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Do Clothing Style and Color Affect Our Perceptions of Others?

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Abstract

Prior research has shown that women who wear red clothing or suggestive clothing are perceived as more attractive, having greater sexual intent, and having more negative qualities than women dressed in different colors or less suggestive clothing. This bias towards perceiving sexual intent may be evolutionary or may be due to people projecting their emotions onto others. The current study builds from this research by performing a 2 (color: white or red) x 2 (clothing type: suggestive or non-suggestive) between-subjects experiment. We hypothesized that women would be perceived as more attractive and as having greater sexual intent while wearing red and suggestive clothing rather than while wearing red and non-suggestive clothing or while in either of the white clothing conditions. Although we found no significant interaction between the color and clothing conditions, we did find multiple main effects. This suggests that either the color red or the suggestive clothing type will make a difference in perceptions of attractiveness and sexual intent, but when together, the effect is alleviated.

Do Clothing Style and Color Affect Our Perceptions of Others?

The way that women dress often affects how people perceive them. Prior research has demonstrated that men misperceive women's friendliness as sexual intent, especially when the women are dressed suggestively (Haselton, 2003; Farris et al., 2008; Montemurro & Gillen, 2013; Guéguen, 2011; Lennon et al., 2017). This bias to misperceive friendliness as sexual intent is higher in men than in women (Haselton, 2003; Farris et al., 2008), although women have been shown to think less of other women who dress slightly more suggestively in the workplace (Howlett et al., 2015). Perceiving sexual intent does not have to be a misperception of friendliness as sexual intent, instead it could be as simple as over-perceiving sexual intent when there was none. While women make judgments about other women based on their clothing, they are worried about what messages they are sending with their clothing choices, because the messages are so often perceived as sexual (Montemurro & Gillen, 2013). Further research has shown that men will approach a suggestively dressed woman sooner and more often than a non-suggestively dressed woman. They also rate their chances of going on a date and having sex with the woman as more likely if she is dressed suggestively, possibly because she is perceived as sexual (Guéguen, 2011).

Researchers have asked if there is an evolutionary explanation for overperceiving sexual intent. Durante, Li, and Haselton (2008) investigated multiple variables that could have an effect on women's clothing choice. They looked at women's sexual experience, relationship status and satisfaction, and ovulatory cycle to see what effect they would have on outfit choices, since these variables could all cause women to dress more provocatively. Durante et al. (2008) had participants come to the lab on a day when they were ovulating and on a day when they were not ovulating. Photographs of their outfits were taken, then participants were asked to draw an outfit

to wear to a party that night. Results showed that when single women were closer to ovulation, they drew more revealing clothing for the party, while when sexually experienced women were closer to ovulation, they wore more revealing clothing to the lab session (Durante et al., 2008). This shows that women will choose to wear more suggestive clothing at ovulation, possibly because they are trying to attract men when they are most likely to get pregnant.

The sexual intent over-perception is also clearly seen when women wear red clothing (Roberts et al., 2010; Guéguen, 2012; Elliot & Niesta, 2008; Elliot et al., 2012). Not only do people rate opposite-sex targets as more attractive when they are wearing red (Roberts et al., 2010), men also rate women as having more sexual intent when wearing red, relative to any other color (Guéguen, 2012). The same effect is seen when women are shown against a red versus a green backdrop (Elliot & Niesta, 2008). Further, women who are wearing red are more likely to be asked on a date, be thought of as attractive and as having more sexual intent, and are more likely to have a man spend money on the date than a woman wearing blue (Elliot & Niesta, 2008).

Interestingly, if women are manipulated into anticipating a conversation with an above-average-looking man, they are more prone to choose to wear a red shirt than a green shirt. They are also more prone to choose a red shirt than the women who are anticipating a conversation with a below-average-looking man or an average-looking woman (Elliot et al., 2012). Later, the same researchers ran a similar experiment, manipulating the women into anticipating an above-average-looking man or an above-average-looking woman, and asked them to choose between a red or blue shirt. Again, women who were anticipating the above-average-looking man were more prone to choose the red shirt (Elliot et al., 2012).

