



Unveiling What's Really in the Eye of the Beholder: Consumers and Color Perception

Color Marketing Group Fall International Conference

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**Decision Analyst
Innovation Services**

The global leader in interactive innovation systems

The Project



Just how do people perceive color in practice, rather than in theory?



- We set out to design a study that would answer:
 - How do consumers perceive the colors used in imagery for the brands they are exposed to every day?
 - How do consumers perceive the relationships between colors and emotions in the context of branding?
- And an additional question came up:
 - Can we prove or disprove any of the common wisdom about the relationships between colors and emotions?

Innovation Panel: Consumers with a high degree of idea-centric creativity.



- Respondents were recruited from our Innovation Panel.
 - We were curious about how people who are creative, but not necessarily visually creative, would respond.
 - These panelists are more articulate and fluent in their responses than most consumers.
 - For our exploratory purposes, it wasn't necessary to use a representative sample.
- More about our Innovation Panel:
 - All panelists scored in the top 4% of the US population in terms of creativity
 - All panelists have received advanced creativity training
 - All panelists' contributions are continuously assessed to ensure consistent performance

Phase 1: The online individual assignment (7 days)



- 82 participants were recruited, not representative of any particular demographic
- The assignment consisted of 10 open-end questions about 5 real-world positioning statements:
 - The Power of Dreams (Honda)
 - Synchronized Commerce (UPS)
 - Everything Your Skin Needs Most To Look Healthy And Beautiful (Olay Complete)
 - The Next Stage (Wells Fargo)
 - The Third Place (Starbucks)
- Participants were asked to:
 - Describe the colors the positioning statements prompted
 - Describe the emotions the positioning statements prompted
- Participants were never told which brands went with which positioning statements.
- Participants were allowed to write as much as they wanted for their responses.
- Participants received a \$15 incentive to encourage participation

Phase 2: The online group discussion (7 days)

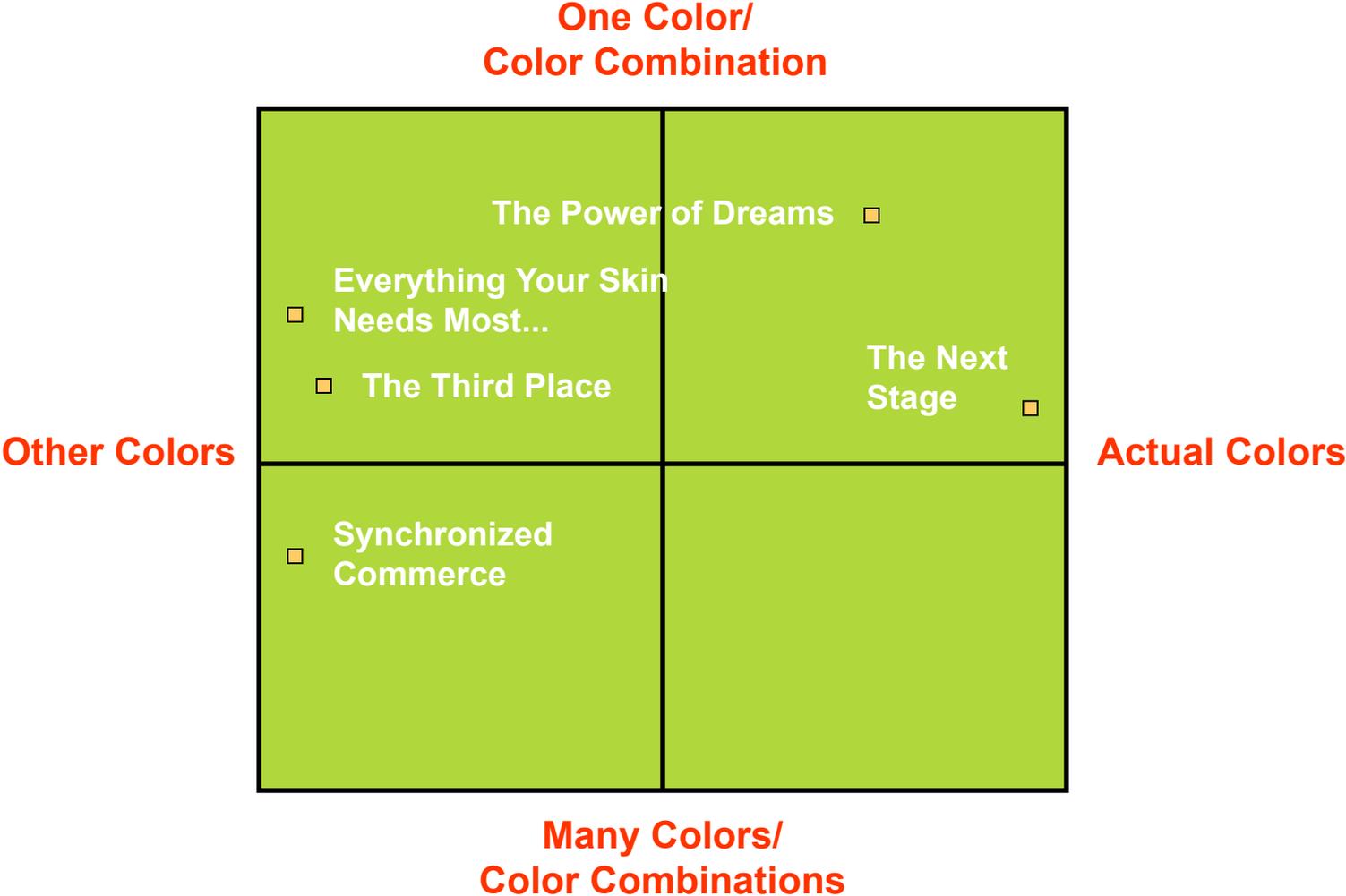


- 25 participants were recruited on the basis of their fluency in Phase 1.
- Discussion was held via online message board software, moderated by Innovation Services team members.
- Participants were asked to respond in greater detail and in group discussion about the colors and emotions prompted by the brand statements.
- Participants were then shown the accompanying imagery and encouraged to react.
- Participants received a \$30 incentive.

The Results



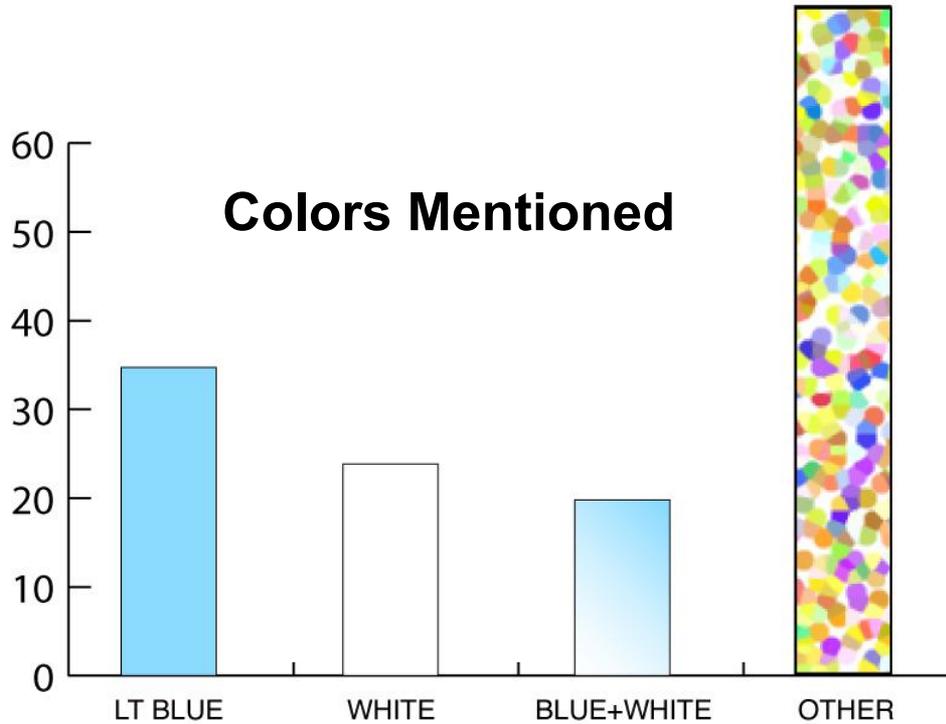
Positioning statements rarely prompted the colors actually used in the brand imagery.



