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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.18820/24150525/Comm.v22.11>

ISSN 2415-0525 (Online)

Communitas201722:136-148

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SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE CULTURAL IDEOLOGY OF BEAUTY AMONG YOUNG BLACK WOMEN IN SOUTH AFRICA

ABSTRACT

Celebrities and celebrity culture tend to influence young people's ideas of culture and the aspirational perception of self and identity. With social media platforms increasingly becoming spaces of influence for celebrities, how do they use these platforms to communicate their perceptions of beauty and the feminine body, and what messages do they communicate in this manner? This article reports on a study that explored the cultural ideology of beauty against the backdrop of a digital culture that draws on celebrity beauty performances on social media. Through non-participatory digital ethnographic observations on social media of four female South African celebrities and conversational interviews with young adults, the study examined how celebrities present their bodies in the performance of beauty on social media and explored the messages that pertain to feminine beauty amongst young women. The findings revealed that celebrity culture perpetuates the ideology that black beauty can be achieved through natural skin colour erasure, extended artificial weaves and a thin body frame.

Keywords: social media; communication; mass communication; celebrity culture; beauty; feminine body image; identity; South Africa

INTRODUCTION

Beauty enhancements through medical interventions have become a growing norm amongst women in South Africa, and some celebrities are reported to have undergone surgery in order to achieve their ideal of feminine beauty (Madikwa 2009; Naidoo 2015; Van den Heever 2016). Beauty is not a stagnant and rigid concept, as what was regarded as "beautiful" in a previous era, or by a specific group, may not be regarded as so in the current epoch or by other groups (Patton 2006; Wolf 1991). Considering the diversity in human bodies, a generic notion of beauty is flawed, and when a specific ideal of beauty is propagated as ideology, it often discriminates against those who do not conform to certain body types. This results in stereotyping, racism, depression and eating disorders, amongst others. Mediated popular

culture continues to shape certain ideals of beauty, and, in this regard, celebrities in movies, music videos and other forms of entertainment have become idolised images of beauty (Aruguete *et al.* 2014; Chae 2014). The fashion and advertising industries often perpetuate the image of a slim physique as the ideal of feminine beauty. Young females look up to celebrities in the media and the impact of the idealisation of these celebrity bodies cannot be ignored.

Social media have changed the consumption of celebrity from mass mediated media to a much more personal experience. Celebrities choose how they present themselves and their notions of beautiful bodies to appeal to their “friends” and “followers” on social media with images and comments that accentuate their bodies and material accessories. In South Africa, following international trends, celebrities have taken to social media to communicate their beauty ideologies to their often young fans. As a result, social media inform and sometimes dictate the ideal definition of beauty (Patton 2006). Many local celebrities also tacitly dictate beauty trends on social media platforms through their postings and comments about body types and body augmentation that they consider beautiful. These celebrities often showcase the different body enhancements and cosmetic altering they have undergone. Examples of common beauty enhancement practices are skin bleaching, long hair extensions and weaves, efforts to attain slender bodies, and buttock augmentation. Social media platforms create a space where celebrities can present public virtual performances of new beauty trends.

Propagating a certain ideal of beauty through mass media, and specifically social media, has been researched quite extensively. For example, Shen and Bisell (2013) observed the impact and use of social media by cosmetic beauty product companies in marketing and branding their products. Other studies investigated the trend of body dissatisfaction and other social psychological effects on young women. For instance, a study by Meier and Gray (2014) examined how appearance exposure and Facebook photo activity are associated with body image disturbances in adolescent girls. They found that elevated appearance exposure on social media significantly correlated with weight dissatisfaction, a drive for thinness, thin ideal internalisation and self-objectification. Tiggemann and Slater (2013) found that adolescent girls, who are Facebook users, scored significantly higher on all body image concern measures than non-users. These authors then argued that the Internet represents a potent socio-cultural medium of relevance to the body image of adolescent girls. Other studies on social media and body image (see Kim & Chock 2015; Cohen & Blaszczynski 2015) have shown similar trends of body image concerns, such as pursuit of thinness, body image dissatisfaction and eating disorders.

In South Africa, there are limited studies on how celebrities use social media platforms to highlight their ideals of beauty, or the implications of social media use and body image among young women. Consequently, the focus of this study is on the messages communicated by certain black celebrities, and their ideas of feminine beauty through their posts and communication on social media, and how young black females aspire to these images of beauty. The study is guided by questions related to the perceptions of young black women of the idea of “beauty”; the ways in which some local black

female celebrities present their bodies in the performances of beauty on social media; and the reactions by followers on social media to these performances.

