

An Informal Research Study Investigating the Influence of Hair Color on Attractiveness and
Competence

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Abstract

In this informal research study, the researchers focused on the influence of hair color on perceptions of attractiveness and competence, and two hypotheses were posited. The first hypothesis stated that there would be differences in perceptions of competence based on hair color. The second hypothesis stated that there would be differences in perceptions of attractiveness based on hair color. The researchers conducted a survey experiment where participants were asked to complete parts of the Interpersonal Attraction Scale and the Source Credibility Scale in reference to one of two color photographs of a female actor. Participants were 50 students (20 men, 30 women) from a large Mid-Atlantic University. After analyzing the data, the researchers found that the first hypothesis was not supported. The second hypothesis was supported in one way and not supported in another.

Hair color has had a long standing effect on individuals, and history provides clear evidence of this phenomenon. During World War II and the genocide that has come to be known as the Holocaust, dark hair was associated with the physical characteristics typical of Jewish people. Adolf Hitler made it clear that blonde hair was considered an attribute of the so-called “superior race.” In that situation, a person’s hair color had a direct impact on whether or not he or she lived or died, which exemplifies the implications that come with perceptions of another’s physical characteristics (Suedfeld, Patterson, Soriano, & Zuvic, 2002).

Decades later, hair color continues to be directly associated with perceptions of overall competence and attractiveness. Rich and Cash (1993) believed that the stereotype of blondes being attractive and flirty was reinforced in media outlets such as *Playboy* magazine, where a majority of the women pictured are blonde. Stereotypes like this based on appearance are abundant. They exist cross-culturally and can easily differ between males and females. Overall, there seems to be a lack of research focusing strictly on the influence of hair color, and what research does exist has been found to be contradictory. Because of this, the study of perceptions attributed to humans based on hair color is an important topic to expand upon in the field of nonverbal communication.

The present study intends to focus on how hair color, specifically blonde hair compared to others, contributes to perceptions of attractiveness and competence in females. Up to this point, the investigators have encountered a great deal of research that was conducted outside of the United States, in places like the United Kingdom, France, and other parts of Europe. The goal of this research is to bring light to the influence hair color has on perceptions among the American population.

Hair Color and Attractiveness

Communication studies scholars have come to the conclusion over the years that interpersonal attractiveness is a multi-dimensional concept, made up of social, physical, and task attractiveness. For the purpose of the current study, physical and task attractiveness will be assessed; in other words, it is the goal of the researchers to investigate perceptions of how physically appealing someone is and how appealing they would be considered in a work or goal-orientated setting (McCroskey & McCain, 1974). It has often been said that men are more attracted to blonde-haired women than any other, and some of the research found supported that notion. For instance, a study conducted in France by Guéguen (2009) tested the frequency with which women were offered help depending on their hair color. The results showed that women wearing blonde wigs as opposed to black or brown had a small, but significantly greater, amount of success when it came to hitching a ride from male drivers. There were no differences in the amount of times women wearing brown or black wigs were offered a ride, and there were no differences on an overall scale if the driver of the car was female. Even if the results were not significantly higher, this study clearly shows that men were more willing to solicit the company of blonde females.

The researchers also found two studies that focused on hair color and success at a fundraising event. One was conducted in North Carolina by Price (2008) and showed that, when the donor was Caucasian, blondes received more funds. Similarly, Guéguen (2011) found that women wearing a blonde wig received more frequent and also larger donations from men, though there were no significant findings for donations from other women. Both of these studies further the idea that blondes are seen as more attractive than other women and experience a series of benefits as a result.

Other studies have looked at the association between blonde hair and neotony, a trait that has historically been associated with physical immaturity (Bereczkei & Mesko, 2006). If a woman had blonde hair, she was typically perceived as having a more neotonous face than women with dark hair. Despite the association with immaturity, those women with neotonous faces were generally perceived more positively and as being more attractive to men than other women. Much like with the aforementioned studies, this research emphasized the fact that these perceptions were specific to males. In fact, when Feinman and Gill (1978) assessed how women and men differed in their preference for light and dark hair, this phenomenon was yet again brought to the forefront. However, it was seen that women had the opposite preference – they were more attracted to men with dark hair than to men with light hair. This evidence addressed an aspect of hair color that the researchers had not previously come into contact with, thus providing them with a different perspective for the present study.

