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“Beauty” as a Public Health Concern: An Analysis of the Internalization and Effects of the Western Beauty Ideal in Nairobi, Kenya

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"Beauty" as a Public Health Concern:

An Analysis of the Internalization and Effects of the
Western Beauty Ideal in Nairobi, Kenya

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Kenya: Development, Health, and Society

Fall 2006

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Abstract

Acts of personal decoration or even body modification for the purpose of attaining a cultural norm of “beauty” have been undertaken in every human society for centuries. In certain societies, however, people engage in acts or practices to obtain such cultural beauty only at the expense of individual and community health. The current eating disorder epidemic in the United States, based on the Western beauty ideal of an extremely thin woman, is an example of such destructive behavior in the name of beauty. With the current phenomenon of globalization, Western cultural norms, including the beauty ideal, are spreading around the world at an increasingly rapid pace. In this context, this study first examined the extensive prevalence of images depicting the Western beauty ideal in media and advertising in Kenya, noting the time frame of their introduction and target audience. Next, the extent to which these images have been internalized as “ideal” by Kenyan women and teenage girls in Nairobi was evaluated through survey and discussion, including an attempt to determine if such internalization was damaging to their physical and/or mental health. Results indicate a complex, transitory understanding of “beauty,” in which traditional concepts of African beauty mold with the Western beauty ideal in different ways across generations. Nonetheless, exposure to the Western beauty ideal has undoubtedly contributed to a culture of body dissatisfaction and weight obsession that is moving in the direction of the eating disorder epidemic in the United States, especially for young women in Nairobi with consistent access to media.

Introduction

The biggest tulip craze in all of history took place in Holland in the 1630's. Though formerly popular, especially among the elites, tulips suddenly took off on the market and created one of the largest and most difficult to explain manias in economic history. One exotic strand of brilliantly colored tulips was especially coveted. People sold furniture, valuables, and even homes in order to buy them...the quest to pursue their beauty obscured everything. There was a catch, however. Beneath the beauty, these flowers had a deadly disease. This disease created the beautiful color patterns, but eventually killed the tulip from the inside out, destroying other flowers and even soil quality in the process. The spread of this disease among tulips help bring about the crash of the tulip craze in 1637. Turns out the cost of the beautiful, exotic tulips, so revered and desired by so many, was simply too high.¹

Believe it or not, there is a similar beauty craze underway in the contemporary United States regarding not flowers, but women. Since the 1960's, the beauty industry has pushed an increasingly thin standard for women, to the point where popular culture demands near emaciation to be considered beautiful.² The internalization of this beauty ideal has caused millions of American women to develop disordered eating, most commonly associated with the diseases anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa but also including a plethora of other behaviors like compulsive exercise.³ Ironically, the more these diseases progress for an individual, the greater the level of praise and positive feedback she receives from those around her. Even those women who do not develop disordered eating are likely to exhibit extreme dissatisfaction with body and self as a result of their constant exposure to the thin beauty ideal.⁴ As American women waste their time, energy, money, and even lives in the pursuit of an unattainable standard of beauty, the larger culture sits back and praises their attempts, enthralled with the

¹ Mike Dash, *Tulipomania: The Story of the World's Most Coveted Flower and the Extraordinary Passions It Aroused* (New York: Random House Inc., 1999), 9.

² See: Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (New York: Morrow, 1991).

³ For further description of these disorders, see Appendix I: Glossary of Terms.

⁴ Hitchon, Bush, Park, Sung-Yeon, Yun, and Gi Wong, "You Can Never Be Too Thin—or Can You? A Pilot Study on the Effects of Digital Manipulation of Fashion Models' Body Size, Leg Length, and Skin Color," *Race Gender and Class* (30 Apr 2004): 143.

perceived 'beauty' produced and blind to the costs to both individual women and the society as a whole.

Just like any other social phenomena, the cultural obsession with thinness does not affect all women equally. For one, young girls are understood to be particularly susceptible to the internalization of social beauty norms, due to the greater social pressure put on them regarding their appearance and their recorded psychological susceptibility to such peer pressure.⁵ In addition, though mistakenly understood as a disease affecting only wealthy, white women, studies increasingly show a high prevalence of disordered eating in minority ethnic groups in the United States.⁶ In fact, the need to conform to racial norms different from their own often results in comparatively worse body image, self esteem, and health for minorities in the US.⁷ For example, the often unobtainable desire for lighter skin and a thin frame observed among African Americans is associated with body image dissatisfaction and other psychological effects.⁸ Similarly, Asian American women increasingly undergo surgical manipulation of their characteristic Asian features, opting for eyelids with folds and longer, more pointed noses.⁹

The trends exhibited in the United States have also been entrenched in Western European countries for decades, resulting in the understanding of a young, thin, light-skinned, fashionably dressed, and well made-up woman as the "Western beauty ideal." In the age of unprecedented globalization and cultural amalgamation, this Western ideal that has proven so damaging to women, minority women in particular, in the United States and Europe is rapidly spreading throughout the world through advertisements, television, magazines, and print media. The infamous *Cosmopolitan*, for example, which began its success in 1965 and has since attained eminent status in the United States women's magazine market, now boasts 52 editions sold in over 100 countries, with a

⁵ Amparo Bonila Campos, Rosa Pastor Carballo, and Isabel Martinez Benlloch., "Adolescence and Gender: Body Image and Eating Disorders," *Women's Health Collection* (06 Nov 2001): 149.

⁶ National Women's Health Resource Center, "The Weight of Eating Disorders and Women's Health," *National Women's Health Report* (Apr 1999): 14.

⁷ Eugenia Kaw, "Medicalization of Racial Features: Asian American Women and Cosmetic Surgery," *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* (Mar 1993): 75.

⁸ Hitchon et. al, "Digital Manipulation," 140.

⁹ Kaw, "Medicalization of Racial Features," 77.

monthly readership of over 60 million women worldwide.¹⁰ The spread of such media is of particular concern when it is noted that exposure to images of the Western beauty ideal, particularly in the format of women's magazines, is the primary predictor of disordered eating in the United States.¹¹

Though the effects of exposure to these images in countries outside of North America and Western Europe have not been adequately studied, the research that has been conducted has found that the Western beauty ideal is indeed taking a toll on the health of women. In a groundbreaking study in Fiji, secondary school girls exhibited the beginning of weight preoccupation, poor overall body image, and even purging and fasting practices to control weight as early as three years after television had first been introduced to them.¹² Women and adolescent girls in India were also found to have internalized media images to a significant extent, resulting in body dissatisfaction and the drive for thinness to the point of modifying eating behavior.¹³ Similarly, a study of 855 youth ages 10 to 19 in Argentina noted that 247 were suspected of having an eating disorder; of those, 137 cases were clinically diagnosed with anorexia nervosa or bulimia nervosa.¹⁴ And just recently, on November 15th, 2006, 21 year old Brazilian model Ana Carolina Restor died of "infection brought about by anorexia nervosa."¹⁵ At her time of death Ana weighed a mere 88 pounds, far too few for her 5 foot 8 inch frame.¹⁶ Overall, there is extensive evidence that eating disorders have become a global epidemic, with many places in the world holding higher rates than those in North America or Western

¹⁰ Maureen Jenkins, "Aging Gracefully; Cosmopolitan, the 'bible for fun, fearless females,' turns 40," *Chicago Sun Times* (24 Aug 2005): 64.

¹¹ Hitchon et.al, "Digital Manipulation," 143.

¹² Anne E. Becker, "Television, Disordered Eating, and Young Women in Fiji: Negotiating Body Image and Identity During Rapid Social Change," *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 21, no. 4 (2004): 535.

¹³ Hemal Shroff and Kevin J. Thompson, "Body Image and Eating Disturbance in India: Media and Interpersonal Influences," *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 35 (Mar 2004): 202.

¹⁴ Cecile R. Herscovici, L. Bay, and I. Kovalskys, "Prevalence of Eating Disorders in Argentine Boys and Girls, Aged 10 to 19, Who Are in Primary Care," *Eating Disorders* 13 (Oct-Dec 2005): 476.

¹⁵ "Anorexia Blamed for Brazilian Model's Death," in South Florida News, 17 Nov 2006 [journal online]; available from <http://www.southflorida.com/news/sf1-apeople17nov17,0,3075503.story?coll=ste-guide-headlines>; Internet; accessed 17 Nov 2006.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Europe.¹⁷ These constitute just a few of many examples of the damaging effects of standardizing international beauty to an already harmful ideal in Western countries.

In fact, there is evidence that this spread of the Western beauty ideal to non-Western countries could prove even more damaging than in Northern America and Europe. One reason for the same found in minority groups in the United States: the ideal of a thin, light-skinned, light-haired, and tall woman is simply out of reach some for women of non-European ethnic backgrounds. While the minimum height for international beauty competitions is five foot eight inches, the average height of an Indian woman is five foot two.¹⁸ In another example, just like Asian American women, Chinese women increasingly undergo cosmetic surgery to create the fold in their eyelids common to Europeans.¹⁹ With this growing standardization of beauty around the world, pushed largely by the fashion industry and the beauty competitions previously alluded to, women around the world are "forced to look beautiful as per the dictates of international marketing requirements," regardless of their traditional, more realistic understandings of beauty.²⁰

In addition, the transitory nature of non-Western societies, particularly regarding gender roles, exacerbates the damaging effects of the Western beauty standard and confuses both individual and cultural constructs of female identity. When "the ideals of femininity generate contradictory messages," women not only increasingly rely on aesthetic norms in the creation of their identity, but also suffer from "insufficient autonomy and lack of control, damaging self-esteem and encouraging a propensity towards abnormal behavior around food."²¹ One example of this is found in the comparative study between young women in Korea and the US, which found that the groups exhibited nearly identical high scores on the Drive for Thinness Scale, while the

¹⁷ It should be noted that, while there is a strong correlation between disordered eating and internalization of the Western beauty ideal, other factors contribute to eating disorders in different places depending on the social context. Study should always be undertaken to determine the cause of disordered eating in different places, though the role of the Western beauty ideal should always be included in the investigation.

¹⁸ Fred Edwards, "Tall and Tan and Young and Lovely," *Humanist* 59 (Apr/May 1999): 41.

¹⁹ Christine Rosen, "The Democratization of Beauty," *Current* (Sept 2004):12.

²⁰ Edwards, "Tall and Tan," 42.

²¹ Campos et. al, "Adolescence and Gender," 155.

Korean sample had *more* behaviors characteristic of disordered eating.²² As African American model Elaine Evan reported upon visiting Africa as early as 1992:

Through the images that are transmitted globally, women are bombarded with ideals of beauty that are not representative of themselves. It is through these mediums that women are trying to construct their identities.²³

This contradiction in identity construction also takes place on a cultural level regarding beauty, especially in many African societies in which a traditional emphasis on robust size and the value of ageing directly conflict with the Western beauty ideal. In Nigeria, for example, the selection of Nigerian Abgani Darego (referred to as a “white girl in black skin” due to her thin stature), as Miss World led to a “social transformation” among younger Nigerians, causing a critic to comment that, in the new Nigerian popular culture: “voluptuousness is out and thin is in.”²⁴ Not only does the introduction and marketing of the Western beauty ideal cause disordered eating and poor self image in women around the world, but it also creates disruptions across generations in the formation of cultural identity.

