

# White Noise: Pantone's Cloud Dancer, and the Politics of Colour

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Pantone's latest choice for its annual "Colour of the Year," titled "Cloud Dancer," a shade of stark white, has triggered an unusually sharp backlash, revealing that colour is never merely aesthetic. In this post, Anjali and Nandita explore how colour, standardisation, and intellectual property intersect to shape taste, power, and ownership. [Anjali Tripathi](#) is a final-year B.A. LL.B. student at Jindal Global Law School with an interdisciplinary interest in critical approaches to law, visual storytelling, and design. Nandita Purvi Durgam is a fifth-year BA LLB student at Jindal Global Law School. She is passionate about exploring the intersections of gender, caste, and social justice, with a focus on queer theory and feminist perspectives.



White Noise: Pantone's Cloud Dancer, and the Politics of Colour

**By Anjali Tripathi and Nandita Purvi Durgam**

Pantone's [announcement](#) of its 2026 Colour of the Year, a soft but insistent white titled "Cloud Dancer," has triggered an unusually sharp backlash. The [criticism](#) has not come only from designers, but from cultural commentators, TikTok creators, and readers have treated the choice less as aesthetic guidance and more as a cultural diagnosis. In a year marked by economic anxiety, political retrenchment, and the return of austerity logics, a recession-coded white has been [received](#) as sterile rather than soothing, and as quietly ideological rather than neutral.

Pantone's own [justificatory language](#) fails to resolve these concerns. The colour is described as "calm," "pure," "clean," and "soothing," "a blank canvas" meant to quiet a frenetic world and offer clarity amid noise. These descriptors are familiar. They also insist that skin tone and politics did not factor into the decision, positioning Cloud Dancer as an apolitical response to collective exhaustion. But Pantone has never merely named colours; it has consistently claimed to capture the "[spirit of the time](#)." If colour forecasting has long functioned as a form of cultural diagnosis, then the intensity of the reaction to Cloud Dancer suggests that whiteness, far from being a restful default, has become a charged aesthetic site where power, restraint, and exclusion converge. Pantone, then, serves less as our thesis than as a flashpoint through which deeper questions about taste, discipline, and authority come into view. This post does not argue against the availability of colour trademarks as such, but examines how their recognition reshapes aesthetic meaning and access. While debates about colour are rarely framed as questions of intellectual property, this piece argues that the legal structures governing ownership and standardisation quietly shape how aesthetic authority is produced and stabilised.

## Colour Codes Power

Colour definitely operates as a sensory register, but it could also act as a normative code that quietly disciplines our taste, behaviour, and aspiration. We tend to treat good taste as obvious or natural, but as [Bourdieu](#) reminds us, what looks like "good taste" is actually a social achievement, one that converts restraint, neutrality, and understatement into moralised virtues.

The same logic can be observed in the contemporary dominance of whites, beiges, and greys. Brands consistently deploy these palettes to signal discipline, cleanliness, and seriousness that become particularly desirable during periods of economic uncertainty. The recent discourse around "[sad beige interiors](#)" captures this dynamic well: beige minimalism is framed as calming and mature, as it strips domestic space of excess, colour, and affect.

Contemporary platforms intensify this process. [Contemporary capitalism](#) increasingly operates through subtle behavioural modulation rather than overt control, shaping conduct by structuring environments and feedback loops. Algorithmic amplification of desaturated, minimalist visuals ensures that "quiet luxury" and the "clean girl" aesthetic circulate as default aspirations. Yet [critiques of the "clean girl"](#) trend show us how this supposed neutrality rests on racialised assumptions about whose bodies can appear effortless and polished without labour.

IP law furthers this by cementing this "discipline" into existing structures. For example, [Christian Louboutin's red soles](#) operate as instant visual shorthand for luxury and distinction, so much so that courts have been willing to recognise and protect that colour as proprietary identity. Colour here does not merely signify class – it stabilises it, legally and economically. [Another case](#) shows exclusivity over specific colours and colour-shape combinations for pills and capsules, including particular purple hues. Here, colour ownership extends beyond branding into product form itself, illustrating how IP law does not merely reflect market meaning but legitimises it as enforceable property, deepening the normative hierarchies those aesthetics already carry.

## Aesthetic Choices with Supply-Chain Consequences

Pantone is often described as a trend forecaster, but this framing understates its actual power. In practice, Pantone operates as a de facto [standard-setter](#), embedding colour into the technical and logistical backbone of global production. Although the [Pantone Matching System is hardwired](#) into supply chains across textiles, plastics, inks, packaging, and digital calibration, it is not an ISO standard nor a trademark-based regulatory regime. Regardless, Pantone has become the default colour language across textiles, plastics, inks, packaging, and digital calibration. It functions as an instruction that allows a shade to be reproduced identically across factories, geographies, and materials. This status is sustained through a combination of trade secrecy and contractual lock-in with major industry actors, including software and manufacturing platforms that make PMS compatibility a baseline requirement. As a result, a Pantone code is not merely advisory. It operates as an instruction that enables a shade to be reproduced consistently. Interoperability in colour reproduction – critical for globalised manufacturing – depends on shared reference systems, and PMS has effectively monopolised this role. What appears as neutral standardisation thus also consolidates market power, quietly aligning design, software, and production ecosystems around a single proprietary framework.