Up to this point, there does not seem to be a great deal of research that tries to explain why it is exactly that men tend to prefer blonde women. Even so, one study conducted in Poland by Sorokowski (2008) attempted to do just that. This study brought to light the idea that fairness of hair could be related to greater mating potential and overall health. For instance, the findings revealed that pictures of blonde women were generally seen as being younger than dark-haired women, and thus more attractive. These results were similar to previous studies, but this study, in particular, took it further to try and explain why this happens, which is an important contribution to the compilation of literature the researchers have formed thus far.

Until now, all the research that has been addressed has dealt with men preferring blonde women to any other hair color. However, as often happens with studies involving humans and their nature, a great deal of research said the opposite. A study from Lawson (1971) looked at

perceptions of both men and women based on hair color, and the results sort of bridge the gap between one side of the general results and the other. In his study, it was found that both sexes perceived brunette men and women as superior to people with other hair colors, but blondes were perceived as more attractive. Both hair colors were attributed positive qualities, but they were different.

Similar results came from a study by Swami and Barret (2011), which looked at men's preferences for a particular hair color and how said preferences influenced dating behaviors. Over the course of a five to six week period, a female confederate aided the researchers in assessing this phenomenon by altering her hair color and attending nightclubs where they could observe how often she was approached by different men. The researchers also surveyed men from the same nightclubs and asked them to rate an image of the same woman on a range of interpersonal characteristics. Overall, the results showed that the woman was approached as a blonde more often than she was as a brunette or redhead. However, when reacting to the stimuli in the survey, men rated her as more attractive when she was a blonde than when she had blonde or red hair. Furthermore, 31 men actually stated that they preferred brunettes to other hair colors, as compared to 25 that said the same of blondes and nine that stated a preference for redheads. Though this particular study is contradicting previous evidence the researchers have come into contact with, it is a great example of how this is not a cut and dry situation, especially when other personal qualities like competence are taken into consideration.

Hair Color and Competence

Competence has been found to be one of three dimensions that make up a concept called source credibility. The other dimensions are trustworthiness and goodwill (McCroskey & Tevin,

1999). However, for the purpose of the current study, the researchers are interested solely in the competence dimension of credibility. Many stereotypes exist that surround women with blonde hair having a lack of competence. Some are positive stereotypes, but most are extremely negative. For instance, Roll (1971) addressed the idea that blonde hair is typically seen as far more valuable than dark or red hair, and Swami, Furnham, and Joshi (2008) furthered this idea with their discussion about blonde women typically being seen as attractive and outgoing. Despite the good things, they are also often associated with being untrustworthy, manipulative, and sexually promiscuous. What's more, Beddow, Hymes, and McAuslan (2011) noted the term "dumb blonde" that usually surrounds women with a particular hair color. They also went on to explain that people with brown hair are known as "studious brunettes," and people with red hair are described as "temperamental redheads."

These stereotypes can have a huge impact on how women are perceived in the workplace. Research from Takeda, Helms, and Romanova (2006) looked at this by exploring the appearance of 500 company CEOs. After each picture was categorized based on hair color, the following results were found: 20 were redheads, 25 were blonde, 114 had black hair, and 341 were brunettes. Of the two out of 500 CEOs that were women, both were brunettes. When the researchers compared these statistics to the general population of the United Kingdom, blonde women were found to be extremely underrepresented. They make up a quarter of the population, but only five percent of CEOs.

Within the workforce in general, attitudes are very similar. Beddow et al. (2011) showed in their research that blonde women were perceived as the least successful and mature, as well as more emotional and aggressive. Conversely, brunette females were perceived to have the highest work ethic, be the most mature, and the least emotional and aggressive. It would seem that

blonde women are generally considered less capable than other women and generally start out with lower salaries than brunette women (Kyle & Mahley, 1996).

However, it does not seem that blonde women are doomed in the professional world. There is research available that says being a blonde in the workplace can be advantageous. For instance, a study conducted by Johnston (2010) addressed a phenomenon the researchers were surprised to have not seen up to this point. Communication studies scholars generally agree that physically attractive people, to a point, make more money than unattractive people. When the researcher involved with this study surveyed women about their hair color, salaries, and spouses' salaries, evidence showed that blonde women received significantly higher salaries equivalent to an extra full year of schooling. The study also concluded that their spouses made higher salaries as well.

The researchers combed and analyzed an abundance of research relating to the topic of hair color and how it influences attractiveness and competence. Based on the evidence the researchers have found, two hypotheses have been posited:

H1: There will be differences in perceptions of competence based on hair color.

H2: There will be differences in perceptions of attractiveness based on hair color.

