

Beauty Ideals & Body Image: Suva, Fiji

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SIT Fiji Spring 2007

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To women around the world who struggle to see how truly beautiful they are

Acknowledgements

A warm thank you to Taomi Tapu-Qihilo for being such a strong person for all these months; Safaira for being the most fun assistant academic director ever; and Savaira- no one teaches Fijian better than you! Special thanks to my advisor, Dr. Unaisi Nabobo for not only guiding me through the logistics of this project, but for inspiring me to put all of my heart into it. Thank you to the Ali Family- I love you and will miss all of you dearly. To all of the young women who lent their time to me, you are all beautiful people and made this project possible. And finally, to all of the people who showed me throughout this semester that after every storm, a rainbow appears...even if you can't see it at first.

Abstract

Fiji is a country rich with traditions and culture. For many decades, the two dominant ethnic groups in Fiji- Indo-Fijians and Indigenous Fijians- have maintained their distinct cultural values and practices. As a country that is currently experiencing westernization, technological advancement, and the influx of mass media, cultural traditions, lifestyles, and ideals are changing rapidly. One such change from the traditional past is the emergence of a new body ideal and different beauty standards. In this research project, connections will be made between the past and present in regards to body and beauty ideals in Fiji. The differences and commonalities between Indo-Fijian and Indigenous Fijian beauty and body ideals will be assessed. Results from this research project will be comparatively analysed in relation to previous body image research in Fiji in order to look at the ways in which Fiji is changing and the potential future direction of body image and beauty ideals in Fiji.

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Body Image & Beauty Ideals in Fiji: How Have Things Changed?

In Suva, the capital of Fiji, two racially distinct populations dominate and coexist in a shared urban setting. While both Indo-Fijians and Indigenous Fijians maintain their traditional cultural values and practices, a unified culture is emerging as a result of integrated schooling, diverse neighbourhoods, and collective exposure to various media outlets. More than ever before, the two dominant cultures in Fiji are blending together. One of the most evident examples of this is the development of a single beauty ideal- one that has developed in and been perpetuated in large part by the media.

While many Westerners are used to the existence of a particular body ideal, it is a fairly new phenomenon in Fiji. According to Anne E. Becker, an anthropologist that has done extensive research on body image in a handful of villages in the Sigatoka region of Viti Levu, a body ideal has always existed in Fiji. However, she argues that people- particularly women- are not as interested and invested in attaining this particular body ideal via dieting or exercising, unlike many women in Western countries such as Great Britain and the United States. However, in my research I have found that in Suva, Fiji today, there is a rather large interest and investment in attaining a particular body ideal; interestingly, this body ideal is similar to the Western body ideal.

Is this similarity in body ideals coincidental or the result of a common factor? While some researchers argue that a similar body shape preference can be found in various cultures all over the world, several researchers found evidence that shows otherwise. In a 1983 study by Furnham & Alibhai, Kenyan and British participants were asked to rate a range of body figures (Becker 1995: 88). They found that Kenyan women had a relatively more positive evaluation of obese female figures than British women, likely because of the Kenyans' cultural association that body fat symbolizes sufficient food resources; in a country where food is scarce, a larger body is considered to be desirable. Anne Becker used

Furnham & Alibhai's (1983) research as a springboard for her body ideal research in Fiji from January 1988 to April 1989. Becker found that Fijian women's ratings were closer to those of the Kenyan women than the British women; her justification for this finding was a high vulnerability to food shortage in Fiji as well.

If money and economy are the determining factors in the formulation of a beauty ideal, than it could be hypothesized that since Fiji remains a third world country today, there would continue to be a trend of acceptance for larger, and even obese, body shapes. However, my research findings indicate otherwise. Using Becker's research in both the late 1980s and the mid-1990s as a method of comparison, this research project was undertaken in order to assess what the current body ideal in Fiji is and to generate possible reasons as to why Fijian women (which in this study includes both Indian and Indigenous Fijian women) are experiencing the need to achieve a particular body ideal more than ever before.

Methodology

My main objective in carrying out this research project was to determine whether there is a particular body ideal in Fiji, and if that body ideal is different in the capital city Suva than in the more rural village settings where Anne Becker performed her body image research in the 1980s and 1990s. I wanted to understand the degree to which people were satisfied with their current appearance, as well as what young women feel has most greatly impacted body image and beauty ideals in Fiji today. In addition, I wanted to add to Becker's research by including Indo-Fijian women, as the Indian population is almost equal to the Indigenous Fijian population in Fiji. Including Indo-Fijian women in my research allows me to compare differences and similarities in body and beauty ideals between the two dominant racial populations.

A total of 13 women between the ages of 15 -28 ($M = 18$) participated in my research. All 13 women completed a 5-page questionnaire regarding body image, beauty ideals, satisfaction with personal appearance, and personal background information such as body weight, height, family income, religion, ethnicity, and school. While most participants were of Indian (6) or Fijian (5) ethnicity, a young Banaban woman and a young Rotuman woman were included in this research because both have lived in Suva for a long period of time and have insight into Indo- and Indigenous Fijian perspectives regarding body image and beauty ideals. All of the participants reported having a religious affiliation; participants were Christian, Hindu, or Muslim.

