. The posters advertised the nature of the study, the researcher and participant's roles and the researcher's contact details. Participants interested in participating contacted the researcher via e-mail or telephonically. Approximately 15 students who were interested in participating in the research project contacted the researcher. In a few cases, the researcher was unable to meet with some of the students as it was difficult to schedule an interview and some

others did not arrive for the scheduled interviews. Once the interviews were completed, the researcher removed her research posters from the first year notice board.

A venue, time and date for the interview were arranged. To ensure that the venue was accessible for both the researcher and the participants, the interviews were conducted at the Umthombo building, on the East campus of Wits University. The Psychology department was approached for permission to use the Psychology 1 tutors' rooms for the interviews.

When the participants arrived for the interview, the researcher invited them to take a seat and she introduced herself. Participants were given a brief overview of the nature of the study as well as both their role and the researcher's role in the study. Participants were told that participation in the study was voluntary, that their responses would be treated with the strictest of confidence and that they were guaranteed anonymity in the presentation of the research results. Participants were also told that they could withdraw from the study at anytime should they wish to. They were also informed that their responses would only be used for the purposes of the study or its publication. Participants were required to fill in a consent form for participation, a consent form for permission to be audio-taped during the focus group and a demographic sheet. Participants were notified that their input would be highly appreciated. Before the start of the interview, the researcher asked the participants if they had any questions regarding the interview, thereafter participants settled down and the interview proceeded. The lengths of the interviews varied from 40-60 minutes. Participants were then presented with visual imagery of female public figures and they were asked their thoughts about these women. When all the questions in the interview schedule were answered and the participants had nothing to add, the researcher ended the interview and thanked the participants for attending. One participant indicated that she has had some issues with her body and she was encouraged to seek counselling services from the free counselling services list provided to them in the interview.

The responses from the interviews were then transcribed verbatim. The notes that the researcher took during the interviews were also added into the data corpus. The data was then analysed using thematic content analysis. The transcripts and audio-tape are kept in a protected password

file accessible only to the researcher and her supervisor. Some participants requested to see the research report and they were told that they would be notified once it is available.

3.7 Data Analysis

3.7.1 Thematic Content Analysis

Thematic content analysis was used to analyse the research data. This method of analysis is useful for analysing qualitative data because it is descriptive and allows for identifying, analysing and for reporting on the patterns emerging from the data. The procedure of analysis involved organising the research data into themes as well as noting differences and similarities. Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that themes have to stand on their own as they capture something important in relation to the research. The researcher's task is to find recurring themes from the data obtained. Due to its flexibility, this analytic tool provides a "research tool which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78). Furthermore, it can be used within any theoretical framework. Since this research is based on a social constructionist framework, this method of analysis will permit us to examine how events, realities, meanings and experience attributed to social action are the product of discourses existing in society (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.7.1 Steps for Thematic Content Analysis

Thematic content analysis was used to systematically analyse the data obtained from the interviews. The process involved identifying, analysing and reporting patterns that emerged once the research data was collected, thereafter, it was organised into themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher used the six steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) to analyse the research data:

1. The first step involved familiarisation with research data. Once data collection was complete the researcher engaged in the process of transcribing the interviews. This process allowed the researcher to familiarise herself with the data and to begin to

generate ideas about how the data could be organised. The researcher then read over the transcripts multiple times to search for potential patterns in the data. These patterns were useful in generating ideas for coding the data.

2. In step two, the researcher began generating initial codes. This means that once the researcher had a general idea of how she wants to lay out her data; the segments of data that were repeated across the data set were collated into groups. The codes were colour co-ordinated.
3. The third step in analysis involved searching for themes that emerged from the coded data. At this stage, the researcher began sorting out the coded data into general themes. The collated coded data was organised into themes and data relevant to each theme was organised accordingly. At the end of this stage, the researcher had a general idea of the themes.
4. In step four, the themes were reviewed. The researcher went back to her coded data and themes that collated with each other were grouped together into one theme; themes in which there was not enough supporting data were discarded; some of the themes were broken down into sub-themes and additional data was added to some of the themes.
5. The fifth step included defining and naming themes. In this phase, the researcher began the process of interpreting the themes and giving each theme a label. Each theme was analysed in detail and extracts used had to be contextualised so that they capture the essence of the themes. This was also done in a way so that themes flow in a coherent and logical way.
6. The last step was producing the report. Once the researcher had completed the analysis, she began compiling the research report. The researcher integrated information from the literature review and the research data in order to check for consistency. New material which emerged from the research data which the researcher did not cover in the literature review was gathered in order to inform the analysis. The final phase was the production of the final research report where all findings were written up and then reported through the researcher's theoretical lens (Braun & Clark, 2006).

3.8 Reflexivity

The role of the researcher is integral to the research process, especially since the researcher deduces the findings to generate meaning from the participants subjective experiences (Maree, 2007). “Due to the fact that the researcher is involved in a rigorous experience with the participants, it is necessary to continually recognise participant bias, values and personal interests with regard to the research topic and process” (Maree, 2007, p.298). Reflexivity is an important part of the research process. This means that the researcher has to reflect on herself in relation to the research process and interpreting his/her data.

As a Black South African female researcher, my position potentially gave me two advantages. Firstly, all of the participants were young Black South African women, so the racial background was a common factor. In this case, being an ‘insider’ probably made it easier for me to develop rapport with some of the participants of this research project. Secondly all participants were female and this seemed to allow us to engage at a deeper level. Again being an ‘insider’ allowed me to explore cultural issues surrounding beauty. On the other hand, since the participant’s and I come from more or less similar backgrounds, this may have made them feel possibly inhibited due to cultural similarities; however this did not seem to be the case. Furthermore, at all times, I was mindful not to project my own understanding and objectives into the interviews or data analysis. I had to be aware of my contribution to the interpretation of the data. At times it was difficult to be ‘outside’ of this subject because I could relate to some of the participants experiences and views on Black beauty. As a Black woman I found that I was also faced with the same challenges as my participants. Nonetheless, I was extremely careful not to allow personal biases to intrude into the research process and consciously aware of these so as to not let them affect the research process in any way.

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

4.1. Introduction

This section covers the results emanating from data. Thematic Content Analysis was used to analyse the research findings which allowed the data to be organised into nine themes and five sub-themes which will be discussed in turn. The following nine themes emerged from the data: 'Women as consumers of mass media communications regarding female beauty'; 'Racial and cultural bias regarding female beauty'; 'Significant others' communication regarding female beauty'; 'Beauty as the golden key to success'; 'Women as objects of the gaze'; 'Perceptions of beauty from an African perspective - urban and rural opinions'; 'Perceptions of beauty from the perspective of the older and younger generations'; 'Bodily transformations – necessary or not?' and 'Specific sites of bodily transformation'.

4.2.Themes

4.2.1. Women as consumers of mass media communications regarding female beauty

All of the participants felt that there is pressure for women to be beautiful and that this pressure is usually external, that is family, friends, media and so forth. Ribane (2006) argues that conceptions of beauty are rooted in culture thus; the pressure for women to be beautiful is likely to stem from social discourses around how women should look. In a globalised world where technology makes it easier for people to connect (Odhiambo, 2008), it seems that the media has been influential in dictating what women should look. One participant, Lindiwe, said the following about the mass media pressure:

> *"A lot (laughs) there's too much pressure. I think like from media, and like there's this thing that you have to look a certain way cause people judge you by first impressions, and women it's even worse because of how we relate to each other as women as well, to look a particular way, to be for, for men to approach you. So yea people classify you already just by the way. And you see it even in like Idols [a high profile television show] and that, the nicer cleaner looking people with a certain look make it." (Lindiwe)*

Lindiwe expressed that the media sets a standard for how women should look and she felt that people are judged on the basis of how they look, thus it is important for people to present themselves in a socially desirable way. Unathi added the idea that people usually take what they see from the media and feel the need to apply it in their lives:

> *"Pressure meaning from the media which are the things we see on TV ...hmm to be up to date I guess. hmm a lot of girls like to look like someone or someone has a certain weave or has a certain look or is using this and that so you want to also use that because that other person was using that, they ja they branded and then we get attracted to it 'cause mang-mang was using it." (Unathi)*

Unathi shares the idea that certain trends regarding physical appearance become fashionable through the media's exposure of glamorous celebrities. Lelo also stressed that there is pressure from the media for women to be beautiful and she felt that teenagers are also receptive to the messages conveyed by the media:

> *"Ok, uhmm. I can say in a way there is pressure. Okay looking around the adverts on tv, adverts, uhmm the way people, the way people are, just the whole media thing. It does influence, or it does pressure women to be beautiful. If you look now at uhmm teenagers, they've already started using make-up, why because of the pressure to be beautiful. They believe you have to look beautiful all the time. So yea I do believe there is pressure for women to be beautiful." (Lelo)*

Wood (1994) argues that the media idealises the thin body ideal and so disseminates this ideal. Thus if this is what is depicted in the media then young girls who are unable to achieve this beauty ideal and they might be susceptible to developing a sense of bodily dissatisfaction. In light of this, Phindi's statement below is important:

> *"I think, basically you see what the media advertise and advocate for as beauty you see that on the ramps, like models and all that kind of thing. So you know your blonde blue eyed type of people. Those are the ones that are regarded as beautiful and I mean those are your models and everything, so you kind of see that's the ideal, you can't miss that, in the literature and movies you just can't miss that." (Phindi)*

Phindi goes a step further suggesting that 'beauty' as portrayed by fashion models, movies and literature typically takes the form of 'White' features as these are idealised beauty standards in the media. It has been documented in the literature that constructions of beauty are created around White womanhood (Gyeke, 1996), and by implication this devalues Black womanhood (Shaw, 2005).

Dimpho recognises that there is a difference between what is real and what is not real as the media's depiction of beauty is often unattainable for many, even most, women:

> *"You definitely find some who do compare what they see on TV and expect that in real life because they feel like: if she can do it on TV, why can't you and they don't realize that we are completely different because this person on TV, you know like Nicki Minaj [a glamorous popular musician] and them and all these American artists, I mean that's what they do for a living, to keep us entertained sort of and it's the extreme lengths that they go through but as a normal person , even finance wise, they have the money to do extravagant things. I myself being a university student can't have red hair on this day then purple the next or funny nails or funny hair." (Dimpho)*

Dimpho's comment refers to the idea that there are certain limits to what women can do in order to attain the beauty ideal. Her comment echoes the sentiments expressed in Wood's (1994) statement that the manner in which women are often presented in the media deviates from what is known to be normal. Thus what the media depicts may not be a true reflection of reality.

Participants certainly felt that the media promotes a particular beauty ideal and that this exerts a pressure for women to aspire to this ideal. In addition, participants believe that specific parts of women's bodies are focal points for body enhancements and facial beauty.

