### Global Beauty

“Beauty in the flesh will continue to rule the world.” - Florenz Ziegfeld (Beauty Quotes)

If one searches the internet for the definition of beauty, thousands of results are returned. According to the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, beauty is “the quality or aggregate of qualities in a person or thing that gives pleasure to the senses or pleasurably exalts the mind or spirit: loveliness” (Beauty). However, who is truly to define beauty? The perception of this elusive quality varies from country to country and across the cultures of the world. These attitudes arise directly from historical cultural values and are further influenced by media and social pressures. With each nation holding a unique history and culture, it is not surprising that contradictions exist across cultures about the meaning of beauty.

This paper will focus on the beauty concepts held in four areas of the world: Africa, Polynesia and other islands, Asia, and North America. Though there are multiple beliefs of what constitutes attractiveness held in each geographical region, it is impossible to discuss them all in depth. Therefore, the focus of each section will be on one beauty perception held by many individuals across the region. To begin, in order to gain a full understanding of the many different perceptions of beauty, one must have a grasp of the intriguing similarities shared by all people on the subject.

### Universal Commonalities

"The science of beauty is that beauty is a universal part of human experience, and that it provokes pleasure, rivets attention, and impels actions that help ensure survival of our genes."- Nancy Etcoff (Todosijević)

Before delving into the topic of the divergent views held in various sectors of the world, this paper will describe some universal commonalities. The focus of this research will illustrate that, though there are a multitude of divergent human perceptions of what constitutes physical attractiveness, commonalities exist that are widely shared and serve as a unifying factor. Many evolutionary psychologists contend that some of the ways in which people view beauty are influenced by human genetics and biology, as in the case of facial beauty. Like Nancy Etcoff states, there is a science to the principle of beauty (Todosijević). According to Professor Gillian Rhodes of the School of Psychology at the University of Western Australia, “face preferences may be adaptations for mate choice because attractive traits signal important aspects of mate quality, such as health” (199). Some facial features commonly viewed across cultures as beautiful include averageness, sexual dimorphism, and symmetry (Penton-Voak).

It has been proposed that human biology leads people of all cultures to view faces that appear average in that culture as beautiful. This is because average facial features indicate “developmental stability and heterozygosity” (Rhodes, 203). The Heterozygous Advantage, when used to describe an individual, is the existence of two different alleles, or pairs of members that make up a gene, one dominant and one recessive, for a particular trait, generally one that deals with fighting disease (Allele). This advanced gene gives the organism superior fitness, thus allowing it to better survive and reproduce (Conneally). This theory has been applied to the study of the biological factors that prompt perceived human beauty and has been tested multiple times by psychologists and evolutionary scientists. Steven W. Gangestad and David M. Buss conducted an experiment testing whether or not “human societies in pathogen prevalent environments should be more polygynous” (90). The term “pathogen” is used to describe parasitic diseases, while polygynous is another terms for heterozygous. The results illustrated that in those societies in which parasitic diseases are common, “pathogen prevalence substantially correlated with average attractiveness rating across countries” (Gangestad and Buss, 92). In layman’s terms, people with attractive, average facial features have stronger immune systems. The positive immunity genes associated with average facial appearance may explain why such facial features are commonly viewed around the world as beautiful.

As a second point, sexual dimorphism, or “the differences in appearance between males and females of the same species,” plays a key role in the perceptions people hold of beauty (Sexual). As humans undergo puberty, differentiation of female and male traits increasingly occurs. These characteristically female and male traits indicate sexual maturity, health, and the strength of one’s reproductive ability (Symons). Cross culturally, men view women as more attractive if they have typical, feminine features such as full lips, small chins, and high cheekbones (Rhodes, 208-209). Additionally smooth skin and moderately short lower portions of the face in women are perceived in all cultures as attractive by men (Symons). One additional indication of female attractiveness is muscle firmness and definition (Buss, 2). These characteristics signal youth and nubility, sexual attractiveness indicative of marriageable age (Nubile). Male ancestors utilized these cues to determine which females in society had the highest mate value, the greatest ability to reproduce successfully and often (Symons). In males, extremely masculine body features are found attractive by females. Typical masculine features include “large sexual ornaments,” thick brows, square chins, and defined jaws (Rhodes, 208-209). However, according to David M. Buss:

Male fertility, to the degree that is valued by females, is less steeply age-graded from puberty on than is female fertility and therefore cannot be assessed as accurately from physical appearance. Physical appearance, therefore, should be less central to female mate preferences than to male mate preferences (3).

Therefore, the physical attractiveness of males is often less important in mate selection for females. What are valued more are the services males can provide, for example food and protection (Buss, 3).

