

THE STRAITS TIMES

FOR SUBSCRIBERS

Shaving head for charity helped me face common fear of losing hair one day

Hair loss was the top concern among over 44 per cent of Singapore respondents in a survey on beauty in 2022.



Denise Chong



Participants, some of whom were seen here at Hair for Hope in 2023, were encouraged to make a statement about being bald. PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO

UPDATED SEP 3, 2023, 5:56 AM SGT

I had been nervous about shaving my head completely, though it didn't feel like a matter of life and death at the time. So I was surprised by the years of avoiding hairdressers and the revenge hair-growing that followed the shave. My last full haircut – the shaving – was done for a cancer charity event in 2019 (if you didn't count the trim I later had to stop an overgrown crew cut from turning into an epic mullet).

A couple of weeks ago, I finally had a full haircut. However, despite the years of revenge hair-growing, I'm glad to have shaved off my hair to support a good cause, and for inadvertently confronting one of the anxieties in life about losing hair from illness or ageing.

Hair loss is a big deal to many

Hair seems like such a vain and superficial thing to talk about, but the roots of its emotional and social importance run deep in our heads, hearts and culture.

Hair loss was the top concern among more than 44 per cent of Singapore respondents in a survey on beauty in 2022, according to the Statista website. This was more than those concerned about damaged or dry hair.

Over in America, the industry of hair-loss products is expected to be worth US\$5.4 billion (S\$7.3 billion) in 2027, a 50 per cent jump from 2020, according to one estimate reported by The New York Times.

However, historically, baldness was treated with neutrality, as a regular part of daily life (at least, for men), argued Mr Glen Jankowski, a social psychologist with a research interest in balding. It affected "more than 50 per cent of men".

He said that balding men were idealised in art historically, and seen among religious figures, and it was the mass marketing of anti-balding products in the 20th century that changed how baldness was seen.

"It transformed the perception of baldness from a benign aesthetic to a disadvantageous disease in need of 'cure,'" he wrote in an article published in The Conversation.

As for women, the stakes are arguably higher. It is harder to think of balding women being idealised in art historically in the same way as bald men were.

