

Module 13: "Color and Society"

Lecture 36: "Single Color Meaning"

The Lecture Contains:

- Single Color Meanings
- Three Layers of Culture
- Meaning of Color in Social Events
- Colour has Cultural Significance
- Color in Politics
- Color Symbolism in Religion
- Age Affects People's Colour Preferences
- Conclusion

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Single Color Meanings

Colour is a powerful and important communication tool, and it is tied to religious, cultural, political and social influences. A single color may have totally contrasting meanings, depending on where in the world you live. For example, white is perceived as purity and virtue in western society, while in many Asian countries it represents mourning. White in India is associated with peace, serenity and purity. That is why during mourning symbolically people use white in large part of India. The table below, modified from several sources, highlights the differences in the meanings of colors between different cultural groups. Some references gave very different meaning to colors, and all these have been included in the table. For example, one reference gave yellow a cowardly meaning¹, while another said it indicated joy and happiness.

Color is very much subjective and extremely difficult to judge measure globally. Recent globalization has successfully implemented some of the aspects to rationalize its application. While cultures are complexes of learned behavior patterns and perceptions, societies are groups of interacting organisms.

Three Layers of Culture

1. The body of cultural traditions that distinguish the specific society from others
2. The culture that may be part of your identity is a subculture

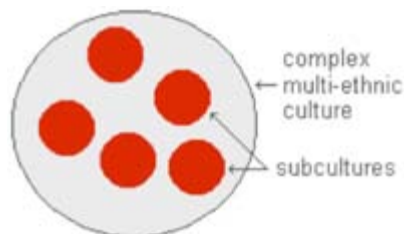


Plate 17 Cultural Layers

(Ref. http://anthro.palomar.edu/culture/culture_1.htm)

(<http://thinkvitamin.com/design/how-colour-communicates-meaning/>)

3. The layer of culture consists of cultural universals. These are learned behavior patterns that are shared by all of humanity collectively.

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Meaning of Color in Social Events



Ceremonial Event, India



Mourning Dress (Christianity)



Mourning in China



Queen's Birthday Celebration, UK



Birthday Cupcake Color



Birthday Flower

Plates 18 Meaning of Colors in Social Events

Most of us have a favourite colour or prefer some colours over others. This is because can affect our moods so we surround ourselves in the colours that have a positive impact on our mood.

The influence of color may be interpreted differently in different global cultures- religion, politics, climate, gender, age and other influences that play a powerful role. The issue of globalization against national traditions of color has certainly has become an interesting area of research. Each culture and nation takes pride in displaying and preserving their identity through various manners. Color is one of the most powerful elements to express the national and cultural sentiment of a country.



Plates 22. Green (Islamic) Islamic Architecture Geometric & Calligraphy



Covering the head is considered taboo.



Orange Color associated with Hindu Spiritual Gurus



International Flags



Clean Environment



Recycling



Olympic Color

Plates 19 Color Taboo & Symbolism

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Taboo dominates the social ethos in most traditional cultures. Many times the reason may not be logically understood. However, the faith remains to be respected. The sentiment around any taboo has to be respected and not challenged. National flags of every country choose special colors in their flag that symbolizes and attach societal sentiment and pride. Each color has very special significance related to their ethos and philosophy of the nation.



Buddhist (orange)

Jewish (blue)
Star of David

Feminine Color

Feminine & Masculine
ColorsFertility- Growth
(Fertility)Spring Color
Plate 20 Color Symbolism in CultureTanzanian Symbol- Green, Yellow
& Black- fertility, mineral & people

Based on the above observations, colors are being applied in modern design to attract the human emotion. However, one need to remember understanding each culture is extremely important for its successful result. However, interestingly in many cases the color taboo is ignored in today's application. The urbanization may not accommodate the social taboo in their lifestyle, however a large segments of population continues to practice the above taboos.

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Colour has Cultural Significance

Different colours mean different things in different places. This is extremely important for designers to know because without an awareness of the cultural significance of a particular color, one may risk offending the entire target audience.

Purple for example is a colour of mourning in Thailand. In western culture however, it is associated with royalty, luxury, wealth and sometimes magic. Many times purple color is used for the expensive perfume bottle packaging design. The brand colour for Thai Airways is purple. On first glance this seems like a huge error on their part because as mentioned above, purple is a colour of mourning in Thailand.

It is most likely however, that the Thai Airways website isn't aimed at locals but at tourists, therefore if westerners view the site and see purple it will associate Thai Airways with values such as luxury and comfort.

- In western cultures black is a colour of mourning
- In Japan however it is a colour of honour, with white the colour of mourning
- Red in the west represents danger, love, passion, in India it is a colour of celebration (marriage), in China it is a colour of good luck and in South Africa it is a colour of mourning
- Yellow represents courage in Japan, celebration of Spring Season, mourning in Egypt and hope in the West

(<http://thinkvitamin.com/design/how-colour-communicates-meaning/> March 19th 2012)

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Color in Politics

The association between political parties and colours isn't a new connection but it is often taken for granted. In the UK for example the following pairings exist:

Labour – Red

Conservative – Blue

Liberal Democrats – Yellow

The Green Party – Green

If a colour is representative of a political party then the values and behaviours that the party is known for can be suggested through the use of this colour.

Red is often linked to socialism and communism

White has links to pacifism and the surrender flag. In India white symbolizes 'peace' and compassion.

In contrast to this, black is a colour that is used in conjunction with anarchism.

Color Symbolism in Religion

As with politics, colours are representative of certain religions. So as not to unintentionally offend anyone through your designs, some examples of these colour/religion associations are:

- Green is considered to be the holy colour of Islam
- Judaism is represented by the colour yellow
- In Hinduism, many gods have blue skin (Krishna)
- White is linked to peace across many religions



Islamic (Green)



Buddhism (Orange/ Saffron)



Christianity (Green & Red)



Judaism (Blue & White)



Hinduism (Red/ Orange/ Yellow)

Again this may only be necessary information if you are designing a site that has specific links to religion but it also emphasises that a thorough knowledge of your audience is a fundamental part of the design process.

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Age Affects People's Colour Preferences

"Colour expert Faber Birren carried out many studies into this area and in his book Color Psychology and Color Therapy, he states that for both genders, blue and red "maintain a high preference throughout life". He found that yellow is popular with children but as become move into adulthood it shows less popularity. Birren found that, "with maturity comes a greater liking for hues of shorter wave length (blue, green, purple) than for hues of longer wave length (red, orange, and yellow)"

Another factor that influences people's colour preferences is that throughout their life there will be social and cultural changes and this can directly impact on their favourite colours. Some knowledge of what colours certain age ranges prefer can be valuable for designers. If you were designing a website for a toy store or a children's TV channel, then knowing they prefer bright colours and yellow in particular would help with your design decisions.

Likewise, if you designed a website for a charity whereby the audience was to be the older generation then blue, green or purple might be ideal, based on Birren's findings."

(<http://thinkvitamin.com/design/how-colour-communicates-meaning/>)

Conclusion

Exposure to modern day lifestyle, especially the urban environment allows one to interact with cross-cultural and multi-ethnic cultural environment that has strong influence on the choice of color. The modern day minimalist color and form has strong influence in our lifestyle. It has generated new style of color selection that has created a new choice of aesthetic appreciation. Therefore, choice of color is extremely complex that requires vast exposure of wide range of cultural ethos.

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