In this global context, the analysis of the Western beauty ideal and its effects is extremely important, especially in those societies most affected by the cultural transitions of globalization. Unfortunately, the issue does not receive much attention in either academic circles or popular culture in such countries; sub-Saharan Africa has been particularly left out of the research and discussion. Many remain quick to defend this exclusion, pointing to body dissatisfaction and eating disorders as phenomena of the wealthy, as unimportant in light of the many challenges facing post-colonial states with transitioning economies, or as merely superficial. Others don't consider the issues at all. As the evidence presented thus far suggests, however, such attitudes are misguided and dangerous. People throughout history in all places of the world have constructed their sense of self-worth based at least in part on their outward appearance. To ignore the

²² Jaehee Jung and Gordon B. Forbes, “Multidimensional Assessment of Body Dissatisfaction and Disordered Eating in Korean and US College Women: A Comparative Study,” *Sex Roles* (5 Nov 2006): 136.

²³ Kerri A. Reddick-Morgan, “Emulated Through Images: The Globalization of Misconstructed African American Beauty and Hip-Hop Culture,” in *ICAAP*, 1993 [journal on-line]; available from <http://www.globalization.icaap.org/content/v.41/reddick-morgan.html>; Internet; accessed 30 Sept 2006.

²⁴ Norimitsu Onishi, “Globalization of Beauty Makes Thinness Trendy,” *The New York Times*, 3 Oct 2002.

contemporary pressures faced by women everywhere to achieve what is essentially an unobtainable standard of beauty, and to turn a blind eye to the damaging mental attitudes and physical practices they take on as a result, is to belittle the importance of this human characteristic with what is certain to bring increasingly devastating effects.

This study was undertaken in order to advance recognition of the importance of the Western beauty ideal and its effects worldwide, in the hopes of making a small contribution to this essential discussion by adding much-needed analysis of at least one small part of sub-Saharan Africa: Nairobi, Kenya.²⁵ In this attempt, the presence of the Western beauty ideal in media images in Nairobi was assessed, followed by the internalization of this ideal by people in Nairobi and the effects of such internalization on the health of adolescent girls, women, and society as a whole. Due to time constraints, the study was admittedly broad and, as a result, was undertaken to obtain a broad picture of a complex situation. Nonetheless, it is hoped that the findings will promote further research and a general understanding of the potentially damaging public health and social effects of the strict Western beauty ideal worldwide, as well as discussion about solutions and possible responses to these problems.

²⁵ See Setting and Background: Why Nairobi?

Setting and Background: *Why Nairobi?*

This study was conducted in Nairobi, Kenya, between September and December, 2006. As the capital city of the country and the second largest city in sub-Saharan Africa, Nairobi has long been recognized as one of the most modern, in terms of Western, places on the continent; for this reason, the presence of images containing the Western beauty ideal have been present for some time. In fact, the presence of these images, and their internalization, has caused numerous debates in the past about the definition of African beauty, particularly in reference to skin color. The use of damaging skin bleaches caused the Kenyan government to ban all such products in 2001; nonetheless, the pursuit for lighter skin continues to cause women to use products with hydroquinone, a known carcinogen.²⁶ Still, images of lighter skinned women continue to be used more frequently in both foreign advertisements and those produced in Kenya; no corresponding decrease in the number of images displaying light skin has resulted from the noted damage to women produced by this ideal. This is one example of the effect that the Western beauty ideal has had on women and their physical health in the historical perspective, and it points to potential internalization of the ideal today on other levels.

Indeed, images of women who fit the Western beauty ideal are everywhere in Nairobi. Preliminary evidence is found as early as the drive from the airport, where various billboards post images of thin, young, light-skinned African women with straight hair advertising everything from skin creams to cell phone minutes. A trip to any newspaper/magazine stand provides another plethora of images, particularly in magazines such as *True Love*, *Eve*, *African Woman*, *Glamour East Africa*. These women's

²⁶ "The Colour Divide," *Daily Nation*, 1 Jul 2006.

magazines are all strikingly similar in content and images to magazines like *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour* in the United States with an emphasis on beauty and sexual prowess as a means to happiness and female independence.²⁷ Women's magazines printed in the US, UK, or South Africa are also numerous and commonly read among Nairobi's women. Even the two most popular newspapers in Nairobi, the *Daily Nation* and the *Standard*, each have a section in the Saturday paper resembling the women's magazines in content. When it comes to printed media, the Western beauty ideal is inescapable.

One trying to avoid images of women considered beautiful by Western standards would also be unable to watch much television in Nairobi. The majority of programs shown on the three major Kenya television stations, NTV, KTN, and KBC, originate in America, which virtually guarantees that images of the Western beauty ideal are displayed frequently. 36 different American shows were aired on these three stations during the week following September 30, 2006, many more than once.²⁸ The women and girls depicted in these programs clearly represent beauty in the typical Western manner; in fact, the majority of them are very thin white women. Kenyan women on the comparatively fewer local programs also fit the Western ideal to a much greater extent than the average woman in Nairobi. This trend led one columnist to comment that somehow one "becomes slim as soon as one goes on television."²⁹ Some programs, such as "America's Next Top Model," directly focus on becoming beautiful as defined by the Western ideal as the central theme of the program. Nairobi's television, as in Nairobi's magazines and advertisements, is full of the images of beauty that have proven so destructive to women in the United States and elsewhere.

In addition, Kenya has embraced a significant number of beauty competitions in the last four years, most of which take place in Nairobi. The Nokia Face of Africa competition is the most popular of these in not only Kenya but also all of Africa,

²⁷ The October 2006 *True Love*, for example, presents Kenya's "sexiest 24" people, contains six different articles on "true beauty," has a special on sex under the "life skills" section, and presents three separate articles about supermodels. Similarly, the September 2006 *African Woman*, features 10 African "Future Supermodels" on the cover, all extremely thin and none very dark in color, and proceeds to dedicate over 20 pages of text and/or pictures to the models.

²⁸ *The Standard* (Nairobi), 30 Sept 2006.

²⁹ Kamal Panesar, "Weight Watching," *Daily Nation*, 6 Jun 2005.

primarily because of the coveted modeling contract provided to the winner.³⁰ Additional Kenyan national pageants, many local branches of international competitions, include Miss World Kenya, Miss Earth Kenya, Smile of Africa, Miss Teen World Kenya, Miss Commonwealth Kenya, Miss Samsung India Kenya, Miss India Kenya Worldwide, Miss Malaika, Miss Tourism, Miss Disability, Miss Exodus, and Miss Universities, to name a few.³¹ Though the local branches of all of these competitions are poorly organized and inconsistent, their addition to the national beauty pageants results in over a hundred in the country each year. These competitions are perceived by many to be a viable career option for young girls and women in Kenya; even the *Daily Nation* referred to them as “a major avenue to fame and fortune.”³² But this “avenue” isn’t open to everyone; applicants for the majority of these competitions must meet strict international regulations of a minimum five foot nine inches in height, a 36 inch bust, 24 inch waist, and 36 inch hips (fluctuating no more than two inches in each of those categories), and flawless skin.³³ Those Kenyans aspiring to be models do not have the option to deviate from the tall, thin standard of the Western beauty ideal; they will not even be considered if they do not fit the “norm.”

The increase in beauty competitions is not unrelated to a recent boom in the beauty salon industry in Nairobi over the past few years. In fact, Ashley's Hair and Beauty Academy, the largest beauty school and salon in the city, owns the franchise to some of the most popular pageants in order to “promote progressive modeling while marketing their beauty industry.”³⁴ The growth Ashley's has enjoyed, enabling the company to invest in such expensive endeavors for the sake of advertising, has come from a recent increase in women’s concern over their appearance. As Terry Mungai, the owner of Ashley's, reported: “More women have realized that apart from working hard, beauty also counts.”³⁵ Not only Ashley's has benefited from this so-called realization. The 2005 Nairobi telephone directory lists 123 beauty salons in the area, not including the numerous informal shops in the city and surrounding areas. What’s more, nearly all

³⁰ Connie Aluoch, “Searching for the ‘X Factor’,” *Daily Nation*, 11 Mar 2006.

³¹ Elly Wamari, “All Glamour But Not Beauty,” *Daily Nation*, 1 July 2005.

³² Bertha Kang'ong'oi, “Smile Your Way to Fame,” *Daily Nation*, 8 Jan 2005.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Wamari, “All Glamour,” 1 July 2005.

of these salons in Nairobi have more images of white women than of black, therefore promoting the Western beauty ideal. Due to a ten percent excise tax on cosmetic production within the country that does not extend to imports, the majority of the products in beauty salons are foreign in origin; in fact, Kenya imported Sh495 million worth of beauty products in 2000, a number that has only increased since.³⁶ With such a tax in place, local cosmetic companies have a difficult time competing, and the increasingly popular beauty salons are guaranteed to be flooded with foreign products pushing images of foreign, and usually white, women.

Another recent trend than indicates the growing contemporary importance of body image, and not just beauty, to women in Nairobi is the recent surge in popularity of exercise gyms, particularly the aerobics classes they offer. There were 20 fitness centers listed in the 2005 Nairobi Yellow Pages, again not including those that are informal, with many of these having just opened in the last few years. The majority of the members of these new clubs are women, who flood the aerobics classes offered.³⁷ Though a concern for health may be the cause, evidence points to concerns about physical appearance instead; one columnist commented that many of those who appear to be exercising for their health are in fact "exercising way too much and eating way too little" in the attempt to "transform their body."³⁸ Regardless, the trend is worth investigating due to the noted relationship between exercise and body dissatisfaction in other countries.³⁹

Evidence of the recent importance of aesthetic appearance is also found in the increasing demand for cosmetic surgery in Nairobi. Though previously recognized to be only necessary for reconstructive work following burns or other medical deformities, plastic surgery is now frequently sought out at both Nairobi Hospital and Karen Hospital for operations such as liposuction, rhinoplasty, tummy tuck, breast augmentation, and breast lifts.⁴⁰ Some directly attribute this trend to Western influence via the internalization of the Western beauty ideal: "the need for cosmetic surgery...is gradually

³⁵ "As Cost of Beauty Rises, So Do Clients," *Daily Nation*, 22 Jun 2006.

³⁶ "Tax Puts Ugly Strain on Cosmetic Makers," *Daily Nation*, 16 May 2006.

³⁷ Patricia Odera, "What I Hate About My Body," *Daily Nation*, 23 Apr 2005.

³⁸ Raymond Onyango, "Unhealthy Exercise," *Daily Nation*, 14 Oct 2006.

