

Pink and Blue: Gendered Consumerism

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Abstract

This paper deals with the large scale usage of gender-specific colors in media representation and promotional activities of several products in the consumer world. Irrespective of region and race, the association of the color pink with females and blue with males has become a part of consumer culture worldwide and, consequently, has resulted in a consumerism conditioned by gender. Such a trend is eventually leading to gender stereotypes and sexism among consumers. In this paper, the author gives a brief historical account on gendered consumerism followed by an analysis of the current consumer culture where trends in the entertainment and cosmetics industries are analyzed. The paper discusses the impact of gendered consumerism by presenting an online survey conducted among 200 consumers. It also attempts to propose a few solutions like androgyny and alternative marketing promotions to subvert the fixated color representation.

On July 22, 2013, all the fountains of Trafalgar Square had a blue glow and remained blue for the next seven days. The London Telecom Tower also flashed a dark blue digital display, saying “It’s a Boy.” The reason behind these flashing blue lights was to welcome the birth of a baby boy to the royal couple, Prince William and Kate Middleton. Two years later, on May 2, 2015, the landmarks of London, like the Parliament building, Westminster Abbey, and the Big Ben Tower, blazed pink as the royal couple gave birth to their second child, and since it was a girl, the welcome greetings were in pink. These royal celebrations fed into the ubiquitous idea of blue for boys and pink for girls. However, this tradition of associating colors with gender is not new, having started to take shape around the 1940s.

This paper gives a detailed analysis of how the advertising world and media are yielding to a norm that does not have any rooted cultural history either in the West or in the East. Even though the history of associating specific colors to gender is considerably new, the consumer world has taken this trend to a whole new level, equating pink with feminine qualities and blue with masculinity and giving a gendered dimension to the current consumer society. Branded cosmetics industries, giant cinema industries like Hollywood and Bollywood, and even the entertainment features for children, like popular cartoon characters, toys, and animated series, are exhibiting the idea of gender-specific colors. The idea of associating certain colors with specific genders in the consumer world is thus leading to a practice of gendered consumerism where the end users are consciously and subconsciously linking colors to their genders. As a result, such representations are eventually leading to gender stereotypes and biased attitudes toward colors.

Historical Background

As stated earlier, if we look at the history of the link between colors and gender, there is no deep-rooted historical background. In her book, *Pink and Blue: Telling the Girls from the Boys*

in *America*, Jo B. Paoletti, a historian at the University of Maryland, shows that earlier, parents used to clad their children in white clothes. The reason behind this was practicality. White was easy to bleach and thus was used as a convenient option for children. At that time, parents were not concerned about expressing their children's gender through their clothing and the concept did not even exist in the society. The dependence on white clothes shifted right before World War I when blue and pink came to the scene and parents started to adopt it. Paoletti points out that gender was not the only deciding factor though, because blue clothes were thought to be "flattering for the blondes and pink was for brunettes or blue was for the blue-eyed babies and pink was for the brown-eyed ones" (19). Interestingly, at that period, blue was thought to be suitable for the girls and pink for the boys. Paoletti goes on to explain in her book that, in June 1918, an article from the trade publication *Earnshaw's Infants' Department* stated,

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, is more suitable for the boy, while blue, which is more delicate and dainty, is prettier for the girl. (20)

This association was perhaps coming from the concept that "purple was regarded as the color of the royalty." In the early Christian era, purple was regarded as the royal color and common people were not allowed to wear it. The only reason was that the color purple was very expensive to acquire. It could only be found in the Phoenician trading city of Tyre, which is now in Lebanon. Fabric traders obtained the dye from a small mollusk that was only found in the Tyre region of the Mediterranean Sea. This dye was so expensive that sometimes even the royal families could not afford it. However, Emperors of Rome and Britain were famous for their usage of purple attire. Hence, the connection of pink "being a more decided and stronger color" becomes evident with the boys. In 1927, Time magazine printed a chart showing sex-appropriate colors for girls and boys according to the leading U.S. stores. Stores like Filene's, Best & Co., Halle's, and Marshall Field suggested to parents that pink was for boys and blue was fit for girls. This idea continued till the 1940s.

