

2012

## Appearance and Perception: The Effects of Hair Color and Weight on Product Perception

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APPEARANCE AND PERCEPTION:  
THE EFFECTS OF HAIR COLOR AND WEIGHT ON PRODUCT PERCEPTION

A Thesis Submitted  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Designation  
University Honors

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May 2012

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Entitled: Appearance and Perception: The Effects of Hair Color and Weight on Product Perception

has been approved as meeting the thesis or project requirement for the Designation  
University Honors

4/27

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## INTRODUCTION

Human models are frequently used in advertisements to assist in selling the product. In particular, the use of attractive models is common and seen as a way to grab the viewer's attention and encourage purchase. The common theory is that attractiveness sells: the more attractive the model, the more positive the perception toward the product advertised. On the other hand, the effectiveness of this assumption is difficult to measure. Past researchers have looked at this idea of the effectiveness of attractiveness, but few have looked at specific elements of attractiveness like hair color or weight. Specifically, little research has examined how hair color and weight influence advertising effectiveness and overall product perception. This brings up several questions to research: Does changing the weight of the model make the viewer's attitude toward the product more negative or positive? Or does changing the model's hair color change the viewer's perception of the product? How do these two characteristics interact?

This thesis study expands on current research on attractiveness, hair color, and obesity and looks at print advertising and the influence of model appearance on product perception. The intent is to discover how these physical features play a role in advertising and what advertisers can do to best sell their product. The variables hair color and weight were used as objective measures in the study and were subtly changed in advertisements to determine if certain hair colors or weights produce more positive perceptions. This study helps to answer whether there is an ideal weight or hair color for use in advertisements.

### **Literature Review**

Over the years, numerous studies have looked at attractiveness and implications for advertising. Many of these studies look at broad measures of attractiveness. Research by Patzer (1985) produced a conclusion that "sources of higher physical attractiveness are more effective because the receivers experience greater liking for the physically attractive source" (p. 188).

Snyder and Rothbart (1971) found that when communicating, the use of a photograph with an attractive source was more persuasive than when no photograph of a source was used. Baker and Churchill's study (1977) attempted to further previous social science research that suggested a person's initial perception of and reaction to another is influenced by the other person's attractiveness by applying that concept to advertising. Their study looked at whether the viewer's reaction was influenced by the sex of the viewer or by the type of product in the advertisement. Their findings suggested that "the sex and physical attractiveness of an ad model do influence peoples' evaluations of the aesthetic qualities of an advertisement and therefore seem to be important determinants of the attention-getting value of the ad and the subjects' liking of the ad" but that attractiveness may be ineffective in actually getting the message across to viewers (Baker & Churchill 1977, p. 553). Rather, with products that did not have romantic undertones like coffee, the unattractive female model was more effective than the attractive model in eventual product purchase by a male viewer.

A study on highly attractive models (HAMs) and women's evaluations of those advertisements found that "comparisons with HAMs are associated with the experience of greater negative effect" and are "associated with lowered evaluations of the model as both an expert spokesperson and as a product argument if that negative affect was felt strongly enough" (Bower 2001, p. 60). This study highlights the effect of a female viewer's comparison with the model. When a female viewer compared herself with an attractive model, she had a negative opinion of the model due to the comparison. This negative effect was stronger when the HAM was advertising a product to improve body shape than when advertising a hair improvement product, showing that whether a women feels like she can improve her appearance with the product influences her attitude toward the model and the product. Another study involving

gender found that in general, “customers may be more responsive to advertising models perceived as similar to themselves” (Caballero & Solomon 1984, p. 23). The implications of this suggest that physical attributes other than gender may also create comparisons and perceptions of similarity.