A few requirements for participation in this research were that all participants had to be currently enrolled in secondary school or university; in addition, all participants had to be fluent in English, as all interviews and questionnaires were conducted and administered in English. In order to limit potential research weaknesses, I used both qualitative and quantitative research methods. As a quantitative research method, I used a questionnaire,

which was more structured and carefully worded, allowing me to compare data between participants. In this questionnaire, I also used Furnham & Alibhai's (1983) body figure chart to compare my findings to previous research that has been conducted in Fiji regarding body image and beauty ideals. As a qualitative research method, I conducted informal interviews with a series of focus questions. The interviews were semi-structured; while similar questions were asked, wording varied slightly and not all questions were necessarily repeated during each of the interviews. While I initiated topic questions during the interviews, the focus questions were open-ended in order to generate as much information as possible from interviewees. All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed. For each of the 13 participants, the questionnaire was administered before the semi-structured interviews took place in order to limit my interaction with them during the interview portion from potentially influencing their questionnaire responses.

In addition, I conducted both group and individual interviews. My reason for using dual interview styles was to eliminate a potential research weakness, since group responses can vary in relation to individual responses due to the different nature of one-on-one and group interactions. My first group interview consisted of 4 Muslim-Indian women between the ages of 15-17, all attending Suva Muslim College. After each participant completed the questionnaire, a group interview was held in one of the participant's homes in order to provide an environment where the young women felt comfortable and open. Another group interview consisted of 5 women- 3 Indigenous Fijian women, one Banaban woman, and one Rotuman woman- between the ages of 17-18, all attending Saint Joseph's Secondary School. The interview was conducted in a classroom at St. Joseph's after each of the girls completed the questionnaire.

The remaining four interviews were conducted on an individual basis; three took place on the University of the South Pacific (USP), Laucala Bay campus with USP

students. The final individual interview was conducted in a quiet café in Suva city with a student from St. Joseph's Secondary School. None of the participants were given monetary compensation for their participation.

Originally, I intended to interview women between the ages of 17-21, as this is a period of physical and mental transition for most young women; but I expanded the age range because I found that older participants had a lot of valuable information to contribute to the topic of body image and beauty ideals in Fiji, particularly how body ideals have changed in the past 10 years. In addition, I was only looking to interview Indo- and Indigenous Fijian women. However, I realized that while my research revolves around the two major ethnic groups in Fiji, there were other ethnic groups that could provide another perspective and different insight on the topic of body ideals in Fiji today, as well as a less bias perspective on Fijian and Indian women's body types. Therefore, I included a Rotuman woman and a Banaban woman in my research as well.

I faced several challenges while conducting this research project. First, it was very difficult to ask young women that I did not have a personal relationship with for almost an hour of their time, which is approximately how long the questionnaire and interview took to complete. But I found that most women were willing to help me with my research, even without compensation. Another challenge was trying to formulate questions in ways that were culturally appropriate and easy to understand. Although all of the participants were fluent in English, there were several points throughout interviews where there were misunderstandings or my participants needed me to clarify a particular question. Similarly, not all of the participants felt comfortable being recorded or talking to a researcher that they did not personally know about the sensitive issues of body image, body satisfaction, and beauty ideals. Due to the highly sensitive nature of the topic, it was important for me to

start with broad questions and only begin discussing more personal questions after developing some rapport with the participants.

Background on Body Image & Beauty Ideals

For many years, there has been a strong emphasis on appearance, particularly in first-world countries. Extensive research has been done regarding the effect of media, marketing, and celebrity culture on the formation of beauty ideals and the increasing occurrence of illnesses such as anorexia and bulimia nervosa. Nichola Rumsey, Professor of Appearance and Health Psychology at the University of West England suggests, “In current society, appearance-related norms are defined and perpetuated in many ways, with imagery in print, on television, and in films offering a particularly powerful point of social comparison through a constant barrage of messages about how we should look and behave” (Rumsey, 11). These images, which people see on an everyday basis, are no doubt impacting and shaping the way women think about and attempt to shape their bodies. With time, the problem only seems to be getting worse, with women dying of self-starvation and unrealistically thin models and actresses ruling the runways and starring in films.

In 2004, research indicates that as many as 92% of teenage girls in the United Kingdom are unhappy with their body shape (Rumsey 3). Disturbingly, during a 1993 survey in the United States by Prokhorov et al., their sample of 2406 adolescents rated appearance as being the most valued characteristic over school performance, money, food, family, exercise, and friends (Rumsey, 71). Body image and self-esteem issues in Western societies are mirrored in the incredibly high number of plastic surgeries performed. In 2000 alone, about 7.4 million plastic surgeries were performed in the United States (Quart 148). And, from 2000 to 2001, the number of cosmetic surgeries performed on teenagers (18 and under) jumped 21.8%, from 65,231 to 79,501 (Quart 148). These statistics are a testament of people’s desire to change their bodies to achieve a particular beauty ideal, even

if that means taking extreme measures. Teenagers are particularly influenced by body and beauty ideals, as their need to conform and seek approval from peers is extremely high at this life stage. More than ever before, body shape and appearance issues are dictating the lives of women- how they feel about themselves, how they eat, and how they use and misuse their bodies.

How did this 'thin ideal' become the dominant image in the media to begin with? Research psychologists have suggested that portraying physically attractive people in advertisements results in "greater attention being paid to the advertisements increases the amount of attention viewers focus on the product, and increases their willingness to buy and makes it more likely that they will actually purchase the product" (Rumsey, 17). Each year, billions of dollars are invested in marketing a variety of products to teenagers in first-world countries, such as the United States and Great Britain. The success of this marketing comes as a result of stimulating a desire to develop and project a particular identity by making young women feel unique and different. "A remunerative strategy for marketing health, beauty, and fashion products, for example, is to create an awareness of a 'gap' between the consumer and the ideal, and then to promise (and sell) the solution in a product (Becker 2004: 534)." In a social context in which the perfectly sculpted bodies of models and celebrities are used to sell products and services that are tied with highly valued attributes, such as wealth, happiness, and beauty, women- and especially teenagers- begin to feel an undeniable, strong pressure to purchase and consume whatever it takes to reach some ideal state.

