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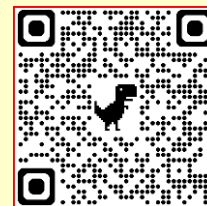
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## Cultural Color Codes in Animal-Focused Children's Literature: How Vietnamese and Japanese Perceptions of Color Shape Emotional Response and Brand Messaging

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### ABSTRACT

*This research explores the impact of culturally embedded color meanings, character-based color–emotion linkages, and color branding on children's emotional reactions to animal characters in picture books, drawing comparisons between young readers in Vietnam and Japan. Grounded in Ecological Valence Theory and Social Semiotic Theory, the study views children's affective responses as emerging from both innate perceptual appraisals and culturally shaped interpretive lenses woven into visual storytelling. Through a survey using authentic picture-book images and a 5-point Likert scale completed by 385 children, combined with SPSS reliability checks, exploratory factor analysis, and multiple regression, the analysis identifies three powerful predictors: cultural color meaning ( $\beta = 0.627$ ), color–emotion associations in character design ( $\beta = 0.659$ ), and color branding ( $\beta = 0.526$ ). These results underscore that children interpret color not primarily through universal biological mechanisms, but through learned symbolic frameworks that heighten emotional clarity, deepen engagement, and enrich narrative comprehension. By bridging cultural semiotics, affective psychology, and branding principles, the study addresses a significant gap in cross-cultural children's literature scholarship and provides practical guidance for illustrators, educators, and publishers aiming to create visually compelling, culturally sensitive, and emotionally powerful picture books for young audiences.*

**KEY WORDS:** Children's emotional response, Cultural color meaning, Color–emotion associations, Color branding

## INTRODUCTION

Studies exploring how children emotionally react to colors lay essential groundwork for understanding narratives centered on animals. As early as Boyatzis & Varghese (1994) demonstrated, children between five and six-and-a-half years old reliably connect vivid, bright hues with feelings of joy and excitement, while darker shades evoke sadness or fear, suggesting that the color palettes chosen for picture books actively help young readers make sense of emotions rather than serving merely as background ornament.

Newer research confirms that these color–emotion connections remain fairly consistent yet richly layered as children grow: Japanese schoolchildren, for instance, repeatedly favor red and blue and attach specific feelings to a range of colors (Baniani, 2022), and eye-tracking studies show youngsters instinctively linger longer on color gradients they like when judging toys. Still, most of this evidence comes from isolated color swatches, room décor, or playthings rather than from expressive animal characters woven into stories. Cross-cultural findings further indicate that some associations are nearly universal, whereas others vary across

societies. For example, red may signify anger in one context but love in another, making it risky to assume that Vietnamese and Japanese children will respond identically (Hanada, 2018; Jonauskaitė et al., 2020). On top of that, children's own words, cultural symbols, and the unfolding plot all shape how they interpret color, so in animal tales a single hue might simultaneously hint at a character's mood, suggest good-or-evil alignment, or reinforce a familiar brand image. Ultimately, any robust study must carefully separate the raw impact of color itself from the influences of character design, narrative events, and learned cultural meanings when trying to predict or explain young readers' emotional reactions.

Previous studies have consistently shown that children associate specific colors with emotions: bright, warm tones tend to spark happiness, while dark or cool shades often trigger sadness or fear (Boyatzis & Varghese, 1994). This pattern becomes even clearer in children's own artwork, where they deliberately pick cheerful, warm colors for topics they like and colder, gloomier ones for things they dislike (Burkitt et al., 2003). More recent large-scale and cross-cultural research confirms that many color-emotion links are quite stable worldwide, yet some are noticeably shaped by local culture (Hanada, 2018; Jonauskaitė et al., 2020, 2024). The limitation, however, is that nearly all of this evidence comes from abstract color squares or free drawing tasks rather than from colors embedded in real stories; even fewer studies look at anthropomorphized animal characters, where color simultaneously conveys mood, moral alignment, and commercial branding. Moreover, the existing samples lean heavily toward Western children or mixed global groups, leaving East Asian cultural meanings underexplored, and no study has directly compared Vietnamese and Japanese youngsters. The current paper fills these gaps by employing authentic picture-book pages featuring animal characters as stimuli, examining how culturally nuanced color associations influence children's emotional reactions and their subsequent responses to color-driven brand messages.

This study seeks to answer the research questions as follows:

- 1) To what extent does cultural color meaning influence children's emotional response to color in animal narratives in Vietnamese and Japanese contexts?
- 2) How do color-emotion associations in character design affect children's emotional response to color in animal narratives across the two cultures?
- 3) How does color branding in animal-focused storybooks impact children's emotional response to color in animal narratives among Vietnamese and Japanese children?

