



The Perception of Colors in Fashion: A Cohort Comparison of Baby Boomers and Generation Y

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Introduction: Colors of clothing affect psychology of consumers (Lind, 1993). For example, Roberts et al (2010) found that red clothing increases the wearer's attractiveness and perceived success level. Kobayashi (1991) developed the color image scale in two-dimensional spaces with descriptive adjectives (i.e., warm-cold and soft-hard) and identified psychological effects. The psychological effects and meaning of colors may vary by generation and culture. Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate if baby boomers and generation Y have different interpretation of colors, and how their color perceptions are related to self-esteem, social motivation for fashion consumption and fashion involvement. In this study, research questions include: Do baby boomers and the generation Y perceive clothing colors differently? Do they have any significant preferences for certain clothing colors?

Literature Review: *Generational Cohort Theory.* The generational cohort theory is based on the book, "Generations: The History of America's Future (Strauss & Howe, 1991)". Each generation is called "cohort", sharing similar experiences and historical events. Generational cohort theory explains the changes and differences of values, beliefs, and behaviors across generations (Edmunds & Turner, 2005). According to the theory, important historical incidents and social changes in society for the generational cohort affect individuals' values, attitudes, beliefs, and inclinations (Jackson, Stoel, & Brantley, 2011). For instance, baby boomers are interested in health care costs while generation Y individuals are interested in the occupational therapy profession (Davis, 2004).

Baby boomers and Generation Y. Baby boomers are the demographic group born during the post-World War II baby boom, approximately between the years 1946 and 1964. This includes people who are between 53 and 71 years old in 2017. Among them, about 75 million baby boomers are 65 years of age or older (Joung & Miller, 2007). Clothing preferences of the baby boomers are different from the younger generations as their physical and psychological needs change as they grow older (Jackson & O'Neal, 1994). The baby boomers prefer a loose outfit such as one-piece dress without the waistline (Marjanen & Kohijoki, 2014). On the other hand, generation Y consumers are interested in a fitted outfit. The generation Y cohort, children of baby boomers, uses technology in their casual lifestyles and has some consistent characteristics of optimism and diversity (Fisher & Crabtree, 2009).

The Psychology of Color. Color is one of the important clothing design elements. Color has been studied for understanding consumers' psychology and preferences. According to Tangkijviwat and Shinoda (2008), preferences of colors are affected by the people's age, and seniors prefer vibrant colors while younger generations prefer plain colors. Also, Ou et al (2012) found that individuals in the different age groups evaluate emotions related to color differently. Thus, this study is designed to examine the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): There will be different color perceptions between the baby boomers and the generation Y. Hypothesis 2 (H2): Color perceptions of the baby boomers and the generation Y will be influenced by a) self-esteem; b) social motivation of fashion consumption; and c) fashion involvement.

Methodology: A quasi-experimental quantitative survey method using a 7-point Likert scale was used for this study. Respondents consisted of two generations including baby boomers in age 65 or older (n=50) and generation Y (n=50). A set of eight colors were applied on the sample dress image: four warm colors, including red, yellow, orange, brown; and four cold colors, including white, teal, cobalt, and black. In this study, the average age of the generation Y group was 30 and the average age of the senior group was 67. Regarding the ethnicity, a majority of participants was White Caucasian. For the quantitative data analysis, descriptive statistics, t-test and multiple regressions were used in this study.

Results: The baby boomer and the generation Y consumers perceived colors similarly in terms of warm-cold, soft-hard, young-old, and fashionable-unfashionable scales. However, results of testing the first hypothesis (H1) with t-test showed significant differences of color perceptions between the baby boomers and the generation Y (e.g. orange color preference differences between the two groups $t=1.95, p<0.05$). The orange colored clothing was favorable to the baby boomers ($M=3.28, SD=1.14$) but less favorable to the generation Y ($M=2.84, SD=1.11$).

Interestingly, brown colored clothing was differently perceived by the two groups. The generation Y perceived the brown color as old and unfashionable. In addition, results of testing the second hypothesis (H2) with multiple regressions showed that color preferences were significantly related to their fashion involvement ($\beta=0.53, p<.05$) and self-esteem ($\beta=0.34, p<.05$). As their fashion involvement and self-esteem were higher, they preferred red color.

Conclusion and Implications: In conclusion, two generational cohorts, baby boomers and generation Y have different color perceptions. Baby boomers, generally, prefer bright colors such as orange whereas generation Y prefers dark colors such as black. Certain clothing colors are favorable to the baby boomers but perceived as unfashionable by the generation Y. Self-esteem and fashion involvement are important factors of understanding their different color perceptions. The results from this study can be useful for apparel manufacturers and retailers to understand each generation's different perceptions of clothing color. Further research should be done for understanding consumer psychology and perceptions of clothing design related to the generational cohorts.

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