There has also been research into an evolutionary explanation as to why men perceive more sexual intent when women are wearing red. To investigate this phenomenon, Beall and Tracy (2013) asked women to self-report the color of their shirt and when their last menstrual cycle began. This produced a correlation between ovulation and women choosing to wear red clothing (Beall & Tracy, 2013). This could be construed as women making themselves look more attractive to men when they are most likely to become pregnant.

As discussed earlier, even women judge other women who are dressed slightly more suggestively as having more sexual intent and as deserving less respect. Howlett et al. (2015) found that professional women who had a slightly shorter skirt and a few more buttons unfastened were rated more negatively on intelligence, confidence, trustworthiness, responsibility, authority, and organization than a professional woman who was dressed slightly less suggestively (Howlett et al., 2015). This effect is even seen when participants make judgments of pre-teen girls dressing suggestively or non-suggestively. The suggestively dressed girl was rated as lower in competence, determination, intelligence, self-respect, and morality than the non-suggestively dressed girl (Graff et al., 2012). Additionally, a possible link has been discovered by Karl et al. (2013) between how people feel when in a certain style of dress and how they judge people who are wearing those clothes. Participants perceived themselves as more friendly, creative, productive, and trustworthy in business casual clothes, and more capable and assertive in either business casual or business formal clothes (Karl et al., 2013). These results clearly show a bias in perceptions and trait judgments of women based on their clothing choice (Lennon et al., 2017).

The above research shows that when women wear red or suggestive clothing, they are perceived as more attractive, as having a greater sexual intent, and as being less capable and

moral than their counterparts (Elliot & Niesta, 2008; Elliot et al., 2012; Graff et al., 2012; Guéguen, 2011; Guéguen, 2012; Haselton, 2003; Howlett et al., 2015; Farris et al., 2008; Lennon et al., 2017; Montemurro & Gillen, 2013; Roberts et al., 2010). These effects can be explained by how people feel when they are in those clothes, and projecting those feelings onto how they believe others should feel in the clothes (Karl et al., 2013). The effects are also somewhat explained by evolutionary concepts, including wearing red and suggestive clothing during ovulation in order to attract men when the woman is most likely to get pregnant (Beall & Tracy, 2013; Durante et al., 2008). In the modern world, however, these biases lead to the degradation and poor judgment of women, sometimes simply because their skirt is a bit shorter and they have a few less buttons fastened (Howlett et al., 2015). The current study builds from this research, investigating an interaction between perceived sexual intent, the color red, and suggestive clothing. We will manipulate the colors red and white with suggestive or non-suggestive clothing on women to investigate this. We predict that the rates of perceived sexual intent will be higher with red and suggestive clothing than with red and non-suggestive clothing or either of the white clothing conditions.

Method

Participants

Participants were thirty-four female and eight male undergraduates at Arcadia University, all between the ages of 18 and 22. Participant demographics were thirty-three Caucasian, one native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, two Black or African American, two Hispanic or Latino, two Asian, and two Caucasian and Black or African American. All participants were recruited through SONA or through word-of-mouth and were compensated with research credit

for their psychology classes in exchange for their participation if they needed credit. Participants could not be color blind.

Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions – white and non-suggestive clothing, white and suggestive clothing, red and non-suggestive clothing, or red and suggestive clothing (Appendix A). This study was a 2 (color: white or red) x 2 (clothing: suggestive or non-suggestive) between-subjects study, with the dependent variable of sexual intent measures. Participants then signed the informed consent form and were told that the study was about perceptions of others. They then answered a personality and demographics questionnaire (Appendix B). Afterward, participants were asked to look at 5 pictures within their condition (Appendix A). Participants looked at each picture for 30 seconds (timed on iPhones) and then were asked to turn the picture over and fill out the questionnaire for that picture (each questionnaire was the same) (Appendix C). After completion of all five picture questionnaires, participants were asked if they knew the purpose of the study. None of the participants knew the purpose. Two participants did not fill out the personality and demographics questionnaire and one participant looked at all of the pictures before filling out the picture questionnaire – they were therefore excluded from our analysis. All participants were fully debriefed after the experiment.

