
ETHICAL ASPECTS OF COLOR IMPACT IN CROSS-CULTURAL MARKETING COMMUNICATION

Genoveva VladimirovaTechnical University – Sofia, Republic of Bulgaria gvladimirova@gmail.com**Bilian Marinov**Technical University – Sofia, Republic of Bulgaria bilinic@yahoo.com

Abstract: This paper attempts to summarize the determinants of consumer attitudes towards the color development of the products or services that designers and marketers need to comply with. The focus is the question of what are the characteristics of color impact on consumers in different cultural contexts. The proposed analysis is multidimensional and has an interdisciplinary character. The subject of analysis is the psycho-physiological and socio-cultural impact of color on the consumer in terms of its value differences. The aim is to expand the frame of reference and the understanding of the use of color as an effective marketing strategy for improving intercultural communication. In this respect, important role is played by the assumption that there are both individual and socio-cultural prerequisites in the perception of color by the user. The comprehension of the universal importance of color is based on the collected data from neurophysiology studies. Scientific evidence shows that regardless of the relevant ethnic and cultural particularities of the individual, the physiological effect of color is totally human and equally valid. In terms of intercultural marketing communication, perceptions related to color provoke various ethical problems. Outside the context of the general importance of color, the individual characteristics of consumers from different cultural regions are an issue that needs to be considered. In particular, the traditional customs established for a given region as well as the national, gender, age and religious concretizations of the issues are particularly significant. The thesis that color defines the distinction in the ethical judgment of a consumer from a given culture is viewed in the perspective of cross-cultural business ethics. An ethical analysis of the visual color representation of products is proposed by highlighting the user's perceptual attitudes and the extent of marketing strategy adequacy in different cultures. It provides a theoretical and descriptive framework for recognition and understanding of ethical issues in the visual representation of popular products, but to an audience culturally diverse in values. The use of examples endorses the idea that assessments of relevant ethical marketing communication should be interpreted in accordance with the socio-cultural identity of the consumer. It is no longer satisfactory to associate advertising only with persuasion, but needs to be seen as a comprehensive system, based on socio-ethical attitudes, and with economic effects as well. The theoretical, research and managerial consequences that arise from the ethics of visual color representation in the context of cross-cultural marketing communication are discussed. It is a challenge for marketers, ethicists and researchers to broaden their concept of marketing communication to a more compatible one with the ethics of perception of color and economic benefits for companies.

Keywords: ethics, marketing, color impact, psychophysiology, culture

1. INTRODUCTION

The use of color in marketing in the perspective of multicultural communication has a broad scientific basis and is an interdisciplinary object of research. It is already known that main factors in the formation of color perception are both the universal psychophysiology of man and his culture, social environment and situational experiences, as well. However, the individual and cultural features of the consumer, related to the perception of colour, deserve a deeper scientific understanding.

In a world of hedonistic consumers and striving for faster satisfaction of the basic¹¹⁸ human needs, the ethical questions concerning marketing in international business gain greater importance. According to Perception Research Services the first thing, which grabs the attention of the consumers is the color of the product [1]. For example, 85% of the consumers globally believe that color is a major motivating factor in choosing a product, and 93% get orientated in a purely visual way. Can we then call, and to what extent, “aggressive“ the marketing, in which every brighter color turns into a weapon of domination and rule of the leading brands (IBM, McDonald’s, KFC, Coca Cola, Nestle, and many others)? To what extent should marketers comply with the specific culture and the emotional impact of color on the consumer? Is a balance between the economic benefits in business and the endorsement of the values of individual and universal well-being possible? Is the concept of *universal consumer*,

¹¹⁸ See A. Maslow's hierarchy of needs in his well-known motivational theory (1943, 1953).

motivated by the dominant color in the world of advertising possible? Is the idea of cultural relativism, brought about by the unlimited use of color in the mass media, still topical?

