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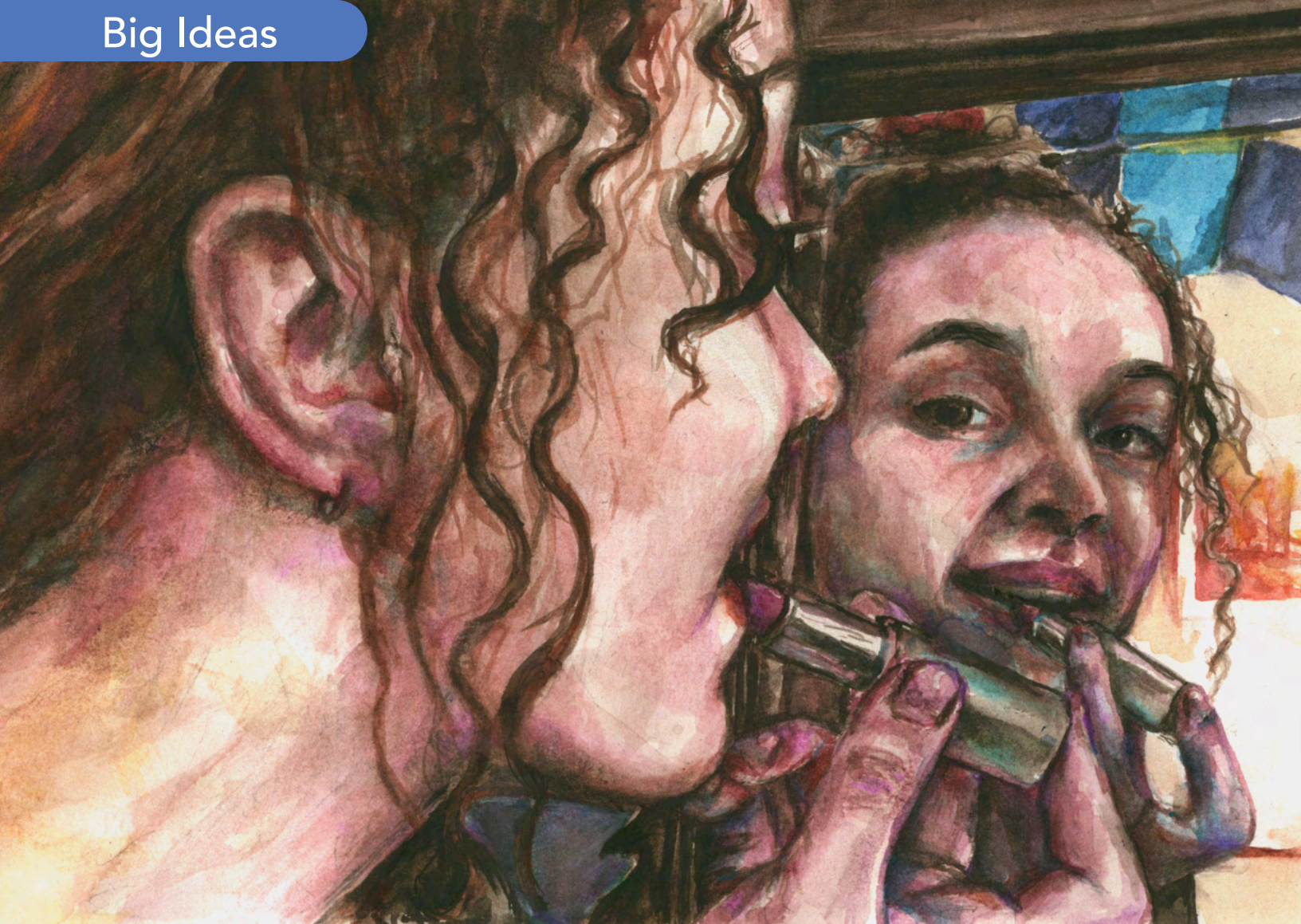
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Lips Don't Lie

Lipstick Effect, Self-esteem, and Social Implications

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What object has existed since 5 thousand BC in ancient Mesopotamia and remained popular in today's society? The surprising answer is lipstick. Tremendous changes have happened in human society over thousands of years, but lipstick remains an essential part of our daily life. Lipstick's resiliency within our culture implies that lipstick aligns with something fundamental to human nature. Recent studies show that self-esteem might be the answer.

Derived from one's past experiences - self-esteem is motivated by the basic social motive of self-enhancement as described by social psychologist Susan Fiske. People like to feel good about themselves, so they seek to maintain high self-esteem and self-improvement. Feelings of high self-esteem often follow success in an important task, positive feedback from others, the feeling of being unique, and things that increase positive perceptions of oneself. People with high self-esteem tend to

perform better, work harder, and collaborate more willingly. Positive feedback from daily achievements enables people to boost their confidence and maintain self-esteem at an appropriate level - which reflects the common loop of self-esteem under most circumstances. However, during difficult times, even people born with high self-esteem can feel terrible about themselves and in need of a booster. That is where lipstick got involved.

