

---

Theses, Dissertations, and Projects

---

2012

## The essence of beauty : examining the impact of idealized beauty standards on college-age African America women

Tiffany M. Paschal  
*Smith College*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.smith.edu/theses>



Part of the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Paschal, Tiffany M., "The essence of beauty : examining the impact of idealized beauty standards on college-age African America women" (2012). Masters Thesis, Smith College, Northampton, MA.  
<https://scholarworks.smith.edu/theses/884>

This Masters Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in Theses, Dissertations, and Projects by an authorized administrator of Smith ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@smith.edu](mailto:scholarworks@smith.edu).

Tiffany Paschal  
The Essence of Beauty:  
Examining the Impact of  
Idealized Beauty Standards  
on College-Age African  
American Women

### **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative study examined the psychological and emotional effects of contemporary western society's standards of beauty on college-age African American women. Various studies on perception of beauty have explored body image perception from a middle class Caucasian perspective; and as a result, body image conceptualization from the perspective of African American women has gone unnoticed (Spurgas, 2005, Hatcher, 2007, Hall 1995). Previous literature suggests that African American women define self-perception and beauty differently from mainstream definitions. This study involved conducting a focus group with eighteen students between the ages of 18 and 25 who were enrolled at a Historically Black College in the Southeast. Students were asked a series of demographic background questions followed by a mixture of unstructured, open-ended questions that explored their perception of beauty standards and how such beauty standards have made an impact throughout their lives. In addition, the body image rating scale was given to each participant to rate based on their desirability. Major findings from this present study suggest that college-age African American women continue to be challenged by contemporary American standards of beauty in various ways. These findings also reveal how the family, media, and society's idealized beauty standards have a great influence in a woman's overall self-esteem and body image.

**THE ESSENCE OF BEAUTY:  
EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF IDEALIZED BEAUTY STANDARDS  
ON COLLEGE-AGE AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN**

A project based upon an independent investigation,  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

Tiffany Paschal

Smith College School for Social Work  
Northampton, MA 01063

2012

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I send my deepest gratitude to all the individuals who have provided me with much support, encouragement, and assistance throughout this research process. I would like to send a special thanks to my family for their unconditional love and support they have bestowed upon me as I progressed throughout this Masters program. Next, I would like to thank my research advisor, Dr. Narviar C. Barker for all her guidance and support and my Faculty sponsor Dr. Vickie Ogunlade for her time and assistance with this project. I would also like to thank my colleagues/classmates for their support and encouragement in the completion of this project. Finally, this thesis would not be possible without the assistance of such an amazing group of students who kindly volunteered to participate and contribute to this study. Thank you for allowing your voices to be heard and sharing your thoughts and feelings about the perception of beauty standards in our society.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iii
CHAPTER	
I INTRODUCTION .....	1
II LITERATURE REVIEW .....	4
III METHODOLOGY .....	19
IV FINDINGS.....	22
V DISCUSSION.....	34
REFERENCES .....	39
APPENDICES	
Appendix A: Human Subjects Review Approval Letter.....	44
Appendix B: Human Subjects Review Amendment Approval Letter .....	45
Appendix C: Spelman College Institutional Review Board Approval Letter .....	46
Appendix D: Flyer .....	47
Appendix E: Screening Questions .....	48
Appendix F: Informed Consent Form.....	49
Appendix G: Referral List .....	51
Appendix H: Demographic Questionnaire.....	52
Appendix I: Interview Questionnaire.....	53
Appendix J: Body Image Rating Scales.....	55
Appendix K: Transcriber’s Confidentiality Form.....	60

## **CHAPTER I**

### **Introduction**

Physical attractiveness is an important factor in the definition of a woman's sense of self and her role in Western society (Grimes, 1997). Self-esteem is a pivotal element of mental health among women in the U.S. (Hatcher, 2007, p. 224). There have been several empirical studies illustrating the common effects of poor self-esteem on overall mental health and the value placed on body image (Spurgas, 2005). For example, because of strong internalized perceptions of beauty in the contemporary U.S., women have psychological issues such as eating disorders, depression, and chemical dependency (Spurgas, 2005). Much of the literature explains idealized body image perceptions from a middle-class Caucasian women's perspective; as a result, issues of self-esteem and body image conceptualization among woman of ethnically diverse backgrounds have not been fully examined (Spurgas, 2005, Hatcher, 2007). The current researcher examines the psychological and emotional effects of contemporary western society's standards of beauty on college age African American women. There is limited literature on how African American women define and or conform to standards of female beauty in America. Using a black feminist perspective, the current literature explores historic and psychological impacts of negative body image and sense of self of African American women. These perspectives prompt further explanation about the resistance African American women continue to use with idealized beauty standards.

A black feminist theory paradigm is found in many of the key concepts and theories found in existing research on African American women. According to Blackwell (2010), Black

feminism is a standpoint theory that assumes the sociological significance of race, class, and gender as a lens for examining the impact of oppression on the lives of black women (p. 474). African American women indeed may define self-esteem and beauty differently from mainstream definitions due to historical oppressions, culture, and personal influences on their lives.

The research literature suggests that African American women tend to define female beauty standards based on historical and cultural issues regarding skin color, hair, facial features, and body size (Hall, 1995). These standards of beauty may affect their self-esteem and produce body image disturbances that put them at risk for mental health problems. In addition, negative media portrayals have a huge influence on sense-of-self among African American women (Daniel, 2000). The literature suggests that various factors such as racism, sexism, and classism are important and unique aspects of study with African American women as they conceptualize body image in a westernized dominant society (Hatcher, 2007). The purpose of this study is to explore how the standards of beauty in contemporary America impact the psychological and emotional states of African American woman in our society.

Strong leadership roles obtained by African American women such as Michele Obama, Maya Angelou, Ruth Simmons, and Condoleezza Rice are on the rise throughout the country; and this occurrence could spur a shift in the perception of beauty among African American women. Movements such as “My Black is Beautiful,” celebrates and promotes the uniqueness of African American culture and beauty and also plays a significant role in the perception of idealized beauty standards in America. The current research gives voice to African American women’s perception of beauty, and may lead to newer, collective perceptions and standards for beauty in our society. Specifically, this study examined the psychological and emotional effects

of contemporary western society's standards of beauty on college-age African American women. Findings from this study may provide insight and reflections for clinicians who work with African American women on issues of beauty, self esteem and confidence.



## **CHAPTER II**

### **Literature Review**

#### **Women and the Internalization of Beauty Standards**

Self-esteem is a key factor influencing body image among women of all races and ethnicities. Many factors, including race, ethnicity, cultural background, media consumption, and individual psychology have been linked to the diverse body image perceptions among women in the U.S. (Spurgas, 2005). Several studies have indicated how the media has played a large role in an idealized conception of female standards of beauty. Historically, most of the theory derived from body image research has supported the claim that White women more often are afflicted by problems associated with poor body image than women of other ethnicities (Spurgas, 2005). A woman's body image is greatly influenced by her own interpretation of her culture's beauty standards, her perception of how closely her own body matches those standards, and her belief about how important a woman's body is in matching those standards to other members of her cultural group (Spurgas, 2005). Pumariega et al. (1994) conducted a large survey on high income and educated African American women of diverse age and geographic locations within the United States. They found that African American women struggle with disordered eating as much as White women, but that a strong adherence to Black identity/culture is a protective factor against the development of behaviors associated with eating disorders, such as the drive for thinness (Brook and Pahl 2005).

## **Family's Influence on Beauty Ideals**

The family represents an important social institution through which values, behaviors, and attitudes are transmitted and passed down from one generation to the next. (Kluck, 2009, Parke and Buriel, 2008). According to the transactional model, a child's development becomes a product of continuous interactions between the child and the experiences provided by his or her family and the social environment (Davies, 2011). Several studies have indicated that the most influential group in the development of body image is the family institution (Haworth-Hoepfner, 2000, Spurgas, 2005, Kluck, 2009). Family values have been illustrated to be more of a significant factor in how children internalize beauty ideals as much as the influence from the media. Through the use of modeling, children learn how to explore and make sense of their world through the use of parent's behaviors, values, and opinions (Kluck, 2009). A general tendency for a family to focus on appearance and attractiveness is related to greater difficulties with disordered eating and weight concerns among daughters (Kluck, 2009, pg. 8).

Several studies have indicated that the mother-daughter bond is another significant factor in regards to the internalization of female beauty ideals (Haworth-Hoepfner, 2000, Kluck, 2009, Spurgas, 2000). In the American culture, the mothers are represented as the matriarchs and are expected to uphold the family structure. As children transition into adulthood, daughters yearn for their connection with their mothers while at the same time experiencing the pressures from society of not living up to certain standards of beauty ideals. (Kluck, 2009). Haworth-Hoepfner (2000) suggests that the family operates in mediation of culture and works in combination with other factors. According to (Bell & Nkomo, 1998, p.286) black women are taught by their families to develop a protective shield as a buffer against unsavory elements of the outside world- a world where they discover they are invisible, devalued and dishonored in particular

ways due to their race and gender. Armoring enables an African American girl to develop and maintain a sense of self-worth, dignity and beauty in the face of social standards clearly signaling otherwise (Bell and Nkomo, 1998 p287). A major source of strength and empowerment for Black or African American women are the support systems they gain from the family institution.

