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## Hair as Attribute, Hair as Symbol, Hair as Self

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### ABSTRACT

*Over the past two decades, consumer research has paid scant attention to one of the most malleable aspects of self-presentation – one's hair (for important exceptions see the work of Rook, McCracken and Schouten and McAlexander). The present paper reviews research on hair and grooming practices in the psychological, sociological and anthropological literatures in order to distill insights relevant to consumer research. A set of possible topics, data sources and interpretive methods is then outlined for use by researchers who desire to pursue inquiry in this area.*

### INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades consumer research has paid scant attention to one of the most malleable aspects of self-presentation – one's hair (for important exceptions see Rook 1985; McCracken 1995; Schouten and McAlexander 1989). The purpose of this paper is to review the social psychological, sociological and anthropological literatures dealing with hair in order to distill propositions and insights that are applicable to consumer behavior. A preliminary interpretive approach to this significant – and signifying – area of consumption will then be suggested.

### Prior Consumer Research

Four consumer researchers have made constructive efforts to direct attention to the importance of hair as a site of consumer identity construction. Rook's (1985) article on grooming rituals introduced to our literature the notion that grooming, especially of the head hair, played a large role in consumers' attempts to construct an attractive self to present to the public. Through a series of essays elicited from young adults, Rook found evidence that hair was seen as having special, almost magical, transformative powers in the consumer's life. Daily practices of shampooing, conditioning and styling the hair enabled consumers to exercise some control over their self-images, both on an internal and external basis.

The idea that hairstyle could be used to effect or signal a change in the inner self was developed further by McAlexander and Schouten in a 1989 article an "Hair Style Changes as Transition Markers." Utilizing autobiographical essays from young adults, these researchers identified three rites of passages in which alterations in hairstyle signaled a change in life status:

- (1) Asserting independence from parental control, i.e., "coming of age."

- (2) Sexual identity formation, and
- (3) Shifts in social membership/affiliation (e.g., high school graduation).

In each case, the young consumer used a change in hairstyle to announce his/her change in self, i.e., a new “me” requires a new “look”.

Most recently, McCracken in *Big Hair* (1995) expanded the consumer behavior perspective on hair by examining the social meaning not only of *style*, but also of *color*. As this researcher notes, blonde, red, brunette and gray hair all have distinct cultural meanings. And since consumers may use products that can temporarily or permanently alter their hair color, this too must be incorporated into the investigation of self-construction through hair care practices.

Despite these pioneering efforts, however, our field has not advanced far its comprehension of how hair care and grooming practices shape – and are shaped by – consumers’ lives. The studies by Rook (1985) and Schouten and McAlexander (1989) were limited to the experiences of young adults in their twenties; while McCracken’s study focused primarily on women. Thus, there is a vast terrain of cultural and personal hair care meaning yet to be explored. We take a look now at what may be gleaned from inquiries in social psychology, sociology and anthropology.

#### Social Psychologists Look at Hair

Within the social psychology literature, hair is most commonly viewed as an *attribute*. Research in this area is typically undertaken using controlled experiments in which hair *colors*, hair *lengths*, and hair *amounts* (i.e., full, bald, partially bald, bearded, clean

shaven) are treated as independent variables, while the perceptions of others are the dependent variables. From this body of research, some intriguing findings have emerged.

First, we may consider the amount of hair. By the time they are fifty years of age, most men will experience significant thinning of their head hair (Cash 1990), while a sizeable minority will become fully or partially bald. As we shall see, the lessening of the amount of head hair in men is generally viewed negatively in American culture; thus, in response, marketers have promoted products to hide (e.g., wigs, toupees, weaves) or ameliorate (e.g., Propecia, Rogaine, hair grafts) this condition.

