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The Lips of Feminism: How Lipstick Has Challenged Feminist Spaces in America

Although it would appear that lipstick is no more than a cosmetic meant to turn one’s lips into a new shade of pink, red, or purple, its power exceeds that of mere beautification. Something so simple as lipstick has served to create tension in feminist spaces for hundreds of years, and its power is evident even in today’s society. Lipstick’s ability to challenge these spaces has risen and fallen simultaneously with the three waves of feminism, sometimes serving to motivate and encourage women, others, serving as a tool of their oppression. Lipstick did not become a commercialized product until 1884 (Pallingston 17), but its “appropriate” place in American society was debated for over a century prior to this.

English colonization in the United States ushered lipstick into the American culture, and societal views have shifted dramatically back and forth for centuries since. In later years, entering the twentieth century, lipstick’s symbolism in American society would move fluidly with the feminist movement, specifically the three waves, and it would serve to compartmentalize and distinguish women of different standings, whether in terms of class, political ideologies, or profession, through history, extending even into today’s society and the current state of feminism.

**Pre-American History of Lipstick**

Sixteenth century England began the process for lipstick’s eventual popularization in America, and the English people believed lipstick to “work magic, possibly even ward off death” (Williams 25-26). Although this belief encouraged more women to partake in this cosmetic trend, it also sparked debate within the church. Women were told that use of lip rouge was punishable as sin, and therefore, they were ethically obligated to tell of their lipstick use in confession. The only acceptable use of lipstick that was not considered a mortal sin was “to remedy severe disfigurement or so as to be not looked down upon by [one’s] husband” (Pointer 87). In addition to this, Englishmen were given the Parliamentary right to accuse a woman of witchcraft if he believed himself to be “deceive[d]…into marriage,” and a woman could also be subject to arrest (Pointer 96) by her use of lipstick and other makeup.

The 1600s in England saw further regulations on the use of lipstick. Women of all classes still took part in the trend, though most did so discretely as to avoid severe judgment for it. The classes, however, wore different colors of lipstick in order to maintain distinction, and these colors were determined by the cost of its ingredients. More expensive lipsticks were brighter because their ingredients were higher quality, while the lower classes wore a deeper shade of “cheaper ochre red” with lower quality materials (Williams 16). In 1650, Parliament attempted to pass a law banning its use, but the bill did not pass. In the 1700s, the English population moved away from lipstick as a cosmetic when it became highly popularized among prostitutes and “older ladies” (Corson 187). Lipstick became reserved for women who were older and presumably married, and laws made it possible for marriages to be annulled on the grounds that a man had been “seduced by lip rouge” into the relationship.

Meanwhile, as England found itself moving away from lipstick use, the American colonies shifted to the French mentality: obsession with lipstick (Pallingston 68). Even so, some colonies chose to enforce laws similar to those of the English which allowed a man to annul his marriage if his wife used any cosmetics during their courtship (Ragas 17), so the colonies were not entirely independent of English influence. Ultimately, the history of lipstick just prior to its full Americanization is highly problematic, as the patriarchal hierarchy steadfastly attempted to contain women’s individuality by creating more laws that restricted them in order to further protect men. These laws prohibited women from freely choosing how to alter their appearance and gave men the option to end a marriage based on the sole notion that his wife engaged in “lipstick trickery” (Ragas 17), meaning that he would not have married her had he known her cosmetics-less appearance. From its introduction to western society, lipstick has served as a device of categorization, primarily of that to oppress women, and in turn, favoring men.

Lipstick did not evolve into a real symbol of feminism in America until the turn of the twentieth century when the leading suffragettes endorsed its use. Authoritative figures had challenged lipstick’s use in a social, religious, and legal sense, so women applied it “with the express intent of appalling men” (Gunn 148). Lipstick’s oppressive history would play an integral role in the formation of lipstick as a symbol of liberation and freedom in America, as women would soon challenge the standards enforced by the patriarchy and deem lipstick a ready symbol of rebellion.

**First-Wave Feminism**

In the early 1900s, women rallied for political emancipation. At this point, women were unable to vote in any elections, and there were a number of arguments to support this federal institution. Some claimed that “[s]uffrage is not a right,” and that “it is a privilege that may or may not be granted.” Arguments claimed that women’s right to vote would lead a mother to start “gadding the streets and neglecting her children,” and essentially that women did not need to vote because the men did that for them, just as they go to war and “protect” them in all respects (Sanford). Essentially, women were deemed the lesser sex and useless in any processes concerning elected officials because men were active citizens, whereas women were confined to the home. The women who rallied for suffrage became known as suffragettes, including a number of well-known women like Susan B. Anthony, Dorothy Day, Alice Paul, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who led what would come to be known as the first-wave feminist movement.

Parallel to the fight for women’s suffrage was the popularization of lipstick—red ipstick, specifically—worn by the suffragettes “who took to the streets, banded together” (Marsh) in an act of solidarity to defy the patriarchal society that confined them and fight for their political rights. New York City was a prime location for these types of rallies. In fact, the 1912 New York Suffragette Rally incorporated a “specific shade of red lip rouge” as a procedure of participation (Pointer 156), and this trend continued as a standard rally institution thereafter. Red lipstick in particular, according to historian and author Madeleine Marsh, has been “more than anything else about female strength.” In the years that follow, women would continue to embrace red lipstick not as a tool of rebellion, but as one of patriotism and unification with the United States culture.