During World War II, the entire scenario of associating pink with boys and blue with girls changed and blue shifted to boys and pink to girls. According to Paoletti, this was the decision from the retailers and manufacturers and was set arbitrarily. During World War II, the Nazis introduced the "Pink Badge" for gay captives. It was that period when the perception of pink started to be regarded as more feminine, shameful, and less masculine. Later, when the LGBT Rights Movement began, pink regained its pride. During the '60s and '70s, there was an outgrowth in the women's rights movement and a rise of the Beat Generation¹ in the US. In that period, everyone, especially women, opposed the usage of gender-specific colors for their babies and rather dressed their girls in more masculine attires. They were against the notion of being feminine and frilly. The representation of sex was not welcomed by fashion catalogs at that time either. Paoletti delineates in her research that, in 1970, American fashion moguls like Sears and Roebuck did not feature any pink dressed baby girls in their catalogs for the following two years.

¹ The Beat Generation is an American literary movement which was initiated around the fifties by a group of young poets, writers, and artists who were sharp critics of post-WWII American politics, bureaucracy, and consumerism.

In the '80s, however, the fashion of gender-specific colors came back, and till date, with the growth of globalization and dependency on visual culture, this gender-specific color trend has been in full swing worldwide. The custom of labeling girls with pink and boys with blue has gradually taken a lead role in labeling genders even before a child is born. In a situation like this, the question of gender becomes more complex if we analyze the definition by Judith Butler, who says:

We act as if that being of a man or that being of a woman is actually an internal reality or something that is simply true about us, a fact about us, but actually it's a phenomenon that is being produced all the time and reproduced all the time, so to say gender is performative is to say that nobody really is a gender from the start. (65)

According to this idea, gender is a performance that can be "produced" and "reproduced." Now, if we regard gender as a performance, then specifying colors for males and females from early childhood will eventually hinder the idea of the flexibility of genders and such functions will gradually lead to gender stereotypes.

The Representation of the Pink-Blue Trend

Nowadays, the colors pink and blue is used for gender-specific items in almost every aspect of the consumer world. This paper puts forward a few instances of the industries where the target consumers (both male and female) consciously and subconsciously indulge themselves in a world of gendered consumerism – that is to say, females are catered to with shades of pink and males are offered shades of blue. The following three sections give a brief account of industries like cosmetics, cinema posters, and cartoons where gender-specific colors are profusely used by the producers for their promotional activities and consequently are consumed by the buyers.

Cosmetics and Toiletries: From Unilever's world's number one fairness product, "Fair & Lovely" to Axe's body spray, the products which are targeted for women are pink or purple, whereas the same product targeted for men like "Fair & Handsome" or male body sprays carry the dark shades of grey/black/ blue. Perhaps, the best possible example of showing the color code would be perfumes. The international brands of perfume like Versace, Diana Vreeland, Chanel, She, Antonio Banderas, Clinique, and New Yankees all have two sections. The female section is represented by several shades of pink and purple whereas the male section is displayed in a variation of blues.

The trend began in the '80s in the US, but it was not confined there. In time, this practice has permeated the borders and extended worldwide. As a result, consumer culture in Asia has also acquired the concept of stereotyping genders with color labels. For example, the fourth fastest growing consumer goods company in India is Dabur, and Dabur's beauty soap (Fem), Dabur Rose Water (Gulabari), and Dabur Facial Cream are all delivered in pink containers. Bangladesh is also not far behind in this gender-specific color trend. The leading local toiletries companies like Square Toiletries and Kohinoor Chemicals are following the footsteps of Western norms and introducing pink labelled products for female consumers even though in the Eastern culture there is no such cultural background of feminine or masculine colors.