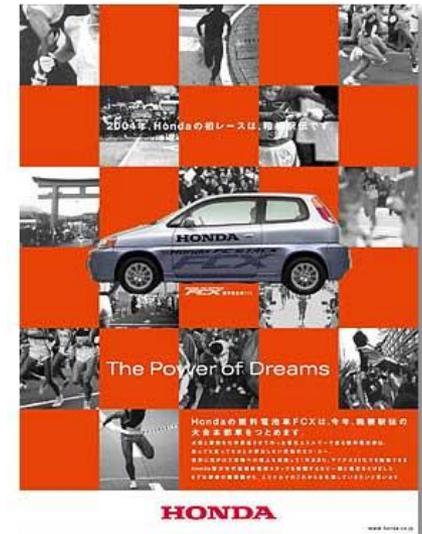
When you hear the statement 'The Power of Dreams,' what colors come to mind?



Number of Mentions



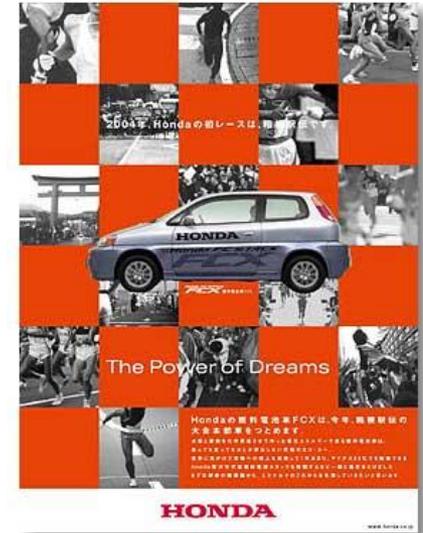
Base = 82 Respondents



The Power of Dreams (Honda): Comments from participant discussion



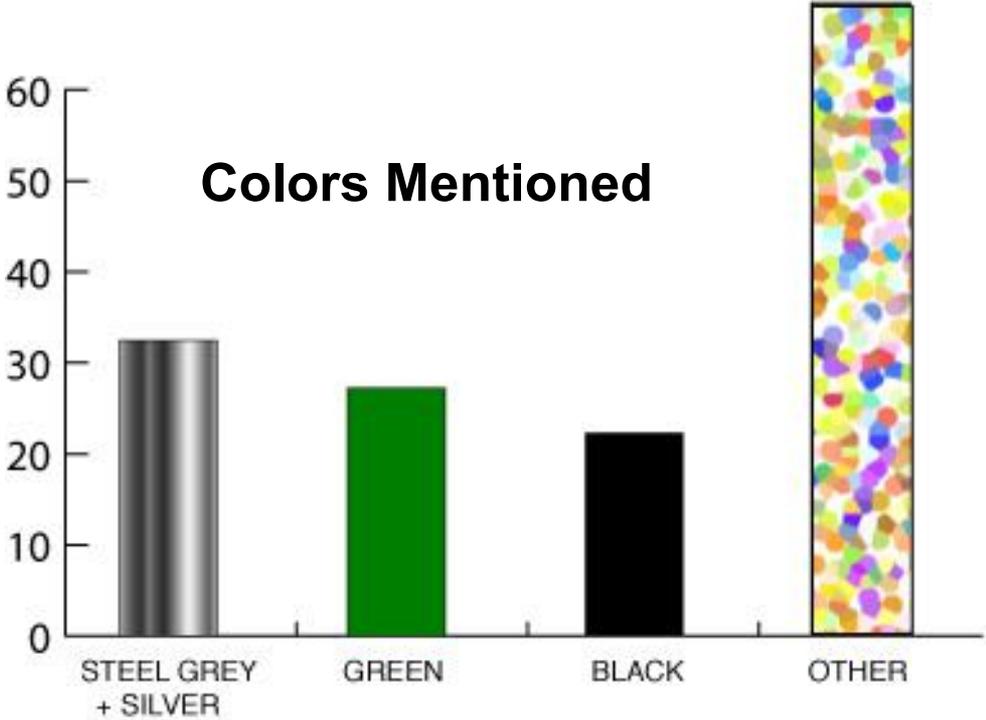
- “Dreams are in Technicolor...vibrant hues of blue, yellow, red, even orange. The shapes are both definite and morphing into other things. Power flows in, almost a tangible visible force.”
- “Blue skies, a few puffy white clouds, and a bright happy yellow sun to evoke the mood ‘yes it’s great to be alive and dream big.’”
- “I agree that strong colors are called for...I think the key here is the relationship between ‘power’ and ‘dreams’ ... to me this means subtle power more than overwhelming power....Strong colors, deep colors, done both in opaques and transparencies would all help imply the ethereal and inspiring power of dreams.”



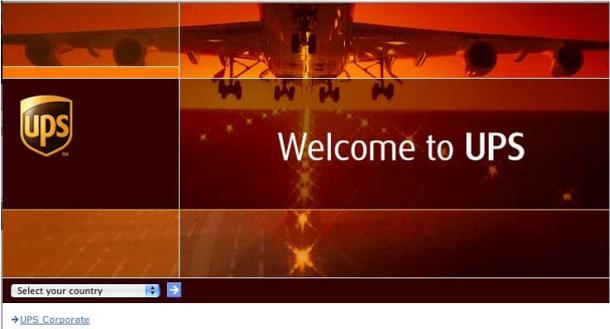
When you hear the statement 'Synchronized Commerce,' what colors come to mind?



