

“Lip”-sticking out in the society

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Abstract

The study aimed to examine if/how people judged women on the basis of the color of their lipstick, and if it had an impact on the women across India and the US. An online, 18 item, lipstick survey was presented to the participants who were randomly assigned to either one of the three pictures of a woman in different lip colors, and was used to gather mean response ratings of the participants, determined by their level of agreement with the statements. A follow-up survey with three societal judgment scenarios was presented to females to learn if such judgments would prevent them from wearing their choice of lipstick. It was found that there was a difference in the participant ratings of positive qualities amongst the three different colors, with more positive ratings assigned to the no-lipstick picture. There were differences observed in the ratings across both the cultures as well.

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“One of the most courageous things you can do is identify yourself, know who you are, what you believe in and where you want to go.” — Sheila Murray Bethel

For centuries, women have been persevering to find their identities and to establish themselves in a society that has consistently served patriarchy. To feel empowered and celebrated has been a tenacious process for women, and has required an immense effort in building self-confidence and self-esteem, which continues till date. Getting inspired by the success stories of other powerful women and idolizing them, known as *empowering mimicry* (Latu et. al., 2018), has been one of the major motivators. Lately, women have been working on replicating the body postures and physical appearances of their role-models—including choice of clothing and cosmetics—which has been contributing a significant amount in helping them to exercise their free will and lifestyle choices (Swirsky & Angelone, 2014).

However, the desire to exhibit power and live life on one’s own terms brings about one of the most controversial aspects of patriarchy—the societal judgments about women who do not conform to the “norms”. Even though different cultures exist through different parts of the world, they stand united by patriarchy, and prior research has shown that women are repeatedly subject to harsh judgments based on their choice of clothes and their looks (Smith et. al., 2018). There are certain stigmas around, and definitions of what constitutes an “appropriate” look for females, deviations from which are perceived to generally communicate substantive information about a person (Smith et. al., 2018).

Similar judgments are known to have likely ignited fears in females who choose to wear lipstick across cultures, and left them perplexed. Upon reviewing the previous studies that have

been done on the effects of wearing cosmetics, there was an observed association between the use of makeup and an increase in the level of self-esteem and body positivity (Palumbo, Fairfield, Mammarella & Di Domenico, 2017). However, it was found that comparatively less research has been done on societal perceptions and the stigma that lipstick wearers are subjected to daily. I conducted a preliminary experiment exploring if/how people view women differently when they wear lipstick as opposed to when they do not across different cultures of India and the United States of America, and the impact those perceptions have on women. I hypothesize that the woman with no lipstick would be judged less harshly in terms of ratings than the woman with red and pink lipstick, across both the cultures.

Method

Participants

For the study, 95 participants (45 males and 50 females) participated from various cities in India and the US. Out of them, 35 (33.3%) were randomly assigned to the no lipstick condition, 26 (24.7%) to the pink lipstick condition, and 34 (32.3%) to the red lipstick one. There were a total of 51 participants from India and 44 from New York, out of which, 83 (78.9%) identified as heterosexual, 4 (3.8%) identified as bisexual, 2 (1.9%) identified as homosexual, 2 (1.9%) identified as other, and 4 (3.8%) preferred not to say. Also, religiously, 44 (41.8%) identified as Hindu, 5 (4.75%) identified as Sikh, 2 (1.9%) identified as Jewish, 1 (0.95%) identified as Buddhist, 2 (1.9%) identified as Jain, and 43 (40.9%) identified as Christians.

Materials

For the study, Lipstick Attitudes Online Survey was used, which was a 18 item survey that asked participants for their level of agreement to 18 statements related to judgments about qualities of women, using a seven point scale (0-strongly disagree, 6-strongly agree). Examples of statements include “I think the woman is intelligent,” “I think the woman is beautiful,” among others. See appendix A. There were three conditions that consisted of the same woman’s picture with either no lipstick, pink lipstick or red lipstick. Random assignment was used to determine the condition each participant was exposed to. Another 3-item follow-up survey was presented to females that consisted of questions like, “Now imagine if someone told you that the color of the lipstick you’re wearing is “too provocative.” What would you do?,” among others, with answer choices consisting of, “I’ll still choose to wear lipstick irrespective of the judgment,” “I’ll not wear it in front of the person who just passed this remark, and maybe wear it on some other occasion,” “I’ll choose to not wear it at all,” “I’ll confront the person about their judgments,” and “I don’t know what I’ll do.”

