**ORIGINAL PAPER**

# Perceptions of Victims of Street Harassment: Effects of Nationality and Hair Color in Vietnam

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## Abstract

Very little research has investigated how a woman's appearance affects the perceptions and judgments of her as a victim of harassment. This study focuses on how Vietnamese participants evaluate victims of street harassment based on nationality (Vietnamese vs. American) and hair color (dark/brown vs. light/blonde). After randomly viewing a blonde or dark-haired Vietnamese or White American target and reading her story of street harassment, participants rated her perceived threat, negative emotions, benign coping, self-blame, self-esteem, and frequency of street harassment. The results align with the hypotheses that blondes will be judged to experience less threat, negative emotions, and self-blame, but to experience more benign coping, self-esteem, and frequency of street harassment. This main effect for hair color, however, was qualified by significant interactions of these dependent measures suggesting that the blonde Vietnamese target was especially likely to not experience street harassment as negative. This research suggests that hair color, much like clothing and makeup, is used to judge women's experiences of street harassment.

**Keywords** Street harassment · Vietnam · #MeToo · Stranger harassment · Hair color

## Introduction

With the advent of #MeToo, women around the globe have raised their hands and tweeted #MeToo to share their experiences with gender-based violence ranging from harassment to assault. Understanding encounters with gender-based violence in different cultures around the world can help to illuminate the similarities and differences in women's experiences. Street harassment is one type of gender-based violence, and defined by Hutson and Krueger (2019) as "an intrusion, often by a person

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unknown to the target, which may take a variety of forms, ranging from remarks on physical appearance to sexual touch to brutal physical assaults" (p. 770). Street harassment has been studied in a variety of countries around the world, but no studies have been conducted in Asian countries.

Research on street harassment has been conducted in many different countries including the United States (e.g. Fairchild and Rudman 2008; Kearl 2014; Davidson et al. 2015, 2016; Saunders et al. 2017), the United Kingdom (e.g. Betts et al. 2019), Australia (e.g. Johnson and Bennet 2015; Bastomski and Smith 2017; Fileborn 2018), Sweden (Mellgren et al. 2017), Spain (Berenguer et al. 2016; Moya-Garófano et al. 2018), Morocco (Berenguer et al. 2016; Chafai 2017), Mexico (Campos et al. 2017), Peru (Alcalde 2018), Egypt (Henry 2017), and India (Madan and Nalla 2016; Borker 2017; Adur and Jha 2018). These studies find similar experiences among women in prevalence and response to street harassment despite the cultural differences between these countries. For example, in Peru, Alcalde (2018) focused on migrants who were returning to Lima. Her participants expressed fear for their safety in public spaces due to repeated experiences of street harassment. Similarly, Madan and Nalla (2016) found that Indian women also feared for their safety due to the prevalence of street harassment, especially in terms of harassment on public transportation. In Morocco, Chafai (2017) analyzed women's status in a patriarchal society and found that women's low status enables and sustains street harassment and gender-based violence. The international research on street harassment explicitly reflects Kissling's (1991) assertion that street harassment is a form of sexual terrorism.

As a form of sexual terrorism, street harassment keeps women in a state of fear in public spaces. As sexual terrorism, the negative effects of street harassment come not just from the initial harassment, but from the continued injury through the judgment of perceivers. While #MeToo, encourages women to share their experiences, the listening audience is not always friendly and understanding. Fileborn (2018), for example, found that some of her female participants reported being dismissed or chided by older women when disclosing their experiences of street harassment. In addition, her participants also reported that the men in their lives often did not take their concerns about street harassment seriously, and did not understand why catcalls upset them. It is reasonable to ask if factors related to women's appearance and behavior can alter perceivers' sympathy and judgment.