This study seeks to explore how Vietnamese and Japanese children emotionally react to the color palettes employed in illustrations of animal-centered stories, with a sharp focus on culturally rooted color-emotion associations. A further aim is to investigate the degree to which local color meanings guide children's understanding of an animal character's feelings, personality traits, and moral alignment within narrative contexts. Drawing on these findings, the research also examines how color-driven branding elements, ranging from cover designs and recurring visual motifs to signature character palettes, affect children's engagement, preferences, and sense of brand identity in each cultural setting. Collectively, these goals offer a nuanced cross-cultural perspective on color as a multifaceted tool that simultaneously conveys emotion, carries symbolic weight, and strengthens commercial recognition in children's literature featuring animals. The value of this work lies in its effort to deepen cross-cultural insight into the role of color in shaping young readers'

emotions, story comprehension, and early brand awareness, areas that remain strikingly underrepresented in the literature. By directly comparing Vietnamese and Japanese children, the study enriches theoretical understanding of culturally shaped color-emotion linkages within illustrated animal narratives, stepping beyond the Western-dominated samples and decontextualized color patches typical of earlier work. Practically, the results provide authors, illustrators, and publishers with evidence-based guidance on selecting culturally attuned colors to heighten emotional resonance, improve character legibility, and strengthen narrative impact. At the same time, the findings deliver actionable implications for children's media brands, revealing how thoughtfully embedded color strategies can cultivate preference and loyalty among young audiences in culturally distinct ways. Ultimately, this research bridges a critical empirical and contextual gap while furnishing the creative sector with robust, culturally informed principles for producing inclusive, emotionally compelling, and commercially effective children's books.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Children's Emotional Response to Color in Animal Narratives

Children's emotional response refers to the feelings, such as joy, fear, curiosity, or sadness, that arise when young viewers encounter sensory or symbolic material. These reactions represent the first, rapid appraisals that steer attention, spark preferences, and color interpretation (Izard, 1991). A large body of work highlights how such responses drive cognitive growth, social insight, and the way children make sense of stories and media (Denham, 1998). In the particular setting of picture books, children's emotional response to color in animal narratives captures the affective reactions triggered when readers meet animal characters, backgrounds, or visual details that carry deliberate color coding. These reactions draw on learned color-emotion links, local cultural meanings, and the surrounding story context, all of which guide how children read mood, guess intentions, and grasp the overall emotional tone (Hanada, 2018; Boyatzis & Varghese, 1994).

Color is among the earliest and most powerful emotional signals children learn to recognize, and its impact is especially pronounced in illustrated stories, where pictures often speak before words do. Evidence consistently shows that children tie warm, bright shades to happiness or excitement and link darker, cooler tones to fear or sadness (Boyatzis & Varghese, 1994; Burkitt et al., 2003). In tales built around animals, color does far more than signal mood: it sketches personality, hints at good or bad intentions, and helps young readers predict relationships and story tension. Psychologically, these color-triggered responses matter because they deepen engagement, foster empathy, and strengthen memory for what happens in the book, outcomes that carry both educational and commercial weight (Denham, 1998).

In everyday life, children constantly lean on color as a shortcut for understanding feelings and intentions. Studies reveal that color-emotion associations stay remarkably steady through early childhood and shape everything from social judgments to safety cues and media preferences (Lipponen et al., 2018; Jonauskaitė et al., 2020). One striking illustration comes from research showing that both Japanese and Western children reliably use hue to judge whether a story character feels positive or negative, revealing how narrative color choices can spark culturally flavored emotional reactions (Hanada, 2018). Such findings underline just how central color is to the emotional world that animal-focused picture books create for young readers.

## Anchoring Theoretical Frameworks

### *Ecological Valence Theory (EVT)*

Ecological Valence Theory (EVT) holds that people come to love or dislike particular colors largely because of the feelings they have toward the everyday objects and scenes those colors typically represent; preferences are therefore rooted in real-life emotional experience rather than random symbolism (Palmer & Schloss, 2010). This framework is especially useful for the present study, since children's emotional reactions to color in animal stories can be understood as a quick, overall affective judgment drawn from memories of color-linked things, namely clear blue skies, lush green jungles, shadowy caves, that suddenly light up again inside the illustrated world. EVT fits neatly with large-scale findings that certain colors reliably trigger joy, fear, calm, or anger across populations, yet still leaves room for cultural variation in those links (Jonauskaitė et al., 2020). When viewed across dozens of countries, the data reveal both near-universal patterns (red with anger, white with relief) and clear local flavors, showing that shared ecological exposure and distinct linguistic or cultural practices together shape color–emotion connections (Jonauskaitė et al., 2024).

In our research, we extend EVT by incorporating the concept of cultural color meaning. Vietnamese and Japanese children grow up with partly different color–object associations. For example, red may represent luck and festivity in one culture but danger or intensity in another. Therefore, applying the same color palette to an animal character may evoke different emotional responses across the two cultural groups. Color–emotion associations in character design become living examples of EVT in action: a warmly colored, brightly saturated animal who keeps helping others gradually ties those vivid hues to positive feelings, whereas a muted, gloomy palette paired with menacing behavior builds negative valence. The theory also sheds light on color branding: recurring cover palettes, logos, or background motifs act as stable “color + valued object” bundles, so repeated joyful encounters with a publisher's signature colors slowly create a positive weighted affective valence estimate (WAVE) that can later transfer to merchandise or new titles. Because EVT is built on measurable emotional responses rather than artistic guesswork, it gives us a solid, testable link between children's reported feelings, their actual choices (favorite book, favorite character), and the effectiveness of color-based brand messages in Vietnamese and Japanese settings.

Applied to this project, EVT suggests that children's emotional responses to the colors in animal-centered picture books arise from their personal histories with color-linked objects and experiences, histories that diverge in meaningful ways between Vietnam and Japan. According to the theory, youngsters naturally gravitate toward hues connected to things they cherish and shy away from those tied to unpleasant or threatening ones (Palmer & Schloss, 2010). These learned associations spill over from simple color patches into rich story illustrations, guiding how children read characters and scenes. Existing work confirms that children's self-reports and observable behaviors reliably reveal these affective meanings, and that culturally distinct experiences powerfully steer emotional reactions to color (Tham et al., 2020).

