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▶ **To cite this version:**

Kévin Bideaux. Millennial pink: gender, feminism and marketing: A critical analysis of a color trend. Cultura e Scienza del Colore - Color Culture and Science, 2019, 11 (1), pp.82-89. 10.23738/CCSJ.110110 . hal-02188255v3

HAL Id: hal-02188255
https://hal.science/hal-02188255v3

Submitted on 10 Mar 2022

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MILLENNIAL PINK: GENDER, FEMINISM AND MARKETING

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF A COLOR TREND

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Résumé : Le « millennial pink » fait référence à une gamme de nuances de rose qui sont devenues très populaires vers la fin de l'année 2015. Cette tendance a pris d'assaut le monde de la mode et celui du design, et s'est largement répandue via les réseaux sociaux, notamment sur *Instagram*. Le millennial pink porte le nom de la « *millennial generation* », dont la principale caractéristique est leur connaissance des nouvelles technologies et leur utilisation intensive des internets. Il prétend porter un message significatif : cette couleur a pour but de se dissocier du symbolisme féminin habituellement attaché à la couleur rose. J'analyse cette tendance sous l'angle des études de genre, afin de montrer que le millennial pink est en réalité une nouvelle forme de marketing genré. En effet, l'utilisation de concepts féministes (empowerment, body-positivism) et l'utilisation d'une stratégie basée sur l'association d'images dites masculines à une couleur dite féminine permettent aux spécialistes du marketing de séduire la jeune génération, considérée comme des consommateur·trice·s sensibles au féminisme ainsi qu'aux théories queer.

#Millennial Pink #Marketing genré #Femvertising #Queer marketing #Tendance de couleur

Abstract: The "millennial pink" refers to a range of pink shades which became widely popular towards the end of the year 2015. This trend stormed both the world of fashion and the world of design, and was widely spread through social networks and especially on *Instagram*. The millennial pink was named after the so-called "millennial generation," whose main feature is their knowledge of new technology and their extensive use of the internet. It pretends to bear a meaningful message: this color aims at disassociating itself from the feminine symbolism usually attached to the pink color. I analyse this trend from a gender studies perspective to show that millennial pink is in fact a new form of gendered marketing. Indeed, the use of feminist concepts (empowerment, body-positivism) and the use of a strategy based on the association of so-called masculine images with a so-called feminine color allows marketers to seduce the younger generation, seen as consumers sensitive to feminism as well as queer theories.

#Millennial Pink #Gender marketing #Femvertising #Queer marketing #Colour trend

Pour citer cet article : Bideaux, Kévin, 2019. « Millennial pink: gender, feminism and marketing. A critical analysis of a color trend », *Color Culture and Science Journal*, 11(1), pp. 82-89. https://doi.org/10.23738/CCSJ.110110.

MILLENNIAL PINK: GENDER, FEMINISM AND MARKETING

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF A COLOR TREND

1. INTRODUCTION

The "millennial pink" refers to a specific range of pink shades which became widely popular towards the end of the year 2015. This color was named after its users, a generation of young people born between 1980 and 2000. The so-called "millenial generation" main feature is their knowledge of new technology and their extensive use of the internet. Fashion journalist Véronique Hyland was the first to assign a name to this color in an article published on *The Cut* website on August 2, 2016. In the article, she describes how this trend stormed both the world of fashion and the world of design, and was widely spread through social networks and especially on *Instagram* (Hyland, 2016).

This trend first spread through fashion. Major brands, from haute-couture (Gucci, Balenciaga, Valentino, etc.) to ready-to-wear (Adidas, Converse, Reebok, etc.) released pink designs. The trend then reached the design and architecture sphere, which was already influenced by the emerging "Scandinavian pink" mostly through Nordic furniture. Surprisingly, the millennial pink became a trend in the gastronomy and cooking world. Eventually, pink images of "fooding" got huge on social networks, with an ever-growing amount of rosé pictures and rosé cocktails, beetroots, strawberries, pitayas and other radish dishes. The millennial pink craze even reached tourism, and the Australian Pink lake since became a very attractive destination for millennials.

