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**THE EVOLUTION OF ATTRACTIVENESS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF  
BEAUTY NORMS AT SCRIPPS COLLEGE**

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

**PROFESSOR JUNISBAI**

**PROFESSOR HIRSCH**

**DATE OF SUBMISSION: 04/22/24**

## **Acknowledgements**

To Barbara and Dan, my dream thesis reader team:

Barbara, thank you for starting me on my Organizational Studies journey by overenrolling your Organizational Theory class. I feel very lucky to have had you as an advisor these last three years, and I will certainly miss our biweekly thesis support group sessions.

Dan, thank you for all that you've taught me, about social norms, leadership, and so much more. Your excitement about social norms research was contagious, and I couldn't have completed this thesis without your expertise.

Thank you both for your unwavering support and thoughtful insights.

I would like to thank Professor Kovitz, Professor Bromley, and Professor Kim at Scripps for allowing me to present to their Core II classes. Their contribution was essential in the collection of data on the Freshmen class.

## **Abstract**

This undergraduate thesis investigates the beauty norms present at Scripps College, a historically women's college in California. The study extends previous research by introducing the concept of the 'beauty gap' between the Real Beauty Standard (RBS) and the Perceived Beauty Standard (PBS), highlighting the influence of meso-level norms within the college community. Utilizing a newly developed scale, the Attractiveness Standard Norms (ASN), in addition to the Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale and the Self-Objectification Questionnaire, the research examines the evolution of beauty norms between Freshmen and Senior year. A sample of 57 respondents from the Freshman and Senior classes participated in the study, revealing clear differences in both actual and perceived beauty norms between the two classes. Seniors exhibited stronger adherence to Western beauty standards, endorsing traits such as makeup, long hair, and large breasts, while freshmen displayed more moderate preferences. This study could not make firm conclusions from the data due to the small sample size, but it proposes several avenues for future research.

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## Introduction

The origins of the Western beauty standard can be traced back to ancient Greece, where beauty was derived from the symmetry and proportionality of the face. Beauty was so important to the ancient Greeks that they developed the (pseudo) science of physiognomy, which used a person's facial features to determine their character.<sup>1</sup> If that sounds absurd, you may be surprised to learn that researchers have found facial symmetry to be a reliable predictor of attractiveness in our current society.<sup>2</sup> In fact, many of these researchers argue that facial symmetry is attractive because it signals phenotypic mate quality.<sup>3</sup> So, while physiognomy may not have been an objective measure, it is clear that beauty has long been an important part of our experience as humans.

The beauty standard is far from stable, however. In fact, facial symmetry is one of the few characteristics that remains popular over time. The beauty standard is incredibly volatile and reactionary. In the beginning of the twentieth century women wore S bend corsets that gave them a very dramatic and feminine hourglass figure. But in the 1920s, women rebelled against the corsets of their foremothers, and the beauty standard instead became a slim, boyish figure. More recently, in the 2010s, the beauty standard shifted from the extremely thin 'heroin chic' of the 90s, to a figure that emphasized large breasts and butts.<sup>4</sup>

Currently, we are in an interesting moment culturally where there is more awareness for trend cycle than ever before. There is a sense that everything is 'in style' all at once. Scrolling through any social media platform, you will see both people lobbying to dismantle the beauty standard all together, and people actively trying to get you to conform to it. For example, the Instagram account @hondroutwins has a series called "Tanning Thursdays", in which every Thursday the twins apply fake tan. In their post entitled "Part 1: why do YOU LOVE fake tanning?" they explain that "for us it feels like we are stepping out in the best versions of

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<sup>1</sup> Sharom Romm, 'BEAUTY THROUGH HISTORY', *Washington Post*, 27 January 1987 <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/wellness/1987/01/27/beauty-through-history/301f7256-0f6b-403e-abec-f36c0a3ec313/>> [accessed 10 November 2023].

<sup>2</sup> Bernhard Fink and others, 'Facial Symmetry and Judgements of Attractiveness, Health and Personality', *Personality and Individual Differences*, 41.3 (2006), 491–99 <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2006.01.017>>.

<sup>3</sup> Gillian Rhodes and others, 'Facial Symmetry and the Perception of Beauty', *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*, 5.4 (1998), 659–69 <<https://doi.org/10.3758/BF03208842>>.

<sup>4</sup> Mew, Andrea, 'Https://Www.Eviemagazine.Com', *Evie Magazine*, 2022 <<https://www.eviemagazine.com>> [accessed 10 November 2023].

ourselves”.<sup>5</sup> Their statement carries the implication that they feel they must regularly alter their natural appearance to adhere to the western beauty standard in order to feel good about themselves. In stark contrast, there are influencers such as Isabella Davis, whose intention is specifically to diffuse the pressure her audience feels to confirm. In a recent post, she shared images of herself at differing weights throughout her life and reminded her followers that, “to believe your body must stay unchanged is to be at war with reality”.<sup>6</sup> These conflicting messages beg the question: What is the beauty standard in 2023—if it even exists?

But, before we explore the ‘what’ of the beauty standard, it is important that we understand the ‘why’: why should we examine the beauty standard? It is because of the tangible, and more often than not, negative, impacts that it imposes on people. It has been demonstrated that negative self-perception, depressed mood, and disordered eating are linked to feelings of dissatisfaction with one's body.<sup>7</sup> In response to the negative self-perception generated by a disconnect between themselves and the beauty standard, people often turn to dieting. An obsession with dieting is a predictive factor of the early onset, greater severity, and longer duration of health issues.<sup>8</sup>

It is not unreasonable to postulate that different environments breed different beauty standards.<sup>9</sup> It follows, then, that these differing standards may impact community members to a lesser, or greater, degree. As a student at Scripps, an Historically Women’s College, I have often wondered how, if at all, the focus on women’s empowerment has impacted my own relationship with beauty standards. Extrapolating beyond my personal experience, in this study I seek to understand the beauty standards at Scripps College, how/if they evolve over students’ four years, and whether the Historically Women’s College environment acts as a mitigating factor diverting the pressures of the typical western beauty standard.

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<sup>5</sup> @hondroutwins Hondrou, ‘Part 1: Why Do YOU LOVE Fake Tanning?’, *Instagram*, 2023 <<https://www.instagram.com/reel/CoBkNIVpCxf/?igsh=MTc4MmM1YmI2Ng%3D%3D>>.

<sup>6</sup> Isabella (@isabelladavis6) Davis, *Instagram*, 2024 <[https://www.instagram.com/p/C118o5vyXj7/?img\\_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/p/C118o5vyXj7/?img_index=1)>.

<sup>7</sup> J. Kevin Thompson and others, *Exacting Beauty: Theory, Assessment, and Treatment of Body Image Disturbance*, Exacting Beauty: Theory, Assessment, and Treatment of Body Image Disturbance (Washington, DC, US: American Psychological Association, 1999), pp. xii, 396 <<https://doi.org/10.1037/10312-000>>.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Prevention of Mental Disorders: Effective Interventions and Policy Options’ <<https://www.who.int/publications-detail-redirect/924159215X>> [accessed 10 November 2023].

<sup>9</sup> Murat Kara and Fatma Figen Özgür, ‘Chapter 2 - Perception of Beauty in Different Cultures’, in *Beauty, Aging, and AntiAging*, ed. by İbrahim Vargel and Fatma Figen Özgür (Academic Press, 2023), pp. 11–19 <<https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-323-98804-9.00018-9>>.

As the sole researcher on this study, it is important that I recognize my positionality in regard to this topic. As a woman, I experience the impacts of the beauty standards on a daily basis. It informs how I dress, how I do my makeup, how I interact with my peers, and it does it all subconsciously. Moreover, being in a liberal arts space for the last four years has shifted the way that I conceptualize beauty. There is an exceptional, decolonial and deconstructionist approach present at Scripps College, driven by the prominent queer community, that is potentially distinct from other college campuses in America.