Very little research has investigated how a woman's appearance affects the perceptions and judgments of her as a victim of harassment. Pryor and Day (1988) manipulated a target's appearance in relation to experiences of sexual harassment in the workplace. They found that a sexy woman was less likely to be seen as harassed in comparison to an unsexy woman, who was clearly viewed as having been harassed. In other words, observers rated the behaviors as harassment when they occurred to an unsexy woman, but not when they occurred to the sexy woman. The authors speculate that the reason for this finding is that sexy women (by acting, dressing, and/or projecting sexuality) may be viewed as seeking male attention and thus may be thought to have provoked the harassing behavior. In a rare experimental study on street harassment, Fairchild (2016) found that perceivers of street harassment were likely to judge victims based on their appearance. Specifically, women

who dressed in a sexy manner compared to women who dressed casually were more likely to be blamed for and seen as deserving of the harassment they received. These two studies suggest that variety of appearance factors (clothing, makeup, hair) and behaviors may influence the judgment of a victim of harassment including whether she was harassed or not, and if so, whether she deserved it. In the current study, instead of manipulating a woman's appearance based on clothing or makeup, we sought to change a woman's hair color.

## The Effect of Hair Color on Perceptions of Women

Women's hair color may have an important role in people's perceptions of the women's physical or behavioral attractiveness. For example, Feinman and Gill (1978) suggest that men prefer women lighter coloration, such as blonde hair, and men also found these women more attractive than women with darker hair.

Indeed, many research studies have found that women with blonde hair are perceived as more approachable than women with darker hair. A study by Swami and Barrett (2011) found that a female confederate, after going blonde, was approached more frequently in the club by men and was given the prime table at the restaurants. Similarly, Guéguen (2012) found that women with blonde hair were approached more significantly by men than women with black and red hair. Guéguen and Lamy (2009) found that female hitchhikers with blonde hair got more male drivers to stop and offer a ride than women with other hair colors. Research by Lynn (2009) found that waitresses with blonde hair got more tips. This set of studies suggests that women are judged based on hair color. It is reasonable to assume that some women may purposefully change their hair color to achieve the benefits of lighter hair color, such as increased attractiveness.

Yet lighter hair color is not purely beneficial. Participants in Swami and Barrett 's (2011) study rated women with blonde hair as more needy, whereas they rated women with brunette hair as more intelligent. Swami and Barrett (2011) postulate that the perception of blonde women as more needy may reduce men's fear of rejection, which may encourage men to more often approach blonde women in order to increase their feelings of dominance. While no studies exist to compare rates of street harassment between women with blonde and darker hair, it would be reasonable to assume from Swami and Barrett's (2011) research that blonde women may receive more harassment than brunette women. If men are less fearful of rejection, view blonde women as more attractive and needy, it would follow that blonde women would receive potentially more street harassment. This may be particularly true of women who appear to have purposefully changed their hair color.

## Current Study

While no current research exists on Asian cultures and experiences of street harassment, we sought to assess the impact of women's hair color on judgments of street harassment in Vietnam because for a Vietnamese woman to change her hair from natural black/brown to blonde is a significant and striking change. In line with Pryor

and Day (1988), a Vietnamese woman bleaching her hair blonde may be viewed as seeking more male attention.

We hypothesized that a light/blonde hair victim will be viewed as less of a victim than a black/brown hair victim. Research that blondes are viewed as more attractive and needy suggests that it is conceivable that women who bleach their hair from dark to blonde will be viewed as attention seeking and thus perceived to experience street harassment as less offensive. Specifically, we predicted that a Vietnamese target who has light/blonde hair color will be perceived to experience less threat and negative emotion when street harassed than a dark-haired Vietnamese target or blonde and dark-haired White American targets. Because she is drastically altering her appearance, the blonde Vietnamese target will be perceived to view street harassment as benign, be unlikely to self-blame, and be more prone to experiencing street harassment.

## Methods

### Participants

One hundred and thirty-seven Vietnamese participants (75% female) participated in the study. Vietnamese participants were recruited in Vietnam over the summer 2017.