BACKGROUND

Body image and youth's perception of beauty

Young women are often faced with the challenge of (dis)identifying themselves in terms of what is beautiful and what is not in their struggle for conventional body image (Field 2001). Exposure to media images of unrealistic beauty affects the self-concept of many women and they become dissatisfied with their body image (Szabo & Allwood 2006). It is observed that with the increasing influence of Western media and values, more black South African women may be attracted to the media-portrayed images of a specific type of beautiful feminine body, often seen as "thinness equals beauty" (Szabo & Allwood 2006). This may lead some young women, who have full-figured bodies, to suffer from eating disorders and body dissatisfaction; their self-esteem is affected negatively because of the portrayal of thinness as the ideal body image. Moreover, according to Groesz (2002), women are significantly more body dissatisfied after viewing thin and beauty media images.

This is also concern in South Africa as some young women will go to great lengths to lose weight in order to conform to a thin body type. In a study conducted by Szabo and Allwood (2006), it was found that young South African women were abusing diet pills and laxatives as a means of losing weight. Moreover, it was found that a large number of young South African females had a strong desire to be thin, and had a negative body image. Furthermore, Szabo and Allwood (2006) state that these young females sought to lose weight because of a perception that young men prefer thinner women.

The role of the media in creating a certain perception of beauty amongst young women is perhaps a reflection of societal, and particularly patriarchal, ideology of women and the body. As Wolf (1991) argues, it was historically believed that women who are considered beautiful have more advantages relating to their career, marriage and social mobility than those who are not. Baron (2005) asserts that there is more pressure on women, than on men, to be attractive because women are judged more on their physical appearance than on any other personal aspect or quality. The implication of this is that many women are affected by how they perceive themselves and compare their own beauty with other women's because of a society that views women's body image as central to their existence (Baron 2005). As a result, the pursuit of a societal acceptable notion of body image, largely influenced by the media, has become a goal for many young women. According to Grabe *et al.* (2008), body image dissatisfaction and low self-esteem in women are often the result of consistent exposure to the notion of "ideal" bodies portrayed by the media. Furthermore, low self-esteem and low body image dissatisfaction increase the rate of people who report eating disorders and other behavioural concerns (*ibid.*).

In addition to their body, for many women hair plays an important role in their perception of beauty. Hair is therefore a marker of identity. The idea that there is such a thing as "good" and "bad" hair is a beauty myth that has become normalised. "Good" hair usually

describes long straight hair, which mostly is unnatural to many African women. As a result, many black women wear weaves that hide their natural hair in order to achieve a specific notion of “good hair”, namely shoulder-length straight hair. Oyedemi (2016) studied the concept of “beautiful” hair amongst young black South African women and found that many young black women do not wear their natural hair as a result of many stereotypes and issues with social acceptability. In fact, many young women have their hair relaxed at a very young age, some as young as three years old, in order to erase the natural texture of their hair. This, Oyedemi (2016) argues, leads to a cultural violence of identity erasure in the pursuit of achieving an idealised body feature.

Skin colour remains a marker of beauty amongst many black women in South Africa. In this sense, the lighter the skin complexion, the more attractive a woman is perceived to be. Fair skin colour and the demeaning of dark skin has a long history of colonial prejudice that still shapes the perceptions of dark-skinned people of African descent (Porano 2006). Today, many women of African descent augment their skin by bleaching it in the pursuit of a fairer skin. All these various perceptions of beauty shape cultural identity. Hooks (1996) argues that cultural identity is a matter of “becoming” as well as “being”, and as such belongs to the future as much as to the past. It means that black women’s identity is rooted in their culture and heritage, but also in the past experiences of colonialism that have clouded black identity. Hooks (*ibid.*) further argues that black women have the challenge to question issues of race and representation about “good” and “bad” images of black women in order to decolonise the mind in the perception of the body.

Celebrity culture and social media trends

The media can be considered a reflection of society and thus play an important role in the perception of the feminine body. Individuals who possess some level of authority as a result of their visibility in the media tend to reinforce this perception. Amongst many young women, this reinforcement of a specific type of idealised beauty is reflected on social media platforms where celebrities display and perform their perceptions of thinness and skin hue as elements of ideal beauty. Many young black South African women look up to these celebrities and model their behaviour accordingly to conform to the subtle dictates of celebrities regarding the body. Consequently, the idealisation of these celebrities becomes an aspirational pursuit for many young women. The consistent exposure to certain kinds of body aesthetic in the media and specifically social media has an influence on body image and perceptions of women (Sutton 2009).

