

1-1-2011

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Ogilvie, M. , & Ryan, M. M. (2011). Lipstick: More than a Fashion Trend. *Research Journal of Social Science and Management* , 1(6), 117-128. Available [here](#)

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LIPSTICK: MORE THAN A FASHION TREND

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ABSTRACT

Purpose:

This paper explores and discusses why women purchase and wear lipstick and the behaviours associated with its use.

Design/methodology/approach:

A study of 300 female lipstick users were interviewed using a semi structured questionnaire.

Findings:

The study indicated that women use lipstick in a significant way to transform and present themselves; using it to reflect their daily fluctuations in moods and identity. Although lipstick is a mainstream fashion discourse, Western Australian society (where the study was located) maintains strict codes of conduct in applying and using the product. Behaviours associated with lipstick use are steeped in ritual and cultural customs.

Research limitations/ implications:

The data was collected within the one geographical area. While the consumption behaviour of lipstick and the driving motivating for using lipstick remain constant as a fashion artefact it is susceptible to changing trends, particularly colours and packaging.

Social implications;

For centuries lipstick has been scorned, shunned and embraced. Lipstick facilitates life transitions as consumers undergo a period of liminality. The codes associated with the use of this artefact are steeped in ritual with rigid codes and cultural customs that are acceptable within society forming strong societal practices.

Value: The value of this study is that it explores everyday appearance; lipstick has a valuable role to play in constructing self-identity and providing understanding in how women experience appearance in their daily lives. For this reason lipstick will always be more than a fashion trend.

Keywords: Lipstick consumption, appearance, self-identity, transformation of self, cosmetics.



1.0 INTRODUCTION

Lipstick has been donned by both genders for war and worship, used as an economic productivity tool, considered a possible health risk and even outlawed by governments; so why then do women wear lipstick?

The very first origins of lipstick date back to the Sumerian region of Ur in 5,000 BC (Pallingston, 1999). Over the centuries lipstick has been embraced and shunned by different cultures with swings for and against the product changing throughout history. Ancient Egyptians loved lip paints and according to Pallingston (1999) were masters at mixing colour and precise application. In Roman days the real lip colours were reserved for prostitutes, while the barbarians used the blue hues of face and lip paint for men charging into battle. Lipstick was associated with Satan during the medieval days and it was not until Elizabeth Tudor that lipstick once again became an accepted and popular grooming aid (Pallingston, 1999; Corson, 1972; Gunn, 1973).

In 1770, lipstick once again fell into disrepute when the British Parliament passed a law condemning the use of lip paint. Similarly, the New York Board of Health considered banning it in 1924, fearing it might poison men who kissed the women who wore it (Ragas, *et al.*, 1998). During the Second World War, cosmetics, and in particular lipstick, played an important psychological role as governments realised the necessity of keeping up the morale of the women who worked in munition factories or other war work. Providing lipstick was a relatively inexpensive way of making women look and feel good. Lipstick, which little more than a decade before had been regarded as suitable only for 'fast' women, became a priority product for the female market (Allen, 1981; Pallingston, 1999).

Today, lipstick represents a significant financial market. During the nineties the market expanded to \$4.6 billion and 45 million in the US and UK respectively (Pallingston, 1999). Into the naughties the trend for consumption of cosmetics continued to increase with predictions that the global spend on discretionary products will rise to US\$3.1 trillion by 2020 (Hofman, 2007). More specifically, the future looks positive for cosmetics and toiletries, with a projected growth of 16% between 2006 -2011 (Dodson, 2007). In Australia, ABS statistics confirm similar consistent growth trend with a rise in the pharmaceutical, cosmetic and toiletry index of 19.8% from April 2001 to April 2002 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002). In 2008-09 the overall Australian cosmetics and toiletries retailing industry generated revenue of \$2.13 billion, a growth of 1.7 per cent on the previous year despite difficult economic times (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009). As indicated by Raghu Rajakumar, senior industry analyst with IBISWorld, "In bad times, consumers turn to small luxuries such as lipsticks and make-up." (Greenblat, (2009) <http://www.smh.com.au/business/in-a-pouting-economy-lipstick-booms-20090705-d99e.html>). Lipstick turnover far exceeds that of any other cosmetic product as consumers shift their expenditure from expensive fashion items to cheaper alternatives that still produce the 'feel good' factor (Bashinsky, 1999; Greenblat, 2009 2009 <http://www.smh.com.au/business/in-a-pouting-economy-lipstick-booms-20090705-d99e.html>).

