

Color, Emotion, and Perception: A Mixed-Methods Study on Social Media Design and Youth Well-Being

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the role of colors in the lives of youth who are actively engaged on social media platforms and their emotional well-being. Acknowledging the major influence of social media on adolescent minds, the goal of this study was to learn about particular color schemes and its effects upon online user feelings and actions. This research uses a mixed-methods approach with 110 survey respondents, along with 9 interview participants. The survey used questions that came from the 18-item General Well-Being Schedule (GWB). The selected questions assessed participants' mental health during the past month. Demographics as well as color perception questions were incorporated in the survey. The interviews followed a semi-structured process to get participants' perception of social media color palettes and posts. Quantitative analysis disclosed that color perception and general well-being had a weak, but non-significant, positive correlation with color usage in social media. The qualitative analysis generated approximately seventeen themes, and these themes included color schemes, engagement, and perceived appropriateness of color use. The overall findings indicate that pastel and soft tones promote feelings of calmness and relaxation. Moods involving joy are tied to hues that are bright and energetic. Neon or highly saturated shades can provoke over-stimulation or discomfort. Color matching the content type was highlighted as important by participants. Moreover, the importance of color matching the content type to maintain credibility and appeal was also noted. These findings stress that color plays a complex role in shaping user experience on social media. Colors as well as design significantly impact youth choices, thus this suggests a potential influence.

Keywords: *Color psychology, social media, youth, emotional well-being, impact on youth*

Social media has become a significantly large part of adolescent culture in today's digitalized world. It shapes how youth communicate, learn, and express themselves. Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat are deeply ingrained in everyday lives, "The median number of times that adolescents pick up their smartphones is 51 times per day, with 44% of older adolescents (age 16-17) picking up their smartphones more than 100 times per day" (ACT for Youth, 2023). Adolescents receive more than 200 notifications within a single day, making it impossible to ignore the profound impact these platforms have on teen mental well-being, behaviors, and their daily routines (Twenge et al., 2018). Teens start their day by first looking at their phones for the latest updates that

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Color, Emotion, and Perception: A Mixed-Methods Study on Social Media Design and Youth Well-Being

occurred overnight and end the day by scrolling through their feed before bed. As youth becomes increasingly controlled by social media, there are both positive and negative implications. Benefits that support social media usage include various networking opportunities, community building, instant news access, promoting awareness for causes, etc. (Naslund et al., 2020). Social media provides a platform for creative sharing and educational entertainment content for users, creating an appealing outlet for self-expression and connectivity. However, despite the numerous positives, there are also downsides to social media. Factors such as cyberbullying, setting unrealistic beauty standards, loss of productivity, and mental health issues such as anxiety and depression reveal the dark side of social media. The issues are often kept behind screens and not talked about. However, as social media has gained popularity in the past few decades, the rise in mental health issues among adolescents and young adults has also begun to worsen (Patel et al. 2007; Twenge et al. 2019). 5.07 billion people now use social media around the world, with an average scrolling time of 2 hours and 20 minutes per day (Data Reportal, 2025). Social media has evolved to be a fundamental part of daily life for individuals worldwide and has proven to be an addiction for those unable to function without it. While it offers benefits, the impact on mental health is detrimental. Its constant presence has overshadowed the benefits, resulting in greater disadvantages. One major problem raised by social media is the feeling of being inadequate and having low self-esteem. A study done by Farooq, Farrukh, & Khan, (2023) found an inverse relationship between social media use and self-esteem, showing greater social media use leads to lower self-esteem. The pressure to be 'Perfect' often leads to harmful comparisons between oneself and others. When compared to other people's perfectly curated posts, individuals find themselves feeling inferior. Issues such as body image and self-esteem stem from this unhealthy behavior that threatens to consume people, especially youth. As explained by the American Psychological Association (APA) (2023), early adolescence is a crucial period for growth. The brain undergoes dramatic developmental changes in regions associated with the desire for attention, making teens extremely vulnerable to social media as it targets those desires and exploits them. Additionally, features like infinite scrolling and notifications, made to keep users engaged, lead to excessive screen time that disrupts sleep and harms mental health. By making specific design and color choices, app creators hook teens to their screens and lead them down a rabbit hole. It cultivates anxiety, distraction, and a constant need for online approval, negatively affecting teen self-worth.

To sum up, apps that provide social interaction are shown to take up the most time on young people's screen time, and consequently, are also harmful to mental well-being. Part of the reason for this is finely tuned algorithms that provide infinite scrolling content made by creators who are competing for attention (Common Sense Media, 2023), targeted color choices to keep users engaged, and constant pressure from society.

The Role of Color

Driven by complex algorithms specific to each user's account, social media platforms skillfully select content based on user engagement including visual appeal. A crucial factor that influences the algorithms is color as it is key in capturing user attention. Colors play a critical role in shaping experiences on social media, influencing emotions, behavior, and engagement. Color comes under the category of User Interface (UI) which includes all design choices and components in apps. Popular platforms like Instagram and Snapchat use warm and vibrant color palettes in UI to convey the feeling of energy, creativity, and excitement to display a dynamic and youthful platform (Kurt & Osueke, 2014). As opposed

Color, Emotion, and Perception: A Mixed-Methods Study on Social Media Design and Youth Well-Being

to Instagram and Snapchat, Facebook uses its signature primary blue and white color scheme to evoke feelings of calm and relaxation to further reinforce its image as a platform for meaningful connections (Carson et al., 2021). Beyond basic platform branding, colors are calculated and made use of in content design and marketing. Often used to represent passion and urgency, red is strategically used to pop-up in notifications. This color compels users to engage immediately and react quicker compared to other colors. This occurrence can be attributed to the association of red with warning systems in situations requiring amplified awareness or immediate action. As commonly seen, red is frequently used in warning signs and signals, prompting urgency and rapid responses (Elliot & Maier, 2014). Similarly, a color like pink is known for its femininity and playfulness—this color is harnessed in apps targeting female populations as it has higher resonating levels with female customers. This is apparent in the extensive pink-themed products, especially in the cosmetic industry and other daily necessities targeted at women (Wang et al., 2023). Color choices used by these apps are rooted in psychology. By using user's subconscious responses, brands can maximize engagement.

Colors are more than mere aesthetic elements; they are powerful devices that dominate feelings, actions, and choices. Research shows different colors evoke distinct psychological responses. For instance, blue is generally partnered with relaxation and trust while yellow is often linked to optimism and life (Insights Psychology, 2025). However, despite the universal role color plays in affecting us, interpretation greatly differs due to cultural circumstances. In Eastern traditions, white is analogous to mourning and loss (Bradfield, 2014). However, it also represents purity and fresh starts in Western societies (Pandey, 2018). Due to the cultural diversity present in our world, it is crucial to take into consideration various viewpoints when utilising color in design. Aside from cultural meanings, colors also impact consumer buying behavior (Kumar, 2017). Red stimulates urgency, and is commonly used in sales to encourage impulsive buying. In contrast, green evokes feelings of safety, and is often used in eco-friendly branding. Furthermore, color psychology is used in fields other than marketing. Pastel blues and greens are mainly used in healthcare businesses to help patients feel at ease (Babin, 2013). Vibrant tones like red and orange are frequently utilized on social media platforms to promote engagement and draw attention. These colors have been proven effective in eliciting emotional responses (Kron Dahl & Nilsson, 2023). Taking into consideration the multifold effects of color, businesses can smoothly create a platform that is appealing and keeps users engaged. To condense, colors used on social media platforms are not randomly chosen, but conscientiously picked in order to create a psychological level of impact on users, subtly influencing their mental well-being and engagement. As a result of the heavy emphasis on visuals on social media platforms, color psychology and design have become a key and increasingly important part of shaping feelings, actions, and mental health. Colors are psychological weapons that can either positively or negatively affect young audiences' mental health.

Color psychology suggests that the colors we see significantly impact our emotions and mental well-being. On social media platforms, color is not only a design tool but also a powerful element which determines how users feel and behave. Energy and excitement can be stimulated by bright, vibrant colors like red or yellow (Joosten, Lankveld, & Spronck, 2010): An example of this can be seen through Snapchat's yellow branding that encourages positivity. However, they can also be a source of anxiety or agitation when they are overused (Birren, 1961). On the other hand, softer, cooler tones like blue or green are

Color, Emotion, and Perception: A Mixed-Methods Study on Social Media Design and Youth Well-Being

generally linked to calmness and tranquility and are therefore more useful for promoting relaxation (Elliot & Maier, 2014). Since youth are extremely sensitive to visual stimuli, colors on social media can have a big impact on them. For example, platforms like Instagram and TikTok, which are visually driven, often use bright colors and while color can be therapeutic, such as improving relaxation and positivity, it can also be detrimental when used incorrectly. This knowledge can assist in forming environments that enhance positive mental health and reduce the chance of stress or negative emotional responses. High contrast is often used by platforms like Instagram and TikTok to get bright colors, which can cause overstimulation and stress. Since social media is still evolving, it is important to consider how design choices can impact youth mental health. The primary colors—red, blue and yellow—are the base colors from which all other colors are derived from and each of these colors has its own set of psychological associations. Red is linked to love, excitement and strength (Elliot & Maier, 2014). Blue is seen to evoke trust, loyalty, and peace (Kaya & Epps, 2004). Yellow is associated with feelings of creativity, happiness, and cheer (Valdez & Mehrabian, 1994). By examining the role of design, particularly color choices, used in social media posts and how it impacts mental health, this research paper seeks to discover the relationship between color psychology and youth mental health on social media. Although much has been explored about the psychological impact of excessive screen time, and effects of social media usage in adolescents, there is limited research on how subtle design elements, like color choices and specific advertisement categories, directly influence mental health, especially in youth who are the primary consumers of these platforms.

METHODOLOGY

Aim

- This study aims to investigate how color design on social media platforms influences emotional well-being and user engagement among youth, using a combination of survey and interview data.

Objectives

- i) To examine how different social media categories (e.g. home decor, make-up, advertisements) utilize various color palettes.
- ii) To explore how color palette usage in social media content varies across youth preferences.
- iii) To explore how the use of colors in social media content impacts the emotional state and mood of the audience.

Hypothesis

- **H1:** There will be a significant correlation between social media color perception and general well-being.

Research Question

- **RQ1:** How do colors on social media influence emotional well-being and engagement among youth?

Sample and Sampling Technique

This research used convenience sampling to gather data from a wide demographic, primarily focusing on youth aged 15-25. The Google Form provided age options from 13 to 27 years old to allow broad participation. However, the analysis focused on respondents aged 15-24 to align with common definitions of youth (United Nations, 2025). A majority of survey

Color, Emotion, and Perception: A Mixed-Methods Study on Social Media Design and Youth Well-Being

respondents (n=62) were aged 16-18 years old. A total sample of 110 respondents were selected for the quantitative research whereas 9 respondents were interviewed as part of the qualitative research. Among the 9 respondents interviewed, 8 were aged 15-18 and 1 was older than 18.

Instrumentation

The survey comprised both quantitative and qualitative components designed to assess participants' perceptions of color in social media contexts. Quantitative measures included structured Likert-scale questions, multiple-choice items assessing general well-being, and visual stimuli featuring various color palettes. These components aimed to capture both attitudinal and emotional responses to color.

The qualitative component consisted of 14 open-ended interview questions that explored participants' interpretations of color and its influence on social media engagement. For instance, one prompt asked: *"Which of the following colors would make you more likely to engage with a social media post (like, comment, or save)?"*

To elicit richer emotional responses, three sets of curated image stimuli were also presented:

- Set 1: Two vibrant-colored make-up advertisements.
 - Set 2: Two furniture advertisements with neutral color schemes.
 - Set 3: Three "Black Friday Sale" promotional images featuring a pastel/pink palette, a high-contrast black-red-white palette, and a neon-based design.
- Images can be viewed in Appendix A.

These stimuli were purposefully selected to represent a range of color schemes: vibrant, neutral, pastel, and neon. This allowed participants to reflect not only on the color usage but also on the content type and aesthetic appeal in shaping their emotional and engagement responses.

The present study utilized the General Well-Being Schedule (GWB) which is an 18-item self-administered questionnaire by National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES). Well-being, self-control, vitality, depression, anxiety, and general health are the six categories covered by the GWB Schedule's positive and negative questions. The time period for each item is "during the last month," and the first 14 items employ 6-point response scales to indicate frequency or intensity. Adjectives at each end of a 0–10 rating scale are used in the final four questions. For certain items, the current survey used reverse scoring. Higher ratings indicate better well-being whereas lower values indicate the opposite. For the present research, 7 questions have been taken from the 18-item GWB schedule. These items were selected on the basis of their appropriateness with respect to the present research.

Data collection procedure

Quantitative responses were collected using a self-administered Google Form, which was distributed through social media platforms and school groups. Additionally, due to the mixed-methods nature of the study, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain deeper insights into individual color associations, mood responses, and engagement behavior with color-based content on social media. Combining the two methods allowed for a more in-depth understanding of the topic. The survey provided a broad overview of trends and general perceptions across a larger sample, the interviews offered detailed perspectives

Color, Emotion, and Perception: A Mixed-Methods Study on Social Media Design and Youth Well-Being

that helped explain the reasoning behind the participants' responses. This approach offered a more complete and nuanced understanding of how color used in social media impacts emotion and engagement. Out of the nine interviews conducted, seven were in-person interviews whereas two were telephonic interviews. Responses were recorded and later transcribed for thematic analysis.

Ethical Considerations

The present study took place by keeping in mind the various ethical concerns. For the quantitative survey, respondents were provided with clear instructions on how to fill the questionnaire. All respondents were ensured that confidentiality will be maintained in the course of the research. Participation in the research was voluntary in nature. With regard to the interviews, before commencing with the interviews, participants were informed that their responses will be audio-recorded with confidentiality being maintained throughout the entire process. This entails that no personal details will be disclosed, and their responses will be utilized for research purposes only. Participants were made aware that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

RESULTS

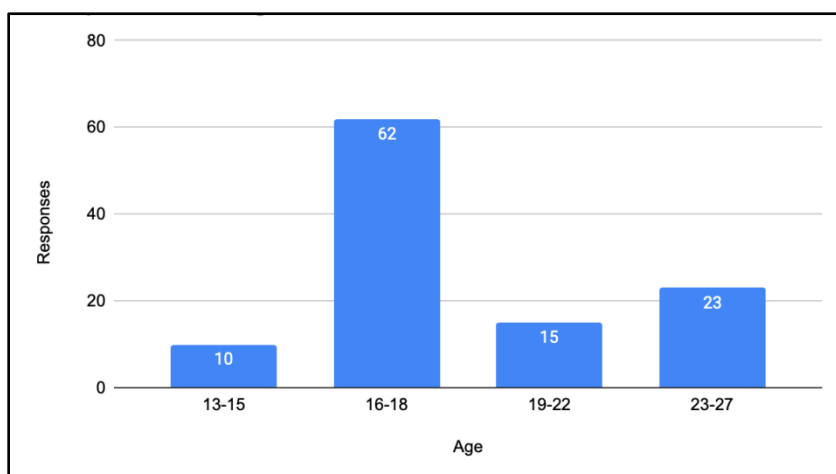


Figure 1 shows the age distribution of respondents

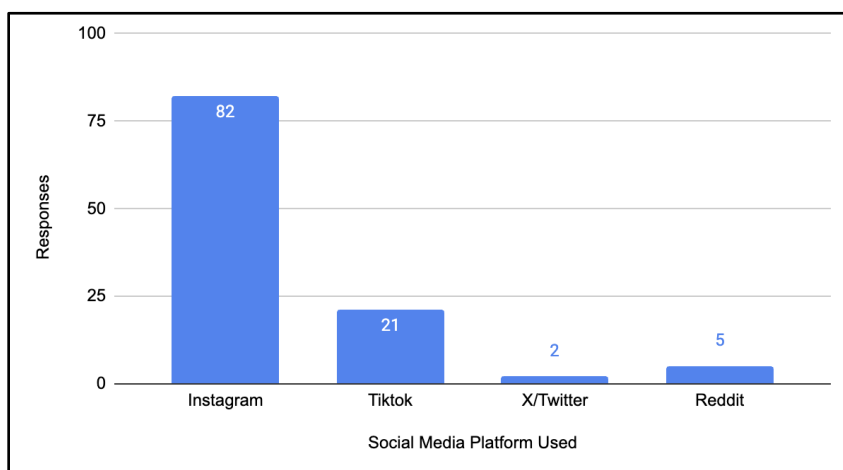


Figure 2 shows the social media platform most commonly used by the respondents

Color, Emotion, and Perception: A Mixed-Methods Study on Social Media Design and Youth Well-Being

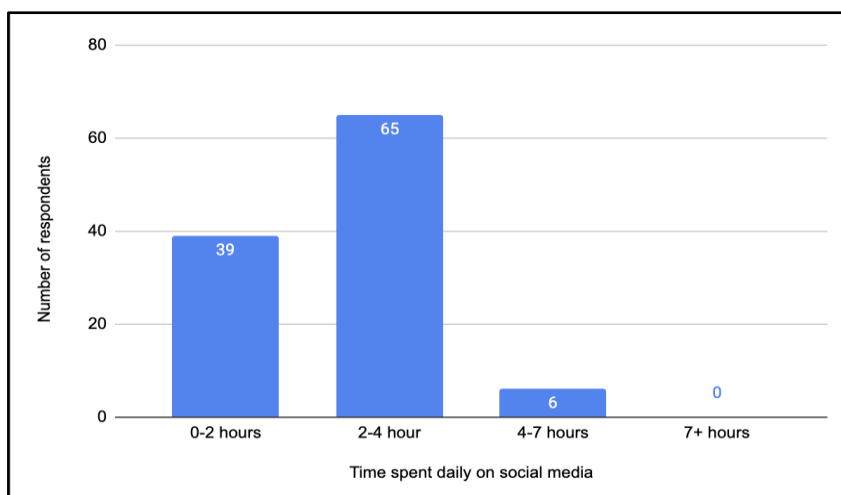


Figure 3 shows the daily time spent on social media by the respondents

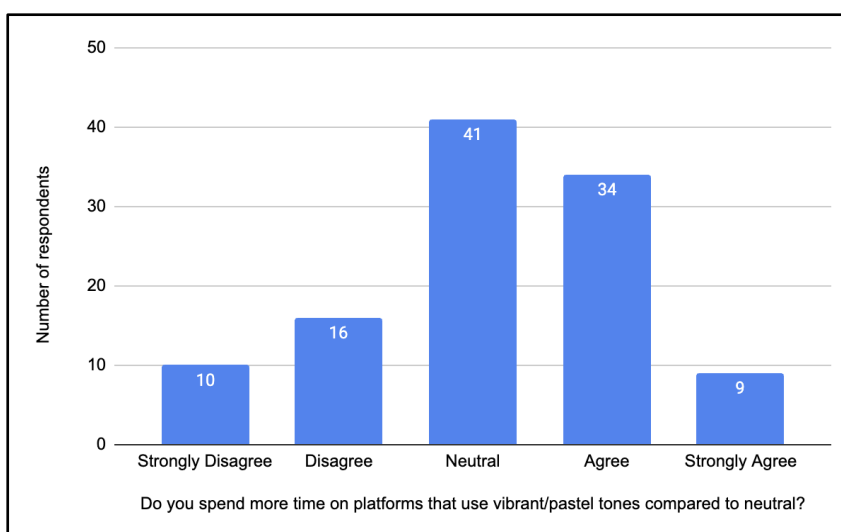


Figure 4 shows whether respondents spend more time on platforms that use vibrant/pastel color schemes compared to a neutral color scheme.

Among the respondents, 42 selected “Neutral,” suggesting either they did not consciously focus on color schemes used in posts, or perceived no difference in their usage patterns. A combined total of 43 participants (n=34 selecting “Agree” and n=9 selecting “Strongly Agree”) indicating that they do perceive a difference in platform color design, suggesting color schemes may influence the time they spend on certain platforms. Contrarily, 26 respondents disagreed with this idea (n=16 selecting “Disagree” & n=10 selecting “Strongly Disagree”) indicating that color schemes did not influence platform use.

Color, Emotion, and Perception: A Mixed-Methods Study on Social Media Design and Youth Well-Being

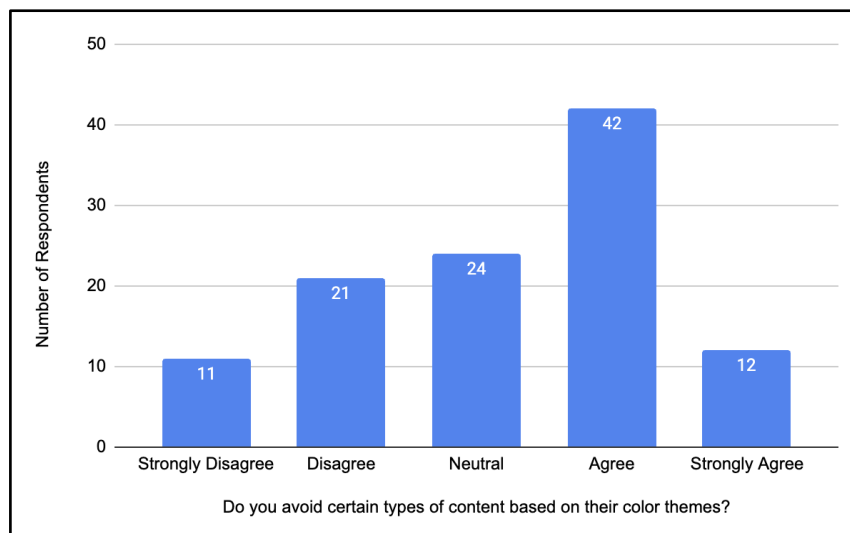


Figure 5 shows whether respondents avoid certain types of content based on color schemes.

Measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree,” 42 respondents selected “Agree” and 12 selected “Strongly Agree” out of a total of 110 respondents. Together, this indicates that almost half the respondents actively acknowledged avoiding content with color schemes they did not like. 24 respondents picked “Neutral” as an indicator that there was either lack of conscious awareness about color influence or uncertainty. In contrast, 21 respondents picked “Disagree” and 11 selected “Strongly Disagree,” defining a sizable group who reported color schemes do not affect their willingness to view or engage with particular content.

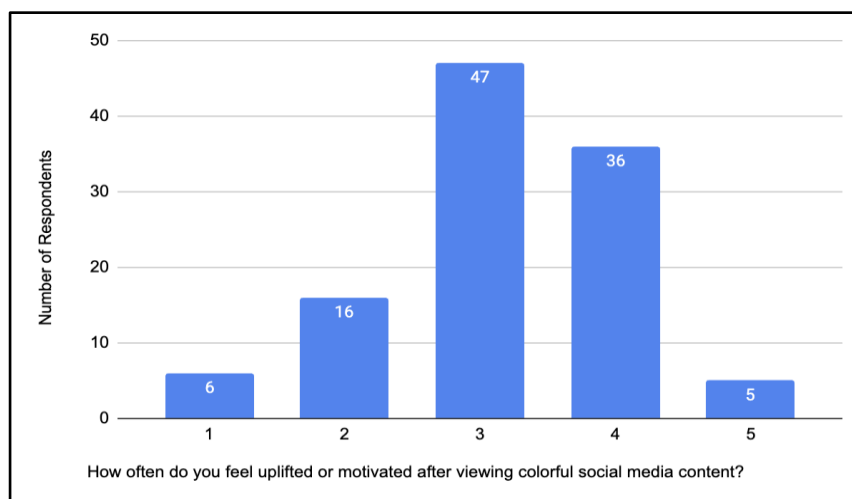


Figure 6 shows the relationship between viewing vibrant/colorful social media content and feeling motivated/uplifted thereafter.

Color, Emotion, and Perception: A Mixed-Methods Study on Social Media Design and Youth Well-Being

Fig.6 is measured on a 5-point likert scale where “1” indicates “Not at all” and “5” indicates “Always.” The majority of respondents(n=47) took a neutral stance, indicating that viewing vibrant and colorful social media content did not make a difference in their moods. 36 participants picked “4” and 5 participants chose “5”, suggesting that a substantial group did report often, or always feeling uplifted after viewing colorful social media content. Contrastingly, 22 respondents rated low on the scale, indicating that they felt no mood change from such content.

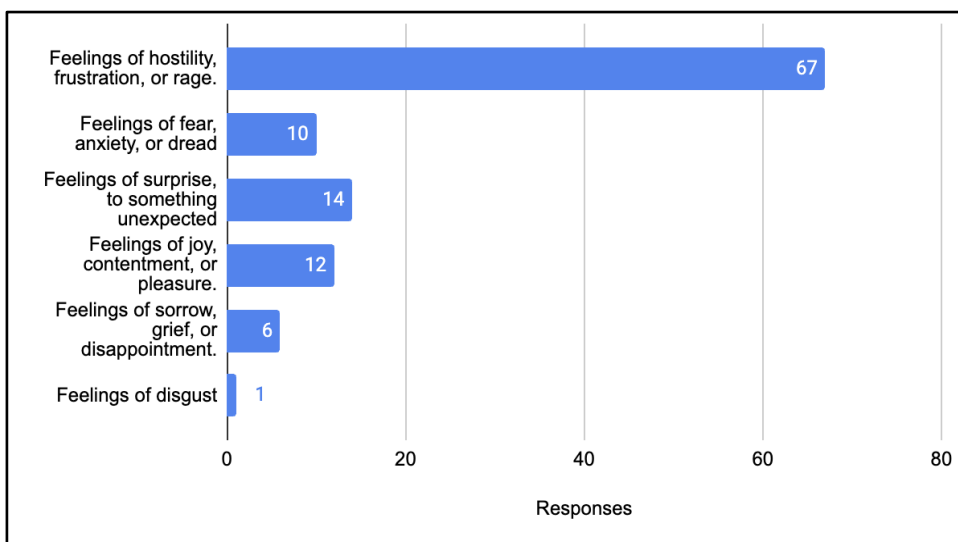


Figure 7 shows what emotions respondents associate with the color red

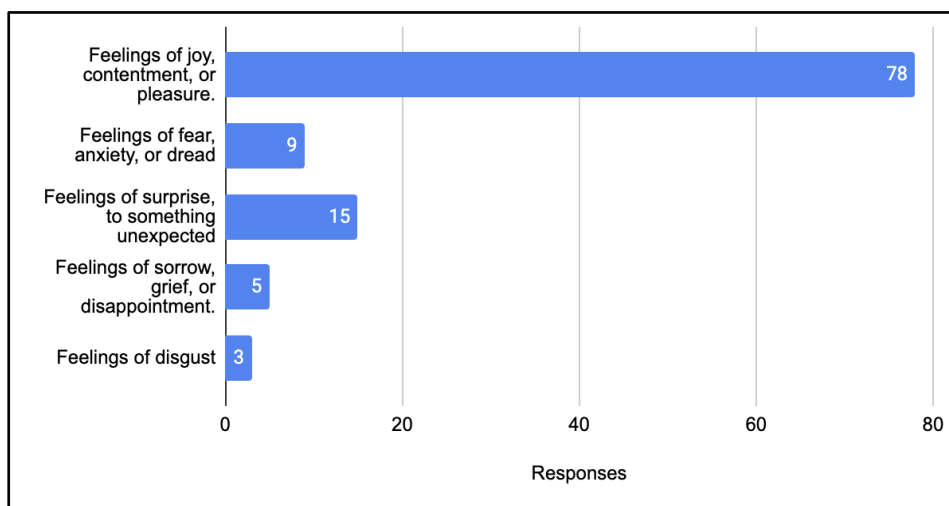


Figure 8 shows what emotions respondents associate with the color yellow

Color, Emotion, and Perception: A Mixed-Methods Study on Social Media Design and Youth Well-Being

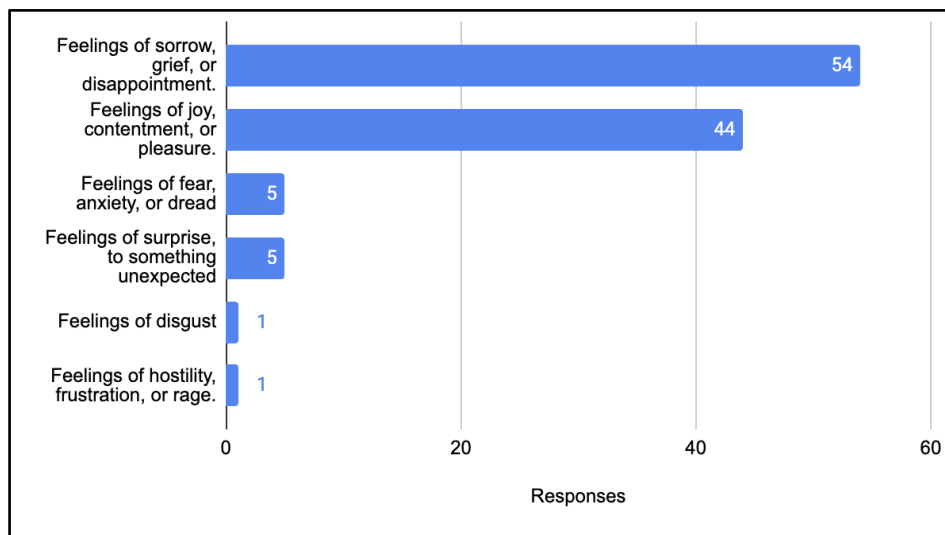


Figure 9 shows what emotions respondents associate with the color blue

The figures above represent the emotion respondents associated with the three primary colors: red, yellow, and blue. Over half of the respondents (n=67) from the present study held that the color red is strongly associated with feelings of hostility or rage (Fig. 7). Similarly, the majority of respondents (n=78) from the present study related the color yellow with feelings of joy, contentment, or pleasure (Fig 8). Based on Fig.9, about half of the participants (n=54) selected feelings of sorrow or disappointment as most closely related to the color blue. The other half (n=44) selected feelings of joy and pleasure as most closely related to the color blue.

Table 1 shows the correlation between social media color perception scale and general well-being scale

	r	p
Social Media Color Perception and General Well-Being	0.17	0.079

According to Table 1, there is a weak positive correlation between social media color perception and general well-being (r = 0.17). However, this correlation is not significant (p = 0.079, p > 0.05). This can be explained due to the unfamiliarity of the respondents with the significance of colors on social media platforms. As no significant correlation was found, the hypothesis was not supported.

Thematic Analysis of the interview responses

Theme	Codes generated	Description
Role of colors in social media	Emotional Expression	Certain colors are said to evoke emotional responses among the people visualising them.
	Appeal and Mood	Colors can show the appeal and mood of a certain post.
	Attention-Grabbing	Colors attract audience attention.

Color, Emotion, and Perception: A Mixed-Methods Study on Social Media Design and Youth Well-Being

Theme	Codes generated	Description
	Advertisement	Colors are chosen for specific reasons when advertising products.
Positive Emotional Associations of Color	Bright colors (yellow, orange, red, green, pink); Pastel colors; Based on favourite color	Warm and pastel tones were seen as calming or joyful; when someone likes a color, it automatically makes them happy.
Negative Effect Linked to Color	Aggressive colors (Red, Yellow, Black); Dark colors (blue, purple, brown, black); Personal associations; Dull colors (gray, brown), neon colors	Colors like red, black, gray, and brown were viewed as evoking fear, sadness, or personal discomfort. Neon colors were seen as too harsh.
Positive Reactions to Pastel and Aesthetic Colors	Pastel tones; soft or happy tones	Respondents felt more positively engaged with soothing and visually pleasing colors.
Emotional Stimulation from Bold/Neon Filters	Red and neon filters; gym videos; increased energy and emotion	Bold filters were described as eye-catching and energizing, especially in fitness content.
Negative Reactions to Fear-Inducing or Gloomy Tones	Dark backgrounds; phobia-related colors; anxiety-inducing contrasts	Dark or intense color combinations triggered discomfort or anxiety in some respondents.
Set 1. Responses to Color Imagery+Emotions experienced	Positive, happy, calming	Respondents reported feelings of joy, calmness and interest, and associated these feelings with light-hearted and cheerful emotions.
	Attention-grabbing, artistic	Bright colors, especially red, were seen as bold, eye-catching, and visually appealing.
	Mixed response based on color context and conflicting emotions	Depending on the post's layout and shades, feelings varied between comfort and discomfort. Respondents had conflicting feelings—one felt hungry and annoyed; the other felt both hatred and beauty.
Influence of Color on Engagement Intent	More inclined with relaxing/pleasing color schemes	Respondents said appealing colors (especially pinks, pastels) encouraged more interaction.

Color, Emotion, and Perception: A Mixed-Methods Study on Social Media Design and Youth Well-Being

Theme	Codes generated	Description
	Not inclined to engage	Some noted that they were unaffected or repelled by bold/neon colors.
Perceived Appropriateness of Color Use	Aligned with product message	Most respondents agreed that the pink/red tones align with make-up themes and appeal.
	Unclear message from advertisement	Noted that the color scheme was effective, but the purpose of the advertisement wasn't fully clear.
Set 2. Calming/Natural Aesthetic+Emotions	Relaxed, peaceful, cozy, nature-like, calming, modern	Respondents described the setting and neutral tones as calming or vacation-like. Most linked the neutral tones with peace, elegance, and comfort.
Low Stimulation/No emotional response	Neutral, dull, boring	These respondents found the colors unengaging and lacking stimulation.
Influence of Color on Engagement Intent	Less likely to engage if dull, not eye-catching	Neutral tones were seen as peaceful but not compelling enough to interact with.
	Depends on product or personal aesthetic	Engagement increases when colors match personal taste or product category.
Perceived Appropriateness of Color Use	Match furniture aesthetic and minimalism	All respondents agreed the neutral tones match modern furniture and style.
Criticism of Design Choices	Found neon or pink mismatched with "Black Friday" theme	Some respondents expressed that certain colors (e.g. pink) did not suit the context.
Set 3. Neon Appeal Neon > Black/White > Pink	Preference for high visibility and brightness. Bold and attractive.	Respondents favored the neon design for being visually striking and enjoyable. Pink came at the end.
High Contrast Appeal Black/Red/White > Others	Strong visuals contrast (black, red, white) catches attention.	These respondents found the black/red/white design powerful and well-crafted. Strong preference for classic high-contrast color schemes.
Soft/Pink Aesthetic Appeal Pink > Others	Preferred based on personal liking of lighter/pastel tones over color theory.	Respondents liked the pink post more due to aesthetic preferences to liking lighter tones or soft visuals.

As per the table showing the thematic analysis of interviews from the respondents, the role of colors on social media was identified as a significant theme in evoking emotional expression, enhancing appeal and mood, grabbing attention, and supporting advertisement

Color, Emotion, and Perception: A Mixed-Methods Study on Social Media Design and Youth Well-Being

strategies. Numerous respondents highlighted the emotional significance of color, saying that various tones contribute to expressing the feelings the creator wishes viewers to experience. For example, one respondent highlighted, “Colors play a very important role in expressing what whoever's posting the media wants to express,” linking color choice to evoking emotional responses. Another common statement brought up by the respondents was that they found that colors tend to have a more appealing and mood-centric role in social media posts. One participant observed, “Colors can sort of show the appeal and mood of a certain social media post.” Furthermore, colors were often described as attention-grabbing tools. Multiple participants believed that brighter shades had a higher likelihood of stopping a viewer mid-scroll and paying more attention to the post. As one respondent said, “In social media, they use colors to attract audiences,” and another added on, “The brighter the color, the more attention-grabbing it is.” Some participants also acknowledged the strategic use of color in advertisements and the science behind how advertisers use specific color palettes to influence viewer perception. One respondent mentioned, “Advertising has different strategies when it comes to color choices; if I am outside and I see a billboard, and then if it is predominantly blue, I will feel like that symbolizes security.” In addition to these roles, color preference itself affected engagement for users. Multiple respondents reported a tendency to be drawn to bright or favorite colors: “When I see a post which has a color that I like, I tend to get drawn to that,” and conversely, dull or dark tones like “black or gray” were disliked. This shows that in addition to the content, the selected color palette also strongly impacts viewer interest and emotional connection.

As per the table showing the thematic analysis of interviews from the respondents, the theme of “Positive Emotional Associations of Color” was generated, and spotlighted that most respondents associated bright colors such as yellow, orange, red, green, and pink with feelings of warmth. As one participant put it, “Probably yellow or orange? Mainly, because I think it is biological that when people see certain colors, they feel certain things.” Warm tones like these were repeatedly mentioned as naturally uplifting and joy-bringing. Additionally, pastel colors were described as, “I feel that light colors, like light pastel colors, are more calming to me.” This suggests that soft tones contribute to a peaceful emotional state for some individuals. Several participants also mentioned that their personal preferences impacted their emotional reactions, with one respondent saying, “I would probably say any colors that I like,” and another stating, “When I'm scrolling reels and I see bright green, I feel really happy,” showing the subjectivity of these responses. While bright colors were generally seen as positive and well-received, some respondents pointed out that neon shades in particular can be “too loud” or that “they feel like they're screaming too loud.” This indicates that extremely vivid colors may have a more negative effect rather than a positive impact on social media posts.

Respondents associated a variety of shades with negative influence under the theme “Negative Effect Linked to Color.” Respondents shared that red, yellow, and black are often linked with aggression, warning signs, or propaganda, therefore evoking negative emotions. One respondent described, “Red is usually like anger, but then sometimes Yellow and Black could mean like danger.”

Two respondents noted that darker shades, such as dark blue, purple, and green, tend to carry negative connotations and are commonly associated with gloom. This sentiment was echoed by a respondent who stated, “Dark colors just generally have that connotation,” and another respondent said, “Brown, black... depressing.” Additionally, several responses

Color, Emotion, and Perception: A Mixed-Methods Study on Social Media Design and Youth Well-Being

revealed how personal experiences influenced color perception. For instance, one participant described neon green as resembling "the color of animosity," while another linked red to their dislike of a fictional character. This illustrates how emotional responses to color can also stem from subjective experiences.

Another key set of themes generated from the interview questions was "Positive Reactions to Pastel and Aesthetic Colors", "Emotional Stimulation from Bold/Neon Filters", and "Negative Reactions to Fear-Inducing or Gloomy Tones." Most respondents— six out of nine— shared that bright and pastel colors in social media posts made them feel more drawn to the content and positively engaged. For example, one participant said a pink-themed post "made me feel really happy and nice," While another participant added that the pastel aesthetic visuals aligned with their style, making it more eye-catching and "seem kind of sweeter, I guess, more inviting." Another essential pattern that emerged from the analysis was that bold, saturated colors—especially red filters— evoked energy and intensity. This was supported by a participant who mentioned the color red within gym content created "energy and emotion." Conversely, two respondents expressed distress and a negative emotional response to fear-inducing visuals with darker tones. One participant shared, "just made me feel... all gloomy and sad..." after seeing a phobia-related post with dark colors.

Image Set-1 featured vibrant and bright tones like pink and red. The two make-up posts evoked a mixed but, for the most part, positive emotional reaction. Three main themes were generated: "Positive, Happy, Calming," "Attention-Grabbing, Artistic," and "Mixed Response based on color context and conflicting emotions." Respondents generally expressed a mix of positive and varied emotional reactions. Most described feelings of happiness, calmness, or intrigue. One respondent stated that the pink side made them feel "happy and cute," while another said it looked "welcoming." Some respondents focused on the attention-grabbing nature of red elements and described them as visually striking, portraying the red as "very interesting and attention-grabbing" as well as "a work of art" because of its contrast with the background. However, a few individuals expressed discomfort or conflict depending on context, for example, disliking the red books due to visual discomfort— "it hurts your eyes because everything around the red is brown." These reactions show that the effectiveness of color is often context-sensitive.

Respondents largely associated the visuals with joyful, energetic, and warm emotions. Many mentioned feelings such as happiness, excitement, and positivity. As one participant noted, "they give... warm energy," and another supported saying that it gave a "fuzzy feeling." One of the respondents described being energized by the vivid color use, especially the red tones. Sharing, "It makes me feel energized to look at it... It's eye-catching." However, a few respondents had mixed emotions in response to the post. One respondent mentioned the books made her feel "angry" because of the composition and visual clutter. These responses reveal that color has the power to invoke complex emotions depending on the context and the individual's state of mind.

The theme of "Influence of Color on Engagement Intent" highlights how visual aesthetics shape user interaction. 7 out of 9 respondents said they were more likely to engage with posts featuring relaxing or aesthetically pleasing colors, especially soft pinks or cool tones. For instance, one explained, "Life is stressful, it would be nice to have more relaxing colors." Another respondent said, "If I was scrolling and I saw that, I would be immediately drawn to it." However, not all respondents reacted positively. A few expressed that they

Color, Emotion, and Perception: A Mixed-Methods Study on Social Media Design and Youth Well-Being

were unaffected by color alone, and even put off by extremely bright colors such as neon red. This indicates that while color can be a compelling engagement tool, its impact is highly subjective.

Almost all of the participants agreed that the color choices in the post matched the product being promoted, specifically the pink and red tones were said to be well aligned with make-up advertising. A few responses indicated that the colors used evoked a “girly” feeling and fit the message, as “brighter and happier” is used for make-up. Despite that, a few of the respondents also brought up that the second post felt a bit random and made them feel confused as to the overall purpose of the advertisement. Noting that while the color scheme was effective, the message wasn’t entirely clear. One respondent said, “I don't like the one on the right. I think it's just kind of awkward,” and another added, “I would say the neutrals and the background are kind of off.” This criticism reflects how color alignment alone does not guarantee clear communication.

Image Set-2 featured a neutral aesthetic with two furniture advertisements. The dominant theme that stemmed from the pictures was “Calming/Natural Aesthetic.” A majority of respondents felt relaxed, cozy, or at peace when viewing the image. The beige, white, and muted tones were described as soothing and nature-inspired. As one individual noted, “It feels very nature-like and peaceful... kind of like a vacation vibe.” However, some respondents perceived the imagery as dull or unstimulating. Under the sub-theme of “Low Stimulation,” they described the post as unengaging. One respondent even stated, “There is a large lack of color... I am kind of bored just looking at it.” These differences reveal how neutral palettes can be relaxing for some and dull for others.

Building on the previous question, respondents fell into two categories under the themes “Emotionally Neutral/Positive” and “No Emotional Response.” Words like “cozy,” “elegant,” and “peaceful” appeared frequently. One noted, “It just fits the theme.” Contrarily, two respondents expressed detachment by feeling neutral or uninterested, describing the post as “just neutral” or “boring.” This variation highlights how minimalistic visuals can soothe or underwhelm, depending on the viewer.

Based on Image Set-2, two main patterns emerged in terms of consumer engagement: “Less likely to engage if dull, not eye-catching” and “Depends on product or personal aesthetic.” Several participants explained that while the neutral tones were calming, they did not inspire engagement or grab attention. One respondent said, “It is dull and not that interesting.” Others shared that their likelihood to engage depends on what is being advertised and whether the colors align with their aesthetic. For example, “If it is furniture, I would definitely like this, because it is the style that I like,” showing that personal taste and color both play a part in user interaction.

There was a clear consensus that the colors from Image Set-2 were properly aligned with the product and purpose of the advertisement forming the theme, “Appropriately Aligned.” The beige and neutral tones were said to fit modern furniture aesthetics. One participant stated, “You would not sell furniture in pink,” and another mentioned, “This one is best because it is the most versatile.” The visuals were seen as effective in matching the product’s purpose.

The data from responses to the Advertisements from Image Set-3 clustered around four themes: “Neon Appeal,” “Soft/Pink Aesthetic Appeal,” “High Contrast Appeal,” and

Color, Emotion, and Perception: A Mixed-Methods Study on Social Media Design and Youth Well-Being

“Criticism of Design Choices.” Some participants favored the neon sign for its brightness and clarity, especially where neon green or similar tones matched personal taste. Meanwhile, others liked the pink version purely for aesthetic reasons and personal preference. Others preferred the black-red-white image for its boldness and contrast. One said, "It is a brilliant use of color." Some critique surfaced regarding the pink advertisement. One respondent said, “Black Friday... and then a pink background? That is just inefficient,” suggesting that context also determines the effectiveness of color choice.

Based on Image Set-3, responses for the most appealing poster were grouped into: “Neon > Black/Red/White > Pink,” “Black/Red/White > Others,” and “Pink > Others.” Those who ranked neon first explained it as more "eye-catching" or "striking." The participants who preferred the black/red/white advertisement valued the strong contrast and fit to the main idea of Black Friday. Lastly, those who placed pink at highest preference did so purely for aesthetic reasons, not perceived effectiveness. Overall, a common critique was that pink did not suit the urgency or tone of Black Friday.

DISCUSSION

The present study looked at the role that colors play on social media with regard to well-being and engagement of users. In order to accomplish this, a mixed-methods study was carried out wherein correlation between respondents’ perception of colors used on social media and general well-being found a weak positive correlation, but no statistically significant difference. From the nine in-depth interviews conducted, it was found that colors used on social media did make users feel a certain way depending on what colors were employed. For instance, bright colors made some respondents feel a sense of happiness and positivity, and pastel colors made them feel calm and added a sense of aesthetic to the post. Participants also noted that certain colors, such as blue, tend to convey meanings like security or trust when used in specific contexts, such as advertising or billboards. This finding is supported by Mehta & Yadav (2024) who stressed the importance of colors in advertising due to emotive and cognitive reasons. In awareness commercials, certain colors such as red are utilized more to indicate a sense of urgency while green represents positivity and optimism.

Many participants linked aggressive colors to negative emotional responses which included feelings of discomfort and fear. The strong intensity of red and other colors creates harsh associations because they are often linked to dangerous situations. The combination of yellow and black colors produces a warning effect similar to road signs. The dark colors navy, black and purple were frequently associated with feelings of sadness and gloom. The general perception among respondents was that dark colors carry negative connotations. The dull colors gray and brown were described by many participants as lifeless and uninspiring. According to participants gray colors produce dull emotions while black and brown colors create depressing feelings. The research by Boyatzis & Varghese (2013) supports the findings that dark colors create negative emotional responses. The study revealed that children link dark colors including brown, gray and black to negative feelings but associate bright colors like pink and blue with positive emotions. The present study confirms the findings of previous research by showing that darker tones maintain their negative emotional associations and weight among young people.

Color plays a crucial role in influencing user engagement on social media, especially in terms of drawing attention and promoting interaction. Many participants in the present study

Color, Emotion, and Perception: A Mixed-Methods Study on Social Media Design and Youth Well-Being

reported that soft, aesthetically pleasing color palettes, such as pinks and pastels, encouraged them to like, comment, share, or simply linger on the post for longer. One respondent explained that since life is full of worry and stress, it would be nice to have more relaxing and calming colors. A respondent added that if they came across a vibrantly-themed post while scrolling, they would be immediately drawn to it. These responses align with findings from a study done by Kanuri, Hughes, and Hodges (2023), who demonstrated that color complexity in social media images can increase engagement by shifting users from a peripheral processing mode (passive scrolling) to a central processing mode (active, deliberate attention). This suggests that the thoughtful use of color, particularly when it enhances visual interest can meaningfully increase a post's ability to engage viewers.

Engagement is also influenced by how well the color scheme reflects the content's theme or product category. Participants in this study mentioned pink hues were associated with femininity, brightness, and happiness, aligning well with the tone of beauty product advertisements. However, they felt that using such colors for categories like furniture would reduce the appeal or credibility of the post. This reflects an underlying expectation among users that different content types require different visual treatments. For example, neutral tones like beige and white were seen as more appropriate and trustworthy in the context of furniture. As one respondent noted, something like furniture wouldn't be sold in pink. This observation is supported by Labrecque and Milne (2013), who emphasized the importance of brand-color fit, arguing that congruence between color and product type enhances consumer perception and engagement. Their study also found that color misalignment can reduce message clarity and harm brand credibility, particularly when the color evokes traits that contradict the product's intended image. When color choices align with the intended message, they not only attract viewers but also reinforce clarity of the content and disperse any confusions.

Pastel color palettes were consistently associated with emotional comfort and aesthetic appeal among participants in this study. Many respondents expressed a preference for soft, light tones, describing them as peaceful, calming, and visually pleasing. One participant expressed that light pastel colors were more calming and encouraged them to spend longer on the post. These emotional reactions are supported by Kaya and Epps (2004), who found that light shades of pink, blue, and green were widely associated with feelings of calmness and happiness among young adults. These findings suggest that pastel colors offer visual relief and also emotional resonance.

While some colors promoted calmness and emotional connection, neon or highly saturated tones were often described by participants as overwhelming or distressing. Several respondents expressed discomfort when viewing neon-based social media content, describing it as too loud and harsh. One participant shared that neon red triggered some dark memories, while another said such colors felt like they were screaming too loud. These reactions reflect a broader pattern of emotional overstimulation, Valdez and Mehrabian (1994) found that colors with both high brightness and high saturation—characteristics typical of neon—are associated with high arousal levels, which can contribute to emotional discomfort or agitation depending on context. In the context of social media, such overstimulation may lead users to avoid or disengage from content perceived as too intense.

High contrast color schemes emerged as a strong tool to attract attention and stand out, especially in social media advertising. Several responses from this study indicated that

Color, Emotion, and Perception: A Mixed-Methods Study on Social Media Design and Youth Well-Being

people had strong preference for bold contrasts, such as using black, white, and red in the Black Friday advertisement as seen in Image Set-3. These high-contrast visuals were viewed as well-suited for contexts that require urgency or bold messaging, such as Black Friday sales. This observation is supported by Moore et al. (2005), who found that the contrast between the background color and text color in banner advertisements significantly affects user attention and recall. They conducted experiments which demonstrated that “increased contrast between the text and background results in increased readability,” which is a key factor in drawing users’ attention to digital advertisements. The authors also reference prior research indicating that high-contrast advertisements are more likely to be noticed and remembered, even though not all advertisers utilize this strategy to its fullest potential (Hall & Hanna, 2004).

Colors play various roles in how social media content is perceived and experienced, influencing both engagement and emotional responses. Participants in this study recognized that colors are not simply decorative but serve strategic functions, such as evoking specific moods, attracting attention, and reinforcing the intended message of a post or advertisement. For example, respondents highlighted how bright or pastel colors could create feelings of positivity or calmness, while high-contrast schemes conveyed urgency and professionalism. Kanuri, Hughes, and Hodges (2023) demonstrated that color in social media images functions strategically to attract attention, evoke particular moods, and reinforce the intended message of a post or advertisement. Their findings indicate that images exhibiting higher color complexity—such as those featuring bright or pastel palettes—are more likely to capture user attention and increase engagement within crowded social feeds.

CONCLUSION

This research was done to examine the effect of colors used on social media platforms on youth mental health. Considering the fact that platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat are woven into the routines of users, especially adolescents and young adults, this study set out to investigate how certain colors used in social media posts shape user engagement and emotional well-being. While prior research has thoroughly examined the general impact social media has on the mental health of its users, there remains a gap in understanding the specific role of color as a design element that can influence mood and behavior. This study contributes to filling that gap by providing insights on how different color palettes are recognized by users and how those observations influence general well-being and engagement. By exploring how colors evoke emotions, guide attention, and reinforce marketing messages, this research highlights the significance of understanding color psychology as a factor in both promoting positive mental health outcomes as well as creating responsible, user-sensitive design in the digital world.

The study used a mixed-methods approach combining survey data with in-depth interviews. While the quantitative analysis revealed a weak yet non-significant positive correlation between color perception and general well-being, the qualitative findings offered richer insights. Participants reported clear emotional reactions to different color palettes. The bright and pastel tones were repeatedly linked to happiness, calmness, and aesthetic appeal, encouraging engagement and a positive emotional response. In contrast, neon or highly saturated colors were described as overstimulating, harsh, or even anxiety-provoking. High-contrast schemes like black-red-white were viewed as effective in grabbing attention and signaling urgency in advertising contexts, while users also emphasized the importance of matching color choices to the product or message for credibility. These insights offer

Color, Emotion, and Perception: A Mixed-Methods Study on Social Media Design and Youth Well-Being

valuable guidance to social media content creators who target youth and help advertisement agencies to make thoughtful color choices that increase engagement while avoiding negative emotional responses. Overall, this research underscores the psychological role of color in digital spaces and calls for attention to user-sensitive color choices that support youth well-being and encourage pragmatic social media practices.

Limitations of the Study

The majority of participants shared a similar demographic background, which might have limited the variety of viewpoints and decreased the applicability of the study to larger or more varied groups. Because respondents were self-selected rather than chosen at random, convenience sampling was used for both the survey and the interviews, further limiting representativeness. Additionally, reliance on self-reported data introduced potential bias like social desirability or faulty memory.

Future Recommendations

Future research can build on the present study by comparing the perceptions of social media users with those of content creators to better understand how design choices are made and received on these platforms. Researchers may also incorporate a mixed-methods approach with a larger and more diverse sample to arrive at stronger, more generalizable conclusions about how colors are perceived in social media contexts. Given that color-emotion responses varied by tone and saturation, future studies could explore this with a cross-cultural lens. Longitudinal designs are recommended to explore how perceptions and emotional responses to digital color palettes evolve over time, especially looking at mental health outcomes.

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Color, Emotion, and Perception: A Mixed-Methods Study on Social Media Design and Youth Well-Being

- vibe and brighten up the space—perfect for a casual feel. Dark wood tables add warmth and a touch of elegance, creating a cozy ambiance. Comment ‘light’ or ‘dark’ to tell us your fave. #DiningTable #DiningRoom #DiningFurniture #DiningChair #Decor.” (2024, November 6). Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/crateandbarrel/p/DCC_fGJhyt9/
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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A:

Image Set 1: Bright colors



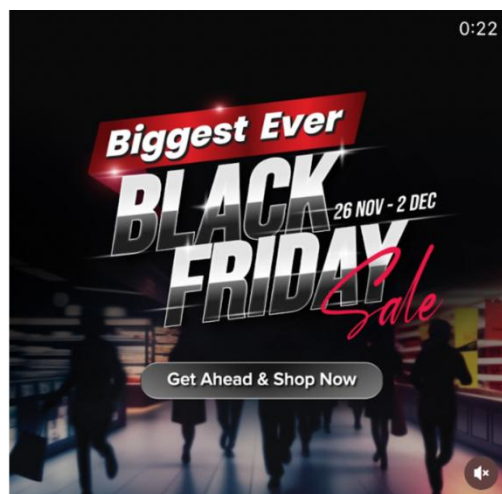
Images taken from:
@dasique_sg Instagram
@Romandyou Instagram

Image Set 2: Neutral colors



Images taken from
@crateandbarrel Instagram

Image Set 3: Advertisements



Images taken from

1. BeautyAmora: <https://www.beautyamora.com.au/blog/post/black-friday-summer-skincare/>
2. Epay: <https://ghu.flvsz.top/ProductDetail.aspx?iid=57881004&pr=63.88>
3. @harveynormansg Instagram