In one of the major studies of men’s hair loss on social impression formation, Cash (1990) found that “hair loss had a nearly uniform, adverse impact on how the men were initially perceived by others. As compared with their matched, non-balding counterparts, the bald or balding men were perceived as less physically attractive, less self-assertive, less socially attractive, less likely to experience success in their personal and career lives and were less personally liked by the perceivers, themselves (p. 159).” As if this were not bad enough, Cash also found that men losing their hair were judged to be 3.6 years older than their actual age.

Subsequent research has reinforced these findings. Butler, Prior and Oreider (1988) found that matched photographs of men with full heads of hair versus bald heads led to higher ratings of the full-head condition for being dynamic, dominant, and masculine, as well as younger. This cultural viewpoint is apparently not lost on men themselves; Franzoi, Anderson

and Frommelt (1990) found that balding men *judged themselves* as less attractive than did men with no hair loss, and those who were especially concerned about the opinions of others were even more self-critical, if their hair was thinning. The loss of head hair is not restricted to men, however, nor are its damaging consequences. Women with significant hair loss also suffered deleterious effects upon their self-esteem, self-confidence, perceived attractiveness and perceived youthfulness (van der Donk, Hunfeld, Passchier, Knecht-Junk, and Nieboer 1994).

Not only hair quantity, but also hair *length*, has been found by social psychologists to influence others' perceptions. In three studies conducted during the 1970's – a time when disco ruled and long hair and polyester suits for men were *de rigueur* – hair length was found to create different impressions of the wearer's personality, and to be correlated with different perceptions of self. Larsen and White (1974) found that male college students wearing below shoulder length hair (classified by the researchers as 'deviant' in length) were significantly more independent, and less conforming and recognizing of authority than their shorter haired brethren.

When female college students were asked to evaluate the personalities of long, medium, and short haired male students, those with long hair were rated as more feminine, youthful, pleasure-seeking, immoral and outspoken, while the short haired male students were seen by these same midwestern coeds as more careful, wise, academically oriented, masculine, strong, mature, intelligent, moral, physically attractive and well-adjusted. Among the subset of women students who did prefer the long-haired men,

drug use, sexual experience, and liberality were found to be higher than for women who preferred the short haired males. Finally, a study by Pancer and Meindl (1978) examined perceptions of male hair length and beardedness conditions on evaluations by males and females. Bearded males, regardless of hair length, were perceived by both men and women as more educated, intelligent, open minded, outgoing, reckless and younger than those who were clean-shaven. However, fifteen years subsequent to this, Terry and Krantz (1993) found that beards may "evoke the schema of a virile male, [one who is] more socially forceful than cognitively able" (p. 1766). Thus, social perceptions of the meaning of male facial hair may change over time.

Hair *color*, in both men and women, has also been studied as a social perception attribute. In one of the earliest investigations, Lawson (1971) found that redheaded men were viewed very negatively by both other men and women. Later research (Clayson and Maughan 1986) found red headed men were seen as sad, feminine, unpleasant, weak, slow and shallow. Red headed women fared somewhat better, being seen as professional, complex and powerful. Blonde women were found in the same study to be rated highly as beautiful, pleasant, feminine, smooth, weak, gentle and soft; while blonde men were seen as handsome, pleasant, strong, powerful, rich, successful, active and aggressive.<sup>1</sup> In an unusual interpretive extension for social psychologists, these authors comment that "Ancient Greek actors used black wigs for villains, blonde for heroes and red wigs for the clown or fool" (p. 816). They also conjecture that we are a

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<sup>1</sup> Comparisons to brunettes were not made in this study.

“society that attributes lightness to femininity and darkness to masculinity” (p. 816).

A final social psychology study examined the impact of women’s hair color (blonde, brown, red) and moderate versus no use of cosmetics upon perceptions of her ability to perform a professional role (Kyle and Mahler 1996). The investigators found that both blonde and redheaded job applicants were deemed significantly *less* capable than brunette women and were assigned a lower starting salary. Further, the use of cosmetics, regardless of hair color, acted to lower job performance expectations and salary assignments.

