

Colors: A Unique Understanding and Sociological Interpretation Across Societies

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ABSTRACT

Color is a universal phenomenon, yet its meanings and interpretations vary significantly within a society, as well as across cultures, shaped by social norms and historical contexts. This theoretical paper aims to provide a sociological interpretation of colors and color symbolism, drawing exclusively on secondary data sources. The present research explores how colors are interpreted differently across different societies, and how these meanings impact human behavior, emotions and even social systems. By interpreting color as socially and culturally constructed and not an isolated concept, this paper contributes to a broader and detailed understanding of how colors can be approached from a psychological as well as sociological perspective. The findings emphasize the functions of colors, how colors impact human emotions, cross-cultural interpretations of colors and finally, how colors impact relationships in society, thus, offering an in-depth perspective on the sociological dimensions of colors across societies.

Introduction

A color is defined as a characteristic of visual perception arising from the stimulation of photoreceptor cells in one's eyes in response to various wavelengths of light (Bettini, 2016). Such perceptions are named such as red, yellow, green, blue, purple, and so on. An important concept related to the scientific study of colors is Colorimetry— 'the science and technology used to quantify and describe the human color perception' (Ohno, 2000). While the broader study of colors is called Color Science, the study of colors across societies and their comparison can be referred to as Cross-cultural Color Science.

A popular mnemonic to memorize the seven colors of the optical spectrum is termed as VIBGYOR- an acronym that represents Violet, Indigo, Blue, Green, Yellow, Orange and Red (Roy et al., 2021). These are considered to be the main set of chromatic colors from which various new mixtures and shades emerge. This order of the colors as stated in VIBGYOR is in an

ascending order of wavelength. Red, being of highest wavelength, is visible from a very large distance which is also why major signs and symbols on roads are red in color (Roy et al., 2021).

Colors can also have many shades that vary in brightness, hue and saturation. For instance, yellow can have various shades such as bright yellow, mustard yellow and lemon yellow; and shades of green can vary from bright green to olive green (Frery et al., 2000). These shades are more significant in art, painting and design, to enhance aesthetic beauty and expression.

In addition, colors can broadly be classified as **chromatic** and **achromatic**. Chromatic colors possess distinct hues, while **achromatic colors**—such as black, white, and gray—do not possess hue and are defined solely by brightness and light (Narayana, 2021).

Further, colors can also be classified as primary or secondary on the basis of composition. Primary colors are those which are fundamental and are mixed to form other colors and shades. These are red, yellow and blue. Secondary colors on the other hand, such as orange, purple and green are those colors which are mixtures of primary colors (Narayana, 2021). To create more shades, primary colors and secondary colors are further mixed in varying proportions to produce more unique and complex shades, such as baby pink, olive green, brown and lilac.

Colors are usually understood in the context of drawing, painting, art and aesthetics. However, they also provide insights into the cultural and symbolic interpretations and meanings attached to colors across societies. For instance, an entire field of Psychology related to colors has emerged, referred to as Color Psychology. Sociologically, colors can be viewed as symbols used in society which indicate or reveal something meaningful, interpreted uniformly by the members living in that particular society. Therefore, colors have a significant role to play in the minds of individuals and in society, that is, they can be approached from a psychological as well as from a sociological perspective. Thus, colors are not isolated from the social system yet in fact, they play a significant role in social communication and cross-cultural understanding in various ways across the globe.

Review of Literature

The literature reviewed for the present research reiterates how colors are not isolated but play a significant role in all walks of individuals' lives—be it sports, medicine, social settings, advertisements or even consumer behavior.

Frank and Gilovich (1988) examined whether sports teams wearing black uniforms were more aggressive in their behavior and found that such teams belonging to two sports—ice hockey and football ranked the top of the list in most penalties and increased aggression among the players.

De Craen et al. (1996) conducted a study to examine the effect of color on drugs and found that red, yellow and orange colored drugs were associated with a stimulant effect, while blue and green colored drugs had a calming effect on individuals.

Meier and Clore (2004) highlighted how darkness and light were interpreted in popular culture. For instance, those wearing black were considered 'evil' and dark colors were associated with death and evil. Further, those wearing white were considered 'good' and light colors were associated with goodness and life. It was also analogized how while Satan was referred to as the 'Prince of Darkness', Jesus was referred to as the 'Light of the World.'

Lichtlé (2007) conducted a study to examine the effect of an advertisement's colour on emotions evoked by attitude towards the ad and found that color was found to affect emotions brought about by the advertisement, for instance, individuals were found to experience enhanced pleasure from ads which had red as their dominant color.

