Bright Modernity

Color, Commerce, and Consumer Culture
"Real Men Wear Pink"? A Gender History of Color

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The first thing that happens to a newborn baby today is that it is color-coded—pink if a girl, blue if a boy. For girls, in particular, this is just the beginning of an extensive color-coded gendering process. At two months, a pink sparkly headband adorns a girl’s hairless head. At age one, her little bed has been taken over by pink cuddly things. By the time she is two or three, this girl will likely be the proud owner of a pink empire populated by Disney Princess, Barbie, Hello Kitty and Princess Lillifee paraphernalia. The anthropologist Christine Yano has coined the term “pink globalization” to refer to this transnational phenomenon, the pinkification of girl culture and the particular femininity that it recycles and circulates around the globe¹ (Fig 4.1).

Since the early 2000s, however, more and more girl advocates have openly criticized pink’s seductive pull on little girls. They are sure that pink incites girls to act in artificial and superficial ways, instead of letting them develop authentic feminine selves. To give these voices credit, it does seem as if the desire to be pretty sticks like an affective glue to the pink princess dresses worn by little girls the world over. On the other hand, when in June 2014 Prince George, the one-year-old son of British royals Prince William and Kate Middleton, the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, was spotted wearing pink dungarees at his father’s polo match, no one seemed to fear that he was falling prey to little-girl princess culture. Instead, mass media stepped in to affirm the little boy’s masculinity and agency: “Real men wear pink,” proclaimed the free daily newspaper Metro cheekily. In fact, little George’s pink dungarees were presented to the public as a “real” man’s choice for getting in touch with his “feminine side.”²

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1. Reference to Christine Yano's work on pink globalization.
2. Reference to the coverage of Prince George's appearance in the media.

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R.L. Blaszczyk, U. Spickermann (eds.), Bright Modernity, Worlds of Consumption, DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-50745-3_4
Fig. 4.1 One artist’s rendering of transnational pink girl culture: *The Pink Project*—*Tess and Her Pink and Purple Things*, Lightjet print, 2006, by JeongMee Yoon

*Source:* Copyright © JeongMee Yoon, 2006, and used with the artist’s permission. For more on her Pink and Blue Project, see http://www.jeongmeeyoon.com/aw_pinkblue.htm.

One way of making sense of the different reactions to girls and boys in pink is to look at the relationship between gender and color historically. Tracing the metonymic relationship between color and femininity in the Western history of art, fashion, and marketing helps contextualize current anxieties about pink’s feminizing abilities. It will become apparent that the global circulation of color theories and actual paints and dyes since the sixteenth century, on the one hand, and the “color revolution” in marketing and fashion of the early-to-mid twentieth century, on the other hand, paved the way for today’s global “affective economy” of pink.³ Historicizing the current “pinkification” of girl culture will also shed light on the tension between the notion that pink is merely a color, on the surface, and thus superficial, and the anxiety that pink might impact the psyche after all, affecting core gender and sexual attributes. What can past and present preoccupations with pink—and color more generally—tell us about gender and desire?
The first section of this chapter touches on the gendering of color and painting by Italian and French art critics in the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. It identifies artificiality, superficiality, seduction, and femininity as dominant themes in the history of color. The second section discusses the coloring of gender in nineteenth- and mostly twentieth-century fashion and marketing. It explores the deeply seductive power attributed to color. Whoever fell prey to the allure of color was deemed weak-willed and emotional, personality traits commonly attributed to women. The third section hones in on the gender history of the color pink and explains how in the 1950s pink became attached to a new feminine beauty ideal. In light of this history, the fourth section returns to the gendered ways in which color organizes current Western child culture and the stamp of artificiality, superficiality, and seduction that sticks to pink femininity today.