Number of Mentions



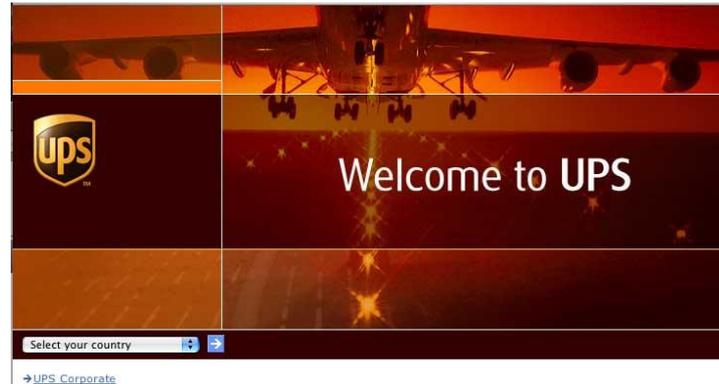
Base = 82 Respondents



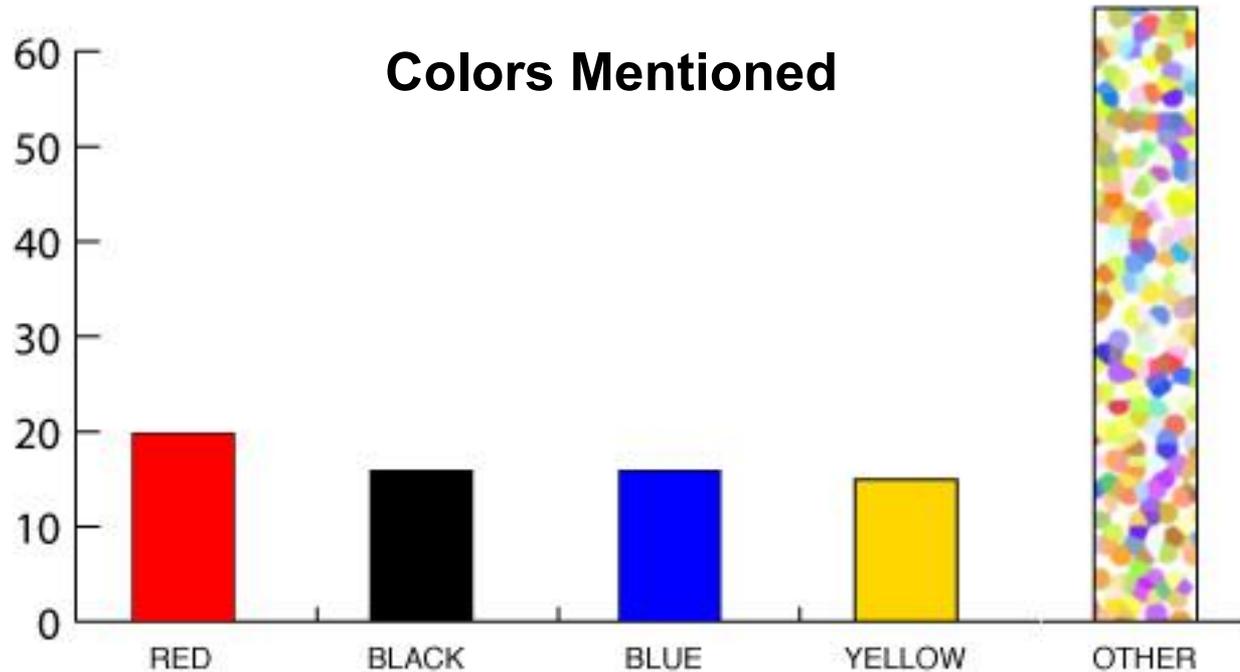
Synchronized Commerce (UPS): Comments from participant discussion



- “The colors I associate with the word ‘commerce’ are strong solid colors like navy blue, black, grey, white. But there always needs to be a contrasting color, preferably bright like red or yellow, to show that it’s not dead...just professional.”
- “Steel, carbon, and white plastic are the colors of serious work. Any other colors tend to trivialize the message.”
- “I would want to avoid dark colors like black, charcoal, dark blue and dark green, which might suggest conspiracy, monopoly and black ops.”



When you hear the statement 'The Next Stage,' what colors come to mind?



Base = 82 Respondents

The Next Stage (Wells Fargo): Comments from participant discussion

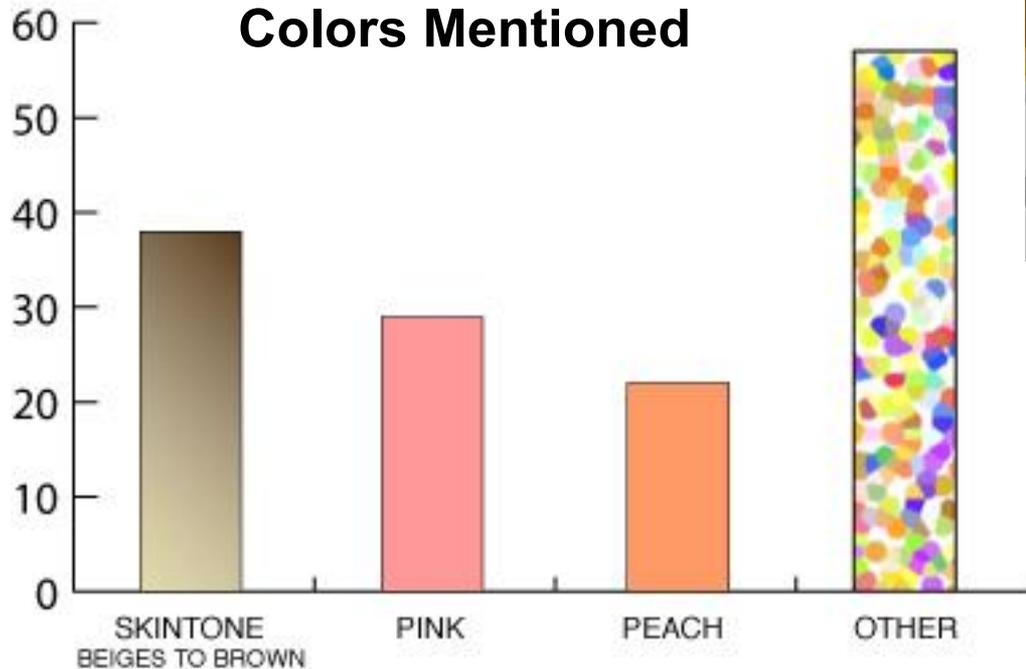


- “Confidence, curiosity, and a desire to better oneself and move oneself into the future...Complementary or contrasting shades of colors are useful here....Any combo will do as long as it is light and dark.”
- “The first thing that comes to mind....is a progression of colors such as white as the first color, followed by the colors of the rainbow (from blue to red), and black as the last color.”
- “White would be especially important because it signals a clean slate, a new beginning....”



Dreaming is the first stage
Wells Fargo. **The Next Stage.**®

When you hear the statement 'Everything Your Skin Needs Most To Look Healthy And Beautiful,' what colors come to mind?



Base = 82 Respondents



Number of Mentions

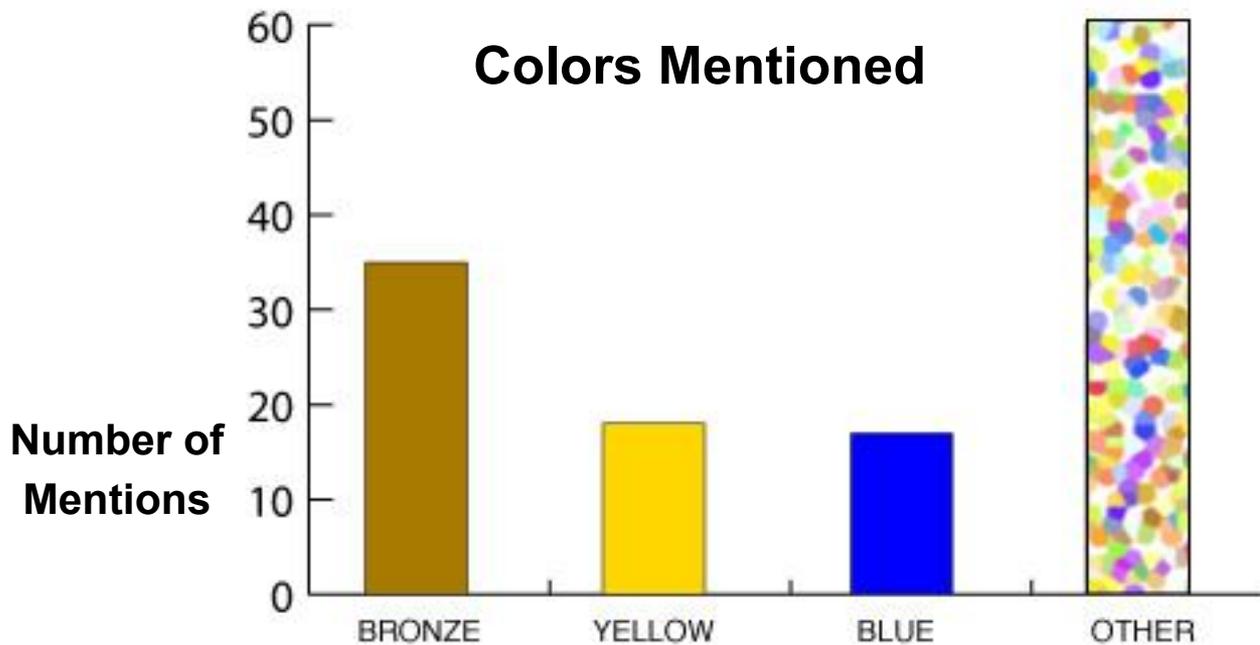
Everything Your Skin Needs Most To Look Healthy And Beautiful (Olay Complete): Comments from participant discussion



