

Running head: BLONDE STEREOTYPE

Dumb Blondes: Are They Really?

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Abstract

This analysis is an investigation into the generalizations and negative stereotypes based on how blonde women are perceived as less intelligent in the past, today's world, and in the future. In this paper we will deconstruct the dumb blonde stereotype's history that dates back to Roman times and the Elizabethan period. Today, this stereotype is portrayed in media of all kind. Many people know of this stereotype's existence, but refuse to acknowledge it as being significant to daily life — here we refute that thinking. Through studies developed by professionals, a closely linked survey, and evident social media examples we deduced that the idea of the “dumb blonde” stereotype is evolving. We discuss implications of these findings in regards of previous and recent research; Furthermore, our results did not support our expectations on account of the stereotype fading. Our close look into the stereotype illuminates how each participant in our experiment viewed certain generalizations associated with women's hair color. Finally, we unearthed the commonalities of blonde women and motivating factors which lead to their hypothetical lack of success.

Keywords: Blonde, Stereotype, Deconstruct

Past

Where did the notion that blondes are dumb ever come from? Historically there have been many instances relating to how blonde women are perceived dating back to the Roman times of 27 BC. Females were required by law to dye their hair different colors depending on their social class; This distinction was made evident in order to set them apart. However, the image of “Dumb Blondes” as we know it today, can be dated back all the way from the late 18th century in Paris by a French Courtesan. Rosalie Duthe is credited with initiating this stereotype “famous for being beautiful, famous and slow-witted” (Conger, 2014, para.3). In 1775, Duthe was involved in a play emphasizing her trademark long and vacant pauses during conversations, this entertained the audience. A century later, many risque stage performers were referred to as dizzy blondes in Britain and soon this blonde joke began to spread. Looking into the past, we can see famous examples of women who have built an empire on the stereotype in order to enhance their multitude of successes.

The most recognized character of this imposing stereotype is Marilyn Monroe. “Monroe portrayed an object of desire and exhibition. Her basic character grew out of the dumb blonde archetype” (Pomerleau, 2016, para. 4). which was characterized not by a distinct origin or social class, but as what was presented in her roles as a dumb blonde. This blonde archetype consisted mainly on the way she had to depict a dumb person’s behavior that lead up to degrading the value of a person based on their hair color and damaging the image as presented to the many audiences exposed to this comedic portrayal.

As this image began to grow in popularity, more and more big film directors and popular record labels began to notice and incorporate this to their works to draw people in and create the notion that all blonde haired women lacked intelligence more than their smart counterpart — brunettes. The stereotype since then has managed to surface out to our day to day lives. It has caused a major impact on how both the market and the public visualize blond haired women measuring their intelligence by only glancing upon what appears to be nothing more than hair color.

Present

Millennials have grown up with technology all around them and due to the advancements of innovation, our generation tends to rely on media for a majority of entertainment as well as information. When we think about where we see the blonde stereotype, it is often used in comedic jokes and humorous movies. Today, our generation is vulnerable to the blonde stereotypes across all types of media. Our main sources of exposure is in tv shows, movies, and advertisements. Hollywood produced movies, like Mean Girls, and common television advertisements, such as Pillsbury, all depict the silly and often a dumbfounded image of an oversexualized blonde. The function of social construction on the development of this image is crucial to how we see blonde women compared to their intelligence.

As people began to notice the impact of degrading blonde women as a way of entertainment, the conspicuous stereotype made its way into the media. Production companies and writers created an image of dumb blonde characters to add to the comedic tone their movies and advertisements called for. From her studies of films associated with blond-haired women,

Sydney McCarthy (2015) found, “that in popular media, blonde haired women are continuously shown as oversexualized and unintelligent” (para 1). You can see this image that movie Mean Girls portrays with its characters of Regina George and Karen Smith.

Regina George is one of the main characters of Mean Girls and is the antagonist famous for being controlling, manipulating, sexualized, and having a lack of intelligence. Most of the famously known quotes of unintelligent questions and remarks are made by Regina George in the movie. One instance was when she was talking to Cady Heron, the red headed protagonist asking, “Is butter a carb?” (Waters, Michaels, Rosner, Fey, Okada, Kent, 2004). The purpose was of course for humor, however it leaves the audience with a bad exposure of a blonde image of women. Another ‘dumb blonde’ character is Karen Smith, one of Regina’s best friends, better known as one of the plastics. According to an analysis completed by Lawrence Yee (2017), a chief-in-editor at Wikia,

Karen makes her first appearance on the school's football court, being hit by football, unable to catch it. It was at this moment that Janis Ian (a side character) introduced her as the 'dumbest girl you'll ever meet'. Later, in the cafeteria, as Cady is looking for a place to sit, she gets picked on by Jason in front of the Plastics' table. Karen, alongside her two fellow Plastics, invited her to join them for the lunch, where she started to ask Cady some very odd and hilarious questions such as ‘If you're from Africa, why are you white?’ (para.7)

These characters show insight to present day movies that the millennial generation refers to and many idolized for their witty humor and ignorance. When this movie came out, middle school

age children were exposed to the fact that appearance correlates to intelligence. Young minds are easily manipulated; therefore, the existence of the brainless blonde came into effect for many growing individuals.