Shankar et al. (2009) conducted a study with M&Ms to examine how vision (color) impacted ratings of flavor and found that participants were heavily influenced by the external color of the product they consumed.

Elliot (2015) discussed how various colors were associated with psychological functioning, for instance, wearing red while playing sports conveyed dominance; blue color on a ribbon represented positivity while blue color on meat represented negativity as it suggested the meat was rotten.

Roohi and Forouzandeh (2019) conducted a study to examine the color psychology principles in adventure games to enhance the individuals' sense of involvement in the activity. The study was carried out on an adventure game 'TikTak' and it was found that color psychology played a significant role in affecting the performance and behavior of those playing the game.

Research Objectives

The objectives of the present research are as follows:

- To examine the functions of colors in society
- To understand how colors influence human behavior and emotions
- To highlight cross-cultural differences in the interpretation of colors
- To evaluate how colors impact relationships in society

Research Methodology

The present study employed a theoretical research design based on the analysis of available secondary data sources.

Results and Discussion

Based on the analysis of pre-existing secondary data sources, elucidated below are the results of the present research:

- **The functions of colors in society**

Colors have certain basic functions in society. Firstly, different colors used to represent different things make it easier for the viewer to interpret the message. This is particularly visible in the case of map reading where different colors are used to represent different geographical or topographical aspects. For example, blue is used to depict water bodies, brown is used to highlight mountainous regions or relief features and green usually depicts greenery in any form—grasslands, forest cover, wildlife management areas or vegetation.

Further, colors are used to allow individuals or groups to recognize certain common objects. For example, although red and yellow capsicums exist, the vegetable is usually shown green in color. Similarly, the branches and trunks of trees are always shown brown. Although green bananas do exist, small children associate the fruit with yellow color because that is normally how one is taught to recognize it. Sociology identifies this process of inculcation of knowledge in children as socialization. Children are primarily socialized in their families and the older members, such as parents teach the children basic objects along with its color to develop their basic learning.

Furthermore, commonly used in marketing and even on websites, more important information is highlighted in bright colors such as red, yellow or green so that the viewer's attention is focused on that particular piece of information. Such highlights are also used to attract the attention of the individual viewing it.

Colors also help conveying structure. For example, a table with 4 columns might be harder to read and understand if it does not have any color or is of the same color. If each column is in a different color, the columns become more distinct and also allow the viewers to understand the table quickly and easily.

Colors also help identities to be established. For example, Gmail makes use of red color; Yahoo makes use of purple and so on. This is also visible in brands and companies which have a particular color on their logo and they are gradually identified with that color. This also makes it easier for individuals to identify the company from afar. For instance, the popular eating outlet

Subway uses yellow and green which can be identified easily. Similarly, Barista's logo is a bright orange which one can recognize from a distance.

Colors also hold importance in subjects like Mathematics and Chemistry. Graphs, diagrams, chemical bonds, charts and other such graphical interpretations are more clear and visible with the help of colors. For example, in a component bar diagram, each component must be shown in a different color so that the diagram is easily understood by the reader. Similarly, if a chemical bond involves 3 elements, the diagram will show each element in a different color so that all the 3 elements are visible and the concept is clear to the individual.

Further, colors have linguistic associations and are used in metaphors and language as well. For example, 'green-eyed jealousy' is a term used to express envy and jealousy. Similarly, the popular phrase 'Monday blues' refers to negative feelings one associates with at the beginning of the week. Elaborating further, red can be referred to as 'cherry red', 'blood red' or even 'tomato red' depending on the context of conversations. One can also refer to green as 'light green', 'grass green', 'bottle green' and even 'olive green'. These are different shades of the same color and these terminologies are used to refer to something more specific than just the color itself.

Colors are also the prime focus of attention at any supermarket, grocery store or mall. The arrangement of products is strategic and it is always noted that all the items to be sold are placed in such a manner that they are attractive to the customers. Items are arranged colorfully and the consumer is eventually compelled to purchase something from the store.

The functions and the need for colors in a society point to the fact that there is a relation between man and colors. There are colors at every step of one's life and a society needs colors to operate. Even while traveling, the traffic signals operate with the help of colors which the individuals obey to avoid accidents. Therefore colors hold a valuable position in any society.

