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Kévin Bideaux

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Proceedings of the International Colour Association (AIC) Conference 2022

Sensing Colour

June 13-16, 2022

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This publication includes abstracts of the invited talks, and contributed oral and poster papers presented at the International Colour Association (AIC) Conference 2022. The theme of the conference was Sensing Colour. The conference, organized by the Colour Research Society of Canada (CRSC), was held online, from June 13th-16th, 2022 and should have been held in Toronto, Canada at OCAD University.

More information at: www.aic2022.org and www.colourresearch.org

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Conclusion

The challenge for this article is to integrate mathematics formulas into the study of Tertiary and Intermediate colours. Integrating disciplines will help to reveal the liminal experience and knowledge. The article suggests that tertiary colour can be different from intermediate colours by combining two equal proportions of secondary colours.

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Pink Marketing: How does it work? Why is it (still) working?

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Abstract

Gender marketing takes advantage of gender research, modifying some products to respond to the allegedly specific needs of women. The aim is to double profits by offering two gendered versions of the same product. Pink is then massively used to particularise a product “for girls/women”, which has often been criticised by feminist researchers and activists as sexist. The intent here is to explain how and why such a marketing strategy persists, even though it is in decline. Through gender studies, the article will first show how the gendered use of pink in marketing manages to construct a “feminine mode of consumption”, referring to Christian Derbaix and Pierre Gregory’s model of the “doors of persuasion” to show how the colour pink can activate different levers likely to modify the attitudes and behaviour of female consumers. The article will then consider Jean Baudrillard’s semiological approach to consumption in order to explain female consumers’ adherence to this “pink marketing”. Finally, using the concept of “extended-self” developed by Russel W. Belk, it will show how the consumption of these “feminine products” allows consumers to prove their belonging to the category of “women”, while reinforcing their feeling of “being a woman”.

Keywords: *Gender Marketing, Consumer culture, Femininity, Consumerism, Extended-self*

Introduction: The Uses of Pink in Gender Marketing

Gender marketing is a strategy that emerged in the 1970s, taking advantage of the research on gender that was developing at the same time, in order to produce targeted marketing according to the sex of the audience¹. As much as marketers are very familiar with gender studies, gender marketing strategies differ from them in that they are not aimed at gender criticism, but at profit. In particular, marketers rely on studies of behavioural differences between men and women in terms of decision-making, risk-taking or self-confidence; as well as on the design preferences – shapes, sizes, colours of objects – that men and women express, and the reasons that motivate them (Moss, 2009). They can then apply these results by changing the shape, colour or even the functionality of a product, by changing the colour or textual elements of its packaging, or by working on a specific advertising promotion. The aim is then to double the benefits by offering two gendered versions of the same product.

¹ In reality, gender marketing is much more about targeting women than men: while brands are increasingly interested in men, they are feminising their ranges for female consumers rather than masculinising them for male ones.

While it is now common to find a product available in several shades, pink is specifically used to make products available in a version for women (Bartow, 2008). Thus “pinkified”, a product becomes exclusive to girls or women, while the rest of the range becomes both “neutral” – suitable for everyone –, and “masculine” – thought to be intended for men. For marketers, this “pink factor” allows for a doubling of profits (Orenstein, 2011: 43). This however does not mean that all goods or services targeted towards women are pink, but rather that all pink products – and there are many – are targeted to women: pink razors, pink toolboxes, pink ear plugs, pink pens, and even pink laxatives (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. Various pink products from gender marketing, 2021 (brand names have been masked)

The use of pink to label a product “for women/girls” has been repeatedly criticised by academics (e.g., Coy, and Garner, 2010; Fine, and Rush, 2016), feminist associations² and the media – particularly on the internet³ – as reinforcing sexist gender stereotypes. Why then does pink marketing continue to work, renewing itself, but always relying on the same discursive and visual resources – chromatic in particular? Using psychology and theories of advertising persuasion, then semiology and the sociology of consumption, I will sketch out hypotheses to explain the success of gendered marketing, even today.

² Some examples include the Unstereotype Alliance initiative of the US association UN Women (<https://www.unstereotypealliance.org>), or the French campaign Marre du Rose of the associations Osez le féminisme !, and Les Chiennes de Garde (<https://marredurose.olf.site>).

³ For instance, the association Pépite Sexiste (<http://pepitesexiste.fr>) relays via social networks (Twitter, Instagram, etc.) examples of gender marketing sent by its readers. The initiative is now replicated in several other countries.

The Woman, that special consumer: Pink Marketing through theories of persuasion

Colour and advertising typologies

Consumer acceptance of a product depends on the communication strategies used, the type of product to be sold, but also on the expected target and the context in which the advertising is broadcast or received (Aylesworth, and Mackenzie, 1998). However, sociologist Benoît Heilbrunn reminds us that “[t]he consumer is a social construct insofar as the people we meet in shops or who are said to consume products or services are flesh and blood beings with a history, affects, desires, budgetary and temporal constraints, etc.” [own translation] (2005: 27). On this basis, it is understood that it is not possible to control all the parameters influencing consumers’ persuasion, such as their personality (Haugtvedt, and Petty, 1992) or their mood (Bless *et al.*, 1990).

