

Women's Hairstyles: Two Canadian Women's Hairstories

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Abstract: The physical appearance of women matters in contemporary North American societies. One important element of appearance is hairstyle. Most sociological studies examine the influence hairstyle has on others or the problems that ethnic women encounter when faced with North American and European standards of beauty. This study takes a different approach by examining how peers, fashion, and trends have a subconscious influence on the hairstyle choices of two Canadian women. Unlike the existing body of scholarship, this research illuminates the role of structure and habitus in order to illustrate the illusion of agency these women have about their choices in hairstyles. Although the participants feel that they do not follow fashion trends, this study argues that the words they use to describe their hairstyles reveals that fashion does dictate their hair-style choices.

Key Terms: Identity, Self-image, Fashion, Hairstyle, Archetypes of Beauty

Introduction

This case study examines how two Canadian women, one Caucasian Canadian and one Jamaican Canadian, view their hairstyles as reflective of their individual personalities, while in actuality the structures of North American societies also shape their choices. Unlike the current body of scholarship which tends to focus on how others view women's appearance (e.g. Kyle & Mahler, 1996; Weitz, 2001; Onwuachi-Willig, 2010), this project focuses on how the structures of North American standards of beauty subconsciously influence these two Canadian women's choices and their desired self-images. The distinction is subtle but significant because it acknowledges an illusion of agency.¹ These women feel that they are not influenced by peers, trends, or fashion; however, by revealing the subconscious directives constructed by the standards of North American beauty, the

¹ The researcher has used the phrase "illusion of agency" to convey that each of the two women feels her choice of hairstyle was determined by her own feelings.

researcher illuminates the integral role that “structure” and “habitus” play in their choice of hairstyles.

The concept of structure relates to societal norms, which are the patterns and values – such as fashion, hairstyle, or speech patterns – that individuals adopt to assimilate into society (Porpora, 1989, p.201). The concept of habitus takes the idea of structure even further: applied to the two women, habitus refers to their subconscious adoption of societal patterns (“Habitus,” Oxford Dictionary of Sociology). Structure and habitus are indeed underlying factors in these two women’s hairstyle choices. Even though both women state they make choices based on personal preference, those personal preferences are, to some degree, also dictated by peers, trends and fashion. I therefore cautiously argue that peers, trends, and fashion play a larger role in these women’s style choices than they consciously realize. But first, how do other studies treat the significance of hair style?

The sociological significance hairstyles hold in Western societies has been studied from many angles, with particular focus on the relationship between hairstyle and public perception in the workplace. Kyle & Mahler (1996) have examined how employers consider hairstyles and hair colour as pivotal in identifying female job candidates. Weitz (2001) has examined how women, regardless of age and ethnicity, try to achieve power through their hairstyles. Onwuachi-Willig (2010) has examined how employment policies that regulate workplace hairstyles do not take into account the intricacies of Black hair. Each of these studies is focused on how others view and react to women’s hairstyles. They do not address women’s reactions to their own hairstyles, nor do they question what causes women to choose a particular style.

Discussion

With the theoretical concepts developed in the above studies in mind, I interviewed two Canadian women in order to find out 1) how they feel their hairstyles reflect their self-image, 2) why they choose their hairstyles, and 3) what they think their hairstyles convey to others. One participant, CW, is a 29-year-old Jamaican-Canadian woman and the other, BD, is a 61-year-old Caucasian-Canadian woman. The data was cross-referenced and indexed according to the methodology explained by Ritchie, Spencer, and O’Connor (2003). Although the participants in this study differed in age and ethnicity, common themes emerged involving the reasons behind their choices of hairstyle, their maintenance preferences, and the influence of fashion trends.

I first asked the participants to describe why they chose their current hairstyle. The women responded that each chose their hairstyle because it was easy to maintain. CW stated, “I wanted something light, that I can get in and out of the water . . . something I could just wash, dry, and go and I did not have to worry.” Likewise, BD stated, “It’s easy to keep. It’s easy to maintain.”

