

Using the Psychology of Color Schemes to Create an Appreciative Advising Environment

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One of the hallmarks of the Disarm phase of Appreciative Advising is creating a safe, warm, and welcoming environment (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008). Friedhoff and Murray (2014) emphasized the important role that color has played in making their Appreciative Advising Offices more welcoming to students. Color has a dramatic impact on our moods and emotions. In *Color Psychology and Color Therapy: A Factual Study of the Influence of Color on Human Life*, Faber Birren (1950) breaks down color psychology into three main groups: mental associations and objective and subjective impressions. Our objective impressions are not influenced by personal feelings or opinions, while our subjective impressions are impacted by emotions. The purpose of this article is to examine Birren's (1950) psychology of color schemes, the emotions that colors elicit, and how advisers can use this information to enhance their interactions with students as well as their marketing materials.

Color Categories

Birren (1950) broke colors into two categories: warm and cool. He also had a third category, neutral, including the colors black, white, and gray, that is "emotionally neutral" (Birren, 1950, p. 261).

Warm Colors

Table 1 highlights the color psychology of warm colors. Red is considered to be one of the most "dominant and dynamic of colors" (Birren, 1950, p. 258). It is often associated with heat and fire and is objectively seen as the color of passion and excitement (Birren, 1950). The excitement that results as a response to this color can be both positive and negative. Positivity lies in becoming restless as you anticipate a long-awaited event. Negativity lies in anxiety. When deadlines approach, they tend to be highlighted in red on calendars or in e-mails. Associating deadlines with the color red can lead an individual to become stressed at the sight of this color no matter the location. Subjectively, red invokes feelings of intensity (which can be linked to passion) and power. Psychologist William A. Wellmann referred to red as the "color of vigor" (Birren, 1950, p. 141).

Table 1.
The Color Psychology of Warm Colors

Color	Mental Association	Objective Impression	Subjective Impression
Red	Heat, fire	Passion, excitement	Intensity
Orange	Autumn	Energetic	Cheerful
Yellow	Sun, sunlight	Vitality	Well-being, health

Orange is very similar to red in terms of its associations. Orange is associated with autumn and is objectively seen as cheerful. Research has shown that many individuals do not prefer the pure shade of orange, but variations of the color instead. Lighter shades of orange (i.e., peach) are recommended for academic institutions (Birren, 1950). Because orange is less intense than red, it makes one feel calmer and more relaxed in their environment.

Yellow is automatically associated with the sun and sunlight. Because the sunrise signals the start of a new day, yellow is objectively linked to feelings of vitality and subjectively to feelings of well-being and health. Because the sunlight warms the earth, yellow is seen as the color of warmth (Birren, 1950).

Warm colors can be strategically used in certain situations. For example, because red can be viewed both negatively and positively, it is not recommended for use in an appreciative advising environment. Orange can be used; however, lighter shades of the color are preferred in academic settings. Yellow is a better alternative to white in that it appears brighter when applied to a physical space. Birren (1950) recommends the use of yellow in physical spaces with unfavorable conditions, such as large offices or offices with vaulted ceilings.

Cool Colors

Table 2 highlights the color psychology of cool colors. Blue is associated with water, which leads to thoughts of ice and cold and is objectively seen as a very soothing color (Birren, 1950). Subjectively, blue can express gloom (feeling “the blues”), but Wellmann deemed blue as the color of “spirituality and thought” (Birren, 1950, p. 141), which aligns with the objective side of the color’s association.

Table 2.

The Color Psychology of Cool Colors

Color	Mental Association	Objective Impression	Subjective Impression
Blue	Water	Soothing	Gloom
Green	Trees	Peaceful	Terror
Purple	Darkness	Royalty	Loneliness

Green is associated with trees, which leads to thoughts of nature and, like blue, water. As a result of its tie-in with nature, green is viewed objectively as peaceful. However, subjective feelings of terror can arise when green light is cast upon an object. For example, green light has been used by law enforcement in interrogation rooms to force confessions (Birren, 1950). Purple is associated with darkness and is viewed objectively as the color of royals, thus provoking feelings of dignity. Due to its ties to darkness, purple can be seen subjectively as involving loneliness (Birren, 1950). Blue is a favorite color of individuals around the world and can be used in almost any shade – light or dark. Blue tends to be overwhelming when applied in areas that are very large; however, it is “associated with dim light, is restful and sedate” (Birren, 1950, p. 260), which keeps it favorable among many individuals. Greens and blue-greens have been found to reduce feelings of nervousness and tension. In terms of color psychology, green provides the best environment for concentration and meditation. Purple is a blend of red and blue

(warm and cool colors). Though it is classified as a cool color, it is “more or less neutral biologically” (Birren, 1950, p. 260). Similar to blue, it is best not to apply this color to large areas as it tends to become overwhelming, causing one to lose focus.

Neutral Colors

Table 3 highlights the color psychology of neutral colors. Black is associated with night and darkness. Black is objectively and subjectively tied to depression and death while white is associated with winter and snow (Birren, 1950), and thus has a cooling effect on an individual. White is objectively associated with cleanliness and purity. Because white is the only perfectly balanced color, it is subjectively associated with feelings of normalcy (Birren, 1950).

