The Effect of Women's Hair Color on Perceptions of Competence and Attractiveness

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Abstract

Prior research has shown that stereotypes regarding women's hair color have very real effects. The purpose of the present research is to examine the pervasiveness of stereotypes regarding women's competence and attractiveness in relation to hair color. Hair color, blond or brunette, and grade point average, high or low, will be manipulated to form four conditions. Participants will be asked to rate a female graduate school applicant on the basis of perceived competence and attractiveness. Based on prior research and current stereotypes, it is hypothesized that blond women will be evaluated as most attractive and that brunettes will be evaluated as most competent and thus stereotypes will dominate decisions in the face of contrary information.
The Effect of Women's Hair Color on Perceptions of Competence and Attractiveness

For many years psychologists have studied the occurrence of stereotypes. According to Aronson, Wilson, and Akert (2002), “a stereotype is a generalization about a group of people in which identical characteristics are assigned to virtually all members of the group, regardless of variation among the members” (p. 461). They may also be thought of as schemas applied to social groups. Aronson et al. also asserts that stereotypes may be helpful when knowledge about individuals in a situation is limited. They can work to fill in the gaps and to organize the overwhelming amount of information taken in by the brain. However, stereotypes are not always beneficial, for the person making them or the person who they are being made about. They are often incorrect and although they may provide some instantly accessible information the ramifications of inaccuracy may be severe.

Consider for a moment stereotypes regarding the hair color of women. Most people are familiar with the “dumb blond” stereotype and with the belief that brunettes are bookish and intelligent. Is this an accurate assessment? Does hair color really determine intelligence? Not likely, but that is precisely the belief that was supported in a study done by Kyle and Mahler (1996). They found that when all factors, except hair color, were held constant and resumes were evaluated, women with blond hair were assigned a starting salary of $23,792 while brunettes were assigned a starting salary of $26,737. This is a significant difference, especially if one happens to be blond, and a difference that most would not consider fair if brought to light. Stereotypes such as these are pervasive in a modern culture of individuality and diverseness. Perhaps if people become more aware of the powerful stereotypes that are associated with women’s hair color, and the lack of truth behind them, they may be more inclined to adjust their
thinking and evaluations accordingly. This is precisely the goal of the present research, to examine the pervasiveness of stereotypes regarding women’s competence and attractiveness in relation to their hair color.

In American culture there is a saying that “blondes have more fun.” Regardless of whether or not this is true, behind the saying seems to be a popular belief that blond women are more attractive. In a study by Clayson and Klassen (1989) this is exactly what was found. The study examined the interaction between obesity and hair color because of the perceived difference in personal responsibility of the two characteristics. However, for the purpose of this paper, only the effects of hair color will be examined. Using a relatively large sample of college students, researchers asked students to evaluate the resume of a potential worker. Resumes included personal information about the worker including hair color, which was listed as blond, brown, red, or black, and the gender of the worker. Among other things, students were asked to assess the perceived attractiveness of each person. Researchers found that overall blondes were viewed as most attractive. Next were individuals with brown and black hair, which were rated as nearly equal. Collectively, people with red hair were rated as most unattractive, but one must note that in the non-obese woman condition, red hair was seen as equal to blond hair in attractiveness, though in every other condition red hair was seen as significantly less attractive. Clayson and Klassen concluded that although hair color is not a matter of personal choice, it is still a factor by which people are judged. Since non obese blond and red haired women were seen as equally attractive it is unlikely that blondes really do have more fun and one may suppose that there is no truth to this saying.

However, Feinman and Gill (1978) conducted a study in which stereotypes were examined in relation to the “kernel of truth” hypothesis and found some support, which indicates
that there may in fact be some truth in the stereotype of “blond bombshells” or in other words, blond women are seen as more attractive. According to Triandis, the “kernel of truth” hypothesis (as cited in Feinman and Gill, 1978, p. 44) is defined as “the proposition that cognitive components of stereotyped attitudes correlate at a greater level than chance with actual reality” and has been supported in various contexts. Feinman and Gill used the hypothesis to investigate the coloration ideal portrayed to each sex. They asserted that there is a stereotype of attractive males being darker in coloration and attractive females being lighter in coloration, that is produced by “American media and popular culture” (Feinman and Gill, 1978, p. 44). What researchers focused on were the perceptions of ideals for each sex as believed to be held by the opposite sex.