> *"Uhmm okay, models I believe it's more about their bodies than their faces, though their faces count it's more about their body's right. But what I've noticed, I was watching some time back this whole Tyra Banks show and there was this girl, she had scars I can't remember what happened to her. She had scars but still she was a model, she qualified to be a model. What normally happens is if you have that good body structure you can be a model. Okay but if you, if you okay…if you're taking their face right? If you could put*

models here, like their faces they're not all beautiful. Yeah they are beautiful but they're not all beautiful, so with models I believe it's more about their body structure, yea." (Lelo)

Lelo's statement indicates her weighing up of the media's valuing of facial beauty versus bodily beauty. Dimpho also felt that at times the focus may be moved from a woman's facial features to particular types of youthful, voluptuous body shapes, these are media 'markers of beauty':

"Well, celebrities on TV, nowadays from what I see, you need to have funky hair, you need to dress in sexy revealing clothes like in music videos because that's what they are always showing. They seem to be promoting you know, bigger breasts, bigger busts just like plastic surgery and every woman, or everyone even guys from old age, they think that growing older is just not a good thing anymore." (Dimpho)

Dimpho mentions how women in music videos are likely to be objectified and portrayed as sex objects. This observation is in keeping with the findings of Ward and Merriwether's (2006) study namely that men are likely to look at women as sexual objects and that the media is a contributing factor regarding this tendency. In contrast to the media's sexualised depiction of female beauty, Lelo commented on a recent counter-trend she has observed where the media sometimes represents women in a more holistic, empowered light:

"These days we have this whole magazine thing women of the year, which is uhmm, I'm not so sure but I'm thinking your success counts, your beauty counts, in that. So back then that wasn't there, they were beautiful but not noticed that much as they are these days." (Lelo)

Therefore Lelo felt that not all women in the media are evaluated merely in relation to western beauty stereotypes, but women who are making a positive contribution to society are also starting to be represented and this partly takes away the media's fixation on the beauty of women only.

As part of the interview, participants were presented with visual imagery of Black local and international female celebrities and they were asked about their thoughts about the appearances of these women. Lelo had this to say about Minenhle Dlamini, a young Black South African

actress, model, radio and television presenter who has a normal, rather than overly slender body shape:

> "*I think she's beautiful. She is also beautiful. And the fact that, she might be not so slim, but she is beautiful. The way she dresses, the way she presents herself... like for her I think she has a good personality. So it just adds to her beauty for me. So I think she's really nice." (Lelo)*

For Lelo, Minenhle has been a role model for her because she does not conform to the thin beauty ideal. Lelo evaluates Minenhle against the thin western ideal clearly noticing that her body does not conform to these standards. However she compliments her facial beauty, personality and the way she carries herself. Phindi, Unathi and Charmaine speak about the contrast between 'natural' beauty and beauty that artificial in some way.

Phindi said:

> *"Oh Alek Wek she looks the most authentic, I mean she's not wearing any fake hair, she looks the most comfortable in her own skin. I wish I could do that, I would be feeling a whole lot alive. Bonang [a South African television presenter, radio DJ and model] usually wears short kind of revealing kind of clothing, tight, she's got the fake hair going, I don't think she's comfortable in her own skin, she's really trying to be beautiful that's what I think . Thandiswa [a South African multi-award winning musician and ex-member of the afro-pop group, Bongo Maffin]... I think it's her natural hair she's comfortable she's adapted that whole African identity and the whole africaness, that's great for her. Mshoza [a South African kwaito musician] she doesn't even look black, she looks more coloured than black so and I don't think that's a mistake and don't remember this as her natural skin colour." (Phindi)*

Phindi's quote refers to the notion that African female celebrities who appear authentic embody a sense of being comfortable in their own skin. She seems to identify more with celebrities who endorse natural looks. She compliments Alek Wek and Thandiswa Mazwai for not emulating western standards of beauty. Unathi also compared Bonang Matheba, Alek Wek, and Beyonce Knowles in relation to their physical appearance:

“Emm ok how should I read them? She [Bonang] like she stands out for me, her hair I like her hair emm and I don’t like nah. Not that I don’t lke cause of, ja if I was looking in a magazine I would probably pass it, there is something too artificial about her, like her make-up is done, her hair… her clothes are loud so ja it’s too it’s something too artificial. So doesn’t look like someone I’d be able to approach she’s just too you know [pause]. I like her [Alek Wek] hairstyles, it’s clean you know, very professional, she’s a model ja. I don’t know, I don’t know this picture it’s a bit weird hey trying to emphasisie her dark skin but…like…ja I can see that she looks like a model she’s a model it’s probably a photo shoot ja that’s about it, do I need to comment on her? I think if they took away her [Beyonce] make-up and her eye-lashes and her hair wouldn’t be pretty, she wouldn’t ja, I think she’s dolled up you know, you would think that if she just took them away and stood in a shoot you wouldn’t recognise her ja, and her I know she’s a singer righ? Ja, I don’t have a comment for her [Mshoza]” (Unathi)

Unathi, like Phindi, also identifies with the more authentic female celebrities. Unathi further positions herself as endorsing a woman’s natural beauty and she distances herself from women who are less authentic. However she notices with surprise the image of a Black female celebrity whose darker skin has been emphasised. Her comment “it’s a bit weird hey?” reflects her belief that this is not the norm for media images of Black celebrities. This seemingly has created the expectation in Unathi that Black models will usually lighten their skin with cosmetics. While Phindi and Unathi identify with Black female celebrities, Lindiwe felt somewhat different commenting on the artificially of the actual images:

“It's not nice. Like for us, because it’s not we would look at her and say "oh" you know. "Wow" and where as they give her like these yellow, pink it's always like bright colours like this purple that they have done. And stuff that we don't actually look at and say, "nice, let me try that look" no. It's like a cartoon nje, not nice, the way they. We don't like it as black people. Maybe more artistic people will say "no, look at it from that angle". Okay it's fine from an arty angle. Thandiswa looks odd, it's normal. What they do to AlekWek is not normal” (Lindiwe)

Lindiwe felt that Alek Wek appearance is modified to emphasise her dark skin, almost for shock value. This portrayal deviates from stereotypical depictions of Black women in the mass media. In response to the photographs, Lindiwe added that grooming was an important aspect of womanhood and that a person's physical appearance can say a lot about their personality:

> *"Mmmm, everyone looks like well groomed hey. Like super well groomed. Okay except the model obviously they've dressed her up so I'm not sure about her personality but everyone is beautiful, nice smiles. Typical black people's smiles. Colgate smile, they look happy, they look healthy. Inviting like you know, something that you look at and you're like nice. Well except, okay I don't even notice that that's Mshoza. Is that her?"(Lindiwe)*

Lindiwe's quote seems to refer to the notion that a woman's physical appearance is important and that what women may project may not necessarily be a reflection of how they feel.

Overall, the participants agreed that the mass media disseminated idealised images of women and through repeated exposure to these images, women feel pressurised and so aspire to this beauty ideal. This discussion will now move to the second theme regarding the perceived racial and cultural bias regarding female beauty.

4.2.2. Racial and cultural bias regarding female beauty

The following theme considers the racial and cultural bias regarding female beauty as discussed by participants. Many writers have commented that constructions of female beauty are embedded within socio-culture and that in contemporary western-influenced societies; this takes the form of the aesthetics of white womanhood (Gyeke, 1996).

Phindi believes that from a religious point of view that everyone is beautiful; however, she struggles internally against the socio-cultural westernised beauty standards which dictate that a woman is considered beautiful if she is White or thin. She also adds that while Black woman might aspire to the beauty ideal, it is often an un-attainable ideal for Black women:

> *"Okay you know, I think for me most importantly, I've always kind of departed, my starting point has always been…because you're made in the image of God you're*

beautiful, every human being. That's always been like my starting point. Ya well on bad days, that type of thing obviously I get to think…ok a person is not that beautiful if they're not White or if they not thin, you know, things like that. But then I also think in terms of body, what I think is beautiful, I'd like to see a person optimally healthy. So if like your BMI [Body Mass Index, a measure of healthy weight range] *is like in the correct, correctly classified is being healthy accordingly to your BMI you can live a healthy vital lifestyle. I think for the body that's perfect. Okay for hair, you know I've always been socialised to think long hair is better, long hair is what a girl should have you know, and I realise that's really not natural for black women, because I mean keeping long hair , especially straightened long hair is really not easy it's hard for black women, it really is hard. You know even with your hair plaited it gets itchy it's really uncomfortable. Even the process when they busy plaiting your hair it's really uncomfortable. So I've realised it's not natural, for women to have that kind of hair, but as I say I've been socialised to think that way and I don't know whether if I'm just conforming to the standards or maybe I'm just not brave enough to be kind of like be my own person I guess, that's what I have to confront." (Phindi)*

In this lengthy excerpt Phindi talks about the tension which exists between what she believes, on the one hand, and society's values and expectations on the other. She communicates her feeling that societal pressure is somewhat inescapable, especially for Black women and she comments on the discomfort involved in trying to conform to the "White" westernised beauty ideals.

The participants were asked what they thought are the preferred features for Black women. Unathi had this to say:

"Hmmm, preferred features, physical appearance? Lately you know the slim type of I don't know like enough meat, not too thin. I don't think that's ever been good for black women to be too thin, it's it's just not right you know, you know a bit of meat maybe not too much, or if you do have too much it goes back to the preventability, you don't wear inappropriate clothes or you putting it out there like in the wrong way, you keep it together so I think just ja, hmm hmm, the body, I don't know I don't know, I wouldn't… I wouldn't know what exactly" (Unathi)

For Unathi, it seems that the beauty standards of Black womanhood are blurry as she feels that Black women cannot be too fat or too thin and they have to somewhat fit in the middle of this continuum. Charmaine, on the other hand, felt that Black people endorse larger body shapes, sometimes this includes one particularly attractive bodily feature that is emphasised. She believes that a Black woman that is thin might be regarded as unhealthy:

> *"Black people like a…I realized that black people like a plum feature like a …you know, so you must have a really small waist, you must… that's what they like… they like the shape then if you petite like me you kinda… you don't eat too much, you not healthy. It's like that black women, I mean black people like bigger framed people." (Charmaine)*

Interestingly, it appears that Charmaine sees this particular socio-cultural construction of beauty as having slightly different 'beauty markers' to western ideals. Her comment is in keeping with some research that found that 'Black culture' endorses larger body shapes and that subsequently this might create a buffer for Black women, possibly preventing the development of an eating disorder (Rucker and Cash, 1992; Rubin et al, 2003).