The millennial pink definitely forms a new approach to pink, as it no longer refers to its popular gendered symbolic inherited from the twentieth century (Paoletti, 2012). Therefore, it is not a new pink, but it is a sub-category of pink grouping a set of hues, intended to dissociate itself from a so-called feminine archetype that embodies the princess pink, or the Barbie pink. Fashion journalists have difficulties trying to describe the millennial pink, mostly because it is actually not a color. It is a set of shades of pink, a color chart of pale pink, beige pink and salmon, that I tried to determine from a hundred images collected on the internet (**fig. 1**).

More than a color, the millennial pink is above all an idea. French color historian Michel Pastoureau says that colors first are a concept, then an idea and finally an intellectual category (Pastoureau, 2010). It is a non-feminine pink, a "not-pink pink" (Mitchel, 2017), that is located in areas of the color spectrum where it is difficult to describe the hues. These pale

hues are thus paired with so called gender-neutral colors, such as whites, beiges, oranges and grays.



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 (photo: © Kévin Bideaux).

2. THE ORIGINS OF THE TREND

Since millennial pink is more a zeitgeist than an actual object, its "history" is quite hard to map out. To achieve a global understanding, the study of this particular color in itself must be paired with a study of how this trend was formed, and more particularly in its relationship with fashion and design.

The internet is the backbone of today's development of musical and visual micro-trends. The mainstreaming of the « millennial pink » on the internet — and especially on the website *Tumblr* (millennial pink also is sometimes called "Tumblr Pink") — could be connected to the growth of the seapunk movement (Stuhr-Rommereim and Mollichi, 2014) as well as the vaporwave (Tanner, 2015). These two micro-genres of electronic music framed a visual aesthetic putting pink color as a driving element.

But what seems to have definitely launched the millennial pink is its "Color of the Year" nomination by the most influential Trend office: the Pantone Color Institute. Since 2000, Pantone appoints a "Color of the Year" based on a multimodal trend analysis. Obviously, the "Pantone propaganda" bears a strong power over the growth of a trend (Lo, 2016), and the nominated color always hits the worlds of fashion, design and graphics, whether immediately or a few months later. Unexpectedly, 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 both elected colors of the year (**fig. 2**).

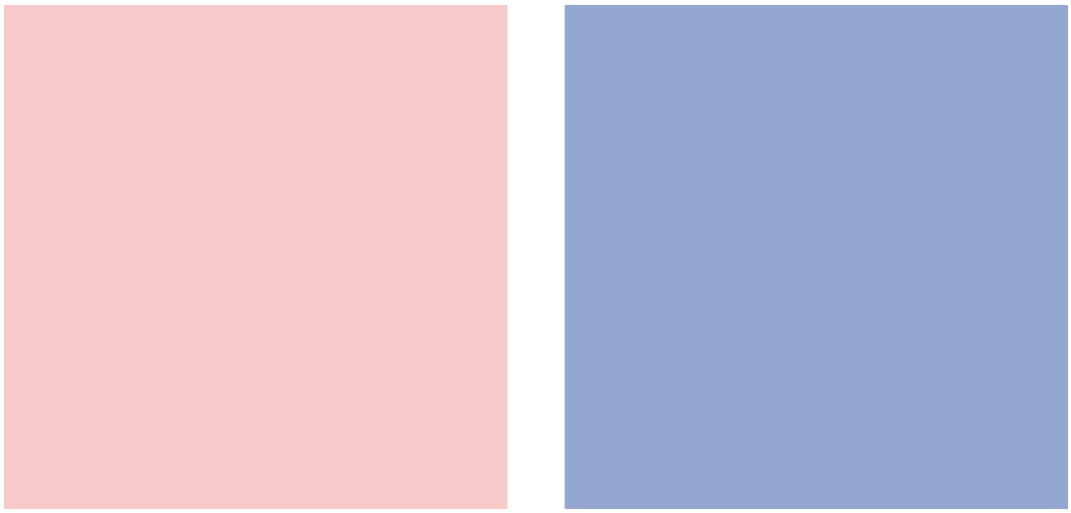


Fig. 2: "Rose Quartz" (PANTONE 13-1520) and "Serenity" (PANTONE 15-3919), elected Color of the Year 2016 by Pantone (photo: © Kévin Bideaux).

