

# Chromatic Identity in Global and Local Markets: Analysis of Colours in Branding

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Colour, in its use as identity, is symbolically codified. However, other non-chromatic factors influence the way colour is interpreted in different social environments. The formulation of a chromatic identity includes considerations of identity and differentiation, as well as tradition and innovation. The expansion of companies and institutions in the global market often involves the transposition of their chromatic signs. Local connotations may resignify or neutralise the values attributed to branding and identities. Colour is a central feature of the globalisation of brands, so it is interesting to study chromatic identity as an aspect of visual semiotics, because, as a sign, colour seems to be more 'transparent' in its meaning than written texts or even certain iconographies.

## Introduction

When the company United Airlines started its escorting service for passengers in Tokyo, its employees could be identified by white carnations. However, the company soon changed that colour to red, because executives realised that white was inconvenient. In Japan, white flowers are a reminder of mourning and death, completely negative associations in the image of an airline (leaving aside the fact that this happened before 11 September 2001).

This anecdote illustrates how colour works as a true code in the context of an institutional image. The existence of a chromatic code presupposes an intention in its aspects of production, and the possibility of it being recognised by readers or users, i.e. it shows some degree of standardisation. The use of colour for identity purposes is symbolically codified but, in turn, is also influenced and interpenetrated by other codifications that interfere with its interpretation. The formulation of a chromatic identity takes into account the coherence in relation to its competence in a system that assures identity and differentiation, traditional values and innovation. The expansion of companies and institutions in the global market has resulted in the transposition of their chromatic signs. Local connotations may resignify or neutralise the values attributed to the brands and identities that the companies intend to communicate. While this phenomenon is a consequence of the global communication, it is interesting to study its chromatic aspects because, as a sign, colour seems to be more 'transparent'<sup>1</sup> in its meaning than written texts or even certain iconographies.

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<sup>1</sup> A sign is said to be 'transparent' when we pay direct attention to its meaning, while the sign itself, as a medium to the meaning, passes unnoticed. It is the ordinary function of words of language. What is important in this context is the meaning of the word, more than the sound of its verbal expression or the graphic form of its written expression. This is the reason why translation is possible. The same meaning can be embodied into different forms of expression in different languages. The forms of expression become 'transparent' and allow us to directly 'see' the meaning conveyed. In Bertrand Russell's words, 'the ordinary use of words is as a means of getting through to things' [1].

Throughout this article we will see that corporate identity is a product of the 20th century, related to the globalisation of commerce, that colour is a relevant aspect of this identity, but that in this genre (branding) colour can also be interpreted in terms of local contexts, and there are cases in which local colours (sometimes related to national or sports identities but also to local culture or idiosyncrasy) are more powerful and successfully resist the direct transposition or imposition of global corporate colours.

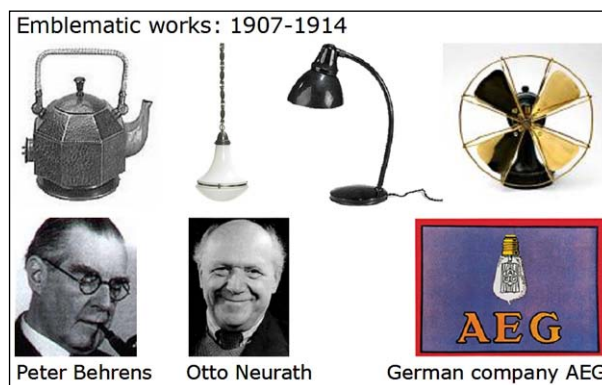
### Designed Identity: At the Service of the Global Market

The very concept of corporate identity is a product of market. At the beginning of the 20th century, and in the framework of the so-called second industrial revolution, production and design appear interwoven, inaugurating a new concept of serial production that adds a symbolic value to objects. This tradition is inaugurated with emblematic works such as those produced between 1907 and 1914 by Peter Behrens (a German architect and graphic artist) and Otto Neurath (an Austrian sociologist) for the German company AEG (Figure 1).