Therefore, the media has a profound effect on women- particularly young women- because it promotes an ideal and sells to its viewers the way to achieve an ideal in the form of a product or a service. However, with this marketing scheme comes a huge negative effect; by creating this 'gap' between what one is and what one should be, women are

beginning to feel inadequate and unhappy with themselves as they are. And, while many people would agree that happiness and a 'good life' involve much more than external appearance, most people also 'pander to the superficial ideology in which beauty and attractiveness are linked with all things desirable (Rumsey, 12)." As hard as one may try, it is difficult to ignore something as prevalent and pervasive as the media.

Unfortunately, while marketers and advertisers could potentially sell products and services in a less detrimental way, the body became the media and advertisement 'scapegoat' because it is "one of the few social markers accessible to individual control...it has great appeal as a target of manipulations" (Becker 1995: 66). The body is one of the few things that each individual has personal control over and the ability to shape. Hence, the development of a lucrative market based on physical appearance.

While the media and the "thin ideal" are now engrained in the lives of first-world citizens, they are not yet global realities. In many third-world countries, where media and technology are less accessible and some cultures still remain relatively unexposed to the images of unrealistically thin women, body ideals and beauty standards can and do vary greatly from Western body ideals and beauty standards. However, research from the past 20 years has shown that even in third-world countries, which are now being influenced by technological advancement and the media as well, are experiencing the detrimental impacts of technological advancement and information sharing that first-world countries have faced. One such impact has been the emergence of a dominant body ideal, leading many women to feel inadequate, consumed by their appearance in ways that they never were before. This trend is currently occurring in Fiji, and change is happening at a very fast rate. While research on body image and beauty ideals in Fiji is limited, there have been several research projects conducted in the rural Nadroga area of Fiji in western Viti Levu. I will review this past research and use it as a point of comparison for my research findings.

History of Body Image & Beauty Ideals in Fiji

While beauty ideals in Fiji may have fluctuated with time, a beauty ideal has always existed in that Fijians have a construct of beauty and admire a culturally determined body shape ideal. In addition, Fijians attribute certain values to a particular body ideal. Anne Becker suggests that the only difference between body ideals in the West and in Fiji is what that respective ideal actually is and the degree to which people are interested and invested in attaining the ideal body. Becker suggests that the cultivation and maintenance of the body is indicative of particular cultural values, in both Western societies and in Fiji. For instance, the fascination of Westerners with their bodies as representations of their “inner selves” is indicative of the construction of the “self” in the West as autonomous and independent (Becker 1995: 3). On the other hand, the cultivation and maintenance of the body in Fiji is consistent with the Fijian conceptualization of the “self” as dependent and part of a larger community (Becker 1995:3).

Regardless of the particular culture one lives in, the existence of a body ideal suggests that there is a “participation in a matrix of values and institution of the greater community (Becker 1995: 4). So, the existence and acceptance of a body ideal in Fiji is indicative of an understanding and investment in a particular set of cultural values and norms, which ultimately exist to provide unity and harmony within a society. According to Becker, “the body emerges as a space for communication between the self and the community. The key issue is not how the body is cultivated, but rather, by and for whom it is cultivated (Becker 1995: 5). While in almost every society the body is cultivated by an increase or decrease in exercise and food intake, what differs from one society to the next is the people who are made responsible for cultivating the ‘body’ and the people for whom the ‘body’ is cultivated.

Unlike Western societies, the “body” in Fiji has historically been a representation of a collective rather than the individual in the sense that it does not represent one’s “inner self.” Rather, it represents the culture and family that one is a member of. As a result, the body is meant to be worked on by others as opposed to the self, usually through the careful preparation and encouraged consumption of food by one’s family and community. The body ideal in Fiji has traditionally been a bigger, more muscular build, as this body shape is a sign of being well cared for and fit for performing vigorous work. Fijians in the past were not even motivated to reshape their bodies because while Fijian women expressed admiration for the particular aesthetic appeal of certain body features (e.g. large calves and a body that is *jubu*, *vina*, or robust), they did not express an interest in or focus on efforts toward attaining this culturally idealized shape. For Fijian women, the body wasn’t meant to be shaped by the self, but rather, by the community in which one lives and the family one is part of. Interestingly, exercise never used to be as big of a concern for Fijians, as it comes unconsciously and daily for most while performing household and family chores both inside and outside the home.

While there is a preference for larger, more robust bodies in Fijian society because this shape is associated with the positively valued traits of vigour and ability to work, there is an interesting absence of interest and investment in viewing one’s body as a personal project. So, what differentiates Fijians from Westerners is the degree of interest in attaining a particular body ideal as an exercise in “self-enhancement”. However, it should not be concluded that Fijians are unconcerned with body weight: “Fijians are extraordinarily attentive to fluctuations in weight and make frequent and direct comments, which speculate on the etiology of the changes, relating them to disturbances in the social milieu or alternatively to a caretaker’s social skills (Becker 1995: 10-11).”