Table 3.

The Color Psychology of Neutral Colors

Color	Mental Association	Objective Impression	Subjective Impression
Black	Night, darkness	Depression, death	Depression, death
White	Winter, snow	Cleanliness, purity	Normalcy
Gray	Old age	Death, purity	Death, normalcy

Wellmann described gray as the color of “old age” (Birren, 1950, p. 141). As a combination of black and white, it is unique in that its objective and subjective feelings are a combination of both colors’ impressions. Neutral grays tend to echo the feelings of “sophistication, practicality, and solidarity,” while overwhelming amounts of gray can lead to “feelings of nothingness and depression” (Jasinski, 2014, para. 4). As previously noted, black, white and gray can be described as “emotionally neutral” (Birren, 1950, p. 261). Therefore, they tend not to invoke powerful emotions within individuals and should be avoided when designing a physical or electronic space for appreciative advising.

Using Color to Create Effective Office Space and Marketing Materials

Given the above information about the impact of colors, this section will provide advice about how to effectively use colors when decorating office space and creating marketing materials.

Office Space

The Disarm phase of Appreciative Advising involves creating a safe, warm, and welcoming environment (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008). Therefore, office space considerations are key in the creation of such an environment. The use of color plays a substantial role in making students feel comfortable. When choosing wall colors, it is best to select a color that will create a calm, relaxing atmosphere. This can be achieved by using one of the cool colors. Blue and green are the two best options, as they invoke feelings of peace. Gray is best used for “industrial purposes” (Birren, 1950, p. 248), not in academic settings. Depending on the area of the country in which your institution is located, it may be acceptable to use warm colors. If your institution is located in an area of the country that experiences predominantly cold temperatures,

warm colors would be best (Birren, 1950). Conversely, Birren (1950) advocated the use of cool colors in predominantly warm temperature locations. If the office is comprised mostly of dark floors and/or furniture, then lighter wall colors are more appropriate; similarly, if the office has lightly colored floors and/or furniture, then darker wall colors are more appropriate (Birren, 1950). Although ceilings should be white in most cases, Birren (1950) said that large spaces with high, vaulted ceilings can be brought to life by using warm colors such as cream or peach.

Marketing Materials

The choice of color – whether it be for an office logo, publication, or website – can have a tremendous impact on an individual’s mood. Jasinski (2014) suggests that there are large sums of money being invested to research the impact color has on people. Table 4 highlights color psychology’s impact on marketing materials, logos, and public perception. The neutral colors – black, white and gray – should be avoided in large amounts. These colors are associated with depression, purity, and old age (Birren, 1950). Student affairs professionals want their students to be excited about the information being presented to them, not sad. It is also important to note that yellow should never be used on a white or bright background, as it is impossible to quickly make out the information being presented. Jasinski (2014) echoes this sentiment, noting to avoid colors that “clash” (para. 12) with others on the page. Warm colors paired on a cool background or cool colors on a warm background are easiest to read.

Table 4.

Color Psychology and the Impact on Marketing Materials, Logos, and Public Perception

Color	Associations/Impressions
Neutral (Black, White, Gray)	Depression, old age, purity
Red	Intensity, power
Pink	Youthfulness, purity
Yellow	Sunlight
Blue	Calmness
Green	Nature
Purple	Royalty

Color is a key aspect of public perception. In 2013, Ridgeway surveyed 184 adults on their perceptions of the use of color in various company logos (Gould, 2014). In terms of the use of yellow, the sample of adults surveyed linked the color to fun and sunlight (Gould, 2014). Companies who use yellow as the primary color in their logo include DHL and Shell. Green is associated with nature and can be used to make your audience feel calm. It is also linked to the “green” movement of recycling and being environmentally conscious (Jasinski, 2014). Ridgeway echoes this claim by tying green to sustainability (Gould, 2014). Companies that use green as their primary logo color include Starbucks and BP. Blue, like green, is a calming color and is tied to feelings of trust (Jasinski, 2014). Blue and green are ideal colors to use in any situation. Blue, being associated with calmness, is tied to companies (e.g. IBM) that are successful and reliable (Gould, 2014). Purple, associated with royalty, provokes feelings of a company (e.g. Yahoo! and Cadbury) that is charming (Gould, 2014).

Jasinski (2014) suggests that font color and style is equally as important as background colors. Make sure that the font style selected is readable. Font size and color are key when distinguishing important information from that which is not as urgent. If using a cool color for your background, make sure that the color of hyperlinks (blue) is changed accordingly so that the link is visible to the user.

A Rainbow of Opportunity

The strategic use of color can help create more welcoming office environments, marketing materials, and logos. Color is an important design component. Therefore, choose colors that fit best with the organization's personality. Instead of using the traditional colors of gray, white, and yellow throughout an advisement office, it is recommended that the cool colors of blue and green be used to make students feel comfortable and fully engaged during their visits. These offices should also strategically use colors when designing logos and publications. Color plays a critical role in engaging students and creating an appreciative advising environment on campus.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Dr. Jennifer Bloom for her support and editing assistance throughout the writing process.

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