Cinema Posters: The entertainment industry is another area where associating pink and blue with females and males is alarmingly common. Hollywood cinema posters are perhaps the best examples for the representations of the gendered color code. How subtly the entire idea of gender-specific colors is pervading the minds of the audience will be evident if we take a close look at a few cinema posters. From the 1960s box office blockbuster *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, with Audrey Hepburn's famous coy pose to the 2011 *Mean Girls* background, most of the movies with female central characters have posters in the shades of pink/purple/fuchsia/magenta. A few examples include *Pretty in Pink* (1986), *Pretty Woman* (1990), *Never Been Kissed* (1999), *Legally Blonde* (2001), *Bend it like Beckham* (2002), *Bride Wars* (2009), *Confessions of a Shopaholic* (2009), *Bridesmaids* (2011), *Austenland* (2013), and *How to be Single* (2016).

In these posters, the backdrop or attire of the protagonist is pink, and sometimes the text is written in pink ink. The idea gets more problematic when specific words are written with bright pink to emphasize the feminine attributes of the respective connotations, such as in the titles of *It's a Boy Girl Thing* (2006) and *Suburban Girl* (2007) where the word "girl" is written in bright pink and the word "boy" is written in blue. In the poster of *Never Been Kissed*, the word "kissed" is written with bold pink which might proclaim the innocence and the "untouched essence" of a girl whereas the first two words are written in blue. On the other hand, if we look at the posters of action-based Hollywood cinemas with male central characters, like *Jaws* (1975), *Thor* (2011), *Wolverine* (2013), and *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014), we see that they are all charged with dark shades of blue/black/fiery red. These two different kinds of posters solidify the impression that pink cannot be used for action or war movies but must be used in cases of feminine representations.

Though Bollywood (the Indian cinema industry) has fewer movies with female protagonists in comparison to Hollywood, the industry exhibits the same inclination towards pink through cinema posters. For example, the posters of Bollywood movies *Aisha* (2010), *Humpty Sharma Ki Dulhania* (2014), and *Ae Dil Hain Mushkil* (2016) each use a remarkable amount of pink/magenta color. The idea of using gender specific-color becomes critical when cinemas like *Gulab Gang* (2014) and *Queen* (2013), despite advocating for women's empowerment, make posters with arbitrary usages of pink. In the cinema poster of *Queen*, the first letter "Q" is written in magenta which emphasizes gender, and hence the color-coding.

The problem is that in the process of doing so, the stereotypical idea of gender-specific colors is being imprinted on the minds of contemporary society. Children and teenagers are most affected by such stereotyping, because they are easier to convince and thus can be manipulated by the marketing strategies of the corporate world, without their even realizing it.

Animation and Cartoon Characters: Associating colors with specific genders is becoming more common in children's entertainment too. With a biased representation of a gender-specific color through the cartoon characters and cinematography, the young audience becomes the most affected. As a result of such exposure, their childhood is not neutral anymore. From their early days, children know that there is a fixed color for males and for females. They grow up with

a specific idea of gender which will eventually result in nullifying Judith Butler's phenomenal idea that gender is a performance. For instance, popular female cartoon characters like *Hello Kitty* (Japanese series), *Winx Club* (Italian series), *Power Puff Girls* (American series) are pink whereas the male characters in *Doraemon* (Japanese manga series) or *Phineas and Ferb* (American series), even though they are a cat and a platypus, are blue, which reinforces the association of blue with males. The cartoon series *Power Puff Girls* exhibits girls as saviors and heroes, and have three girls as the central characters. Though their costumes are not pink, their background screen where they emerge from and the text of the title are both pink. The same can be observed in the characters of *Winx Club*, where all the six focal characters are female, with magical powers. In this Italian series, the girls use their magic to rescue people in danger and, interestingly, there is an overwhelming use of pink in every background of the scenes. Presenting female characters in pink attire is common in other cartoons as well. For example, in *Dexter's Laboratory*, Dexter's annoying sister Dee Dee wears a pink skirt with pink socks and pink shoes. In *Phineas and Ferb*, Phineas and Ferb's sister Candace and their friend Isabella always wear pink dresses. In this same series, there is a secret agent, played by a platypus named Perry. Perry is a male secret agent and is ocean blue just like Doraemon is a male cat and perhaps therefore is blue.