Whilst much has been written about lipstick's use as an art form, its history, and how other people perceive the conspicuous consumption of products such as cosmetics (Belk, 1977,



McKeachie, 1952), very little research into how women experience appearance in their daily lives has been documented (Beausoleil, 1994). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the link between consumers' beliefs about appearance and their specific goals and uses of lipstick. It endeavors to identify the reasons why women wear lipstick and gain insights into the attributes that influence the consumption behaviour surrounding it. The study covered a range of topics including grooming rituals, product attributes, and lipstick's influence on mood fluctuation and identity.

1.1 Self-decoration

Self-decoration to entice the opposite sex has been practiced by humans for centuries (Allen, 1981; Corson, 1972; Etkoff, 1999; Gunn, 1973). Anthropologists suggest that women use cosmetics to simulate the body in a state of orgasm. Diane Ackerman (in Pallingston, 1999, p31) claims,

"...the lips remind us of the labia, because they flush red and swell when aroused, which is the conscious and unconscious reason why women have always made them look even redder with lipstick."

Animal behaviourist Desmond Morris supports these claims and views cosmetics as a method employed by early man to detract attention away from the rear of the body to the face. He concurs that the red pouting lips represent the blood engorged labia, the rouged cheeks the skin's state of flush and the darkened eyes the dilated pupils of excitement (Etkoff, 1999; Pallingston, 1999). Evolutionary psychologists would also claim that through natural selection processes behaviour such as self-decoration has been inherited from our Pleistocene ancestors and become part of our genetic coding (Cary, 2000; Gad and Tripat, 2000; Goode 2000; Rose and Rose, 2000).

Self-decoration used by women has changed markedly over the last decades (Allen, 1981; Corson, 1972; Etkoff, 1999; Peiss, 1998). From the large lush-lashed eyes of the 1950's through to the black and blue lipsticks of the Gothic and Shock Rockers in the nineties, and the more muted natural tones of the naughties, the lipstick landscape continues to change. Today, with the specialised lipstick companies that sprang up during the nineties, lipstick has undergone resurgence in popularity to become an everyday commodity.

1.2 Women and Beauty

The link between beauty and cosmetics is perpetuated daily in the media and by advertising. Hielman (1998) addressed society's commodification of young girls as they strive to achieve an impossible likeness to the slim beautiful model image depicted frequently within the mass media. Thompson and Hirschman (1995) also examined the transformation of the body into a perceived perfect form, and suggest that it is through the consumer ritual of self-care (Rook, 1985) that women 'normalise' their bodies to achieve an image that is valued as the cultural norm (Thompson and Hirschman, 1995). In addition, studies have also extensively researched women's emulation of beauty images that are portrayed in the mass media and the strong influence these messages have in how women want to look (Solomon *et al.*, 1992; Englis *et al.*, 1993).

Other researchers claim that society places more value on beautiful people (Etkoff, 1999; Fabricant and Gould, 1993; McNeil, 1998; Richins, 1991). Studies have demonstrated that people who are perceived as more beautiful tend to have better careers, earn more money and



have a higher social status than less attractive people (Fabricant and Gould, 1993; McNeil, 1998; Richins, 1991). The use of female beauty within popular culture has been exploited relentlessly due to an assumed link between a woman's appearance and her measure of self worth (Englis *et al.*, 1994; Lury, 1996), and lipstick is an integral part of the appearance many women strive to attain.

2.0 METHOD

Initially six in-depth interviews were conducted with women who were known to be lipstick users and aged between 20 – 40 years. The primary aim of the interviews was to investigate women's perceptions and feelings surrounding lipstick, and to gain ideas and insights into the aspects that may influence their use of the product. Interviews were chosen as a data capture technique because they allow the research to "focus on the context that may shape the understanding of the phenomenon" (Creswell, 1994, p.10), and hence can provide valuable knowledge about women's lipstick behaviours. The interviews were taped and transcribed. Transcripts were analysed for re-occurring themes, which were further explored in a series of semi-structured interviews.