- “Any bright color or any color associated with disease should be avoided, [like] yellow...”
- “I would stay away from any intense orange or red as this would give an impression of excessive heat...”
- “When I think of healthy skin, I think of milk and golden honey. Pink roses and soft floral prints, breezes blowing, sheer curtains and pastel blue skies beyond....”
- “The true color of healthy skin would be the color of water. I guess water would be a light blue or even a silver, though I have always thought of water as colorless...”



When you hear the statement 'The Third Place,' what colors come to mind?



Base = 82 Respondents



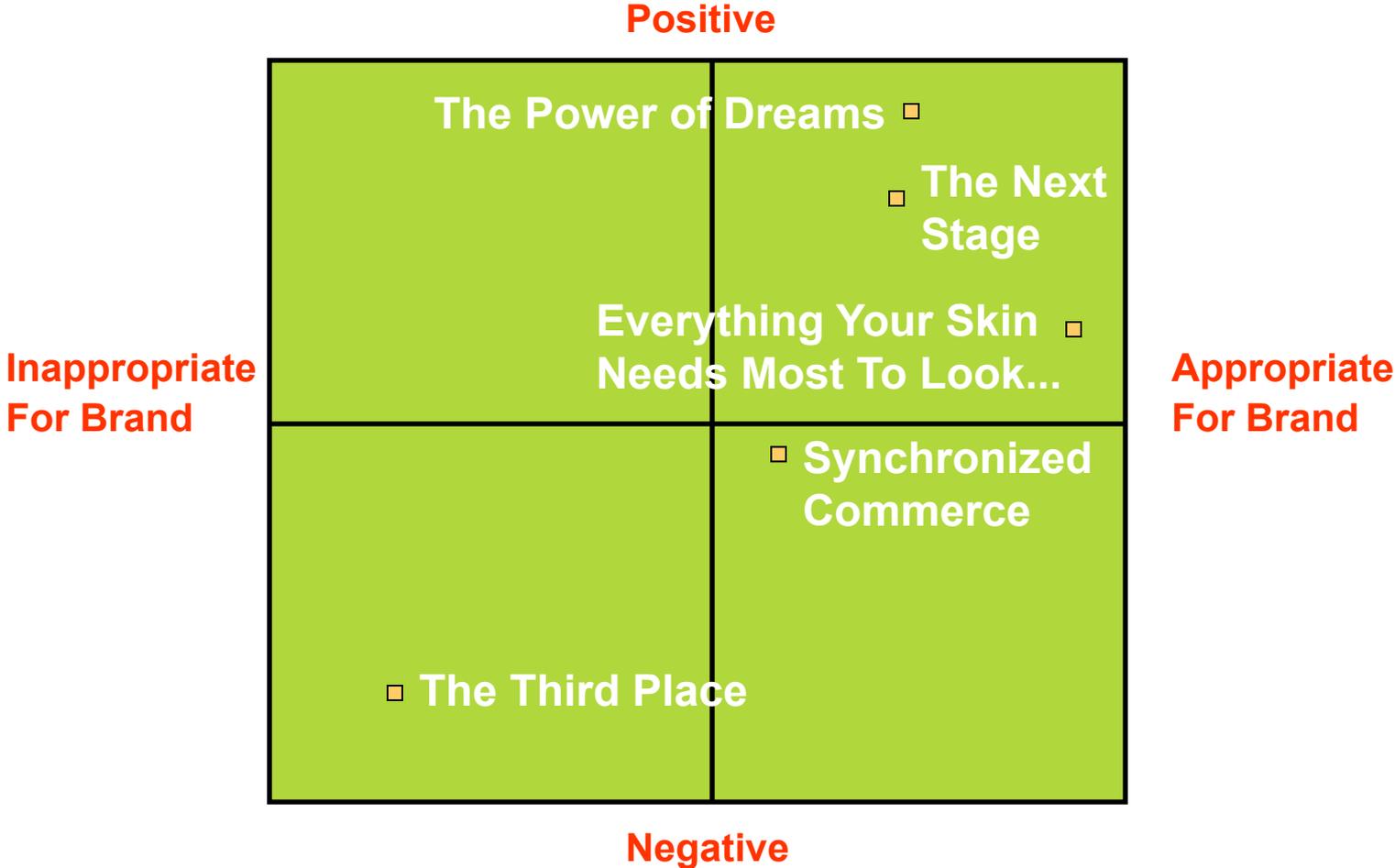
The Third Place (Starbucks): Comments from participant discussion



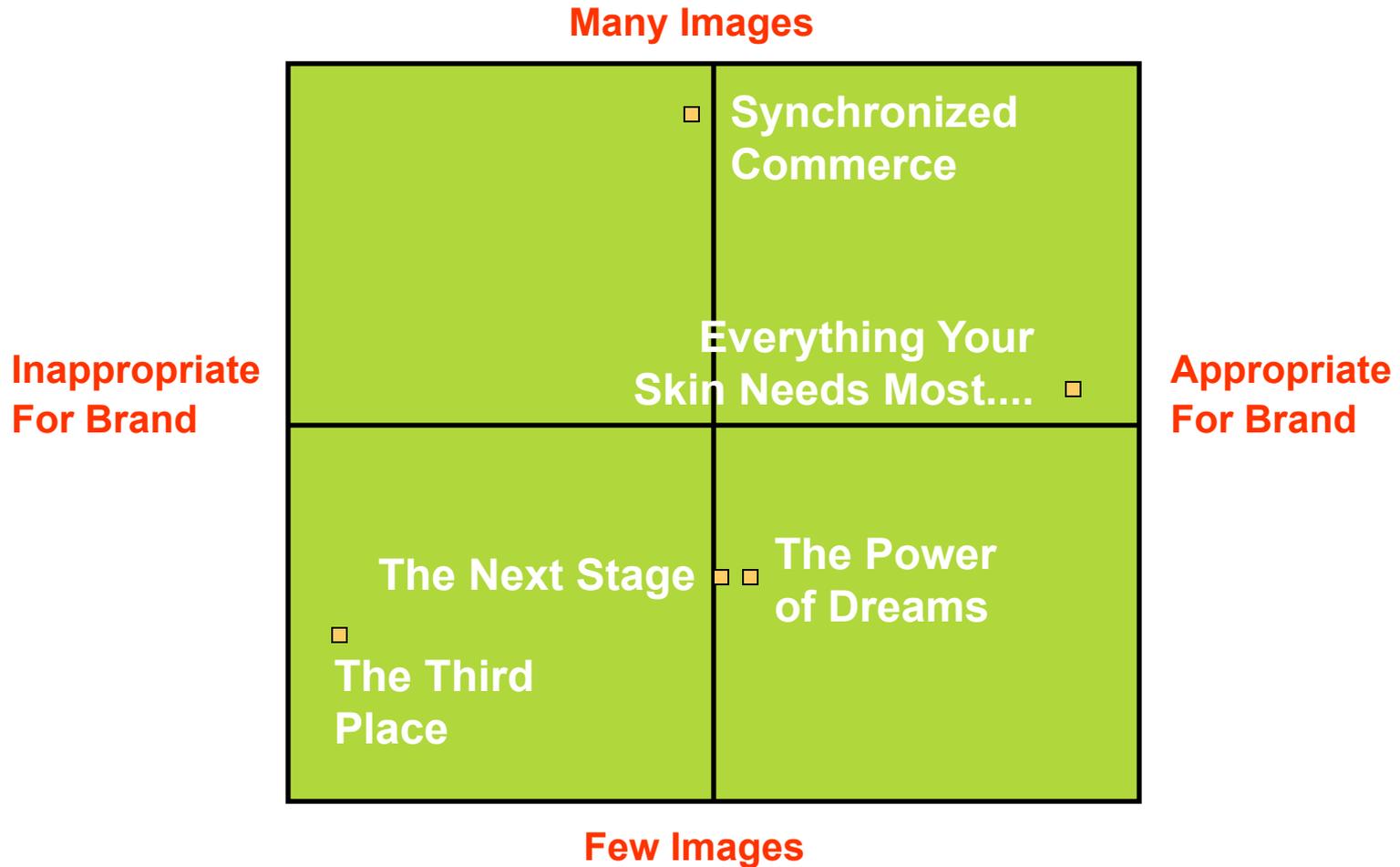
- “I see the color red for anger. Nobody wants to be in third place. Or dark green, for envy.”
- “As long as the company explains the meaning behind the slogan, I think it will work well for their purpose. I do like [the] idea of putting a gold rim around the logo and agree wholeheartedly that it would lend a homey, comforting feel.”
- “I would want people to feel third place is a relaxing place...I think the colors should be soft. Not exactly pastel, more on the cloudy side: blueish, pink, light versions of colors, even browns or beige, etc. No bright colors.”
- “Green with a slight blue tinge and gold. The third place would be beige, fading into the background, camouflage, the color of a shadow of a person who has left the room.”
- “Colors associated with home sweet home, greens and browns, earth tones.”