Several studies seemed to point toward the idea that model attractiveness may not be influential in eventual product purchase (e.g., Baker & Churchill 1977; Caballero, Lumpkin, & Madden 1989). One study went as far as to say that, in addition to the common idea that “beauty sells,” “ugly does not hurt” (Caballero, Lumpkin, & Madden 1989, p. 21). These studies showed that although beauty sells many products best, unattractive models sold certain products better. When the low involvement product tissue was used in a study, displays using an unattractive model resulted in more sales than those with attractive models (Caballero & Solomon 1984). Research by Kamins (1971) produced similar results in that no difference was found between attractive and unattractive endorsers for products that are irrelevant to attractiveness. Bower and Landreth (2001) explored the effects of pairing HAMS versus normally attractive models (NAMs) with different attractiveness-relevant products and discovered “a match between a model and product improves ad effectiveness not necessarily through the elicitation of product arguments from model appearance, but instead by heightening perceptions of the model’s expertise about the product” (p. 1).

### ***Weight***

Many of the past studies on attractiveness deal with attractiveness in a broad sense, but several have looked at body weight. Agerup (2011) looked specifically at weight in the fashion industry and found that “consumers’ impressions of mass market fashion brands are significantly affected by the weight of ideal users” (p. 486). The use of slender models resulted in more positive brand perceptions. Ironically, the use of obese models was preferred to the use of

overweight models in the building of brands in pure fashion. In contrast, an earlier study on weight and ad effectiveness found that advertisements featuring thin models, average-size models, or no models were equally effective (Halliwell & Dittmar 2004). It is important to note that the researchers also found that “the advertisements featuring the more attractive model were perceived as more effective”, providing support for the idea that “beauty sells” (Halliwell & Dittmar 2004, p. 120). Attractiveness in this particular study was defined by how the viewers perceived the weights. The implications of another obesity study suggested that one must consider a consumer’s weight control beliefs to determine whether larger sized models may be effective (Martin & Xavier 2010). Findings of this study uncovered that “internals (i.e. consumers who believe they can control their weight) prefer slim models, particularly for ads for weight-controlling products” (Martin & Xavier 2010, p. 497); this effect was strongest for ad attitudes followed by brand evaluations and then purchase intention. On the other hand, externals, defined by Martin and Xavier (2010) as “consumers who believe their weight is beyond their control,” “may be more accepting towards larger models” (p. 497). An important implication of this study is how it relates to market segmentation. Markets can be segmented based on these psychographic characteristics of internals versus externals. Several studies on obesity have also looked at comparison and how the viewers felt about themselves after seeing the advertisement (e.g. Martin & Xavier 2010).

### ***Hair Color***

The second variable in the current study is hair color. A study looking at redheads and blondes found that redheads were seen as unattractive (Clayson & Maughan 1986). This result may be attributed to other characteristics of a redhead besides red hair including very light skin, no tan and freckles. In the study results, red-haired women were “seen as a relatively more powerful professional type, rather no-nonsense and not physically attractive” while redheaded



men were “seen as very unattractive, less successful, and rather effeminate, with less potency than even the redheaded woman” (Clayson & Maughan 1986, p. 814-15). Another study looked at how hair color effects perceived ability in women with the result that brunettes were seen as most competent (Kyle & Mahler 1996). Lawson (1971) concluded from his research that “stereotypes based on hair color are widely held” and “four of the six hair-color categories gave the highest scores to their own group” (p. 311-12). All of these studies found differences in attitudes and perceptions between hair colors; thus, it is important to further this research by looking at the effects hair color stereotypes have on product perception and advertising specifically.

### ***Obesity and Hair Color***

Few studies have been done on the combination of obesity and hair color, but researchers Clayson and Klassen developed a study to examine how these two variables affect perception of attractiveness (1989). Results by hair color showed that redheads were seen as least attractive when compared to people with blonde, brown or black hair while results for obesity showed that nonobese workers were seen as more attractive than obese workers. Results also suggested that these preferences were evaluated independently. The current study furthers this research by examining whether these stereotypes play a role in product perception.