Advertisements

Advertisement are notorious for displaying the mindless and often foolish blonde image. Pillsbury has done so in one of their recent advertisements to showcase how easily made their products are — even for a blonde. The advertisement shows the woman reading directions for making chocolate chip cookies and being confused when reading them. She essentially took the directions too seriously and literal. The recipe said “separate eggs” and she goes to literally separate the eggs, placing them at different corners of the table. When people read that they are supposed to crack the eggs and know to separate the egg yolk from the egg white. Next, she reads whip the butter and looks away in bewilderment. The advertisement cuts to a separate screen saying “Pillsbury ready to bake cookies. Foolproof” (2011). Pillsbury wanted to make it clear that the purpose of this advertisement was to sell their product with backhanded compliment to blondes. From just the last few seconds of the advertisement, I can infer that their product is so easy to use that even a dumb blonde woman can do it.

Day-to-day

Consistently, we are exposed to stereotypes of women in schools, the workplace, and even in our own home. The media’s large platform places a significant portrayal of stereotypes of how women are perceived, as well as their roles to society. In the professional industry, women are often not taken seriously if they have blonde hair. Case studies conducted show the bias

against women and their physical features in the workplace. In a study conducted by Berdahl and Natalya Alonso, of the Sauder School of Business at the University of British Columbia explained from their studies, “Participants were shown a picture of the same woman — with blonde and brown hair and asked who they’d recommend for a CEO or Senate position. The majority of participants voted for the brunette because she is ‘intelligent, professional and serious’ (as cited in Peck, 2016, para.16). What can be taken away from this, is that women who are chosen for job positions and have been evaluated for potential intelligence. And aside from their performance, they have had their physical features (like hair color) taken in account for. This stereotype has negatively impacted people enough in order to have the thought of who they would recommend would be a better choice solely based on the difference in haircolor alone since the subject was the same person.

Experiment

Until we began researching this seemingly abstract concept of bloneness and its implications, we had no idea that there would be such a vast collection of works dedicated to the subject of hair and more specifically, hair color. It was enlightening to be to be able to see this absurd stereotype refuted in so many different fashions. Our experiment displayed a look into what millennials think of this idea of dumb blondes without knowing the actual purpose of the experiment. With pictures of three different hair colored women, equal in attractiveness, successfulness, age, and skin color we established a printed list for our classmates to choose from. They were to go in with a naked eye and associate intelligence between women, and this allowed us to collected their opinions. We invited 100 of our high school classmates ages

ranging from 14 to 18, all races, all genders, and all religions to take our survey. Their task was to circle the woman in which they thought as the most intelligent based off of appearance alone. We expected the choices to vary from person to person and the experiment depended solely on their personal choice of each participant. We could have had possible biases and interruptions to our data based on if the person circled the person who they knew the most. Our three women who we picked were all famous in the sense of being an actress, singer, and model. Their intelligence level was not a factor for which we wanted to display for our research; actually, we used the question as a distractor to actually see who would pick what based only on what they seen. Allowing our subjects to think there is a right answer made our data have significance to our claim because of the primed implication of intelligence to hair color. They thought there was a right answer, but intelligence is subjective, so there could not be a real answer as to who is the smartest (aside from IQ tests).

Results

Our results proved have disproved our hypothesis and did not meet our initial expectations. We thought that the brunette and the red head would have the two highest votes and the blonde would for sure have the lowest amount of votes for intelligence. However, red hair had the highest vote at 45, blonde following in second place with 30, and lastly brunette with 25 votes. This was a shocker for us because we thought we planned our all the details to an exact measure. What was nice to see was the difference of opinions that swayed in each collection of data. We took data from five different classes and the average of each was different.

Some classes chose more blondes for intelligence and others swayed towards the red haired woman, but brunette was always the underdog.