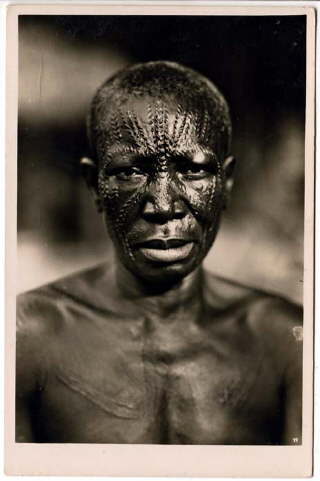
While blatant sexual dimorphism plays a vital role in the perception of attractiveness, the more subtle nuances of symmetry also are a noteworthy universal commonality in the beauty preferences of humankind. The concept that symmetry of body and, especially, face is indicative of beauty was first proposed by the Ancient Greek Philosopher Aristotle, who considered symmetry “one of the greatest forms of beauty to be found in the mathematical sciences” (BBC). This concept has been tested and retested by psychologists with the vast majority of results confirming that humans consider symmetrical faces more beautiful than asymmetrical ones. In an experiment testing whether or not symmetrical faces are viewed as more attractive than asymmetrical ones conducted by Rhodes, Fiona Proffitt, Jonathon M. Grady, and Alex Sumich, results confirmed that “perfectly symmetric versions [of faces], made by blending the normal and mirror images of each face, were preferred to less symmetric versions of the same faces” (659). Evolutionary psychologists contend that the driving force behind this is that symmetry “may signal mate quality,” health, and genetic excellence (Rhodes et al., 659). Highly asymmetrical faces are commonly the result of genetic abnormality and/or mental retardation and can often be accompanied by emotional and psychological disease. According to Rotem Kowner of the University of Tsukuba, “Mentally retarded individuals show greater anthropometric asymmetry than normal individuals, and people suffering from schizophrenia were found to have greater FA [Fluctuating Asymmetry] than healthy [people]” (663). For the mental and physical health symmetry implies in an individual, it has been genetically programed into human nature to be more attracted to faces that are symmetrical to some degree.

It is important to keep these principles in mind as this paper delves further into the topic of beauty perceptions around the world. Behind many of the perceptions of beauty are the concepts mentioned above. If one travels to the Far East, one would discover that fair skin is perceived as exceptionally attractive, as will be discussed in the fifth section of this paper. It is not only the cultural beliefs held by Asians that drive this perception, but also the femininity associated with fair skin. Here, sexual dimorphism comes to play a role. Pale skin, decidedly feminine in this society and many others, is especially perceived as attractive when found on women. Sexual dimorphism then can explain why men and women alike strongly view fair skin as especially beautiful on women. In addition, one may also note that averageness, sexual dimorphism, and symmetry are all perceived as attractive due to the healthiness of body and mind that they signal. This same concept is part of the perception held by Polynesians, discussed in depth in the third section, that tattooed individuals are highly attractive, as well as part of the belief of North Americans that tan-skin is beautiful. In Hawaii, tattooed men and women are thought to be healthier and spiritually protected. Similarly, North Americans, discussed in the sixth section, share the general belief that bronzed skin indicates healthiness in an individual. In Western and Central Africa, scarification, which will be discussed in depth in the next section, typically takes on symmetrical patterns. It is arguable that the behind this trend is the shared concept by all humans that symmetry is beautiful.

### Africa

“‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty,’- that is all Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."- John Keats (Ode on a Grecian Urn)

Africa is a continent rich in tradition and culture. As the birthplace of the human race, Africa is home to a cornucopia of societies, tribes, languages, and practices. Readers may be interested in the further study of African head molding, Efik fattening, and tribal teeth filing, however, in the interest of time, this paper will discuss only one aspect of the multitude of beauty concepts held by African cultures; scarification. This method of body adornment is a traditional aspect of African culture and is used to reflect not only beauty, but also social status, tribal affiliation, sexuality, and maturity.

Scarification, a form of which is cicatrisation, is a “scar formation at the site of a healing wound” (Cicatrisation). In many African cultures, especially those in Sub-Saharan, Central, and West Africa, scarification is practiced by both men and women as a means of body adornment. The decorative scars created during scarification, called keloids, are raised by cutting incisions along the skin with razor blades, sharpened stones, glass, and knives (Peck). These scars are cut repeatedly until the desired size is reached. When participants elect to rub dirt, ash, or plant juice into the scar to further irritate the incision in order to produce a more defined and raised keloid, the process is called cicatrisation (Coleman). Many of the patterns of scarring take on geometrical tendencies. These scar patterns are generally symmetrical, especially those located on the face. As discussed earlier in the paper, all humankind holds the common belief that symmetry is a sign of beauty. This helps explain why symmetry is so central to the practice of scarification in African culture. Scarification, in part, is so popular in these regions because the high levels of melanin found in the skin of Africans prevent tattoos from showing up darkly and defined on the body (Africa). Scarification is used instead to form geometric patterns and markings that relate such information as the tribal affiliation, social status, age, and lineage of a person. This form of body adornment has a long history of existence in Africa.

\*The African man above displays the typically symmetrical, geometric pattern of scarring created on the face and chest (Coleman).

Scarification has been practiced for centuries by many West and Central African tribes. A multitude of legends and beliefs about the origin of the practice exist today. Some contend that scarification originated as a medical practice that was believed to have spiritual healing powers, while others contest that this form of body adornment began as a means to identify fellow tribesmen, as well as enemies, during times of war (Houreld). “The indelible markings prevented warriors, who wore little clothing, from killing members of their own tribe, and ensured corpses received the correct funeral rites” (Clajot). One legend holds that scarification of the body discouraged the spirit of Death by making the person less desirable to it (Africa). African philosopher and author Ousmane Sembene theorizes in his novel Tribal Scars that the practice of scarification began in the 17th century with the advent of the slave trade (Clair and Niala). He contends that scarification was symbolic of freedom during this time because those tribes who marked their bodies were less likely to be raided and sold as slaves (Irving). Africans with scars and marks on their faces and bodies were less likely to be purchased in the New World because, as property, they appeared damaged and thus undesirable. In addition, in many places, like Benin, “the scars also helped to prevent wearers being taken into slavery because traders viewed unscarred faces as a sign of good health” (Clajot). However, it is more likely that the slave trade influenced the popularity of scarification, rather than served as the source of the practice. Evidence supplied by tribal art illustrates that scarification existed long before the slave trade. For example, Djenne terracotta figures displayed in James Willis Gallery in San Francisco, California during the months of May, June, and July of 1983 heralding from prehistoric Africa include scarification amongst their body ornaments (Ghent). In addition, “early evidence of African scarification can be seen in rock art dating back beyond 4000 BC” (Clajot). This evidence illustrates that the practice of scarification existed centuries before the slave trade began. Though the origin and original intent of scarification remains an enigma, they can most likely be attributed to by a combination of the above factors.

