

Doctoral School of Sociology and Communication Science

THESIS SUMMARY

Zipporah Muthoni Mwangi

**AFRO-OCCIDENTAL BEAUTY; A STUDY ON THE PORTRAYAL, PERCEPTION AND
EFFECTS OF BEAUTY AMONG THE YOUTH, A KENYAN CASE STUDY.**

Supervisors: Kovacs Lajos, PhD
Buvar Agnes, PhD

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Department of Communication and Media Science

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Table of Contents

I. Research background and justification of the topic.....	1
II. The methods used.....	5
III. Main findings	7
IV. Main references	12
V. List of own (or co-authored publications related to the topic).....	15

I. Research background and justification for the topic

Beauty standards vary across different cultures. In western cultures thinness among females is considered attractive while in Africa fatness was a sign of fertility, health and wealth (Kaziga et al. 2021; Frederick, Forbes & Berezovskyaskaya, 2008). Western beauty also known as *Occidental beauty* is characterized by a thin and toned woman who has a symmetrical face, a thin nose, full lips and high cheek bones (Tolentino, 2019). On the other hand, African beauty also known as *Afrocentric beauty* is characterized by a woman that has wide hips, small waist, big buttocks, dark skinned, short hair, big legs, long arms, slender fingers and decently dressed (Kaziga et al. 2021). Beauty standards continue to change and are influenced by urbanization, globalization, changes in socioeconomic status, popular culture, education and exposure to broadcast media and social media. Popular culture depicts a beautiful woman of African descent as one who is light skinned, has straight hair (relaxed hair or wearing straight or wavy wigs), practices hair removal, medium breasted, has a small waist and big buttocks (Lee & Watkins 2016; Avery 2017). The reality therefore for women of African descent is that beauty lies in a continuum and they may hold on to Afro-Occidental beauty, a hybrid of the beauty standards from the west and those from the African society.

The media significantly contributes to the internalization of beauty norms; the beauty images displayed provide a blueprint for ideal beauty standards (Dye, 2016; Galioto & Crowther, 2013; Warren 2008). Social media, a channel through which intrinsically private and external information from individuals, organizations, industries and the society are propagated (Lundmark et al. 2017) is more potent at conveying ideal beauty standards compared to broadcast media (Cohen & Blaszczynski 2015). This is because social media continues to perpetuate a flawless appearance as synchronous to beauty (Almaki et al. 2023). Existence of filters on social media also foster the internalization of makeup use to cover flaws (Miller & McIntyre 2022). Research also shows that social media users who spend a lot of their time on social media had a higher chance in comparing their physical appearance with others which leads to feelings of envy, rise in shame and body surveillance (Alfonso-Fuertes 2023; Chancellor et al. 2016; Wick & Harriger 2018).

Statistics show that social media plays a crucial part in the lives of many Kenyans especially the youth. Kenya had the highest internet penetration rate in Africa in 2020 with 87.2% of the population connected to the internet (Sang, 2021) and is leading in the continent in smart phone penetration with 96.1% mobile subscription (Namunwa, 2019). Social media users spend at least 44 minutes on YouTube, 35 minutes on Facebook, 33 minutes on Instagram, 32 minutes on TikTok and 10 minutes on Twitter (Wise, 2022). Kenyans use social networking sites for entertainment, education, job related issues, to access current affairs, business purposes and other social issues (Kanyi, 2020). Although social media offers individuals opportunities to interact with family, friends and peers these interactions may also lead to sexual objectification of women and social comparison (Alfonso-Fuertes 2023; Luo 2019). In instances where individuals compare themselves with peers they feel are better than them, they experience body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem which encourages the adoption of unhealthy practices (Klier, Rommerskirchen & Brixius 2022; Ratwatte & Mataccola 2021; Cohen et al. 2019). Some of the peers that individuals compare themselves with are social media influencers (SMIs). They encourage their followers to participate in activities, purchase products, change their way of life, introduce new ideas, suggest adoption of a set of behaviour among many other things.