³⁹ Molly Burger and Dennis Dolny, "The relationship among body mass index, body image, exercise habits and stage of change in college-aged females," *Women in Sport and Physical Activity Journal* (Sept 2002): 19.

growing following the widespread exposure to Western media and its cosmetic industry."⁴¹ The main complaint of a recent article in the "trends" section of the *Daily Nation*, however, is not that "Kenyans, like Westerners, are increasingly getting obsessed with their looks," as is noted, but rather the fact that cosmetic surgery is expensive and leaves "large, ugly financial scars on Kenya patients."⁴² The large trauma to the body due to an unnecessary surgery is also of concern in the study of the potentially damaging effects of the Western beauty ideal, making the recent growth in popularity of plastic surgery of particular interest.

The seemingly recent trend of an increased interest in beauty, corresponding to an increase in exposure to Western media images, is supported by an analysis of articles and images relating to beauty and body image in the *Daily Nation*. For one, it is of consequence to note that diet and weight loss ads, extremely rare in 2003, have increased ever since to the point of becoming standard in every addition. In addition, several telling articles reveal what appears to be a high level of body dissatisfaction among Nairobi's women and adolescent girls. One article in 2005 noted that "most women are unhappy with their hips, legs, breasts, and bottom" as a result of "the image that is thrusting upon them," then proceeded to interview six women who shared how they would change their bodies to fit the ideal image if they could.⁴³ Another followed one week in the columnist's desperate attempts to eat less and lose weight at all costs, without success.⁴⁴ One particularly revealing editorial was written by a man around Christmas in 2005 who was frustrated with women's seemingly endless dissatisfaction with their body and attempts to lose weight.⁴⁵ He noted:

Oddly enough, many women have gone into denial about eating, haunted by their cravings and ashamed with their bodies. No time in our history as a nation have women been so afraid of food. The fear of getting fat is becoming a genuine mental concern.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ Mercy Randa, "The Hideous Cost of Beauty," *Daily Nation*, 16 Nov 2006.

⁴¹ Susan Njoki, "Nips and Tucks," *Daily Nation*, 25 Jun 2006.

⁴² Randa, "Cost of Beauty," 16 Nov 2006.

⁴³ Odera, "What I Hate," 23 Apr 2005.

⁴⁴ Panesar, "Weight Watching," 6 Jun 2005.

⁴⁵ Oyunga Pala, "Of Women and Fat," *Daily Nation*, 11 Dec 2005.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

He went on to nostalgically remember when "voluptuousness" was desirable, complaining that "it takes a brave man" to admit that one is attracted to bigger women and wondering "how in the hell those standards suddenly changed?"⁴⁷ Another article points more directly to effects of this changing standard, suggesting that negative body image in teens is becoming more prevalent in Kenya and is often brought on by both mass media images and the influence of mothers, who affect their daughters when expressing the desire to achieve a thinner figure.⁴⁸ The article recognizes that the beauty standards pushed on mothers and daughters alike by the mass media "are unattainable and frustrating for many" and "fuel emotional disorders."⁴⁹ The *Nation* indicates that not only have at least some women internalized the Western beauty ideal, but that it is also a trend that has broader effects on everyone in society, including the standards that men find, or do not find, attractive, relationships between generations, and societal definitions of beauty.

In spite of noting the hurt experienced by women who feel aesthetically unappealing, other *Nation* articles appear to be applauding, or at least accepting, the Western beauty ideal. Weekly articles, particularly in the Saturday women's magazine, provide beauty, exercise, and weight loss tips, including low fat recipes. One psychologist advised women that, while "your man doesn't expect you to be a supermodel, he does want you to look your best," which includes losing some kilos and not "letting yourself go."⁵⁰ Another recent article lamented the "Afro-centric outrage about the meager body proportions required for a model," asserting that: "Models have to be thin" and that the prestige and money that come along with being a successful model make it desirable for young Africans to adopt Western beauty standards.⁵¹ The article does go on to comment upon how this definition of beauty is determined by politics and economics and very different from the values of their ancestors, quoting Alinda Sawe from Africana House of Fashion:

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Esther Waithaka, "Mirror, mirror..." *Daily Nation*, 4 Oct 2006.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Christopher Hart, "This is All Your Man is Looking For," *Daily Nation*, 22 Oct 2006.

⁵¹ Lilliane Barenzi and Maurice Chirimi, "Inside the Changing Politics and Business of Black Beauty," *Daily Nation*, 8 Sept 2006.

Our ancestors were more interested in the values of a good woman and not those of a beautiful woman...waist, size, and height have now become the primary focus in determining beauty...Before, a thin woman was not considered beautiful.⁵²

In spite of this constructive point, the authors of this article appear overall to accept the changing beauty standards as inevitable and to advise women to benefit from them as much as possible by conforming to them. Unfortunately, attempted conformity to such images will only propagate body dissatisfaction and poor self-esteem in women, and it may even result in eating disorders among the female readers of this article who take such advice.

Indeed, some *Nation* articles have addressed the issue of eating disorders, though they are few in number. The first was in reference to a study done in 2004 that found a miniscule number of cases of anorexia in spite of a perceived increased desire to be thin.⁵³ Another in early 2005 noted the susceptibility of teenage girls to developing eating disorders, encouraging parents to monitor the eating habits of their daughters and listing symptoms of both anorexia and bulimia.⁵⁴ More recently, several outright warnings of the danger of dieting and losing weight have been exhibited through articles. The dangers of malnutrition were presented in the context of dieting and weight loss attempts, advising women to avoid fad diets and make sure their food intake remains above 1,200 kilocalories per day.⁵⁵ Another article warns:

For many people, the attempt to lose or control weight often begins with simple dieting. For some, however, it becomes an obsession, such that the person loses sight of the objective and cannot stop dieting. Regardless of how emaciated they look, they remain obsessed with losing weight and starve themselves, sometimes to death.⁵⁶

The article also notes that messages of thinness and beauty often originate from advertisements for beauty products and weight loss products and should not be taken seriously.⁵⁷ Though there is no clear evidence that eating disorders are problematic in

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Dagi Kimani, "Craving to Stay Thin Has Not Raised Cases of Anorexia," *Daily Nation*, 29 Aug 2004.

⁵⁴ Esther Waithaka, "Teenage Girls Weight Gain Woes," *Daily Nation*, 3 Feb 2005.

⁵⁵ Lina Njoroge, "How Inadequate Diet May Affect Women," *Daily Nation*, 12 Nov 2005.

⁵⁶ Bertha Kang'ong'oi, "Going to Great Lengths to be Thin," *Daily Nation*, 8 May 2006.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

Nairobi, the internalization of the Western beauty ideal appears to be extreme enough for the concern to be raised.

The combination of information regarding media, the modeling industry, beauty salons, gyms, and plastic surgery, in addition to an analysis of the way beauty and the Western ideal are presented in Nairobi's leading newspaper, give evidence of a situation that is rapidly changing, somewhat complex, and immediately relevant. For all of these reasons, Nairobi is an ideal place to study the Western beauty ideal and the effects it has in society at this precise moment in time. This is especially true because the issue has received relatively little serious attention in the region thus far. The only major exception, other than the newspaper articles, is found in the study conducted in 2004 alluded to in the *Daily Nation* article, which surveyed 27 psychiatrists in Kenya to determine if anorexia nervosa was present and if psychiatrists knew how to recognize it. The psychiatrists were found to be capable of diagnosing eating disorders, but their cumulative total of 320 years of practice yielded a mere 16 recorded cases of anorexia nervosa, only 7 of which were found in native Kenyans.⁵⁸ However, this study looked only at the incidence of anorexia nervosa, one specific eating disorder, and in doing so it failed to analyze broader societal trends and directions regarding the internalization of the Western beauty ideal and its effects. Also, this study was conducted two years ago. As already mentioned, much has changed in the way of beauty in Nairobi over the past few years, making a reassessment and deeper analysis of the situation immediately essential.

For all of these reasons, this study was carried out in Nairobi. From mid-September to mid-November, preliminary research and observation took place primarily in the area surrounding the neighborhood of Jamhuri, off of Ngong Road in between Adam's Arcade and Nakumatt Junction. However, the bulk of the study took place from the base of the Safari Times Guest House on Turbo Road, in the neighborhood of Kilimani near Yaya Center. Research itself was conducted throughout Nairobi including both city center and the surrounding areas, but with an emphasis on the Western side of the city simply due to the location of the guest house.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ F.G. Njenga and R.N. Kangethe, "Anorexia nervosa in Kenya," *The East African Medical Journal* 81 (2004): 188.

⁵⁹ For the purpose of confidentiality, the exact location and names of the households, schools, and places of business visited throughout this study will not be disclosed in this document, with the exception of those

Methodology

The main components of this study included analysis of media images and messages, a questionnaire, focus group interviews, both formal and professional individual interviews, and field observation (including informal interviews and conversation). First, in order to investigate the existence of images depicting the Western beauty ideal, information was obtained through a detailed analysis of television programs, advertisements, newspaper articles, and the contents of magazines, particularly women's magazines. Enquiries were also made regarding the timeframe in which these images were introduced and/or became popular in the Nairobi area.⁶⁰

In order to obtain information regarding the internalization and effects of the Western beauty ideal in a systematic and useful way, 43 secondary school students were given a body satisfaction questionnaire to fill out in addition to participating in three separate focus group interviews.⁶¹ One similar focus group interview was held with eight women attending the University of Nairobi. 16 formal, individual interviews were held with people of different ages and occupations in Nairobi for supplementary information, in addition to four professional interviews with two health professionals, the

professionals and businesses that consented to full disclosure of their identities ahead of time. See Methodology for an explanation of type of research conducted, and see Bibliography for the modified list of people interviewed and places visited.

⁶⁰ The findings from this pursuit are documented in the Setting and Background section.

⁶¹ See Appendix II for questionnaire and additional information.

chief executive officer of a modeling agency, and a beauty lecturer at a local beauty school.⁶²

Finally, in a more informal capacity, this project utilized the significant number of beauty salons and exercise facilities in the city of Nairobi to conduct general field observation, including the attendance of several aerobics classes, other exercise sessions, and browsing products at various salons. Such observation helped to augment the information collected through background research, the survey, and interviews. Due to its qualitative nature,⁶³ the data was then incorporated and analyzed to provide a broad illustration of the degree of internalization of the Western beauty ideal in Nairobi and the effects that this has on the health of adolescent girls, women, and society as a whole.

Discussion and Analysis

Popularity of Media Displaying the Western Beauty Ideal

Preliminary evidence already discussed shows that images containing the Western beauty ideal frequent nearly all sources of media in Kenya, in both media that originates in North America and Western Europe and Kenyan media that mimics Western images. The first component of research undertook to ensure that these images were indeed seen and enjoyed by Kenyans in Nairobi, an essential piece of information for determining how internalized and sought after the Western beauty ideal is.

Not surprisingly, media of all kinds is popular among Kenyans in Nairobi. Each adult consulted confirmed reading the newspaper, and particularly the *Daily Nation*, at least once a week, with some of the women noting a special liking for the Saturday women's magazine. All people interviewed also claimed to watch television frequently, supported by the fact that the television is on nearly all the time in the households in Nairobi that own one. Among adults, news and soap operas were the most popular shows, with the American MTV music videos ranking as most popular among the teenagers surveyed. All three of these programs contain women who fit the Western

⁶² See Bibliography for a complete list of interviews conducted. Note: names

⁶³ The questionnaire was used to obtain information in a qualitative manner and was not analyzed quantitatively, with a few minor exceptions (see Discussion and Analysis).

beauty ideal, especially the music videos favored by the youth, indicating that exposure to such images is high.

