

# THE USE OF COLOUR AS A TOOL FOR PROPAGANDA

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## ABSTRACT

The main objective of this paper is to point out the crucial role that colour plays in human perception of stimuli, and how we may use this information to promote and enhance our communicational objectives. If we can educate consumers to use colour codes at the point of purchase, we will assist them to make the best purchasing decision and in the end save the consumer money.

**Key words:** Colour, propaganda, non-verbal education

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Of all the forms of non-verbal communication, colour is the most instantaneous method of conveying messages and meanings (Eiseman, 2000:6) Human survival depends on the ability to identify necessary objects and/or warning signals, whether they are animal, vegetable or mineral, and colour is an integral part of the identification process.

Among other uses, colour stimulates and works synergistically with all of the senses, symbolizes abstract concepts and thoughts, expresses fantasy or wish fulfilment, recalls another time or place and produces an aesthetic or emotional response.

The best place to observe the effectiveness of colour is in the market place where it is a vital key in communicating a positive, enticing and irresistible image to a product. Often called the "silent salesperson", colour must immediately attract the consumer's eye, convey the message of what the product is all about, create a brand identity and most importantly, help to make the sale (Eiseman, 2000:6). It must create enough interest or curiosity to induce the would-be-buyer to find out more about the product or service.

Much of the human reaction to colour is subliminal and consumers are generally unaware of the pervasive and persuasive effects of colour. The psychological effect is instantaneous as colour stimulates the senses and exerts its power of suggestion. The power that colour wields is seen at every level of communication: in corporate identification and logos, signage, advertising, on television, billboards, in print media and packaging, on the Internet and at point of purchase.

The power of colour in the market place is proved by the consumers' behaviour. As consumers speed down the supermarket aisles, their eyes rest on a package for approximately .03 seconds. In that blinking-of-an-eyelash timing, the package must be riveted upon the observers' eyes, inform them of the package contents and, more importantly, appeal to their psyches (Eiseman, 2000:7).

After earning a consumer's attention, the package must visually express the value of the goods. If a product is more expensive than a competing product, the colour must convey that it is worth the cost and, when goods are priced competitively, the appropriate colours may make a greater impact than the competitors' product. With thousands of products lining the market shelves and millions of rands frequently at stake, the clever use of colour may make or break a product line.

For truly effective marketing, package colours must satisfy a "wish fulfilment" or need that the product promises to fulfil. For example, products offering sweet taste or sweet scents should be featured in pink, peach, cream or lavender, while the promise of cool refreshment should be an icy blue, green or blue-green. Each colour family conveys specific moods and associations that become part of the symbology that is critical in marketing the product or company image (Fiesner, 2000:8).

Corporations spend millions of rands/dollars establishing a corporate identity, image and brand equity through their logos, advertising, web sites and signage. The company must convey an instant message of who they are and what they stand for. IBM will forever be known as the Big Blue: trustworthy and dependable. Coke is red: energy and exuberance. Colours not only identify, they idealize too.

One of the reasons behind the ANC's great success during the previous General Election was the effective use of colour in their election campaign. Each time President Thabo Mbeki appeared in public he wore traditional ANC colours. Each poster that the ANC used was set against the background of the traditional ANC colours. Through a process of conditioning, illiterate individuals were able to familiarize themselves with the colours that the ANC used, as well as President Mbeki's face on the ballot-papers. To identify a colour is a task that even an illiterate person may execute easily, and this is something that the ANC used to their advantage.

Colour adds tremendous meaning to communication, as it vitalizes the visual message, creating an instantaneous impression that is, most often, universally understood. This is especially important in conveying a mood or idea where verbiage is not used or understood. Colour is a universal language that crosses cultural boundaries in our electronically/technologically/ satellite linked "Global Village".

## **2. COLOUR-LANGUAGE , COLOUR-SYMBOLS**

Colour-salience as revealed by language, must be related to the wider experience of colour in a given culture, the experience differing among different culture groups within this culture, to whom colour is of some concern (Gage,1995:79).

