Colour in Retail,
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Colour in Retail

Everyday colours are used to have an impact in people by serving as visual cues, attracting us to activities such as dining, shopping or entertainment. Others are simply a reminder of familiar ideas and offer identity to a space. For interior designers the choice of colour is driven by the prevailing function of the environment. Colour might also communicate with cultural and practical purposes. It is used at its best when it reflects the psychological well-being of those who enter in a space.

This article will be dedicated to colour in retail as a way to influence peoples’ behaviour, spending money, relaxing or consuming products. While each public function has a specific application, they all share the common purpose of appealing to a large group of potential consumers.

Importance of colour in Retail

One of the most effective uses of colour testing is the retail space, where the main objective is to promote sales and improve profitability of services, objects or both. As manufacturers try to create an image that will attract potential customers, their designed environment is aimed at inspiring buyers to consume. This design will use stimulating ideas and associations that will appear irresistible to the customers. Decisions are taken in relation to form, scale and space, but colour is considered to be the major factor in achieving a strong emotional and visual impact.

One of the main reason why colour is so important in retail is the fact that it appeals to people’s emotions, contributes to a very attractive space and assists in the selling process. The reaction of the public to colour can play a major part in the success of a retail space. Colour can be considered as one of the main factors to make a selling establishment an ‘interesting package’. A successful selling environment can be achieved by making sure that the qualities of colour are considered and by making sure that the right colour consumer preferences are taking into account.
Although we can sustain that colour is instrumental in manipulating purchasing, we can still question the fact that it should be considered as the main factor, as other aspects of retail, like lighting and design play also a major role in this process.

However, Satyendra Singh is more categorical in this issue as he affirms that between 62 and 90 per cent of the buying decision is based on colour alone: ‘Prudent use of colours can influence moods and feelings positively or negatively. Given that our moods and feelings are unstable and colours play roles in forming attitudes, it is important that managers understand the importance of colours in marketing’.

Colour can draw attention, create emotional responses and produce certain automatic biological reactions. Colour affects living things. Retailers use colour to project an image or to create a desired atmosphere. They use colour to put customers in a buying mood.

The Body Shop is portrayed by its leaf-green exterior having its olive and luscious products displayed in tomato reds, oranges, rusts, butter yellows and aubergines. These intentionally chosen hues reflect key psychological signs of the company ethos - earthiness, warmth, reliability, friendliness, tradition and environmental awareness.

Colour provides stimulation in the customer, establishes a change of pace and breaks up the monotony. These are all very beneficial and valuable psychological assets that build up the retail space to its full potential.
This psychological effect is particularly evident in the catering field, where colour can enhance the look of food or make the product distasteful. Grocery stores and supermarkets should use warm colours ranging from red to orange as they stimulate the appetite and encourage people to eat or consume more.

Colours from the orange range have the additional value of stimulating the customer for social communication and conversation.

Product lines in retail are developed to reach a target customer, selected according to age, level of education, socio-economic groups, disposable income, regional demographics or gender. Once the customer groups are identified, the physical space is developed and colours are selected to communicate visual associations. The colour of the product line is rarely considered for this purpose, as they change frequently due to trends or seasonal conditions. Only in special stores, like jewellery shops, is the product displayed in the same deep blue, dark purple or even black year after year.
The retail environment

A psychological use of colour can be applied to the selling environment in order to create an attractive space both from the exterior and the interior.

Retail owners depend on the **exterior** of their business as visual focus to enhance their products and attract customers. Specific colours in combination will reflect the location of the store, the social issues of the time, like war or recession, or the shift to environmental concerns. If colour or materials appear to be expensive and the economy is in a downturn, buyers will immediately assume that the products are too high-priced. Normally the colours will be limited to the fascia and could be either a house colour or a hue associated with the business of the establishment. In other cases highly saturated colours or high levels of contrasts are recommended.

