



What is the psychology behind Kandinsky's Theory, and why do the results differ so considerably between time periods?

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Table of Contents

List of Figures.....	3
Abstract.....	7
The Bauhaus.....	8
An Introduction to Kandinsky.....	10
Analysis of Orange, 1923.....	11
Kandinsky at The Bauhaus.....	13
Kandinsky's Theory Today.....	15
A Child's View of Shape and Colour.....	18
Conclusion.....	20
Sample Questionnaire.....	21
References.....	23
Bibliography.....	25

List of Figures

The Bauhaus



Fig.1 Alexander Rodchenko, Books (Please)! In All Branches of Knowledge, 1924
(<https://www.artsy.net/artwork/alexander-rodchenko-books-please-in-all-branches-of-knowledge>)



Fig.2 Karel Tiega, Jazz Age Alphabet, 1926
(<https://www.photopedagogy.com/typophoto.html>)

Analysis of Orange, 1923



Fig.3 Wassily Kandinsky, Orange, 1923
(<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/70099>)

Kandinsky at The Bauhaus



Fig.4 Unidentified Bauhaus Student, Kandinsky's Theory answers, 1923
(https://www.getty.edu/research/exhibitions_events/exhibitions/bauhaus/new_artist/form_color/interactive/)

Kandinsky's Theory Today



Fig.5 Facebook Logo, 2013

(https://www.iconfinder.com/icons/771382/channel_circle_logo_media_social_video_youtube_icon)



Fig.6 YouTube Logo, 2017

(https://www.iconfinder.com/icons/771382/channel_circle_logo_media_social_video_youtube_icon)

A Child's View of Shape and Colour



Fig.7 Mr. Men, Mr Strong character, 1976 design

(https://mrmen.fandom.com/wiki/Mr._Strong)

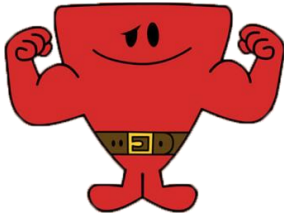


Fig.8 Mr. Men, Mr Strong character, 2008 design
(https://mrmen.fandom.com/wiki/Mr._Strong)

Abstract

This piece of writing delves into the idea of colour theory and how shape and colour relate to each other. It debates whether social media has any real impact on people's subconscious, or whether other factors are the real influence behind it. It talks through the history of The Bauhaus, and Wassily Kandinsky himself, researching into his Synesthesia and understanding what it means before analysing one of his paintings.

Some other reasons against social media being the main influence on people is backed by the questionnaire and other research articles and theories, from how children perceive shape and colour, to an adult's perception. It also considers both environmental and genetic influential effects.

The Bauhaus

In 1919, the architect Walter Gropius, established the Bauhaus. A school which would go on to become the most influential and well-known art school (not just in the 20th century, but today) by creatives of all disciplines, from Ceramics to Graphic Design. The Bauhaus had one main goal 'to reimagine the material world to reflect the unity of all the arts.' (The Met 2016). Gropius wanted it possible to mass produce aesthetic, and to allow all objects to have a mean of design to them, creating a gesamtkunstwerk. Gesamtkunstwerk is a German expression dating back to 1827, used to describe an art genre, one where the arts could be combined to create one piece, essentially what the Bauhaus strove to achieve. The term was initially coined by philosopher K.F.E Trahdorff who used it in one of his essays to describe this movement and is still used today in Architecture and Film (Wikipedia 2020).

Germany's defeat in the first world war meant that more experimental design could take place which was subdued under the previous regime. 'Germans of the left wing were influenced by the cultural experimentation that followed the Russian revolution, such as constructivism.' (Wikipedia 2020). The philosophy behind constructivism began by Vladimir Tatlin and Alexander Rodchenko, both Russian artists. As proven in Figure 1, the constructivism movement hosted visuals that were industrial and modernistic, this particular piece really reflects on a stereotypical Russian visual language with strong typography and illustration, mirroring that time period. The 1915 ideas had a notion of art as a way for propaganda. This really had a lasting effect, not only on the Bauhaus but for the De Stijl movement, despite Gropius denying it as the school was apolitical. This was something that would have been very difficult to achieve in the time, and the then current climate was still an influence on the students. Russia had its own version of The Bauhaus, Vkhutemas, whose ideals were similar to the formers, whereby combining techniques and specialities together. They featured similar courses, from 'colour theory, industrial design and architecture.' (Wikipedia 2020), allowing collaborations to take place between them.