A woman is wearing white for a special occasion. Where is she going? In a Western country, she'd be the bride at a wedding, in Korea, she'd be at a funeral. And in China, brides wear red. The bride in Jan van Eyck's

Renaissance painting “ The Arnolfini Wedding” wears green as a symbol of her fertility (Feisner,2000:118).

Colour provides both visual and psychological information. The colour-vocabulary of different sub-cultural groups differs. Women, for example, are more precise and discriminating in their handling of colour than men. Colour may therefore be observed differently and interpreted differently.

Certain colours seem to convey universal meanings and have been codified by health and occupational safety organizations. Compare the brown/blue/green and yellow colour coding for standard 220 volt electric wiring. The use of black against yellow for road signs, is a common phenomenon all over the world. Red for danger, is the colour used to identify fire protection equipment and emergency stop buttons on dangerous machinery.

Colours can change their meanings over time with fashion and changing social awareness. According to Feisner (2000:118), green used to be an unpopular choice for cars, since it was interpreted boding bad luck. This perception dates back to the nineteenth century when Paris Green became a fashionable emerald shade until it was discovered that this arsenic-based pigment had caused several deaths (it was optly renamed Poison Green) Now all the different shades of green are back in fashion, along with greater environmental awareness.

The names of colours, too, may have an influence on the perception of the colour. In 1962 Binney and Smith renamed the Crayolo colour “Flesh” to the less cultural “Peach”, and in 1992 introduced “multicultural” crayons in many subtle variations of brown (Feisner,2000:118).

We often use colour to describe our emotions and feelings: “I was so angry, I saw red”, we also say, “ I’m feeling blue,” or “ I was green with envy”. “Paint it black!” sang the unhappy Rolling Stones during the Vietnam War.

### **3. COLOUR ASSOCIATIONS IN LANGUAGE AND THE EFFECT ON EMOTION**

In order to establish an immediate message , colour combinations should contain visual colour cues that trigger specific responses – those that best express the intention and/or purpose of the product or service.

Feisner (2000:118) distinguishes the following values in his colour symbolism:

### **3.1 Black, white and grey**

These are the achromatic or neutral colours. Black is as dark as a colour can get.

Black's positive connotations include:

- sophistication (in fashion), power, sexuality and being in credit in business.

Black's negative connotations include:

- death, emptiness, depression, disapproval (black market), and bad luck.

Black is used in the following expressions:

- black economy, black magic, blacklist, black sheep.

White is the ultimate in lightness. It is all the colours combined (light) and in watercolour paintings, the absence of colour.

White's positive connotations include:

- purity, birth, cleanliness, sterility, innocence, peacefulness.

White is used in the following expressions:

- white lies, white-collar worker.

White's negative connotations include:

- surrender (White Flag), cowardliness (white feather), cover-up and perversion of justice (whitewash).

Black and white together equals authority and truth – written in black and white.

Grey is neither positive nor negative and implies confusion, loss of distinction, for example, "it's a grey area".

### **3.2 Red and Pink**

Red, one of the oldest colour names, is the first to be seen in a rainbow and has the greatest emotional impact of all.

Red's positive connotations include:

- love ( red roses) red hearts , luck, passion (red-blooded), sexiness( red lipstick, red sports cars), festivity ( we are going to colour the town red) and Santa's red clothing at Christmas. Things that are memorable ( red-letter day), important (red carpet), compassionate (Red Cross), and new (red-hot news)

Red's negative connotations include:

- (red uniforms disguised the presence of blood from wounds), revolution and anarchy (red flag), prostitution (red-light district), the devil, danger (traffic lights), fire, debt ( in business), and bureaucracy (red tape).

Pink's connotations are mostly positive:

- healthy (in pink), pretty, feminine, sweet and babyish.

### **3.3 Orange and brown**

Orange is present in nature, in the setting sun, fall of leaves, fruit and flowers. It stands out well and creates a sense of warmth.

