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Malyn Pope
Winthrop University, popem3@winthrop.edu

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The effect of hairstyle on the perceptions of black women's personality and earning potential

Malyn Pope & Merry Sleigh, Ph.D.
Winthrop University

Abstract

The current study addressed a gap in the literature by examining if a black woman's hairstyle impacted perceptions of her personality and earning potential. Participants were presented with an image of a black woman with one of four hairstyles and asked to assess aspects of her personality and career. Results revealed that regardless of hairstyle, participants had similar perceptions of the woman's warmth, attractiveness and professionalism. There were no gender differences; however, black participants found the afro condition to reflect the highest competence levels, while white participants preferred the curly condition.

Background

An extensive body of research has focused on how skin tone, hair length, and body type affect perceptions of attractiveness in black women (Capodilupo, 2015). In general, the results reveal that features that align with Eurocentric beauty standards (i.e. lighter skin, longer hair) are considered to be more attractive (Robinson-Moore, 2008). Attractiveness is an important variable because observers use it to predict personality and earning potential (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster 1972; Kramer 2007). For example, Sheppard, Goffin, Lewis, and Olson (2011) found that observers rated attractive targets' personalities both more positively and more accurately than unattractive targets. Umberson and Hughes (1987) also found that attractiveness helps to predict personal income for those who are employed.

Although previous research has examined multiple factors related to black women's attractiveness, specific hairstyles have not been explored. Thus, the current study examined whether the hairstyle of a black woman would influence perceptions of her personality and earning potential. We hypothesized that participants would rate the straight hair condition as having the highest warmth and competence scores. We hypothesized that men, compared to women, would be more likely to rate the straight hair condition as professional.

Method

Participants
Participants were 105 men and 128 women recruited through college classrooms and social media. Participants self-reported their race as 49% white, 32.5% black, and 18.5% other ethnicities. The mean age was 22.16 (SD = 5.24), with a range of 18 to 57. Participant race, age, and gender were similar across conditions.

Materials
Participants responded to an online survey. We took a single image of a black woman, age 35, and using Adobe Photoshop®, incorporated four hairstyles onto the image: dreadlocks, straight hair, curly hair, and an afro. One photograph was randomly generated for each participant to view. While the image was visible, participants assessed the target individual's warmth and competence (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). Next, participants evaluated the woman's earning potential and her likely career (methodology based on Nash et al, 2006). The image was removed, and participants completed the Acceptability of Stereotyping Behavior Scale (Carter, Hall, Carney, & Rosip, 2006), the Multiple Ethnicity Identification Measure to assess identification with members of their racial or ethnic group (Phinney, 1992), and the Skin Tone Scale which asked participants to match their own skin tone to pictures in the scale (Massey & Martin, 2003). Last, participants responded to demographic questions.

Warmth Similar Across Conditions
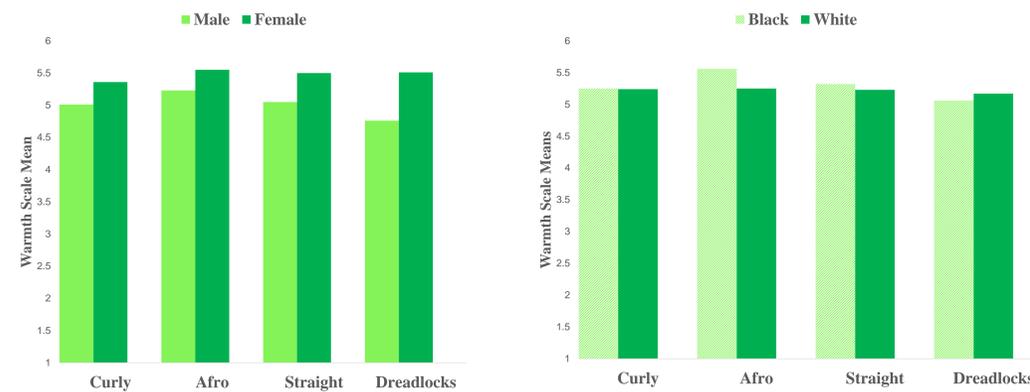
A 2 (gender) X 4 (conditions) ANOVA revealed no significant warmth differences. A 2 (race) by 4(conditions) ANOVA also revealed no warmth differences. In other words, participants, regardless of their gender or race, perceived all four hairstyle conditions to have similar levels of warmth.

