

The Figurative Visual Language of Virtual Product Design: The Semiotics of Colour and Shape in Smartphone App Icons

A product's colour and shape convey crucial information about what the product is, what it does, and how well it performs (Kumar & Noble, 2016). Similar to figurative messages in advertising (Forceville, 1996; Littlemore & Pérez-Sobrino, 2017), colour and shape can function as a figurative, visual language that conveys messages to the consumer about the product (Heath, 2012). This study presents findings from a corpus analysis of 250 smartphone app icons from the Google Play Store.

It was found that apps that require more active user engagement, such as productivity apps (e.g. ad-blocker, alarm clock) or fitness apps (e.g. pedometer, workout) used warmer colours (red, yellow, and orange), in line with these colours being figuratively associated with arousal (Labrecque & Milne, 2012; Sokolik, Magee, & Ivory, 2014). Squares and circles were abundant in app icons. These shapes resemble structures in our environment - from buildings to buttons - that compartmentalise our lives and encourage engagement respectively (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). Many messaging apps used speech bubbles, which act as visual conduit metaphors, framing online communication as a physical transference of messages (e.g. 'trying to get your thoughts across' and 'giving you an idea'; Reddy, 1979).

Overall, colours tended to play attention-grabbing, aesthetic, and symbolic roles that created visual contrasts and coherence, and served as brand, category, and function identifiers (Creusen & Schoormans, 2005). Shapes conveyed information about the app's category, function, and ergonomic value, relating to objects and structures in our environment.

While colour appears to be used as a means to attract smartphone users and complement figurative messages about the app, shape seems to convey more specific information about the app's capabilities through the representation of more familiar, concrete forms.

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