**The Gendering of Color: Sixteenth-and Nineteenth-Century European Art Criticism**

In the Italian Renaissance art controversy commonly termed the *paragone*, color was pitted against rational, masculine *disegno*—design or form. To the proponents of *disegno*, line and drawing were the essential and primary features of a painting, whereas color was deemed secondary if not superfluous. Indeed, these sixteenth-century art critics devalued color as superficial by comparing it to women. Two distinct, if related metaphors were invoked. Much like women supposedly used cosmetics to disguise their real selves and seduce men, an artist was believed to use color to enchant and trick the observer. In this logic, color distracted the viewer from appreciating a painting’s form, thereby cheating him of direct access to the painting’s essence. Thus, the artist’s use of color was deemed a form of artistic prostitution. A second metaphor suggested that being transfixed by color was like falling prey to feminine seduction, for artists and viewers alike. Developing too close a relationship to color, like becoming too intimate with one’s muse, was believed to have detrimental effects on a painter’s genius. It was perceived as a show of excessive emotional involvement, and it revealed a lack of distance to one’s art, the end of artistic mastery. By contrast, a good painting, similar to an honest woman’s true (read: inner) beauty, was unadorned and natural.

Similar comparisons of color to women can be found in mid- to late-nineteenth-century French art criticism, though this time color and form were seen not as adversaries but as complementary forces. Charles Blanc, head of the French Department for the Visual Arts at the Ministry of the Interior and director of the École des Beaux-Arts, claimed that “the union of design and color is necessary to beget painting, just as is the union of man and woman to beget mankind, but design must maintain its preponderance over color. Otherwise painting speeds to its ruin: it will fall through color just as mankind fell through Eve.” All the same, despite conceding the importance of both
form and color, Blanc, like his Renaissance predecessors, asserted the dominance of the former over the latter. Employing a gendered metaphor of domesticity, he naturalized the hierarchical relationship of form and color by comparing it to that of men and women.

Thus far, I have highlighted the gendering of color in European art criticism, which entailed a pronounced feminization of color. This coding of color as feminine went hand in hand with the marked feminization of those who let themselves be swayed by color. Unsurprisingly, Charles Blanc dedicated the greater part of his 1875 treatise on ornamentation and dress exclusively to women, equating color with feeling and feeling with women. In his view, rational bourgeois men knew how to control their attraction to color. A human being in his or her "primitive" state, however, was fully controlled by his or her affects and emotions and so would fall prey to color. In line with colonial thinking of the time, not just European women fell into his category of the "primitive"; Blanc also included children and "savages." Of the latter's aesthetic sensibilities, he declared, "the Moor, the Negro, the Arab, and the Indian deck themselves with staring hues."

As the nineteenth century progressed, bright colors became a signifier of bourgeois women, children, and "exotic" Others. Yet as the next section will show, white bourgeois women could set themselves apart from women of other classes, races, and nations by following certain color rules. In the back of male commentators' minds, however, even the most rule-observing bourgeois woman could at any moment fall prey to the affective and emotional pull of color again, which is why male color experts of the fashion and advertising industry made it their goal to attract female consumers.

**The Coloring of Gender: Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Fashion and Advertising**

The innovations in dye technologies in the mid- to late nineteenth century, described by Alexander Engel in Chapter 2, made colorful fabrics available and affordable to the European middle classes. Soon, women's dresses were being made up in the wildest colors imaginable. A discrete children's fashion also emerged, first in England, with other European countries following suit. Bourgeois men, on the other hand, were dressing in dark suits by this time. This practice set them apart from the brightly colored apparel of their middle-class wives and children, the flamboyantly dressed aristocracy, the dingly dressed working class, and the unfamiliar world of the colonial Other (Fig. 4.2).

Still, despite the availability of hundreds of different colors and shades, fashion dictated that bourgeois women exercise restraint. The color of a woman's dress had to harmonize with her complexion and hair color, as prescribed by the prominent French color theorist, Michel-Eugène Chevreul. Soft pinks supposedly suited blondes best, and only the most fair-skinned
women were believed to be able to pull off certain color combinations without risking ridicule. This performance of restraint was firmly rooted in class, racial, and national biases, all of which were buttressed by fashion periodicals such as Godey's Lady’s Book and Magazine in the United States, the
Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine in Great Britain, and similar publications in France, Germany, and elsewhere in Europe (see Chapter 5). The written and unwritten rules prescribing pink for anyone but blond and fair-skinned women reveals how deeply implicated color codes had become in the construction of racialized norms of feminine beauty.

