Does hair length influence the hiring process?

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ABSTRACT

Previous research suggests that a person's hair can influence how others view their personality and professional abilities. This study examined whether a woman's hair length influences how she is perceived as a candidate for management and customer service positions and how it influences her assigned starting salary. Participants viewed the applicant's resume and picture and then rated the personality traits of the applicant, evaluated the resume of the applicant, and assigned the applicant a starting salary. Results indicated that the applicant's with longer hair were rated as looking more professional than those with shorter hair. Hair length and job position did not influence salary.

PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

One would hope that personnel actions, such as hiring, setting salary, and judgments of competence and professionalism, are based on one's credentials (e.g., education, employment history, and letters of recommendation). However, a considerable amount of research shows that such decisions are full of biases and errors (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Often when making judgments about others, people rely on stereotypes based on the race, age, gender, and physical attractiveness of the applicant. Recent studies show that hair length, hair color, and hair part can also influence personnel actions. For example, Terry and Krantz (1993) found that women with longer hair are viewed as less socially forceful, and men with beards are viewed as less competent. Kyle and Mahler (1996) studied how hair color and cosmetic use influenced people's perceptions of the woman's ability. They found that the brunette female with no make up was assigned the highest salary and was rated as more capable. Walter and Walter (1998) suggest that even the way a person parts their hair influences how they are viewed. A left-side part draws people to believe that you are more masculine and a right-side part leads to perceptions of femininity. However, the researchers did find that either a center part or no part was considered neutral for both genders. The present study was designed to add to prior research by examining how hair length influences a woman's career opportunities. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to examine how a woman's hair length influences how she is perceived as a candidate for management positions versus a customer service position.

HYPOTHESIS

The female applicant with shorter hair would receive higher ratings and starting salary in the management condition, whereas the woman with longer hair would receive higher ratings and salary in the customer service condition.

METHOD

Participants: 95 (32 male, 63 female) undergraduate students and employees at Mansfield University. 82 were White, 6 Black, 2 Asian, 2 Hispanic, and 3 were classified as Other.

Procedure: After completing an informed consent form, participants viewed a picture of an applicant and the applicant's resume. The person pictured was either a woman with shorter hair or longer hair (pictured below). Participants were informed that the person was applying for either a customer service or store management position at Lowe's. The same resume was used in all conditions. After reviewing the photo and resume, participants rated personality traits of the applicant (i.e., whether the applicant looked professional and looked like a good fit for the position), evaluated the resume, the applicant's intelligence, and whether the applicant would be respected by or sensitive to employees/customers. The participants also rated how likely they were to call the applicant in for an interview, assigned a starting salary to the applicant, and completed a demographics form. Following these ratings, participants were debriefed.

RESULTS

A 2 (Hair length: shorter, longer) X 2 (Job position: manager, customer service) ANOVA was computed to examine ratings of the applicant's personality. Results showed a main effect of hair length, F(1, 90) = 5.47, p < .05 for professionalism. Participants indicated that the female applicant with longer hair looked more professional (M = 3.92, SD = .28) than the applicant with shorter hair (M = 3.74, SD = .44), see Figure 1.

In addition, 2 (Hair length: short, long) X 2 (Job position: manager, customer service) ANOVAs were computed to examine ratings of the resume and assigned starting salary. Results showed a main effect of job position, F(1, 91) = 10.51, p < .01 for resume ratings, such that the resume for the customer service position (M = 3.71, SD = .30) was rated more favorably than the resume for the management position (M = 3.47, SD = .41). There were no other significant main effects or interactions found.

DISCUSSION

The results of the research did not support the hypothesis that women with shorter hair would be rated more favorably for management positions whereas women with longer hair would be rated more favorably for customer service positions.

However, results did show that the woman with longer hair was viewed as looking more professional than the woman with shorter hair. This has implications for women during interviews. If long hair is viewed to be more professional, women with shorter hair may need to take extra steps to appear more professionally during the hiring process.

The results also demonstrated that the customer service resume was viewed more favorably than the management resume, even though the same resume was used across all four conditions. This could possibly be due to the qualifications indicated in the resume. Using the same resume for both job positions may have made the customer service applicant seem over qualified and the management applicant under qualified.

Although the idea that individuals often judge others on the basis of stereotypes is not new, an interesting implication of this research is that hair length is a factor many people can control. Whereas judgments based on race, age, gender, physical attractiveness, etc., cannot be manipulated by the applicant; for many, hair length can be. Nevertheless, personnel actions should be based on credentials and not such superficial characteristics.