

## **Lipstick in the Time of Corona: A Sociological Musing**

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**Abstract:** *This article is a musing of a sociologist regarding the importance of lipstick as an item of makeup at a time when its primary area of usage, the face, has been covered due to demands of health and safety as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. By looking at the sale of lipsticks on online platforms and the ideas regarding its importance and usage as explicated by online beauty personalities, this article tries to understand the importance of lipstick as a tool of women's emancipation and beautification as well as a symbol of consumerism in the current times when it cannot be flaunted due to the face masks.*

**Keywords:** Lipstick, coronavirus, makeup, women's empowerment, lipstick feminism, lipstick effect.

### ***Introduction***

Beautifully stained puckers have been an aspect of womanly grace for centuries. Lisa Eldridge, a famous Hollywood makeup artist, recently made a three-episode documentary series on BBC Network titled "Make-up: A Glamorous History" that delved into British makeup trends and what they said about British society spanning from the Georgian era to the 1920s. In this documentary she has shown in great detail exactly how women made themselves up in accordance with their social positions. As written in the description of an episode, 'Wealthy Georgians used their look to show off just how rich they were - it took time, skill and money. The sheer glamour of the high Georgians was no accident: it is a style that owes its origins to the turbulent history of the age. The 18<sup>th</sup> century was a period of massive ostentation, matched by staggering inequality - ending in parts of Europe with bloodshed and

revolution ... in this period of extreme wealth in Britain, the rich entered an arms race of beauty – competing to go more and more extreme to show that they belonged’ (BBC 2021). Faces painted completely white with toxic paint that was potentially and at times actually fatal, elaborate hairdos and definitely discernible makeup including specifically coloured lips were important aspects of the look. However, with the revolution raging on in Europe, such displays of wealth began to be looked down upon and even became dangerous as the guillotine of Marie Antoinette proved. Yet, while it was popular, it said much about society and about the need for women to look a certain way in order to be good representatives of their communities and their social statuses. With the Victorian era, the approved look changed completely and became extremely subtle, something akin to the currently common “no-makeup makeup looks”. The idea was to look as though one is effortlessly beautiful even though some makeup was used to attain porcelain-plain faces and slightly reddened lips. This gave way to the 1920s where women’s beauty and fashion took a serious turn towards self-expression and numerous brands emerged that are still common and prestigious names in the world of cosmetics such as Max Factor, Estee Lauder, Elizabeth Arden, etc. A significant development that took place during this time that changed the meaning of makeup for women greatly was the creation of small and compact makeup items that the post-World War II working women could fit in their handbags. It is during this era of earning women with greater say and choice regarding their looks, that the stark red lipstick became the mark of a strong and glamorous woman, especially since it began to be as depicted such in Hollywood. As the documentary shows, makeup by this time became a necessity to be presentable in society and the lipstick became a very important part of producing that presentable look. The importance of the lipstick is, however, not just a Western phenomenon. In India, for example, before the arrival of Western colour cosmetics, women liked to enhance their lips and different methods and implements were used to achieve that look such as chewing on the betel leaf, something that older Indian women still do to get the stained lip effect without having to wear conventional lipsticks, or using some other naturally derived pigments for the same effect. The lipstick’s journey, therefore, has been a long one, from using insect juices and leaf juices to get the red tainted lips to the modern lipstick created in high-tech

laboratories with various colours and finishes sold in roadside shops, in pharmacies as well as in luxury stores. However, what has remained a constant in this long journey is its importance. The continuous sale of lipsticks even in the time of the coronavirus pandemic when faces need to be covered for protection is perhaps the most convincing proof of the importance of the lipstick in the lives of women (and many men).