Color codes also served to affirm national and class-specific standards of style and good taste. The French literary critic Hippolyte Taine’s scathing comments on the bright dresses of wealthy English middle-class women in the 1860s left no room for doubt. He proclaimed that bright colors were the domain of prostitutes and the wives of parvenus. Any woman who dressed too shrilly was suspected of being one or the other. Not only did the unrestrained use of bright colors disqualify English middle-class women and their fashion sense in the eyes of this Frenchman but it also invalidated the social ambitions of the British bourgeoisie more generally. By arguing that the collective cultural disposition of a nation’s middle class correlated with its aesthetic sense, Taine used fabric colors to propagate class and national distinctions. Thus, when the management of bright colors became the domain of bourgeois women, it was their responsibility to use colors responsibly so as to uphold sociocultural differences and white bourgeois beauty standards.

The gendered history of art criticism, advertising, and fashion that I have unpacked thus far stresses the ways in which color fostered social and national distinctions. However, color also worked as a type of sociocultural glue. Indeed, the bright colors that dominated the postwar years in American fashion and advertising managed, in effect, to paint over sociocultural differences.

In the 1920s, the marketing and advertising industry started to show serious interest in color as a marketing tool. It was not until the mid-twentieth century, however, that color advertising fully established itself and a euphoric belief in the great commercial powers of color took hold. American color psychologists and industry consultants had much to do with this. They went to great lengths to sell color as a highly productive and efficient sales stimulant that promised high returns. According to the historian Regina Lee Blaszczyk, these consultants both scouted and shaped trends behind the scenes, spawning nothing less than what she calls a “color revolution.” First, they underscored how color garnered consumers’ attention. In the words of one contemporary advertising expert, color possessed a “pulling power.” Consultants emphasized color’s “attention and illustrative value” to advertisers and clothing manufacturers and, more importantly, the ways in which color influenced consumers, whether they wanted it or not. According to the eminent color consultants Faber Birren and Eric P. Danger (who are discussed at length in Chapter 10), color affected human beings on a base, “primitive,” and “subconscious” level. Color appealed to emotion, not reason, they concurred, and feeling was “likely to dominate reason.” Danger reasoned that this was why babies (ostensibly) responded earlier and more strongly to color than they did to form.
Numerous color experts opposed the common perception that color just added superficial allure to a product. Instead they maintained that color affected mood and temperament, even to the point of provoking physical sensations in people. Indeed, these experts declared that color produced desires and a need to act on them. Howard Ketcham, one of the most influential corporate advertising psychologists, was confident that the U.S. advertising industry knew how to use color to “create... demand.” The close attention that he paid to female role models in film and theater suggested that he envisioned consumers as women: “It’s a full-time job keeping tabs on color influence ranging from My Fair Lady to Cinderella,” Ketcham stressed. Indeed, advertising consultants generally presupposed female consumers, and they assumed that these consumers were “more sensitive to color than men.” Similarly to the art critics before them, these professionals explained women’s color preferences with their ostensibly more emotional and gentle natures.

Thus were the industrial color consultants able to inscribe themselves into a century-old tradition of depicting consumption as a feminine, irrational, and excessive activity—the opposite of production conceived as the domain of white rational man. It was not long, however, before the advertising and fashion industries began encouraging bourgeois men to dress more colorfully as well. The 1950s saw the establishment of men’s leisurewear, which brightened the color scheme of men’s wardrobes considerably. Early male adopters of the Ivy League look that came to be called “preppy” could now be seen wearing pink dress shirts, although it is likely that their wives or mothers bought them these colorful items.