One particular study included a sample of 268 college women who completed the Family Influence Scale, Bulimia Test –Revised, Body Shape Questionnaire, and a series of items about their parents’ comments about their weight/size. Both family appearance focus and daughters’ body image dissatisfaction predicted increased disordered eating in daughters. Additionally, body image dissatisfaction partially mediated the influence of family appearance focus on daughters’ disordered eating. No specific type of parental comments regarding weight/size emerged as a superior predictor of eating disturbance, but encouragement to control weight/size was a stronger predictor of body dissatisfaction than other types of parental comments.

Another study involved utilizing a focus group and individual interviews that was conducted with 16 Black women. The results indicated that 6 major themes emerged suggesting that shapely and curvaceous ideal body image standards within the Black community were the most prevalent themes reported. Therapeutic implications emphasize recognition of culture specific ideal standards of beauty, as well as the influence of external factors such as men, family, peers, and media on Black women’s self-evaluations (Kelch-Oliver & Ancis, 2011).

### **The Media Portrayal of African American Women**

The social constructions of African American women have been woven into the fabric of American Society over many years (Daniel, 2000, p.132). Negative depictions of African American women in the media have been an ongoing pervasive phenomenon in American pop culture. Memories of distorted images of African American women are a source of racial trauma

for African American women (Daniel, 2000). The frequent media portrayal of idealized Black women usually consists of Eurocentric influences dominated by Caucasian facial features (Perkins, 1996). These features would include light skin tones, light eyes, hair length and texture (Hall, 1995). For example, the issue of colorism has existed for over 200 years in the United States and established its origins during slavery. It was not until the 1930s when research on skin color was first conducted. Colorism is the skin color stratification brought on by the dominant white society into the black community which suggests that being “bright” (light skin) was usually preferable to being dark (Hall, 1995, p.126). In regards to issues of hair, much of the concern and maintenance of black hair may be to reach the texture and style of Caucasian hair, since long, smooth, flowing hair is seen as the feminine ideal in the United States (Hall, 1995; Brownmiller, 1984). Many studies suggested that television images of women show beautiful female characters as having a predominantly thin body type (Perkins, 1996; Hall, 2007; Daniel, 2000). Several other studies conducted explored America’s media influence on African American women’s self-perception and their overall resistance to idealized beauty standards.

One particular study examined differences in the body images of 80 African American women and 89 European women using a methodology that controlled for body size, distinguished between satisfaction with and the importance of body features, and included non-weight, as well as weight related features (Jefferson & Stake, 2009, p396). These participants were female undergraduate students from a large Midwestern university. Relative to African American women, the results showed that European American women were more dissatisfied with their weights and specific physical features and also compared themselves more often to media beauty figures, and internalized western beauty standards (Jefferson & Stake, 2009). Several findings, coupled with the relatively low level of body image dissatisfaction found in

African American girls and women, suggest that mainstream media has less influence on their body image than it does on European American girls and women (Jefferson & Stake, 2009). However, many studies have indicated that African American girls watch more television than European American girls but are not as easily influenced by unrealistic body image depictions (Jefferson & Stake, 2009).

### **The Emergence of African American Beauty Standards**

In a society where African American women have been positioned at the bottom of the social hierarchy by structures of inequality and racism, their perseverance, strength, and resiliency have created a source of triumph throughout American history. During the era of slavery, light-complexioned Blacks, often the offspring of the White slave owners and enslaved Africans, were given preferential treatment for housework in stark contrast to darker skinned Blacks, who were usually assigned to outdoor, hard-labor tasks (Keith & Herring, 1991; Sandler, 1994; Scales-Trent, 1995, Coard et, al.p.2256). During the abolition of slavery, skin-tone stratification persisted and lighter skinned African Americans operated in a generally higher socioeconomic stratum than did their darker skinned counterparts (Coard, et al, 2001). Privileges associated with being a lighter-toned skinned African American has been passed on to multiple generations within the black community and still exists today ( Hall, 1995) The 1960s also paved the way for beauty pageants exclusively for African American women. Pageants such as Miss America were held exclusively for white women contestants during the 1960s. In response, the NAACP sparked a movement to develop pageants, which celebrated African American beauty for African American women (Craig, 2002).

The civil rights movement of the 1960s became a pivotal time for the African American community in which a sense of Black pride was celebrated and raised into consciousness within

the Black community (Hall, 1995, Craig, 2002, Coard, et al.2001). It also was during this time that many light complexioned African Americans were belittled because of their appearance of not looking “black enough” and having resemblance to European American physical features (Coard, Raskin, Breland 2001). Even though the “Black is Beautiful Movement” during the 1960s sought to eradicate black stratifications of colorism within the African American community, it was not successful in putting an end to the politics of colorism (Coard, et, al 2001). Furthermore, for many African Americans, varied aspects of facial features, including nose broadness, lip thickness, and hair coarseness have been used separately and jointly with skin color to make within-race distinctions (Grier & Cobbs, 1968; Gwaltney, 1980, Coard, et, al. 2001).

**Skin Color.** Colorism in the United States among African Americans has great significance to their history, sense of identity, and heritage. Several studies based on historical and contemporary evidence on self perception, self-esteem, and racial identity indicates that desirable preferences of skin color from African American participants chose lighter skin tones as a standard of beauty (Bond and Cash, 1992, Hall 1995, Craig, Byrd et al. 2002, Bailey 2008). In contrast, one particular study examined the role of skin color as it pertains to racial identity development theory and self esteem among 113 African American college students of various skin colors. The results indicated that this sample of students preferred skin color of medium tone, regardless of their own skin complexion. The relationship between family values and opposite gender preference of skin color also presented as a significant factor to preferences and or self perceptions of skin tone idealization among participants in the study. For example, based on the data reported in this study, it appears that family ideals may be associated with how samples of African Americans perceive their skin colors across skin-color groups.

This particular study presented contradicting results from the massive amounts of literature that emphasized in their findings that African Americans exhibit preferences for either a lighter or darker skin tone. When gender was considered in this study, men and women did not differ significantly with respect to self-perception and self-preference for skin color. In the current study, darker skinned individual's perceptions of and preferences for their dark skin color were significantly related to the skin color they felt was idealized by their family and opposite-gender peers. For lighter skinned individuals, perceptions of and preferences for their light skin were related only to skin colors that they felt were idealized by family members. These findings reveal the importance of family ideals, regardless of skin color, and further support the idea that the family plays a significant role in the internalization of beauty ideals or preferences of skin color. The current study sought a more in depth understanding about how the complexity skin color becomes internalized among African American women and the community, and the internal conflicts which may continue to exist.

**Hair.** The phenomenon and meanings behind issues with hair have become a rite of passage and a symbolic, revolutionary sense of identity among African American women. Hair texture and length have been shown to indicate various political and ideological aspects of an African American women's sense of self. In the early decades of the twentieth century, most African American women viewed hair straightening as a modern and attractive practice of female grooming (Creed, 2002. p. 15). Hair straightening became the cultural norm particularly among African American women. Black women spend time, energy, and money on the maintenance and upkeep in the styling of their hair. The maintenance and upkeep with Black hair reflects the texture and style of Caucasian hair, since long, smooth, flowing hair is seen as the

feminine ideal in the United States (Hall, 1995). Other research suggests that there are other reasons for styling and maintenance of hair for African American women.

Media and society have continued to portray an image for Black women to reach this ideal in order to be feminine and beautiful. Hair pressing with hot combs, "processing" hair with lye and other chemicals, and weaving extensions into the hair have become other ways in which Black women have attempted to emulate Caucasian hair. The terms "bad hair" and "good hair" define the styling ability, the feel of the hair, and its proximity to Caucasian hair (Russell et al., 1992, Hall, 1995 Byrd & Tharps, 2002). Throughout the years and due to historic connotations associated with the identity of African American hair, the internalization of "good" hair as determined by its resemblance to Caucasian hair, is valued more highly because of its similarity to textures of European Americans.

Prior to the 1960s, many African American people tried to emulate the White lifestyle since this brought images of acceptance, financial security, and power (Craig 2002, Hall 1995). However in the 1960s, Black people began to identify with the pride of African Americanism and were making political strides toward equality; this also was reflected in the hairstyles (Hall, 1995). During the 1960s and 1970s, the political statement of having a large "afro" or "natural" was a sign of radicalism or Black pride among the African American community. Afros were a way of showing American society that African hair was good hair grown by good people (Hall, 1995). Today, the practice of hairstyling trends continues to be a huge trademark and sense of identity within the African American community, particularly with African American women.