The notion of being “well cared for” is a huge part of traditional Fijian culture. In regards to body morphology, “care” is displayed through the labouring of communities on its member’s bodies. One is expected to allow others to shape his or her personal body; unlike Western societies, the body was not meant to be personally cultivated in Fiji in the past. In allowing others to cultivate the body, one establishes their social presence in Fijian societies by engaging in and abiding by the complex social rules relating to informal and formal “care”, which is of utmost importance to Fijians.

Prior to the 1990s, anorexia and bulimia nervosa were thought to be rare or nonexistent among ethnic Fijians. The two traditional locally-defined eating disorders were *macake*, which is a loss of appetite rather than a suppression of appetite, and the commonly used phrase, ‘going thin.’ The existence of these locally defined eating disorders indicated that there is indeed an astute awareness of the body and its cultivation or lack thereof. Both of these locally defined eating disorders reflect a huge social concern with appetite and a fear of weight loss.

In Becker’s research from January 1988 – April 1989, she found that while overweight and obese shapes were given a low rating for attractiveness by research participants, Fijian women gave these body shapes a high quality of care (*viqwaravi*) rating. Overall, Becker found that there was an inverse relationship between thinness and quality of care. Although perceived quality of care peaked in the higher end of the mid-range shapes, this rating remained relatively high even among the more obese shapes (Becker 1995: 92). This demonstrates that for Fijian women, assessing an “ideal” shape based just on how people rate bodies for attractiveness would be misleading because there are other qualities that are valued just as much or even more than attractiveness, such as a body that is “well-cared” for, which can also be viewed as the “ideal” body shape in a society where quality of care is weighed so heavily.

And, as previously suggested, Becker noted that while she found that there was a particular body shape ideal in Fiji, there was also a paradoxical absence of interest in working to attain that ideal by dieting or exercising. Most likely, this is because in Fiji, the body was traditionally regarded as something to be moulded by others- particularly family members and communities- rather than by the 'self'. The 'body' in Fiji is a representation of a larger cultural reality, which is that Fijians define themselves not on the basis of autonomy, but on the basis of being a member of a collective community.

More Recent Research on Body Image in Fiji

In 1998, Anne Becker did another research project in Fiji. This more recent study examined the impact of the introduction of television on ethnic Fijian adolescent girls' identity and body image in rural Fiji. She collected narrative data from 30 schoolgirls in 1998- three years after the introduction of television into their community ($M = 16.9$ years-old). Results showed that there was a dramatic increase in indicators of disordered eating during the three years following the introduction of broadcast television with Western programming to this community- a period that was also a time of rapid social and economic transition. She found that television did appear to have shifted and redefined body ideals and aesthetic presentation, and stimulated a desire to acquire elements of the lifestyles portrayed. Especially striking, Becker found that particular comments by participants reflected a motivation to reshape their bodies, which was very different from the traditional Fijian way of thinking about the 'body.'

Interestingly, many women made comments suggesting that social and economic success were related to being slim and weighing less. Becker suggests, "Television has certainly imported more than just images associating appearance with material success; it has arguably enhanced reflexivity about the possibility of reshaping one's body and life trajectory, and popularized the notion of competitive social positioning" (Becker 2004:

552). So, in a time when Fiji is in a period of social transition, women in Fiji are exposed to the body ideals and beauty standards that are present in the media and make the connection between particular cultural symbols (e.g. body appearance and thinness) and enhanced social and financial status. Traditionally, Fijian culture has not generally supported social mobility, aspiration to higher education, and social pretension- these things were actually criticized and actively discouraged in Fijian communities. Becker's finding that more and more women wish to achieve a thin body ideal highlights the contrast between traditional and modern perspectives in Fiji and ties this shift to the recent influx and impact of the media on Fijians.

One might wonder how imported media images originally intended for audiences in first-world countries- such as American movies and British magazines- could have as strong an influence on a small island nation like Fiji. But, "Western-identified images and products may be especially powerful in non-Western contexts precisely because of their perceived 'exclusivity'" (Mazzarella 2003, in Becker 2004: 537). Hence, Western media images may have an even stronger impact on women in Fiji, which would explain why the media has influenced beauty standards and body ideals in Fiji so rapidly.

Participants' responses in this study also reflect a complicated reshaping of personal and cultural identities, which comes as a result of women's endeavours to reshape their bodies. This is in direct opposition to traditional beliefs regarding the 'self' in Fiji, where identity was never fixed in the body so much as it was in family, community, and relationships with others. Even more interestingly, data results show that Fijian women regarded television characters as role models. According to Becker, this admiration and desire to emulate television characters "appears to stem from recognition that traditional channels are ill-equipped to assist Fijian adolescents in navigating the landscape of rapid social change in Fiji" (Becker 2004: 551). But, while foreign role models may help to ease

the tension that commonly exists in a society with a shifting social context, it has also undercut the traditional Fijian ways of understanding and forging one's 'identity.'

Body Image & Beauty Ideals: Where Fiji is Today

My data analysis will take place in two parts. *Part I* will review responses from the quantitative questionnaire component of my research. *Part II* will review responses from the qualitative interviewing component of my research. I will discuss trends that I found amongst all of the women I interviewed, differences in responses with respect to race, and comparisons to Anne Becker's previous body image research findings in Fiji.