### ***Product Category***

The theme that the perceptions and effectiveness of advertisements depends on the product category appears in multiple studies (e.g., Kanungo & Pang 1973; Baker & Churchill 1977; Caballero & Solomon 1984; Brown & Stayman 1992). One study found that the relationships of ad attitudes and feelings as well as ad attitudes and brand cognition were affected by product type, especially when the products were in a category other than consumer nondurables (Brown & Stayman 1992). This finding suggests that future studies may not uncover

an ideal level of attractiveness or ideal physical characteristic to generalize for all products. Rather, ideals will vary across product categories.

### **Research Question**

The main research question examined is: Do subtle changes in a model's appearance in advertising influence a person's perception of a product? Specific changes in appearance examined are hair color and weight. Based on these variables, questions arose about (1) What is the optimal hair color or weight? (2) How do these two variables interact to influence product perception?

In their research on model attractiveness and sales response, Caballero and Solomon (1984) examined the following three questions: (1) What is the optimal level of attractiveness? (2) Do responses vary according to the sex of the model and/or the sex of the buyer? (3) Do responses vary according to the type of product being advertised? (p. 17). Adaptations of these questions guided the current study with the understanding that an ideal level in regards to hair color or weight attractiveness may not be achieved.

## **METHODOLOGY**

A quantitative approach was taken to analyze the results of primary research for this research study. Collecting primary research for this study involved developing several ads with differences in a model's hair color and weight and showing each research respondent one of the ad variations. The hair color and weight of a model was digitally manipulated in Adobe Photoshop in such a way as to create identifiable model characteristics in terms of hair color and weight while allowing all other elements of the ads to remain unchanged. Hair colors used were blonde, red, and brunette. Initial weights represented reflected normal, overweight, and obese body shapes (the overweight factor was later dropped). The degree of weight and hair color

change was based on creating noticeable differences between factors. Coffee was selected as the advertised product because of its neutrality in terms of weight and hair color. A neutral product like this should not affect results because it has no relationship to weight gain or loss.

A pretest was conducted to test for differences in attractiveness among the initial nine ad variations. The main survey tested for differences in product perception, purchase intent and ad appeal between the final six ad variations. Analysis was conducted utilizing analysis of variance, factor analysis, and multivariate analysis of variance. The study conformed to all Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocols.

### **Pretest**

Before data collection, the manipulated advertisements were tested to show if significant differences existed between advertisements in terms of weight and hair color when compared to each other. A pretest survey was developed that asked respondents to rate the models appearance on five terms: overall appearance, hair color, weight, facial appearance, and clothing. Each survey showed a variation of the model's picture reflecting three variables for hair color and three for weight for a total of nine variations. These surveys were handed out in three university classrooms. Seventy-four surveys were collected and analyzed. Table 1 shows the results of the analysis of variance. A *Tukey post hoc* test was also done to examine individual stimuli differences. Results showed significant differences between the normal and obese body shapes, and between brunette and the other two hair colors on attractiveness, but no significant differences between normal and overweight body shapes, and between red and blonde hair colors.

Table 1: ANOVA Results for Pretest 1

Univariate Analysis of Variance – Pretest 1						
Dependent Variables	Hair Color		Weight		Hair Color x Weight	
	F (df)	p value	F (df)	p value	F (df)	p value
Appearance	2.140 (2)	.126	6.685 (2)	.002	.322 (4)	.862
ColorAttractive	3.989 (2)	.023	1.971 (2)	.148	.405 (4)	.804
WeightAttractive	.521 (2)	.596	26.542 (2)	.000	1.22 (4)	.310
FacialAttractive	1.106 (2)	.337	8.739 (2)	.000	.414 (4)	.798
ClothingAttractive	.796 (2)	.455	1.682 (2)	.194	.822 (4)	.516

Consistent with these findings, ad variations that included the overweight body shape were eliminated. An attempt was made to exaggerate the red and blonde hair colors, but a follow up pretest with twenty-one respondents showed even less differences between hair colors than the original images. Thus, the original hair color edits were used in the final ad variations.