This circumstance notwithstanding, industrial color consultants such as Faber Birren continued to emphasize the importance of paying attention to gendered color preferences, asserting, for example, that “blue is useful in appealing to men, rose and pink in appealing to women.” Louis Cheskin even took the color-coded bourgeois gender difference a step further. This self-made color expert insisted that women who liked colors normally preferred by men exhibited other masculine characteristics, whereas “men who prefer delicate or ‘feminine’ tints show other effeminate traits.” Cheskin never earned the respect of his colleagues. Yet his claim that a person’s color preference could reveal his or her true gender identity was only the logical next step in the argument that color consultants had made all along, namely, that color’s impact on human beings was profound, that specific colors appealed to men and others to women, whereby women were more sensitive to the emotions, desires, and behaviors triggered by colorful things. The advertising industry and their consultants thus tapped into feminine popular culture to produce emotional and affective attachments to brightly colored Cinderella fantasies. Feminine hues were applied to all types of consumer goods, even the mundane electric light bulb (Chapter 8). These businesses and experts were convinced that they had mastered the female mentality and therefore consumer demand.
The chromophilia of U.S. advertising from the mid-twentieth century on can be read as a symptom of the feminization of consumer culture more generally. For starters, American women were decisive in both the buying and selling of consumer goods. While white middle-class Mrs. Consumers were in charge of family spending, perfectly styled, ever-attentive “shopgirls” were trained to sell them a particular image and emotion with each product. Male commentators claimed that saleswomen played to their customers’ vanity, effectively enchanting them with their brightly colored goods and the “gushy feelings” they represented. Women thus came to embody what the historian Victoria de Grazia has called the “irresistible empire,” the mid-twentieth-century American model of consumer capitalism that extended across the globe. That said, the colorful “vain and silly feminine world” of consumption was geared to “seducing” everyone—women, men, and children alike.

THE GENDER HISTORY OF THE COLOR PINK

Right around the time when men were incited to wear brighter colors, one color began to be singled out as the most feminine of all: pink. The color pink had long been a favorite in children’s fashion. If infants and toddlers from middle-class families were not dressed in white, they would be seen in pretty pastel shades of pink, blue, or yellow. (Fig. 4.3) The association of pink with girls and blue with boys was not dominant until the 1950s or later. In fact, the textile historian Jo Paoletti cites American women’s magazines and fashion catalogs of the 1920s and 1930s that declared pink as the “more decided and stronger” color and thus more suitable for boys. Similarly, Catholic regions throughout Europe were known to associate light blue with girls, a tradition attributed to Christian iconography, in which the Virgin Mary was frequently depicted wearing a blue cloak. Mostly, though, pink and blue were used interchangeably as baby colors. Thus, pink did not become synonymous with girlish femininity overnight, especially not in Central Europe, where the gendered blue–pink color-coding seems to have taken hold later than in the United States and where there remain substantial class, religious, and regional differences.

Pink’s popularity in the 1950s was not due to girls’ princess culture—even though pink’s biggest fan, Mamie Eisenhower, was a princess of sorts. The First Lady cultivated the image of the girl. Not only did she dislike the “old lady” look but—like any other girl—she loved to shop. Instead of having her clothes tailor-made, like the First Ladies before her, she claimed to buy her outfits off the rack. She thus came to be the poster child for American mass consumption in the 1950s. Her love of pink seemed to know no bounds. She wore a pink Nettie Rosenstein gown for her husband’s inaugural ball, which she had embroidered with over 2,000 gemstones in various pink tones. She also decorated her boudoir in the family section of the White House in assorted pink shades, from the tops of her cosmetic jars.
Fig. 4.3 Example of a boy in pink in the early nineteenth century: *Young Boy with Whip*, anonymous, American School, ca. 1840, oil on canvas

*Source*: Honolulu Museum of Art, bequest of John Gregg Allerton, 1993 (7440.1).

and the headboard of her bed to the fluffy bath mat in her bathroom. If that were not enough, Mamie’s Cabin, the vacation home of the presidential couple, and Mamie’s Dream House, the couple’s post-presidency home, were devoted to the color (Fig. 4.4).
It did not take long for middle-class women to catch on. In the United States in the mid-1950s, such women started buying clothes and hats in the pink shade favored by Mamie Eisenhower, one subsequently dubbed Mamie Pink or First Lady Pink. Mamie Pink was a watered down, soft kind of pink
that showed little resemblance to the much stronger shocking pink that the Italian fashion designer Elsa Schiaparelli had promoted since the late 1930s.53

