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Reassessing the effect of colour on attitude and behavioural intentions in promotional activities: The moderating role of mood and involvement

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ABSTRACT

The present research examines the effect of background colour on attitude and behavioural intentions in various promotional activities taking into consideration the moderating role of mood and involvement. Three experiments reflecting different promotional activities (window display, consumer trade show, guerrilla marketing) were conducted for this purpose. Overall, findings indicate that cool background colours, in contrast to warm colours, induce more positive attitudes and behavioural intentions mainly in positive mood, and low involvement conditions. Implications are also discussed.

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1. Introduction

Past research has shown that environmental cues, such as colour, provide affective information that directly influences consumers' processing strategy (e.g. Soldat et al., 1997) and, subsequently, their decision-making process. The influence of colour on psychological functioning (i.e. feelings and behaviours) is automatic, takes place without conscious intention or awareness (Elliot & Maier, 2007) and, despite individual and cultural differences, it has been found to be quite consistent. Moreover, early evidence indicates that colours have been associated with mood. Empirical evidence on the effects of colour in marketing communication exist (Gorn, et al. 1997). Most studies in marketing communications support a strong influence of colour on consumer behaviour (e.g. Elliot and Maier, 2014; Kareklas, et al., 2014; Krishna and Schwarz, 2013; Wedel and Pieters, 2015). Relevant literature mainly focuses on areas like packaging, print advertising (e.g. Wedel and Pieters, 2015; Elliot and Maier, 2014; Kareklas, et al., 2014; Pantin-Sohier, 2009) and web pages (Cheng et al., 2009; Mandel and Johnson, 2002), while other promotional activities, like guerilla marketing, have been relatively overlooked. Still, the growing importance of tactics like guerilla marketing have become increasingly important, following a shift from traditional advertising

to unconventional methods of promotion, mainly due to increased advertising clutter, media proliferation and consumer sophistication (Rizomyliotis et al., 2017).

In response to this challenge, whilst the significance of advertising in marketing communications is undeniable, businesses have also integrated a variety of other promotional tools that are relatively neglected in literature (Ots & Nyilasy, 2017; Turner, 2017). Conversely, the contribution of our research is threefold. First, we aim to address the apparent need for further investigation of promotional tools that are not widely researched. Second, we expand existing knowledge in regards to the effect of colour on consumer behavioural intentions and attitudes towards such promotional activities. Finally, we present new evidence by examining the moderating role of mood and involvement on the relationship between colour and attitudes/behavioural intentions in promotional activities other than advertising.

2. The current research

The present research focuses on the background colour of a promotional activity, which is investigated with respect to its effect on consumer attitude and behavioural intention, further examining the possibly of moderating effects of consumer's mood and involvement. In this study, intention refers to "intentions to seek information". The intention to seek for further product/service information is long ago recognised as being the link between the cognitive and the emotional stages of consumers' buying process. It signposts the possibility of converting consumers' first impression

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to action and adds to the understanding of how to communicate with prospects effectively. According to Singh (2006), regardless of the extensive research conducted in the field of colour and its impact on human behaviour, the linkage between specific colours and specific responses is inconclusive. Moreover, in terms of marketing communications, past research has mainly focused on the use of colour in advertising, packaging and in-store atmospherics (Ettis, 2017), while other elements of marketing communication (IMC) mix in relation to colour require further investigation (McGrath, 2005). Deeper understanding of the impact of colour on a series of promotional activities will provide comprehensive insights into its significance in an IMC setting (Dresler-Hawke and Veer, 2006). Reasoning from this fact, three different types of promotional activities that have attracted limited attention in literature were chosen, namely window displays, consumer trade shows and guerrilla marketing promotions. Research on the influences of colour on humans dates back over 100 years (Babbitt 1878 cited in Bagchi & Cheema, 2013). According to Elliot and Maier (2007) colour is not just about aesthetics; it has been shown to carry specific meanings, enhance emotions and communicate specific information. Colour, as external stimuli have an impact on humans' emotions (Cimbalo et al, 1978). Cimbalo et al. (1978) found that yellow, orange, and blue enhance happy feelings, while red, black and brown were described as sad colours. More specifically, blue seems to stimulate the sympathetic nervous system much more than red (Kido, 2000).

In relation to marketing research, colour is documented to alter consumers' attitudes towards products; it is also reported to influence behavioural intentions (e.g. Visser et al., 2015; Ghaderi et al., 2015;) as well as behaviour itself (Sokolik et al., 2014). Colour has also been found to contribute to the perception of products. For example, dull colours are associated with unhealthy products (Karnal et al, 2016), while green backgrounds in advertising is found to assist products being perceived as natural and organic (e.g. Schuldt & Schwarz, 2010; Schuldt, 2013). Finally, level naming or atypical colour naming (e.g. friendly green vs. pine green) has been found to influence consumers' product perceptions and purchase intentions; ambiguous colour names are preferred to common colour names (Miller & Kahn, 2005).