Though it is unclear when and why scarification began, today the purpose of the practice is centered on providing an identity, spiritual protection, beauty, and several other factors for those that chose to participate. In many African cultures, scarification is used to identify tribal membership. In West Africa, markings on the forehead signify tribal affiliation, while those on the cheek indicate familial lineage (Heller). In many cultures, members of the tribe that do not receive that tribe’s markings are treated like outcasts. In areas where scarification is tradition, adults who do not have scars have trouble finding spouses (Clajot). The social stigma of lacking scars influences many Africans to undergo the painful cosmetic procedure.

Scarification can also be used to identify the age and maturity of a person. Members of the Bessoribe tribe in Benin, for example, form markings on the face to symbolize the start of childhood. Later, when children become men, new markings are created on the stomach as an initiation rite into manhood (Scarification). In addition, scarification is conducted in many cultures because it is believed to provide spiritual protection and to appease the spirits of ancestors. To illustrate, the Senufo of the Ivory Coast believe that the markings made through scarification protect young children from death because they are unappealing to the spirit. In Senufo culture, if a woman loses many children to death, a scar is inscribed on her next child to ensure his or her survival (Peck). In Benin, where scarification is a common practice, over 60 percent of the population believes in voodoo. Many people living there inscribe voodoo symbols, such as the “voodoo python”, to appease or repel spirits (Clajot).

Many African cultures consider scarification not only practical, but also beautiful. The intricate designs carved into the face and abdomen of a woman in the Yoruba tribe in Nigeria signifies that she is mature, as well as brave. They serve as a testimony to her ability to face childbirth (Coleman). Stomach carvings are also considered highly erotic. Women with meticulously carved abdomens are considered more sexual and thus desirable to men in the Yoruba tribe because they will most likely bear an abundance of children (Peck). Even though evidence shows that currently the practice is slowly declining in Africa and that Africans no longer place as high a level of importance on the scars as once before, people continue to have their children scarred because it is viewed as beautiful (Houreld).

Perhaps the most famously known culture for practicing this method of body adornment, the Yoruba people have a culture and history steeped in scarification. Though not as popular as it once was, research gathered through experiments reveals that “among respondents whose children were regarded as old enough for scarification, 95 per cent of parents had had it performed” (Orubuloye, Caldwell, and Caldwell). Tolu Fakeye, the head of Nigeria’s traditional medicine development program, contends that the practice of scarification has declined in recent years because people no longer identify with it as heavily as in earlier times. He stated in an interview with the Washington Post, "In the last one to two decades, it's been mostly restricted to rural areas. The origin of the practice -- to identify people in the tribal wars -- is no longer relevant, and the people who identify it with cultural beliefs haven't had so much contact with formal education or urbanization" (Houreld). However, despite the evidence of decline, scarification remains an enormous part of Yoruba culture, which has a great deal to do with the perception that the practice makes an individual beautiful. Modernly, parents’ major reasons for having their children scarified stem from their desire to please the family’s ancestral spirits and to uphold tradition (Scarification). In addition, scarification is still an essential ingredient of physical attractiveness for many of those belonging to the Yoruba tribe. Many families have their children scarified with simple markings for the purpose of beauty, rather than to provide historical information about the child. Razak Ahmed, a Yoruba traditional doctor, summed this principle up in an interview with the Washington Post by stating, "It makes the face beautiful. . . . They cannot stop it, it is our culture" (Houreld).

Many outsiders view the practice as a form of cruelty to the young children that receive it; however, as illustrated above, it is a deeply engrained part of West and Central African culture, a practice that many Africans take intense pride in. Writer Jean Clajot explains, “Some tribes in northwestern Benin and northeastern Togo are so proud of their scarification that they copy the designs onto the walls of their Tata Somba (house)” (Clajot). Despite the criticism scarification receives from Westerners, the practice continues on in much of Western and Central Africa because of its strong ties to the tradition, history, and religion of the region.

Body adornment plays not only a great role in the beauty culture of Africa, but also in those of island nations such as New Zealand and the Philippines. It is fascinating that these two areas of the globe, separated by a vast ocean, jointly hold the belief that body adornment improves the attractiveness of individuals. Though this belief is manifested in two different forms, scarification and tattooing, the reasons these markedly different cultures both practice body modification are shared. This hints that some of the concerns held by mankind, such as one’s position in society, are universally held and displayed through beauty practices, as will be further discussed in the following section.

### Polynesia and other Islands

“A man without tattoos is invisible to the Gods."- Iban Proverb (Quotations)

In many island nations around the globe, body adornment has historically played a critical role in the concept of physical attractiveness. Though there are many other facets of the beauty perceptions held by island dwellers, this section will focus on body adornment in particular. For centuries, residents of the islands referred to as “Polynesia”, “Micronesia”, and “Melanesia” have practiced tattooing, or *Tatau* as it is traditionally called in this part of the globe, as a method of beautification. These include New Zealand, Hawaii, Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, Cook Isles, Tahiti, and several others (Joyce and Thomas, 36). In addition, natives of the Philippines have also practiced traditional tattooing since before the islands were first colonized by the Spanish (Philippine). The aboriginals of Australia have also been known to practice the art (Viegas).