Orange's positive connotations include:

- warmth, fruitfulness, brightness, cheerfulness, and spice.

Orange negative connotations include: brashness, danger.

Brown equals earth, wood, coffee, chocolate, comfort, security, gloom, melancholy and boredom.

### **3.4 Yellow**

Yellow is the most easily perceived of hues, with the highest luminosity rating after white. It is seen before other colours, especially when placed against black. Yellow against black is often used as a warning sign.

Yellow's positive connotations include:

- cheerfulness, sun, gold, happiness, vitality, hope and optimism (yellow ribbon).

Yellow's negative connotations include:

- caution(traffic-light), sickness( jaundice), betrayal and cowardice ( yellow streak, yellow-bellied).

### **3.5 Green**

Green is the largest family discernible to the human eye, which is why our feeling towards green may be so varied.

Green's positive connotations include:

- environment, growth and renewal in spring, fertility, freshness, nature, youth, health, peace and calm, things that are cool and refreshing, and wealth (greenbacks).

Green's negative connotations include:

- envy, inexperience and gullibility, immaturity, nausea (green around the gills), rawness, sourness, and the alien (little green Martians).

### **3.6 Blue**

In many cultures, blue is the colour of spirituality.

Blue's positive connotations include:

- royalty and aristocracy (blue blood), the best (blue ribbon, blue-chip stocks), heaven, coolness, truth, tranquillity, conservatism, loyalty and dependability (true blue Ford), security.

Blue's negative connotations include:

- introversion, sadness, depression (the winter blues), blue with cold, wintery, unexpected (out of the blue), low class (blue-collar worker), indecent (blue movie).

### **3.7 Purple, Violet and Indigo**

Purple is the hardest colour for the eye to discriminate.

Purple's positive connotations include:

- bravery (purple heart), aristocracy, spirituality and mystery.

Purple's negative connotations include:

- mourning, death, conceit and rage.

#### **4. COLOUR AND CULTURE**

Our culture conditions the colours that we see. Colour is therefore intimately bound up with language because it supplies a system of arbitrary signs (Gage,1995:79). Colour has always been used symbolically, whether painted directly on the body or worn in garments to announce the wearers' social status, tribe, province, country or other significant group .

Humans have always used colour in their surroundings for decorative purposes or to chronicle their everyday lives and other important events. Throughout history, colour has consistently been a critical factor in determining the choice of bartered or bought goods (Eiseman, 2000:120).

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, consumers continue to want more colour options. They are better educated about colour, appreciate guidance and intelligent advice. They have come to recognize that the colours that best reflect their lifestyles help them to achieve their own comfort levels. Through lifestyle magazines and documentary TV- programmes they look for guidance in creating colour combinations for use in their homes, businesses, clothing and sport.

No matter what the product, the consumer must respond on the same emotional level to the colours of the product, the advertisement, the web-site, the commercials, the packaging or the point of purchase appeal.

#### **5. COLOUR FORECAST**

The real intention of marketing communication is to persuade the public at large to become customers, to induce the consumer to respond in a positive way to the message transmitted. According to Eiseman (2000:125) to be able to convey a meaningful marketing message, the proper use of colour is important in the following areas:

- Graphic images and brand names
- Packaging as it represents the qualities of the product
- At point-of-purchase where it vies with competitive products and must gain attention
- In all forms of advertising: print, point-of-purchase, TV, web-sites, direct mail, billboards, where it must convince and appeal, especially in a short time span
- Through signage, at the company site or other appropriate areas
- In company logos and ID's
- In the product itself

## 6. CONCLUSION

With shrinking barriers and increased communication, as a result of globalization, there is a greater homogenization of colour exchanges, especially as companies reach out to embrace broader markets throughout the world. Old colour concepts are changing and expanding.

Seen in this light , one may clearly state that the use of colour as a tool for propaganda, is now more relevant than ever.

The use of colour is of crucial importance and forms the backbone of communication in a modern marketing environment.

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