Using over 1000 participants, Feinman and Gill (1978) distributed a questionnaire that examined likes and dislikes of hair color, eye color, and complexion color. Participants rated preferences in relation to the opposite sex and then gave responses as to their own characteristics. The options listed were blond, red, brown and black. The results supported the hypothesis over all, with women preferring dark men and men preferring light colored women, when one examines the extreme ends of the scale. Of men, 38% preferred women with blond hair while only 14% preferred women with black hair. These findings are similar to those of Johnston and Oliver-Rodriguez (1997), who found that faces with blond hair were rated as more attractive than those with black hair. It is also interesting to note that according to Feinman and Gill (1978), 14% of males also disliked black hair. Women preferred dark hair for men with brown and black hair making up 70% of the likes and showed an intense dislike for red hair, as it contributed 84% of the dislikes. However, this study was prone to various limitations. One of which, particularly interesting, is that the hypothesis was supported when preferences for “dark” hair color were
compared with “light” hair color, i.e., black to blond. If one looks exclusively at the results of
the hair color preferences it can be plainly seen that brown hair is the most desirable of all.
Preference for brown hair made up 41% of male likes, exceeding the blond male likes by 3%,
and contributed to 47% of the female likes. Although, this is only one piece of what Feinman
and Gill examined, the finding in and of itself is still valid and may raise questions as to whether
or not men really do prefer blond women.

A study by Jacobi and Cash (1994) seemed to answer this question, by investigating the
differences between perceived opposite sex ideals and actual opposite sex ideals in hair color. A
questionnaire was distributed to participants listing ten shades of hair color, but to avoid
insignificant categories, colors were then grouped into blond and brunette. What they found was
somewhat of a surprise, 48.5% of men believed that women preferred blond men while only
17.4% of women actually preferred blond men. Even more striking was that 84.1% of women
believed that men prefer blond women while only 34.8% do. Of the sample 51.5% of men prefer
brunette women and 79.4% of women prefer brunette men. There seems to be a relatively
widespread notion that blond hair is an attractive ideal in America, yet a considerable amount of
research on hair color seems to reveal that in actuality brunettes are also desirable. However, the
message sent to Americans via media is somewhat different.

Rich and Cash (1993) conducted archival research of several magazines to determine just
what message was being sent to Americans regarding hair color. Their research covered four
decades, from the 1950’s through the 1980’s, and three popular magazines. Two of the
magazines, Vogue and Ladies Home Journal, were directed at American women and the third,
Playboy, was directed at a male audience. They hypothesized that the percentage of blondes in
all three magazines would increase, and exceed the base rate of blondes in the population, due to
the appearance of many blond actresses, such as Marilyn Monroe and Veronica Lake, and because of new hair coloring techniques. They also believed blond was becoming related to heightened sexuality so the number of blondes would increase more in Playboy centerfolds.

Between the years of 1950 and 1989, Vogue was sampled on alternating even years and Ladies Home Journal was sampled on alternating odd years. Since Playboy wasn’t established until 1953, beginning then, it was sampled on alternating odd years until 1989. Hair color of “adult Caucasian female” (Rich and Cash, 1993, p. 117) models was assigned to one of ten categories, defined by Clairol standards, and at least 50% of the samples were rated by a second judge.

After computing the inter-rater reliability, researchers collapsed the ten categories into three, consisting of blond, brunette, and redhead. Cash also collected data to establish a base rate of blond Caucasian women by using self reported hair color.

Rich and Cash (1993) found that the proportion of blondes in these three magazines did in fact surpass the based rate of blond in the population. The based rate, as self-reported, was 26.8 %, while the percentage of blondes in Vogue was 35.7%, in Ladies Home Journal was 36.4%, and in Playboy was 41.2%. These are significant differences when compared to the base rate and as expected blondes were even more prominent in Playboy than either of the women’s magazines. Regarding the increase in the number of blondes over time, researchers found individual differences between magazines but overall the 1950’s and 1960’s depicted a lower percentage of blondes than did the 1970’s, which saw a fairly dramatic increase. Another significant finding was the gradual decrease in the number of redheads pictured in magazines over the examined period. Authors concluded that the distortion of blondes seen in the media may be sending men a message that equates blondness to sexuality and a message to women that blond is the beauty ideal.
Similar results were found in a study of another, more pervasive, media source. Davis (1990) examined characteristics of women on prime time television. He taped prime time television for one week and, using two trainer coders, coded the film for the percentage of women and men, hair color, age, marital status, and parental status. What he found was somewhat disturbing. Davis discovered that 65.4% of characters were male, while only 34.6% were female. These results are very similar to what Head (as cited in Davis, 1990) found in the 1950’s with only 32% of characters being female. Davis (1990) also found significant differences in hair color, with women being “five times more likely to be blonde than men” (p. 329). With 35.7% of female characters sporting blond hair, a significant increase over any other hair color, a clear ideal is portrayed to the public. According to Clairol Corporation (as cited in Davis, 1990) this percentage is twice the number of blondes in the average female population. Women were also more likely than men to have red or auburn colored hair. These trends tend to reflect a traditional feminine ideal and support the notion that a woman’s value in the television industry is a consequence of her beauty.