In treating hair as an attribute, social psychologists have made substantial headway in identifying the social and personality correlates of various amounts, lengths and colors of head hair. Where they have perhaps fallen short is in linking these empirical data to the cultural norms and historical patterns that underlie and reiterate them across generations. To gain an understanding of these forces, we must turn first to sociology and then anthropology.

### The Sociology of Hair

There have been some brilliantly insightful sociological treatises on hair as a cultural symbol, most of which (e.g., Hallpike 1969, Synnott 1987) overlap with equally insightful work in anthropology (Leach 1958; Herschman 1974); thus we postpone examining these large-scale efforts until the subsequent section. What we take up here is a look at recent, more tightly focused inquiries that examine hair as a signifier of social class norms, gender norms and religious norms.

Representative of work on hair as a social class signifier is Mazur’s (1993) study of wedding portraits. Using bridal portraits published in current newspapers, Mazur had forty persons examine the photos and estimate the social class of the bride. He found that brides from higher social classes were (correctly) identified as having short, simple hair styles and/or hair that was pulled back from the cheeks and forehead. Conversely, brides from working class backgrounds were (correctly) recognized as having longer, elaborately curled hairstyles that covered their foreheads and cheeks. After considering and rejecting several explanations for this difference in appearance, Mazur hits upon one that rings true: working class women, who generally had lower career/professional aspirations, placed more value on appearing *alluring*, i.e., sexually desirable, than did the upper class brides. As Mazur (p. 281) writes “Secretaries are relatively more free to develop their own persona using makeup, elaborate hairdos and jewelry, whereas young female executives do better by dressing conventionally... [On their wedding day] lower class brides may wish to appear ... with all the glitter and splendor of a princess,” whereas the upper class bride will seek a more sedate, classic appearance. (The motion picture *Erin Brockovich* is a relevant exemplar here).

Sociologists have also examined norms surrounding the use of hair in creating and communicating gender identity. A (1999) article by Zipkin regarding hairstyles and hair length among lesbians is an instructive example. In this piece, Zipkin, who is a lesbian with hair below her shoulders, discusses the strict norms within this gender subculture regarding hair: “Ideal” lesbians have short haircuts; whereas those who have long(er) hair are seen as

weak-willed, uncommitted, insecure “femmies.” As Zipkin aptly points out, within the lesbian community, sexual authenticity is ironically judged according to how *masculine* (i.e., butch, dykey) the woman can make herself appear. Lesbian women who look like their straight sisters are denigrated (again, ironically) as sissies. Thus, Zipkin argues, traditional lesbians have essentially accepted patriarchal norms regarding what women are ‘supposed’ to look like; they have simply inverted the evaluations: looking like a man is good; looking like a woman is bad. Zipkin argues, correctly, that these norms are still derived from patriarchal values. As she writes (p. 10), “Lesbians have internalized the sexist beliefs of the dominant culture that they attempt to reject in the first place. Even in rejecting these images, women are held captive by them.”

Indeed, Zipkin’s critique could be applied more broadly to feminist ideology regarding societal pressures that require women to value themselves by their appearances. Although Wolf (1991) is certainly correct in declaring that “the beauty myth” pushes women to re-make themselves in keeping with prevailing standards of beauty, she does not address the fact that men currently are placed under similar pressures. Further, prescriptive cultural beliefs regarding hair length, color, and style for both men and women predate the Industrial Revolution by centuries, if not millennia, as any examination of artistic or mythological representations will reveal.

Perhaps more insightful is Friday’s (1996) *our looks, our lives*, which describes women’s (and men’s) skillful use of their appearances to attract attention and attain self-set goals. As she notes, (p. 627) “... until the late eighteenth century, the dressing room

mirror belonged to men. When the beauty of fashion was men’s domain, they didn’t employ women’s denials ... Men used their looks, flaunted them, competed with them to win whatever prize and power were to be had.”