If Mamie Eisenhower’s love of pink contributed to the feminization of the color, it was pink’s strong connection to childhood that made it exude youth and an innocent kind of sexiness.54 The color pink came to be associated with the light-hearted feeling and appealing innocence of rosy-cheeked girls. Teenage girls of the baby-boomer generation embraced pink, which in turn became emblematic of their conspicuous consumption. Indeed, the popularity of the color pink in the 1950s, the cultural historian Karal Ann Marling argues, signaled a fundamental change in fashion, consumption, and femininity. A new focus on the teenage girl supplanted the beauty ideal of the forever thirty-five-year-old woman. A younger generation became the main target of the advertising and fashion industries. New fashion and beauty standards fetishized the adolescent, not fully grown girl’s body. Predictably, women’s dress sizes began to shrink.55 Thus, pink’s soaring popularity among women in the mid 1950s and early 1960s went hand in hand with increased attention to the girl as a consumer target group and fashion symbol. The latter trend, in turn, promoted the infantilization of adult women’s fashion, on the one hand, and the heteronormative feminization and sexualization of the girl child, on the other.

This development raises the question of how the tropes identified in this and the previous sections of this essay—the superficiality and artificiality of color, the power of color to produce desire as well as express core gender differences, and the rise of pink and adolescent girlhood as markers of heteronormative femininity—inform public debate over pink princess culture today. How do the gendering of color, the coloring of gender, and the pinkification of girl femininity play out in children’s culture today?

**Girls’ and Boys’ Love of Pink Princess Culture**

A 2006 article by Sandy Chiu et al. in the psychology journal *Sex Roles* discusses how parents of boys diagnosed with Gender Identity Disorder “report that their sons are ‘obsessed’ with the colors pink and purple and that their drawings are often replete with these colors.”56 Indeed, today the connection between pink and girlish femininity is so pervasive that a boy child’s preference for the color is quickly read as an indication of homosexuality or a transgender identity. A 2011 *New York Times* article features parents sharing strategies on how to raise boys who love to dress up in what a New York University study terms “PFD” or “Pink Frilly Dresses.”57 These progressive parents negotiate their children’s love of so-called pink frilly dresses by letting them dress, act, and feel “pink” around the house.58 Indeed, there is a growing “intimate consumer public” expressing support of pink boys.59 An array of self-help books and blogs encourage parents to love their children’s gender nonconformity.60 One prime example is the nonfiction picture book *My Princess Boy*. Its author, Cheryl Kilodavis, tells the story of her “4-year-old boy who happily expresses his authentic self by enjoying
‘traditional girl’ things like jewelry, sparkles or anything pink.” Kilodavis describes when her son Dyson seems truly happy: whenever he is shopping with his mom for pretty pink bags and sparkly pink dresses.

In light of the psychological discourse that construes “sex-dimorphic color preference in children” as an indication of Gender Identity Disorder or Gender Dysphoria, these parents’ acceptance is exemplary. The right to an authentic self—to the coherence of one’s inner feelings, identity, and outer appearance—seems to be the impetus behind this parental support for the unconventional gender presentation of these children. The parents are invested in their children’s authenticity. Indeed, they buy material goods—ballet shoes, nail polish, and pink dresses—to help their children discover their ostensibly true feminine selves. Consumer goods seem to be the magic key to their children’s happiness and to the parents’ own happiness, too. Literally and figuratively, authenticity comes at a price. For these parents seem to believe that their children can only express their authentic feminine selves with the help of what some might consider artificial, superficial, and expensive consumer goods.

Yet if some boys’ predilections for pink has made the news in recent months and years, most interventions about the color pink focus on girls and on how the media and marketing affect girls’ self-esteem, aspirations, and body image. One prominent example is the campaign and website Pinkstinks, launched by London twins Abi Moore and Emma Moore. These mothers of two sons and two daughters, respectively, “challenge...the culture of pink which invades every aspect of girls’ lives.” In addition, Pinkstinks educates readers on who reaps the benefits of pink girl culture. In 2010, Disney marketed 25,000 different Princess merchandising items for total revenue of four billion U.S. dollars (Fig. 4.5).