However, only some decades afterwards, with the creation of the Ulm School of Design (Hochschule für Gestaltung), the application of the principles of design at the service of a company becomes evident and systematic. One of its precursors, Otl Aicher, to whom the creation of the concept of corporate image is attributed, asserts that when speaking of corporate image we should speak of its representative image, the intended appearance. Everything that exists has a form, a shape and a face. The form is not only image and edge; it is gesture, presence and behaviour. The image is a philosophical and moral phenomenon. Corporate identity is not merely the visible aspect but the complete personality of the company. It should not be understood as an external appearance but as a manifestation of the whole: it represents what the company actually is [2].

Identity is unity, concordance, synthesis of different elements; it should never be mere cosmetics that simply cover the objects or services like make-up. Concerning activities of companies or organisations, this posture would imply that the inner profile of the services of a company, i.e. its know-how, its competence, its attitude, must coincide with the external profile of its services, for example, the configuration of the product, the communication or image of the brand [3].

The communicational study of corporate identity, understood as the representation or play of images of the subjects interacting in the interchanges, demonstrates that there is no univocal image but a set of ideas more or less diverse, coexistent and, nevertheless, 'true' [4]. The identity involves at least four complementary faces: two subjective aspects, what the subjects



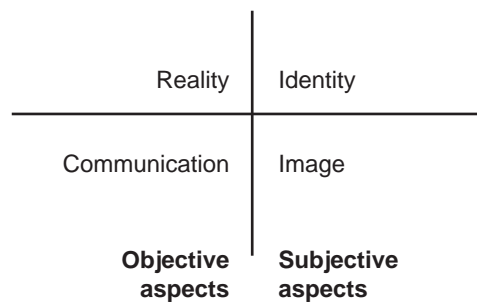
**Figure 1** Peter Behrens, Otto Neurath and the AEG company; pictures from [www.rudesign.ru](http://www.rudesign.ru), [www.arqhys.com](http://www.arqhys.com), [www.elmuseum.se](http://www.elmuseum.se), [www.designboom.com](http://www.designboom.com), [www.moma.org](http://www.moma.org), [www.neurath.at](http://www.neurath.at)

intimately *believe to be* (their Identity), and what *others think they are* (their Image); and two objective aspects, what *they say they are* (the Communication), and the so-called objective indicators (the Reality), what the data, relatively true and not always known, reveal.

The design of an identity for companies and institutions can only operate on the subjective aspects, but it is necessary to establish the correspondences with the ‘phantom’ created, between the interpretants<sup>2</sup> addressed by the symbols and the objective aspects of the company (objective world or reality) (Figure 2).

The identity becomes visible and communicable by means of different objects of design (architectural, graphic, industrial, textile, and multimedia design) that integrate a system of signs. The global character of the identity, pointed out by the designer Joan Costa [6], and its interdisciplinary nature, emphasised by Aicher [2], are two dimensions that can never be disengaged from the designer of the institutional image. The identity is a complex system of signs that calls for the sensorial and cognitive domains: it is visible, audible, and communicable. This system of signs was analysed by Joan Costa by means of seven vectors that constitute the means of support of the global identity (Table 1) [7].

The communicational strategies outlined coincide temporally and ideologically with the move towards globalisation of markets. In fact, it can be asserted that both global identity and global market are two faces of the same coin, and that both permanently feed back to each other.



**Figure 2** The four faces of identity

**Table 1** Vectors that support the corporate global identity and interpretation in terms of a semiotic system

| Vectors supporting corporate global identity according to Joan Costa [5] | Interpretation in terms of semiotic system                         |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Name (brand name) or verbal identity                                     | Linguistic symbol                                                  |
| Logo                                                                     | Verbal symbol visualised typographically                           |
| Graphic mark                                                             | Graphic symbol                                                     |
| Chromatic identity                                                       | Colour as a symbol                                                 |
| Cultural identity                                                        | Behavioural indices: behaviours, actions, modes of doing, gestures |
| Corporate architecture                                                   | Spatial signs                                                      |
| Objective indicators of the identity                                     | Economic indices                                                   |

<sup>2</sup> According to Charles Sanders Peirce, the interpretant is the aspect of the sign by which its meaning is established through other signs; it is the explanation of a sign by means of other signs. The interpretant is the third correlate of the triadic conception of the sign: the *representamen* (the sign itself), the *object* (the represented thing) and the *interpretant* (the idea of the object that is conveyed by the representamen) [5].

