

Hair and Hairstyles as Metaphors for Librarians

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Abstract:

What roles do hair and hairstyles play for librarians and their images? Long hair, short hair, or hair tied in a bun, there are stereotypical and traditional hairstyles that librarians may have because it can be a perceived expectation of a specific industry culture. But can we explore “hair” and “hairstyle” as other kinds of images or metaphors for our work and performance instead? This paper will explain how hair and hairstyles can be perceived as metaphors for change, adaptation, and risk-taking based on our experiences as librarians. To accommodate a librarian’s image, hair plays a critical role in showing what can be “acceptable” and “unacceptable” in the workplace. However, altering hairstyles can have profound effects on one’s self-image: developing a sense of confidence, conformity and complexity.

Keywords: Fashion, Hair, Image, Experience, Professionalism.

Introduction to Hair and ‘Hairstyles in Librarianship

From literature to poetry to movies, image stereotypes of librarians are constantly fraught with traditional looks, outfits and hairstyles. In the National Broadcasting Company’s (NBC) Saturday Night Live (SNL) show, a short comedy skit entitled “The Librarian” featured Margot Robbie, an Australian actress, as the librarian who takes off her “bun” to loosen her sexually self-repressed behavior and attract her students. This skit reinforces the perpetuation of the stereotype in popular culture.

In fact, research has shown that “there really has been little change in the image of the librarian in movies in the last 60 years” (Wells, 2013). Movies and films reinforce such

stereotypes and can have harmful effects to our profession-at-large. Look up any research today about librarians and hair, and you'll find the word "bun" in the study because that's how symbolic the "bun" is in research relating to librarian's stereotype (Luthmann, 2007). But what can we do to address these situations? Do we want to have complete makeovers and drastic haircuts? We may want to reframe our thinking about hair and hair styles differently. How about viewing hair as another kind of metaphor for adaptation, change and risk management?

In this paper, we explore how hair and hair styles can be perceived as an extension to one's appearance in adjusting to changing work environments in the profession. We all know that libraries are constantly undergoing major changes due to technological, economic, political, social and digital forces; how can we embrace these changes? For one's sense of fashion or appearance, hair is often neglected but plays a critical role in fostering change in such challenging times. The paper also features Dr. Jesus Lau, expert and professor of information literacy, and his experiences and thoughts on hair in the profession.

The Psychology of Changing Hair and Hairstyles

The psychological effects of hair and hairstyling are complicated and can be highly politicized; many librarians today have shown and embraced their tattoos, ear piercings and other expressions to combat the stereotype. When it comes to hair, librarians of color may face challenges that are not unique to our profession alone: microaggressions. People may even ask if they can "touch" the hair or question it; ask how the hair got to be formed this way; sometimes in a harmless manner but other times can lead to microaggression, discrimination, racism, and prejudice including hair bias. "Hair bias against natural or textured hair has a distinct impact on black women for whom textured hair is their 'normal.' To be clear, harms linked to racial bias against black women have been well documented – in health care, policing, education, and the workplace" (Macfarlane et al., 2017, p. 1). Lugo (2016), a children's librarian in Boston Public Library, shares her experiences working in Puerto Rico and writes that "anti-blackness [is] present in the Latino communities and how hair texture becomes the signifier of blackness" (p. 24). We can recognize that hair can be viewed as a symbolic instrument of exclusion and oppression based on cultural contexts.

By changing hairstyles, we also recognize that we have access to alter our images and perceptions to liberate ourselves from these harmful stereotypes. We have different hair styles to adapt to our own circumstances, for empowerment and to resist stereotypes. We are all familiar that the library can be a very conservative place to work depending on the location and the expectations from the manager/library. We are also aware that the community may also be conservative and have their own perceptions and expectations too. While altering hairstyles may be a challenge in some industries, the field of librarianship is growing, and we may need to take risks to show that we, as

librarians, are comfortable with these changes. There are numerous studies to show that people change their hairstyles may directly improve their self-esteem as well (Weitz, 2001).

In our experiences, we embrace new hairstyles to conform to the work environments; hair can be perceived as a metaphorical extension and expression of who we are, what we represent, what are our values are, and how we like to be perceived. In the following narrative, Dr. Jesus Lau shares his experiences and history with hair.