Materials

We ran a pilot study on 20 pictures of each condition and used the pictures that were rated close to the middle for the study in order to avoid a basement or ceiling effect. Each photo was of a woman and had come from a Google search of "non-suggestive white clothing," "suggestive white clothing," "non-suggestive red clothing," or "suggestive red clothing." Each

photo was then cropped to show only the woman, centered on the page, and cut so that participants could only see one photo at a time.

Participants answered a personality and demographics questionnaire (Appendix B), which was analyzed to see if personality differences cause some people to be more biased than others in misperceiving sexual intent. The picture questionnaires were analyzed to see if people perceived sexual intent in the women in the pictures (Appendix C). Both questionnaires were answered with 1-5 ratings.

Results

Analyses consisted of a series of one-way MANOVAs with color and clothing condition as the independent variables and questionnaire answers as the dependent variables. This was used to look for main effects and significant interactions within the questionnaires.

Personality and Demographics Questionnaire

A one-way MANOVA on the personality and demographics questionnaire revealed a significant multivariate main effect for color condition, Wilk's $\lambda = .478$, F (13.000, 26.000) = 2.188, $p = .035$, and for clothing condition, Wilk's $\lambda = .467$, F (13.000, 26.000) = 2.285, $p = .043$. There was no interaction between color and clothing condition, Wilk's $\lambda = .632$, F (13.000, 26.000) = 1.165, $p = .356$ (see Figure 1). Given the significance of the color and clothing conditions, the univariate main effects were examined. We found a significant difference between clothing condition and personality question 6, F (1, 42) = 4.548, $p = .039$, and between clothing condition and personality question 7, F (1, 42) = 5.712, $p = .022$ (Appendix B, see Figure 2).

Picture Questionnaire 1

A one-way MANOVA on the first picture questionnaire revealed a significant multivariate main effect for color condition, Wilk's $\lambda = .465$, F (10.000, 29.000) = 3.331, p = .005. There was no main effect for clothing condition, Wilk's $\lambda = .727$, F (10.000, 29.000) = 1.091, p = .401, and no interaction between color and clothing condition, Wilk's $\lambda = .749$, F (10.000, 29.000) = .971, p = .488 (see Figure 1). Given the significance of the color condition, the univariate main effects were examined. We found a significant difference between color condition and picture 1 question 5, F (1, 42) = 6.354, p = .016, picture 1 question 6, F (1, 42) = 5.962, p = .019, and picture 1 question 10, F (1, 42) = 21.304, $p < .001$ (Appendix C, see Figure 2).

Picture Questionnaire 2

A one-way MANOVA on the second picture questionnaire revealed a significant multivariate main effect for color condition, Wilk's $\lambda = .445$, F (10.000, 29.000) = 3.619, p = .003, and for clothing condition, Wilk's $\lambda = .371$, F (10.000, 29.000) = 4.920, $p < .001$. There was no interaction between color and clothing condition, Wilk's $\lambda = .657$, F (10.000, 29.000) = 1.514, p = .185 (see Figure 1). Given the significance of the color and clothing conditions, the univariate main effects were examined. We found a significant difference between clothing condition and picture 2 question 1, F (1, 42) = 5.085, p = .030, picture 2 question 5, F (1, 42) = 7.934, p = .008, picture 2 question 6, F (1, 42) = 22.077, $p < .001$, picture 2 question 8, F (1, 42) = 6.270, p = .017, and picture 2 question 10, F (1, 42) = 18.012, $p < .001$. We also found a significant difference between color condition and picture 2 question 10, F (1, 42) = 8.329, p = .006 (Appendix C, see Figure 2).

