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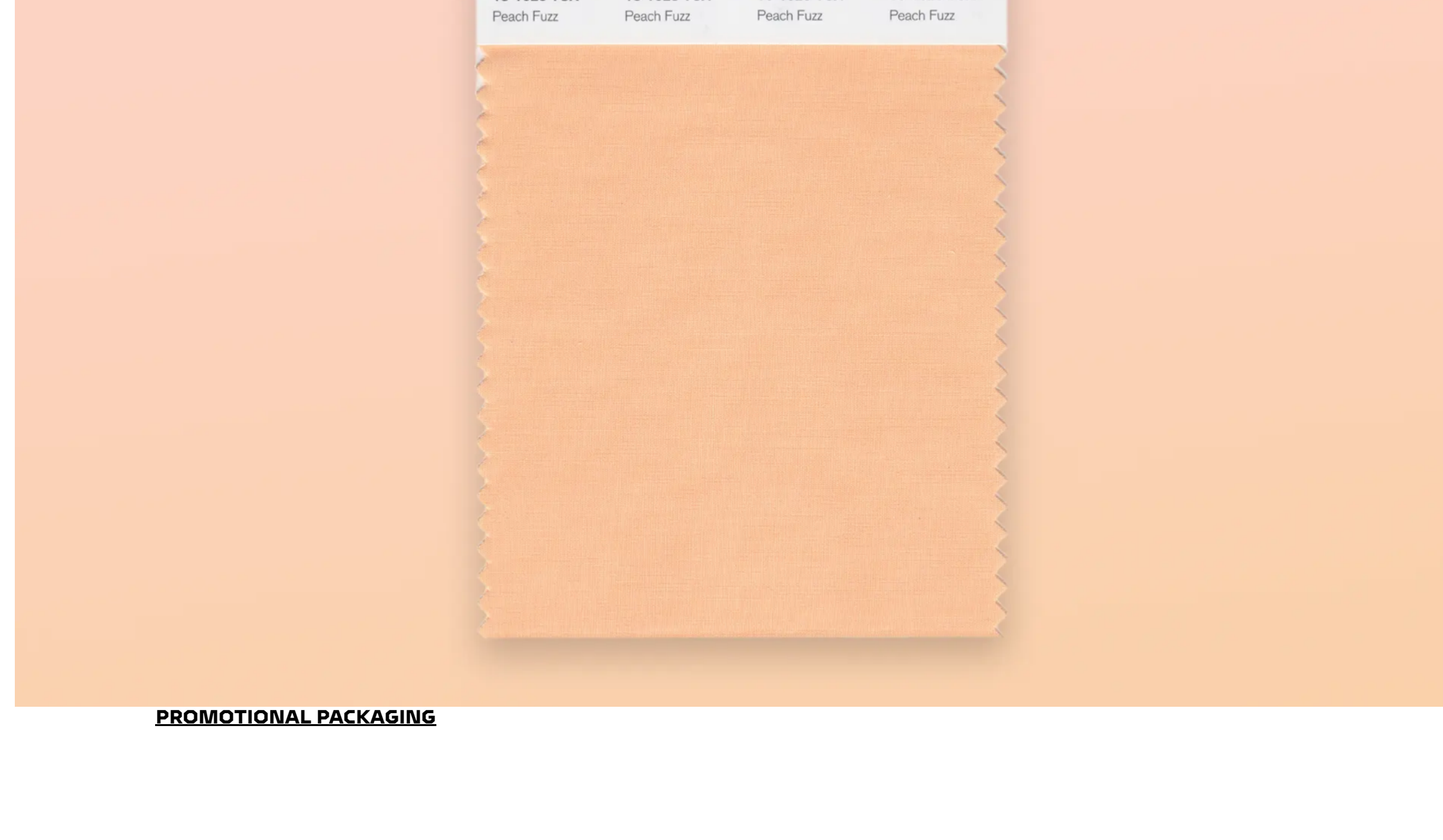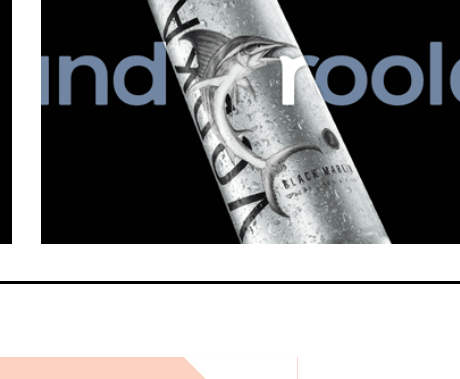
