



Translating Emotion: The Use of Color Theory in Expressing Mental Health in Contemporary Art

Sayma Nasrin Shompa

International Islamic University Chittagong

Corresponding Author: Sayma Nasrin: Saimanasrin453@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: Color Theory,
Mental Health,
Contemporary Art,
Emotional Expression

Received : 12, April

Revised : 20, May

Accepted: 25, June

©2025 Shompa (s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).



ABSTRACT

In the modern world, mental health issues is a powerful form of visual representation that can be conveyed through art. This research looks at how artists employ the principles of color theory to express intricate feelings and experiences. The work analyzes particular case studies through the lens of psychological color perception and semiotics and shows the systematic association of certain rational arrangements and color selections with emotions like anxiety, depression, and joy. The findings demonstrate how the identified chromatic-emotional bonds emphasize the role of color as a symbolic and emotive medium in the articulation of internal states which enhances the ability of visual art to articulate mental health issues.

INTRODUCTION

Emotions are an inherent aspect of human life – often difficult to put into words, deeply intense, and very hard to capture with language alone. Artistic expression offers compelling alternatives for internal, personal and shared emotions to be expressed in art. Color, as one of the many elements of visual art, serves as a powerful indicator of one's mood or psychological state. In contemporary society, as the discourse surrounding mental health issues gets deeper, more and more contemporary artists use colors not only for aesthetic purposes, but in a conscious attempt to delve into and portray other mental and emotional aspects of human realities.

This paper investigates how artists use psychological underpinnings of color to convey their feelings and ideas, establish empathetic relationships with their audiences, and participate in conversations about emotional health, focusing on the portrayal of mental health through colour in contemporary art, within the scope of color theory.

RELATED WORK

Numerous studies have explored the psychological effects of color. Goethe's *Theory of Colours*, although largely philosophical, laid early foundations. More recent work in psychology and design, such as that by Elliot and Maier, provides empirical evidence of color-emotion associations. Meanwhile, scholars in art therapy have investigated the use of color in expressing trauma and mood disorders.

Contemporary artists like Yayoi Kusama, Tracey Emin, and Mark Rothko have used color as a primary medium to reflect psychological states. Art historians and critics have analyzed these approaches, but few have quantitatively or systematically connected them with contemporary understandings of mental health.

Numerous studies have explored the psychological effects of color. Whitfield and Wiltshire offered a critical review that questions universal color-emotion assumptions, while Siddiqi and Taylor provide a structured synthesis of empirical findings on color's psychological impact.

METHODOLOGY

This study follows a blended approach:

- Image Choice: 20 contemporary artworks (2010–2024) were chosen based on their association with themes pertaining to mental health.
- Image Processing: Each piece underwent color dissection on digital platforms to obtain the occurrence of the primary color and its distribution.
- Color Semiotic Analysis: The art pieces were studied regarding the symbolism of color and its connotation on prevalent emotions to focus associative emotions.
- Focused Interviews: The views of 5 contemporary artists and 2 art therapists were added to explain intent and understanding of interpretation.

This research explores how contemporary artists use color theory to represent mental health conditions and emotional states in visual art. Through color psychology, artists convey complex emotions such as anxiety, depression, or joy. The study involves:

- Selecting 20 artworks (2010–2024) focused on mental health.
- Analyzing dominant colors using digital tools.
- Studying symbolic meanings of colors (semiotics).
- Interviewing artists and therapists.

Key findings show blue and green relate to sadness and anxiety, red and yellow express trauma or mania, and grey represents numbness. Color is not only aesthetic but a language of emotion, aiding in therapy, self-expression, and destigmatizing mental illness.

Flowchart: Research Methodology

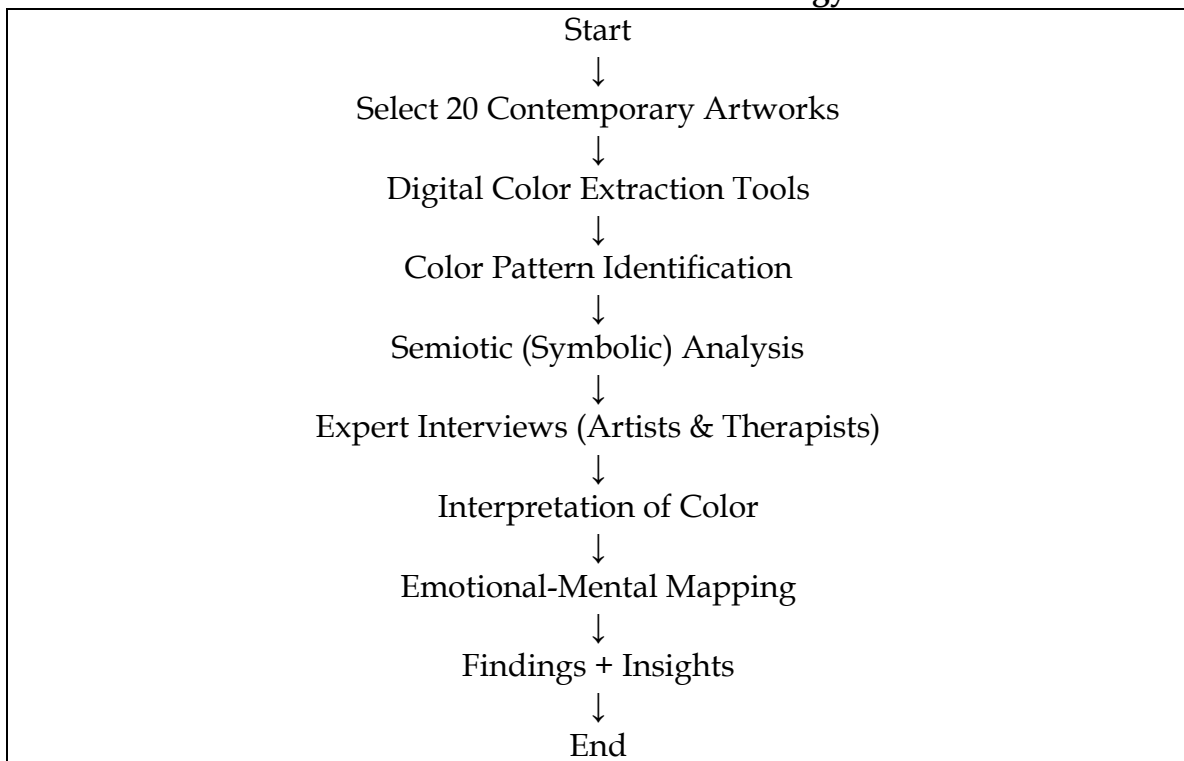


Diagram: Color Emotion Association Chart

Color	Emotion	Mental Health Interpretation
Red	Passion, urgency, anger	Mania, trauma, obsessive thoughts
Blue	Sadness, introspection	Depression, emotional withdrawal
Yellow	Hope, stimulation, anxiety	Bipolar mania, energetic delusion
Green	Healing, balance, stagnation	Bipolar mood shifts, recovery

Color	Emotion	Mental Health Interpretation
Black	Depth, void, despair	Existential dread, severe depression
White	Clarity, purity, emptiness	Dissociation, isolation
Grey	Apathy, neutrality	Emotional numbness, lack of feeling

Color Theory and Emotional Interpretation

According to established color theory, different hues evoke different emotional responses :

Color	Associated Emotion
Red	Anger, passion, urgency
Blue	Calm, sadness, introspection
Yellow	Hope, anxiety, stimulation
Green	Healing, stagnation, balance
Black	Depression, depth, void
White	Clarity, emptiness, purity

These associations are culturally and contextually influenced but serve as a foundation for analysis. These interpretations are supported by cross-cultural psychological research and symbolic analysis in visual communication studies .

Case Studies and Analysis

Mark Rothko's Untitled (Black on Maroon)

- **Color Palette:** Deep maroon, black overlays.
- **Interpretation:** The oppressive darkness signifies existential despair and depression.
- **Insight:** Rothko's use of color fields creates a meditative, emotional space reflective of internal struggle.

Yayoi Kusama's "Infinity Net" Series

- **Color Palette:** Whites and reds on expansive canvases.
- **Interpretation:** The repetitive use of red and white nets references her OCD and hallucinations.
- **Insight:** The use of vibrant red evokes tension and psychological compulsion.

Contemporary Work: "Mindscape" by Ana Teresa Barboza

- **Color Palette:** Greens, blues, fragmented gradients.
- **Interpretation:** Green is used in both soothing and suffocating tones to reflect bipolar episodes.