### **The Development of Body Size Ideals**

Throughout history, female body sizes have played a significant role of how women today perceive themselves (Keenan, 1999). In mainstream America women have been objectified



to portray an ideal body image based on a male supremacist society. Throughout the years, Black women have been excluded from or included in images that reinforced Eurocentric beauty ideals (Craig, 2002). The portrayal that the ultra thin body image of models and actresses have been on the rise in the media since the early 1900s, to the short-haired flapper, to Twiggy in the 1960s and now to the majority of today's fashion models (Martin, 2010). During the 1950s', there was a short departure of the ultra thin body image when Marilyn Monroe was featured as a beauty icon (Martin, 2010). Today, many successful ethnic minority celebrities appear more comfortable with their personal body image that does not meet the "ideal ultra thin" body physique (Martin, 2010). These women serve as excellent role models for size acceptance and by achieving a healthy weight (Martin, 2010).

Historically, weight has not appeared to be as salient a factor in the Black community as in the White community (Hall, 1995). In essence, there tends to be more tolerance and acceptance of excess weight, and Black women are less likely to equate thinness with beauty (Hall, 1995). Black women report greater comfort with and even idealization of fuller figures compared to White women, and still tend to consider themselves attractive even when they perceive themselves as overweight (Kelch-Oliver & Ancis, 2011; Franko & Striegel-Moore, 2002). p. 346). Several studies have found that the more African American women identify with their own cultural standards and resist the ideal thin body image from mainstream society, the less they are to succumb to disordered eating attitudes and or behaviors (Kelch-Oliver & Ancis, 2011, Hall, 1995, Keenan, 1999) On contrast, some research have indicated that as African American women move up in the socioeconomic ladder, they may become vulnerable to eating disorder pathology and body dissatisfaction (Kelch-Oliver & Ancis, Hall 1995, Abrams, et al 1993, Harris, 1993, Wifley, et. al 1995). Since research has indicated that the ideal body image for

Black women is that they prefer to have a curvier, heavier body frame, and statistically show to be more overweight, the outcomes then makes issues of obesity a health concern within the African American community.

### **Beauty Standards Defined by African American Women**

Previous studies suggest that African American women define idealized standards of beauty much differently than the dominant idealized perspective. Measures of beauty can be uniquely defined by African American women looking at characteristics of skin color, hair, facial features, and body size (Hall, 1995). Studies have shown that African American women largely aspire to a standard of beauty by keeping their own cultural standards (Dia 2003, Hall, 1995). Few studies have examined how African American women define their own standards of beauty within a contemporary western society. Boyd-Franklin (1991) reported that emotions of pain, anger, and confusion regarding skin color, hair, body image, and race were experienced by many Black women during their adolescence and continued into adulthood. It also was found that many African American women held secrets of self-hatred and shame about their bodies (Hall, 1995).

Other research suggests that many African Americans view light-skin tone as an idealized standard of beauty that leads to greater opportunities of upward mobility in America (Perkins, 1996). One such study by Falconer, Jameca, Woody and Neville (2000) explored cultural factors associated with the body image perception of 124 African American women attending a historically black college. These students completed the African self-consciousness scale, skin color satisfaction scale, and the body mass index. The results suggested that African American women are less satisfied with their skin color, and also were less satisfied with their overall appearance (Falconer, Jameca, Woody, Neville, 2000). Even fewer studies have been conducted

to establish a correlation between African American women's idealized beauty standards of hair and body weight satisfaction. As members of a hegemonic dominant society, Black women are often forced to judge themselves not only in accordance with Black cultural standards, but also to compare themselves to White standards of beauty (Spurgas, 2005; Parker et al., 1995). Two studies of Black women in middle school, high school, and college have suggested that Black women might have more positive body image than White women due to a broader and more flexible definition of beauty, which in turn is connected to positive body image (Parker et al. 1995; Wood-Barcalow et al. 2010).

### **Black Feminist Perspectives on Beauty**

Literature illustrates how African American women live in a bicultural society where cultural contexts are divided by barriers encrusted with racism, sexism, and classism (Edmonson, Bell, 1998). A black feminist perspective can be used to explain African Americans' resistance to social dominance in the U.S. Studies have shown that African-American women draw on the conceptualization of black feminism to cope with racial oppression. A study was conducted to illustrate the relationship between political ideology and self-esteem among African American college women from a historically black college. The findings of this study suggested that African American women who possess a political ideology have a healthy state of well-being. In other words, the results indicated that African American women who were politically conscious and were more accepting of Black Nationalism had higher perceptions of themselves in the U.S. than African American without strong political consciousness (Eaton, Livingston, & McAdo, 2010).

## **African American Women vs. Caucasian Women and Body Image**

Cultural differences in the definition of beauty among African American women have been attributed to their low prevalence of mental health problems as opposed to European American women. Abrams, Allen, and Grey, (1993) was the first study to examine differences in the nature of disordered eating behaviors for black and white college students. Their data revealed that white females demonstrated significantly greater disordered eating attitudes and behaviors than black females (Abrams, Allen, and Grey, 1993). This study is the first to provide evidence that restrictive eating disorders among black women are related to the degree to which they assimilate to mainstream culture (Abrams, Allen, and Grey 1993). Several findings suggest that the role of culture from various social contexts is explored indirectly through measuring how much a women has internalized various cultural norms (e.g. beauty ideal, femininity, and acculturation) and the impact of these internalized values become a risk for developing mental health problems, particularly eating disorders (Freedman, R. K., Carter, M. M., Sbrocco, T., & Gray, J. J. (2007). Findings in these studies were closely related to mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and low self esteem in both groups (Abrams, Allen, and Grey 1993).

The frequency of obesity is greater among black women than white women in the United States; however, black women report body-image dissatisfaction but are less driven to achieve thinness than white women (Abrams, Allen, and Grey, 1993 p.50). The etiology of anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa is, in part, attributable to the internalization of particular cultural values and standards concerning the importance of thinness and beauty as central in the formation of self-concept for females (Abrams, Allen, and Grey, 1993 pg 50,). A few researchers have suggested that as black females gain greater socioeconomic status and as they acculturate

into mainstream society, they will be more at risk for developing anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa.

Another study compared the prevalence of bulimia and the attitudes toward food and weight in a Black college population with the results obtained from a similar study of Caucasian college students (Gray & Ford, 1985). A 34-item questionnaire containing an operationalized version of the DSM-III criteria for bulimia (American Psychiatric Association, 1980) and demographic information was completed by 507 (341 women, 166 men) Black college students. Results showed there were significantly fewer Black women than Caucasian women who met the DSM III and bulimia nervosa criteria for bulimia. In addition, Black college women were found to be less likely to experience a sense of fear and discouragement concerning food and weight control than Caucasian women. The prevalence of bulimia was very low to nonexistent in both the Black and Caucasian mate samples. These findings were addressed to differentiate attitudes toward weight and beauty among the two ethnic groups.

### **Standards of Beauty from the Male Perspectives**

Acculturation to mainstream culture may impact ethnic differences in women's body image and beauty ideals, as well as men's perceptions of female beauty (Freedman, R. K., Carter, M. M., Sbrocco, T., & Gray, J. J. (2007). Several studies have identified body shape, or waist-to-hip ratio, as an important feature of female attractiveness for which Caucasian and African-American men may have different preferences. Research exploring differences between African-American and Caucasian male preferences for female body size has generally found African-American men to be more accepting of larger body sizes for women than Caucasian men. African-American women's awareness that African-American men may be more accepting of heavier body sizes (Freedman et al., 200) may contribute to the perception that there are few

incentives to lose weight and attend to eating disorder pathology (Freedman, R. K., Carter, M. M., Sbrocco, T., & Gray, J. J. (2007).

One particular study examined racial differences in men's preferences for African American and Caucasian women's body size and shape (Freedman, Carter and Gray, 2006). Findings in this study suggested that while preferences for waist-to-hip ratio may continue to be associated with cultural factors, African-American and Caucasian men may have become more similar than different in their preferences for female weight. Also, the results suggest that within the African-American sample, there were two subsamples with regard to waist to hip preferences, with one subgroup endorsing the same ideal waist to hip ratio as their Caucasian male counterparts. The results of this study did indicate that African American men prefer heavier women. If women are not protected from restricting types of eating disorders by men's preferences, then one might expect the rate of restrictive eating pathology to rise for African-American women. Some research has suggested that the rates of restrictive types of eating disorders in African-American women are increasing to the prevalence rates of Caucasian women (O'Neill, 2003); while other research suggests that the differential rates persist (Striegel-Moore et al., 2003). Although the findings from this study extend the existing research on men's preferences for female body size and shape, it should be noted that weight and body shape may not be the most important features to men when considering the attractiveness of a potential mate. Inner beauty characteristics such as personality and overall appearance may be more important traits men tend to value in women.

### **Self Esteem Measurements**

Many studies used qualitative methods to examine and explore factors that influence college-aged women's perceptions of their bodies (Spurgas, 2004). The results indicated that

women of all races and ethnicities are held to similar standards of beauty and few studies have been done to examine self-esteem and body image conceptualization specifically in women of color (Spurgas, 2004). One particular study argued that measurements conducted on self-esteem have not been accurately tested for validity and issues of racism and sexism may not be considered when measuring self-esteem in African American women (Hall, 1995). The samples used in this study were the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, The Tennessee Self-Concept Scale, and The Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory. Data analyzed in this study suggested a need for research that conceptualizes culturally relevant definitions of self-esteem for African American women (Hall, 1995, p. 230). These Self-Esteem measuring instruments are utilized throughout many studies addressing issues of body image.