In order to access these hypotheses, a survey experiment was conducted.

Methods

The researchers used quantitative methods when collecting data for this study. The survey that was administered involved measures for which the answers were either in numeric form or could easily be converted to numeric form. In this section the sampling procedures used

and demographic information about participants will be discussed. The researchers will also give a detailed explanation of the measurements used in data collection.

Participants

Participants were 50 students (20 men, 30 women) from a large Mid-Atlantic university. Participants were recruited by approaching classmates, co-workers, and acquaintances both on and off campus. The age of the respondents ranged from 17 to 28 years ($M = 20.56$, $SD = 2.14$). Sixteen percent of participants were freshman, 8% were sophomores, 20% were juniors, 32% were seniors and 24% identified with either the ‘other’ or ‘not applicable’ classification. Ethnic makeup of the sample was 76% Caucasian, 4% Asian, 8% Hispanic, 2% African American, and 4% other.

Procedures and Instrumentation

A convenience sample was used to obtain participants. Respondents were instructed to complete the survey based on their own beliefs and perspectives. Two copies of the survey were distributed. One survey depicted a face shot of a female celebrity with blonde hair; the other survey depicted the same image of the same female celebrity as a brunette (Appendix A). The questionnaire included two measures, Interpersonal Attraction and Source Credibility.

The Interpersonal Attraction Scale (McCroskey & McCain, 1974) is an 18-item instrument that asks students to indicate how sexy looking someone is or how good he or she is to work with. This scale has three dimensions. However, only two were used in this study: physical attraction, which indicates how handsome or good looking someone is, and task attraction, which indicates such things as a person’s ability to get something accomplished. Responses were solicited using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree (5) to strongly

disagree (1). A reliability coefficient of .88 ($M = 23.08$, $SD = 4.49$) was achieved for the Physical Attraction dimension of the scale. A reliability coefficient of .84 ($M = 19.84$, $SD = 2.95$) was achieved for the Task Attraction dimension of the scale.

The Source Credibility Scale (McCroskey & Teven, 1999) is an 18-item instrument that asks students to indicate how self-centered or honorable a person is. This scale has three dimensions. However, only one was used in this study – the competence factor, which looks at such things as a person's intelligence or expertise. Responses were solicited using a 7-point semantic differential scale with opposite terms representing the extremes (i.e. untrained (1) and trained (7)). A reliability coefficient of .85 ($M = 20.83$, $SD = 4.48$) was achieved for this scale.

Results

Hypothesis one stated that there would be differences in perceptions of competence based on hair color. To test the hypothesis an independent sample *t*-test was conducted ($t = -1.51$, $p = .14$). Hypothesis one was not supported. The mean for blonde hair was 3.30 ($SD = .69$) and the mean for brunette hair was 3.63 ($SD = .78$). Hypothesis two stated that there would be differences in perceptions of attractiveness based on hair color. An independent sample *t*-test was conducted both for physical attraction and task attraction in order to test this hypothesis (physical: $t = -.94$, $p = .35$; task: $t = -2.43$, $p = .02$). Hypothesis two was both supported and refuted. There was no statistical significance between hair color and perceptions of physical attractiveness. However, there was a level of statistical significance between hair color and perceptions of task attractiveness. In terms of physical attraction, the mean for blonde hair was 3.74 ($SD = .71$) and the mean for brunette hair was 3.94 ($SD = .78$). In terms of task attraction, the mean for blonde hair was 3.14 ($SD = .51$) and the mean for brunette hair was 3.46 ($SD = .43$).

Discussion

The point of this research study was to investigate how people's perceptions were influenced by hair color. Specifically, the researchers looked at perceptions of physical attractiveness, task attractiveness, and competence. The study was broken into two survey versions; version one provided an image of a woman with blonde hair, and version two provided an image of the same woman with brunette hair (Appendix A). Both versions were identical other than the image provided.

The study found no significance between hair color and physical attraction. This contradicts research findings reported by Swami, et al. (2007). That particular study cited work from Guthrie (1976) and Lawson (1971), who both found that blondes were perceived as more physically attractive. However, the actual study conducted by Swami, et al. (2007) found that brunettes were perceived as more physically attractive. Where the present study is concerned, there exists no true evidence to say that any of the aforementioned studies are fully accurate or fully flawed because in order to support or refute their findings, the researchers would have needed to find a significant relationship between one hair color and physical attractiveness, and they did not.

