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### Conservatism with a Bow

Paint your face. Adorn your neck with pearls. Wear baby pink lace trims. Just whatever you do, do not let them see the power behind your pout, the intention behind your innocence, or the way your girlhood is twisted into a performance for their pleasure.

For women, the color pink is shoved in your face from birth. It is on our onesies, shoes, bedding, and even bedroom walls. A simple color is symbolic of society's defining identity. Growing up in the early 2000s and spending my formative years in school, there was a defining moment in girlhood when rejecting pink became the ultimate form of rebellion. At some point, liking pink was no longer "cool." In elementary school, little girls traded tutu dresses for denim overalls, swapping Mary Janes for sneakers, just to avoid ridicule. Wearing a dress to school? That was practically an invitation to be bullied. This was when many of us first embraced the idea of being a tomboy, not just as a personal style choice, but as a way to differentiate ourselves. It was a rejection of traditional femininity, but looking back, it also carried an underlying contradiction. In striving to be "different," we were often subconsciously aligning ourselves with male approval, proving we were not like "other girls." This phase, which seemed like a rebellion against gender norms, may have actually reinforced them in a different way, suggesting that

femininity was something frivolous, weak, or performative. But then came the 2020s, the resurgence of the coquette aesthetic. Skirts replaced baggy jeans, girlhood became something to celebrate, and bows covered everything. Suddenly, pink was not just accepted, it was *in*. Both women and girls are embracing all things feminine, unapologetically reclaiming the aesthetics once dismissed as childish or superficial. Retail stores are now capitalizing on the trend, flooding the shelves with pink accessories and frilly details. Mary Janes, once the shoes we resentfully wore to church, have become wardrobe essentials. And we are not stopping there. Can you believe as a society we are tying delicate pink bows around the straws of our LoveShackFancy floral Stanley cups? While it may seem women are now taking over the world with sequin pitchforks, I can not help but to wonder: the coquette aesthetic may seem like an expression of personal style, but does it reinforce restrictive gender roles?

Coquette? First off, the word coquette has French origins, derived from the word “coquet,” meaning “flirt.” Traditionally, it describes a woman who is flirtatious. Somewhere in the early 2010s, the word began to take on a new meaning, developing into the name of an aesthetic. It gained popularity on Tumblr, a platform that played a crucial role in shaping the identities of many girls growing up in the digital age. Do you remember your Tumblr username? The coquette aesthetic is characterized by romantic, hyper feminine fashion, vintage influences, and, of course, effortless elegance. In many ways, it draws heavily from the ornate and delicate style of French Rococo design style. Taylor Hunt, author of “The Artistic Origin of the Viral Coquette Aesthetic” states, “While the term ‘coquette’ dates back to 17th-century France, where it denoted a woman skilled in the art of playful flirtation, its contemporary interpretation has taken on a new dimension” (2024). Most rococo art displays women in flowy feminine dresses with ornate details. Women depicted in Rococo art embody an idealized version of femininity:

delicate, flirtatious, and, of course, effortlessly elegant. They are draped in pastel colored gowns detailed with ruffles, lace, and floral embroidery. Soft skin, rosy cheeks, and gentle expressions give them a sense of playful sensuality.

I know what you are thinking. How did this “girly-pop,” 18th century style find its way into the digital world of the 21st century? Tumblr became the platform to share images, stories and connect with people who shared interests in the same subcultures as you. The coquette aesthetic, a space for lovers of feminine styles, was characterized by visuals such as baby pink tights with matching ballet flats and legwarmers, eyelet off the shoulder tops, Lana Del Rey’s elegant wedding dress in the “Ultraviolence” music video, and stills of Kirsten Dunhurst character’s outfits from Sofia Coppola’s 1999 film, *The Virgin Suicides*. These are just a few examples, but they all shared a common visual language rooted in femininity. The coquette aesthetic became a space where girls and women could inspire one another, exchanging ideas about feminine fashion and accessories. It was not just a platform for showcasing outfits, but also for sharing ideals of femininity, creating a community centered around delicate and romanticized self expression. But what happens if we take this aesthetic a step further, and consider its darker implications?

Though the coquette aesthetic may appear harmless, maybe even empowering, it carries a deeper undertone about how femininity is curated and consumed. What begins as a celebration of softness, beauty, and romanticizing the self can quickly deviate into the territory of restrictive gender norms. In these online spaces, particularly TikTok and Tumblr, femininity is often curated to fit a particular mold: delicate, submissive, youthful, and desirable. I found myself deep in TikTok’s “feminine energy” content, and one creator, in particular, really grabbed my attention, along with her engaging comments. In this TikTok video, a young white woman with a

predominantly female, girly following sought advice on how to embody the “clean girl” aesthetic and tap into her femininity. She asks her followers how she can make her wardrobe more feminine and what hair products, diets, or routines she should try to enhance her appearance and mystique. The video is lighthearted, and she engages with her community through a relatable tone that seems to resonate with young girls aiming to seek the same advice and share the same look. In the comments, a mix of beauty tips and lifestyle advice floods in. Some followers suggest she try specific skincare products, like Rhode Beauty by Hailey Bieber, highlighting the “clean” or “effortless” feeling Bieber advertises. Many recommend the serums as she can achieve “glass skin.” Others recommend searching Matilda Djerf’s hairstyles, a popular influencer and brand owner who is known for her big blonde blowout hair.

