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Pamela R. Hinney

West Virginia State College

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The Role of Hair Color in the Perception of Attractiveness

Pamela R. Hinney

West Virginia State College

ABSTRACT

The concept of attractiveness pervades every aspect of society in the United States. Attractiveness is used to manipulate decisions, desires, and even needs; in turn, society allows itself to be manipulated by the same concept of attractiveness. This study was designed to determine if hair color plays a role in the perception of attractiveness. A questionnaire was administered to 36 West Virginia State College students. An Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was applied to the data and a significant difference was found among blonde, brunette, and red hair color categories: $F(2,99) = 14.92, p < .05$. The experimental hypothesis that hair color plays a role in the perception of attractiveness was supported.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of attractiveness pervades every aspect of society in the United States. Attractiveness is used to manipulate decisions, desires, and even needs; in turn, society allows itself to be manipulated by the same concept of attractiveness. Attractiveness, at least as defined and promulgated by the media, is a prerequisite for the attainment of happiness in life. Drink this soft drink, wear these clothes, drive this car, even smoke this cigarette and you will be beautiful, for only beautiful, happy people do these things. For those who are not attractive, at least as defined by the media, a multitude of products are available to confer attractiveness. These stereotypical images of beauty are clear: both sexes are tall and tanned; males are muscular, brown-eyed, and wavy-haired; and females are thin, blue-eyed, and blonde. Those who do not conform to this image are looked upon as different, missing out on the fun and enjoyment of the attractive. Unfortunately,

many pay an even greater price for their nonconformity, whether voluntary or involuntary, to this "ideal." Low self-esteem and confidence result in serious psychological and physiological problems for the "unattractive." For example, the obese woman who cannot buy the most fashionable clothes, because they are simply not manufactured in her size, may feel inadequate. Cauwels (1983) found that such feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem are key factors in bulimia and anorexia nervosa.

In order to determine a relationship between perceived attractiveness and self-esteem, a working definition of attractiveness must be obtained. Is attractiveness perceived "in the eye of the beholder" or is it perceived in the more narrow definition of the media? Are there different definitions of beauty (i.e. one for the self and one for others)? The answers to these questions must be determined so that loss of self-esteem can be prevented and/or treated effectively.

Feinman and Gill (1978) found that males preferred lighter female hair coloration and that females preferred darker male hair coloration. However, Lawson (1971) found that both males and females preferred darker coloration. Clayson and Klassen (1989) found that blondes were preferred by both sexes, as did Clayson and Maughan (1986). The hypothesis of this study is that hair color plays a role in the perception of attractiveness. Further, male and female perceptions of hair color as a determinant of attractiveness in the opposite sex differ. This study will show that a stronger correlation exists between hair color and the perception of attractiveness than observed in the study by Feinman and Gill (1978).

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects sampled in this study were 6 male and 30 female West Virginia State College students (N=36). Subjects were psychology majors or Introductory Psychology students who received extra credit for participation.

Materials

Subjects were asked to complete a questionnaire designed to ascertain preferences in physical attractiveness. General questions asked subjects to rate hair color characteristics on a Likert scale with five being strongly agree and one being strongly disagree. These characteristics were listed in the form of adjectives such as attractive, intelligent, and successful. More specific questions gave subjects options in choosing the hair color of dates, friends, and spouses, and in choosing the person they would be most likely to aid in an emergency situation (blonde, brunette, or redhead). The survey also asked subjects to supply the name of the famous person they found most attractive, while a contingency question asked subjects to list that person's hair color. There were a total of ten close-ended questions, one open-ended question, one contingency question, and 19 positive characteristics on a Likert scale for consideration on this survey.

Procedure

The questionnaire was administered to both male and female subjects under the same conditions, in the same room, and as a single group in an effort to control for extraneous variables. Subjects were asked to complete their questionnaires after instructions were given. The experimenter was present to clarify any questions.

RESULTS

Total scores on the Likert scale were calculated for each of the three hair color categories with the total number of points for blonde 2358, for brunette 2621, and for red 2144. The mean for each of the three categories was 69.35 blonde, 77.09 brunette, and 63.06 in the red category. An Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was applied to these results and indicated a significant difference in the preference of hair color: $F(2, 99) = 14.92, p < .05$. A Tukey test was applied to this data showing that all three hair colors differed significantly from each other. Brunette was clearly the hair color perceived as most

attractive, with blonde as the second most attractive, and red as the least attractive. Figure 1 summarizes these results.

