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Millennial pink: From iPhone to Rihanna

An Analysis of a Color Trend

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1. Introduction

The millennial pink is a new shade of pink, a color trend which appeared in late 2015. It is called “millennial pink” because it is particularly aimed at a generation of young people born between 1980 and 2000, who masters new technologies and especially the Internet on which they spend their time. Fashion journalist Véronique Hyland gave its name to millennial pink in an article published on *The Cut* website on August 2, 2016. She indeed noted that a wave of pink had invaded both the world of fashion and the world of design, which was obvious on social networks, leaded by Instagram [1]. The millennial pink quickly became a true fashion phenomenon used in haute-couture (Gucci, Balenciaga, Valentino, Calvin Klein, Chanel, Anya Hindmarch, Peter Pilotto, Ryan Lo, Victoria Beckham or Helmut Lang) or ready-to-wear (Puma, Nike, H&M, Reebok, Chloé or Common Project). It also reached the sphere of design and architecture, previously influenced by the emergence of “Scandinavian Pink” in Nordic furniture, and in particular those created by Normann Copenhagen. The millennial pink trend then reached the world of *fooding*, *Instagram* brimming with photos of rosé and rosé cocktails, as well as beetroot, strawberry, pitaya and other radish dishes. This strong influence emerged along with the release of a new kind of pink chocolate (food coloring free), the “ruby chocolate,” and the success of the pink salad. Finally, the craze for the millennial pink had repercussions on tourism. For example, the Australian Pink Lake became a very attractive destination for millennials.

Fashion journalists face difficulties when they attempt to describe the millennial pink, mostly it is actually not a color, but it is a set of shades of pink, a color chart of pale pink, beige pink and salmon.

More than a color, the millennial pink is above all an idea, accordingly with Michel Pastoureau's understanding of the colors first as concepts, then as ideas and finally as intellectual categories [2]. The millennial pink is a new approach to pink: since it is no longer referring to the twentieth century's symbolic of gender, pink is now seen as a positive color [3]. Therefore, the millennial pink is not a new pink. It is a sub-category of pink, grouping a set of hues that dissociates itself from the archetype caricature of femininity while moving away from the princess or Barbie pink. This is why its pale hues are pushed away on indefinite corners on the chromatic spectrum. They end up with colors considered as « neutral » regarding gender, such as white, beige, orange or gray.

Also, the millennial pink is a non-feminine pink, a “not-pink pink”, and it is on this concept of “neutral” pink that the success of the millennial pink is built, playing on the contrast between traditional femininity and feminist femininity, and that of a feminine color and virile masculinities.