Part I: Quantitative Data Analysis

Thirteen female participants completed a 5-page questionnaire (Appendix A) with questions regarding personal information, degree of media exposure, body ideals, body satisfaction, and beauty standards in Fiji. When asked to name favourite music artists, actors, actresses, and other celebrities, all 13 participants were able to name at least 3, indicating that there is a high level of awareness and exposure to celebrity culture via the media. American celebrities were mentioned by all but one participant, which indicates a high level of exposure to imported images of celebrities and cultures. Of the 6 Indian women participating in this research, 5 listed Bollywood actors and actresses. Interestingly, none of the non-Indian participants listed a single Bollywood celebrity, which indicates that Bollywood culture is targeted primarily to an Indian audience; Hollywood culture, on the other hand, is targeted to all races. The most popular female celebrities listed were: Catherine Zeta-Jones, Hillary Duff, Rihanna, Shakira, Angelina Jolie, Avril Lavigne, Beyonce, Jessica Alba, and Katie Holmes.

Almost all participants (12) reported reading the *Fiji Times* on a regular basis; some also read *Fiji Sun*. Many read magazines, the most popular one's being: *Girlfriend*, *Fiji Living*, *Woman's Day*, *Dolly*, *Total Girl*, and *Cosmopolitan*. Almost all reported watching

television shows regularly as well; the most commonly listed programs were: *Smallville*, *Shortland Street*, *Amazing Race*, *That's So Raven*, *Prison Break*, and *CSI: Miami*. These responses indicate that all 13 participants had easy and frequent access to various media channels: magazines, television, movies, newspapers, and music.

When asked what was thought to be the biggest influence on body image ideals in Fiji today, 11 participants said that the media has the biggest influence:

“It’s always available to people and people try to be like their favourite celebrities.”

“The media is a powerful tool that influences teenagers.”

“Many young people would love to have a beautiful image, adorned with the latest fashions which they have seen on television and magazines.”

“Times have changed, as well as the people of Fiji today...kids, teenagers, and young adults are being influenced by the media and peers...they copy the lifestyles of celebrities, the way they dress, and the way they look, especially their weight and body image. More girls want to look sexy, slim, and fashionable.”

“The television influenced me on how to take care of myself and how to feel good.”

Six participants also said that peers have a strong influence on body image and beauty ideals today:

“That’s who we are around the most. You try to fit in.”

When asked whether participants ever felt pressure by anyone to gain or lose weight, some said that they never experienced such pressures. However, 7 of the participants did feel pressured; 3 to gain weight and 4 to lose weight. Of the four that said they felt pressured to lose weight, 3 were Indigenous Fijian Women. All 3 of the women that felt pressured to gain weight were Indo-Fijian women.

When asked to describe the ideal body type, an overwhelming majority listed the words “slim” and “tall,” but interestingly, most of the comments indicated that being slim or being curvy was not acceptable; one had to be “just right”:

“tall and slim”

“Slim, but not skinny”

“Slim and about average height.”

“Slim, not too tall, not too curvy.”

“Your height and size should match.”

“Not too slim and skinny...fit, and everything you wear looks good and healthy.”

“Slender. Not too skinny, and not too overweight- just right.”

“Slim, tall, with long, straight brown hair and blue or light brown eyes.”

“Being Slim, but healthy.”

When asked, “Do you think most of your peers feel happy with their appearance?,” 8 women responded “No,” suggesting that many of their friends wish they could be thinner and lose weight, or wished to have prettier features:

“They want to lose their weight and become skinny goats!”

“Definitely not. They always wish they could go slim.”

“No! They are always told ‘your too fat’ or ‘your too skinny’ and it does get to their heads, messes with their self-esteem.”

“My peers love their food, but watch what they eat. They are health freaks! They’re appearance is important to them.”

When asked to describe the typical Indigenous Fijian body type, answers were consistent. Many felt that Indigenous Fijians tended to weigh more than Indo-Fijians. Several also noted that most Fijians have frizzy or curly hair:

“Heavy weight- fat or fit.”

“Some are like Indians, but mostly Fijians are quite fat – their weight might be 60-70 kg.”

“They are mostly built, huge body structure, weigh more, and have frizzy or curly hair.”

“Usually fit and they look good with long hair.”

“A traditional Fijian style of dressing and hair, most have a healthy weight.”

“They are of average height and weight and they look bold.”

“Broad, tall, dark-skinned, and frizzy hair.”

“Usually overweight and obese.”

“There are two kinds: those that are beginning to look like Indians, dieting and looking slim. But, some are becoming weight conscious and looking anorexic. The other half seem not to care and are proud of how big they are. Some are big and fat.”

When asked to describe the typical Indo-Fijian body type, answers were also consistent. Many felt that Indo-Fijians generally weighed less than the average Indigenous Fijian:

“Light weight. Slim, fit, and good looking. Some are fit while others are skinny.”

“Not too slim and not too fat, just average. Weight is around 50-60 kg.”

“Mostly slim to medium weight. They generally have straight to wavy hair, skin color is fair to dark brown, and they are not that huge in build.”

“Usually slim, but some are fit. They have long black hair.”

“They are mostly slim, not obese, and are very stylish.”

“They are usually short and skinny.”

“Tall, skinny, dark-skinned.”

“Usually thin and slender.”

“They seem like strong, but fragile in a way. Very light in weight.”

In the final section of the questionnaire, more in-depth questions were asked, including, “What does it mean to have a good life?” Participants generally had a lot to say in response to this question. While some related the “good life” to food, exercising, and appearance, most said that having a good life meant being happy with what one has, having money, being satisfied with oneself, and living life to the fullest:

“Enjoying your life to the fullest”

“Eating all you want, exercising, and having fun in life. Being ready for everything that comes your way.”

“Being happy with your life. It’s not that no one has problems, but we have to understand it. Life is given once, so we have to live it to the fullest. Understanding your life is the most important thing.”

