

# Exploring the Role of Colours in Positioning Luxury Brands

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## Abstract

Colour is one of the most widely used visual elements in products and brand identity. It enables differentiating products from competitors and also influencing moods and feelings, both positively and negatively. Therefore, colour affects attitudes. Brand positioning is the art of designing the company's offer and image so that it occupies a distinct and valued place in the target customer's mind. It is important for brand managers to understand the different associations between brand and colours in consumers' perceptions of brand positioning.

This study explores the role of colour in positioning luxury brands. Sample population is university students, both male and female, in Hong Kong studying in different faculties. In-depth face-to-face interviews are used to explore consumers' concepts of luxury, as well as the relationship of colour with each luxury concept. Preliminary results of the findings from in-depth interviews will be discussed in the paper.

*Keywords:* colour, brand positioning, luxury

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## Introduction

Brand positioning is the art of designing a company's offer and image so that it occupies a distinct and valued place in the target customer's mind (Kotler, Wong, Saunders, and Armstrong, 2005). It involves identifying and establishing points of parity (POP) and points of difference (POD) to establish the right brand identity and to create the proper brand image (Keller, 2003; de Chernatony and McDonald, 2003). This enables a unique positioning of the brand and makes it different from its competitors and remembered by its customers.

Brand can be a company's most valuable asset. "People buy things not for what they can do, but also for what they mean" (Levy, 1959). An emotional tie is important in consumer's choice of brand, as well as in brand positioning (Hooley, Moller and Broderick, 1998a; Hooley, Saunders and Piercy, 1998b). Gardner and Levy (1955) mentioned that the long-term success of a brand is contingent upon the proper selection and operationalization of brand meaning prior to market entry. Brand meaning can be divided into brand performance and brand imagery (Keller, 2003). Imagery refers to intangible aspects of the brand and can be linked to four categories (Keller, 2003). First, user imagery means the type of person using the brand. Second, purchase and usage situations mean the retail / shopping environment, as well as the situations in which the brand is being used. Third, personality and value means the type of personality and values the brand projects. Fourth, history, heritage and experience mean the past history and heritage of the brand and the consumer's own personal experience with the brand. Aaker (1996) defined brand image as how the brand is now perceived, so it is the perception about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory (Dove, 1992).

Colour impinges on our every waking moment. There is colour in daylight, in the sky, in the landscape, in our skin, hair and eyes. Every object we manufacture to use or wear is coloured. It is

carelessly taken for granted and, curiously, is largely unstudied by the majority. Colour is defined in the American College Dictionary as "the evaluation by the visual sense of that quality of light – reflected or transmitted by a substance – which is basically determined by its spectral composition. It is that quality of a visual sensation distinct from form" (Israel, 1994). So colour is light that carried wavelengths absorbed by the eyes that the brain converts into the colours that we see. Light can be decomposed into a spectrum of six distinct colours: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and violet. The red has the longest wavelength whereas the violet has the shortest. An object appearing to be green absorbs all of the colours in the spectrum except the green light. This unabsorbed light is reflected back from the object into the eyes, from where it travels to the brain where it is interpreted as green. The colour perceived as belonging to an area depends on the composition of the light reflected from it, the surrounding visual field and the state of the observer – his expectations, state of adaptation, and so on. Perceived colour has three basic dimensions or defining attributes: hue, saturation and lightness or darkness. Hue corresponds to the dominant wavelength of a colour, saturation to its relative colourfulness (colours can be pale or bright) and lightness to the amount of grey in it (Varley, 1980).

"Colour affects our life. Colour is physical...we see it. Colour communicates...we receive information from the language of colour. Colour is emotional...it evokes our feelings" (Whelan, 1994). Ideas can be communicated through colour without the use of either written or verbal language. Emotional response to individual colours alone or in combinations is often predictable. For example, a prestigious law firm sends a message of confidence to potential clients by using rich, deep colours in its office and on its letterheads. Conversely, a dentist's waiting area in bright red or orange sends a stressful message to patients, rather than the calm feeling the dentist wishes to convey. Colour can also evoke different emotional responses. For example, red

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can be powerful, exciting, passionate, energising, warm, and daring. Blue can be clear, cool, holy, reliable and strong. Green is complex, a vast palette from fresh to sophisticated. Black is traditionally associated with dark and sombre occasions implying mystery and corruption. However, it is a forceful colour in fashion as it brings focus to the wearer. White is aristocratic and refined. It is elegance, purity and honesty (Garthe, 1995).