- **How colors influence human behavior and emotions**

Colors are not only restricted to art work and paintings. They play a very important role in peoples' daily lives and also influence their behavior and emotions. A branch of Psychology called Color Psychology, studies hues as a determinant of human behavior. Colors influence perception, emotions and can also enhance the effects of placebos.

Color Psychology as a model works on 6 basic principles:

- a) Color can carry a specific meaning.
- b) Color meaning is based either on learned meaning or biologically innate meaning.

- c) The perception of color causes evaluation automatically by the person perceiving.
- d) The evaluation process forces color-motivated behavior.
- e) Color usually exerts its influence automatically.
- f) Color meaning and effect has to do with context as well.

There is a direct link between color psychology as a psychological phenomenon and how it operates in a society as a sociological phenomenon. Color Psychology is widely used in marketing and branding. For example, in a grocery store, the items are organized in such a manner that it appears to be extremely colorful, thus urging the customer to purchase them. Logos of companies are also structured in such a way that it is attractive and more customers approach it. Colors are also important for window displays in larger malls and stores. The main motive behind this is to attract the customers by displaying colorful items such as yellows, reds, greens and oranges. A research revealed that although more favorable colors include cooler colors such as blue, spontaneous customers are attracted more towards red and orange.

Colors widely influence one's perception especially in the case of food. Food is more attractive if it is colorful. Dull colors do not attract people even if the food is well cooked. People also understand food and drinks by their color. For example, if a cherry juice is yellow or green in color, one might mistake it for lime juice. Food and drinks items are packed in colorful packets and cans so that the customers find them attractive and purchase them immediately. For example, the Gems which young children eat are packed in a purple packet with Gems written on it. Alongside, there is a picture of a lot of gems of multiple colors which are bright colors. This urges the children to purchase the item due to its attractiveness. Color Psychology is found functional and effective even in placebo. Bright color pills such as red, orange and yellow are found to be better stimulants, and cooler colors such as light blue are found to be better anti-depressants.

Color Psychology works in the case of individual differences as well. For example, speaking of gender, boys are usually shown items which are blue, black, white or red in color whereas girls are shown items which are pink and purple. This is also a social construct of gender which stereotypes the colors that boys and girls would prefer.

Color also influences performance in sports. It is revealed that red color has a strong influence on sports. It is perceived as the color of strength, and is seen as an active color which enhances motivation among the players to perform the best they can.

Most importantly, color strongly influences one's behavior and emotions. Different people have different choices of colors. A research in United States of America found that blue was the top choice followed by green, purple and red.

Color can also be influenced by temperature of the environment. For example, those living in cold areas prefer warm colors such as red and yellow, while those living in warm areas prefer cool colors such as blue and green. Another study showed that color is influenced by personality as well. Those who are introverts prefer cool colors while extroverts prefer warmer colors.

Thus, these are examples of how color psychology operates in a society.

- **Cross-cultural differences in the interpretation of colors**

Elaborated ahead are the meanings and influences of different colors as interpreted by the people living in the Western world such as United States of America as compared to the Eastern world such as India.

Firstly, United States of America and other countries of the Western world have their own interpretation and meaning of colors which influences their daily lifestyle.

- Red: Red signifies various behaviors. In certain contexts it could refer to arousal or lust, whereas in other contexts it could imply power. Red is also considered to be used when one wishes to show love, such as purchasing red roses for their loved ones. On the other hand, it could also represent anger or be a sign of danger.
- Yellow: Yellow is the color of happiness. It further signifies competence, joy, hope, sunshine and friendship.
- Green: Green can have two meanings. Green can be used to show eco-friendliness and love towards the environment. However, it can also be a sign of jealousy.
- Blue: The color is considered 'masculine' as at a young age, males are shown blue colored items (whereas girls are given pink ones). However, the color is a cool color which also portrays cooperation and reliability. Blue can also be used as a metaphor when one says he/she is feeling 'blue', meaning melancholic.
- Pink: Pink color is considered 'feminine' but it also represents sincerity, tenderness and acceptance.
- Violet/Purple: The color represents authority, royalty and power in the Western world.

- Orange: This color is represented as full of excitement. The color spreads joy, enthusiasm and is looked up to as a color that spreads positivity.
- Brown: The color reveals ruggedness in geographical as well as psychological terms.
- White: The color is known as the color of peace, purity and happiness. This is why in the Western world white is worn on marriages, happy occasions such as baptism in church and other auspicious events.
- Black: The color is the opposite of white and is the color of grief, fear and even death. This is why people in the west wear black to funerals.