Since the late 1990s, there has been growing interest in the ways in which girls are affected by pink femininity. Three main positions dominate public debate. Sue Palmer, author of Toxic Childhood, espouses what may be called a colors-are-seductive perspective: She is convinced that overexposure to pink stunts girls’ personalities. “It’s under their skin from a very early age and severely limits choices, and decisions.” In an article in the Daily Mail with the catchy title “Why Pink Makes Me See Red,” Palmer expresses her fear that girls exposed to pink are not “old enough to make rational choices. Their brains simply aren’t sufficiently developed for the application of reason. So when marketers turn their big guns on young children, they’re not so much entertaining and informing as brainwashing them.” The author of Toxic Childhood explains that because children “operate mainly on emotion,” the “deep emotional attachments made in the first six or seven years are likely to influence the way they behave for the rest of their lives.”

Michael Gurian, a therapist and author of Nurture the Nature, disagrees. He is a proponent of what might be termed a color-is-superficial view. Too much pink does not have a profoundly negative effect, according to him. “Scientists all argue the same thing—you cannot have a biological organism without having an
environment for it to exist in, but that environment does not change the very basic make-up of that organism." Gurian believes that the effects of exposure to pink or any other color are temporary and inconsequential.

The third position combines the first two views but looks more closely at how pink affects femininity. For Peggy Orenstein, the author of *Cinderella Ate My Daughter*, pink femininity is artificial and superficial, yet it affects girls’ core identities. Essentially, Orenstein criticizes how “the all-pervasive media machine aimed at our daughters—and at us—from womb to tomb... presents femininity as performance, sexuality as performance, identity as performance, and each of those traits as available for a price.” Drawing on the developmental psychologist Deborah L. Tolman’s work, Orenstein argues that the commercialization of pink femininity results in girls not knowing how they feel about their true feminine selves anymore: “I have to remind them that looking good is not a feeling.” In addition, she warns that girls send out sexual vibes before they are emotionally mature enough to understand them. Orenstein posits that the color pink forms part of a shallow type of femininity that is obsessed with appearance. She then contrasts pink femininity with authentic femininity, which is not about superficial looks but deep feelings and healthy autonomy.

Significantly, these three dominant positions in the contemporary debate about the impact of ubiquitous pink marketing on girls reproduce the two contradictions that I have traced historically above. On the one hand, color has been viewed since early modern art criticism as superficial and deceptive, just as the twentieth-century advertising industry promoting attire in gendered colors
has been perceived as a vehicle of mere appearance. On the other hand, scholars, parents, and the media focus on color’s role in generating core sex differences, suggesting that color deeply affects children’s gender identity and sexuality. An analogous contradiction is today’s gendered reaction to pink color choices by young girls, leaving both blue and pink boys aside. Whereas pink girls are seen to succumb to consumer culture’s pressure to “look good,” boys’ love for pink (or blue)—at least for progressive parents—is deemed an authentic expression of their child’s gender identity, sexuality, or both. Regardless of the underlying psychological motives for the toddlers’ color choices, these two views beg the question of why pink can be an authentic choice for gender-nonconforming boys but not for gender-conforming girls. Why does the stain of fakery and superficiality adhere only to girls’ pink femininity? Moreover, since newborn babies are immediately immersed in a color-coded, gendered child culture, what and where might this authentic self even be?

In light of these questions, I contend that we need to develop further Ruth Barnes and Joanne B. Eicher’s observation that “dress is one of the most significant markers of gender identity.”72 For attire and its color do not just express one’s identity to other people but also help form the very fabric of one’s identity. As the aphorism goes, “clothes make the man”—and the woman. In other words, the act of buying, wearing, and being seen in pink frilly dresses is central to how today’s girls and boys construct their gender and sexuality. To add yet another idiom to the mix, the expression “wearing the pants” underscores how seemingly innocuous fashion trends are intimately bound up with the material and symbolic gender order.73 Thus, when parents, child advocates, and feminists challenge the growing pinkification of girl culture, they both support and challenge the power of color and dress in the struggle against gender and child commodification.