SMIs are instrumental in influencer marketing. Kenya boasts of over 200,000 social media influencers (SMIs) (Intellifluence, 2022) who are engaged in daily or regular production of digital content. Reports show that 86% of consumers make at least one purchase in a year that has been influenced by a SMI (Kendall 2025). In a study carried out by Red Brick Africa, 59% of Kenyans would purchase an item that has been endorsed by a SMI (Njoroge 2023). Additionally, research on beauty in Africa is limited. Studies on beauty in Africa have assessed beauty contests, celebrity culture and post-feminism, beauty and synthetic hair care and skin bleaching (Balogun-Mwangi et al. 2023; Glapka 2018; Motseki & Oyedemi 2017; Faria 2020; Nyoni-Kachambwa et al., 2016; Jacobs et al. 2016).

The thesis therefore sought to answer the following Research Questions:

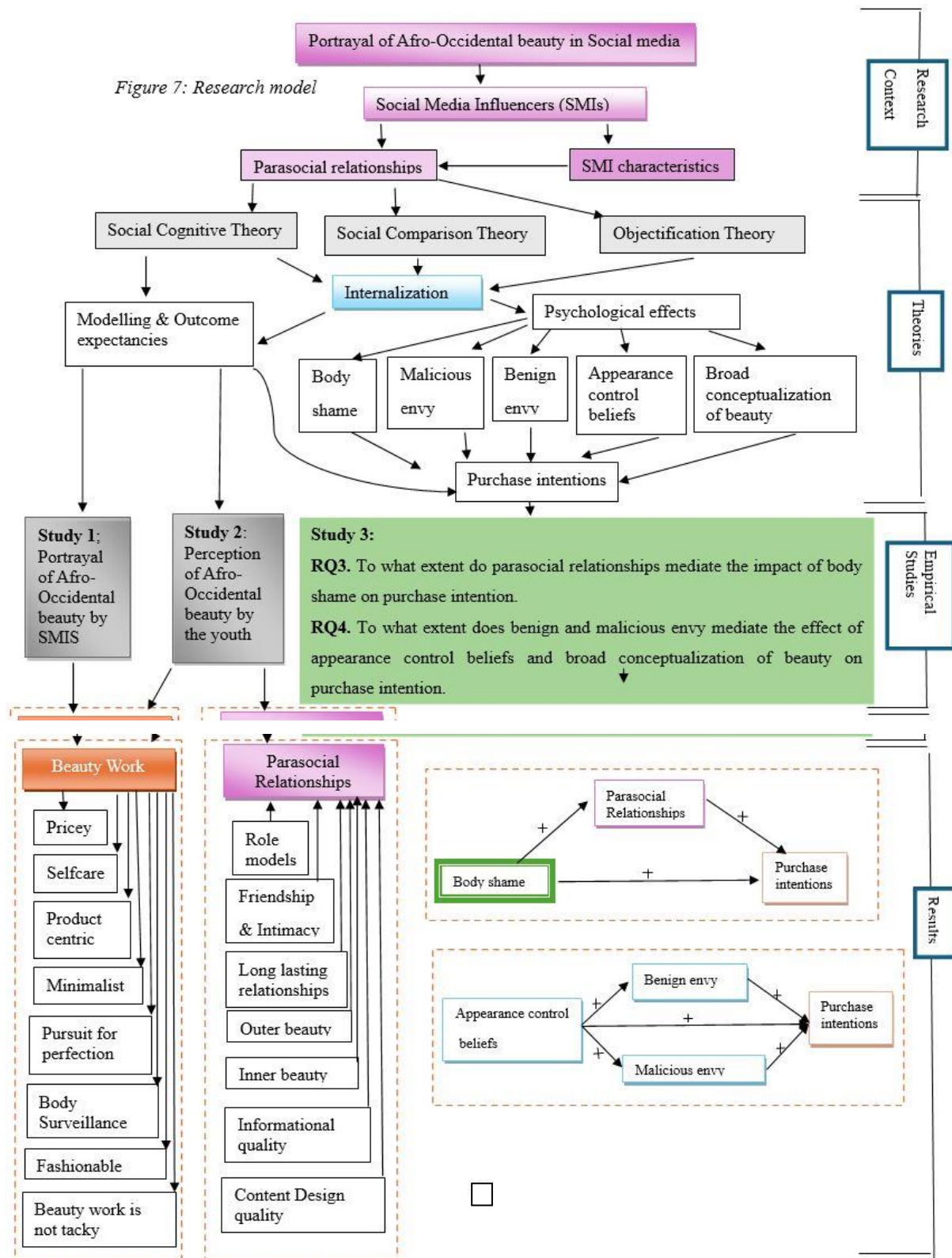
RQ1. How do social media influencers portray *Afro-Occidental* beauty standards and outcome expectancies on YouTube?