The key aspect is to draw the attention of the potential buyers while ensuring that the attractiveness of the product is enhanced. But colour selection should also be an instrument to establish the mood of the buyer when being confronted with a particular product: the colour used for buying a bonsai will very likely be low in saturation, while the athlete looking for a kayak will be more stimulated in the presence of highly intense colours.

The socio-economic aspect to the selection of colour in retail should also be considered: low-income groups are more inclined towards saturated and stronger colours, while high-income groups will lean towards more neutral combinations. For Carlton Wagner, colour preferences change with age. Also, as a person becomes
more educated and has more financial resources, his or her colour preferences develop. His conclusions on this study reveal that the less advantaged people are in socioeconomic terms, the more comfortable they are with simple and lighter colours. And as a result, the more successful individuals will be more likely to choose dark colours and smaller range of values when hues occur in combination. Wagner goes on to describe colours as classifiers and de-classifiers. A classifying colour is a hue that only a small percentage of the population, normally amongst in the higher socioeconomic classes, finds appealing. Some of these colours are the forest, burgundy and dove gray. A declassifying colour is a hue that most people recognise with familiarity, like the orange and yellow in full saturation.

As a result of this, low-cost products, fast food chains or high-turnover product shops will be more successful with bright colours, as their business is usually based on impulse purchase. However, in locations where leisure shopping is possible or the products are more exclusive, a more muted coloration is reflected in order to attract a certain type of client.

![Image](image_url)

Lurdes Bergada, Barcelona, by Deardesign. This client is an established Spanish fashion company well known by its simplicity in forms and colours.

The **interior space** is essential to communicate an image. The choice of colour will be dictated by the nature of the product and customer, reflecting the style of decoration with the type of trade, creating a mood and projecting a house image. Conservative elderly people would be more inclined to traditional decoration with the
use of subdued colours, whereas outgoing and younger generations will be more leaning towards modern, abstract and radical forms with intense colours.

Warm colour specifications of medium brightness, like beige, should be applied in areas where people gather together and cast flattering reflections. Alcoves, end of walls and architectural features can be more colourful to create more variety. The combination of medium tones of colour with bright areas will prevent clashing effects and will allow a smooth changing of scenes. Dark areas will benefit from the use of bright colours and pale colour spaces will profit with high levels of light.

It is important to mention the importance of space as a background to show off the product. This space, used for shelving, cabinets and systems to hang garments or other items, should be as discreet as possible, so as not to compete with the selling products. A good example of this technique is the Rockport shop outlets, designed by Bergmeyer Associates, Inc.

The use of neutral and light background with natural materials is very effective in displaying shoes leather products.

The colour scheme of a retail space should be the image of the establishment, but it should also be in tune with the nature of the product. This scheme also has a very favourable affect on the staff, as it creates a corporate identity that helps them to connect with the customers and drive sales.
Creating an atmosphere

Another aim of colour is to create an atmosphere that appeals to customers, sets the tone of the business and enhances the image of the organisation. The design of the retail establishment is normally the factor that contributes to create a convenient and functional space, the lighting will assist in highlighting specific areas and colour will be the instrument to create visual variety.

In the retail space, the majority of customers are motivated by compulsive behaviour rather than by rational thoughts. Therefore, they react to colour trends in different ways. Designers should be able to create the right mood for the type of trade they work with using the appropriate colours for exciting, relaxing or encouraging fast turnover of customers.

As colour stimulates emotional reactions it will be inappropriate to use unusual hues to appeal to the general public. On the other hand, the top end of the market will be more prone to accept sophisticated tones, as this type of customer prefers a more exclusive treatment and welcomes high fashion and individuality.
Some specific colour tendencies have proven to be very reliable. Neutral colours, browns and tans seem to be the norm for mature men clothing whereas brighter colours are used for young teenagers. However, women’s clothing tends to be the area where the colour display area varies most, as their products change more frequently. Bright accent colours used with grey, white, metallic and black are related to high-tech products such as photography and electronics.¹ Saturated and cheerful hues are used to show off sports and exercise equipment and toy stores are filled with primary and secondary colours to attract the children.