In addition, as Odhiambo (2008) argues, the media’s influence can take away women’s natural confidence and catalyses the obsession of what is considered perfect and flawless celebrity beauty. Young South African women are bombarded with images of celebrities on social media platforms, such as Instagram and Facebook. Here many celebrities present their bodies as perpetually beautiful and flawless, through either skin bleaching, plastic surgery, or an often-unhealthy thinness. Furthermore, the power that some celebrities accumulate through a large following on social media reinforces the demand for their presence in marketing and media spaces. This is apparent in the increase in the demand for celebrity endorsements of products,

where a celebrity's body becomes an aspirational goal that contributes to trends in body augmentation and increasingly high rates of eating disorders, self-harm and depression (Odhiambo 2008).

Celebrity culture not only affects young women's self-esteem and mental health, but also their behaviour. It is considered acceptable for young women to have idols as they grow up and to mould their identity in line with their celebrity idols (Sutton 2009). Studies by, amongst others, Dlova *et al.* (2014) and Sastre (2014), have shown the impact of celebrity culture on various perceptions of elements of beauty. Dlova *et al.*'s (2014) study of skin bleaching amongst black women in South Africa shows that out of 292 Africans and 287 Indians included in the survey sample, 32.3% had used skin-lightening products (60% of Africans and 40% of Indians). According to the study, black women who use skin-lightening products confirmed that they use the products because models and celebrities use them and the notion of beauty in advertisements is defined as being light-skinned. Sastre's (2014) study of celebrity culture and the body engages how Kim Kardashian, a American reality television show celebrity, presents herself in a sexualised body, and how she uses her body to define "her" beauty on social media. The study also indicated that Kardashian's habit of "performing beauty" on social media could negatively affect other women's self-concept.

Engaging "self-concept" as a theoretical concept is significant in the understanding of the perception of beauty. Combined with the agenda setting theory, this study contributes to understanding how some celebrities use social media to set the agenda about what is considered an "ideal" feminine body. Self-concept can be described as everything that people think and feel about themselves. It includes appearance, physical and mental capabilities, attitudes and beliefs, strengths and weaknesses. Mead (1972) explains that self-concept is a social entity that exists in ongoing transactional relationships between an individual and the environment, an individual and other individuals and groups of individuals, and an individual and various types of institutions. Similarly, Epstein (1973) suggests that self-concept can be perceived as a theory that a person holds about himself/herself as an experiencing, functioning being in interaction with the world. In developing the "self", we use others as measure to assess ourselves (Steinberg 2007). To Goffman (1963), self-concept reflects the content and organisation of society in relation to how individuals present themselves in interactions, what he calls "staging operations", towards achieving a desired impression, which he refers to as "impression-management". This process involves the presentation of self in social encounters (Goffman 1959). Applied to the current context of social media, celebrities' communication of self through social media is often the measure that many young people use in their own development of self. In developing self-identity young women tend to compare themselves to images on social media and then perform a self-identity that is "liked" by many "friends" online.

Similarly, because of the ability of celebrities to influence how many youth perceive themselves, they invariably set agendas for the self-concept and, as demonstrated by this study, they set an agenda for a specific type of body that is considered beautiful. Agenda setting in its original form (McCombs & Shaw 1972) shows how mass media influence the topics in public discourse through the covering and neglect of certain

topics in the news media. Agenda setting is based on the assumption that, whether consciously or unconsciously, the media create a particular image of reality and what is considered to be important (McCombs & Shaw 1972). Today's media landscape is different from the 1960s: bloggers, so-called citizen journalists, social media users, as well as traditional media corporations populate the media landscape. The emergence of new digital technologies has given celebrities the opportunity to leverage social media to influence ordinary people. Castells (2011: 1) refers to "networked power", which is "the power of social actors over other social actors in the network".

METHODOLOGY

As method this study made use of non-participatory digital ethnography, which in this case involved non-participant observations of postings of text messages, photographs and comments by four black South African female celebrities and the comments of their social media following on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Four local female celebrities were chosen purposely for the study:

Khanyi Mbau is a television personality and socialite. She is open about her body transformation from a dark skin to a very fair complexion. She is known for celebrating her new fair skin and her thin body frame in both traditional mass media (*The Citizen* 2017), as well as social media, where she commands a substantial following (375 000 followers on Twitter and 654 000 followers on Instagram).