RQ2. What is the perception of the youth on *Afro-Occidental* beauty ideals portrayed by social media influencers on YouTube?

RQ3. To what extent do parasocial relationships mediate the impact of body shame on purchase intention.

RQ4. To what extent does benign and malicious envy mediate the effect of appearance control beliefs and broad conceptualization of beauty on purchase intention.

There has been limited research on beauty in Sub Saharan Africa, this research goes a long way in addressing this gap. Although the nature of African tradition is mainly passed down orally, social media plays a crucial role in providing research material that help in the furtherance of beauty studies in the African continent. Some of the beauty practices are a part of African women lived experiences but quite foreign to the rest of the world. This research provided a glimpse into the portrayal of Afro-Occidental beauty. The first step lay in developing a code book for Afro-Occidental beauty, a methodological innovation, was developed using the framework provided by (Guest et al. 2012). This code book can be used by other researchers as a guide to develop beauty codebooks for other regions such as the Asia Pacific and Latin America. This is a great addition to the body of work on beauty studies because it provides digital African print that can be referenced in future studies. Previously most studies had been done in North America and the conceptualization of beauty among African American women (Teteh et al. 2017; Byrd 2015; Bryd & Tharps 2014; Capodilupo & Kim, 2014; Bryant, 2013; Awad et al. 2015; Gordon et al. 2010; Overstreet et al., 2010) are heavily influenced by racism which is not necessarily the case for African women. The research also adds to the body of work on beauty work. This area of study is still developing and with the changes in beauty practices globally we need more studies in this area. This research adds to the body of work on parasocial relationships. Attractiveness plays a crucial role in strengthening parasocial relationships (Ashraf, Hameed & Saeed 2023; Zheng et al. 2022; Lou & Kim 2019; Bond 2018). Previous studies only focused on external beauty where they assessed attractiveness, however internal beauty also contributes to the growth of parasocial relationships. This research therefore significantly contributes towards the advancement of knowledge in social media use and effects, beauty and the youth.



II. The methods used

The research adopted a mixed method research design; a content analysis of four Kenyan beauty social media influencers' YouTube channels to assess the portrayal of Afro-Occidental beauty, and a Netnography of their comment section to assess the perception of the youth on Afro-Occidental beauty ideals portrayed by these social media influencers. Lastly a survey (N = 201) was done to evaluate the effect of body shame, parasocial relationships, benign envy, malicious envy, appearance control beliefs and broad conceptualization of beauty on purchase intentions. Mixed methods are helpful in addressing the limitations of each research design (Harvard catalyst nd; APA 2024; Creswell et al. 2018; Morgan, 2014). For example, obtaining the perception of the youth on the portrayal of Afro-Occidental beauty through a content analysis of the YouTube section is limited because less than 20% of followers leave comments. Therefore, a questionnaire helps to gather more information from individuals who may follow SMIs but are afraid of commenting on SMIs YouTube channels.

This research espoused three main studies to answer the research questions.

Study 1 sought to assess RQ1 How do social media influencers portray *Afro-Occidental* beauty standards and outcome expectancies on YouTube? A deductive and inductive content analysis of four Kenyan beauty SMIs was carried out from the 5th of April 2024 to 19th July 2024. The study selected two macro influencers; Joanna Kinuthia (150,000 subscribers), Natalie Tewa (110,000 subscribers) and two micro-influencers Just a Bantu (58,000 subscribers) and Geek on fashion (25,000 subscribers) as they have a high engagement rate showcasing resonance with their audience and therefore have a higher chance to influence their followers than mega influencers. The beauty and lifestyle videos analysed were published between 2022 and 2023 and had the highest number of views. This period was significant as it was shortly after the covid-19 pandemic that saw a rise in social media use and rise in SMIs (Dixon, 2022; Dukurs, 2022). A thematic analysis was carried out to examine emerging themes on Afro-occidental beauty.