Colour can also improve the evaluation process, like the use of orange in changing areas to make skin tones more appealing when customers are viewing themselves in the mirror. Some products are very colourful and require very limited amount of background colour for display.

Merchandising

As one of the main functions of colour in retail is to create a sale, it is obvious that the environment should complement the merchandise and therefore, the key to the selection of the hue should be the colour of the product to be sold. To ensure that the best results are going to be achieved, the right foreground and background colours should be applied to the display using the appropriate lighting. If the colour of the merchandise is dominant, the background colour should contrast the hues of the product in order to highlight it. If the merchandise is made by a variety of colours, the background should be neutral, as the surround should never distract from the attention of the merchandise.

Oilily, Antwerp, (Belgium), by Uxus. This display shows how objects are exhibited capturing and holding the buyer’s attention.

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Practical benefits of colour in retail

Another function of colour in retail is to provide practical benefits, like creating illusions of larger or taller spaces by the use of cool and neutral hues. Hiding imperfections, reducing the temperature of an area and making objects look nearer can also be achieved by the right use of colour.

Controlling the traffic in the retail space can be attained by the right use of colour: plenty of bright colours on the rear walls of an establishment can push people to move towards the end of the premises and brightening dark corners will attract them away from the centre of the area.

Lighter colours applied in some surfaces can reduce the lighting costs as they reflect more light. They can also be used for identification purposes and distinguish different departments in the establishment. Additionally they can increase safety, as it helps to identify fire appliances and exits.

Colour stimulation in retail

The context of store and service design, the most important aspect of colour deals with colour warmth, as people generally prefer cool colours, such as green and blue, to warm colours such as yellow and red.
Generally speaking, warm colours provoke higher levels of anxiety and present greater distraction levels. In line with these findings, research indicates that highly stimulating colours such as red and yellow express excitement and tension, whereas low arousing colours, such as green and blue, trigger associations with calm, security and peacefulness.

Consumers consider red retail environments as unpleasant, tension-inducing and less attractive compared with blue retail environments. We can argue that highly stimulating colours over-excite buyers, and therefore, impair their buying decisions. However, low-arousing colours have been shown to facilitate focus. In short, these findings suggest a straightforward relationship between colour warmth and stimulation.

However, colour stimulation in potential buyers may impact their experiences and behaviours in different ways depending on the type of product. For instance, previous research suggests that participants engaged in regular purchasing habits,
such as food buyers, prefer high-arousing colours like red for their stimulating qualities.

Recreational shoppers, like DVD game buyers, seeking fun and sensory stimulation, may likewise value highly stimulating colours for the excitement they bring to the buying experience.

However, task-oriented shoppers looking for technology equipment may value low-stimulating colours, as they are less distracting and, therefore, do not interfere with their buying decisions.

**Perception of colour in retail**

Memory colour in retail is a phenomenon in which an object's characteristic influences the perception of its colour. This phenomenon keeps order in our lives (with the use of traffic signals or warning signs) and it can be used in areas of business such as retail in order to optimize sales using colours that are most familiar to people. Familiar colours are seen as being richer and also more saturated. The consumer's attention will be drawn to displays or signs that appeal to their colour knowledge. Copycat brands acquire meaning from existing brands by using consumer recognition. People become familiar with certain colours associated with brand name items. A good example of this can be found upon examining the concept design of coffee franchises, like Costa and Lavazza.
A large number of coffee shop retailers use red and white in their premises. This is not done by accident but as a deliberate marketing strategy based on the effect of memory colour.

Retailers recognize that when we go shopping we are not simply buying an item which we need, we are tuning into our deepest aspirations and buying into a whole lifestyle every time. Buying anything is a new beginning, an expression of hope. The experience is loaded with psychological complexities. This aspect has long been acknowledged since the old days in which people bought their clothes in individual shops and received undivided attention from the sellers. Nowadays the emphasis is in drawing the potential buyer into the shop so as he can get on with the business of choosing by himself. Retail environments are presented as a new universe in itself with a whole philosophy to which each individual responds at a different level.