“Being happy with your family, relationship, job, friends, and religion.”

“To have friends who care about you and are always here to give good advice. Having a good life means to have family members always there for you. It means you are loved.”

“Less responsibilities, adequate incomes, and nice family and friends.”

“To be able to look after yourself and the people you love. To have the people you love around you. To achieve your goals and be successful in life. To be independent.”

“To be satisfied with the way you look, feel, and with all that you have around you.”

“To have the right choice and decisions...freedom.”

“Good family, good house, to enjoy life to the maximum, to be happy with yourself. Feeling fortunate to have food to eat, clothes to wear, a house to live in, and water to drink.”

“It means eating well with the right type of food that the body needs and also eating only the amount the body needs. It also means being well educated and having a good job...being well-off.”

“To be happy with yourself and who you hang around with. It means being satisfied with who you are and to live with it...to keep healthy, see the goodness in others, don’t hold grudges, show love and kindness to family and friends.
A good life is one where a person can smile more often than they cry.”

“What does it mean to be beautiful?” While more than half listed physical traits as marks of beauty, almost all participants said that being beautiful was about more than just

looks. And, some participants suggested that inner beauty is the true definition of 'beautiful':

"Having a good body and nice hair"

"Slim, pretty, good features, smiling, and always fun-loving."

"Beautiful is to be not just slim but also to be happy."

"It's not just physical appearance...but the personality, attitude and the person as a whole."

"To be happy, always smiling, very humble, and making people's day even better. To be beautiful means to feel good with what you're wearing and always be willing to try something new. To have a good heart...always honest."

"Being cheerful with a body that is desired by most; being fair."

"To be kind, loving, caring, and honest. To be yourself and not someone people want you to be. To be positive minded and look at the positive side of things."

"It's not how you look from the outside, but rather, what's really inside. Being beautiful is just being simple."

"That you have a good heart and a smiling face."

"It's not only being beautiful on the outside, but on the inside. *I think everyone is beautiful in their own unique way.*"

"It means to be happy with who you are regardless of what others say about you. Some people relate beautiful to people who keep up the latest trends in fashion. But for me, everyone is beautiful in a way whether it is through their looks or personality. *Everyone is beautiful.* The ones that stand out are the ones with inner beauty."

"Let beauty enhance your knowledge and wisdom."

And finally, I asked, "Do you consider yourself to be a beautiful person?" Most of the participants did feel that they were beautiful; although, not always on the basis of physical appearance. Several participants suggested that they felt they were beautiful because of who they were on the inside. A couple also gave answers alluding to religious beliefs that one must be happy with who they are because they are God's personal creation:

"Yes I do. I am fit, pretty, got beautiful featured and make life happy for everyone. I am happy- that's what makes me beautiful."

"A lot of people tell me I'm pretty, but I also know I am able to get along with people easily. I have two beautiful parents, so genetically I think I am beautiful too."

"Yes I do. I feel good with whatever clothes. I am very confident and a very outspoken person. I do not care about other people's negative opinions."

"Not really. Nobody has actually said that before."

"Yes, because I know that God has created me perfectly, and that I am God's masterpiece. I have respect for others and know that I am loved by family and friends."

"Absolutely, because God made me. I like who I am and what is within me. I am so happy and proud to be a person that I am today."

"Yes because I have people that love me."

“Yes on the outside. But, that doesn’t mean I am more beautiful than any other one. I don’t think I am totally beautiful on the inside because....like the saying goes, ‘actions speak louder than words.’”

“I’m close to being a beautiful person. I still haven’t developed fully my inner beauty. I still have a number of bad qualities I’d like to get rid of. But, matter of factly, I think I have a great body.”

“If one feels beautiful, they are beautiful.”

Part I: Quantitative Data Analysis

After participants completed the questionnaires, I interviewed each of them; in total, there were 3 group interviews and 5 individual interviews. I asked the same set of focus questions to guide the conversation, but asked additional questions depending on the ways in which the participants responded to the focus questions. All participants said that they typically have conversations about body image and beauty with their peers. Conversation topics include what celebrities are gaining/losing weight, which peers are beautiful or have good figures, and feelings about their own bodies. When I asked if participants felt there was a particular body ideal, all 13 participants said that most- but not all- people wanted to look thin. A majority of participants also felt that older generations of women did not face the same pressure to be thin or to look a particular way.

When I asked them why, all participants said it was due, at least in some part, to the influence of the media and modernization. 12 out of 13 participants also made comments relating thinness to the desire to be fashionable and wear nice clothes. Eleven participants said that the desire to be thin came in large part as a result of wanting to attract males. The following dialogue took place during a group interview with 4 Indo-Fijian women:

Participant 1: Girls nowadays, they want guys to be attracted to them. That’s why they care about their bodies.

Participant 2: If they wear good clothes, they can attract good guys.

Me: But don’t you think women have always wanted to attract men, even in previous generations?

Participant 2: Well, in the old days, there used to be arranged marriages, so it...

Participant 3: So it didn’t matter if you were fat, slim, or whatever. You’d get married either way. But now, it’s like your searching for your own partner.

This exemplifies the pressure to look good in order to attract male attention and be considered suitable for marriage. It also shows that change has occurred not only in terms of media exposure and beauty ideals, but also by the ways in which women and men interact with each other and the roles that both genders are expected to assume today.

