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## **Instantaneously Hotter: the Dynamic Revision of Beauty Assessment Standards**

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We show that beauty is an instantaneously constructed notion and offer a micro-level explanation for how aesthetics change at the macro, societal-level. People non-consciously modify their judgment standards for beauty when exposed to others' aesthetic preferences, consequently altering their subsequent judgments of beauty even in the absence of social pressure.

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# Instantaneously Hotter: The Dynamic Revision of Beauty Assessment Standards

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Physical attractiveness can impact people's lives considerably. Physically attractive individuals have more successful careers and higher income (Hamermesh 2011), and are also judged and treated more favorably by others across myriad social domains (Eagly et al. 1991). In consumer research, perception of physical attractiveness has substantial influence on how consumers evaluate advertisements and hence products and brands (Hirschman 1987; Mazis et al. 1992).

Prior research suggests that the perception of physical attractiveness results from evolutionary processes and is thus 'hardwired,' with the ultimate goal being the perpetuation of genes (Rhodes 2006). That is, certain physical features are attractive because they are true biological signals of health and reproductive fitness, guiding mate selection and maximizing the quality of offspring. Further, aesthetic views (e.g., body shape) can also be driven by macro environmental factors such as differences in socioeconomic and cultural norms (Cunningham et al. 1995). At the societal level, aesthetic taste can also change over time. However, cultural differences and societal level shifts typically require extended periods of time to occur. In this research, we examine whether exposure to others' aesthetic views can alter one's beauty assessment standard instantaneously.

We propose that people assess a target individual's physical attractiveness based on the beauty assessment standards they hold at the time of judgment (cf. Said and Todorov 2011). This standard is constantly and automatically updated to align with the aesthetic views of others, shifting one's *subsequent* judgments of physical attractiveness toward the average taste. Unlike the classic conformity effects driven by social pressure (Asch 1955), this 'beauty convergence' occurs outside one's conscious awareness and when one's judgments of physical attractiveness are anonymous and unobserved by others.

We tested our proposition in both field and lab studies, where participants anonymously provided their personal assessment of the attractiveness of target individuals without knowing others' ratings of the targets a priori and without social pressure. In Study 1, we analyzed a large-scale field dataset of over 800,000 physical attractiveness evaluations by over 60,000 visitors to an online dating website. Visitors of the website are first shown a randomly selected photograph of another individual. Visitors then, anonymously, rate the attractiveness of the target on a ten-point scale (1 = *not*, 10 = *hot*). Thereafter, the average of the ratings from all prior visitors who have also evaluated that particular target is displayed. A new photo of a different target is then presented for evaluation. This process continues until visitors decide to leave the website.

We calculated the absolute difference between each visitor's rating of a target and the average evaluation by all prior raters of the target; this deviation score served as the dependent variable. Of central importance to this study is the independent variable *N*<sup>th</sup> exposure: the *N*<sup>th</sup> photo that a visitor evaluated in the data set. This variable also indicates that the visitor had already rated and subsequently seen the average rating for each of *N*-1 other photos. The results of a series of random-effects regressions (controlling for gender) revealed that the *N*<sup>th</sup> exposure had a significant negative effect on the dependent variable: the more prior exposure to others' ratings visitors had, the more their subsequent judgment of the physical attractiveness of a target individual shifted toward the average aesthetic taste, even though they were not provided with others' evaluations

of that target a priori and even though visitors' own evaluations were anonymous and unobserved by others.

Study 2 further examined the effect by comparing participants' judgments of physical attractiveness when they had prior exposure to others' aesthetic views versus not. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. Participants in the no-info condition evaluated a large set of target photos of either women or men in a random order. Participants in the info-before condition evaluated the same photos but were shown each photo along with the average-rating information (obtained from a pretest) before evaluation. By contrast, participants in the info-after condition were provided the average rating information on a separate page after they had evaluated each photo (but before they were shown the next target). Supporting our proposition, participants in the no-info condition deviated from the average aesthetic taste more as they evaluated more photos; that is, they refined their independent beauty assessment standards over time and the standards increasingly deviated from the average aesthetic taste. However, participants in the info-before and info-after conditions deviated from the average taste less as they rated more photos and were exposed to more average ratings. In the info-before condition, the greater convergence of participants' ratings toward the average taste over time suggests that these participants increasingly used the average ratings as reference points for their own judgments. Remarkably, however, in the info-after condition, although participants did not know the average rating of a target until after they had rated the target, their ratings converged toward the average over time similarly as participants who had the average-rating information during evaluation.

In Study 3, we directly manipulated the average aesthetic ratings presented to participants, examining whether people's beauty assessment standards and subsequent judgments of physical attractiveness can be altered arbitrarily. Participants were randomly assigned to two conditions (actual average vs. reduced average). All participants were shown the average rating of each photo only after rating the photo. Participants in the reduced-average condition were shown ratings that were lower than the actual average ratings obtained in a pretest, whereas participants in the actual-average condition were shown the original average ratings. Supporting our proposition, the more participants were exposed to reduced (vs. actual) average ratings, the more they deviated from the actual average in subsequent evaluations. Further, when asked, participants did not believe that their judgments were affected by prior exposures to others' aesthetic preferences, and were not conscious of the effect of the prior exposures on altering their beauty assessment standards.

Overall, our findings not only provide a micro-level explanation for how changes in aesthetic views occur at the macro, societal level, but also suggest that beauty should be regarded as a constantly shifting and instantaneously constructed notion.

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