## Colour: A Global Sign?

Is colour a global sign? One of the factors that render the identity of an institution visible is colour. As a factor of identification of a company and, in turn, as a factor of differentiation from its competitors, colour is widely acknowledged in institutional design. As we have seen, it is one of the vectors of corporate identity.

By mentioning cases such as IBM (the 'Big Blue'), we must agree that, inside the global semiotic system, colour is one of the key elements in the conformation of corporate identity. Its visual impact, pregnancy, memorability, as well as its possibilities of reproduction in different applications and media, are key factors in design (Figure 3). Our perception of colour is faster than perception of a symbol; inasmuch as it works as a 'signal'<sup>3</sup> and not as 'information', the corporate colour becomes a language [7].

Colour has a high influence on institutional communication because it is perceived more quickly than other institutional symbols such as iconographies or verbal texts. It has been proved that colour requires less time of 'reading' than a logo [8]. When shape and colour are adequately associated, colour (the more primary element) facilitates the memorability of shape. Chromatic logos are more easily remembered than achromatic ones. In this way, colour works as a factor for remembering the brand, for instance, Kodak yellow, Nestlé red, Intel blue, Coca-Cola red, etc. (Figure 4).

But in addition to the perceptual aspects and the production and reproduction matters, the right choice of an institutional colour is based on the values attributed by the addressees.

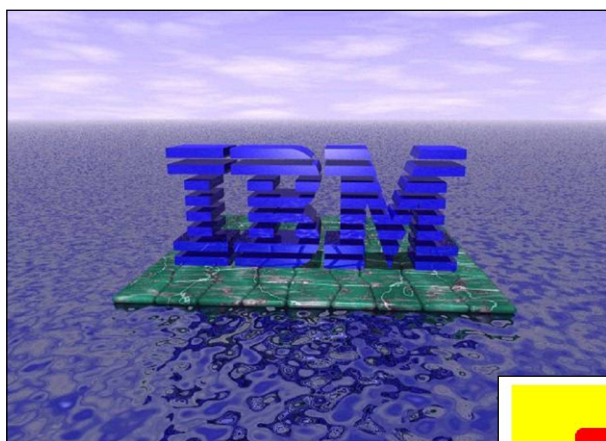


Figure 3 (left) The Big Blue



Figure 4 (right) Chromatic logos help in remembering a brand

<sup>3</sup>A symbol is a sign that has an arbitrary relationship with the represented object; it works by means of a codification. The knowledge of the code is required to be able to grasp the meaning, and the decodification implies a certain timescale of cognitive processing. In contrast, a signal is a class of indexical sign, which has a physical relationship with the represented object. A signal points directly to its object; thus, there is a physical co-presence of signal and signaled object and the connection between both is immediate.

Positive or negative associations are metonymically<sup>4</sup> transferred from signs to objects, whether they are products or services.

Shigenobu Kobayashi has developed a colour image scale that is useful as a guide for design and marketing purposes [9]. While his research was conducted in Japan, these associations of colours to image words can be safely used all over the world because they rely in some universal semantic axes, such as cool/warm and soft/hard, and one has only to pay careful attention to their application in particular contexts. Usually, Kobayashi's associations are in line with the use of colour as a generic code for institutions, products, or objects in general.

The colour of an institution is never apart from the more or less conscious associations that a community historically endorses to that colour by tradition. For example, the colour of the packaging of a product may connote cheapness or expensiveness. In the global economy it is necessary to pay attention to the values culturally attributed to colours by different people, because they can present local variations that downgrade the idea of a brand and are associated with negative connotations. Colour works as a sign that transmits symbolic values. For instance, the choice made by IBM is appropriate for the universe of technology and the vanguard: the future is blue (Figure 5).



