Put Away the Scissors and Flat-Iron: Males Prefer Long, Curly Hair

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   A large majority of studies on human mate selection have indicated strong evidence towards women being more selective than men (Feingold, 1992a; Fiore et al., 2010). Due to reproductive cost differences among men and women, biology compels women to have precedence of selection over men (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Trivers, 1972a). While men are able to continuously produce semen throughout their lives, women are born with a certain number of eggs, and conception becomes increasingly risky as the rate of birth defects increases with age. In a cultural context, however, reputational costs of procreation influence women to be more selective in mate choice than men when access to birth control and financial independence are jeopardized (Eagly & Wood, 1999; Kasser & Sharma, 1999). Since the culture of the United States allows women to have this access to contraceptives and liberation to pursue careers, their cost of sex decreases, which in turn decreases their selectivity. This leads us to the question of whether there are other factors that influence males to be more reproductively selective than what studies have previously led us to believe. Kenrick, Sadalla, Groth and Trost (1990) answer this by showing males' differential behavior in selectivity when the magnitude of sex cost varies. Longer term, monogamous relationships are more costly than shorter term, casual relationships; therefore, men who seek to achieve the long-term were shown to be just as selective as women. There are a variety of factors that influence males' opinions on what is attractive to them, and what dynamics should be prevalent in potential mates. Of these features, there is little known about the potential impact that hair or hairstyle has on males' differential views of women and attraction. This question brings us to the base line of inquiring how evolutionary or biological factors and social or societal factors potentially play a role.

There has been evolutionary research to support differing ideas on what is considered beautiful. Studies on waist-to-hip ratio, bilateral symmetry, averageness, and development of secondary sex characteristics that emulate neonate features are among the variety of discoveries for how males typically perceive beauty in females; they each suggest health and youth which signal the female's reproductive capability **(**Cunningham, Barbee & Pike, 1990**;** Perrett et al., 1999; Singh, 1993; Thornhill & Gangestad, 1993; Zebrowitz & Montepare, 1992). While there is no research that relates hair to most of these theories, the neonate proposition may hold some evolutionary ground. Furdon and Clark (2003) found abnormal growth of newborn infant scalp hair to be indicative of abnormal development of the brain and spinal cord. They could actually associate the distinguishable abnormalities seen in the scalp hair to genetic, metabolic, and neurologic disorders. One could deduce that males would be less attracted to females with unruly hair due to the indications of poor development of the neonate features no longer denoting health and beauty. This leads the good genes theory in that sexual selection will be greater for members of the opposite sex that have high genetic quality. This can often be demonstrated through animal ornamentation. Roulin, Jungi, Pfister and Dijkstra studied barn owls' plumage spottiness and found greater amounts of antibody response in correlation to lower quantities of parasites with birds exhibiting more spots (2000). These birds have a reserve of metabolic resources to produce more spots and maintain the plumage. In a similar way, the growth and maintenance of human hair is costly for both metabolism and energy (Mesko and Bereczkei, 2004). Therefore, in order to have the ability to grow long hair, one must have extra, unused metabolites that were not needed for the maintenance of health. Good health is additionally found in hair shafts with intact cuticles (the outer, protective layer) as their flat nature will be more reflective of light or shiny and will tightly overlap to further protect inner layers (Hyde, 2011). The sebum produced by

sebaceous glands further adds shine, making straight hair appear healthier due to it being easier to cover it than curly hair (Hyde, 2011). Jeblonski goes to explain how those with darker skin and more melanin from the African continent had decreased ability to produce vitamin D when exposed to the weaker, northern sun due to the lack of UV penetration (2006). This lead to the evolution of straight hair from thick, curly hair. The straight texture was better at enabling UV light passage in a manner similar to the way it passes through fiber optic tubes (Iyengar, 1998). In the transition of those with light skin to areas nearer the equator, the evolution of curly hair facilitated protection from harmful UV rays as well as contributing to increased circulation of cool air and retention of moisture (Iyengar, 1998; Jeblonski, 2006). With the changes in clothing and shelter, the survival mechanism that drove the evolution of hair is now less important.