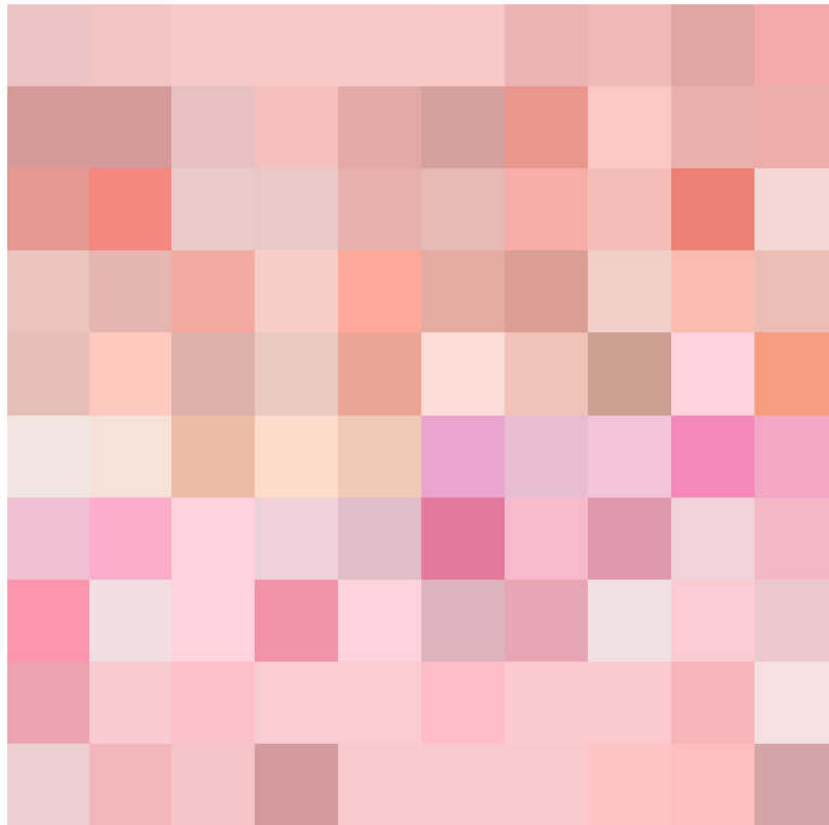


Fig. 1 - Color chart of millennial pink. It was obtained from the collection of one hundred images answering the keyword “millennial pink” on the internet, in September 2017.

2. Short “history” of Millennial Pink

Because it corresponds more to zeitgeist than to an object in particular, it is difficult to trace what would be a “history” of the millennial pink. Nevertheless, there are events that, for one or another reason, have been considered *a posteriori* as important elements of the trend. This recent “history” consists of a relatively large amount of events that follow one another or overlap each other, which are mainly relayed on the Internet.

The internet is a place that promotes the development of micro-trends, both musical and visual. For a few years now, pink has started to dominate the web, especially via the *Tumblr* website, to the point where we are able to talk of a “Tumblr Pink”. First, with the emergence of the seapunk movement [4], and then with the vaporwave [5], a micro-genre of electronic music that develops in parallel a visual aesthetic where pink holds an important place.

But if they are productions of the younger generations, the pink in the seapunk and vaporwave is not associated with a gender symbolism: it is used to contrast with the dominant blue of the first movement, and it evokes the artificiality of the virtual worlds in the second movement. Pink on the Internet emerged simultaneously with a popularization of feminism, with personalities such as Beyoncé, Emma Watson or Miley Cyrus, along with the re-appropriation of the pink color by young feminist

artists (the “radical softness”). It then acknowledged its feminist potential that would lead to the millennial pink.