Figure 5 Blue as a connotation of future and technology

## Identity in Metamorphosis: An Imperial Rainbow?

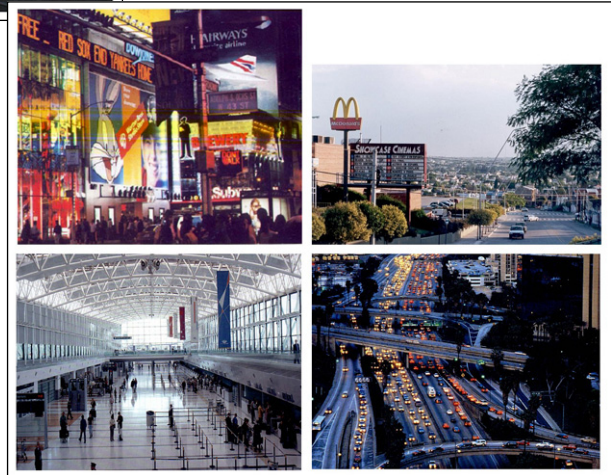
The local identity of a population, of a nation, is a constant whose axis is the spatial variable. The city is conceived as a spatial unit. The urban identity is displayed in a space that promotes difference, with its history, its people, its economic and symbolic heritage. This urban space reproduces a sensory and affective world identified by smells, sounds, colours, which are basically referred to a territoriality (Figure 6).

Globalisation, instead, proposes a de-territorialised identity. In this new paradigm of infinite spaces, time is the measure, and movement or dynamism is, paradoxically, the only constant (Figure 7). Marshall McLuhan's *global village* was an infinite space without frontiers or boundaries. The Internet recreates this paradigm: virtualisation, dematerialisation of space, and the illusion of belonging to a global fraternity. The dissolution of barriers (communicational, economic, cultural and ideological ones), whose emblem could be incarnated in the fall of the Berlin Wall, seems to be a sign of the age. In parallel, the creation

<sup>4</sup> A metonymy is an association based on a physical contiguity or a causal relation. It is an indexical association, where often a part of something is used to represent the whole thing.



**Figure 6 (left)** Examples of local identity in urban spaces: architecture, scale, historical colours; the locations shown are Venice, Italy; Córdoba, Argentina (photograph by María I Girelli); a town in Brazil (photograph by João Carlos de Oliveira Cesar); a town in Slovenia (photograph by Leo Oberascher)



**Figure 7 (right)** De-territorialised identity: commercial centres, airports, highways, which could belong to almost any place in the world; photographs taken from María Inés Girelli, Alba Di Marco and Luis Curubetto's presentations, included in proceedings of ArgenColour 2004 (CD-ROM)

of supranational entities with diverse aims was fostered, such as the European Union, the Mercosur in South America, the Free Trade Area of the Americas, ALCA or FTAA, the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa, COMESA, and many others (Figure 8).

With all these warnings it becomes evident that management, institutional or corporate identity does not always mean the same thing. Given that one of the essential conditions for identity is unity in differentiation, the very concept of *global identity* becomes dubious. In the first place, its characteristics require the acknowledgment and identification on the part of the public – not just a massive public, as before, but a global public – and, in addition, it could not anchor its communication in rigid schemes that rapidly become obsolete but, instead, it must undergo a unity in perpetual movement.



**Figure 8** Supranational entities in the age of globalisation

Globalisation has not produced the utopia that McLuhan envisioned. Nobody can deny that today the world is not a village but a gigantic market without barriers and with deep asymmetries between producers and consumers, between those who have access to consumption and those who are directly excluded from it. And communication in a globally interconnected community has created necessities instead of satisfying them.

In this scenario, as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri point out, the sovereignty has acquired a new shape, composed of a series of national and supranational organisms joined by the logic of domination [10]. This new form of sovereignty responds to the concept of 'empire'. Although this word immediately recalls the concept of 'imperialism', these authors differentiate them. National sovereignty was a condition of the imperialism, whose boundaries guaranteed the purity of the nation's own identity and, at the same time, excluded what was different.

Imperialism was actually an extension of the sovereignty of European nation states beyond their own boundaries. Eventually, almost all territories in the world could be divided in pieces of land, and the entire map of the world would appear encoded with the European colours: red for the British territories, blue for the French ones, green for the Portuguese ones, yellow for the Spanish ones, etc. [10].

Today, the empire does not establish a centre of power, but it could be argued that the United States occupies a place of privilege in it, but is constituted in a decentralised and de-territorialised apparatus that includes the whole planet with open boundaries in permanent expansion. Within the empire there are no pure identities, but hybrid ones. This is a world governed by new ways of differentiation and homogenisation. National colours, distinctive of the imperialist map of the world, have been fused and blended together in a global imperial rainbow [10].

