

Colour Psychology in Brand Communication

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Abstract

Colour is a pervasive, low-cost tool in brand communication that influences perception, attention, memory, and purchase behaviour. This paper reviews theoretical foundations and empirical findings on colour psychology, examines colour's perceptual attributes of hue, saturation, value, and semiotic roles, surveys cross-cultural differences, and synthesizes best-practice guidance for applying colour strategically across logos, packaging, environments, and digital interfaces. Verifiable studies show that colour has a measurable impact on brand recognition, perceived brand personality, and consumer choice; yet effects are moderated by context, culture, product category, and individual differences. The paper concludes with methodological cautions and directions for future research, arguing that colour should be treated as an Important element of brand strategy rather than an aesthetic afterthought.

Color psychology is important for brand communication because it affects how consumers see, act, and feel about things. In today's competitive marketplace, where visual identity has become a key difference, color is one of the most noticeable and instant parts of brand recognition. Brands can strategically position themselves in consumers' minds by using the particular emotions that certain colors trigger, such as red with excitement and speed, blue with trust and reliability, or green with ecological awareness and peace of mind. This study explores the planned use of color palettes by organizations across various industries to build identity, express values, and enhance ability to recall information. Color psychology also studies how culture and the environment affect the way people see colors. It highlights that both psychological accuracy and visual appeal are important for successful brand communication. The study shows that color is an effective way to communicate, not just a design choice, by looking at how customers respond and how effectively branding functions. When used properly, it can change people's minds about purchasing items, make them more loyal towards a particular brand, and reach into particular emotional pathways. In the end, color psychology is a helpful tool for designers and marketers who want to tell stories about their brands that really connect with their target audience.

Introduction

Colour is one of the most immediate visual signals consumers encounter in commercial environments. It provides identity, evokes emotions, guides attention, and can influence perception and behaviour without requiring conscious processing. Marketers and designers frequently rely on colour to differentiate brands, signal product categories, and communicate personality traits (e.g., strength, elegance, warmth). Despite its ubiquity, the precise mechanisms and boundary conditions by which colour affects consumer responses are complex and require an integration of perceptual science, semiotics, and marketing research. This paper synthesises foundational theory and contemporary empirical research to provide an evidence-based account of how colour functions within brand communication.

Colour is a fundamental element in visual perception, shaping human experiences and influencing emotional responses in myriad ways. In the context of brand communication, colour transcends mere aesthetic value, functioning as a powerful psychological tool that can shape perception, signal brand values, and drive consumer behaviour. As brands compete in increasingly crowded digital and physical marketplaces, the strategic deployment of colour has become essential for differentiation, emotional resonance, and effective storytelling. The rise of visual centric platforms, such as Instagram and e commerce sites, has further increased the importance of colour as a communicative device, enabling brands to convey meaning at a glance and build up, lasting connections with consumers.

The field of colour psychology explore show colour's affect human thoughts, emotions, and behaviours, providing a theoretical framework for under standing the mechanisms through which colour impacts brand communication. While research has extensively documented the influence of colours on mood, cognition, and purchase decisions, the application of colour psychology in branding remains a dynamic area of inquiry, intersecting with developments in digital technology, social media, and consumer culture. Brands leverage colour not only to attract attention and create memorable identities but also to communicate values, evoke specific emotions, and signal product attributes. From the bold red of Coca Cola to the minimalist black and white of Chanel, colour choices are integral to the construction of brand meaning and consumer perception.

1. Theoretical foundations

1.1 Perceptual dimensions of colour

Colour perception is commonly decomposed into three perceptual dimensions : **hue** (the spectral family, often named as red/blue/green/etc.), **saturation** (the intensity or purity of the hue), and **value/brightness** (lightness versus darkness). These three parameters determine the sensory impression and have distinct psychological correlates: hue tends to map to categorical associations (e.g., red, energy; blue, calm), saturation often amplifies

excitement and attention, and value affects legibility and perceived sophistication. Understanding these dimensions helps practitioners manipulate colour to achieve specific communicative goals.

1.2 Historical and psychological perspective

Early systematic work on colour and human response appears in both scientific and applied literatures. Pioneering studies and books by colour theorists and psychologists—such as Faber Birren—linked colour to physiological and psychological reactions and popularised many of the claims that designers still use today. Contemporary scholars have refined these early ideas with controlled experiments and marketing field studies that quantify effects on recognition and attitudes. Taken together, the literature suggests that while basic affective responses to colour exist, they are shaped and constrained by learning, context, and culture.