Nomasonto "Mshoza" Maswanganyi is a local pop star. Although her music career has waned somewhat, she recently became popular for her body transformation from a dark-skinned woman to a very light-skinned woman through a medical skin bleaching procedure. She has a fairly strong following on social media platforms, with some 15 000 followers on her Twitter account.

Bonang Matheba, a television and radio personality, model and the Revlon Face of South Africa, has a significant presence on social media. She has 1.8 million followers on Twitter.

Zahara, a singer/songwriter, has 241 000 followers on Twitter. She was selected for the study as she projects a natural-looking body image. She is known to wear her hair styled in what is considered natural African styles.

The data for this study was collected through daily observations of postings and comments made by these celebrities and the responses posted by their followers on social media. The observation and data collection took place over a period of three months, from 26 February to 31 May 2016. The postings were collected daily and saved for analysis. In addition, data was also collected from the Facebook account of MTV Base, a 24-hour music and entertainment television satellite channel of Viacom International Media Networks. Although MTV Base is popular amongst young people and its social media pages attract a large following, the reason for selecting this media platform is due to a reality show broadcast on the channel that captured how Mshoza, one of the celebrities selected for this study, was recorded during her plastic cosmetic surgery in an effort to look like Nicky Minaj, an American celebrity who underwent a

body transformation. The promotional video for the reality show was posted on MTV Base's Facebook page. This post and subsequent comments formed part of the data for this study.

In addition to digital ethnography, conversational interviews were conducted with eight university students (three male and five female), selected through convenience sampling, to examine their notion and perception of feminine beauty. Speaking to male students allowed the researchers to explore the notion that young women's idea of beauty is also influenced by men's perception of feminine beauty (cf. Szabo & Allwood 2006). Data was analysed through the use of thematic analysis and qualitative content analysis. The findings presented below describe the ways that celebrities shape the agenda of what is considered a type of feminine beauty for young black South African women.

FINDINGS

Data from the online ethnographic observations indicated that these celebrities perform their cultural ideology of feminine beauty through three key themes: skin complexion, where fairness of skin is considered a beauty ideology for black women; thinness as an ideal body frame for feminine beauty; and weaves as a marker of beautiful hair.

Fair skin as black beauty

Skin colour tends to influence the perception of beauty amongst some black women. The notion that proximity to whiteness or a fair skin complexion is considered the measure of beauty amongst some black women is supported by the findings in this study. Celebrities play a major role in promoting the trend that proximity to white skin is more beautiful than dark black skin by erasing their dark black skin through skin bleaching. The video of Mshoza posted by MTV Base on its Facebook page and cross-posted on MTV Base's Twitter account shows her inviting the audience to watch her reality show as she undergoes cosmetic plastic surgery in order to look like the American pop star Nicky Minaj, who is reported to have bleached her skin. This video is a telling artefact in engaging celebrity culture and the ideology of beauty. In the video, Mshoza is seen undergoing medical procedures, including injections to achieve full lips; she describes her love for Minaj and how she hoped to be like her after the cosmetic surgery. The viewers hear her screams of pain during the medical procedure, a pain that is bearable considering the reward of a new body. The promotional video then shows Mshoza on a clinic bed looking fair-skinned and wearing a blonde weave.

In response to this post, some people were critical of her bleached skin while others commented on how beautiful her skin looked. One comment reads:

"You look good my dear, don't let jealous and negative people put you down, you only live once, so do what makes you happy. We as Africans are so negative and pathetic as long as the goodness is not on us we will have negative stuff to say. They claim they were happy with the old you, not the new you, but my dear either way they will still be negative. Nicki Minaj, Beyoncé, Riri, but to name a few, have all gone thru surgery and skin bleaching but none of us Africans will criticize but instead wish to be like them. Unfortunately reality is we all have flaws regardless of

skin colour, gender, [or] race, if one isn't comfortable or rather brave enough to do anything about their flaws they shouldn't be negative to those who are bold enough to actually correct their flaws. If enhancing your beauty under the knife is wrong, then to those who don't support it, but use make-up, tell me then what makes the make-up we put on our skin right? To me it's the same only a temporary solution to hiding my flaws for a short time, a cheaper solution than going under the knife, so as a person, choosing your solution could be based on your financial status" [sic].