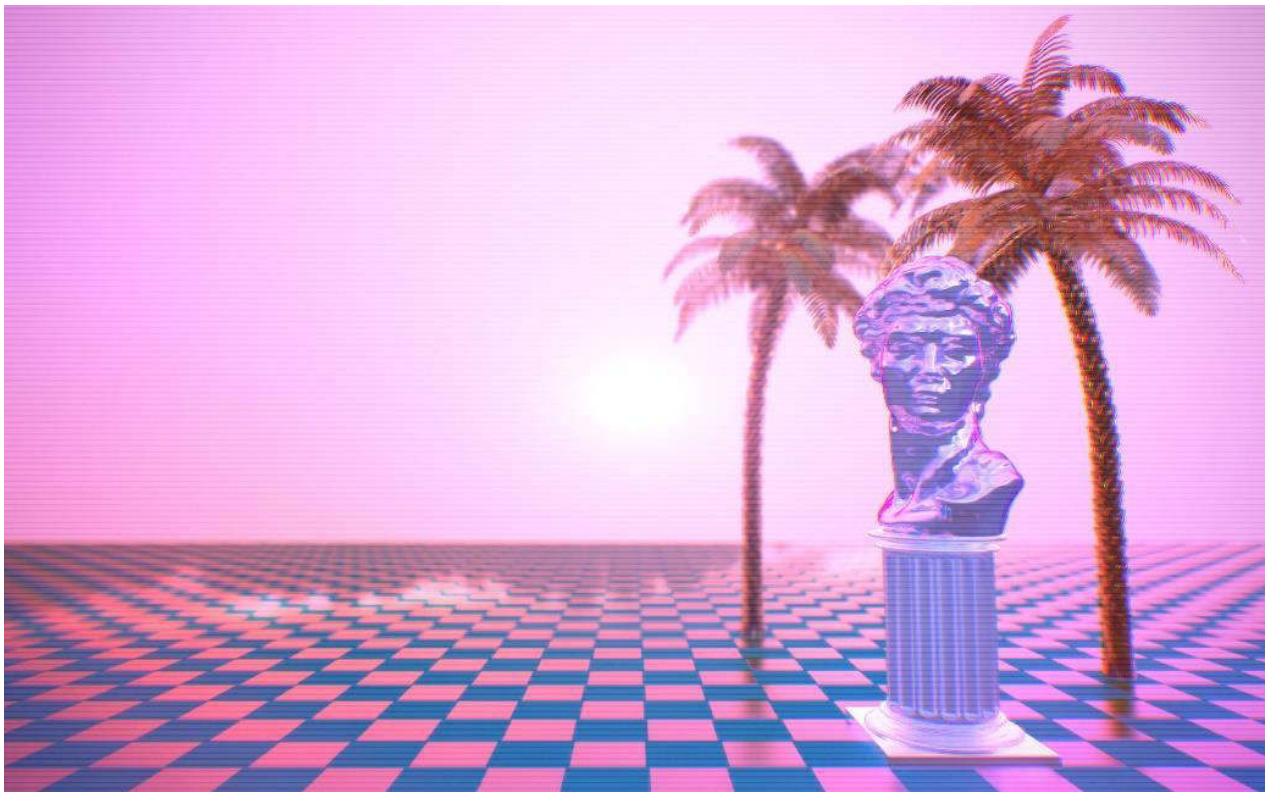


Fig. 2 - example of a visual “vaporwave” by Raphaël Dong, circa 2016-2018

2.1. How iPhone “rose-gold” subverted masculinity

The release of the “rose-gold” color of the iPhone 6S, Apple's latest smartphone model in September 2015 is considered the first true occurrence of the millennial pink, when signifying clearly that the color would not be a regular pink, but a totally new one. Completing the already existing colors (“gold”, “silver” and “space gray”) the rose-gold iPhone had the ambition to appeal to an Asian clientele — and in particular Chinese — who values gold tremendously. Nevertheless, the rose-gold iPhone found his audience in the West, among young women who see in this model a feminine version of the smartphone; but also with some young men, more hesitant to buy it for fear of seeing their masculinity stained by the possession of a pink accessory.

Very quickly, this new color challenged the Internet, because Apple seemed to offer for the first time a smartphone to only one part of the population: women. Since colorful objects are strongly associated with the feminine in the West, the men who *dare* to wear pink clothes or to have pink accessories are still few. This new color is considered too feminine and not manly enough, and very quickly, media and web forums asked themselves the question: can men have a pink iPhone?

The choice of color in marketing, whether in terms of product, packaging or communication, has a great influence on consumers. Pink is massively used as a signifier of femininity and is applied just about every marketable product. By targeting a female audience, the pink product keeps, at the same time, the male clientele away. Therefore, during the designing conception of the product, the customer’s gender is

always addressed, and it is strongly recommended to ban pink if the target audience is a male clientele [6].



Fig. 3 - iPhone 6S, “pink-gold” model, promotional visual Apple, 2015.

However, “rose-gold” is not really pink since still falling in a metallic color, and because such hues refer to technology and therefore to masculinity. The rose-gold iPhone is claimed for men a way of being masculine. “Men, do not fear the rose-gold iPhone” headlines an article from the *Wall Street Journal* [7], while a developer of the social network Twitter, says: “There's enough guys getting pink gold that it should be called bros’ gold” [8].

“Bro” is a diminutive of “brother” and refers to masculinity, which reassures the consumer that the purchased product is for him. It also refers to fraternity, underlying a solidarity between all these men who *dare* to buy this “subversive” model, and to go against the chromatic codes of traditional masculinity. The purchase of the rose-gold iPhone is no longer a question of taste or preference for a color, but it becomes a political choice and an identity reaffirmation of manhood by the integration of these circles of male customers. They are not only supportive, but also brave, and therefore equally virile.

