

Study suggests color affects ethical judgments of brands

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This graphic shows various colors that were studied for how they may be

perceived by consumers when companies choose a color as part of their brand identities. Credit: Courtesy of Aparna Sundar

University of Oregon and University of Cincinnati researchers have found that everyday shoppers make assumptions about brands that use green colors. The findings, published in the *Journal of Business Ethics*, hold ethical implications for environmentally friendly branding.

Through a series of studies, lead researcher Aparna Sundar, a professor of marketing in the UO's Lundquist College of Business, and co-author James Kellaris of UC's marketing department uncovered evidence that color shapes opinion about eco-friendliness.

"What we're finding is that color biases the way consumers make ethical judgements," said Sundar, whose research examines the role "Of course green is one of those colors, but blue is also one of those colors that consumers associate with eco-friendliness."

In one study, the pair worked to pinpoint colors that were highly associated with environmentalism. Shoppers were presented with a fictitious [logo](#) that was colored using a color associated with a known brand. Armed with only an unfamiliar logo, the study found that shoppers consider [retailers](#) using Walmart's blue or Sam's green in their logos to be more eco-friendly than retailers using Trader Joe's red.

"Interestingly, blue is 'greener' than green in terms of conveying an impression of eco-friendliness, despite the frequent use of the word green to convey that idea," Kellaris said.

Once researchers established a set of eco-friendly colors, they also identified colors perceived to be environmentally unfriendly, such as

Target's red. Sundar and Kellaris then developed additional studies to test whether the [colors](#) impacted perceptions of the retailer's environmental friendliness.

Respondents were asked to share whether a fictitious retailer, DAVY Grocery Store, acted ethically in various morally ambiguous scenarios, such as when spraying water on produce. Subjects only saw the logo for DAVY, which was presented in either an eco-friendly color or an unfriendly color. The results show that exposure to a more eco-friendly color in a retailer's logo influenced consumer judgments, and ethically ambiguous business practices seemed more ethical.

In addition to observed biases in situations of ambiguous ethical practices, follow-up studies within this work found that consumers tended to be more critical of a retailer with an eco-friendly-colored logo when faced with a practice that was definitely ethical or definitely unethical.

While individual differences still play a role in this observed effect of color, Sundar's research suggests that color used in a logo has far-reaching consequences on consumers' perceptions of retailers.

More information: Aparna Sundar et al. How Logo Colors Influence Shoppers' Judgments of Retailer Ethicality: The Mediating Role of Perceived Eco-Friendliness, *Journal of Business Ethics* (2015). [DOI: 10.1007/s10551-015-2918-4](#)

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