Both women expressed that neither their friends, peers, nor fashion dictated their choices. Nevertheless, their words reveal that on some subconscious level structure and habitus do influence how they wear their hair. Each woman stated that her choice of hairstyle is based on what best suits her face shape. For example, to explain her hairstyle choice, BD stated, “I think because also it suited me better . . . I have a very round face and . . . I think it suits my structure of my face.” BD also chose her hair colour because she felt it suited her face: “My colour is light auburn, and I choose the colour because . . . it goes great with my complexion.” When asked if her hairstyle conforms to her peers’ hairstyles, CW stated, “None of my friends are wearing single braids.” However, just a few more lines down in the interview, she was asked if she has more confidence on the days that her hair is braided opposed to days where it is not. She replied,

Oh definitely. Well, after I get my hair done, just get it done I have to collect maybe ten good compliments before I grow to like it. Without the compliments, I feel like, oh well maybe it’s good and maybe it’s not good, and I always ask what do you think? To see how people perceive it on my face and what I should do. But I very much . . . take a poll and see who likes it and who doesn’t like it.

CW’s words illustrate that her peers do influence her choice in hairstyle, even if it is on a subconscious level. This influence is a direct reflection of the concepts of structure and habitus. In choosing hairstyles, both women adopt societal norms and are influenced by their peers without realizing it.

BD’s adoption of societal norms is illustrated in how she describes her hairstyle. When asked to describe her style BD replied, “short, cut around the ears, short in the back, over to the left side.” When asked to describe how her hairstyle reflects her personality BD stated, “I keep it short and neat. I think it means that I am a well-organized individual.” Her choice of a short hairstyle could be considered an age-appropriate hairstyle as reflected in the findings of Clarke and Korotochenko (2010). The authors found that in older Caucasian women, long hair was not a desirable, age-appropriate style to wear. Older women with long hair were viewed as looking witch-like and unattractive. The preferred style for older women was a short, neat and stylish cut. Clarke and Korotochenko’s findings illuminate the structures surrounding North American ideals towards hairstyles for

older Caucasian women, and BD's words illustrate that she is adhering to these structures by choosing a short age-appropriate hairstyle.

CW also subconsciously follows trends on what is considered age-appropriate length for her hair. CW stated, "I want to look younger. I am going to turn thirty ... but I am trying to look younger. So, I put on the single braids and get a little curly and do the smiling and batting my eyes, and they think I am about twenty-two, and that suits me just fine." Single braids are a style in which longer extensions are braided into natural hair. The braided appearance is close to the scalp and the extensions are soft, voluminous, flowing waves. CW stated, "I wanted my hair to say 'sexy, fabulous' ... That's what I'm hoping. I'm paying for." CW's hairstyle choice showcases her femininity and sexiness. CW's feelings about her hair correspond with Weitz's study (2001), which demonstrates that Caucasian men judged the most attractive and sexy hairstyle on a younger woman of any ethnicity to be long and flowing with a wavy curl. Clarke and Korotochenko (2010) have similarly noted that long hair on a woman is associated with femininity and overt sexuality. Indeed, CW's desire to appear younger and more attractive through her hairstyle corresponds with the findings of these studies.

Conclusion

Both women attach some aspect of self-image to their hairstyles. CW feels her hair increases her sexuality and femininity, whereas BD feels her hair symbolizes neatness, organization, youth, vitality and vibrancy. Neither feels influenced by fashion trends in choice of hairstyle. Yet, the researcher found that on some subconscious level, the two women chose hairstyles that fit North American ideals of what is considered an attractive and age-appropriate hairstyle, and, in this way, their agency is at least partially an illusion. The comments from both of these women illustrate the concept of habitus because neither woman seems to be consciously aware of the influence that societal norms has on her choice of hairstyle. The researcher acknowledges the study is limited due to the small number of interviewees and the inability of the interviewees to represent the cultural and ethnic diversity of Canadian women. Thus, this claim cannot be related to the larger body of Canadian women because of its small sample group; more interviews are needed for such a broad claim to be made.

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