Another comments reads:

"You look beautiful dear. I love you. People will always have something negative to say, Miss SA [South Africa] is mocked whilst she won the title of being the most beautiful girl in SA. So... Yeah you do you and lots of love."

Fans were critical of those who criticised Mshoza's decision to augment her body and they acknowledged the beauty of her new body. One comment reads:

"People project their own internal and/or physical defects or goodness on your posts. If someone says you are sad, they are actually projecting their sad lives. Those who say you are ugly, they are projecting their ugliness but the case is they do it on your profile for all of us to see their sadness, ugliness and nastiness. You are loved dear, Wamuhle girl (you are beautiful, girl)."

Some Facebook comments were critical of the transformation, referring to "self-hate" and that "black people have a perception that whiteness is better than blackness with the trend of bleaching black skin". Others comments included:

"What is wrong with us black people?? We always think the white people are better than us. Which is nonsense, black is beautiful and God loves you the way you are."
"Black child why do you hate yourself so much ... God made you beautiful. Why put your face through so much alterations ... it's sad."

"Mental slavery ... Africans feeling inferior about themselves, it's a Big shame ... Black child Love yourself."

Others commented on what they perceived as her "misguided" idea of beauty. However, one of the male student participants, who was interviewed as part of the study, commented that a fair-skinned woman provokes a sense of pride; she is a cultural trophy to elevate one's status amongst other men:

"We prefer yellow bone girls [light complexion girls] because it's a new trending concept of beauty, so if we date yellow bones we normally get praises from our friends that our girls are hot and beautiful."

Another male respondent concurred:

"It is prestigious to date a light-skinned girl these days because you will be complimented for dating a beautiful girl."

Thinness as ideal body image

Thinness as a beauty standard has always being a prominent ideology in the media's construction of feminine beauty. This has made thinness a marker of beauty in many

societies; even in places where a fuller body shape was historically considered beautiful (Onishi 2002). Many celebrities have embraced this thin-body standard, and South African celebrities are no exception. Social media allow celebrities to show off their thin bodies, as well as the rigorous endeavours they undertook to achieve this body frame.

Khanyi Mbau posted a semi-nude photograph on herself on Instagram, showing off her bleached skin and thin body. Although she posted this photograph without a caption, it is clear that the message was to direct attention to her slim body and her now bleached skin, which she celebrates in many of her media comments (Seimela 2017). Her followers appear to grasp the message communicated with the photograph. This specific post had 2537 “likes”, with almost all those who commented showing positive appreciation for her body and commenting on the aspirational tendency created by her body. Comments such as “perfection”, “cute”, “beautiful as always”, “I have never seen someone as beautiful as you”, “the most beautiful and sexy black woman”, “flat tummy”, “toned arms”, “Lord what is your secret?” and “thumbs up, you are sexy, you are a true definition of beauty” are used to describe and respond to the photograph. A similar trend is seen in responses to other celebrities’ photographs of their slim bodies. Bonang Matheba posted a photograph in which she is wearing a swimsuit. Comments included positive references to her flat tummy, slim arms, and thin frame.

In conversational interviews with participants, they tended to support the ideology of beauty being a slim body. However, some did indicate that they aspired to a slim body for other reasons. For example, a female student said: “A nice body to me is a slender body because it doesn’t make you struggle when buying clothes, because big sizes are rare to find in stores”. Another female participant stated: “A skinny body is a healthy body because it is not associated with obesity and heart-related diseases”.

Weaves as a marker of beautiful hair

As mentioned earlier, hair plays an important role in the perception of beauty amongst many women. Hair is both a marker of race and beauty, and it is tied to biological, political and historical processes (Patton 2006). In South Africa, many black women have embraced the global trend of wearing weaves made from synthetic or natural human hair (Oyedemi 2016), which is associated with class and a Western notion of beautiful hair. Wearing weaves of Indian, Brazilian or Peruvian origin have become a beauty trend in South Africa. Many female celebrities in South Africa promote natural Brazilian and Peruvian weaves as the “new” look for a “beautiful” black African woman. In terms of the celebrities focused on in this study, Bonang Matheba and Khanyi Mbau often wear weaves; in general, only a few black female celebrities are seen with their natural hair.

