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Colour matters: An exploratory study of the role of colour in clothing consumption choices  

ABSTRACT  
It is widely acknowledged that clothing serves as our second skin. Colour plays a significant role in our choice when selecting our clothing, as well as in social and cultural realities, various rituals, everyday practices, and individual or group identities. In this study, we discuss consumer clothing choices in relation to colour based on data analysis drawn from focus group-based research. Analysis of the data revealed not only the importance that colour holds for consumers, but also that there exist different types of colour consumers and that different colour consumption attributes coexist. Moreover the study presents consumers’ colour preferences through different lenses; internal forces (colour preferences in connection to consumers’ identity, mood and body image), colour attributes (shade, matching colours, colour maintenance), external structures (colour preferences in connection to weather conditions and markets) and social factors (social acceptance and cultural context).  

KEYWORDS  
colour consumption  
colour preferences  
clothing colour  
consumer types  
colour in culture  
colour attributes
More than any other single factor, colour gives a garment (and the person who wears it) impact – both visual and emotional. (Eiseman 2014: 5)

1. INTRODUCTION

It is considered that the language of colour is diverse, multi-faceted and radiant. In the natural world, colour plays a central role in communicating vital information that is essential for the survival of most species. Animals are known to use the colour of their skin to either ward off potential predators, or to attract suitable mates. Plants reflect their vitality through the richness of their colour. Fruits and vegetables exude luminous colours to indicate that they are ready to be harvested and plucked. We humans are no different; we continuously communicate through colours. We experience and consume colours in many ways and often attach specific meanings to using and understanding them. One area in which colour is frequently used to communicate various messages resides is clothing.

It is widely acknowledged that clothing serves as our second skin. Likewise colour plays a significant role in shaping our choice of dress, as well as in our social and cultural realities, various rituals, everyday practices and individual or group identities. In this article we explore these and other factors and present a study of consumer clothing colour preferences in Finland. We conducted a series of focus group interviews of consumers and the aim of the data collection was to find out consumers’ relationship with colours, especially colours of clothing. In the examination, we present descriptions of what we refer to as colour consumers and discuss the factors that motivate their colour selections. We asked the following research questions:

What are the ways in which colour is consumed?
What factors influence perceptions of colour in clothing?

2. BACKGROUND LITERATURE

2.1 Colour, marketing and consumer behaviour

Colour plays a leading role in marketing strategies and how products are advertised. Indeed, it is known to significantly steer our purchase decisions. Hemphill (1996) notes that colour has a major influence on the buying decisions of consumers and that approximately 85% of the time, colour is the reason people purchase products. The importance of colour has been supported by other researchers such as Cheskin (1957) who found that colour influences consumers’ ability to recognize products and catches their attention. Cheskin (1957) states that it is the selection of colour combinations, a key element of design, that creates the most impact on consumers. Colour combinations that are more vivid or warm, such as yellow or red, tend to result in more impulse buying (Cheskin 1957). Similarly, Kumar (2017) argues that even if the design of a product is poor, consumers are still prone to purchase it if the colour combination is correct. This shows the persuasive power of colour over consumer behaviour. In fact, a Finnish study found that 42% of female and 40% of male consumers had purchased their most recent garment because of its colour, and when asked to evaluate their most recent garment purchase, 42% of men and 62% of women reported that they were satisfied with its colour (Niinimäki 2017). Based on forementioned it can be concluded that colour is an important element
while seeking and getting emotional attraction and fulfilment through aesthetic experience.

Realizing the strength of colour, Eiseman (2008) also claimed that several clothing retailers arrange their stores on the basis of the colour of the clothing, focusing mainly on displaying clothing with light colours such as pinks or blues, as these colours have been known to evoke a feeling of calm and peacefulness (see also Section 2.2). This helps create a relaxing shopping experience for consumers and encourages buying behaviour. Eiseman also noted that this increased the sales of clothing and increased the success of a business as ‘95% of consumers’ decision-making is dictated by the subconscious and approximately 5% is rational’ (Eiseman 2000: 69). Retailers acknowledge that colour preferences are trend-based and thus often arrange their stores on the basis of the colours that are popular and in demand in that given time. Yet, at the same time, trends and colours can also be created and reinforced through the intentional display of clothing of certain colours in the window or on store shelves. Eiseman (2008) thus stressed the importance of understanding that colour preferences are not permanent but temporary.

However, when companies use colour to create their brand images for a particular product or service, the impact tends to be permanent (e.g., the iconic red H&M logo). In fact, the aim is to create a lasting effect on consumers, to create brand loyalty and help the brand stand out so that consumers remember it for a longer time, thus encouraging continuous consumption. Kumar argues that colour is not ‘simply an after thought when it comes to product packaging and company branding. Marketers and businessmen invest sufficient time in selecting colours that reflect the values of the company and preferences of the target audience’ (2017: 11). This emphasizes the importance of colour in stimulating and maintaining consumer purchase behaviours.