Picture Questionnaire 3

A one-way MANOVA on the third picture questionnaire revealed a significant multivariate main effect for color condition, Wilk's $\lambda = .468$, F (10.000, 29.000) = 3.290, p = .006, and for clothing condition, Wilk's $\lambda = .534$, F (10.000, 29.000) = 2.530, p = .025. There was no interaction between color and clothing condition, Wilk's $\lambda = .753$, F (10.000, 29.000) = .952, p = .504 (see Figure 1). Given the significance of the color and clothing conditions, the univariate main effects were examined. We found a significant difference between clothing condition and picture 3 question 1, F (1, 42) = 9.099, p = .005, picture 3 question 5, F (1, 42) = 14.833, $p < .001$, picture 3 question 6, F (1, 42) = 6.160, p = .018, picture 3 question 8, F (1, 42) = 5.407, p = .025, and picture 3 question 10, F (1, 42) = 8.165, p = .007. We also found a significant difference between color condition and picture 3 question 1, F (1, 42) = 4.226, p = .047, picture 3 question 2, F (1, 42) = 11.351, p = .002, and picture 3 question 5, F (1, 42) = 15.344, $p < .001$ (Appendix C, see Figure 2).

Picture Questionnaire 4

A one-way MANOVA on the fourth picture questionnaire revealed a significant multivariate main effect for clothing condition, Wilk's $\lambda = .367$, F (10.000, 29.000) = 5.005, $p < .001$. There was no main effect for color condition, Wilk's $\lambda = .596$, F (10.000, 29.000) = 1.969, p = .075, and no interaction between color and clothing condition, Wilk's $\lambda = .714$, F (10.000, 29.000) = 1.164, p = .353 (see Figure 1). Given the significance of the clothing condition, the univariate main effects were examined. We found a significant difference between clothing condition and picture 4 question 1, F (1, 42) = 14.384, p = .001, picture 4 question 5, F (1, 42) = 5.379, p = .026, picture 4 question 6, F (1, 42) = 4.371, p = .043, picture 4 question 8, F (1, 42) = 14.855, $p < .001$, and picture 4 question 10, F (1, 42) = 36.057, $p < .001$ (Appendix C, see Figure 2).

Picture Questionnaire 5

A one-way MANOVA on the fifth picture questionnaire revealed a significant multivariate main effect for color condition, Wilk's $\lambda = .512$, F (10.000, 29.000) = 2.765, p = .016. There was no main effect for clothing condition, Wilk's $\lambda = .587$, F (10.000, 29.000) = 2.037, p = .066, and no interaction between color and clothing condition, Wilk's $\lambda = .592$, F (10.000, 29.000) = 2.001, p = .071 (see Figure 1). Given the significance of the color condition, the univariate main effects were examined. We found a significant difference between clothing condition and picture 5 question 3, F (1, 42) = 5.759, p = .021, picture 5 question 5, F (1, 42) = 7.893, p = .008, and picture 5 question 10, F (1, 42) = 18.952, $p < .001$ (Appendix C, see Figure 2).

Discussion

We hypothesized that there would be a significant interaction between red clothing and suggestive clothing, because red clothing and suggestive clothing each individually lead to higher ratings of sexual intent, attractiveness, and negative qualities in prior research (Beall & Tracy, 2013; Durante et al., 2008; Elliot & Niesta, 2008; Elliot et al., 2012; Farris et al., 2008; Graff et al., 2012; Guéguen, 2011; Guéguen, 2012; Haselton, 2003; Howlett et al., 2015; Karl et al., 2013; Lennon et al., 2017; Montemurro & Gillen, 2013; Roberts et al., 2010). Although we did not find the interaction that we were hoping for, we did make an interesting discovery. We found that there was at least one main effect in all questionnaires for color condition or clothing condition, and sometimes for both. This implies that either the color red or the suggestive clothing will cause the sexual intent misperception, but the bias towards the misperception is assuaged when the suggestive clothing is red.

Our analyses also showed significance at the univariate level for multiple personality and demographics questions and for picture questions in the color condition or the clothing condition. These results indicate that suggestive clothing had more of an effect on perceptions of sexual intent, attractiveness, and negative qualities than red clothing did. They also suggest that there may be some personality differences, including believing that others see them as friendly and as a good judge of character, that may mitigate the effect of the misperception with suggestive clothing.

