# Pink is *NOT* for Girls

In the 21st century, the colors blue and pink are the most commonly assigned discriminants for the male and female sexes, respectively. Contrary to popular belief, the color-coding of the genders is relatively new; in other words, pink is not an inherently "feminine" color. In fact, a study conducted on infants' color preferences found that "there is no evidence that girls actually have a special preference for the colour pink" (LoBue and DeLoache 656). This phenomenon raises the question of exactly when and how this particular color attained its meaning. Thus, this paper will address the extensive history of the color pink, and how even though it came to concretely represent femininity in the modern day, this approach should be widely recognized as misandrist and non-gender-inclusive, for labeling items as only male or female creates harmful gender stereotypes and insinuates the existence of only two genders.

Blue was first discovered 6000 years ago by the Ancient Egyptians when they unearthed Lapis Lazuli, a type of semi-precious gem, and since then, the rare color has been associated with luxury and royalty in subsequent cultures (Holmes). In the Byzantine Empire era, for example, the Virgin Mary was associated with royal blue, making this color commonly used amongst royalty and monarchs across Catholic Europe (Fuchs; *Divine Right of Kings*). In order to emulate the sinlessness of the Virgin, as stated in the doctrine of her *Immaculate Conception* established by the Roman Catholic Church, her signature color of blue was also encouraged to be worn by virtuous and aristocratic women (Akin). According to Michelle Stamberg of National Public Radio, blue was gradually used for girls as it was a "much more delicate and dainty tone."

Pink's link with femininity was neither intrinsic nor ingrained; rather, the association is a relatively new social construct as pink was not used in fashion until the 18th century in France (Raffalli). It was mainly imported from South America, but its scarcity led it to be a symbol of wealth and aristocracy, not gender (Raffalli). Then onward, this new obsession over pink, stemming from the "fashion capital of the world", spread throughout the Western world.

However, pink and its modern-day counterpart blue only became associated with gender later around the 1860s in America. Even then, they were not as strictly binding as they are now. Instead, they were "interchangeable, gender-neutral 'nursery colors'" used in all baby clothing (Paoletti 87). Several primary sources from the late 19th century portray contrasting viewpoints regarding the two colors:

> "Pure white is used for all babies. Blue is for girls and pink is for boys, when a color is wished."

> "Amy put a blue ribbon on the boy and a pink on the girl, French fashion, so you can always tell. Besides, one has blue eyes and one brown. Kiss them, Uncle Teddy," said wicked Jo.

Furthermore, pink and blue were also coded to the child's complexion: pink was assigned to brunettes and blue to blondes (Paoletti 87).

At the turn of the 20th century, as infant and child psychology entered mainstream America, parents became ever more interested in "greater and earlier distinction between girls' and boys' appearance," and color coding in pink and blue were prime candidates to serve this function. Still, the *how* was widely contested all over America, as consumers could not decide which color belonged to whom. In 1927, *Time* displayed the trends in major department chains across America in infants' departments:

**Table 5.1. Color Preferences for Infants' Clothing in Major U.S. Cities, 1927**

| STORE | BOYS | GIRLS |
|---|---|---|
| Filene's (Boston) | Pink | BLUE |
| Best's (Manhattan) | Pink | BLUE |
| Macy's (Manhattan) | Blue | PINK |
| Franklin Simon (Manhattan) | Blue | PINK |
| Wanamaker's (Philadelphia) | Blue | PINK |
| Halle's (Cleveland) | Pink | PINK |
| Marshall Field's (Chicago) | Pink | BLUE |
| Maison Blanche (New Orleans) | Pink | BLUE |
| The White House (San Francisco) | Pink | BLUE |
| Bullock's (Los Angeles) | Blue | PINK |

Source: "Fashions: Baby's Clothes," Time, November 14, 1927.

Source: Paoletti, Jo B. *Pink and Blue: Telling the Boys From the Girls in America*. Indiana University Press, 2012, table 5.1.

Paoletti explains, “None of this transition happened by childcare expert fiat or industry proclamation. There was no sudden, unanimous cultural shift. It evolved over decades.” Clothing manufacturers certainly expedited the process though. In particular, companies, in search of generating more profit, needed families to limit handing down old clothes and start buying new ones for their children. In order to do so, clothing had to be as individualized for each child as possible, and the most obvious discriminant was biological sex. According to USC News, “[color-coding clothing] prevents parents from handing down clothes between siblings of different sexes so [that] children’s clothing designers, manufacturers and retailers could increase profits.”