Figure 1

Alexander Rodchenko, Book (Please)! In All Branches of Knowledge



Note. From *Artsy.net*, by Alexander Rodchenko, 1924, (<https://www.artsy.net/artwork/alexander-rodchenko-books-please-in-all-branches-of-knowledge>)

Over the 14 years of The Bauhaus, it saw three locations in which it continued this ethic of work, Weimar, Dessau and finally, Berlin. Under each, a new director. After Gropius came Hannes Meyer and following, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, all architects, all following that original Gesamtkunstwerk ideal that Gropius started back in 1919. Despite this, the school saw many changes over the years as some classes were ceased and eventually Rohe turned it into private education from then on. Eventually, the Nazi Regime took over and

closed the Bauhaus, seeing teachers flee mainly to The United States, where they continued their teachings and spread their motto across the world.

But before The Bauhaus closed it trained many students for the world of art and design. As students began their time there, they would undergo a preliminary course, where they studied colour theory to start as a fundamental understanding before heading to their specialised course such as Pottery and Typography. As time went on, the school started to lose money, so the goal of the Bauhaus changed again in 1923 to 'stressing the importance of designing for mass production.' (Wikipedia 2020).

Typography was one of the subjects offered at The Bauhaus and had a great role in the designs for the school and the outside world. Their movement favoured sans serif typefaces which, visually, were very rounded and used circles as its main form and structure. With the introduction of Laszlo Maholy-Nagy to the school, it saw a shift in how typography was used in projects, even within all the disciplines. It was to use these newly designed typefaces as a new communication, Maholy-Nagy used them alongside image, to form the new idea of 'Typofoto'. This new term for typography became a popular style in the school. In Figure 2 we see an example of the type of artwork created by this style and is evidently still used today. Despite the images used, the typeface running alongside it is still to that original Bauhaus design aesthetic and can be visually recognised to this period.

Figure 2

Karel Tiege, Jazz Age Alphabet



*Note. From Photopedagogy.com, by Karel Tiege, 1926,
(<https://www.photopedagogy.com/typophoto.html>)*

An Introduction to Kandinsky

Wassily Kandinsky was a teacher at The Bauhaus from 1922 to 1933, where he became the head of the painting workshop. As a painter himself, he specialised in abstract art, using simple colours, shapes and lines to create his pieces, these ideals he would pass along to his own students. The types of shape and colour also reflecting on that visual language that The Bauhaus is so famous for.

Kandinsky is also known for his own theories towards the mind and its emotions. He believed that art was based purely on emotion, which would explain how different people view each one. As a child he experimented with music and painting and had specifically seen lines and colour when attending Lohengrin, an opera composed by Richard Wagner. The colours in which he used in his work, reflected his own emotion, along with the emotion he connected the colour to. This became known as Kandinsky's Theory "Kandinsky argued that artistic experiences were all about feeling, and different colors affected mood. Yellow could disturb, while blue might make people feel good" (Study.com 2016). This is better described as Synesthesia "Synesthesia is a neurological condition in which information meant to stimulate one of your senses stimulates several of your senses... Synesthetes can often "see" music as colors when they hear it, and "taste" textures like "round" or "pointy" when they eat foods" (Healthline 2018). It is a rare disorder that is said to be present in less than 4% of the population, meaning that the described symptoms can be difficult to understand. With that in mind, as Kandinsky's work is very much reliant on the understanding of colour, shape and emotion, it can receive attention from many who won't be able to 'feel' the art as he himself once did.