Throughout these islands, there is negligible variance in the manner in which tattoos are created. For the most part, the tattoos are administered using a sharpened bone with serrated teeth. This instrument is dipped into a mix consisting usually of the baked and ground kernels of the candlenut mixed with oil, but also sometimes of soot from burnt plants and vegetables for added pigment. The bone chisel is then tapped with a slightly heavier stick in order to pierce the skin (Skin). Before the tattooing commences, the design is usually traced onto the skin with charcoal, however highly skilled artisans often create the designs free-hand (Joyce and Thomas, 40). In New Zealand, the Maori people cut incisions into the skin before administering the tattoo ink in order to create a raised design (The Maori). The Filipinos practice a slight variation of tattooing by using a piece of iron with three serrated teeth, rather than the bone chisel most other cultures utilize, to administer the ink. They also an ink consisting of sugarcane juice, soot, and lard (Philippine). It is interesting to note that in Polynesia, men generally receive more tattoos than women. In addition, the designs that women and men are tattooed with vary by sex and by location. For example:

In Rotuma a favourite design for the men is the *perero*, supposed to represent a strong-smelling flower which the young men give to their sweethearts. The women’s proper marks are circles enclosing designs, placed three in a row on each arm, diagonal marks along each finger joint, and small blots on the hand below the base of the thumb between the palm and the wrist (Joyce and Thomas, 41).

Though the designs of tattoos prevalent in these islands vary by culture, their general purpose and history coincide greatly.

The Polynesian people migrated to the islands located in what is now called Polynesia, Melanesia, and Micronesia sometime before 1000 AD; the exact date of their arrival in modern Polynesia is unknown. With them they brought the practice of tattooing. In New Zealand, the traditional tattoo is called *Moko*, in Samoa and Australia it is referred to as *Tatau*, and in Hawaii it is named *Kakau* (History of Tattoo). The tattoos were historically applied to mark social status, illustrate the wearer’s bravery, honor the wearer’s ancestry and family name, and serve as a form of beautification. The practice also held significant spiritual and religious implications. In some cultures, such as Hawaii, tattooing was traditionally practiced to protect one’s “health and spiritual well being” (History of Tattoo). In addition, tattooing, like scarification in African, was traditionally practiced as a means of attaining acceptance in the community and to mark the transitions the wearer had passed through in life, such as childhood and marriage (Skin). For example, in some parts of Fiji, spots tattooed at the corners of a woman’s mouth signify that she has had children; however, the spots are also often tattooed to hide wrinkles and make the wearer appear more youthful. In the Fijian Hades, tattoos are so central to social acceptance that women who have not been adorned with tattoos are not only ostracized by society, but often chased by other women in the community “who tear and cut them with sharp shells” (Joyce and Thomas, 86-87). In New Zealand, Maori men who did not complete the process of tattooing were shunned by their societies, while those who did not have any tattoos were considered naked (Body). The “Maori could "read" each others' iwi ("tribe"), hapu ("clan"), rank, and locale in their moko”, which is the traditional facial tattoo (Levinson). In most of these cultures, the practice of traditional tattooing has sharply declined and, interestingly enough, for the same general reason. To illustrate how this decline occurred, as well as the modern day influence of this traditional practice, the following paragraphs will take an in depth look into the history of tattooing in the Maori culture, the most famed of Polynesian cultures for tattooing.

The Maori of New Zealand are well known for their unique tattooing practices. Unlike the many other island cultures that practice tattooing by simply puncturing the skin with inked needles and chisels, the Maori practice a far more painful method of tattooing in which tattoos are “carved into the skin,” leaving the surface scarred and rough (The Cultural Body). These tattoos can take several months, and up to a year to complete, because of the painful and dangerous nature of the practice (History of Tattoo). Maori legend holds that tattooing became known to mankind when “a young man by the name of Mataora (which means "Face of Vitality") and a young princess of the underworld by the name of Niwareka” were betrothed. One day, Mataora beat his wife, who fled to the underworld, or *Uetonga*, in response. Feeling guilty, Mataora attempted to enter the underworld and find Niwareka. In order to do so, he was forced to pass through treacherous trials and numerous dangers. When he finally arrived in the underworld, his face paint was ruined. Niwareka’s family taunted him for his unkempt appearance. He humbly begged his wife for forgiveness. Upon her acceptance of him, the woman’s father taught Mataora the sacred art of tattooing, which was in turn passed through the generations of the Maori (The Maori). Thus the Maori tattoo themselves as a sort of permanent face paint honoring their family and rank, one that can never smear like Mataora’s did. This “face paint” takes many years and serious contemplation to complete.

Traditionally, upon reaching puberty, Maori men and women began to design their *mokos*, elaborate facial tattoos. Though these designs are unique to each individual, patterns are often “passed down from generation to generation” (Levinson). Maori women were traditionally tattooed on the lips and chin. In Maori culture, “A woman with full, blue lips is considered the most beautiful and desirable” (Defining Beauty). Occasionally they also received tattoos on the legs and chest (Joyce and Thomas, 74). Men, however, often tattooed their entire bodies in what is called the *puhuro*, swirling, colorful tattoos stretching from mid abdomen to the lower calves (History of Tattoo). In addition, they also tattooed their entire faces. The process caused severe swelling and irritation, forcing those receiving the facial tattoos to eat only liquefied food passed to the mouth through tubes for weeks after a tattooing session occurred. The tattooing process is heavily steeped in tradition and ritual. As a part of the art, those being tattooed had to abstain from sexual intimacy and food during the process. However, family and loved ones were always present to chant incantations and offer moral support to those undergoing the painful procedure (The Maori).