Interpretation of results

What can we take away from this? We assume because of the differing results that there has to be an influence of factors, such as the evolution of the stereotype itself leading to an open-minded view for some people's mentality. This can be observed and reflected in our collected data. As we identified that blondes were not subject to this assumption of the stereotype, but were given a slight preference over the brunette option, we assume there's alteration in thinking. Despite the fact that people have been exposed to media portraying blonde hair color in association with women, having the connection to assume the thought of unintelligence with blondes was not evident. So there must have been a shift since the past. The stereotype has lost the majority of its thrust when looking at the experimental data.

Shift in Media

In some instances, newer tv shows and media have displayed a disapproval of the blonde stereotype. To counteract the stereotype, the show *The Suite Life of Zack and Cody* developed characters against the stereotypical view. The occidental blonde, Maddie Fitzpatrick, is referred to as the insanely smart one while the oriental brunette, London Tipton, is the dumb one. Maddie was played by Ashley Tisdale, and London by Brenda Song. Their roles in the TV series were chosen on purpose in order to accentuate that not all stereotypes are true. An analysis by Stephanie Barack 2010), a writer for Tv Tropes says, "London Tipton is the Asian airhead that is as dense as a brick" (para. 1). Throughout the show, she is progresses with getting dumber as

time goes on. An example is how London gets easily distracted by things she desires a few times, such as jewelry. The writers wanted her to be to the equivalent of a dumb blonde. Originally, the role was not written for an Asian girl, as it was supposed to be a parody of Paris Hilton.

However, Ashley Tisdale was originally going to play London with Brenda Song in the Maddie role, but they ended up being switched because the girls played the parts better. The switch is referenced in the alternate dimension episode, where the girls are their original intended roles (Barack, 2010).

The Suite Life of Zack and Cody showed that we, as an audience, are aware of the notion that the stereotype exists, but can be changed to reflect a difference in personalities amongst blonde as well as other groups of women. The growth of shifting personalities for characters illuminates the ideas that media is progressing for future. The trend of differing character intelligences is making it obvious to us, that no longer will television series, advertisements, or movies will there be referral to blonde women as dumber than other individuals. The audiences and writers of said shows are agreeing to recognize that the bias views are invalid and are moving towards being less accepted throughout not only in the media, but also in day-to-day life.

Society

Eventually, middle class women from all over the country began to recognize obvious discrimination around them. The feminist movement is now under way to change that, women are now speaking out against unjust treatment and gaining positions of respect in a large variety professional fields. As blonde women reach higher powers in government, business, and media

they refute the stereotype by standing on top of their possible competition. Because of the feminist movement, all aspects of a woman have been celebrated. No matter the race, skin color, age, or hair color women are now being empowered across our generation for their differences. The future of women is being shifted. In our generation, women are now achieving high levels of education, reaching various measures of success, and exuding both confidence and competence. Despite the obstacles set forth by this negative perception of their physical identity, the stereotype is dissipating. Still, however, it resonates profoundly throughout society amongst our generation.

Future

Beliefs and views inclusive of women have changed and continue change towards a more feminist outlook of development. Cooper (2016) explains, “A pioneer of the body-positive movement for more than a decade now, is Dove campaigning it counters society’s definition of beauty. The ad features a group of diverse women of different body types, backgrounds, and careers” (para.9). Dove has went as far as accepting all physical differences in order to market their products better, knowing the impact would be a larger target audience that enjoys the campaign. If a campaign can advertise for allowing women to embrace their differences rather than make a joke about them, there has been a social change towards women’s acceptance.

Throughout time tv shows have faded the popularity of using a dumb blonde to create comedy, they are now trying to remove the idea as a whole. As the stereotype is fading it is made clear through loss of use in tv series. In hopes for a better turn towards equality, women's haircolor should no longer be associated with intelligence nor should women be judged by their

blondeness. But instead, they are treated equally no matter what features they possess. The dumb blonde stereotype is unrealistic when taken into account for daily life, but it seems as though people do use it just less as time progresses. The future of this stereotype is continuing its downward spiral as it has been refuted genetically. As cited in Walton (2014), a study by Nature Genetics found that

A switch of a single letter of the genetic code is responsible for lighter hair: An A (adenine) is changed to a G (guanine) on a region of human chromosome 12. The team says that because this specific genetic change only affects the hair follicle, other cell types — especially, say, brain cells — are not affected (para. 1).

Therefore, hair color has absolutely no link to anyone's intelligence. Looking into where the dumb blonde image will be years from now is nearing nonexistence. Showing that women of any physical stature can push themselves into powerful positions proves they are not dumb. The stereotypes future stands no chance and eventually will be a stereotype of the past.

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Figure 1