Colour psychology can be everything to a successful store, if the range of colours works well across the shop and complements other elements such as product displays and lighting. The idea is not simply to create a beautiful surrounding, but a successful and coherent space in which the target customers react to the product on display and the sales environment. Colour is central to this notion as we react instinctively to it. In children, those colour associations are still forming, which is why youngsters respond best to bright primary colours. For this reason bold colours are very evident in most toys, clothes and books shops of the most successful kid's retailers. Older people prefer more subtle palettes, as colours have a more intellectual appreciation in their psyche. If the colour scheme selected is wrong, the retailer will find that their customers simply will not relate to the brand.

By recognising how colour influences us, retailers are better able to induce feelings of warmth, intimacy and serenity, or by using more vibrant palettes, to excite or stimulate. It is about understanding the target consumer, the product lines that appeals to them and the kind of brand the retailer wants to convey.
**Colour trends**

In an effort to obtain the maximum appeal in colour, it is necessary to consider trends of preference. These should be based on the consumer inclinations in their home environment, as they represent the wishes of the vast majority of the public.

These preferences will suit the selling product, create an appealing look to the retail environment and contribute to produce a contemporary look to the space. If a colour is selected for practical reasons, the designer should select a popular variation set by consumer preferences, as trends apply not just to hues, but to tones of colour. Therefore, if blue is required in the designed space, the tone of blue to be used should be the one dictated by the colour trend of the time, for instance: clear blue or cloudy blue.

Trends originated from clothing are less important in the retail space, except for the shops of departments dedicated to woman's fashion. Most stylists accept the impact of the catwalks used in the collections displayed in New York, Milan, Paris or London. Colours presented in these venues become the initial guide for the non-fashion industry trends. As a result, women tend to be the first group of customers that will use the colour trends. Subsequently, trend colours are presented to other industries: product design, home furnishing, automobiles, retail and industrial design.

Colour forecasting organizations work to stay ahead of changes, trends and preferences. Their professional analysts monitor colour moods to anticipate the reaction on society. Analytical methods are developed to predict the new colour preferences for individual colours and for colour combinations. Eventually consumers decide which trends are successful by accepting specific products with specific hues. This way, consumers do not lead the trends, they endorse them.
Colours for a specific product are often selected 18 to 20 months before its buying season. They are presented in a series of palettes organized by type, shade, tints and tones. Usually, they are displayed in groups of saturated colours and/or pastels.

The reason why people conform to these trends is probably because of the desire for change as a basic human motivation, which forces a natural progression. Some people distrust their judgement and therefore prefer to follow the same pattern as everybody else. In this case designers appear as the facilitators that guide consumers to make their retail decisions.

By recognising how colour influences us, retailers are better able to induce feelings of warmth, intimacy and serenity, or by using more vibrant palettes, they can excite or stimulate buyers. Retail designers’ challenge is about understanding the target consumer, the product lines that appeals to them and the kind of brand the retailer wants to convey.
Summary

I believe that the use of colours stimulates a certain feeling in the viewer, be it calmness, aggression, energy or happiness. These feelings are not just the product of a learned cultural experience, but are also based on psychological and physiological reactions. Colours have a relationship with meaning, as they are associated with non-colour ideas, but this association is not just cultural, it is also psychological.

When designing for a retail space colour is an essential tool that can be used in a wide variety of dimensions: it attracts the attention of the customers, persuades potential buyers to come in, enhances the image of the organisation, keeps the customer happy by creating a pleasant atmosphere, displays the product to the best advantage, improves profitability and helps to create sales.

Memory colour should be considered as an essential tool for retail design. The consumer’s attention is drawn to displays or signs that appeal to their previous experience, hence the copycat strategy of retailers who design their business along similar lines to their competitors. Colour psychology is essential for designing a successful interior space created on the basis of a well researched product line and consumer brand.

An assessment of trends of consumer preference is fundamental to retail design. These should be a reflection of most consumers home colour preferences, as the retail space should be made as attractive as possible to the general public.