

# Colour Psychology

How people respond to colour is of great interest to those who work in marketing. Colour psychology research is often focused on how the colouring of a logo or a product will yield higher sales, and what colour preferences can be found in certain age groups and cultures.

The study of the psychological effects of colour have coincided with colour theory in general. Goethe focused on the experience of colour in his *Zur Farbenlehre* from 1810,<sup>1</sup> in opposition to Sir Isaac Newton's rational approach. Goethe and Schiller coupled colours to character traits: red for beautiful, yellow for good, green for useful, and blue for common. Gestalt psychology in the early 1900s also attributed universal emotions to colours, a theory that was taught to students at the Bauhaus by Wassily Kandinsky.

The best known colour psychology test was conducted by Max Lüscher in the 1940s, when he tested the responses of people to a series of coloured cards. A psychologist could interpret the person's character based on the test results. The interpretation of this research in colour psychology is disputed, since it is not clear whether people respond to the colours or the cultural concept of the colour. It is more likely that the cultural context, our upbringing, and personal preferences influence our interpretation of colour more than anything else.<sup>2</sup>

Some colour psychology findings have been proven to work. 'Cooler' colours can have a calming influence on people, which is why hospitals and prison walls are often painted in a soft greenish colour. Another research shows that the colour of placebo pills influences their effectiveness. Blue coloured pills work better as depressants, and red colour pills better as stimulants.<sup>3</sup>

1. Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von, *Zur Farbenlehre*, 1810.

2. Gage, John. *Color and Meaning: Art, Science, and Symbolism*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999. 31.

3. Cohen, Tessa Fiorini. 'The Power of Drug Color.' *The Atlantic*. October 13, 2014. [www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/10/the-power-of-drug-color/381156](http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/10/the-power-of-drug-color/381156).

4. Holtzschue, Linda. *Understanding Color*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2002.

# Colour and Culture

Research shows that ninety-eight languages have words for the same eleven basic colours;<sup>4</sup> however, the meaning a colour may have can be very different. There are conflicting theories on whether the cultural meanings of colours can be categorised. Meanings can change over time and depend on the context. Black may be the colour of mourning in many countries, though a black book cover or a black poster is not always associated with death. Another example is that brides in China traditionally wear red, but many brides have started to wear white in recent decades.<sup>4</sup> The cultural meaning of colours is not set but always changing. The next few pages list some of the meanings of colours in different cultures.

## Black

was the colour of mourning during the Roman empire, and in Judaism and Christianity it is associated with death and evil. During the Middle Ages, black clothing became popular, and during the Renaissance it was worn by the wealthy and nobility in all parts of Europe. In the nineteenth century, the black army was the nickname of the Russian anarchists. In the twentieth century, black became the colour of Italian and German fascism, who were called blackshirts. In Shia Islam black is a very devout colour. The black standard is one of the flags of Muhammad in Islam. The black standard has been appropriated as a symbol by jihadism since the late 1990s.

## White

is the colour of death and mourning in China, Vietnam, and Korea. In India, people wear white after the death of a family member. Jewish, Christian and Hindu religions use the colour white in rituals to indicate purity, chastity, virginity, and peace. White is the traditional colour of bridal dresses in Western cultures. In Europe, white was historically associated with absolute monarchy. It became synonymous in the twentieth century with anti-communist and counter-revolutionary movements in Russia. A white dove is an international sign of peace, and a white flag is the international sign of surrender.

## Yellow

is the most visible colour from a distance, so it is often used for objects that need high visibility, such as ambulances, road maintenance equipment, and taxis. In East Asia, yellow is considered sacred and imperial. In China it is the colour for royalty, and during the Qing Dynasty, only members of the imperial household were permitted to wear yellow. In China it is still seen as the colour of happiness, glory, wisdom, harmony, and culture. Yellow is used to symbolise gold as one of the colours of the Catholic church and the Vatican. Yellow in Italian is *giallo* and a nickname for crime stories. The demonstrations in the Philippines in 1986 were also known as the yellow revolution.

## Orange

comes from the Sanskrit word for orange tree. In Asia it is known as saffron, named after the spice. In Hinduism, the divinity Krishna is portrayed dressed in saffron. In Buddhism, saffron is the colour of illumination, the highest state of perfection, and the colour of robes worn by monks. Orange ribbons are used to promote awareness and prevention of self-injury. In Northern Ireland the protestant order is called the Orangemen, who wear orange during annual marches. Orange is the colour of the Dutch monarchy, and in South Africa, orange was the colour of the ruling party during Apartheid. Prisoners are often dressed in orange to make them distinctive in case of escape.