A final example of sociological inquiry regarding hair norms comes from a very atypical source, the journal *Judaism* (1987) in an article by Broyde. At issue is whether the covering of a woman’s hair is specifically required by religious law, *halakha*, or whether it is subject to the prevailing norms of the society in which the woman lives, termed *minhag*.

Broyde notes that the original prohibition on women entering the synagogue with uncovered hair was to prevent their serving as source of sexual distraction to the male worshippers. Reviewing a long series of Talmudic opinions on the matter, Broyde astutely argues that the historic prohibition on women worshipping with uncovered heads was based on the historic fact that women in virtually all Mediterranean and Semitic societies were deemed immodest (i.e., sexually provocative) if any body parts except their face, neck and hands were revealed. Hence, historic norms saw uncovered hair as sexually tempting. However, in contemporary times and American culture, women who go about with uncovered hair are not viewed socially as lewd or immodest. Thus, *ipso facto*, Jewish women may now pray in synagogues with uncovered hair,<sup>2</sup> since the governing principle is not law (halakhah), but rather custom (minhag).

#### Sociology and Anthropology Cast Hair as a Cultural Symbol

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<sup>2</sup> Notably, however, orthodox Jewish women still enter synagogue with head coverings.

Two of the primary writings devoted to the cultural aspects of hair's meaning are *Magical Hair* (1958) by Edmund Leach, an anthropologist, and "Social Hair" (1969) by C.R. Hallpike, also an anthropologist. Leach's analysis constructs a metaphorical linkage between the psychoanalytic interpretation of head hair developed by Charles Berg and the symbolic meanings of head hair as incorporated into several rituals reported by ethnographers. In its essence, Berg viewed head hair as equivalent psychologically to one's sexual potency; thus, cutting one's hair is a metaphor for castration. Leach concluded that although the psychological and the social symbolism of head hair existed on two different planes of meaning, one could be transformed into the other by a process of metaphoric equivalence. To Leach, these equivalencies could be expressed as follows.

Head = phallus<sup>3</sup>  
 Hair = semen  
 Hair cutting = castration  
 and that,  
 Long hair = unrestrained sexuality  
 Short hair = restricted sexuality  
 Close shaven hair = celibacy

Hallpike (1969) reinterprets the ethnographic record and proposes alterations in Leach's proposals. First, he argues that long hair symbolizes not merely/only unrestrained sexuality, but more fully "is associated with *being outside society* and that the cutting of hair symbolizes re-entering society, or living within a particular disciplinary regime within society (p. 260)." And later (p. 261), "Cutting the hair equals social control. Dressing the hair may also be ceremoniously equivalent to cutting it," in that styling the hair takes

<sup>3</sup> Note that Leach is considering only the male gender.

it from its natural/wild state and forces it to conform to cultural conventions. Hallpike notes, for example, that monks, soldiers, and convicts all have shaven heads to signify that they are under rigid discipline, i.e., their freedom is greatly restricted, hence their hair greatly reduced to signify this.

He then provides the examples of "women, intellectuals and juvenile rebels" who are viewed as being less under social control than are most men. "Long hair is therefore a symbol of being in some way outside society, of having less to do with it, or of being less amenable to social control than the average citizen (p. 261)."

Hallpike further reasons that "outside society equals hairiness equals animallike ... the chaos of untamed nature before the process of socialization (p. 262)." He links these proposals to Biblical (i.e., ancient Hebrew) examples:

Hairiness = hunter (Esau)  
 Hairiness = wild beast  
 (Nebuchadnezzar)  
 Hairiness = physical strength  
 (Samson)  
 Hairiness = spiritual power (Elijah,  
 John the Baptist)

And also to examples from Stith-Thompson's *Motif Index of Folk Literature* (1955-1958), concluding that hairiness (both on the head and body) is associated strongly with supernatural or quasi-human beings, e.g., dwarfs, giants, wood sprites, devils, witches and mermaids.

