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## Lindenwood Students' Cultural Domain of Female Beauty

Courtney Cox<sup>9</sup>

*In this study, the shared cultural domain of female physical beauty on the Lindenwood campus was identified. A cultural domain is essentially, "things that somehow go together" (Bernard 2006, p. 299). The domain is established by systematic use of free lists, a method in which participants list all of the attributes that they can in response to a prompt. A written free list method was selected so that a large group of students could provide their data in a quick and anonymous manner. In this case, the domain of interest was "attributes that are physically beautiful in women." After providing written consent, participants responded to the following prompt: "Please list physical traits that you find attractive in women." Responses were collected until saturation, which occurs when the informants give repetitive answers and nothing new is being mentioned (Bernard 2006, p. 436). Data generated using the free list was used to establish the domain. The domain was arbitrarily defined as any item that was mentioned at least four times. Through analysis, eight items made up the cultural domain, which means there is a tight domain of attributes of attractiveness in women along with many idiosyncratic outliers. In total, the sample included 77 participants at which point the cultural saturation level was reached, which means that through the free listing no new attributes were included.*

*Keywords:* Cultural domain, female, beauty, free list

The aim of this project is to determine the cultural domain of female beauty on Lindenwood University's campus. This study's goal is to establish which traits students on campus view as beautiful in women despite the diverse student backgrounds. Lindenwood University is home to students from each of the 50 states and many countries around the world, but despite the different backgrounds represented, are there overlaps between perceptions of attractiveness? The objective of this study is to answer the following research question: within the Lindenwood University community is there shared understanding of physical beauty in

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women? Through this study, I hope to form the basis of continued research on the role of aesthetics on women's sense of self. By using the attributes from the established cultural domain of the representative sample of Lindenwood students, I plan to assess how women internalize the characteristics of the domain, and to what effect their acknowledgement of the cultural domain of beauty has on self-esteem.

Charles Darwin wrote, "It is certainly not true that there is, in the mind of man, any universal standard of beauty with respect to the human body (Darwin, 1871, p. 337)." Since Darwin's time, many social scientists have argued that perceptions of beauty are a social construct, a product of class and social hierarchical systems. Although the research on female beauty has been extensive, there remain many questions about the differences in perceptions of beauty that can be seen cross-culturally. In our modern age of Photoshop, global communications, and advertising, the boundaries between real and ideal physical beauty are blurred, no matter how unrealistic the ideal may seem. For this reason, the topic of female physical beauty continues to be an important research topic for social scientists. Studies of female attractiveness appear to be driven by the high level of importance that both men and other women place on physical attractiveness, making it highly salient (Fisher, 2006). Although beauty can be influenced by our media outlets, there are seemingly biologically ingrained preferences that transcend our cultural and social influence. Feminist theorists, namely Naomi Wolf, adhere to the social constructionist perspective, which states that female beauty standards and expectations are intertwined with the culture they reside in and are not related to the biological reality. The evolutionary perspective, rather, holds that the emphasis on female attractiveness is universal in nature (Gottschall, 2008). Despite the extensive study of the body, many questions remain; particularly in the realm of cross-cultural comparison (Fisher, 2006).

However, the prevalence of the importance of female beauty is uncontested. In a study of 658 folktales from 13 distinct cultures, researchers have found that if a character is female, her physical appearance is mentioned as much as twice as often than if she were a male (Gottschall, 2008). Through these folktales, it seems that throughout culture and time we as humans have maintained our fascination with women and their physical beauty.

Although there is no unified definition of beauty, many researchers believe that there is a culturally constituted perception of beauty based on shared socialization experiences (Sener, 2013). Studies on cross-cultural perceptions of female beauty have found, in general, that culture has a large impact on the body type that participants find attractive; however, facial beauty seems to be much more universal (Brichacek & Moreland, 2011). Recognition of those who are physically beautiful begins in early childhood development, and several factors of attractiveness are similar across cultures; namely facial symmetry, youthfulness, and proportionality (Vera Cruz, 2013). Brichacek & Moreland (2001) reported that all men in a cross-cultural study, regardless of background, appear to prefer facial symmetry and average features in women. These preferences seem to transcend cultural and media influences. The researchers of this study conclude that there is a high level of agreement on beauty across different cultures in facial characteristics. The preference for facial symmetry may be tied to an evolutionary basis, where left-right bilateral symmetry was tied to health and genetic success (Brichacek & Moreland, 2011). Facial symmetry indicates that an individual did not have extensive exposure to mutations, parasites, and toxins during their development (Wilson, 2013). Evolutionary biology provides much of the understanding that we have of mate attraction and perception of beauty today. Facial symmetry and sexual dimorphism are physical representations of reproductive fitness, which makes cultural variations in this perception more