### Materials

#### Nationality and Hair Color Manipulation

A range of images of young 20-something White American and Vietnamese girls were pre-tested for equivalency in attractiveness and age. The selected images were rated as slightly above-average in attractiveness, but equivalent. Then the hair color on the images was altered using Photoshop to lighten the Vietnamese target's hair to blonde and darken the White American's blonde hair to dark brown. The altered and original images were tested again for attractiveness. Pre-test participants rated the four images as equally attractive. Pre-test participants were unable to tell the hair color had been altered.

#### Street Harassment Narrative

While viewing the picture of the target, participants were given a story that she had presumably written about a recent experience. The story describes the target dressed in casual clothing and headed to a restaurant to meet with friends after work. The key street harassment portion featured a catcall with mildly threatening escalation. The narrative was specifically worded to minimize the response and emotional reaction of the victim. The key portion of the narrative read:

> After arriving at the restaurant, I noticed a man smoking a cigarette out front who was looking at me. I walked toward the entrance still excited to see

my friends. Then the man said "Hey beautiful! How are you doing tonight, sweetheart?" I hesitated for a moment and then I tried to walk around him, but he stepped in my way. He continued to ask me questions like "what's your name?" and "what, you too good for me?" I looked down at the ground and waited for him to stop and let me through. Eventually, the man gave up and moved aside, and I entered the restaurant.

## Perceived Responses of Target

Following the picture and story, the participants were instructed to use their knowledge of the target to predict her emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reactions. The participants rated the perceived threat the target experienced by rating on a Likert scale from 1 (not at all) to 6 (very much) how likely the target would label the situation with terms including: dangerous, safe, threatening, fun. The 15 items were averaged into the Threat Scale with high scores indicating a more threatening situation ($\alpha = .97$).

On the same Likert scale, participants rated the target's emotional reaction (i.e. happy, sad, disgusted, angry, complimented, nervous). These 10 items were averaged into the Negative Emotion Scale with high scores indicating more negative emotion ($\alpha = .97$).

Participants rated the target's thoughts and behaviors in reaction to the situation on the same six-point Likert scale. The thoughts and reactions were taken from the Coping with Stranger Harassment Scale (Fairchild and Rudman 2008). The items represent coping strategies classified as self-blame and benign (see Fairchild and Rudman 2008 for items). Items were averaged to create the Benign Coping Scale (thinking the situation is no big deal, $\alpha = .71$) and the Self-Blame Scale (blaming self for the situation, $\alpha = .97$). High scores indicate the name of the scale.

Participants then rated the target's self-esteem using Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale. The 10 items on the scale were presented to the participant with the instructions to respond as they believed the target would rate her own self-esteem. A four-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree' was used. Items were summed to create a scale from 10 to 40 with high scores indicating higher self-esteem ($\alpha = .92$).

Finally, participants rated how frequently they believed the target experienced street harassment. Street harassment experiences were rated on a six-point Likert scale from 'not very likely' to 'extremely likely'. Participants were instructed to rate how likely they believe the target was to experience the following based on the narrative: "sexist remarks or behaviors from a stranger", "crude and offensive sexual remarks, jokes, or actions from a stranger", "seductive behavior, remarks, or 'come ons' from a stranger", "unwanted sexual attention or interaction from a stranger", and "catcalls, whistles, or stares from a stranger". These items were drawn from Fairchild and Rudman's (2008) stranger harassment questionnaire. The items were averaged into the Street Harassment Experiences Scale ($\alpha = .95$).

## Procedure

The survey was initially constructed in English. It was translated into Vietnamese by the co-author, who is fluent in Vietnamese and English. The survey was then back-translated into English by an independent translator, fluent in Vietnamese and English and who had no knowledge of the research or hypotheses. The original English survey and the back-translated English survey were judged to be equivalent. The English and Vietnamese versions of the study were approved by the IRB.

The study was administered in Vietnam via an online survey presented through Qualtrics. After agreeing to the informed consent, participants were randomly assigned to read a short story of a street harassment experience accompanied by a picture of a White or Vietnamese woman with either light or dark hair. After reading the story and viewing the accompanying picture, the participants responded to a survey that asked them to think about the woman in the story and respond to the scales in the order listed above.