A One-Way ANOVA also revealed no differences across the four conditions on other perceptions. On five-point scales, participants found all four women to be moderately attractive, 3.55 (SD = .78); professional, 3.73 (SD = .82); and to have an earning potential that matches the national average, 3.22 (SD = .67).

Race Predicts Competence Ratings
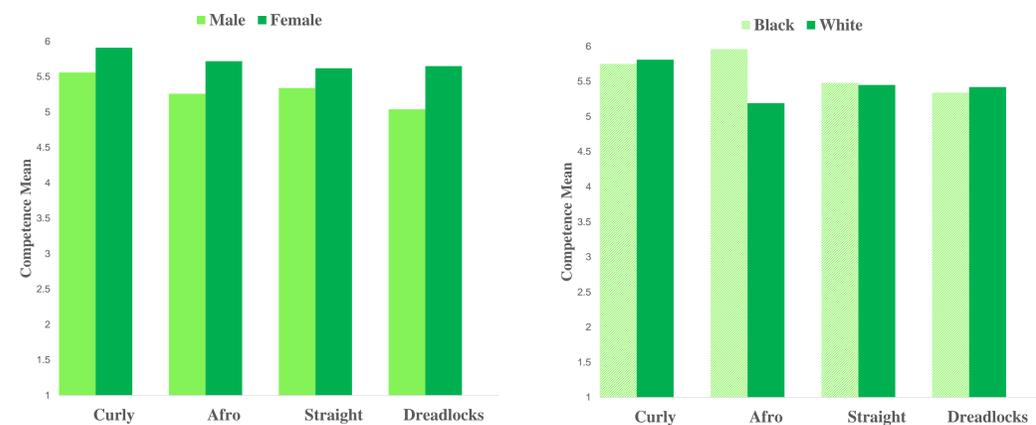
We ran a 2(gender) X 4(condition) ANOVA and found no significant difference on the woman's competence ratings. However, another 2 X 4 ANOVA revealed an interaction between race and condition for competence, $F(3, 195)$ = 2.54, p = .05. In general, black participants preferred the afro condition followed by the curly condition, and they least preferred the dreadlock condition. White participants preferred the curly condition followed by the straight condition, and they least preferred the afro condition.

Identification with one's own race did not predict how participants evaluated the woman. Acceptance of stereotyping behavior also failed to predict how participants evaluated the woman.

Perceived Profession

1 = Company Director
2 = Administrative Assistant
3 = Professor

1 = Administrative Assistant / 2 = Professor / 3 = Company Director

Participants ranked jobs that the woman was likely to hold. The curly condition was more likely to be perceived as the company director than any other condition, $F(3, 232)$ = 3.60, p =.014. The lighter the skin tone of the participants, the less they perceived the woman as a professor, $r(225)$ = -.16, p = .016.

Take Home Messages

1) **Regardless of hairstyle, participants rated the woman as being attractive, professional, and an average earner. The curly condition was perceived to be a company director, while the other women were assumed to be secretaries.**

2) The participants rated all hairstyle conditions similarly on warmth, a variable that included factors such as happiness, tolerance, and patience.

3) **Participant gender did not predict how participants responded to the four hairstyle conditions.**

4) The competence ratings differed across four hairstyles between races. In general, black participants rated the afro condition as most competent and the dreadlock condition as least competent. White participants rated the curly condition as most and the afro condition as least competent.

5) **Although race predicted perceptions, how much participants identified with their own race and how much participants accepted stereotyping behaviors did not predict perceptions.**

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