Do We Still Collectively Care About the Pantone COY? Color Experts Weigh In
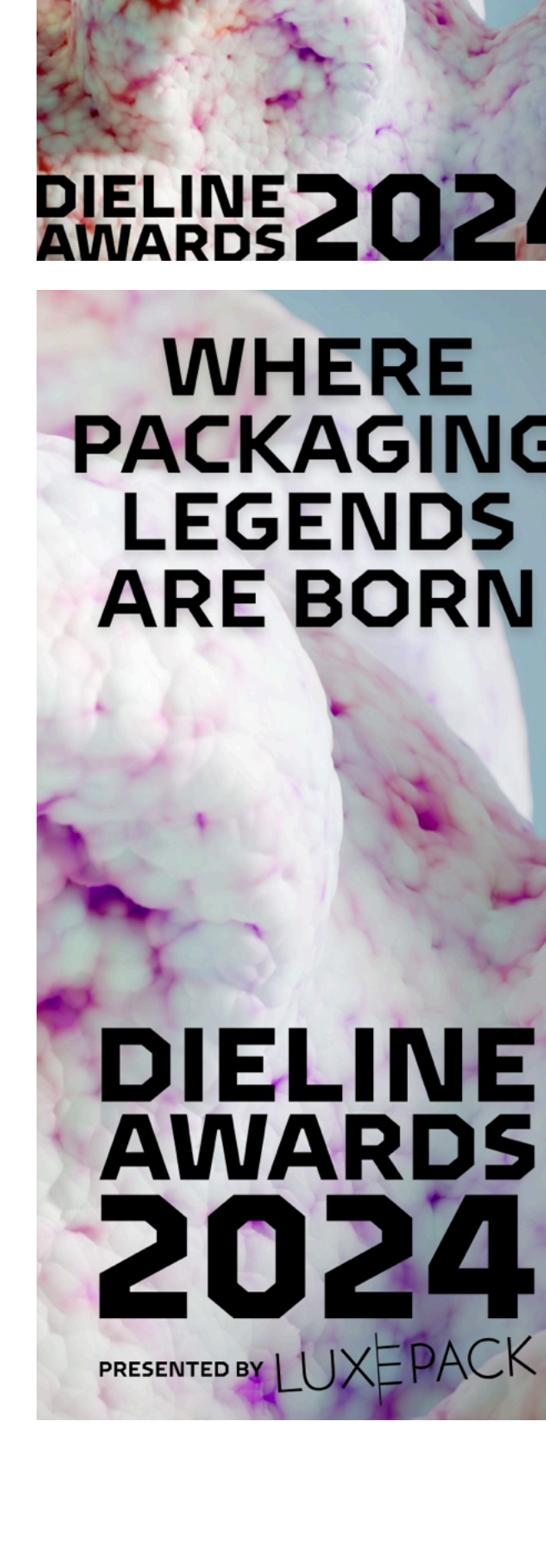
by Chloe Gordon on 01/23/2024 | 8 Minute Read   Edit Post

