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Programme of Study: Design Craft BA

Module: ADAD5004 Research in Practice

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Word Count: 2729

Three Keywords: Joy, Feminine, Trend

Introduction

For my three words I have chosen Joy, Feminine, and Trend. I want to explore the social prevalence of each word and how they manifest themselves within society as a whole as well as on an individual scale, linking to identity and community. Practitioners, researchers, and theorists whose work I will touch on throughout this essay include The Memphis Group, Ingrid Fetell Lee, The Science Museum Group and Roland Barthes.

Joy

Defined as “a feeling of great pleasure and happiness.” (Oxford Languages, 2023).

Joy within the world of design relates to the aesthetics of the objects we are surrounded by, and how they have the ability to impact our emotions in a positive way. Colour and form have proven their palpable influence in many cases, and when applied these elements of design can have a dramatic effect on society and on the individual. It is not a new concept that colour is tied to emotional connotations, and there have been a number of studies to explore this. Graphic designer Orlagh O'Brien coordinated a study into which colours are most commonly associated with different emotions- “A custom survey method was designed, with bespoke CMYK colour chart. 250 people of various ages and nationalities were asked to contribute” (O'Brien, no date). Results found that the colours most linked with joy were bright yellow, followed by orange, pink, green, and lemon yellow. Other colours followed, however in much smaller fractions. The four other emotions investigated included anger, fear, sadness, and love, all of which had their own colour palette, displayed in Figure 1.

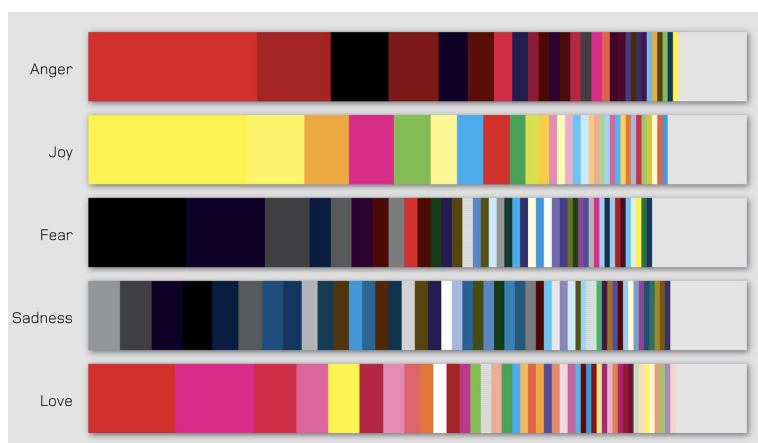


Figure 1. (O'Brien, no date)

When applied to practical situations, the colours found in the Joyful palette boast a society changing phenomenon. In 2000, Edi Rama, the mayor of Albania's capital city, Tirania, applied his knowledge he had gained in his previous profession as an artist and decided to paint Tirania, giving it a new lease of life. He designed bold patterns and employed bright colours to transform the previously drab and grey cityscape that had suffered from crime and corruption following the end of Communist rule in the 1990's. Following Tirania's colourful metamorphosis, there was a significant shift; citizens claimed to feel safer, there was a drop in crime rates, and higher levels of sociability in the public areas of the city. This demonstrates the power that colour can have over people, and how joy can be spread through well applied design (Lee, 2018, p13-14). Gjergj Ruci (2021) explains this effect on Tirania by stating that "colour touches and triggers all the senses in a psychological and empathic way, but also it lightens up aesthetic, sets the tone for artistic movements, builds up identity and memorability, but also shifts the social and economic perception on how people value their surroundings."

Within the home, these design principles can be applied with the same intention and theoretically offer the same effect. The Memphis Group (see Figure 2), which functioned between 1981 to 1987, were a group of designers who focused on engaging with non-traditional materials, colours, and forms to create collections of modern furniture, which became so successful that 80's design is strongly associated with their style. Lyon and Turnbull Auction's senior specialist in decorative arts and design, Joy McCall, writes "Memphis was about rejecting the principles and values held by Modernism in favour of an exploration of new

possibilities and an intentional engagement of the senses (and) was intended to stimulate emotions and its works do indeed convey a spirit of happiness and pleasure with a degree of humour thrown in” (2022).



Figure 2: Memphis Group exhibited at Koenig & Clinton / Joe Sheftel Gallery, New York (2015)

In Ingrid Fetell Lee’s book *Joyful- The Surprising Power of Ordinary Things to Create Extraordinary Happiness*, she discusses how she investigated what can create joy and why, by asking friends and strangers to describe items or locations they think of in connection with joy. She goes on to list the answers she received, including stories involving “rainbows (...) beach balls and fireworks, swimming pools and tree houses, hot-air balloons and googly eyes and ice cream sundaes with colourful sprinkles (...) lollipops, pom-poms, and polka dots (...) bubbles, balloons and hummingbirds”. Upon observing the imagery of these recountments, Lee began to notice patterns. The images were mostly round in shape, saturated with colour, had symmetries and feelings of balance, or were light and floaty. This then offers designers a guide on

what qualities to employ when developing products with the intention of creating a happy environment (Lee, 2018).

Colour palette preference often correlates with age- babies and children are surrounded by bright, engaging, joy inspiring colours, and, as we age, an expectation of maturity of tastes places a pressure to dispel these colours in place of muted tones. In 1810 Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe (cited in Lee, 2018) stated that “savage nations, uneducated people, and children have a great predilection for vivid colours (but that) people of refinement avoid vivid colours in their dress and the objects that are about them, and seem inclined to banish them altogether from their presence”. Since the early 1800s, our distaste for colour appears to have grown, demonstrated by Figure 3, a graph that displays the decrease in the use of colour across time. The Science Museum Group (2020) made this graph by analysing pixels displayed in their photographs of over 7000 objects from the past 200 years. They also used these photographs to compare objects with similar purposes from different time periods as seen in Figure 4 (Sleeman, 2020).

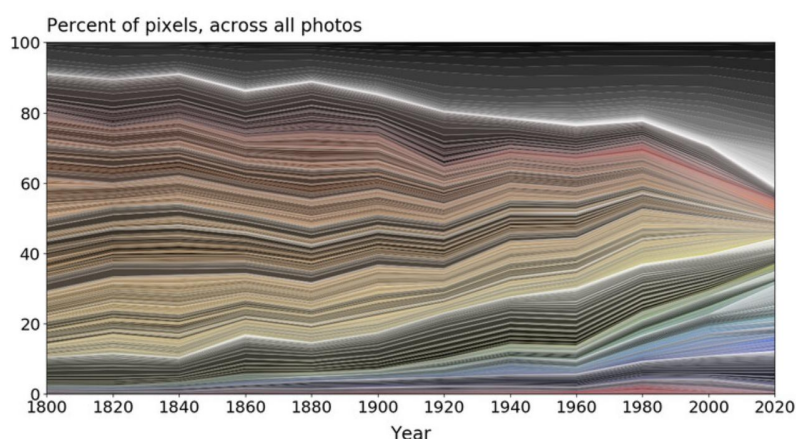


Figure 3.



Figure 4.

This aversion to colours is seen from fashion, through to interior design, however it can be assumed based on the previously mentioned examples - The Memphis Group, Lee (2018), O'Brien - that by employing a wider variety of colours in our everyday life we can ignite motivation and happiness. But now, more than ever, colour and joyful design are crucial tools since the mental health of our population is in crisis; "the overall number of people reporting mental health problems has been going up in recent years. The amount of people with common mental health problems went up by 20% between 1993 to 2014, in both men and women" (Mind, no date).

Feminine

Growing up as a girl in a world filled with gender norms, expectations, and limitations can cause difficulties when figuring out your true identity. Throughout their infancy and childhood, stereotypes are pushed onto young girls including maternal pressures (e.g. toy babies with prams etc), and cosmetic and physical expectations (e.g. Barbies with unattainable body shapes, and heavy makeup). The split in the children's section between the boys' and the girls' clothing is identifiable from afar due to the glaring contrast of blues and greens to the pinks, pastels and sparkles. These stereotypes are absorbed by the child, and reinforced by the media as they grow into supposedly free thinking adults. Once at this age some may reject the collection of sexist conventions as they develop awareness of their patriarchal conditioning. For example a woman might move on from the pink palette and 'girly' clothes she was raised with and may instead source more androgynous muted clothes. Women turn their back on their feminine childhoods in an act of feminism, however this rejection may be another layer to our patriarchal society. This can be understood as a result of attempting to remove gender differences with feminist intentions, however it is always feminine clothing that is cut out and transformed into something masculine; androgyny is not the meeting-in-the-middle of feminine and masculine fashions, but instead it is the abandonment and compromise of feminine fashions, whilst men's ware remains untouched- the Xenofeminist Manifesto states that "the notion of what is 'gendered' sticks disproportionately to the feminine" (2018, cited by Medhurst 2021). Contrastingly, the women who choose to continue dressing stereotypically feminine are ultimately reduced to vacant sexual objects. This paradox is reflective of the Madonna Whore Dichotomy which "denotes

polarized perceptions of women in general as either good, chaste, and pure Madonnas or as bad, promiscuous, and seductive whores [...] feminist theory suggests the MWD stems from a desire to reinforce patriarchy” (Bareket et al., 2018). Despite attempts at self expression, women are placed within categories, with presumptions projected onto them. So the possibility of women figuring out and then honestly expressing their true identity without their intentions falling victim to being misconstrued or misguided remains contentious.

Feminine fashions being demonised as being overly promiscuous also poses a dangerous threat to women’s safety; sexual assault is often justified or sympathised with by describing what the victim was wearing. Studies such as Kanekar and Koswalla, 1981 and Lewis and Johnson, 1989 (cited by Siefkes-Andrew and Alexopoulos, 2018) have found that more blame is attributed to the victim of sexual assault if they were wearing an outfit deemed provocative versus more modest clothing, furthermore they found shorter sentences were given to the perpetrator in the former case. Theresa Beiner (2007) writes “Feminists have been debating what constitutes appropriate female attire since the beginning of the feminist movement in the United States. [...] No one theory explains the current happenings with women’s dress - instead, the discussion leads to tension within feminist theory: Are women exercising freedom to dress as they please or are they simply buying into their own objectification?”. Comparisons can be made between the attitudes to this question across the different generations or ‘waves’ of feminism. An example of shifting perspectives are SlutWalks, which were conceived as a rebellion against the notion that clothing is directly tied to sexual assault. The marches are populated by women “wearing not much more than what their foremothers once dubbed “objects of female

oppression” (Valenti, 2011). The protest emerged “after a police officer told students at Toronto’s York University in January that if women want to avoid rape, they should not dress like “sluts.” (Valenti, 2011). The goal is for women to be able to express their identity through fashion and suffer no harmful consequences.

Traditionally feminine clothing is, however, making a comeback; vintage inspired outfits associated with the height of femininity are re-emerging with a new impetus. Trend forecaster and fashion editor, Anna Ross of WGSN, (cited by Harriet Brown, 2020) suggests this resurgence is a response to our current socio-political state, perhaps fuelled by “movements such as #MeToo and #TimesUp”, and aims to find “moments of joy in a world that has increasingly dark twists and turns”. She goes on to say the style is a “new kind of power dressing”. The aesthetic is influenced by the 1800’s, an era of rife sexism, hence Ross suggests the trend is a subversion of the attitudes of the time and “can be read as a reclamation of sorts in times of suppression”. This offers a new hope for feminist fashions existing in a form that doesn’t rely on rejecting femininity as the scapegoat, and suggests a brighter future for women being able to express their own version of femininity.