The aim of the present research is to raise the importance of a marketing oriented at balance, responsibility and transparency so that it stimulates the generation of positive messages in advertising and providing products/services in business. Moreover, color plays a significant role not only in the economic but in the psychophysiological and linguistic evolution of man. Within the conceptual framework, emphasis is laid on **the impact of color as an active sense irritant in marketing communication.**

2. THE UNIVERSAL NATURE OF COLOR PERCEPTIONS IN PHYSIOLOGY

Research in the field of physiology reveals that, the functioning of the vegetative nervous system (VNS) is a key factor, which determines the reactions of human organism under the impact of color. A major contribution is the work of the Russian physiologist S. B. Kravkov [2]. The main object of his experiments was to identify the **correlation between color perception and 1) VNS and 2) hypothalamus**, which plays an integral part in the psychophysiological functions of the organism. Thus, for example, *the perception of the red-yellow part of the spectrum causes activation of the sympathetic part of the VNS and slows down the parasympathetic one*, while *the blue and the green color have a depressive effect on the sympathetic nervous system (SNS) and activate the parasympathetic nervous system (PSNS)* [3]. Moreover, the **SNS** determines behavior of the “fight-or-flight” type while the **PSNS** creates conditions for rest and recuperation. It is worth pointing out also that activation of the first type of VNS leads to dilation of the pupils, increase the incidence of heart rate and breathing, enhance the blood circulation in the brain and the muscles, weakens the stomach and the intestines, slows down the digestion processes. But if the predominant activity is that of the PSNS it is just the opposite – the blood circulation in the digestion tract is increased, the pulse decreases, the pupils contract and so on.

We can elaborate on some peculiarities of the **individual color perception of red, yellow, green and blue in physiology.** They are applicable in the practice of marketing communications to attract consumers in multicultural communication.

Red and **yellow** as stimulating colors justify their traditional characteristics as “active”. They make *interested* the VNS of a person who needs rest and recuperation. They stimulate the need for intensive functioning and output of energy. With a domination of the **SNS** and a further increase of its activity through the red and the yellow colors increases the risk of distress and impaired homeostasis. That is why the sensitivity of the eyes in perceiving these colors decreases. Since VNS always strives for balance, the sensitivity of the eyes in perceiving the red and yellow colors decreases, while to the **blue** and **green** colors it increases. Vice versa – the activation of the **PSNS** reduces the sensitivity to blue and green and increases it to red and yellow. The blue color, and to some extent, the green color have a relaxing effect and they are preferred by people looking for relaxation and rest. Continuous domination of the **parasympathetic part** (through impact of colors from the cold color scheme) is also problematic as it reduces the readiness of the organism for active functions, makes it difficult for it to act and can lead to depression. The physiological reactions of the organism to the impact of the four colors are: **1) red** causes a sensation of rise in the temperature, activates all functions of the organism, for a short time increases the muscle tenseness, intensify the blood pressure, accelerates breathing, stimulates VNS; **2) yellow** refers to refreshes, cheers up, warms up, increases muscle activity; stimulates the activity of the central nervous system; **3) green** decreases the blood pressure and expands the capillaries, calms down, reduces stress; and **4) blue** slows down the cardiac activity, has a soothing effect but can turn into a depression [2].

We believe that to achieve economically and ethically successful intercultural communication with the consumer it is important for marketers to weight up the above physiological prerequisites when they use color in offering (advertising) their products.

3. PSYCHOLOGY OF THE MAIN CHROMATIC COLORS

The eighteenth century can be accepted as the starting point for the evolution of the psychology of color linked with the name of the great German poet Johann W. Goethe (“Theory of Colors”). His observations and conclusions about the connection between color and the psyche became the basis for later research on the same topic by scientists and thinkers such as Hegel, W. Kandinsky, N. Bohr, A. F. Losev, M. Luscher and others.

According to the classical theory of Goethe about color and emotions, the four colors are linked to the following characteristics: **red** gives a sense of weight and dignity and at the same time for grace and elegance. The effect of the **green** color, perceived by the eye is definitely soothing. **Blue**, according to Goethe, is almost imperceptible to the eye, as a nuance it is domineering in the negative sense of the word. It stimulates negation. Its occurrence is a

compromise between excitement and calmness. About the yellow he writes: “the eyes rejoice, the heart expands, the soul becomes merry, it seems to you that light appears“ [4].