### Test

The stimuli now consist of two weight conditions and three hair conditions resulting in a 2 x 3 factorial design. Surveys were developed to uncover participants' perceptions of the above-mentioned advertisements as a whole. Six different variations of the survey were created with one ad per survey (See Appendix A). Besides the ad, all other questions remained the same across surveys. Respondents were first asked to read a consent form and agree to participate. Demographic information, age and gender, was collected at the end. Questions were developed that asked participants to rate each advertisement on several dimensions related to ad appeal, product attitudes, and purchase intent (See Appendix B; also summarized in Table 2) utilizing Likert-type scales.

Table 2: Survey Questions with Corresponding Variables

Survey Question	Variable Name
The brand in the ad is likely to possess the stated ad claims.	Ad Claims
I react favorably to the brand.	FavorableBrand
I react positively towards the ad.	PositiveBrand
I dislike the brand.	DislikeBrand

Rate how each term describes the product	
Quality	Quality
Experience	Experience
Reliable	Reliable
Successful	Successful
Price	Price
How likely are you to purchase the product?	PurchaseIntent
Overall, how would you rate the appeal of the advertisement?	AdAppeal

The survey was developed online using SurveyGizmo and distributed electronically to college students on a mid-sized Midwestern university campus. This method was used to retain the clarity of the advertisements and to allow for easily converting results into SPSS.

Recruitment was done primarily online through university announcement emails, Facebook, and Twitter as well as emails sent to student organizations and forwarded by university faculty and staff. Surveys were collected from a total of 291 participants, of which 76 were male and 215 were female. When a respondent opened the survey, they were presented with one of the six variations of the ad chosen at random. The distribution of respondents by ad variation can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3: Respondents per ad variation

Ad	Description	Count
1	Brunette Normal Weight	43
2	Blonde Normal Weight	64
3	Red Normal Weight	40
4	Brunette Obese Weight	45
5	Blonde Obese Weight	51
6	Red Obese Weight	48
<b>Total</b>		<b>291</b>

## RESULTS

Using SPSS, analysis were run using hair color and weight in a 3 X 2 factorial design.

The first test was a univariate analysis of variance. As shown in Table 4, no significant differences ( $\alpha = 0.05$ ) were found between hair colors (the variable Successful was almost significant at  $p=.083$ ). Four of the variables showed significant differences for weight: PositiveBrand ( $p=.049$ ), Successful ( $p=.006$ ), PurchaseIntent ( $p=.005$ ), and AdAppeal ( $p=.005$ ). FavorableBrand was almost significant at .051. This same test was also run to see if the gender of the viewer played a role. No significant results were found between males and females for all variables measured.

Table 4: ANOVA Test Results

Dependent Variables	Univariate Analysis of Variance					
	Hair Color		Weight		Hair Color x Weight	
	F (df)	p value	F (df)	p value	F (df)	p value
AdClaims	.010 (2)	.990	.284 (1)	.595	.063 (2)	.939
FavorableBrand	.831 (2)	.437	3.832 (1)	.051	.919 (2)	.400
PositiveBrand	1.353 (2)	.260	3.914 (1)	.049	1.030 (2)	.358
DislikeBrand	1.755 (2)	.175	.845 (1)	.359	.120 (2)	.887
Quality	.430 (2)	.651	.535 (1)	.465	.103 (2)	.902
Experience	.940 (2)	.392	1.991 (1)	.159	.384 (2)	.681
Reliable	.321 (2)	.726	.024 (1)	.876	1.815 (2)	.165
Successful	2.511 (2)	.083	7.663 (1)	.006	.194 (2)	.824
Price	.413 (2)	.662	.067 (1)	.797	.428 (2)	.652
PurchaseIntent	1.408 (2)	.246	7.839 (1)	.005	2.481 (2)	.085
AdAppeal	1.869 (2)	.156	8.441 (1)	.004	.580 (2)	.561

To analyze patterns within the different variables, a factor analysis was conducted. Two major factors were found. The first was labeled "Features," representing the variables Quality, Reliable, Success, and Price. The second was labeled "Likeability," with Favorable, Positive, and Dislike being the three emotional variables relating to the likeability of a brand. Based on these

two major factors, a multivariate analysis of variation (MANOVA) was conducted and showed weight was a significant influence for the group “Features” but not for “Likeability” (See Table 5).

