Pink Is A Feminist Issue

No prizes for guessing who all these products are aimed at... How can we break free of gender stereotyping and rethink pink? Tracy Ramsden investigates.
MINIST ISSUE

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It’s your birthday. Your boyfriend has just placed a reassuringly heavy box in front of you and simply by holding it, you know it’s what you’ve been hinting at for the best part of a year – a new laptop. Your old one takes 20 hours to charge and can no longer read DVDs, so thank goodness you finally have a sleek, high-spec version which will allow you to work during your commute, instead of watching the loading symbol spin round.

But as you unwrap it, you’re slightly perturbed to discover a smaller version of his laptop. Fine. You didn’t really want to heft a huge machine around anyway. But that’s not the main problem here. The most troublesome aspect in this whole scenario is that your new laptop is also pink. You struggle to keep the shock off your face. What on earth was he thinking? Only nine-year-old girls, Barbie and Paris Hilton would ever own a fun-sized pink laptop.

And therein lies the problem. Pink is a colour that’s loaded with connotations of immaturity; a shade that most females leave behind during the first few years of secondary school for fear of being viewed as naive as Sandy in Grease.

Yet walk into any shop and you’ll find products aimed at women in varying shades of pink – crystal-studded toolkits in hues of cerise, magenta mobile phones, baby pink dumb-bells, razors and Bic Cristal pens ‘for her’. There are trainers, mugs, cake tins and diaries – all pink, all aimed at those of us with XX chromosomes.

You can’t help but picture the predominantly male meetings where these decisions are made – fewer than 5% of advertising creative directors in the UK are women. So it’s no wonder brands resort to feminine clichés rather than something that speaks our language. But does this feminisation of products work?

Robertta Lombardi, brand communications manager for Fiat Group, certainly thinks so. In 2010, Fiat celebrated Barbie’s 50th birthday by launching a limited edition bright pink Fiat 500, alongside its Pink my Ride Campaign (a male model painting the car with pink nail varnish), which won a Campaign Media Award. “The colour was pink and dipped in glitter. Cameras and laptops will be practical and easily bleached. The reason is that pink, being a more decided and stronger color [sic], is more suitable for the boy, while blue, which is more delicate and dainty, is prettier for the girl.” Pink may be a strong colour but still an infantilised one – the not-quite-red. So how did women inherit it?

COLOUR CODES

A 2007 Newcastle University study claimed that females have an innate biological preference for pink, dating back to early civilisations, when men would hunt and women gathered fruits and berries, often in reds and pinks. But in her 2012 book Pink And Blue: Telling The Boys From The Girls In America, author Jo B Paolletti argues that the pink and blue dichotomy was established in the 20th century by retailers as little more than a marketing ploy – if genders were defined by different colours, hand-me-downs from sister to brother were unlikely, forcing mothers to buy double the amount of clothes. So why did girls get pink? Paolletti says it could have gone either way, but girls simply pulled the pink straw and it’s stuck ever since.

“Marketing – like the world – operates from a masculine model,” says Jane Cunningham, co-founder of Pretty Little Head, a female-centric marketing consultancy. “I’d been working in advertising for 15 years but set up our company seven years ago after becoming frustrated with the gender bias in marketing, especially in traditionally male arenas, like financial services, technology and automotive. Pink became the lazy shorthand for speaking to women. It says, ‘I don’t understand you, but if I paint this pink, you might think I do.’”

“It’s a battle Belinda Parmar has been fighting since she founded Lady Geek in 2010, a campaigning agency that fights against the patronising ‘pink it and shrink it’ approach of selling tech to women. ‘Pink is a dirty colour,’ Parmar insists. “Look at any gift guide ‘for her’ and everything from mobile phones to cameras and laptops will be pink and dipped in glitter.

“PINK HAS CONNOTATIONS OF IMMATURETY; IT’S A SHADE MOST FEMALES LEAVE BEHIND DURING THE FIRST YEARS OF SCHOOL”

“key – a shocking pink,” says Lombardi. “But there was nothing stereotypical about the approach. We focus on attitudes rather than demographics like gender. All our activities are based on specific insights, starting with the product and its key attributes. We never specifically built a campaign just for women.” The pink Fiat sold out in the UK, and the majority of buyers were women.

GIRLS AND TOYS

However, while pink and women may not go hand in hand for all advertisers, it certainly does for the rest of us. “From a second-wave feminism perspective, pink is a problem,” insists Elisabeth Kelan, associate professor at King’s College London, who specialises in gender studies. “It may seem like a surface level issue but it’s an important one, because pink is the first indicator that men and women are different. What makes it especially dangerous is that it is introduced to girls at such a young age.”

True, it’s a colour foisted upon us before we even leave the womb. Pink booties are knitted by grandmothers to be worn like gender identity bracelets. It then follows us through childhood, when toy manufacturers insist on separating the girls from the boys – My Little Pony for us, Lego for them.

And for those of you averse to pink, the high street probably isn’t your favourite place right now. It dominated the s/s 2014 catwalks and continues through a/w 2014, referenced everywhere from Chanel to Miu Miu. Pantone, the oracle of all things colour, has declared Radiant Orchid as the shade of 2014, while beauty consultants are swimming with girly hues for lips, cheeks and eyes.