Beyond their relaxing qualities and the visual contrast that is played between these two tones, it is the pair of colors traditionally gendered that we are dealing with: in the West world, the blue is for boys and the pink is for girls. However, the press release announcing the election of the duo Serenity-Rose Quartz still claimed an overcoming of the sexual dichotomy by the appropriation of its chromatic symbols (Pantone, 2015).

It is common to believe that fashion is a reflection of societal advances (Erner, 2008, p.52), therefore Pantone's pink and blue would echo the social movements towards gender equality, transgender people rights and same-sex marriage. Accordingly, they would become the emblem of a younger generation supposedly less inclined to categorization and more opened to gender fluidity. 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 — which was traditionally the violet (Habib, 1988) —, of sex equality, and even of the neutral. To do so and in order to achieve a renewal, its association with the world of little girls and princesses must be relinquished.

3. PINK, FEMINISM AND MARKETING: WHEN RIHANNA SELLS FEMINISM

From the very beginning, the millennial pink was associated with the feminine gender and it was very quickly presented as a feminist color that would celebrate the return of a strong femininity — asserted by a traditionally feminine color now presented as a positive value —

. Pink but not really pink, millennial pink would embody the color of compromise. It is aimed at women who do not want to choose between traditional femininity and radical feminism.

The digital revolution has given feminism a worldwide visibility that disclosed phenomena such as street harassment (Cochrane, 2013). Called "cyber-feminists," "feminists 2.0," or "techno-feminists," the internet campaigns of the youngest generations commonly wave pink as a rallying color. Many artists also use pink as a color of femininity in a strong and positive way, like Signe Pierce, Ambivalently Yours, Lora Mathis, etc.

It is no coincidence that millennial pink appeared at the same time as "pop feminism" which spread mainly through the singers Beyoncé, Miley Cyrus or Nicki Minaj (Djavadzadeh, 2017). Several feminist movements of the 2000s also took up the pink as a symbol of political demands: the Gulabi gang in India which campaigned against domestic violence towards women adopted pink sarees to be singled out as members (Berthod, 2012) ; 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 (Hestir, 2018). These feminist groups are creating a shift in the feminine stereotype of pink from gentleness and passivity toward force and rebellion (**fig. 3**).



Fig. 4: Feminist activists at the Washington Women March against the president Donald Trump, 2017 (photo: Thirty Two).

The (re)politicization of pink goes hand in hand with the millennial pink trend, and many brands took advantage of the acknowledgment of pink as the color of feminism, even post-feminism. Millennial pink is thus used in marketing strategies that since about 2014 have appropriated the feminist struggles to sell products to female consumers, vastly educated to feminist theories. These consumers also do not hesitate to denounce sexism in marketing, and particularly in advertisement. This new strategy is called "femvertising" (contraction of "feminism" and "advertising"), and consists in using feminism to sell, by exploiting the

feminist concept of empowerment and body-positivism, by playing with gender stereotypes using a queer aesthetic, or by reclaiming the codes of girl power (Milcent, 2017, p. 20).

Therefore, Rihanna, who holds strong feminist positions, does not hesitate to appear in pink. In September 2016, she collaborated with the sportswear brand Puma for a ready-to-wear collection. Almost exclusively pink, the collection "Fenty x Puma" was based on the millennial pink trend and took the codes of femvertising by offering outfits that combined sports activities with femininity inspired by Rococo, using fabrics such as lace or chiffon. 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 provide a product 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.

However, it should be remembered that the goal of advertisers is to sell their products. It is to seduce consumers that marketers have to borrow the codes of feminism, in an "attention economy" that dominates in contemporary consumerism (Franck, 2014). Indeed, a societal commitment of a brand can capture this attention and be taken into account in a market strategy (Benhamou and Diaye, 2016), and pink is an effective communication tool to display such progressiveness.

