

ROLE OF COLOURS IN CONSUMER PREFERENCES

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Abstract:

Colours play a vital role in almost our everyday lives and contribute significantly in influencing our buying decisions. Considering their extreme relevance, present study has been taken up to understand the influence of colours in moulding our buying preferences. The paper shall briefly discuss the scientific, cultural and psychological aspects of colours. It shall also examine the association of colours with the gender, income group and zodiac sign of an individual and his buying preferences. Paper shall finally conclude with the recommendations on utilization of colours in the Branding and promotional strategies of the marketers. Study is based on both primary and secondary collection of information.

Key Words: Colours, Product, Branding, Promotion, Zodiac

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Introduction:

As per Oscar Wilde, “Mere colours, unspoiled by meanings and unallied with definite form, can speak to the soul in a thousand different ways.” Colours have their existence in this universe even before the humans or any other form of life would have evolved. The science of colours was also well studied and recognized by the ancient civilizations. Our ancestors used colours for natural healing and curing various ailments. In astrology, colours are associated with the birth signs and corresponding favourable stone or fabric of an individual. Colour exists in nature in different forms of flora, fauna and light rays emitted by the sun. Though may not be a part of formal studies in most of the academic learning except for in fashion & interior designing, advertising or packaging, yet they contribute significantly in almost our everyday lives. Colours have a key role in moulding our liking; for the food we eat, clothes we wear, place where we sit or sleep, vehicles we drive and so on. Colours in fact are allied with our society, culture, religion, politics and economy since ages and shall remain so in future also.

No one can imagine this world, nature and things around us in simple grey, white or black hue. Had it been so, the life would have been dull, boring and without any vigour for all of us. Festivals, Entertainment, Sports and even Business would have become totally unexciting and meaningless without colours. Marketing activities such as advertising, branding and packaging would have been rendered totally irrelevant. The colours are therefore extremely important to us as they bring enthusiasm, festivities and energies in our lives. They influence our personalities, opinion, culture and buying preferences. As a result, colours are widely used in industries such as packaging, fashion, apparel, advertising, automobiles and off late ICT.

Considering its immense significance, present study has been undertaken to understand colour preferences for certain products and services. The paper shall briefly comment on the scientific, socio-cultural and psychological aspects of colours. It shall make an effort to find out the association of colours with the gender, income groups and zodiac sign of the consumers and their buying preferences. Paper shall conclude with the recommendations on utilization of colours in the sales and promotional strategies of the marketers. Literature review is primarily from the print and electronic sources while primary data has been collected through a randomly conducted questionnaire survey.

In the subsequent paragraphs, significance of colours from various aspects has been discussed.

Socio-cultural aspects of Colours:

Different societies or cultures over a period of time have developed preferences or aversion to certain colours. These may be due to their religious influences, experiences or environmental conditions. In Christianity, white is the colour worn by the brides and is considered auspicious, on the other hand same colour is associated with mourning and widowhood in Hinduism. Red is the colour of festivities in Asian nations while green is associated with the Islamic ideology. Among Jews, blue is considered to be a sacred while Irish have strong emotional bonding with green. Black which basically absorbs the light and thus all the colours, is inauspicious in several western nations. Violet is also related with mourning in some European nations.

Though no proper explanation can be given for the variation in colour ideologies among different nationalities, still it can largely be attributed to the topographical or climatic conditions prevailing in those countries or regions. Our ancestors use to worship natural forces of sun, air, water, fire and earth, which they considered as indispensable for the sustenance of life. Similarly in middle-east or Arabic countries which are largely the deserts and deficient of grass and vegetation, green must have been the most sought after colour and therefore would have become sacred for them. In Islamic ideology, green is also associated with the Paradise. Those living closer to the polar region, experience cool climate and normally use warm colours such as red or yellow. The cooler colour such as white is used less in their routine life and hence is therefore sought after during festivities. Similarly, Asian or tropical countries facing warm climates normally use cooler shades such as blue or white. Warmer shades of red and yellow are hence more prominent during festivities, especially among females. However, use of these two colours along with green and dark blue is very common in warm desert regions of Gujarat and Rajasthan, where they symbolize traditions, social status and rituals. The implications of colours are very important since they elicit a variety of consumer emotions and responses.

Commercial aspects of Colours:

Designers in any commercial establishment have a tough task while deciding a firm's logo, catalogue, business card, letter pad, etc. as all these reflect the ideology and image of the organization. Their task is to identify the colours, which align with the business, its mission, vision as well as the target customers. Several organizations are nowadays redesigning the corporate logos in order to align their brand image and identity according to global operations and customers.

Designing the packaging or promotional schemes for a product again is extremely difficult for the brand managers. The same brand cannot be packaged differently to suit the varying colour preferences among the consumers, obviously due to enormous costs involved in development, production, shipment and storage. The marketers thus have to rely on their judgment of the most suitable and preferred colour scheme and thereafter design the whole product or promotional campaign around it.