Table 5: MANOVA Test

Multivariate Analysis of Variance						
Factor Group	Hair Color		Weight		Hair Color x Weight	
	Lamba	p value	Lamba	p value	Lamba	p value
Features	1.021	.418	3.430	.009	.845	.563
Likeable	.696	.653	1.728	.162	1.173	.319

\*Using Wilks’ Lambda for values

### DISCUSSION

Based on the above results, weight provided the only significant differences in terms of product perception, purchase intent, and ad appeal. This implies that model weight does have an influence on product perception. Product perception in this discussion refers to how viewers see the brand, whether that is in a positive or a negative light. Based on the univariate analysis of variance, variables most related to product perception (e.g. positive brand, successful brand, and purchase intent) showed significant differences between the normal and obese body shapes. This particular test shows that appearance plays the biggest role in regards to how the brand is perceived in terms of likeability (shown by results for the variables PositiveBrand, PurchaseIntent, and AdAppeal) and has a lesser role in terms of product features as only one product feature variable, Successful, showed significant results (the other variables representing features were Quality, Experience, Reliable and Price). Thus, appearance has an influence on the overall product perception but does not influence how particular features of the brand are perceived. When variables were grouped into the factor groups found in the factor analysis, the features group showed significant differences, but alone, no differences were found. This shows

that weight did not play a role independently for the Feature factor group (i.e. Quality, Reliable, Success, and Price), but that the perception of the combination of features was influenced by the weight of the model.

The ads with an overweight model were not as appealing to viewers as the ads with a normal weight model, shown by the results of the univariate analysis of variance. Ad appeal is one of the first indicators of advertising effectiveness. Without initial appeal, many ads do not attract consumers and push them to the final purchase point. This also translates to purchase motivations, as purchase intent was heavily influenced by weight as results for this variable also showed significance of 0.005. Sales is the primary goal of advertising so advertisements need to produce desire and drive consumers into the store to buy the produce. In this case, the obese model did not produce the same level of desire as the normal weight model. This serves to further back up the importance of a model's body shape.

Although not statistically significant, the brunette ads on average had higher product perceptions than other two hair colors. This trend followed the same pattern as the pretest where the brunette model variation rated higher on average for hair color attractiveness. There was no clear result as to whether blonde or red hair produced the lowest results, which conflicts with the previously mentioned study by Clayson and Maughan (1986) that showed redheads were seen as less attractive than blondes. This conflict may be attributed to the particular shade of red hair used in the study.

No specific interaction between hair color and weight was found. This implies that no particular combination of hair color and weight produced higher product perceptions. The strength of the differences in weight can explain this result in that all combinations of hair color



with a normal weight produced higher results than all combinations of hair color with the obese weight factor.

Audience gender did not play a role in advertising for coffee. No significant differences were found between how males or females perceived the product. This may be influenced by the product itself, as coffee is a gender neutral coffee.

Weight has an impact on advertising. Although this concept is not new in itself, the product category emphasizes the importance of the finding. Coffee is a product that does not directly relate to weight, beauty or attractiveness, yet a model's weight still had a significant influence on product perception. This result conflicts with Kamins' (1990) research, which showed no difference was found between attractive and unattractive endorsers for products that are irrelevant to attractiveness.

Product category plays a large role in model selection as shown in the current study as well as those previously mentioned. Identification of the features that can influence perception is important in the consideration of model selection as well as how a company wants to portray its brand. In fashion, weight plays a role. This was found to be the case with coffee as well, but this may vary across product categories.