We're a few weeks into the new year, but Pantone's color of the year feels like old news.

And it is! In our current infinite-content state, everything moves from one headline and trend to the next quicker than your thumbs can scroll through your TikTok feed, so it makes sense that no one is talking about Peach Fuzz anymore.

Perhaps I'm the lone holdout because I can't stop thinking about the peachy-toned hue. From its name to its more profound meaning to the tinfoil hate conspiracy theories surrounding the year's color selected only for monetary gain, there's more to share than it seems. We're coming off a year where every trending color had a food-based name. "Blueberry Milk Nails," a pastel blue hue, went viral thanks to Sofia Richie. Every girl in the universe was chasing a version of the perfect left their face looking like a glazed donut. We even cycled through "Tomato Girl Summer" essentially dressing in Italian-ì-point-resbe-Sophia Loren cosplay.
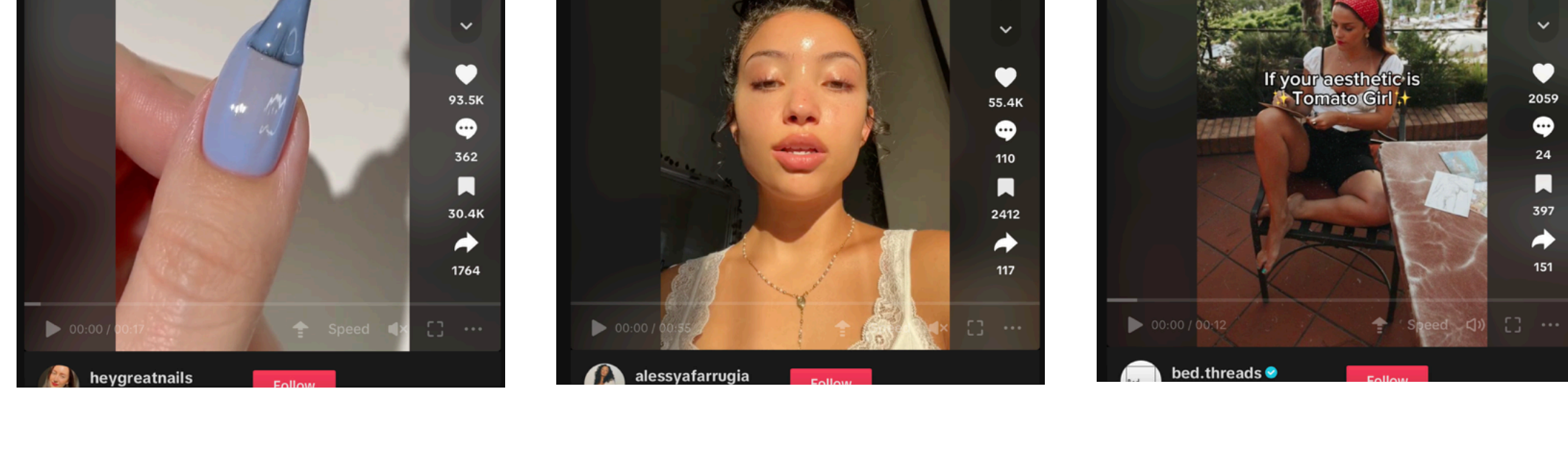
So it wasn't all that surprising when Pantone announced that this year's color was named "Peach Fuzz."

"Pulling names from food typically works pretty well. If you think about olive green and what that is, you treasure it. But you could also call it baby shit green, and that changes its association, right?" shares Sean Adams, author of The Designer's Dictionary of Color and the Chair of Undergraduate and Graduate Graphic Design at ArtCenter. "For the most part, food naming tends to be safe, but you still have to be aware. If you call something liver brown, for example, people aren't going to want to buy it."

Additionally, according to Montaha Hidefi, Color Archaeologist and VP of Color Forecasting at Color Marketing Group, color-based names have a sizable impact on consumers' perceptions and preferences. "Naming colors after food is a longstanding tradition, and a significant portion of color names have consistently drawn inspiration from culinary items. A glance into the Color Marketing Group's color forecast archives reveals flood-related color names like the Italian Orange, Tawny Olive, and Kumquat dating back to the 60s. In the 70s, names such as Pure Cream, Strawberry Crush, and Chocolate Chip were trending."