When placing men and women into parental and marital categories, Davis (1990) again found clear differences. Relatively similar percentages of men and women were labeled as parents and as being married. However, the differences are clearly seen in the indeterminate category with 59.4% of men and only 30.6% of women not being of classifiable marital status. Regarding the parental condition, 48.4% of women were classified as indeterminate while a whopping 71.1% of men were in the indeterminate category. It seems as though women need to be defined by their social roles and are unable to stand alone as characters. Is it because they are simply inept actors or lesser individuals? Not likely, so why is the media sending this message
asserting that women are more valuable as mothers and wives, and not as capable individuals, as compared to men?

In a study conducted by Lawson (1971) characteristics associated with various female hair colors were investigated. In the case of blondes, the results he found closely matched those characteristics portrayed by the media. The categories for females were brunette, blond, redhead, and artificial blond and they were each rated by a group of women and a group of men. The ratings were performed on a 21 bipolar adjective scale and dispensed in booklets containing standard instructions. Generally, men seemed to rate brunette women very favorably, surprisingly, even more favorably than blond women. Men viewed brunette women as intelligent and ambitious while blond women were seen as beautiful. Brunettes were also regarded as strong, valuable, effective, and dependable. Men rated blond women as feminine, interesting, and entertaining although not significantly more so than brunettes. Redheads were rated by men as rugged, complex, colorful, and strong willed. Overall women also rated brunette women more positively on 18 of the 21 characteristics. Blondes and redheads were rated positively on four traits, while artificial blondes were rated more positively on only one. Brunettes were rated by the women as intelligent, ambitious, sincere, strong, and warm. Blondes were again rated highly on traits such as feminine, warm, and relaxed. Redheads were seen as rugged, complex, colorful, and strong willed, exactly the same as the male condition. Artificial blondes were seen as equally rugged to brunettes and redheads. Lawson concluded, that despite the popular belief that men favor blondes, both men and women rated brunettes more highly on many positive traits.

In a similar study, by Clayson and Maughan (1986), redheads and blondes were rated in their relation to adjectives using a distance matrix. Blond females were rated very close to
femininity, whereas redheads were over five times as far. However, redheads were rated quite close to the professions of doctor and professor, although they were not rated as attractive. Overall, blondes were rated more positively with adjectives such as beautiful, pleasant, gentle, soft, and pleasing, results that are very similar to those found by Lawson (1971). Clayson and Maughan (1986) note that the rarity of redheads may account for their negative portrayal and that the ratings of redhead women go up with the age of the respondent. Contrarily, ratings of blondes go down with age. These findings were comparable to those of Roll and Verinis (1971), who found that blond hair was viewed as most valuable and red hair as least valuable. They also found that black hair was seen as most potent and most active. These studies suggest that blond hair may be viewed as beautiful and desirable, but that red hair and especially dark hair seem to have a stereotype as professional and competent. Dark hair is also assigned many valuable interpersonal traits, like sincere and warm, suggesting that they may be thought of as more respectable and worthy people, even if they lack the perceived beauty of blondes.

If dark hair maintains a more professional and able stereotype, one would think this would be an advantage. As a woman, having dark hair may help to be taken more seriously in the workplace and may possibly affect both hiring and promotion decisions. Indeed, Kyle and Mahler (1996) found that both hair color and cosmetic use have a significant impact on a female’s perceived ability. Specifically they found that women with dark hair and without cosmetics were assigned higher starting salaries. Is this difference related to stereotypes? It may be according to Cash, Gillen, and Burns (as cited in Kyle and Mahler, 1996). They found that when personnel decisions are being made about female applicants, physical characteristics may in fact play a role.
In the study by Kyle and Mahler (1996) six conditions were created for a group of participants to evaluate. Each condition included a resume for a female applicant and a photo of the applicant with blond, brunette, or red hair and wearing either a “moderate” amount of cosmetics or no cosmetics. The woman’s hair in the picture had been electronically altered so the attractiveness of the applicant was held constant. The position in question was for that of an accountant and participants were asked to rated the applicant's perceived ability and assign a starting salary. A seven-point scale was used for rating ability and a range of $22,000 to $29,000 was given for the starting salary. Authors predicted that brunettes would receive the highest ratings and starting salary and that blondes would receive that lowest, based on popular stereotypes and past research. They also thought that the condition without cosmetics would be rated more highly as cosmetics use is related to higher femininity. Prior research has shown that greater femininity resulted in lower assessment of women in non-gendered occupations. These predictions were in fact correct. In both the blond and brunette conditions, applicants were rated as significantly lower and assigned lower starting salaries when wearing cosmetics. Little difference was seen in the ratings of the redhead condition, but a $675 difference was found in assigned salaries. Overall the brunette without cosmetics condition was rated most highly and the blond with cosmetics was rated lowest, with an almost $4,000 difference in assigned salaries. The blond without cosmetics condition was rated and assigned a starting salary slightly above the redhead with cosmetics condition. Are these differences the product of stereotypes? Quite possibly when one understands that the differences are due to differences in physical characteristics, hair color, when attractiveness is held constant.

