

From Dopamine to Maillard: A Study on the Application of Color in Brand Marketing in the New Media Era:Based on the Analysis of Color Psychology

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ABSTRACT

In the era of new media, the rapid development of social media platforms has provided an unprecedented broad stage for color marketing. As a representative new media platform in China, Xiaohongshu, with its rich content and active user groups, has become an important position for brand marketing. Based on the theory of color psychology and the characteristics of Xiaohongshu platform, this study explores the application logic of dopamine color (highly saturated bright colors) and maillard color (brownish-brown earth colors) in brand marketing. Through in-depth interviews and case studies, we analyze consumers' attitudes towards color marketing, the effectiveness of branding strategies and potential risks, so as to reveal the successful experiences and potential challenges of brands' marketing strategies using color trends in the new media environment.

KEYWORDS

Color marketing; Consumer psychology; Dopamine; Maillard; Xiaohongshu; Brand Strategy

1 Introduction

In the visually dominated new media era, color has become a core strategic resource for brands to compete for users' attention. In the summer of 2023, "Dopamine Dressing" swept through Xiaohongshu with a storm of highly saturated colors, with more than a million related notes; only half a year later, "The Style of Maillard" took over as the new favorite in autumn and winter, with the topic views exceeding 200 million. For example, Luckin Coffee took the lead in launching the concept of "Dopamine Iced Coffee" by choosing six different colors of fruit coffee to form the "Dopamine Iced Coffee Series" among the existing products, and took brand new publicity pictures of the corresponding colors to launch the "Color Sense Challenge" on Xiaohongshu. The "Color Sense Challenge" was launched on Xiaohongshu, and the tutorial on the "Maillard Makeup" of Lancôme has been broadcast 48 million times. These phenomena highlight that color is becoming a new medium for brands to establish emotional connections with consumers.

Existing research focuses on three areas: new media and visual marketing: color as a strong visual stimulus can quickly capture attention in an information overload environment; the basis of color psychology: color is directly related to emotions and decision-making; highly saturated colors (dopamine) stimulate excitement, and warm brown tones (Maillard) convey a sense of warmth and sophistication; branding examples: Coca Cola's red color strengthens brand recognition, Tmall's "Chinese color" reinforces brand identity, and Tmall's "Chinese color" is the most popular color in the world. Tmall's "Chinese color" marketing enhances cultural identity; however, existing studies lack systematic empirical research on dynamic color trends and seldom analyze the acceptance and pain points from the user's perspective.

This study adopts a combination of theoretical analysis, case study method and in-depth interviews. Luckin Coffee and Lancôme are selected as cross-industry cases, and based on the interview data of seven users (Table 1), the study integrates the theoretical frameworks of color psychology, communication, and marketing to analyze consumer perceptions and behaviors. The interviewees cover different ages, genders and occupational backgrounds to ensure the diversity of the sample.

Table 1 Basic information about the interviewer

Respondents	Age	Gender	Occupation	Daily Browsing Preferences	Perceptions and Attitudes towards Color Marketing
1	21	Male	Students	Photography, music	Dopamine color "vivid", but easy to aesthetic fatigue; prefer classic (black, white, gray, brown)
2	25	Female	Pilates instructor	Beauty product reviews, tutorials, Paying attention to the ingredients	Follow beauty trends, buy Lancôme Maillard eyeshadow palette because of blogger's review; think color is an "emotional connection tool"
3	21	Female	Students	Table tennis, food, beauty, clothes	Will try trendy colors but not blindly buy them; believe that brand followers are "benign innovation"
4	43	Female	Company employee	Daily life, clothes	Refer to bloggers' outfits, color needs to "suit you"; prefer classic models because of "reliable reputation"
5	52	Female	Clothing store owner	Beauty, accessories	Believe that the color of Maillard "temperament of foreign style"; attach importance to color design
6	29	Male	Company employee	Unknown field	Think that color marketing "pursues publicity and lacks substance", refuses to pay for premiums
7	32	Male	Company employee	Sports, food	Judge by feelings, "looks comfortable" will spend money

2 Theoretical foundation: color psychology and new media marketing

2.1 The core mechanism of color psychology

Color acts directly on the limbic system through visual neurotransmission, affecting emotions and behaviors[3]. Dopamine colors are highly saturated, highly contrasting and bright, stimulating dopamine secretion, triggering excitement and pleasure (e.g., respondent 1 describes it as "vibrant and vivid"), and are suitable for fast-moving consumer goods and youthful brands; while Maillard colors are mainly brownish-brown and warm, activating a sense of security and belonging, and associating with natural and retro scenes (e.g., Respondent 2 associates it with "wooden furniture" and Respondent 1 mentions "fall woods"), which is suitable for high-end, durable consumer goods. These cognitive and emotional responses reveal the potential of color to evoke emotional resonance in consumers.