Study 2 sought to assess RQ2. What is the perception of the youth on *Afro-Occidental* beauty ideals portrayed on YouTube? This was done through a Netnography of the comment section of YouTube videos published between 2022 and 2023 with the highest number of views, of

the four Kenyan beauty SMIs. The data was collected between 29th August 2024 and 11th of September 2024. 419 comments were selected for this study. Data collected was then analysed through a thematic analysis.

Study 3 sought to examine the following research questions:

RQ3. To what extent do parasocial relationships mediate the impact of body shame on purchase intention.

RQ4. To what extent does benign and malicious envy mediate the effect of appearance control beliefs and broad conceptualization of beauty on purchase intention.

This study employed an online survey distributed through WhatsApp groups, LinkedIn, TikTok and Instagram. 201 participants completed the survey. This study employed five well established scales: Parasocial Interaction scale (Rubin et al. 1985), Dispositional Envy Scale (Lange & Cruisius 2015), Purchase intention scale (Spears & Singh 2004). The Objectified Body Consciousness Scale (OBC; McKinley & Hyde 1996) and Broad Conceptualization of Beauty Scale (BCBS; Tylka & Iannantuono 2016). Mediation analysis using SPSS was carried out to establish the mediating effects of Parasocial relationships, Benign envy, Malicious envy, Body shame, Appearance control beliefs and Broad conceptualization of beauty on Purchase intention research method.

In Study 1 & 2, the coders analyzed the nine videos selected for the study, between 30th October 2024 and 21st November 2024, a percentage agreement was used to assess the intercoder reliability. These studies also espoused active listening reflexivity and positionality to assess how the researcher consciously assesses their predispositions and context and its effect on the research process (Olmos-Vega et al. 2022).

Study 3 espoused ethical considerations to mitigate negative effects of surveys on research participants. The objective of the survey was highlighted in the information and conclusion sections of the survey. This ensured that participants were clearly informed on the goal of the study. A consent form was attached at the beginning of the survey and clearly stated there was no monetary compensation and research participants were free to withdraw from the study without suffering any consequences. All the data gathered for this study was stored in my laptop and google drive. Data was made available to my supervisors and research assistants.

The research assistants signed a confidentiality agreement prior to undertaking data analysis. No names or identification was included that could link the results to any research participant in this study.