On the other hand, India and other countries of the Eastern world interpret colors differently which influences their daily lifestyle as well.

- White: In the Eastern world especially India, white is seen as an absence of color, worn by widows, and even worn at funerals. However, it also represents peace and non-violence.
- Black: Black refers to evil and negativity, fear and death.
- Red: Red signifies fire, love, anger and is also considered a pure color which is why it is the color of the dress of a bride.
- Yellow: It is the color of happiness, hope and is also a positive color which is why it is used in marriages and ceremonies.
- Blue: The color is associated with Lord Krishna. It is seen as a calm color.
- Green: It symbolizes harvest, happiness and eco-friendliness. However, it is also a color of jealousy, greed and envy even in the Eastern world.
- Orange: Particularly in India, the color is one of the sacred colors of Hindus. Further, orange also features dominantly on the country's flag representing courage.
- Pink: The color symbolizes trust and is associated with the feeling of security.
- Purple: The color is a comforting color often associated with reincarnation.

It can thus be understood that colors can be associated differently in different cultures. For instance, the color green may be associated with ecology, freshness and even good luck. However, in certain cultures green may also be associated with negative things such as greed.

Similarly, blue could also be associated with a bright sky on a sunny day in some cultures and societies such as the Eastern world. However, in the western societies, blue is considered a gloomy color and those who are feeling sad often say 'I am feeling blue today.' This is, in fact, known as 'Dual Symbolism'.

Different religions in society also have their own sacred color. For instance, Muslims associate green with heaven. While Christians associate white with purity and peace, Hindus have red as their sacred color, which is why all Goddesses in a temple are seen wearing red.

The color of flags, colors associated with political parties and royalty are also all symbolic of something or the other. For example, the color of the country Libya's flag is green because it was the favorite color of an emperor in the country.

From all the above examples and instances, it can be understood that color plays a vital role in society. This could be in the field of sports, day-to-day shopping, consumption of goods and products, purchase of toys for children, one's personality, marketing and branding and so on. It has also been discussed how color is interpreted in the Western and Eastern world. While certain similarities have been noticed, some differences have also been noted. This shows that color can be interpreted differently in two geographically and culturally different areas.

- **How colors impact relationships in society**

Colors have a deep influence on people in general and can also impact one's relationships and equations in society. Each color has its own way of maintaining or ruining an equation between two people or even groups. Warm colors such as red, yellow and orange make people feel happy and energized. Due to their bright nature, if somebody is wearing clothes of these colors, it can make others also feel equally happy, energized and enthusiastic, thus improving relationships and spreading positivity among those present at the time. Certain colors such as green, blue and purple are ways of showing calmness and are soothing in nature. According to a study conducted, people wearing blue were found to be more approachable than those wearing colors such as black and darker shades of gray. Some shades of gray and black are found to be sadder and melancholic in nature as compared to brighter colors. Thus, if these colors are dominant in any setting, the moods of the people present automatically drop and are also found to not engage in conversations with one another. Which is why, at happy social events such as parties and ceremonies, brighter colors are made use of and if the event is a sad one such as mourning, then dull colors like gray and black are more prominent.

There is a separate category of colors which are referred to as neon shades. These colors are extremely bright, easily catch the attention of people and shine at night. These are fluorescent shades found in various colors like green, blue, pink and yellow. These colors have found to be

very refreshing and energizing. This is also one reason why sportswear and sports shoes are of such colors or such shades are part of the color combination. People engaged in sports who wear clothes of such color shades are more likely to develop a bond; and an increased spirit of sportsmanship among them.

Another interesting example of color impacting a relationship in society is in Belgium. In a marriage ceremony in Belgium, the flowers that are given are never chrysanthemums and never white in color because white chrysanthemums are representative of death, grief and bereavement. This can be an example of how necessary it is to be aware of other cultures in the world. They further add that the number of flowers in a bouquet should always be an odd number except thirteen which is considered inauspicious.

Conclusion

To conclude, it can be seen that colors are significant in a society as well as across cultures and societies worldwide. Although they hold various meanings and are interpreted differently in different societies and cultures, they are important for us to understand symbolisms and the unique interpretations of something as simple and straight-forward as colors. Understanding colors from a sociological perspective also allows individuals to be more accepting of and sensitive towards other cultures due to increased awareness and intercultural sensitivity. From this perspective, colors can actually contribute to promoting enhanced cross-cultural understanding, peace, brotherhood and mutual respect among all across the globe.

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