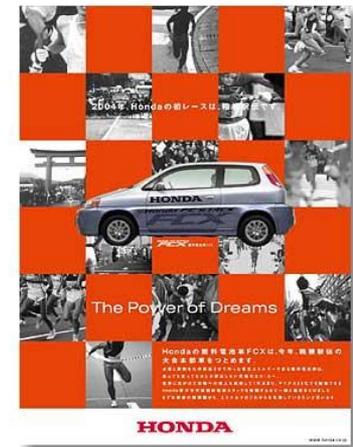
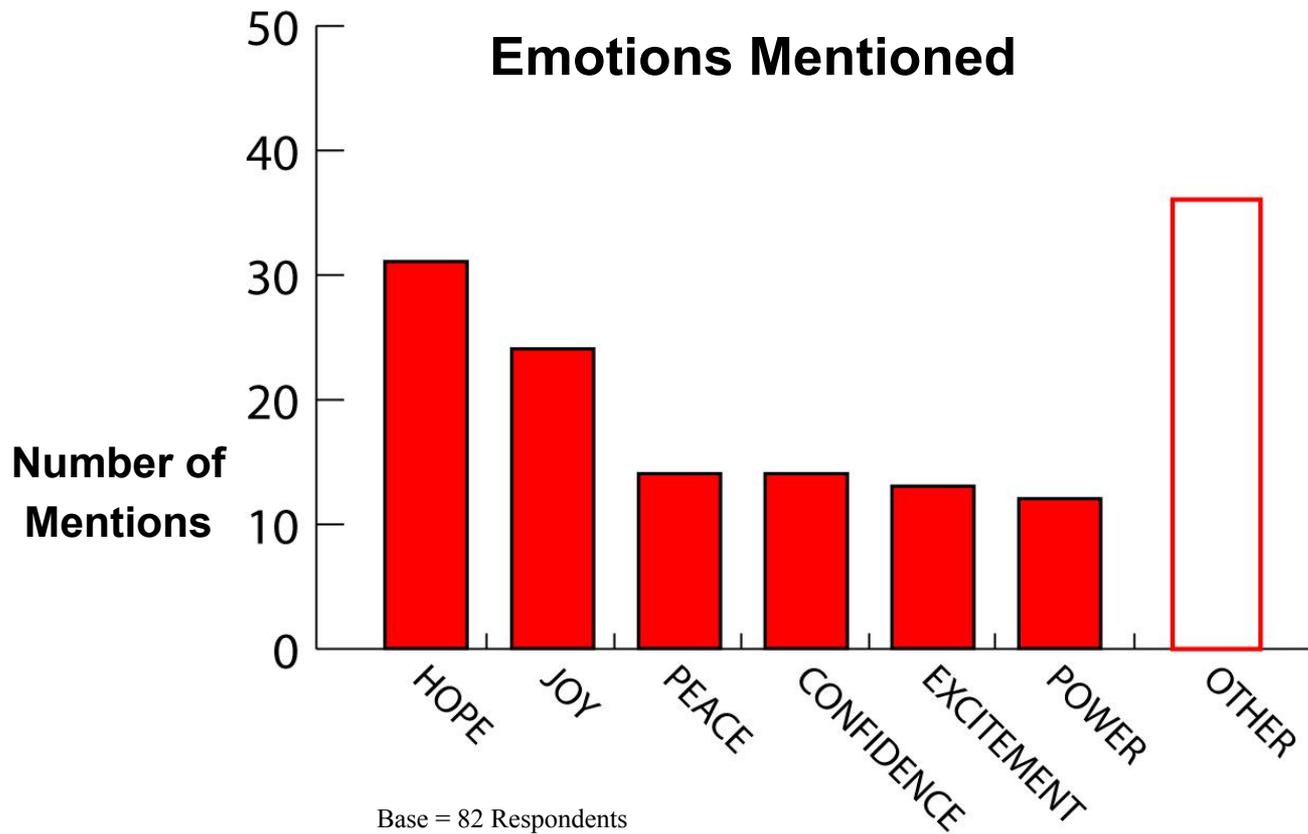
Positioning statements did not reliably prompt the kind of emotions the sponsoring company intended to prompt.



Positioning statements evoked varying amounts of imagery from the participants.



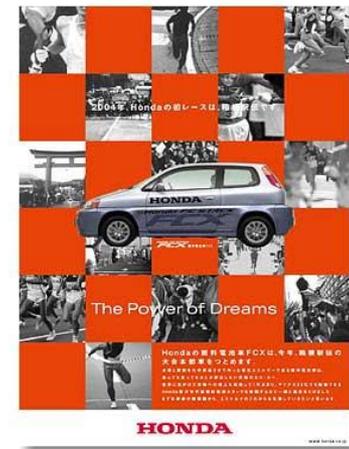
When you hear the statement 'The Power Of Dreams,' what emotions come to mind?



The Power of Dreams: Images and emotions from participant discussion.