Three hundred (300) women from selected shopping centres around the Perth metropolitan area participated in these interviews. Respondents were all female lipstick users between 20 – 40 years, from a broad range of demographic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Interviews were conducted across a range of shopping times to reflect a broad range of consumers and their shopping patterns. A relatively large sample was selected to enable more sophisticated analysis of the interrelationship between the anticipated large number of independent variables (Malhotra *et al.*, 1996; Zikmund, 2000).

The semi-structured interviews explored a range of topics such as consumption patterns, grooming rituals, product attributes, brand equity, the impact of colour and emotions generated by wearing lipstick. These interviews took on average 20 -30 minutes to complete and interviewers' were trained to ensure continuity and accuracy of the data captured. Analysis of the data suggests that to these respondents lipstick was far more than a fashion trend. Results are discussed in the following section with an emphasis on lipstick's transformational properties and the ritual and customs associated with the use of this product.

3.0 FINDINGS

The sample reflected an even spread of respondents across the 20-40 year age group with participants being 20–25 years ($n=99$, 33%), 26-30 years ($n=78$, 26%), 31-35 years ($n=49$, 16%) and 36-40 years ($n=69$, 23%). Respondents' occupations also represented a cross section of the community. Clerical and service workers ($n=85$, 29%) made up the largest percentage of respondents, followed by sales and marketing ($n=63$, 21%) and professional ($n=60$, 20%). Participant's income range was weighted towards under \$51,000 per annum (57%), and all respondents used lipstick.

3.1 Self-esteem

In investigating how lipstick makes women feel a variety of attributes (derived from the qualitative interviews) were included in the semi-structured interviews to determine the influence that lipstick may have on different individuals' experience of appearance. The results suggest that wearing lipstick for the purpose of attracting the opposite sex as



suggested by the literature (Etcoff, 1998; Pallington, 1999), is not as high as wearing it for self-esteem and confidence.

“ For me though lipstick is an incredibly wonderful product where I can feel good and be quite self-assured about my appearance whether I am 17 or 70 years”. (Female 40)

“....the rest of you may not be well groomed, for example, hair and nails can be a mess but with your lipstick on you don't care! I feel really good and confident about myself when I have my lipstick on especially if I have a new colour I have just purchased. I will even wear it to bed, - cause it feels great.” (Female 37)

Overall, respondents' perceptions would indicate that lipstick today is considered as part of the normal image presented to the world and an integral part of what makes a normal face. Given a range of attributes to describe their feelings about wearing lipstick, 85% ($n=253$) of the sample used 'very confident' as a description of their feelings in wearing lipstick. In addition 82% ($n=244$) of the sample perceived that lipstick made them feel 'really good about themselves'. In contrast only 28% ($n=83$) of the sample used 'attractive to the opposite sex' as an explanation of how lipstick made them feel.

Some of the other attributes measured to help determine the impact lipstick had on self-perception included 'pretty', 'complete', 'attractive', 'tarty', 'common', 'overdressed', 'sexy', 'presentable', and 'acceptable'. Whilst undoubtedly women may still subconsciously wear lipstick for the purpose of attracting the opposite sex, results from this study would indicate that factors of self-esteem rated significantly higher. However, discriminant analysis of the data revealed that there were differences in respect of age to this phenomenon. The exception to this trend was the 36-40 year group, who in addition to reasons related to self-esteem, considered attraction to the opposite sex as an important rationale for wearing lipstick as this following quote also demonstrates.

“.....and I can look people (especially good looking, appealing males) straight in the eye and go for broke! I think that lipstick gives you a certain amount of euphoria and giddiness because it makes you feel and look great and I know I am.” (Female 38)

It is unclear whether this group is a true reflection of the behaviour of the age category, or if it is peculiar to this sample set of women. Despite the anomaly of this cluster, overall lipstick is no longer perceived as tarty, common, or a symbol relegated to the 'fast women' of the past (Etcoff, 1998; Pallington, 1999). This study would suggest that lipstick has today gained an accepted place in our society and that the reasons behind women's use of this product are linked more to self-esteem and status within society than for sexual allurements. This has significant marketing implications for cosmetic companies who presently advertise their products based on the link between beauty and sexual attraction, for in conjunction to this, a whole new range of reasons pertaining to self-esteem are also driving the products consumption.