Upon reading the literature, the current researcher identified the need to conduct a study that explores how African American women are impacted as they internalize female standards of beauty in contemporary America. African American college students at a Historically Black College and University served as the study population.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **Methodology**

#### **Formulation**

This study examined the psychological and emotional effects of contemporary western society's standards of beauty on college-age African American women. The research questions that guided this study were, do contemporary American (western) standards of beauty:

- 1.) affect college-age African American women
- 2.) affect the psychological and emotional states of college-age African American women
- 3.) portrayed by visual media, affect the self-esteem and self-worth of college-age African American women

More specifically, this study examined how beauty, as defined by contemporary America and African American women, impacts the psychological and emotional states of college-age African American women. Qualitative methods using life history interviews and Body Image Rating Scales were used to collect data for this research study.

Participants for this study consisted of English speaking, college-age women who identified as Black or African American between the ages of 18 to 25 years at a Historically Black all-female college in the Southeastern United States. The researcher recruited English speaking African American women who reflected a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. The sample of the participants consisted of eighteen members from the student peer education group called S.H.A.P. E (Student Health Associates and Peer Educators). Methods of recruitment for this study employed purposive nonprobability sampling. Once this study met all requirements for IRB approval, the researcher obtained permission from the advisor of S.H.A.P.E. to discuss the



details of the research study for focus group formulation. Once the researcher received approval from the advisor, an arrangement to meet during one of the group's regular scheduled meetings to conduct the focus group was confirmed. Potential attendees were notified of the date and nature of the focus group in the weeks beforehand through verbal communication from the advisor and president of the organization.

### **Data Collection**

The primary sample population for this study consisted of eighteen participants taking part in a focus group lasting for an hour with the current researcher. After all approvals were obtained and the meeting times and locations were confirmed, at the scheduled meeting, the researcher began screening for eligibility. Each member who met the requirements for the study and agreed to participate was given a letter of consent to review and sign. A list of mental health referrals was also provided to each participant at the start of the focus group. Each participant completed a demographic information questionnaire and was provided four silhouettes to review and rate based on their desirability. After all the participants completed rating each silhouette, the researcher utilized a questionnaire protocol of unstructured, open-ended questions to explore the participant's perceptions of contemporary American (western) beauty standards and how such standards have impacted their lives. The researcher asked probing questions to gather further information from the respondents as needed, or to seek clarity on information provided. During the focus group, the researcher took notes and used a tape recorder to record verbatim responses from participants. Data from the study was collected by audio tape and transcribed into written form to capture the full richness and meaning of personal life histories, and to note non-verbal communication from participants. The researcher analyzed the study's qualitative data by using open coding.

## **Data Analysis**

After the focus group was complete, the researcher used pseudonym names to identify the data. Prior to the initiation of the discussion, participants were asked to keep information shared in the focus group strictly confidential. In addition, the researcher informed participants that a research advisor will have access to the data after identifying information is removed. The researcher used precautionary measures to prevent unauthorized access to data or release of information by coding the identity of each participant and storing all audiotape materials and notes in a secure safe whereby the key is only accessible by this researcher. Any electronic data also was protected in password-protected files, with backup discs also maintained in a safe. Data and tapes are kept secure for three years as required by Federal regulations and after that time, they will be destroyed or continue to be kept secured as long as the researcher needs them.

## **Risks and Benefits of Participation**

The potential risks of participation were explained to each participant before they agreed to participate. Participants were informed that participation in the study was voluntary and that they could refuse to answer any question during the focus group, however, due to interactions and the data collected, the researcher could not withdraw or omit any information provided during the interview

## CHAPTER IV

### Findings

This chapter presents participant responses to the three research questions that examine how beauty, as defined by contemporary America and African American women, impacts the psychological and emotional states of college-age African American women from a private, all-female Historically Black College in the Southeastern United States. How these women defined beauty captures the perceptions and stereotypes about African American women through the media, family and relationships; the sense that these women have made of those messages; and how they have integrated these messages into their own sense of well-being and self-worth.

#### *Demographics*

Of the 18 participants in this study, 88% (n=18) self-identified as Black/African American and 6% (n=1) identified as Black/Hispanic and 6% (n=1) identified as Black/Native American. Half of the participants identified as sophomores (50%, n=9); 28% (n=5) were juniors; 17% (n=3) were freshmen; and only one senior participated in the study.

The majority of the participants self-identified as upper middle class (61%, n=11); 33% (n=6) were middle class; and 6% (n=1) was working class. Age groups were somewhat evenly distributed with 28% (n=5) 19 year-olds, 28% (n=5) 21 year-olds, 33% (n=6) 20 year-olds and two 18 year-olds. Participants were also from various regions of the country: (n= 10) Southeast region, (n= 4) Midwest region, (n= 1) West region, (n= 2) Northeast region, (n=1) Southwest region. In addition, participants also reported majoring in the arts and sciences at the college: (n= 6) Biology majors, (n= 1) Economics major, (n= 1) Sociology major, (n= 5) Psychology

majors, (n= 1) Political Science major, (n= 1) Chemistry major, (n= 1) International Studies major, (n= 1) Drama major, (n=1) Women's Studies major.

#### Research Questions:

1. How do contemporary American (western) standards of beauty affect college-age African American women?

Findings from this study suggest that contemporary American standards of beauty challenge African American college students and create a level of sensitivity about their own beauty. All participants reported that they were keenly aware of American standards of beauty and some participants stated that they deflect and or modify these standards in order to feel attractive or to attain their own defined self-beauty. Findings suggests that contemporary standards of beauty caused the college students in this study to frequently minimize, enhance, correct and or draw attention to or away from their body areas that are not supported by contemporary standards. Also some students spoke of body types as an explanation for body structure, and thereby justifying distinctions in size and beauty. Take for example, the excerpt from Participant A below who spoke of body size.

“...when I look at different styles or what the summer style is [or] the spring style...if I like the shirt, or if I like a pair of pants, I'm looking at the big image....in my mind, I'm kind of like – it's just like – I don't know, you just think about it. That's how I think, like I – I can't get any bigger or I won't be able to fit that to – in that dress, or it won't look the same if I was a size 20 or--...”

Or Participant B who suggests that beauty standards significantly influence her behavior and attitude about self:

“.....I’m looking in particular for... like perfection in fixing things, like I had like acne in middle school, but like I went to a dermatologist. I still go, like just the fact that I want my skin to be beautiful, like I had braces. I want them again because I feel like the bottom [teeth] are getting crooked, like the slightest little things like tick me off....but I just want everything to be perfect, you know, like my hair ...my eyebrows, and if my hair and my nails aren’t done... oh...I’m not going anywhere.”

Several other participants spoke of the need for a complete package “from top to bottom”, the “need to keep boobs and an excellent body”, or to know that “everybody is beautiful in their own way, no matter...you know whatever someone may think, there is always some beauty in every person...” and that “individuals must hold onto their own feelings of beauty no matter what society says...”

One participant had not yet come to grips with her own feelings of beauty and others’ standards of beauty as evidenced in the following excerpt.

“...I feel like it’s one thing being comfortable with yourself and another thing to think that you’re like beautiful or something. But I just feel like with me, it’s...um...I know I’m being real with myself...I know I haven’t really found

myself – you know what I mean, I feel like I’m just in this stage where like, yeah...I’m understanding more about – you know I came here.... I’m learning more about myself, being comfortable....so I don’t think I’m ugly or anything, ...but ...there’s a lot of things that I just don’t like...you know what I mean.”

From an observational standpoint, the researcher during her focus group noted several behaviors that relate to perceptions of beauty among the participants. These behaviors included straightened hair, weaves, manicured nails, added eyelashes, jewelry, tailored physic and abs, and numerous high-end bags, shoes, clothing and pens. These observations are descriptive of how the participants in this study defined physical beauty, as transcribed below.

P: “The exterior...”

P: “From the top of your head to the bottom of your feet.”

P: “Your hair, your body...your clothes”

P: “Nice, put together hair”

P: “Healthy looking skin”

P: “Nice smile”

P: “Aesthetic physic”

P: “Confidence”

2. How do contemporary American (western) standards of beauty affect the psychological and emotional states of college-age African American women?

The majority of the women in this study reported conforming to or balancing multiple beauty standards simultaneously. Although the participants reported being clearly attuned to contemporary American standards of beauty, their own interpretations of beauty were based upon cultural values, family, and society's expectations of beauty. These variables were clearly demonstrated in their dialogue about body image, self-esteem, self-acceptance, and approval. One participant spoke of her experience with a ballet instructor.

“...I remember like being at the bar and my teacher getting like, tuck your butt under, and I was just like, it is... but it won't – it won't do anything else.

Um...but I think that as I got older...you know...I was still trying just like, okay, I want to be smart, I want to look like these white girls....”