However, this subversion is no longer really one: by changing the name of the color from “pink” to “bro’s,” the color is disconnected from its feminine symbolism. If pink is well accepted as the color of the feminine, the “bro's gold” becomes “the gold of men.” Moreover, gold is not even a color but a material. Therefore, since it symbolizes wealth and power, the very name of the color embodies men’s clichés. Pink is now intended for an exclusively male clientele with a speech and terminology that eradicates any possible closeness with the feminine gender.

2.2. The Pantone propaganda

Since 2000, Pantone chooses a “Color of the Year” based on a multimodal trend analysis. The trends are strongly influenced by the “Pantone propaganda” [9], and Pantone's “Color of the Year” reverberates on the worlds of fashion, design and graphics, wether immediately or a few months later.

Extraordinarily, the 2016 winner is not one, but two colors: Pantone announced on December 3, 2015 that “Rose Quartz” and “Serenity” (a shade of blue) were elected colors of the year. According to the executive director of Pantone Color Institute Leatrice Eisemann, “Serenity” is “weightless and airy” and complementary to the “Rose Quartz”, a “persuasive yet gentle tone” that expresses “compassion and a sense of composure” [10].

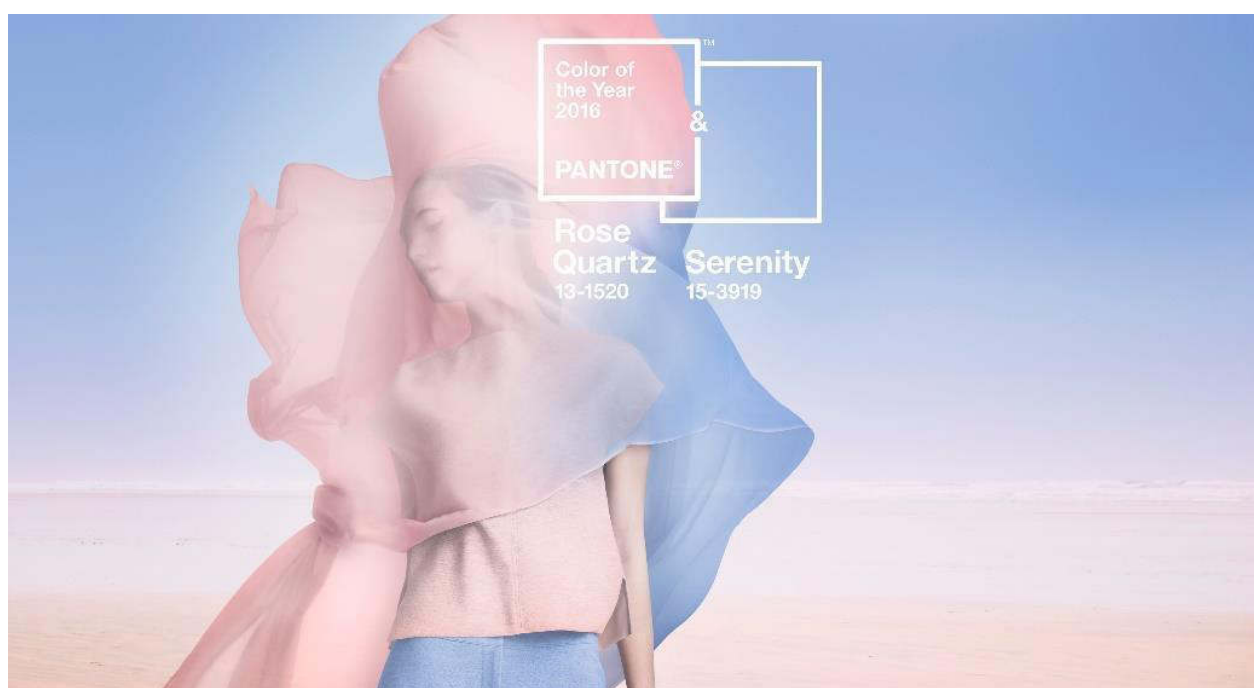


Fig. 4 – “Rose Quartz” (PANTONE 13-1520) and “Serenity” (PANTONE 15-3919), elected Color of the Year 2016 by Pantone

But beyond their relaxing qualities and the visual contrast that is played between these two tones, it is the pair of colors traditionally gendered in the West that we are dealing with: the blue of boys and the pink of girls. However, the press release announcing the election of the duo “Serenity”-“Rose Quartz”, claimed an overcoming of the sexual dichotomy by the appropriation of its chromatic symbols.