3.2 Transformation

Vans Genep (1960) argues that during major phases of life transition consumers undergo a period of liminality where individuals divest their old identity and prepare to metamorphose into a new one. Noble and Walker (1997) describe this liminal state as “the instability, ambiguity, and suspended identity that can occur in the transition from one significant role to another” (p90). In this context results from this study suggests that lipstick represents an inexpensive and non-permanent means by which women can try on a new image and test the response by society to it. It offers a quick retreat should the new image not meet with approval or be congruent with the image the individual is trying to create unlike more permanent plastic surgery procedures (Schouten, 1991).

“ I love lipstick, but hate the shape of my own lips, so I can change them with lip liner to basically any shape I want..... ” (Female 28 yrs)

In this regard it appears that lipstick is an important vehicle in this liminal stage of the transformation process (van Gennep, 1960; Noble and Walker, 1997). The new image is either accepted or rejected for another. Once accepted the transformation is adopted and complete. This may occur quickly or even take years as respondents allude to in the in-depth interviews:

Respondent: “If I have had some bad or disappointing news, I will go out and buy a lipstick.

Interviewer: “Do you still wear this lipstick again considering that your mood was not the best at the time of purchase?”

Respondent: “Yes, because I know I am over or have found some sort of solution to whatever it was that originally set me off. I have only really made one mistake when in the ‘dark-side’ mood. The colour was shocking bright orange, but I wear this one in summer now and I have clothing to also match. Although, it took me three years to wear it regularly, I never threw it out.” (Female 30 yrs)

The above quote also indicates the important influence that lipstick can have on daily fluctuations of mood and identity. Beauty therapists also confer that wearing a new colour lipstick that is quite different to colours that the individual normally adopts requires huge amount of risk. Wedding parties are often consulted and counselled before the use of such colours in order to give the participants confidence in adopting the new image the lipstick can create for the day (Ogilvie, 2003). Similarly Rook (1985) found that consumers experienced uncertainty and anxiety when undertaking an unfamiliar ritual, which would explain these women’s reluctance and discomfort with changing their lipstick routine. Interestingly though, most women will often possess a collection of different half used lipsticks within their make-up purse at any one time, just in case they need to revert to the identity ascribed to each one.

As expected results also provided evidence that lipstick serves as a right of passage (Noble and Walker, 1997) from adolescence to womanhood within Western Australian society. Such transformations mark major identity reconstructions and it is interesting to see an everyday product such as lipstick playing such a major role in these significant life changes.

“I have not worn make-up for very long and I have an Italian upbringing, therefore make-up was not a recognised idealism for ‘female beauty’, but



lipstick was! Anyway, when I turned 19 years old, my mother said to me that I was now allowed to wear lipstick and it had to be red because it would embellish my lovely olive and clear complexion. And ..., there I was on my first 'womanly' lipstick shopping spree with mother, my aunt and three cousins. It was like a 'coming of age' where men get circumcised and women wear lipstick" (Female 22)

Indeed lipstick remains woven into the folklore of society and is bound up with traditions and myths about its abilities and attributes. Like folktales, the benefits and intricacies of wearing lipstick are handed from mother to daughter like family recipes and traditional practices (Wallendorf and Arnould, 1991; Levy, 1981).

"Lipstick is a girl-thing, my mum always told me from when I was around 14 years of age to look nice (and tidy) 'always put a nice coloured lipstick on that would highlight your complexion not overpower it', funny though – she never taught me how to apply it." (Female 31 years)

3.3 Ritual and Lipstick

Behaviour associated with the everyday grooming priorities of human beings has been found to be ritualistic in nature (Beausoleil, 1994; McCracken, 1986; Rook, 1985). The use of lipstick in this context is, of itself, seen as a ritualistic process. Rook (1985) has identified four tangible characteristics of a ritual process and these characteristics are discussed in the following paragraphs with reference to the consumption of lipstick.

3.3.1 The ritual artefact

The lipstick itself is the ritual artefact. It communicates messages by the choice of colour. In the sample, 32% (95) of respondents indicated their choice of lipstick colour was influenced by their mood at the time of applying their makeup. Overall, red is the favoured colour lipstick (35% of the sample selected red as their favourite colour; $n=106$). It is also the colour most likely to be worn when respondents were feeling happy. Neutral and brown shades were most often chosen when in a pensive state of mind and when feeling tired. A substantial increase in the use of mauve colours was associated with feelings of sadness. Lipstick colour was also regarded in a functional sense, coordinating with other colour accessories, functioning as the colour vehicle for the face.