In a similar vein Lindiwe commented that within the 'Black culture' there is a lot of attention on a women's lower body and that this is an inherently Black 'feature' which needs to be embraced:

> *"Body-wise I think we're not fixated on boobs I think black people, ne?... It's more our lower body that draws attention. Cause that one I don't know. We are not cursed it's ours; we need to embrace it (laugh). It's ours, it's here to stay. But majority nje, the lower body yeah, yeah." (Lindiwe)*

Lindiwe's comment is linked with the idea that within the Black culture breasts are seen more for their functional purposes and not necessarily sexualised as much as in westernised depictions of female beauty. She felt that a Black woman's lower body was emphasised far more within African beauty ideals.

Commenting on body shape preferences too, Phindi felt that there is a preference for slenderness but that some men also admire voluptuous women:

"You have to be curvy depending on the type of person or the man. Some men like curvy women but slender is most definitely the preferred type of thing. I can't think of anything else, that's relatively it." (Phindi)

Phindi spoke about physical features that men might prefer in women, and she seems to believe that what men may prefer in women is important for setting beauty standards for women. Dimpho shared the same sentiments as Phindi, different to Lindiwe, regarding a preference for women with a small body shape regardless of race and that women whose physical appearance does not to this ideal might be pressurised to go to extreme lengths to lose weight.:

"Big breast, more curves. It's either that or you have to be extremely skinny. So people who are a bit bigger always feel the need or pressure to go on crazy diets or do funny legal things to do things like plastic surgery and so forth. So you always pressurized." (Dimpho)

Phindi and Dimpho's comments point to their belief that there appears to be a change in hegemonic standards of beauty within the Black culture regarding Black womanhood, noted by Caradas et al. (2001). Thus it seems that for some of the participants, traditional cultural beauty standards do not seem to play such a prominent role in how women measure themselves aesthetically anymore.

Charmaine believes that there are different beauty standards White versus Black women:

"Ok, like for White people you must be thin, you must be tall, (laugh) you must be thin, you must be tall, you must have long legs. And then for a Black woman I guess uhm there are different standards in different societies in different parts of black communities. Like if you live in the modern side of Blacks, there is also people that you copy; big, bold and black people are big, bold and black woman are bold. You must have a weave, you know, you must nice nails, heels and all of that stuff. And then like I guess with traditional Black people if like you are small figured you are not beautiful, you must be big, you must be plum, you must be." (Charmaine)

Charmaine also spoke about the idea that in different sectors of South African society there are different beauty standards set in different sectors for Black women (this idea will be deliberated

in detail under other themes) while there seems to be only one set standard for White women. These different standards make it difficult for Black women who live between 'different worlds'. Phindi believes that White women represent the beauty ideal for White men. She also felt that Black women might be perceived as rejecting their 'Blackness' in an attempt to emulate 'Whiteness'. She communicated her idea that Black men are also influenced by these beauty trends to a certain extent and so prefer the 'White' ideal for Black women's appearances:

> *"Okay well, I think okay… for White men well I don't know I still think most of them prefer White women, because again that's still the ideal in the media and the literature wherever you look. So that's kind of still the ideal and besides if you look at Black women, you know with straighten your hair, you wear hairpieces and stuff like that you are also in a way trying to emulate that white beauty kind of standard. So I guess they also see that in Black women, they also see Black women wearing White people's hair and there's a kind of disconnect there. So they kind of probably realised, okay these people don't think they are beautiful or these people know they're not beautiful I don't know. So I know they probably still prefer mostly White women. As for Black men, I guess in a sense with them as well it's kind of like, cos I mean. Ya… They like long hair and that type of thing. So it's also affected them what they expect in a woman, that ideal thing, has also affected them….ya." (Phindi)*

Shaw (2005, p.147) argues that Black women are faced with the challenges of "re-inventing themselves in a society that values whiteness". Therefore while 'Black culture' might be seen as embracing conceptions of Black womanhood, it seems that the participants felt that this is slowly losing momentum in modern society as women, regardless of race, increasingly seem to accept the idea of conformity to a beauty system that idealises the features of White womanhood. Participants commented on the different standards of beauty for White and Black women and that culture also plays a huge role in this. Notwithstanding they felt that the strength of influence of indigenous versus western cultural notions of beauty differs according to geographical location. This idea will be explored later in depth in the report. We now turn to the next theme which discusses significant others' perceptions of female beauty.

4.2.3. Significant others' communications regarding female beauty

Most participants indicated that loved ones could in some way be experienced as exerting pressure on women to look beautiful, this included family members and romantic partners. McKinley (1999) argues that when women are perceived positively by their partners their self-esteem is likely to increase. Thus it seems that when the participants are viewed positively by their partners or significant others, this might make them feel confident about themselves. Messages from significant others' then serve as an important mode of transmission of communications relating to ideas about how women *should* look.

Dimpho said:

> *"Yes. And mostly when you are like chilling watching TV and you are with your boyfriend or whatever, he could be busy saying: "Why don't you ever do your hair like that?" or whatever would be nice. I mean that also applies a lot of pressure on you.'" (Dimpho)*

Dimpho felt that within romantic relationships, men might put women under pressure to look a certain way. She seemed to feel that this might engender a sense of insecurity in some women especially if they are compared with women in the media. Unathi shared the same idea as Dimpho, that romantic partners can also put pressure on women to beautify themselves. Dimpho also added that due to pressure from partners, women are likely to put more effort into how they present themselves in order to be physically attractive to their mates or potential partners:

> *"hmm...most of it would be from society and then would be from males maybe if you have a partner or you're looking for a partner that means you will put in more work to look good because you trying to attract somebody, you know." (Unathi)*

On the other hand, Lelo said she felt under pressure to do what her female relatives do when it comes to enhancing their physical appearance:

“Around the family. If you think I have a cousin or an older sister, I’ll do exactly as she does, because I’m thinking that’s the right thing so I have to also do it since I’m a girl.” (Lelo)

Charmaine spoke about the different messages she has received from her family and her brother over time, and that this put her under pressure first to gain weight and later to lose weight, even though she did not see herself as too ‘thin’ or too ‘fat’ at the time:

“Uhm… well… when my family told me that I was thin and stuff I tried to gain weight but that didn’t work, yes, and then there was a time in my life when my brother always said I was fat, I was young, and I tried to lose weight. He reassured me that I was fine the way I am. So yea it was just then but now I’m cool... Uhm I exercised… I jogged, I skipped, I had this thing that had like a belt that you tie around and stuff, yea I did that (laughs) yea I didn’t realize that I was doing it, and then he spoke to me about it, ja, and then we were cool.” (Charmaine)

It seems that it was difficult for Charmaine to try to please others and to conform to their standards, even though she did not feel that there was anything wrong with her body. Lindiwe spoke of social pressures to be beautiful emanating from her husband’s work environment which she has internalised:

“Like I'm telling you now on Friday, my husband at work they have like a dinner. As soon as he told me I think it was last week I was like "yeah, I've got that dress (laugh) and I'm gonna wear it with this" or you start calculating, "are those shoes gonna work"? you then check for this you know. Cause they like, "wuu, I can't look like you know…" and you go to these dinners and then they come and there's a prize for the best dressed couple and you were there like. It's there; it is there I think you do it even if you don't verbally say it to yourself that this is what I'm doing but underneath it, yeah. The constant I need to look like this.”

The quote above shows that for Lindiwe, the need to look a certain way to impress certain ‘important’ people is something she has become accustomed to do. Thus the pressure to ‘look a certain way’ can also come from the professional realm, she continued:

"Exactly. And like certain jobs Thuli. Like to be an air-hostess, long ago, you never saw like an ugly person or, or what society deems to be. It was all like picture perfect. So there's pressure, too much pressure. So there's pressure to look beautiful from head to toe. And now there is new pressure its more that beauty, like I train, I hit the gym so now you either uhmm, the plastic surgeries. It's now not only boob jobs, now it's not that scary, you can talk about it at lunch." (Lindiwe)

According to Lindiwe, the pressure to look a certain way involves all the sorts of strenuous efforts, she mentions gym work-outs and even plastic surgery which she feels has become somewhat normative.

The discussion now turns to the influence of close senior female relatives – mothers, aunts and grandmothers. A study conducted by McKinley (1999) showed that mothers have an important influence in how their daughters perceive their body image. Lelo said:

"Uhmm... well with my mom, well I can't really say, there isn't much really you know. Okay, okay I believe I'm beautiful just the way I am, I can just add the whole make up thing but I'm beautiful the way I am, and then my mom she really isn't a make-up fan whereas she does put it on for certain occasions, it's not like an everyday thing so yeah."(Lelo)

Despite McKinley's (1999) statement that daughters are likely to be influenced by their maternal body image, it seems that Lelo's decision to wear make-up was not influenced by her mother. Charmaine felt she was different from her older, female relatives:

"Well older black people like my grandmothers, my aunts. How it makes me feel? Well before I used to hate it a lot because I'm the, was the only one like this at home everyone has… everybody has, you know like tall and they've got you know…uhm how do I say this… like defined features you know, nice waist and all that stuff and I'm small and short, so before I found it hard to be different but now I realize it's cool, being petite and short and all that, because ja, because yea if I'm tall I find it hard to find a good man." (Charmaine)

Charmaine spoke about comparing herself to her older female relatives and feels less attractive.

However, she finds solace in the belief that even though she is different (shorter) this puts her at an advantage in finding a romantic partners believing that due to their height, taller women are likely to have fewer potential mates.

Dimpho felt under pressure from her mother not to put on additional weight:

> *"Yeah like you'd find me putting on a pair of pants that fit and you get some pants that are too tight and she'd be like: What happened? What have you been eating? These pants when we bought them at the shop they were okay now they are...just tight and you need to lose weight. I think it was her way of trying to re-live what she thinks she lost because looking at old pictures of her, when she was my age, she was very skinny, extremely skinny and it was just also a natural thing, I think I got all of it from her, being a lady meant everything. So, life happens hey."(Dimpho)*

It seems as though Dimpho believes that her mother is trying to live vicariously through her, and as a result might be projecting her own insecurities onto Dimpho.

Thus the opinions of significant others appear to influence participants regarding their physical appearance. There seems to be a variety of motives behind the communications of these significant others; these opinions appear to have an effect on participants as there appears to be some attempts at conformity to the standards espoused by loved ones and influential people. This confirms McKinley's (1999) finding that women's self esteem is affected by the opinions of loved ones.

4.2.4. Beauty as the "Golden Key" to life success

Participants were asked if whether they thought that attractive women have an advantage in life. Their responses suggested that they do believe this. For example, Dimpho felt that attractive women succeed in getting others to do what they want and also that they are better able to manipulate men. She felt this stretched to the extent that these women are treated as if they are above the 'law' due to their beauty:

"I think sometimes it does help if you are perceived as being beautiful but it definitely, hence I say you need in yourself, because if you believe something you can play the part so definitely it does help being confident and just radiating this self beauty and it helps you sometimes. It gets you out of trouble, you know you are able to flirt around or whatever with policemen or whatever, when you in trouble with traffic cops, and I've heard quite a lot of guys who would come up to me and be like you know you could be far, you don't need to be here at WITS, learning and getting your studies and I'm thinking, how can you already just look at me and perceive okay, this person is sick for life, I've heard this and this and this." (Dimpho)

Dimpho seemed to feel that attractive women are likely to be more assertive and to have increased self-confidence and thus, do not have to work as hard as less attractive women. She linked this with the ideas of corruption, that there are *special*, less stringent rules for beautiful women to the extent that they could almost make a livelihood merely out of the favours accruing to their beauty.