Two Maori women displaying the typical chin *moko* and blue lips (History of Tattoo).

In modern times, Maori tattooing has declined due to western influence and the colonization of New Zealand in the mid 1800’s. In 1907, the British banned *moko* as part of their attempt to eradicate Maori culture, religion, and language in New Zealand. This ban, as well as the influence of Christian missionaries on the island, greatly contributed to the decline of *moko* (Levinson). “By the 1850s, the moko suffered under attacks from missionaries, who described it as "the Devil's art" (History of Tattoo). The ban on *moko* was repealed in 1962, allowing the practice to be taken up again (Levinson). Similar declines of the tattooing tradition were documented in other island nations due also to the influence of Christianity. For example, “In Huahine (Society Isles), native law decreed: ‘No person shall mark with *tatua*, it shall be entirely discontinued. It belongs to ancient evil customs’” (Joyce and Thomas, 41 and 42). Today, many New Zealanders with Maori heritage continue to get traditional tattoos as a means to revive their heritage. This *moko* revival is more prevalent amongst women. One Maori woman, named Aneta, explained in an article on the practice that "Moko is about reclaiming a lost taonga--a part of us that was taken away. ... It is my external way of showing that I'm proud to be Maori" (Levinson).

The intense pride felt by island dwellers in their heritage and cultural practices is a large part of the momentum behind traditional tattooing, as it is with scarification in Africa. The many meanings behind this ancient practice are almost identical to those of scarification in much of Africa. It is intriguing that the cultures of Polynesia and of Africa, so isolated by distance, have conducted different forms of beauty practices for thousands of years, as archaeological evidence shows, but for the same overarching reasons. The similarities underlying the beauty practices of these isolated cultures imply that, though beauty ideals may differ widely, physical attractiveness is not only of superficial importance, but also pertains to the universal concerns of human beings, such as religion, family pride, and health.

While cultures like the Maori of New Zealand and the Yoruba of Nigeria find faces marked with tattoos and scars beautiful, in many parts of Asia, it is porcelain, flawless skin that is the ultimate symbol of attractiveness. It is interesting to note that all three cultures find the skin, or the adornment of it, central to beauty. This may be due to the fact that human skin takes up and large portion of the body and, unlike that of most mammals, is not covered by hair. Thus the appearance of one’s skin is perhaps one’s most noticeable trait next to the face.

### Asia

“Beauty’s but skin deep” - John Davies (Trivia)

Asia is home to many cultures and perceptions of beauty. However, one of the most prevalent concepts shared by Asian cultures is that pale, smooth skin is the epitome of attractiveness. This notion has existed in Asia for centuries, “stemming back to ancient China and Japan, where the saying "one white covers up three ugliness" was passed through the generations” (Bray). Japan and China in particular have mushrooming consumer markets in face-whitening cosmetics and other skin products, as well as a variety of traditional methods rumored to give participants fair, flawless skin. In virtually all Asian countries, for example Thailand, Korea, and Malaysia, pale skin is preferred (Fuller). However, the majority of the market seems to be concentrated in Japan and China. In addition, less research has been conducted in these other Asian nations on the topic of beauty, as will be discussed later in this section; this lack of evidence is evidence in itself.

It is fascinating that despite the differences in language, religion, culture, and ethnicity between Asian nations, fair skin has been preferred in all for centuries. Several theories exist today about the origin of this preference. One common concept is that fairness of skin was once indicative of aristocracy, wealth, and education. This stems from the fact that “those from lower social classes, laborers and farmers, are more exposed to the sun”, and thus have darker skin (Fuller). Another theory holds that colonization by lighter races, such as the British and Moguls, led to the perception that power is associated with whiteness and therefore pale skin is beautiful (Shankar and Subish, 101). This preference for fair skin is deeply engrained in Asian culture and has survived through modern times. One Asian man explained in an interview with the *Los Angeles Times* that “lighter-skinned Asian women…embody the traditional ideal known as si si wen wen”, which means that “a lady stands there with white skin and is very polite, and when she laughs, she doesn't make a big noise," according to Margaret Qui, an Asian woman also interviewed for the article (Chong). Research shows that “three quarters of Malaysian men thought their partners would be more attractive with lighter complexions” and “In Hong Kong two thirds of men prefer fairer skin, while half the local women wanted their men paler” (Bray). This belief is not only common in Asia, but is also found in other parts of the globe. The perception that fairness equates to attractiveness has led to centuries of skin-whiting practices in Asian countries.