2.2 Colour, perception and emotions

Research shows that colour also influences our senses, emotions and subsequently also our behaviour (Kumar 2017). However, it must be noted that colour is perceived differently by different people, and thus our sensorial response to it also varies. Therefore, colour perception and preferences are not a static phenomenon; they are dynamic. Colour can be understood as light that travels on wavelengths that become absorbed by the human eye and are transferred to the brain, where they are converted into what we see as colour. Different colours have different wavelengths. For example, the colour red has longer wave lengths than the colour purple (Singh 2006). Once the eye absorbs the light wavelengths, various complex combinations are created that allow us to see a spectrum of colours. But as each human’s biological make-up differs, the cones and rods inside the human eye that allow us to see colour and light also differ, and this impacts the variations in the perception of colour (Kumar 2017; Singh 2006). Singh (2006) states that our response to colour is in fact a learned behaviour and is also tied to factors such as gender, culture, ethnicity, age, geographical location and even exposure to sunlight. Similarly, and according to Hine (1995) colour impacts behaviour on three interrelated levels, namely the physiological, associational and cultural levels.

In the physiological sense, colour can indeed stimulate a range of emotions that often affect behaviour. Over the years, psychologists have tried to understand how colour influences human emotions and feelings by studying the relationship between colour wavelengths and the physiological effect they
have on people (Kumar 2017). The impact on human emotions of three basic properties of colour has been studied: hue, lightness and chroma. Fairchild (2013) states that differences in any one of these characteristics can influence different cognitive and sensory responses. It has been reported that the brighter the hue of a colour, the more the human sensory response tends to elicit feelings of positivity. Kaya and Epps (2004) conducted a study of college students to identify their various sensory responses to various colours. Their findings showed that the colour blue was associated with feelings of comfort and peace and was linked to water. The colour red evoked feelings of love but also dominance, where as the colour green was associated with nature and feelings of calmness. All these colours have brighter hues and resulted in positive sensory reactions in the study participants. This relationship between colour and emotions is referred to as colour emotion (He et al. 2015).

Closely related to this is the associational level, i.e., the meanings that become attached to certain colours due to repeated interaction with them (Hine 1995). As we always see colour in relation and in combination with other colours and never in isolation, we associate meanings to colour with
regards to other colours. Valdez and Mehrabian (1994) argued that the associations we learn to make by attaching certain colours a specific meaning have physiological roots and reasonings. They illustrated this by stating that human ‘photoreceptors may be stimulated more strongly by more saturated and darker colours, thus accounting for the association of such colours with high arousal and high-dominance emotions’ (Valdez and Mehrabian 1994: 406). Kobayashi (1992) claimed that to understand how colours evoke emotions we have to explore how a single colour evokes emotions in association with other colours. Thus, the colour red may have several meanings such as powerful, rich, luxurious, dynamic or even mellow, depending on which colours it is combined with (Kobayashi 1992).

Colour perceptions and influence on emotions is also deeply connected to cultural context, as stated by Hine (1995). Cultural factors are the third way in which colour supposedly affects human emotions. According to Aslam (2006), the meaning that colours have in a given culture is learned and can be maintained over time due to the regularities and signifiers that are communicated through time. The meaning colours hold in any given culture can also change with the passage of time. However, in certain cultures, the meaning remains static and is maintained and reinforced through continual cultural practices. For example, the colour purple has been associated with mourning in Japan for centuries and continues to be so, whereas in Pakistan the colour black formerly shared this meaning but white is now also rapidly becoming the symbol of mourning, for example, when people dress for funerals.

2.3 Colour, identity and body image

So far, we have discussed the effects that colours have on human behaviour, as induced by instinctual and associative factors. In this section, we explore how colour shapes the understandings of identity and body image and is used as a tool of expression and communication. For early civilizations, and perhaps in certain parts of the world even today, clothing only served the functional purpose of providing protection to the human body, but over time, and as civilizations have evolved and cultures have matured, the practice of attaching meaning to our garments has become more widespread and common. The colour of clothing in particular has been used as a means of communicating individual and social identities for centuries. Research shows that the use of colour as a symbolic communication medium started as early as the Renaissance period, when sumptuary laws that permitted only the nobility to wear certain colours in clothing were implemented in Europe (Eckstut and Eckstut 2013). The process of extracting and dyeing these colours was rather costly and so only the noble class had access to the colour purple used to dye clothing, which came from Mediterranean seashells (Eckstut and Eckstut 2013). The colour purple in Medieval Europe represented the elite and cultured class and was thus worn exclusively by the upper-class nobility.

Indeed, over the years the meaning of purple has changed in the European context, although the practice of attaching meaning to colour and using it to reflect notions of social and individual identity continues to this day. At times, the colour of clothing is used to communicate conformity and communal unity (when we follow dress and colour codes at funerals or weddings) while at other times we use it to reflect our individuality and nonconformity (when we wear specific colours to reflect our tastes and
The colour of clothing most certainly has a powerful ability to create impressions on others, but it also affects the wearer of the garment. Research shows that people often end up adopting the characteristics and traits they associate with the colour of the clothing to their own personalities. Frank and Gilovich (1988) observed this phenomenon in a study they conducted of the impact of the colour black on sports teams. They noted that teams wearing black sports uniforms ended up being more aggressive than those wearing white uniforms. In most cultures, the colour black is associated with what Adams and Osgood (1973) refer to as negative impressions. Therefore, the characteristics that the colour black is perceived to hold evoke feelings of aggression that are transferred to the wearer of the clothing. In a similar study, Vrij (1997) identified that offenders wearing black gave impressions of guilt and irritation and were regarded with suspicion and less trust than offenders wearing lighter colours. Thus, the colour of our garments communicates certain messages to others about who we are, but it also impacts the wearer of the clothing and their (perceived) identities. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as *enclothed cognition*, that is, when people adopt the features they perceive certain colours of clothing to possess for their own self-identity (see Adam and Galinsky 2012).