Phindi and Charmaine felt that beautiful women are more likely to get attention from others and to have an appreciable advantage in relation to prospective romantic partners, socially and in their careers:

"I think that's a fact of life, we probably more likely to get married as I say the guys not really going to come to you and just say "hi" to you at a bar, on the street wherever on the basis of the personality really, people are more likely to listen to you if you beautiful. As I say just thinking about that report you more likely to get further in your career. I mean that's not fair, but I think that's how things are." (Phindi)

Charmaine agreed with the sentiments expressed by Phindi that the lives of beautiful women are better in many different ways because of the favourable way that individuals typically respond to beautiful people.

"Of course, of course people take you more seriously when you beautiful, people listen to you when you beautiful, people will give you what you want when beautiful. You don't have to…ah… in certain parts of life you don't have to work as hard, because, you will

get what you want and what you need because you beautiful. It's just the fact of life." (Charmaine)

Lindiwe and Unathi also felt that even within the professional arena, beautiful women may have an advantage and may be given preferential treatment based on their looks:

"Sometimes maybe you walk into an interview and you don't know half the stuff, the other person knows and you can get it. You can, especially imagine those jobs like uhmm receptionist, and what what and they don't hire like funny looking ones." (Lindiwe)

Lindiwe also felt that companies are likely to hire someone who can attract customers based on their physical appearance. Thus women are likely to be used and this undermines women's intellectual abilities.

"I think also in the work place, hmm especially with er the environment that needs people to represent themselves like so they can... like you grew up in front of people and speak or you're in the or you always in the camera and stuff like that, I think it's a pretty person is more, hmm how can I say reachable maybe? We can relate or not relate but I will remember that pretty girl as opposed to maybe an average looking girl, I'll remember "do you remember that lady ehh, she works for 'wewe' she came and she gave us a talk because of she's beautiful so firstly you attracted at how she looks and then secondly you want to hear what she has to say because she has already gotten your attention by her looks so I think beautiful women do have that advantage and in the work place it works for them because if it's a company that is out there they need someone that can represent them that maybe looks good or you know, ja is beautiful" (Unathi)

Unathi shared the similar idea as Lindiwe. Unathi stresses that it is easy to identify with a person that is beautiful, that they may be perceived in a positive light. This seems to imply the idea that beautiful people appeal to potential customers almost like selling the company for them.

Lelo was the only participant who felt that attractive women do not automatically have an advantage, particularly in the employment sector:

"Uhmm, well not necessarily because if you're talking like you going, let's say you going to job interview, it's not your beauty that counts. I could say that being beautiful is, I'm not sure if you're blessed or something but it's one of those things you have but then that doesn't necessarily really makes you better than the not-so-beautiful woman. Yea" (Lelo)

Thus all participants besides Lelo felt that beautiful women have a significant advantage in life. A similar finding emerged in a recent study conducted by Lorenzo, Biesanz and Human (2010). They found that attractive individuals were indeed viewed more positively and that others were able to make accurate statements about their personality (Lorenzo et al, 2010). It seems that most participants are aware of this phenomenon.

4.2.5. Women as 'objects of the gaze'

The 'gaze' refers to the way that something or someone visually compels others to fix their eyes and minds admiringly upon them. Becoming the focus of this kind of fixed visual attention from others can then become something to aspire to (Poran, 2006). The participants of this research were asked about the ways in which they thought men looked at women, and whether women look at and evaluate other women. Mulvey (1975) coined the term 'male-gaze' to depict the idea of the male preference for stereotypically sexualized and objectified depictions of women. Thus according to this hypothesis, women are arguably viewed and evaluated with reference to the male perspective. Mulvey (1975) states further that the male gaze influences how women look at themselves, and each other.

4.2.5.1 The male gaze

The participant's responses suggest that the ways in which men look at women is different from how women look at each other. Existing research informs us that from the perspective of the male gaze, women are often objectified - shown in ways that draw male attention (Poran, 2006) as women are typically 'that which is watched' while men *do* the watching. Lelo felt that when a man looks at a woman, he might try to evaluate her personality but would certainly pay attention to how she looks, the way that she presents herself for *the gaze*:

"When they look at a woman, okay they might look at their personality but first it's gonna be the body features okay from what I've just noticed that men do really look at the features, and how a woman is and how she represents herself, the clothes she wears you know." (Lelo)

Phindi communicated the idea that men are likely to look at a woman's physical appearance first. She added that men pay more attention to women who dress in clothes that reveal the body:

"As I said it's very visual, unfortunately it's got sexual connotations stuff like a short skirt or tight jeans would probably cause the attention, as to something more conservative or modest. If you got short skirts and tight jeans you would probably get more attention from the guys." (Phindi)

Phindi's comment implies that women may dress in ways that draw the male gaze to them. Unathi felt that men are not very discriminating in their noticing of women's particular sorts of efforts to beautify themselves, especially pertaining to the specific detail of how a woman is dressed:

"Yes but there is a huge difference, that's like how men look at women. Men are simple, men are very simple because they when they look at you, half the time the effort that you put in is not noticed, they will just be like "ohh she looks nice", "she looks beautiful" or "I like what she's wearing" (Unathi)

Charmaine and Dimpho had different views from other participants regarding how men look at women. Charmaine said:

"Yes uhm…I think men admire women and men fear women but other women… I think men… I think both men and women fear women, ok , but I think that the way men show it… is uhm… doing things for women, and letting women get their way, and admiring them, you know" (Charmaine)

Charmaine spoke about a non-physical characteristic that men see in women and the idea of the way in which women are treated with respect by men. Dimpho also spoke to the notion of the importance of 'inner beauty':

"Yes, it's definitely inner beauty, your personality because I've heard many guys on some occasions say that the pretty girls that meet the beauty standards and meet the criteria have such a sucking[very unappealing] *personality. I mean in order to build a relationship with not just lovers but there should be a need for a person with a really nice personality who will build you as well, not someone who will turn you down or make you feel down or make you feel bad or maybe just think that the only thing in life is make-up and dressing up, looking beautiful because that is not how nature intended. If we were supposed to have (laughs), long hair, and fake eyelashes we would have that naturally, that's what I believe." (Dimpho)*

Dimpho's perspective on romantic relationships is that they are not sustained by physical attraction alone, but non-physical aspects such as one's personality. She felt that it might be risky to be involved in a romantic relationship with a beautiful person as they might be conceited and pre-occupied with their looks than on investing in the relationships. Charmaine's and Dimpho's comments extend from external aspects of beauty to the notion of character and personality. Thus they differed from the others in that they believed that men do not only pay attention to female physical appearance but to internal aspects as well. Dimpho felt that there were limitations regarding the importance of physical appearance for sustaining romantic relationships.

Participant's responses to how women look at other women will be discussed next.

4.2.5.2. <u>The female gaze</u>

The 'female gaze' refers to the manner in which something or someone is perceived from a female perspective. Mulvey (1975) states that within the 'gaze', women have two roles as they are the objects to be viewed and they can also be the audience who do the viewing. The research participants felt that when women view each other, it is usually done through a critical lens. Charmaine felt that women evaluate each other in an envious, rivalrous way, while men look at women more appreciatively:

" Yea so… other women judge each other, other women want to envy each other and they

want to be like each other, but they want to be better…. women compete with each other and men admire women." (Charmaine)

Charmaine's comment is important in that it refers to the tension between female identification and female competitiveness that may exist in interactions between women. Lindiwe felt similarly to Charmaine, she also expressed the view that women are critical and highly competitive towards one another:

"Women on women, when we look at each other its sounds like, we're always calculating nje, like "ai, this one, she always wants to up-stage me whenever we go places or, okay. Okay fine" "or this one" it's not just "okay, whatever"." (Lindiwe)

Dimpho felt the same way as Charmaine and Lindiwe; however she tried to understand this as a way that women might employ in an attempt to defend against feelings of low self-worth:

"Meanwhile women who judge other women or woman-and-woman interaction, you will find that there is a lot of backstabbing and where we generally tend to bring ourselves down more than how actually men would. We always try to bring the other down. I think that's also due to the lack of confidence. You see a person and they just radiate you know, self confidence, then you see them and you want to turn them down to sometimes make yourself feel better and bring someone down to your level. That's how women work." (Dimpho)

Lelo also felt that when women compete with each other, and that when this competition is overt, women may feel under pressure to look a certain way:

"I think we're always in a competition, I don't understand why, cause you know I just wanna be there, I wanna be seen, I wanna be better than the others with the clothes I wear, with the hairstyle I wear. Such that when I've had a hairstyle for two months now I should remove it, I should go get a new hairstyle." (Lelo)

Lelo confided that she attempts to distinguish herself from others in order to be noticed, she felt however this comes with the risk of negative judgements from other women. From the above quotes, it seems that participants all feel that the female gaze is much more critical than the male

gaze. This criticism can carry to the extent of female-to-female bullying. Lelo cited an incident at school where one of her peers was told indirectly and in a malicious manner, to change her hairstyle:

> *“Yeah when I was in grade 11 some grade 12 girls came and ... there was a girl in class who had a hair style but it was so messed up and we had to write on a paper to tell her "you have to change your hairstyle".” (Lelo)*

From the profane to the sacred, Lindiwe made reference to the Durban July, an annual horse racing event held in Durban where guests also parade in the latest fashion. She compared this event to those held at her church to express the extent that female church goers participate in a ‘competition’ for the best dressed:

> *“You see it. I'm a Seventh Day Adventist ne, and our church is notorious in terms of like, it's like going to the Durban July every Saturday people bring out the hats and I'm telling you. You'd think someone is getting married every week here or something. It's like that, all the time, it's like that. People stand outside, they don't go inside, they just chatting like to make sure that you see them, walking up and down, that's where that.” (Lindiwe)*

According to Lindiwe, nothing is sacred or above the tyranny of beauty standards, not even within the realm of religious worship.