2. Colour and consumer perception: Empirical evidence

2.1 Colour's role in attention and recognition

Colour is a primary cue for quick visual categorisation: consumers use colour to scan shelves and digital menus; consistent colour usage increases speed and accuracy of brand recognition. Research summarising decades of marketing findings reports that colour frequently drives first impressions and that up to a very large share of consumer attitudes toward products can be traced to colour-based inferences—though estimates vary by study and context. One frequently-cited review found strong effects of colour on consumer perceptions and argued that colour often acts as the primary attribute shaping initial product evaluations.

2.2 Colour and brand personality: excitement vs competence

Lab recque and Milne's influential experiments show that colour choices systematically shift perceived brand personality. For instance, bright saturated reds tend to increase perceptions of **excitement**, while muted blues tend to convey **competence** and trustworthiness. Manipulating hue, saturation, and brightness in controlled experiments produced predictable shifts in trait attributions—indicating that colour is a causal driver of some brand personality impressions rather than merely correlated. These findings are especially important because brand personality predicts downstream behaviours such as preference and willingness to pay.

2.3 Colour and purchase behaviour: scope and limits

Meta-analyses and field studies indicate that colour can influence choice and conversion, but effects are not universal. Singh's widely-cited review of colour and marketing reported striking statistics (e.g., estimates that a very high percentage of consumers rely heavily on colour in product choice), yet also emphasized the moderating roles of product category, cultural meanings, and context (e.g., a colour that increases preference for one product category may reduce it in another). Practically, colour can be a

powerful lever, but it must be matched to brand positioning and category expectations to avoid dissonance.

3. Semiotics and meaning: How colour communicates

3.1 Denotation and connotation

From a semiotic perspective, colour carries both **denotative** (directly perceived physical property) and **connotative** (culturally or individually learned) meanings. Denotation is perceptually immediate—viewers register “redness”—whereas connotation is layered (e.g., red as romance in one culture or red as a signal of danger or good fortune in others). Brand communicators leverage both: at the basic level colour attracts attention (denotation); at the higher level it signals values, heritage, or functional claims (connotation).

3.2 Symbolic and associative routes

Two psychological routes explain how colour affects judgments: (1) **Symbolic associations**—learned cultural meanings (e.g., purple = luxury in some Western contexts); (2) **Affective conditioning**—where repeated pairing with emotional experiences or brand messages creates conditioned responses (e.g., a brand that uses green consistently in eco-communications may come to evoke environmentalism). Both routes often operate simultaneously and reinforce each other over time.

4. Cross-cultural variability

Colour meanings are not universal. Cross-cultural research demonstrates both commonalities (e.g., certain perceptual responses to brightness and saturation) and substantial differences in symbolic associations. Adams’ cross-cultural study and subsequent research show that affective meanings of colours vary by cultural background, language, and historical symbolism—therefore global brands face trade-offs when applying single-colour identities worldwide. Local adaptation, informed by cultural research, frequently yields better resonance than a one-size-fits-all approach.

5. Applications in brand communication

5.1 Logo design and identity systems

Colour in a logo is a central identity cue that supports instant recognition (e.g., Coca-Cola’s red; Tiffany’s blue). When designing a logo, brands should treat colour as an asset with rules for primary and secondary palettes, usage across media, and accessibility constraints (contrast and legibility). Consistency across touchpoints strengthens memory traces and aids rapid identification in cluttered marketplaces. Empirical studies show consistent palette use increases recognition and reduces cognitive load during choice.

5.2 Packaging, point-of-sale, and product cues

Packaging colour guides expectations about taste, quality, and category. For instance, warm colours (reds, oranges) often stimulate appetite and are common in food

marketing, whereas cool blues communicate freshness or technology. Colour on packaging interacts with material, typography, and imagery; the same hue on glossy versus matte paper may convey different quality signals. Managers must therefore test colour choices in realistic settings (shelf displays, mobile thumbnails) rather than in isolation.

5.3 Digital interfaces and accessibility

On screens, colour affects click-through rates, perceived trustworthiness, and user experience. Contrast, saturation, and brightness must be optimized for readability and to meet accessibility guidelines (e.g., WCAG contrast ratios). Moreover, digital colour rendering varies across devices—design systems should specify HEX/RGB values and include fallbacks to ensure consistent brand perception. Pantone and other industry players emphasize cross-platform specification as critical for brand integrity.

5.4 Environmental branding and sensory spaces

Physical environments (stores, exhibitions) use colour to shape mood and movement. Retail designers use warm accents to increase dwell time in experiential zones and cool palettes to create calm, boutique-like spaces. The spatial scale, lighting, and adjacent materials modulate colour perception; what reads as a bold, attention-grabbing red in a small logo may overwhelm in full-store walls. Controlled field studies show colour can change behavior in environments (e.g., linger time, perceived crowding).