2.2 New media environment reshapes color marketing

In today's digital wave, the new media environment is reshaping the landscape of brand marketing with unprecedented power, and color marketing, as a key dimension, is undergoing a profound change. While traditional color marketing focuses on the visual impact and basic recognition of color, the new media environment has given color marketing a brand new connotation and mission by virtue of its immediacy, interactivity, fragmented communication and other characteristics.

The new media era has given color marketing a more accurate positioning ability, and brands can gain deep insight into the color preference codes of audiences in different regions, ages, genders and consumption habits with the help of cutting-edge technologies such as big data analysis. Color is no longer a single visual symbol, but is endowed with precise emotional labels and personality markers. The interactivity of color marketing is also infinitely amplified in this environment. In the traditional marketing model, the application of color is a one-way output that consumers can only passively accept. However, in the interactive field of new media, consumers become the co-creators and disseminators of color marketing. The brand's carefully crafted color-themed content, such as exquisite dopamine color wearing tutorials, bloom in social networks in various forms, such as short videos and graphics, to stimulate consumers' participation. Consumers incorporate their unique understanding of color and life inspirations through liking, commenting, sharing and even secondary creation.

The new media environment also promotes the dynamic evolution of color marketing. Color trends in the new media era are like fast-changing trends, and brands must always keep a keen eye on them to keep up with the pace. Brands in this environment can not only meet the short-term color hot pursuit, but also from the dynamic changes in the refining of the long-term value of the color concept. For example, the dopamine color from the initial burst of fashion, gradually expanding to beauty, food and beverage, digital and other areas, the brand in the process of following up this trend, and continue to explore the positive emotional core behind it, so as to achieve emotional resonance with consumers.

3 The rise of dopamine and maillard color marketing motivation

In the consumer environment of information explosion, the rapid popularity of dopamine and maillard color is not by chance. In-depth interview data reveal that behind their explosive spread is the resonance of the triple driving force of the competition for attention in the new media environment, the upgrading of consumers' emotional needs and the emotional arousal ability of the color itself:

3.1 Competition for attention in the new media environment

In the social platform of information fragmentation (Xiaohongshu), the highly saturated "dopamine color" and the warm and rich "maillard color" have become the focus of brands to instantly capture users' attention with their strong visual impact. Respondent 6 said that the purpose was to "break common sense and attract traffic", while respondent 5 also named the brand's intention to "increase attention and sales".

Platform bloggers (beauty and fashion) are a key driver of color trend popularity. Respondent 2 ordered the Lancôme maillard eyeshadow palette directly from the blogger's review, while Respondent 4 said they would "buy it if it's suitable", and KOLs transformed abstract color concepts into tangible, imitable lifestyles (e.g., "maillard makeup tutorials for fall/winter", "dopamine weekend wear", and so on), greatly reducing the cognitive threshold, accelerating the transformation chain from "see" to "want". This proves that color has become the most direct competitive chip in the new media attention economy.

3.2 Upgrade of consumers' emotional needs

3.2.1 Emotional resonance has become the new demand of consumers

Respondents coincidentally bound color to deep emotions. Respondent 1 describes dopamine as bringing the

pleasure of "vivid and lively", and maillard as conveying "warmth and coziness, and a sense of sophistication"; Respondent 2 associates color with the literary sentiment of "film filters and retro"; Respondent 3 feels the "cool and handsome" temperament of maillard. This shows that consumers no longer only pay for product functions, but also desire to obtain emotional comfort, identity or seasonal rituals through consumption.

3.2.2 Color as social currency for emotional expression

Young consumers take the initiative to search and understand new words of color in Xiaohongshu and internalize them as aesthetic labels. Purchasing and using popular color products has become a "social passport" for participating in social conversations, demonstrating fashion acumen, and integrating into circles. Respondent 3 confessed that they choose popular colors to "cater to popular aesthetics and hobbies", naming the social expression and sense of belonging carried by colors.

3.3 Color's own ability to evoke emotions

3.3.1 Color is the most efficient emotional trigger

Compared with words or complex narratives, color can bypass rational analysis and act directly on the senses and emotional center. The high saturation of dopamine color has the physiological basis of stimulating excitement and transmitting vitality; the earthy browns and browns of the maillard color family are rooted in people's warm associations with nature, earth, and campfires. For example, respondent 1 associates it with "a walk in the woods in the fall", and respondent 4 points to the "autumn and winter atmosphere". This instinctive ability to evoke emotions is the core advantage that makes color marketing far more effective than other means.

3.3.2 Cross-cultural universal language of emotion

Respondents of different ages and genders, such as respondent 5, who described maillard as "temperament, foreign style", and respondent 3, who felt "cool and handsome", although their expressions were different, there was a consensus on the emotional tone conveyed by color (warmth/vitality/higher sense of style), which reflects the universal language of color as a non-verbal emotional symbol. This reflects the universality of color as a non-verbal emotional symbol.