Phindi offered a different understanding to how women look at other women as she believes that it is easier for women to empathise and identify with each other:

> *“I think that there is a definite difference, because as women you are able to identify with each other, because I know how it feels to wear a heel so when I look t another girl I probably know how she’s feeling, so she can’t be on that “oh I’m totally comfortable I got this look thing” because in the back of my mind I’m going to be thinking that it’s so uncomfortable and walking around campus in that is so uncomfortable, shame, shame. And maybe a guy would think that she’s hot, it’s amazing you know. So there’ definitely that difference because we can identify with each other we wear the same things. So you won’t necessarily look at a girl the way a guy would. There’s that identification thing.” (Phindi)*

Phindi implies that women might endure pain in the process of beautifying themselves in an attempt to attract men; she argues that because of this shared experience among women, they are able to empathise with each other. Significantly, while participants felt that men tend to emphasise the external features of women, it seems that the male gaze is most often perceived as 'kinder' than the envious and competitive female gaze. Participants conveyed the belief that while women may dress in ways so as to attract the male gaze, they may simultaneously become vulnerable to harsh criticism from other women.

The next theme to be discussed is the perceptions of female beauty in different geographical locations within South Africa.

4.2.6. Perceptions of Black beauty from an African perspective: urban and rural opinions and messages

This theme covers participant's observations regarding the ways that how beauty standards differ in relation to different contexts and regions within South Africa. Charmaine linked the idea that Black people are in some way predisposed to enjoying food and so have more ample bodies, however she mentions an emerging trend espousing slimness:

> *"I think that uhm… black people are just one of those the societies where food is everything and you embrace food, I think that's why we are…most black people are bigger because in our genes we were kinda like bigger people, and I think that this whole thing about thin people, you know so many thin girls around, is only really starting now, I don't know…I think it's more now than before but ja I think black people have always embraced food, you know and have liked, looked bigger." (Charmaine)*

Existing literature conveys the idea that 'Black cultures' value bigger body types, especially in women (Gyeke, 1996). Charmaine's quote confirms the idea that Black culture promotes bigger body types by encouraging Black people, especially Black women to eat. Lindiwe shared with us how her helper, who is originally from rural Kwa-Zulu Natal, has difficulty adjusting to the urban and rural environment, especially during the festive season:

“Like I'll have my helper telling me "hah! No, no, no. I'll start this thing of eating less after Christmas when I come back from home. Pela [the thing is] *now I must go back looking nice and plump otherwise they will think hey no, are you troubled or stuff".” (Lindiwe)*

Lindiwe’s helper is encouraged to eat when she goes home for the Christmas holidays and does so, but back in Johannesburg she feels she will have to start a diet as a fuller body has different meanings in each place. Lindiwe’s helper is apparently faced with the struggle of having to modify her body weight so that she is able to fit in with the favoured body sizes within the different geographical locations. Feminist writer Wolf (1991) supports this view arguing that women do not have the freedom to do what they want with their bodies as they have to conform to the standards of beauty within each culture. Thus this issue is not merely aesthetic but has gender-political implications regarding women’s freedom from discriminatory trends that undermine them.

This matter has additional political importance regarding another aspect of social discrimination – the negative bias against people living with HIV and AIDS (Matoti-Mvalo and Puoane, 2011). Participants noted that because weight loss is often a symptom of HIV/AIDS, this has seemingly created the perception that a person with a thin body shape might be HIV positive. Thus participants felt that in order to avoid the stigma around being HIV positive based on one’s size, individuals might attempt to gain weight. Lindiwe believes that HIV/AIDS plays a role in shaping the perceptions of beauty in rural areas with a larger body being upheld as a marker of good health:

“Rural areas, I would think my assumption is that you still need to look a little bit nice and not chubby chubby that, yeah. Nice and full, a fuller figure is more attractive. Especially now with HIV and that if you're guaranteed that at least if you're dating someone who's not sick.”(Lindiwe)

She added:

“It's the initial, you're first guaranteed. Tick before you physically go to the clinic together. It's like the first sure sign that okay cool. It's fine and in urban ai now people want more like, healthier looking bodies. You see how Minnie Dlamini was getting flack

on how she's too chubby, she's too chubby. Yeah. But, no-one said Bonang is too skinny. But they said she's too chubby" (Lindiwe)

Lindiwe felt that in urban areas, fuller figured women are often criticised while thin women are likely to be admired. She believes that there are different meanings attached to the female body in the urban and in the rural areas. Sarwer et al., (2003) argue that from an evolutionary perspective, in previous generations mate selection was based on physical markers of health and fertility. Therefore a partner who looks physically healthy was given first preference for marriage. This meant that healthy women had to have a fuller-body figure and this was also an indication that they are disease free (Sarwer et al, 2003).

Charmaine shares the same idea as Lindiwe regarding women's body shapes, believing that there are different standards of beauty set for women in urban and rural areas:

"Ok well like in rural areas you can't look petite, you can't… you can't… because you are now unhealthy, but in urban areas you must be tall, you be thin."(Charmaine)

For Lindiwe and Charmaine, different specific influences operate in rural and urban areas affecting body shape ideals.

Unathi felt that there is a culture of a holistic acceptance of individuals in the rural areas when compared to the urban areas:

"I think rural people, it can be... they are more, they are also more receptive of how we look or what's going on whereas urban people are exposed to things that make you feel uncomfortable because certain things can make you feel uncomfortable if you have inferiority problems. Like if you feel you not beautiful then you see some beautiful girl like why can't I just be like that. People change, lemme go bleach my skin or whatever it may be. Rural people are more like maybe I don't have economic backup I can't just walk into an expensive shop and buy all these clothes but then I'm gonna try re-stylishing a bit I'll also you know, my friends love me, my family loves me the way I am you know." (Unathi)

Unathi introduced the idea that one needs money to be able to beautify oneself. She seemed to say that due to the lack of resources and poor economic development in rural areas, rural women

have to rely only on what they have naturally. Lelo also discussed the socio-economic factors in beauty:

> *"Uhmm, in rural area, well looking at the situation there, they, I wouldn't say they're not really concerned about beauty but...well they may think of it but it's not as much as it is in urban areas. In urban areas beauty is everything, if you're a woman you have to be beautiful to fit in that society whilst in the rural areas you're just yourself, if you're able to afford then you can make yourself beautiful. Well if you can't, well a lot of them can't then you just stay as you are." (Lelo)*

Phindi mentioned the role of the media in changing perceptions of women's physical beauty. She seemed to want to distance herself from traditional conceptions of beauty and womanhood:

> *"Obviously the rural population is a little bit isolated in terms of access to information than somebody in an urban area. So they've probably got different ideas of beauty. You still see the rain dance or the reed dance I'm not sure its Zulu women I'm not very cultural, where they like bare breasted girls and stuff, virgins, the whole virginity thing you still see them. As a girl raised in an urban area I would never even think of going there, that for me is just a no-no...Yeah, well there's certainly differences and again I think it's more in terms of the influence that people have access to media and I mean if you have access to media it's a force to be reckoned with in your life whether you like it or not consistently watching TV, listening to the radio and you kind of bombarded with this, whether its subtle or in your face, it's kind of explicit this is beauty and this is the ideal from the west and America." (Phindi)*

From Phindi's comment, it appears that acculturation becomes a process whereby Black women's exposure to the media or western values may affect, even erode, traditional ways of thinking. Contrary to research findings that showed some sort of protectiveness afforded by 'Black cultures' against eating disorders and obsessions with thinness (Rucker and Cash, 1992), Szabo and Allwood (2006) found that contemporary South African high school girls of all races had similar rates of body dissatisfaction. Dimpho expressed her opinion that rural areas are associated with traditional ways of living where a woman's natural beauty is embraced.

However, she felt that rural areas are gradually becoming urbanised and influenced by Western life-styles:

> *"I think it is a bit of both because you get some homelands that are very traditional. I mean...in black traditional cultures, fake things or make-up is definitely frowned upon whereas I mean nowadays you get some homelands that are slowly adapting or developing and they tend to adopt all the beliefs of urban areas so they then take up all these traits." (Dimpho)*

Dimpho's comparison is important in that it depicts that any protectiveness provided by traditional African cultural constructions of womanhood are slowly losing momentum due to the many effects of urbanisation and acculturation. According to some participants, the perception of beauty in rural areas is representative of traditional ways of living. For them, urban areas are representative of modern westernised life-styles while the rural areas are synonymous with traditional African ways of living.

Dimpho and Lelo, who are both from outside of Johannesburg, shared their experiences about the areas where they come from:

> *"Not with youth, but mostly it is the older people who disapprove of how the youth sees beauty in our society in Limpopo. I've seen that now there is rapid growth in girls, because of exposure to TV for instance, let's say I come this side and I also start dwelling in Joburg's society and how they pursue beauty and I take that with me back home. So I think exposure to different sort of things is changing that and people or the youth back home see beauty also as being like using make-up and wearing all these outfits that are revealing and just using weaves and everything. You know, that's how, that's the change I'm beginning to see.… So definitely, Joburg is more commercialized and Limpopo is what's on the inside that most people will look at."" (Dimpho)*

Dimpho felt that within the rural areas, the youth and older generation have different views regarding female beauty. She believes that this difference is the result of exposure to the beauty ideal promoted by the media and that this change can be seen in the youth. Lelo believes that there is a greater emphasis on women's physical appearance in Johannesburg than in Nelspruit.

She explained:

> *"With Nelspruit uhmm...okay what I've noticed with Jozi like you can just wear anything you feel comfortable in you just don't care about what people think as long as you're comfortable. You're, like I've noticed this thing of leggings, cause I believe that if you're wearing leggings you should have a longer length t-shirt with it. But then nower days I can wear my short t-shirt with leggings and then I go to town. Like in Nelspruit it's not usually the case. Well personally I haven't seen one person wearing like that so I would say yeah, there is that difference that they, they've got their own, you know, kind of clothes that they wear that they think are, which are comfortable for them which are the right clothes and then here they've also got their different style." (Lelo)"*

Lelo's quote above refers to the difference in mode of dress in Johannesburg and Mpumalanga. From Lelo's experience, it seems that women in Mpumalanga are conservative in the way they dress while women in Johannesburg are free to dress in the way that they want to.

In general, the participants felt that within the Black communities in rural South Africa, it is acceptable, even encouraged, for Black women to have larger bodies as this is a sign of good health and mental wellbeing. Participants felt that in urban areas the perception appears to be different as Black women feel pressurised to conform to Western ideals of womanhood. Some of the participants felt that this difference is the result of the influence of Western life-styles in urban areas. For women who move between these two geographical locations it becomes very difficult to feel once and for all comfortable with ones appearance.

4.2.7. Perceptions of beauty from the perspective of the older and younger generations

Just as there appears to be differences in African beauty ideals in urban and rural areas, differences also seem to exist between the older and younger generations, as mentioned by participants.