## Chromatic Identity

How were some companies able to establish a universal chromatic code? Amongst other factors, leadership in their markets, diffusion and permanence are decisive. For instance, the election of red for Coca-Cola, when no equivalent beverage was present in the market, created



**Figure 9** The chromatic code established by Coca-Cola and reproduced by all brands of cola beverages

a generic code for all cola beverages. Even though what is remembered is 'Coca-Cola', the use of red in the competitive brands allows for the identification of the kind of beverage, and for certain mimicry which would associate the competitor with the prestige of the leader brand (Figure 9). Red conveys 'calories', and in this sense may be appropriate for this kind of energising beverages with sugar and caffeine. However, the association seems to be more of a symbolic kind.

In addition, red is the preferred colour for mass-market products, because it is regarded as a 'declassifier', i.e. a colour that does not contain markers of class. Another similar phenomenon is the case of McDonald's.

In general, once a generic chromatic code has been installed the different brands tend

to reproduce it, for instance, normal cigarettes (reddish, brownish, blackish) versus light cigarettes (bluish) and menthol cigarettes (greenish) (Figure 10). This kind of metonymic-indexical association is repeated in liquids for cleaning, mineral water (cold colours plus white), coffee or tea (warm colours plus black). The green hue, selected as an index of naturalness, has become a symbol of 'ecological'.

However, these connotations only reach certain regularity in their interpretations within the framework of the class of product or service alluded to. For instance, green can be selected for a bank, a health service or a university because it is perceived as a 'serious' or institutional colour (such as purple and blue), which metaphorically and symbolically transmits 'security' and 'reliability' and aims to generate the feeling of trustworthiness on the part of the public.

To design a chromatic identity, then, more than 'creating' the colour, seems to be a matter of a delicate play of insertion in a complex grammar of codes (generic, stylistic, cultural codes) which, in spite of not being a determinant of the selection of colour, certainly imposes limits to this selection. There are senses that must be 'silenced', sealed off, making then invisible; then, there are inappropriate or unacceptable colours. For instance, pink is not acceptable for male products, while it is a preferred colour in brands of products for girls, like Barbie (Figure 11).



Figure 10 Codification of colours for cigarettes: normal, light, menthol



Figure 11 Pink in products for girls

However, when a brand succeeds in breaking those stereotypes, it may impose its chromatic identity as a powerful symbol. For instance, the lilac colour of Milka chocolates is a transgression with regard to the traditional iconic<sup>5</sup> associations of the product with brown, the indexical-metonymic associations (energy, calories = warm colours), or the symbolic values (sumptuousness, premium = gold). In this way, the lilac colour creates a plus (softness), reinventing and updating a well established product such as chocolate (Figure 12).

From what has been said, we can conclude that very few brands have succeeded in fixing their chromatic identities to the public. Only the pioneers and leader brands are memorable and have established true codes that regulate the use of colour.

<sup>5</sup> An icon is a sign that is related to the represented object on the basis of a certain similarity or some common feature, which may be a similarity of shape, colour, etc.





Figure 12 Milka's transgression of the generic colours for chocolate

### Chromatic Identity: A Factor of Resistance?

The multi-faceted character of the chromatic sign is based upon its great sensibility to the context in which it is experienced and on the fact that every colour simultaneously participates in different subcodes. When one of these subcodes competes in significance with another, the user decides the sense by paying attention to the criteria of relevance (in that context). This would explain how some chromatic codes that are positively interpreted in the majority of contexts could be rejected in certain local contexts.

The conscious rejection that global-phobic people could make by not consuming certain brands is an isolated gesture; its action is insignificant in comparison with the organised project of creating a global market. However, there are zones, not of the order of what is rational but of the order of what is emotional, and for this reason more resilient, that still operate as a factor of continuity and resistance: the patriotic colours (national identity), and, associated with them, the sports identity (for instance, the colours of the national football team) and the identity of political parties.