Even more telling is the popularity of magazines. Though some older women claimed not to read them often in order to save money, university and secondary school students exhibited enthusiasm about them, explaining that they sometimes even bought them collectively and shared.⁶⁴ Their favorites, in order, include the *Insyder*, *Drum*, *Shout*, and *Eve*, all magazines that draw a great deal from Western pop culture. The latter two, along with *Parents* magazine, are also the most popular among adult women. Dina, a 19 year-old student in Nairobi, said of *True Love*: "I love it, and so do my friends. Many do. If you go to the salon, everyone will be reading a copy."⁶⁵ Studies have shown women associate magazine depictions of female beauty with power and efficacy, and the reading of such women's magazines is one of the most accurate predictions of future eating disorders and poor body image.⁶⁶ Indeed, the popularity of all of these media outlets exhibiting images of the Western beauty ideal is certainly cause for concern about the effects that internalization of this ideal has on women and adolescent girls in Nairobi. The remainder of the research sought out such information.

The "Image Industry:" An Assessment

As already discussed, an assessment of media messages indicates that an increasing preoccupation with image is currently taking place among women in Nairobi, and that this preoccupation is at least peripherally associated to Western emphasis on its beauty ideal.⁶⁷ In addition, it appears that this preoccupation has both stemmed from and fueled a recent surge in the popularity of what could be referred to as the "image industry" in Kenya, including beauty salons, beauty competitions and modeling, and exercise facilities. The next component of research was undertaken to assess the validity of this assumption through interviews and field observation. The following summarizes these findings.

- *Beauty Salons*

⁶⁴ Secondary School FGI 1, Interview by author, 10 Oct 2006.

⁶⁵ Dina Chiera, Interview by author, 24 Oct 2006.

⁶⁶ Hitchon et al, "Digital Manipulation," 140.

⁶⁷ See Settings and Background: Why Nairobi?

There is no question that the beauty salon industry in Nairobi has experienced large growth recently. Of seven salons visited as part of field observation, three had been opened within the past two years and another two had either expanded or relocated to meet the higher demand. Many of the women in the salons confirmed being frequent customers and coming in multiple times a month, primarily for hair styling and manicures. "I wouldn't feel right if I didn't have my hair and nails done professionally," commented one customer who came weekly to the salon. Dora, a beautician employed in Nairobi, complained that so many salons had recently started that business wasn't quite as good as it had been, though she said she was usually kept busy due to the high demand for her services and those similar throughout the city.⁶⁸

Of course, leading the way in this economic boom is the previously mentioned Ashleys, which has expanded into not just a salon but also a prominent beauty school. A visit to the downtown Ashleys salon offers many options from basic manicures and facials to more extensive body wraps, with cappuccino available on the side. Such luxuries at the spa were "unheard of" two years ago, probably an "attempt to be like those England places," according to one 36 year old woman who frequents the spa. An interview with Ashleys beauty lecturer Samson confirmed this recent expansion and the sources of its inspiration. Two years ago, Ashleys Beauty School had 60 students in each new monthly module, while today they turn students away after meeting their maximum 125 per month.⁶⁹ Ashleys also guarantees to find work for their graduates, which, as it turns out, isn't difficult: "The market is not saturated [and] is always open for students who are good," confirmation that the industry is "mushrooming everywhere."⁷⁰ Samson also asserted: "All of a sudden there's a rush for people wanting to be beautiful," attributing this to both a good economy and the fact that women "want to look up and modern, to stop being so simple" and to "keep up" with a changing society.⁷¹ Indeed, this is the recent trend that Ashleys has capitalized on with a strong emphasis on the "modern" woman for whom no cost is too high for beauty.

⁶⁸ Dora Mboya, Interview by author, 23 Nov 2006

⁶⁹ Samson Omundi, Interview by author, 26 Nov 2006.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

Of course, much of this trend has come from the corresponding idea in the West that women "deserve" to be beautiful and should put much effort towards obtaining the Western beauty ideal for themselves. This terminology of "modern" women "deserving" to pamper themselves with beauty was encountered at several of the salons observed during field observation.⁷² Dora, for example, explained that "Women know that they earn the right to look beautiful and to feel good about themselves...we are really becoming more independent like American women here in Kenya."⁷³ Samson also confirmed this: "There's been a lot of change in media, of late [there is] a lot of inclusion of beauty images," which, to him, has been successful in "giving Kenyan women the knowledge that beauty is important for them professionally and socially."⁷⁴ Clearly, a boom in the beauty industry has taken place in Nairobi largely due to the influence of Western concepts and media.

- *Modeling and Beauty Competitions*

As it turns out, the recent increase in the number of beauty competitions in Kenya over the last several years is largely a result of the economic expansion in the beauty salon industry. As already mentioned, Ashleys is the franchise owner of four of the largest competitions, Miss Kenya, Miss Global, Miss Tourism, and Miss Internet, and they promote such pageants as a way of advertising their company and promoting a desire for beauty in general.⁷⁵ The modeling industry itself in Kenya has not experienced significant growth outside of the increased number of beauty competitions. In fact, those in the industry complain of the extensive difficulties they face; of course, the "standard" they are comparing the Kenyan industry to is the international modeling community. In these terms, modeling agent CEO Wilson lamented: "standards in Kenya are way below par."⁷⁶ He went on to complain about how Kenyan women are too short, have hips that are too big, and don't have the "discipline" it takes to stay thin, since it is "really hard work to be able to keep up as a model."⁷⁷ Virginia, a 23 year old model, voiced the

⁷² Much evidence exists for the theory that such terminology evolved in an attempt to shift the focus of the most recent feminist movement from obtaining social equality to spending money on and for oneself. See Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*.

⁷³ Dora Mboya, Interview by author, 23 Nov 2006

⁷⁴ Samson Omundi, Interview by author, 26 Nov 2006.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Wilson Malaba, Interview by author, 22 Nov 2006.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

same complaint: "The Kenyan modeling agency needs to step it up a bit," since a runway model really must go abroad in order to make enough money to model professionally.⁷⁸

Nonetheless, modeling is still perceived to be a viable career option by many young girls and women in Nairobi. While the industry itself may not have grown, Wilson attested that the number of people interested has grown significantly over the past several years, attributing this to media and the social pressure it creates:

With television and magazines people want to be modern; that's the way society is moving. A lot of us are influenced by mob psychology. We begin to want what our friends and our society tells us we should want.⁷⁹

Of course, the modeling agencies also do their part in creating this desire for beauty according to international modeling standards. They go into high schools to perform what they call "model development," in which they teach the girls about fashion, hair, public presentation, nutrition, and even current affairs in a desire to groom new models and contestants in beauty competitions.⁸⁰ The modeling agencies may not be growing as an industry at the moment, but their popularity among Kenyan women is.

- *Exercise Facilities*

Observation confirms what *Daily Nation* articles assert in that the vast majority of Kenyans who attend the exercise facilities in Nairobi are indeed women. This is particularly true of the extremely popular aerobics classes, which men rarely attend. While increased awareness of the dangers of obesity certainly plays a role in this behavior, conversations with people at the gyms confirms that it is in fact a desire to achieve what is perceived to be "beauty" that drives most women to exercise. As Naliaka, 30 said: "Women go to gyms for their thighs and ass. We don't care about that cardiovascular stuff."⁸¹ Another woman, Rebecca, explained that her main goal for exercise was to get rid of her thighs and make her stomach flat, which is why she hates to miss even one day of aerobics a week.⁸² Likewise, Josef, a personal fitness trainer, said:

The biggest concerns for women are mostly weight loss and body toning. Especially those above 28 years, they have accumulated so much weight

⁷⁸ Virginiah Shikuku, Interview by author, 22 Nov 2006.

⁷⁹ Wilson Malaba, Interview by author, 22 Nov 2006.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Naliaka Garana, Interview by author, 13 Nov 2006.

⁸² Rebecca Inwani, Interview by author, 18 Nov 2006.

so they want to bring their bodies back to a smaller size. The younger ones are just into looking better.⁸³

According to another trainer, several of his clients were so interested in losing weight and being slim that they actually compromised their health as a result, and attributed this to their desire to "look and be like the women in magazines."⁸⁴ Indeed, studies show that women who regularly exercise often experience the highest frequency of poor body image, weight preoccupation, and disordered eating.⁸⁵ The combination of increased emphasis on physical presentation, the attractiveness of modeling as a career option, and body toning provide strong evidence of internalization of the Western beauty ideal. The extent of this internalization was analyzed next.

Internalization among Adult Women in Nairobi

Clearly, much of the evidence already presented indicates that an increasing preoccupation with outward appearance has recently taken place for women in Nairobi, and that a significant portion of this is due to internalization of the Western beauty ideal, at least by the Kenyan media and image industry. But how much of this internalization has taken place at the level of individuals and broader society? The next two components of research were undertaken in an attempt to answer this question. From the beginning, it should be emphasized that complexities and contradictions abound regarding perceptions of Western images of beauty among adult women in Nairobi. In spite of this difficulty, some noteworthy themes give useful insight into contemporary understanding, or confusions, about definitions of beauty in Kenya and how they are affected by the Western beauty ideal.

- *Differing Beauty Norms across Generations*

Nairobi is a place where tradition mixes with new cultural norms on a variety of different levels, causing inevitable splits between generations on a level not seen in more culturally static environments. Definitions of beauty are no exception. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that older women in Nairobi, particularly those who have come to the

⁸³Josef Karanja, Interview by author, 28 Nov 2006

⁸⁴ Chrispus Baragu, Interview by author, 16 Nov 2006.

⁸⁵ Molly Burger and Dennis Dolny, "The relationship among body mass index, body image, and exercise habits and stage of change in college-aged females," *Women in Sport and Physical Activity Journal* (Sept 2002): 19.

city from elsewhere, are less likely to perceive the Western beauty ideal as desirable than younger women. This theme emerged in nearly every interview in the study. In his experience training women at the gym, Josef noticed that younger women "tend to embrace being slim," while for the older women "slim is not fashion and they sometimes see it as an illness."⁸⁶ Esther, a dressmaker and owner of a shop in downtown Nairobi, deals primarily with an older generation of women who are fairly well off. The women she works for "like to show off their large size with tight dresses" because "they are recognized as important if they have nice, tight clothes on a heavy body."⁸⁷ Young women note this difference as well:

Like, for our mothers, beauty is about the whole person, not just clothes and the like but also inner character. Now for us it's like beauty is very narrowly focused on just the body.⁸⁸

Rose, a young college student, complained: "mother is not modern; she always complains about my clothes and makeup and wants me to be fat like her."⁸⁹ Such ideas were confirmed numerous times, as interviewees noted the desire for young people to look Western while their mothers remained more traditional and disapproved of the changes they see in their daughters.