"The terms borrowed for color naming reflect the prevailing language of the time, aligning with current food trends. Recently, we see an inclination towards names inspired by everyday consumables, particularly from the realms of coffee and sweets," Hidefi continues. "This choice stems from the positive emotions associated with these familiar food-related terms in color recognition and articulation, suggesting that a mental image, particularly related to food objects, influenced participants' ability to identify colors. Essentially, naming colors after foods creates a visual vocabulary, creating a shared reference and mutual understanding amongst a bigger population. Plus, in the TikTok world, it allows for the potential of virality—it's easy to reference the Italian countryside. But when we rebrand the aesthetic into "Tomato Girl Summer," there's creative intrigue and instant recognition. Thus, virality is born.

Lindsay Macdonald and Dimitris Mylonas proved this in a research study on the impact of edible color names. The study highlighted the significance of familiar food-related terms in color recognition and articulation, suggesting that a mental image, particularly related to food objects, influenced participants' ability to identify colors.

Even beyond Peach Fuzz's name, though, Pantone leaned into the cultural and global happenings, allowing the color to seep positivity into the world. Beatrice Eiseman, the executive director of the Pantone Color Institute, suggests that Peach Fuzz will bring comfort and peace. Eiseman emphasizes that it represents more than just a visual concept; it evokes feelings of facility and cocooned warmth and reflects a global shift towards a greater focus on community and reevaluation of priorities.

That we all needed tranquility, or something close to it, prompted the selection in the first place. And with the shade announced two months after the Israel-Hamas conflict broke out, an ongoing war in Ukraine, and a looming election year, I'm confident in saying the world was and is in desperate need of a light, calming effect.

The Pantone Color Institute began choosing the Color of the Year in 1999 (PANTONE 15-4020 Cerulean Blue), to engage the design community and strengthen the relationship between culture and color. And while it seemed to be a hit throughout the years, we're starting to lean into a place where its reception might not be as welcomed.

Peach Fuzz
13-1023

Pantone's mission is to create a universal color code, it's the brand's model and essence. But in December 2021, Adobe announced it would cut Pantone's colors from its app. There are rumors about who began the controversy—Pantone or Adobe—but Scott Belsky, Adobe's chief product officer at the time, says "Pantone actually required the removal, as they want to charge customers directly," after a tweet about Pantone charging users $21 a month for access to their color selections. If users choose not to pay, they'll only be able to see a black hue in its place.

The real question is, however, if Pantone declares a shade as "the color of the year," does that affect the decisions designers make? On a graphic design forum, asking "Does the Pantone Color of the Year have an impact on the color palettes used in graphic design that year?" a user responds, "As a professional designer, my boss directs me to use the color of the year style guide they put out. So I HAVE to use it. So yes, it can directly affect graphic designers, in reality, the Pantone Color of the Year is forecasting for the fashion industry. They look and see what is getting popular, and, in turn, it becomes more popular. It's a self-feeding cycle."