These findings could be applied to evolutionary hypotheses, such as women wearing red and suggestive clothing when they are ovulating so as to mate when they are most likely to become pregnant (Beall & Tracy, 2013; Durante et al., 2008). Further applications include what colors and clothing styles women should wear when hoping to be perceived in a certain way, be it sexual, professional, trustworthy, etc. These results could also be used to teach young men about the dangers of sexual intent misperceptions and the necessity of consent. This could have a significant impact on reducing the rape culture that is prevalent in American society today (Lennon et al., 2017).

Alternative explanations of these results are comprised of our experimental errors and limitations. Experimental errors include confusing instructions, inaccurate timing for participants to look at the pictures, lack of consistency with running the experiment between the experimenters, questions that do not exactly correlate with measures of sexual intent, attractiveness, and negative qualities, and having many dependent variables that affected the power of the analysis. Experimental limitations include a sample not indicative of the general population, a low number of male participants, unmotivated participants, a smaller sample size

than we would have preferred, limited time to run participants, and no ability for follow-up studies or replications.

Future studies could examine how the color red relates to sexual intent with variables such as sexual experience, relationship status and satisfaction, and the ovulatory cycle (Durante et al., 2008). They could also look into a possible interaction between suggestive clothing and the color red with these variables. Other studies could investigate if there is an interaction between suggestive clothing and the color red in an experimental design similar to that used by Elliot and Niesta (2008). This interaction could be further studied by manipulating women into expecting a conversation with an attractive man or an average-looking man and asking them to choose between a red and suggestive shirt, a white and suggestive shirt, or a red and non-suggestive shirt (Elliot et al., 2012). A conceptual replication of the Howlett et al. (2015) study would also be interesting. Researchers could replace the clothing style manipulation with a color manipulation to identify if there are negative associations with the color red in the workplace, and if it operates to the same extent as the slightly more suggestive negative associations operate. Additionally, they could investigate an interaction in this study (Howlett et al., 2015).

Succinctly, our results did not support our hypothesis because we did not find a significant interaction between color and clothing type. We did, however, find main effects for both color condition and clothing condition in multiple analyses. These results support the results of previous research (Beall & Tracy, 2013; Durante et al., 2008; Elliot & Niesta, 2008; Elliot et al., 2012; Farris et al., 2008; Graff et al., 2012; Guéguen, 2011; Guéguen, 2012; Haselton, 2003; Howlett et al., 2015; Karl et al., 2013; Lennon et al., 2017; Montemurro & Gillen, 2013; Roberts et al., 2010). Our results indicate that individually, the color red and suggestive clothing will increase perceptions of sexual intent, attractiveness, and negative qualities; when the color red

and suggestive clothing are combined, these effects are placated, as shown by the absence of any interactions. These results may have significant impacts on evolutionary hypotheses, the clothing that women will choose to wear, and rape culture. Our results can also be explained by experimental errors and limitations. There are many directions that this line of research needs to pursue, including replications of this study and conceptual replications of the aforementioned studies in order to investigate a potential interaction between the color red and suggestive clothing that our experimental limitations did not allow us to see.