Interestingly, the younger generation also appears to influence older women in their definition of beauty. In some cases, for example, children provided an avenue into images of the Western beauty ideal and an interpretation of them that older Kenyan women might not otherwise have had. 49 year old Alice, for example, first started thinking about losing weight when her teenage daughters began complaining about wanting a thin figure.⁹⁰ Now, while she doesn't want to be thin, she is a member at a gym and admits to intentionally limit food intake in order to "become slimmer," in sharp contrast to her professed desire to gain weight for her entire youth and young adult life.⁹¹ Logically, it is also true that the more traditional and conservative beauty norms of mothers help their daughters build beauty ideals for themselves that deviate from the

⁸⁶ Josef Karanja, Interview by author, 28 Nov 2006

⁸⁷ Esther Tolle, Interview by author, 17 Nov 2006.

⁸⁸ Secondary School FGI 2, Interview by author, 16 Nov 2006.

⁸⁹ Rose Mbugua, Interview by author, 25 Nov 2006.

⁹⁰ Alice Apiyo, Interview by author, 6 Nov 2006.

⁹¹ Ibid.

Western beauty ideal they see elsewhere. As 16-year-old Roselyn expressed: "I know I'm beautiful even though I'm fat because I'm African, and African women are beautiful however they are."⁹² She later said it was her mother who taught her that.

There is also a significant difference between what is expected of single women and what is expected of married women, which in turn reflects the generation difference in beauty norms. Many separate interviews independently confirmed that single women are expected to put a lot of effort into being fashionable and fit, "beautiful" by Western standards, while married women should gain weight in more traditional African style. Rebecca explained: "Kenyan men like my husband want to provide well for their families, so they don't want thin wives or children who seem to be sick."⁹³ Indeed, one informal encounter with a recently married woman revealed that she had gained over 10 kilograms in the six months since she had been married, for the same professed reason. Of course, some married women express desires to lose weight, just as some younger women want to gain weight. These observations are generalizations that do not hold true in all cases, but are uniform enough on the level of society to discuss and analyze.⁹⁴ In short, though transitory and complex, there is a general trend in Nairobi in which younger women differentiate themselves from the traditional beauty norms of older generations and turn to the Western beauty ideal for their standards.

- *Importance of Perceived Male Desires*

Another theme of interest is the high level of importance that women in Nairobi place on the opinion of men, especially younger single women. In words that were similar to those expressed by many interviewees, Dina noted that "Men expect [women] to always be very smart."⁹⁵ She went on to explain that women put a great deal of effort into their hair, clothing, and overall appearance in order to please men, and commented that "looking good is one of the many things women do to maintain their men. They must because the competition is there."⁹⁶ In the focus group interview with university students this point was emphasized again and again, with one individual complaining: "If

⁹² Roselyn Waweru, Interview by author, 16 Nov 2006.

⁹³ Rebecca Inwani, Interview by author, 18 Nov 2006.

⁹⁴ Another note that should be made is that class divisions regarding beauty norms also exist and complicate the noted generation division, though this was not sufficiently studied in this research. See Recommendations for further discussion.

⁹⁵ Dina Chiera, Interview by author, 24 Oct 2006.

my hair isn't perfect, or if my clothes aren't stylish, the men will notice right away. But for them, they don't care at all about how they look."⁹⁷ In spite of understanding this inequality between genders, every single woman interviewed without exception accepted the need to look good for men as important and unavoidable for all those who desire to date.

In this context, the perception women have of what men want in a woman is important. Though there is a broad understanding that men prefer body types much larger than the model size of the Western beauty ideal, this isn't always the case. In the same interview with university students, Sara expressed her belief that "girls want to look like models because men like the models," which, in her opinion, "is part of all Kenyans becoming more modern."⁹⁸ Naliaka, a single 30 year old, had a more nuanced belief, exposing what she believed to be male hypocrisy in this regard:

Men give all the attention to skinny women, at least officially. They follow them around at the clubs and talk about how they want to have a woman that looks like a model. But the women they want to go to bed with are the big ones. The skinny women are for looking, the big women for touching.⁹⁹

Regardless of what men are really looking for at the end of the day, the fact that women are beginning to believe that men want thin women is a warning sign for damaging eating behavior and other beauty practices. This is especially true considering the large emphasis that is placed socially on the need to please potential dates and husbands.

- *Skin and Hair*

Lighter is almost universally recognized as better throughout Nairobi when it comes to skin color; nearly all agree whether an older woman, younger woman, man, or boy. As Dina said: "here people want to get lighter; the lighter the better is what we all say."¹⁰⁰ The roots of this cultural belief lie in the discrimination and abuse inherent in the colonial system, and are outside the scope of this study. Nonetheless, the Western

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ University FGI 1, Interview by author, 26 Nov 2006.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Naliaka Garana, Interview by author, 13 Nov 2006.

¹⁰⁰ Dina Chiera, Interview by author, 24 Oct 2006.

beauty ideal does perpetuate this image.¹⁰¹ Throughout interviews, women of all ages expressed a desire to have lighter skin, many had used or continued to use skin lightening creams of some kind, and several asked outright questions requesting advice for how to go about changing their color.

Similarly, several interviewees commented on the fact that East African women traditionally wore very short hair but are now afraid to do so for fear of "looking like a man," and they opt for braids, weaves, or extensions instead.¹⁰² Trips to beauty salons confirmed that women are increasingly interested in straightening their hair, though this has gone on for some time in Nairobi. Though the perceived desirability of light skin and straightened hair doesn't directly originate from exposure to the Western beauty ideal today, they are rooted in similar historical, racist beauty standards that are currently perpetuated by such images.

- *The Importance of Shape and the Thin Ideal*

Perhaps the most damaging and indoctrinated component of the Western beauty standard to women in many parts of the world is the thin ideal. For this reason, this study placed an extra emphasis on the extent to which the thin ideal in particular played into the definition of beauty to women in Nairobi. Of course, this varied for different individuals. But results on a societal level in Nairobi show that the thin ideal has not been internalized completely, but instead has influenced and changed a Kenyan emphasis on "shape" and a "firm" body. Having a good shape was important to all women interviewed, usually including larger, firm breasts and buttocks. From this perspective, fat isn't necessarily bad, though, as Naliaka explained: "It's not the same kind of fat. People want to have shape and be proportionately distributed; they don't want to be fat."¹⁰³ Another confirmed the same idea: "What you Americans call fat can be beautiful to us here in Kenya because to us it is shape that is important; the fat that is ugly for us is the shapeless body."¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Though this generalization is true in advertisements and television programs, there is an exception in the international modeling scene, where dark models like Sudanese Alek Wek are considered beautiful due to their exotic appearance. Nonetheless, this exotic is understood only in relation to a norm of light skin that still permeates the Western beauty ideal as it relates to the black and brown people of the world.

¹⁰² Quote from Naliaka Garana, Interview by author, 13 Nov 2006, also Dina Chiera, Interview by author, 24 Oct 2006 and University FSG 1, Interview by author, 26 Nov 2006.

¹⁰³ Naliaka Garana, Interview by author, 13 Nov 2006.

¹⁰⁴ University FGI 1, Interview by author, 26 Nov 2006.

Increasingly, this emphasis on shape also includes a desire for a thin waist and a tight, toned body, in what can be interpreted to be the influence of the Western beauty ideal. According to Samson of Ashley's Beauty School, women "want to adopt a good body...a slim waist, a good butt, and a protruding bust."¹⁰⁵ Rose agreed, and added: "for me, I don't mind my hips so much but I really want a flat stomach like Tyra Banks; that is what all Kenyan women want now because of the media influence."¹⁰⁶ Two self-assured young women in a club one night expressed confidence in their large breasts and hips yet were simultaneously dissatisfied with their stomachs. In fact, throughout the evening the two made jokes about having a large "belly," in reference to consuming too much food or alcohol. These themes were brought up repeatedly throughout interviews and field observation. On average, Kenyan women do not desire to look like thin supermodels in all aspects but rather covet and appreciate a firm, fit body.

Though this is true on the societal level, it should also be noted that the desire for thinness was very strong in some of the women encountered through this study, particularly those that are younger. The model Virginiah, for example, complained of her large "Kenyan" hips several times and noted how she often goes days eating nothing but fruit in order to lose weight.¹⁰⁷ Ashioya, a 30-year-old office secretary, spoke of her desire to become as thin as possible, and she explained how she "pretty much stopped eating," because all that she wanted was "to become small."¹⁰⁸ She also said that her friends share this desire, and that "all women just want to be thin like the models."¹⁰⁹ Several women at the gym were also discontented with their hips and breasts and desired to become thinner. In addition, the modeling agent Wilson noted:

If you haven't seen a woman in a long time and you say 'you put on some weight,' they will be offended. They want to be very small, this tiny, tiny thing that will be blown away with the wind. They try to copy the Western lifestyle, maybe not eat for two days and then just eat a sandwich.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁵ Samson Omondi, Interview by author, 26 Nov 2006.

¹⁰⁶ Rose Mbugua, Interview by author, 25 Nov 2006.

¹⁰⁷ Virginiah Shikuku, Interview by author, 22 Nov 2006.

¹⁰⁸ Ashioya Odinga, Interview by author, 24 Nov 2006.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Wilson Malaba, Interview by author, 22 Nov 2006.

Of course, not all women would fit this description. But it is noteworthy nonetheless that some are beginning to, not to mention the influence that the Western beauty ideal has had on the traditional emphasis on shape and larger size in Kenya.

- *Transitory Nature of the Definition of Beauty*

As the discussion thus far has indicated, the way in which women in Nairobi define beauty is in transition, making it complicated and difficult to completely understand. Traditional understandings of beauty, emerging Kenyan definitions, and the influence of the Western ideal all mix so that complexities abound not only across generations, classes, and genders, but also within individuals. In the same twenty minutes, 30 year old Naliaka said both that "all women in Nairobi want to be thin," and that women pay more attention to fashion and care very little about what their body looks like.¹¹¹ Later she noted the contradiction in some of the things she was saying: "There is so much intermixing when it comes to what we Kenyans think is beautiful."¹¹² Truly, this "intermixing" was recognized in nearly every interview and focus group involved in the research. On an intellectual and social level women would often condemn the Western beauty ideal as a foreign imposition that meant little to Kenyans, while at the same time expressing their own desire to be thinner, lighter in color, and younger looking. Samson, the beauty lecturer, explained this phenomenon: "The media has been pushing through that message [of the Western beauty ideal]. To some they feel it has been shoved down their throats but they are agreeing that it is true."¹¹³ Such dichotomy takes place everywhere but is especially noticeable in a society where so many cultural norms and attitudes are in transition.

A level of complexity is also added by the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Kenya. Recurrent in many interviews was the idea that being too thin automatically subjected a person to the social stigma of having the disease, something to be avoided at all costs. Ashioya, who had invested so much in her desire to become thin, also said that "some people say now that I am sick, or that I have AIDS," which makes her want to gain some weight.¹¹⁴ According to 29-year-old Wajiru: "If those models in the magazines walked

¹¹¹ Naliaka Garana, Interview by author, 13 Nov 2006.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Samson Omundi, Interview by author, 24 Nov 2006.