Colour Theory was published in 1911 and clarified the artist's understanding of colour. The ways in which he did so were, the 'effect on the eye' (how the viewer understood the colour visually) and the 'inner resonance' (the psychology behind it). For example, Yellow, he describes as warm, exciting but has the possibility to be disturbing. This is such a deeper understanding of colour than just its visual personality and really allowed Kandinsky to expand on a deep sense inside paintings. His art now becomes much more spiritual and allows the viewer to experience two senses in one environment.

It is interesting how he describes the transition from black to white, white being pure and silent, and black being eternal silence, negative and inspired by grief. The grey that sits between is a perfect balance, also soundless but neither too silent like the black, or pure like the white.

Analysis of Orange, 1923

Figure 3

Wassily Kandinsky, Orange



Note. From MOMA, by Vassily Kandinsky, 1923, (<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/70099>)

Knowing this information as to what each colour means, emotionally and spiritually, to him, allows us to further understand his work and analyse a whole different side and meaning to them. Figure 3 is Kandinsky's painting, *Orange*. Where he uses line, shape and colour to convey a message, which is perhaps secret until uncovered.

The painting in Figure 3 sees the use of very tonal colours of orange, pink and yellow. The colour choice reflects the feelings of seriousness coming from the orange as well as health and radiancy. The yellow returns the idea of that warm and excited feeling, however, Kandinsky himself thought it to be a possibly disturbing colour for others. The shapes in which the yellow is shown through are both sharp and rounded, for example the three triangles in the lower part of the piece identify this personification and are partnered with the same shape yet in black. Black having the connotations of grief and depression.

The lines in the piece are also significant in the sense that they have the same meanings and identities as the shapes and colours. In this specific painting the most striking element is the black line through the centre. We already know the undertones of the colour, yet the line has its own meaning. Depending on the angle, a line has its own colour that he associates it with. The angle in this piece is around 135° , which as it is nearing the 180° point, shows itself as almost black, giving the connotations of aggression. This is similar to those of the colour black, giving it its double meaning.

Incidentally he composed these pieces whilst teaching at The Bauhaus and it somewhat gives that modernist and influential feeling to it, with the use of strong shape and colour. "In his writings Kandinsky analyzed the geometrical elements and the various ways that their color, placement, and interaction could affect the viewer, both physically and spiritually. He considered the circle to be the most elementary form, possessing a cosmic meaning." (Moma 2008). As the Museum of Modern Art suggested, this painting does have a cosmic

feel from the use of circles partnered with the use of gradient and line. It has an almost graffiti element to it which allows it to be seen as perhaps more modern.

It is argued that his work is very mathematical and precise. "Kandinsky worked to build up a "grammar" so that his paintings could be as expressive as a musical performance" (G. Wittenborn 1963, p40)(Karl Kattchee 2013). This 'grammar' that has been referenced is very interesting as the term is notably used in literature, however, it can now be connected to mathematics as a visual identity for his style of painting. The pieces feel very geometric and forward thinking for the time period.

"he relied on mathematical terminology quite often to describe his ideas. His ideas on form and color were like axioms" (Karl Kattchee 2013). It is possible to say his paintings were a visual way of exploring theories like those of science and mathematics, Kandinsky was not especially talented at the subject, however, his visual understanding on it means we can see from another perspective.

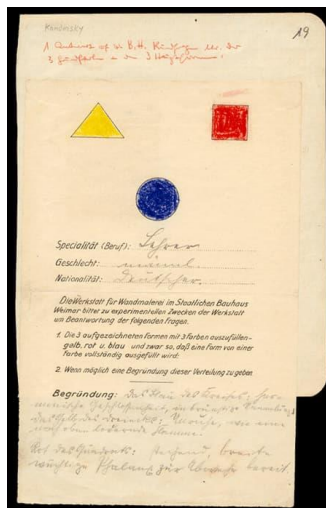
Kandinsky at The Bauhaus

We know already about Kandinsky's time at The Bauhaus and what he taught, however, whilst there he put his theories to the test. Using his students, he composed a survey to better understand the relationship between shape and colour. He himself obviously already knew in his own mind how he would connotate them, as from his Synesthesia Disorder. But his idea of their harmony was not known elsewhere. The survey asked students to identify what colour belonged to what shape and vice versa. For example, 'What colour would you associate with a square?'. These simple questions have really shaped the design world and our modern understanding of the relationship.