Being an avid consumer of beauty not only in terms of products but also in terms of ideas, trends and techniques as displayed on internet platforms like YouTube and Instagram, the author has a reasonably good idea about the happenings in the world of beauty in India and in the West. In this context, this paper deals with the observations made as a viewer and a consumer in the beauty world regarding the importance of the lipstick during the coronavirus pandemic and what they potentially say about society. Before proceeding further on the matter, it is important to mention here that the paper does not have a strict methodology since, as the title says, it is primarily based on musings of a sociologist who has observed certain phenomena keenly to try and understand what they say about our society. By way of data collection, the study has only resorted to observing content on social media platforms, especially YouTube, Instagram and on beauty apps such as Nykaa, which have then been analysed using certain theoretical positions. The musings are possibly quite generalizable since the lipstick's fate in times of COVID-19 seem to be quite similar in different societies and parts of the world if we go by the content that beauty influencers are putting up in different parts of the world. It must, however, be made clear that this study is by no means universal, historical and thorough. This work is an example of using the sociological eye (Collins 1998) and sociological imagination (Mills 1959) to notice certain behaviours that a section of the population is engaging in in the particular context of the pandemic to understand what it might say about the current society.

### *Observations as a viewer of beauty content*

As already mentioned in the introduction, the author is an avid consumer of beauty content on online platforms. This gives her fair knowledge of the newest trends in the beauty community that emerge in the West and transport the world over, including

to her own nation India. The transportation of beauty ideals and trends from the West to the East is a good example of how the West has been hegemonizing the rest of the Non-Western world through not only materialistic products but even cultural and social ideals. This phenomenon can be seen when we observe products sold on beauty apps in India. The influence of Western products and trends is obvious. Wearing makeup on an everyday basis at work or in college has recently become a common phenomenon among Indian women as a result of watching Western “beauty influencers” or “beauty gurus” who typically started out on YouTube to showcase their love for and skill of doing makeup and teaching others how to do it. They taught women and gradually many men that “imperfections” like acne or dark circles need to be hidden using makeup while other parts of the face need to be enhanced such as the eyes and the lips, perhaps because they are the most expressive parts of the face, used the most in daily communication and therefore must be presentable. Context-specific lipstick looks are being recommended to viewers by such beauty gurus such as wearing my-lips-but-better (MLBB) lipsticks or lip glosses in formal occasions and trying out darker colours for festive makeup looks, all of it of course depending on the eye makeup. Lipsticks of different, colours (including nude colours which are closest to one’s natural lip colour) and finishes have to be kept in a woman’s arsenal of beauty so that she is always prepared with the perfect look, no matter what the occasion. Lipstick sales had thus been soaring sky high for decades all over the world.

Then came the pandemic that the modern world had never seen and was unprepared for. Being locked up in homes, the human world literally stopped for a period of time and all the makeup was suddenly useless while the animal world got a chance to flourish, or just breathe, for the first time in decades. While the animals breathed and the air cleared, human beings quickly developed online platforms through which work could continue via video-conferencing and therefore looking presentable even inside the home became necessary. As a result, the lipsticks that were left untouched in vanities again began to be drawn out and worn. All of a sudden beauty content began to be geared towards makeup suitable for such occasions and beauty gurus began to churn out new video ideas of creating makeup looks using existing

makeup, a novel idea since the trend before this was to use the latest launches for any looks, reflecting the excessive consumerism that the beauty industry has been supporting.

When lockdowns finally began to be lifted and people began going outside wearing masks, one would think that the lipstick would be forgotten since it would be covered and get smudged under the masks. These were two convincing issues that beauty gurus quickly realized and began to focus their content on teaching how to make the eyes the centre of attention and creativity. This did not last though. Makeup brands began to start competing with each other to make the perfect “mask-proof” lipstick that would be long lasting and smudge-proof. It did not take long for such lipsticks to be formulated since many brands were already carrying lipsticks of similar description even before the pandemic hit when the only requirement from a lipstick was to remain on the lips after a heavy meal. Now, with the added need of having to remain intact under the mask, lipstick formulations have been perfected in that direction and are marketed as “mask-proof” lipsticks, advertised, reviewed and raved about by beauty gurus online. Thus, the importance of the lipstick in the woman’s (and some men’s) arsenal of beauty products has not been dulled at all by the pandemic but has instead been reiterated through reformulations. The clever sales strategy of beauty brands is, thus, evident. The strategy has been working so well in spite of the requirement of masking up is because of the beloved beauty influencers who are used almost as tools by the beauty brands to ensure continuous capitalistic gains over something that is of little or no practical use in the current pandemic. With beauty brands sending free products to beauty gurus to showcase them on their channels and beauty gurus doing so for creating trendy content to increase views, viewers are constantly bombarded with information about different kinds of products and techniques that make many, if not all, viewers feel somehow inadequate without them. Therefore, whether or not they would get a chance to wear it, many will surely buy it and some might stop themselves with difficulty. The story is the same in the West, in India and elsewhere in the world.