"It's funny. When I first saw [Pantone's Color of the Year selection], I thought, well, that makes sense. It makes sense to me because it is the next evolution of millennial pink. Everyone was all over millennial pink, and Peach Fuzz has a little more teeth to it," says Adams. "It's a little hotter. I mean, I get it. It's beautiful. I can understand how Pantone got there. It seemed like a normal, natural evolution from where we were, and the reasons they give are fantastic. I love that the biggest issue is getting people to think about color."
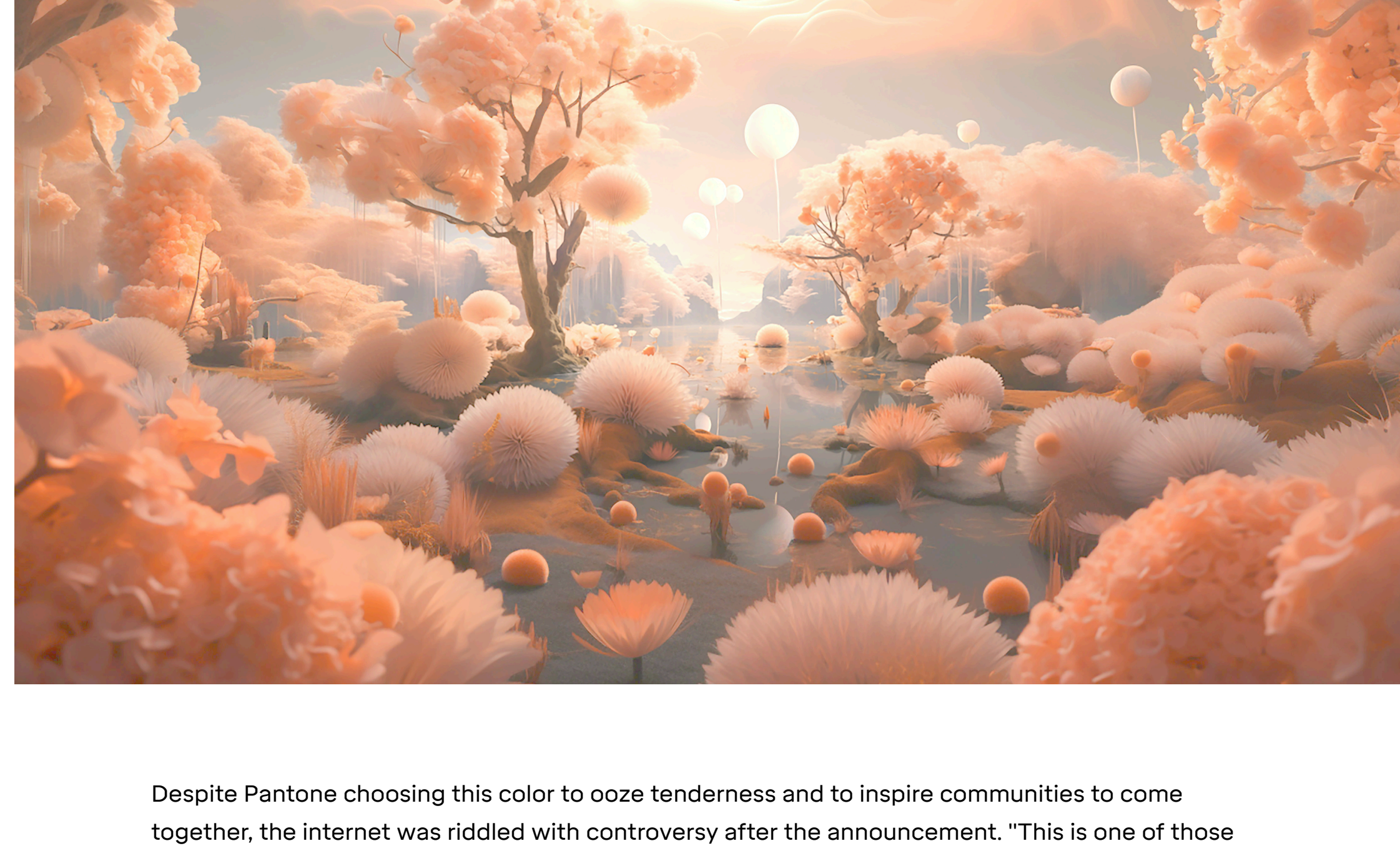
Despite Pantone choosing this color to ooze tenderness and to inspire communities to come together, the internet was riddled with controversy after the announcement. "This is one of those colors you name the wrong thing, and it goes bad," Adams shares. "Finding that flesh is not going to go well."

Users on Reddit shared comments such as, "Am I the only one who finds this shade absolutely hideous? It's too... fleshy," "WHO GIVES A #FFFFFF," and "This sh*te is the dumbest thing ever. How does a single color dictate mass usage and applications over the span of a year? I would love to see a board meeting over their way of choosing these."

Collectively, though, it does seem like most folks are over Pantone's Color of the Year. From Reddit threads to Instagram comments, user after user gripes and argues about the color selection and the entire concept. Trend fatigue might be to blame, and learning about a trend that theoretically lasts a year can feel more all-consuming than one that cycles through TikTok for just a week or two.