Media representations and influence are potential factors that tie into a male's interpretation of beauty. As we have seen in previous studies, there is support of violent and sexual crime coinciding with the boom of availability of violent and sexual content within the media through television programming and video games (Barlett et al., 2008; Eron, 1982). This goes to show that just as flight simulators teach flight, violence and aggression beget violence. In such a way, it is plausible that the media could also influence our perceptions of beauty through hair manipulation and how we react to it. In such a sense, actresses and models can serve as the higher authority on what is beautiful or not. They will set the definitions of beauty as demonstrated through their choice in hair style and length. Men will be influenced to respond positively to actresses and models and their choices in hair style because they are the "beautiful people" that represent having better social interactions, more money through higher paying jobs, and more dates (Curran & Lippold, 1975; Feingold 1992). Men will be duped into the what-is-beautiful-is-good theory; however, their appreciation of the actresses and models' beauty is

overcome by their avoidance of threats to their self-esteem or own competence (Tesser, 1991);

therefore, they will pursue women on their own level. Women, on the other hand, will want to

achieve the factors associated with being more attractive, so their behavior to mimick the

hairstyles of actresses and models is reinforced. The mere-exposure effect may additionally play

a role in how beauty is perceived through media because the more familiar the encounter, the

more we will like it (Bornstein, 1989; Zajonc, 1968). I believe this can be applied to hair styles

worn by actresses and models as well. Such effects of media can be seen across cultures through

the normative influence as others' customary standards tell what is appropriate (Miller &

Prentice, 1996). Turton presents the Mursi, a people that find beauty in gauging their lower lip

with wooden 'plates'. Such painful practices are up to the individual; however, girls willingly

endure the pain for the associations that come with the plates. These include a correlation

between size of the lip-plate and amount of bridewealth, the 'coming-out' to society as an adult,

and the reproductive potential each possesses (2004). By traveling long distances and paying the

women for photographs to be taken, tourists reinforce the practices, making the Mursi women

with larger lip plates more 'famous' (Turton, 2004). As mentioned previously, those with

authority have more influence on the population, therefore encouraging Mursi women to

continuously gauge their lower lips.

     Standards of beauty have been shown to be influenced by either evolutionary, or innate,

factors or social factors through exposure to media. If evolution were the culprit to why women

wear their hair the way they do, then we would expect men to select the women wearing it

longer, indicating good genes, and straighter if from northern regions or curlier if from regions

closer to the equator since these would exhibit the reproductive success the women possessed.

Alternatively, if media were the predominant reason of why women wear their hair the way they

do, then we would expect men to select the women mimicking the actresses and models' choice

in hair length and style because of the positive social outcomes that stem from being beautiful.

Table 1

Hypothesis

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Evolutionary

    1. Due to the good genes theory, males should prefer women with longer hairstyles because their reserve of metabolic resources needed for the maintenance of long hair shows their youth and reproductive potential.

Social/Media

    1. Due to the mere-exposure effect, males should prefer women with hairstyles that are more prevalent in the media because the increased exposure should breed like from familiarity.

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Method

Participants

Sixty-five heterosexual males from Austin College were recruited through the psychology participant pool. After they gave their informed consent and completed the study, they were given extra credit for their participation.

Apparatus

Microsoft PowerPoint 2004 for Mac Version 11.5.1 was used to display a series of photos in presentation format with slides containing either two photos (5" X 5") side-by-side or one photo (7" X 7") alone. Handouts were dispensed with 31 options to indicate preference with an ink circle for left or right images as well as 42 options to indicate the subjective score on a likert scale of 1-10 for individual images. Additionally, a questionnaire was distributed as a follow up. People magazines (2007-2012) from the Sherman Public Library were utilized as archival research.

Design/Procedure

Headshots of female college students were digitally altered into picture series, containing short or long hair; females' hairstyles were additionally altered to be straight or curly in the photographs. These were arranged in a PowerPoint presentation where the participants chose between pairs of faces (long/short or straight/curly) and rated headshots for attractiveness. Afterwards, they indicated their conscious preference for women's hair length and style and specified whether or not media influenced their opinions. Full page advertisements gathered from People magazine were analyzed for hair length and style to determine how the media portrays attractiveness through these endeavors.