A female student interviewed for this study stated, “I wear weaves because they bring out the best look that I like about myself”. Another female student explained, “I prefer weaves because they are easy to comb, unlike natural hair, which is often painful to comb”. One female student expressed a different opinion, saying, “I don’t wear weaves, I prefer my natural hair because I don’t spend too much money on cutting it and making it short”. This assertion implies that the decision to wear natural

hair is financially influenced, and not necessarily because it is considered beautiful. A previous study by Oyedemi (2016) established a similar trend.

As mentioned above, a number of South African female celebrities wear synthetic or natural hair weaves as a marker of hair beauty. Their posts on the different shades and types of weaves they wear generate many positive comments from their fans. For example, in a post by Bonang Matheba she draws attention to her hair, mentioning that the weave she is wearing is of Peruvian origin. The majority of the comments were positive, referring to her “nice and beautiful hair piece”, with some asking where she bought it, while others observed that she always wears beautiful weaves. Examples of comments on this post include:

“Hey Bonang what is the name of your hairpiece? I like it.”

“Ke kopa one of your hairpiece Bonang [I am asking for one of your hair pieces].”

“Mmmmh that is oweeeeesum [awesome] I’m in love with your hair.”

“I love your hair, [It is] is 3 things at de same time ... classy ... funky ... and hot ... mwaaah.”

“Beautiful ... where can I get your hair, Bonang? I love it.”

On the other hand, singer/songwriter Zahara projects a different hair image. She is known to present a natural look; she wears her hair natural or styles it in a manner that reflects a typical look for African hair. Most photographs she posts on her social media sites show her without shoulder-length straight hair or the weave typical of many South African black female celebrities. In a Facebook post by Zahara, in which she wears her hair natural, comments include a number of negative observations targeting her hair or “lack of style”. The majority of people who commented on the photograph did not like her hair. However, a few people commented on her tendency to wear her natural hair, stating that Zahara is proud to be natural and comfortable in being naturally beautiful. Examples of such comments are:

“I love your hair Zahara, be who you want to be, don’t let anyone tell you what to do. It’s your life, it’s your time, live the way you want people to remember you! Be natural, be yourself Zahara.”

“I love your hairstyle; I wish I can be just like you. Keep it up girl, your fine like that don’t change, be yourself and stay strong country girl# u ya baba girl [you are hot, girl].”

Some people who commented also engaged in debates regarding natural hair as opposed to synthetic or natural hair weaves. Some said that Zahara should change her natural-looking hairstyle:

“The hairstyle must fall.”

“You babe, but please change your hairstyle ngoku yhini? [what now?].”

“When are you changing the hairstyle? It’s ugly.”

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Some key observations can be highlighted from this study. First is the hegemonic cultural ideology of proximity to whiteness that is perpetuated by a number of celebrities through social media. The legacy of political and, more importantly for this study, cultural colonisation elevates closeness to European culture as ideal, while African cultural identity remain debased or relegated in cultural performances of many African youth. The performance of beauty, as seen in this study, is such an example and, as Oyedemi (2016) argues, this form of beauty performance warrants a scholarly inquiry from a postcolonial and cultural critique perspective.

A second observation relates to the globalisation of celebrity culture, which has been propagated in the media through reality shows and by the ability to self-broadcast on personal media sites. This provides celebrities with immense cultural power to display their wealth, taste, lifestyle and bodies, with the resultant effect of creating an aspirational desire for materialism amongst many of their fans. The implication of this trend is that the media's influence can rob young women of their natural confidence and instigate the obsession with "perfect" and "flawless" celebrity beauty.

Thirdly, this study on celebrity performances of self and beauty on social media platforms shows that the ideal feminine body is one that is slim and fair in complexion; if not naturally endowed, a fair skin can be achieved through bleaching. A more European or Asian looking hairstyle is also preferable to natural African hair. These tendencies have real-life implications for young women, one being the trend of skin bleaching (Dlova *et al.* 2014). Many women in South Africa fall prey to media-portrayed images of "thinness equals beauty" (Szabo & Allwood 2006). A consequence is that women are significantly body dissatisfied after viewing media images of thin bodies (Goesz *et al.* 2002).

Although this study only analysed a small sample of black female South African celebrities' social media postings and the comments on these, it is insightful to see how these celebrities have appropriated social media to set the cultural agenda for what is considered beauty. If the "self" is developed in communication with the generalised other, the socio-cultural environment and institutions in society, as Mead's (1972) seminal theory of self proposes, for many young women who follow the social media posts of celebrity performances of beauty, their idea of their "self" and what they consider "beautiful" is bound to be influenced by the cultural agenda of beauty set by celebrities on social media platforms.

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