4. CAN MILLENNIAL PINK BE MASCULINE?

When Apple released the "rose-gold" color of the iPhone 6S in September 2015, 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? (Blanchard, 2015). Medias even suggested to rename it "bros' gold" to reassure the consumer that the purchased product is intended for him (Chmielewski and Deamicis, 2015).

The choice of color in marketing, whether in terms of product, packaging or communication, has a great influence on consumers (Kacha, 2009). Pink is massively used as a signifier of femininity and is applied on 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 (Bartow, 2008).

The Nazis used pink during the Second World War and its re-appropriation by gay communities make also pink a color of ambiguity and homosexuality (Mollard-Desfour, 2002). 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 create a suspicion of homosexuality. It can also lead to homophobic reactions, sometimes violent (Ben-Zeev and Dennehy, 2014).

Since the twenty-first century, the contrasts between men and women's clothing are fading, including the gender segmentation of pink for girls (Guionnet and Neveu, 2009, pp. 44-45). According to the executive director of Pantone Color Institute 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 color (Landry, 2017; Hoare, 2017).

Furthermore, if the media are not slow to take an interest in 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. It must also be added that we must not confuse sex and sexual wear of clothing, and there are always women's and men's cuts, in addition to unisex cuts (Guionnet and Neveu, 2009, p. 46): if men wear more and more pink, it colors either costumes or streetwear.

5. THE COLOR OF THE "BUZZ"

It is by combining masculinity and pink that brands are best at attracting attention: 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 have made pink the emblematic color of their gender subversion (Wuerges, 2016) (**fig. 5**). This will always be a form of irony that plays on the contrast between the female color and the man who wears it, pink being "still a symbol of femininity and likely to remain so for time" (Paoletti, 2012, p.99). This process is not new, and already in 2005 Le Stade Français, the French rugby team, was noticed by choosing to wear pink jerseys.



Fig. 5: The German artists EVA & ADELE at the Venice Biennale, 2009 (photo: Arben Llapashtica).

So, when the singer Zayn Malik appeared 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 of his new single. 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.

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.

In addition, pink is generating interest in terms of communication: it attracts the eye as much as it arouses curiosity. Pink tones attract more attention than more saturated shades or than blue or green shades (Lindsey et al., 2010), and in the specific context of the internet, red, purple or pink images, seem to have a better chance of being propagated on *Pinterest* social network (Bakhshi and Gilbert, 2015).

The success of millennial pink lies in its ability to capture the consumer's attention aesthetically, symbolically and politically. 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 that seems to want to break the gender roles.

6. CONCLUSION

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 (Agacinski, 1998, p. 20). It is a product of class division and is primarily intended for elites (Simmel, 2013, pp. 10-13).

Moreover, if the millennials live in an era that legalized same sex marriage and brought LGBT characters to television (*Sense 8*, *Transparent*, etc.), it is also a generation that has seen the rise of conservatism and even extremism in several countries (USA, Brasil, Pakistan, etc.). Furthermore, debates around gay marriage revealed that homophobia was rooted in different strata of society. Pink can therefore also be used with blue by a conservative movement (La Manif pour Tous, #rosaeazul) to symbolize the importance of gender difference, heterosexuality and nuclear family model.

The recovery of millennial pink and its so-called feminist values by brands is only the development of a new form of gender marketing called “femvertising,” which uses feminists’ concepts to generate profits, proceeding in the same time to the depoliticization of the color (Erner, 2008, p. 42). Furthermore, if brands choose to focus the concept of "gender neutrality" around the only color so strongly associated with the feminine, it is to play precisely with this symbolic.

Moreover, if they share a certain number of common traits, the generation Y is in no way a homogeneous whole (Dagnaud, 2013, p. 8). 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.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author thanks Olivier Thuillier and Marie-Dominique Gil for helping with the translation and correction of this article.

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