In 1977, British sociologist Anthony Synnott extended the interpretations of both Leach and Hallpike in his essay, "Shame and Glory: The Sociology of Hair." Synnott sought to contemporize the interpretations of hair symbolism by

examining current Western mores regarding its meaning, especially in North America and Britain. Synnott's approach was highly organized and well developed; it may be summarized in three propositions:

1. Opposite sexes have opposite hair norms
2. Head hair and body hair have opposite norms
3. Opposite ideologies have opposite hair norms

Synnott contends that his propositions are applicable to three 'zones' on each person's body: head hair, body hair and facial hair. He also observes that hair may be manipulated in four primary ways (several of these are reminiscent of the social psychology literature): *length* may vary from microscopic to several feet; *color* may be altered to several natural (and unnatural e.g., blue, green, purple) shades; *style* can be altered from straight to curly, up to down, forward to back, and so on and, finally, *quantity* of hair may be manipulated via wigs, hairpieces and extensions.

In his analysis of contemporary society, Synnott turns to experimental studies, poetry, mythology, magazines, newspapers, motion pictures and television shows. He observes that head hair is much more likely to be manipulated by women than men in terms of style, color, length and quantity; that blonde is deemed a more feminine color, while brown hair is more masculine; and that facial hair on men can be used as a symbol of adulthood/manhood whereas women are more likely to eschew any beard or mustaches on themselves, while alternatively plucking their eyebrows and thickening their eyelashes. Thus, as Synnott proposed, there are oppositions between the genders with regard to facial and head hair.

He also points out that while women eschew chest hair on themselves and often shave or deplitate their leg and underarm (axillary) hair, men behave oppositely – desiring body hair as a symbol of masculinity and potency. To Synnott, luxuriant chest hair on men is symbolically equivalent to luxuriant head hair on women: a sign of sexual vitality and attractiveness.

In extending his propositions to ideology, Synnott connects with works discussed earlier:

1. That too large or elaborate hairstyles on women are seen as unprofessional and inappropriately alluring for a business (masculine) environment.
2. That feminists (and/or lesbians) will adopt non-normative standards for women – having short, unstyled hair, no make up, no eyebrow plucking, no leg or underarm shaving; that is, they will oppose themselves to the traditional female hair pattern.
3. Societal malcontents, protesters and rejects will don hair styles that countervail traditional norms: hence long hair and beards on beatniks and hippies, Afros on Blacks (1970's), greased hair on juvenile delinquents (James Dean), spiked, multicolored hair on punk rockers, and shaved heads (indicating hyper-masculine codes of discipline) on Marines and Skinheads.

While Synnott's analysis is compelling, it does not address some more deep-seated structures that are typically of interest to anthropologists and may also be important to consumer research. Among these are ideas of ritual grooming, pollution, mortality, mourning and sacred/profane dualism.

Writing in 1974, Herschman offers an essay titled "Hair, Sex and Dirt", which deals with these topics.

Herschman's work is based upon ethnography conducted among Hindu and Sikh Punjabis, but contains many elements which relate to Western consumption practices regarding hair, as well. Among these are the following:

- (1) Punjabi women utilize a special elixir, buttermilk, to wash their hair and special oils to condition it during periodic rituals of cleansing and binding. A cursory examination of hair care products in the United States reveals that these are also deemed to have special (in some cases virtually magical) properties to cleanse and restore hair.
- (2) Among Punjabi men, the loss and/or graying of head hair is viewed as a decline in sexual potency. Hence, many attempt to reverse this process by dyeing their hair red or black.
- (3) The first haircut (actually a shaving of the head) for a Hindu boy signals his departure from the intimate care of his mother (who previously has solely washed and plaited his hair) and entry into the world of men.
- (4) Among Punjabi women, there is a close correspondence between signification of the hair and sexuality. For example, unclean body states (menstruation, partuition) are described as "needing to wash one's hair." Reversing this, among Americans unclean hair states (dirty, oily, unkempt) may lead to the perception that one's self is dirty.
- (5) Hair among the Punjabis symbolized life and vitality; hence, during mourning for the loss of a

loved one, hair may be left disheveled and unwashed among women and shaved off for men. Both acts are equivalent to an important loss of self.