This hypothesis would explain anomalous cases in which the local market fights against the multinational brands and even succeeds in defeating them. One of the few countries in Latin America in which Coca-Cola is not the best-selling sparkling beverage is Peru. Inca Kola, with 'a national flavor', is the leader. Its success is based on the exaltation of the local and autochthonous values that it represents (Figure 13).

In Argentina, a country with no pedigree as a producer of beer, a brand leader, Quilmes, has been established whose success relies on the use of the national colours. In addition, light blue and white are colours very seldom used for beers, and for this reason they become transgressors of the generic chromatic code, and 'different', as compared with colours used for other brands of beer. Quilmes could not compete successfully



Figure 13 Inca Kola from Peru, using blue and yellow



**Figure 14** Quilmes beer from Argentina (light blue) compared with other brands of beer (red, yellow): transgression of the generic chromatic code

with the brand leaders from common or traditional positions, but it is effective by evoking values based on local idiosyncrasies (Figure 14). These kinds of associations are not unknown by the creators of a global image, for instance, they know that it would be impossible to introduce a brand with the colours of the US flag in adverse contexts.

Colours, and specially colour combinations, are one of the elements that are characteristic of cultural diversity, which in turn is one of the most important treasures of humankind (as important as biological diversity is to the Earth). While the colours that the global tendencies try to impose work towards cultural homogenisation instead of differentiation, the colours of the local cultures, traditions and idiosyncrasy could be taken into account with stronger emphasis to help preserve this cultural diversity. The local identity provides the colours from which small but fruitful redoubts of local resistance can be built.

## The Strategy of the Chameleon

### The Appropriation of Local Chromatic Features by International Branding

An interesting case, where an identity was created by paying attention to the state–national axis versus the private–foreign one, was the process of privatisation of national companies (state companies) in the 1990s in Argentina. The old state company ENTel lacked a chromatic identity. Now, following privatisation, something had changed, and it was necessary to show that change in the design, but some aspects were best left hidden. The two telecommunications companies that divided the fixed-line telephone services business, the French-based Telecom and the Spanish Telefónica, selected different ways. It is necessary to make clear that the companies required a differentiation in the market, though there was no competition between them because each one was assigned a different part of the country, with ‘captive’ customers whom they do not need to attract. Telecom aimed at establishing a national identity, its logo was an Argentine flag-telephone. In reality, this was not in continuity with what had gone on in the past, but an emphasis on the quality of being multinational, oriented to this specific market. On the other hand, Telefónica decided to concentrate on the concept of modernisation and universality, an idea of positive change (Figure 15).

Subsequently Telecom dissociated its identity from the icon of the telephone to correlate it with the new services offered. The



**Figure 15** Privatisation of the telecommunication company in Argentina: the old state company, ENTel, and the first logos of the private companies Telecom and Telefónica

new graphic symbol can be seen as a metaphor<sup>6</sup> of fibre optics encircling the globe: with the promise for the future of technology as an inevitable destiny. The chromatic continuity



**Figure 16** Private telephone companies in Argentina: Telecom and Telefónica in their secondary development of corporate identity

lays down a bridge between past and future, masking the global aspects. For its part, Telefónica also maintained its own profile by introducing its global corporate image that connotes modernity, innovation and technology. All these attributes are desirable and are expected from a company that offers this kind of service, a reason why both companies felt the need to represent empowerment by using positive images (Figure 16).

During the same period the Argentinean state oil company YPF was privatised. Its image was not depreciated in the mind of the public, in the same way that the image of the old ENTel telephone was. Instead, YPF was regarded as an emblem of sovereignty and national richness. Its position was excellent, even when, before being privatised, the government said that it overloaded its budget in order to be able to afford its inefficient administration. Its identity was based upon the national colours. The privatised company kept the name and also the chromatic spirit. The modifications were almost imperceptible, and seemed just a modernisation of the same company. Yellow was incorporated, which may represent the sun that appears in the Argentina military flag. The design emphasised continuity and downplayed the change in ownership.