### *Social Semiotic Theory of Color*

Social Semiotic Theory, particularly as developed by Kress & van Leeuwen (2002) in their treatment of color as a semiotic mode, views color not simply as decoration but as a fully-fledged meaning-making system with its own grammar, able to express ideas, relationships, and textual coherence in visual texts. Within the

present study, this perspective is vital for seeing color as a culturally taught language through which animal characters, story worlds, and publishing brands speak to young readers about values, emotions, and social roles. The theory organizes color along dimensions of hue, brightness, saturation, and texture, showing how choices along these dimensions can mark distinctions of power, closeness, tradition, or modernity. In animal picture books, such choices actively shape whether a creature feels approachable, commanding, enigmatic, or threatening, pushing children's emotional responses well beyond simple liking or disliking and into richer interpretive territory. This emphasis on cultural and contextual variation directly informs our cultural color meaning variable: the same red coat on a fox might read as joyful energy or bold heroism in one tradition and as cunning danger in another, meanings children absorb from the wider visual culture surrounding them, not just from the page in front of them. Recent studies of picture book design confirm that illustrators deploy recognizable color “grammars” like favorite palettes, levels of brightness, and harmonious combinations precisely because they match child's learned visual expectations (Xu, 2022). Social semiotics also sheds light on color–emotion associations in character design: repeated use of warm, luminous palettes for kind protagonists and muted, shadowy ones for antagonists teaches children to read these chromatic stereotypes as reliable emotional and moral signals. When it comes to color branding, the theory reveals how a publisher's consistent palette across covers, endpapers, logos, and merchandise build a recognizable visual identity that children both recognize and feel, mirroring findings from advertising research that place color at the heart of brand recognition and emotional positioning. Overall, social semiotics strengthens the claim that children's emotional reactions to color in animal narratives are at once psychological experiences and acts of decoding culturally shared brand messages—an interplay especially visible when we compare the distinct yet overlapping publishing landscapes of Vietnam and Japan.

The social semiotic framework rests on the idea that children do not passively receive color but actively interpret it through shared cultural grammars, attributing emotional and symbolic significance to colored animals, settings, and branded elements in ways that align with the view of color as a powerful communicative resource (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2002). Vietnamese and Japanese youngsters draw upon visual systems that partly diverge yet also intersect, patterns clearly visible in the recurring color conventions of their respective children's literature (Xu, 2021). Because color serves simultaneously as storytelling device and commercial signaling, the approach expects brand messages to travel along the very same semiotic pathways that children use to grasp emotions and narrative meaning (Günay, 2021).

## **The Determinants of Children's Emotional Response to Color in Animal Narratives**

### *Cultural Color Meaning*

Cultural color meaning captures the symbolic, emotional, and metaphorical layers that a society attaches to particular colors through rituals, language, everyday objects, and historical traditions (Taylor et al., 2013). Children pick up these meanings very early, soaking them in from festivals, school materials, television, and picture books that repeatedly pair colors with specific values and feelings (Aslam, 2006). Developmental studies show that youngsters actively build color–emotion frameworks that can differ sharply from one culture to another (Widen & Russell, 2010). In many East Asian settings, for example, red is tied to joy, luck, and celebration, whereas elsewhere it more often signals danger or warning; these

associations become part of a child's worldview long before the teenage years (Kaya & Epps, 2004). In animal-centered picture books, such cultural meanings guide how children read an illustrated character's mood, moral standing, or personality traits. Philosophically, colors function as carriers of a culture's "moral aesthetic" (Saito, 2008); psychologically, they serve as fast-track emotional cues; and sociologically, they help reproduce shared values and collective memory in stories aimed at the young (Aslam, 2006).

When the colors on the page match a child's culturally learned expectations, the story feels clearer, more gripping, and emotionally richer (Skaremyr et al., 2024; Taylor et al., 2013). Familiar symbolic patterns light up instantly, deepening the child's connection to the narrative. A bright red fox, for instance, might strike Japanese readers as lively and heroic yet make Western children slightly wary (Jonauskaitė et al., 2020). This cultural fit not only sharpens moment-to-moment feelings but also steers deeper story understanding: children more readily attribute the "right" intentions, emotions, and moral weight to characters when the palette aligns with what they already know (Taylor et al., 2013). Congruent colors improve memory for plot events by making the emotional thread of the story easier to follow and retrieve (Widen & Russell, 2010). Neuroscientific evidence even suggests that culturally expected colors trigger stronger brain responses in emotion-related areas, heightening physiological excitement and involvement while reading (Palmer et al., 2013). In cross-cultural comparisons, these effects stand out sharply because children lean heavily on their own symbolic templates to make sense of stylized or ambiguous illustrations, with color often acting as the very first clue to a character's emotional tone or narrative role (Saito, 2008). Overall, cultural color meaning does more than influence emotional reactions. It actively shapes how children construct meaning and generates predictable and powerful responses when illustrators respect local color expectations.

