THE SWEET COLOR OF AN IMPLICIT REQUEST: WOMEN’S HAIR COLOR AND SPONTANEOUS HELPING BEHAVIOR

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Results of previous researchers’ studies on the effect of blond hair color on helping behavior have been inconsistent. In addition, spontaneous helping behavior has not been examined. In this study, female confederates wearing blond, brown, or dark wigs accidentally dropped a glove while walking in pedestrian streets and then walked away, apparently not aware of their loss. It was found that male and not female pedestrians helped the confederates wearing blond wigs more often. An explanation for these results is that a greater degree of youth and good health is associated with women who have blond hair.

Keywords: hair color, implicit request, spontaneous helping behavior, pedestrians, gender.

Previous researchers have focused on the effect of hair color on helping behavior, gaining mixed results. Juni and Roth (1985) asked male and female confederates wearing either brunette or blond wigs to encounter male and female street pedestrians and solicit money. Results showed that the hair color of male and female confederates did not affect helping behavior of either male or female participants. Price (2008) and Guéguen and Lamy (2011) found that blond women who engaged in door-to-door fundraising received more donations than did their brunette counterparts. Lynn (2009) found that higher tips were received by blond-haired waitresses. Guéguen and Lamy (2009) instructed a group of female confederates aged between 20 and 22 years to hitchhike while wearing a blond, brown, or black wig and found that blond hair, compared with brown and black hair, was associated with a small but significant increase in the number of

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male drivers who stopped to offer a ride. Hair color had no effect on the female drivers who stopped.

These inconsistent results may be explained by different methodological factors. In Juni and Roth’s (1985) research, the sample size and attractiveness of the female confederates were not controlled, and blond and dark hair only were evaluated. In Lynn’s (2009) study, data were collapsed across the male and female patrons, patron analysis was correlational, and an experimental design was not used. The physical attractiveness of the fundraisers was not controlled in Price’s (2008) study and also the race of a potential donor was critical for the effect of hair color on helping. Guéguen and Lamy (2009) found that blond hair color had a positive effect on men’s responses to hitchhikers whereas hair color had no effect on women.

To address the issues of methodological differences and divergent results, a more controlled experimental study with a large sample size was undertaken. In addition, the effect of hair color on spontaneous helping behavior had not been previously tested. Most researchers had used compliance of individuals to an actual request by confederates with different hair color, for example, by asking for money or for a ride.

**Method**

**Participants**

The participants ($N = 600$ men and 600 women) were aged between approximately 20 and 50 years and chosen at random while they were walking alone on pedestrian streets.

**Procedure**

Ten young women ($M = 20.8$ years, $SD = 1.4$) were selected as confederates because they were rated by 22 male students to possess an average physical attractiveness and because they all had brown hair. In the three experimental conditions, the three different wigs all had midlength hair and a current style, varying only in the hair color, that is, blond, dark, or brown. Confederates wore similar clothes, that is, neat jeans, sneakers of a light color, and a white figure-hugging shirt. The confederate chose a single participant walking in her direction, while standing in front of a store apparently looking for something in her bag. If the passerby was a child, an adolescent, or an older adult, the confederate ignored them. Once the participant was identified, the confederate began walking in the same direction about three meters ahead of the participant, holding a handbag. She then accidentally lost a glove and continued walking, apparently not aware of her loss. Two observers placed approximately 50 meters ahead noted the passerby’s reaction, sex, and approximate age. Responses were
recorded if the participant warned the confederate within 10 seconds of the loss of the object. If this did not happen, the confederate acted as if she were searching her handbag, looked around in a surprised manner and returned to pick up the object without looking at the participant.

**Results**

The dependent variable was the number of times that respondents warned confederates of their dropped items. The independent variable was 1 of the 3 wig colors. No difference was found between the 10 confederates according to the three wigs worn \( (p > .30) \) and no difference was found between the 10 confederates irrespective of the three wigs worn \( (p > .10) \). Thus, data were collapsed across confederates and are presented in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Blond</th>
<th>Brown</th>
<th>Dark</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male pedestrians</td>
<td>75.5%</td>
<td>59.0%</td>
<td>56.5%</td>
<td>63.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(151/200)</td>
<td>(118/200)</td>
<td>(113/200)</td>
<td>(382/600)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female pedestrians</td>
<td>47.5%</td>
<td>53.5%</td>
<td>48.5%</td>
<td>49.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(95/200)</td>
<td>(107/200)</td>
<td>(97/200)</td>
<td>(299/600)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A chi-square dependency test was applied with the frequencies observed. An overall difference between the three hair color conditions \( \chi^2(N = 600) = 22.26, p < .001, r = .19 \) was found with male pedestrians. Follow-up analysis showed that the response to blond hair was statistically different from that to dark hair \( \chi^2(N = 400) = 16.35, p < .001, r = .20 \) and brown hair \( \chi^2(N = 400) = 12.59, p < .001, r = .17 \), whereas no statistical difference was observed between the dark hair and the brown hair conditions \( \chi^2(N = 400) = 0.26, p = .61, r = .03 \). No overall difference between the three hair color conditions \( \chi^2(N = 600) = 1.65, p = .44, r = .05 \) was found with female pedestrians. Follow-up analysis using paired comparison showed no statistical difference \( (p > .20) \). In general, male respondents engaged in significantly more acts of helping than did female respondents. An overall difference between the three hair color conditions \( \chi^2(N = 1200) = 23.40, p < .001, r = .14 \) was found among male respondents.

**Discussion**

Results gained in this study show that women with blond hair were more often helped than were women with brown or dark hair, by male pedestrians
only. These results differ from those of Juni and Roth (1985), who found that female confederates wearing blond wigs when soliciting money from male street pedestrians did not receive more help than confederates wearing brunette wigs. The contradictory results could be explained by the smaller sample size in Juni and Roth’s study, or by the different request for help. In Juni and Roth’s study, a verbal request was made to the participant, whereas, in this experiment, the request was implicit with no direct solicitation. The results in the present study confirmed those of Guéguen and Lamy (2009), who found that women hitchhikers wearing a blond wig received more help, from male drivers only, than hitchhikers wearing a brown or a dark wig.

One possible explanation for the greater help given by men to women confederates with blond hair could be that they were perceived as more attractive by male respondents. Matz and Hinsz (2000) found that women with blond hair were perceived as younger and healthier than were brown haired women. Other researchers have shown that youth and good health are physical components associated with fertility (Manning, Scutt, Whitehouse, & Leinster, 1997; Millsted & Frith, 2003). As a result of biological hardwiring to procreate, men are often attracted to characteristics emphasizing youth, health, and vitality. Because of this, men may be more sensitive to such physical traits as age and hair color (Buss, 1994). Thus, when the confederates in the present study became blond, they also became more attractive for male passersby who, by warning the confederate that she had lost something, found a way to initiate contact.

References