During the process of colour perception, an associate feeling or emotion is normally induced in our brains and this feeling is usually termed colour emotion (Nakamura et al, 2004; Xin et al, 1998; Sato et al, 2000 and Xin et al, 2004a,b). Colour emotion is in the domain of psychology and is influenced by age, sex, climate, geographical location, race and cultural influences (Humphrey, 1976; and Kobayashi, 1981). Xin et al (2004a,b) conducted cross-regional comparative studies of colour emotions in Hong Kong, Japan and Thailand to study the influence of different cultural and geographical locations in colour emotions. They found that there are good correlations of colour emotions among these three regions and the best ones for colour emotion pairs are light – dark, and heavy – light. What about the perception of colours representing luxury brands?

### **Colour and brand associations**

Consumers encounter brand and colours in their daily activities. Although both colour and brands convey messages as they are source of information and appear everywhere, relatively little attention has been given to them until recently. Analysis of real-life situations can provide some insights.

Colour is a powerful cue assisting brand recall (Tavassoli and Han, 2002). Colour is first in the order of sequence in which people remember visual elements, followed then by shapes, letters and numbers. Real life examples can be seen in the world's largest brands. Using and owning a colour as a device for the brand significantly reinforce recognition and recall. For example Coca-Cola, has been strategically consistent in the application of its brand signature and the use of its Coca-Cola red in the vending machines, billboards, tables, merchandise, points-of-sales, etc. This red enables brand awareness and recognition. The company has developed a strict set of standards for the application of its red on virtually any substrate, so it appears the same each time. The Coca-Cola signature and propriety red is also one of the best protected. McDonalds also has consistent use of its red-and-yellow signage throughout the world which has created a recognizable icon for hamburgers and French fries (Perry and Wisnom, 2003).

Elizabeth Arden's famous Fifth Avenue flagship store still retains the signature red door at its entrance and even though the interior design has been updated to create a modern Arden lore and visual merchandising, they have carefully planned to use multiple coats of shocking "red door red" to lacquer the elevator bank, thus supporting the brand identity program and enveloping customers in a gallery of Arden heritage (Abramson and Stuchin, 1999). So Coca-Cola's red, Cadbury's purple, Heineken's green, McDonald's Golden Arches, IBM's solid blue, and Elizabeth Arden's red, are a few examples where a brand's owning a colour enables brand recognition, recall and awareness. How about luxury fashion brands? What are the colours representing luxury fashion brands? Immediately, we can think of Valentino's red, Hermès' burnt-orange and Tiffany's pale blue. Will there be

specific colours representing luxury brands? This is the main objective of the present study.

### **Methodology**

This is the initial part of the study, university students from different faculties were invited to be participants. Small amount of transportation fees is given to each participant. Face-to-face interviews were conducted. There are three parts in this study. In the first part, participants are asked to write down in less than 100 words their concept of luxury. In the second part, participants were asked to rank TEN adjectives best describing the concept of luxury and asked to select one colour swatch from the Pantone colour book that best representing that colour. In the third part, each participant was asked to propose and rank TEN luxury brands that spontaneously come into their minds and another TEN luxury brands from the suggested list. The suggested list was the result of an international joint research project on young consumers' concept of luxury (Aiello et al, 2007). Participants were then asked to select one colour swatch from the Pantone colour book that best representing each brand. Colour swatches of the colour selected were grouped together for analysis.

### **Results and discussions**

In this initial study, young consumers' concept of luxury is that "luxury is a behaviour to satisfy desire which is usually expensive and enjoyable but unnecessary. It can represent one's identity and social status. It is a trend depending on age, sex, race, occupation and generation. It is easily affected by others". Results for part 2 showed that majority of the colours selected for representing luxury are deep dark colours. Black is the most popular or has highest selected frequency, followed by different versions of gold, silver and deep wine red. Results for part 3 showed that colour did have an impact on consumers' perceptions and there are specific colours representing different luxury brands. Consistencies in the colour named by the participants to be representing different brands, such as black for Giorgio Armani, deep red for Cartier, Tiffany blue for Tiffany, deep brown for Louis Vuitton, gold for Versace, Pink for Dior, and deep wine for Ferragamo showed that colour did can be used to represent luxury brands. However, for some brand, respondents named different colours for the same brand.

This study showed that colour did have a role in positioning the brands. Colour facilitates brand recall and recognitions. Consistent results generated when asked respondents to name the colour representing the brand showed brands can be represented by colours. When look into the colours named by respondents representing different luxury brands, some are related to the brand logo, some are related to the shopping bag, some are related to the product colours, and some are related to the colours in recent advertisements. Further studies can be conducted to find out the importance of different cues of colour associations with brands. It is of interests to know whether it is the logo colour, shopping bag colour, store colour or product colour that is of more importance in generating linkages and recall. Information of these will be useful for brand manager when thinking about reinforcing and positioning existing brands in the minds of the consumers and in building new brands in the consumers' minds.

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