For centuries, Chinese women have used crushed pearls, powdered white jade, and ginseng on their skin as whitening agents. Japanese women have also used natural products as skin whiteners, such as a cleanser made from the droppings of nightingales (Sherrow). Today many Japanese women still use this same treatment. However, currently, skin whitening trends have gradually moved away from traditional methods to mass produced creams, cleansers, and chemicals. Most products either exfoliate dead skin to reveal the paler skin below or inhibit melanin. Surveys conducted in Asia have revealed startling results about the popularity of such whiting products: “Almost half of Asians aged 25 to 34 years used skin whiteners in a business that some analysts have said could be worth billions of dollars” (Bray) and “In Hong Kong, Malaysia, the Philippines, South Korea and Taiwan, 4 of every 10 women use a whitening cream” (Fuller). The media has added fuel to this craze. Typical Asian movies show heroines and heroes as pale and beautiful, while the villains are generally dark-skinned and less attractive (Shankar and Subish, 101). Billboards, advertisements, and posters litter Asian cities with messages touting whiting products and pale-faced models (Bray). Available in these countries are foreign products like Avon and Christian Dior, as well as products made by local companies and foreign-joint ventures. Many women prefer to purchase the locally made products because they are cheaper; however there is a huge market amongst wealthier Asian women for the more expensive, foreign products, which can cost hundreds of dollars (Sampson). In addition to creams, many women depend on animal products for skin care. A growing trend in Japan involves the daily ingestion of collagen-rich meats, such as beef tendons. Many women mix collagen in with their drinks because they believe it makes the skin beautiful (Defining Beauty). However, many of these methods have averse affects.

Many of the whitening creams Asian women use have detrimental effects on wearers. These products are often produced in filthy warehouses, contain toxic levels of mercury, and can even cause cancer. Many of the brands produced locally in countries such as China and Taiwan “exceeded the U.S. Food and Drug Administration safety limits for mercury” and can seriously harm those that use them. One such product, Rosedew, was found to contain mercury levels “27,000 to 60,000 times the acceptable dose” (Bray). Companies like Rosedew that face criticism for the chemicals found in their products claim to have been unaware that there was mercury in their products and propose that the products containing them may be fakes (Bray). In addition, the market place has been flooded with illegally produced products made in village factories, many containing bleaching chemicals that eventually cause the blackening of skin and growth of itchy boils (Sampson). Toxic chemicals, such as mercury and hydroquinone, are highly effective in skin bleaching and also cheap in comparison to healthier substitutes such as licorice extract, which sells for $20,000 per kilogram (Fuller). This is part of the reason why these chemicals are so often used in the illegally produced whitening creams. Several women in Hong Kong have been hospitalized for mercury poisoning in recent years due to the use of such creams. In Asia and in areas of the United States where there is a high concentration of Asian immigrants, plastic surgeons have begun to offer treatments, called “mesofacials”, that “deliver vitamins, moisturizers and bleaching agents to a woman's face”, as well as block the production of melanin (Chong). However, by blocking the production of melanin, such treatments actually increase the risk skin cancer. Despite the dangers in using these whitening products, the market in Asia for them continues to grow in leaps and bounds and is even beginning to feature creams specifically for men. For many Asian consumers, the quest for beauty and the image of wealth far outweighs health risks.

“An ad for a skin-whitening product in Hong Kong says: "White or wrong? The right choice. Beauty White makes your whole body white”” (Fuller).

Again, similarities abound in the traditional values behind the belief that fair skin is beautiful in Asia and those behind scarification in Africa and tattooing in the islands of Polynesia. While the pale-skin craze in Asia is driven far more by the media and consumerism in comparison to these other traditions, similarities lie in the fact that the two practices of adornment and the perceived beauty of white skin symbolize social status and power in those that fulfill these requirements. However, research on the topic has been primarily conducted in China and Japan, where these products are most widely used. As previously mentioned, the lack of evidence on the beauty preferences in other Asian nations is evidence in itself. China has an ever growing consumer market that has been highly influenced by the western consumer culture, while Japan has been for quite some time, a highly consumerist society. This in part explains why the skin whitening trend has been so pronounced in these two nations. One may speculate that the reason less importance has been placed on beauty practices in some of the other Asian nations stems from the possibility that the beauty market may have less relevance there. In nations like North Korea where the average yearly income is a mere $757, every penny must go to the necessities, therefore many citizens may not have the money or time to emphasize beauty (Kirk). However, it has been well documented that despite any variance of incomes or emphasis on beauty across Asian nations, it is a common belief that fair skin is attractive.

While most Asians find pale skin the height of beauty, on the other side of the world, it is tanned, bronzed skin that is perceived as attractive. These contrasting perceptions come into direct conflict in areas like the United States, where immigrants and their children differ vastly in skin color preference. One daughter of such immigrants explained:

Filipinos don’t want to be really dark, especially for girls because it gives of the impression that she is a laborer. The elder generation of my family wants to be fair skinned, but my generation wants to be tan. Like my mom and all of my aunts use whitening face washes (Monton).

As this paper continues, it will illustrate that, interestingly enough, these two opposing views concerning skin color and beauty are driven by the same underlying perception that those traits that signal wealth are most attractive. As noted previously, there is considerable overlap in the underlying principles of beauty perceptions, rather than their outward manifestations. It is intriguing that yet again, the appearance of one’s skin plays a vital role in one’s physical beauty.

### North America

“Too much beauty, I reckon, is nothing but too much sun.” - E. B. Browning (Quotes on Beauty)

In much of North America, but especially the United States, having a glowing tan is perceived as one of the many facets of what makes one attractive. Though in centuries past, it was fair skin that was sought after, since the early 1900’s a reversal of this trend has occurred. This can be attributed to changing attitudes of how the aristocratic spend their time, as well as a morphing perception of which outer-appearances signal health. The quest for tan skin has led to the burgeoning of the tanning bed, tanning oil, and spray tan markets as men and women alike seek to maintain a bronzed appearance not only in summer, but throughout the entire year. Teens and adults in their twenties are most prone to tanning because the negative effects of the sun and tanning beds on their skin are not immediately revealed (Darker). Growing concern over the tanning craze in the United States has even led to proposals calling for a ten percent tax on tanning salons (Could Congress). To fully understand how the belief that tan-skin is attractive originated, it is important to look into the history of this phenomenon.