Trend

Clothing can be used as an expression of identity across social groups; it offers a sense of belonging, as well as an immediate display of character, which ultimately aids us when searching for a community. This is demonstrated across the history of LGBT+ fashion trends, employed to help identification amongst the community. An example of this is the 'handkerchief code' used by gay men to communicate their sexual identity and specific sexual preferences. It was a covert way to make connections without arousing suspicion from a heteronormative society, in which being known as gay could place you in danger. The details of this code were broken down in Bob Damron's *Address Book* (1980), which also included lists of gay bars and became a well known guide for gay men to engage socially and sexually as safely as possible (The Saint Foundation, 2019). A more recent example of this is a similar application of colour, but within the lesbian community. 'Femme-flagging', which involves "painting one or two nails a different colour to signify interest in sexual activities" began in the early 2010's (Feeld, 2023). There are many iterations of this technique that are constantly being developed and reimaged.

Roland Barthes' *The Fashion System* (1967) breaks fashion down into three components; a "vestimentary code" - the physical garment, a "rhetorical code" - a written description of the garment, and a "semantic code" - what the garment symbolises (McNeil, 2015). To explain this further McNeil states that "when the vestimentary code is represented by the rhetorical code, Fashion becomes less about the garment and transforms into an abstract symbol of the world". When applied to the aforementioned trend of the handkerchief code, the garment alone

would not hold much significance, however it is through the use of written descriptions in books such as Damron's *Address Book* (1980) alongside verbal dialogue that the semantics of queer culture start to widely emerge. Mathilda Tham (2008) reiterates this notion by writing "although they often coincide, fashion is different from clothing. Fashion operates primarily at a symbolic level; simply put we do not disregard a fashion item because the garment is threadbare but because it no longer communicates what we want it to communicate", therefore new trends arise as old ones lose their meaning.

This use of clothing as symbols needs to be constantly growing due to the fact that the meaning is often appropriated by society as a whole to the extent that the original symbolism becomes so clouded, the garment loses any ability to communicate what was originally intended. This is seen frequently when LGBT+ trends used for forming a community identity are absorbed by mainstream fashion and therefore lose their original meaning. Throughout World War II, women donned masculine clothing due to its practical nature for working in the factories. Post World War II, these fashions mostly reverted as men and women resumed their original gendered roles, however the masculine clothing paired with shorter hair stuck with the Lesbian community, and would frequently appear in underground gay bars of the era (see Figure 5), however as the decades progressed, this fashion bled out into wider society, meaning new identifiers had to be created (Sarah-Jane, 2019).



Figure 5.

Appropriation of LGBT+ symbolism is seen annually alongside Pride Month; many shops participate by releasing rainbow themed merchandise, which would not be an issue if it were executed with integrity. Instead these stores are profiting from their sales without supporting the community. The rainbow flag was designed by Gilbert Baker in 1978- each of the original eight colours had its own specific meaning, however, since then, the most recognisable version has a reduced number of stripes (Medhurst, 2021). This flag is often used as a form of a chauvinistic alliance from commercial brands. The use of the rainbow flag on fast fashion t-shirts acts as a reduction of the complex history the flag represents and is applied with no sensitivity. Eleanor Medhurst states that the flag “represents community, battles fought, lives lost and loves gained. It represents identification” (2021). Medhurst goes on to cite Melissa Tyler and Sheena Vachhani (2021) who explain that Rainbow-washing is when a brands “commitment to equality becomes conditional, dependent upon the contribution of something of value to the organisation, or the purchasing of a product. [...] The scenario becomes less a concern with what Primark can do for the LGBTQ

community, and more a case of what its rainbow colours can do for the brand". However it is possible for the flag to be used in appropriately, an example being Apple's rainbow coloured Apple Watch, of which a portion of profits will be donated to programmes run by "ILGA, The Trevor Project, and youth charity, GLSEN" (Hardcastle, 2021). The key element is that when using LGBT+ symbols within fashion and design, it must not be done with an erasure of the identities it was created to represent, who instead should take centre stage and lead the way within the design process, and be given due credit.

Conclusion

Across my three words, there is a common theme of identity, and how design can mirror internal character with the external objects and spaces. A summation of what this could lead me to explore would be: How can design effectively be used to communicate a person's identity, in a way that contributes to a positive self-affirming, self-exploratory journey with the end goal being personal joy?

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