### **Limitations**

Although hair color did not provide significant results, the lack of differences may be specific to the stimuli utilized in the study. Different shades of the hair color used may produce different results. For instance, differences between dyed and natural red hair may have played a role in the results as the shade used resembled a dyed red hair rather than a more natural shade.

Other limitations of the study included Photoshop skills and time constraints. The primary author had never attempted to alter hair color and weight before this study. In addition, time constraints set by the timeline of the project were a limiting factor and caused the

simplification of factors. Additional time would have allowed for the fine-tuning of the overweight ad variation.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Future research in this area will help to build on the many aspects of appearance. Hair color in particular is one area in which it would be beneficial to expand. Further studies may be done to determine whether a particular shade of a hair color has a different influence on perception. For example, the red hair color can range from light to dark and can also be influenced by whether the color is natural or artificial. It may be valuable to conduct a similar test with multiples variations of the three variables used in the current research. Additional features could be tested including eye color, height, and alterations to one's appearance like tattoos and piercings. To truly test the influence of features on product perception across product categories, variables reflecting different product categories could be used. These may include products in the categories of goods versus services or beauty versus entertainment. It would also be valuable to see how the viewer's weight and hair color influences their perceptions.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study attempted to look at the influence of model appearance on product perception in advertising and to identify an ideal hair color and weight combination for advertising. This research verified that model appearance is important and can have a significant impact on how a consumer perceives a product. Although an ideal combination was not achieved, previous research on weight was confirmed with the result that weight does play an important role in advertising and model selection.

This research also showed how different elements and features of a model's appearance are influential in the overall perception of an advertised product. Model interviews and selection

are very important when developing advertising as even small aspects of appearance like weight can influence a product. The concept of attractiveness can be defined by more than the sum of the features as specific dimensions can play a role in determining whether someone is perceived as attractive. Further research may also show that even the tint of the hair color can prove to be influential in brand perception.

The largest takeaway from this particular study is the result that the weight of the model influenced perceptions of a neutral product like coffee. In today's age, beauty does sell most of the time, even with products unrelated to physical appearance. This finding is a sad reflection of our society but is important to consider when advertising. Advertising is all about what the consumer wants and what will best sell the product to the consumer. Increasing sales is the ultimate goal of all advertising so advertisers must do their part by driving consumers to the point of purchase. Great advertisers keep this in mind when planning out photo shoots and working with designers to edit final advertisements. In this case, the viewer of the advertisement, college students, preferred the coffee sold by a normal sized model. So what should a company like the Brewery Coffee do to sell its product? Feature a normal sized model to best sell its coffee.

APPENDIX

Appendix A: Ad Variations



**Appendix B: Survey Questions**

1. For quality control purposes, please enter the number in the caption above.

Use the above advertisement as a reference while answering the survey questions.

Rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements.

2. The brand in the ad is likely to possess the stated ad claims.

Strongly disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly agree      Not Applicable

                                                                                                            

3. I react favorably to the brand.

Strongly disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly agree      Not Applicable

                                                                                                            

4. I feel positively towards the ad.

Strongly disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly agree      Not Applicable

                                                                                                            

5. I dislike the brand.

Strongly disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly agree      Not Applicable

                                                                                                            

6. Rate how each term describes the product (For example, rate quality on a scale from very low quality to very high quality).

	Very Low	Low	Average	High	Very High
Quality	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Experience	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Reliable	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Successful	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Price	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

7. How likely are you to purchase the product?

- I will definitely purchase the product
- I will most likely purchase the product
- I might purchase the product.
- I will most likely not purchase the product.
- I will definitely not purchase the product.

8. Overall, how would you rate the appeal of the advertisement.

Not appealing      Somewhat not appealing      Neutral      Somewhat appealing      Very appealing

9. What is your gender?

Male

Female

10. What is your age?

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