Overall the research on women’s hair color is somewhat inconsistent. Blondes seem to be viewed as more beautiful than either brunette or redheads (Clayson and Maughan, 1986;
Feinman and Gill, 1978; Lawson, 1971; Rich and Cash, 1993). In some studies however, men seemed to prefer brunettes, and red hair was seen as comparable to blondes in attractiveness (Clayson and Klassen, 1989; Davis, 1990; Jacobi and Cash, 1994; Kyle and Mahler, 1996; Lawson, 1971). In others, redheads are seen as least attractive of all hair colors, but this may be the result of changing trends (Clayson and Klassen, 1989; Feinman and Gill, 1978; Rich and Cash, 1993; Roll and Verinis, 1971). Blondes were depicted as rather feminine and with qualities such as interesting and warm (Clayson and Maughan, 1986; Lawson, 1971). Brunettes were also typically seen as possessing valuable interpersonal qualities (Clayson and Maughan, 1986; Lawson, 1971). They, along with redheads, may also be seen as being more intellectual than their blond contemporaries (Clayson and Maughan, 1986; Lawson, 1971). These results are rather discrepant in some areas and it may be due to the differences in methodology, where some studies use photos and others use descriptions. In the case of descriptions, individuals may have different images of women with each respective hair color and with less information to go off of than a photo, stereotypes may play a larger role in these evaluations. Another limitation to be considered is that the majority of this research has been done on college students, presumably for reasons of accessibility, making it difficult to generalize results to the greater population. Finally, these studies are self-report studies and rely on participants to know how they actually perceive and might react to the stimulus. While past research is relevant, it may be more informative to use actual situations to determine whether interactions between individuals with specific hair colors do in fact differ.

Stereotypes are a pervasive influence in the judgments and evaluations made about women. The purpose of the present study is to see whether stereotypes regarding hair color persist and possibly override information that contradicts them when individuals are evaluated,
or whether given the information individuals will base their evaluations on it. Using similar methodology to the Clayson and Klassen (1989) study, descriptions of female graduate school applicant’s hair color and GPAs will be manipulated to measure the effects on perceptions of the woman’s competence and attractiveness. Based on prior research and current stereotypes, it is hypothesized that blond women will be evaluated as most attractive and that brunettes will be evaluated as most competent and thus stereotypes will dominate decisions.

Method

Participants

This study will use 80 participants from a midwestern university who will generally be under the age of 25. Students will sign up to participate and will likely receive credit for lower level psychology classes. All participants will be treated in accordance with the ethical principles of the American Psychological Association.

Materials

An 8 1/2 x 11” piece of paper will be used to give a description of a potential graduate school applicant and various characteristics will be listed to rate on a 7 point scale (1= not at all and 7= very), as used in the Kyle and Mahler (1996) study.

Design and Procedure

Participants will be run in groups of approximately ten. Each participant will be asked to sign and return an informed consent. Then they will be given a sheet containing a description of a potential graduate student applicant with instructions included on the sheet. There will be four conditions, identical, except hair color and GPA will be manipulated to create a 2 (hair color: blond or brunette) x 2 (GPA: low or high) factorial design. Students will rate various characteristics of the applicant on a seven-point scale and fill out basic demographic information.
When complete, participants will be asked to place the sheet in a manila envelope. Participants will then be fully debriefed. It is expected that, consistent with stereotypes and in spite of contrary information, participants will find blond haired applicants to be most attractive and brunette haired applicants to be most competent.
References


Clairol Corporation, Research and Development Department. (1986).