Numerous models of the process of advertising persuasion have been developed since the 1980s, broken down into two typologies: a cognitive one, based on memory and reasoning; and a second one, emotional, based on effects (Georget, 2005). This distinction corresponds more or less to the categorisation of types of content proposed by Christopher P. Puto and William D. Wells: on the one hand, they distinguish informational advertisements which disseminate a factual message about the product, and involve a process of cognition; and on the other hand, more recent transformational advertisements which engage the effect of consumers (1984).

Mathieu Kacha attempts to move beyond such a distinction, arguing that colour can influence or even change consumers’ attitudes towards a product by acting on both the cognitive (congruence of the message with the symbolism of the colour) and the emotional (liking or disliking a colour) dimensions (2009: 184). The use of pink to particularise products targeted towards women fits perfectly with the cognitive aspect of this hypothesis: the feminine symbolism of pink is not only well established, but also shared by the majority of countries (Bideaux, 2021: 369-371). However, on the emotional side, we are confronted with the repulsion that pink arouses in many women⁴, which should not therefore be beneficial to advertisers’ strategies, especially as the criticisms made of stereotypical pink toys (Orenstein, 2011), of the instrumentalisation of feminist discourse by advertising (Hains, 2009), and of the inequalities produced or perpetuated by gendered marketing (Bartow, 2008), are numerous and massively disseminated by the popular media.

⁴ In a German survey, only 3% of women surveyed declared pink as their favourite colour, while 17% cited pink as their least favourite colour (Heller, 2000: 179). A meta-analysis compiling several surveys from 22 US and Canadian universities showed that only 5% of North American women declared pink as their favourite colour (Ellis, and Ficek, 2001).

The “Gates of persuasion”

Why then does marketing continue to use pink to segment its market according to gender, if this means running the risk of customer defection? According to Christian Derbaix and Pierre Gregory, it is possible to change consumers’ attitudes and behaviour through persuasive communication (2004). To do this, they identify four “gates of persuasion”, which are conceptual levers usable by advertisers, which Kacha subsequently associates with the characteristics of color (2009: 189-190):

- (1) The “gate of logic” corresponds to cognitive learning, which refers for Kacha to the meaning of colours;
- (2) The “gate of imitation”, which corresponds to interpersonal relationships, and for Kacha to colour manifestations in fashion or tradition
- (3) The “gate of feelings and emotions”, linked by Kacha to personal experiences with colours (memories, habits);
- (4) And “the gate of automatisms”, which corresponds to the conditioning of consumers, and for Kacha to the almost unconscious associations made with a brand or a product.

If we apply Kacha’s correspondences to the use of pink as a sign of femininity in marketing, we can see that the strategy is to operate all these levers at once:

- (1) Pink is a colour recognised as a symbol of femininity almost everywhere in the world;
- (2) It has been established as a symbol of femininity, and continues to spread as such, simultaneously through the layette tradition and women’s fashion;
- (3) Girls are conditioned from childhood – via television, toys,... – to associate pink with femininity (Bideaux, 2021: 439-483);
- (4) Finally, as Mary Celeste Kearney points out, “it is very difficult to associate it with anything other than females and femininity” (2010: 29), which corresponds to the last gate of automatisms.

It seems to me at this point that I can invoke the “cradle to grave” marketing strategies that target women from childhood as the reason for the effectiveness of what I call “pink marketing”. The mercantile association of pink with the feminine is diffused through all strata of daily life, to the point of creating a form of continuity between childhood and adulthood. Female consumers are thus conditioned from birth to own pink objects, making pink marketing a real tool of persuasion specific to female targets, playing on both the cognitive and emotional registers, and having repercussions on gender relations.

Having and being (pink): Consumer goods as social markers

Consumption of symbols and symbol of consumption

The effectiveness of pink marketing can also be explained from the point of view of semiology. In *La Société de consommation*, Jean Baudrillard showed that

consumption is also a non-verbal language and that possessions have meaning beyond their desired functionalities (1970: 20). A few decades later, Grant McCracken supplemented Baudrillard's thesis by postulating that the cultural significance of consumption is projected from the world of cultural values and symbols to consumer goods, by two major instruments of transfer, namely advertising and fashion systems, which forcefully associate symbolic characteristics with the functional attributes of the product (2005: 104-106). Baudrillard spoke in this sense of consumption as a concept like a mythology, *i.e.* "a statement of contemporary society about itself, the way our society speaks itself. [...] the only objective reality of consumption is the *idea* of consumption" [own translation] (1970: 311-312).