Drawing on Social Norms Theory, I use a positivist construction to interrogate the injunctive norms surrounding beauty and attractiveness at Scripps College. Social Norms Theory is essential to my research as it provides a framework to understand how collective expectations around beauty influence the varied experiences of individuals at Scripps College. Applying a positivist approach in my study involves providing participants with pre-established concepts, operating under the assumption that there is a shared comprehension of said constructs. I also chose a positivist approach because it allows me to empirically analyze survey data to gain a clearer, birds' eye understanding of beauty standards at Scripps. I seek to answer the following questions:

- 1) Is there a difference in the beauty standard at Scripps college between Freshman and Senior year?
- 2) Is there a 'beauty gap' present at either time, and does it change between Freshman and Senior year?
- 3) Do Scripps students experience a change in self-efficacy or self-esteem over the course of college?
- 4) Does Scripps, being a women's college focused on empowering students in a female-centric environment, act as a mitigating factor allowing the beauty standard to shift from the dominant western ideal and decrease its negative effects on women's mental self-perception?

To address these questions, this thesis first outlines the relevant research that has previously been conducted surrounding beauty norms and beauty standards, especially as they pertain to college students. It then discusses the study's importance and how it fills a gap in previous research on the topic. Next is an outline of the survey methodology I used to obtain the results, including a discussion of how the scale was developed, and why. Survey results are



presented alongside their implications. My findings challenged my perceptions and my understanding of the beauty norms of my community. The data show that Scripps College Seniors, more than Freshmen, find the traditional westernized beauty standard to be attractive, and this finding holds true across conditions. That the beauty standard is endorsed by students in an educational setting dedicated to its deconstruction is a testament to the immense power that it exercises in society.

## Literature Review

### Social Norms Theory:

The contemporary construct of Social Norms Theory originated in 1986 with the publication of “Perceiving the community norms of alcohol use among students: some research implications for campus alcohol education programming” by Perkins and Berkowitz. This study observed that college students tended to overestimate the alcohol consumption of their peers, which led them to feel pressure to drink more heavily. These findings demonstrate an essential principle of Social Norms Theory: pluralistic ignorance. This phenomenon occurs when individuals incorrectly perceive that their attitudes and behaviors are the minority, and the attitudes and behaviors of their peers are the majority; it occurs in relation to both problem/risk behaviors (typically overestimated) and healthy/protective behaviors (usually underestimated).<sup>10</sup>

Social norms are defined as “the rules and standards understood by a group, and that guide or constrain social behaviors without the force of law.”<sup>11</sup> These norms tend to operate implicitly, shaping individuals’ behavioral patterns and intentions based on their perceptions of normative behaviors within their social groups. The theory highlights the significant impact of normative misperceptions on behavior, with individuals potentially engaging in unhealthy behaviors due to false beliefs about the prevalence of such behaviors among their peers. The theory distinguishes between injunctive norms—related to perceived attitudes or approval—and descriptive norms—related to perceptions of others’ engagement in behaviors.<sup>12</sup> Often, injunctive norms are predictive of behavior, however in this study, I focus exclusively on the injunctive norms themselves, leaving room for future research to interrogate the effect that the attitudes towards beauty norms could have on college students’ descriptive norms.

Berkowitz (2005), in “Overview of the Social Norms Approach,” highlights another important principle in Social Norms Theory: false consensus. False consensus occurs when the minority group thinks that they are in the majority and uses their perceived majority status to continue a (often harmful) injunctive or descriptive norm. Berkowitz describes false consensus

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<sup>10</sup> Alan D Berkowitz, ‘An Overview of the Social Norms Approach’, in *Changing the Culture of College Drinking : A Socially Situated Health Communication Campaign[n]* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2005), pp. 193–214.

<sup>11</sup> Robert B. Cialdini and Melanie R. Trost, ‘Social Influence: Social Norms, Conformity and Compliance’, in *The Handbook of Social Psychology, Vols. 1-2, 4th Ed* (New York, NY, US: McGraw-Hill, 1998), pp. 151–92.

<sup>12</sup> Robert C. Dempsey, John McAlaney, and Bridgette M. Bewick, ‘A Critical Appraisal of the Social Norms Approach as an Interventional Strategy for Health-Related Behavior and Attitude Change’, *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9 (2018) <<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.02180>>.

and pluralistic ignorance as mutually reinforcing and self-perpetuating, leading individuals to conform to misperceived norms. False consensus and pluralistic ignorance are often generated by very public normative displays by the minority group. Providing accurate information through interventions induces cognitive dissonance by revealing that pluralistically ignorant individuals are the majority, and those in false consensus are the minority. In seeking to reduce their cognitive dissonance, individuals will come to realize the truth about the norms in their community, and often reduce their engagement in risk/problem behaviors.<sup>13</sup> Interventions are often targeted at correcting the misperceptions for all community members, regardless of whether they engage in the problem behavior. However, some interventions are targeted to a specific group, or even a specific individual. The intervention is tailored to the specific norm(s) and the desired impact. Beauty norm interventions geared towards reducing pluralistic ignorance run the risk of reinforcing the false consensus by exposing students to the specific traits that society dictates as attractive. This could lead to students feeling insecure, instead of empowered, after the intervention. To combat this, it would be best to initiate interventions in small groups, or even on the individual level, in a space where students feel safe.

To summarize, Social Norms Theory operates under four essential assumptions, “(i) that perceived norms are consistently associated with behaviors; (ii) individuals tend to misperceive or under/overestimate their peers’ behaviors and attitudes; (iii) that such misperceptions are associated with the increased/decreased engagement in those behaviors; and (iv) interventions which correct such misperceptions should promote more positive behaviors.”<sup>14</sup>

### **Beauty Norms Research:**

Within social norms research, beauty norms are well-established, with much of the research being conducted on college aged students. The prevailing viewpoint within the academic community posits that beauty ideals and practices serve as instruments of oppression, perpetuating women's subordinate status in society. These standards shift attention from women’s competencies to their appearance, turning them into sex objects, undermining their

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<sup>13</sup> Berkowitz.

<sup>14</sup> Dempsey, McAlaney, and Bewick.

self-confidence and becoming a drain on their emotional and economic resources.<sup>15</sup> This viewpoint stems from the Beauty Ideals are Oppressive (BIO) hypothesis, which states that individual differences in the endorsement of beauty ideals correlate with measures of sexism and hostility toward women.<sup>16</sup> This approach allows researchers to view beauty norms not merely as an individual concern but as a societal issue for empirical investigation, which the current study builds upon.

Forbes, Collinsworth, et al. (2007) used the BIO hypothesis as the foundation for their study which sought to establish a connection between the endorsement of beauty ideals and oppressive beliefs. A cohort of 353 participants, predominantly aged 18 to 19, all from the same university, took a secure online survey. Three distinct scales gauged participants' perspectives: the importance of beauty, belief in the necessity of body modification, and the significance of the thin body ideal. Silhouettes representing the "average college woman" and the "ideal college woman" were presented, with participants identifying them and the disparity between the two silhouettes was quantified. Additional scales, including the Hostility towards Women scale (HTW), Attitudes towards Women scale (AWS), and the Ambivalent Sexism inventory (ASI), were employed, all scored on a 5-point Likert scale.

Noteworthy findings emerged, revealing that men demonstrated significantly higher endorsement of beauty ideals across all three factors studied. Men also scored markedly higher on all measures of sexism, particularly on the AWS. Intriguingly, both men and women perceived the body size of the average college woman as larger than the ideal college woman, yet women tended to identify the 'ideal' body type as thinner than their male counterparts. These results supported the Beauty Ideals are Oppressive (BIO) hypothesis, establishing clear relationships between the endorsement of beauty ideals, hostility toward women, and sexist beliefs. This study is important to our understanding of beauty norms in college because it highlights that a strong endorsement of the typical western beauty ideal (white, thin, etc.) is a predicting factor for sexism and hostility towards women, demonstrating the negative effects of the risk/problem injunctive norms that I will seek to mitigate through normative intervention.

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<sup>15</sup> Gordon B. Forbes and others, 'Sexism, Hostility toward Women, and Endorsement of Beauty Ideals and Practices: Are Beauty Ideals Associated with Oppressive Beliefs?', *Sex Roles*, 56.5 (2007), 265–73 <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-006-9161-5>>.

<sup>16</sup> Forbes and others.