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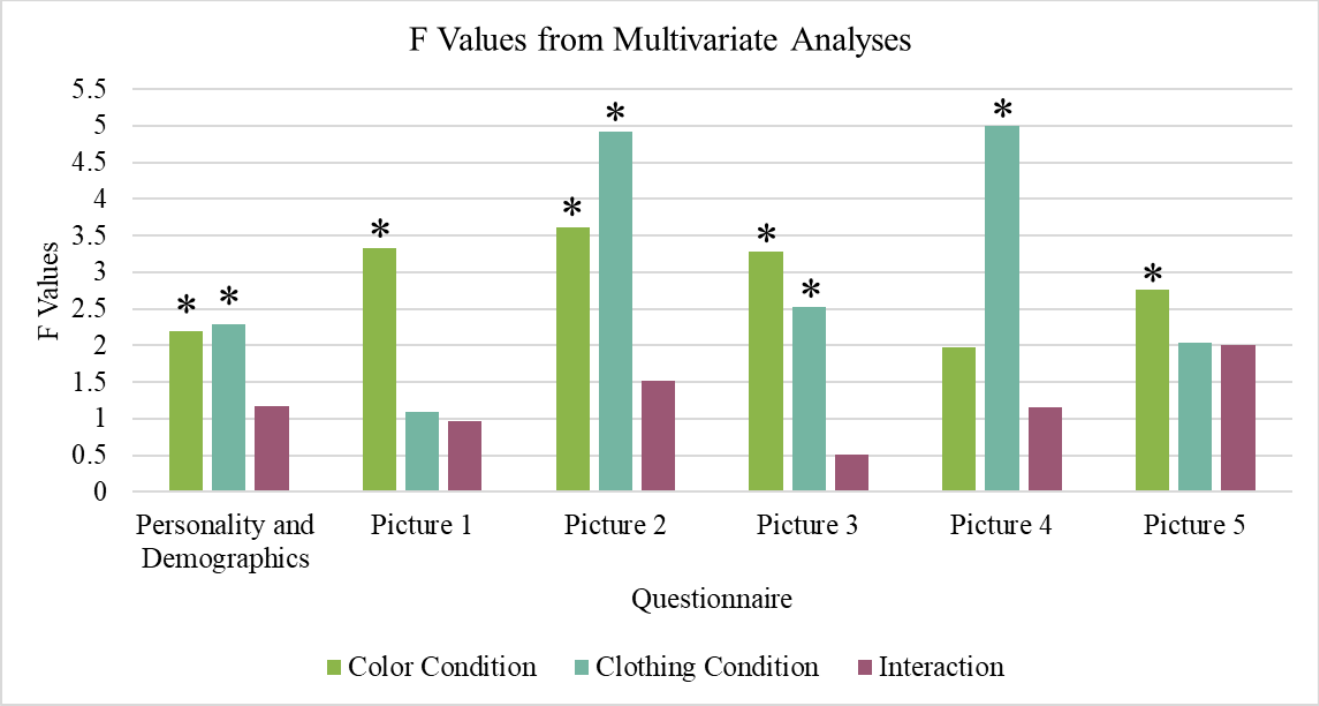

Figure 1. Multivariate F-values produced by MANOVAs on each questionnaire for color condition, clothing condition, and the interaction. Asterisks (*) signal a significant p-value at $p <$ .05.