Hegel also confirms the four basic chromatic colors [2, 3]. He relates them to emotional-color correspondences of the spirit: the light colors and **yellow** are lively, cheerful, creative; the dark colors and **blue** are meek, sensible; **red** – manly, royal; **green** – calm, neutral. The existing descriptions in psychology and cultural anthropology of the meaning of the four colors can be summarised as follows:

- The symbolic meanings of the **red color** are diverse and controversial. On the one hand, it symbolizes joy, strength and life, but on the other hand it can cause perceptions related to blood, feud, vengeance, aggression, lust and despotism. Red color is associated mostly with fire and blood. It is the symbol of joy, beauty, love, the blood of Christ, dynamics, strength and active acts [5, 6]. It stands for power and greatness. It is the color of the physical. It is associated with the ego, ambitions, valour, vanity, passion and sexuality.
- **Yellow color** is the first color, which the child perceives. It is associated with the sun, gold, autumn and ripe wheat, positive energy, activity and optimism. Yellow is linked with intellect and buoyancy. It is a cheerful, joyful excitation. The yellow color is the brightest and the most visible of all the colors in the spectrum. It fastest attracts the attention of the consumer, which makes it preferred by brands offering middle/down market product.
- **Green color** is the most common color in nature and is perceived by the consumer as non-intrusive and natural. It has a beneficial effect on people. It is associated with youth, vitality, hope, grass and leaves. Green is a symbol of wakening life, of strength, of long age, of nature, the opposite of industrialization. Although the green color can have a weak negative aspect as overpossessiveness and materialism, most scientists believe that its impact on people is more positive unlike the other colors. It is known in physiology that the green color has a soothing effect and helps the organism to reach homeostasis. Green has many similar meanings in different cultures which are: nature, ecology, health, military, etc.
- **Blue color** is associated with the sky, the sea and water, with the Universe and thought, with fidelity and godly wisdom. Blue is the deepest color. The blue color symbolises security, trust, purity, chastity, honesty, fame, power. In color psychology blue characterizes the need for serenity and peace. It serves to restore the strength after profound experiences. It expresses striving for safety or oblivion, for harmony or passive sensitivity, for pleasant relationship and satisfaction. The blue is the color of spiritual peace, related to self-analysis and looking into oneself. But it can be associated with remoteness, coldness, loneliness and melancholy.

It follows from what has been said above that the meaning of the individual associations in the color spectrum in different cultures vary from: “active“, “hot“ and “vibrant” (associated with red) to “calming”, “gentle” and “peaceful” in the blue-green scheme. Yellow is positioned somewhere between them.

In order to interpret the psychological type of consumer from different cultures we use the most popular theory of human temperaments from Hippocrates (further developed by Galen, C.G. Jung and H. Eysenck). But instead of the monochromatic white and black, corresponding to phlegmatic and melancholic we concentrate on the chromatic green and blue (Fig.1).

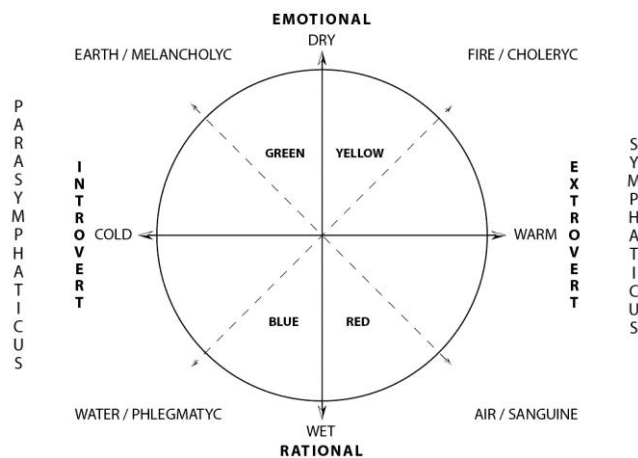


Fig. 1. Psycho-physiological model of the color impact on the consumer

In the example model presented here, the four temperament types are associated with the qualities of the four basic chromatic colors. That allows us to broaden the conceptual framework of interpreting the psychophysiological qualities of the consumer from different cultural contexts. From the brightest (yellow) to the deepest color, the profiles of the four types of consumers are the following: **choleric** (yellow, fiery, warm/dry, extrovert) – active, wilful, irritable and quick-tempered; **sanguine** (red, airy, warm/wet, extrovert) – lively, active, positive; **phlegmatic** (blue, of water, cold/wet, introvert) – calm, analytic, balanced, imperturbable or even impassive; and **melancholic** (green, earthly, cold/dry, introvert) – careful, profound, slow, deep in thought and often sad. According to Jung's concept¹¹⁹, the four colors correspond to the two rational (primary) and the two irrational (assisting) cognitive functions in general attitude types. Precisely the association between four elements of matter and the noted cognitive functions imposed this arrangement of the colors in Fig.1. For the full understanding of the different profiles we lean on the **hypothesis** that

“the consumer’s preference for a color depends on the compensatory mechanisms for reducing the needs/deficits in the psycho-physiology and the energetics of the individual.”