Statistical Analysis

The statistical significance of the results was computed by independent samples t-tests and within subjects tests using *SPSS 12.0.*

Results

When forced to choose between hairstyles, men significantly preferred curly over the chance of straight [t(64)=5.19, p<0.05], and when forced to choose between hair lengths, men significantly preferred long over the chance of short [t(64)=10.19, p<0.05] (*Figure 1*). There were no statistical differences in attraction ratings of the women with short straight hair, short curly hair, long straight hair, or long curly hair [F(3, 186)=2.03, p=.11]; however, regardless of style, men rated long haired women's attractiveness significantly higher than that of short haired women [F(1, 62)=4.72, p<0.05] (*Figure 2*).

From the follow up questionnaire, men indicated a 92.2% preference for long hair and a 57.8% preference for curly hair. Additionally, 57.8% of men recognized that media played a role in their decisions. Media portrayals of women's hair length and style through *People* magazine from 2007 to 2012 showed no clear difference in trend over time, but rather remained consistent with 72.21% prevalence of long hair and 56.21% prevalence of curly hair (*Figure 3*).

Discussion

Results showed that when males were forced to choose between short and long hair or straight and curly hair, they preferred long and curly hair significantly more than chance. In addition, males rated long hair as significantly more attractive than short hair, regardless of hairstyle. Furthermore, males consciously indicated a preference for long hair in 92.2% of the surveys and curly hair in 57.8% of the surveys. These preferences support the evolutionary hypothesis for long hair being selected for since it indicates good health, youth, and reproductive

potential (Mesko and Bereczkei, 2004). By having a reserve of metabolites to allow for growth and maintenance, women with long hair display good genes. Preferences for curly hair may indicate an evolutionary mechanism based on survival since the region we live in is hot in temperature and sunlight availability. Despite the fact that in the contemporary world we have access to buildings, air conditioning, hats, and other such items that would protect our head from heat and harmful ultra violet light, we still see men in Texas choosing curly hair as being more attractive. This supports Iyengar and Jeblonski's (1998 and 2006) theories that curly hair evolved from regions of intense sunlight to facilitate the diffusion of UV rays and increase the circulation of air and retention of moisture due to perspiration. This, however, is only seen in the results of the forced choice test. When males were rating individual photos for attractiveness, there was no significance found for preferences to certain hairstyles. This leads me to believe that maybe the survival mechanisms behind the evolution of certain hair textures is not as important as it may have been in the past.

Magazines currently publish more photos of women with long hair, as opposed to short hair, regardless of hairstyle; though, results did not support any significant trend or shift in hairstyles from straight to curly between 2007-2012. When asked, 57.8% of male participants said they were consciously aware that media played a role in their hairstyle preferences. The mere exposure effect of prevalence of long and curly hair may be associated as well (Bornstein, 1989; Zajonc, 1968). Because the media currently produces more photos of long and curly hair, making the styles more exposed, I believe that 'like' of such hair is potentially being produced from the familiarity associated with it.

To further this research, it would be necessary to analyze archival research beyond the year 2007. When thinking about the era of straight hair, we think back to Jennifer Aniston in

Friends during the 90s. If the prevalence of certain hairstyles was attributed to social influence, I believe that we may see a further drop in the prevalence of curly hair if we had looked back past 2007. The manipulations we administered to women's hair were predominantly done by use of a curling iron. Results may have been different if we had looked either at only natural curly hair or hair done more or less professionally by use of a hot iron. While we had black and white photos, the possibility for lighter and darker hair colors may have played a role in the field of attraction. Blonde hair has been associated with the neonate features that signal attraction (Zebrowitz & Montepare, 1992), but our study did not include this as a possible effector towards preference. A potential factor that may have influenced our data was the way we classified long and short hair. We completely disregarded medium lengths, which may have skewed our data. Additionally, we didn't take any other age range besides the typical college student into account. If we had surveyed males from the generations that saw the straighter styles in effect, we may have seen different results. Additionally, a more ethnically diverse group of males and females should be included to test the preferences for hair lengths and styles cross-culturally. If we are to look at the potential of different regions affecting different preferences of style based on survival mechanisms, I think it is necessary to expand this research towards more groups, where caucasians are not the prevailing race. Having utilized males and females that went to the same small school could have additionally skewed our results. Rating friends and significant others can yield quite different results as rating frenemies or ex-partners due to harbored feelings and relationships.