Another participant spoke of the impact of her grandmother's influence upon her self-esteem, which she now feels was directly related to contemporary standards of beauty. She reported the following.

“Gramma just kind of always picked out the things that were wrong with me, so I would think the thing that she was saying was...you know...basically the – I don't know how to explain it. So she would say like...you know... like go change that, you don't need to wear that, or something, though I looked perfectly fine or something, that's where I kind of got my --- like it kind of just messed

with my head, kind of like, uh, obviously I'm not what she wants me to look like, or to be, so I need to be what she's saying...you know....”

Another participant shared experiences from her mother and how this impacts her. She spoke of her feelings of self-consciousness and chimed in after the above participant spoke.

“I would have to agree with that, like, um...with my mom...she's very straightforward, so being that like I'm small, but like ....I eat a lot, so she would make comments, like okay...keep going...you'll be big as a house. .... And then like if I gain a little bit of weight, she's like, ooh...see...see..., and it's like okay, like come on, she's like okay. You know that we kind of gain weight in the stomach area and like [you're] going to [need to] be doing some crunches....”

The preceding participant again jumped in with the following comment.

“...I don't look so completely different from my siblings, but like we do look a little different, I am kind of like the odd one out. And [Mom] would always like do things where like she would ask them about their day, like how they were doing, but she would kind of just like ignore me or whatever. So I think that, um, when she would do that, when I was really young, like I, it would make me think that there was something wrong with me or she would comment about, you know, maybe like my little sister's dress or like how my little sister wore her hair, even



though we looked alike...you know...we have the same thing on and wore our hair the same way... it was like she saw her prettier...”

Weight was a concern for many of the participants as they saw “thin”, “small”, and “healthy” as priorities for them and their body image as demonstrated by the following excerpts.

P1: “I used to be athletic ...And so it’s just when you see yourself at your best, it’s hard to accept anything else...um...like I need to get back to that weight.”

P2: “I really like understand what you said, it’s hard to accept anything other than like your best. Like I’ll still look through my phone, like pictures from when I was like doing cross-country and training and all that, and it’s like...yeah...and so I’ve definitely gained weight, like experiencing all the food being eaten in other countries...”

These responses may in some way suggest that when these African American college women’s bodies began to change so did their image and feelings about self. While on one level they can accept the change, on another level they reminisce and feel sorrow about the weight gain. It then begs the question of how this image is tied to sense of self, self-acceptance and emotional well-being. They accept themselves but inwardly question how they measure up to others, their own perceptions of beauty, and their self-esteem. They appear to be inwardly struggling to find a balance. Their acceptance of self appears to be

rooted in society's perceptions of beauty, and is molded through family, the media and relationships. Research question 3 below further addresses this issue.

3. How do standards of beauty as portrayed by visual media affect the self-esteem and self-worth of college-age African American women?

The media is a common source from which women gather information about beauty, styles and social acceptability. Therefore it is common for them to use this medium as a sense of comparison, how they will evaluate themselves and how they make meaning of this information. The majority of women in the current study were able to separate the stereotypes about standards of beauty from their own image of self. They were able to articulate their own levels of confidence and satisfaction/dissatisfaction with their body image and perceptions of beauty. However the core or foundation of their sense of beauty was clearly embedded in the media, family and relationships. It appears to be these constructs that many women in this study used to define their own beauty and self-worth. How they have made sense of these messages and how they respond to the myriad of perceptions and stereotypes that surround them is articulated in the following exchange among the participants.

P1: "...the home structure is the first...media is the second one [influence about perceptions of beauty] ... a lot girls...um...also worry about what guys – what attracts guys – and I feel like what attracts a lot of guys is what they [men] see in the media, so they want to kind of, you know, imitate that same look, not – maybe not because – I don't know – I don't

feel like they're so direct, like, oh, watch TV, I want [you] to look like her. But if the guy ... has that preference, they're [women] going to try to, you know, conform to that."

P2: "Um...I think personally a lot of my constructs [perceptions of beauty] – a lot of my constructs also come from my family. Um, and however I guess it's a little subconscious, like I have – you know like media and everything that is seen – that is being accepted today ... um... in place – yeah, just kind of like with media and...um...like having a personal conversation with friends, like those things are also influence the way I feel about just me in general."

P3: "...I think that happens when you're young and you watch Disney princesses... they all kind of have the same body shape, long hair, that kind of thing. So...um...it happens when you're young, in media but you also pick it [perceptions of beauty] up through your family, maybe through friends, ... discuss with your friends and then, again, like when you're older and you're watching...uh...it seems like movies and media...it's also, uh, there as well."

P4: "...I feel like now the media is kind of trying to steer away from the stereotypical ...like white girls, long hair, pretty eyes thing, and start to show that African-Americans are beautiful, too, and like other races. I was watching, uh, Toddlers and Tiaras and I know, one of the little girls was like, I want to be tan like Beyonce, and she was a little white girl!

...Like everyone thinks Beyonce is gorgeous, but some people don't think she's pretty or like her body type."

P5: "...Um, but I think that as I got older, you know, I was still trying just like, okay, I want to be smart...I want to look like these white girls, but then like when Jennifer Lopez and Beyonce like came onto the picture and they had these healthy, curvy physiques and it was just like, okay, like I got a little something going on..... like the media has like a big, um, influence on me, but I also feel at the age of like 22, like it's definitely transformed from when I was like six or seven, what I thought beauty was."

P6: "I believe that, um, Americans' size is basically thin, it's always going to be thin, even though we see people are with the curvy bodies, big butts, and big boobs ... I feel like the thin styles are always going to be there."

P7: "...the media has a great deal of influence on people and how they want to be perceived by others."

P8: "...Um...I would say that just to be completely honest, that for me personally the media does influence me.

P9: "I feel that the media and all that influences our generation's idea of beauty 100%, because it's in our face every day, it basically is how you kind of govern your life because you can see what's popular...let's say on TV, somebody is going to find something they like appealing..."

This discussion on the influence of the media reveals several facts about the participants' perceptions of how the media affects standards of beauty and impinges upon their self-esteem and self-worth. While these participants did not fully accept contemporary standards of beauty as portrayed in the media, they did not reject them either. Rather they continue to use the media as a gauge of how they want to project themselves and on what is attractive. Regardless of the various levels of confidence presented by the women in this study, none of them were completely satisfied with their body and attributed cultural, body type and eating habits to accept their body size. It can be deduced that beauty, as defined by contemporary America and through the media, does impact the psychological and emotional states of the participants in this study in various ways, some more negatively than others. Although the women who participated in this research voiced their opinions about beauty and their bodies in different ways, how they defined beauty in relation to themselves overlapped. Many stated that they had learned to "love themselves as they are", that "beauty is in the eye of the beholder", that "beauty is more than physical", and that "beauty is how you feel on any given day". All participants agreed that everyone has some feature about themselves that makes them attractive.

### **Body Image Rating Scales**

The Body Image Rating Scales used psychometric dimensions to depict the perceptual body image of the African American women in this study. Participants responded to four figures that represented thin (small body frame with proportioned upper and lower body); robust (heavy body frame with disproportional upper and lower body); hourglass (well

proportioned upper and lower body); and pear (larger lower body and smaller upper body) and rated these figures as most desirable, desirable, neutral and least desirable.

Sixty-seven percent (n=6) of the respondents in this study chose robust as the least desirable body shape; and the hourglass shape was ranked most desirable (56%, n=7). Thirty-nine percent (n=7) of the respondents also rated the hourglass shape as desirable. Forty-four percent (n=8) rated thin as desirable. What this appears to project is that respondents in this study view the hourglass and thin shape as the most desirable and desirable, respectively.

Constantly the robust, or heavier shaped body, was the least preferred among all participants in this study. See Table 1 below for percentage breakdown.

	Most Desirable	Percentage	Desirable	%	Neutral	%	Least Desirable	%
Thin	3	17%	8	44%	3	17%	4	22%
Robust					6	33%	6	67%
Hourglass	10	56%	7	39%	1	5%	1	
Pear	2	11%	6	33%	5	28%	5	28%

## **CHAPTER V**

### **Discussion**

Findings from this exploratory study attempted to define and outline salient psychological and emotional distress produced from body image distortions. Many studies on perception of beauty have explored body image perception from a middle class Caucasian perspective; and as a result, body image conceptualization from the perspective of African American women has gone unnoticed. Hence, this study captured the personal experiences idealized beauty standards have on college-age African American women. The literature review suggested that African American women may define self-perception and beauty differently from mainstream definitions. Some literature suggested that African American women define female beauty standards based on historical and current issues regarding colorism, hair, facial features and body size (Coard, et, al 2001; Grier & Cobbs, 1968; Gwaltney, 1980, Hall, 1995) A careful review of the literature led the current researcher to conduct a study to capture the personal narratives of college-age African American women in order to explore how they are impacted by idealized standards of beauty in America.

