

The Societal Impact of Wigs

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Abstract

Throughout history wigs have had cultural value as symbols of power, health, and self-expression. Despite their historic popularity, wigs have traditionally been stigmatized in the United States due to their connection with aging, medical conditions, and hair thinning. However, 21st century American perspective toward wigs has become less stigmatized over time, a change reflective of expanded beauty standards and acceptance of people with different backgrounds and identities. Despite the positive trend towards perception of wigs, the methods of hair acquisition have historically been unscrupulous and remained poorly regulated up to present days. For centuries, wigs came from the hair of slaves and prisoners of war, or outsourced from developing countries. Raising public awareness of where wigs come from may pressure hair buyers to adopt more transparent, ethical practices. A fair-trade hair movement reminiscent of those in the coffee and diamond industries could be the vehicle for those changes.

Keywords: Wigs; History; Alopecia; Culture

Introduction

Throughout recorded history wigs have had cultural value as symbols of power, health, and self-expression. The earliest evidence of wigs traces to Ancient Egypt ca. 3400 BC, and since then cultures across the world have utilized wigs [1]. Despite historic popularity, wigs have traditionally been stigmatized in the United States due to their association with aging, disease, and hair thinning. In the past several decades, though, this stigma has been mitigated. Prominent black women have overtly worn wigs as fashion pieces and some members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ) community have embraced wigs for outward expression. As the national atmosphere has become more supportive of diversity and self-expression, these groups have normalized wigs as a popular, acceptable, chic accessory.

Wigs and social standing

Dating to the cultures of antiquity, wigs symbolized power and wealth. Over 5000 years ago, affluent members of Ancient Egyptian society first wore elaborate wigs to demonstrate their rank in a rigid social hierarchy [1]. Although wigs largely disappeared from Western Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire, wigs re-emerged as a defining accessory of the elite in 16th century Old Regime Europe [1]. Queen Elizabeth I of England and King Louis XIV of France were two prominent monarchs of the period who popularized wigs, making them household items amongst the upper-class [1]. During the French Revolution, however, wigs again fell out of fashion as a symbol of the aristocracy and by the 19th century men had ceased wearing wigs [1]. Remnants of the wigged aristocracy persist in formerly colonized nations around the world,

with judges in the former British territories of Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, and Zimbabwe still wearing white horsehair wigs.

Wigs and self-expression

Once an explicit symbol of wealth, wigs convey very different messages today. It is significant that the groups credited with re-popularizing the wig in the United States – black women and the LGBTQ community – are both historically marginalized. Understanding the modern symbolism of wigs requires conceptualization within the context of race and gender.

Historic contextualization of perspectives on African American beauty standards frames hair as deeply symbolic and powerful. Although hairstyle was an indication of social status in 15th century Africa, in American slavery this practice ended [2]. In the 20th century, the advent of hot combs and chemical straighteners created pressure for black women to adopt straight hair styles. Despite the end of slavery, black women in America were still not free to wear their hair without it dictating how they were perceived and the opportunities they were afforded [2]. In the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, wigs and weaves were popularized by black women in Hollywood including Tina Turner, Oprah, and Beyoncé. While some objected to the proliferation of wigs and weaves as counterproductive to fostering acceptance of natural hair, the prevailing attitude has since become supportive. Today, a new generation of eminent black women promote their natural hair alongside weaves, setting trends for women of all ethnic backgrounds. This represents an unequivocal expansion of narrowly defined, hegemonic beauty standards.

Wigs have also played an important role in LGBTQ and drag culture. Cross-dressing is a form of self-expression that is an important part of many people's identity. As LGBTQ and drag communities have trailblazed progressive changes in cultural tolerance and acceptance of diversity, wigs have become a recognizable symbol associated with this movement. A new HBO television series exploring drag culture and identity is even entitled "Wig", clearly underscoring the ever evolving and enduring power of hair as a symbol.

Wigs and health

Healthy hair is a sign of youth and health, a perception that has motivated people throughout history, including Phoenicians, Assyrians, and Greeks, to conceal balding with wigs [1]. In ancient Rome, men and women used wigs to camouflage hair loss, which was considered unattractive and unhealthy [1]. Later, when 16th century Europe was stricken by a syphilis epidemic causing hair loss, the sick wore wigs to hide the effects [3]. Today, modern medicine and decreases in infectious disease mean wigs more often conceal signs of cancer treatment, alopecia areata, and androgenetic alopecia.

For anybody with alopecia, either due to age or chemotherapy, wigs (also referred to as cranial prostheses) offer privacy and a tangible connection to their healthy self. Beyond disguising disease, wigs are important for the psychological well-being of these patients. The American Cancer Society recognizes this and provides thorough guidelines for choosing, caring for, fitting, and styling wigs. Cranial prostheses are so integral to cancer patients that their costs are often covered by insurance companies and hair donation organizations frequently subsidize wigs for individuals unable to afford them [4]

Wigs and exploitative sourcing

Unfortunately, the methods of hair acquisition are historically unscrupulous. For centuries, wigs came from the hair of slaves or prisoners of war. In 20th century America, hair dealers on Ellis Island exploitatively purchased hair from poor immigrants until the practice was banned in the early 1900s [5]. Although the wig industry has grown into a multibillion-dollar industry and now incorporates donations, it is still largely unregulated and some make accusations of continued unethical practices [5].

Ritualistic hair cutting is an element in many religious ceremonies and a common source of wig hair past and present. In 19th century Europe, hair from tonsuring ceremonies in churches and convents was purchased to make wigs [5]. Hair shaving as fulfillment of religious vows is frequently practiced by members of South Indian temples, with the long, valuable hair later sold by the temples to wig makers [5].

Hair traders typically work in poorly developed nations where hair can be purchased cheaply. In the 1960s, South Korea was a popular location for hair procurement and wig manufacturing. However, as the country developed China became a cheaper, more

attractive destination for business. More recently, Chinese economic growth has pushed the hair sourcing wig industry to countries like Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, Mongolia, and Myanmar [5]. Women from these areas are only compensated an average of \$3 - 5 for their hair, while their wigs are sold in salons across the world for as much as \$1000 - 3000 [5]. The limited economic opportunity in these areas means it is not uncommon for women and children to be attacked for and robbed of their hair, often at knife or gunpoint [5]. With no mechanism to trace the source of hair used in wigs, consumers remain unaware of these practices.

Conclusion

The unique purpose wigs serve means they have evolved throughout history as relevant symbols of health, social standing, and self-expression. The 21st century American perspective toward wigs is less stigmatized than ever before, a change reflective of expanded beauty standards and acceptance of people with different backgrounds and identities. Instead of tools to hide imperfections and disease, wigs are being redefined as accessories for expression of personality and individual beauty. Hair donation organizations also signify progressive changes in the hair sourcing industry despite continued concerns about exploitation of vulnerable people. Public awareness of where wigs come from may pressure hair buyers to adopt more transparent, ethical practices. A fair-trade hair movement reminiscent of those in the coffee and diamond industries could be the vehicle for those changes.

Key Message: Historically wigs demonstrated power and health; recently, however, wigs have emblemized progressive interests promoting equality.

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