

RED

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Visualize the color red.

Do you see fire trucks racing down the streets? Maybe you think of love and romance. Do you imagine blood pooling at your feet? Maybe you think of anger and passion.

The color red invokes different feelings in each of us. No one person will have the same association or experiences with the color red.

Jennifer Bourn, creative director, digital strategist, and founder of Bourn Creative, describes red as “assertive, daring, determined, energetic, powerful...impulsive...and aggressive... It symbolizes action, confidence, and courage. The color red is linked to the most primitive physical, emotional, and financial needs of survival and self-preservation.”

Red is a charged color. It symbolizes life and vitality, and also danger and warning. It is a dominate color that symbolizes power, love, vigor, and beauty (Cherry).

In the article, “The Color Psychology of Red” author Kendra Cherry asked readers to answer the question, “How does the color red make you feel?” Below are some of the responses.

“Red makes me feel energized and strong.”

“I do love red it makes me feel in charge of my life. I feel noticed by others and I receive confident when it’s around me or if I’m wearing it.”

“The color red makes me feel happy, and that is my favorite color.”

“Red is passion. Red means you are alive and face life full throttle with pedal to the metal!”

The common theme? Confident. Passionate. Energized.

So many people have positive associations with red. They feel empowered and confident when wearing it. Red is the kind of color you wear when you want to be noticed, flamboyant.

I hate the color red. I always have. It’s too much.

I don't hate the color red because it's red. I hate that I can't pull it off.

Red has never been my color. It's one of the pain-in-the-butt colors that never works when you have red hair.

Trying to find the right shade of red evolves into too much of an ordeal and I just walk away frustrated. There is a fine line about the thickness of a baby hair that separates colors that work with red hair, and colors that don't. It is a delicate, tumultuous line that shouldn't be toyed with. One step too far in either direction and you end up looking like a pumpkin or tomato. More often than not you are in vegetable land, and it's best to walk away defeated.

Sometimes I wonder at the larger meaning of this defeat and the fact that I just walk away from something I want. Is it really too much of an effort for me to find a red that works that works for me? I am literally walking away from a potential source of confidence. What does this reveal about my self-esteem and my self-worth that I can't even out in the effort to find a source of artificial confidence?

The worst part of all of this is how much I want to make red work. I want that confidence that women think about when they see something red. I want to be able to wear a red dress and feel confident and seen. I go back to red time and time again, trying to have this amazing feeling that everyone talks about. I want that feeling of empowerment for myself – but I don't know how to make that happen with the color red.

My senior year of high school we had our first family photos taken. The photographer asked us to pick a color that would blend well with all of us. True to form she chose red, and not even a sensible red like maroon – which I can pull off with some grace – but the kind of red you see around Christmas time for ornaments and mistletoe and gift-wrap. My dad and sister got away with wearing black. Lucky them. When we sent out the pictures later that year, everyone said the red complimented my skin and made me stand out from everyone else.

I thought I looked like a tomato.

When I wear red I feel awkward. Self-conscious. I feel fake and artificial. It isn't me.

Maybe I get in my own way. People say time and time again that I look great in red, so maybe I have this mental block against the color itself. Maybe I just don't see myself for what I am or what I represent.

My mom married my stepdad in June 2011. It was a small wedding at the house, just friends and family. She wanted to keep everything simple, classy. Yet she chose red as the main color. She picked out red roses with white lilies as the accent in the floral arrangements and centerpieces. We covered the reception tables in red linens with red dinnerware. It looked simple and elegant, but I felt like I was swimming in a sea of red and couldn't escape.

She chose red bridesmaid dresses. She debated the specific shade of red for awhile; we needed something that would go with both my skin tone and my step-sister's. It was no easy task. We settled on a darker red – not fire engine, but lighter than a merlot.

