

Optimal Distinctiveness Applied to Trending Smartphone Case Colors

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Background: The Wall Street Journal reported that smartphone cases have become a “zeitgeist-y” accessory item that has shifted from being a pragmatic protection to a personal statement (Mistry, 2015). Formerly, smartphone cases only came in select limited colors, but with the increased availability of designer smartphone case selections (Mistry, 2015), consumers may personalize their smartphone cases to exhibit their personal aesthetic. The purpose of this research was to forecast trends for 2017 Spring smartphone case colors and investigate possible social-psychological meanings associated with selected trending smartphone case colors.

Theoretical Approach: Smartphones and their accessories may be viewed as luxury items that can be seen as status symbols. The Trickle Down Theory (Brannon, 2010) describes the downward transfer of material status symbols used by elite groups of a population to individuals from lower socio-economic groups (e.g., the new Louis Vuitton *It* smartphone case) (Bobila, 2016). These elite groups must continually change their use of status markers to differentiate themselves from the individuals who have adopted former elite status symbols (Brannon, 2010). Smartphones and their cases are highly visible and recognizable items that could be viewed as a status symbols to provide individuals with differentiation. For instance, the former rarity of expensive smartphones has become more of a commodity, and therefore, there has been a changing of status symbols towards unique individualized smartphone cases from top designers such as Diane von Furstenberg, Kate Spade, and Fendi (Mistry, 2015).

Moreover, according to the Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (Brewer, 1991), there is an optimal point of maintaining both individual distinctiveness and inclusion within a social group at which the individual assimilates within a group while still maintaining a level of unique identity for distinctiveness. Smartphone and their accessory cases could be an example of items that may provide individuals with this optimal point of distinction in tandem with inclusion within a social group. For instance, former status-symbol smartphones have trickled down for adoption by the masses and provide inclusion into a larger social group of other smartphone users. Meanwhile, smartphones may be transformed using smartphone cases that cover the device to act as a new status marker in distinguishing an individual from other smartphone users.

Both the Optimal Distinctiveness Theory and Trickle Down Theory (Brannon, 2010; Brewer, 1991) share the underlying principle that individuals seek differentiation and imitation within groups (i.e., such as social classes). Therefore, smartphones and their cases could be status symbols that may provide individuals with a level of distinctiveness within their social group. Furthermore, those seeking a higher status level with smartphone cases may differentiate themselves even further from others by using unique smartphone case colors. Since color attracts

consumers (Pegler, 2011), this study focused on observing smartphone case colors that were predominant (i.e., need for inclusion) and scarce (i.e., need for differentiation).

Method: To formulate a 2017 Spring forecast, observational data was collected by a random counting of smartphone case colors from men and women carrying smartphones at a southeastern university in the fall of 2016. Observations were conducted for 2 hours at two campus locations, one hour per location. The resulting sample size was 559 men and women. An observation table with color names (e.g., red, pink, orange, etc.) was created to take counts of different smartphone case colors. Multi-color smartphone cases were counted according to their predominant color (e.g., predominately pink smartphone cases with black detailing were counted in the pink category). Furthermore, variations of a color were counted in their closest color category (e.g., gold and platinum were counted as yellow, robin's egg and navy as blue, etc.).

Results: The data showed that black (30%) and blue (22%) were the most frequently observed smartphone case colors whereas yellow was the least frequently observed (1%). The third most frequently observed smartphone case color observed was white (11%); the fourth was pink (9%). The remainder of the colors observed from most to least frequent were grey (8%), clear (6%), brown (4%), violet (3%), orange (2%), red (2%), green (2%), and yellow (1%).

Outcomes: The results indicate that black and blue were the most frequently observed smartphone case colors, whereas yellow was the least frequently observed color. By applying a combined framework consisting of Trickle Down Theory (Brannon, 2010) and Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (Brewer, 1991) to these results, it was determined that smartphone case status markers in black and blue colors were associated with individuals that may seek inclusion with others in their university community. However, the scarcity of yellow smartphone case colors suggests that individuals with these smartphone case colors may seek distinction from others. It was concluded that the saturation of black and blue smartphone accessory cases will continue to maintain mass acceptance within the market in spring of 2017, while yellow (which includes platinum and gold) smartphone cases may gradually be purchased by innovative early adopters of new technological devices. This study gives insight into how smartphone case colors could be used for an individual's inclusion and exclusion in social groups as well as for consumer behavior preferences.

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