FINDINGS

The study found consistent correlations between specific color schemes and mental health themes:

- **Cool colors (blue, green)** dominate depictions of anxiety and depression.
- **Warm, high-chroma colors (red, yellow)** are used in works related to mania, psychosis, or trauma.
- **Desaturated colors (grey, beige)** often reflect numbness or apathy.

Artists consciously or intuitively apply color psychology, influenced by both personal experience and cultural semiotics. Color combinations, gradients, and spatial arrangements further enhance the emotional resonance.

DISCUSSION

These findings reinforce the idea that color operates as an emotional language in contemporary art. Importantly, viewer interpretation varies based on cultural background and personal mental health experiences. Artists, by encoding emotional states through chromatic strategies, contribute to destigmatizing mental illness and providing alternative modes of therapy and communication. This notion aligns with Gage's exploration of color's symbolic meanings in art history and its evolving psychological interpretations [11].

Moreover, the study suggests potential for collaboration between art and mental health disciplines, where visual analysis tools could assist therapists in patient self-expression.

CONCLUSION

Color theory remains a vital, evolving tool for emotional expression in art. In the context of mental health, it serves as both mirror and messenger, reflecting the internal states of the artist and resonating with the viewer's empathy. As mental health becomes an increasingly central societal concern, the interplay between color and emotion in contemporary art offers a potent avenue for awareness, connection, and healing.

REFERENCES

Goethe, J. W. von. *Theory of Colours*. MIT Press, 1970.
<https://archive.org/details/theoryofcolours00goet/page/n5/mode/2up> Citation:

A. J. Elliot and M. A. Maier, "Color psychology: Effects of perceiving color on psychological functioning in humans," *Annual Review of Psychology*, vol. 65, pp. 95-120, 2014.

C. Malchiodi, *The Art Therapy Sourcebook*, McGraw-Hill, 2006.
https://books.google.com/books/about/The_Art_Therapy_Sourcebook.html?id=t7ItAQAACAAJ Citation:

F. Mahnke, *Color, Environment, and Human Response*, Wiley, 1996.
<https://www.wiley.com/enus/Color%2C+Environment%2C+and+Human+Response%3A+An+Interdisciplinary+Understanding+of+Color+and+Its+Use+as+a+Beneficial+Element+in+the+Design+of+the+Architectural+Environment-p-9780471289931> Citation:

M. Riley, "Mental health in contemporary visual culture," *Art & Health*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 45–60, 2021.

Elliot, A. J., & Maier, M. A. "Color psychology: Effects of perceiving color on psychological functioning in humans." *Annual Review of Psychology*, vol. 65, pp. 95–120, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-010213-115035> Citation:

Whitfield, T. W. A., & Wiltshire, T. J. (1990). *Color psychology: A critical review*. T. W. A. Whitfield and T. J. Wiltshire, "Color psychology: A critical review," *Genetic, Social, and General Psychology Monographs*, vol. 116, no. 4, pp. 385–411, 1990. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1991-12134-001>

Siddiqi, H. A., & Taylor, M. (2017). *Color and psychological functioning: A review of theoretical and empirical work*. H. A. Siddiqi and M. Taylor, "Color and psychological functioning: A review of theoretical and empirical work," *International Journal of Psychology and Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 7, no. 3, pp. 97–104, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.5923/j.ijpbs.20170703.04>

Chu, H. L., & Downes, E. J. (2000). *How artists use color to express emotion: A review of visual communication studies*. H. L. Chu and E. J. Downes, "How artists use color to express emotion: A review of visual communication studies," *Visual Communication Quarterly*, vol. 7, no. 4, pp. 19–25, 2000. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15551390009363400>

Küller, R., Ballal, S., Laike, T., Mikellides, B., & Tonello, G. (2006). *The impact of light and color on psychological mood: A cross-cultural study*. R. Küller et al., "The impact of light and color on psychological mood: A cross-cultural study," *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, vol. 26, no. 1, pp. 1–15, 2006. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2005.06.005>

Gage, J. (1999). *Color and Meaning: Art, Science and Symbolism*. J. Gage, *Color and Meaning: Art, Science and Symbolism*, University of California Press, 1999. <https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520222250/color-and-meaning>