III. Main findings of the dissertation

Study 1

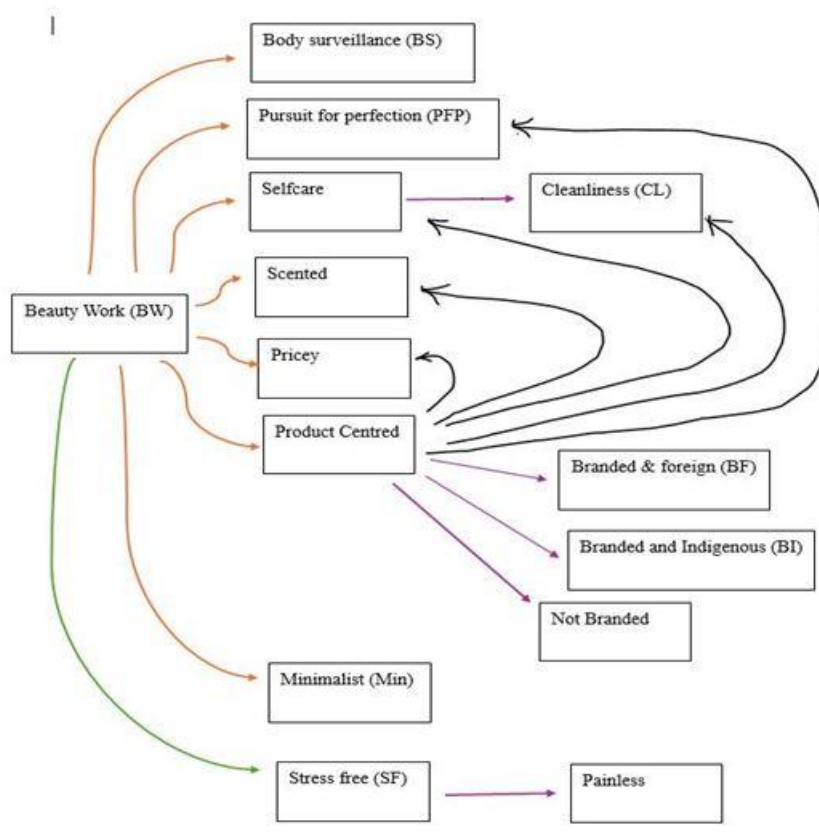


Figure 9: Conceptual diagram of Beauty work

The analysis of YouTube videos curated by the four SMIs (Joanna Kinuthia, Natalie Tewa, Just a Bantu & Geek on Fashion) revealed the prevalence of beauty work. Irrespective of how closely or loosely one holds onto Afrocentric or Occidental beauty they will participate in beauty work. Beauty work was characterized by body surveillance, selfcare, pursuit for perfection and product centric. Body surveillance refers to a constant focus on physical appearance and habitual monitoring of the body through dieting, portion control, intermittent

fasting and regular exercises aimed at weight management and weight loss. Physical outcome expectancies such as feeling good about being able to meet daily exercise targets and achieving a flat tummy, which allowed SMIs to wear crop tops, encouraged regular exercises (Simpson and Mazzeo 2017; Willis and Knobloch-Westerwick 2014; Bandura 1999).

Selfcare refers to activities aimed at taking special care of the body, they ranged from showers, skincare and haircare routines, massages, spa visits to manicure and pedicure. Selfcare for African women is characterized by an obsession for cleanliness with practices such as double cleansing the skin.

Beauty work was also characterized by a pursuit for perfection, which refers to the desire or quest to remove, clear or mitigate any pimples, marks, imperfections, uneven skin tones, discolourization, aging, fine lines, crooked and discoloured teeth aimed at obtaining a youthful appearance. A pursuit for perfection was accomplished through wearing makeup, braces and using beauty products to remove blemishes, hydrate the skin and reduce fine lines. Achieving an even skin tone, straight teeth and flawless skin acts a physical outcome expectancy that motivates a pursuit for perfection hence encouraging beauty work (Simpson and Mazzeo 2017; Willis and Knobloch-Westerwick 2014; Bandura 1999).

Beauty work is also product centric, beauty hinges on the use of cosmetic products aimed at attaining, maintaining and achieving beauty, these beauty products range from skincare, haircare and body care. Beauty products such as perfumes are aimed at attracting social approval which acts as the motivation for their use (Kwan & Trautner, 2009). Although perfumes may have negative effects on users who are allergic to them, social approval outweighs the physical discomfort.