These “Colors of the Year” 2016 would echo the social movements towards gender equality, transgender people rights and gay marriage. Pink and blue would become the emblem of a younger generation supposedly less inclined to categorization and open to gender fluidity. The emergence of gender neutral or non-binary people's claims movements made popular by celebrities like Miley Cyrus would be a proof of this achievement.

Then, “Rose Quartz” should be understood as subversive, since it shifted the popular view on pink by splitting with its feminine symbolism to make it the very color of feminism, of the equality of the sexes, even of the neutral. To do so, its association

with the world of little girls and princesses must be relinquished in order to achieve a renewal.

3. Pink, gender and marketing

3.1. *When Rihanna sells feminism*

The brands seized the acknowledgment of pink as the color of feminism, even post-feminism. Feminism is now a part of marketing strategies. “Femvertising” consist in using feminism to sell, by exploiting the feminist concept of empowerment, by playing with gender stereotypes using a queer aesthetic, or by reclaiming the codes of girl power.

Therefore, popular figures such as Rihanna, who holds strong feminist positions, do not hesitate to appear in pink. In September 2016, the new collection “Fenty x Puma” introduced by the collaboration between the sportswear brand and the singer was born. She surfs on the millennial pink wave and presents many models wearing pink clothes. The clothing is inspired by the eighteenth century. It resets the flagship color of the Rococo, and also uses fabrics such as lace or chiffon, strongly associated with the feminine.

Several feminist movements of the 2000s also took up the pink as a symbol of political demand. The Gulabi gang in India, a group of women formed in 2002 by Sampat Pal Devi, campaigned against domestic violence against women. They adopted pink sarees to be singled out as members. Or the “pussyhats,” an American movement of feminists who demonstrated against the presidential campaign of Donald Trump, and whose distinctive sign is a pink woolen hat in the form of cat ears. These feminist groups are creating a shift in the feminine stereotype of pink from gentleness and passivity toward force and rebellion. By mixing a very feminine and stereotypical aesthetic with a line of sportswear clothes, Rihanna also tries to show that one can be feminine and sporty, or feminine and live in the middle (sportswear being also a mark of class).

Rihanna uses here the concept of empowerment developed by feminism to make a marketing surplus for her collection, and for the brand Puma: one can be a feminine woman and have so-called male activities or characteristics. The pink initially used in gender marketing to decline a product line in a line dedicated to women, becomes here a feminist marker, pushing women to choose the pink product because it is feminine, and no longer to select passively because the products for women are usually pink.



Fig. 5 - Promotional photography of the "Fenty x Puma" Spring-Summer collection, 2016

3.2. Can the pink be masculine?

But what makes the communication force of this collection is that pink is also chosen for men's products. It's really by combining masculinity and pink that brands are best at attracting attention. Indeed, the contrast between the association of a feminine color and masculine figures attracts the eye while conveying a queer message of displacement of the stereotypes. For example, German artists EVA & ADELE, "*the hermaphrodite twins from the future*," [11] have made pink the emblematic color of their gender subversion. The French artist Marcel Duchamp chooses "Rose" as a name for his feminine alter ego created in 1920, both anagram of Eros, but also the color of ambiguity incarnated by Rose Selavy.

Pink was used by the Nazis during the Second World War and its re-appropriation by gay communities make also pink a color of ambiguity and homosexuality [12]. Indeed, by becoming the feminine color, pink has become an anti-masculine color, which, when associated with a man or a boy, may cause an alteration of his manhood and creates a suspicion of homosexuality. It can also lead to homophobic reactions, sometimes violent [13].