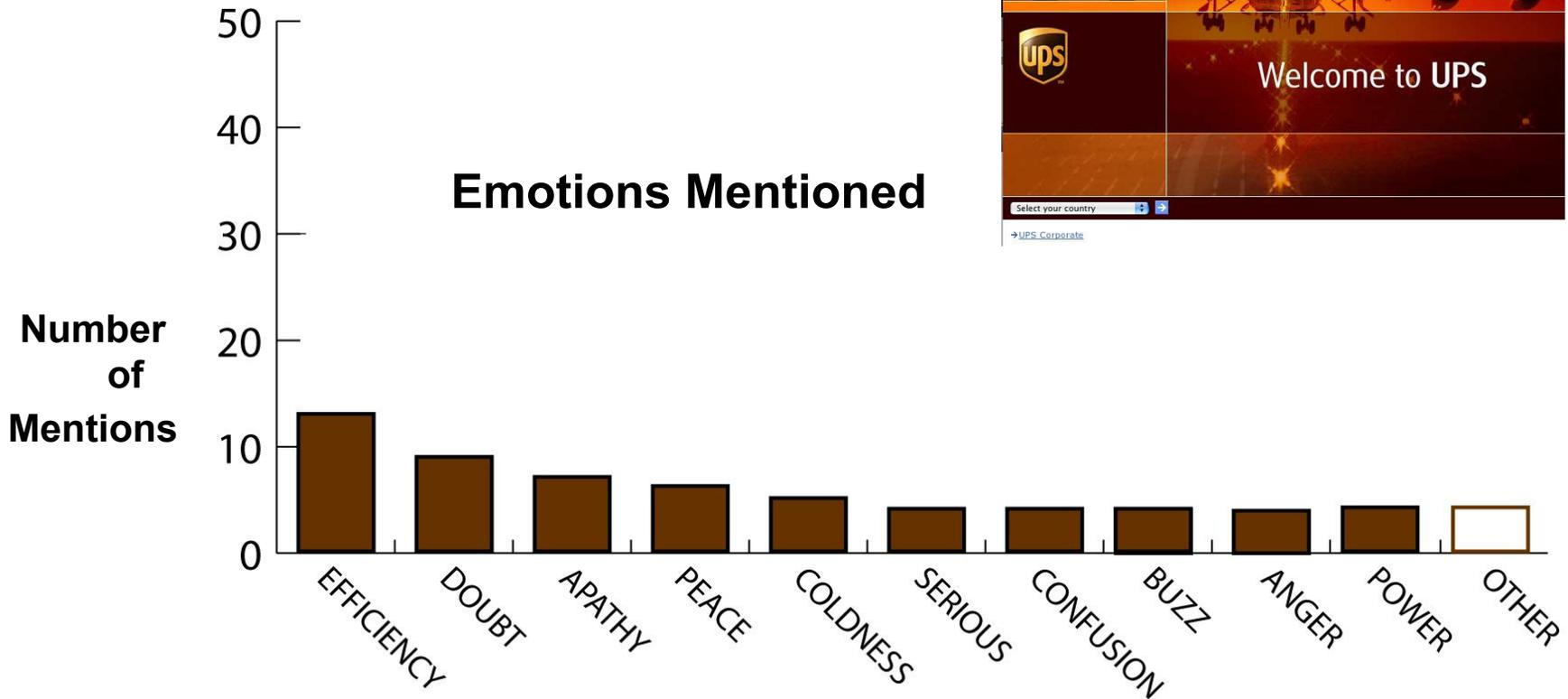
- Invention, imaginativeness, buoyancy, masculinity, astrology, transcendence
- “I would want people to feel confident, empowered and in charge of their destinies.”
- “I see a deep purple solid circle. Small with one gold star in the center and then another slightly larger with two gold stars in the center which intersects the first. Continue the progression around in a spiral. The outermost ring goes off on a tangent to a large golden star with ‘rays’ around in the upper right. The feeling of taking off on a flight of fancy to burst into a great idea. This would work with royal blue and bright yellow, or a nice maroon with copper.”



When you hear the statement 'Synchronized Commerce,' what emotions come to mind?



Emotions Mentioned



Base = 82 Respondents

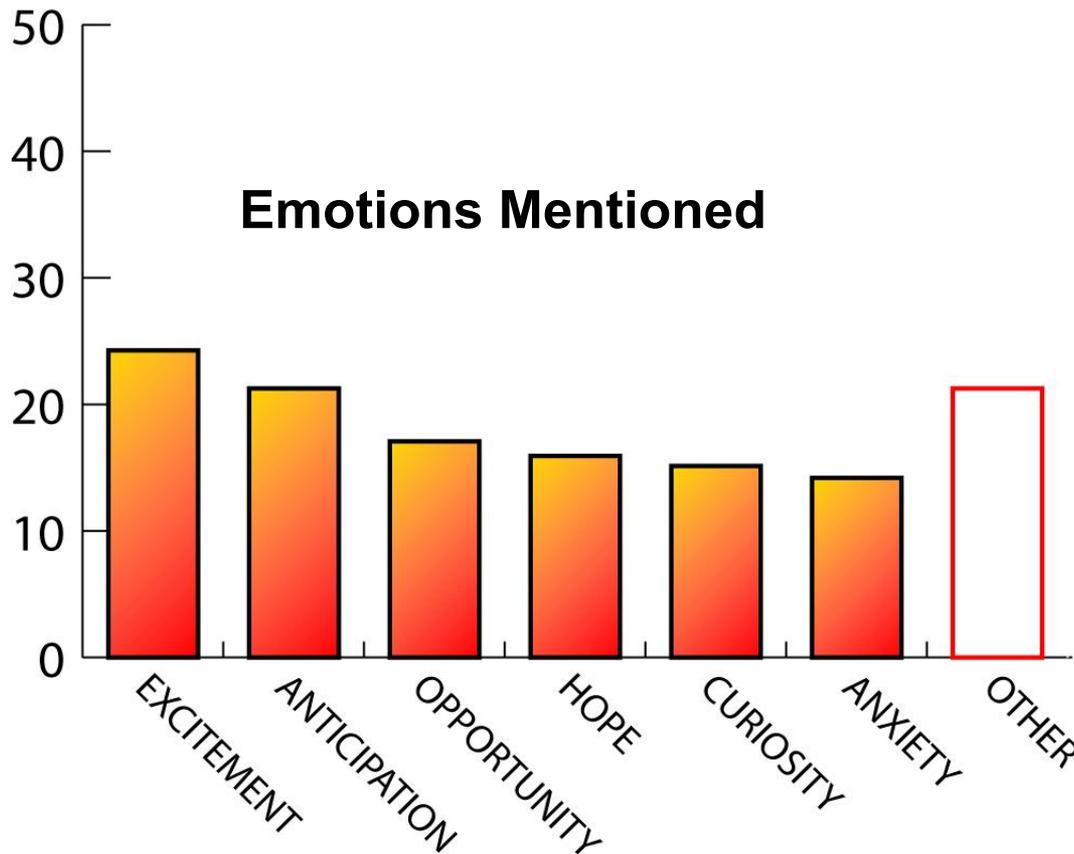
Synchronized Commerce: Images and emotions from participant discussion.



- Enron, progress, government regulation, logic/order, manufacturing, vehicles in motion, busy retail, money, e-commerce, speed, innovation, conspiracy, anal retentiveness, training, teamwork, ‘brightness mixed with caution’
- “I envision a Yin and Yang symbol or something like the Master Card symbol, like two seemingly opposite arenas coming together to get the job done. Like two elements of your business that would be great if they were linked somehow, but you just never thought about linking them.”
- “I would want people to think about efficiency, high standards, timeliness and organization...a sense of professionalism....[colors would be] navy blue, grey, and white. I picture the logo being a stopwatch with arched arrows pointing outward from where the numbers would be on the face of the watch, matched by arrows pointing inward.”



When you hear the statement 'The Next Stage,' what emotions come to mind?



Base = 82 Respondents

Number of Mentions

The Next Stage: Images and emotions from participant discussion.