I looked ridiculous. We had been living in Vegas for over a year, and the time spent in the sun left my skin a tanned brown. Add a red dress on top that and it was a mess. Picture it: ginger red hair, tanned upper body and face, red dress, and then white legs.

I didn't feel confident or empowered. I felt uncomfortable.

This is something I struggle with all the time. I'm always asking myself: How do I make myself feel okay in red? Is there some kind of imaginary switch in my brain that I can flip in order to feel okay in red? Do I need to install a button on my mirror that lets reality filter through?

What does this disconnect with the color red reveal about my personality? What does it say about me, that I don't associate with red and what it embodies and symbolizes?

I'm a shy and timid person - I don't command attention. It's just part of my personality. Maybe my desire to make it work is a bigger struggle to want to be seen.

Maybe I hate that I can't embody what my mom represents. Maybe red signifies my underlying jealousy of who she is and her own sense of self.

Red is a highly visible color. It demands to be seen. Red captivates your attention. You see the color it and you have to look. You stop. You hesitate. You pay attention. When we see it, we automatically focus our attention and make swift, almost instinctual decisions. It demands acknowledgement.

Lipstick

In an article posted in Scientific American, Susana Martinez-Conde and Stephen Macknik quoted a research study conducted by Nicolas Gueguen of the University of South Brittany in France. In the study, Gueguen asked a group of women to wear red, pink, or brown lipstick, or none at all while sitting at a bar. The results of

the experiment showed that men approached women wearing red lipstick much faster and more often than any other lipstick category (Martinez-Conde and Macknik). Even in something as simple as physical attraction, red draws attention.

Most women will agree that finding the right red lipstick is a complete game changer. Sarah Martindale, of Bustle, says, “Red lipstick is the epitome of fabulousness. It is gloriously, glamorously gorgeous and has an amazing transformative quality. When worn, it adds a spring to your step and a song to your heart and all those other wonderful things that describe feeling bloody marvelous.”

Finding the infamous perfect red lipstick is almost impossible. I’ve wasted hundreds of dollars on lipstick, desperately trying to find the one. When it doesn’t I just hand it over to my mom, because she can pull off any red lipstick she wants.

I remember I found that perfect shade once. I went back to the store the next day and bought four more. Wearing it made me feel incredible. I felt like I could conquer the world. It felt like I stood out from the crowd and my presence would be acknowledged anywhere I went.

It was discontinued not long after that and I haven’t been able to find a replacement since.

Blood

We see blood and we panic – we pay close attention. It’s alarming. It’s dangerous.

I remember being at work a few weeks ago and my coworker came into my department holding his arm. I couldn’t register what was wrong with the image, just that something was not quite right.

“Where’s Katie?” His breath was a little ragged and he looked disheveled.

My gaze went down to his arm and I could see blood oozing from between his fingertips where he was clutching a gash on his arm.

In that moment my body froze. I wanted to help him. I saw the first aid kit behind him – I knew I should help. I was First Aid certified and could at least apply a pressure bandage. But I was powerless to move. The sight of the blood has me frozen; my entire focus was on the blood oozing from his arm. It alerted me of danger and crisis. It demanded my attention.

I called for Katie over the radio and she walked into the department to two people standing completely motionless, captivated by the blood.

Lights

Red focuses our attention and is a visible cue that we should

stop and proceed with caution. Imagine you are driving down the road and you see flashing red lights in the rearview mirror. Your first reaction will be to slow down and pull over. You instinctually know that if you see red you need to stop, whether it's for police or emergency vehicles. Jennifer Bourn explains this phenomenon: "Flashing red lights mean danger or emergency, while stop signs and stop lights use the color red to alert drivers to the dangers of the intersection." In all situations we stop because our attention is focused.

Nature

When red appears in nature it is generally a cue that danger is ahead and you should be cautious. In the animal world, red is meant to draw attention and act as a warning. Typically, animals that are red are poisonous, venomous, or otherwise harmful. One example is the Sonoran coral snake of Western North America. The red coloring is meant to signal poison and toxicity (Martinez-Conde and Macknik).