difficult to understand and classify (Wilson, 2013). This is, perhaps, due to the biological indication of relative fertility as it relates to physical attractiveness in women. Whereas men do not possess a clear connection between fertility and attractiveness, perhaps due to the smaller amounts of variability in male fertility, their physical appearance gives less indication of their ability to produce offspring (Gottschall, 2008).

Wilson (2013) claims that infantile signals that evoke parental responses in their potential mates, including large open eyes, a small chin, and full lips, have an evolutionary advantage when it comes to passing on genes when they are also found in a woman's adult phenotype. Similarly, hyper-female traits that indicate high levels of estrogen, such as big eyes, narrow eyebrows, red lips, and a pinkish complexion are often exaggerated with makeup. Supermodels, for example, tend to have very symmetrical faces, which reinforces their high level of perceived attractiveness (Brichacek & Moreland, 2011). The preference for symmetrical faces has been tested in both modern and traditional populations around the world, and in all of these studies, has proven strong. Our preference for average features is also called koiniphilia, and is a cross-cultural sign of beauty in women. Vera Cruz (2013) studied participants from a study of participants from Mozambique, Brazil, and France showed that despite living in different continents and with distinct cultural backgrounds, similar assessments of women's faces were performed in regard to facial proportionality. Body size and shape, on the other hand, seems to have a larger variation between cultures (Wilson, 2013).

It appears that many of the quantifiable measures of attractiveness are not cross-culturally consistent (Fisher & Voracek, 2006). Although beauty is abstract, quantifiable measures of the female body, such as the waist-to-hip ratio and body mass index can be used for comparison of the physical body (Brichacek & Moreland, 2011). Body mass index seems to be contingent on

the amount of resources that a group of people have access to. In areas where there are low levels of resources, women with higher body fat are considered more attractive, while in areas of abundance, thinner women are considered more beautiful (Fisher & Voracek, 2006).

In a study similar to my own, university students were surveyed on their preferences of women's attractiveness, and significant differences in the results based on gender and racial differences were apparent. In this study, men and white respondents were most likely to have extreme preferences regarding their physical perceptions (Sewell, 2013). After 300 participants completed the survey, the variables that had statistically significant relationships with the race of the respondent were skin, eye, and hair colors, along with body type. This contradiction with previous research that said that racial background only caused changes in the perception of the physical body and not the facial structure indicates that more research needs to be done on the subject. Beauty appears to be situational, and the roles that an individual holds, as well as other extraneous factors may influence the perception of beauty (Sewell, 2013). Concluding a relationship between cultural diversity and perceptions of beauty is difficult; however, the role of the social context on these perceptions is strong.

An example of the role of social context in perceptions of beauty in women historically is the preference for pale skin in the Victorian era. According to the International Communication Association (2012), at that time, tan skin was considered to be for the low class, working society, but in the 1950s, darker skin began to become the ideal. Since this change, tan skin is often associated with beauty in the United States, as evidenced in my study. Women are often held to a higher standard for their physical attractiveness than are men (Gottschall, 2008). Cultural concepts of beauty in one area may seem extreme in others, such as neck elongation in Southeast Asia and Chinese foot binding. The International Communication Association (2012) exhibits

how women around the world are held to different standards based on their cultural and historical locality. Global ideals of beauty are communicated through mass media and print advertisements, in particular. By examining the differences between the apparent objectives of these advertisements cross-culturally, it appears that most magazines in the United States focused on bodily beauty, whereas similar magazines in Singapore and Taiwan focused much more on facial beauty.