McKay et al (2018) is in agreement with Forbes et al. (2007) stating that, “through imagery in advertising and in popular culture, women and girls receive the message that their value largely depends on their physical appearance”. Indeed, a woman’s ability to conform to the western beauty ideal is also a measure of her economic value, which affects not only her self-worth, but her career. Weitz (2008) found that conventionally attractive women are more likely to get hired, promoted, and paid higher salaries. In addition, they are less lonely, more well liked, more sexually experienced, and are more likely marry.<sup>17</sup> This corroborates the findings of Hamermesh et al. (2013) who found that, an individual's perceived beauty positively correlates with their happiness and life satisfaction, and that at least half of the increase in happiness associated with beauty can be attributed to indirect factors such as better health, higher earnings, and an increased likelihood of marriage.<sup>18</sup> This unspoken understanding, that beauty equals success, no doubt weighs heavily on the minds of young women. This study seeks to determine if a strong female community, such as the one found at Scripps college, might alleviate such stress, and shift students’ perception of the beauty standard.

According to McKay, western beauty norms demand that women be fair-skinned, youthful, thin, toned, able-bodied and physically ‘good looking’, and that this pressure has only been increasing in recent years. Thus, we can conceptualize beauty norms as not only an issue of social norms, but also social justice. To explore the topic further and understand the impact of the western beauty ideal on college-aged women, McKay conducted a series thirteen of semi-structured interviews with students at Brock University. They found that these women’s race, class, culture, and size all shape their experience of the westernized beauty norms. But, one thing is similar across cases, as the pressure to conform to the norm increases, women feel increasingly inadequate and seek out more drastic changes to their appearance.

The adherence to beauty norms for the women McKay et al. interviewed was not voluntary. It seemed to be an internally driven, compulsive act, that often caused harm to their mental and physical well-being. Discussing her practice of putting on makeup, Sam (white, 18) noted that, “there are some days where you might have a cold, or you are really tired, and you

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<sup>17</sup> ROSE WEITZ, ‘WOMEN AND THEIR HAIR: Seeking Power through Resistance and Accommodation’, *Gender & Society*, 15.5 (2001), 667–86 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/089124301015005003>>.

<sup>18</sup> Daniel S. Hamermesh and Jason Abrevaya, ‘Beauty Is the Promise of Happiness?’, *European Economic Review*, 64 (2013), 351–68 <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eurocorev.2013.09.005>>.

think I don't want to do this, but I have to do this.”<sup>19</sup> Sam's fear of not being perceived as adhering to the beauty norm causes her to act against her self-interest. April (Indian Canadian, 20) candidly said, “if I could have that [looking like a Victoria's Secret model]. I would die for it, literally.”<sup>20</sup> Beauty norms, for her, and perhaps for many women, feel like life-or-death situations. They seem to imply that to live a life in which you are not considered conventionally attractive, or are not actively in pursuit of these norms, is not a life worth living.

It is true that different cultures have different beauty norms and standards, but many of them are designed in a way that approximates whiteness and the western beauty ideal.<sup>21</sup> In India, and many southeast Asian and east Asian countries, lighter skin is prized above darker skin. Skin lightening creams are popular in these areas, and people tend to avoid the sun to reduce the production of melanin in their skin.<sup>22</sup> For African American women, this standard is similar. Lighter skinned individuals are often seen as more attractive both within and outside of the Black community. Additionally, hair is a site of cultural and political conflict, because some hair types are seen as ‘more beautiful’ (closer to the beauty norm) than others, “curls that are smaller and kinkier are often less prized...straighter hair or relaxed curls are more ideal because they are closer to images of whiteness.”<sup>23</sup> Regardless of the community or the culture, beauty norms are always paramount in determining one's appearance. In investigating the Scripps community, I seek to discover whether or not Scripps students develop their own beauty standards that diverge from the western norm.

In these previous studies, all evaluations of adherence to beauty standards have been based on subjective evaluations, wherein the individual is evaluating their own appearance and proximity to the beauty norm. However, it is important to recognize that there is also a possibility to use more objective measures, wherein an outside party rates an individual's appearance and their proximity to the norm (their perceived attractiveness). Outside ratings are useful because they show less bias than when participants rate themselves. However they are not perfectly objective, since preferences of attractiveness are inherently subjective to each

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<sup>19</sup> Ashley McKay, Shannon Moore, and Wendee Kubik, ‘Western Beauty Pressures and Their Impact on Young University Women’, *INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF GENDER & WOMEN'S STUDIES*, 6.2 (2018) <<https://doi.org/10.15640/ijgws.v6n2a1>>.

<sup>20</sup> McKay, Moore, and Kubik. Page 7

<sup>21</sup> Kara and Özgür.

<sup>22</sup> McKay, Moore, and Kubik.

<sup>23</sup> Germaine H. Awad and others, ‘Beauty and Body Image Concerns Among African American College Women’, *Journal of Black Psychology*, 41.6 (2015), 540–64 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0095798414550864>>.

individual.<sup>24</sup> Taking inspiration from such quasi-objective measures, in this study I have included an established and tested measure in the form of the Attractiveness Social Norms scale (ASN).

I developed the ASN in a previous study conducted at Pitzer College, a member of the Claremont Consortium alongside Scripps. An important catalyst for this study was the desire to identify a community specific beauty norm, since in my research I have found that studies rarely define the beauty standard against which they are comparing their results. According to McKay, the western beauty norm is fair-skinned, youthful, thin, toned, able-bodied and physically ‘good looking’ women. But in many other studies, the beauty standard is assumed to be known, and assumed to be the Western (white) beauty standard. Certainly, this is a reasonable assumption, since said beauty standard is well documented, but I wondered if continually making this assumption at a certain point, contributes to the standard itself. Therefore, I sought to discover the beauty standard specific to Pitzer college.

The scale itself includes both an objective measure, which establishes the Real Beauty Standard (RBS), in which participants rate what they themselves find attractive, as well as a subjective measure of the Perceived Beauty Standard (PBS), in which participants rate what they perceive their peers find attractive. The inclusion of both measures allowed me to identify a ‘beauty gap’, which is the difference between the PBS and the RBS.

My findings indicated that the Pitzer PBS strongly emphasized traditional westernized beauty standards, particularly for women. The PBS for women included a preference for larger breasts and butts, minimal to no body hair, straight hair, wearing makeup, and shortness. Thinness is also often associated with the idealized western woman, and in the subjective measure body type was selected by 72% of participants, making it the most important consideration in the PBS. Interestingly, the mode of the body type category remained the same between subjective and objective conditions, at 2. This indicates that being thin is valued in both the RBS and the PBS, so there is no ‘beauty gap’ but there is a prejudice towards the western beauty standard that strongly emphasizes thinness. The PBS for men revolved around being tall and athletic, but that didn’t differ much between conditions. While the PBS for men could be relevant to this study should it change between the Freshmen and Senior subject pools, this study

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<sup>24</sup> Peter P. Ehlinger and Aaron J. Blashill, ‘Self-Perceived vs. Actual Physical Attractiveness: Associations with Depression as a Function of Sexual Orientation’, *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 189 (2016), 70–76 <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2015.08.071>>.

mainly seeks to identify if the RBS and PBS for women change over time due to exposure in a women's college environment.

My inspiration for the scale largely came from the work done by Ehlinger et al. (2015) in which they sought to establish the connection between objective vs subjective ratings of attractiveness (understood also as adherence to the beauty norm) and mental health, specifically depression. Their study employs Objectification Theory as developed by Fredrickson & Roberts (1997) because it helps to explain how experiences of sexual objectification relate to psychological distress. Objectification Theory states that, “when a body or body parts are separated from the person and reduced to their sexual functioning for others’ use or pleasure, body surveillance and shame may result”<sup>25</sup>. Ehlinger et al. (2016) add to this framework by asserting that this feeling of shame generated by body dissatisfaction may lead to depressive symptoms. Ehlinger et al. (2015) also postulate that gay women may be equally affected by this objectification, despite not seeking the attention of men, because of the way they have been socialized. Additionally, heterosexual men appear not to experience much pressure, but gay men, because they wish to attract other men, do. These findings are particularly relevant to my study because 77% of participants self-identified as being LGBTQ+.