Referring to Claude Levi-Strauss's totemism (1962), Marshall Sahlins proposes to consider consumer goods as new totems that can be understood as means of objectifying differentiated social identities, *i.e.* they allow social groups to be distinguished from one another (like animals and plants for certain tribal populations) (1976). Beyond its market value or its capacity to satisfy a need, the object of consumption is thus also a social marker, which is confirmed by Heilbrunn when he specifies that consumption, when it participates in social and cultural identities, does it both in the mode of social reality, but also of the idealisation specific to individuals in these social categories: "The self-concept is enhanced through the transfer of the socially accepted meanings from the product or brand to the person" [own translation] (2005: 94-96).

I consume pink so I am a woman

Based on these assumptions, it is possible to consider the pink objects produced by gender marketing as a way for some women to signify their femininity through the consumption of these objects, or more accurately, a way to signify their conformity to a model of femininity⁵. The desire to respond to social codes of femininity would therefore prevail over personal preferences – which explains why pink marketing can continue even though women do not specifically like pink –, and sometimes also over personal convictions – particularly feminist ones.

Consuming "in pink" can therefore be seen as a new way of expressing femininity and constructing a gendered identity, specific to our contemporary societies. Lynn Peril speaks of "Pink Think", which she defines as "a set of ideas and attitudes about what constitutes proper female behavior [...] pink think is the belief that one's success as a woman is grounded in one's allegiance to such behavior" (2002: 6-7). Among these feminine behaviours is consumption; Ann Bartow develops: "Choosing pink against her own inner wishes constitutes consummate pink thinking by a female, reflecting self-sacrifice, conformity to gender norms, and

⁵ This may explain the emergence of a craze for pink as a symbol of femininity in 1950s America, which was obsessed with the roles assigned to men and women (Bideaux, 2021: 317-325). Historian Penny Sparke also explains that at that time "[t]he objects became, first and foremost, symbols, sacrificing their utilitarian features to their symbolic functions', notably by signifying femininity" (1995: 10-11).

acquiescence to the dictates of mainstream consumer culture” (2008: 37-38). Thus, it does not matter whether women like pink or want to have pink objects, the important thing is that they buy these pink products – that they consume pink – because to consume pink is to consume femininity (Peril, 2002: 218).

Pink marketing’s effectiveness is therefore made possible by all the social pressures imposed on women, which from childhood – via toys or clothes bought for them by their parents (Picariello et al., 1990; Pennel, 1994), socialisation at school (Darroux, 2007), ... – condition them to respond to the cliché of stereotypical femininity. The role of the colour pink is then to maintain a symbolic cohesion that is immediately recognisable and technically replicable on different media. The “cradle to grave” marketing strategy aimed at targeting girls and women throughout their lives then shows its full effectiveness: it not only makes it possible to retain female customers, but also to ensure a renewal of the clientele through the intergenerational transmission of a supposedly feminine taste for pink.

Conclusion: Pink as a prosthesis of femininity

For psychoanalyst Serge Tisseron, “[t]he human being inhabits the objects that surround him as he inhabits his own body” [own translation], a way to “peripheralized” his psychic life, to extend his spirit (2016: 216), *i.e.* to invest objects symbolically as an extension of oneself. Russel W. Belk highlights this postulate by developing the idea of “extended self” through the possession of objects: “It seems an inescapable fact of modern life that we learn, define, and remind ourselves of who we are by our possessions” (1988). According to him, possession would define not only what is “mine”, but also what is “Me”, implying a definition of identities through objects, their acquisition, consumption, or collection. Moreover, Belk, as well as Tisseron, extend the concept of “object” beyond the mere consumer good: to money, animals, monuments, a gesture, etc. We could include in this non-exhaustive list colour, and in particular for our purposes, pink. *To possess something pink is to be pink oneself*, and to be what it symbolises: the feminine.

Through pink marketing, femininity becomes artificial, superficial, externalised and conditioned by the possession of feminine objects, in contrast to masculinity, which is manifested and proven through acts, physical or mental ritual tests (Hoquet, 2009: 174). Femininity then appears accessory, in the sense that it is “worn”: it is an extra-corporeal artifact but nevertheless necessary for women, who have to buy it, to consume it, in order to claim to belong to the category “women” as defined by gender and shaped by stereotypes. In this sense, Belk points out that the extension of the self is also part of a collective plan: it is acknowledged and even expected by society (1988). Pink in gender marketing is therefore a paradox: it symbolises femininity in order to respond to women’s “natural” needs and, at the same time, it refers femininity to an artificial aesthetic process that is consumed, that is accessory. Pink objects are thus visible markers of femininity that make it perceptible and measurable. To paraphrase French feminist Simone de Beauvoir, if

“one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (1949: 274), then it is clear that women become women in part through consumption of “women’s pink things”.

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