Several studies have indicated that Black or African American women have a higher self-esteem, body image, and overall body satisfaction as opposed to Caucasian women (Jefferson & Stake, 2009). There is limited research that examines the psychological and emotional impact idealized beauty standards have on African American women. Findings in this present study suggest that college-age African American women continue to be challenged by contemporary American standards of beauty in various ways. Based upon this study's findings, it appeared that

these college-age young women, at times, struggled to find a balance between external messages and current interpersonal influences regarding issues of beauty and body image.

The current study's findings also are consistent with those studies that suggest that college-age African American women define idealized beauty standards through certain behaviors and physical characteristics consisting of straightened hair, manicured nails, healthy skin, body size structure, and fashion trends (Freedman, R.K., Carter, M. M., Sbrocco, T., & Gray, J.J. (2007). This was especially evident as the participants spoke of their hair, nails, type of clothing and how they presented themselves before leaving their rooms. Some of the participants suggested that internal beauty characteristics consisted of having confidence and self acceptance and that everyone possesses a form a beauty within themselves. While these findings are supported by other researchers, it almost appears that this explanation is often used by women when they do not see their external beauty recognized by others. Another common observation among the participants in this study was their reporting of heritage and culture also influencing their body frames, and that African American men preferred 'heavier bodies' over thin body frames.

The results of the body scale ratings supported findings from the focus group. None of the participants in this study found the hourglass to be undesirable, which also is consistent with contemporary standards of beauty. Also noteworthy was that the robust shape was the least preferred body shape of the four selections among the participants, even among the oversized participants. Secondary to the hourglass was the 'thin' body shape, which also was seen as favorable or desirable. It is these images that dominate the media in news and in print and by which women consistently compare themselves. Of particular significance was how the media, family, relationships and society have greatly influenced and impacted the self-perception ideals



about beauty and body image conceptualization among college-age African American women and how they looked to their mothers (primary) and father (secondary) for emotional support and modeling. Grandmother's influence upon the participants was equally important to their self-image and self-esteem.

Contrary to the literature that suggests African American women resist contemporary standards of beauty due to sociocultural influences, such literature does not support the findings that Black or African American women are fully protected from body image issues. Many of the young women in this study reported conforming to or balancing multiple beauty standards simultaneously and discussed this impact in various ways. Although participants reported being aware of contemporary American standards of beauty, their own interpretations of beauty were based upon cultural values, family influence, media, and society's expectations. These findings support studies that revealed family, media, and society's idealized beauty standards have an influence in women's overall self-esteem and body image (Kluck 2010, Spurgas, 2005, Davies, 2011, Hawthorne Hoepfner, Jefferson, and Stake, 2009, Perkins, 1996). Although these findings revealed the challenges faced by college-age African American women as they conceptualize standards of beauty and its impact on their self-worth and self-esteem, no results were reported on participants' experiences with eating disorders that sometimes are attributed to may be resulted from body image concerns.

As the participants defined and outlined their own interpretations of beauty, issues of skin color was not a salient topic discussed throughout the focus group as previous research reveals from their definitions of colorism and beauty standards within the African American community. Body size was a common theme discussed throughout the study suggesting that a heavier, curvier body physique was becoming socially accepted among the participants. Specific

reference was made to Jennifer Lopez and Beyoncé who have heavier, curvier physiques as becoming more and more acceptable and seen as ‘sexy’, ‘attractive’, and ‘beautiful’.

Participants expressed greater comfort with various shapes and sizes based on what they perceived as different standards of beauty within the African American culture. However, the results of the body shape rating scale showed contradicting reports and relished findings that showed the hourglass or thinner body frames to be the most desirable body physique, while the robust shape was the least desirable body size selected.

#### *Strengths of the Study*

One of the major strengths of this study was the range of diversity among participants. This study represented a diverse range of college-age African American women from various regions of the country, socioeconomic family backgrounds, and different age groups. Participants were able to add to the existing research on standards of beauty from an African American perspective by sharing their personal thoughts and feelings on perceptions of beauty. Information for clinicians who work with Black or African American students on issues of self-esteem, confidence, and beauty also was gleaned from this study. This discussion will allow clinicians to better understand the challenges young college-age women encounter with body image issues and how they deal with these dilemmas.

#### *Limitations of Study*

African American women are a traditionally underserved and understudied population. Therefore, despite the inequitable mental health of this population, research studies over the past decade involving groups of African American women continues to be limited and evaluating self-esteem are scarce. (Hatcher, 2007). Findings from this data represent only the participants in this study and is not generalizable to all African American women. One of the main limitations

of the study was the fact that all participants were undergraduate students matriculating at an elite historically black college. This population only represents a small portion of African American women and how they perceive perceptions of idealized beauty standards can vary vastly from other African American women in a westernized society. Many other voices of Black or African American women were omitted from the study. An additional limitation was the timeframe in which the research project had to be completed. The amount of time needed to obtain Human Subjects Review, to the scheduled meeting time of the focus group, and the confines of the semester system were limitations on the study. Lastly, the structure of the focus group versus individual interviews may in some way have influenced participant responses. Some participants may have felt more comfortable in a one-on-one setting while others may have felt a sense of support from the group setting.

## References

- Abrams, K. K., Allen, L., & Gray, J. J. (1993). Disordered eating attitudes and behaviors, psychological adjustment, and ethnic identity: A comparison of Black and White female college students. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 14(1), 49-57.  
doi:10.1002/1098-108X(199307)14:1<49::AID-EAT2260140107>3.0.CO;2-Z
- Bailey, E. J. (2008). *Black America, body beautiful: How the African American image is changing fashion, fitness, and other industries*. Westport, CT US: Praeger Publishers/Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Blackwell, D. (2010). Sidelines and separate spaces: Making education anti-racist for students of color. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 13(4), 473-494.  
doi:10.1080/13613324.2010.492135
- Bond, S., & Cash, T. (1992). Black beauty: Skin color and body image among African American college women. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*. pp. 874– 888.
- Boyd-Franklin, N. (1991). Recurrent themes in the treatment of African American women in group psychotherapy. *Women and Therapy*, 11, 25– 40+.
- Byrd, D. Ayana & Lori Tharps (2001) *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black America*: Library of Congress: Library of Congress Cataloging
- Capodilupo, C. M. (2010). The effects of idealized media images on the body esteem and appearance satisfaction of African American women. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 70, Retrieved from EBSCOhost..
- Coard, S., Breland, A. M., & Raskin, P. (2001). Perceptions of and preferences for skin color, Black racial identity, and self-esteem among African Americans. *Journal Of Applied Social Psychology*, 31(11), 2256-2274. doi:10.1111/j.1559-1816.2001.tb00174.x

- Craig, L. M. (2002) *Ain't I a Beauty Queen*: New York, New York: Oxford University Press
- The courage to hear: African American women's memories of racial trauma. Daniel, Jessica Henderson Jackson, Leslie C. (Ed); Greene, Beverly (Ed), (2000). *Psychotherapy with African American women: Innovations in psychodynamic perspective and practice.*, (pp. 126-144). New York, NY, US: Guilford Press, xxii, 298 pp.
- Davies, D. (2011). *Child Development: A Practitioner's Guide*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Davis, D. S., Sbrocco, T., Odoms-Young, A., & Smith, D. M. (2010). Attractiveness in African American and Caucasian women: Is beauty in the eyes of the observer? *Eating Behaviors*, 11(1), 25-32. doi:10.1016/j.eatbeh.2009.08.004
- Eaton, S. C., Livingston, J. N., & McAdoo, H. (2010). Cultivating consciousness among Black women: Black nationalism and self-esteem revisited. *Journal of Black Studies*, 40(5), 812-822. doi:10.1177/0021934708320012
- Edmondson Bell, E. J., & Nkomo, S. M. (1998). Armoring: Learning to withstand racial oppression. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 29(2), 285-295. Retrieved from EBSCOhost.
- Engeln-Maddox, R. (2006). Buying a beauty standard or dreaming of a new life? Expectations associated with media ideals. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 30(3), 258-266. doi:10.1111/j.1471-6402.2006.00294.x
- Falconer, J., & Neville, H. A. (2000). African American college women's body image: An examination of body mass, African self-consciousness, and skin color satisfaction. *Psychology Of Women Quarterly*, 24(3), 236-243. doi:10.1111/j.1471-6402.2000.tb00205.x

- Freedman, R. K., Carter, M. M., Sbrocco, T., & Gray, J. J. (2007). Do men hold African-American and Caucasian women to different standards of beauty? *Eating Behaviors*, 8(3), 319-333. doi:10.1016/j.eatbeh.2006.11.008
- Frisby, C. M. (2004). Does Race Matter? Effects of Idealized Images on African American Women's Perceptions of Body Esteem. *Journal of Black Studies*, 34(3), 323-347. doi:10.1177/0021934703258989
- Gray, J., Ford, K., & Kelly, L. (1987). The prevalence of bulimia in a Black college population. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 6, 733– 740
- Grimes, D. L. (1997, October). Toward understanding attractiveness ideals among African-Americans: The role of racial socialization, racial identity, and the impact on self-esteem. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 58, Retrieved from EBSCOhost..
- Hall, C. (1995). Beauty is in the soul of the beholder: Psychological implications of beauty and African American women. *Cultural Diversity and Mental Health*, 1(2), 125-137. doi:10.1037/1099-9809.1.2.125
- Harris, S. M. (1995). Family, self, and sociocultural contributions to body-image attitudes of African-American women. *Psychology Of Women Quarterly*, 19(1), 129-145. doi:10.1111/j.1471-6402.1995.tb00282.x
- Haworth-Hoepfner, S. (2000). The critical shapes of body image: The role of culture and family in the production of eating disorders. *Journal of Marriage & Family*, 62(1), 212.
- Keith, V., & Herring, C. (1991). Skin tone and stratification in the Black community. *American Journal of Sociology*, 97, 760– 778.