Ehlinger et al. (2015) used a nationally representative sample of 48,882 adults polled from 2001 to 2002. They measured sexuality, depressive symptoms, as well as subjective and objective appearance evaluations. They found support for their two theses that i) more negative subjective appearance evaluations were predictive of depressive symptoms while objective evaluations were not and ii) the effects of subjective appearance evaluation were stronger among members of the LGBTQ+ community compared to heterosexuals. Interestingly, they found no significant difference between gay men and women in terms of how much the beauty norms impacted them, indicating that the gender gap of objectification is closing.<sup>26</sup>

The most important takeaway from this study is, “adopting a schema that values the often-unrealistic Western societal ideals of beauty and body shape may cause an individual to feel unattractive if he or she does not meet these societal expectations, and therefore increase

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<sup>25</sup> ‘Objectification Theory: Toward Understanding Women’s Lived Experiences and Mental Health Risks - Barbara L. Fredrickson, Tomi-Ann Roberts, 1997’ <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1471-6402.1997.tb00108.x>> [accessed 15 November 2023].

<sup>26</sup> Ehlinger and Blashill.



reported negative self-evaluations of appearance.”<sup>27</sup> In turn, these negative self-evaluations can lead to very real psychological impacts, such as depression. Recognizing the implications of beauty norms is crucial. If this study reveals a disparity between actual and perceived beauty norms, identifying a beauty gap, students experiencing pluralistic ignorance may be enduring unwarranted stress and other psychological consequences.

In summary, through the use of an established and tested measure, I am able to identify both the actual and perceived injunctive beauty norms present at Scripps College. Social Norms Theory posits that individuals are compelled to change their attitudes or behaviors based on what they perceive to be the norms in their community. In the context of beauty norms, this compulsion to change, as demonstrated by McKay et al. (2008), can have devastating impacts on the psychological wellbeing of Scripps students. Hamermesh et al. (2013), Weitz (2008), and Ehlinger et al (2015) in varying ways all demonstrated that being perceived as unattractive, either objectively or subjectively, decreases one’s happiness and increases feelings of depression and loneliness. The BIO hypothesis put forth by Forbes et al. (2007) has important implications for this study as well because it suggests that if one or both groups studied show endorsement of the western beauty standard, it could be an indication of internalized misogyny.

This thesis builds on my previous study conducted at Pitzer, by continuing to the search for the ‘beauty gap’ between the RBS and PBS, as measured by the ASN. The success of this scale is important for future Social Norms research because it allows a quasi-objective standpoint to be established without the help of an outside party, instead relying solely on first person self-reports. This is significant because the majority of studies rely on subjective assessments of beauty, where individuals rate themselves based on their own perceptions. Only a limited number of studies attempt an objective measure, which is why the work done by Ehlinger et al. is particularly important.<sup>28</sup>

This thesis also fills a gap in traditional research about beauty norms by proposing that individualized communities within Western countries can have their own distinct beauty norms that differ from the Western ideal. This proposition delves into the meso-level of organization-specific norms, which describes the customs, values, and behaviors that emerge within medium sized specific institutions or communities. Looking at norms at the meso-level allows me to

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<sup>27</sup> Ehlinger and Blashill. Page 74

<sup>28</sup> Ehlinger and Blashill.

aggregate data and draw conclusions about statistical trends in the Scripps community. Within the context of a women's college environment, these meso-level norms regarding beauty standards may play a significant role in shaping the interactions and perceptions of beauty among students. In my review of the literature, I have not found anything pertaining specifically to women's colleges, so this is an important new development in the field. I also examine if a women's college environment can act as a mitigating factor in the relationship between students and the beauty norms. Additionally, not much research has examined mitigating factors on beauty norms, and further research should certainly continue to examine in what sorts of environments the negative impacts of the beauty standard can be lessened.

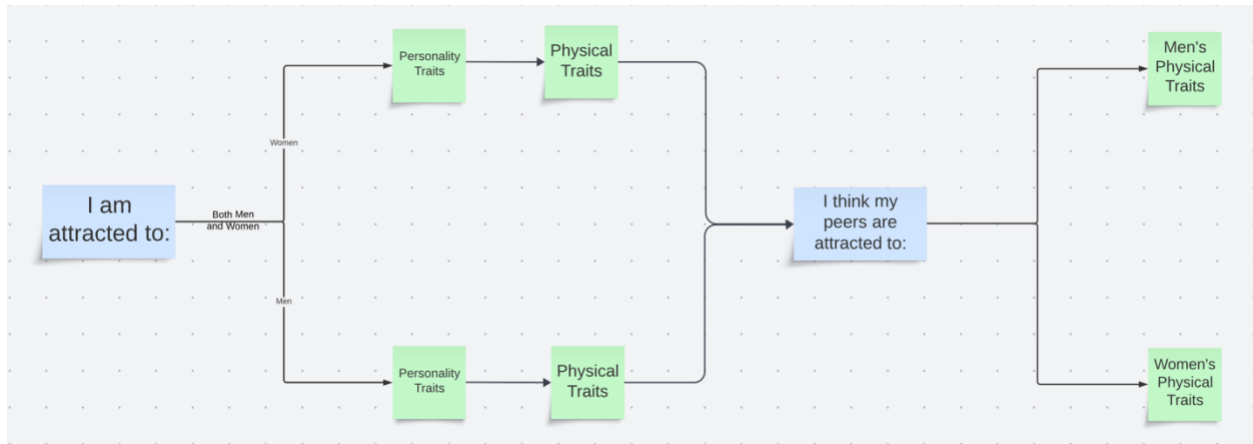
## Methods

In order to address the topics outlined in the previous section, I have devised four research questions:

- 1) Is there a difference in the beauty standard at Scripps college between Freshman and Senior year?
- 2) Is there a 'beauty gap' present at either time, and does it change between Freshman and Senior year?
- 3) Do Scripps students experience a change in self-efficacy or self-esteem over the course of college?
- 4) Does Scripps being a women college environment focused on empowering its students in a female-centric environment act as a mitigating factor allowing the beauty standard to shift from the dominant western ideal and decrease its negative effects on women's mental self-perception?

The ASN addresses questions one and two through a sorting mechanism (see Figure 1 below). The participants are first asked whether they are attracted to men, women, both, or neither. Based on their response, the next section changes. If they select only men or only women, they are only asked to rate the top three most attractive physical and personality traits for the gender they selected. If they indicate they are attracted to both genders then they will have to fill out four rating boxes: one for male physical traits, one for male personality traits, one for women's physical traits, and one for women's personality traits. If they select neither they will be directed to the next section, the subjective measure pertaining to their peers' preferences. The personality categories are: Compassion, Confidence, Creativity, Dependability, Empathy, Humility, Humor, Intelligence, Kindness, and Self-awareness. The physical trait categories for men are: Skin tone, Age appearance, Body type, Hair length, Butt size, Height, Hair type, Body hair, Facial hair, and Athleticism. The categories are the same for women with the addition of Breast size and Make-up use.

**Figure 1:** ASN survey question progression



After the participants rate their top three traits, they are asked to specify their preferences on a scale as outlined in Table 1:

**Table 1:** ASN scale items

Trait	Scale	Description
Skin Tone	1 to 5	1: Lighter skin, 5: Darker skin
Body Type	1 to 5	1: Skinny/Thin, 5: Curvy
Age Appearance	1 to 5	1: Younger appearance, 5: Mature appearance
Hair Length	1 to 5	1: Shorter hair, 5: Longer hair
Men's Height	Likert	1: 5'4" and shorter, 2: 5'5"-5'7", 3: 5'8 - 5'10, 4: 5'11 - 6'1, 5: 6'2 and taller
Women's Height	Likert	1: 4'11" and shorter, 2: 5'0" - 5'2", 3: 5'3 - 5'5, 4: 5'6 - 5'8, 5: 5'9 and taller
Hair Type	1 to 5	1: Curly, 5: Straight
Body Hair	1 to 5	1: Body hair, 5: No body hair
Facial Hair	1 to 5	1: Facial hair, 5: No facial hair
Makeup Use	1 to 5	1: Makeup, 5: No makeup
Breast Size	1 to 5	1: Small, 5: Large
Athleticism	1 to 5	1: Athletic, 5: Unathletic

Participants are not asked to specify their choices of personality traits. Participants are then asked to rate both what they believe their peers would choose for the top three attractive physical and personality traits for both men and women, repeating the same series of questions they just answered from their personal perspective, now from the perspective of their peers. All participants are asked to choose traits for both genders for this second part, regardless of their sexuality.