Up until the end of the Victorian era, about 1901, pale skin was the absolute symbol of beauty, refinement, wealth, and power in both Europe and North America (Victorian). Behind this ideal was the long standing view that only the aristocratic had the leisure to stay inside, away from the rays of the sun, while the poor laborers toiled in fields and grew darker skinned. This perception continues in Asia today, however around 1920, it reversed in Europe and North America. It is generally accepted that this cultural reversal was directly due to two famed French women during the 1920s. Coco Chanel, the prominent designer, returned from a yachting vacation with a suntan; her fans began to follow in her footsteps. In addition, French singing sensation, Josephine Baker, had a naturally caramel complexion, which prompted many of her female supporters to take up sun tanning (Sun). Around this time, newspapers and other forms of media grew more prominent. Photos of these tanned stars were widely circulated and soon after magazines began to feature tanned models (Ashbrook). Bronze soon became the new skin color of glamour and luxury. Being tanned became synonymous with wealth during this time as the public began to believe that the privileged had the time to lounge in the sun and spend time on boats, in the process gaining deepened skin tones (Chong). Part of this belief may in part be a byproduct of the Industrial Revolution, during which the common laborer shifted from doing outdoor work to spending hours inside stifling factories, and thus avoiding the skin-darkening UV rays.

As a second point, many psychologists contend that people have come to deem tanned skin as a sign of healthiness, further adding to the appeal of the tan. North Shore psychiatrist Lenore Cantor explained in an interview with *The Boston Globe* that "There's a general perception that a tan means you're healthy” (Muther). Dr. Sandra Read, “a dermatologist in Washington and member of the National Council on Skin Cancer Prevention”, seems to agree with this assertion; she states on the subject, “We're fighting a Darwinian struggle here…We're hardwired to look at color-- vividness--as a sign of health and attractiveness and a potential good partner to mate with” (Rawe). As discussed in the Universal Commonalities section of this paper, it is often those traits that signal health that are perceived as attractive.

Further driving what is now referred to as the “tanning obsession” is the media and social pressures. Advertisements in Asian nations feature fair skinned women and whitening products; however, in the United States and much of Canada, bronzed models peer out from magazine ads and billboards, while tanning salons promote their services through television, radio, and internet advertising. Commercials promoting healthier lifestyles, such as those for dieting services like Nutrisystem® and exercise machines like Bowflex®, virtually always display toned, deeply bronzed men and women who claim to have experienced success through the use of their products. Advertisements such as these further promote the concept that tanned skin is indicative of health. While television and movie stars in Asia are typically pale skinned, the vast majority of celebrities and socialites in North America sport tans year round. Tanned icons like Jessica Simpson and Paris Hilton help reinforce the perception that tan skin is beautiful and valuable (Rawe). This evidence illustrates that as a society, the United States in particular is driven by advertising and the media.

The perception that tanned skin is beautiful has led many adolescents and young adults to feel socially pressured to use self-tanners and tanning beds and to spend hours in the sun at beaches and pools. Many feel pressured to get tans because the majority of their friends and peers sport this look and/or find it more attractive. One survey conducted in 2004 found that “1 in 10 youths ages 11 to 18 uses a tanning bed each year” (Narayan). Additional evidence shows that an “estimated 2.3 million teens who pop into a tanning parlor at least once a year, helping make indoor tanning what an industry trade group says is a $5 billion-a-year business” (Rawe). Research conducted by the International Medical News Group in surveys during the years of 1988, 1994, and 2007 reveals that “in each successive interval, there was an…increase in the perception that people looked better with a tan --58% in 1988, 69% in 1994, and 81% in 2007 (Young Adults). Use of tanning beds also rose 1% in 1988, 26% in 1994, and 27% in 2007” (Young Adults). The self-tanning market has experienced similar growth in its product use:

Sales of self-tanners in the United States have skyrocketed in the past five years. In 2003, sales totaled $53 million. By 2008, sales surpassed $200 million, according to market research group Mintel International Group, Ltd. They anticipate those numbers will continue to rise in 2009 (Muther).

This evidence indicates that the desire for tanned skin is quickly growing in North America. Furthermore, in light of this research, one can confidently state that the United States, especially, is a highly consumerist society in which the beauty industry reaps large benefits by encouraging the use of its products through the heavy use of advertising. One may note here that this is very similar to the situation in Asia, in which beauty companies are increasingly profiting by adding fuel to the desires of women, and even men, to have fair skin through media. This directly contrasts to the beauty practices of Africa and Polynesia, which are much more steeped in culture and tradition and where no real market exists for the practices of scarification and tattooing. Much like in Asia, where women contract ill effects due to the use of whitening creams, many people in North America, women especially, face adverse effects in the quest for bronzed skin.