Thirty-three participants were randomly assigned to the image of the blonde White American target, and another 33 were randomly assigned to the dark-haired White American target. Thirty-five participants were randomly assigned to the blonde Vietnamese target, while another 36 were randomly assigned to the dark-haired Vietnamese target.

## Results

A 2×2 between-subjects ANOVA was conducted to examine the connection between victim's nationality (Vietnamese vs. White American) and hair color (black/brown vs. light/blonde) on the dependent variables (threat, negative emotions, passive coping, active coping, benign coping, self-blame, self-esteem, and street harassment experiences). We predicted that the blonde target would be rated as experiencing less threat, negative emotions, and self-blame. In addition, the blonde target would be rated as using more benign coping and to experience more street harassment overall. Further, we predicted there would be an interaction between nationality and hair color, such that the blonde Vietnamese target would exemplify the hypotheses about blondes.

## Threat

No significant main effect for nationality was found, $F (1, 133) = 1.40$, $p = .24$. There was a significant main effect for hair color, $F (1, 133) = 132.14$, $p < .01$, partial eta squared $= .50$. Blonde targets ($M = 2.43$, $SD = 1.21$) were perceived to view the harassment as less threatening than dark-haired targets ($M = 4.62$, $SD = 1.22$). This is qualified by a marginally significant interaction, $F (1, 133) = 3.76$, $p = .055$, partial eta squared $= .03$. The dark-haired Vietnamese target was perceived to view the

**Table 1** Interaction means and standard deviations for all dependent variables

| Hair color | Vietnamese M (SD) | White American M (SD) |
|---|---|---|
| | *Threat* | |
| Light/blonde | 2.36 (1.01) | 2.50 (1.24) |
| Dark/brown | 4.91 (1.26) | 4.32 (.87) |
| | *Negative emotions* | |
| Light/blonde | 1.95 (1.17) | 2.38 (1.28) |
| Dark/brown | 4.77 (1.23) | 4.40 (.91) |
| | *Benign coping* | |
| Light/blonde | 4.14 (1.09) | 3.71 (.94) |
| Dark/brown | 2.61 (.88) | 2.80 (.90) |
| | *Self-blame* | |
| Light/blonde | 1.41 (.82) | 1.67 (1.11) |
| Dark/brown | 4.60 (1.90) | 3.11 (1.26) |
| | *Self-esteem* | |
| Light/blonde | 36.49 (5.44) | 29.94 (3.70) |
| Dark/brown | 27.06 (3.63) | 26.50 (2.36) |
| | *Street harassment experiences* | |
| Light/blonde | 5.06 (1.36) | 4.44 (.97) |
| Dark/brown | 2.62 (1.34) | 2.72 (.77) |
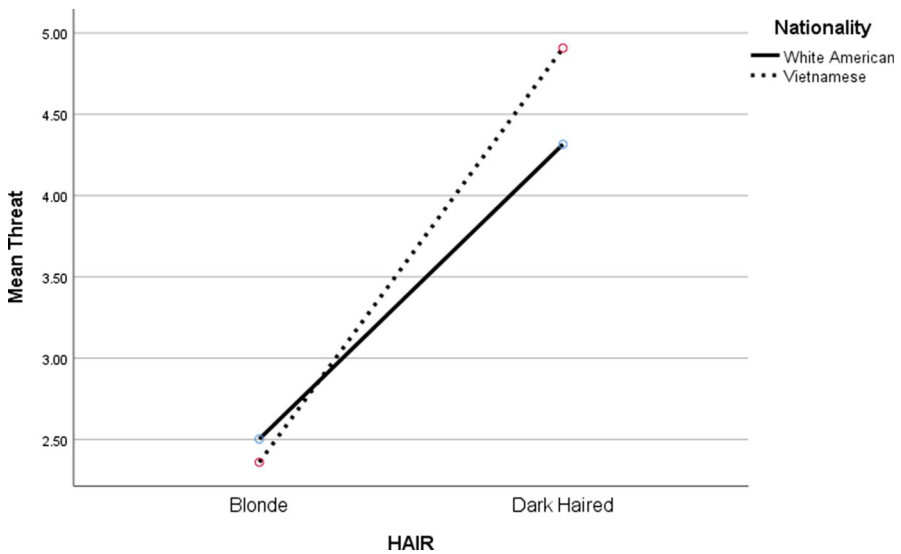