- Kelch-Oliver, K., & Ancis, J. R. (2011). Black women's body image: An analysis of culture-specific influences. *Women & Therapy*, 34(4), 345-358.  
doi:10.1080/02703149.2011.592065
- Kluck, A. S. (2010). Family influence on disordered eating: The role of body image dissatisfaction. *Body Image*, 7(1), 8-14. doi:10.1016/j.bodyim.2009.09.009
- Jackson, L. & Greene, B. The courage to heal: African American women's memories of racial trauma. (pp 126-144) *Psychotherapy with African American women: Innovations in psychodynamic perspectives and practice*. NY: The Guilford Press.
- Jefferson, D. L., & Stake, J. E. (2009). Appearance self-attitudes of African American and European American women: Media comparisons and internalization of beauty ideals. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 33(4), 396-409. doi:10.1111/j.1471-6402.2009.01517.x
- Martin, Jeanne (2010) The Development of Ideal Body Image Perceptions in the United States. *Nutrition Today*. 45(3):98-110,. doi: 10.1097/NT.0b013e3181dec6a2
- Neal, A. M., & Wilson, M. L. (1989). The role of skin color and features in the Black community: Implications for Black women and therapy. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 9(3), 323-333. doi:10.1016/0272-7358(89)90060-3
- Perkins, K. R. (1996). The influence of television images on black females' self perceptions of physical attractiveness. *Journal of Black Psychology*, 22(4), 453-469.  
doi:10.1177/00957984960224004
- Russell, K., Wilson, M., & Hall, R. ( 1992). *The color complex*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

- Sekayi, D. (2003). Aesthetic Resistance to Commercial Influences: The Impact of the Eurocentric Beauty Standard on Black College Women. *Journal of Negro Education*, 72(4), 467-477. doi:10.2307/3211197
- Spurgas, A. (2005). Body Image and Cultural Background. *Sociological Inquiry*, 75(3), 297-316. doi:10.1111/j.1475-682X.2005.00124.



Appendix A

Human Subjects Review Approval Letter



---

**School for Social Work**  
Smith College  
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063  
T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

February 16, 2012

Tiffany Pascal

Dear Tiffany,

Your project is approved, nice job on the revisions!

*Please note the following requirements:*

**Consent Forms:** All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

**Maintaining Data:** You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

*In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:*

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

**Renewal:** You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

**Completion:** You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Thanks for the great work and good luck on this project.

Sincerely,

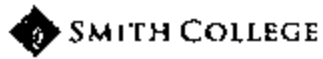
A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'David L. Burton' with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

David L. Burton, M.S.W., Ph.D.  
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Narviar Barker, Research Advisor

## Appendix B

### Human Subjects Review Amendment Approval Letter



School for Social Work  
Smith College  
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063  
T: (413) 595-7050 F: (413) 595-7334

March 19, 2012

Tiffany Pascei  
350 Spelman Lane, S.W.  
Atlanta, Georgia 30314

Dear Tiffany,

I have reviewed your edits to your Human Subjects Review Application and I accept your amendments. Thank you for keeping us informed and good luck.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "David L. Burton". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above a horizontal line.

David L. Burton, M.S.W., Ph.D.  
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Narviar Barker, Research Advisor

## Appendix C

### Spelman College Institutional Review Board Approval Letter



Spelman College

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

PHONE: 404-270-5706

FAX: 404-270-5762

#### IRB NOTIFICATION OF PROTOCOL APPROVAL

PI: Tiffany Paschal  
TITLE: *The Essence of Beauty: Examining the Impact of Idealized Beauty Standards on College-Aged African American Women*  
DATE: April 13, 2012  
Review Type: Expedited Review  
IRB Protocol #: 548568  
This approval is valid from 4/10/2012 until 4/09/2013

Your research proposal referenced above and the associated informed consent process was reviewed and APPROVED by the Institutional Review Board.

Your approval period is noted above. Thereafter, continued approval is contingent upon the submission of a renewal form that must be reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board prior to the anniversary or expiration date of this study. Any serious reactions resulting from this study should be reported immediately to the Committee, to the Departmental Chairperson, and to any sponsoring agency or company. Approval is granted based upon your agreement to abide by the policies and procedures of Spelman College with regard to use of human subjects in research and to keep appropriate records concerning your subjects.

Failure to receive a notification that it is time to renew does not relieve you of your responsibility to provide the IRB with a "Request for Renewal" in time for the request to be processed and approved before your expiration date.

Please note that this protocol has been assigned the above referenced IRB protocol number. All inquires and correspondence concerning this protocol must include: 1) The IRB Protocol number, 2) Name of the Principal Investigator, and 3) Full Title of Study.

If you have any questions or concerns or do not agree to the terms of the approval letter, please contact Bruce Wade ([bwade@spelman.edu](mailto:bwade@spelman.edu)) IRB co-chair, at 404-270-5629, or Karen Brakke ([kbrakke@spelman.edu](mailto:kbrakke@spelman.edu)) IRB co-chair, at 404-270-5633 or go to the Spelman College website to review IRB guidelines and procedures.

Sincerely,

Bruce H. Wade, Ph.D., Co-Chair  
Spelman College Institutional Review Board

Attention Students!!!  
**The *Essence* of Beauty is in  
the Eye of the Beholder**

*What are idealized standards of beauty and how do such standards impact you???*

Allow your voice to be heard by participating in a confidential research study that is designed to explore college-age African American women's perception of the impact of idealized beauty standards

**Criteria for participation include:**

- You must be matriculating as a current Spelman student
- You must be between the ages of 18-25
- You must self-identify as an English speaking, Black or African American woman
- You must agree to participate in an interview lasting no more than an hour at a mutually agreeable time and location.

If you meet the above criteria and are interested in participating in this research, please contact (personal information deleted by Laura H. Wyman, 11/30/12). Your voluntary participation in this research will give voice to African American women's perception of beauty, and may contribute to newer perceptions and standards for beauty in our society.

Sincerely,

Tiffany Paschal, Graduate Intern at Spelman College  
Smith College School for Social Work

Appendix E

Screening Questions

**Screening Questions**

- |   | <b>YES</b>               | <b>NO</b>                |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Do you self-identify as a Black or African American woman?                   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. Are you currently an undergraduate student in attendance at Spelman College? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. Are you between the ages of 18 to 25 years of age?                           | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

## Appendix F

### Informed Consent Form

#### **Focus Group Informed Consent Form**

Dear Participant,

I am a graduate student at Smith College School for Social Work conducting a research study to explore the psychological and emotional effects of contemporary western society's standards of beauty on college-age African American women. Many studies on standards of beauty have been conducted to explore body image perception from a middle class Caucasian perspective, but there is limited research on African American women's perception of standards of beauty. The proposed study is designed to capture the personal experiences and voices of college-age African American women on idealized beauty standards. This research will be used for a completion of a Master of Social Work thesis at Smith School for Social Work and for possible presentation and or publication. You are being asked to participate in this study because you may meet the criteria for selection and may have some important information to contribute to this study.

In order to participate in this study you must self identify as an English speaking, Black or African American woman between the ages of 18 to 25. In addition, you must be currently matriculating as an undergraduate student at Spelman College. Exclusion criteria is women above or below the required age of 18-25, who do not identify as Black or African American, and are not matriculating as an undergraduate student at Spelman College.

Participation in this study involves partaking in a focus group which will last for approximately one hour, or less. During the focus group, you will be asked general questions about your demographic background, followed by a mixture of unstructured, open-ended questions that explore your perception of beauty standards and how beauty standards have impacted you throughout your life. You will also be given four different body size silhouettes where you will be instructed by the researcher to rate each body shape according to your desirability.

Throughout this study, I may take notes to record your responses; and with your permission, the interaction will be tape recorded. There are minimum risks to participation in this study.

However, some questions may evoke increased feelings or sensitivity in various aspects of your life that may have been impacted by society's standards of beauty. A list of local mental health resources will be provided to you before the start of the focus group, should you wish to speak with someone afterwards. Although there will likely be no direct benefit to you for participating in this study some of the benefits include your contributions to existing research on standards of beauty from an African American perspective; sharing and releasing your personal feelings on perceptions of beauty; and providing insight for clinicians who work with African American students on issues of beauty, self esteem and confidence.