The subjective measure in this case is the participants' perception of the traits their peers find attractive, and the objective measure is the participants' self-report of which traits they personally find attractive. My original study conducted at Pitzer acted as a beta test for the scale, in which I found that these two measures yielded different results, as Ehlinger et al did, so there was an element of pluralistic ignorance and thus room for social norm intervention.

The beta test was helpful in updating the ASN to be a more effective scale. I added in the 'neither' option at the beginning for students who identify as asexual, I removed fashion sense as a measure because it is too complicated to quantify in this context, and I expanded on the height measure to make it clearer. In the original scale, Fashion was quantified on a scale of 1 being fashionable and 5 being unfashionable. However, Fashion sense is usually not viewed in a binary, it is comprised of many different styles such as preppy, goth, skater, etc. In the context of this study, it would be too complicated to try and capture all the aspects of what specific type of fashion the student population prefers, so I decided to leave it out of analysis for now. Future studies should definitely look into the fashion beauty standard as fashion sense was identified as a highly popular choice in the beta test. Also in the original scale, height was measured on a scale of 1 being shorter and 5 being taller. I realized that this jeopardized the validity of the scale because 'short' and 'tall' are constructs that may have differing meanings to different people. This kind of internal validity is essential for a study based in positivism, so, to keep the measure consistent I added labels with specific heights. These updates to the scale should allow it to yield more accurate and precise responses.

This study expands on the beta test by including two other peer-reviewed scales that measure self-esteem and self-objectification. These scales will allow me to look at not only if the PBS and RBS have changed over the course of four years at Scripps, but if there has been a correlated change in self-perception. Specifically, I am employing the Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale and the Self Objectification Questionnaire.

The Self Objectification Questionnaire was developed by Noll and Fredrickson and is based on both Fredrickson's previous research in Objectification Theory, and the Body Esteem Scale.<sup>29 30 31</sup> Objectification Theory states that women experience self-objectification regardless of whether they are satisfied with their physical appearance, it is the simple fact of being preoccupied with their appearance that allows for the self-objectification.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, this scale is not a measure of satisfaction with one's body, it is a measure of how concerned the respondents are with their appearance. This scale was first developed by Fredrickson and Noll in 1998, but has since been used empirically by many other researchers building on their work.<sup>33</sup> It consists of 10 items, 5 that are competence based and 5 that are appearance based. It is scored by subtracting the sum of the competence-based items from the sum of the appearance-based items.<sup>34</sup>

The Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (RSES) was developed by Morris Rosenberg in 1965 in his book *Society and the Adolescent Self-Image*.<sup>35</sup> It was originally used to measure high school students' self-esteem; however it has since been translated and tested for reliability and validity in multiple languages, consistently demonstrating effectiveness across various populations.<sup>36 37</sup> It is comprised of 10 items, each of which are evaluated on a four-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (4). Five of the items are worded positively and five are worded negatively. Scores can range from 10-40 and the higher the score, the higher the participants' self-esteem.

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<sup>29</sup> Barbara Fredrickson and others, "That Swimsuit Becomes You: Sex Differences in Self-Objectification, Restrained Eating, and Math Performance": Correction to Fredrickson et al. (1998)', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology - PSP*, 75 (1998), 1098–1098 <<https://doi.org/10.1037/h0090332>>.

<sup>30</sup> 'Objectification Theory: Toward Understanding Women's Lived Experiences and Mental Health Risks - Barbara L. Fredrickson, Tomi-Ann Roberts, 1997'.

<sup>31</sup> S. L. Franzoi and S. A. Shields, 'The Body Esteem Scale: Multidimensional Structure and Sex Differences in a College Population', *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 48.2 (1984), 173–78 <[https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327752jpa4802\\_12](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327752jpa4802_12)>.

<sup>32</sup> 'Objectification Theory: Toward Understanding Women's Lived Experiences and Mental Health Risks - Barbara L. Fredrickson, Tomi-Ann Roberts, 1997'.

<sup>33</sup> Danielle Lindner, 'The Development and Psychometric Evaluation of a New Measure of Self-Objectification'.

<sup>34</sup> Fredrickson and others.

<sup>35</sup> Morris Rosenberg, *Society and the Adolescent Self-Image* (Princeton University Press, 1965) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt183pjhh>> [accessed 21 February 2024].

<sup>36</sup> Morris Rosenberg, 'Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE)', 2006.

<sup>37</sup> Wongpakaran Tinakon and Wongpakaran Nahathai, 'A Comparison of Reliability and Construct Validity between the Original and Revised Versions of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale', *Psychiatry Investigation*, 9.1 (2012), 54–58 <<https://doi.org/10.4306/pi.2012.9.1.54>>.

This study is limited by the fact that it is a thesis that must be completed within the time frame of two semesters. Since I cannot conduct a traditional longitudinal study, I approximate the passage of time by exclusively surveying first and fourth years at Scripps; participants' age thus ranges from 18-23. Participants are also predominantly female, with some participants being nonbinary, and none being male. Participants were recruited through a variety of methods, word of mouth, group chats, class visits, and public posters. In total there were 57 respondents: 26 Freshmen and 31 Seniors.

## Results

### Self-Objectification and Rosenberg Self Esteem Scales:

Table 2 contrasts the RSE scores of the Freshman and Senior classes. The mean, median, and modes for both classes range from approximately 17 to 18. This indicates that there is no significant change in self-esteem over the course of four years for these students. The Freshmen have a mean score of 17.85 while the Seniors have a mean of 18.13. Both of these figures are on the lower end of the ‘normal’ range, which spans from 15 to 25. There were more Seniors that scored above the 25-point threshold than Freshmen. There were also less Seniors that scored below the 15-point threshold than Freshmen (Table 3). Though, this observation could be due to the discrepancy in sample size. Figure 2 displays the average score for each item on the scale and each class. Scores remained fairly similar for both Freshmen and Seniors, though it appears that more Seniors feel that they do not have much to be proud of, and Freshmen seem to feel marginally more satisfied with themselves.

**Table 2:** RSE score analysis

	Mean	Median	Mode
Freshmen	17.85	17.50	17, 18
Seniors	18.13	17	17

Note: The scale ranges from 0-30. Scores between 15 and 25 are within normal range; scores below 15 suggest low self-esteem.<sup>38</sup>

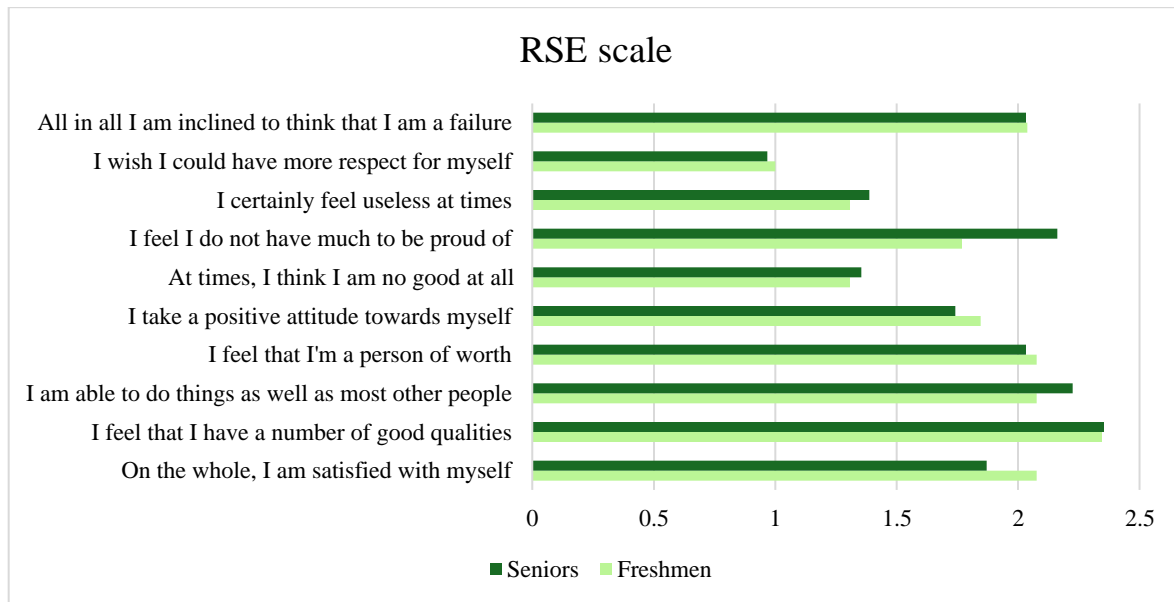
**Table 3 about here**

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<sup>38</sup> ‘Rosenberg’s Self-Esteem Scale’ <<https://wnnorton.com/college/psych/psychsci/media/rosenberg.htm>> [accessed 30 March 2024].