¹¹⁴ Ashioya Odinga, Interview by author, 24 Nov 2006.

around the streets here everyone would think they had AIDS."¹¹⁵ In an interesting paradox, the devastating AIDS pandemic encourages a healthier lifestyle for some women in Nairobi, though of course the HIV/AIDS crisis impacts society at so many levels that this fleeting conclusion is meaningless in the big picture of the disease.

Also distorting the definition of beauty in Kenya and pushing people towards acceptance of the Western beauty ideal is the strong desire of people to be "Western," or "modern," themselves. Permeating all facets of the research was the belief in the superiority of the materialistic, individualistic way of life emphasized in North America in particular, in which people in Nairobi want to participate. Nearly all of the people interviewed were asked the question: "What would the ideal Kenyan women look like to you?" In addition to universally referring to a fit, lighter skinned, fashionably dressed woman, people also frequently mentioned lifestyles for this ideal woman that match the perceived lifestyle of wealthy Westerners. For example:

She wants to look like Naombi Campbell or Tyra Banks, to look good, to have a car, to have money, to have a good social life, and to have fun.¹¹⁶

After hours of field observation and interviews, it is clear that the biggest force behind the increasing prominence of the Western beauty ideal in Nairobi is this desire of people to be "modern" in the way they perceive Westerners to be. Unfortunately, this means copying the "Western" way of life, beauty ideal and all.

Internalization among Adolescent Girls in Nairobi

Many of the same themes exhibited in the analysis of internalization among adult women in Nairobi also hold true for adolescent girls. The definitions of beauty are complex and contradictory for the secondary school students who participated in the study, with the same emphasis on men's desires, a toned shape, and overall fashion. However, as the generation dichotomy has already begun to show, there is a noted difference in this generation due to their youth and susceptibility to media messages. Indeed, this susceptibility is characteristic of adolescents, who exhibit vulnerability to media messages and social pressure to a large extent.¹¹⁷ For this reason, a deeper look at

¹¹⁵ Wanjiru Wamai, Interview by author, 23 Nov 2006.

¹¹⁶ Wilson Malaba, Interview by author, 22 Nov 2006.

¹¹⁷ Campos et al., "Adolescence and Gender," 151.

the way in which the messages and values of the Western beauty ideal are affecting young girls in Nairobi is necessary.

- *Survey Results*

First, 43 of the adolescent participants filled out a body questionnaire measuring their own level of body satisfaction, their perceptions on what is attractive, and their ideas on how media determines what is attractive.¹¹⁸ The data and information collected through the survey was very revealing. First, in response to the question: "If you could look like any celebrity in the world, who would it be," the most common response was Beyonce, the second Ciara, and the third Paris Hilton. All three are American, all three would certainly fit into the Western Beauty ideal, and the third, Hilton, is excessively thin with very white skin. In fact, of all 38 that responded to the question, only two listed Kenyans; the rest desired to resemble Americans, and all thin Americans with either white or lighter brown skin.¹¹⁹ Similarly, there was strong consensus among the girls that media is an important source of information about what is attractive, and the vast majority reported watching at least 1-2 hours of television per day and reading at least one magazine per month. The media images displaying the Western beauty ideal are clearly watched and respected by the secondary school girls who participated in the survey.

The responses about attractiveness itself, especially regarding what the girls wanted for themselves, were a bit more ambiguous but also exhibited significant trends. The statement "Slender women are more attractive" drew 11 "strongly agree" responses, 12 "agree," 7 "neutral," 9 "disagree," and 4 "strongly disagree," which leaves an average at just below "agree." Though it is significant that more girls than not would agree, the mixed results are not indicative of extremely high internalization of the thin ideal. Results are similarly mixed for the questions that asked if girls wanted to look like the images they see on television and in magazines, with slight but not definitive overall affirmative responses. However, some of the ambiguity was resolved with other revealing questions. For example, only three of 43 claimed to have felt pressure to gain weight, and the vast majority showed signs of body dissatisfaction and concern about

¹¹⁸ See Appendix II: Body Questionnaire.

being heavy. In addition, though 8 said they would desire a body size larger than their own and 10 would remain the same size, the remainder would become smaller if they could. With over half desiring to lose weight and nearly all dissatisfied with their appearance in some way, it seems that the thin ideal has at least made some impact.

Also revealing were the general comments made by the girls at the end of the survey, especially in relation to their other answers. They can generally be divided into two categories: those who admitted to the desire to be thin on an individual level and those who disparaged the thin ideal on a social level. One of the strongest examples of the former comes from a 16-year-old:

For a 16-year-old I am too huge with my height 5' 10" I should be weighing 45 kilograms. So I've started exercising and doing aerobics. I once tried laxatives but it was the worse experience ever. I just wanna [sic] look like Paris [Hilton] and do modelling [sic]...I just want to be a stick figure.

According to the survey, this girl is "extremely dissatisfied" with her body on the whole and shows a strong desire to look like models in magazines, placing a very high level of importance on the role of media in determining what is attractive. She claims to "always" be worried about her shape, feel that she needs to diet, and imagine cutting off fleshy areas of her body, among other things, clearly showing a preoccupation with shape and weight. Another 16-year-old asked: "Please try and help those of us who want to lose weight in order to pursue modeling." She was also extremely dissatisfied with her body and wanted very much to look like the images in the media. Most revealing of all is her indication on the survey that she vomited often in order to feel thinner, the classic sign of bulimia nervosa. Though others didn't indicate such damaging behaviors as laxatives or vomiting, many expressed similar extents of body dissatisfaction, belief in the media as an important source of information about attractiveness, and desire to lose weight.

Other girls were very adamant about actively resisting the Western beauty ideal. One 16-year-old expressed her resistance eloquently:

I guess the media has really corrupted what we term as beauty. We've stopped believing in ourselves because of this. It's a wrong attitude that

¹¹⁹ Other answers included: Tyra Banks, Jessica Alba, Kelly Rowland, Jada Pinkett Smith, Halle Berry, Alicia Keys, Ashanti, Jennifer Lopez, Kate Moss, and Celine Dion.

should change and starts from within, when we judge ourselves by what is in our hearts and not just outside.

She consistently answered questions on the survey to show her resistance to the beauty ideal as much as possible; for example, she answered "strongly disagree" to the statement that slender women are more attractive. However, she also feels ashamed of her body "very often" and "always" feels self-conscious about her shape in front of other people. Another example was given by a 17-year-old, who complained that "the issue of becoming slender makes fat people feel shapeless." She also answered questions based on her resistance to the ideal while simultaneously indicating moderate dissatisfaction with her body and the desire to become slimmer. In fact, in spite of such resistance shown by many, only three or four girls exhibited true confidence and acceptance of their bodies that wasn't rooted in defiant denial of the Western beauty ideal.

When analyzed, the resistance itself presents evidence of the strength of the Western beauty ideal among these students. Roselyn, a 16-year-old from one of the schools visited, explained that it is not always popular to admit that people want to look like models or celebrities from America.¹²⁰ Nonetheless, she said that she's "never actually heard of anyone who wants to be bigger," and that her friends "always say 'I want to be thinner here, thinner here' ...Even the girls who are very thin already always want to be thinner."¹²¹ Based on this contradiction between expressing resistance to the Western beauty ideal yet being dissatisfied with one's size, it appears that the thinness ideal has indeed been internalized to a significant extent among the secondary school participants. This is further confirmed by those girls that blatantly express their desires to be models and their preoccupation with weight. Whether it resulted in defiant denial or complete acceptance, the Western beauty ideal influenced every one of the girls surveyed in some way.

- *Focus Group Analysis*

The focus group discussions with secondary school students, taken place as supplemental to the surveys, also revealed useful information. Through the conversations

¹²⁰ Roselyn Waweru, Interview by author, 16 Nov 2006.

the girls emphasized the extreme popularity of media, and particularly media involving American pop culture. In fact, they often asked questions about American pop stars, actors, and television shows. They also confirmed some of the themes noted through general interviews, such as the increasing popularity of beauty salons, exercise facilities, and models, both for themselves and for the majority of Kenyans in Nairobi.

Most importantly, however, the focus group interviews displayed more clearly how much the students view the thin ideal as desirable. In a similar fashion to the surveys and interviews, this did not come out through direct statements. Students often emphasized the African desire for curves and shape when directly asked about body image. However, when conversation got going, each of the focus group sessions included the girls asking questions such as: "Some of us have cellulite and we don't know what to do to get rid of it," or "What should we do to lose weight?" "How can I make my body more firm?" "How can I lose the fat on my stomach without losing weight on my bust and buttocks?" Many also enquired about becoming models. Through such passing enquiries and comments it became blatantly clear that many of the students desire to lose weight and strive to obtain the Western beauty ideal, either as it is or as it has been modified to include "shape" in its blend with Kenyan culture.

This desire was also expressed in conversations surrounding food. Though not all diet, most claim to be extremely conscious of what they eat so as to not gain weight. In the first group, several of them admitted to dieting and to exercising for the purpose of losing weight, though others said such things were more for "modern mothers," and said they watched their weight by limiting food intake instead.¹²² This was also asserted in the second group, though more claimed to diet and all claimed to be conscious of what they eat; one said "you feel guilty when you eat food" in reference to her eating habits.¹²³ In the third group, the consensus was that they "avoid fried and fatty foods and sweets" overall, but in addition some take diet pills, exercise, or, in the words of one, "just starve."¹²⁴ There was disagreement about eating disorders in general. Some

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Secondary School FGI 1, Interview by author, 10 Oct 2006.

¹²³ Secondary School FGI 2, Interview by author, 16 Nov 2006.

¹²⁴ Secondary School FGI 3, Interview by author, 19 Nov 2006.

claimed that such things wouldn't happen in Africa, while others agreed with this 15-year-old when she said:

I think it's common. You'll find someone not eating fries because they want to be thinner, another will fill herself up when people are there and then throw up later, another won't eat at all.¹²⁵

Though evidence of a major eating disorder problem doesn't exist in abundance, the overall desire to be thin, expressed in preoccupation with food, is strong enough to raise concern about the issue.

The girls also displayed adept understanding of where the pressure to be thin comes from. Again, the pursuit of a "Western" lifestyle and image drove many of the girls to want to be thin and "beautiful" by Western standards, and they also recognized this trend at a societal level. One 14-year-old explained: "The pressure comes from music videos and movies from Western culture."¹²⁶ Another added that "it is because of people from Western cultures; Kenyans think they are more advanced so they try to imitate them."¹²⁷ They were all aware of the tension this sometimes causes with more traditional African definitions of beauty, though the extent to which this was viewed as a problem varied. Regardless, though the definition of beauty is also in transition in this context, the secondary school students have internalized the Western beauty ideal to an extent greater than the average woman in Nairobi.