Scholars do debate how dominant these cultural effects are. Some insist that learned color meanings run deep and remain stable across different media (Widen & Russell, 2010), while others point out that basic perceptual tendencies, such as perceiving blue as calming and red as arousing, can moderate interpretations based solely on cultural meanings (Kaya & Epps, 2004). Most recent cross-cultural work, however, confirms that cultural modulation is real and substantial. Accordingly, the stronger the activation of culturally relevant color meanings, the greater the predicted boost in children's emotional engagement with the story.

Grounded in the guiding theoretical framework, this study advances the rationale that forms the basis of our first hypothesis:

H1: Cultural color meaning has a positive impact on children's emotional response to color in animal narratives.

### ***Color–Emotion Associations in Character Design***

Color–emotion associations in character design describe the deliberate and systematic ways illustrators use hue, brightness, and saturation to signal a character's feelings, personality, and moral alignment, drawing on both hard-wired perceptual reactions and culturally learned meanings (Valdez & Mehrabian, 1994). In picture books, these color choices act as instant visual cues that allow even pre-readers to guess whether an animal is friendly, scary, cheerful, or trustworthy long before they decode the words (Burkitt & Barrett, 2011). By around age three, children already show reliable patterns: they link warm, bright colors (yellows, oranges, reds) with happiness and approachability, and dark or muted tones (black, deep

greens, greys) with sadness, anger, or menace (Taylor et al., 2013). In animal stories, where facial expressions are often simplified or stylized, these color cues become essential for decoding emotion and intention.

Psychologically, such associations work as fast emotional heuristics: the moment a child sees a character, stored color–emotion schemas trigger an automatic appraisal of mood and motive (Ellsworth & Scherer, 2003). A fiery red fox may appear energetic or dominant, a soft blue bunny may seem calm and dependable, and a sickly green monster may evoke envy or danger. These are classic examples of color functioning as an affective prime (Wexner, 1954). These shortcuts not only speed comprehension but also help young children practice emotional literacy within the safe space of a story. From a cultural angle, however, the very same colors carry different symbolic weights. In much East Asian illustration, red on an animal often reads as brave, joyful, or auspicious, whereas many Western children first register red as a warning or sign of aggression (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). These contrasting conventions mean that identical character palettes can produce markedly different emotional readings across cultures, reminding us that no design choice is ever culturally innocent. Sociologically, repeated color–morality pairings quietly reinforce broader cultural scripts about good and evil, safety and threat, belonging and exclusion (Mary Tew, 1996). Philosophically, expressivist aesthetics offers another useful perspective by proposing that colors do not imitate emotions but embody qualities that feel structurally similar. Vibrant saturation conveys excitement, whereas muted greyness evokes melancholy (Goodman, 1976). A gently pastel-colored creature therefore "expresses" tenderness through its very form, and children grasp this analogy intuitively.

The payoff for children's emotional response is clear and strong. When character colors match expected emotional and cultural patterns, young readers show heightened engagement, stronger empathy, and better story recall (Burkitt & Barrett, 2011). Brain-imaging work confirms that emotionally congruent colors spark greater activity in emotion-processing regions, amplifying excitement and attention while the child turns the pages (Phelps et al., 2006). Mismatched or ambiguous palettes, by contrast, can blunt those reactions and leave children uncertain about a character's feelings or intentions (Taylor et al., 2013). Although some researchers emphasize nearly universal color effects rooted in biology (Valdez & Mehrabian, 1994), most now agree that Cultural learning substantially shapes these tendencies and may sometimes override them (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). What remains undisputed is that the colors wrapped around an illustrated animal are among the most powerful tools designers have for steering a child's heart and mind through a story.

Drawing on the established theoretical foundation, the paper delineates the conceptual logic that informs the formulation of our second hypothesis:

H2: Color–emotion associations in character design have a positive impact on children's emotional response to color in animal narratives.

### ***Color Branding***

Color Branding describes the deliberate deployment of color to forge a recognizable brand identity, trigger specific emotional reactions, and enable instant recognition, especially for young children who depend far more on visual than verbal cues (Martti, 2015; Labrecque & Milne, 2013; John, 1999). In the world of children's books, color branding works as a powerful shorthand: a consistent palette

splashed across covers, endpapers, character designs, and series logos instantly tells a child what kind of emotional atmosphere and story to expect. Vivid, highly saturated colors spark excitement and invite approach, while muted or shadowy tones hint at mystery, seriousness, or danger, setting the child's first emotional posture toward the animal characters inside (Mahnke, 1996).

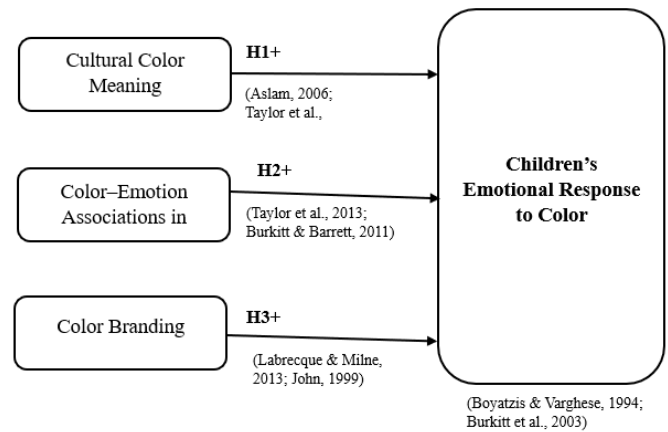
Psychologically, brand colors act as rapid affective primers. Marketing studies show that hue alone can shape perceptions of warmth, trustworthiness, or competence in a fraction of a second (Arnott & Yelland, 2020; Labrecque & Milne, 2013). These snap judgments spring from well-worn emotional networks that link particular colors to past feelings, networks that light up the moment a familiar cover or logo appears. Brain-imaging work confirms that emotionally loaded brand colors boost activity in attention and reward centers, heightening excitement even before the child opens the book (Reimann et al., 2012). Culturally, color branding is deeply embedded in shared symbolic economies. The same palettes migrate from books to cartoons, toys, lunchboxes, and bedroom walls, turning colors into socialized carriers of meaning (Koller, 2008). Japanese youngsters, for instance, grow up surrounded by the soft pastels of kawaii branding that scream gentleness and cuteness, while many Vietnamese children meet bold reds, golds, and festive brights that radiate celebration and good fortune. These contrasting conventions make it clear that branding colors are never culturally innocent; they anchor stories inside a society's broader aesthetic and moral landscape. From an aesthetic-philosophical angle, color branding follows an expressivist logic: rather than simply pointing to an emotion, a palette embodies it through its place in a system of contrasts (Goodman, 1976). A recurring warm, sunny scheme across a series can express comfort and safety, whereas sharp, clashing tones can embody tension or adventure.

When a publisher's palette resonates with a child's stored emotional and cultural schemas, the result is stronger affective pull, deeper empathy, and more joyful immersion (Bottomley & Doyle, 2006). Children themselves report clearer feelings and greater attachment to stories whose branding colors feel "right" for their culture (Sharp & Johnson, 2016). Mismatched or unfamiliar palettes, by contrast, can blur emotional signals and dampen engagement. Although some researchers still highlight near-universal color effects (Mahnke, 1996), the weight of recent evidence shows that branding responses are meaningfully shaped by culture (Sharp & Johnson, 2016). What is beyond dispute is that color branding stands as one of the strongest levers designers and publishers have for guiding a young reader's heart through an illustrated animal tale.

Building on the theoretical framework, we explicate the conceptual reasoning that supports the development of our third hypothesis:

**H3:** Color branding has a positive impact on children's emotional response to color in animal narratives.

Drawing on well-established theoretical foundations, this study advances current scholarship by introducing the following conceptual framework:



**Figure 1.** The proposed Conceptual Framework

## METHODS

### Research Approach and Sampling Strategy

This research adopted a quantitative approach to investigate the impact of cultural interpretations of colors, emotional connections linked to character coloring, and brand-related color choices on children's affective reactions to animal figures in picture books from Vietnam and Japan. Following Bryman's (2016) recommendations, participants were recruited through probability sampling methods, utilizing parental contacts, school newsletters, and digital parent forums to minimize bias and promote a varied sample. An engaging online survey tailored for young users employed a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) to gather responses, with items drawn from reputable prior work on color-emotion links, symbolic meanings in culture, and visual storytelling (Boyatzis & Varghese, 1994; Burkitt et al., 2003; Hanada, 2018; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2002), thereby aligning closely with Ecological Valence Theory and Social Semiotics. Children between 6 and 10 years old took part after obtaining parental permission, where parents served solely as facilitators—offering limited help, such as reading items if necessary, while refraining from shaping answers—and surveys were administered in calm home settings to encourage independent, genuine feedback. To maintain real-world relevance, the study used genuine illustrations of animal leads from actual picture books instead of simple color swatches; data integrity was upheld via attention checks, timing filters, and exclusion of partial or erratic submissions, yielding 385 reliable responses from an initial 617 for robust multivariate examination.

### Data Analysis

The survey data were analyzed in SPSS to maintain precision and transparency throughout the statistical process. We began with descriptive statistics to outline the sample's demographic profile and to gain a preliminary understanding of how children in each country responded to the core constructs. Reliability was then confirmed through Cronbach's alpha; every scale surpassed the conventional 0.70 benchmark, indicating excellent internal consistency and robust measurement properties (Hair et al., 2009). To verify the underlying structure of the instrument, exploratory factor analysis was carried out using principal component extraction with varimax rotation. Only items loading above 0.50 on their intended factor were kept, while any cross-loading or weakly loading items were removed. This rigorous process ensured strong convergent validity and clear alignment with the theoretical dimensions: cultural color meaning, color-emotion associations in character design, color branding, and

children's emotional response, resulting in a clean and defensible measurement model (Hair et al., 2009). With reliability and validity established, multiple linear regression was employed to test the study's core hypotheses. Separate models examined the direct impact of cultural color meaning (H1), color-emotion associations in character design (H2), and color branding (H3) on children's emotional reactions to colored animal characters within narrative contexts. Following established practice in cross-cultural research on perception and affect (Shrestha, 2020), all effects were evaluated at the  $p < .05$  significance level, providing clear evidence of which color-related factors most powerfully shaped young readers' emotional experiences across the Vietnamese and Japanese samples.

## RESULTS

### Descriptive Statistical Analysis

**Table 1.** Cross-Tabulation of Respondent Characteristics

| Characteristic    | Category          | Percentage (%) |
|-------------------|-------------------|----------------|
| Age               | 6                 | 21%            |
|                   | 7                 | 20%            |
|                   | 8                 | 18%            |
|                   | 9                 | 15%            |
|                   | 10                | 22%            |
|                   | Other             | 4%             |
| Gender            | Boy               | 42%            |
|                   | Girl              | 46%            |
|                   | Prefer not to say | 12%            |
| Country           | Vietnam           | 54%            |
|                   | Japan             | 37%            |
|                   | Other             | 9%             |
| Reading Frequency | Very often        | 30%            |
|                   | Often             | 27%            |
|                   | Sometimes         | 20%            |
|                   | Rarely            | 15%            |
|                   | Never             | 8%             |

Source: (The authors, 2026)

Table 1 reveals a well-balanced and diverse respondent profile in terms of age, gender, nationality, and picture-book reading habits. Age distribution was fairly even, with the largest groups being 10-year-olds (22%) and 6-year-olds (21%), closely followed by 7-year-olds (20%), 8-year-olds (18%), and 9-year-olds (15%), while a small minority (4%) chose "Other." On gender, girls made up the biggest share at 46%, boys accounted for 42%, and 12% preferred not to specify. Geographically, Vietnamese children formed the majority (54%), with Japanese participants representing 37% and 9% coming from other locations. This East Asia-focused sample offers a solid foundation for meaningful cross-cultural comparisons of children's emotional responses to color. Reading frequency also showed healthy variation: half of the children read picture books either "Very often" (30%) or "Often" (27%), while 20% did so "Sometimes," 15% "Rarely," and 8% "Never." The predominance of

regular readers strengthens confidence that participants were familiar with illustrated narratives and thus well-positioned to provide informed responses about color interpretation and emotional impact.

### Reliability analysis

**Table 2** Reliability analysis of "Children's Emotional Response to Color"

#### Reliability Statistics

| Cronbach's Alpha | N of Items |
|------------------|------------|
| .718             | 4          |

#### Item-Total Statistics

|     | Scale Mean if Item Deleted | Scale Variance if Item Deleted | Corrected Item-Total Correlation | Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted |
|-----|----------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| RC1 | 10.800                     | 5.528                          | 0.530                            | 0.686                            |
| RC2 | 10.730                     | 5.689                          | 0.489                            | 0.709                            |
| RC3 | 10.870                     | 5.313                          | 0.588                            | 0.653                            |
| RC4 | 10.650                     | 5.515                          | 0.534                            | 0.684                            |

Source: (The authors, 2026)

Where the survey items labelled RC1 to RC4 directly mapped onto questions 1 through 4, which had been specifically developed to capture the underlying construct of children's emotional response to color.

As shown in Table 2, every observed dependent variable achieved an adjusted item-total correlation of 0.3 or higher. The scale's overall Cronbach's alpha reached 0.718, comfortably above the conventional 0.7 benchmark, and removing any single item only lowered this value (Hair et al., 2009). Moreover, the alpha-if-item-deleted figure for each of the four items stayed well above its own corrected item-total correlation, providing clear evidence that all items contributed positively to internal consistency (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). Consequently, the full set of items was kept for the next stages of analysis, while similarly satisfactory reliability coefficients were observed across the study's remaining measures.

### Exploratory factor analysis (EFA)

**Table 3** Factor Loading Matrix.

| Rotated Component Matrix <sup>a</sup>               |           |          |          |
|-----------------------------------------------------|-----------|----------|----------|
| Component with loading factors                      |           |          |          |
| 1                                                   | 2         | 3        | 4        |
| RC1 .630                                            | CCM1 .637 | CD1 .557 | CB1 .631 |
| RC2 .621                                            | CCM2 .625 | CD2 .606 | CB2 .596 |
| RC3 .598                                            | CCM3 .642 | CD3 .629 | CB3 .584 |
| RC4 .575                                            | CCM4 .633 | CD4 .588 | CB4 .620 |
| Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.    |           |          |          |
| Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. |           |          |          |
| a. Rotation converged in 7 iterations.              |           |          |          |

Source: (The authors, 2026)

Where items CCM1-CCM4, CD1-CD4, and CB1-CB4 were

purposefully designed to assess the three independent variables with each construct represented by four dedicated questions.

As displayed in Table 3, exploratory factor analysis clearly extracted four factors that aligned perfectly with the intended dependent variable and three predictors. Every one of the 16 items exhibited factor loadings exceeding the recommended minimum of 0.5 (Hair

et al., 2009), reflecting strong convergence on their respective constructs. As a result, all items were retained, providing solid evidence of construct validity for each measured variable.

### Multiple linear regression analysis

**Table 4** Coefficients<sup>a</sup>.

| Coefficients <sup>a</sup> |            |                             |            |                           |        |      |                         |       |
|---------------------------|------------|-----------------------------|------------|---------------------------|--------|------|-------------------------|-------|
| Model                     |            | Unstandardized Coefficients |            | Standardized Coefficients | t      | Sig. | Collinearity Statistics |       |
|                           |            | B                           | Std. Error | Beta                      |        |      | Tolerance               | VIF   |
| 1                         | (Constant) | .482                        | .190       |                           | 2.537  | .000 |                         |       |
|                           | CCM        | .565                        | .040       | .627                      | 14.125 | .000 | .710                    | 1.560 |
|                           | CD         | .603                        | .041       | .659                      | 14.707 | .000 | .684                    | 1.693 |
|                           | CB         | .472                        | .046       | .526                      | 10.261 | .000 | .792                    | 1.046 |
| a. Dependent Variable: RC |            |                             |            |                           |        |      |                         |       |

Source: (The authors, 2026)

Where RC: Mean of RC1 - RC4; CCM: Mean of CCM1–CCM4; CD: Mean of CD1–CD4; CB: Mean of CB1–CB4.

Table 4 revealed that all three predictors yielded a significance level of  $p = .000$ , well below  $\alpha = .05$ . This provides strong evidence that each independent variable significantly influences the dependent variable. Accordingly, all three hypotheses received full empirical support and none were rejected.

## DISCUSSION

### Result Summary

Cultural color meaning, color–emotion associations in character design and color branding demonstrate significant effects on children’s emotional response to color, with coefficients of 0.627, 0.659 and 0.526, respectively. Therefore, the findings provide affirmative support for all three research questions.

### Theoretical Implications

The robust backing for H1 reignites the long-standing discussion on whether children’s emotional reactions to color stem mainly from cultural conditioning or from innate, cross-cultural perceptual patterns. Our results strongly resonate with studies that highlight the powerful role of cultural symbolism in shaping affective responses (Aslam, 2006; Taylor et al., 2013), as Vietnamese and Japanese children displayed markedly stronger emotional reactions when colors aligned with meanings deeply rooted in their respective cultures, a finding that dovetails neatly with Social Semiotic Theory (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2002). Conversely, these outcomes push back against perspectives that minimize cultural differences in favor of nearly universal links between warm/cool tones and emotion (Boyatzis & Varghese, 1994; Burkitt et al., 2003). The sizable coefficient tied to cultural color meaning underscores that universal perceptual tendencies, while present, are insufficient on their own to explain children’s responses; culturally acquired associations clearly intensify, redirect, or even override them. Thus, while our evidence offers partial alignment with Ecological Valence Theory’s allowance for cultural modulation of color preference (Palmer & Schloss, 2010), it firmly challenges any claim that biological or perceptual universals are the primary drivers across diverse contexts. Instead, the findings position culturally learned meanings as the dominant

force structuring children’s emotional engagement with color in animal-based narratives.

The strong support for H2 underscores that color–emotion pairings deliberately woven into character design serve as fast-acting emotional shortcuts for young readers. This result echoes classic work on affective perception (Valdez & Mehrabian, 1994; Ellsworth & Scherer, 2003) and aligns closely with evidence that children actively use color to judge a character’s feelings, intentions, and moral alignment (Burkitt & Barrett, 2011; Taylor et al., 2013). Yet the magnitude of the effect also highlights a key tension: while some foundational studies treat these links as largely hard-wired and stable across contexts (Wexner, 1954), our cross-cultural data reveal considerable flexibility. The same hue can signal courage in one culture and danger or good fortune in another (Hanada, 2018; Jonauskaitė et al., 2020). We therefore propose a blended view: biologically rooted tendencies exist, but they are powerfully reshaped by the culturally specific visual conventions outlined in Social Semiotic Theory (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2002). In short, character-design colors prove far more predictive of children’s emotional reactions when they respect local interpretive rules than when designers rely solely on presumed universal patterns.

The validation of H3 sharpens ongoing discussions about whether color branding engages children mainly through raw perceptual appeal or through deeper symbolic resonance. Our results firmly back branding scholars who stress the emotional and memory-boosting power of consistent color schemes (Labrecque & Milne, 2013; Bottomley & Doyle, 2006), showing that children respond with greater enthusiasm when a series’ palette feels familiar and expected. At the same time, the data push back against claims that branding colors work primarily via universal affective triggers (Mahnke, 1996). Instead, Vietnamese and Japanese participants reacted most strongly when branded colors echoed locally meaningful emotion codes, confirming that brand recognition is deeply entangled with cultural color systems (Sharp & Johnson, 2016; Koller, 2008). Color branding, then, functions less as a standalone perceptual hook and more as a culturally mediated emotional anchor.

### Practical Implications

The full support for all three hypotheses carries clear messages for

anyone creating picture books or educational materials. First, the dominant role of cultural color meaning means illustrators should choose palettes that resonate with local symbolic traditions rather than defaulting to supposedly universal preferences. Matching colors to familiar cultural associations sharpens emotional clarity and helps children feel confident in their interpretations (Aslam, 2006; Taylor et al., 2013). For example, using festive reds and golds common in Vietnamese celebrations can make a story feel instantly welcoming and emotionally accessible. Second, the potent effect of character-design color–emotion links reminds creators to treat color as a deliberate emotional signal. Pairing warm, bright tones with kind characters and cooler or darker shades with antagonists gives children an immediate, intuitive grasp of mood and morality, supporting both enjoyment and comprehension (Burkitt & Barrett, 2011). Third, the value of consistent color branding encourages publishers and educators to build recognizable visual identities across book series or learning programs. Repeated, culturally coherent palettes foster a sense of familiarity that deepens attachment and sustains attention—especially helpful for young readers who thrive on predictability (Labrecque & Milne, 2013).

### Limitations

Despite its contributions, the study has boundaries worth noting. Self-reported Likert scales, while practical, may oversimplify the richness of children's affective experiences or miss subtle physiological responses. The sample covered only Vietnam and Japan, so sub-regional or community-level differences in color symbolism went unexplored. The use of static illustrations also limits applicability to today's interactive and animated formats where motion and sound interact with color. Then, the data collection occurred online with parents serving as primary gatekeepers, researchers could not completely oversee the extent of adult participation while children completed the survey. Despite the use of uniform instructions for parents and thorough data screening protocols, the possibility of some parental sway on responses remains unavoidable. Subsequent research could enhance rigor by shifting to supervised settings, such as in-school administration, to better manage the conditions under which participants respond. Finally, by concentrating on color alone, we left open how line, texture, composition, or layout might jointly shape emotional impact.