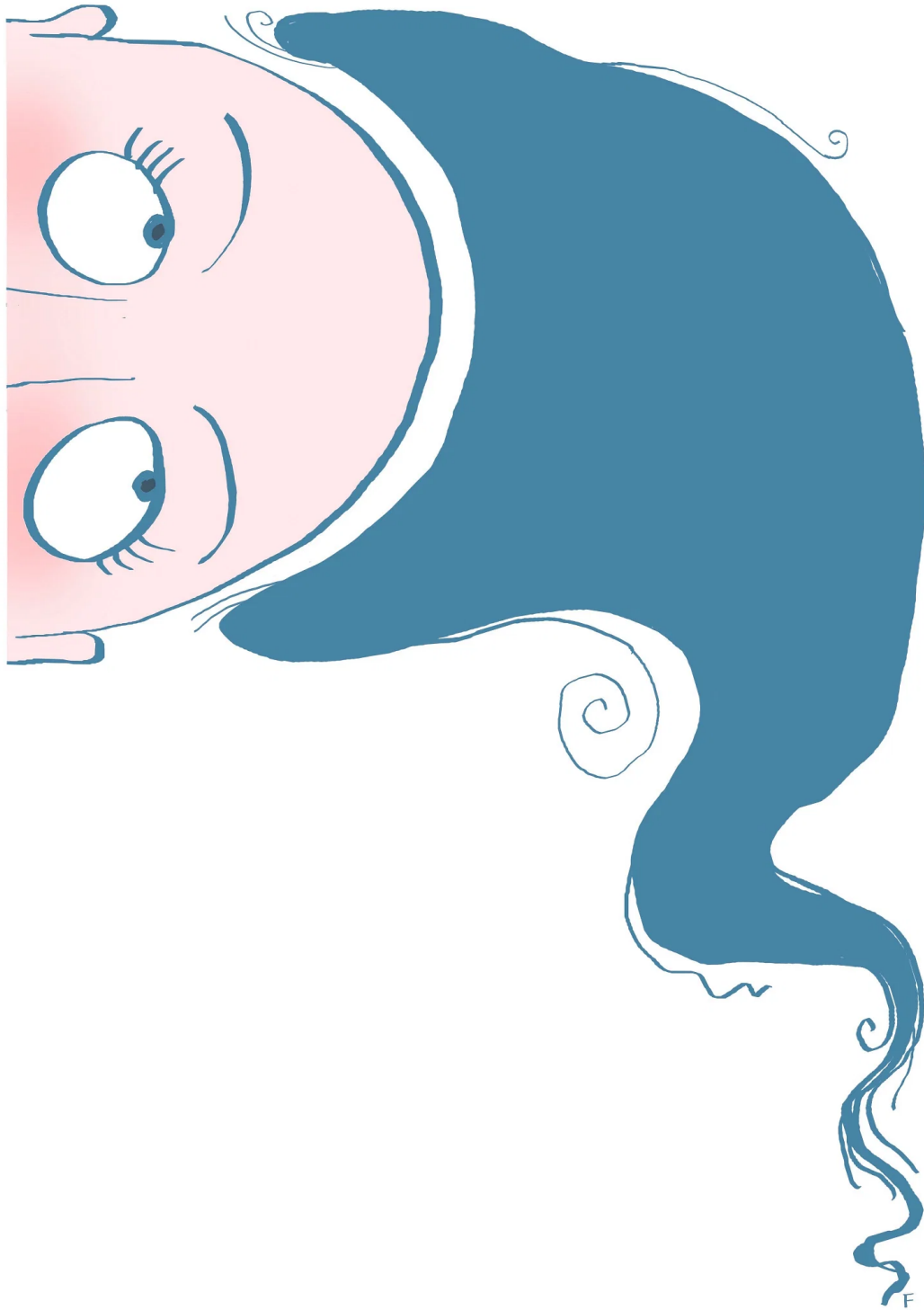
We more readily recall images of fuller hairstyles, from flowing silken locks and elaborate hairdos to Asian ghost-style hair seemingly alive with supernatural power.

Today, shaving off your hair as a woman still sends a loaded message.

"In the social media age, something like hair becomes a part of your brand," Professor Tanisha Ford said in The New York Times. She's a professor of history at the Graduate Centre of the City University of New York. The bare female head, for example, is often read as a statement of "radical politics and transgressing gender norms", she added.

Hair, or the absence of it, is one of the things we use to form first impressions of one another.

I wondered what impressions strangers had of me.



ST ILLUSTRATION: MANNY FRANCISCO

MORE ON THIS TOPIC

[How did baldness go from acceptable to alarming?](#)

[Hair loss common among those infected with Covid-19](#)

Strange looks

After I had shaved off my hair, I found that strangers in the street seemed to react to me differently from when I had long hair.

It was rather subtle and strange to me.

They looked quickly away or cast their eyes more at the top of my head than at my face or any other part of my body.

They didn't try to come too close or jostle past me while walking along the pavement like they did before.

It felt strange that a bare head seemed to confer some sort of protection upon me. I felt like I was one of the boys, especially when I was wearing shorts.

But when I was wearing a skirt or dress, did strangers struggle to place me in the two normative genders of our society, or think I was transgressing such norms?

Did they think I was part of an organisation that required a shaved head and that I gave off an otherworldly or threatening vibe?

Did they think I was seriously ill?

One of the common short-term side effects of cancer treatment is hair loss, which may affect the confidence of children with cancer, said the website of the Hair for Hope event that I had my head shaved for. It is the Children's Cancer Foundation's flagship fund-raiser.

It added: "Make your bald statements to be part of the community to tell children with cancer that it is okay to be bald."