CONCLUSION

The two contradictions unpacked in this chapter—the notion that color is superficial but capable of altering core gender differences and the presumption that pink girls have been seduced by outside influences whereas pink boys are merely expressing their true gender identities or sexual selves—are metonymically connected. In the case of gender-conforming girls, color is superficial, the superficial is deceptive, deception is a form of masquerade, masquerade is femininity, femininity is consumerism, consumerism is advertising, and advertising is pink. Boys’ choices, by contrast, appear authentic, even those of toddlers in pink dungarees, and the position of boys appears homologous to the subject position of producers. Operating through a discourse that devalues women’s collective consumption as irrational but elevates the choice of the masculine individual as rational and authentic, a child’s love of pink consumer goods is thus doubly gendered.
Far from arguing that feeling blue is the real deal while happy pink femininity is mere delusion, my intention has been to historicize today’s color-coded child consumer culture. Pitting authenticity against pink artificial femininity—feeling good against looking good—does not shed light on the workings of girl culture and feminine identifications. Analyzing these gendered oppositions historically, however, help us to understand how gender and desire are constructed in today’s color-coded child consumer culture. For one, the fact that girls’ desires are constructed as coming from the outside but boys’ desires from the inside reveals how incoherent common understandings of desire and sexual identity really are. Furthermore, today’s color-coded child culture reflects a shift in the ways in which gender and sexuality are produced and reaffirmed in contemporary Western societies. There is a growing consensus that gender differences are eroding; the phenomenon of girls surpassing boys in school is often cited as evidence. One glance at the pinkification of girl culture is enough to call this commonly held belief into question. Gender differences may have declined in the legal, political, or educational arenas, but they have become more pronounced in child consumer culture.

Color codes teach girls and boys gendered consumer practices from the moment they are born. If we subscribe to color psychologists’ and consultants’ belief in color’s power to affect the body and the mind in ways beyond the control of those deemed uncivilized or pre-civilized, then pink is the glue that sticks to pink frilly dresses and forms an affective bond among those girls and boys who share pink toys, clothes, and shoes as well as tales of princesses, fairies and unicorns—a cultural imaginary priming pink children for a dreamy prince and the disappointment that ensues when he turns out to be a toad or a regular human being after all. If investment in the authentic self undergirds progressive parents’ support of pink boys, it is gendered notions of seduction and disappointment that inform their critique of girls’ pink femininity. To borrow Sara Ahmed’s term, the “affective economy” of pink draws on a repository of feelings, looks, and ideas about girlie femininity. Indeed, the color pink allows these feelings to be recycled and to circulate globally, establishing an affective bond with pink consumer goods. Despite the fact that the affective economy of pink is undergirded by a long tradition of equating color with femininity and femininity with color, the way in which gender and sexuality is produced and dramatized through color in early childhood today is unprecedented.

Notes


   See also Rebecca Pocklington, “Real Men Wear Pink! After Prince George Wears Pink Dungarees, More Celebrity Men Looking Rosy,” Mirror, June 15, 2014,


6. Ibid., 80.

7. Ibid., 78.


15. Ingeborg Weber-Kellermann, *Die Kindheit* (Frankfurt am Main, 1997); see also Weber-Kellermann, *Der Kinder neue Kleider: 200 Jahre deutsche Kindermoden in ihrer sozialen Zeichensetzung* (Frankfurt am Main, 1985).


20. Ibid., 42.


22. For example, *Pittford’s Manual for Advertisers* (Chicago, 1924), 153 and 124.

23. Ibid., 124.


26. Birren believed that color affected the most “primitive” level of human existence, while Danger focused on color’s influence on the “subconscious.” Both addressed some kind of base instincts, however. Faber Birren, Selling Color to People (New York, 1956), 159; Eric P. Danger, How to Use Color to Sell: A Calmers Management Guidebook (Boston, MA, 1968), 5; also Louis Cheskin, Business Without Gambling: How Successful Marketers Use Scientific Methods (New York, 1963), 245.


35. Advertisements portrayed the consumer as an irrational “creature of suggestion” who was easily hypnotized by advertising; Ludy T. Benjamin, A Brief History of Modern Psychology (Malden, MA, 2007), 100–101. Excellent histories of the gender of consumption are Kathy Peiss, Hope in a Jar: The Making of America’s Beauty Culture (New York, 1999); De Grazia, Irresistible Empire; Eva Illouz, Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism (Berkeley CA, 1997).