#### WHERE TO LOOK AND WHAT TO LOOK FOR

This review has introduced propositions regarding hair that have not yet been explored by consumer researchers. As Rook (1985) and McCracken (1995) have pointed out, hair grooming products and practices are not only multimillion dollar industries, but also aspects of consumers' lives in which substantial emotional and identity effort is invested. If we are going to pursue a more vigorous inquiry on this topic where should we be looking and what should we be looking for?

#### Where and How:

A wide variety of potentially useful data sources present themselves. Among the most obvious of these are print and broadcast advertisements for hair care products. For example, what attributes are most often deemed desirable and included as product benefits? A cursory glance indicates that "volumizers", "lighteners", "smoothers" and "revitalizers" seem to be often presented as special benefits: could hair quantity, lightness, sheen and texture be tied to deeper metaphoric equivalencies in the culture and consumers' lives?

#### [EXAMPLES WILL BE PRESENTED]

How are hair care products marketed in retail settings? Where are they sold? Two obvious outlets are drug stores, where they often occupy one or two full aisles, and hair salons, where they line all available shelf space. What does

hair care products' close proximity to medical products imply? Why are special sites (hair salons) and personnel (hair stylists) required for hair care? Are special, even magical, powers attributed to these products, sites and personnel?

[EXAMPLES WILL BE PRESENTED]

More broadly, we could examine the 'lived representation' of hair in popular culture media, such as motion pictures, television shows, popular music, magazine and newspaper content. What characters wear which hairstyles? Or hair colors? Presently, there seems to be an abundance of longhaired, blonde female singers in both the pop and country and western musical genres. What might this suggest about contemporary views of female desirability?

[EXAMPLES WILL BE PRESENTED]

Does the current spate of highly stylized coiffures on male actors, singers and models signal a shift in cultural gender roles? Are men now permitted more open displays of vanity – and vulnerability – regarding their appearances? [EXAMPLES WILL BE PRESENTED] Additional in-depth consumer studies, like those conducted by Rook and McAlexander and Schouten could help excavate the connection between grooming practices and self-construction.

An additional vector of interest could (and should) be directed toward *age-related* shifts in hair appearance and hair care norms. In several cultures, puberty, marriage, childbirth, and old age are signaled by significant alterations in hair care and grooming practices. Analogously, are new

mothers in the United States pressured to cut their hair "short" and wear a "simple" style because of its averred practicality and ease of care, or rather because they have now changed cultural status from nubile maidens to sacred (and desexualized) madonnas? Do men who have successfully used Propecia or Rogaine, or had hair transplants, feel more virile and sexually potent, as well as attractive, now that their hair has been 'restored'.

It is likely that a variety of interpretive methods would be useful in achieving individual and cultural level answers to these questions. One approach could be to identify informants from different generations/age cohorts and discuss with them their current and earlier hair care practices. Using photographs of the informants during current and prior life stages, i.e., auto-driving, the informants could be encouraged to relate incidents involving the role of hair care in their construction and projection of self-identity.

Beauty salon and barbershop ethnography would also be useful for comprehending some of the social aspects of hair care and grooming practices. It is likely that the customer-hairdresser relationship contains several embedded roles, e.g., confidante, guide, friend, which play into consumers' feelings about themselves and their appearances. Hair care professionals could also serve as knowledgeable informants regarding their clients' sought-after images and how these may be achieved through grooming.

Interviews conducted with consumers about those celebrities/fictional characters whose hair styles they wish to emulate (or especially avoid) could also provide valuable clues about the norms and icons they feel are appropriate for themselves. For

example, do older men and women re-direct their emulative icons to models and celebrities their own age (e.g., with graying and/or thinning hair) or do they continue to use youthful models as their grooming referents?

Clearly, there is ample ground for exploration available to consumer researchers in this significant aspect of selfhood.

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