Upon discovering that participants felt the media played a large role in the change of beauty ideals, I asked most of the participants why they felt the media had such a strong influence; why did being ‘beautiful’ become so important? The following are samples of how participants responded:

“Well, if you’re beautiful, other people will talk about you. I see a pretty girl and think, ‘She must have a good looking guy because she’s pretty.’”

“Kids our age watch a lot of T.V. When they see a beautiful girl, they want to look just like that.”

“Celebrities have such an influence because they are well known and in the spotlight and people want to know more about them. They just get recognized. And, that’s what people want...to make an identity for themselves in this world.”

“I think it’s bad that people want to look like celebrities because girls cut back on their food. That isn’t healthy.”

I also asked participants whether they felt there were any differences between Indo-Fijian women and Indigenous Fijian women in respect to appearance and body ideals. Overall, participants said that Indo-Fijian girls are thinner and more concerned with their appearance. However, some alluded to the notion that Indigenous Fijian are beginning to be more interested in fashion and achieving a particular beauty ideal, usually by going on a diet in order to lose weight:

“I think Indian girls have better body image. But, some Fijian girls have a really nice figure and wear clothes to stand out and stuff.”

“Fijian women don’t really stay on diets. Indian women do.”

“To get their weight down, Fijians exercise and stuff. With Indian girls, they think the only solution to lose weight is dieting and not eating as much food...maybe because food for Fijians plays a really, really big part in their lives.”

“When you compare Indians and Fijians, Indians don’t need to exercise because they work very hard in their daily lives, so they don’t need any more exercise.”

“I reckon Indian girls would actually want to look slim, probably more like a model body. But a lot of Fijian girls, they want to look big. Even some of my guy friends who like islanders, they like it when girls are big, I don’t know why. They don’t care if they are big, but they don’t like it when girls are too slim.”

“Indians are really influenced by Bollywood, and the Bollywood girls are really pretty. But that’s only because they put on so much makeup. Yea, but most of my Indian girlfriends want to look like Bollywood actresses- to be stylish, slim, have a good body.”

“Fijian women my age- like in their 20s- I think they are really influenced by rap and hip hop and stuff...like Beyonce’s kind of music...I’ve seen a lot of them change the way they dress so nowadays they probably want to look like those types of images. Not so much like a model, but you know. The older generation doesn’t really bother or care as much.”

“Indian women I associate with being skinny, I don’t know why. They are more influenced by the media because they are into fashion and material things. And also, they have Bollywood to influence them.”

These responses indicate that Indo-Fijian women are highly influenced by Bollywood and the fashion industry, and therefore, are at a higher risk for being influenced by the media. While Indigenous Fijian women have traditionally felt less of a need to look thin and to care about fashion and appearance, the responses from participants in this research project indicate that as Fiji becomes more modernized and people are more influenced by the media, they are beginning to diet and strive to look thin and fashionable as well.

Finally, I asked several participants whether they felt the ‘body ideal’ could change in the future; or, would people always want to look thin. Here are a few of the responses:

“I reckon that the media, if there were more awareness programs, and if people showed that you don’t have to be super slim to be a model, you can be beautiful. You don’t have to look flashy...I mean, I’ve actually seen in some magazines that girls don’t want to wear a bikini because they think they look too fat in it. But, this one magazine showed bigger girls in bikinis, which send the message that you don’t have to be super slim to wear what you want.”

“It depends on how the media portrays people. Like, if they portray slim people as the prettiest, people will want to look like that. But, if they portray a thick girl as beautiful, then people’s minds will begin to shift. So, it’s all about how the media portrays people.”

Participants generally felt that if the media changed the images and messages it was sending to women, women would begin to change the way they thought of their own bodies and what they regarded as “beautiful.”

Comparative Analysis of Results to Past Research

During her research in the late 1980s in Nadroga, Anne Becker found that two-thirds of Fijian women were either overweight or obese. Interestingly, of the women who were either overweight or obese, 54% wanted to maintain their weight and 17% wanted to gain more weight (Becker 1995: 91). These statistics show that there was a high level of satisfaction amongst women in regards to their weight and appearance. However, when I asked participants in my research whether they were satisfied with their current weight and/or appearance, 54% said they were not satisfied. This shows that today, women in Suva, Fiji are much less satisfied with their weight and/or appearance. This may be due to living in a city with access to media and technology, as well as changes in body ideals over

the last decade. The inclusion of Indo-Fijian women in my research may also have impacted weight and appearance satisfaction results.

During her study of four different villages around the Sigatoka region of Viti Levu, Becker used a body gradation chart extrapolated from Furnham and Alibhai's (1983) research in Kenya and Great Britain; she found that "regardless of age or present location in a village relatively proximal or distant to an urban area, women's responses reflected similar ratings of attractiveness for the range of shapes, with all groups responding most favourably to the midrange shape F (Becker 1995: 92)." So, Becker concluded that while it might be assumed that exposure to Western media and values might influence Fijian body and beauty ideals, her data did not support this finding. I wanted to see if women in Suva, Fiji would respond most favourably to midrange shape F as well, so I used the same body gradation chart in my research.

I found that 10 out of 13 of the participants of my research responded most favourably to the shape E, which is slightly thinner than shape F, the body figure that Becker's participants felt was most ideal. This finding indicates that the body ideal- at least in the city of Suva- is getting thinner, perhaps because Indo-Fijian women have a slightly thinner body ideal than Indigenous Fijian girls. Another reason may be that while Becker's participants lived near an urban setting, it does not necessarily mean her participants were influenced by the urban lifestyle as much as people who actually live in the urban capital of Suva are.

