Color sells:

How the psychology of color influences consumers

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Introduction

Color sells products. It is a powerful marketing tool that significantly influences consumer purchases, so much so that it accounts for 85% of the reason why someone decides to purchase a product (Hemphill 275). Marketers must understand the psychology of color in order to use it effectively.

Humans associate colors with meanings. These associations are studied extensively in marketing research. This paper explores how the psychology of color influences purchasing behavior as it pertains to product design, company branding, and the consumer.

Nearly all products sold today have colorful facades. Selecting the right colors to use has an enormous impact on product sales. While no single set of rules governs color choices, research has established general guidelines based on the principle of *associative learning*, the relationship between color and emotion.

Associative learning

It is necessary to define the three basic principles of color, hue, saturation, and value, to understand associative learning (see fig.1). *Hue* is the wavelength of a color and determines its label, such as orange or green. *Saturation* is the intensity of a color, or, how pigmented a color is. *Value* is how bright a color is. Together, these three factors determine how people perceive color and thus the associations they form with it.


A study in the *College Students Journal* reports descriptions given by college students in response to various colors (Naz and Epps 396). Findings show that green is primarily associated with nature and elicits positive feelings such as relaxation and calmness. Blue is associated with water, eliciting positive responses including comfort and peace. Red is associated with love and is considered to be a color of dominance. Black is associated with power, whereas yellow and orange are associated with happiness.

A second study reports the most common words used to describe these colors (Clarke and Cotsall 406). In this study, 75% of participants described red with words like “anger,” “energy” and “passion.” Orange and yellow elicited more cheerful descriptions. Green and
blue were described as “peaceful,” “relaxing,” “clean” and “calming.” 69% of participants associated black with evil or death, while over 88% of participants used words such as “innocence,” “happy,” and “euphoria” to describe white. 70% of participants associated pink with femininity. Brown, grey, and purple had less agreement on their meaning. The study also reports that the brighter a hue, the more positively it is perceived. This research shows that some colors have stronger associations than others, which is important to keep in mind when designing the package for a product.

**Implementing color associations in package designs**

Marketers use color associations to increase product sales by sending a message to the consumer (see fig. 2). Crest 3D Whitestrips, for example, consists primarily of blue. Blue is associated with cleanliness, emphasizing the product’s promise of clean, white teeth. White’s association with purity makes it the ideal accent color.

Nature Valley Granola Bars are packaged in a green and yellow box. Green is associated with nature and the outdoors, which is appropriate for this product’s sales pitch of wholesome, all-natural, and healthy ingredients. Furthermore, it is the easiest color for the eyes to process. Yellow is associated with sunshine and optimism, promoting the product in a warm and positive manner.

![Crest 3D Whitestrips, Nature Valley Granola Bars, iPhone](Fig. 2. Crest 3D Whitestrips, Nature Valley Granola Bars, iPhone. Digital Image. Google. Web.)

Apple’s black iPhone box demonstrates the effective use of black in packaging. Although black is linked to death and evil in specific contexts, in this context it is associated with power and luxury. Apple’s products are expensive and the color black aids in selling the product as an exclusive, high-quality item. Black is often the color of choice for electronics and other luxury items.

**Establishing brand recognition with color**

*Brand recognition* is the consumer’s ability to identify or associate a product with a brand. Marketers establish brand recognition by using a specific formula of colors and shapes to form a brand mark. The key is consistency; the same colors must be present across all facets of a company. For example, a company’s website should be visually relatable to its store and consumer products.

Researchers at the University of Loyola found that color increases brand recognition by up to 80%. (Morton “Why Color Matters”). In another study, when a group of people were
shown 3-second advertisements, over 62% developed an association to a brand based purely on the colors they saw (Chang and Lin 3345).

Brand recognition has a large impact on consumer purchasing behavior. Aside from impulse shoppers, many shoppers seek out products of brands they recognize. Successful color manipulation enables shoppers to quickly and easily identify the brand they are looking for amongst a sea of similar products.

Once a company succeeds at establishing brand recognition, it can temporarily manipulate trademark colors to add interest to a product. Heinz, which successfully established brand recognition by using the color red, introduced EZ Squirt Blastin’ Green ketchup in October 2000. This dramatic alteration from the familiar deep-red ketchup bottles boosted product sales by $23 million. Consumers had developed such strong associations between Heinz and red ketchup bottles that the green bottles attracted attention and drew interest. This illustrates just how powerful color can be.