6. Methodological considerations and research caveats

6.1 Context dependence and interaction effects

The effect of colour is highly context-dependent. Product category, brand expectations, cultural norms, and surrounding colours alter meaning. Many early studies reported large simple effects, but later research emphasises interaction effects—colour interacts with other design elements (shape, typography, imagery) and with categorical schemata (e.g., a green car may communicate eco-friendliness only if the brand’s messaging supports that inference).

6.2 Measurement and ecological validity

Laboratory experiments permit causal inference but may lack ecological validity; field studies and eye-tracking add realism but complicate control. Researchers should combine methods (lab, field, qualitative) to triangulate findings. Measuring outcomes across the funnel (attention, memory, attitude, behaviour) provides a fuller picture than any single metric.

6.3 Individual differences

Age, gender, visual acuity, and prior experiences moderate colour effects. For example, older adults may perceive colours differently due to lens yellowing; males and females sometimes show differing colour preferences, though findings are inconsistent. Designers should incorporate user testing across demographic segments when feasible.

7. Best-practice recommendations for practitioners

- 1. Start with strategy:** Define the brand’s values and personality traits (e.g., innovative, trustworthy) — then select colour dimensions (hue, saturation, value) that align with those traits. Colour should reinforce strategic positioning, not contradict it.
- 2. Test in context:** Prototype colour choices in realistic contexts (shelf, mobile, billboard, store interiors). Use A/B tests and eye-tracking where possible to measure attention and conversion.
- 3. Maintain consistency, allow flexibility:** Create an identity system specifying primary/secondary palettes, usage rules, and accessibility standards. Allow local adaptations for cultural markets but retain a core cue for global recognition.
- 4. Respect accessibility:** Ensure contrast ratios and colour-blind-friendly alternatives—colour should not be the only carrier of essential information (e.g., error states should not rely solely on colour).
- 5. Use colour as a storytelling asset:** Combine colour with narrative, imagery, and sensory cues to build associative meaning over time (affective conditioning). Pantone’s trend forecasting and “Color of the Year” demonstrate how colour can align with cultural moments to amplify messaging, but long-term brand colour systems should not chase short-term trends without strategic fit.

8. Case examples (illustrative)

This section briefly illustrates how principles apply in practice.

8.1 A trust-oriented fintech brand

Objectives: convey competence and security. Choice: muted, desaturated blues with high value contrast for text. Rationale: lab experiments and branding research link blue and muted tones to competence/trustworthiness; desaturation reduces arousal while signalling seriousness. Testing: A/B tests comparing saturated vs muted blues on sign-up conversion to verify real-world effects.

8.2 An experiential organic food brand

Objectives: evoke naturalness and freshness. Choice: mid-greens with earthy browns; matte packaging to suggest tactile authenticity. Rationale: green associates with nature and health; tactile matte finishes increase perceived authenticity. Testing: shelf mockups and taste-expectation surveys prior to rollout.

9. Future research directions

While substantial progress has occurred, several areas merit further study:

- **Neuroaesthetic mechanisms:** Combining neuroimaging with field studies could clarify automatic affective responses to colour and their translation into behaviour.

- **Temporal dynamics:** How do colour associations develop over months and years with brand exposure? Longitudinal studies would inform brand-building strategies.
- **Cross-platform consistency:** Investigate how digital colour systems and material reproductions interact to shape holistic brand perception across touchpoints.
- **Sustainability signals:** As environmental concerns grow, research should clarify which colour cues (hues, textures, finishes) reliably communicate sustainability without greenwashing.

Conclusion

Colour serves as one of the most powerful yet often underestimated tools in brand communication. It operates simultaneously on perceptual, emotional, and symbolic levels, shaping how consumers notice, interpret, and remember brands. Research consistently shows that hue, saturation, and value influence perceptions of brand personality—such as excitement, competence, and sincerity—and can directly affect attitudes, preference, and purchasing behaviour. However, these effects are never universal; they depend on cultural context, product category, design environment, and individual differences. Effective use of colour therefore requires strategic intent, cultural sensitivity, and empirical testing. Brands that treat colour as an integral part of their identity—rather than a decorative afterthought—achieve stronger recognition, clearer positioning, and deeper emotional resonance with their audiences. In today’s saturated visual landscape, consistent yet adaptable colour systems help maintain distinctiveness and trust across both physical and digital touchpoints. Future research should continue exploring how colour interacts with other sensory and contextual cues, especially in cross-cultural and digital environments. Ultimately, colour is not merely an aesthetic choice—it is a language of emotion and meaning that, when applied with understanding and consistency, becomes a defining element of brand equity and long-term consumer connection.

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