During World War II, women played a large role in the success of the American economy and were offered more opportunities than ever before. About 350,000 women served in the armed forces during WWII, while another 19 million took on jobs at home in support of the war effort (Collins 374). According to Marsh, “ladies were encouraged to ‘look’ [their] best to do [their] best,’” during wartime, and lipstick was a strong source of female empowerment as these women established a new identity in this changing American society. Tangee, then one of America’s largest lipstick producers, launched the “War, Women, and Lipstick!” campaign to boost women’s morale during wartime (Pallingston 21-22). Lipstick symbolized patriotism and resilient femininity throughout this time, and it also represented the U.S. government’s attempt to keep women feminized during a time of masculine responsibility. Lipstick’s representation of female sexuality was now no longer looked down upon, but welcomed, most specifically because it could not affect men as greatly and women were integral players in the country’s economic success. Between the first- and second-waves of the feminist movement, however, there would be yet another shift in lipstick’s societal symbolism not dictated by the patriarchy.

**Second-Wave Feminism**

The focus of the feminist movement shifted in the 1960s and 70s from women’s legal rights to every area of the female experience—in the family, regarding sexuality, and work—and this shift became known as the second-wave of feminism (Rampton). Socially, lipstick had progressed as a general symbol of rebellion in a cultural sense. This cultural movement, predominantly in the 1970s, “express[ed] sex, violence, and general nonconformity” (Pallingston 25), and served to be deliberately provocative to the public. Although lipstick flourished in this disco era, feminists about-faced on the topic and rebelled by *not* wearing lipstick. These women had gone from wearing red lipstick to each of their protests and rallies to refusing to wear it at all under the rationale that “commercialized beauty business [was] degrading to women” (Boock 38). This refusal to participate in lipstick use protested the beauty industry for capitalizing on female degradation by prompting women to believe cosmetics were necessary means to be societally accepted, and feminists rejected this patriarchal school of thought.

Feminist behavior during the second-wave emerged largely as a response to anti-Vietnam War and civil rights movements, according to Rampton. Furthermore, the rejection of cosmetics did not occur solely on an individual level for feminists themselves, but as a public retort against the patriarchal American society. In 1968, a feminist group known as the Redstockings staged a protest against the Miss America pageant, rejecting the “beauty dominated cattle parade” (“The Miss America Protest: 1968”) and staging a counter-pageant in which a sheep was named Miss America while various oppressive feminine artifacts—bras, girdles, high heels, cosmetics, false eyelashes, etc.—were thrown in the trash (Rampton). This wave of feminism also coincided more highly with the civil rights movement, focusing on an oppressive patriarchy that existed at all levels for minority groups, especially those based on gender, race, and class.

**Third-Wave Feminism and Modern Feminist Culture**

Generally speaking, the year 1992 is designated as the turning point of feminism and the commencement of its third-wave, marked predominantly by court cases centered on rape, sexual harassment against women, especially in the workplace, and reproductive rights. Considered the current stage of feminism, the third-wave focuses largely on social inequality and oppression against women in the legal sense. According to Rampton, women today “have stepped onto the stage as strong and empowered, eschewing victimization and defining feminine beauty for themselves as subjects, not as objects of a sexist patriarchy,” which is where lipstick steps in. Once banned from the feminist movement, lipstick’s use was now embraced. Furthermore, the 1990s also served as a pivotal moment for Wall Street’s investors, as it suddenly became apparent how economically useful the cosmetics industry was. More conversations surrounding the nature of lipstick emerged, ranging from theories about how popular shades reflect societal moods (Pallingston 26-27) and why women use lipstick, both psychologically and socially speaking. Some psychologists argued that lipstick use reflected “society’s youth worship,” while others attributed its popularity to simply being reflective of adult sexuality (Ragas 75-76). All considered, lipstick had regained general popularity in the 1990s, but according to Jerry Gillam, feminists remain divided between second-wave and progressive thought.

Women’s work towards equal rights and pay did not end with the second-wave, but the focus on sex-negativism, or the designation of one sex—e.g., males—as a detriment to success, had more or less dissipated, reassigning the focus of the feminist movement to women’s rights and equality, rather than that of retaliation against the patriarchy (Rampton). Third-wave feminists, according to Rampton, sometimes even abandon the title of “feminist” altogether in an attempt to erase the “us-them” binary between men and women. Although the need for women’s equality in American society is still in existence, the third-wave of feminism has challenged the need to attack men for these means.

Those feminists who still believe in lipstick as an oppressive tool of the patriarchy fall into a number of various categories of feminism that have developed in twenty-first century America, but some of those who embrace its use are called Lipstick Feminists. The argument for “Lipstick Feminism,” a variation of third-wave feminism, stems from the second-wave feminist consideration of the cosmetics industry as being largely patriarchal, making women’s participation in that economic arena problematic. Second-wave feminism focused largely on this patriarchal society, viewing cosmetics, high heels, and low cut apparel as tools of patriarchal oppression, while third-wave feminism sought to transform that view of beauty by turning perceived tools of oppression into objects of empowerment and personal beauty, contends Rampton. Although lipstick is no longer governmentally regulated in the United States, its use is still policed in feminist spaces, as evidently seen through the formation of Lipstick Feminism.

The phrase coined by Paulo Freire—“The oppressed…tend themselves to become [the] oppressors.”—rings true in today’s society as the genuine, underlying purpose of feminism gets lost in translation among different “types”: liberal, cultural, radical, socialist, ecofeminism, Black, separatist, etc. Even these types become compartmentalized to include and exclude those whose views do not completely coincide with those of the group. Since even before the introduction of first-wave feminism, women have been forced to negotiate these spaces in order to remain in-line with society’s standards for them. Society, in this context, includes any and all influencers of American thought from the federal government to feminist women regardless of the movement they followed. Regardless, women have fluidly embraced and rejected the use of lipstick and other cosmetics over time as its representation of society shifted. When lipstick symbolized strength and patriotism, women embraced its use proudly during the first-wave, and they did the same even when it symbolized promiscuity and sexuality to the public during the second-wave.

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