Study 2

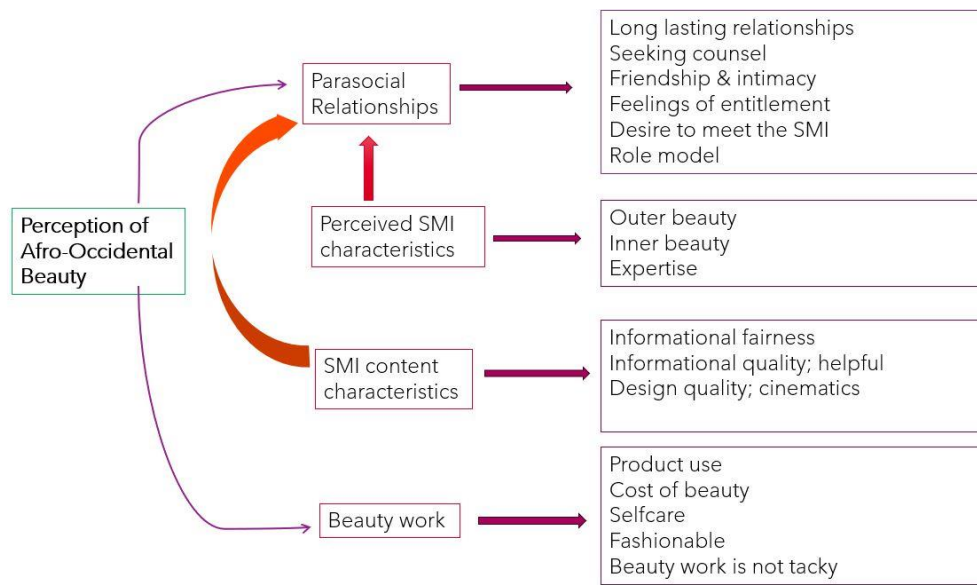


Figure 12: Conceptual diagram on the perception of beauty

Parasocial relationships were characterized by an existing relationship between the follower audience and the SMI that spanned several years (Aw & Labrecque 2020, Dibble et al. 2016; Giles 2002; Nordlund 1978; Horton & Wohl 1956). It also involved a pursuit to seek beauty and lifestyle advice from SMIs, this spanned from counsel on product use, product availability, products cost, make up routines, skincare routines, haircare routines and lifestyle choices such as tips on solo trips. Parasocial relationships are also characterized by friendship and intimacy, although these relationships are illusionary, their followers made a public declaration of their love and a commitment to support their content (Aw & Labrecque 2020; Rubin, Perse & Powell 1985). It also involved feelings of entitlement where followers demanded to know why some videos were no longer downloadable and they felt abandoned when SMIs did not post content regularly. These remarks were made using strong words and sometimes exaggeration to express their displeasure. Followers also expressed their desire to meet SMIs in person and considered them as role models. SMIs inspire them in fashion and lifestyle choices such as romantic partners.

Beauty is an essential element that enhances parasocial relationships (Ashraf, Hameed & Saeed 2023; Zheng et al. 2022; Lou & Kim 2019; Bond 2018). Beauty was characterized by an analysis of outer beauty, which involved an assessment of the SMIs body, hair, skin, nails and teeth. Beauty was also characterized by an analysis of a SMIs inner beauty, this involved admirable attributes such as boldness, vibrance, humour, authenticity, sincerity, politeness and gentleness (Dimitrov & Kroumpouzou 2023; Stearns 2002; Matiza 2013; Muhammad 1993). These attributes enhance SMIs likeability.

The followers were also keen on evaluating the content characteristics of SMIs videos. Followers were drawn to entertaining and lively videos, inspirational content which spurs them to try out new lifestyle choices such as travelling, cinematic videography, user friendly navigation of their content, honest reviews on products and practical and helpful information on beauty products (Yuan & Lou, 2020, Caselo et al., 2020; Mohammad et al. 2020; Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Lin et al., 2018; Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014; Al-Qeisi et al. 2014; Kim et al. 2012). SMIs content characteristics are also crucial in enhancing parasocial relationships.

Study 3

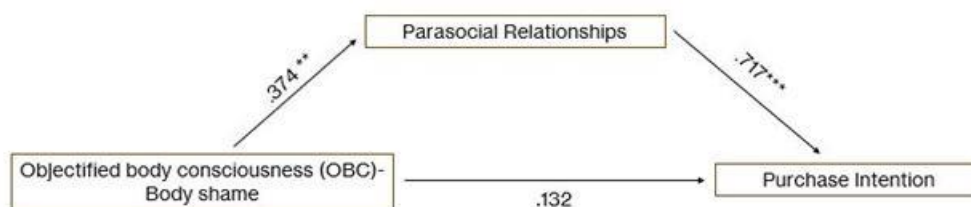


Figure 13: Model on the mediating effect of parasocial relationships on the influence of body shame on purchase intention.

Body shame is strongly associated with parasocial relationships. Parasocial relationships are also strongly associated with purchase intentions. This means that as body shame increases, parasocial relationships strengthen which in turn influences purchase intentions.