Beauty brands alone are not to blame, however. While brands do have a big role to play in advertising and marketing mask-proof

lipsticks to ensure sales are maintained, the social conditioning of females has been such that lipsticks have been an integral part of the way a woman presents herself to the world, mask or no mask. In more traditional times, women were taught that the lipstick is a marker of social status. Today however, this social conditioning is justified by the feelings of glamour and empowerment that lipstick wearers tend to feel. Beauty gurus encourage wearing a bold coloured lipstick to “feel good” on a bad day or to “feel powerful” when going out in the world of social stigmas and rules. The red lipstick, once associated with prostitution, is today seen as especially important in transferring to its wearer a special sense of power and the production of red lipsticks in different tones and formulations, as well as any other shade, has been continuing unabated in spite of the pandemic. The bold lipstick, that women have been taught to associate with feelings of strength, power and confidence, is therefore still going strong in idea and usage under the masks. The author herself, admittedly, is a victim of the idea of wearing a lipstick under the mask to “feel good”, an idea that has been planted in the minds of consumers of lipsticks by cosmetics companies and beauty influencers who are of the opinion that wearing lipsticks is not about showcasing one’s beauty to the external world but to feel internally confident and good about oneself. Therefore, although the social conditioning of women around the wearing of lipsticks has changed over the ages, the importance of wearing the lipstick has remained the same even at a time when the lips are the only part of facial makeup that women cannot show to the world.

The tendencies of the buyer of the beauty community are informed and influenced very greatly by their viewing patterns of beauty content online. Therefore, closely linked to the observations of the viewer and arising from them are the observations of the buyer in the beauty community.

### ***Observations as a consumer of beauty products***

Consumption habits are very closely related to viewing choices, especially in the age of social media in which pleasures of consumption often override actual needs or become disguised as needs. The *need* we often feel to buy an expensive lipstick if it goes on sale even though we know we cannot showcase it to the world

due to mask wearing is an example of pleasures disguised as needs. To understand consumption patterns of the lipstick simple interactions with fellow lipstick enthusiasts, following the purchases of different consumers on beauty apps and monitoring one's own consumption patterns are useful tools. In case of the author's own consumption patterns, since March 2020 almost every order placed on apps to purchase essentials has had at least one lipstick added to it. The author has accumulated more than ten lipsticks in a year and a half in spite of knowing very well that there are hardly any chances of flaunting the lipsticks outside in the real world, let alone using up one. This is not only in the case of the author but it is a general market trend. The author's explanation, as well the explanations of many other women in the author's known circle, is that, as mentioned in the previous section, the lipstick is not worn to show anyone else but for one's own desire to feel good and confident. Thus, the lipstick is used as an accessory of self enhancement not just in terms of physical appearance but also psychological build and therefore is used in spite of the mask which, in a way, justifies the buying of lipsticks during the pandemic. Moreover, with the fast paced vaccinations and gradual opening up of public places, especially eateries where masks need to be taken off, along with more frequent gatherings of friends and families, opportunities to go mask free are increasing and therefore opportunities to flaunt the lipstick are also on the rise. In fact, as the media and marketing director of a makeup brand pointed out in an interview to Times of India, the lowered sales during the initial phase of the pandemic had more to do with supply issues than with demand issues. In the first phase of the coronavirus induced worldwide lockdown in early to mid-2020, it was only essential items that were being sold in the market - online and offline - and the lipstick, being non-essential, was not getting a chance to be sold. However, as soon as such restrictions lifted around the middle of the year, numerous people like the author once again began to buy lipsticks in spite of not needing them for any practical purposes. A cursory glance through the beauty apps tells the tale of the lipstick's popularity in the times of corona, possibly over and above any other form of makeup. Women are still buying lipsticks and not just mask-proof lipsticks but even those which would smudge badly under a mask. This shows that the lipstick's form is also not affected significantly by the pandemic and that all formulations of lipstick are still as