**Fig. 1** Mean threat ratings for targets based on nationality and hair color

harassment as the most threatening, and the blonde Vietnamese target as the least. See Table 1 and Fig. 1.

## Negative Emotions

No significant main effect for nationality was found, $F(1, 131) = .02$, $p = .88$. There was a significant main effect for hair color, $F(1, 131) = 146.24$, $p < .01$, partial eta squared $= .53$. Blonde targets ($M = 2.16$, $SD = 1.24$) were perceived to experience less negative emotion than dark-haired targets ($M = 4.59$, $SD = 1.10$). This is qualified by a significant interaction, $F(1, 131) = 4.02$, $p = .05$, partial eta squared $= .03$. The blonde Vietnamese target was perceived as experiencing the least negative emotion compared to the dark-haired Vietnamese, who was perceived to experience the most negative emotion. See Table 1 and Fig. 2.

## Benign Coping

No significant main effect for nationality was found, $F(1, 133) = .49$, $p = .49$. There was a significant main effect for hair color, $F(1, 133) = 55.27$, $p < .01$, partial eta squared $= .29$. Blonde targets ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 1.03$) were perceived as viewing the harassment as more benign than dark-haired targets ($M = 2.71$, $SD = .89$). There was a marginally significant interaction, $F(1, 133) = 3.63$, $p = .06$, partial eta squared $= .03$. Blonde Vietnamese target was perceived to view the harassment as the most benign compared to the dark-haired Vietnamese target who viewed it as the least benign. See Table 1 and Fig. 3.
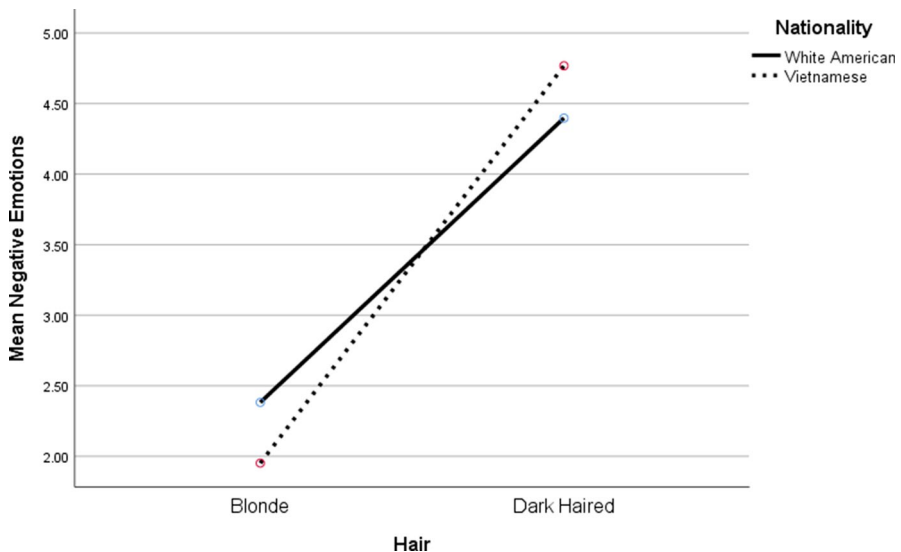