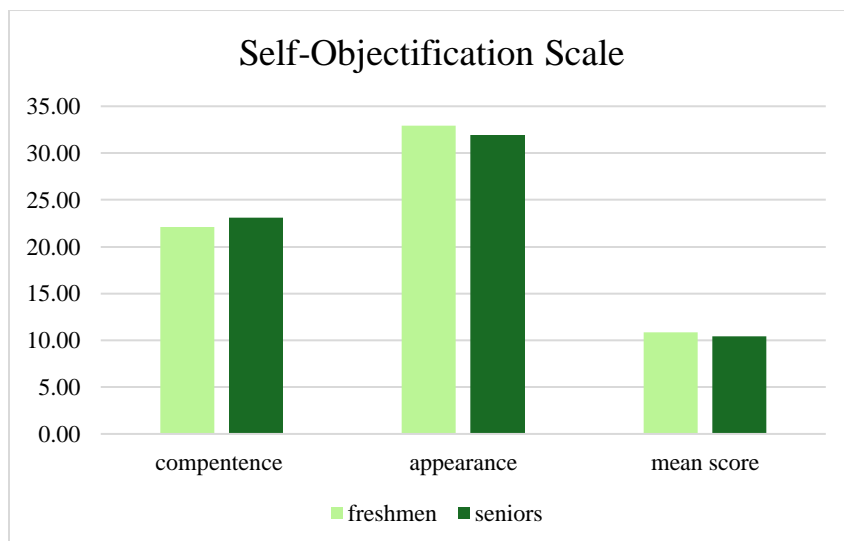


**Figure 2: RSE scale items**



Similarly to the RSE results, the self-objectification scale did not find any significant differences between sample populations. As demonstrated by Figure 3 the mean competence, appearance, and overall mean score of the two classes are very close. The Freshmen scored an overall mean of 10.85, while the Seniors scores 10.46. For both the Freshmen and the Seniors, their appearance scores were higher than their competence scores (Table 4). The Median and Mode scores also do not vary widely (Table 4). The Freshmen scored marginally higher on appearance and lower on competence than the Seniors, but not significantly.

**Figure 3 Self-Objectification Scale**



**Table 4:** Self-Objectification Scores

	Mean		Median	Mode
	Score	Competence	Appearance	
Freshmen	10.85	22.08	32.92	12.00
Seniors	10.46	23.10	31.90	11.00

Note: Scores are obtained by subtracting the sum of the competence-based items from the sum of the appearance-based items

### Attractiveness Social Norms Scale:

**Table 5 :** Percentage of Scripps students who selected the indicated personality traits as attractive in the ASN

Personality Traits	Women		Men	
	Freshmen	Seniors	Freshmen	Seniors
Humor	47%	56%	58%	63%
Intelligence	29%	40%	47%	58%
Empathy	41%	36%	32%	25%
Compassion	53%	32%	32%	25%
Kindness	29%	36%	47%	38%
Self-awareness	29%	28%	37%	29%
Confidence	35%	40%	5%	38%
Creativity	24%	44%	16%	13%
Dependability	29%	32%	11%	38%
Humility	0%	4%	16%	17%

Note: the labels Men and Women refers to whom the Freshmen and Seniors are attracted. Women encompasses all those who indicated that they were attracted to either only women or men and women, while Men encompasses all who are attracted to either only men or both men and women.

Both Freshmen and Seniors at Scripps selected Humor, Intelligence, and Kindness as the top three most attractive personality traits for men. 58% of Freshmen selected Humor and 63% of Seniors selected humor, making it the most important trait for men across the years. 56% of

Seniors also selected Humor as an attractive personality trait for women to possess. The only demographic that did not select Humor as the top trait was Freshmen attracted to women. For Freshmen, Humor placed under Compassion, with 47% and 53% selection respectively. Just under Humor, 41% of Freshmen selected Empathy as an attractive personality trait for women. Creativity comes in as a bit of an outlier for Seniors, 44% of whom selected the trait as most attractive for women. For these same Seniors, 40% chose Intelligence and 40% chose Confidence. Confidence remains in fourth place for all demographics except for Freshmen attracted to men, in which case only 5% of them chose it as an attractive trait.

**Table 6 :** Selection Rate for Physical Traits of Men

	Men			
	Objective		Subjective	
	Freshmen	Seniors	Freshmen	Seniors
Skin Tone	11%	8%	4%	3%
Body Type	58%	63%	85%	81%
Age Appearance	32%	25%	35%	13%
Hair Length	21%	17%	4%	6%
Height	58%	63%	88%	90%
Hair Type	53%	50%	15%	16%
Body Hair	0%	8%	0%	3%
Facial Hair	5%	13%	12%	3%
Athleticism	58%	50%	54%	74%
Butt Size	0%	4%	4%	10%

In both objective conditions, Scripps College students selected Body Type and Height as the most attractive physical traits for men. These traits tied with 58% of Freshmen, and 63% of Seniors selecting both. 58% of Freshmen also selected Athleticism, making the three traits equally important for Freshmen students attracted to men. Athleticism was also in third place for Seniors, but it tied with Hair Type, with 50% of Seniors selecting each trait. The rest of the traits

were selected in the same order of importance by both classes: Age Appearance, Hair Length, Skin Tone, Facial Hair, Body Hair, and Butt Size.

In both subjective conditions, Scripps students perceived Height, Body Type, and Athleticism as the top three most attractive physical traits for men, in that order. 88% of Freshmen and 90% of Seniors selected Height, 85% of Freshmen and 81% of Seniors selected Body Type, and 54% of Freshmen and 74% of Seniors selected Athleticism. Significantly more Seniors thought Athleticism was considered attractive than Freshmen, but significantly more Freshmen considered Age Appearance than Seniors; 35% and 13% respectively. Butt size, Hair Length, Skin Tone, and Body Hair were all chosen at a rate of 10% or less by both classes, with 0% of Freshmen selecting Body Hair.

For Freshmen attracted to men, Height, Body Type, and Athleticism all factored into both the objective and subjective condition. In the subjective condition, Freshmen seemed more confident in their choices of Height and Body Type, with rates of 88% and 85% respectively. This indicates that it is a strongly held perception, and a clear part of the beauty standard. Interestingly, Hair Type was chosen significantly more often in the objective condition, at 53% as opposed to 15% in the subjective condition.

For Seniors, Height, Body Type, Athleticism, and Hair Type dominated the top four slots across both conditions, despite moving around in order. Similarly to the Freshmen, the Seniors selected Height, Body Type, and Athleticism at much higher rates in the subjective condition: 90%, 84%, and 74% as opposed to 63%, 63% and 50%. This indicates that these traits are very important to the Perceived Beauty Standard of both the Senior and Freshmen class. Interestingly, Hair Type was an important trait in the objective condition, tying with Athleticism with a 50% selection rate, but in the Subjective condition, only 16% of Seniors perceived it as being important to their peers.

**Table 7:** Selection Rate for Physical Traits of Women

	Women			
	Objective		Subjective	
	Freshmen	Seniors	Freshmen	Seniors
Skin Tone	6%	8%	15%	3%
Body Type	59%	60%	88%	77%
Age Appearance	35%	36%	8%	13%
Hair Length	24%	24%	19%	19%
Height	41%	28%	19%	13%
Hair Type	47%	52%	27%	26%
Body Hair	0%	4%	0%	0%
Makeup Use	6%	8%	23%	23%
Breast Size	6%	16%	54%	55%
Athleticism	59%	48%	19%	29%
Butt Size	12%	12%	27%	42%

In both objective conditions, Body Type emerges as the most desirable trait for women. Seniors and Freshmen selected it at nearly the same rate, 59% and 60% respectively. The next two slots belong to Athleticism and Hair Type, though the order is inversed for the Seniors. 59% of Freshmen selected Athleticism 47% selected Hair Type. While 52% of Seniors selected Hair Type and 48% selected Athleticism. For Freshmen, next in line comes height with a 41% selection rate. For Seniors the next most attractive trait was Age Appearance, with a 36% selection rate. 35% of Freshmen also chose Age Appearance. Body Type, Makeup Use, and Skin Tone were unpopular choices across the two classes, whereas Breast Size was noticeably more important for the Seniors than the for the Freshmen.