With advertisements proposing the beauty ideal, many fashion magazines, specifically *Cosmopolitan*, which has an international following, transmits this ideal of beauty via ads which vary from country to country (Sener, 2013). These different views of beauty not only help sell specific products, but they also reinforce the large scale perceptions of physical norms for readers. In a recent study by Dove on women, over two-thirds of the women surveyed felt that beauty was very narrowly and specifically defined. These findings also showed that 90% of the women wish that they could change something about their body, and a strong relationship between appearance satisfaction and self-respect was also noted (Sener, 2013).

Although advertisements do have a role in homogenizing cross-cultural images of beauty, variation still remains (Bjerke, 2006). Yet, it is important for social scientists not to make generalized assumptions of a participant's taste in attractiveness based on their background and cultural norms (Wilson, 2013). Despite the images of perfection presented by advertising companies around the world, there are differences that remain between cultures. Some attributes, such as hair color, which can be changed fairly easily and inexpensively, are much more culturally variant as opposed to eye color, which cannot be changed (Bjerke, 2006). Some cultures are much more definite about their physical preferences and finding these trends is

difficult; however, hair and eye color often seem to be one of the most often mentioned characteristics of beauty in women (Bjerke, 2006).

In the modern age, with Photoshop used to warp models into perfect and unattainable images, it is no surprise that many consumers have a resulting unrealistic body image. Adolescents seem to be particularly vulnerable to this influence. As written by Diller (2014), many celebrities and models have seen the influence of Photoshop on their own advertisements and magazine cover shoots, and have now taken positions of advocacy against its use. Diller (2014) also writes that The American Medical Association, in particular, has taken a stance against advertisement manipulation, citing the contributions between Photoshop use and unrealistic physical expectations, emotional trauma, and eating disorders. Other professional opinions have been mixed; physicians have found links between photo distortions and eating disorders (Diller, 2014). Due to the large impact that our perceptions and reactions to physical beauty in women have on our increasingly global society, further research on cross-cultural assessments of beauty should be completed. Through such studies, we will better understand the impact of globalization on perceptions on young women growing up in a world inundated with diversity and modification. The resulting impact on their sense of selves may be powerful, and should be assessed fully.

My research is within the field of cognitive anthropology, which focuses on how people think about the people, objects, and events which make up our world (D'Andrade, 1995). This type of study is important in anthropology because these perceptions help us understand how we classify our experiences, and the role that they have in our interactions. Cultural domain analysis has become more popular with the growth of applied anthropology, especially within the field of cognitive anthropology (Borgatti, 1994).



According to Bernard (2006, p. 299), cultural domains are “things that somehow go together.” Through the study of a cultural domain, researchers are able to study how we relate external objects together within the confines of our minds (Bernard, 2006). I have completed this research due to my curiosity about how Lindenwood, as a campus, perceives female beauty, taking into consideration the geographic diversity of the students enrolled in the university. For this reason, I expected the domain of the students to be wide with a large amount of idiosyncratic outliers and few points of agreement. In order to test this hypothesis, I collected data from students in General Education World History (HIS10000) classes through the method of free listing.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

I collected my data from Lindenwood University students in General Education classes of World History (HIS10000). This particular course was selected because it is a course in which all students are required to complete prior to graduation. Students of all majors, age, and backgrounds enroll in World History courses, so it provided a representative sample of Lindenwood University’s students. However, only students over the age of 18, who are able to consent to their participation without parent or guardian permission, were eligible to participate in this study. I visited and collected data from classes in which I received approval of their professors, whom I contacted via email (see Appendix A) to inquire if they were willing to allow me to visit their class. In the email I explained that I would like to spend a few minutes collecting data from consenting participants during class time. Once a professor approved of my request, I visited his or her HIS10000 class and recruited participants through a memorized script (see Appendix B). For these students, participation in the study was optional, and no extra

credit or compensation was given for completion. I brought candy for whoever chose to take some regardless of whether they took part in the study or not.