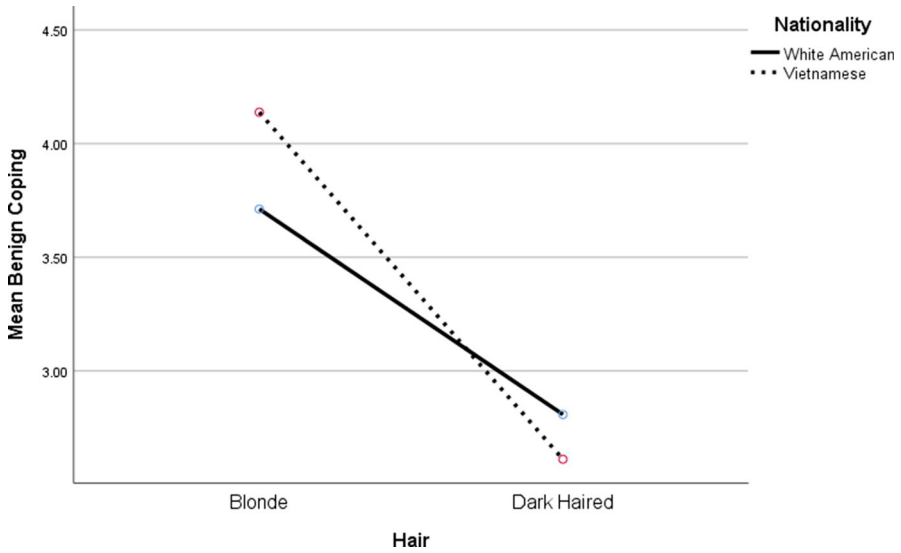Fig. 2 Mean negative emotions ratings for targets based on nationality and hair color

**Fig. 3** Mean benign coping ratings for targets based on nationality and hair color

## Self-Blame

A significant main effect for nationality was found, F (1, 133)=7.28, $p$=.008, partial eta squared=.05. The Vietnamese target (M=3.03, SD=2.17) was perceived as more likely to self-blame than the White American target (M=2.40, SD=1.39). There was also a significant main effect for hair color, F (1, 133)=102.14, $p$ < .01,
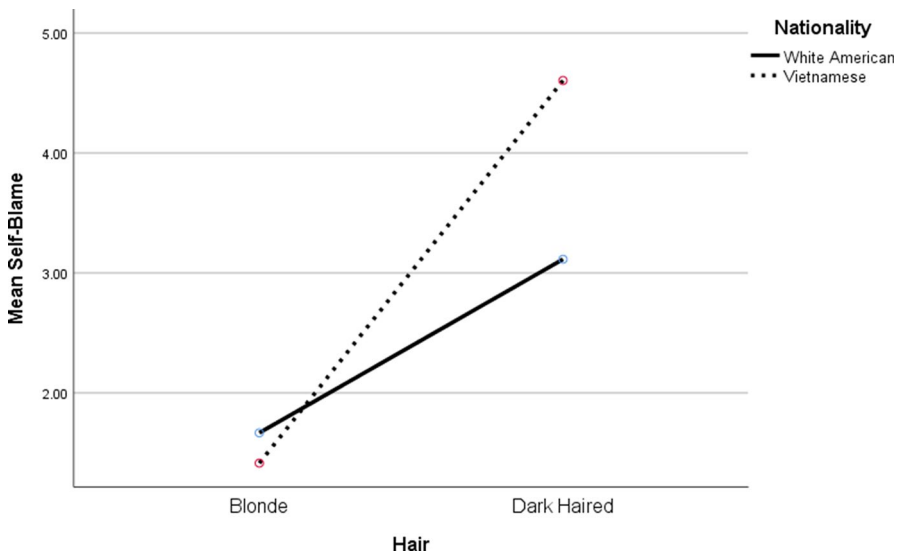


**Fig. 4** Mean self-blame ratings for targets based on nationality and hair color

partial eta squared = .43. The dark-haired target (M = 3.89, SD = 1.78) was perceived as more likely to self-blame than the blonde target (M = 1.53, SD = .97). These main effects were qualified by a significant interaction, F (1, 133) = 14.43, $p < .01$, partial eta squared = .10. The blonde Vietnamese target was perceived to be the least likely to blame herself for the harassment, whereas the dark-haired Asian target was the most likely to blame herself. See Table 1 and Fig. 4.