Jesus Lau: A Bit of Personal Hair History

Hair is an aspect of the human body that is malleable. Unlike other parts of the body, changing one's hair allows for a complete change in appearance. You may paint your face, but you may not cut it, or you may dress your body as you wish, however, it is difficult to trim it from one day to the next, unlike hair that can be cut, dyed, combed and decorated at will in a short amount of time. Hair frames our face, a window to our personality for those in our workplace, such as the library. In my case, hair has been part of my personal statement. However, I was not originally aware of its communication potential in my early years. During my childhood haircuts were my mother's domain. I think she honed her skills by practicing on me, the eldest child in the family. Haircuts were cut as short as possible so that they would last as long as possible. She normally administered hair cuts in a row, me and then my two other brothers. She usually performed this task on a Sunday morning before we departed for our weekly outing or before special events. I lived on a farm; there was no one available to cut our hair unless we could afford a trip to the city and the cost of a haircut. There were no special creams or gels during those early years, so I did not put anything in my hair except on Sundays when my mom would borrow my dad's hair perming liquid called Wildroot, a cream that he has used ever since I can remember--he is now in his 90's and still loyal to this perming cream.

My first hair cut with a barber was when I started junior high school--and was living in a town. I felt at the time that my mom's hairstyling was a bit out of fashion. It took some brave moments to tell my mother that I wanted to try a barber. This was certainly the beginning of my awareness of the importance of my hair. Those were times when men's hairstyles were conservative, standard for everyone in my small city. Later, during my university student years, when I was away from home I enjoyed the freedom of hair expression --for the first time I let my hair grow lengthy, not too long, just over the shoulders. It was the time of the Beatles' and the hippie style. Long hair was a challenge in my conservative neighbourhood. However, my parents were always supportive of my decisions. At the time my hair statement did not have anything to do with work, as I was only a library student page; my hair was more for flirting and following my friends' trends. I used shampoo for the first time in the early 1970's, a major hair breakthrough, and began drying my hair with a fan when time allowed, mainly on weekends before going out on a party. There were no proper hair dryers at

home at the time. They were imported and expensive for a public university student. Shampooing and fan-drying hair were major discoveries that would enhance the look of my strait black hair.

It was also time for more freedom, not only with hairstyling but also with dressing. The freedom to let my hair grow ended after I finished my Library Science Master's Degree in the United States and began hunting for a job. I had to comply with manly short hair styles in offices. Years passed without much change. I generally styled my hair in keeping with prevalent social standards until I began to grow it to subtle lengths and use gels to fix it in different ways in the 1990's. As winds of social change kept pushing boundaries, I would let a "fleco" grow. Throughout my life, I have experienced several different hair trends.

Thus, as stated, from my mom's countryside pragmatic haircuts, I migrated to the neighbourhood barber's cut in the city, a job done by men who simply cut your hair in smoky basic shops. Then "estéticas" (aesthetics) appeared in my university student years. Those hair salons were run by women who were certainly better at hairstyling than men, adding services such as washing your hair, then drying, combing and styling it. They were also preferred because they offered more fashionable haircuts. Barbers almost disappeared and were frequented by those who really wanted a classic and simple haircut, normally mature gentlemen. However, now barbers are back. They have sprung up all over and offer you something that was unbelievable years ago --men who can provide all sort of hair cuts, such as drawing a hairline, side head hair trimming, and other trimming niceties. Additionally these new barbers may offer you face cleaning, neck massage, bottled water, coffee, even a glass of wine with bar-like music. They really make your hair look perfect but force you to come back in two weeks if you really want to looked trimmed.

My current barber has changed my hairstyle following the latest short hair trends. He has a nightclub-type salon with black walls, even black chandeliers with a bar-style counter, sofas and big screen TVs with videos playing the latest foreign and national Billboard songs. Barbers are all men wearing youthful black t-shirts and jeans who master scissors and shavers, as well as hot towels for facials. A girl, the cashier, is behind the counter offering drinks such as sodas, bottled water and coffee. Getting my haircut has become a nightclub experience! What a great incentive to have my hair trimmed!

My current feeling about hair in a library or any workplace is that you have freedom, at least in the part of the world where I live, to create whatever metaphor you may want, at least in university libraries. Most libraries, at least university ones, do not have hairstyle policies. Some private academic libraries may have unwritten policies in regard to dress code and long hair and hair dye. My personal conclusion is that changing your hair allows you to make a change as often as you want. It allows us to communicate cleanness and a personal style statement. Hair is, as mentioned, an aspect

of my body that offers ample opportunities to communicate change, a fact that has helped contribute to my personal satisfaction as well as, I assume, to library customers, especially if you are among young library users.

Conclusion

We find that hair and hairstyle can play an intricate and intricate part of profession's identity and responsibility. Hair symbolizes health, energy, and life while hairstyle can be perceived as transformational; Dr. Jesus Lau shares his experiences and thoughts about how hair allows us to fully communicate our personal styles and satisfactions. Stereotypes may continue to isolate the image of a librarian as a singular one, however, we are now seeing that hair as an outward expression can change that; we need to remember that it's important to adjust into work environment as it continues to change rapidly. We can stay current, take risks and become comfortable with the environment. Like hair, we can make changes to our appearances and to conform the current settings of our libraries. To this end, we say that everyone should experiment with their hair, try on new styles and embrace change.

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