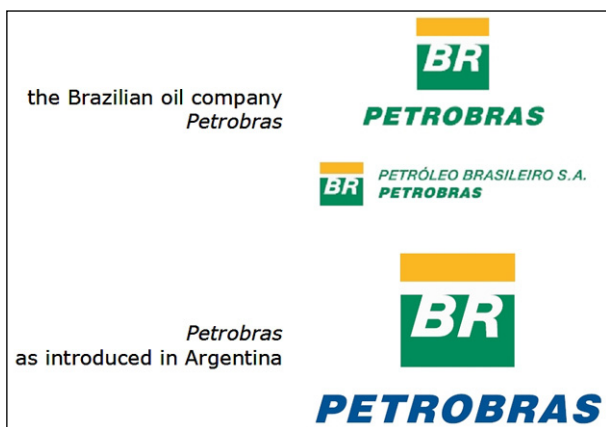
In the last stage of this story, the company merged the Spanish Repsol, integrating both names in the same logo. However, the modern well equipped gas stations were not modified. The commercial strategy was not to make the change evident. The value of the local–national features differentiates Repsol-YPF from its competitors, Esso and Shell (red and yellow), which historically represented the multinational companies (Figure 17).

When the Brazilian company Petrobras, with its green and yellow colours making a clear reference to the flag of Brazil, was introduced in the Argentine context, its owners decided to make a small chromatic change. The inclusion of blue had the intention of making the identity closer to the company that holds the



**Figure 17** Changes in logo after the privatisation of the YPF oil company in Argentina

<sup>6</sup> A metaphor is produced when a new sign substitutes an old sign with which it establishes an implicit comparison based on similarity either of expression or content.



**Figure 18** Launch of the Brazilian Petrobras oil company in Argentina: original logo with yellow and green and chromatic adaptation for Argentina, with the addition of blue

best position in Argentina (YPF) and attenuating its Brazilianness, which is an attribute not at all positive in the mind of some users, mainly because of the historical rivalry between Brazil and Argentina in football (soccer). The strategy is clearly to mimic the strategy of the old national company YPF, still present in the mind of the consumers (Figure 18).

Extreme cases of this strategy are produced in the publicity applied to sports clothes, where the corporate colour are set aside in favour of the

colours of the team. In Figure 19 we see how the original corporate colours of Petrobras have been abandoned and lose their identity in favour of the colours of the Argentine team Racing Club of which it is sponsor.

The sports identity, the political identity, the national identity and patriotic colours seem to be colours engraved on our affective memory in such a positive way that they work as unconscious barriers or ‘chromatic vaccines’ in front of the dominant and hegemonic colours of the global market. In Figure 20 we can see how Pepsi has relinquished its colours and



**Figure 19** Loss of identity colours in a trademark when it is a sponsor of a sports team: Petrobras adapts its colours to the Racing football club of Buenos Aires



**Figure 20** Pepsi colours, and the adaptation to the colours of the Boca Juniors football team of Buenos Aires

adopted the yellow and blue of the Boca Juniors team. In the example of Figure 21 Pirelli has sacrificed its corporate colours (yellow and red) and adopted the sports identity colours when sponsoring the Inter football team of Milan. In Figure 22 the Coca-Cola logo appears embedded into the particular formal and chromatic characteristics of the sign in the Albayzin neighborhood in Granada, Spain.



**Figure 21 (left)** The original colours of Pirelli, and its modification when sponsoring the Inter football team of Milan



**Figure 22 (right)** Coca-Cola in Granada, Spain

## Conclusion: Strategies in Colour Branding

Summing up, the cases analysed provide evidence of the existence of four categories or strategies in the use of colour in branding:

1. Colour is often used as a generic code, helping the identification of different kinds of products (e.g. red for cola beverages, pink in products for girls, brown for chocolates, etc.).
2. The existence of these generic codes opens the possibility of their transgression to promote the differentiation of brands (e.g. Milka chocolates).
3. These transgressions may be also based upon chromatic features associated with local culture (e.g. Quilmes beer in Argentina and Inca Kola in Peru).
4. Finally, we can verify the marketing-oriented appropriation of these local chromatic identities put at the service of global branding (e.g. Pepsi and Pirelli in the context of soccer, Telecom in Argentina, YPF-Repsol in Argentina, Petrobras in Argentina, Coca-Cola in Granada).

This last strategy shows how multinational companies recognise cultural chromatic diversity and make an appropriation of the local features to empower their brands in certain contexts by means of an affective approach to the consumer.

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