## Red

comes from the Sanskrit word for blood. In Greek mythology it was the colour for the planet Mars and the god of war. Red is the most important colour in China and means good luck and happiness. Red promotes long life, and it is used in Chinese new year celebrations. Red is the traditional colour for brides in India and Nepal. In Japan, a red kimono symbolises happiness and good luck. In Japan's Shinto religion, red is the symbol of life. The Russian word for red has the same root in Old Russian as the word 'beautiful'. The oldest symbol of socialism is the red flag, and red is still associated with socialist and communist parties. The red shirts, or the red movement, was the name of those who opposed the 2006 military coup in Thailand.

## Green

is the colour of nature in many cultures. Early rituals centred on the hope of a good harvest with green vegetables. Green is the traditional colour of Islam, the colour of the prophet Muhammed, which is why many flags in the Islamic world use the colour green. Since the 1980s, green has become the colour of environmental parties and organisations. Green parties in Europe have programmes based on ecology and environment. The word greenwashing is used to describe the advertising of companies that use positive environmental practices to cover up environmentally unfriendly activities. A 'green room' is used in television and theatre to quiet nervous performers.

## Blue

is tested as the colour that is best liked by all cultures, which is how it became the colour for international business. The United Nations chose blue as a colour in 1946, but the colour has no special significance. Bluewashing is a term for companies that join the United Nations 'Global Impact Initiative' only for PR reasons. 'Blue collar worker' refers to the shirts worn by people working manual labour jobs. The Tuareg of North Africa wear blue turbans, dyed with indigo. Azure blue is the national colour of Italy, the national soccer team is called the *Azzurri*. Several languages, like Japanese, Thai, Korean, and Lakota Sioux, use the same word to describe blue and green.

## Purple

was the the most expensive dye in Roman times, and was worn by Roman magistrates, Byzantine emperors, and the rulers of the Holy Roman Empire. During the reign of Elizabeth I, only royalty was allowed to wear purple in England. Roman Catholic bishops still wear purple as a colour of royalty. In Japan, the colour is traditionally associated with the emperor and aristocracy. In Thailand, widows in mourning wear purple. In Western politics the colour purple is neutral, and used for a coalition between a left-wing and a right-wing party. The Women's Suffrage movement used purple, and the colour was adopted in the 1970s by the women's liberation movement. Purple and pink are both associated with the LGBT community.



21:54, 28 September 2005 by Zscout370



08:00, 5 February 2006 by Denelson83



21:33, 12 February 2006 by Vz83



13:36, 23 September 2008 by Flad



01:45, 27 September 2008 by MaggotMaster



23:46, 27 September 2008 by Flad



22:01, 9 October 2008 by Avala



19:02, 10 October 2008 by Flad



21:43, 10 October 2008 by Reisio



21:08, 26 September 2011 by Zscout370

# National Colours

With Yuri Veerman

The flag has been the most prominent symbol of national identity since the nineteenth century. A new national flag often marks a revolution or a political change. Flags have a military origin, and were used to identify military units from one another in the Roman legions.

Different national flags often use similar colours, sometimes even with the same meaning. Thirty-eight percent of the world's national flags use red as a colour, which symbolises the blood spilt for independence, or on the battlefield. One of the most used colour combinations is red, white, and blue (Chile, Panama, Russia, Samoa, United Kingdom, Thailand, etc.) where blue often symbolises the domination over sky or sea.<sup>1</sup>

Many African countries use red, black, and green in their flags. This stems from the Pan-African flag from 1920.<sup>2</sup> The red symbolises the blood spilled for liberation, black is for the African people, and green for the continent's natural wealth.

There have been a few monochrome flags. Morocco had a deep red flag for over two hundred years. Afghanistan had an all black flag at the end of the nineteenth century. And during the reign of the Taliban in 1996, Afghanistan had an all white flag. The last remaining monochrome flag in the world was the Libyan flag, a plain green field without markings or insignia.

The green flag was a personal choice of Muammar Gaddafi whose manifesto was called the 'Green Book'. Artist Yuri Veerman collected the different digital versions of the Libyan flag that were discussed on the English Wikipedia page, 'Flag of Libya'. Between 2005 and 2011 the chromatic representation of Libya was revised fifteen times, each with different shade of green. After a six-year fight over the right shade of 'Gaddafi green', a fifteenth revision was made, marking the fall of the Libyan regime and the last monochrome flag.

← Yuri Veerman, 'Libya in Transition', 2012.

1. Byrne, Marie. 'Culture & Communications: Similarities of Color Meanings Among Diverse Cultures' *The Journal of Global Issues & Solutions*. BWW Society, 2003.
2. 'UNIA Declaration of Rights of the Negro Peoples of the World', New York, August 13, 1920. Reprinted in Robert Hill, ed., *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Papers*, vol. 2, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983.