For example Dimpho felt that societal evolution plays a role in the way in which beauty is conceptualised. For her, the older generation in Limpopo present different views on female beauty as compared to the views a young women such as herself is exposed to when relocating to Johannesburg:

> *"It depends also on society because I come from a very small town back in Limpopo, definitely the values I was given are definitely what they are looking for. You find older women, mothers and grandmothers, that you can see that they don't take a liking to how nowadays, the twenty-first century society sees beauty as having fake nails and hair and the skimpy stuff, they really disapprove of such but I mean when you come, well me coming here to Jo'burg, its exposure. What I see on TV it seems society is accepting of beauty being seen as all these fake things and skimpy outfits and all these things including make-up. Basically you cover yourself up and making yourself into sort of like a Barbie doll (laughs), if I can put it that way. So it definitely depends on where you are and what kind of society you find yourself in" (Dimpho)*

Lindiwe said that she has a friend who is a model and since her friend is thin, her older male relatives attribute her thin body shape to poor health:

> *"I have a friend who's a model so when she goes to her uncle's "Lerato what job is this? Are you not doing well?" She's tiny, like thin, thin, thin and then tall so you look even lanky. It's okay you're getting work you know, what's wrong cause they don't understand like "huh". How does something look like this?"(Lindiwe)*

Charmaine linked the ideas of the differential generational constructions of womanhood including beauty, to the greater independence of contemporary young women. This is an observation that links appearance with socio-political and gender-political significance. This implies that although Black South African women have greater freedom to determine the ways that they will live, love and work - they have less freedom in relation to their appearance. They are now arguably oppressed by western beauty standards; these are particularly burdensome to Black women.

> *"Uhm… I think we different because the older generation admires women who can be home makers, you know they stay at home, and take care of kids and all of that stuff and*

then the younger generation admires women who can be independent, yes and then, with beauty also… I think with younger women you don't want to be big boobed and big, but with older women like if you long ago most women were like very voluptuous you know, I think that's what they admire. Uhm…well…I'm gonna go back to hair. They embrace being African; my mom has dreads, my aunt has a short afro, my gran… she also has like an afro and ja, uhm they embrace their hair, their natural hair and I guess they all brown, I have never seen them like use skin lighteners or things like that or them say anything bad about dark skinned people, ja they embrace that part too and body shapes too, ja." (Charmaine)

Lelo agreed with the idea that the older generation are more likely to embrace their natural looks while the youth are likely to use beauty enhancers:

"While our mothers were growing up, they had their afro's, they were beautiful, they had those clothes, they were clean and beautiful and then now it has changed, you have to add to your beauty. You're beautiful but now you need to add, you buy those beautiful clothes we need to buy make-ups and all that so for me, my parents are really not make-up fans but they still look beautiful. And my friends like dreadlocks. So yeah." (Lelo)

Unathi pointed out a difference in the way the youth and older generation dress themselves. She felt that the youth are less conservative in their dress, looking to the media for ideas on how to dress. She feels that the older generation did not have this:

"I think they are very different because if you look at even the way the older generation dresses and stuff it... there is a lot of what we dress as, look inappropriate you know... you know and come summer cause now its winter people are scared but come summer you still will get those mothers that look at you and be on some "those shorts are really short or that skirt is really short, don't you wanna wear jeans or something". So they have a different idea to what we have 'cause we free and we can do whatever and dress whatever it's not really a big deal. I think for a very. I think our channels are open to explore like you can buy whatever, anything that's in your, if you wanna look like gwana, or you wanna look like whoever, or if you like a certain look that you saw on t.v. you can literally go to a shop and get the whole look as supposed to back then it wasn't like that

you know, you wear what is there... you work with what you have. Now you can get anything, we wear more free. Older people are more constricted 'cause they come from a time where you wore what you had and it looked nice like that you know" (Unathi)

Phindi said that she is still struggling to understand why some women choose to wear weaves and she seems to identify with the some of the listeners of a radio station who expressed the same sentiment. She believes that contemporary Black youth (even younger than she is) are more tolerant of, even blind to, the artificiality of Western beauty ideals:

"Absolutely, oh yeah so one of the radio stations I like listening to 702, that is stereotypically for older people , but I like listening to them and I don't know how many times I heard them talk about the topic specifically to do with hair and skin bleaching and that type of thing. It's a predominantly white radio station, but the demographics in South Africa means there would be a lot of black listeners as well, so sometimes with white radio they informal and people bring up different topics. I don't know how many times they've brought this topic up about the hair. You get black men calling in... you asking me about the younger versus the older generation you get them talking "but why do you guys wear fake hair "it's just not okay, you can still hear them in their voices they also struggling with that and yet some other time I asked my cousin and little brother what do you think of her hairstyle and that was somebody with bonding, long hair and a fringe to top it off , and so they like she looks hot and all that she's beautiful and I'm like the hair is fake and he's like so? So I'm thinking don't they have some sort of like tension, that it's not her real hair to have that in their minds. So I think that the younger generation is a bit more permissive, maybe people are getting more materialistic or shallow. You don't care if people really look natural or authentic. You don't care if people have fake hair or fake boobs. Young generation are certainly permissive." (Phindi)

The responses clearly demonstrate that participants felt that there exist differences regarding the perception of beauty between the older and younger generations. Some participants felt that contemporary women's greater freedoms were diametrically opposed to their potential oppression through westernised beauty standards. They felt that in the older generation, women

were expected to stay home and that the youth is seen to be more independent however the older generation was perceived as more accepting and content with their physical appearance.

McKinley (1999), in her study on body ideals between mothers and daughters regardless of race, found the same sort of difference in body ideals between daughters and their mothers. The study found that: mothers did not put as much pressure on themselves to look a certain way as did their daughters; mothers felt less ashamed about their bodies; and mothers weighed more than their daughters (McKinley, 1999). The views expressed by participants of this current research regarding the ways in which they feel differently in how they see their bodies when compared to their female relatives seems to echo McKinley's findings.

4.2.8. Bodily transformations - necessary or not?

Dimpho and Lindiwe discussed the idea of not conforming to westernised beauty ideals for different reasons. These reasons were in some way held to be above the oppressive influence of societal pressures and were linked to more important aspects of their lives, roles and/or sense of self.

Dimpho felt that inner beauty is most important and that one should not depend on the judgment of others for one's self esteem, but rather to feel comfortable oneself:

> *"(laughs) I think beauty comes from basically you being comfortable with yourself. It doesn't matter what anyone comes and tells you, if you feel: "okay you know what, I am beautifully and wonderfully made", then you have no problems despite what anyone would come and say. You don't need clothes or all these fake things to feel beautiful. It all starts with you because there is no point in always getting all these things or having other people give you compliments in order to fulfil you self beauty or whatever-you need to feel it on your own from the word 'go'." (Dimpho)*

Lindiwe, a wife and mother of two, shares her difficulties with dressing in ways that are appropriate for her different roles as a mother and wife. More importantly she feels that as a wife, she has to ascribe to certain ways of dress that are deemed appropriate for a wife:

> *“Yes, and the way you dress. And people that ask "what does your husband say?"Hei I'm still an individual. What do you mean what does he say? For me as long as you've dressed well for the occasion, I'm not gonna go to his work with my little shorts or you know. Dress appropriately for each occasion but I'm not gonna age myself. Yeah.” (Lindiwe)*

Both Dimpho and Lindiwe spoke about ways in which stereotypical proscriptions can be opposed or adapted to suit the individual. Although Lindiwe seems to feel she must conform to socio-cultural expectations accruing to wives and mothers however she communicated that she will still dress the way she wants to, that she can do both. Dimpho’s communication indicates that she feels it is important to approve of oneself rather than to change ones appearance to gain the approval of others. She believes that it is a mistake to look to others for validation as this can never be fully internalised.

4.2.9 Specific sites of bodily transformation

This theme relates to the idea that specific beauty trends are imposed on specific parts of the body i.e. hair, skin and body shape - in compliance with westernised standards of beauty. The first of these two sites involve modifications specific to Black women’s features in relation to westernised beauty standards. These three specific bodily sites seemed to be an especial focus for contemporary trends and modificatory behaviors.

4.2.9.1 Skin

All participants felt that there was a distinction made between light skinned Black people and darker skinned Black people. The former were thought to be more beautiful than the latter and this resonates with the ideas about race and oppression documented in the literature. Neal and

Wilson (1989) argue that skin colour is linked to the historical processes of oppression whereby lighter skinned Black slaves were given preference over darker skinned Black slaves.

There was discussion about the light skinned so-called “yellow-bones” and the darker skinned so-called “brownies”. These terms have been used colloquially in South Africa to connote this distinction in skin tone.

> *“Skin, there is that whole debate of yellow bones versus the black berries. Probably the first natural instinct is that a lighter woman is like "oh" and then they look twice or something but the initial reaction is always positive...Initially, and the darker ones you must look twice and then "okay, she's nice".” (Lindiwe)*

Lindiwe felt that lighter skinned Black females are perceived as physically attractive based on their lighter skin tones. Similarly, Dimpho felt that Black females with lighter skin tones are first to be noticed when compared to Black females with darker skin tones. However, she expressed that a Black person’s skin tone is not necessarily a true reflection of their Africaness:

> *“Basically what I've heard, quite a number of people, especially guys, but you get girls these days as well, they feel like when you're more light skinned, light skinned in the fact that you are not as dark as others, you are like almost sort of coloured if I can put it like that then you will be first preference you know. Out of a group of girls you are definitely the first people they see first... But then with more of darker skinned women they show, you can see she is a true African she is a hundred percent black you know, she knows what it is to be a black woman but I definitely don't agree with such. You can get darker skinned woman who engages in a lot of Western cultures who's a 'coconut' so it becomes very difficult, people have their own preferences and are very particular.” (Dimpho)*

Dimpho and Lindiwe’s comments refer to the Poran’s (2006) notion of the ‘colour caste’ whereby lighter skinned Black women are perceived to be more desirable and attractive than darker skinned Black women. For Phindi, lighter skin tones are representative of ‘White’ conceptions of beauty. She also alludes to the pressures that darker skin toned Black women are faced with because the standards of beauty are constructed around White womanhood and the extreme lengths that Black women go to in order to attain this standard of beauty:

"Well as I said again it obviously reinforces and it's evidence to the fact that we still have that inferiority complex of I want to be white so its again...its people I think mostly women do it. It's that feeling again where women are pressured to be beautiful. And what is beautiful again...anything that we can attribute to a white person, so skin bleaching is a manifestation of that." (Phindi)

The fact that lighter skinned Black women are perceived to be more attractive seems to strengthen the notion that 'White' features are beautiful (Neal and Wilson, 1989). Charmaine and Dimpho share their experiences as dark skinned Black South women:

"The older I get the more I realize that brown is beautiful, yes it really is, like my best friend she's also brown and we like the fact that we so brown because we different from other people. Before uhm… light skinned people were prettier and now I think it all depends on you, if you embrace the way you look then other people will appreciate it too, yea I love my brown skin and I realIy… I wouldn't like to wake up light skinned; I don't want to wake up light skinned one day. I like the way I look." (Charmaine)