From the above we can draw the conclusion that in situations of stress, overpressure, insecurity, or any factors destabilizing the equilibrium of the individual, it is easier for a need to arise to perceive color, which is closest to those psychophysiological qualities that will lead the organism to a state of homeostasis. Thus, for example, if we have had too much of the qualities of red, standing for work, dynamics, ambitions, or associated with aggression, fear, and despotism it would not be surprising if we prefer to choose as a compensation the qualities characteristic of the opposite (cold) color scheme.

4. CROSS-CULTURAL METAANALYSIS OF COLOR PERCEPTION

The metaanalysis [7, 8, 9] of data about color perception in different cultures is conducted in two directions. First, in **color science**, in terms of **the extent of lightness of the color hue**, colors are perceived sequentially like that: *yellow, orange, red, violet, blue, green*. It is a well-known fact that the advertising of products in yellow (as the brightest and the first to originate) is fast noticed by the consumer during the day. Second, in comparative cultural studies, starting with the **Sapir–Whorf hypothesis**¹²⁰ and **the theory of foci of basic color terms** (Berlin & Kay, 1969), we can accept as convergent with the aims of the present research the formulated **thesis about the sequence of the origin of the language categories** in the different languages [10]. The eleven basic colors, are encoded in the history of every language in a certain sequence. It forms a kind of **evolution in the perception of the world expressed in the linguistic evolution**. The main stages in that evolution are the appearance of the concepts of *white and black* color, followed by *red* (the language already contains three color terms), *yellow or green* (there are four color terms), and *yellow and green* (five concepts), *blue* with six concepts respectively, and if the language contains seven color terms or more we continue with *brown, violet, pink, orange, grey*. It is not accidental, as the chromatic color originated in the language, namely the red one is the most aggressively influential – it provokes a desire for active acts in the consumer.

According to a study of R. Fletcher presented at an international conference in N. Ireland (2004), color may be associated with words such as *expensive, happy, love, dependable* [11]. The results include the most common associations corresponding to the chromatic colors in different cultural context. Here is an excerpt:

China: **grey** – independable; **blue** – high quality/expensive; **green** – dependable; **red** – happy, love;

Japan: **grey** – independable; **blue** – dependable; **red** – love, happy;

USA: **grey** – expensive/dependable; **blue** – dependable/expensive; **red** – love, happy.

The findings of research done by L. Jacobs and colleagues of his [12] show that while certain colors (such as white, black, red, blue) more categorically reflect cultural similarities, others (such as lilac and grey) have, over time, developed opposite meanings in different cultures. In support of the above is the existing **new tendency for companies to use in their advertising a transition from red, pink, lilac and orange color**. This is a combination of very bright and intense color teasers, which leads to a diffusion of the perceived image. The latter has been proven by research carried out by S. Bakshi and E. Gilbert as to how color impacts the emotions and behavior of the consumers from different internet-communities, for example Pinterest [13]. The results show that *the qualities of red, lilac and red stimulate diffusion of the image while green, blue, black and yellow suppress it*. In consequence of the cultural analysis carried out in the perspectives of color science and linguistic evolution, the different cultures with their respective perceptions of color can be described as follows:

¹¹⁹ These are: thinking/feeling, corresponding to blue and red, and intuition/sensation – yellow and green.

¹²⁰ The two scientists introduce the concept of “language picture of the world”.