Due to your participation in a focus group, other participants will be able to hear your answers to the questions. As a participant, you will be able to respond to other participants' answers to questions and they will be able to respond to yours. Since participation requires interaction with other participants, complete anonymity or confidentiality will not be guaranteed. By agreeing to participate in this study, I request that you consent to keeping the information shared by other

participants and their identity strictly confidential. As outlined by the social work code of ethics, I will keep all identifying information confidential. Your name and any other identifying information will be removed from all tapes and transcriptions and a code name will be used in place of data collected from this study. When I prepare for presentations or publications, I will disguise any identifying information. Data and tapes will be kept secure in a locked safe for three years as required by Federal regulations; and after that time, they will be destroyed. If I should need data after three years I will keep data secure and will destroy them when I no longer need them.

Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time or to discontinue with the focus group. However, due to interactions and the data collected, I cannot withdraw or omit any information provided during the focus group. You also have the right not to respond to a specific question without repercussions. You will not receive financial compensation for your participation in this study.

The final date for withdrawal from the study will be April 15, 2012. After this date, all data will be analyzed for inclusion in the researcher's thesis. You may contact me via email or by the phone number listed below should you have any questions or concerns about this study. You may also contact the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee at (413) 585-7974 or the Chair of the Spelman College Institutional Review Board at (404) 270-5706.

**YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTOOD THE ABOVE INFORMATION; THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.**

Signature of participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Please sign below if you agree to participate with audiotape during the interview

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

If you have any questions or wish to withdraw your consent, please contact:

Tiffany Paschal

**(personal information deleted by Laura H. Wyman, 11/30/12)**

## Appendix G

### Referral List

Spelman College  
Counseling and Disabilities Services  
350 Spelman Lane, S.W.,  
Atlanta Georgia, 30314  
(404) 270-5293

The Imara Center, LLC  
2001 Martin Luther King Jr. Drive Suite 105  
Atlanta, Ga. 30310  
(404) 564-4796  
[theimaracenter@gmail.com](mailto:theimaracenter@gmail.com)  
[www.imaracenter.com](http://www.imaracenter.com)  
Accessible by public transportation

Families First-Main Office  
1105 W. Peachtree St., NE  
Atlanta, GA 30309  
(404) 853-2800

Families First-Harris Johnston Office  
25 Newcastle St., SW  
Atlanta, GA 30314  
(404) 541-3050

The Link Counseling Center  
348 Mt Vernon Hwy Ne,  
Atlanta, GA 30328  
(404) 256-9797

Heartwork Counseling Center  
990 Edgewood Avenue NE  
Atlanta, GA 30307  
(404) 658-1222



Appendix H

Demographic Questionnaire

**DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE**

**Please write or check your response for each of the following questions.**

1. What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_
  
2. What is your current year in school?
  - a. Freshmen
  - b. Sophomore
  - c. Junior
  - d. Senior
  
3. How would you describe your family's socioeconomic status?
  - a. poor
  - b. working class
  - c. middle class
  - d. upper middle class
  - e. upper class
  
4. What is your original home state? \_\_\_\_\_
  
5. What is your race/ethnicity? \_\_\_\_\_
  
6. What is your major? \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix I

Interview Questionnaire

**Interview Questionnaire**

1. How do you define “standards of beauty”?
2. How did you formulate your definition of standards of beauty? i.e. parents, media, self observations, books, personal discussions, etc,?
3. What do you consider to be the dominant standard of beauty in America?
4. How much pressure do you feel to conform to the dominant standard of beauty?
5. Describe how your family influences your ideals about beauty.
6. How much do the media, advertisement, T.V., modeling, and the entertainment industries impact your perception of beauty standards?
7. Who are your role models for standards of beauty and why?
8. Why did you choose to attend a Historically Black College for women?
9. How has being in this milieu (HBCU setting) affected your sense of standards of beauty?
10. What is your response to the following question and why?

I feel I am a beautiful woman

A. Agree

B. Disagree

C. Neither agree nor disagree

D. Strongly Agree

E. Strongly Disagree

11. How would you describe the impact your defined beauty standards have made on you throughout your life?

12. How do you cope with the images of beauty standards when they do not meet your personal standards of beauty?

13. Have you ever been in a counseling relationship to address issues of body image, self-esteem or other issues related to your perception of self? If so, what prompted you to seek counseling?

14. Are there other comments or feedback that you have for me that I have not asked already?

**Thank you for your participation in this research**

Appendix J

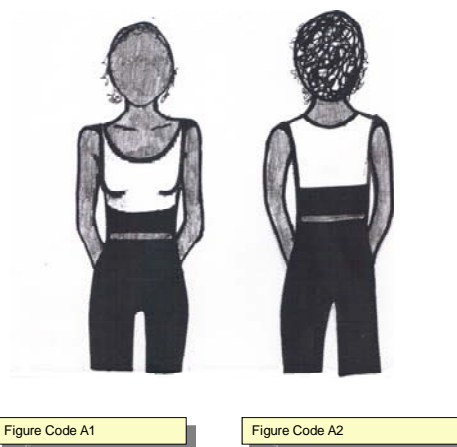
Body Image Rating Scales

Appendix G

Body Image Rating Scales

Rate this figure by placing a check on one of the following lines

1. \_\_\_ Most Desirable
2. \_\_\_ Desirable
3. \_\_\_ Neutral
4. \_\_\_ Least Desirable



Rate this figure by placing a check on one of the following lines

1. \_\_\_ Most Desirable
2. \_\_\_ Desirable
3. \_\_\_ Neutral
4. \_\_\_ Least Desirable

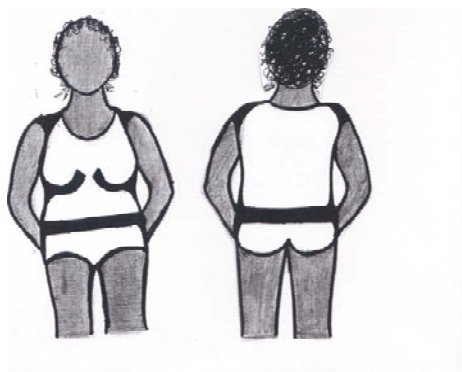


Figure Code B1

Figure Code B2

Rate this figure by placing a check on one of the following lines

- 1. \_\_\_\_ Most Desirable
- 2. \_\_\_\_ Desirable
- 3. \_\_\_\_ Neutral
- 4. \_\_\_\_ Least Desirable

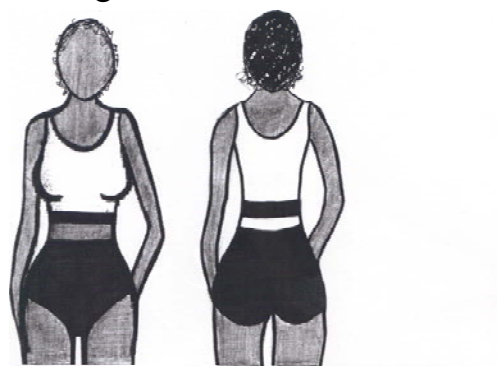
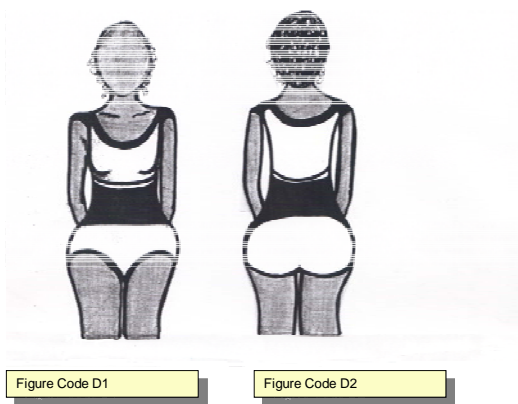


Figure Code C1

Figure Code C2

Rate this figure by placing a check on one of the following lines

1. \_\_\_\_ Most Desirable
2. \_\_\_\_ Desirable
3. \_\_\_\_ Neutral
4. \_\_\_\_ Least Desirable





Appendix K

Transcriber's Confidentiality Form

**CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT**  
**TRANSCRIPTION SERVICES**

I, Jennifer Tall, transcriptionist, agree to maintain full confidentiality in regards to any and all audio recordings and documentation received from Tiffany Paschal related to her Masters in Social Work from Smith College. Furthermore, I agree:

1. To hold in strictest confidence the identification of any individual that may be inadvertently revealed during the transcription of audio-taped interviews, or in any associated documents;
2. To not make copies of any audiotapes or computerized files of the transcribed interview texts, unless specifically requested to do so by Tiffany Paschal;
3. To store all study-related audiotapes and materials in a safe, secure location as long as they are in my possession;
4. To return all audio recordings and study-related documents to Tiffany Paschal in a complete and timely manner.
5. To delete all electronic files containing study-related documents from my computer hard drive, online storage spaces, and any backup devices.

I am aware that I can be held legally liable for any breach of this confidentiality agreement, and for any harm incurred by individuals if I disclose identifiable information contained in the audiotapes and/or files to which I will have access.

Transcriber's name (printed) Jennifer Tall

Transcriber's Signature \_\_\_\_\_



Date April 22, 2012