Organizations understand the importance of colours in effective brand recall and visibility. Traditional rivals Coke and Pepsi make themselves distinguished on the basis of red and blue colours respectively. India's largest bank SBI can be identified by its dominantly blue coloured logo while ICICI and Bank of Baroda have incorporated orange. Among telecom firms, Vodafone and Airtel again rely on tested red colour while Idea logo is prominently in yellow. Among IT firms, TCS, HCL and Infosys use stable blue colour while Wipro make use of all seven colours in the rainbow. In automobile industry, logos of Tata motors and Ashok Leyland have blue colour signifying stability and reliability. Maruti Suzuki use red and blue, while Mahindra's logo is in red. Retailers, such as Shoppers' Stop use black in order to associate itself with the niche, exclusive or upper income segment customers, Big Bazaar has orange and blue combination to depict vibrancy and trust while Birla's More again has orange to indicate energy and enthusiasm. In FMCG and consumer durables, red is dominant in the logo of LG, on the other hand blue is found in Samsung and whirlpool. HUL has blue, Dabur is in green and orange, Cadbury has purple and Nestle has red coloured logo. In industrial product firms, ABB and Areva have red colour as dominant while GE has blue and BHEL has blue and white. Crompton Greaves has recently redesigned its logo as blue and green in accordance with its multinational status and commitment towards environmental protection.

In a commercial organization, colours have applications in the followings areas;

- Communication: Web sites, visiting cards, letter pads, uniform of the staff, etc
- Publicity and promotion: Hoardings, banners, print and electronic advertisements, etc.
- Product packaging, labelling, etc.
- Branding: Logo, trademarks, interior or exterior furnishing of the manufacturing or sales outlets, etc.
- Product Positioning: Display at the retail outlets, atmospherics, visual merchandising

Colours off late have become more important in view of the e-commerce and internet where customers can be attracted through a neatly designed and attractive web site. Promotions through hoardings, posters, print and television also make use of colours to effectively convey the message of a brand or the organization. With the advanced generation telecom products and services, colours shall play a vital role in m-commerce also, in the near future.

Psychological aspects of Colours:

Commercials such as “Give me Red” (Eveready Battery) or “Men in Blue” (Indian cricket team), not only aimed at building the brand identity but also indicated the psychological association. Red colour with its highest wavelengths, are considered to be warm and arouse excitement & energy while blue are considered to be cool and helps in soothing the emotions. It is well known that colours influences mood and feeling. However, since human emotions are not very stable and varies from person to person, it is difficult to generalize the preferences. Psychologists have observed that colour impression can account for nearly 60% of the acceptance or rejection of any product or service. The field of colour psychology is still not very well studied and researched except for in the fashion, interior designing, packaging or advertising.

Personality of an individual also plays a very crucial role in colour selection. An extrovert generally prefers bright colours such as red or orange. He might feel uncomfortable in the blue, monochromatic or monotonous environment. The climatic and environmental conditions of a particular region also affect the preferences. Hot colours are not preferred in the warm climatic conditions while cool colours are generally avoided in the colder regions. Similarly, men usually

prefer cool colours compared to women who prefer hot and bright colours. Since colour communicates so effectively among the people, it is extremely challenging for the marketers to convey the right message to the right people.

Scientific aspects of Colours:

We perceive colours on the basis of light reflected by an object. Newton observed that colours are not inherent in any substance. Rather the surface of the object reflects some colours and absorbs the rest. The white colour of an object is because it reflects all the wavelengths while black appear when the surface absorbs all the visible light. That makes the colour of sky appear sometime blue, white or even orange in the day and almost black in the night. The colourful flowers or birds are all due to phenomenon of reflection of light from them. The most naturally occurring colour spectrum is rainbow with seven basic colours. Newton invented the concept of colour wheel by bending the colour spectrum into a circle and segregating colours as cool and warm or complementary and contrast, between the two extremes of violet and red. The visible light corresponds to small wavelengths of 400 – 700 nm of radiations. Other electromagnetic radiations that are beyond or below these wavelengths fall under infrared or ultraviolet categories and cannot be seen through a human eye. Colours, in the case of paints and furnishings are used to protect the surface from varying atmospheric and temperature changes. In Naturopathy, coloured drinks, lights or bath are recommended for the healing of body and mind. Personality and physical health of a person can also be judged by the colour of his aura, which envelops around a person closely.

Political aspects of Colours:

Congress has tricolour of national flag, so BSP has capitalized on blue as a symbol of progress for the backwards castes, SP has green coloured flags while Communists are traditionally red. Several companies, organization and even countries have distinguished themselves on the basis of colours. White, red or blue colours are most prominent in flags of European or communist countries, on the other hand, green coloured flags are popular in Islamic countries. The flag of Red Cross organization has a famous red coloured symbol which makes it distinct from others.

Similarly the Olympic flag, which contains five rings of red, green, blue, yellow and black colours, symbolize the five continents. The three stripes in Indian flag indicate courage, sacrifice and selflessness for the saffron, purity and peace for white and growth & prosperity for the green. The blue coloured chakra denotes progress and vast extremes such as in sky and ocean.

Colours in Astrology:

Each zodiac sign is associated with a certain colour according to our ruling planet or stars of birth. Most of the astrologers recommend favourable colours of stones or clothing corresponding to each astrological sign. Though may not be generalized, yet people born under a certain sun sign exhibits similar characteristics and preferences. However their colour choices at times may be different from the colours of their zodiac sign. Colour association with various zodiac signs are as mentioned in the Table 1.

Zodiac sign	Associated Colour	Characteristics
Capricorn	Indigo	Emphatic, intuitive, spiritual
Aquarius	Violet	Team builder, visionary, creative
Pisces	Magenta	Helping, socially active, confident
Aries	Red	Dynamic, ambitious, creative
Taurus	Orange	Stubborn, sacrificing, determined
Gemini	Orange	Persistent, enthusiastic, demanding
Cancer	Yellow	Creative, emotional, entertaining
Leo	Yellow	Curious, independent, compassionate
Virgo	Green	Adaptable, team player, passionate
Libra	Green	Harmonious, compassionate, helping
Scorpio	Turquoise	Energetic, expressive, emotional
Sagittarius	Blue	Expressive, balanced,

Table 1 (Compiled by author)

Colours in Marketing Strategies:

Colours can be categorized into two basic categories: warm and cold. In general, warm colours, like red and yellow, send an outgoing, energetic message, while cool colours, like blue, are calm and more reserved. Though different studies have come up with varying significance of colours depending upon the context in which those researches were conducted, yet by and large following are the characteristics of major colours

- **Red:** It is the hottest colour and symbolizes blood and fire. It is often used in packaging of FMCG products to attract the consumers at the retail outlets. It is also used in logo of large number of brands and also conveys passion, excitement, aggression, energy and danger.
- **Brown:** It relates to earth or wood and conveys warmth, comfort, stability, reliability, and approachability. It also associates with the feeling of wholesomeness and simplicity. It is used in transportation and industrial product firms
- **Yellow:** It conveys happiness, creativity and energy and is associated with the sun. It relates to optimism and motivation and is often used for displays in the point of purchase counters. Generally used to boost morale, stimulate nervous system and to support communication.
- **Green:** A neutral colour that relates to nature and vegetation is in the middle of colour spectrum. It symbolizes health, freshness and tranquillity. It is also used in packaging of food products and helps in reducing anxiety and nervousness. At times it conveys different associations depending upon the shades like dark green relates to prestige while light green is used to provide soothing effect. Colour of uniform of Indian armed forces is green. Many companies are now associating their brands with this colour to convey concern for environment.

- **Blue:** It is the most popular colour and is considered as trustworthy, loyal and dependable. Companies use it to convey a sense of commitment among its customers and other stakeholders. It relates to sky as well as water and is often used to provide a cooling impact.
- **Black:** It is associated with authority, power, elegance and sophistication. It is used for niche or expensive products and used to target upper income group customers. It sometimes creates strong emotions or emptiness.
- **Orange:** It is considered to be vibrant, playful and full of energy. It induces fun and excitement and is used for representing edible and health products. It is mostly used in restaurants or in dining halls to raise appetite.
- **White:** It is associated with purity, cleanliness, peace, simplicity and freshness. It communicates clarity of thoughts & actions and often related to baby or clinical products. In western culture it is associated with marriage or festivities and indicates snow or cold.
- **Purple:** It conveys royalty, mystery, sophistication, creativity and spirituality. It is used for upper end customers or in the premium priced products. It provides soothing impact on the mind and is at times used for targeting females or teenagers.

Research Methodology:

While secondary sources are both electronic and print publications, primary data has been collected through a structured questionnaire. Random sampling survey was conducted among the youths in the age group of 18-24 years, considering them to be most responsive to the new brands, technologies or advertisements that are launched in the market. Sample size of 120 was

taken and the survey was conducted in Delhi-NCR, where consumers are sensitive and highly responsive to new fashion trends. Analysis has been done with the help of statistical tools such as cross tabulation and frequency distribution. Association of key variables like zodiac sign, gender and income categories with the colour preferences in different situations were studied.

Research was primarily to understand the colour preferences in the present young generation. Among the limitations, the sample size was relatively small to come to any generalized conclusions. Besides, the colour preferences in rural area and children below 18 years of age or adult above 24 years were not studied. It is however indicative of the prevailing fashion trends and preferences among the urban youths who take independent decisions while buying several products and who shall be financially independent within a year or two.

Respondents were asked to give their preference and opinion on the following aspects;

- Why do they think that colours are important in our lives?
- What is their most favourite colour?
- What is more important for a beverage or eatable? Colour or taste
- Which colour is generally preferred for formal or informal wear?
- Which colour attracts the maximum attention on the roadside or at the marketplace?
- What colour relax or irritate the moods?
- How is the product remembered after it is seen in the market? Though its colour or brand name

Analysis and Interpretation:

I. Demographic details of the Respondents

All the respondents were students in the age group of 18-24 years. The income profile was more or less evenly distributed with 37% of respondents coming from families with income over Rs. two lac per month and 27% had family income of between Rs. fifty thousand - one lac. Those having income level below Rs. fifty thousand per month were around 23% (Fig.1). 70% of total

respondents were males, 40% were post graduates while 37% were graduates with commerce background. (Fig. 2 & 3) Around 23% of respondents belonged to zodiac Gemini followed by 13% of Aquarians and 10% each of Aries, Virgos, Cancer and Capricorns. (Fig. 4)

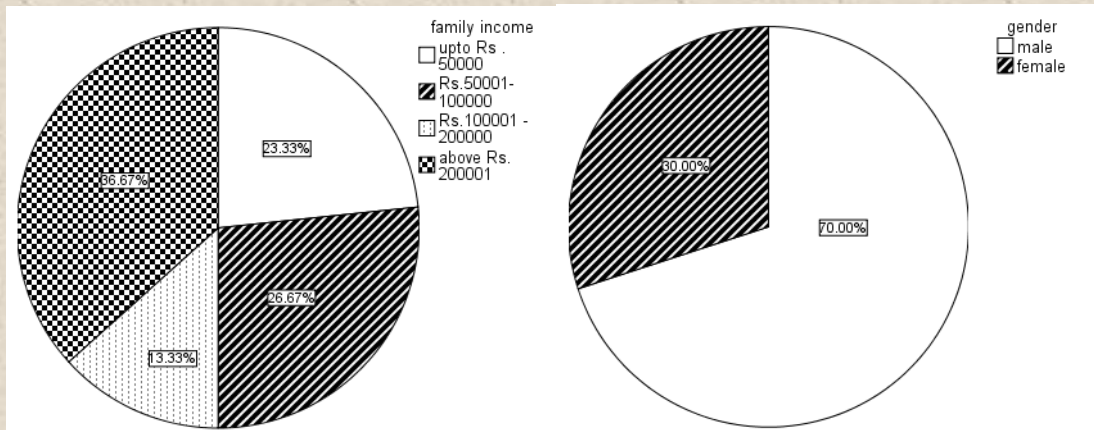


Fig.1

Fig. 2

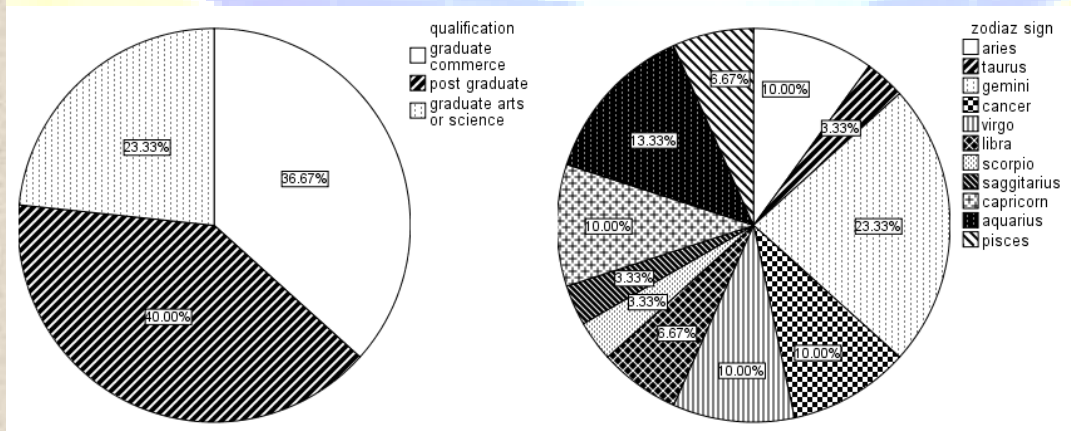


Fig. 3

Fig. 4

II. Overall Analysis

- i. When asked about the importance of colours in our lives, about 63% of respondents were of the view that colours play an important role as they bring sparkle and energy in our lives while 20% agreed that colours are important in moulding our tastes and preferences for the products and services. Rest were of the view that colours depict our personality and character (Fig.5)

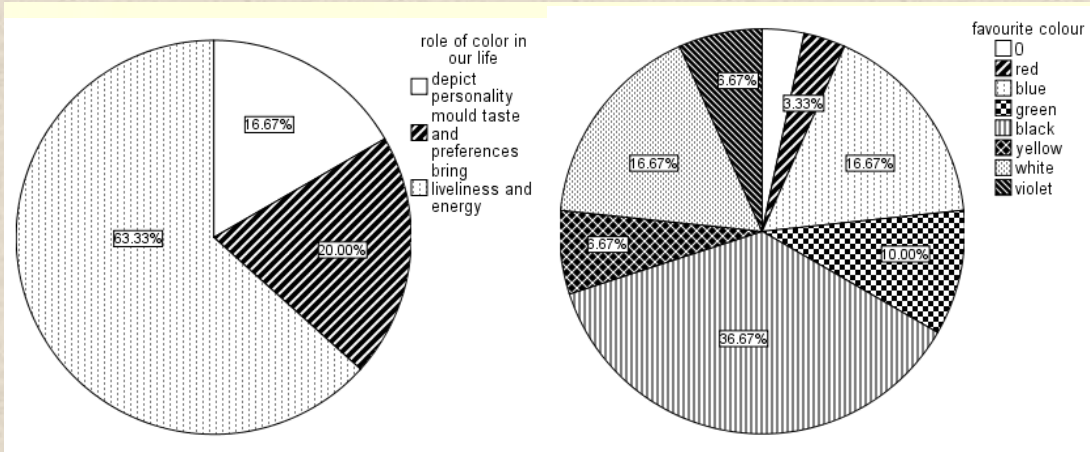


Fig.5

Fig.6

- ii. Nearly 37% of the respondents mentioned their favourite colour as Black, which in fact absorbs all the colours and reflects no light. Blue and white were the next choice among 17% each of the respondents. Other preferred colours were green, yellow, violet and red in that sequence. (Fig.6)

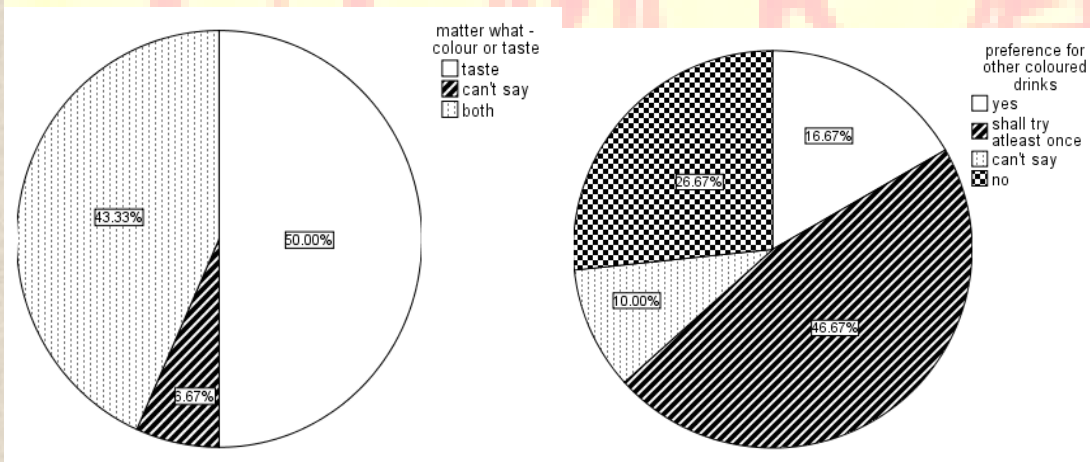


Fig.7

Fig.8

iii. Half of the respondents consider taste as more important for any beverage or eatable while 43% consider both taste and colour as important. (Fig.7) Majority 47% respondents opined that they would try at least once, a beverage or food product that tastes same but is differently coloured such as orange coloured coke or green coloured pasta (Fig.8). It indicates that youths are open to new products or ideas.

iv. Nearly 30% of respondents preferred blue as their favourite colour for informal dressing followed by 27% preference for black. Green and Red were other prominent colours mentioned by around 17% and 10% respondents respectively (Fig.9). In case of formal wear, black was the choice of more than half (53%) of the respondents. White (27%) and blue (17%) were the other major favourite colours for formal wear among respondents. (Fig.10). It was noticed that respondents used more choices of colours (around seven) while dressing up for the informal wear as compared to when they dress up for the formal wear (only four). Another noticeable factor was the choice of black colour for both formal as well as informal wearing among today's youth. Considering that black is associated with authority and power, indicates that present youth irrespective of their gender are more confident and determined. They also aspire to look different and above the rest.

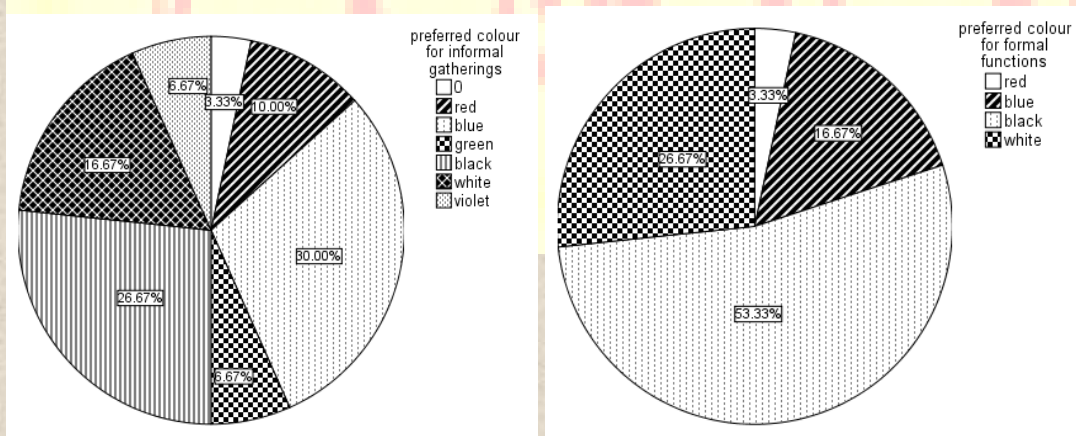


Fig.9

Fig.10

- v. Red colour most obviously attracts maximum number of respondents (approx.27%), as proved scientifically also because of its highest wavelength. Green colour was considered most attention seeking by 23% respondents followed by black (17%), yellow and white (10% each) (Fig.11). Question was asked specifically to the road side hoardings, banners, posters or billboards. The response indicates that the advertisement on highways, malls or roadside should prominently utilize red, green or even black colour in its theme to attract maximum attention. However, black may not be the choice of many advertisers because of their low visibility at night.

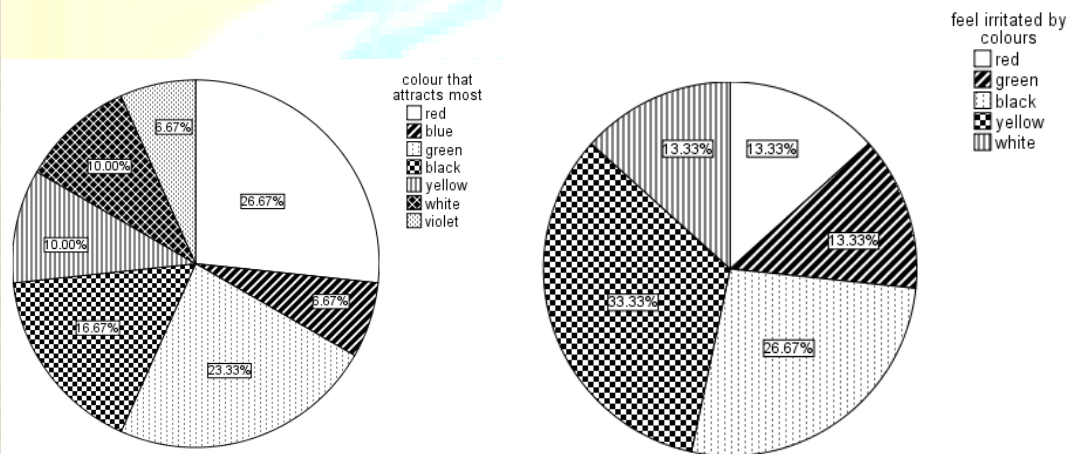


Fig. 11

Fig. 12

- vi. Nearly one-third of the respondents (33%) held that yellow is the most irritating colour while 27% were of the view that black is the most irritating. Among remaining respondents (13% each), red, white and green were believed to be irritating colours. (Fig. 12). More than two-fifth (43%) respondents felt that white colour brings calmness and tranquillity. Blue was voted by nearly 27% while green was considered to most serene by about 13% respondents. Other colours supposed to bring the cooling effects were red, yellow and violet. (Fig.13) Response was in reference to the preference for indoor furnishing or painting of walls and furniture. The above responses indicate that youth nowadays prefer to have blue and green as colours for indoor furnishing and dislike yellow or black.

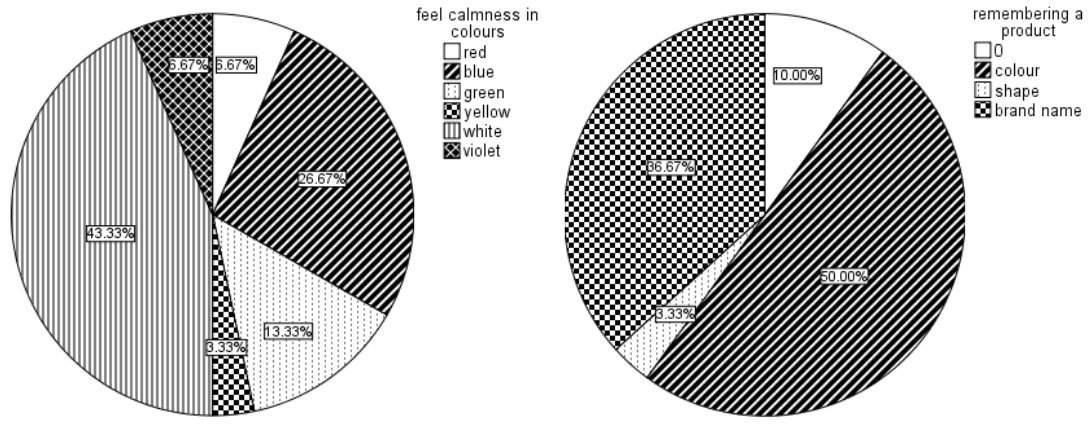


Fig.13

Fig.14

vii. When asked how they remember a product later on, half (50%) of the respondents considered colour as a reminiscent factor while approximately 37% felt that they remember a product through its brand name (Fig.14). Question asked was in reference to product packaging and point of sale display. Companies especially the FMCG, apparel or consumer durables should give due considerations to the colours in their packaging or branding.

III. Analysis - Gender wise

- a) Gender wise cross tabulation indicates that males get irritated by black and yellow furnishing in rooms. Surprisingly they prefer to wear black but at the same time they don't want to see black colour around them. Among female youths most irritating colour is yellow. (Fig.15)

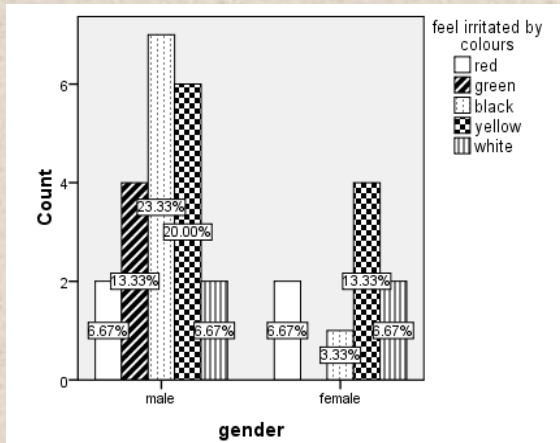


Fig.15

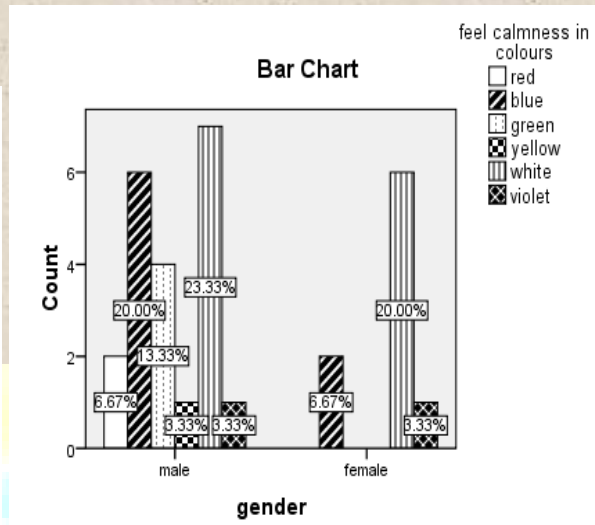


Fig.16

b) Both males as well as females preferred white and blue colour as the ones that bring tranquillity and peace. (Fig.16)

c) Black was the most preferred colour followed by blue and white by males for the formal as well as informal gatherings. Among females, blue and black were preferred for informal gathering while black and white were preferred for formal gatherings. The views seems to differ from the traditional preferences for red, yellow or green, among women during formal wear (Fig.17 & 18)

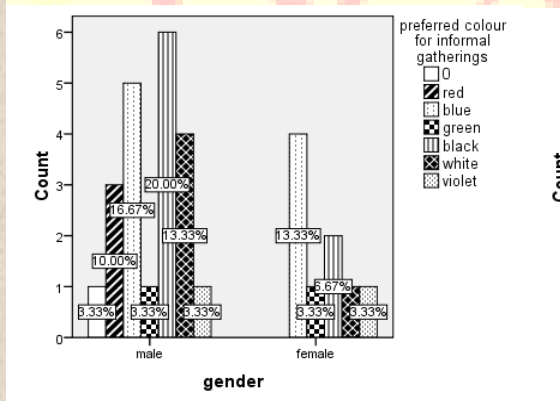


Fig.17

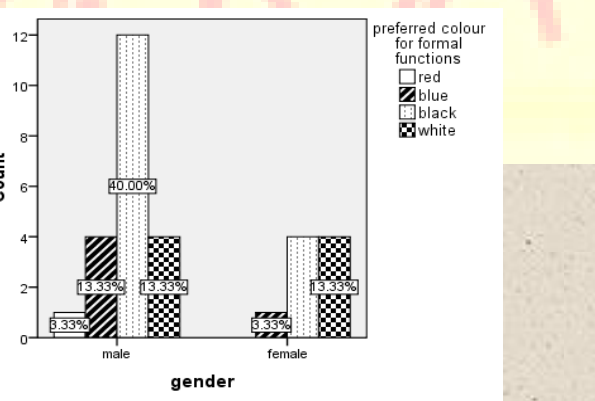


Fig.18

d) Red and green are the colours that attract most number of male as well as female respondents alike. (Fig.19)

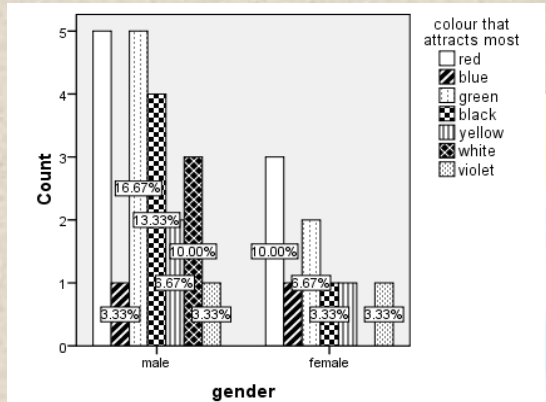


Fig.19

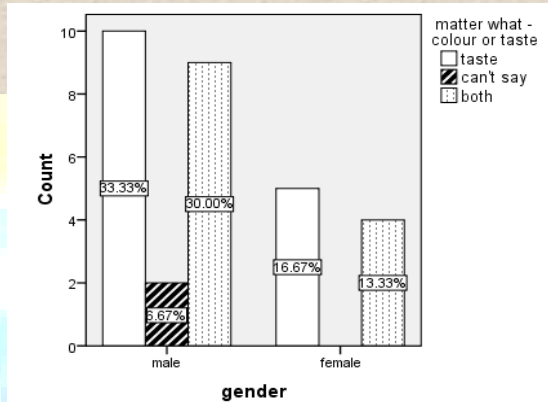


Fig.20

e) Most respondents among males as well as females, view taste as more important compared to colour of the beverage or a food product. (Fig.20)

f) Most number of males as well as females respondents remembers a product through its colour while substantial numbers remember it through the brand name. (Fig.21)

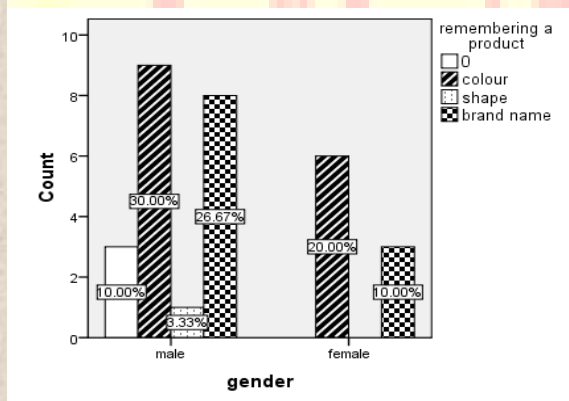


Fig.21

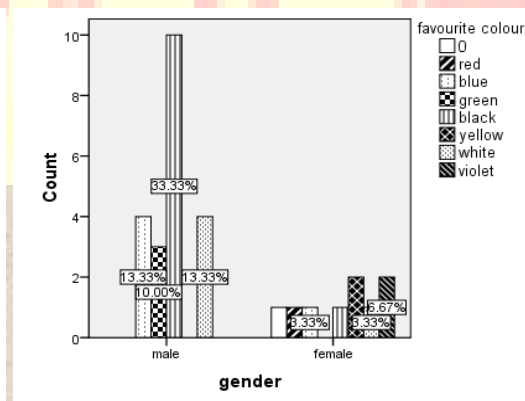


Fig.22

- g) Black, blue and white are the favourite colours among most of the males while it is generally yellow and violet among the females. (Fig.22)

Conclusions and Recommendations:

Following are the key conclusions and recommendations, drawn from the above study;

- Majority of the respondents are of the opinion that colours play an important role in our lives as they bring sparkle and energy in us. Products such as mobiles, laptops, automobiles, fashion accessories, footwear, health food & drinks, cosmetics, etc. should therefore have more colour options to target the younger segment
- Black is the most popular colour among the respondents indicating that today's youth aspire for niche and premium products and want to look different. Blue and White are the other two most prominent colours signifying the simplicity and security respectively. Firms dealing in apparels, accessories or consumer durable should come out with designs having above colours in prominence.
- Youth nowadays are open to new products, technologies or brands. They are ready to taste beverages or food which may be artificially coloured. Packaged drinks and ready to eat or cook products such as juices, wafers, cookies, noodles, pasta can be introduced with more colour variants to attract the younger generation.
- In case of informal wear, blue colour is the most popular among youngsters while black emerged as clear favourite in formal wear. However, youths prefer to select from among far more colour choices when it comes for informal wearing as compare to the formal dressing in which limited colours are preferred. Firms manufacturing jeans, casual shirts, dress material, half pants, night-suits, etc. must look for more colour options such as

green, red, violet and black, apart from blue. Those in the marketing of formal shirts, trousers, suits and dress material should focus on black, white and blue.

- Red colour quite obviously attracts the attention of maximum number of people on the roadside or at the marketplace as indicated by the survey also. This is followed by green, black, yellow and white. Advertising firms, architects for the malls or retail stores must utilize the above colours dominantly for hoardings, billboards, banners or retail atmospherics. The above must also be used in the packaging of products especially those sold across the shelf in the hypermarkets. Gifts, cards, bags, toys, footwear and accessories, apparel, jewellery and FMCG fall under this category.
- Despite black being preferred as clothing by the youth, they don't want black or yellow interiors considering them to be too bold and warm. White and blue are the colours, which are generally favoured for the interiors. Firms dealing in paints, furniture or furnishing should therefore avoid yellow, black or red colours and focus more on white, blue and certain shades of green. Similarly, some other products such as personal care, eyewear or home appliances may also be designed accordingly.
- Since products are also remembered by their colours, firms must place special emphasis on the colour of packaging so as to increase the product recall and repeat sales. This is also important for impulse buying as well as for the apparels, automobiles, mobiles, consumer appliances, furnishing or fashion accessories.
- Most of the retail firms, hotels, restaurants, consumer durables firms, etc. in their CRM efforts collect date of birth of their customers to convey wishes on appropriate dates. They can accordingly collect data related to the customer's favourite colours and can also work it out according to their respective zodiac signs. The customers can be informed whenever their preferred colour shades arrive in the stores. Hotels, restaurants, airlines can also work out their interior furnishings for the regular and preferred clients.

Scope for future research:

Colour play a vital role in our behavioural responses and have an impact on how we behave, feel and respond. Our personality is sometimes judged by the colours we choose or wear. It is important to study various aspects and factors, hidden or explicit, that influences our response to varying coloured stimuli. Detailed study is also required to understand the general colour preferences among the adults, for some commonly purchased products and the role of colour as an important product attribute. The above study can be extended to other age groups and also to the rural areas.

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