Adams, a true color expert, challenges the average design Twitter shitposter. "Yes, the Color of the Year absolutely matters. Not because everyone will race to use it but because it asks all of us to think about color. Sometimes the choice reinforces our own aesthetic, other times it challenges us to spread our vision."

"In the contemporary landscape, this proliferation of Colors of the Year highlights the heightened awareness surrounding the significance of color in our lives," Hidefi adds. "Designers, along with the general public, are increasingly attuned to the nuances of color and its impact. It's important to view the Color of the Year not as a strict guideline for all design creations but as a mood-setting element for the year—a reflection of the prevailing societal psychology pulse. This approach acknowledges that each year carries a distinctive emotional tone, and the Color of the Year serves as an artistic expression of that collective sentiment rather than a rigid prescription for design choices."

Even beyond the shade of the color, controversy surrounds how the color is selected. There are conspiracy murmurs on TikTok that Pantone has sold out to big tech. Ariana Alfonso, for example, has a video with over 1 million views breaking down how the Color of the Year has conveniently corresponded with tech happenings multiple years in a row. Alfonso claims that Pantone selected "Greenery," a green-yellow shade, to appeal to Android's interests in 2017 because of the brand's wildly unpopular lime-green feel messages. Another example people have speculated is the potential for Delta Airlines to have paid for the 2018 "Ultra Violet" choice to coordinate with launching its plum-colored employee uniforms.

PANTONE® 13-1023 TCX   PANTONE® 13-1023 TCX   PANTONE® 13-1023 TCX   PANTONE® 13-1023 TCX
Peach Fuzz   Peach Fuzz   Peach Fuzz   Peach Fuzz
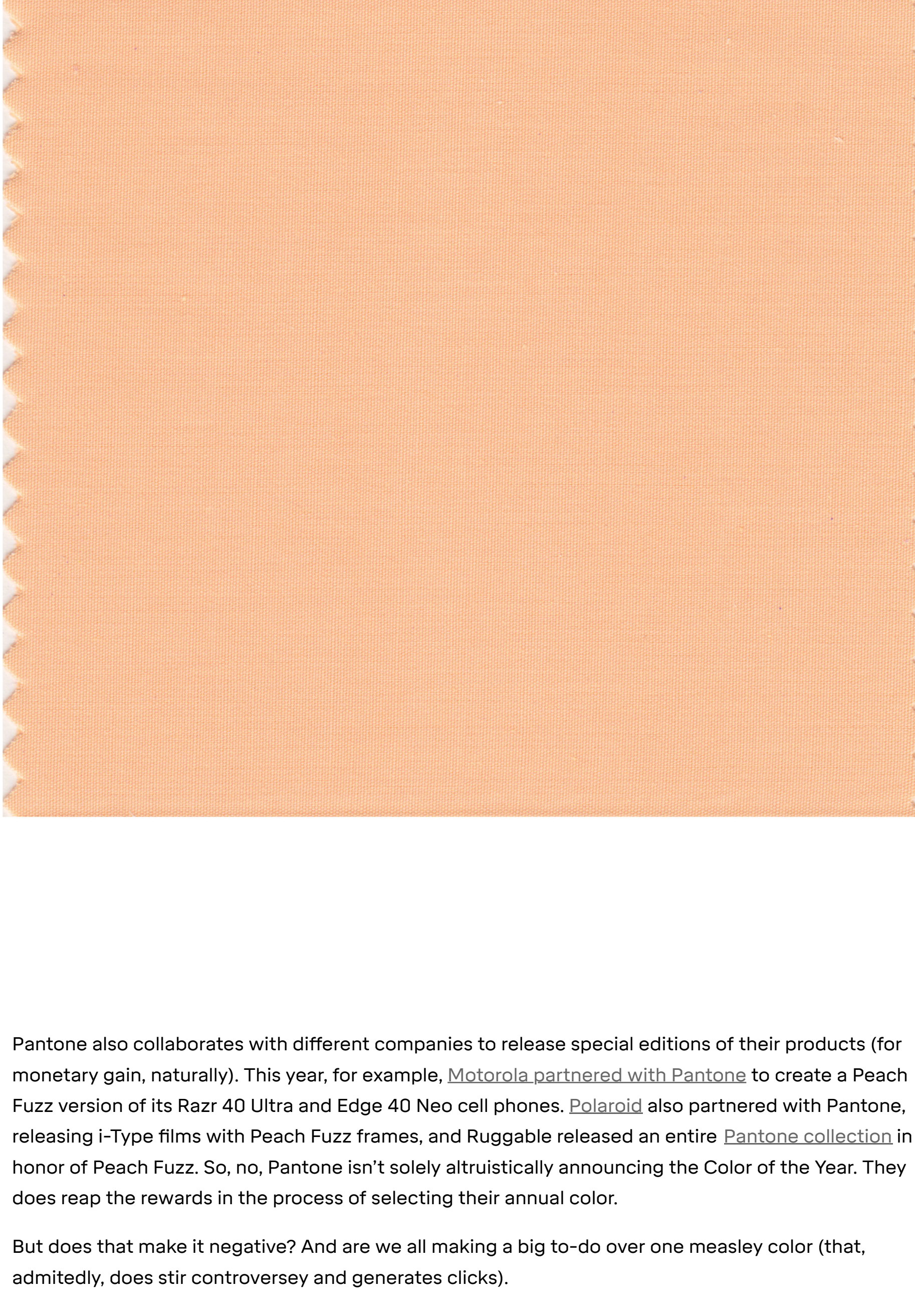
Pantone also collaborates with different companies to release special editions of their products (for monetary gain, naturally). This year, for example, Motorola partnered with Pantone to create a Peach Fuzz version of its Razr 40 Ultra and Edge 40 Neo cell phones. Polaroid also partnered with Pantone, releasing i-Type films with Peach Fuzz frames, and Ruggable released an entire Pantone collection in honor of Peach Fuzz. So, no, Pantone isn't solely altruistically announcing the Color of the Year. They does reap the rewards in the process of selecting their annual color.