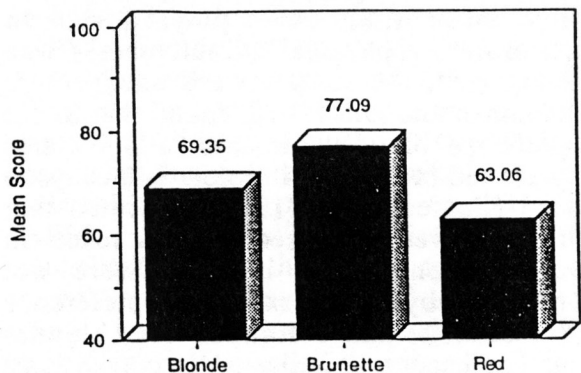


Figure 1. Mean values of Likert scale characteristics

Table 1, representing the data obtained from questions taken from the 11 close-ended questions of the survey, also shows brunette as the preferred hair color, with blonde second, and red hair last in preference. In all questions except numbers 8 and 10, brunette shows a much higher incidence of choice. Question 8, which asked subjects to list the hair color they found least attractive, resulted in the highest score of 26 points for red hair. Question 10, with a score of 33 points, indicates that hair color would not influence a subject's decision to help a stranger in an emergency situation.

Table 1

DATA¹ for Questionnaire Responses that Indicate

Question ² #	Preference			
	Blonde	Brunette	Red	No Preference
1	9	26	1	0
2	11	25	0	0
3	5	5	1	0
4	3	17	0	15
5	4	8	0	0
6	8	25	0	2
7	10	25	1	0
8	3	3	26	4
9	13	21	1	1
10	1	2	0	33
11	6	24	1	1

Note. ¹Number of responses; N = 36.

²Question # corresponds to same number on Questionnaire

DISCUSSION

Although the experimental hypothesis (hair color plays a role in determining physical attractiveness) was supported, the results were unexpected. Feinman and Gill (1978) found that males preferred blonde hair color and females preferred brunette hair color. The Clayson and Klassen study (1989) indicated that blondes were preferred by both sexes. In the present study blondes were not preferred by either sex: a clear preference for brunette hair coloration over blondes and redheads was indicated. In concurrence with both earlier studies, the results of this study indicated red hair as the least preferred hair color. In the Likert scale positive characteristic evaluation, as well as in the survey questions, brunettes were given the highest ratings of all three categories.

Question 9 of the survey asked subjects to choose the hair color they found most attractive, and resulted in responses of 21, 13, and 1 for brunette, blonde, and red, respectively. Question 6 asked subjects what hair color they would prefer for a spouse, and resulted in scores of 25, 8, and 0 for brunette, blonde, and red, respectively. In comparing the scores of these questions, it is obvious that the hair color found most attractive by subjects is also the hair color they would choose for a spouse. Question 4 asked subjects to choose the preferred hair color of a date and resulted in scores of 17, 3, and 0 for brunette, blonde, and red, respectively. While the results of question 4 still showed brunette to be the hair color of choice, the brunette score was not as high as in questions 6 and 9. This variation in score may be due to the fact that choosing the hair color of a date (question 4) is not a permanent decision as is choosing the hair color of a spouse (question 6), or choosing the most attractive hair color (question 9).

Question 8 asked subjects to choose the hair color they found least attractive and resulted in the highest score for red of 26 points. Red also received the lowest total points (2144) on the Likert scale positive characteristic evaluation. Redheads can find some encouragement in the statement of

Clayson and Klassen (1989), with whom I agree,

Redheads can take solace, however, from knowing that red hair comes in and out of fashion. There are those, regardless of age, who have simply loved red hair, persons of talent like Monet and Renoir, and more average souls like the present authors (p. 816).

This study may lead to further research on the subject of hair color as it relates to physical attractiveness. It would be interesting to investigate why blonde hair has fallen from favoritism, and why red hair has endured as the least favored. The answers to these questions lie in future research.

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Author Notes

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