"Beauty" as a Public Health Concern

The discussion thus far has revealed several actions taken by women and girls in Nairobi that are known to be damaging to their health. These actions demand further attention and analysis in a public health context. They include:

- *Skin Lightening*

As previously noted, skin lightening continues to take place in Nairobi through various creams and treatments. Luckily, since the ban on skin bleaching products, few of these creams have immediately damaging side effects (nor are they very effective). Nairobi hospital used to see a number of cases of burns and damage due to bleaching

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

products but hasn't since the government ban.¹²⁸ However, it should be noted again that several of the creams still on the market may have long term effects due to their use of the carcinogen hydroquinone.¹²⁹ The FDA has considered making such creams prescription drugs due to the potential damage they can inflict, which is a move that should be considered by the public health authorities in Kenya as well.¹³⁰

- *Dieting*

The secondary school girls weren't the only ones to claim to diet, or to use such potentially dangerous practices as diet pills or drastic calorie reduction. Many of the interviewees claimed to diet or to know many who did. Ochieng, after graduating from university, looked back on it and recalled: "The girls there were always dieting and complaining about this and that, not wanting to eat more than small amounts of anything."¹³¹ In addition, Nairobi Hospital deals with a number of cases of crash dieters, who "lose weight quickly but always regain it, which is very bad for their health."¹³² Both of the trainers interviewed also confirmed that most of the women they work with diet and often don't do so in a healthy way.¹³³ Dieting is clearly becoming more common. In the United States, the frequency of dieting is a major contributor to disease and obesity.¹³⁴ For this reason, there should be a campaign that pushes proper nutrition and discourages dieting, even if this extends to banning advertisements of diet products.

- *Smoking*

Also of concern on a public health level is the fact that women are beginning to smoke with the intention of losing weight. Naliaka admitted to continuing her smoking habit in part because she fears that she would gain weight were she to quit, and she said that many of the women she knows in Nairobi do the same, some even beginning to smoke for the sole intention of losing weight.¹³⁵ Wilson confirmed that many of his

¹²⁸ F.K. Mathiu, Interview by author, 15 Nov 2006.

¹²⁹ "The Colour Divide," *Daily Nation*, 1 Jul 2006.

¹³⁰ "FDA Recommends Rx Status for All Skin Bleaching Creams," *Drug Industry Daily* 5 no. 171, 31 Aug 2006.

¹³¹ Ochieng Odundo, Interview by author, 6 Nov 2006.

¹³² F.K. Mathiu, Interview by author, 15 Nov 2006.

¹³³ Josef Karanja, Interview by author, 28 Nov 2006 and Chrispus Baragu, Interview by author, 16 Nov 2006.

¹³⁴ Terry Poulton, *No Fat Chicks: How Big Business Profits Making Women Hate Their Bodies and How to Fight Back*, (New York: Birch Lane Press, 1997), 44.

¹³⁵ Naliaka Garana, Interview by author, 13 Nov 2006.

models and other women he knows do the same.¹³⁶ The harms of smoking to everyone in society lend strong support to efforts to increase public knowledge about the effects of cigarettes as well as dissuading women from losing weight through such a dangerous practice.

- *Eating Disorders*

This study did not find any concrete evidence to refute the 2004 finding that eating disorders are rare among Kenyans. However, one of the women interviewed was a probable victim of anorexia and one of the secondary students appeared to have bulimia, which is significant considering the small number of subjects in this study. Other sporadic cases were also noted by those interviewed. For example, the matron of Nairobi hospital said: "We have had a few cases of bulimia nervosa, people throwing up their food, but it is quite rare."¹³⁷ The trainer Josef also admitted to having several anorexic clients, though he says it is not the norm.¹³⁸ Still, even a few cases are important considering the potentially devastating effects of eating disorders, and intervention is again validated by projections regarding the probable increase in eating disorders in the future.¹³⁹ Educational campaigns warning of the dangers and symptoms of eating disorders would be of extreme benefit to the health of young girls in particular in Nairobi.

- *Body Dissatisfaction and Self-esteem*

Related to all the other issues, general body dissatisfaction is perhaps the most significant finding of this study. Though many who have grown up surrounded by chronic dissatisfaction with body in their respective societies may view this to be the norm, this should not be the case. Body dissatisfaction leads to poor self-esteem and decreased confidence on many levels, eventually preventing women from being able to participate in society to the full extent possible. In an atmosphere where so much is already stacked against women, this should be taken very seriously and countered with public measures to increase acceptance of different kinds of body types in Kenya, thus

¹³⁶ Wilson Malaba, Interview by author, 22 Nov 2006.

¹³⁷ F.K. Mathiu, Interview by author, 15 Nov 2006.

¹³⁸ Josef Karanja, Interview by author, 28 Nov 2006

¹³⁹ See "Projections for the Future."

countering the present move towards more widespread internalization of the thin ideal. The vulnerability of adolescent girls in particular should be noted. Potential interventions include going into secondary schools to promote genuine self confidence and acceptance, another would be to control the images young girls are exposed to through legislation. One example would be the banning of digital manipulation of models in magazines and advertisements.

Projections for the Future

Of all of the assertions made by interviewees, one of the most common was the understanding that the Western beauty ideal will only become more accepted as time goes on. A university student age 19 projected: "I think the magazines and the media will have more effect in the future."¹⁴⁰ Some of the secondary school girls revealed that, in their estimation, the impact of the Western beauty ideal will only increase as people watch more and more television and read magazines, especially in terms of people's actions.¹⁴¹ One student predicted: "Already Kenyans want to be thinner than before because of Western media, so I think that people will try harder to be thin the more they see the models and actresses."¹⁴² Indeed, even the professionals consulted predicted an increase in the prevalence of eating disorders. Samson, the beauty lecturer, believes: "It is bound to happen. It is not happening at a very large magnitude yet, but it is bound to happen because people will take it to the extreme."¹⁴³ Mrs. Mathiu, the matron at Nairobi hospital, explained: "In terms of anorexia nervosa and bulimia, I believe it will come. I am actually surprised we haven't had more cases yet considering our clientele, because this is the hospital they would come to."¹⁴⁴

In short, people and professionals at all levels are predicting an increase in the popularity of media's influence on beauty, leading to predicted eating disorder epidemics in the not too distant future. As complex beauty is right now, people in Nairobi have very little disagreement regarding the direction that the Kenyan beauty ideal is headed. This is perhaps the most important discovery of this research. The images in media

¹⁴⁰ Dina Chiera, Interview by author, 24 Oct 2006.

¹⁴¹ Secondary School FGI 3, Interview by author, 19 Nov 2006.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Samson Omundi, Interview by author, 26 Nov 2006.

containing the Western beauty ideal are indeed present in Nairobi, and they are internalized to varying extents among different people. On a societal level, however, there is a movement towards more complete acceptance of the Western beauty ideal without criticism, a movement that will prove to be increasingly damaging to women and adolescent girls in Nairobi if the lessons learned throughout the world have any validity.

Conclusion

The research conducted through this study reveals a picture of beauty standards in Nairobi that is complex and transitory. Nonetheless, the western beauty ideal has certainly impacted people in Nairobi, causing many to be increasingly preoccupied with their physical appearance and their bodies. Such an exaggerated concern for physical presentation is not only an unnecessary distraction from more productive uses of women's resources, but also potentially damaging to women's physical and mental health due to dieting, potential eating disorders, and most of all general body dissatisfaction. True, the Western beauty ideal has not met with uniform, widespread

¹⁴⁴ F.K. Mathiu, Interview by author, 15 Nov 2006.

acceptance at this point in Nairobi. Nonetheless, the effect that it has had in a short amount of time is significant enough to demand attention, especially considering the projected increasing importance of the damaging beauty standard in the future.

Kenyan women face many challenges, of which meeting beauty standards is not a top priority. In fact, the majority of women who starve themselves in Kenya do so because there is not enough to eat and they want to save food for their children and husbands, not because they wish to be thin.¹⁴⁵ Indeed, all of the post-colonial countries of the global South and their allies have many important concerns, perhaps the most immediately pressing of which include economic stability, public health, and gender equality. Cultural definitions of female beauty are inextricably linked to all three. Though beauty should not demand resources otherwise needed for poverty alleviation or other programs for equality and freedom among the world's people, it should certainly be recognized as a significant contributor to the continued subjugation of women everywhere. Indeed, at the end of the day, freedom from the strict restrictions and demands of imposing cultural norms is inextricably linked to all other desirable human advancements. If not taken seriously, any of the social diseases afflicting societies has the potential to destroy all other progresses made. The image of beauty put forth by the Western ideal will only continue to spread and create damage in its wake unless major efforts are put forth to stop it. We all need to recognize the disease that often lies underneath what we perceive to be beauty in our world today, before it is too late.

Recommendations

Areas of Future Study

As an attempt to assess a broad, complex reality in a very short amount of time, this study was inherently and irrevocably plagued by restrictions. Any facet of what was attempted in the methodology would benefit from a more in depth and lengthy analysis, especially due to the rapid rate at which beauty norms are changing. For one, greater attention should be given to university students, on whom pressures and attitudes were not adequately explored in this study. Also, a more in depth analysis of the differences between generations would be useful, with a special focus on the ways in which mothers

and daughters affect one another's expectations of beauty, which is known to be extremely relevant in other contexts. Completely lacking in this study, but also extremely necessary, is a class analysis of beauty norms and an exploration of the ways in which different levels of economic autonomy affect both exposure to and internalization of the Western beauty ideal. Finally, the continued monitoring of the ways in which beauty norms in Nairobi are affected by the Western beauty ideal is extremely important in such a transitory context. The incidence of eating disorders and other damaging attempts to meet beauty norms should be especially noted in this continued evaluation due to their potentially harmful effects.

"Beauty" as a Public Health Concern

In addition to demanding further study, the research presented here provides strong evidence for the need of public health intervention regarding the damaging actions already taking place among women and girls in Nairobi in their quest for "beauty." The specific areas of concern, and recommendations for intervention for Kenyans, correspond to the issues laid out in the corresponding section in the Discussion and Analysis section. To reiterate, the specific interventions recommended include:

- Expanding the ban on skin lightening products to include making those creams containing hydroquinone available by prescription only.
- Intervention in the form of advertising campaigns directed towards discouragement of dieting and other harmful practices, instead advocating positive body image. This should focus on adolescents in particular and include classes in secondary and even primary schools.
- Legislation to ban diet advertisements and digital manipulation of models.
- Raising awareness about eating disorders and their potentially devastating effects, including education regarding symptoms and warning signs.

Call for International Recognition and Support

Finally, the international nature of this issue cannot be overlooked. Images containing the Western beauty ideal originate elsewhere and are exported to Kenya as part of a global economic system in which corporations from North America and Western

¹⁴⁵ Helena Halperin, *I Laugh so I won't Cry: Kenyan Women Tell the Stories of Their Lives*, (Trenton,

Europe dominate the majority of markets. For this reason, efforts should also be concentrated in these Western countries to confront the prevalence of the Western beauty ideal and fight for acceptance of a broader range of body types. Examples of movements already going on include those initiated in Madrid and Milan demanding a minimum body mass index for supermodels. Pushing for a global ban on digital manipulation of models would be another worthwhile and necessary area of concentration. Also needed is the push for recognition of issues of beauty by women ' s groups, since they are largely ignored by many of those in existence, especially outside of North America and Western Europe.

