

COLOUR FUNCTIONS AS IT RELATES TO AESTHETICS, IDENTIFICATION, AND SYMBOLISM

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Abstract

Colour plays an important role in human perception and interaction with the environment, contributing significantly to aesthetics, identification, and symbolism. While artists perceive colour as pigment, scientists define it as light because colour can only be experienced through the reflection of light on objects. This paper examines the functions of colour as a medium of beauty, a tool for identification, and a means of symbolic communication. In terms of aesthetics, colour enhances visual appeal and evokes emotional responses, thereby increasing the attractiveness of objects, environments, and artworks. As a means of identification, colour enables individuals to easily recognize and remember objects, institutions, and symbols, often more readily than shape or form. Furthermore, colours communicate symbolic meanings across cultural and social contexts, representing ideas such as purity, passion, growth, power, and wealth. The study concludes that colour is an essential element in art, design, and everyday life because it influences perception, supports communication, and conveys meaning through symbolism.

Keywords: colour, aesthetics, identification, symbolism, visual communication

Introduction

Recent studies emphasize that colour significantly influences human perception, cognition, and emotional response (Schloss, 2023; Mirzaei, 2025). Contemporary research demonstrates that colour associations affect behaviour, communication, and decision-making across design, marketing, and environmental contexts (Maghraby et al., 2024). Colour cannot be perceived in the absence of light; when light reflects on an object, colour becomes visible. Colour has three basic properties: hue, value, and intensity. Hue refers to the name of a colour (e.g., red, blue, purple). Value describes the lightness or darkness of a colour, which can be adjusted by adding white or black. Intensity refers to the brightness or dullness of a colour.

Colour may be defined as the reflection of light on an object (Avae, 1990). Without light, colour cannot be perceived. Colour contributes significantly to beauty because its application to surfaces often produces emotional and aesthetic responses in viewers. Scholars have emphasized the importance of colour in art and design, noting that the visual appeal of artworks depends largely on the effective application of colour (Ogumor, 2007; Wangboje, 2008).

Colour also influences daily human experiences and decision-making processes (Banjoko, 2000). It contributes not only to aesthetics but also to identification and symbolism. For example, colours are used in public spaces to create atmosphere and convey meaning, such as green in hospital wards to promote calmness and healing, or yellow in kindergarten classrooms to stimulate energy and enthusiasm. In Christian iconography, blue and white are often associated with the Virgin Mary, symbolizing purity and spirituality, while red is associated with Christ, symbolizing sacrifice and vitality.

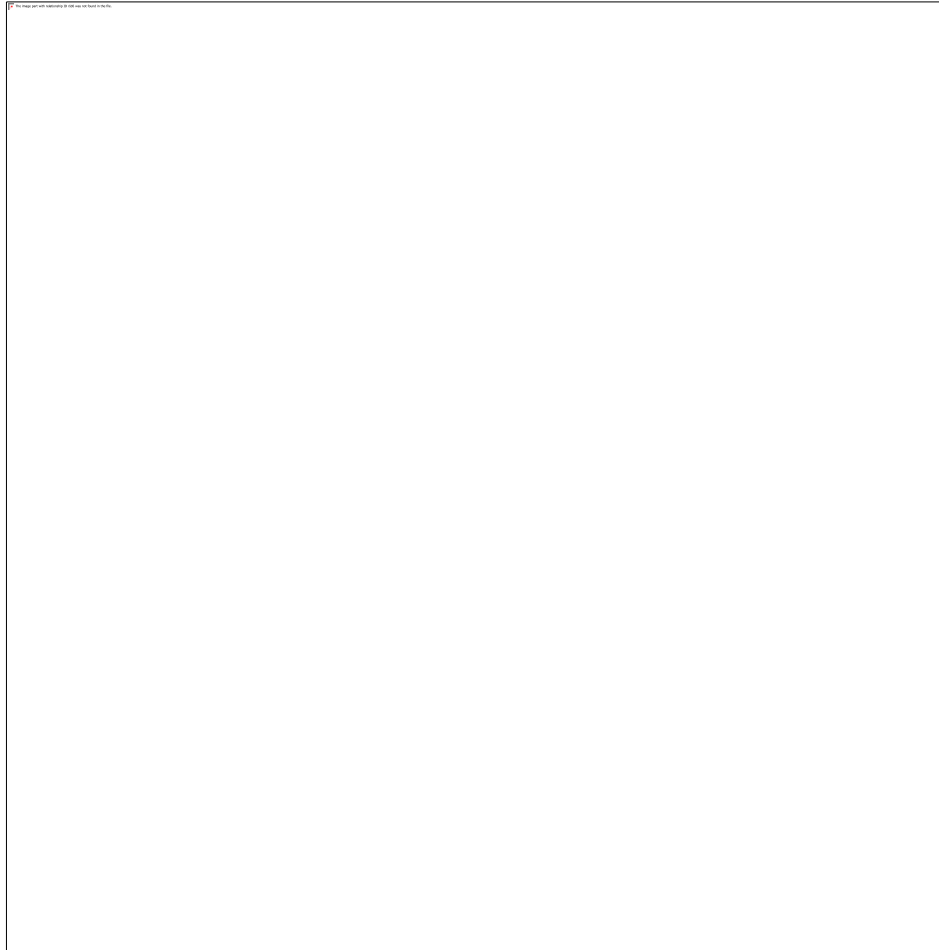
This paper discusses the functions of colour in relation to aesthetics, identification, and symbolism.

Colour Analysis

Colour is perceived differently by artists and scientists. Artists often regard colour as pigment applied to surfaces, while scientists understand colour as light reflected from objects. According to Uzoagba (2000), white light consists of seven colours in the visible spectrum: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet.

Colour is a fundamental element of art because it enhances visual appeal and influences emotional responses. It affects human mood, preferences, and perception of objects. Colour harmony refers to combinations of colours that are visually pleasing and effectively communicate mood or meaning (Ejioghuo, 2023).

Colours may be classified into several categories:



Pic 1: Colour Wheel

Primary Colours

Primary colours are red, blue, and yellow. They cannot be created through the mixture of other colours and serve as the basis for producing other colours (Ganagana, 2011).

Secondary Colours

Secondary colours include orange, green, and purple (violet). They are formed by mixing two primary colours.

Tertiary Colours

Tertiary colours are produced by mixing two secondary colours or a primary colour with a secondary colour. Examples include citron, russet, and olive.

Intermediate Colours

Intermediate colours are produced by mixing a primary colour with a secondary colour. Examples include yellow-green, blue-green, blue-purple, red-purple, red-orange, and yellow-orange.

Complementary Colours

Complementary colours are colours that appear opposite each other on the colour wheel. When combined, they reduce each other's intensity. Examples include red and green, blue and orange, and yellow and purple (Uzoagba, 2000).

Neutral Colours

Neutral colours include black and white. They influence the shades and tints of other colours and contribute to tonal balance (Ogumor, 2007).

Harmonious Colours

Harmonious colours are colours that appear next to each other on the colour wheel. They blend easily due to their similarity in properties.



Pic 2: Colour chart

Colour as Aesthetics (Beauty)

Studies within African contexts indicate that colour perception contributes to emotional well-being and environmental experience (Fadiji et al., 2024). Recent empirical research shows that colour harmony, contrast, and saturation influence perceived attractiveness and emotional response in visual compositions (Mirzaei, 2025). Studies in cognitive psychology further reveal that humans associate colours with meanings that affect interpretation of visual stimuli (Schloss, 2023). Aesthetics refers to the philosophical study of beauty and taste. The term originates from the Greek word *aisthētikos*, meaning perception through the senses. In design, aesthetics refers to the visual attractiveness of objects.

Colour contributes to aesthetics by enhancing the visual quality of environments, artworks, and objects. For example, the use of green in hospitals may create a calming atmosphere, while bright colours in classrooms may stimulate learning and creativity. In fashion, interior decoration, and ceremonies, colour combinations create visual harmony and emotional appeal.

Without colour, the environment would appear dull and less engaging. Colour enhances the beauty of fabrics, buildings, artworks, and natural surroundings such as the sky, flowers, and landscapes.

Colour as a Means of Identification

Research in African communication studies shows that colour coding improves message clarity and audience engagement, particularly in public information and health campaigns (Eze et al., 2025). Modern branding and communication research demonstrates that colour improves brand recognition and memory retention, making it a critical tool for identity formation and marketing communication (Maghraby et al., 2024). Colour coding enhances information processing efficiency in digital and physical environments (Schloss, 2023). Colour plays a crucial role in identification. People often remember objects by their colour rather than their shape or name (Banjoko, 2000). Countries use colours in their national flags for identification. For example, Nigeria is associated with green and white.

Organisations use colours for branding and recognition. For instance, MTN is identified with yellow, while Airtel is identified with red. Colours are also used in sports uniforms, traffic signals, safety signs, and advertisements to communicate information quickly and effectively.

Colour enables quick recognition of products, institutions, and groups. It enhances communication by making identification easier and more efficient.

Colour as Symbols

Colour symbolism is deeply embedded in African cultural and religious traditions, where colours communicate spiritual meanings and social identity (Kudrya-Marais & Olalere, 2022; Emenike et al., 2025). Recent interdisciplinary research indicates that colour symbolism is influenced by cultural context, psychological associations, and learned experiences (Meliksetyan, 2025). Studies confirm that colours communicate abstract meanings and influence emotional interpretation across design and communication systems (Liang & Hangeldiyeva, 2024). Colour functions as a symbolic tool in communication. A symbol represents or stands for something else (Pearsall, 2002). Colours convey meanings that vary across cultural and social contexts.

Purple symbolizes luxury, royalty, and spirituality. Green represents nature, growth, harmony, and stability. Red symbolizes passion, energy, love, and danger. Orange represents creativity, youthfulness, and enthusiasm. Brown symbolizes stability and connection to the earth. Pink represents romance, sensitivity, and femininity. Black symbolizes power, elegance, and sophistication, but may also represent grief or fear.

Metallic colours such as gold, silver, and bronze symbolize wealth, achievement, and success. Gold represents first place, silver second place, and bronze third place in competitive contexts.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and descriptive research approach based on literature review and theoretical analysis. The methodology relies on the examination of existing scholarly texts, books, journal articles, and credible online sources relating to colour theory, aesthetics, visual communication, symbolism, and design psychology. Relevant academic works published between 1990 and 2025 were reviewed in order to provide both foundational knowledge and contemporary perspectives on the functions of colour.

The study employs conceptual analysis to interpret how colour operates as a visual element within artistic, cultural, and communicative contexts. Sources were selected based on relevance to the themes of aesthetics, identification, and symbolism, with particular attention given to recent interdisciplinary studies in art education, psychology, branding, and African cultural studies. The research also draws examples from practical applications of colour in everyday environments such as advertising, national identity, religion, fashion, and public communication systems.

Through comparative analysis of scholarly viewpoints, the study synthesizes theoretical perspectives that explain how colour influences perception, emotional response, meaning-making, and recognition. This approach enables the study to highlight the significance of colour as both a sensory and symbolic element in art and society. The qualitative method is appropriate because the study focuses on interpretation of meaning rather than measurement of numerical data.

Conclusion

Colour plays an essential role in human life and artistic expression. It contributes to aesthetics by enhancing beauty, supports identification by enabling recognition of objects and institutions, and functions symbolically by conveying meaning. Colour influences emotions, perceptions, and communication across cultural and social contexts.

Without colour, the world would appear dull and less meaningful. Colour remains an indispensable element in art, design, communication, and everyday human experience.

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