While it seems like a positive space for women to connect, this focus on delicate aesthetics ultimately reinforces traditional and potentially limiting gender expectations. It highlights how platforms like TikTok are not just spaces for inspiration, but also environments where idealized versions of femininity are sensationalized, refined, and subtly enforced. The young woman’s question: how to “tap into her femininity”, already implies that femininity is something external, something one must achieve through appearance, products, and performance rather than something innate. In the coquette aesthetic, this moment becomes more than just “gal talk”, it is a glimpse into how young women are shaped by social media to see femininity as something that needs perfecting, maintaining, and above all, a performance to please the viewer. It makes you think, is this self expression or social conditioning?

The coquette aesthetic does not just live on TikTok or Tumblr. It has fully made its way into physical retail spaces like LoveShackFancy and even Abercrombie & Fitch, where I work. LoveShackFancy is a high end boutique known for its ultra feminine, vintage inspired clothing,

often featuring delicate florals, lace, and romantic silhouettes. When I walked into one of their stores, the setup resembled an old fashioned cottage, where white rose vines wrapped around clothing racks, floral arrangements were placed on tables, and picnic baskets with pastel blankets were tucked in the corners. The dresses on display were modest yet whimsical, midi length florals with puff sleeves and sweetheart necklines. The customers mirrored the aesthetic as well, polished women in pastel outfits, many of them shopping for special events like rehearsal dinners or work parties. One mother held up a sage green floral dress and asked her daughter, “You think you can wear this to Savannah’s rehearsal dinner?” Most of the shoppers were wealthy white women, which made sense given the price range of \$350–\$800 per dress.

Yet, even in a more accessible retail space like Abercrombie, I have noticed women coming in with very specific requests, asking for a specific pink crew neck with a big satin bow design or soft pastel pieces to wear to their husband’s company event. They would mention wanting to look modest, reflecting the soft girl ideal that has become so prominent. Younger girls often look for mini skirts or ballet flats, eager to recreate looks they have seen online. Across both high end and mainstream stores, the coquette trend is shaping how women shop, not just in style but in intention, what they wear must match an occasion, a mood, and most of all, an aesthetic that speaks to softness, femininity, and social belonging.

According to Murnen and Byrne in their 1991 article, “Hyperfemininity: Measurement and Initial Validation of the Construct,” hyper femininity is defined as an exaggerated compliance to traditional feminine roles, especially within hetero romantic relationships and male dominance. Their “Hyperfemininity Scale” revealed that those who scored high on hyper femininity were more likely to accept traditional gender norms and tolerate sexist or controlling behavior from male partners. This is significant when analyzing the coquette trend, which often

romanticizes submissiveness, fragility, and dependence under the disguise of ribbons and Fabergé eggs. This subculture does not challenge mainstream culture, in fact, it is a part of it. Given today's political and social climate, it is widely embraced and even normalized. Again, from the modest midi dresses at LoveShackFancy to the off the shoulder white tops at Abercrombie, the aesthetic reinforces gendered expectations. Suggesting that femininity must be demure, accommodating, and, most of all, appearance focused.

Ultimately, the coquette aesthetic is often celebrated for its charm and hyper feminine appeal. However, it reveals a complex and potentially troubling undertone. It is crucial to consider how femininity within the coquette aesthetic is often masked under this grand performance. The aesthetic, with its emphasis on visual symbols such as bows, lace, and pastel colors, constructs a carefully curated image of what it means to be a woman. It is often aimed at being seen and admired, thus linking it to the concept of the "gaze." Whether that be the female gaze and the male gaze has become increasingly blurred. The emphasis on appearance and the performance of idealized femininity can contribute to self objectification, where women, in particular, internalize the observer's perspective and define their self worth based on how well they play the part. This way, the aesthetic can subliminally encourage women to view themselves as objects of beauty. Although, to the girls who loved the coquette princess, like Pinkalicious (2006), we see you. We see your hot pink sequins peeking out from under your overalls.

**Citations:**

1. Hunt, Taylor. "The Artistic Origin of the Viral Coquette Aesthetic." *ArtRKL* [artkl.com/blogs/news/the-artistic-origin-of-the-viral-coquette-aesthetic#:~:text=The%20Coquette%20aesthetic%20owes%20much,central%20to%20the%20Coquette%20aestheti](https://artkl.com/blogs/news/the-artistic-origin-of-the-viral-coquette-aesthetic#:~:text=The%20Coquette%20aesthetic%20owes%20much,central%20to%20the%20Coquette%20aestheti)c. Accessed 31 Mar. 2025.
2. Murnen, Sarah K., and Donn Byrne. "Hyperfemininity: Measurement and initial validation of the construct." (1991): 479-489.
3. Satenstein, Liana. "The Coquette Aesthetic, Explained." *Vogue*, Vogue, [www.vogue.com/article/coquette-aesthetic-explainer](https://www.vogue.com/article/coquette-aesthetic-explainer). Accessed 10 Apr. 2025.