Apart from these cartoon series, if the Disney princesses are scrutinized, it reveals that most of their outfits are also pink/purple, such as Rapunzel in *Tangled*, Megara in *Hercules*, Anna's cloak in *Frozen*. Even in *Pocahontas*, when the background writing was in yellow, a shade of pink was reflected on the last curve of every letter. These ideas are reinforced through the merchandise produced to market the movies of which children are becoming the active consumers. Toy companies are also promoting this idea of gendered consumerism. For example, Barbie's accessories come in all shades of pink: outfits, shoes, accessories. Even her houses are pink/purple. Another toy, the GI JOE (male representative of a war hero), is devoid of any shade of pink. All these representations in the hands of young people can lead to problems like gender stereotyping and sexism because, through these animations, toys and cartoon series, young people are clearly getting the idea that pink is meant for girls and blue is for boys. While analyzing young people as audience in their essay "The Young Audience," Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel states,

Teenage entertainments play a cultural and educative role which commercial providers seem little aware of. Their symbols and fantasies have a strong hold upon the emotional commitment of the young at this stage in their development, and operate more powerfully in a situation where young people are tending to learn less from established institutions, such as the family, the school ... They rely more on themselves and their own culture, and they are picking up signals all the time, especially from the generation just ahead. (63)

Such media exposure to color specific representations can thus work as agents of gender socialization. As a result of such stereotyping, a generation is going to foster these ideas and will associate colors with their own gender.

The Influence of the Color Code

As mentioned earlier, historians like J.B. Paoletti found that pink was used for boys and blue was for girls. Then around the 1980s, this trend was reversed, but the trend is still ongoing. Using gender specific color codes has almost become a prejudice where no one questions it and simply follow it. In their essay “The Young Audience,” Hall and Whannel state, “we are dealing with the complex interaction between the attitudes of the young and what is provided for their consumption by the commercial world of entertainment”(61). Such “complex interaction” can trigger the prejudiced idea towards gender conditioning at a tender age and therefore might have the chance to aggravate the equal rights’ scenario in the near future. Hall and Whannel also observe,

... even if the trends are really set by a small minority and in the age of the mass media, these tensions communicate themselves much more rapidly from place to place, group to group. One of the special features of this media is speeding up the fashion cycle among the young. (63)

Hall and Whannel’s essay was written before the advent of the social network on the internet, but they could sense something and traced the movement of the media in an absolutely impeccable way. At present, the influence of the fashion cycle is speeding in a way that Hall and Whannel perhaps could not even imagine because nowadays, the influence of any culture is always just one click away.

There might be an assumption that media representation cannot have any serious impact on consumer behavior. To delve deeper into the matter of color specific representation of gender, this researcher conducted an online survey among 200 Facebook users, their ages ranging from 18 to 30. These users were asked several questions regarding this issue. Despite the fact that more than 80% people thought pink and blue are perpetuating gender stereotypes, when they were asked more specific questions regarding the matter, the responses failed to support their notions. For example, there was a question on whether they think pink is more feminine than blue, 62.5% people agreed to this statement. Another question asked whether it would look odd if a male dormitory is painted pink. 45.7% agreed that any shade of pink would look odd.

This result shows that even though people know about the trends and tactics of stereotyping, they still fall for such stereotyped advertising or promotional strategies. This is more baffling because the consumers consider themselves aware buyers, but in their subconscious, they are taking the bait of the consumer culture and thus are lured by the marketing stratagems of the corporate world. Such labelling is working at the core level of the consciousness and gradually promoting the inclination towards the stereotyping without realizing that it is the invasion of corporate strategies.