Economists first revealed the relationship between lipstick and self-esteem through data on lipstick sales during economic depressions. We usually assume that demand for non-necessities during an economic depression will drop because people lack the resources and therefore the desire for them. However, lipstick sales increase during times of economic hardship, which is termed the "lipstick effect." Psychologists assert that young, unmarried women bought and used more products like lipstick during economic recessions to increase their attractiveness. The research

of Dr. Geoff Beattie at the University of Manchester shows that red lipstick draws five extra seconds of attention, typically from the opposite sex. An investigation in France also revealed that female waitresses received more tips from male customers when wearing red lipstick. Another relevant study indicates that wearing makeup will intervene in others' facial perception and make people look younger. Since red lips and smooth skin are often indicators of better health and younger age, strengthening those characteristics through makeup can vastly increase physical attractiveness.

The ability of lipstick and other makeup products to increase physical attractiveness is deeply intertwined with self-esteem and the reinforcing effects of past experiences. In the research previously described, makeup led to positive experiences such as receiving more attention and increasing amounts tipped. All of these beneficial effects bolstered participant's perceptions of themselves, causing them to maintain their high level of self-esteem.

Direct evidence on the relationship between makeup and self-esteem came from research at Edith Cowan University, which found that women today primarily wear lipstick because it made them feel more confident. Wearing makeup is revealed to be beneficial to academic performance by raising people's self-esteem. Unlike directly giving you positive feedback under other circumstances, increased physical attractiveness during a test may increase your overall confidence by making you feel good about yourself, which has been shown to increase test scores in general.

The interesting consumer behaviors in the beauty market during recessions inspired some economists to regard lipstick as a new indicator of the economy. Makeup, correlated with self-esteem, can take on many additional roles and meanings. Furthermore,

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what is unique about the make-up-self-esteem model is that while "makeup" (or the presence of it) is explicit, "self-esteem" is hard to measure. The lipstick effect in the economy has shown the power of this model on interpreting self-esteem levels and makeup's impact on it. However, we can also utilize the model reversely, letting makeup reveal changes in self-esteem. Makeup has many natural advantages in such analyses.

Experiences shape self-esteem. Therefore, as a daily routine for some people, makeup is quite close to the origin of their self-esteem, which makes it an excellent indicator of this abstract concept. Take social hierarchy in the mid-18th century as an example. The aristocracy at that time applied flamboyantly styled blushes on a daily basis to distinguish themselves from people in the middle and lower classes. Wearing makeup to represent social status may have increased their feeling of superiority, a critical property of high self-esteem. Studies with lobster demonstrate that self-esteem and social hierarchy are both related to levels of serotonin. Higher self-esteem usually means a higher status in the social hierarchy. The mid-18th century aristocracy likely hoped to

raise their self-esteem by utilizing makeup as a status symbol of their wealth and power.

But the greater potential of the make-up-self-esteem model lies under longitudinal comparisons. After all, makeup has existed in human societies over millennia and recorded complexity in human society over all these years. Recording history with vivid colors, makeup enables us to compare the self-esteem of societies from different periods.

Let's continue with the example of social status, specifically focusing on women. In ancient Egypt, acceptance of makeup was so widespread, women would wear it daily. In fact, women at the time had more autonomy compared to other contemporary and later civilizations. They were able to own and inherit land, own business, and instigate legal proceedings against men, all of which indicates high social status. If wearing makeup made them look more successful and confident, ancient female Egyptians could have experienced a relatively high level of self-esteem, matching with their social status.

However, compared to Egyptians, women living in medieval times were strictly restricted on makeup, because early

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Christian writers closely related makeup with deception. Makeup became something done in secret. The social status of women around this era was also fairly low. It is likely that without the freedom of pursuing physical attractiveness and lacking many rights, women in medieval times generally had lower self-esteem than Egyptian women.

Public perception of makeup transformed in the late 19th century with the beginning of the silent movie industry and female emancipation, allowing it to become a popular way for females to express themselves. With the rise in female social status derived from feminist movements, women enjoyed increased freedom of wearing makeup and personal expression. For example, in the 1970s, some women wore black lipstick to express nonconformity. Though red lipstick is often associated with high estrogen levels, which stands for being sexually attractive, wearing black lipstick was not for physical attractiveness. Instead, this choice should be regarded as a way of expressing women's unique value, a significant portion of self-esteem. Again, makeup leads us to mark female social status and match it with self-esteem level.

Make-up has had a profound effect on our society. By just browsing social media or looking through advertisements, one can see the ability of make-up to mark trends in society. Make-up use also provides a window into the past. Just think about how many subtle changes in female self-esteem across time we can detect by using the make-up-self-esteem model. It is incredible how this small tube of wax can reveal worldly trends. ● ● ●