Charmaine shares that the older she got, the more she felt comfortable with her skin colour and the more she began to embrace. It seems that sharing that experience with her friend has made her look deeper into herself and to accept the way she is. Dimpho, a young who comes from Limpopo said that she finds herself explaining her ethnicity to others as her light skin tone does not qualify her as a Venda person:

"Since I've been here, everyone asks me: "so what are you? are you Zulu, Sotho, Venda, What?", and then I'll say that I'm Venda then they'd be like you can't be Venda, Vendas are dark and Vendas are this and this and this and I mean if you walk around with that kind of mindset, you missed out because I mean when I'm now interacting with a person like that, I always think you know that they are so one dimensional, why would I even want to pursue a friendship with this type of person if already they have this mindset and you know every single time I say something they'd be like: "no but Vendas don't think like that, you're not supposed to do that." (Dimpho)

Unathi, also had similar experiences as Dimpho. As a young woman from outside South Africa,

she felt that there is a colour hierarchy between Black South Africans:

> *"With myself I think I've come to a point where I have accepted the way I am I look, I've accepted who I am and love who I am because that you know, I'm stuck with this body until. Back in high school or primary school it was an issue but I also had a big support system from my family because you know if you get that support from home but you know you beautiful the way you are, it's like ok. I'm not from South Africa originally so you know I'm like dark skinned, when I get to school it was like "where are you from" you know? "Who are your parents?" type 'cause it's only in South Africa where I experienced you know that light and dark black people are two different races. Like it was so weird 'cause you get here and it's like they black people and dark black people" (Unathi)*

The participant's responses reveal that there is an emphasis on light skin tones for Black women and that light skinned women are considered more attractive than darker skin Black women.

None of the participant's has ever used skin lightening creams and they also confirmed that it can result in adverse effects on the skin:

> *"No, I've seen this lightening skin cream thing and everyone who has used it say that it burns your skin and so it does more harm than good because it's burning. Your skin shed, because I think it takes off the outer cover and you get this white skin." (Dimpho)*

> *"Nope, thank God. After seeing one, we had a helper with those things, her cheeks. It messes your cheeks I don't know why and she used to use the brown shoe polish, that's where I saw it. That was like my first experience seeing skin lightening like someone who actually does it. And I thought "hei, okay". And I think what probably stayed with me was like not having growing up with like a lot of acne and that yeah, so it was like argh okay." (Lindiwe)*

Dimpho and Lindiwe vehemently expressed their disapproval about skin lightening skins and they were cognizant about the side effects of these products. On the other hand, Lelo and Lindiwe felt that skin care is important and not necessarily skin lightening:

"When I'm saying skin colour, do you notice that …use products for our skin, so I'm saying that either way, it does makes you beautiful because if I have something on my face, I'll have some products which will just remove it. So skin becomes an important part of beauty you know."(Lelo)

Lindiwe shares her skin care treatment regime to illustrate that taking care of her skin is important to her:

"I think every morning I use like 3 different products: my face, and my body thingy, and my cream. Yeah, that's like 3 things. In the evening I swap the one and use like 2, a night cream and a. Too much, too much." (Lindiwe)

4.2.9.2. Hair

All participants spoke about hair as a beauty marker. They discussed the particular challenges of so-called Black Hair in relation to the western ideal of beautiful hair. Thus it seems that this is a bodily site that participants often modify. The socio-political significance of hair was mentioned directly and implicitly by participants. For example Phindi said:

"As I say hair is a major issue for me and I read this book some time ago it's called "coconuts" by Kopano Matlwa. So basically in that book she's talking about the same things. You know she's also a young black woman. So she's talking mostly about the same things about hair you know she's coming for a much broader, she's accent all of that. But I remember in the opening scene of the book, a description of her being in a church with her family and then there's a preaching going on and she's kind of distracted and she's just looking around, and then as she looks around she notices a little girl, and the little girls' got braiding, and she refers to the braiding as cheap, plastic...ya its cheap plastic that represented girl's messed up desires. So the messed up desire there is I want to be White and at the end of the day its cheap plastic on your head, it's really not you. I don't know I read that book years ago and it just stuck with me." (Phindi)

Phindi's quote serves to illustrate the fact that when Black women wear artificial hair, they may be trying to be something that they are not and that they might also do anything to reach that ideal. The interpretation that Black women who wear artificial hair are attempting to emulate Whiteness has been a topic of debate such that the debate around how Black women wear their hair has become a contentious subject (Thompson, 2009). As mentioned previously, the so-called pencil test practiced as a sort of *racial barometer* by Apartheid officials, and similar attitudes during the historical era of slavery have given hair particular socio-political poignancy (Neal & Wilson, 1989). Thus hair has become a status symbol and an identification of aesthetic values in women such that Black women who wear weaves or extensions might be perceived as conforming to Western ideals of beauty while Black women who wear their hair naturally might be perceived as rejecting Western ideals of beauty. Participants were asked their general opinions about Black women and their hair. Some of the participant's seemed to believe that there is a strong preference for weaves among Black women rather than leaving ones hair. Lelo said that:

> *"Ok in our days, most women, most ladies, they go for weaves, but I still believe your natural hair is beautiful as long as you maintain it well it's beautiful. But then these days they believe weaves are the most beautiful hair." (Lelo)*

It seems that for Lelo, what society views as beautiful and what she views as beautiful are two different things. Even though she feels that natural hair is beautiful, society seems to place more value on weaves. Charmaine felt that the way a Black woman wears her hair carries a lot of value and that it may also be interpreted as a political statement:

> *"Uhm well black women always change their hair. I think that's the biggest part it's always about your hair. Thuli yea with the weave trends and like now the Indian weave, And I'm not hating on weaves...I don't...it's your decision but yea that's when black women started looking not black anymore." (Charmaine)*

Some of the participants shared their experiences about the modificatory procedures they have performed on their hair. Lindiwe, who has opted for short hair, says that it was difficult for her children to accept her when she had short hair and that she can relate to her children because growing up, she also had a preference for long hair:

“It’s too much because my kids always ask me "mommy, when are you gonna wear a weave?" because I have short hair. They didn't understand cause now "oh okay, I like your hair". We grew up wanting long hair.” (Lindiwe)

Now that she has opted for a shaven head as ‘hairstyle’, she is glad that getting her hair done is not an arduous activity anymore:

“Yeah, I walk into the salon and I'm out in fifteen minutes cause they still braiding "I wish I could do that I don't have the guts", one day, maybe I can try an s-curl first then" Cause I think it's like a lot of maintenance keeping hair, and the cost as well, it’s too much.” (Lindiwe)

Lelo felt similarly, expressing her opinion, borne from experience, that when hair is not in its natural state it requires a lot of maintenance, adding that it also has the potential to be easily damaged:

“I think afros are very nice, they very nice. They also easy to maintain. With the other hair-styles like corn-rows, after two weeks you have to un-plait cause it’s ruined. With straight backs and twists okay they, beautiful but the thing is that they ruin your hair because it really damages your hair.” (Lelo)

Lelo added that:

“Okay, with my hair it’s okay though. I have a weave on but I don't really like it but I have it on because I want my hair to grow. Before I had this weave I had singles, twists ne? And it really damaged my hair and I had to cut it so.” (Lelo)

Lelo has chosen not to wear a weave due to the damage it caused to her natural hair. Significantly this choice seems to be one taken due to her putting self-care above fashionable western trends. This seems to be a commentary on the tensions between doing what she wants to, and what sectors of South African society deem desirable.

“That I see, that I realise that okay even especially because I have such big hair issues strangely enough, I don’t know you walk around campus and then you see girls with hairpieces …okay I’ve got hairpieces on as well…I mean you see bonding which you get

like the person is wearing blonde hair and they're black. You know it's, I don't know it's quite difficult to see that because ya, cos I also think to myself something is wrong with that picture, something is wrong. Yeah it kind of convicts me in a sense, that something is not right with me as well. Because as I know I'm trying to be ,if I was my own person I would really wear my hair the way I want it, the way I feel is the most comfortable which is like short or maybe dreads you know…short dreads, something along those lines. But then again I'm trying to be socially accepted more than to be myself." (Phindi)

Thus Phindi has similar feelings to Lelo regarding artificial hair. However unlike Lelo, Phindi seems to feel that she must conform to society's standards of beauty, despite what she feels is right for her. However both Phindi and Lelo, through the politically fraught medium of hair - are beginning to ask themselves the fundamental question - whether conforming to society's values means getting rid of your own values.

Dimpho had a different attitude to this topic. She spoke proudly about all of the different hair-styles she has had:

"Yes I have. I change hairstyles all the time but I've never had weaves and as far as extensions it would only be braids and that's it. I've changed from dreads cause I naturally have course hair, so I've tried dreads, I've tried... I generally have an afro. I've tried relaxing-it's generally different things with my own hair; you know changing the colour sometimes. I think it also comes with being a teenager as well. You just feel like I want to do something eccentric and totally different. Sometimes, I would say, influence comes from TV, like you see, I saw Rihanna with red hair and I was like 'mhmm red hair, why not play around, let's see the reaction people give you', so I did once try red hair and I was just like: 'whaaat??' (laughs)." (Dimpho)

It seems that for Dimpho, experimenting with her hair is a form of a freedom of expression and a celebration of her youth. She spoke about getting inspiration from female celebrities that she admires. This introduces an idea that counters the prior one, asking a very different question: can hair be a medium through which women can gain self-esteem through identification with positive role models? It seems to be an important distinction here that Dimpho's role model, Rihanna is Black like she is.

Charmaine shared a story about how her friend's younger sister responded to her differently after she had her first weave, similar to what Lindiwe previously shared about her children's views:

> *"I remember when I had my first weave my best friend's little sister, they are Coloured at home so they have nice, long straight hair and I always had my braids so when I had my weave she was like: "oh I like this hair better, I can comb this hair better." Yea it's always like kids that find straighter hair prettier I think... I don't know...I think it's what they see on TV because you don't find like afro and dreads or braids or stuff but you have long haired straight, haired women." (Charmaine)*

Charmaine felt that her Coloured friend's younger sister preferred how she looked when her hair was also straight, silky and easy to comb. She also makes an important point that Black female actresses have weaves on most of the time and that this has created a culture where weaves are more accepted than natural hair. Thus it is important to consider the degree to which the media influences young children to believe that straight hair or weaves are more attractive than natural hair. Once again this is not only an aesthetic issue but a socio-political and gender-political one.

Overall it seems that for all of the participants, the way that one wears ones hair as a Black woman is a powerful political statement - conformist or not - to society's standards, behind which the echoes of the dark political past resonate. Hair also has socio-economic importance as a status symbol as it is expensive to maintain elaborate hair modifications (Patton, 2006; Smith, 2012). Some participants felt torn between their need to conform to society's standards, as opposed to doing what they wanted to. Some seem to be starting to question this, realising its deeper significance.