In both subjective conditions Body Type was also chosen by the highest percentage of students: 88% of Freshmen and 77% of Seniors. Somewhat surprisingly, Breast Size is the second most popular choice for both age groups, chosen by 54% of Freshmen and 55% of Seniors. From there, the two classes diverge. 42% of Seniors perceived Butt Size to be a desired trait, as opposed to only 27% of Freshmen. 29% of Seniors considered their peers to find Athleticism attractive, whereas only 19% of Freshmen thought the same.

For Freshmen, Body Type and Hair Type maintained the first and third place slots across conditions. However, in the subjective condition, 88% of Freshmen perceived Body Type to be an attractive trait, whereas in the objective condition only 58% personally found it to be an attractive trait. In the objective condition, Athleticism took the second-place spot, and height took the fourth place. In the subjective condition, Breast size took second place, and Butt Size took fourth. Makeup Use is also perceived as significantly more important in the subjective condition, jumping from 6% to 23%. This shift is indicative of a westernized beauty standard based in the objectification of women's bodies.

For Seniors, the physical traits varied more across conditions. However, Body Type was selected the most often in both conditions: 60% in the objective condition and 77% in the subject condition. In the objective condition, Hair Type and Athleticism were the second and third most popular traits, whereas in the subjective condition they were inversed with Athleticism being fourth and Hair Type being fifth. Breast Size and Butt size replaced those traits in the subjective condition, with 55% of Seniors perceiving Breast size to be considered attractive by their peers and 42% perceiving the same about Butt Size. This shift is also seen in the Freshmen class. Age Appearance and Height factor into the top five in the objective condition, with a 36% and 28% selection rate respectively, yet are not seen as important in the subjective condition.

**Table 8 : Men**

	Mean			
	Objective		Subjective	
	Freshmen	Seniors	Freshmen	Seniors
Skin Tone	3.50	3.00	3.00	2.00
Body Type	2.64	2.29	2.41	2.19
Age Appearance	2.67	3.00	3.22	3.33
Hair Length	3.75	2.67	5.00	2.50
Height	3.91	4.08	4.65	4.65
Hair Type	2.20	2.50	2.25	2.00
Body Hair		2.50		4.00
Facial Hair	4.00	2.00	4.00	2.00
Athleticism	1.82	1.33	1.43	1.32
Butt Size		2.00	1.00	2.50

There were four main areas in the objective condition in which the two groups differed significantly: Hair Length, Body Hair, Facial Hair, and Butt Size. For Hair Length, the Freshman mean was 3.75 while the Senior mean was 2.67. This indicates that Freshmen prefer men with slightly longer hair. On the other hand, Seniors seem to prefer men with facial hair while Freshmen prefer those without facial hair (2.0 and 4.0 means ,respectively). None of the Freshmen selected Butt Size or Body Hair as important traits for men, but Seniors seem to prefer men with little body hair and small butts. The two classes agreed on the rest of the traits, finding darker skinned, skinny, youthful, tall, curly haired, athletic men attractive. Athleticism seems to be particularly important as it has the smallest mean across both populations.

In the subjective condition the two groups differ more in their perception of the beauty standard. Freshmen, with a mean of 3.00, think their peers prefer a man with paler skin, whereas Seniors, with a mean of 2.0, perceive the beauty standard to entail a darker complexion. Hair Length was also a point of divergence, with the Freshman mean of 5.0 a pretty clear indication that they think their peers prefer a man with long hair. Seniors, on the other hand, only scored a mean of 2.50, indicating they think their peers prefer a man with shorter hair. This trend is reversed with Facial Hair, as Freshmen think men without facial hair are considered the most attractive while seniors think the opposite.

Body Type remains the same across conditions, as does Hair Type and Athleticism. We see a rise in Age Appearance in the subjective condition with means moving from 2.67 and 3.0 to 3.22 and 3.33. We also see a rise in Height from 3.91 and 4.08 to 4.65 for both classes. Based on this data it appears that Scripps students do not vary very much across time in their personal understanding and perception of the beauty standards for men.

**Table 9 : Women**

	Mean			
	Objective		Subjective	
	Freshmen	Seniors	Freshmen	Seniors
Skin Tone	3.00	3.50	3.75	5.00
Body Type	3.30	2.45	2.70	2.70
Age Appearance	2.83	2.67	3.00	2.00
Hair Length	2.75	3.00	2.80	4.17
Height	4.00	4.14	3.40	2.67
Hair Type	2.13	2.70	2.57	2.83
Body Hair		2.00		
Makeup Use	3.00	2.50	2.33	1.75
Breast Size	5.00	4.00	3.79	4.18
Athleticism	1.80	1.91	2.00	2.17
Butt Size	2.50	2.50	2.00	2.00

The beauty standard for women has significantly more variety across both years and conditions than the beauty standard for men. This is in line with what I found in my previous study looking at Pitzer College students. In the objective condition, it appears that Seniors prefer women with slighter darker skin tones and longer hair. They also prefer more makeup than do Freshmen (mean 2.5 versus 3.0). The biggest differences between the two grades were found in their preferences for Breast Size and Body Type. With a mean of 3.30, Freshmen prefer women who are on the curvier side whereas with a mean of 2.45 Seniors prefer women who are thinner. It follows that then with the maximum mean of 5.0, Freshmen also prefer women with larger breasts. Seniors also prefer women with larger breasts, but their mean is significantly lower at 4.0.

The subjective condition found even more differences in the Perceived Beauty standard of the two grades. While both grades leaned towards a light skin tone, Seniors scored the maximum mean of 5.0, while Freshmen only scored 3.75. These means, and the difference



between them, have increased significantly from the objective condition. With a mean of 2.0, Seniors perceive that women who look more youthful are found more attractive, while the Freshman mean of 3.0 is more neutral on that trait. Hair Length was found to differ significantly as well, the Freshmen mean of 2.80 indicates they perceive that women are expected to have shorter hair, whereas the Senior mean of 4.17 varies drastically, indicating a perceived Beauty Standard including long hair for women. Perceived Height preference decreased significantly for both groups, who were in agreement in the objective condition. Freshmen thought their peers preferred women of average height, around 5'5" to 5'6", whereas Seniors' perception was on the shorter end around 5'2" or 5'3".

The means for Makeup Use also saw a decrease across both grades, indicating the Perceived Beauty Standard involves significantly more makeup use for women. With a mean of 1.75, Seniors seem to feel more strongly that women are expected to wear makeup in order to adhere to the beauty standard. This is a similar finding to the Breast Size category in which, with a mean of 4.18, Seniors perceived that women with larger breasts are considered most attractive by their peers. Freshmen displayed similar trends across these two categories, mean 2.33 and 3.79 respectively, but to a much lesser degree.

The rest of the traits in the subjective category are perceived similarly by the two grades. The Body Type mean for both Freshmen and Seniors is 2.70, indicating that regardless of age, women who are skinnier are perceived as more attractive. Hair Type and Athleticism did not differ greatly from the objective condition, with both grades indicating a preference for curly hair and athletic figures.

## Discussion

Analysis of self-esteem scores using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE) revealed no significant change between the two groups, with mean scores falling within the normal range. Similarly, the Self-Objectification Scale did not identify significant differences, suggesting consistent levels of concern with appearance across the college years. These findings indicate that the prevailing beauty norms within the Scripps College environment may not markedly impact students' overall self-esteem or self-objectification.

Furthermore, examination of the Attractiveness Social Norms Scale (ASN) revealed certain differences in both the Real Beauty Standard, as measured in the objective condition, and the Perceived Beauty standard, as measured in the subjective condition, across the two grades.

In terms of the RBS for the two grades, the biggest difference was seen in their preference for Body Type and Breast Size. Freshmen preferred women who were very large chested and curvy, while Seniors preferred women who were skinny and had moderately large breasts. However, the elevated Freshmen Breast Size mean is likely due to the fact that only 6% of respondents selected that trait as important, as opposed to 16% of Seniors. The Body Type difference is highly significant because it was the most selected trait for both grades. And, interestingly, despite it being the most pronounced difference in the RBS, the two grades scored the exact same mean in the PBS. This indicates that the PBS of skinny women being most attractive is a very strong perception.