After attending 4 classes, I was able to obtain free list data from 77 participants. Through this sample, I was able to reach saturation, which means that the participants were not contributing any new attributes to their lists, signifying that the cultural domain had been reached. Although 3 participants did not answer the demographic survey, of the 77 participants, 32 were identified as men and 42 as women. The participants spanned a large range of age, from 18 to 49. The average age of respondent was 22. In response to their race or ethnicity, 4 students identified as Asian or Asian American, 2 indicated that they were Black or African American, 2 consider themselves to be Hispanic or Latino, 65 were Non-Hispanic White. Of these students, 12 were international students who have primary citizenship outside of the United States. This sample had students of all years of study, indicating a wide variety of academic backgrounds in addition to the diversity in terms of international or domestic status, age, and race/ethnicity of participants.

### **Materials and Procedure**

After recruiting professors who allowed me to survey their students at the end of one of their World History (HIS10000) classes, I pre-arranged a date to attend their classes and collect my data. Once in the classroom, I introduced myself and recited the memorized pre-written oral recruitment script (see Appendix B). I provided information about the objectives of my study and the involvement of the students as possible participants. I emphasized that participation is completely optional, and that no extra credit or incentives would be given. With this established, I distributed informed consent forms (see Appendix C) to the entire class, and gave them the chance to read it to decide if they would like to participate. Since everyone received the

informed consent form, those who later decided not to participate are not singled out and made to feel uncomfortable for their choice not to take part in the study. I instructed those who planned to participate to sign the form, and those who did not to leave the form blank. After sufficient time had passed, I asked all of the students to pass their forms forward. Those who choose not to participate turned in the blank page and left the classroom at this point.

I then distributed the research instrument, with a blank sheet of paper listing only the free list prompt (see Appendix D) which said, "Please list physical traits that you find attractive in women." on one side, and a short demographic survey on the other. A free list is a great tool for making inventories because it reveals cultural salience and variation, but it will not represent the total knowledge of the participants. Participants are asked to produce as many words that they associate with the prompt that they can. I chose a written free list so that I could have a large group of students provide their data in a quick and anonymous manner.

I reminded participants that their responses would be confidential, and that it was of most importance that they provided their own list without input from others. This experiment took only a few minutes, but no time limit was imposed, so no time taking device was used. After constructing their free lists, the participants completed the reverse side of the sheet, which asked basic demographic questions (see Appendix E).

I reminded the students to work independently and directed where they should pick up a debriefing form (see Appendix F) upon completion. I also offered some candy for after the study and indicated that all completed instruments must be turned into a manila envelope at the front of the room, and then left the room. Once every participant had completed the study, I re-entered the room and collected the manila envelope containing the free lists and demographic surveys. After collecting the surveys, I analyzed the results with Anthropac 4.98 (Analytic Technologies,

1996), which is a program designed for cultural domain analysis through use of cognitive mapping and the construction of domain matrices. First, I entered my demographic data into a spreadsheet and my free list data into a document for upload into Anthropac. From my data collection, I received free lists from 77 participants and cleaned the data in Anthropac, which means I collapsed overlapping categories. For example, if participants wrote responses such as “tan skin” and “tanner skin,” I would collapse them together to reduce the amount of categories. After cleaning my data with the help of Anthropac’s language recognition feature, I had 87 distinct attributes remaining.

Many of these attributes were mentioned only a few times, making them idiosyncratic outliers for this sample, and not a part of the cultural domain. Most of these characteristics were individual preferences such as small hands, while some of the items that were mentioned only several times were surprising for their prominence in the pop culture discussion of aesthetics, such as the thigh gap. Anthropac calculated the frequencies, along with producing statistics such as the mean, standard variation, and salience measurement.

### **Results and Discussion**

From my analysis with Anthropac, I conclude that my representative sample of students at Lindenwood University have a very strong cultural domain of female beauty. Despite the demographic differences between the students in my sample, many attributes were mentioned by a large percentage of the representative sample, which means that we have a strong domain. The items in the domain were arbitrarily sorted based on number of mentions after cleaning was completed. The items that were mentioned four times or more were included in the cultural domain.

In total, the lists had 87 separate attributes listed, but the components of the cultural domain included hair, eyes, smile, teeth, athletic build, lips, legs, a clear complexion, natural beauty, and a tan. Hair was mentioned most often, 54 times, in fact, which means that 71% of the students who responded included hair on their free lists. The average rank of hair was 1.926, which means hair was mentioned near the top of the free list, usually the first or second attribute. The second most mentioned characteristic was eyes. It was included 47 times and on 62% of the free lists. It was mentioned lower, on average, on the free lists with the average rank at 3.149. The attribute with the third highest number of mentions was a smile, with 38, or 38% of participants including it on their free lists with an average rank of 2.421. For additional information on the specifics of the entire cultural domain, see Table 1. The limited number of items in the domain reflects agreement among members of the sample.