**Communicating brand image with color**

Color does more than establish brand recognition. It also conveys traits about a company and reflects a company's personality, or, *brand image*. In this sense, color serves as a subliminal language.

A study in the *African Journal of Business Management* reveals how consumers perceive the colors used by companies like Coca-Cola, Hermes, Starbucks, and IBM (see fig. 3).

Participants considered the red of Coca-Cola conveys stimulus, vividness, youth, happiness and energy. Participants regarded Hermes as courage, ego, uniqueness, differentiation, youth and in vogue...[they] considered that the green of Starbucks conveys quiet, leisure, youth, staidness and comfort. Participants perceive IBM as reliable, staid, professional, cool, novel, and trustworthy. (Chang, Lun, and Lin 3353)

In addition, the colors purple, white, and yellow reflect the following traits, respectively: imaginative, down-to-earth, and spirited. Companies choose colors for their logos and store designs not just because they look good, but to communicate specific qualities about a service or product.

![Logos of Coca-Cola, IBM, Hermes, and Starbucks](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

For example, McDonalds, Wendy’s, and Burger King use red and yellow in their logos and store exteriors’ convey urgency, energy, and speed. This communicates to the consumer that they are fast and efficient. Companies like Whole Foods use green for their logo and store signs, which communicates that they are environmentally conscious. UPS’s deep brown logo and delivery trucks communicate UPS’s promise to deliver packages in a reliable and consistent manner.

**Adjusting colors to reflect the consumer**

While some color associations appear to be strongly rooted, a lot depends on the personality, age, gender, and cultural background of the consumer. For example, different shades of color appeal to specific personality types of shoppers (see table 1). Fast food restaurants and clearance sales use stimulant colors like red, orange, and black to illicit a sense of urgency in impulse buyers. Retail clothing stores use lighter colors like pink and sky blue to evoke a calm, soothing experience for traditional shoppers who prefer to browse through items at a leisurely pace.

Table 1 How Colors Attract Specific Shoppers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of shopper</th>
<th>Venue</th>
<th>Color</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Impulse shoppers</td>
<td>Fast food, outlet malls, clearance sales</td>
<td>Orange, red, black, royal blue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shoppers on a budget</td>
<td>Banks, larger department stores</td>
<td>Navy blue, teal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional buyers</td>
<td>Clothing stores</td>
<td>Pink, sky blue, rose</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Color preferences also vary depending on age and gender. Research findings reveal that 76% of women prefer cool colors compared to 56% of men (Hemphill 276). Men also prefer orange to yellow, while women prefer yellow to orange. Men’s favorite colors include blue, black, brown, green, and red, while women like blue, orange, yellow, purple, green, and red the best. Color preferences and emotional connections to color also change with age. For example, 7-year olds prefer the color yellow much more so than adults (Boyatzis and Varghese 78).

It is also important to keep in mind that the majority of these studies were conducted in the United States and reflect Western values. Although it may seem like it, there truly is no universal color scheme. Colors possess a multitude of meanings depending on the cultural context (see fig. 4). Purple is associated with regality in Europe, but signifies excessive spending in China. The color white implies purity in both the United States and Middle East, yet in Japan and China this color is associated with death and mourning.
In the U.S. blue is a color linked to trust and authority, which is why it is the most prevalent color used in business ads across the country. In Japan, on the other hand, blue represents immorality or treachery, which are not qualities businesses wish to convey to customers.

**Conclusion**

Color is not simply an afterthought when it comes to product packaging and company branding. Marketers invest significant time in selecting colors that reflect the values of the company and preferences of the target audience. The reward for doing so is increased sales and consumer loyalty.

Product packaging, branding, and consumer awareness all operate on different psychological principles. To maximize success with color, it is necessary to understand these principles, thus anticipating and planning how consumers will react to the colors selected.

Finally, it is important to recognize that color trends are not permanent, and can fluctuate over an extended period of time. Therefore, it is important to stay up to date with current marketing research on color in order to make the best decisions for a company.
Works Cited