### Self-Esteem

Self-esteem was measured with the Rosenberg self-esteem scale. Higher scores indicate higher self-esteem with scores ranging from 10 to 40. A significant main effect for nationality was found, F (1, 133) = 27.00, $p < .01$, partial eta squared = .17. Vietnamese targets (M = 31.77, SD = 6.61) were perceived to have higher self-esteem than White American targets (M = 28.25, SD = 3.54) There was also a significant main effect for hair color, F (1, 133) = 88.52, $p < .01$, partial eta squared = .40. Blonde targets (M = 33.31, SD = 5.69) were perceived as having higher self-esteem than dark-haired targets (M = 26.79, SD = 3.08). These main effects were qualified by a significant interaction, F (1, 133) = 19.18, $p < .01$, partial eta squared = .13. The blonde Vietnamese target was perceived to have the highest self-esteem and dark-haired White American the lowest. See Table 1 and Fig. 5.

### Street Harassment Experiences

No main effect for nationality was found, F (1, 133) = 1.73, $p = .19$. There was a significant main effect for hair color, F (1, 133) = 112.30, $p < .01$, partial eta



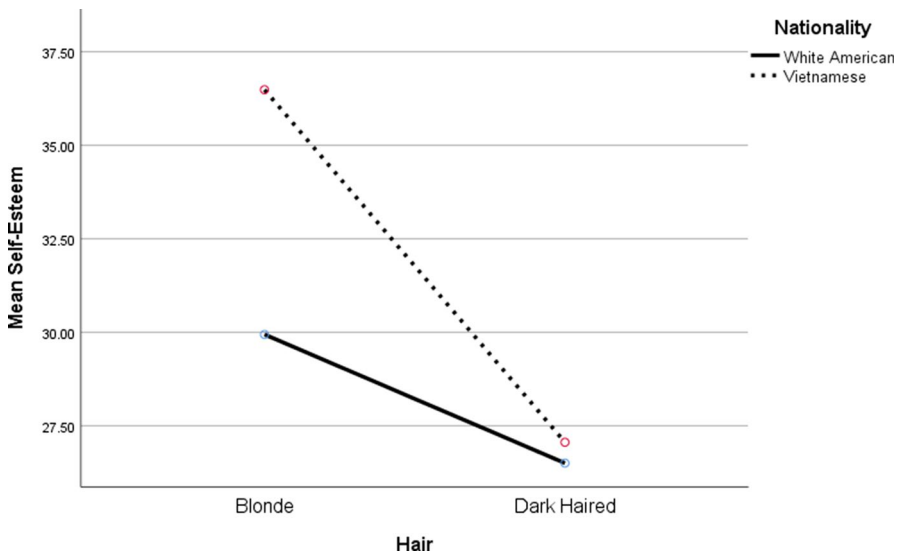Fig. 5 Mean self-esteem ratings for targets based on nationality and hair color

squared = .46. The blonde target (M = 4.76, SD = 1.22) was perceived to more frequently experience street harassment than the dark-haired target (M = 2.67, SD = 1.10). There was no significant interaction, F (1, 133) = 3.42, $p$ = .07. See Table 1.

## Discussion

The current research adds to the psychological literature by suggesting that hair color is a factor that influence how perceivers characterize street harassment victims. Significant main effects for hair color were found on all dependent measures in support of our hypotheses. The blonde target was perceived to find the street harassment in the story less threatening and to elicit less negative emotions than the dark-haired target. These perceptions fit with the findings on the other measures. Because they were perceived to experience less threat and negative emotions, the blonde targets were perceived as more likely to brush the harassment off as no big deal (benign coping) and as less likely to self-blame. While the blonde target was perceived to experience more street harassment in general, she was also seen as having higher self-esteem than the dark-haired target. It is important to remember that the blonde and dark-haired targets for each nationality were the same young woman. These results demonstrate that merely changing her hair color changed the perception of her much like other research on hair color demonstrates (e.g. Swami and Barrett 2011).