Unfortunately, some of the free lists that I received were very general and did not provide descriptive attributes. Because the free lists were constructed after the participants were released from class, some of those who did participate did not put in their sincere effort. Several of the classes I attended coincided with lunch and dinner times, so some students did not put in extensive effort. A portion of the lists were very short, listing only a few general items. Although I took every precaution to ensure that I maintained the privacy of the participants during recruitment, some of the responses seemed guarded and not at all comprehensive. However, I do think that the written free lists were the better of the oral alternatives, because the anonymous nature of the data collection was maintained and if participants felt inclined to include information they would feel uncomfortable listing out loud, they could do so at their discretion. Another limitation of this study was my lack of familiarity with Anthropic. The

program has quite a few glitches, as it is on an outdated operating system, and several technological hold ups have slowed the analysis of the free list analysis.

The characteristics that were mentioned in a large amount of free lists included hair, eyes, smile, teeth, athletic build, lips, legs, and a clear complexion despite the diversity of the students in my sample due to their age range, country of citizenship, and academic background. Thus, with this tight cultural domain, I have established that in my representative sample, there is a shared sense of beauty in women on Lindenwood's campus. There were many idiosyncratic outliers that had fewer mentions, which means that their inclusion on the free list is attributable to individual preference and not cultural agreement. In connection to my literature review, my results were in line with past studies on perceptions of beauty in women. The literature concluded that preferred facial characteristics are cross-culturally similar, and bodily attributes are more variant. Of the items in the cultural domain, seven of the eight were facial features, whereas only one was related to the body. This shows that there is a cultural agreement on facial characteristics, and most of the bodily attributes were idiosyncratic. The smaller amount of mentions for body characteristics may indicate some sort of taboo against discourse about the body for participants.

Through my work on the current project, I have sparked several additional research goals for future study. I suspect that the short responses on many free lists may have been as a result of the discomfort that many students felt describing beauty in women. Perhaps the stigma for both men and women of being too critical or derogatory regarding women's appearance was a factor that limited the responses. Through my data entry; however, I did notice that most of the women put longer and more detailed responses than the men. What influence would changing the prompt of my free list and making it about men instead of women have on the responses from

both sexes in a repeated experience? Would the women provide more extensive responses, yet again, or would the men give more detailed answers? Are we more likely to give critical responses if we are considering our own bodies?

In addition to repeating this study for male traits of attractiveness, I plan to assess self-esteem among women in relation to these established cultural domains of Lindenwood University. I plan to construct a survey with a measure of assessment based on the domain reported in this paper, and then attach an additional instrument to assess participants' self-esteem. This way, I will be able to measure the relationship between internalization of the cultural domain, and the correlation its association with the participants' has on the sense of self. After analyzing my results from my free list data collection regarding physical traits that participants find attractive in women, I have found that the cultural domain is strong, and despite the diversity on campus, there are many shared perceptions of beauty on Lindenwood University's campus.

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## Appendix A

## Recruitment E-mail

My name is Courtney Cox, and I am a senior anthropology and sociology student here at Lindenwood. I am starting a study about Lindenwood students' understanding of physical beauty in women. I have received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval with the help of my research advisers, Dr. Nohara-LeClair (psychology) and Dr. Dames (anthropology). In order to avoid influencing my research participants and to obtain data from a broad array of potential participants, I am seeking professors of World History general education courses (HIS10000) who are willing to let me administer the instruments below during their class time. Participation in this study should be optional for your students, and no extra credit of any kind should be given to those who participate. In all, this exercise will take between 5 and 10 minutes of your class time.

If you would like more information before deciding if I would be able to come to your class to briefly survey students, please let me know.

At your earliest convenience, please reply if you are willing to help me with this research.