Nails

Growing up, my mom always had long, red acrylic nails; they were always smooth and just long enough to do soft scratches on my back as I fell asleep every night. I remember her obsession with red toes; they always had to be a deep, deep red. "Red belongs on toes," she would say. "It makes them look classy."

My mom and I recently went on a trip to Vegas for her 40th Birthday. She had gotten her hair and makeup done, and she had gotten her nails painted red too. She hadn't worn red on her nails in months. It ended up being a nightmare of a trip. As I sat alone in her hospital room watching a ventilator breathe for her, I remember being fixated on her hands. They were bony yet swollen from the IV fluids she was receiving. The veins were protruding from beneath her skin. The red of her nails was stark against the paleness of her hands, and the white of her hospital gown and the bed linens. They caught my attention. They're still one of the only things I remember clearly from that trip.

I can't remember how we ended up in the hospital, what we were doing before the hospital, or even what happened to me in that time period. But I remember with aching clarity the red of her nails.

Whenever I'm struggling with my confidence and my self-esteem, my mom tells me I have to fake it so no one can tell. She tells me throw on something I feel great in and just fake it. Maybe the

color red is like a shell that we have to put on in order to be confident. Maybe the color red is all for show, and is just something we disguise ourselves with.

But what do we do when we can't? What if red isn't our color? Do we find a different color that allows us to feel good?

If my mom is red, I am teal. This color makes me feel in my element. I gravitate more towards this color – it compliments my skin tone better, it makes me POP. I feel about teal the way my mom feels about red. While I would never wear teal lipstick, about 75% of my wardrobe is teal: nail polish, shirts, blouses, underwear, Hunter boots, scarfs, earrings.

I walk through the department stores looking for anything teal. I made a scrapbook of my future dream house that has clippings from different home magazines. I want teal walls with white accents. And I have an entire registry at Target for teal home goods for when I finally get my own apartment – a teal Keurig, a teal pot, a teal Kitchen Aid, even teal pots and pans.

Maybe teal is my red.

Teal is by no means bold or empowering; it's softer, more demure. According to the article, "Teal Color," teal is "the color of restfulness and mental and spiritual balance. The calm shade has a natural dignity that is not contrived or 'in your face'... It combines the stability of blue with the healing and optimism of green."

In the article, "Color Teal" the author states that teal is "reserved, intuitive and perhaps an introverted color, teal is different, yet doesn't look for attention...they value their uniqueness and they don't wish to just fit in with the crowd."

I think that this describes my personality more than red ever could. I am not flashy or outspoken. I am not one to blatantly stand out. This isn't a bad thing. I should be able to feel just as confident in teal as my mom does in red. Our personalities are different, so it makes sense that we would have different color associations.

I think it's interesting to consider the difference between artificial and natural. Both of these colors can be thought of as naturally occurring. Red has been around in various forms since the time of cave men, and teal is a variation of turquoise, which has been used by Native Americans for hundreds of years. Yet, the present day associations of these two colors are completely different – red has an artificial connotation while teal is considered more authentic.

This research really spoke to me in terms of how my mom and I are different. I am not “in your face” and she is. I don’t look for attention, and she does. I associate more with calm, stable things like streams and lagoons, while she is a fireball of energy and passion.

Everything my mom is done is artificial – it’s fake. She has to put on the red in order to have it. But my version of red is more natural. So what does that say? Is it making a statement about my mom’s lack of true confidence, and my own inner confidence?

My mom has to act out her red, it is artificial and she puts it on, yet she owns it. It doesn’t make her shallow or fake. She is one of the most authentic people I have ever met. I am teal. I am natural, soft-spoken, demure. I don’t stand out, but blend in naturally. This doesn’t mean I am more authentic than she is. We are different. We draw our confidence from different places. Neither is right or wrong.

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