Procedure

An online questionnaire through Qualtrics was the principle tool used in the study which consisted of 3 levels of independent variable: 3 different pictures with the same model wearing no lipstick, pink lipstick, and red lipstick. The participants were randomly assigned using Qualtrics to any one of the three conditions, and they were asked to answer the questions listed in the questionnaire, which consisted of 18 different attitude assessing questions and 6 demographic questions including gender. For females, another page was opened which gave them 3 different societal scenarios about the same judgments that they made earlier and asked them to answer how they would react if they were a part of those judgment-oriented situations. The informed

consent form was presented online, but the participants were informed about the entire procedure beforehand over the phone, before they signed off the form.

Results

The purpose of the study was to see if participants rated certain qualities differently when viewed with different lipstick colors, as well as across different cultures. I wanted to know if people based their judgments off of lipstick colors, and the ratings provided support. People across both the cultures tended to rate the picture with no lipstick as higher in traits like intelligence ($M=4.66$, $SD= 0.725$), kindness ($M= 4.40$, $SD= 0.914$) as compared to pink ($M=4.62$, $SD= 0.94$; $M=4.62$, $SD= 1.13$) and red lipstick ($M=4.32$, $SD= 1.06$; $M=4.29$, $SD=1.0$), respectively, as indicated by a significant independent groups t-test, $t(57) = 3.37$, $p= .001$.

Across cultures, it was found that participants from USA rated the woman lower in terms of traits like compassion ($M= 4.30$, $SD= 1.09$) and punctuality ($M=3.95$, $SD= 1.56$) despite the color of the lipstick, as compared to the participants of India ($M=4.69$, $SD=0.79$; $M=4.4$, $SD=0.95$), as indicated by the same t-test.

During the follow up questions for females regarding the judgments, even though the results were not largely different from each other, it was found that women from the US were more likely to choose to wear lipstick of their choice ($M=4.75$, $SD=1.11$; $M=4.9$, $SD=1.17$) as compared to the women in India ($M=4.35$, $SD=0.97$; $M=4.77$, $SD=1.44$), except for the workplaces, where Indian women had a higher mean response rating ($M=5.88$, $SD=1.41$) than in the US ($M=5.08$, $SD=1.14$).

Discussion

The participants took part in an ostensible lipstick and judgments study. They didn't know about that and the results showed that people rated the woman with no lipstick higher in terms of positive qualities as compared to women with lipsticks, even though they were the pictures of the same woman, but with a different lip color. It was also seen that people in the US rated the woman lower in terms of compassion and punctuality, as compared to people in India.

Hence, it can be seen that perceptions of people regarding the difference between lip colors as well as societal influences happen to dictate the judgments they tend to make about women. Some of the key differences observed between responses of the Indian participants and the ones in the US is that people in India rated the woman higher in compassion and punctuality, which might give way into the spiritual attribution of the qualities of compassion and altruism to be higher in females, in India.

Further, it was observed that in general, women were more pro-female and rated the woman higher in all conditions as compared to men. The picture of the woman in red lipstick was also comparatively rated less in sensitivity, and, more likely to drink alcohol. Interestingly enough, it was found that the people who disagreed to the fact that the woman was likely to ask for unwanted attention, tended to agree with the statement that she was provocative.

However, it is imperative to note that this was preliminary research and repeated rounds might yield different as well as stronger results. Also, the results of this study are not incredibly significant because of the very small sample size available for the study. Hence, it could also be possible that people from different ethnicities and age groups might rate their experiences in a similar fashion, once the sample size is increased substantially.

Nevertheless, this brings us to an understanding about human behaviors which might lead to future experiments about the meta-effects of gender in terms of judgments based off of physical appearances, and whether that exists because of the power dynamics that the society had established centuries ago. The fact that more females rated themselves as proactively making a choice to wear whatever lipstick they want also gave way into the fact that more and more females are becoming increasingly conscious about their empowerment, and hopefully we are headed to a direction where societal judgments about women would subsequently subside into nothingness.

References

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Figure 1

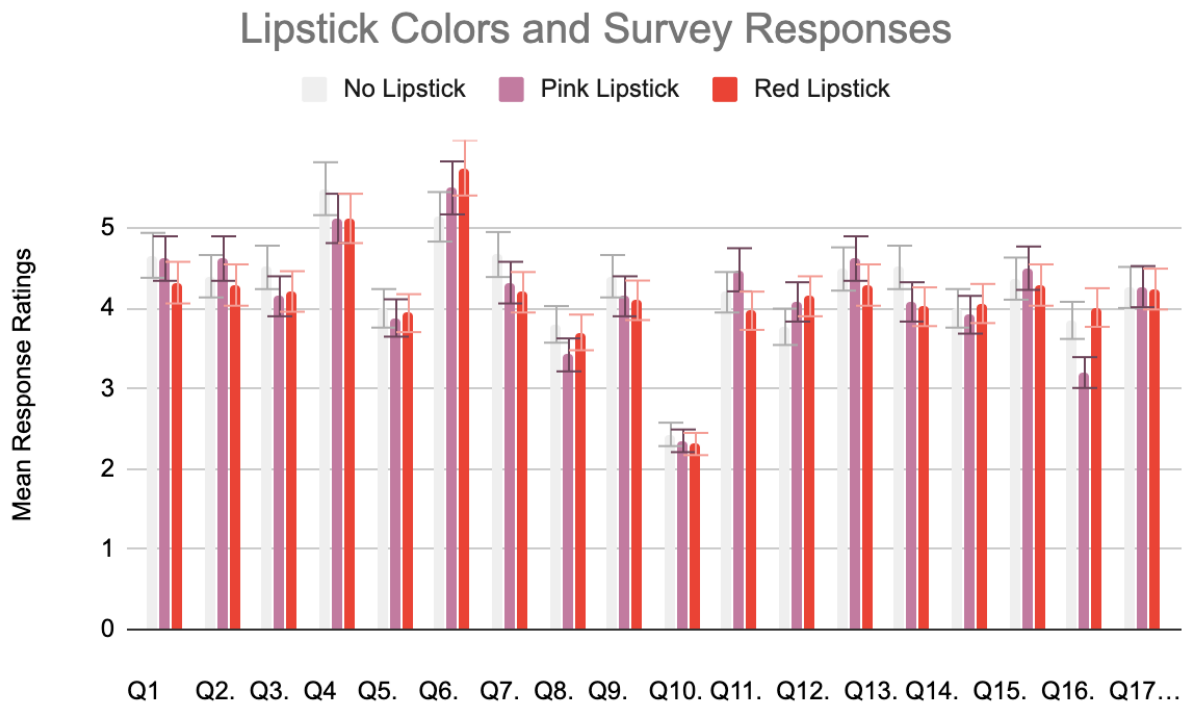


Figure 1: This picture shows the difference in mean response ratings for the 18 questions listed on the Lipstick Survey under the three conditions, No Lipstick, Pink Lipstick and Red Lipstick. It also shows the standard deviation and error bars for the same.

Figure 2

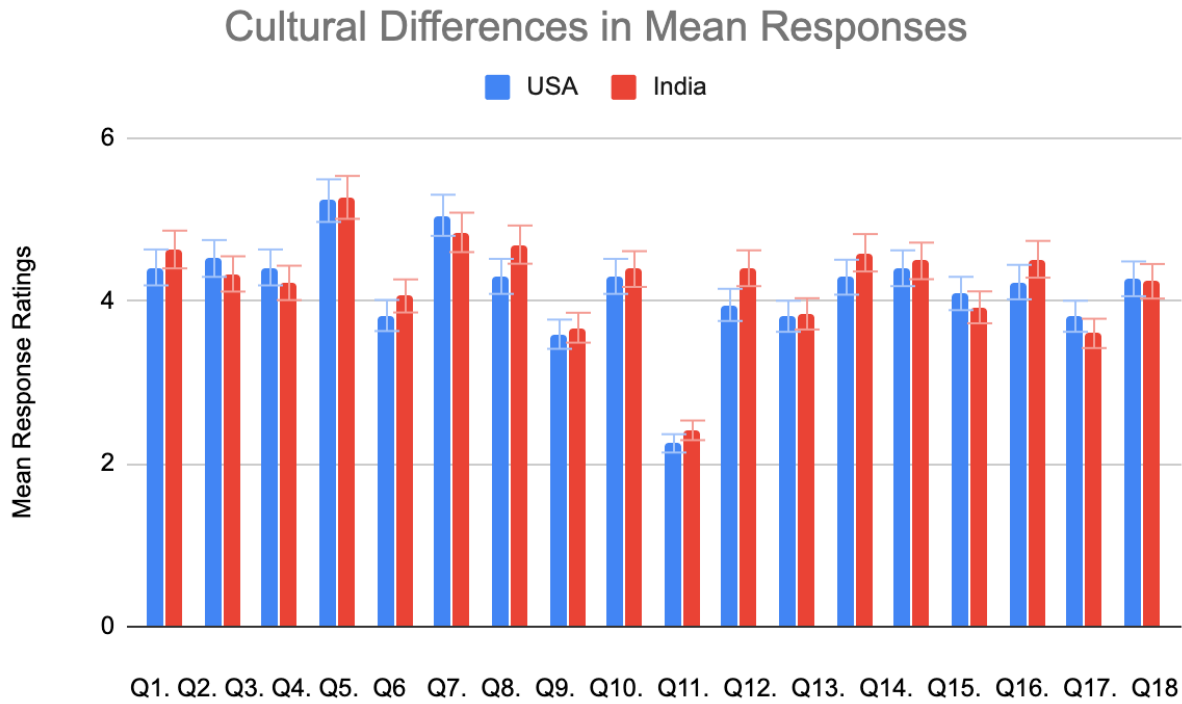


Figure 2: This picture shows the difference in mean response ratings for the 18 questions listed on the Lipstick Survey across the two cultures of India and USA. It also shows the standard deviation and error bars for the same.

Figure 3

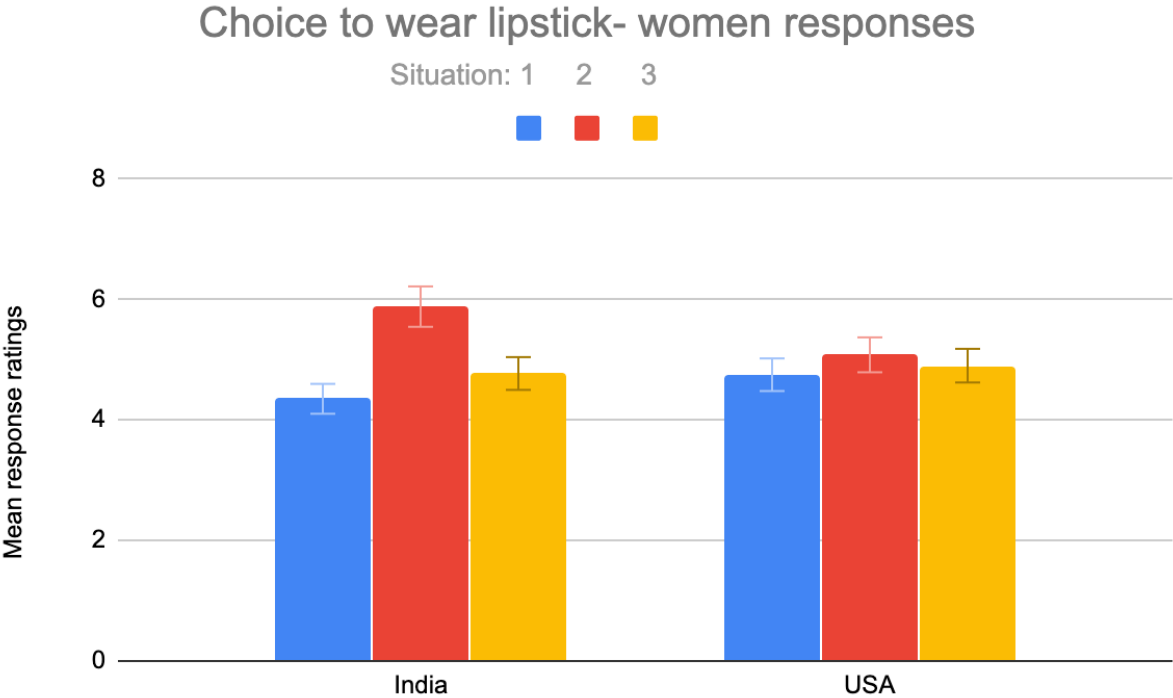


Figure 3: This figure shows the mean rating responses of women for the follow-up survey, along with the standard deviation and error bars.

Appendix A

Online Survey

I think this woman is...

1. intelligent

1	2	3	4	5	6
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Slightly	Agree Slightly	Agree	Strongly Agree

2. kind

1	2	3	4	5	6
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Slightly	Agree Slightly	Agree	Strongly Agree

3. beautiful

1	2	3	4	5	6
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Slightly	Agree Slightly	Agree	Strongly Agree

4. sensitive

1	2	3	4	5	6
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Slightly	Agree Slightly	Agree	Strongly Agree

5. attractive

1	2	3	4	5	6
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Slightly	Agree Slightly	Agree	Strongly Agree

6. sociable

1	2	3	4	5	6
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Slightly	Agree Slightly	Agree	Strongly Agree

7. honest

1	2	3	4	5	6
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Slightly	Agree Slightly	Agree	Strongly Agree

8. trustworthy

1	2	3	4	5	6
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Slightly	Agree Slightly	Agree	Strongly Agree

9. provocative
1 2 3 4 5 6
Strongly Disagree Disagree Disagree Slightly Agree Slightly Agree Strongly Agree
10. funny
1 2 3 4 5 6
Strongly Disagree Disagree Disagree Slightly Agree Slightly Agree Strongly Agree
11. likely to drink alcohol
1 2 3 4 5 6
Strongly Disagree Disagree Disagree Slightly Agree Slightly Agree Strongly Agree
12. compassionate
1 2 3 4 5 6
Strongly Disagree Disagree Disagree Slightly Agree Slightly Agree Strongly Agree
13. flirtatious
1 2 3 4 5 6
Strongly Disagree Disagree Disagree Slightly Agree Slightly Agree Strongly Agree
14. asking for unwanted attention
1 2 3 4 5 6
Strongly Disagree Disagree Disagree Slightly Agree Slightly Agree Strongly Agree
15. helpful
1 2 3 4 5 6
Strongly Disagree Disagree Disagree Slightly Agree Slightly Agree Strongly Agree
16. likely to have an active sex life
1 2 3 4 5 6
Strongly Disagree Disagree Disagree Slightly Agree Slightly Agree Strongly Agree
17. punctual
1 2 3 4 5 6
Strongly Disagree Disagree Disagree Slightly Agree Slightly Agree Strongly Agree
18. likely to have a family of her own
1 2 3 4 5 6
Strongly Disagree Disagree Disagree Slightly Agree Slightly Agree Strongly Agree

Demographics:

1. How old are you? _____
2. What gender do you identify yourself with?
-Male -Female -Other -Prefer not to say
3. Do you practice any religion? If so, what? _____
4. How religious are you?
5. -very -follow most of the practices -neutral -only follow a few practices -not at all
6. Do you think of yourself as:
 - Lesbian, Gay or Homosexual -Straight or heterosexual -Bisexual -
Something else -Don't know -Prefer not to say

Follow up scenarios:

Now imagine if someone told you that the color of the lipstick you're wearing

1. is "too provocative." What would you do?
 - I'll still choose to wear lipstick irrespective of the judgment.
 - I'll not wear it in front of the person who just passed this remark, and maybe wear it on some other occasion.
 - I'll choose to not wear it at all.
 - I'll confront the person about their judgments.
 - I don't know what I'll do

2. "does not look good at work." What would you do?
 - I'll still choose to wear lipstick irrespective of the judgment.
 - I'll not wear it in front of the person who just passed this remark, and maybe wear it on some other occasion.
 - I'll choose to not wear it at all.
 - I'll confront the person about their judgments.
 - I don't know what I'll do

3. "Makes you stand out." What would you do?
 - I'll still choose to wear lipstick irrespective of the judgment.
 - I'll not wear it in front of the person who just passed this remark, and maybe wear it on some other occasion.
 - I'll choose to not wear it at all.
 - I'll confront the person about their judgments.
 - I don't know what I'll do