While this study may have had some problems, we could definitely see it being furthered in the next five to ten years. Styles change so often, and if the media really does have an influence on hair preference, then we should be able to trace a trend. Including a more ethnically

diverse group of individuals can result in possible evolutionary support of hairstyles. In any case,

both evolution and social factors influence our perceptions of attraction, but it would be

interesting to see just where exactly hair is included in this.

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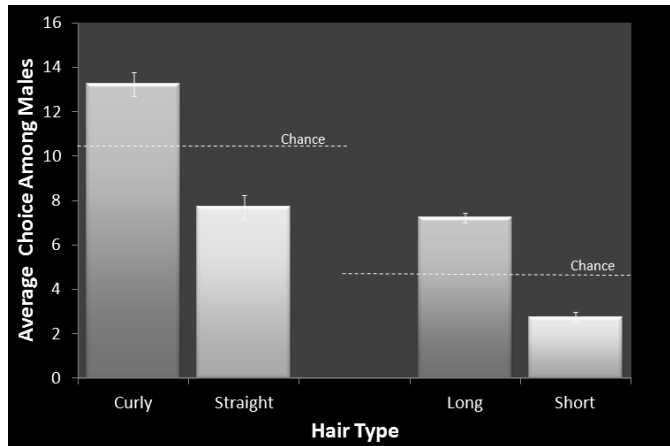
Figure 1. Men had a greater than chance level preference for curly hair, $t(64)=5.19$, $p<.05$. Males also preferred long hair significantly more than chance, $t(64)=10.19$, $p<.05$.
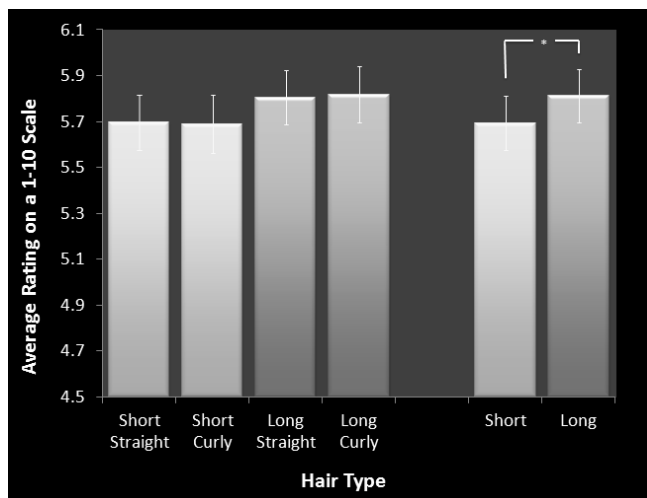

Figure 2. There was no significant difference in how males rated the four hair styles, $F(3,186)=2.03$, $p=.11$; however, men rated long hair as significantly more attractive than short hair, $F(1,62)=4.72$, $p<.05$.
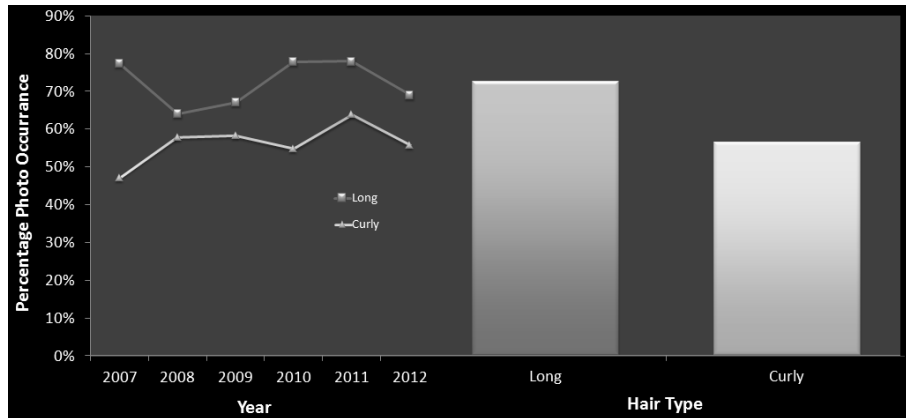
Figure 3. When examining *People* magazine from 2007 to 2012, long hair occurred in 72.2% of

the full page model ads, and curly hair occurred in 56.2% of the full page model ads.