...."It's (Lipstick is) the ultimate in grooming and I feel like I have just stepped out of a beauty shop because I know I've got colour on and in my face. I will even match my lips to the colour of my summer sandals or shoes" (Female, 30 yrs).

Lipstick was considered a consistent and essential part of most respondents' daily grooming routines with 76% ($n= 228$) of the sample wearing lipstick at least 6 days a week. A further 18% ($n= 54$) of participants would wear lipstick 1 –2 days a week, for social occasions. Of the days that respondents wore lipstick, women most frequently applied their lipstick between 3 to 4 times a day (62%, $n= 186$).



As indicated by Belk (1979) and Sherry (1983), ritual artefacts are often exchanged as gifts. Respondents overwhelmingly welcomed the idea of receiving a lipstick as a gift (72% [$n=216$] responded favourably to receiving lipstick as a gift). The key reason given for this was that they *"like to try new lipsticks and colours"*. This was especially worthy of note, as only one respondent in the sample had actually given lipstick as a gift. In addition, in exploring shopping patterns for lipstick purchases, lipsticks were seldom the main purpose for shopping with 90% ($n=270$) of the sample indicating they would 'rarely' or 'never' go shopping specifically to buy a lipstick. This suggests that lipstick is an impulse purchase line, a finding supported by previous literature (Wagner, 1999). Despite this, 59% ($n=177$) of the sample would purchase 4 or more new lipsticks a year (average 4.83 per year, st.dev. 2.07). The most frequent purchasers' of lipstick was the 26 – 30 age category who indicated that they would purchase 6 or more lipsticks a year (54%, $n=42$).

3.3.2 A ritual script

The script identifies the process and the behaviour sequence of the artefact. The application of lipstick has its own script, as evidenced in the overall sequence of its application and illustrated by the following quote. Lipstick is often the final touch to the grooming process.

"There's nothing better than to have a shower or bath, do your exfoliating, plaster your body with fabulous moisturiser, cool off, get dressed and apply lipstick. You're ready to go to bed or out " (Female, 37 yrs).

Various scripts for the use of lipstick were evident in the interview transcripts. Lipstick is used for self-indulgence through to preparing for formal occasions. Women in the sample often relayed quite explicitly the process of applying lipstick, describing the lip liner defining the shape of the lips and then colouring in the lips with lipstick. The application of lipstick was often relayed in terms of the skill, artistry and technical ability it required. A recurrent theme was the control over shaping the lips with various application techniques, as illustrated in the following quote:

"Lipstick is my security 'cause I reckon it makes me look better, especially when I can change my lip shape so easily. I use lip liner to make the shape of my lips what I want, then I fill them in with lipstick." (Female, 29 yrs)

The fashionable shape of women's lips has changed over time. Thin lips were in vogue at the turn of the 20th century as they were said to represent women's submissive role at that time (Solomon, 1992). Although much attention is now focused on a fuller lip shape, the emphasis in the current research by the respondents was the choice and control factor they have over the look of their lips. With smart technical lip liner and lipstick application, they can make a choice as to the shape of their lips.

The script for lipstick application was ordered, consistent and depended on whether the place where one was going to wear the lipstick was a formal, informal or a self-indulgent setting.

3.3.3 Ritual Performance Role/s

The roles that our women played whilst wearing lipstick were many and varied. The roles ranged from the basic "taking care of ones self" by buying and wearing lipstick as a pick me up, or as an indulgent product, through to the classic management meeting where a confident "superior" role was adopted.



"The best thing with lipstick is its 'shield' because when I have a management meeting with the boys (as you know I am the only female) I feel superior to them, confident and very feminine because I always have my lipstick on." (Female, 37 yrs)

3.3.4 Ritual Audience

The ritual audience for lipstick ranges from the self, to the various representations of the public world.

"Lipstick is the finishing touch for me. I would not go out of my house without doing the dishes, the same with lipstick, it's a matter of good grooming and pride in oneself." (Female, 40 yrs).