In addition, inequality lies at the heart of this issue. As already mentioned, Kenya and other indebted countries have limited control over the products and images that flood their media and markets. A true analysis of the effects this has is beyond the scope of this research. Leave it to be said that without a shift in this economic system, countries such as Kenya will remain unable to counter the cultural pressure of the images of the Western beauty ideal with local alternatives. More importantly, as long as such countries remain in debt and impoverished, the severe public health and poverty challenges they face will leave them unable to mobilize resources to meet the needs of young girls and women regarding beauty standards.

The most directly impacting form of inequality in regards to beauty, however, is found in gender inequality. As long as the world ' s women are treated as inferior, they will have a difficult time obtaining the self-confidence and assuredness necessary to not only withstand the pressure put on them by society, but also fight against it. Also, in the current context of inequality, issues that primarily affect women, such as beauty and eating disorders, are more likely to be overlooked or viewed as superficial and of lesser importance. Again, elaborating on these points is beyond the intention of this paper. For now, let it be asserted that what is needed is a true commitment to the empowerment of women on all levels and in all places, from Kenya to the United States.

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¹⁴⁶ For the purpose of confidentiality, the names of the schools and homes attended for focus group interviews will remain anonymous to all but the author. In addition, the names of individual interviewees have been changed for the protection of their identity. Only the information about professional interviews has been fully disclosed, with the consent and knowledge of the participants.

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Garana, Naliaka, hostel manager age 30. Interview by author, 13 November 2006,

Inwani, Rebecca, advertising executive age 38. Interview by author, 18 November 2006,

Kamau, Anderson, retired age 55. Interview by author, 07 November 2006.

Karanja, Josef, personal fitness trainer age 25. Interview by author, 28 November 2006.

Mboya, Dora, beautician age 32. Interview by author, 23 November 2006.

Mbugua, Rose, student age 22. Interview by author, 25 November 2006.

Odinga, Ashioya, office assistant age 30. Interview by author, 24 November 2006.

Odundo, Ochieng, cell phone company employee age 24. Interview by author, 06 November 2006.

Shikuku, Virginia, model age 23. Interview by author, 22 November 2006.

Tolle, Esther, dress shop owner age 55. Interview by author, 11 November 2006.

Wamai, Wanjiru, embassy employee age 29. Interview by author, 23 November 2006.

Wanbua, Pauline, cell phone company employee age 26. Interview by author, 08 November 2006.

Waweru, Roselyne, student age 16. Interview by author, 16 November 2006.

Appendix I: GLOSSARY OF TERMS

anorexia nervosa: a disorder in which preoccupation with dieting and thinness leads to excessive weight loss of fifteen percent or more of normal weight.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁷ National Women ' s Health Resource Center, 1999.

bulimia nervosa: a disorder that involves episodes of binge eating, always followed by purging and intense feelings of guilt or shame.¹⁴⁸

compulsive exercise: a disorder in which exercise becomes an obligation, followed by guilt and anxiety for having not exercised enough and often associated with purging calories consumed with food intake.¹⁴⁹

eating disorder: any of various disorders, such as anorexia nervosa or bulimia nervosa, that cause a person to adopt harmful eating habits and extreme body dissatisfaction. Health effects can include malnutrition, organ damage, and, in some cases, death.¹⁵⁰

Appendix II: BODY QUESTIONNAIRE¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ The majority of the content of the questionnaire was taken from the following: L. Heinberg, J. Thompson, and S. Stormer, "Development and validation of the Sociocultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Questionnaire" *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 17 (1995): 81-89, T. Cooper, M. Taylor, Z. Cooper and C. Fairburn, "The Development and Validation of the Body Shape Questionnaire," *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 6 (1987): 485-494, and A.J. Stunkard, T. Sorensen, F. Schulsinger, "Use of the Danish Adoption Register for the Study of Obesity and Thinness," *Res Publ Assoc Res Nerv Ment Dis* 60 (1983): 115-120.

SECTION ONE

Instructions: We would like to know what you think attractive women look like.

Please circle one number according to how much you agree with each of the following statements.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Slender women are more attractive.	1	2	3	4	5
Women who are in shape are more attractive.	1	2	3	4	5
Tall women are more attractive.	1	2	3	4	5
Women with toned (lean) bodies are more attractive.	1	2	3	4	5
Shapely women are more attractive.	1	2	3	4	5
Women with long legs are more attractive.	1	2	3	4	5

How satisfied are you with your current:

	Extremely Dissatisfied	Moderately Dissatisfied	Neutral	Moderately Satisfied	Extremely Satisfied
Weight	1	2	3	4	5
Figure	1	2	3	4	5
Body build	1	2	3	4	5
Stomach	1	2	3	4	5
Waist	1	2	3	4	5
Thighs	1	2	3	4	5
Buttocks	1	2	3	4	5
Hips	1	2	3	4	5
Legs	1	2	3	4	5

SECTION TWO

Please list your favorite television programs: _____

Please list your favorite magazines: _____

Please list your favorite music artists: _____

If you could look like any celebrity in the world, who would it be? _____

How often do you watch television? (circle one)

0-1 hours per day	2-3 hours per day	4 and up
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How often do you read magazines? (circle one)

Never to once a month	Once a week	Twice or more a week
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SECTION THREE

Instructions: Please read each of the following items carefully and circle the number that best reflects your agreement with the statement.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

TV programs are an important source of information about fashion and "being attractive."	1	2	3	4	5
I've felt pressure from TV or magazines to lose weight.	1	2	3	4	5
I <u>do not</u> care if my body looks like the body of people who are on TV.	1	2	3	4	5
I compare my body to the bodies of people who are on TV.	1	2	3	4	5
TV commercials are an important source of information about fashion and "being attractive."	1	2	3	4	5
I <u>do not</u> feel pressure from TV and magazines to look pretty.	1	2	3	4	5
I would like my body to look like the models who appear in magazines.	1	2	3	4	5
I compare my appearance to the appearance of TV and movie stars.	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
1	2	3	4	5	
Music videos on TV are <u>not</u> an important source of information about fashion and "being attractive."	1	2	3	4	5
I've felt pressure from TV and magazines to be thin.	1	2	3	4	5
I would like my body to look like the people who are in movies.	1	2	3	4	5
I <u>do not</u> compare my body to the bodies of people who appear in magazines.	1	2	3	4	5

Magazine articles are <u>not</u> an important source of information about fashion and "being attractive."	1	2	3	4	5
I've felt pressure from TV or magazine to have a perfect body.	1	2	3	4	5
I wish I looked like the models in music videos.	1	2	3	4	5
I compare my appearance to the appearance of people in magazines.	1	2	3	4	5
Magazine advertisements are an important source of information about fashion and "being attractive"	1	2	3	4	5
I've felt pressure from TV and/or magazines to diet.	1	2	3	4	5
I compare my body to that of people in "good shape."	1	2	3	4	5
I compare my skin to the skin of people who are on TV or in magazines.	1	2	3	4	5
Pictures in magazines are an important source of information about fashion and "being attractive."	1	2	3	4	5
I've felt pressure from TV or magazines to exercise.	1	2	3	4	5
I wish I looked as athletic as sports stars.	1	2	3	4	5
I compare my body to that of people who are athletic.	1	2	3	4	5
I've felt pressure from TV or magazines to change my appearance.	1	2	3	4	5
I <u>do not</u> try to look like the people on TV.	1	2	3	4	5
Movie stars are <u>not</u> an important source of information about fashion and "being attractive."	1	2	3	4	5
I've felt pressure from TV or magazines to gain weight.	1	2	3	4	5
Famous people are an important source of information about fashion and "being attractive."	1	2	3	4	5
I try to look like sports athletes.	1	2	3	4	5

SECTION FOUR

Instructions: Please read each of the following items carefully and circle the number that best reflects your agreement with the statement.

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often	Always
1	2	3	4	5	6

OVER THE PAST FOUR WEEKS:

Have you been so worried about your shape that you have been feeling that you ought to diet?				1	2	3	4	5	6
Have you thought that your thighs, hips, or bottom are too large for the rest of you?				1	2	3	4	5	6
Have you been afraid that you might become fat (or fatter)?				1	2	3	4	5	6
Have you worried about your flesh not being firm enough?				1	2	3	4	5	6
Has feeling full (e.g. after eating a large meal) made you feel fat?				1	2	3	4	5	6
Have you felt so bad about your shape that you have cried?				1	2	3	4	5	6
Has being with thin women/men made you feel self-conscious about your shape?				1	2	3	4	5	6
Have you worried about your thighs spreading out when sitting down?				1	2	3	4	5	6
Has eating even a small amount of food made you feel fat?				1	2	3	4	5	6
Have you noticed the shape of other women/men and felt that your own shape compared unfavorably?				1	2	3	4	5	6
Has thinking about your shape interfered with your ability to concentrate (while watching T.V., reading, listening to conversations)?				1	2	3	4	5	6
Has being naked, such as when taking a bath, made you feel fat?				1	2	3	4	5	6
Have you imagined cutting off fleshy areas of your body?				1	2	3	4	5	6
Has eating sweets, cakes or other high calorie food made you feel fat?				1	2	3	4	5	6
Have you not gone out to social occasions (e.g. parties) because you have felt bad about your shape?				1	2	3	4	5	6
Have you felt ashamed of your body?				1	2	3	4	5	6
Have you tried to gain weight?				1	2	3	4	5	6
Has worry about your shape made you diet?				1	2	3	4	5	6
Have you felt happiest about your shape when your stomach has been empty?				1	2	3	4	5	6
Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often			Always		
1	2	3	4	5			6		
Have you thought that you are the shape you are because you lack self-control?				1	2	3	4	5	6
Have you worried about other people seeing rolls of flesh around your waist or stomach?				1	2	3	4	5	6
Have you felt that it is not fair that other men/women are thinner than you?				1	2	3	4	5	6

Have you vomited in order to feel thinner?	1	2	3	4	5	6
When in company, have you worried about taking up too much room (e.g. sitting on a bus or sofa)?	1	2	3	4	5	6
Has seeing your reflection (e.g. in a mirror or shop window) made you feel bad about your shape?	1	2	3	4	5	6
Have you pinched areas of your body to see how much fat there is?	1	2	3	4	5	6
Have you avoided situations where people could see your body (e.g. communal changing rooms or swimming baths)?	1	2	3	4	5	6
Have you taken laxatives in order to feel thinner?	1	2	3	4	5	6
Have you been particularly self-conscious about your shape when in the company of other people?	1	2	3	4	5	6
Has worry about your shape made you feel that you ought to exercise?	1	2	3	4	5	6

SECTION SIX

What is your current height and weight? cm: _____ kg: _____

Your age on your last birthday: _____ years.

INSERT STUNKARD CHART HERE

Instructions: Write the code number of the figure above that best depicts:

Your current size and shape:....._____

The size and shape you would most like to be....._____

The size and shape you feel is most attractive....._____

The size and shape you feel men in general find most attractive....._____

The size and shape most often represented/shown in the media....._____

Please use the available space for any additional comments you may have: