

he says, she says

When it comes to gender differences, it's not all pink and blue, as Karen Wardell found in her casual survey of colour perceptions.

She wants one colour, he wants another. We've all heard them discussing it in shops and on the street. That one word, 'colour'. Everybody reacts to it; that it should conjure up so many images and stir up our emotions remains one of life's mysteries.

Most of us are aware of the power of colour and that it affects our buying patterns, behaviour and well-being on a deep and psychological level. But why are we so adamant that what we think about a certain colour and its connotations is truthful? And why do men and women have very different opinions when it comes to choosing colours?

To test the theory, 30 Resene colours were selected and participants were asked to match them to 10 corresponding moods: Happy/sad, optimistic/pessimistic, love/hate, active/passive, anxious/calm. They also had a choice of nominating any other colours they desired.

The 30 colours were selected with care, using red, yellow, blue, green, aqua and purple. Warm and cool colours were chosen as well as light or dark shades and tints. Terracotta was the only earthy hue, although it was not popular and designated as a hateful colour by women. Men, of course, disagreed entirely.

As a result, many debates ensued with total strangers and friends, while others tried to 'help' their partner fill in the blanks correctly. There was some discussion about what colour 'sky blue' was, and why one person chose green for both 'love' and 'happy'.

Around 60 percent of participants were female, but results were certainly not divided anywhere near two-thirds in their favour. For instance, the sexes could not agree on the colour of red for love, and more men by comparison chose pink.

Traditionally yellow is the colour of happiness in Western society. More men chose this colour whereas the majority of women opted for a much warmer shade of yellow, some even choosing gold. A definite pattern emerged with warm colours more prevalent for positive moods.

Colours such as mauve and lavender were chosen as calming colours along with light blue and apple green – all of which have a component of blue. Off-white was only chosen (but, at least, agreed on) by both sexes as being a passive colour.

Overall, orange and yellow were happy and optimistic colours, but orange was also chosen as an anxious colour by both sexes. More men thought of orange as happy and apricot as optimistic.

Red was definitely voted the colour of activity, with green the second choice – even though they are opposite colours on the colour wheel.

Most of the colour preferences fell into the category of analogous colours, i.e. colours that sit on the same side of the colour wheel, with the exception of the emotion 'anxious' which moved violently from one side to the other between blue and orange.

Interestingly, nobody chose the colour of learning (pale yellow) as a positive colour, nor did any of the visual arts students choose purple (which is an artistic colour) while grey was overwhelmingly classified as sad.

Says the survey author Karen Wardell: "Colour only takes on its true identity when placed next to another colour. It is forever changing, ephemeral and illusive – so simple, yet so complicated."

As to why can't men and women agree? That's just the way it is. **H**

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