Nevertheless, the question of why “pink is for girls, and blue is for boys” prevailed over the other option still stands. “It could have gone the other way,” Paoletti answers. Clothing manufacturers and retailers tried their best to predict profitable trends, and they simply bet on the former.

This trend steadily evolved and eventually established itself as a widespread convention by the 1940s. Following World War II, which ended in 1945, and the ushering of a post-war era, women returned to fulfill their domestic duties as housewives and mothers (Pitt). In this time of transition, women turned their attention to home product shopping. According to the New York Historical Society, “On average, wives made 75% of all the purchases for her family.” In response, companies started marketing towards women, and the most effective signaler for femininity was evidently decided to be pink. One such example stems from the Woodbury Soap Company, as they marketed “fair” and “pink” as the standards of female beauty (Sutton 124). One of their advertisements expresses that “[the most attractive high school girl] has used Woodbury’s Facial Soap on her lovely *pink* and white skin all her life.” Other campaign agencies at this period advertised in similar fashion, consequently making pink inextricably restricted to women and vice versa.

As this trend cemented generation after generation and as babies absorbed and processed the increasingly solid assignments of each color to a certain gender, their brains created strong connections between one to another (Paoletti 93). As those babies grew to become parents themselves, they provided more intense color-coding than their parents’ for their own children to learn upon. This continued until each color became unambiguously and ubiquitously attached to each gender.

This color-to-gender commandment is not a standalone occurrence though; it’s just one instance of one overarching phenomenon: society’s stereotyping of gender. From clothes to toys, the majority of children’s products are nowadays evidently labeled as either “Boys” or “Girls.” According to a report published by the Fawcett Society, messages on kids’ clothing vary based on gender. On girls’ shirts, phrases include “Glitter On” and “Unicorns Will Save the World,”

emphasizing their looks and implying a sort of naivety, while on boys' shirts, they include "Space Mission" and "Little Monster," implying an aptitude in STEM and encouraging violence (75). While seemingly perfectly innocuous, this form of labeling is detrimental to children's developing worldviews and self-perceptions.

Labeling a set of characteristics, as well as the items encompassing them, as either "masculine" or "feminine" limits children to them. This is especially critical for those between the ages of 3-6, as those are the years in which gender identity and expectations are formed, as defined by the modern gender theory, in which children pick up on gender associations and expectations by observing and interacting with peers and adults. (Martin and Ruble). Gender stereotyping causes a variety of complications. For instance, labeling certain categories as "for girls'" or "for boys'" can manifest negative characteristics in children: for girls, an overemphasis on beauty; for boys, an encouragement of violence and aggression (Trautner). Furthermore, Tracy Trautner from the Michigan State University Extension explains, "Play with masculine toys is associated with large motor development and spatial skills, while play with feminine toys is associated with developing fine motor skills, language and social skills." This too can be identified with color assigning, as it neglects the skill set provided by the other and in turn undermines well-rounded development.

Color bias and stereotypes in women's products also have other repercussions. For example, according to Karen Reuther, a fellow at Harvard University's Advanced Leadership Initiative, the product design industry designs products for women via what is dubbed the "Shrink It and Pink It" method. Because of this, explains Reuther, "Women are too often left no choice than to use products that were designed by men for men, just scaled down and colored pink or some stereotypical feminine color."

With the above being said, pink itself is not the problem. In fact, Priya Elan of the Guardian reports that "pink has been reframed as the color of activism." "Political pink" is now a bold message representing feminism, LGBTQ+ activism, and breast cancer awareness – communities historically ostracized for their labeled femininity. Pink hats became the "global symbol of female solidarity and the power of collective action" during the Women's March in 2017 – the largest single-day demonstration in US history (*The Pussyhat*; Rafferty). Planned Parenthood's "Pink Out Day" united women to stand for their reproductive rights by wearing pink and sharing their message on social media (Berg). Pink is as progressive as it is regressive, determined only by the who and how of its usage.

This paper does not aim to ban pink or prevent girls from liking it. The color itself is not wrong, but society imposing a gender on it is. The solution is quite simple: gender-neutral marketing. It would mean that colors and products would not be marketed to binary genders, but instead be advertised to their appropriate audiences. Girls should not be conditioned to favor

pink, and boys should not be forbidden from it.  It's time to stop labeling pink as "feminine" or "girlish" and start freeing the color up for every gender. As Dr. Steele has summarized:

> "Over the last twenty years, different genders, sexualities and races have gotten together and said, 'Pink doesn't have to be childish and feminine. Pink can be powerful, androgynous, political, cool.' It's kind of a dream color."

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