But does that make it negative? And are we all making a big to-do over one measley color (that, admittedly, does stir controversy and generate clicks).

At the very least, Adams disagrees with the conspiracists. "I can't imagine how they'd get paid to pick a color. I think it's a matter of following trends and seeing what's out there and where it's going. That's how I concluded that it seemed like a natural evolution for millennials with millennial pink."

"Color is so subjective," he adds. "I'm sorry, but none of us see the same color the same way. It's in our eyes, then aren't made that way. And I love that about color."
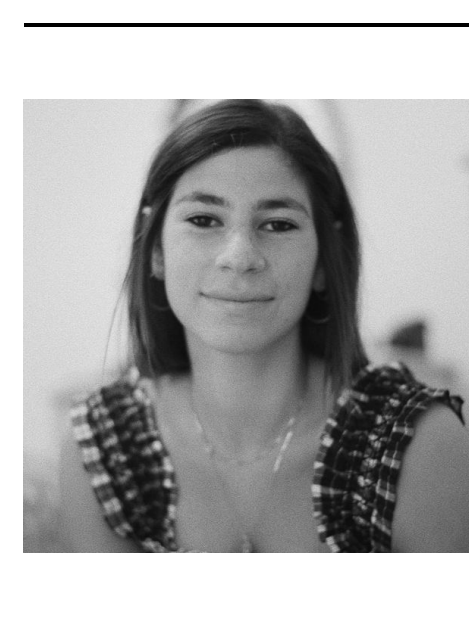
Chloe Gordon

Chloe is based out of New Orleans, Louisiana. While she's a writer by trade, she struggles to settle her own bio. All you need to know is that she's a lover of dirty martinis, a maker of charcuterie boards, and always has her nose in a book but hasn't mastered doing all three at the same time. If you want to know more follow her on Instagram @_chloe_gordon_.

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