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COLOUR USAGES BY MASS MARKET BRANDS AND PREMIUM BRANDS: FOCUS ON INDIA

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Abstract : This paper provides a conceptual overview and practical review of how mass-market and premium brands use color differently in branding and communication. It focuses on India's diverse and complex retail market, which includes traditional kirana stores, modern trade, and e-commerce sectors. Using systematic reviews of packaging color effects, experimental studies on saturation and status signaling (such as perceived heritage), and India-specific case studies, this study shows that color strategy

is mainly influenced by brand goals and the level of decision involvement (low- vs. high-involvement purchases).

Brands differentiate themselves primarily through color saturation.

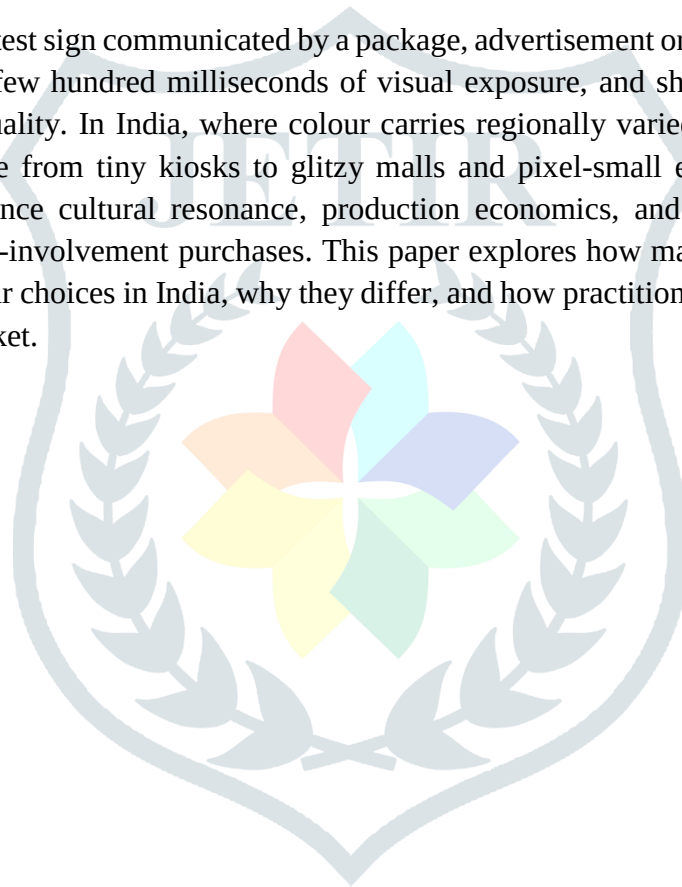
Mass-market brands use bright, high-contrast colors, such as red or saffron, to stand out on crowded shelves and help customers quickly identify products and their variations. These vibrant colors also make flavors seem stronger. In contrast, premium brands use muted colors, darker shades, and special finishes, such as matte or metallic, to convey a sense of luxury, tradition, and exclusivity.

This study explores these strategies in the context of India, emphasizing the role of cultural meanings and the need to adapt color choices for different retail settings, including the challenge of making products visible in small online images. A practical seven-step guide is offered to help brand managers choose colors, saturation, and finishes while considering local and ethical factors.

Key insights: Brand Architecture, Color Psychology, Visual Semiotics, Packaging Design, Indian Retail Market, Mass-Market vs. Premium Branding, Consumer Perception.

I.Introduction

Colour is often the first, fastest sign communicated by a package, advertisement or logo: it is pre-linguistic, processed within the first few hundred milliseconds of visual exposure, and shapes expectations about taste, healthfulness, and quality. In India, where colour carries regionally varied cultural meanings and where retail contexts range from tiny kiosks to glitzy malls and pixel-small e-commerce thumbnails. Colour strategy must balance cultural resonance, production economics, and the differing cognitive processes of low- and high-involvement purchases. This paper explores how mass-market and premium brands operationalize colour choices in India, why they differ, and how practitioners should design colour systems for the Indian market.



II.Theoretical background and literature review

Colour as a marketing cue



Color functions as a multi-dimensional cue (hue, saturation/chroma, and lightness/value) that influences attention, affect, perceived product attributes, and decision speed. Saturation and contrast are especially powerful: more saturated colours capture attention, increase arousal, and can even inflate perceived product size or intensity. Conversely, desaturated palettes and black-and-white imagery have been shown to increase perceptions of luxury and timelessness in certain contexts, driven by associations with continuity and heritage.

Packaging colour and product perceptions



Systematic reviews and experimental studies indicate that the color of packaging affects how healthy a product appears, its taste, and its category. This occurs through direct learned associations (such as green meaning natural or fresh), symbolic associations (such as saffron meaning ritual or auspicious in India), and mental simulation (where color prompts imagined sensory experiences). These effects rely on the product type, existing category norms, and context (online vs shelf) and directly influence willingness to pay and brand choice.

Colour and market tier: luxury vs mass signaling

rich



YVES SAINT LAURENT

wealthy



DELVAUX

Luxury branding focuses on scarcity, heritage, and symbolic value. Recent research shows that using muted colors can make consumers perceive a brand as more prestigious because it suggests continuous heritage. In contrast, bright colors are linked to high energy and immediate attention. Mass brands use vivid, high-contrast colors to stand out on shelves and differentiate their products. The use of black-and-white or restrained colors in ads has been shown to increase the perceived luxury of hedonic products.

Methodology

This paper is a conceptual synthesis and applied review drawing on:

- systematic reviews and meta-analyses on how packaging color affects perception;
- peer-reviewed experimental and field studies on saturation and perceived status, and on packaging colour and health/taste perceptions
- India-specific empirical and case literatures (FMCG packaging studies, industry reports, brand guidelines and legal disputes) to situate global findings in Indian cultural and retail contexts.



I focused on peer-reviewed journal articles when possible; for India-specific corporate materials, I used authoritative brand guidelines and peer-reviewed case studies. The aim is to create a research-level synthesis that brand managers can still use. Important empirical sources include Steiner and Florack (2023), Su et al. (2024), Zhou et al. (2025), Wang et al. (2022), Hagtvedt and Brasel (2017), and India FMCG packaging studies (e.g., Saraniya 2020).

Colour strategies and mechanisms: mass-market vs premium brands

Primary objectives and constraints

Mass-market brands typically face these objectives: immediate shelf salience in cluttered retail environments, clear variant differentiation (flavour, size, function), and tight cost constraints on printing and finishing. Premium brands aim to convey scarcity, craftsmanship, and heritage. Objectives better served by restrained palettes and high-quality substrate and finishing (matte laminates, embossing, foiling). The same visual cue (green, say) can therefore serve different roles: in a mass product bright lime

green signals “mint” or “freshness” and draws attention; in a premium natural brand a muted olive or earthy green signals artisanal or organic provenance. The-tiered objectives map directly onto empirical findings about saturation: saturation increases attention and perceived intensity (useful for mass), whereas low saturation signals continuity and status (useful for premium).

Hue (which colour), saturation (intensity) and value (lightness)

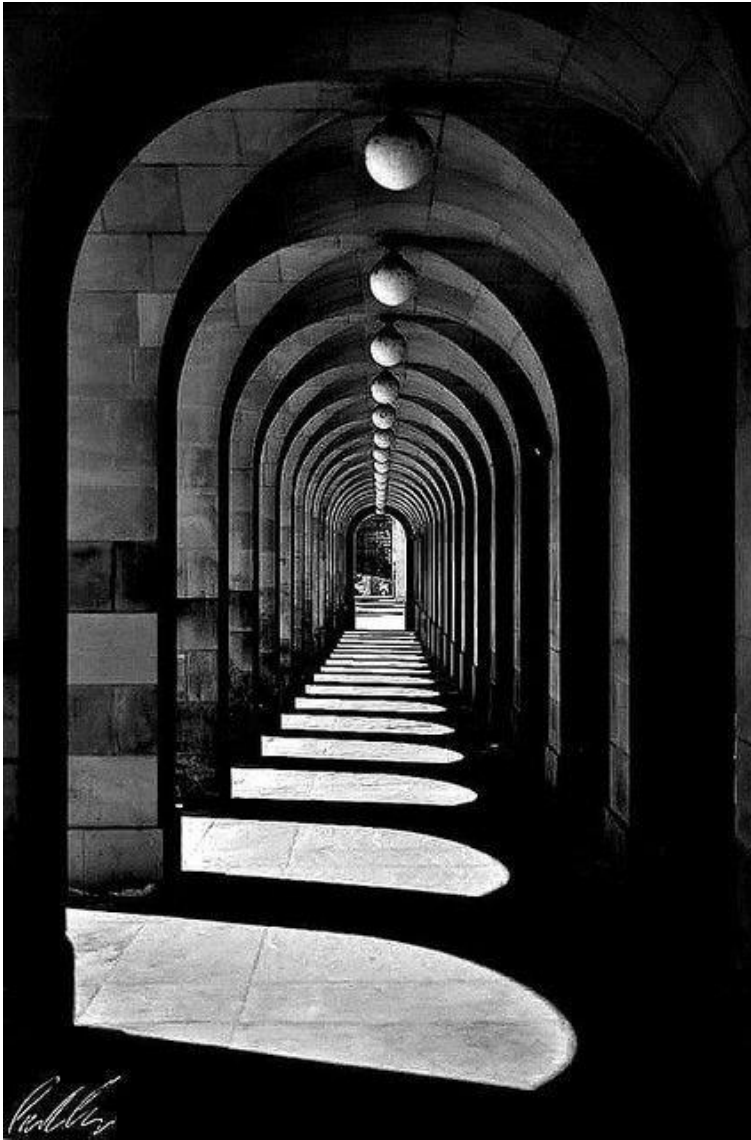
Hue (colour family): Certain colours are category-congruent and yellow in snack foods and impulse items; blue and white in hygiene and cleaning (cleanliness associations); green in health or natural claims. Deviating too far from category-congruent hues can cause misclassification or confusion at the shelf. Empirical reviews show robust associations between common hues and category/health inferences.



Saturation (pigment intensity): High saturation plays a crucial role in influencing visual prominence and perceived sensory intensity, such as a "strong" flavor. High saturation is particularly effective for low-involvement impulse purchases. Conversely, low saturation enhances perceptions of heritage and status, thereby supporting luxury positioning. Consequently, saturation serves as a strategic tool for brands to balance perceived product intensity with prestige.



Value (lightness/darkness): Lighter palettes often read as approachable and modern; dark palettes (deep navy, black) convey seriousness and premium positioning. Lightness interacts with finish and printing technology (gloss vs matte) to produce tactile expectations from visual cues alone.



Finish, material cues and multimodal signalling

Colour alone is seldom adequate for conveying brand prestige. Premium brands often employ material cues, such as thick boards, matte varnish, metallic foiling, and debossing, to enhance the perception of luxury. In contrast, mass-market brands typically utilize high-contrast glossy prints to maximize luminance and color vibrancy on cost-effective substrates. Consequently, research comparing color signals must consider finish as a multiplier or moderator, as identical hues and saturation levels can appear significantly different when printed on silk-laminated versus thin glossy stock.

Cultural semiotics in India



India's colour semiotics are multifaceted: saffron / vermilion evoke religiosity and auspiciousness; green signals agriculture and health; red signals appetite and auspiciousness; white has complex valence depending on context (purity vs mourning in regions). Brands like Patanjali deliberately leverage saffron and earthy tones to emphasize tradition and Ayurveda, while mass FMCG brands employ bright, category-readable palettes for immediate recognition. The effect of a hue therefore depends on region, festival calendar and subcultural identity variables that must be accounted for in national campaigns and SKU design. India-based packaging studies corroborate the strong influence of culturally salient hues on purchase decisions in ritual and festival categories.

Evidence from peer-reviewed studies (selected findings)

Packaging colour and perceived healthfulness/taste



Steiner and Florack's systematic review (Foods, 2023) synthesizes experimental work showing that packaging color influences perceived healthfulness: cool colors and certain green/blue hues increase perceived healthiness, while warm, saturated hues often increase indulgence expectations. The review provides a theoretical framework explaining these results via learned associations, symbolic meaning, and mental simulation mechanisms. This provides direct guidance to brands: color is a low-cost but powerful cue for health positioning.

Food packaging colour × product type interactions

Su et al. (Frontiers in Nutrition, 2024) show that the match between packaging color and food type moderates purchase intention. Warm colors work better for indulgent “vice” foods, while cool colors work for “vice” vs. “virtue” distinctions in other categories. This moderating effect highlights the risk of incongruence using green on a product perceived as indulgent can reduce attractiveness unless the brand intends to signal a healthier variant.

Saturation and perceived brand status (luxury)

According to Zhou et al. (Journal of Consumer Research, 2025), both experimental and field studies reveal that reducing colour saturation enhances the perception of luxury status through a mechanism termed

"continuity heritage." This study outlines conditions such as brand age and innovation cues that influence this effect and shows that saturation levels can also impact willingness to pay in certain scenarios. For Indian luxury or premium brands that emphasize heritage cues, such as Raymond in formal wear, subdued color schemes reinforce the perception of high status.

Black-and-white and perceptions of luxuriousness



Research by Wang et al. (2022) on the use of monochrome or black-and-white imagery in luxury advertising indicates that eliminating colour in specific contexts can heighten perceptions of luxury, particularly when advertisements emphasize hedonic appeals. This finding supports the strategic use of minimalistic palettes or monochrome branding in premium marketing efforts.

Cross-modal and contextual moderators

Research conducted by Hagtvedt and Brasel (2017), along with later studies, indicates that color interacts with other sensory elements like sound and texture, as well as contextual factors such as lighting and online thumbnail size, to influence responses. Hagtvedt & Brasel discovered that increased saturation can enhance the perceived size and visual prominence of products, which is advantageous for mass-market brands on crowded retail shelves. Online thumbnails reduce visual space, necessitating the optimization of hue and strong contrast for readability at smaller sizes.

India-specific evidence and brand illustrations

Patanjali: cultural resonance and earthy palettes



Patanjali leverages saffron/orange, earth tones, and Ayurvedic visual motifs to convey tradition, authenticity, and indigenous knowledge. Their brand guidelines and product range consistently employ these colors across categories, focusing on cultural semiotics rather than minimalist premium signals. Industry analyses reveal several legal disputes over trade dress and color cues as the brand expanded into established categories, highlighting how color becomes a contested aspect of brand identity in India's competitive FMCG market.

HUL and portfolio colour systems

Large FMCG companies like Hindustan Unilever enforce palette rules across SKUs to balance recognizability with differentiation: blues for hygiene, greens for herbal/health cues, and red/yellow for appetite-stimulating categories. HUL's established portfolio management illustrates how mass brands implement color as a system across numerous SKUs and price tiers. Research on HUL's brand strategies in India confirms the practical significance of such color taxonomy in extensive portfolios.

Titan and tiered sub-brands: hybrid strategies

Titan's multi-brand strategy demonstrates how a corporate umbrella can support diverse color systems: mass youth brands with bold, saturated palettes (Fastrack) coexist with premium, minimalist lines featuring muted palettes and metallic finishes (Titan Edge). This combination highlights the managerial necessity for strict brand governance and SKU-level color rules. Industry case studies show how color aids in preventing shopper misclassification across sub-brands.

Retail context and regional differences

Field studies in India reveal that kirana stores with narrow shelving and dim lighting prefer high-saturation packaging that stands out; in contrast, premium retail boutiques and online marketplaces favor muted

palettes combined with textured substrates. Additionally, state/regional festivals affect color prominence (for instance, deep reds and golds are prevalent in Diwali editions). Practitioners must plan seasonal palette variations while maintaining core identity. India case studies (Saraniya 2020) support these retail-context effects.

Practical framework for Indian brand managers

Based on the theoretical and empirical review, I propose a checklist framework to guide colour decisions across tiers and contexts.

- **Start with the objective:** Shelf salience, health signalling, premium status, or cultural resonance.
- **Map category norms:** Identify dominant hues and the color signals consumers expect in the category; deviate only with clear advantages.
- **Select saturation strategically:** Use higher saturation for attention and perceived intensity (mass); use lower saturation to support status and heritage (premium).
- **Plan finishes and substrates:** Where margins permit, add tactile cues (matte boards, foiling) to amplify premium colour signals.
- **Localise:** Adapt palettes by region and festival calendar while preserving a consistent core identity.
- **Optimize for digital thumbnails:** Test colour and contrast at small sizes; simplify patterns and text so the hue remains the primary differentiator.
- **Validate empirically:** A/B test thumbnails, run small in-store attention studies or digital click tests, and where feasible run eye-tracking in representative retail environments.

Discussion and managerial implications

Why colour choices diverge across tiers

The divergence between mass and premium stems from

- Decision involvement (fast vs slow)
- Economics (low vs high margin)
- Desired symbolic associations (utility/celebration vs heritage/exclusivity)
- Retail context differences (kirana vs boutique/e-commerce).

Colour is cheap relative to other brand investments but is most effective when aligned with finish, copy, pricing and distribution strategies. Empirical evidence (systematic reviews and field studies) shows colour's causal effects on health perception and status inference so managers should treat colour as a strategic variable, not mere decoration.

Overlap and convergence

Despite these divergences, there is overlap, particularly in the use of green to signal nature and health across tiers and in festival campaigns, where premium brands temporarily adopt mass-market chroma to tap into cultural salience. Longitudinal brand consistency remains crucial across tiers; frequent and significant changes in the core palette can erode recognition and loyalty. Empirical research on brand recognition and visual identity suggests that consistency should be prioritized unless a strategic rebranding is carefully managed.

Ethical considerations: colorism and cultural sensitivity



Brands in India must be cognizant of the social implications of colour cues, especially in categories like skincare, where "fairness" signalling has historically reinforced colorism. Corporate initiatives to change problematic product language and visual cues are integral to ethical brand-management. Color choices should not reinforce discriminatory beauty standards and should be accompanied by responsible messaging.

Limitations and directions for future research

This paper synthesizes available literature but does not present original experimental or field data collected specifically in India. Future research priorities include:

- Controlled experiments in Indian retail environments (kirana vs supermarket) measuring attention to saturation and hue under representative lighting.
- Eye-tracking and choice experiments testing thumbnail legibility for e-commerce platforms across income segments.
- Longitudinal studies on the effects of palette changes on recognition and perceived heritage in Indian premium brands.
- Regional cultural mapping studies to produce a "colour dictionary" for major Indian states and festival contexts.

Conclusion

Colour is a powerful, low-cost instrument in the marketer's toolkit, but it must be wielded strategically. In India, mass-market brands favor vivid, high-saturation palettes to secure attention and quick category inference; premium brands use muted palettes, material finishes, and tonal restraint to evoke heritage and exclusivity. Retail context, cultural semiotics and production economics moderate these choices. Managers who combine empirical testing (thumbnail A/B, in-store trials) with culturally informed palette rules and careful finish choices will realize the greatest returns from their colour systems.

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