It has been well documented that exposure to UV rays not only damages the skin by causing wrinkles, sunspots, and premature skin-aging, but also by causing the growth of skin cancers, amongst them the most deadly type, melanoma (Darker). A representational survey conducted by the International Medical News Group illustrated that in 2007, 87% of people understood that “tanning can cause melanoma/skin cancer.” Yet despite this knowledge, the use of tanning beds in 2007 increased by 27% (Young Adults). Countless personal stories of fair-skinned women getting melanoma due to tanning have been used in mounting attacks against the tanning bed industry. These women are part of the growing group who contract the deadly skin cancer. Research illustrates a definite, positive correlation between tanning bed use and the contraction of melanoma: studies have found that “younger people who regularly use tanning beds are eight times more likely to get melanoma than people who have never used them” (Cheng). It has been reported that “The incidence of melanoma, the most lethal form of skin cancer, has doubled in the U.S. since 1975 among women ages 15 to 29” and “The World Health Organization estimated…that up to 60,000 deaths worldwide are caused each year by excessive UV exposure and urged youths under 18 to steer clear of indoor tanning” (Rawe). In August of 2009, the International Agency for Research on Cancer classified tanning beds and UV radiation as carcinogenic, “deeming both to be as deadly as arsenic and mustard gas” (Cheng). The same report also stated that “if you tan indoors before age 30, your skin-cancer risk rises by 75 percent” (Colino). Despite this evidence, women and men alike continue to use tanning beds and spend time baking in the sun. This may signify that for many Americans and Canadians, beauty and the bronzed skin culturally associated with it is of the utmost importance.

The common perception that tanned skin is part of what constitutes physical attractiveness is highly similar to the belief held by many Asians that pale skin is beautiful. Behind each perception is the common belief that skin color is reflective of wealth and social position. Asians believe that pale skin is the mark of wealth and class because only the privileged can afford to remain indoors and thus unaffected by the sun, while laborers slave beneath it, growing increasingly dark-skinned. On the other hand, North Americans seem to hold the general concept that tan skin signifies wealth because only the upper class have the free time to lounge at the beach or the money to purchase a boat on which one would experience sun exposure. The less wealthy are more occupied with work and have less time to spend outside, and thus they are lighter-skinned. Less obvious, but still detectable is the similarity between the view held by North Americans that bronzed skin is beautiful and those held by the Polynesians and Africans that tattoos and scarring are beautiful. Behind the three perceptions is the common belief that those who have the following criteria are of higher social status and importance in their societies. Equally compelling is the recurring centrality of skin in all four perceptions of beauty. It is fascinating that these common threads seems to link all of the aforementioned perceptions of beauty, despite the cultural and physical differences separating the regions of the world this paper has discussed.

### Conclusions

“Beauty?... To me it is a word without sense because I do not know where its meaning comes from nor where it leads to.”- Pablo Picasso (Beauty Quotes)

To revisit, Merriam-Webster states that beauty is “the quality or aggregate of qualities in a person or thing that gives pleasure to the senses” (Beauty). In many ways, this is true. Poets and artists marvel over beauty and attempt to convey to others its essence and the pleasure their eyes and souls receive by gazing upon it. However, this paper proves that beauty is much more than just that. Though the perceptions of what constitutes beauty vary immensely between the geographical regions researched in this paper, evidence hints to a network of commonalities, including averageness, sexual dimorphism, and symmetry, underlying the many cultural beauty perceptions discussed. Even more compelling are the common concerns behind many of the differing beliefs of what qualities constitute attractiveness.

To illustrate, in Western and Central Africa, many individuals continue to practice scarification today because it is an important part of their tradition and culture, it honors their ancestors and tribes, provides spiritual protection, helps them gain acceptance within their communities, and marks social status and important events in life. Likewise, the Maori in New Zealand still tattoo their faces with the traditional *moko* for virtually identical reasons. The people of these cultures practice two very different forms of beautification and hold diverse views of what makes one attractive. However, the reasons for the practice of these dissimilar body modifications are the same. To further illustrate this point, throughout much of Asia, fair skin is seen as the mark of beauty. Yet on the other hand, North Americans view bronzed skin as the epitome of attractiveness. However, strangely enough, behind both perceptions is the belief that skin color indicates social class and wealth. Though less obvious, similarities lie in the fact that the two practices of adornment and the perceived beauty of light skin tone in Asia and that of bronzed skin tone in North America all symbolize social status and power in those that fulfill these requirements. This implies that through beauty practices, humankind in general seeks to display more than just its physical attractiveness, but also deeper concerns such as family pride, spirituality, social class, and wealth.

As a second point, this paper also illustrates that the beauty perceptions held by various cultures can hint to the values held by each culture. While the beauty practices of Western and Central Africa and Polynesia place more importance on tradition, spirituality, and honor, those of Asia and North America are more concerned with physical appearance and the implications of wealth and social status through it. In addition, there is no large market for scarification in Africa and tattooing in Polynesia; however, in both Asia and North America, businesses profit immensely by selling their products to individuals and by heightening the beauty perceptions of these areas through advertising and media. This indicates that in African and Polynesian culture, tradition is more important than consumerism or the pressures of media. Directly contrasting with this, Asians and North Americans are highly consumerist and advertisement driven.

Despite the multitude of information and connections one can make in light of this research, this paper is admittedly incomplete. While much can be learned from the in depth look at beauty perceptions in Africa, Polynesia and other islands, Asia, and North America, there is a abundance of beliefs in existence in other corners of the globe, for example the Middle East, Europe, and South America. Due to the constraints of this paper and the lack of research available on the topic of global perspectives of beauty, first hand research through interviews and videoconferencing will be necessary in order to fully cover this broad and fascinating topic. The author seeks to reveal the truth behind what constitutes beauty through such personal research, which will be compiled into a brief documentary. Though many may share in Pablo Picasso’s sentiments when he stated, “Beauty?...To me it is a word without sense because I do not know where its meaning comes from nor where it leads to”, with time, this research will pave the way for a greater understanding of what beauty means around the world (Beauty Qutoes).

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