Most interesting among the results are the interactions between nationality and hair color on threat, negative emotions, benign coping, self-blame, and self-esteem. We hypothesized that the blonde Vietnamese target, whose hair color change from dark brown to light blonde is the most drastic, will be viewed as the least bothered by street harassment. Indeed, the interactions showed that the blonde Vietnamese target was perceived to be the least threatened, experience the least negative emotion, be most likely to think the harassment is no big deal (benign coping), be least likely to self-blame, and have the highest self-esteem. In line with the research that demonstrates that blonde women are more approachable (e.g. Swami and Barrett 2011), our participants presumed that the blonde Vietnamese target experience the most street harassment, even if the interaction was not significant. This research suggests that drastically changing one's natural black/brown hair color to an eye-catching blonde may be viewed as a form of attention-seeking, much like sexy clothing and makeup (e.g. Pryor and Day 1988).

Finally, there were no main effects for nationality on threat, negative emotions, benign coping, and street harassment experiences. On all of these measures, the Vietnamese and White American target were viewed to behave and react similarly. These findings hint at the universality of street harassment experiences such that Vietnamese and American woman are perceived to react in similar ways. Interesting differences were found on self-blame and self-esteem. Overall, the Vietnamese participants viewed the Vietnamese target as having higher self-esteem than the White American target, but also more likely to self-blame for harassment. However, the significant interaction complicates this finding and will be discussed below.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

One limitation of the current research is that we did not assess women's own experiences of street harassment. The participants' responses are in line with how women typically respond to street harassment based on the street harassment literature, but we do not know exactly how frequently Vietnamese women experience street harassment or their preferred coping mechanisms (passive vs. active, benign or self-blame). While the lack of significant difference between the perceived behavior and reactions of the Vietnamese and American targets suggest a universality in street harassment experiences, future research is needed to expand the literature and knowledge on street harassment in Asian cultures.

Another limitation is that we did not directly assess victim blame (like Fairchild 2016) and attention-seeking. Our results do not indicate whether the participants assign more victim blame to the Vietnamese or White American target, blonde or dark-haired target, or a combination. It is an assumption that the blonde target would be assigned more victim blame as she is presumed to feel less threat and negative emotions while viewing the harassment as no big deal. Having high self-esteem and experiencing street harassment more frequently also suggest that the blonde target is used to (and possibly likes and seeks) this type of male attention. Future research is needed to fully explore these ideas. Are blonde women viewed as attention-seeking and receiving more enjoyment from male attention? And thus if they received severely harassing attention, would they be victim blamed?

This last question speaks to another limitation of the current research. The narrative presented to the participants represented a mild to moderate form of harassment. The harasser's actions were annoying, but not overly threatening or violent. Future research should investigate manipulating the severity of the harassment to explore how that affects perceptions of the victim.

Finally, there is an unexplored element to this study that warrants future research. The significant interactions on self-blame and self-esteem show an interesting mixing of racial expectations and appearance stereotypes. The Vietnamese dark-haired target is perceived as stereotypically female Asian (i.e. modest and submissive) with the highest perceived self-blame and lowest perceived self-esteem. Interestingly, the hair color change trumps the Asian stereotype of modesty with the blonde Vietnamese target perceived to have the lowest self-blame and the highest self-esteem. These results suggest that women are judged based on their appearance, and that stereotypes about blondes seeking attention exist cross-culturally. Future research is needed to further elaborate the connection between racial and appearance stereotypes.

**Conclusion**

Taken together, these results provide new and unique insight into street harassment. This is the first study to investigate street harassment in Vietnam. While we did not assess the participants' own experiences with street harassment, their responses on how the target women would perceive harassment fit with other research on how

women do experience street harassment. The results suggest that women will be judged for their experiences of street harassment based on appearance factors such as their hair color. In line with the cliché that "blondes have more fun," our participants perceived blonde women as experiencing less negativity when being street harassed.

## Compliance with Ethical Standards

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