important as before, even if they cannot be used easily in these times without ruining the rest of one's perfectly made up face. In fact, beauty gurus come to the rescue here as well by showing techniques to mattify the transferable lipsticks thereby mask-proofing them. Therefore, the importance of the lipstick has not faded even in times of corona. In fact, makeup, including lipsticks, has been one of the most well performing sectors of the Indian economy. This may be explained using the "lipstick effect" proposed by Leonard Lauder of the famous Estee Lauder cosmetics company in 2001 after the 9/11 attacks. According to him, this effect is seen as the tendency to buy small luxuries and indulgences like lipsticks at a time of economic crisis and chaos in order to feel good by splurging at a time when economic resources are otherwise strained. Going by the lipstick effect, buying a lipstick at the time of the pandemic indicates that people are looking for comfort by buying something they are fond of which is also something which they use to improve body confidence and portray a specific kind of body image. As a consumer in the beauty industry, the author can vouch for both effects when buying a lipstick knowing well that no one can see it under the mask.

In the Indian scenario, what has probably added more strongly to the unabated lipstick sales in spite of the pandemic, apart from frequent discounts that beauty apps and websites keep promoting, is the launch of various international brands in the Indian market. With proliferation of international beauty content through YouTube in India, knowledge about international makeup brands has increased tremendously. Therefore, when these brands have started launching in the Indian beauty market, it has made the hearts of many a beauty lover flutter and has made them open up their wallets whole heartedly to buy these products, including lipsticks in spite of the need to wear masks over the painted lips. The lipstick effect, the linkage of wearing a lipstick to feeling good and confident about oneself combined with the desire to have more and more international items which are markers of status more than anything else, even when prices are marked up to a good measure due to taxes and import duties, has meant that the sale of lipsticks has remained important after a brief lull in the beginning of the pandemic mostly due to lack of supply. Therefore, the wearing and buying of lipsticks even at a time when it is of no significance as an enhancer of one's facial features in the eyes of

others proves that it means much more than a makeup item to its wearers. Based on these observations, the author will now put forward her sociological musing.

### *Attempting a sociological explanation*

Two things are apparent from the above observations. One, the lipstick has an inherent power that is transferred to its wearer. Two, the lipstick aids capitalism in that beauty brands, especially well known international brands, can immediately grasp women's attention and grab a major proportion of the market even during times of economic strains and turmoil.

Let us begin with the idea of power. Femininity has been typically associated with a lack of power. The "ideal" woman is supposed to be adequately meek and subservient to the men in the family, look after every need of the family and do all this while looking pleasant. Not just women's behaviour but their looks have also been very important in determining whether or not they represent their families properly in the outside world, especially when it is a wealthy family, as Lisa Eldridge's documentary has depicted. Since looking the desirable way needed external help, therefore makeup played a very important role in creating different forms of "ideal" feminine looks at different points of time and in this endeavour the lipstick played a very important role. Being an aid to looking the desirous way as stipulated by society, the lipstick becomes 'a polarising marketplace icon that is simultaneously associated with both women's autonomy and oppression' (Gurrieri & Drenten 2021: 225). In feminist scholarship, the lipstick has been variously analysed, sometimes being seen as an expression of power while at other times being explained as manifestations of patriarchal ideals of feminine beauty. Third wave feminism and "lipstick feminism" particularly promoted "girlie culture" by encouraging the use of the lipstick and other feminine symbols even though it was aware of the patriarchal roots of the ideal feminine look, 'emphasising that femininity is a positive trait that can be celebrated, such as through one's self-expression with makeup and fashion (Schuster 2017)' (ibid.: 225-226). Thus, by expressing oneself through makeup, women portray themselves as agential subjects of this patriarchal society in which they are *choosing* how they want to look and be perceived by others in society instead of

being told by society how they should be looking. Western makeup has in fact led women to believe that it is the made up face is supposed to be an important tool in the process of showcasing one's inner and true self and women are portraying agency by choosing how they are reflecting their inner selves through makeup. As Negrin (2000) writes quoting the post-structuralist theorist Thevoz, 'the problem with western cosmetics is not that they mask an "authentic" self, but on the contrary, that they are supposed to accurately reflect who a person "really" is... The individual's physical appearance is taken to be a mirror of the soul and an adequate cosmetic practice is thus seen to be one which provides an accurate reflection of the person's real identity' (85-86). In this project of accurately representing the inner self, the lipstick plays a very crucial role because it is considered that a person's true self and mood are both reflected by the choice of the lipstick colour. It is as if the women have the power to choose how they want their inner selves to be portrayed in society by choosing the colour of their lipsticks.