36. Karal Ann Marling, As Seen on TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s (Cambridge, MA, 1994), 40. Brooks Brothers, for example, had been selling pink shirts for “Ivy League Men or Women” since 1949. See Marling, As Seen on TV, 173.


40. Birren, Selling Color to People, 15.

41. De Grazia, Irresistible Empire, 430.

42. Ibid., 26.


44. Jo B. Paoletti, Pink and Blue: Telling the Boys from the Girls in America (Bloomington, IN, 2012), 88.


46. Paoloetti, Pink and Blue, 85.
47. Ibid., 89; Eva Heller, Wie Farben wirken: Farbpsychologie, Farbsymbolik, Kreative Farbgestaltung (Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1999), 118; see also Ernest Biggs, Colour in Advertising (London, 1956).
49. Marling, As Seen on TV, 24.
50. Ibid., 34.
51. Ibid., 38.
52. Gay Pauley, “Originator of First Lady Pink Also Standardizes Our Colors,” Wilmington Sunday Star, August 30, 1953, 16; see also Marling, As Seen on TV, 38–40.
53. Blaszczuk, Color Revolution, 276. Mamie Pink also contrasted starkly with the black-pink color combination popular with the 1950s youth subcultures that professed to emulate African-American and working-class fashion styles. See William Graebner, Coming of Age in Buffalo: Youth and Authority in the Postwar Era (Philadelphia, 1990), 57. See also Lucy Rollin, Twentieth-Century Teen Culture by the Decades: A Reference Guide (Westport, CT, 1999), 74.
54. Marling, As Seen on TV, 40.
55. Ibid., 43.
56. The article concedes that these observations by parents have not been backed up by empirical research. Sandy W. Chiu et al., “Sex-Dimorphic Color Preference in Children with Gender Identity Disorder: A Comparison to Clinical and Community Controls,” Sex Roles 55 (2006): 387.
58. I by no means want to suggest that all parents embrace gender nonconforming boys. In fact, the sociologist Emily W. Kane’s research indicates that there are next to no worries about girls who act in ways that are perceived to be gender nonconforming, whereas many parents and particularly fathers tend to react negatively to boys liking pink frilly clothing, nail polish, make-up, and Barbie. They also discourage exhibiting “excessive emotionality,” which in their perception goes hand in hand with these material goods. Emily W. Kane, “No Way My Boys Are Going to Be like That!” Parents’ Responses to Children’s Gender Nonconformity,” Gender and Society 20, no. 2 (April 2006), 160; Hoffman, “Boys Will be Boys?”

60. To name but three: Diane Ehrensaft, *Gender Born, Gender Made: Raising Healthy Gender-Nonconforming Children* (New York, 2011); Lori Duron, *Raising My Rainbow: Adventures in Raising a Slightly Effeminate, Possibly Gay, Totally Fabulous Son* (New York, 2013), as well as blogs such as *Pink is For Boys*, https://pinkisforboys.wordpress.com.


62. In 2013, the American Psychiatric Association introduced the term “Gender Dysphoria” in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5* (Washington, DC, 2013) to replace the diagnostic name Gender Identity Disorder (GID). Gender Dysphoria refers to the clinically significant distress associated with gender nonconformity, which is the marked difference between the individual’s expressed and experienced gender and the gender others would assign him or her.

63. Hoffman, “Boys Will be Boys?”

64. As Sahar Sadjadi suggests, parents and their prepubescent children increasingly seek hormone and other medical treatments to align the sex assigned at birth with the child’s gender identity and gender presentation; Sahar Sadjadi, “The Endocrinologist’s Office—Puberty Suppression: Saving Children from a Natural Disaster?,” *Journal of Medical Humanities* 34, no. 2 (2013): 255–60.


73. Trousers in particular have long been associated with masculinity and mobility. The change from breeches to trousers symbolized a boy child’s rite of passage from a mama’s boy to a little man. Jo Paoletti, *Pink and Blue*, 42.
74. After all, the dictum “seeing life through rose-colored glasses” implies a deception inherent in a rose-colored filter.