Finally, 29% of the women in Becker's study matched their "current perceived bodies" with their "ideal bodies" (Becker 1995: 96). But in my research, only 23% of women match their "current perceived bodies" with their "ideal bodies," which indicates a significant decrease in body satisfaction.

Additional Interpretation of Research Findings

Initially, my goal in performing this research was to study the differences between Indo-Fijian and Indigenous Fijian women in regards to body image and beauty ideals. But, my research took a turn in a different direction when I realized that there were more commonalities than differences between both ethnic populations in Suva, Fiji- at least on the topic of body image and beauty ideals. I was very surprised by the strong response I got from participants regarding the influence and detrimental impact that the media has on women, particularly younger generations of women.

Why is the body ideal in Fiji today different than the Fijian body ideal a decade ago? There are several possible explanations for this difference. First, unlike Becker's research, my research took place in Suva, Fiji's capital and the centre of technology, multiculturalism, and consumerism. All of my interviewees indicated that they felt the media was one of the most powerful factors in the development of this new, more Western beauty ideal in Fiji. In addition, I interviewed Indian Fijian women as well as Indigenous Fijian women. Many of my interviewees felt that Indian Fijian women were more heavily influenced by the media due to the popularity of Bollywood and a greater interest in fashion and outward appearance.

The sharing of cultures in the diverse city of Suva may be having an effect on Indigenous Fijian as well, which would explain why all of the interviewees felt that most young women in Fiji wish to lose weight, as being thin is the current body ideal. Unlike villages and small rural communities, cities tend to be more individualistic; there is a diffusion of dependency on family and a community when living in a city, as opposed to living in a traditional village. Within the city setting, people often live in contained homes with their immediate family, surrounded by strangers or unrelated neighbours. Thus, living in a city creates a sense of individualism and independence, which is perhaps why the

“body” for Indo- and Indigenous Fijians in Suva is indicative of one’s “inner self” rather than a symbol of one’s community and family. In a rural community or village- less exposed to mass media, capitalistic values, and independence- the body is cultivated by and for family members as a symbol of their economic status, generosity, and ability to provide care. But, in a city setting, the body is left to be cultivated by the individual as a symbol of one’s level of self-control, determination, and willpower.

In addition, researchers have suggested that women are more susceptible to developing problems with food, eating, and their bodies. A big part of this has to do with women’s subordinate social position compared to men in a patriarchal society: “Women have been subject to patriarchal control of their actions historically and cross-culturally; one of the only areas free for expression of autonomy is within their bodies (Becker 1995: 81).” Women in Fiji may be concerned shaping their bodies is because it is one of the few ways in which women living in a patriarchal society can assert control of their personal lives.

Women are socialized to conform to a particular shape in order to be sexually attractive to and compete for men, who would allegedly take care of the economic needs of women (Blood, 44). This provides an explanation for why women in patriarchal third world countries, such as Fiji, are even more at risk for developing food, eating, and body issues. With the recent influx of media and technology in Fiji, it is easy to see why traditional values and body ideals are rapidly changing and giving way to the body ideals and images presented in magazines, movies, television, and the internet. This also provides an explanation for why Anne Becker found in her research in the late 1990s that while more Fijian women wanted to be thin than she discovered in her research a decade before, there was a lack of commentary about being thin to be attractive to boys. Unlike Becker’s

finding, 92% of the participants in my research noted that a primary reason for wanting to look thin was to wear fashionable clothes in order to attract males.

Conclusion

At the heart of the desire to be thin and attain an ever strengthening solitary beauty ideal, Indo- and Indigenous Fijian women are beginning to strive for this ideal in order to seek a sense of autonomy in a patriarchal society; search for attention by attracting the gaze of others via external beauty; and, by controlling what little they can as a way of asserting themselves and feeling more closely linked to the qualities that the media associates with thinness- such as love, wealth, attention, and success.

With the influx of advertisements marketing products that will change ones appearance- from makeup to diet foods, the media creates and perpetuates a view of the body as “socially produced” and changeable, which makes it rather impossible for women to see their bodies as it really is, or to accept their bodies for what they currently are. Media images greatly impact women in Fiji today. These women, who perhaps feel socially and financially marginalized in a patriarchal third world country, “anchor their identities in widely recognized cultural symbols of prestige popularized by media-imported ideas, values, and images” (Becker 2004: 555). All of the young women I spoke to made this connection between media, newly emerging body ideals, and lowered self-esteem among females in Fiji. While the first step to change- which is awareness- has occurred, much needs to be done in order to avoid in Fiji what has happened in many Western societies as a result of the perpetuation of an unrealistic body ideal, largely by the media.

When compared to Anne Becker’s body image research in Fiji almost 20 years ago, statistics from my research show an alarming movement towards body and appearance dissatisfaction. This could potentially lead to a greater number of women battling more serious body issues, such as anorexia and bulimia nervosa. In order to stop this from

occurring in Fiji, it is of crucial importance that women are made aware of the deleterious impact that the media can have on them. Potential ways of doing this is through media education in primary and secondary schools. Due to limited resources and funding in Fiji, a good place to start may be through media-awareness and healthy body image pamphlets and seminars hosted by various non-profit and women's organizations in Fiji.

Women in Fiji are already aware of the impact the media has on them. The continued influx of the media in Suva and other parts of Fiji is inevitable. However, with increased media awareness, the preservation of traditional Fijian culture and views of the 'body,' and the fight for more diverse images of beauty in the media, women in Fiji stand a chance of avoiding the body image and beauty ideal problems that are currently plaguing Western societies.

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