There is, however, ample scholarship that has perceived of wearing the lipstick as a 'patriarchal bargain (Kandiyoti 1988), whereby a woman conforms to gender-based rules in order to gain benefit or power from the system. Such a perspective acknowledges that beauty occupies a central space in women's lives (Bartky 1990) due to the importance placed on women's physical appearance and the impetus to conform to unattainable and forever shifting ideals. In turn, this means that beauty work for women is never complete and thus functions as a political weapon against women's advancement (Wolf 1990)' (Gurrieri & Drenten 2021: 226). As such, the lipstick is seen as a tool that is used by patriarchal society to continue to produce and maintain unequal relations between men and women by ensuring women keep on subscribing to models of "ideal" beauty, even though women themselves may feel that they are truly expressing their agency and choice by wearing lipstick. In such a scenario, it is questionable whether or not the lipstick really is a symbol of power for women. Yet, the sisterhood, if we can call it that, of the online beauty community does help in granting women a sense of power by attaching feelings of confidence and strength to wearing of the lipstick unlike the patriarchal project of making women subservient to men's standards of ideal beauty. Seen in this light, the lipstick symbolises

the feminine sisterhood which is bound by feelings of pleasure, empowerment and emancipation from patriarchal standards of beauty. In fact, Lazar's (2011) idea of power femininity suggests that the female identity can also be powerful just like male identity and in trying to portray power femininity, the lipstick can be seen as an important tool due to its association with the sense of empowerment and confidence. The lipstick wearing woman is an agential subject of society who is willing to express her choices and desires fearlessly as well as being in charge of her body and sexuality, of which the red lipstick has been an important symbol (Wolf 1990; Gurrieri & Drenten 2021). Therefore, the lipstick began to be marketed as 'something that a woman wore for her own pleasure and satisfaction' (Gurrieri & Drenten 2021: 228). It is not surprising, therefore, that women are still wearing lipsticks to feel pleasure, satisfaction, empowerment and freedom even though they are unable to display their lipsticks to the rest of the world due to the masks. Negrin (2000) refers to the post-structuralist Jean Baudrillard's work *Seduction* to say that 'while philosophers have traditionally condemned cosmetics in so far as they operate within the realm of artifice and appearance, it is precisely this fact which constitutes their strength' (88). Such strength is evident when women associate feelings of empowerment with the lipstick, especially the red lipstick. As Negrin goes on to say, according to Baudrillard, 'women's real strength lies in their mastery of the realm of the symbolic' (ibid.). Yet, she points out while critiquing post-structuralist analyses of the gendered body and the role of makeup in the creation of gendered identities, while celebrating 'the artificiality of cosmetics and the arbitrary play with appearance, theorists such as Thevoz, Wilson, and Butler fail to realize, however, that a mode of cosmetic practice which denaturalizes the body and declares the constructed nature of identity is not necessarily liberatory' (ibid.: 90-91). Using the example of cosmetic surgery, she writes that 'the apparently voluntary nature of such procedures belies the fact that in our contemporary culture where cosmetic surgery is increasingly becoming the norm, those who refuse to use such technologies are becoming stigmatised as "unliberated", as "refusing to be all that they could be" (Morgan 1991: 40-1)' (ibid.: 96). Even if the lipstick may not be as emancipatory theoretically as beauty gurus and cosmetics companies would have us believe, it cannot be denied that most women truly do feel that they are expressing

agency and choice by simply choosing the colour of the lipstick and that they are looking presentable to the society and hence become confident about themselves. Thus, great importance is given to the performance of the self and the lipstick (as well as other forms of makeup) becomes an important prop used in this performance.