Colour attributes and their impact on consumer attitudes and perceptions have also attracted research attention. Labrecque and Milne (2012) focused on colour attributes; specifically hue, saturation and lightness value. Their results supported a significant impact of all three attributes on brand image. Several studies explored the attribute of saturation and most of them suggest that highly saturate colours (i.e. vivid colours) enhance consumer preferences and recall rate in advertising (e.g. Sabate et al., 2014; Kim Sin & He, 2013). Vivid colours were also found to positively influence feelings and emotions towards the brand (Duffett, 2015). Looking into advertising processing, Coyle and Thorson (2001) suggest that in advertising, text usually has the lowest level of saturation if compared to other background colour cues that stimulate the vision. As saturation rises, both attention and processing of the advertising increase as well; successively, this enhances attitudes towards the brand (Lee, 2012) and increases consumers' behavioural intentions (De Vries et al., 2012).

The current study focuses on the colour attribute of hue as the attributes of saturation and value have been receiving more attention lately (Bagchi and Cheema, 2013). Looking particularly into this attribute, Labrecque et al. (2013) suggest that colour hue enhances brand engagement and attachment. Early studies identified consumers' preferences with specific colours. Blue has been reported as the most attractive colour, followed by green, purple, red and yellow. Crowley (1993) suggested that presence of colour (like red and to a lesser extent blue) as opposed to absence of colour (black and white) stimulate the processing of an advertising message and, thus, result in higher message recall.

Researchers have attempted to classify colours in order to generalise their findings. Prior research makes a distinction between "warm" colours (i.e. red) and "cool" colours (i.e. blue), suggesting that they have different "psychological meanings" and evoke different associated themes (Ettis, 2017; Cheng et al., 2009). Warm colours are conceived as being physically stimulating (Bellizzi and Hite, 1992); they have strong excitation potential and high arousal qualities (Schaie and Heiss, 1964; Bellizzi, Crowley & Hasty, 1983). In a web environment, users tend to interact and engage more with web communications that contain red cues than with those that contain blue cues (Ettis, 2017; Cheng et al., 2009). In contrast, cool colours seem to have an adverse effect and are perceived as more relaxing and restful (Bellizzi and Hite, 1992; Sharpe, 1974). Past research consistently suggests that cool colours (e.g. blue) evoke more positive evaluations than warm colours (e.g. red). According to Crowley (1993), this result is significant both in cases where subjects stated their colour preferences directly, as well as in cases where affective reactions were measured instead; in the latter, colours were used as a peripheral cue (Middlestadt, 1990). Crowley (1993) also suggests that blue enhances evaluative reactions to the advertisements. Moreover, Middlestadt (1990) posits that blue (i.e. cool) in comparison to red (i.e. warm) background colour leads to more positive purchase intentions (Bagchi and Cheema, 2012) for specific categories, such as pens. These results were confirmed in online stores, where blue environment was found to arouse joy and enhance online purchase intentions (Etti, 2017). Finally, blue facilitates information processing and consideration (e.g. Madden et al., 2000; Etti, 2017), and this is expected to positively influence information seeking. Thus:

H1. *Cool background colours (i.e. blue) used in promotional activities induce more positive attitudes and intentions to seek information than warm background colours (i.e. red).*

According to Mehta and Zhu (2009), the effect of colour on cognitive processes (e.g. attitude formation) and behaviour (e.g. seeking further information) could be moderated and/ or mediated, when different types of motivations are activated. A main motivator of consumers' cognitive and behavioural activities is involvement (e.g. Petty and Cacioppo, 1979, 1981; Zaichkowsky, 1985). In high involvement conditions, consumers engage in extended information search and processing, as opposed to low involvement conditions (e.g. Zaichkowsky, 1985). Moreover, it is widely accepted that regardless of the purchase decision, consumers will ultimately develop some level of involvement (Engel and Blackwell, 1982). Low involved consumers are often "cognitive misers" who don't engage in extensive information search and processing and use simple heuristics to make their decisions (e.g. Alba and Hutchinson, 1987). Specifically, in such involvement conditions, consumers often employ a variety of judgmental biases such as heuristic processing strategies (e.g. Chaiken, 1980). Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) is one of marketing communication's most-cited models that explores involvement in relation to message processing (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986; Pasadeos et al., 2008). Petty and Cacioppo (1981, 1986) suggest that there are two routes to persuasion, namely the central route (arguments and information are used), which is usually employed in high involvement conditions, and the peripheral route (visual cues are used), which is usually employed in low involvement conditions. Colours are basic visual cues that tend to be persuasive in low involvement conditions, as highly involved consumers do not limit processing on visual cues and are willing to put effort into cognitively process complex information and arguments (Kitchen et al, 2014). Colour is also expected to have a greater impact on attitude and behaviour in low involvement conditions, as their impact occurs outside consumers' 'consciousness' (Mehta and Zhue, 2009); this mainly represents the low involvement- peripheral route to persuasion. Thus, it

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