4 The brand application of color trends in the strategy and effect

Table 2 Cross-industry case study

Brand	Industry	Color	Theme application form	Core strategy	Effect and feedback
Luckin Coffee	Catering	Dopamine	Fruity coffee + Limited peripheral	1.Leveraging on the summer trend 2.Reinforcing the positioning of "young and trendy drink"	Social media exposure increased by 150%, and some users thought it was "eye-catching but disposable" (Respondents 1, 6)
Lancôme	Beauty makeup	Maillard	Fall/Winter Makeup + Blogger tutorials	1.Binding to the seasonal atmosphere 2.Highlighting product quality	Eyeshadow palette sales increased significantly (purchased by Respondent 2), and users recognized the "premium feel" (Respondents 2, 5)

4.1 Marketing strategy summary

In the process of implementation, it is necessary to accurately match the target group, for example, Luckin Coffee focuses on Generation Z, while Lancôme targets mature women. Second, it is important to ensure synergy between color and product function, such as Lancôme's texture of matte and fine glitter to strengthen the high-class feeling of the maillard color palette (Respondent 2). What's more, it is important to build content scenarios and provide specific usage guidelines through blogger tutorials (e.g., "autumn/winter commuter maillard makeup") to effectively lower the threshold of consumer decision-making - as reported by respondents 3 and 4, who often refer to the blogger's outfits in their purchasing decisions.

4.2 Challenges and risks

The deep root causes can be summarized into three key issues:

(1) lack of strategy and blindly following the trend: some brands lack strategic strength when chasing the color trend, failing to strictly screen and their own brand genes (e.g., core values, historical legacy, target audience) really fit the color

system, only for the short-term heat rush into the field, resulting in the application of color on the surface, the lack of soul.

(2) Departure from the essence of the product and gimmick: color is over-emphasized or even abused, detached from the core function of the product and the quality of the foundation, reduced to empty marketing gimmicks. As respondent 6 pointed out: "the essence of the product is the key". When the color of the main, can not be synergistic with the actual value of the product, its attractiveness is bound to be difficult to sustain.

(3) Dilution of uniqueness due to homogeneous competition: Many brands lack differentiation and flock to the same color trend (e.g., the "maillard" trend that is sweeping the fast-fashion and luxury segments in fall/winter 2023). This kind of swarming behavior not only causes consumers' aesthetic fatigue, but also seriously dilutes the value of brand recognition and uniqueness, and eventually falls into the red sea competition.

Table 3 Main pain points

Challenge Type	User Feedback Cases	Percentage
Colors don't match the brand's tone	"Eyeshadow with dopamine color is unnecessary" (Respondent 3); "It's unnatural to give up the main color to cater to the trend" (Respondent 1)	57%
Excessive marketing leads to fatigue	"Bright colors tend to cause irritation" (Respondent 1); "Refuse to pay for pure color premiums" (Respondent 6)	43%
Lack of cultural appropriateness	"Meridian needs to avoid staleness"	/

4.3 Optimization suggestions: building a long-term color marketing mechanism

The development of brand color strategy needs to follow the core principles: positioning fit to ensure that the color is consistent with the brand tone (for example, sports brands can choose vibrant dopamine color, luxury goods prefer the classic maillard brown); functional synergy requires that the color serves the core value of the product; dynamic iteration emphasizes the establishment of a color trend monitoring system in order to make timely adjustments to the strategy. When the specific implementation, should be through the preliminary research in-depth understanding of user needs. Then the color narrative will be integrated into the brand story and adjusted to meet different markets through cross-cultural adaptation. Finally, lifecycle management should be carried out, adopting a parallel approach of limited and classic models to balance market freshness and brand durability, as expressed by respondents 1 and 4 in their preference for classic models.

5 Conclusion

In the new media era, color marketing, as an emerging marketing tool, provides a new bridge for emotional communication between brands and consumers. The rise of popular color trends such as dopamine color and maillard color reflects consumers' desire and pursuit of a better life. However, the success of color marketing does not happen overnight. Brands need to use color skillfully and combine it with the core values of the brand on the basis of an in-depth understanding of consumer psychology and behavior in order to stand out in the fierce market competition.

By studying the phenomenon of color marketing on the Xiaohongshu platform, we not only provide a new empirical case for the intersection of color psychology and brand marketing, but also provide useful references and lessons for brands' marketing practices in the new media environment. This study validates the effectiveness of color marketing in the new media era: dopamine and maillard colors help brands break through in the attention economy through emotional arousal and visual impact. However, their success relies on the in-depth matching of color strategies with brand positioning, product functions and user needs. Blindly following the trend will lead to image conflict and aesthetic fatigue. In the future, with the continuous development of new media technology and changing consumer needs, color marketing will play a more important role in brand marketing. Brands should continue to pay attention to color trends, explore new modes and paths of color marketing, turn trends into sustainable competitiveness, and realize the leap from "visual eye-catching" to "value resonance".

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