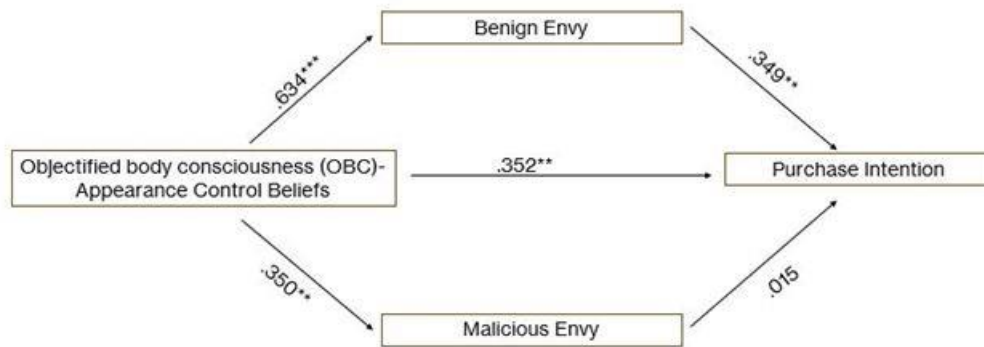


Figure 14: Model on the mediating effect of benign & malicious envy on the influence of OBC-Appearance control beliefs on purchase intention.

Appearance control beliefs are strongly associated with benign envy and not malicious envy. When individuals feel they are in control of how their body looks, they are more likely to experience benign envy. The indirect effect of appearance control beliefs on purchase intention is partially mediated through benign envy. The higher the appearance control beliefs the higher the benign envy which in turn affects purchase intention.

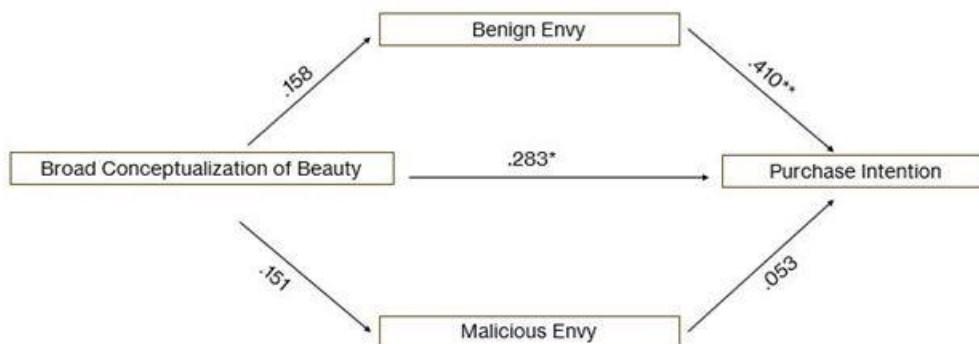


Figure 15: Model on the mediating effect of benign & malicious envy on the influence of Broad conceptualization of beauty on purchase intention.

Broad conceptualization of beauty is not associated with envy. This indicates that individuals who consider varied body sizes and looks beautiful feel less envious. The effect of broad conceptualization of beauty on purchase intentions is not mediated by envy. Women who have a broad conceptualization of beauty engage in fewer upward comparisons and have a higher body appreciation therefore do not struggle with envy (Rousseau 2024; Manning & Mulgrew 2022). Since they are less envious of other women, they are unlikely to engage in purchases so as to increase social desirability (Tylka & Iannantuono 2016).

The investigation of Afro-Occidental beauty standards among the youth highlights the significant role of SMIs and social media in the conceptualization and internalization of ideal beauty standards. This research demonstrates that women of African descent conceptualize beauty as a continuum with an adoption of both Afrocentric and Occidental beauty practices. Beauty work is an integral element of Afro-Occidental beauty standards, often characterized by effort and ritualistic beauty practices that are time consuming and expensive. Lastly, this research also underscores the significant role of parasocial relationships among SMIs followers which lead to upward comparison of the youth with SMIs which eventually leads to envy; malicious or benign. This in turn influences their purchase intentions.

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V.List of own (or co-authored publications related to the topic

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