Table 1. Value meanings of red color in different cultures

<i>Examples, according to the user's red color preference</i>	Value meanings of color in different cultures			
	<i>Traditional Perceptions</i>	<i>Emotions</i>	<i>Personal dimensions</i>	<i>Negative connotations</i>
India	Purity, Fertility, Beauty	Love	Power	Fear, Fire
Western Cultures	Lord, Wisdom, Nthusiasm, Royalty & Government	Excitement, Love	Passionate, Fidelity - (Italy), Action	Anger, War, Sin, Lust, Danger (USA)
South America	Religion, Family bonds	Passion, Love, Drama, Compassion	Persuasion, Tolkativeness, Volatility	Inaduate Planing, Death (Mexico)
China	New Year, Marriage, Good luck, Gift, Government	Joy	Big heart, Cheery	Funeral, Over-excitation
Africa	Morning (South Africa), Wealth (Nigeria), Vitality	n/a	Masculinity	War, Death, Aggression(Nigeria)
Middle East	Good Fortune (Iran), Luck (Egypt), Sacrifice (S. Africa)	Excitability	Changebility	Caution, Danger, Evil
Scandinavians	Death after life, Victory (Denmark), Red Cottage	Idyll	Strong	n/a
Japan	Prosperity, Good fortune	Love, Happiness	Power, Brave, Vitality	Anger
Russia	Power, Beauty, Blood, Fire	Love	Productive, Fertile, Power	Communism
Eastern Europe	Health, Beauty, Medicine, Red Wool (Macedonia)	Happiness, Gratitude	Passionate, Powerful	Anger, Inaduate Planing, Heat

Tabl. 2. Value meanings of blue color in different cultures

<i>Examples, according to the user's blue color preference</i>	Value meanings of color in different cultures			
	<i>Traditional Perceptions</i>	<i>Emotions</i>	<i>Personal dimensions</i>	<i>Negative connotations</i>
India	Sports	Strength	Creautre	
Western Cultures	Blus, Trust, Safety, Authority, Patriotism (USA)	Calmness, Happy (USA)	Fidelity, Masculine, Trustworthy (Canada)	Depression, Cowardice (USA)
South America	Virgin Mery, Hopeness, Wealth, Trust (Mexico)	Hope, Tranquility (Mexico)	Trustworthy	Trouble Mourning (Mexico)
China	Immortality, Healing, Senior	Relaxation	Trustworthy, Feminine	Ghosts, Unlucky
Africa	Thruth, Justice, Faith (Egypt), Happiness(S.Africa)	Peaceful	Positive (Nigeria)	n/a
Middle East	Heaven, The Lord, Holliness (Israel), Safety, Spirituality	n/a	Protective	Mourning (Iran)
Scandinavians	Clean life	Freedom	Soothing	Poor
Japan	Loyalty	Cold	Intellectual	n/a

Russia	Wealth, Seniors	Respect	Loyalty	Homosexual
Eastern Europe	Art, Wisdom, Healing (Ukraine)	Calmness	Honest, Protective, Conservative	Melancholy

Tabl. 3. Value meanings of green color in different cultures

<i>Examples according to the user's green color preference</i>	Value meanings of color in different cultures			
	<i>Traditional Perceptions</i>	<i>Emotions</i>	<i>Personal dimensions</i>	<i>Negative connotations</i>
India	Hope, Harvest, Islam, Nature	Compassion	Virtue	
Western Cultures	Luck, New Birth, Money (USA)	Confidence	Masculinity (USA), Healthy, Sexy (Spain)	Jealousy, Greed, Ambiguity, Envy
South America	Growth, Prosperity	n/a	Indipendent (Mexico)	Death
China	Morning, Birth	Harmony	Calm, Self-assurance	Infidelity, Disgrace
Africa	Nature (S. Africa), Fertility, Islam	Lucky	n/a	Corruption (N. Africa)
Middle East	Sacred (Shiite muslims), Fertility, Hope, Islam,	Respect	Strength	n/a
Scandinavians	God of fertility	n/a	n/a	Sterility
Japan	Life, High Tech, Eternity	Serenity	Activity	Jealousy
Russia	Environmental protection	n/a	Friendship	Cheerless
Eastern Europe	Wealth, Health, Growth	Cosily	Generosity	Immature