While it is debatable whether the lipstick is a true tool of women's empowerment or if women are continuing to unknowingly further patriarchal ideals of beauty, one thing is certain – the lipstick is a perfect example of consumerism. The lipstick has always been an important item sold to women, discretely in the past and gradually more openly. Ideas of pleasure, empowerment and emancipation have aided the sales of lipsticks since women feel that if they wear lipsticks they will truly achieve these feelings. Therefore, one may argue that feminist ideals of empowerment and emancipation are actually instrumental in aiding the entry of capitalism into more and more avenues of women's lives. Brands have been minting money by manufacturing lipsticks even during the pandemic due to these feelings that women want to feel and are willing to put in a considerable amount of money in order to help them feel empowered and emancipated – something akin to the lipstick effect – thereby helping the capitalist brands. Thus, the lipstick is not just a makeup product but is something with which the wearers' emotions are attached and it is this attachment that brands have been able to successfully exploit (Truong et. al 2009). While the lipstick was initially a thing of conspicuous consumption (Veblen 1899), designed to express the status and wealth of the wearer and her distance from the rest of the population, today it is no longer so. In fact, there are dedicated makeup brands today that are making inexpensive duplicates (dupes) of lipsticks and other makeup products that are made by expensive brands so that the less wealthy sections of the population can have access to something similar. Thus, the lipstick, while being an important tool in looking good, is no longer a marker of social status. A democratization of beauty has taken place due to the effects of consumerism and this has aided and has also been aided by the entry of capitalism in women's lives who are the typical consumers of beauty.

However, this does not mean that the aura of expensive, exclusive luxury brands has reduced in the minds of the consumers. This is evidenced by the fact that even during the pandemic and its resultant economic turmoil, lipstick wearers in India have been buying expensive lipsticks from international brands that are launching in India which have been hyped up for many years by international beauty gurus. The unabated sale of expensive lipsticks during the economic turmoil due to COVID-19 can be explained with the concept of lipstick effect. Lipsticks are considered as 'the emblem of those "little luxuries", that consumers do not want to give up, even in harsh economic times' (Mason et al. 2017: 8). As the authors describe, the lipstick effect 'makes apparent consumers' need for compensation (Schaefer 2008) especially in hard economic times. However, it is also a visible manifestation of the changing meaning of luxury in the 21<sup>st</sup> century' (ibid.: 9). Therefore, even during the pandemic period with strained economic conditions and the impracticality of putting on makeup since it would be hidden by the mask, lipsticks are still being bought simply for their hedonistic pleasure, thereby aiding the incomes of makeup brands. This has meant that capitalism is making easier inroads into women's lives by being able to exploit the emotional attachment that women have developed with makeup and especially lipsticks due, once again, to the feelings of empowerment and confidence that media and the recently formed sisterhood of beauty gurus have taught women to associate with lipstick.

The lipstick, therefore, has retained its importance in spite of the need of mask wearing and the economic turmoil of the pandemic as evidenced by the continuous sale of lipsticks as well as online content regarding it.

### ***Conclusion***

Just as love survived in the time of cholera, as Gabriel Garcia Marquez famously wrote in his book *Love in the Time of Cholera*, so too the lipstick has survived in the time of corona. It says a lot about human behaviour and the social conditioning of human minds, especially female minds, with respect to body image, body positivity and society's ideas of appropriate behaviour when it comes to both love and lipstick. It also reveals how consumption

is now intricately related to ideas of agency, choice and identity to the extent that it uses such ideas to ensure its survival in the ever-growing capitalistic society. While the consumerist nature of modern women, especially earning middle and upper-middle class women, has definitely aided the unabated sale of lipsticks in the pandemic times, the sale has been strongly supplemented by the feelings of confidence and empowerment that women have been socialized to associate with the lipstick. This is very much the reason why the lipstick has survived and is still thriving as an important part of a woman's (and nowadays many men's) attire in spite of the inability to show the outside world those perfectly painted pouts due to the requirement of mask wearing. No matter what theories expound about the liberatory capacities of this item, the lipstick is a tool not just of beautification but also, very importantly, of unification of all women into a tribe or a brethren of like-minded people gaining feelings of empowerment and emancipation from the simple act of colouring their lips, even if no one can see the range of colours under the masks.

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