We can infer that the relationship between colour, the self and body image is not mutually exclusive, but in fact incredibly interdependent and deeply intertwined. The colour of clothing has a strong psychological effect on the wearer of the clothing. Research has shown that the clothing a person wears instantly impacts their mood and that it imports the perceived meanings of the colour, bringing on behavioural and emotional change (Tiggemann and Lacey 2009). For example, it has been shown that people often select the colours of their clothing to reflect or even change their mood. To lift their ‘spirits’, a person might even opt for brighter colours whereas a person feeling low or grumpy might want to reflect the image of the inner state of the self by selecting dull or darker colours. People are known to express their feelings through the colour of the clothing they select (Tiggemann and Lacey 2009). Social psychologists explain that clothing acts as an extension of one’s bodily self and thus people tend to use the colours of the garments as a means of reflecting and communicating various aspects of the self, such as their values, tastes, mood and even body image (see Shim et al. 1991).

Moreover, it is claimed that people not only use the colour of clothing to alter the appearance of the body but that body image and feelings of the self are also impacted by the clothing chosen. This closeness between clothing and perceived body image was researched by Sontag (1979), who created the concept of proximity of clothing to the self (PCS). Proximity of clothing to self (PCS) is a multidimensional concept interpreted through six dimensions and it aims to estimate the psychological closeness of clothing to consumers’ self image and understanding. As clothing is the closest material object to the body, Sontag (1979) examined the role clothing plays in the quality of life. For this he developed the PCS scale and discovered how clothing was a key component for establishing perceptions of the self, a symbol of personal identity, mood and attitude, a tool for validating physical appearance and the self, and for affecting body image and self-esteem (Sontag 1979). Due to the proximity of clothing to the person’s identity, the role that the colour of our garments plays in body image is critical. Colour can enhance a person’s attractiveness and visual appearance as it greatly impacts self-esteem and positive body image ideals. We thus concur that the colour of clothing is key
in shaping identities, consumer behaviour, body images, emotions, tastes and cultural and social practices. In the upcoming sections we describe in detail how the present study was conducted and discuss the critical insights Finnish consumers provide into the discussion on colour, clothing and consumer behaviour.

3. METHODOLOGY

We initiated a series of focus group sessions with the intention of identifying the existing knowledge, perspectives and attitudes of Finnish consumers towards the colour of clothing. The aim was to explore the different ways in which colour is consumed and to identify the factors that influence colour preferences in clothing. To meet these targets, we conducted eleven focus group sessions between February and April 2021. A focus group study is a qualitative research method that has traditionally been used in market research but has migrated to social research and is now also used by social scientists (Morgan 2012). It is undertaken by selecting a homogenous group of individuals who are ‘assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research’ (Powell and Single 1996: 499). The source of data is the interactions and discussions that take place in the group setting. Therefore, focus group interviews tend to differ from other group interviews such as Delphi or nominal groups, as interaction is highly encouraged (Morgan 2012). In this way, focus

Figure 2: ‘Colours can fade if the colour is connected to natural fibre’ say empathic colour consumers. These dresses are made from cotton and silk and they are dyed with natural dyes, which have the tendency to get lighter with time. Design by Essi Karell (Eeva Suorlahti/Aalto University).
groups provided the most reasonable option for data collection in this study. In the upcoming section we provide details on how the data were collected and analysed.

3.1 Data collection, description and analysis

A total of eleven focus group sessions were conducted between February and April 2021, each lasting between 60 and 90 minutes (see Table 1 for a summary of the study timeline). The sessions followed a structured approach; the questions were determined in advance and all the participants were encouraged to talk. This gave the focus group sessions an inclusive approach (see Morgan 2012). In addition, the questions remained the same in all the sessions. This enabled us to compare the responses of the various participants from different sessions and to better account for the rigour and validity of the results (Morgan 2012).

To recruit participants for the focus group we reached out to our industry partner Nanso Ltd. Information on the focus group study was posted on Nanso’s Twitter, Facebook, Instagram accounts and in Nanso’s weekly newsletter. A total of 108 people agreed to participate; however, only 32 individuals actually took part in the study. Except for one male participant, all were female. All the participants were Nanso customers and residents of Finland with an age range from early 20s to early 70s. Due to the present COVID-19 pandemic, the mobility of the participants was limited, therefore, to ease logistical concerns, all the focus group sessions were conducted online using the video call platform Zoom. This resulted in easier accessibility and access to consumers residing in cities all over the country.

The first author moderated these sessions. Ethical considerations were followed and a verbal confidentiality agreement was made. This meant that before the start of each focus group, the rights of the participants were communicated along with information about the research, the purpose of the study and how the data would be used. All the sessions were recorded after the participants’ permission was attained. The participants were also given the option to switch their videos off if they did not wish to show their faces and participate through audio. Every session also began with a round of introductions to ensure that all the participants felt comfortable with one another. A participation incentive, in the form of a Nanso gift card was also offered at the end of each focus group.

Table 1: Data description.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data collection period</th>
<th>16 February–14 April 2021</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Industry partner</td>
<td>Nanso Ltd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data collection sources</td>
<td>Social media: Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Nanso newsletter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>108 participants signed up, 32 participated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data collection method and analysis</td>
<td>11 focus group interviews on Zoom Thematic analysis (qualitative)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data description</td>
<td>Female participants (except one male) Age range early 20s to early 70s All Finnish residents</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As all the participants in the focus groups were Finnish, we kept the language of the sessions open and offered the option of communicating in either Finnish or English. The questions were asked in both English and in Finnish. Some of the sessions were conducted in only Finnish and for this purpose, the transcriptions of the sessions were translated. This allowed the participants to freely share their perspectives in their mother tongue and not feel limited in expressing their point of view, which in turn resulted in richer discussions.

All the transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis. This required taking an interpretive approach to the data analysis, in which the similarities and differences in the responses were identified and grouped together. This allowed various categories to be identified and subsequently coded, and these descriptive codes enabled comparisons in the data. The data were also studied several times to account for rigour in the analysis (Flick 2004). The resultant themes from the data analysis are listed, described and discussed in detail in Sections 4 and 5.

4. COLOUR CONSUMER CATEGORIES

This section describes five categories of colour consumers to illustrate existing colour preferences and how they impact colour consumption practices. In this section we also show how various factors impact colour choices, and the relationship that consumers share with certain colours that influence the type of clothing they purchase.

4.1 Minimalist colour consumer

When it comes to clothing, I don’t wear lots of colours. It’s more neutral colours, maybe pastels.

(Focus group interview, 16 February 2021)

I think my favourite colour is perhaps green, but it is not the colour I wear the most. I think I use black and white or more neutral colours, for some reason.

(Focus group interview, 16 February 2021)

For a minimalist colour consumer, the colours that form part of their wardrobe fit neatly in what can be described as a neutral colour palette. Minimalists find joy in consuming colours such as blue, black, grey and/or white. They frequently couple these colours with accent colours such as red, green or pink. These consumers often refer to their selected neutral colours as harmonious or easy colours:

When I open my closet, it’s […] black, white, brown, and grey. Those kinds of colours. Pretty harmonious colours and I can mix them.

(Focus group interview, 16 February 2021)

Colour functionality plays a major role in shaping the colour preferences of a minimalist colour consumer. By this we mean that minimalist colour consumers often select colours on the basis of how well they match and how many colour combinations they can form with the clothing items they have already in their wardrobes. As one informant expresses in the following statement:
I think that colours guide your shopping – you try to build a wardrobe in which every piece goes together. In that sense colours are very important when making purchasing decisions.

(Focus group interview, 18 February 2021)

The interviewees also spoke about the easy characteristics of certain colours. The easier the colour of the clothing was to mix and match with other clothing the more prone they were to purchase that colour. A telling example of this was when during a focus group session, two participants referred to the colour black as a safe colour and reflected on why they like it:

INTERVIEWEE 1: ‘I think that Finnish people feel the colour black is safe, somehow.’
INTERVIEWEE 2: ‘And it’s easy, […] I think Finnish people search for easy ways to dress, so black is easy. You don’t have to worry about whether or not colours go together.’

(Focus group interview, 3 April 2021)

As the excerpt above shows, the colour black is perceived to be easy to match with other colours such as blue or white. In fact, black was identified as the most preferred colour in general (n = 14) and the most common colour of the clothing in the focus group participants’ (n = 26) wardrobes. Perhaps an additional point to note here is that black was identified as the most prevalent colour in clothing stores in Finland. The availability or ease of access to particular colours further reinforced the cycle of black (or neutral colour) clothing purchases among minimalist colour consumers, as expressed in the following quotes:

If you want a colourful coat, you must buy a sports one. If you want a pink or a purple coat, you need to buy a sports one. Normal winter clothing is black only.

(Focus group interview, 3 April 2021)

When it comes to clothing, I like very basic colours like blue. It’s my favourite but also very natural colours like beige, white and black. The usual ones that Finnish consumers want. The colours of 80% of almost all products sold are usually black, white and/or beige.

(Focus group interview, 18 February 2021)

In addition, neutral colours also form the base or are seen as the core of wardrobes, to which accent colours can be added. Another reason for curating a closet with these colours is the desire to save time when deciding on what to wear every day. The choices made by the minimalist colour consumer rest heavily on wanting a lifestyle that mirrors the values of simplicity and ease of use. Thus, colour multi-functionality plays a major role in clothing colour decisions and in shaping the minimalist’s colour preferences, as expressed in the following interview excerpt:

I tend to build my wardrobe so that things match, and most of the clothing is maybe business clothing, so grey, black, blue, green, and then white shirts or light ones or beige or something as well […] Then you
can play around a bit [...]. I do make sure that the colour is also one that I can reuse with many different items.

(Focus group interview, 18 February 2021)

4.2 Emotional colour consumer

For me colour is very important. I have to say I go by my emotions and feelings with it (colour) a lot. So, I’m not always very practical in the choice of the colour I make for my clothing.

(Focus group interview, 30 April 2021)

The second category of colour consumers in our study was emotional colour consumers. Emotions have been identified as playing a key role in clothing consumption choices (Kumar 2017), and they play an equally significant part with regards to colour preferences. The emotional colour consumer can best be understood as one whose colour choices are deeply intertwined with the mood they find themselves in, the mood or feeling they want to convey to others, and the connection they feel with the colour of the clothing. Whereas the minimalist refers to colours such as blue, white or grey as harmonious, the emotional colour consumer often categorizes these as happy or soft colours. Colours that evoke an emotional reaction such as joy or make the consumer smile play a defining role in the decision to purchase a particular item of clothing, as indicated by the following interviewee:

Mostly, if I see something (clothing) I get a smile on my face. I’m like okay that’s beautiful. I like it. It’s a very emotional thing that I can say for my clothing.

(Focus group interview, 30 April 2021)

There are days when I feel like wearing just black because I don’t want to make an effort, I don’t want to be recognized maybe or, paid attention to, rather, if I go out and I’m wearing the most colourful things that I have in my wardrobe, I’m quite sure that people are going to look because it pops in their eyes. So, it really depends, whether I’m feeling happy on that day or if I’m a bit sad or I feel like the day is insignificant in a way, I don’t know. But yeah, mood is also definitely one factor.

(Focus group interview, 3 August 2021)

Emotional colour consumers often mentioned purchasing the same outfit in two or more colours because it makes them happy. Impulse clothing purchases based on the colour of an outfit were often expressed. The emotional colour consumer habitually orders online or buys in-store because of the colour of a garment and how appealing the colour is to them at that moment. However, dissatisfaction or a loss of interest after they had bought the garment and worn it at home was common to these colour consumers. They often felt that when they wore the garment at home, the colour of the clothing was not the same as it was either online or in the store. This resulted in disliking the garment after purchasing it. These sentiments are expressed in the following excerpts:
The last item I bought was a brown shirt and when I brought it home, I decided to return it because the colour wasn’t one of my favourites.

(Female interviewee, 16 February 2021)

A few times I’ve actually challenged myself and decided to buy some new colours. And I’ve never used those clothes […]. Pretty often what happens is that I don’t even start using them. I see that (item of clothing) at home, and I think ok now this is the new blouse, I’ll put it on, but no I don’t want it. The colour is too strange. I’m not comfortable using it.

(Female interviewee, 16 February 2021)

Alternatively, emotional colour consumers do not even look at garments of colours that make them feel bad, such as yellow or orange, as it might contrast badly with their skin or hair colour. This shows that colours have a strong emotional link with body image, self-esteem and understanding of the self. How and what participants wanted to communicate and express about their bodies, identity and images was strongly shaped by colours. The following sentiments aptly encapsulate this point:

It’s also very important that when you choose the colour it suits your face colour and your skin colour because there are colours that just don’t suit you and do not make you look good at all. Then there are colours that lift your face and your skin in a very good light. So that’s also very important to understand and to find your own colours that really suit you.

(Focus group interview, 18 February 2021)

During the focus group discussions, it also arose that some colours were reminders of painful memories, and those colours were not purchased. This also shows how emotions play a leading role in determining and creating colour preferences for this colour consumer group.

4.3 Empathic colour consumer

I saw a programme on television where they dyed textiles in a large container, men were walking in it barefoot, and the chemicals caused cancer. It was in India. I thought it was horrible that they were making cheap textiles for me and dyeing them, and some people lose their health because of it.

(Focus group interview, 3 April 2021)

To explain why we refer to the third category of colour consumers as empathic colour consumers we now describe the key characteristics and common colour traits found within this group. The colour preferences of this consumer group are deeply rooted in aspects of care and maintenance. In other words, these colour consumers have empathy for the environment and its inhabitants, including humans, non-human species and human-made objects. For this reason, they are highly concerned about the impact that colour processing has on the environment and wish to know how colours and dyes are created,
treated and processed in the textile industry. They actively educate themselves on these issues to be able to make informed decisions when selecting and using an item of clothing.

Moreover, empathic colour consumers are also appreciative of the natural ageing process of colours and admire the change in the colour of the garment from sun exposure, washing cycles or time. Patina in and of colour is highly valued and clothing is used for as long as it can be, as expressed by the following interviewee:

It doesn’t matter if the colour fades […]. Same thing with some jeans for example. It’s just part of it. It’s something that should happen when it’s made from natural fibres. It doesn’t happen in polyester, for example. It doesn’t fade that much but then it’s fake. It’s not natural. No. I don’t really care if the colours fade.

(Focus group interview, 14 April 2021)

The visual appeal of colours is also important here, but it is not always the only aspect that impacts clothing purchase decisions. In fact, the decisions are also impacted by the socio-ecological responsibility that empathic colour consumers feel for the environment. This influences their relationship with colour and clothing. Empathic colour consumers take good care of their clothing and consciously follow the instructions on the clothing labels and inform themselves on topics that are important to them, including knowledge of the source of the colours. They try to seek information on whether the colours were created using organic or synthetic raw materials. They pay attention to the environmental impact of their clothing-related practices by washing less, airing garments and avoiding harmful chemicals as much as they can. This can be seen in the following interview excerpt:

I mend my clothes and I tend to take good care of them. I follow the instructions that they have on the labels, and I also try to make them last as long as possible […]. It’s a really important thing to me that the clothes are good. I like things that are actually durable and that they last, and if it takes maintenance then I do it.

(Focus group interview, 14 April 2021)

4.4 Sensorial colour consumer

For a sensorial colour consumer, the experience of wearing the colour determines their colour preferences and clothing choices. Consumers in this group are sensitive to the materiality of not only their clothing but also of colours. The materiality of colours here refers to the sensorial effects that are created through the experience of wearing colours (Adam and Galinsky 2012). Colour is sensed not only through sight but through the sensorial experience of the whole body. Colour is thus not only a visual experience; it is also a corporeal and embodied experience.

Colour preferences are thus not only born from merely liking a colour but also from reflexive experiences felt by the human body (Durrani 2021; Tiger 1992; Jordan 2000). The experience of touching and feeling the garment and it resting next to one’s skin, studying how the colour feels and how the colour changes and responds in different socio-material and
spatial environments impacts and informs choices. Colour preferences are learned through the senses over time and a connection is formed with the colour. Terms such as delicious, light, heavy, harsh, cool and/or easy were often used by sensorial colour consumers when describing colours and their experiences with them. These descriptions are expressed in the following excerpts:

The colours in this Nanso garment are lovely [interviewee points to the garment she is wearing]. I was at the pharmacy last week when the cashier told me the colours of my Nanso top are really nice […]. The colours are really delicious.

(Focus group interview, 3 April 2021)

And again:

I actually do use some grey as well because it’s usually easy, especially if it’s a blue-toned grey, to combine with these colours […]. It’s not as harsh as black, and it doesn’t make me pale in the same way. But I don’t really care for just plain grey.

(Focus group interview, 3 April 2021)

In addition, sensorial colour consumers are rather sensitive to the ecological and spatial environment in which they find themselves and often learn about their own colour preferences in relation to the season and to places. Sensorial experiences of seasons and spaces play a significant role in determining the colour choices of this consumer group. And so, during the summertime they often wear colours such as light blue, pastels and rose pink, as these shades create a sense of calm or comfort for them. This is expressed in the following quote:

What kind of colours I wear depends on the weather [practicality] […]. On a rainy day, I most probably won’t put on any colours that are not suited to the weather, if I’m outside. Well, in the wintertime there are winter coats in the Helsinki area, but most of the year if there’s a lot of rain and drops of water show on the clothes then white might not be a good colour.

(Focus group interview, 3 August 2021)

Experiences of spaces also determine the colour that is worn or preferred. For example, sensorial colour consumers often admitted to selecting colours such as black, white, grey, much like the minimalist, as appropriate for wearing in an office space as they created a sense of seriousness or business-like environment, where as wearing faded colours or earthy tones at the summer cottage or at home expressed a sense of comfort, casual and informal environments.

4.5 Conservative colour consumer

I think it [colour] is a really important thing actually, for example, if I want to buy a blouse and the colour isn’t right, I don’t buy it!

(Focus group interview, 16 February 2021)
I have jeans, I’ve dyed them. I’ve washed them. But not anymore. And usually, the faded colour doesn’t look nice at all. So, I’ve thrown the garment away. I don’t even want to pass it onto anybody because I think it’s spoilt. Colours should last!

(Focus group interview, 16 February 2021)

Conservative colour consumers are, as the name states – conservative – as is reflected in the quotes above. By this we refer to consumers who have very specific colour preferences and a strict understanding of colour quality. They always purchase the same colours and stick to the same colour palette. Unlike the minimalist they do not purchase only neutral colours. They may have a broader colour pallet, but they remain loyal to these colours.

To a certain extent, this trait might be similar to that of the minimalist colour consumer; but perhaps the difference is in how this consumer group perceives the quality of the colour. If a garment is not in an exact shade or hue, they do not purchase it. Therefore, colour is very important to this consumer group and how the colour of a garment looks is factored in when making purchasing decisions.

Figure 3: Blue colour is a ‘safe’ choice and it is understood to be a basic colour in the wardrobe especially among Finnish consumers. Linen dress designed by Essi Karell (Eeva Suorlahti/Aalto University).
There are colours that I could never imagine wearing, for example, yellow. I would never buy a yellow or orange blouse. So, the colour of the garment is very important.

(Focus group interview, 16 February 2021)

5. LENSES FOR COLOUR PREFERENCES

In this section, we expand the analysis to enable a deeper understanding of the interrelationships that exist between and within various factors that influence colour preferences and perceptions, and inversely how colour also impacts the perpetuation of these factors. To make the discussion easy to follow, from here on we refer to these factors as lenses and call them *internal forces*, *colour attributes*, *external structures* and *social elements* (see Table 2).

5.1 Internal forces

Our research showed that factors such as identity, mood/feelings and the body of the wearer play a leading role in determining what colour people prefer and subsequently result in the buying a piece of clothing in that colour. We grouped these as *internal forces*, as they are deeply rooted in physiological and psychological factors. How an individual might form a liking of a particular colour is connected to how they see themselves and their bodies, which in turn impacts feelings and emotions as well as identity formation, which are reflected through the colours of the clothing they purchase and wear. Perception of one’s body further impacted self-esteem and confidence to wear a certain colour of clothing among the participants. For example, if

<table>
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<td><strong>Internal forces</strong></td>
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the participants perceived their skin as very pale, they feared wearing orange or yellow, even if they otherwise admired these colours. Similarly, the colour of their hair, eyes, skin and even age impacted how they perceived the colour of clothing. How participants viewed themselves was reflected in how they viewed and used colour. Colour could be seen to play a significant role in shaping confidence in one’s body and image of the self. If a ‘wrong’ colour was chosen, it possessed the power to negatively impact the participants’ self-esteem. Similarly, the ‘right’ colour of clothing boosted the participants’ confidence and impacted their mood or feelings in a positive manner. These findings are in line with those of studies conducted by Tiggemann and Lacey (2009), Adam and Galinsky (2012), Shim et al. (1979) and Knoll (1991), all of whom have highlighted the importance of colours’ power to shape body image and self-esteem.

Linked closely to this is the deep connection that colour shares with feelings and mood. As the previous section shows, emotions go hand-in-hand with forming associations and attachments to certain colours while hindering relations with other colours. What consumers chose to wear was dependent on the mood they felt at a given time as well as the emotion or feeling they wished to communicate through the choice of the colour they chose to wear on a given day. Conversely, our findings also revealed that the colour of an item of clothing possessed the power to change a person’s feelings. This finding is in line with Singh’s (2006) view on colour and its ability to impact the feelings of the wearer.

It can be inferred that colour plays an influential role on how people’s identities are shaped and how identities in and of themselves also influence colour preferences, whether these identities are related to the self or personal identity, social identity, or even national identities. Colour most certainly influences us on many levels. The concept of enfolded cognition (see Section 2.3) can be aptly used in this context. As explained by Adam and Galinsky (2012), colours have the unique characteristics of bleeding into the identities of individuals. The associations or meaning we attach to certain colours such as black, red or white, when worn in the form of clothing, tend to transcend those characteristics onto the wearer. The garment wearer then reflects their own identity in the same way they might perceive a particular colour (Adam and Galinsky 2012). This became rather prominent in our study as the participants often referred to certain colours as ‘safe’ and ended up referring to themselves as safe consumers. With regards to the use of the colour black in clothing, this reference or way of describing the colour was used often. The participants equated their personal identity to a Finnish identity in which they perceived Finnish people as ‘safe consumers’ and therefore explained the reason why black was worn by so many people in the country (see Section 4.1).

At other times, the participants justified or reasoned that they preferred neutral shades or minimalist colours to bright colours because they did not want to stand out. They preferred to blend into the crowd and avoid drawing attention to themselves, a feature they identified as being very ‘Finnish’. These sentiments point to the power that identities (national or personal) have on the colour that people prefer to wear and the influence this has on consumer behaviour. A clash could also be seen between what is liked and what is actually worn. Even if some preferred brighter-coloured clothing, they ended up keeping to a neutral colour palette to be able to merge into the crowd and assimilate. This is a good example of the power of colour.
5.2 Colour attributes

The second lens that can be used to understand colour consumption relates to the attributes of colours. By this we refer to colour shades, colour combinations or matching different colours together, and colour maintenance. Our research revealed that consumers are influenced by the qualities of the colour of clothing. Questions such as – ‘Is the colour too bright, too light, neutral, soft, harsh and/or is it the right shade?’ – were often considered when determining what colour of clothing to buy or to wear. Moreover, when the participants made their purchase decisions, they also considered how the colour of the clothing in question matched the colours of the existing clothing in their wardrobes. Did the shades, tones or hues of the colour go well with their clothing or did they clash with the clothing they already owned? Whether it would be possible to combine colours to create outfits that ‘match’ or are ‘harmonious’, was also a major point of interest for the participants, especially among the conservative, minimalist and emotional colour consumers. Galinsky (2012), Kumar (2017), Singh (2006) and Hine (1997) explain this phenomenon as resulting from the interdependencies of the physical qualities of colour that evoke sensorial responses in humans and further result

Figure 4: Pastel colours are understood to be easy and neutral, which suit everyone. Design by Julia Valle Noronha (Eeva Suorlahti/Aalto University).
Colour matters

in the creation of colour preferences and perceptions. These responses are reinforced each time a consumer purchases the same colour of clothing and continues to repeatedly wear it. In this way, our colour preferences are a learned behaviour and are dependent on the materiality of colours (Cheskin 1957; Hine 1997).

Moreover, the colour combination of the garment (if it had more than one colour in its design) was also pondered – how well the shades worked or did not work with one another impacted colour perception, preferences and purchases. Kumar (2017) mentions that even if the design of a product is poor, if it consists of a combination of the ‘right’ colours, the consumer will purchase it. Our research found the same to be true. As explained by Hine (2006), this behavioural response can also be understood in terms of the associational aspect of colour. It has been claimed that colour preference or the use of a specific colour is not independent; it is dependent on the colours that can be found in its surrounding. Due to this, our colour partialities are created in relation to and in association with other colours, as was the case among the colour consumers we studied. Whether the colour consumers were minimalist or sensorial, combining colours to experience a harmony of colour use in their clothing was an influential factor.

An additional aspect that formed part of colour attributes is linked to the vitality of the colour. The strength of the colour and its ability to remain the same and free from stains was of importance to some participants (n = 2), and was a determining factor in their colour preferences. It was even pointed out that colours that would be easy to take care of or maintain and that required little care were preferred over colours that did not fulfil this requirement. The strength or ideas surrounding what colours ought to look like thus played a part in influencing what colours of clothing were purchased.

5.3 External structures

Other factors that are deeply linked to how colour preferences are formed are what we refer to as external structures. Within this broad category, we identified natural structures and artificial structures. In other words, the role that weather conditions and marketing play in colour perception. Our research showed that many of the clothing colour choices that the participants made were highly dependent upon the weather or the time of year they found themselves in (n = 23). In the spring and autumn, they often wore colours that reflected the colours of the seasons in nature. The practice or tendency to mirror the colours we are surrounded by in the natural environment in our clothing points to the deeply rooted relationship humans share with their natural environments (Durrani 2021). How deeply intertwined nature and human behaviour are is shown by the way colour preferences are formed and performed. At times, colours are chosen to celebrate the seasons of the year (e.g., wearing red at Christmas), whereas at other times, certain colours are selected out of mere pragmatism. Not wanting to wear light colours especially when living in a rainy city such as Helsinki (see Section 4.4) also played a role in creating a sensorial response to the weather through the choice and preference of colours.

An additional external factor that we identified is linked to the nature of markets, marketing and trends. Cheskin (1957), Kumar (2017) and Hemphill (1996) have noted that markets and marketing play a significant role in impacting colour choices and purchasing behaviour. How shelves
are displayed, advertisements are rolled out, and trends are created through runways or stores all influence the colour of the season or the ‘most wanted colour’ of the moment. The colour consumers we identified in this study also reflected on how the colours they selected in stores were indeed to some extent impacted by what was in fashion or on trend \( (n = 3) \) at that time and on what was available in the stores \( (n = 6) \). The availability of colours on the markets not only plays a role in shaping colour preferences; it can reinforce the purchase of certain colours over others. For example, the participants claimed that the most common colour found in Finnish clothing stores tends to be black, especially in the case of outdoor wear (see Section 4.1).

5.4 Social elements

The final lens that we use to illustrate the relationship between colour preferences and choices in clothing consumption among our Finnish interviewees we call social elements. Under this name we placed social acceptance and cultural contexts of various places and spaces. Over the years, research has shown us multiple times the role that social forces play in determining and influencing clothing consumption behaviour (see Section 2.1). Through this research we were also able to identify the interdependences between social and cultural elements and the choices that people make regarding the colour of the clothing they buy, wear or even like. These social elements that we identified include various social events in which specific cultural codes and clothing rules have to be followed. Among the Finnish participants, following social norms was very important and therefore determined the role that certain colours play in their wardrobes. For example, black was often identified as a colour that was appropriate for funerals or for formal events, whereas other more festive events such as weddings or graduations allowed freedom in the choice of clothing colour. However, depending upon the rules of the given occasion, at times, certain dress codes were followed (such as wearing black to a graduation).

These features were further linked to the cultural contexts of various places. For example, in a public space such as an office, the colours that the participants preferred to wear were more muted and not loud. In a Finnish context (and according to the participants) it was not socially acceptable to draw attention to the colours worn at work and this was avoided (see Section 4.4). Thus, the preferred choice of clothing leaned towards darker or neutral colours, as the minimalist colour consumers explained.

Thus, the perceived meanings that are created by certain colours are deeply rooted in cultural and social contexts. As Hine (1995) and Aslam (2006) have also shown, colour preferences and perceptions are also very much tied to cultural practices and are learned within those spaces. The meanings we derive and attach to certain clothing and the norms we deem acceptable or unacceptable are shaped by our social and cultural surroundings, which are internalized and practiced repeatedly. In other words, colour preferences can also be understood as a form of social and cultural construct that are time and space specific.

6. CONCLUSIONS

In this article we investigated the elements that help create, shape and inform the clothing colour preferences and purchase decisions of Finnish people. We
developed categories to reflect the nuances in the practices of Finnish clothing colour consumers. We found the following colour consumer categories: minimalist, emotional, empathic, sensorial and conservative. However, although these categories differed, we also found several overlaps. It must be noted that these categories were not mutually exclusive; they represented features of consuming colours and explained how colour is consumed by a variety of consumers in a variety of ways.

We were also able to identify the lenses that define colour preferences: the internal forces, external structures, colour attributes and social elements. Of these, internal forces were the most often mentioned, showing the importance of colour to all consumers, as an element linked to identity building, boosting mood and feelings, and moreover to body-image and self-esteem.

Although the study was exploratory in nature, it identified significant intricacies and interdependencies between colour, clothing, consumption and social, personal, cultural, environmental, sensorial, psychological and physiological forces. Exploring these interlinked aspects highlighted the multifaceted and complex nature of how colour choices are created, maintained and at times changed, and the impact that these have on clothing use and purchases. By zooming in on these elements we initiated a discussion on the crucial role that colour plays in clothing consumption behaviour, an area of research that needs to be further explored and examined.

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