Tabl. 4. Value meanings of green color in different cultures

<i>Examples, according to the user's yellow color preference</i>	Value meanings of color in different cultures			
	<i>Traditional Perceptions</i>	<i>Emotions</i>	<i>Personal dimensions</i>	<i>Negative connotations</i>
India	Sacred, Commerce	Happy	Auspicious	n/a
Western Cultures	Hope, Happiness, Caution, Hazard, Visibility	Happy, Joy	Funny	Treason (Spain), Envy (German)
South America	Wealth (Argentina)	n/a	n/a	Death, Sorrow
China	Earth, Power, Royalty, Masculinity, Money	Happy, Empathy	Desirability, Reliable	Anxiety, Pornography
Africa	High rank, Wealth (South Africa)	n/a	Successful	Mourning (Ethiopia)
Middle East	Soul & Prosperity (Egipt), Strenght	Happy	Saintly (Israel), Reliable (Saudi Arabia)	Mourning (Egipt)
Scandinavians	Christianity & Uniforms (Sweden), God sign	Warmth	Generosity, Hearty	n/a
Japan	Nature	Cheerful	Courage, Bravery	Treachery
Russia	Yellow Tulips, Psychiatric hospital	n/a	n/a	Illness, Betrayal,

				Parting
Eastern Europe	Spring, Imperial	Hospitality (Ukraine)	Optimistic	Envy

4. EXAMPLES FROM THE WORLD OF MARKETING

The thesis that there is a most and a least attractive color is based on global marketing research. Statistics shows that the most preferred colors when choosing products/services are **blue and red**. Thus, for example 33% of the brands use blue color, 27% – red, 16% – yellow and 7% – green. According to other data, 57% of men in the world prefer blue, while the percentage is 35 with women, which takes blue to the front position as the most desired color [11]. Last in the ranking are brown (with men) and orange (with women).

Blue is a cold color and is recommended in advertising brands, which want to look *serious, stable, correct and transparent*. Red as a warm color is recommended in advertising products of the food processing industry or with the aim to urge the consumer to act. Stark, simple, bright and intense colors are recommended in advertising middle market or downmarket products, and the more complex, not intense colors – for upmarket products. The aim of the bright colors is to cause a quick reaction of hunger but also at the unconscious level to tease the perceptions of the consumers. For example, fast food chains such as KFC, McDonald’s, Burger King, Taco bells, Happy, Pizza Hut and others, use clear, simple, easy to perceive colors from the warm scheme – red and yellow, to stimulate excitation in the receptors for hunger in their customers.

In the context of multicultural communication it is possible to have different in their extent depth and force conflicts of values. The careful choice of advertising products corresponding to the values, emotions and traditions of consumers from various cultures is a main prerequisite for raising trust in a brand thus bringing higher profits for the company. We can imagine how the green color and the message for “Relaxing Environment and Communication“ of Starbucks would be, in a multicultural conflict, promoting their brand in the southern part of Latin America where green is most often associated with death [see Tabl. 1-4]. The same is the example with the red of Coca Cola, which in many countries in South Africa has the same symbolic meaning. Another similar case of potential multicultural contradiction would arise concerning the blue color. In Western cultures blue is a popular symbol of manlihood and ambitions, while in China it is perceived as a womanly color. As a result man-oriented western blue brands will not be adequately accepted by men in China and vice versa.

5. CONCLUSION

The paper put to the test the possibility for broadening the conceptual framework in understanding and popularizing color from the perspective of multicultural marketing communication. An attempt has been made to develop a psychophysiological profile of the consumer in color perception. A review has been made of the positive and negative effects of the basic chromatic colors in different cultures. These are the first chromatic colors in the linguistic evolution of man – red, yellow, green and blue. In a cross-cultural perspective color impact was concretized in their association with values, emotions and personal traits. Assuming that marketing plays a significant role in persuading the modern consumer, there are issues related to the multicultural competence of managers and marketeers. That would allow reducing the risk of potential cross-cultural conflicts of values according to the thesis of the cultural relativism in global business. Figuratively we have presented concretizations of the different effects of color on the consumer in different cultures. Other issues are the lack of correspondence of the most preferred color schemes in a culture and trends in marketing to stimulate overconsumption and materialism. The conclusions point out that the subjective perception of a consumer affects his/her personal traits, culture and most of all from the particular situation. Probably, due to the strong influence of the context when choosing, there is a lack of reliable results from scientific research and classifications of color in cross-cultural marketing. The object of a further study are monochromatic colors as another important element in multicultural marketing communication.

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