Figure 4 is an example of the survey that Kandinsky would give his students, using blank shapes and making them colour them in with their own judgement. The majority of the answers were the same throughout The Bauhaus courses, which is very interesting as there was an obvious influence on them, which they were unaware of, yet shaped their ideas to what they are.

Figure 4

Unidentified Bauhaus Student



Note. From Getty, by Unidentified Bauhaus Student, 1923,

(https://www.getty.edu/research/exhibitions_events/exhibitions/bauhaus/new_artist/form_color/interactive/)

The Bauhaus answers were yellow for the triangle, blue for the circle and a red square. The survey has been completed hundreds of times by art and design students around the world since the first time at The Bauhaus, and the answers have varied greatly, generation to generation and country to country. These environmental factors have too shaped the answers with subconscious influences we have now compared to the those of the 1920s.

The influences in the 1920s were socially based and the period was a turning point in entertainment. Moral codes changed significantly in this time and women's lives and work switched from the last decade. "By the 1920s, the first wave of feminism was already firmly entrenched in society. A new generation of feminists were entering society full of their own ideas of what the movement meant." (Francisco K. E. & Nicholas C, 2017). This would have had a great impact on not just women but also men, the ability for women to vote in the United Kingdom was passed just two years prior to the decade beginning, despite The Bauhaus being located in Germany, the politics from another country such as the UK, was

influential beyond its border. Coincidentally, World War I ended at this same time period, and involving both countries, again had an influence. The use of propaganda throughout the war would have had an effect on its viewer, this may have happened subconsciously.

The Nazi regime is connected heavily to the colour red, and in Kandinsky's eyes, this meant restless, and not forgetting powerful. This use of red was inscribed within the minds of the German people and as a result will have formed their ideas on this colour, giving it negative connotations. This is proved as an environmental effect as countries in Asia represent red with happiness and celebration, the culture has decided that the colour is positive. This is why as modern-day designers it can be difficult to use colours in a safe way when something is being shown around the world, and many designs have to be altered to market towards the specific consumers in those countries. Colours have so many meanings to so many people and it is easy to cause offence with something so simple.

The Bauhaus decided that the square would be red, the square itself representing interest. In my opinion the square is a powerful shape, both bold and strong, this may be why The Bauhaus students put this shape with the colour red, falling back on those ideas of the Nazi regime that took over Germany, and too in the future caused The Bauhaus to close. Kandinsky believed the triangle to be energetic and paired with the colour yellow reflects that.

Kandinsky's Theory Today

Composing a questionnaire based on Kandinsky's original theory allowed for us to see a trend in colour and shape among different ages and backgrounds. 52.8% of the participants had a profession which was not design related, having around half of the answers from a different perspective (one that perhaps doesn't understand or see colour in the same way designers or artists do) meant for a wide range of answers, all with different influences.

Surprisingly, 91.9% admitted to using social media every day of the week, which was interesting when we understand that the majority of participants were aged 18-25. The next biggest percentage was 50+, where 27 of the 161 contributors sat.

We know from our own experiences that social media plays a big role in our daily lives, whether that be positive or negative, 26% of people said the latter was more fitting for them. Despite this, even believing a positive influence on yourself, it cannot be argued that what we see on our phones, tablets and desktops, has impacted us, and has changed our perceptions and subconscious.

My own thoughts are that we automatically assume colours to shapes, depending on what generation you are a part of. For example, in the Gen Z and Millennial bracket, from ages 18-25 and 26-35 (those who are most likely to use social media regularly and for longer periods of time) the answers towards colour can be backed up by the shape and colour of logos.

Figure 5 is the Facebook logo, which is made up of a blue square and white type. The research from the questionnaire states that the most popular colour given to a square by 18-25-year-olds, is blue (50.9%).

Figure 5

Facebook Logo



Note. From *Pinterest*, by Facebook, 2013, (<https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/748090188082406111/>)

This correlation between colour choice and social media presence happens again with yellow, however, the colour is most common for both the circle and the triangle. Possibly the circle can be related to the YouTube logo seen in Figure 6.

Figure 6
YouTube Logo



Note. From *Icon Finder*, by YouTube, 2017,
(https://www.iconfinder.com/icons/771382/channel_circle_logo_media_social_video_youtube_icon
)

A reason for participants to relate a circle with the colour yellow, could possibly be due to Emojis. The most popular Emojis are faces made up of yellow circles and we see them constantly whilst online. They have become almost their own language and have their own keyboards on all smartphones, in terms of them being like a language, they are universally understood by everyone, from country to country. This is similar to infographics, which are designed so all can read them.

In terms of the social media influences, a yellow circle cannot be backed up, perhaps this is an exception and influences have made their way from other places, such as characters, or road signs. We must also remember that it may have just been the last remaining colour in the selection.

The results from the 2020 questionnaire differ greatly to those of The Bauhaus in the 1920s. We have already discussed some possible influences on the students in those times and have touched on those today too. The only similarity in these results is that both generations chose a yellow triangle. A possibility for this could be the type of patterns which were commonly seen in the 1920s, however, this wouldn't answer for it being the same outcome today. We know that now we have social media, yet again, this is not a possible reason for the past. In terms of history, in the late 30s and into the 40s, the use of triangles was prominently used for segregation by the Nazi Regime, perhaps this idea has stemmed from this, and passed down through generations?

Recently there have been studies that support the idea that phobias are passed through generations by their genetics. 'We used the preferential looking and habituation paradigms in three experiments to investigate whether 5-month-old human infants have a perceptual template for spiders that generalizes to real-world images of spiders.' (David H. Rakison, Jaime Derringer 2007: 1). This being proven, it could be possible for the same thing to happen in regards to colour and shape.

It is interesting to see that in just a period of around 50 years (from the 20s to the oldest age of completing the questionnaire) it is possible to change the perception of something as simple as shape and colour.

The way we see colour can also depend on the country we are from, or the languages we speak. For instance, the English language has 11 main colours, red, blue, orange, purple etc. Yet in other languages such as Yup'ik, originating from Alaska, there are not as many words to name each colour, this particular language sees five, and so misses out on other

hues. For example, the colour we know as orange, may be called red or yellow, depending on its hue (Bower 2016).

This falls under Linguistic Relativity, which is a hypothesis based around languages and how they can influence the speaker, devised by Benjamin Lee Whorf. It dives into semantics and links to behaviour.

In Russia, there are two words for light blue and dark blue (“goluboy” and “siniy”), and they are perceived as two completely different colours (PNAS 2007: 1). In the English language, we use the word blue to describe over an entire spectrum of blue, from the palest to the darkest. The only way to really understand this is by looking at red and pink, because of our language they are given different names and so due to these semantics, we perceive them as different colours, rather than shades of the same colour, which is what they are. This lexical analysis of language lets us understand how the influence of colour differs from country and language, not just from time periods or social media.

A Childs View of Shape and Colour

The way children perceive the world is very different from that of adults, young children can find difficulty in describing a colour without being able to talk about its physical appearance, 'have you ever seen the colour of a blueberry?' (Cut 2017). Whereas an adult would rely on things such as emotions or a feeling when describing a colour to someone who has never seen one. This is because children have a very simplistic view on colour and adults understand it in another depth, on the same level as Kandinsky himself, where he gave colours their own identity and meaning.

In children's TV shows, characters are very simply drawn, and normally with primary colours which are what they understand at that time in life. They are usually used as an educational tool so how children perceive these characters plays a major role in their development. The most prominent characters who are composed of shapes are those of the Mr. Men series.

In 1976, Mr Strong was published, a character made up of a red square, see Figure 7. As his name suggests, he was physically strong which births the connotations towards this character, and subconsciously, towards the shape and the colour. Someone born around this time period, would now fall into the 36-50 age group in the questionnaire, and with this information we can see that 50% said that they related the square with the colour red.

Figure 7

Mr. Men

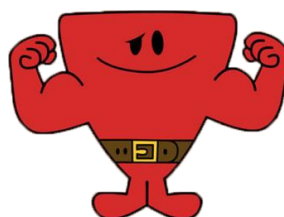


Note. From *Mr. Men Fandom*, by Mr. Men, 1976, (https://mrmen.fandom.com/wiki/Mr._Strong)

This is interesting because in 2008, the characters shape changed from a square, to a circle yet the colour stayed the same, see Figure 8. Mr Strong now being a red triangle meant that a new generation would perceive the two factors in a different way to those of Gen X. 24.5% of 18-25-year-olds agreed that a triangle is red. This could be argued that colour perception is formed at a young age from TV and/or books depending on the time period. Therefore, it is proved that influences from being a child are brought forward to when we are adults, this can then lead onto environmental factors of our personality and beliefs once we are older, linking to Race and where these ideas stem from.

Figure 8

Mr. Men



Note. From Mr. Men Fandom, by Mr. Men, 2008, (https://mrmn.fandom.com/wiki/Mr._Strong)

For shape association to the colour yellow, from age 36+, it was paired mostly with the circle. The results are not as clearly different in this age bracket than with participants of a younger age, 40% said that they perceive a circle as yellow, but another 40% disagreed and said red circle, however, a higher percentage (47.6%) said a triangle should be red, so it is more likely that the answers for ages 36+ is, red triangle, blue square, and yellow circle.

These answers are completely different to those of The Bauhaus, which again creates the argument over whether we are so influenced by our surroundings that it has changed out subconscious over time.

I believe the younger generations (18-25) bracket of the participants have a higher influence over this, purely from social media. This bracket of people have been brought up alongside the internet in a way that no other generation has seen and has clearly had an effect. It will always be argued if this influence is positive or negative. In the questionnaire I asked whether the participants felt as though they had the former or latter. Out of the 110 in the 18-25 range, 105 used a form of social media every day. And from this, 30.9% admitted to this great use of social media having a negative effect on them. We must consider that even with the questionnaire being anonymous, that participants may have fabricated their answers, or may not even realise that their daily usage is having this consequence.

By the results from the questionnaire, backed up by the research into colour psychology, I believe that whatever the impact is from the online world, it is clear that it does influence our subconscious.

Conclusion

The argument of whether and what can change and influence a person's perception of shape and colour is greatly different between time periods. Today we are both burdened and blessed with social media, which allows us to be present throughout the world, yet changing our views subconsciously. It is even debated whether social media has an influence on us at all, being either positive or negative, but from questionnaire research we can clearly see that people have their own opinions on this, admitting to the negativity of the online world.

Children are faced with different types of influences than adults, and this age period is when they start to take effect. We know that it is not only social media that influences us with shape and colour but also genetic influences, such as the languages we speak. The lexical items we learn at this young age, develop our subconscious and change or form our perceptions on shape and colour.

Why do the results differ so considerably between time periods? This question has now been argued and I can conclude that it is not only the passing of time that attributes as an influence, but we must take in consideration that environmental and genetic effects.

Sample Questionnaire

Section 1

1. Please select your age
 - 18-25
 - 26-35
 - 36-50
 - 50+

2. Is your profession design related?
 - Yes
 - No

3. Do you use Social Media? If so, how often?
 - Everyday
 - A few times a week
 - Never

4. Do you think social media has had an effect on you?
 - Yes, Positive Influence
 - Yes, Negative Influence
 - No

Section 2

1. Do you have any prior knowledge of The Bauhaus and/or Kandinsky's Theory?
 - Yes, the Bauhaus
 - Yes, Kandinsky's Theory
 - Both
 - No

2. Do you relate colour to objects or things? For example, relating a certain colour to a person.
 - Yes
 - No

Section 3

1. Choose a colour you relate with a triangle.
 - Blue
 - Red

- Yellow

2. Choose a colour you relate with a square.

- Blue
- Red
- Yellow

3. Choose a colour you relate with a circle.

- Blue
- Red
- Yellow

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