The selection rate for women's physical traits (Table 7) gives us the general trends for the beauty gap that were found for both Freshmen and Seniors. Body type jumped from 59% and 60% to 88% and 77%. Breast sized jumped from 6 % and 16 % to 54% and 55%. Makeup use also jumped from 6% and 8% to 23% and 23%. On the other hand, Athleticism was seen as less important dropping from 59% and 48% to 19% and 29%. Hair Type also decreased and was considered by both grades to be about as important as Makeup Use in the PBS despite being significant more important in the RBS. Further analysis revealed that Seniors perceive that women who appear younger, short, with long hair, lots of makeup, and larger breasts, are most likely to be considered attractive by their peers. Based on the means, the Freshmen perception of the beauty standard tends to be more moderate than that of the Seniors. Their subjective means only range from 2.0-3.79 while the Seniors means range from 1.75-5.0. These findings establish

both a clear difference in the beauty standards between Freshmen and Seniors, as well as a more pronounced beauty gap in the Senior class.

These findings do not offer support for the women's college environment of Scripps college acting as a mitigating factor for the effects of the beauty standard. Indeed, no effect at all was found on students' self-objectification or self-esteem; Freshmen and Seniors scored the same on both the RSE and the self-objectification scale. In terms of the beauty standard, there were slight differences in the RBS, and more pronounced differences in the PBS. However, the differences found that Seniors actually skewed further towards the western beauty standard in both PBS and their RBS. These findings suggest that over the course of four years at college, Scripps students actually become more affected by the prevailing western beauty standard, not necessarily in their self-esteem, but in their preferences of attractiveness.

This dynamic could occur for a number of potential reasons. It is possible that simply being older allows for longer exposure to the western beauty ideal and thus an increased level of identification. It is also possible that in younger individuals, and younger generations, the western beauty ideal is rapidly shifting so that the Freshmen are operating on a different iteration of the western beauty standard. Given the preliminary nature of the data collected, I refrain from offering definitive inferences about the reason behind this finding and suggest that further research will be beneficial in confirming and understanding this phenomenon. This is a point I return to in the Conclusion, below.

## Conclusions

As an undergraduate thesis, this study has several strengths and limitations. A major strength is its contribution to social norms research. It extends previous research by establishing the existence of the ‘beauty gap’ between the Real Beauty Standard (RBS) and the Perceived Beauty Standard (PBS) and introducing the ASN as a new scale in the field of social norms. It also explores the importance of meso-level norms, which are specific to the Scripps women’s college environment, positing that individualized communities can develop distinct beauty norms.

In terms of limitations, I note that the sample size was small, with 57 respondents across both grades. This small sample means that we cannot draw firm conclusions from the data, nor can we propose intervention strategies. In order to be confident in the results, it would have been best to survey the entire Freshmen and Senior classes, but this study did not have the resources or time to do so. Another methodology that could lead to more significant results would be a longitudinal study in which the same class is polled on a yearly basis, in order to track the evolution of their beauty norm perceptions over the course of their four years at Scripps.

Another limitation is the level of objectivity present in the ASN scale. While the measure is in some ways objective, seeing as only participants themselves can truly know what they find attractive, self-reporting is subject to bias. Participants may engage in social desirability bias, selecting traits that they consider to be more acceptable responses, instead of their true preferences. I attempted to combat this by making the survey entirely anonymous, but it is impossible to eliminate bias entirely. Additionally, if I used an outside measure of objectivity, such as that offered by Ehlinger et al, it would eliminate social desirability bias, but would still be a biased measure since attractiveness is subjective. Ultimately, the ‘objective’ measure is still measuring human attitudes and perceptions, which are inherently subjective. Instead, I argue that the measure is objective in the sense that it has been empirically tested for construct and content validity. This limitation highlights the difficulties of establishing a truly objective measure in the domain of beauty norms research, however I maintain that a quasi-objective measure is essential for our understanding of norms and their impact.

Despite these limitations, this study succeeded in finding meaningful results, and demonstrated clear differences in beauty norms between the Freshmen and Senior classes at Scripps College. Overall, Seniors were more likely to indicate personal as well as perceived

preferences of attractiveness that aligned with the western beauty standard. Traits, such as short, long hair, makeup, and large breasts, were all valorized by the Senior class. The Freshmen remained more moderate in their responses, and less likely to endorse the western beauty standard. This was a surprising finding, indicating that Scripps does not act as a mitigating factor in the interaction between its students and the western beauty ideal. At worst, it encourages its students to comply with the norm, and at best it has no effect at all.

This study is not capable of providing an answer for why this observed phenomenon occurs. It is possible that this is a case of pluralistic ignorance, in which Freshmen mistakenly think that their attractiveness preferences are in the minority and the perception goes uncorrected, so that over time they change their injunctive norms to align with the perceived majority. It is also possible that this study happened to poll Freshmen with more subversive preferences and Seniors with more traditional preferences. Since the sample size was so small, it is not possible to say for certain if these findings are valid.

There are a number of avenues for further research, building on my initial foray and preliminary findings. A future study could replicate this one, with a larger sample size, or introduce a mixed methods approach—including in-depth qualitative interviews and focus groups—to address the why. It could also be beneficial to replicate this study on a similarly aged population, but with participants who attend a different university or are not in higher education. The cross-group comparison would allow for more conclusions to be drawn about the impact of the women's college environment at Scripps specifically, since it would establish a baseline that is more representative of the general population of young adults.

This study was important because it contributes a discussion about Historically Women's Colleges to social norms research, which is an underdeveloped area of research. As a Senior at Scripps, I have a strong sense that a women's college community develops very distinctive norms, and thus is ripe for further social norms research. I would be particularly curious to see an investigation into queerness in a women's college environment, and how that contributes to the community norms.

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## Appendix

U = least impact

When considering your *physical self-concept* . . .

1. . . .what rank do you assign to *physical coordination*? \_\_\_\_\_
2. . . .what rank do you assign to *health*? \_\_\_\_\_
3. . . .what rank do you assign to *weight*? \_\_\_\_\_
4. . . .what rank do you assign to *strength*? \_\_\_\_\_
5. . . .what rank do you assign to *sex appeal*? \_\_\_\_\_
6. . . .what rank do you assign to *physical attractiveness*? \_\_\_\_\_
7. . . .what rank do you assign to *energy level (e.g., stamina)*? \_\_\_\_\_
8. . . .what rank do you assign to *firm/sculpted muscles*? \_\_\_\_\_
9. . . .what rank do you assign to *physical fitness level*? \_\_\_\_\_
10. . . .what rank do you assign to *measurements (e.g., chest, waist, hips)*? \_\_\_\_\_

In administering the measure, the title is not included. Scores are obtained by separately summing the ranks for appearance-based items (3, 5, 6, 8 and 10) and competence-based items (1, 2, 4, 7 and 9), and then subtracting the sum of competence ranks from the sum of appearance ranks. Scores may range from -25 to 25, with higher scores indicating a greater emphasis on appearance, interpreted as higher trait self-objectification. Copyright 1998 by Barbara L. Fredrickson. Individuals who wish to reprint all or part of the Self-Objectification Questionnaire should contact Barbara L. Fredrickson.

## RSE

Please record the appropriate answer for each item, depending on whether you Strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with it.

- 1 = Strongly agree  
 2 = Agree  
 3 = Disagree  
 4 = Strongly disagree

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. At times I think I am no good at all.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. I am able to do things as well as most other people.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. I feel I do not have much to be proud of.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. I certainly feel useless at times.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. I feel that I'm a person of worth.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. I wish I could have more respect for myself.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. All in all, I am inclined to think that I am a failure.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. I take a positive attitude toward myself.

## Figures and Tables

**Table 3:** RSE scores

Freshmen	Seniors
27	30
24	29
24	27
23	25
22	25
22	22
20	19
20	19
19	19
18	19
18	19
18	18
18	17
17	17
17	17
17	17
17	17
16	17
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15	17
14	16
14	16
14	16
13	16
11	15
10	15
	15

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11

10

10

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