The question of whether men can wear pink is not new, and the contrasts between men's and women's clothing are fading, including the gender segmentation of pink for girls [14]. According to Leatrice Eisemann, the gender division tends to fade in fashion, which would coincide with the social movements that have been moving toward gender equality since the 1970s. Because it splits with the feminine connotations usually associated with pink, the millennial pink is considered as the "new neutral" and perceived by several media as an androgynous or unisex color.

If the media are not slow to take an interest in Zayn Malik's pink hair, the appearance of Drake with a pink jacket, Justin Bieber with a pink hoodie, or Kanye West who often appears in pink, the extension of millennial pink to the male wardrobe is seen by some media as a feminization of men's fashion, a movement from feminine to masculine often at work when it comes to unisex fashion.

4. The color of the buzz

If the trend of the millennial pink took so much scale and evolved so quickly, it is because the idols of millennials, very active on social networks, play with this trend too. They drain around them a stream of media relaying their adherence to the fashion of the moment. Any appearance of a star in pink is subject to “buzz,” that is to say, a viral media communication that focuses all the attention, especially on the Internet, for a very short period of time. It is a vivid promotional tactic for the media. When they publish their articles, they get the number of views needed on their pages to be adequately paid by advertisements. In the meantime, artists draw attention to themselves and to the products they potentially need to sell.

If Zayn Malik chose Valentine’s Day to appear on his Instagram account with pink hair, it is mainly because he intended to draw attention to him after the release a few days earlier, January 29, of his debut single, “Pillow talk,” from his first solo album *Mind of Mine*. Still, Charli XCX's “Boys” video might not have been as successful if it did not show men dressed in pink and doing so-called feminine activities such as washing dishes, participating in pajamas party, or cuddling a stuffed animal.



Fig. 6 - Charli XCX, “Boys”, 2017. Screenshot

In addition, pink is generating interest in terms of communication: it attracts the eye as much as it arouses curiosity. According to a first study, pink tones attract more attention than more saturated shades or than blue or green shades [15]. Another study shows that in the specific context of the Internet, red, purple or pink images, have a better chance of being propagated on *Pinterest* social network [16]. Obviously, this is a marketing and communication property of pink that greatly benefited the millennial pink.

A brand like Acne was able to own the benefits by adopting a pink powdered visual identity in 2007, before the golden age of the trend color. When walking the street with a tote bag from Acne, the customers catch the eye on them, and thus contribute to promote the brand. An increased phenomenon when it comes to male customers,

since the chromatic contrast doubles as a symbolic contrast, which not only attracts attention but also spreads the values of a brand who seems to want to break the gender roles.

5. Conclusion

If young people mostly give in fashion trends, then not necessarily follow the same ones. Moreover, if they share a certain number of common traits (integration of the Internet in everyday life, presence on social networks as *Facebook*, *Instagram* or *Snapchat*, sensitivity to feminist theories, etc.), the generation Y is in no way a homogeneous whole. Social and cultural disparities differentiate the millennials [17]. We can therefore wonder about this globalization of a generation represented by a single “pink flag.” If Pantone ranks colors behind the declared values of gender division, we must keep in mind that fashion has always made gender division a central concern [18]. Fashion is a product of class division and is primarily intended for elites [19].

Moreover, if the millennials live in an era that legalized same sex marriage and brought transgender characters to television, with shows such as *Sense 8* or *Transparent*, it is also a generation that has seen the rise of conservatism and even extremism in several countries. Also, debates around gay marriage revealed that homophobia was rooted in different strata of society.

The recovery of millennial pink and its so-called feminist values by brands is only the development of a new form of gender marketing (the femvertising) that uses a fashion movement to generate profits, proceeding in the same time to its depoliticization [20]. By standardizing a generation under the same banner, Pantone's trend erases the inequalities between individuals and presents gender equality as an achievement reached by all, which is not yet the case.

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