



## Perceptions of drug color among drug sellers and consumers in rural southwestern Nigeria

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### Abstract

*Background:* Color is commonly used for branding and coding consumer products including medications. People associate certain colors in tablets and capsules with the effect of the drug and the illness for which it is meant. Color coding was introduced in age-specific prepacked antimalarial drugs for preschool aged children in Nigeria by the National Malaria Control Committee. Yellow was designated for the younger ages and blue for the older. The National Malaria Control Committee did not perform market research to learn how their color codes would be perceived by consumers.

*Objective:* The study aimed at determining perceptions of both consumers and sellers of medicines at the community level to learn about color likes and dislikes that might influence acceptance of new color-coded child prepacks of antimalarial drugs.

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*Methods:* Qualitative methods were used to determine perceptions of drug colors. A series of focus group interviews were conducted with male and female community members, and in-depth interviews were held with medicine sellers in the Igbo-Ora community in southwestern Nigeria.

*Results:* Respondents clearly associated medicines with their effects and purpose, for example white drugs for pain relief, red for building blood, blue to aid sleep, and yellow for malaria treatment. Medicine vendors had a low opinion of white colored medicines, but community members were ultimately more concerned about efficacy. The perceived association between yellow and malaria, because of local symptom perceptions of eyes turning yellowish during malaria, yielded a favorable response when consumers were shown the yellow prepacks. The response to blue was noncommittal but consumers indicated that if they were properly educated on the efficacy and function of the new drugs they would likely buy them.

*Conclusions:* Community members will accept yellow as an antimalarial drug but health education will be needed for promoting the idea of blue for malaria and the notion of age-specific packets. Therefore, the strong medicine vendor–training component that accompanied roll out of these prepacks in the pilot states needs to be replicated nationally.

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*Keywords:* Drug color; Community perceptions; Malaria; Nigeria; Medicine sellers

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## 1. Introduction

Color has aesthetic, symbolic, and practical uses in the realm of product marketing. An important practical use of color is establishing brand identity.<sup>1</sup> Color has been a strong force in product branding and is often selected for its perceived cultural associations.<sup>1,2</sup> The association between color and brand is sometimes so strong that one can say a company “owns” a certain color.<sup>3</sup>

Braun and Silver<sup>4</sup> examined the interaction of signal words and colors in 2 separate experiments and identified a significant influence of color on perceptions of hazard and on compliance to printed warnings. Their results indicated that warnings printed in red resulted in a higher proportion of compliant behavior. Red therefore, conveyed the highest level of perceived hazard followed by orange, black, green, and blue. It was also noted that a signal word such as DEADLY connoted less hazard when printed in green than in red ink.<sup>5</sup>

Color can be used for very practical purposes. One of the most common practical color uses is the traffic signal with the ubiquitous red, yellow-orange, and green lights. Regardless of other symbolic or aesthetic perceptions of these 3 colors, people have learned how to respond as either drivers or pedestrians when confronted with these colors at a street junction. Bus

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