Thank you in advance for your consideration,

Courtney Cox

[cec834@lionmail.lindenwood.edu](mailto:cec834@lionmail.lindenwood.edu)

## Appendix B

## Script for P.I. Administering the Instruments in GE Classes

“Hi, I’m Courtney, and I’m a student researcher starting a study in cognitive anthropology and trying to find out how LU students think about beauty in women. This study is optional, and no extra credit will be given for your participation. I will now distribute an informed consent form. Please read this form, and sign it if you would like to participate. If you do not wish to participate, please don’t write on the form.”

*(Wait for the students to sign the form, if they so choose for 10 seconds)*

“Whether or not you signed the form to participate, please pass the papers forward. I will now distribute this sheet of paper with the written prompt and a survey on the back. If you have chosen to participate, please fill out both sides. If you have not chosen to participate, please turn in the blank form. The prompt says “Please list physical traits that you find attractive in women.” Please remember that your responses will be completely confidential, and the researcher will not see the responses in connection with your name. It is very important that you provide your own list without input from others. If you decide to participate, please write as many characteristics as come to mind, and then fill out the demographic survey. Whether or not you participated, please turn in the form by putting it in the manila envelope at the front of the room before you leave. Please pick up the debriefing letter and the consent form with some candy on your way out. Thank you in advance for your participation.”

## Appendix C

## Informed Consent Form

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (print name), understand that I will be taking part in a research project where I will be asked to list physical traits that I find beautiful in women and to complete a demographic questionnaire. I understand that I should be able to complete this task within 10 minutes. I am also aware that my participation in this study is strictly voluntary and that I may choose to withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty or prejudice. I understand that the information obtained from my responses will be analyzed only as part of aggregate data and that all identifying information will be absent from the data in order to ensure anonymity. I am also aware that my responses will be kept confidential and that data obtained from this study will only be available for research and educational purposes. By signing this informed consent form, I acknowledge that I am at least 18 years old. I understand that any questions I may have regarding this study shall be answered by the researcher involved. I understand that I can receive a copy of this form and the debriefing form when I exit the room.

\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

(Signature of participant)

Student Researcher's Name and Number:

Courtney Cox

[cec834@lionmail.lindenwood.edu](mailto:cec834@lionmail.lindenwood.edu)

Faculty Advisers' Names and Emails:

Dr. Christina Dames

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Dr. Michiko Nohara-LeClair

[mnohara-leclair@lindenwood.edu](mailto:mnohara-leclair@lindenwood.edu)

### Appendix D

Please list physical traits that you find attractive in women:

Appendix E

*Demographic Survey*

**Please provide the following information about yourself.**

- 1) What is your gender? \_\_\_\_\_
- 2) What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_ years
- 3) What is your race/ethnicity? (Circle all that apply)
  - A) American Indian/Alaska Native
  - B) Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander
  - C) Asian or Asian American
  - D) Black or African American
  - E) Hispanic or Latino
  - F) Non-Hispanic White
  - G) Multiracial/Multiethnic
- 4) Are you an international student?  
  
YES or NO
- 5) What year of study?
  - A) Freshman
  - B) Sophomore
  - C) Junior
  - D) Senior
  - E) Other

Appendix F

Debriefing Form

Dear Participant,

Thank you very much for participating in this study. This study seeks to understand the similarities in the way that we, as a campus community, view physical beauty in women. The results will help us understand more about the culture of Lindenwood University, and will be used for the basis of future studies.

If you have any questions about this study or if you feel any discomfort from this study please contact one of the following individuals:

Courtney Cox

Dr. Dames

Dr. Nohara-LeClair

Student Researcher

Anthropology Professor

Psychology Professor

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Table 1

*The Cultural Domain of Female Beauty*

	<i>Item</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Average Rank</i>
<b>1</b>	Hair	54	71	1.926
<b>2</b>	Eyes	47	62	3.149
<b>3</b>	Smile	38	50	2.421
<b>4</b>	Teeth	23	30	1.000
<b>5</b>	Athletic	18	24	1.556
<b>6</b>	Lips	9	12	5.889
<b>7</b>	Legs	9	12	2.889
<b>8</b>	Clear Skin	8	11	5.750
<b>9</b>	Natural Beauty	7	9	3.000
<b>10</b>	Tan	6	8	2.667