4.2.9.3.Figure

All participants expressed views about body shape and how they feel about their bodies. There was some difference of opinion among participants on this subject. Lelo's quote relates to expectations regarding how women should look, and that there is a preference for a slim body type among women.

"Everybody wanna get slim and get a figure and they believe if you are a woman you must have a figure and curves, that's what they think is more beautiful mhmm." (Lelo)

As mentioned previously, research on women of all races exposed to western norms that promote a thin body shape indicates that all prefer this shape (Rubin et al, 2003). As mentioned previously, trends for particular kinds of body shape can be influenced by media representations of an ideal body as part of cultural messages about how women should look and *be* (Fallon and Hausenblas, 2004).

The participants' were asked whether they had ever tried to lose weight. Lelo said that she has never actively tried to lose weight, but that she experienced weight loss due to pressure from school rather than from an attempt to transform her body:

"I love my body, I think I'm just perfect as I am, I won't add anything or remove anything from my body, I think I'm okay the way I am, there's no part which I feel is like not good or something, I just love everything about me...I only lose weight, maybe because of school, that's the only time I lose weight, otherwise I haven't really used those slim tablets I've never, I'm just like this" (Lelo)

Unathi actually wished to gain some weight due to health concerns:

"I think I could gain weight ja I'd like to gain weight because I have a certain health issues that they will fix it at a certain weight, if I gain weight it will get better. So it's more of a healthier type of thing." (Unathi)

Phindi expressed dissatisfaction about her body size; negative feedback from others that she should lose weight, makes it hard for her feel beautiful and good about herself. She links her body size to the traditional sorts of food she and her family eat:

"I mean I used to be thin growing up right up until I was 14, because I used to do sports in primary school and athletic as I said I'm very tomboyish I was completely out there. It never was an issue for me and then I go to high school I did no sports. So I got to high school and started thinking I'm grown up now. Running around the field that's not cool. So now I wasn't into to sports or anything and was doing more cultural stuff like debating, but then I wasn't expending any physical energy. With my family, a typical

black family I think where you eat "ipapa"[maize meal porridge] *and all these carbo loaded foods and you're encouraged to finish your meal. So all those factors combined, not doing sports I've got that whole aura with my family that you have to finish your food and having carbo loaded food...I started gaining weight through the years and I think it's been a down ward spiral ever since then..Since then I'm not happy about my body at all, it's because I feel fat and I have been told I am, and gosh I wish I had perfect skin that would be cool. Because I've got really oily skin and pimply ya so I don't feel beautiful." (Phindi)*

Lindiwe felt that she put herself under considerable pressure to modify her body through gym work-outs. She communicates her feeling that she will never be satisfied with her body, that she will always have an area that she is dissatisfied with:

"I think, I probably, constantly like fatigue and you know. If someone could come and take my … every day I would say "come and do it" because you're never happy! You're constantly like trying to, change something, even when you achieve a particular goal that you wanted to do, I would make sure like for me that to take care of my body. I train like for maybe 5days a week, that's like if I can, definitely. If I'm too busy then at least 3 times a week I must go to gym. And yeah, it's too much pressure. That's parts that I don't like, like I don't like my arms, I don't like my this. Ai, it's always pressure, you're never just, happy, like I'm okay." (Lindiwe)

Charmaine expressed that when she was younger her lack of significant breast development made her feel different from her friends. Once she developed larger breasts however she had to adjust to this change and to feel comfortable with her new body shape:

"I really like my body… yes…uhm… I think it's just the right size for me, uhm… I was… because all my friends are taller than me and bigger than me and have bigger boobs than me uhm… and I wanted to have ass and big boobs as them and then mine started growing and now, I was fine where I was. I like my body the way it is and if it changed I wouldn't be me... Well, my best friends had to convince me that I still look like me so if you find that… but it took such a long time to get used that, because you find that everybody noticed that they bigger, it's not something that you want other people to notice, and it's

uncomfortable… because it's my breasts. Ja like everyone noticed like they… with my older… with my old clothes they looked out of place, you know… Yea but now I feel cool about it." (Charmaine)

As a teenager going through the phase of development, Dimpho shares a similar experience of being a 'late-bloomer':

"Growing up, I was short. I was really short and skinny. Like extremely skinny, people were thinking oh my word, like almost the point of anorexia, not too much, just almost the point and you see all these girls around you, well at school, most of my friends started developing you know like breasts and everything quite early so there was a point where I was thinking: what's wrong with me, you know, everyone is growing and I feel like I'm just stuck-am I going to be looking like a guy? I was worried, I was quite a late bloomer and then it was like out of nowhere, everything just popped up and then you see that even interactions with some of my close guy friends became different. It was no more 'she is one of the guys', it was now: she is a girl (laughs) and it definitely makes everything so confusing and so hard because now everything that they would include me in, I would just be part of everything they did, now there were certain times I could be with them and certain times when I can't." (Dimpho)

Dimpho added that she needed to accept her changing body in order to feel comfortable about herself. Lindiwe shared some of the challenges that her friend faces as she looks physically younger:

"Because she's too small, it's hard to date and people think you're a child. If you give her uniform she can go back and start from scratch. The only thing is her face that will give it away that "okay no, you're not 15" but otherwise. Hmmm hmmm, not a child-like body." (Lindiwe)

This perspective is interesting in light of the western beauty trend for women to look youthful. From what Lindiwe has said it appears that looking *too young* can be detrimental to a woman's romantic prospects.

In general participants had different views about their bodies, some felt comfortable with their body shapes while others expressed some body dissatisfaction. One participant mentioned a relationship between her health and needing to gain some weight. One participant who received negative feedback was left feeling dissatisfied about her body, another participant who received positive feedback about her body also felt dissatisfied with her body. Thus whether these participants receive feedback from others about their bodies, they still have a sense of dissatisfaction. It was difficult for some of the participants who were going through phases of development to adjust to their changing bodies because feeling different from their peers brought up difficult feelings.

The transformat6ions of the body have changed over time as an 'ideal beauty' is introduced with each era (Patton, 2006). As such, specific sites of the body have been adjusted in order to fit with the ideal beauty of that time. Hair as a beauty marker seemed to be the most important body modificatory site in light of the historical and political emphasis on Black women's hair. In contemporary society where weaves and extensions have become more desirable and attractive, Black women who wear their hair naturally are seen as affirming their African-ness. For some of the participants, external validation from others regarding their body seemed to carry a lot of value as it seems important for them to fit in and to feel accepted by society. Skin seemed to be the least important body modificatory site. The participants recognized that lighter skinned Black women were more desirable and considered more beautiful. Skin colour, like hair, also seems to be linked to historical processes.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Conclusion

This research project sought to explore constructions of beauty, body-image and body related opinions and behaviours in contemporary young Black females, in this case, students from the University of the Witwatersrand. Six participants took part in the research project and their interviews were rich, providing fertile data that gave answers to the research questions. The research findings will be discussed in turn.

5.2. A synopsis of the research findings in relation to the research questions

The findings of this research project were able to answer the research questions in the following ways. In relation to the main research question pertaining to whether and how young Black South African women perceive their appearance in relation to contemporary Western socio-cultural beauty ideals – the following were found, documented below.

All participants seem to feel that popular mass media has a powerful effect on how they, and other Black South African women especially, view themselves. Media images set standards and ideals that affect women; women use media images as ideals against which to compare themselves and other women. Participants felt that others evaluate them in relation to the images represented in the media. The media is seen to define notions of beauty; this reinforces the need to conform to media propagated standards. Participants felt that media images seem to be a distorted representation of reality, especially for Black women. Participants felt that the media has not only had a powerful influence in individual's lives, but it has become a powerful agent in changing perceptions of beauty within Black South African contemporary culture. From the participant's points of view, traditional constructions of Black womanhood seem not to hold as much weight with them as it did for their predecessors as traditional Black womanhood is not celebrated within the mass media. Thus it becomes difficult for Black women to negotiate their identities through their bodily modificatory procedures and choices in relation to their appearance. This research has offered a deeper understanding of the relationship to historical

processes of oppression and female beauty. It seems that the choices that Black women make can be traced back to history. However, history may have an indirect influence on the choices that women make. Black women have different reasons why they make the choices they make and this can be influenced by a myriad of other things. Regardless, Black women are free to make those choices and hopefully they understand why they make those choices.

5.3. Limitations of the study and recommendations for future research

The goal of qualitative research is not to generalise findings, but to get a deeper understanding from the participant's perspective (Maree, 2007). With the aforementioned, this study cannot be generalised to all young, Black, female university students because of the small sample size. Future research enterprises could by quantitative, using a much larger sample size in order to allow for generalisation of the findings.

Most of the participants of this research were relatively young Black women who are first year university students at Wits. A recommendation for further research is to target women who are older to see if whether their conceptions of beauty differ. Furthermore, this research study could be extended to include women from different geographical locations, for instance, urban women from different provinces and women from rural and/or semi-rural areas. The participants of this study were university students and future research could target women of the same age group who are not university students in order to see if whether or not they have internalised the perceptions of beauty in society in the same ways.

The last area for further research pertains to the data collection method. The current research used semi-structured interviews for data collection; while this was useful for this particular research project, allowing the researcher to explore the pertinent issues in depth, a different method of data collection can be used in future. Focus groups, for example, could be used in order to observe group dynamics and if whether the focus group participants influence each other's views and opinions.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A – Semi-structured Interview Schedule

1. Do you think there is pressure for women to be beautiful? Tell me about this
2. What do you think are the markers of female beauty? That is, what in your opinion makes a woman beautiful?
3. With regards to physical appearance, what do you think are the preferred features for black women?
4. Do you think beautiful women have an advantage in life? Explain
5. Do you think there is a difference in the way men look at women and the way women look at other women? If so, explain
6. a.) Do you think there are differences in beauty ideals between the older (parents and grandparents) and new (your contemporaries) generation? If so, what do you think these differences may be?

   b.) What do you think are the perceptions of beauty in different parts of South Africa? (for example rural versus urban areas)
7. How do you feel about your body?

   -follow-up questions:

   a.) Have you ever tried to lose or gain weight?

   b.) Have you ever changed your hair-style?

   c.) Have you ever tried to lighten your skin?
8. Tell me your feelings about your own physical appearance in relation to the markers of beauty you have mentioned?
9. How important would you say your appearance is to your overall sense of identity?
10. Participants will be presented with visual imagery, including pictures of Black female celebrities such as Nomasonto “Mshoza” Mnisi, Bonang Matheba, Thandiswa Mazwai, Jill Scott, Beyonce Knowles and Alek Wek. Participants will be asked what they think about the women in the pictures.