A beneficiary said in a 2022 Straits Times report that she recalled feeling self-conscious after enduring "weird looks" from friends and members of the public when she lost her hair at the age of 15.

In another ST article, a mother said she cried twice during her cancer ordeal – once at the doctor's office, and again when she lost her hair during chemotherapy. She said: "I always thought, why should losing hair matter, right? But it mattered."

It does matter.

For days after the shaving, it was as if a stranger was looking back at me whenever I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror ("Who is that... Oh, me. How strange.").

You feel a bit detached from your self-image.

I understood the grief of losing your hair, which felt a bit like losing yourself.

MORE ON THIS TOPIC

[Complete hair loss in three weeks: What to know about the causes of alopecia](#)

[Losing your hair? New scientific study may have discovered why](#)

Strong looks

Then I started to enjoy it.

The top of my head felt pleasantly round, and it was fun to stroke the growing buzz cut.

Washing my hair was done in a snap of a finger. I often did it by starting to wash my face at the sink and ending up cleaning my whole head there.

I enjoyed it so much that I shaved my head by myself for some time.

The strong look grew on me.

I felt stronger in having confronted one of the common anxieties in life about possibly losing hair due to illness or ageing. About half of menopausal women notice accelerated hair loss and changes in texture at this life stage, said The New York Times, citing a recent study.

If it gets bad, I may have the strength to shave it all off by myself and happily embrace the strong look once more. I have kept the electric shaver.

But not yet, I thought then, as the world seemed too bright and noisy without my wild, Asian ghost-style long hair.

Hello, revenge hair-growing.

MORE ON THIS TOPIC

Is menopause changing my hair?



In Your Opinion

n Presidential Election could be quite diverse

00:00 / 37:14






Why 'youth vote' in Presidential



In Your Opinion

Follow podcast

Synopsis: Every second and fourth Monday of the month, The Straits Times takes a hard look at social issues of the day with guests. Podcaster: Ernest Luis Produced...

-  Why 'youth vote' in Presidential Election could be quite diverse 37:14
Our guests on how youth in Singapore, aged 18 to 35, can be quite diverse in opinions. Synopsis: The Straits Times takes a hard look at social issue... Aug 30
-  Why Singaporeans need good 'career health' and agility going forward 34:19
Progression, resilience, and inclusion are key areas of concern at public Forward SG sessions on jobs and upskilling. Synopsis: Every second and fo... Aug 28
-  Young people say new housing classification addresses concerns better 21:39
Our guests have regularly attended Forward SG engagement sessions to air their views. Synopsis: Every second and fourth Monday of the month, T... Aug 23
-  Should the extramarital affairs of Singapore's politicians end their careers? 23:58
NTU don says votes should determine whether Singaporeans can stomach politicians involved in such affairs. Synopsis: Every second and fourth M... Aug 14
-  Record-breaking COE's impact on Singapore society 34:24

Join [ST's Telegram channel](#) and get the latest breaking news delivered to you.



Subscribe today

Get unlimited access to exclusive stories and analyses by the ST newsroom

[Choose your plan](#)

E-paper

Podcasts

Facebook

RSS Feed

Instagram

Telegram

Twitter

Youtube

LinkedIn

TikTok

- SINGAPORE
- ASIA
- WORLD
- OPINION
- LIFE
- BUSINESS

- TECH
- SPORT
- VIDEOS
- PODCASTS
- MULTIMEDIA

[About Us](#)

[Need help? Reach us here.](#)

[Terms & Conditions](#)

[Advertise with us](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Sign up for our daily newsletter](#)

[Sign up](#)

[More newsletters](#)
By registering, you agree to our T&C and Privacy Policy.

MCI (P) 076/10/2022, MCI (P) 077/10/2022. Published by SPH Media Limited, Co. Regn. No. 202120748H. Copyright © 2023 SPH Media Limited. All rights reserved.