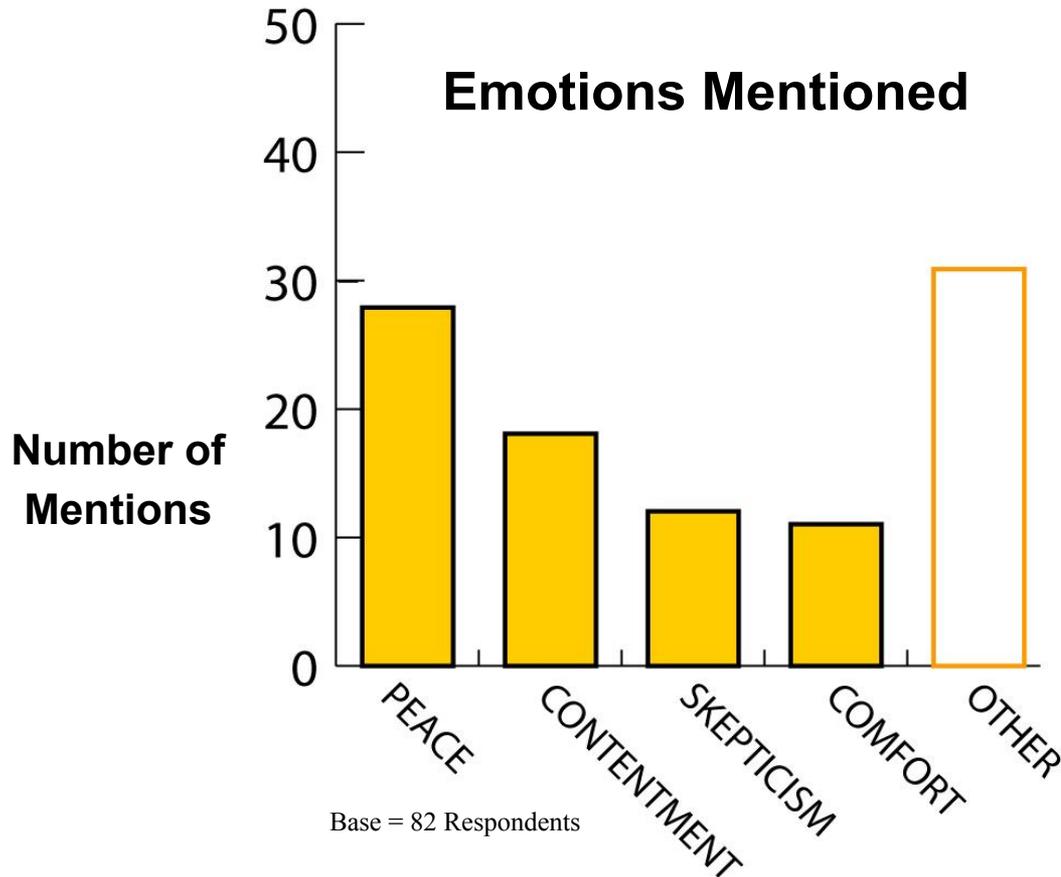


- Sunset, stagecoach, Old West, Cowtown, getting older, onstage in live theater, cover-up a blemish or stain, missile, systematic/efficient/tedious/laborious
- “The next stage is both bringing something, and offering one the opportunity to go further west where fame, fortune and a greater horizon exists.”
- “I would want them to be ready, feel excited, be expectant, be prepared to move forward an upward to new experiences.”
- “Tired of the status quo, curious and seeking what comes next.”
- “A diving board, vibrating, alone.
Voiceover: ‘Gone to The Next Stage.’”



Dreaming is the first stage
Wells Fargo. **The Next Stage.®**

When you hear the statement 'Everything Your Skin Needs Most To Look Healthy And Beautiful,' what emotions come to mind?



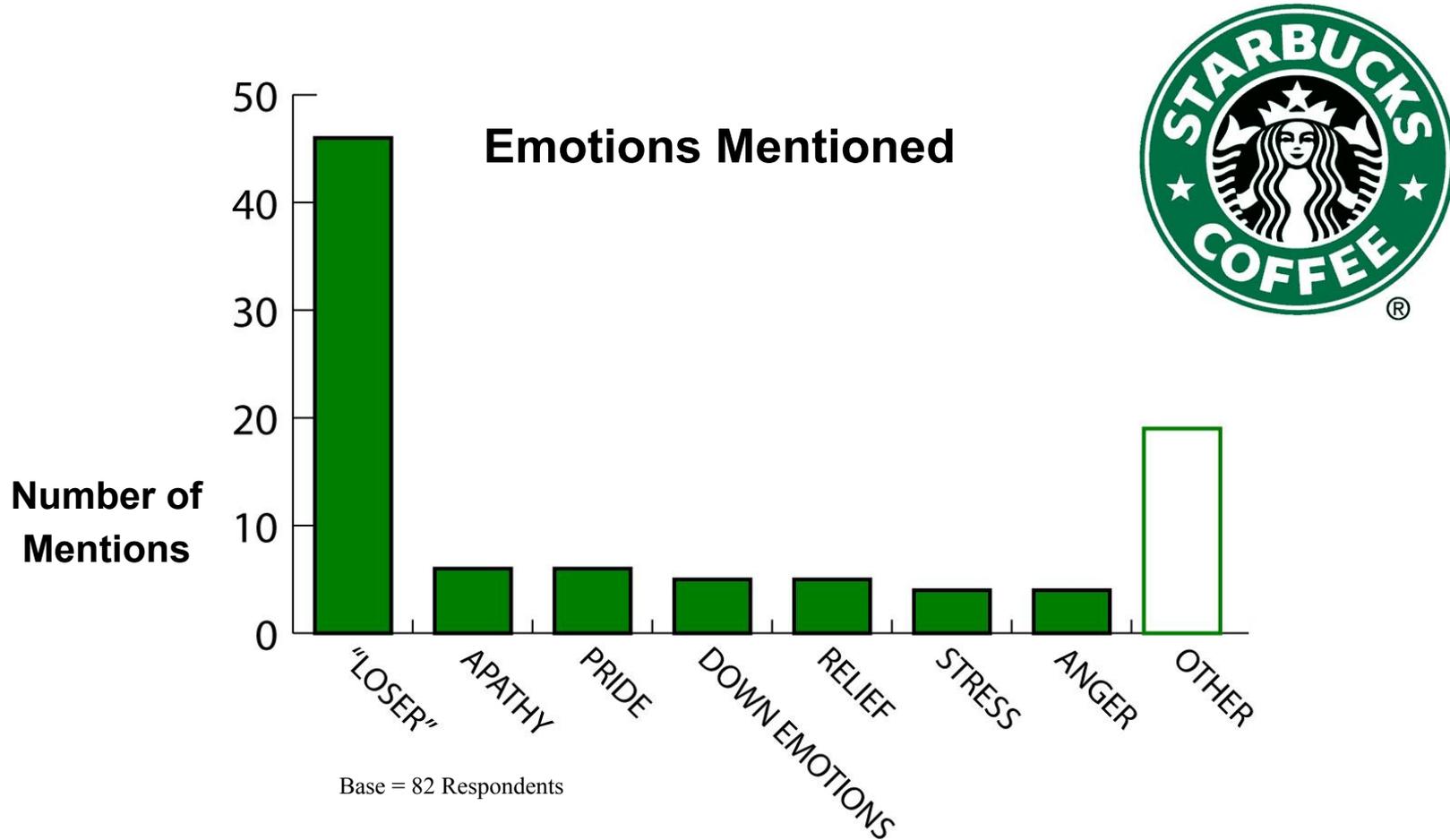
Everything Your Skin Needs Most To Look Healthy And Beautiful: Images and emotions from participant discussion.



- Beauty, healthy skin, health, youth, vibrancy, sexuality, refreshment, light, natural, feminine, maternal, intuition, nurturing, cleanliness
- “Theme with camping or fishing, to go along with beautiful skin, the no-makeup days when we are with those we love....a day with no worries, and no need for makeup, when our skin is glowing and radiant, and extremely healthy looking, even though we really didn’t care that day.”
- “Relating any color to the concept of healthy skin is fraught with peril....I prefer the “healthy” skin....refer to a smooth, fine-grained texture rather than a color.”
- “A Vera style print of tulips with long slender leaves entwined around the package. The logo...a simple tulip with the name of the product written on the leaves.”



When you hear the statement 'The Third Place,' what emotions come to mind?



The Third Place: Images and emotions from participant discussion.



- Images: Average/good but not best, competition, sports, Olympics, neutrality, childhood nostalgia, 1st - 2nd - 3rd place ribbons, separation
- “If you are having a busy day and you think about how tired you have been after you’ve gone to the first place and the second place, don’t you think you would want this third place to be a place of comfort. Something that you can just sit down and relax like a coffee shop. Colors like mocha or a tan or a cloudy looking blue. Something very soothing.”
- “Security, a sense of being calm...To my mind, the saying ‘the third time’s a charm,’ so when I hear ‘the third place’ it makes me feel like maybe someone who has been trying to achieve something has finally done it. Colors: purple, because it has always signified serenity to meit’s time to calm down and reap the benefits of hard work....White, because a third place ribbon is white!”



Conclusions



Color perceptions are dynamic, not static.



- What affected the color perceptions of our participants?
 - Preferences forged by their own histories
 - Personal experience
 - Visceral reaction
 - Observation of others' experiences (family, home, school, etc.)
 - Trends and fads
 - Reported in the media
 - Experienced themselves
 - Observations of others' experience (family, home, work, school, etc.)
 - World events (such as the Olympics)
 - As reported in the media
 - As experienced themselves
 - As observed (friends, family, home, work, school, etc.)

Hard and fast rules about color perceptions don't work, because color perceptions are individualized.



The Color Experience Pyramid



Source: *Color, Environment, & Human Response*
by Frank H. Mahnke (1996, John Wiley)

Color perception: Comments from participant discussion.



- “What I find most interesting is how different colors mean different things to different people...I suggest you find out if there is a relationship between the people who associate the same colors with the same meanings as well as comparing the people with different ideas, and the ones that are ‘out there,’ well...you should try to find out why they’re out there and if they could possibly be the ‘O negative’ that could represent everyone.”
- “Each person brings their own experiences and may react differently to any color. From memory, we connect emotions to sensual inputs....the colors convey richness to our consciousness.”
- “The gut feeling of all of these colors is what matters. If you go too deep, you lose the message. No one looks at an ad long enough or deep enough to think, hmmm, let’s see....BLUE, are they trying to express the feelings of loss that I felt as a child when my ball rolled into the river? Our first impressions...were more like gut feelings than the responses we gave after seeing the logos.”

Recommendations



Don't rely on static color preference information.



- **Don't** use color perception data that is:
 - Not specific to your product category or industry
 - Not specific to your target audience
 - Dated (what constitutes “dated” depends on your target audience, product category, and industry)
- **Do** conduct research
 - Secondary: Be aware of trends and events.
 - Primary: Conduct your own research, both qualitative and quantitative

Make sure you completely understand the way your target audience perceives color.



- Primary research with your target audience is essential
- Compare research results against:
 - Trends in products, fashion, sports, movies, etc.
 - Media – especially media targeted to your target audience
 - Your own observations of what is going on, color-wise, in the world
 - Resources on physiology and psychology (archetypal, associative) of color perception
 - Color Marketing Group research and trend predictions



Brands are complicated and should be tested in more than one context.



- Brands are complicated because of their many components (positioning statements, tagline, logos, etc.). Brands also live longer than any specific advertising campaign.
- Here are some suggested approaches for conducting this kind of research:
 - Test positioning statements separately from images and color.
 - Test positioning statements together with potential color choices.
 - Test color choices separately from other imagery and from statements, to determine if they evoke the “right” emotions.
 - Test the components together to make sure the choices don’t overrule each other.
 - As new brand components are created (new package designs, new ads, etc.), test these separately as well as together with existing brand components.

Thank you!

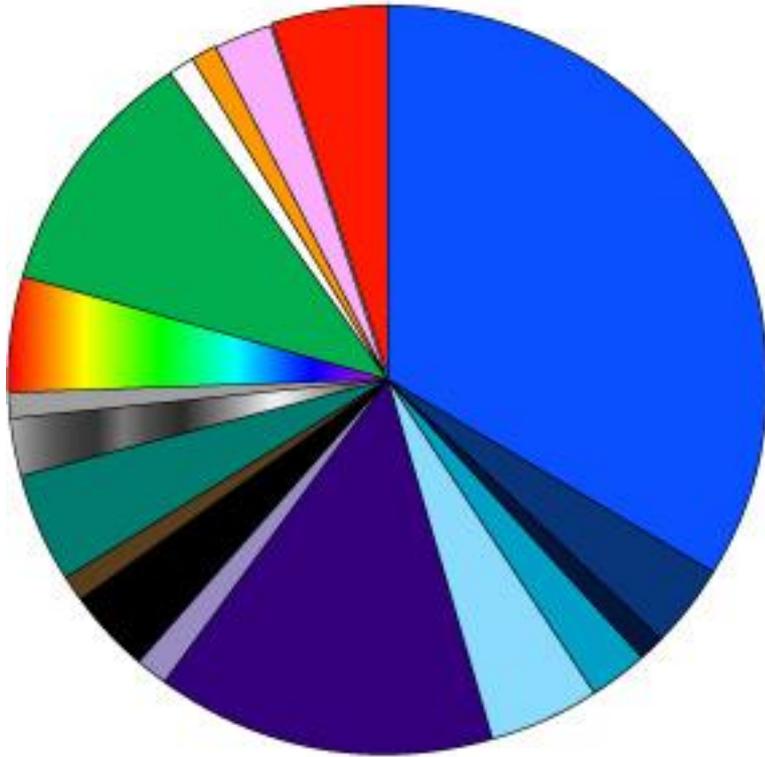


Questions?

Appendix: What's Your Favorite Color, and Why?



Almost everyone likes blue! And some have more than one 'favorite' color.



“What’s your favorite color?”

Base = 82 respondents

- Many sources we consulted said that, historically, blue has been most commonly cited as a favorite color.
- Blue was the color participants were most likely to describe in a specific shade.
- Some participants were unable to identify one color as their favorite, instead identifying different “favorites” for different items, stages of life, or moods.

Favorite colors: Comments from participant discussion



- “Mostly when I think of blue, I think of my bed, which has had blue sheets and blankets since I was very very young....I think this color came to be my favorite because at a certain point in my life it was everyone’s favorite. I suppose you could say it was the ‘color du jour’since then, I’ve taken a more personal liking to it.”
- “One of the most unique things about purple is its ability to draw me into it...I almost feel like it’s pulling me toward it – as if my body is literally drawn to it...I had always liked deep blues the most, but over time I realized there just seems to me something about purple that is, for me, almost magical.”
- “I like dark blue, more toward purple and indigo...it’s the color of perfume bottles I saw often in my youth...I think this color has finally returned to style...Something about this color makes me desire to have whatever is that color, as though my life might improve just by having more of it around me. Totally irrational, but there it is.”
- “I have different preferences for clothing, furnishings, cars, trucks, and landscape plants. I also find it hard to consider color alone without texture.”
- “I typically tell people purple is my favorite color even though I don’t own anything purple. It’s just a color I am drawn to outside of clothes and whatnot.”