How Pantone Landed on Its Color of the Year for 2021
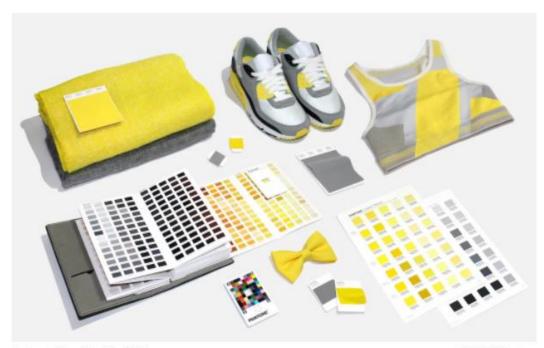
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Pantone Color of the Year 2021   CREDIT: Courtesy

A *Vogue* article described Pantone's Color of the Year for 2021 Ultimate Gray and Illuminating as "really weird" and *Dazed* described it as "depressing," likening it to the color of "terrible suits," but the wordsmiths at these publications may be underestimating the time and research involved in selecting the prolific colors.

The color selection process is not at all arbitrary, said Laurie Pressman, Pantone Color Institute vice president. "The Pantone Color of the year selection process entails thoughtful consideration and trend analysis," she said, noting that it is a combination of the macro-level color trend forecasting and research that the global team involved with the Pantone Color Institute conducts year-round.

The color, or in the case of 2021, colors, are the result of color experts combing the world for new influences in entertainment, film, travel, art, technology and fashion. The emotional history of color is also a significant aspect of Pantone's decision making.

"We want to ensure that the colors we select reflects what's taking place in the culture at a specific moment in time. With color and context so intertwined, there really are reasons why a color family or individual color comes into prominence what it does," Pressman said.

Many of the sources that Pantone typical turns to for guidance were in a state of flux in 2021, but Pressman said the selection process was no different than when Pantone launched the Color of the Year program in 1999.

"What was different is the highly unusual time we find ourselves living in, a time when the world continues to feel as though it is turned upside down, inside out due to the global pandemic and risings around the world focused on the environment and inequality, which have led to the reframing of our social and cultural values," she said.

Though the way of living has changed, society has continued—albeit with shifting values and priorities—and this certainly weighed on Pantone's selection. The shift from quantity to quality, from fast life to slow life, from more to less, as well as a deeper understanding of how people need one another, were critical pieces in how Pantone arrived at Ultimate Gray and Illuminating.

Selecting two colors for 2021, however, was not the initial plan, but like the connectivity between people, Pressman said it became clear one could not exist without the other.

The pairing of Ultimate Gray and Illuminating expresses a message of strength and hopefulness that is enduring and uplifting, which conveys the idea, subliminally, that it's not about one color or one person, it's about more than one, she explained.

Each color possesses positive qualities on its own. Ultimate Gray evokes feelings of dependability, resilience and wisdom. Illuminating is symbolic of light, energy and heightened awareness and intuition. The gray qualities, however, need the yellow qualities and vice versa, Pressman said.

"We need to be uplifted, we need the optimism, we need that positivity," she said. "But [we] also need the strength and resilience in order to move through this time, and we will get there."

Perhaps the most notable qualities about Pantone's Color of the Year for 2021 is how it reflects society's current emotional state—or what it's lacking—more than any predecessor. The combination is simultaneously practical and rock solid on the gray side and warming and optimistic on the yellow side—qualities that have arguably waned during the chaos that consumed most of 2020.

"This is a color combination that's aspirational, a color story that has an energizing spirit, one that gives us hope we need to feel that everything is going to get better," Pressman said. "This is so essential to the human spirit."