

Feeling blue. Green with envy. In the pink. Our inclination to define emotions or states of being with specific colors seems almost instinctive. But is the link between color and human response actually deeper than these simple figures of speech imply?

Research demonstrating the impact of color on human physiology suggests that the answer is yes. Margaret Walch, director of the Color Association of the U.S., points out, for example, a study conducted in 1978 by Alexander G. Schauss, Ph.D., which showed a certain shade of pink's ability to calm aggressive behavior.

Color:

A powerful mood-altering tool.

By Jean Nayar



When Schauss was a part-time instructor for the Washington State Criminal Justice Training Commission, he and other researchers observed that a room painted in this particular shade—which is known as Baker-Miller pink and was named after two military officers at the U.S. Naval Correctional Center in Seattle,



Jean Nayar is a New York City-based freelance writer and editor specializing in architecture, interior design, and decorating. She contributes to various publications including *Real Simple*, *Contract*, *Child*, *American Homestyle* and *Gardening* and has written a book, *Detailing Light*, published by the Whitney Library of Design.



Color, continued

where the study was conducted—produced a soothing effect on wild and drunken sailors. “They found that the color seemed to transform their violent behavior and turn them into pussycats,” says Walch. In contrast, she adds, a different study showed that people typing in red rooms make more mistakes.

Nature versus nurture

According to Leatrice Eiseman, director the Pantone Color Institute and author of *The Color Answer Book* (Capital Books, 2003), the human response to color is in many ways primordial. “If you think of humans as having ancient memory with a kind of prehensile retention, we all have very basic reactions based on experience,” she says. “Our perception of blue, for example, relates to the sky and water, which are elements that seem to retreat from us.” As a result, she explains, cool blue hues have a soothing effect on most people and, when applied to walls, these shades seem to expand a room. Although all humans experience similar elements in nature that affect their response to color, Eiseman cautions against generalizing about color's impact on behavior. “My mantra is that color must always be thought of in terms of context,” she says. “Where is it being used? What is the age of the people who will

see it? What type of activity is being done in its midst?” Ken Charbonneau, color marketing consultant to Wilsonart, points out that a person's reaction to color can also be largely cultural. “I'm French and Irish and grew up in an urban environment, so I like subtly complex colors, but my wife is Latin and comes from a context where magenta is seen as a neutral,” he says.

Conventional wisdom

While the experts concur that color's impact on human behavior is complex, most also agree on a few rules of thumb. In general, warm colors advance, cool colors recede, and the environments that are most hospitable to people include a mix of both warm and cool tones. A good formula for mixing colors, says Eiseman, is to allow one group, either warm colors or cool ones, to dominate. “Use 75 percent warm hues and 25 percent cool hues in your palette, or vice versa,” she says.

In addition, warm colors tend to stimulate, while cool colors generally soothe. “Red can speed up the pulse and raise blood pressure and is associated with passion, intensity and excitement,” says Eiseman, “while orange relates to adventure, openness and activity, and yellow signifies

optimism, creativity and idealism.” Vibrant reds and oranges, notes Charbonneau, are great colors to use in places that people occupy for temporary periods of time, like foyers, stairwells and cafeterias. On the cool side of the color wheel, Walch points out that

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“blue evokes contemplation and is restful and eminently respectable—it's America's favorite color.” Yet, she notes that green is a favorite among men. “It's nature's color and relates to youth, abundance and money,” she says, “purple, on the other hand, is a royal color, one that's spiritual and thoughtful.”

Digging deeper

Although studies like the one conducted by Schauss, or the more well-known ones

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undertaken by the American art historian Faber Birren, demonstrate clear links between color and human response, many of the experts note that

very few studies on color and its affect on human behavior have actually been done and most were completed in the 1940s, 50s and 60s. As a result, Leslie Harrington, the director of LH Color, a Connecticut-based strategy, product development and color consulting firm, has recently conducted her own studies to uncover some of the subtler ways that color influences the psyche. “We’re finding that it’s not so much the specific hue that affects a physiological response in people as the intensity of the hue,” she says. “In other words, the brighter a color is the more stimulating it will be—so blue can, in fact, be stimulating if it is intense and very chromatic.”

According to Harrington, color experts now need to explore the more nuanced aspects of color. “By looking at color preferences—the colors people want in their environments versus colors they want on products—we can learn about deeper and deeper slices of the color puzzle” she says. “We also need to look not just at the effect of a specific color, but at the amount of a color that’s required to work in a positive way.”

And what about neutral or complex hues like taupe, olive green, terra-cotta red or teal blue—colors that include both warm and cool shades?

According to Harrington, these present yet another subtlety worthy of further analysis, as do a color’s saturation and value—the degree of black and/or white it contains. But she notes that regardless of which colors a designer employs in a working environment, a diverse palette is preferable to a monochromatic one. “When you have different colors in a room, you have more places to selectively focus, which improves performance,” she says. Until more research is done, however, determining just how many colors to use in any given palette, and in which shades and proportions, will continue to be more an art than a science.