Even so, the current study did find significance between hair color and task attractiveness. Overall, brunettes were found to have higher task attractiveness than blondes, meaning people think they are more enjoyable or easier to work with on some level than blondes. Research by Beddow, et al. (2011) found that blondes were perceived as the least successful in the work force, and brunettes were perceived to have the highest work ethic. These findings

support the current study and, in part, the hypothesis that hair color affects perceptions of attraction.

The study found no significance between hair color and perceptions of credibility. These findings are contradictory to the findings of Kyle and Mahley (1996) that found that blondes were perceived as less capable than brunettes. Findings by Swami, et al. (2007) reported that blondes were perceived as manipulative and untrustworthy, which also contradicts the current study. After thorough analysis, the researchers came to the conclusion that the lack of significance could be due to a participation error or something of the sort. This conclusion was reached on the basis that task attractiveness and credibility are extremely similar concepts, and if one was found to be significant, it would usually be safe to assume the other was significant, as well. The fact that people are generally taught to not “judge a book by its cover” could also have influenced participants’ answers. Although the surveys were anonymous, a social desirability bias can still occur. In other words, some people still tend to want to answer questions with what they think is right rather than with what they truly feel.

The fact that the current study found significance between hair color and task attractiveness can be extremely beneficial, especially in the workplace, because it allows people to be more educated about the potential stereotypes that could be placed upon them. People with blonde hair may need to work harder than people with brunette hair in order to compensate for those stereotypes.

The fact that the second hypothesis about was not supported in terms of physical attractiveness could be a result of any number of things. For instance, participants could have established an idea of what they were being surveyed on. The possibility also exists that the

participants looked at the woman in the picture as a whole instead of focusing on just her hair color. After all, some participants stated that they did not find the woman attractive, so hair color may not have made a difference. The researchers attempted to account for this sort of sampling error by using the same image for both surveys, but sometimes there is only so much that can be controlled with survey experiments.

Limitations

Most research studies, especially within the social sciences, face some sort of limitation in how they are conducted. This research study is no exception to that. One sort of limitation that may have affected this study involves issues with the visual presentation of the surveys. The image used for measurement in the survey depicts Kristin Kruek, an established actor that, most notably, starred in the television series Smallville. Any person that recognized this woman would more than likely know she is a natural blonde, which could potentially have an effect on their perception of her with blonde hair. In fact, in Swami and Barret's (2011) study where the female confederate altered her hair color to meet experimental expectations, it was surmised that a person's ability to guess whether or not a hair color was natural could potentially affect how attractive they perceived that person to be. In the future, this sort of limitation could be avoided by depicting a much less known female in the image rather than a celebrity.

Another limitation that this research study faced was that of non-response and non-interest. After all, data collection occurred primarily on a college campus where there is oftentimes a limited motivation to participate in research unless extra credit or something of the sort is used as a bribe. Also, when students have not been properly trained in these communication phenomena, they have a tendency to choose answers that fall in the neutral zones

of the scales. For instance, when measuring credibility, a semantic differential measuring technique was used, and there was an overwhelming trend of people selecting answers that fell directly in the middle of the opposites. In order to avoid limitations such as this happening in the future, researchers could be encouraged to give a more detailed explanation of what the scale is measuring.

Future Research

As the researchers previously noted, much of the research available for analysis on the topic of hair color has been conducted outside of the United States. In order to better understand this phenomenon on American soil, future research should focus on replicating studies conducted elsewhere while applying them to different populations in the U.S. For instance, a study similar to that conducted by Takeda, et al. (2006) could be replicated with large corporations and their CEOs in this country.

Building on the idea that research participants may have been influenced by whether or not the female in the image was a “natural” brunette or a “natural” blonde, future research could be conducted in order to deduce whether or not people tend to prefer women with dyed or non-dyed hair. A series of images could be obtained or created that depicted women with non-dyed hair and women with dyed hair and, after data collection, the numbers could be compared to see if there were any discrepancies between how attractive “natural” color was as opposed to dyed color.

Conclusion

This informal research study has focused on the influence of hair color on perceptions of physical and task attractiveness and competence. With knowledge of prior research in the field, the researchers conducted a survey experiment in order to obtain data on the subject. The results showed that there was no statistical significance between hair color and perceptions of competence. The results also told the researchers that, though there was no statistical significance between hair color and perceptions of physical attractiveness, there was in fact statistical significance between hair color and perceptions of task attractiveness. These findings can be applied both by men and women in a variety of situations. Either way, the research contributes to the ever-growing amount of communication studies scholarship out in the world today.

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Appendix A