The self is an important audience in terms of confidence and self esteem. Often the family culture was the first influence as to when and what colour is used in the application of lipstick. ... *"my mother said to me that I was now allowed to wear Lipstick"*. ... Acceptance or rejection is received from spouses, significant others, work colleagues and the general community.

"She even tells me that my father likes the lipsticks that she now takes time and trouble to apply".

3.4 Place

Perhaps one of the more fascinating aspects of the ritual associated with the use of lipstick, is that of the ritualistic setting and the influence of place on the consumption of lipstick. Participants' in this study indicated that social customs still dictate where they apply their lipstick and that they would actually go looking for places to do this. This is consistent with respondents' high use of restrooms as an application location and low incidence of application in public. Only 7% ($n=21$) would apply their lipstick in public. For these respondents, a code on lipstick application remains apparent in society despite cosmetic companies marketing efforts to increase the use of lipstick throughout the day. Regardless of the mirrored lipstick holders, small purse packs and the glamorous cosmetic packs with brushes and mirrors, applying lipstick in public remains, for many, still socially unacceptable.

"I couldn't imagine putting my lipstick on in front of the whole world. I have to turn my back so no one can see me or go somewhere more private, like the bathroom or my car " (Female, 29 yrs).

There are still definite customs associated with the use of lipstick and a taboo still persists about its application in public as this quote from a daughter disapproving about her mother's actions of applying lipstick in public further illustrates.

"... and straight after coffee in the city, she even applies her lip liner and lipstick in the coffee shop, not even waiting until we go to the restrooms" ..(Female, 28 yrs).

There was a high percentage (77%) of young women (20-25 year olds) that would specifically seek out the restroom to re-establish their 'look' by apply lipstick. Restrooms



represent the backstage in Goffman's (1959/1973) metaphor of the dramatic playing out of social interaction. The restroom is where the role is created, out of public view. Usually makeup is applied alone or with intimate others at home (Beausoleil, 1994), however, during the day re-application requires sometimes a group grooming ritual, possibly with strangers. This research indicated many women were reapplying their lipstick 3 to 4 times a day, and this required use of private places like the restroom. The restroom seems to reinforce or validate the act of grooming, it is the backstage area and therefore perceived as 'not real'. Only becoming real when one passes through the doors out of the restroom and the mask or 'shield' is in place.

Whilst the use of the restroom and the general ritualistic process of the use of lipstick enforces the dramaticological view of the use of lipstick, (ie. being based on situations, occasions, and audiences); lipstick is also being used for the sheer pleasure of wearing it and not always goal/place specific oriented. The artistry and enjoyment of wearing lipstick was articulated by the women in the sample, along with the lingering ritualistic nature of its usage behaviour.

4.0 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper has shown lipstick to have many discourses in Western Australian society. It is seen as a transformation vehicle from youth, an artefact of social discourse, a prop used in sporting activities, consumed in both a sensual and self-indulgent manner and a signifying agent of power. It is perceived by women as an important component in their daily grooming ritual and is considered by many as a necessary addition to their faces in order to feel presentable, comfortable and more confident. This study has gained evidence of how women consume appearance in their everyday lives, and despite very traditional and embedded cultural customs, it would appear that women are adopting self-focussed strategies in these consumption practices. Interestingly, despite marketing strategies and product development to assist women in applying their lipstick, a taboo still persists about its application in public. Women continue to be reserved about whom they put their lipstick on in front of and consequently this grooming ritual remains out of the public arena.

This study highlights the need for further research into areas such as the 'powder room culture' found in the 20-25 year-old group and their high use of this location for lipstick application. Further study needs to explore the dynamics surrounding this place and to establish if this location was chosen by these respondents purely to adjust their visual image and the associated psychological benefits derived from perfecting their look, or if deeper group ritualistic behaviours were at play.

In addition the anomaly of the 36-40 year old groups motivation for applying lipstick. Is there truly any difference in motivations for this group, and if so why? Finally, further research is needed to confirm if lipstick is a true liminal product. Have women using it already undergone the separation phase of transition and are in a liminoid state when consuming the product, or, are women using lipstick to try on different selves without this transition process taking place? This study supports the former, and finds that lipstick has a valuable role to play in constructing self- identity and providing understanding in how women experience appearance in their daily lives. For this reason lipstick will always be more than a fashion trend.



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