Probable Solutions

The strategy of associating pink with girls and blue with boys started in the Western consumer world. This scenario has started to change, albeit gradually, in some superstores in the west through the adoption of alternative advertising strategies. In 2012, British toy store Harrods, and in 2015, American retail store Target removed the color labels (pink and blue) from their kids’ zone. In an official statement Target states:

Over the past year, guests have raised important questions about a handful of signs in our stores that offer product suggestions based on gender ... we know that shopping

preferences and needs change and, as guests have pointed out, in some departments like Toys, Home or Entertainment, suggesting products by gender is unnecessary.

It is always easier to manipulate the consumers and mold their mindset in the way the corporate world and media want. Till now, the media hardly recognizes that these two are interrelated like a vicious circle. At present, consumers are inflicted with pink-blue stereotypes at both levels of their “consumer purchasing process” (Baack and Clow 83), where, at the first stage of “internal search/mental decision” (Baack and Clow 84), they are looking at the voluminous representations of gender-based colors at different stores, on the media/social media. At the second stage of the consumer search (during the “external search”), they are making the decisions in reality by evaluating the alternatives. Here, the consumers are presented with the alternatives that are of the same color, which means no variation is actually offered to them, but they do have the idea of a false autonomy while choosing from these stereotyped products. In a process like this, the consumers become puppets in the hands of the corporate world, where the strings are in the hands of the marketing stratagem that is giving them the illusion of options where all the options are of the same color in different shades. If consumers reject the trend of gender-specific color codes and abstain from buying the products which promote such stereotypes, the corporate world will be compelled to change their marketing strategies. As a result, new advertising strategies will be promoted through media and the consumer behavior will eventually change accordingly.

Apart from alternative advertising/marketing strategies, an androgynous approach towards gender can prove an effective solution while counteracting the color-specific gendered consumerism because there is no cultural or ancestral background for such usage of gender-specific colors. Regardless of the type of products, manufacturers can have present them in ways that denote neither masculinity nor femininity because, that way, a product will possibly have a common appeal to all as Woolf once said, “Some collaboration has to take place in the mind between the woman and the man before the act of creation can be accomplished” (87). Products consumed by specific genders may be promoted differently but a certain amount of blending is extremely necessary for products that are consumed by everyone in a massive scale. Otherwise, approaches like color fixation will lead to gender stereotypes and sexism. While analyzing popular culture, Lana F. Rakow, in her essay, “Feminist Approaches to Popular Culture: Giving Patriarchy its Due,” states,

One theme that runs through much of feminist cultural theory is that men and women live in two different spheres and have two different cultural experiences. Elizabeth Janeway has argued that this is socially determined, not innate or inevitable. Therefore, the goal should be not two, but one, androgynous culture. (286)

Following an androgynous approach while making advertisements and promotional activities can alleviate the slanted attitude towards any specific colors among the consumers. While purchasing, consumers also have to possess a critical mind with the ability to scrutinize the whole range of options given to her/him. Along with this, media literacy can be of help to read between the lines before any purchasing decision. A promotion may seem innocent enough, but if buyers look beneath the surface and question the representations of the product, then they would not be so easily duped by marketing strategies. Consumers must understand that colors are only colors.

Colors are not natural determiners of genders and they can never be so. More importantly, the commercial appropriation of childhood masculinity or femininity can have a detrimental impact on the growth of a child's psychology. Young people are more vulnerable to stereotypes and biased representations. Especially, for the young audience there has to be an equal usage of colors while representing animated characters because the concept of having a feminine and masculine color is problematic. Producers need to remember that colors are neutral, associating them with genders will not only hinder young people from having an impersonal view towards color but also it will create a biased idea about certain genders.

It is high time that the companies start exploring new ways to promote their products. If such a condition begins at the process of buying, then the corporate world would also be compelled to eradicate the stereotypes from their own products; but at the end of the day, the final responsibility comes down to the consumers, and leave them with the questions like whether they want to be labeled like the consumed products? Or do they want to be treated like human beings and have the choice to explore their choices and question them? The answer to this question might be the beginning of a new era of creative consumerism for the consumer culture of the entire world, where the consumers will have actual autonomy to select and question rather than an imposed one.

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