### Future Research Directions

Subsequent work could employ animated or interactive stimuli to see how movement and sound modify color-driven emotions. Longitudinal designs or wider age spans would clarify when and how cultural color meanings solidify during development. Investigating regional subcultures within each country would reveal finer-grained symbolic variation. Adding physiological tools—eye-tracking, heart-rate monitoring, or skin conductance—would complement self-reports and offer a fuller picture of real-time emotional processing.

### Conclusion

The findings reveal that children's emotional responses to color in animal picture books arise primarily from culturally learned meanings, thoughtfully designed character cues, and consistent branding rather than from universal perceptual rules alone. By placing cultural semiotics at the center of affective engagement, this study challenges one-size-fits-all approaches to children's illustration and underscores the need for culturally attuned design. For theorists, it bridges affective psychology, semiotics, and

branding perspectives; for practitioners, it offers concrete strategies to craft stories that feel emotionally vivid, narratively clear, and culturally welcoming to young readers across diverse contexts. Ultimately, the research highlights color as a sophisticated, multidimensional language that young children already read with impressive fluency provided the palette speaks their visual mother tongue.

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**APPENDIX: Survey****Table 5** Survey Questionnaire**Background information**

|                                                                       |            |       |                                  |        |       |                                  |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|-------|----------------------------------|--------|-------|----------------------------------|
| <b>1. What is your age?</b>                                           | 6          | 7     | 8                                | 9      | 10    | Other (Please specify):<br>_____ |
| <b>2. What is your gender?</b>                                        | Boy        | Girl  | Prefer not to say                |        |       |                                  |
| <b>3. Which country do you currently live in?</b>                     | Vietnam    | Japan | Other (please specify):<br>_____ |        |       |                                  |
| <b>4. How often do you read picture books with animal characters?</b> | Very often | Often | Sometimes                        | Rarely | Never |                                  |

| No. | Variables                                      | Coded Observed Variables | Content                                                                                                                                                                    |
|-----|------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1.  | Children's Emotional Response to Color         | RC1                      | "I feel happy when I see bright and warm colors in animal characters, as children often associate such colors with joy." (Boyatzis & Varghese, 1994; Burkitt et al., 2003) |
|     |                                                | RC2                      | "Dark or cool colors in animal story illustrations make me feel sad or scared." (Boyatzis & Varghese, 1994)                                                                |
|     |                                                | RC3                      | "Colors in picture books help me understand the feelings and emotions in the story." (Denham, 1998)                                                                        |
|     |                                                | RC4                      | "I quickly react emotionally to the colors I see in animal characters." (Izard, 1991)                                                                                      |
| 2.  | Cultural Color Meaning                         | CCM1                     | "I understand the meaning of colors in stories because my culture teaches me what each color represents." (Aslam, 2006; Taylor et al., 2013)                               |
|     |                                                | CCM2                     | "Some colors in animal characters feel familiar to me because they match the cultural celebrations and traditions I know." (Widen & Russell, 2010; Kaya & Epps, 2004)      |
|     |                                                | CCM3                     | "When a story uses colors that match my cultural expectations, it becomes easier for me to follow the character's emotions." (Taylor et al., 2013; Saito, 2008)            |
|     |                                                | CCM4                     | "I feel more connected to characters when the colors used in the book reflect meanings I learned from my culture." (Aslam, 2006; Widen & Russell, 2010)                    |
| 3.  | Color-Emotion Associations in Character Design | CD1                      | "Bright and warm colors in animal characters make me think they are happy or friendly." (Taylor et al., 2013; Burkitt & Barrett, 2011)                                     |
|     |                                                | CD2                      | "Dark or muted colors make animal characters look sad, angry, or dangerous to me." (Valdez & Mehrabian, 1994; Wexner, 1954)                                                |
|     |                                                | CD3                      | "I can guess the emotions or intentions of an animal character based on its color." (Ellsworth & Scherer, 2003)                                                            |
|     |                                                | CD4                      | "Colors help me decide if a character is kind, scary, brave, or calm." (Burkitt & Barrett, 2011; Taylor et al., 2013)                                                      |
| 4.  | Color Branding                                 | CB1                      | "When I see the same colors used on book covers or characters, I can recognize the brand or series quickly." (Labrecque & Milne, 2013; John, 1999)                         |
|     |                                                | CB2                      | "Bright and repeated color palettes make me feel excited and interested in a book." (Mahnke, 1996)                                                                         |
|     |                                                | CB3                      | "I like books more when the colors match the emotional tone I expect from                                                                                                  |

|  |  |     |                                                                                                             |
|--|--|-----|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  |  |     | the story.” (Bottomley & Doyle, 2006)                                                                       |
|  |  | CB4 | “I feel more connected to a book series when its colors feel right for my culture.” (Sharp & Johnson, 2016) |

Survey link:

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdGyOs4ONh4laxKL2lbGfiJVV32ECijc5fUMa84TKbg9x5yrw/viewform?usp=header>