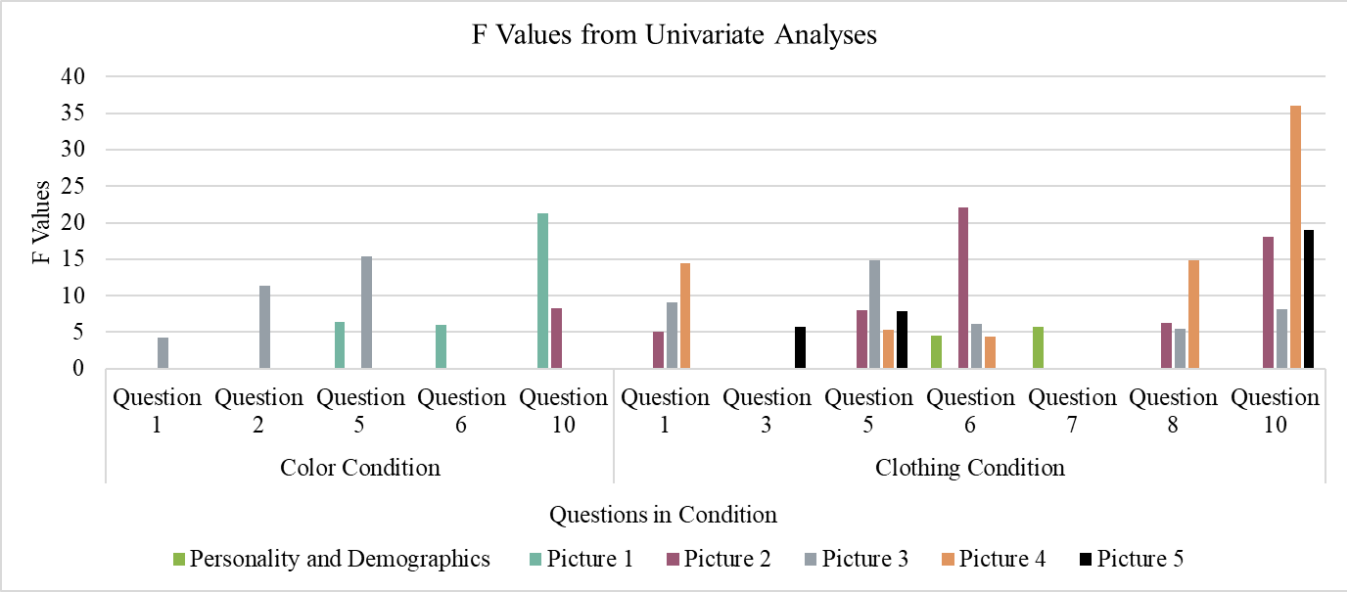

Figure 2. Univariate F-values produced by MANOVAs on each questionnaire divided by condition. All bars have significant p-values at $p < .05$.

Appendix A

Non-Suggestive White Condition

Non-Suggestive Red Condition

Suggestive White Condition

Suggestive Red Condition

Appendix B

Participant # _____

Personality and Demographics Questionnaire

Age: _____

Gender you identify as (please check one):

Male ____ Female ____ Other ____ Prefer not to answer ____

Race (please check any that apply):

Caucasian ____ Black or African American ____

Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander ____ Asian ____ Hispanic or Latino____

American Indian or Alaskan Native _____ Other ____ Prefer not to answer ____

Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability by circling your answer choice.

1. You are a friendly person.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither	Slightly Agree	Strongly Agree

2. You are a good judge of character.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither	Slightly Agree	Strongly Agree

3. You are quick to jump to conclusions.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither	Slightly Agree	Strongly Agree

4. You are concerned about your looks.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly	Slightly	Neither	Slightly	Strongly

Disagree	Disagree		Agree	Agree

5. You judge people by how they look.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither	Slightly Agree	Strongly Agree

6. Others see you as a friendly person.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither	Slightly Agree	Strongly Agree

7. Others see you as a good judge of character.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither	Slightly Agree	Strongly Agree

8. Others think that you are quick to jump to conclusions.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither	Slightly Agree	Strongly Agree

9. Others are concerned about your looks.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither	Slightly Agree	Strongly Agree

10. Others judge you by how you look.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither	Slightly Agree	Strongly Agree

Appendix C

Picture Questionnaire

1. How attractive do you think this woman is?

1	2	3	4	5
Very Unattractive	Slightly Unattractive	Moderately Attractive	Slightly Attractive	Very Attractive

2. How friendly do you think this woman is?

1	2	3	4	5
Very Unfriendly	Slightly Unfriendly	Moderately Friendly	Slightly Friendly	Very Friendly

3. How kind do you think this woman is?

1	2	3	4	5
Very Unkind	Slightly Unkind	Moderately Kind	Slightly Kind	Very Kind

4. How funny do you think this woman is?

1	2	3	4	5
Very Unfunny	Slightly Unfunny	Moderately Funny	Slightly Funny	Very Funny

5. How outgoing do you think this woman is?

1	2	3	4	5
Very Unoutgoing	Slightly Unoutgoing	Moderately Outgoing	Slightly Outgoing	Very Outgoing

6. How likely would this woman be to have sex with a man on a first date?

1	2	3	4	5
Very Unlikely	Slightly Unlikely	Moderately Likely	Slightly Likely	Very Likely

7. How likely would this woman be to call a man after a first date?

1	2	3	4	5
Very Unlikely	Slightly Unlikely	Moderately Likely	Slightly Likely	Very Likely

8. How likely is it that a man would call this woman after a first date?

1	2	3	4	5
Very	Slightly	Moderately	Slightly	Very

Unlikely	Unlikely	Likely	Likely	Likely

9. How likely is it that this woman would wear this outfit on a first date?

1	2	3	4	5
Very Unlikely	Slightly Unlikely	Moderately Likely	Slightly Likely	Very Likely

10. How likely is it that the woman in this outfit would be hit on by a man?

1	2	3	4	5
Very Unlikely	Slightly Unlikely	Moderately Likely	Slightly Likely	Very Likely