And the world view, when painted in shades of pink, doesn’t sit very well with our politics, as 29-year-old fashion and tech consultant Izzy Lawrence explains. “I was desperate to get my hands on an oversized pink coat this spring. But I wrestle with the fact that I always associate pink with the most spoilt girl in school, or Barbie’s Dreamhouse – hardly feminist icons. Part of me feels like it just reinforces all those gender stereotypes we spend our lives fighting against.”

Surprisingly, pink wasn’t always code for female. Before World War I, children of both sexes wore gender-neutral whites, because they were practical and easily bleached. Post-war, boys wore pink before upgrading to bold red when they reached manhood. As an article in American magazine Ladies’ Home Journal put it in 1918. “The generally accepted rule is pink for the boys and blue for the girls. The reason is that pink, being a more decided and stronger color [sic], is more suitable for the boy, while blue, which is more delicate and dainty, is prettier for the girl.” Pink may be a strong colour but still an infantilised one – the not-quite-red. So how did women inherit it?

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Women are fed up with it. We want high-spec, functionality, value for money; not something that says, you’re female, so we’ll make it pink so the boys know it’s not for them.”

Of course, pink has to be viewed in a cultural context. While the connotations of pink for women in our privileged society are irritating and reductive, the fact that pink is seen as overtly feminine is precisely what makes it so powerful for others. Consider the women in Cambodia who were recently given pink mobiles by Oxfam as a way to access market prices for grain or call for healthcare without having to go through a man. Why? Well, men wouldn’t be seen dead using a pink phone, nor would they steal it. It’s a depressing reminder of how negatively females are viewed, yet at least a clever trick to help women in their daily lives.

But we have seen a shift towards pink being subverted in positive ways. In the Forties, inmates of Nazi concentration camps deemed to be homosexual were forced to wear a pink triangle. Pink has since become a symbol of the gay rights movement and the same might be said of modern feminism. Today, it’s the core colour for feminist literature, like Natasha Walter’s Living Dolls book cover. “I didn’t want pretty pink, I wanted shocking pink,” says Walter of her cover. “I wanted to wake people up to what it is to live in this pinkified world.” Even iconic tomes such as Germaine Greer’s The Female Eunuch have been reissued with pink typography.

More recently, websites like Vagenda have used pink as their backdrop and on the sleeve of their forthcoming book, The Vagenda: A Zero Tolerance Guide To The Media (out 1 May). Editor and co-founder Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett explains: “We chose pink primarily because we like the colour. When I was growing up, my mum always talked about ‘feminist pink’ (a bright fuchsia), which did the rounds in the Eighties as a way of reclaiming the colour from toy makers. But our website isn’t feminist pink, it’s just pink. We liked the idea that it gave the impression of looking twee and girly when in actual fact it was rude, filthy and peppered with swearing.”

Today, our relationship with pink reflects the many different facets of feminism. “Second-wave feminism was largely homogeneous,” says Elisabeth Kelan. “Everyone agreed with the same messages. Now, with today’s cross-feminism movement, it’s divided feminists into different camps. Some women think we shouldn’t wear it, that it’s inferior. Others claim to use it in a more subversive way with the message, ‘You know what? It’s OK to be a girl.’”

Most would argue that it’s more than OK to be a girl. Roxane Gay is the author of Bad Feminist (Harper Perennial, out August 2014). “For a long time I resented pink for being ‘girly’. Then I realised, it’s a lovely colour. I am not going to hate pink simply because some people choose to use it as a weapon against my gender. Misogynists don’t get to dictate what pink represents.”

But given all the issues facing women today, is the colour pink really where we should direct our energies? As Gay puts it, “Women are judged for any number of reasons but I prefer to focus my attention on those who make the judgments. If someone wants to call out a woman for loving pink, that tells us all we need to know about them.”

So what of the future of pink? Well, firstly the colour should be reintroduced to a new gender-blind palette for all technology and household gadgets, not just the ones aimed at women, so that men aren’t repelled by items seen as ‘girly’. Cosslett agrees: “We’d have made our book pink but we wanted men to read it too.” Perhaps the problem with pink, then, isn’t a female issue at all.

“My favourite colour is…”

Karen Haller, colour consultant (karenhaller.co.uk), tells Stylist what your choice of hue says about you

- Pink means feminine love – the love a mother would give. Someone dressed head-to-toe in pink might be feeling lonely or needy, though, because they feel they lack nurturing love.

- Purple is about connection to the higher self and looking within. People who like purple tend to be naturally intuitive but could also be accused of naval gazing.

- Yellow shows that you have high self-esteem and have a sunny disposition. However it is also a psychological irritant which is why hotel rooms are never painted in this shade.

- Blue means calmness and tranquillity. It’s very soothing. People who lean towards this shade are often trustworthy. Negatively, blue can come across as cold, distant and unfriendly.

- Green is the colour of harmony so means you’re very relaxed and well balanced. The downside is it might indicate that you’re so laid-back that you’re stuck in a rut.