

The Power of Color

“It is strange how deeply colors tend to penetrate one, like scent.”

- Dorothea Brook in Middlemarch by George Eliot

By Dr. Kim Anderson, Writer/Reporter for [\[TC\]²](#)

We all know the importance of color in the apparel and home furnishings industries. It has been proved that color is the primary purchasing consideration among consumers. Professional associations spend countless research hours predicting each upcoming seasonal color palette; however, people's response to color is more complex than meets the eye. Contrary to popular belief, our first response to color is not to the aesthetic or “look”. A person's response to color is deeply psychological. Color affects us on a subconscious level. We can better utilize color to our advantage if we understand the responses associated with particular colors and the way color affects people psychologically.

Regardless of which colors are trendy, nearly everyone has a strong opinion concerning color. We all have our favorite colors, or colors we don't care for. A person's color preference is also dependent on demographic factors, such as age, gender, ethnicity and socio-economic level. In addition, color preference can be affected by external factors such as climate. In sunny warm climates, people tend to prefer strong warm colors, whereas in colder cloudy climates, soft cool colors are favored.

Color responses are also learned and can change over time. As our age and socio-economic status increase, our response to color can change as well. It is important to note that a specific response to a particular color will vary tremendously depending on where and how that color is utilized. A color used in apparel can elicit a very different response when used in interior design.

In spite of a person's demographic profile and external factors, research has shown that particular colors affect everyone in predictable and measurable ways. We are born with a basic response to color. Because of the way in which the human eye functions, all colors are viewed as either having a yellow or blue base. For example, there are yellow-based and blue-based reds, pinks, oranges, yellows, blues and greens.

Red for babies...

Ironically, pale blues, pinks and yellows are the predominant colors used in marketing nursery items and baby clothes; however, red might be a better choice. Research has shown that the color red can stimulate a baby's brain and aid in neural development. Red is the first color a baby is able to discern. Interestingly, there is a gender bias as well. Male babies have an inherent preference to yellow-based reds, whereas female babies consistently prefer blue-based reds. Over their lifetime some males will shift their preference from yellow-based reds to blue-based reds.

When used as an interior color, red tends to distort time. People stay longer in a red environment, hence the ubiquitous red décor in lounges and casinos. Studies indicate that our sense of taste is enhanced in a red environment.

Pink for prisons...

This is not intended as a reference to the ex-sheriff of Davidson County, North Carolina, who became infamous for painting the jail cells pink. Pink is a calming color which has a temporary but significant effect on stress and anger. It has been used effectively in jails and prisons because of this calming influence. Pink also causes people to highly value certain things. Sweet foods taste better when placed on a pink tablecloth or napkin.

Blue food...

There are few blue foods found in nature and so it is not surprising that blue is not an effective color for a restaurant. It tends to suppress the appetite. The color causes the brain to release tranquilizing hormones and can be used effectively

in hospitals and dentists' offices. Pale blues encourage fantasy. It is the color preferred by most Americans. If not too dark, a blue surrounding increases productivity. Studies show that students score higher and retain more information when reading blue text. Weight lifters lift heavier weights in blue rooms. In apparel, dark blue denotes credibility, responsibility and trust. In the middle ages, blue was a difficult dye color to achieve and it became associated with a high level of socio-economic and moral achievement. Today, it is an excellent color apparel choice for a job interview, an attorney or a police officer.

Brown is a ubiquitous color that appears in many forms. Chocolate, bread, coffee and cola, all are shades of brown making it a very consumable color that elicits many positive responses. Brown can successfully be used in china, interiors, exteriors and apparel. Brown creates an open and friendly atmosphere. Interestingly, research has shown that when people wear brown, they are asked more questions. Brown might be a good color to wear on a covert mission, in which gathering information is key.

Grey is the color for creativity. In a grey environment, creative people are more creative for longer periods of time than in any other color tested. Many people have developed a prejudice against gray. The color is associated with unpleasant experiences caused from gray surroundings such as storm clouds and tornados. This prejudice has carried over to many other areas. In apparel, gray is seen as formal and respectable. Maybe there was something to the old adage- other than navy blue, there is no color better suited to business wear than a grey suit.

Black is a color with widely varying associations. Some people associate black with evil, for others it is the color of mourning and despair. When used in apparel, black symbolizes power, authority and wisdom. No wonder black is the choice color for police uniforms and priests. Black might not be the best political move for the junior executive interviewing with the chairman of the board.

White evokes many positive responses. The color white denotes delicacy and refinement. White is the symbol for purity, chastity and cleanliness. For formal apparel, white or white combined with black is one of the most sophisticated looks you can achieve.

Colors with unique power can be categorized as being either a *classifying* color or a *declassifying* color. Classifying colors appeal to a relatively small number of people, whereas declassifying colors, such as yellow and orange, appeal to a relatively large segment of the population.

Orange is composed of 50% red and 50% yellow and is considered to be a declassifying color. Yellow-based oranges known as “pumpkin”, elicit friendly responses. They are also attention grabbers. A product that is the color of a yellow-based orange is seen as inexpensive; hence it is often used in cheap motels and fast food chains. It can also be used to make an expensive product seem more affordable.

A blue-based orange also known as “terracotta” is an upgrade version of orange which looks friendly but not cheap. It can give an informal appearance to an expensive product without compromising the appearance of quality.

Because yellow-based oranges are attention getters and evoke friendly responses, they are excellent choices for uniforms and recreational clothing. It can be a bit more challenging to dress up orange for formal attire.

Yellow is also a declassifying color. Yellow can be used with wonderful results to grab someone's attention. It is frequently used with black to indicate caution and danger (mimicking nature's bees and poisonous snakes). However, yellow reflects light resulting in excessive stimulation of the eye, causing eye fatigue and irritation. It also speeds up a person's metabolism. In a yellow room, babies cry more and adults lose their tempers quicker and for a longer duration. Have you ever wondered why school buses are painted a yellow-orange color with black accents? Research has shown that people who drive yellow cars are less likely to be hit by another car. With these responses, you might imagine that yellow can be a tricky apparel color.

Green is the color of life and nature. There are many different greens. People's response can drastically change depending on the value (how light or dark a color appears), as well as the context in which the color is utilized. Dark greens are classifying colors and therefore, only a limited number of people respond positively. Only 3% of the population responds favorably to dark blue-green, but it is the upper socio-economic 3% of the population.

Green is an excellent color to be worn by health care professionals in an operating room. For every color the eye focuses on, the eye sees an after-image. The complimentary color or opposite color is seen in the after-image, allowing the eye recovery time. In the brightly lit operating room, workers concentrate on exposed body tissue. The opposite color of body tissue is surgical green, which aids the eye in the replenishment of vision. For every profession in which concentration is required (e.g. extensive work on a computer), colors that aid in visual compensation should be considered.

Green in everyday apparel can present problems. The color that is reflected from a green garment is for the most part unkind to complexions. Few people can wear green next to their face without appearing nauseated; therefore, it is probably better confined to the lower half of the body.

It has long been acknowledged that nature brilliantly uses color to attract mates as well as ward off predators. Flowers are specific colors to attract insects so that pollination will occur. Insects appear in specific color combinations to ward off birds and other potential predators. As in nature, human beings have an innate response to color. Color is the first thing we notice, and elicits a psychological and emotional response. Knowing the ways in which people respond to color can be a powerful marketing and design tool.

References:

Carlton Wagner, Director of the Wagner Institute for Color Research, Chicago IL

Faber Birren, The power of color: how it can reduce fatigue, relieve monotony, enhance sexuality, and more.

June 2005