When Pantone elevates a colour to “Colour of the Year,” the effects ripple outward in material ways. Manufacturers recalibrate machinery, design teams rework palettes, and brands absorb the chosen shade into packaging, fashion lines, and advertising campaigns. [Cultural theorists](#) have compared institutions like Pantone to ISO committees: they do not merely reflect taste, they define the invisible grammar through which everyday objects become legible and interoperable. In this sense, colour operates as infrastructure.

This infrastructural role explains why Pantone’s influence extends far beyond aesthetics. Consistent colour reproduction has been [shown](#) to shape consumer perception, brand recognition, and purchasing behaviour at scale. Pantone’s authority rests precisely in its ability to [stabilise meaning across fragmented production environments](#), ensuring that a product looks the same whether it is printed in Shanghai or New York. The “Colour of the Year,” then, does not simply circulate as a mood board; it reorganises material reality by aligning cultural symbolism with industrial standardisation.

Seen this way, Pantone’s choices cannot be dismissed as decorative or inconsequential. When a standard-setter privileges a particular palette, it quietly synchronises taste, labour, and capital around that choice, transforming an aesthetic decision into a supply-chain fact.

## Colour as Property

Trademark law already treats colour as a protectable asset once it acquires distinctiveness. The examples most frequently cited illustrate this tension clearly. [Christian Louboutin’s red soles](#), [Tiffany’s robin-egg blue](#), [UPS brown](#), [Cadbury’s purple](#). Some more Indian examples include [Exide’s red-white battery packaging](#) and [Cadbury’s purple](#). These disputes expose a persistent tension at the heart of colour trademark litigation: how much visual meaning can be privatised before it begins to look like overreach.

What is at stake in these cases is not merely market confusion but normative judgment. [Courts routinely decide](#) which colours are sufficiently neutral, unusual, or innocuous to be owned, and which are too functional, expressive, or culturally saturated to monopolise. This inevitably produces a legal hierarchy of aesthetics. When trademark protection is granted, it signals that a colour's meaning is legible, stabilised, and capable of serving as a reliable marker of brand recognition and consumer loyalty. In doing so, the law treats the colour as sufficiently settled – and sufficiently manageable – to be enclosed within private ownership, even if its broader cultural or social meanings remain contested.

Conversely, when protection is denied, the law implicitly acknowledges that the colour operates within a shared visual vocabulary whose meanings are too diffuse, expressive, or socially entangled to be exclusive. The distinction, then, is not between colours that are truly unproblematic and those that are not, but between those the law is willing to normalise as proprietary signals and those it must preserve as common visual resources.

This matters because colour is not an inert design choice. [Studies consistently show](#) that colour drives perception, recall, and decision-making at a speed and intensity that precedes rational evaluation. People often form judgments within seconds, with colour accounting for a significant portion of that assessment. Trademark doctrine, however, translates this affective power into evidence of source identification. What begins as emotional resonance is reclassified as brand equity and then legally fortified.

The Indian position reflects this unease. While the Trade Marks Act explicitly recognises combinations of colours, [courts have approached single-colour claims with caution](#), insisting on exceptional proof of acquired distinctiveness and non-functionality. Cases like [Colgate v. Anchor](#) and the [contested trajectory](#) of Louboutin in India show how easily courts slide from protecting goodwill to enabling [aesthetic monopolies](#). [Recent decisions](#) granting interim protection over widely used colour schemes have intensified concerns that ordinary visual language is being converted into private property.

This conversion has [downstream effects](#). Even where trademark law formally limits colour protection through safeguards such as the requirement of acquired distinctiveness, the enforcement of colour standards through licensing regimes and platform integrations transforms aesthetic authority into a gatekeeping mechanism. Designers and creators encounter this not as abstract doctrine but as sudden deprivation: colours that feel ubiquitous, ambient, or culturally shared are rendered legally risky through their association with proprietary claims. Our claim is not that trademark law merely reflects pre-existing meaning, nor that colour trademarks are per se unjustified. Rather, we argue that by recognising colour as property—even under doctrinal constraints designed to prevent overreach—the law actively participates in producing a narrative in which certain meanings appear fixed, distinctive, and beyond contestation. In this way, trademark doctrine does more than protect colour; it trains perception by stabilising particular aesthetic associations as legally salient, while rendering others peripheral or invisible. Law does not simply protect colour; it teaches us how to see it.

## Addressing the (White) Elephant in the Room

Whiteness in design history is never neutral. For over a century, it has been marketed as the colour of hygiene, order, purity, restraint, and elite taste, a symbolic vocabulary that continues to circulate almost unquestioned. In fact, Adobe's own colour guide describes white as signalling "[purity, perfection, honesty, cleanliness, and beginnings](#)". These are not just descriptions; they are moral claims that are embedded in a longer visual history that links whiteness to ideas of legitimacy and correctness.

This history makes the present scenario feel particularly charged. In recent years, [far-right and white supremacist groups](#) have increasingly aestheticised whiteness through minimalist visuals, "clean" design, and imagery of purity and order, often disseminated through [social media platforms](#). The visual language is deliberate, as stripped-down palettes, symmetry, and restraint are mobilised to naturalise exclusion while appearing apolitical. Even the recent controversy surrounding the [Sydney Sweeney advertisement](#) reveals how appeals to "good genes" and visual purity have long intersected with racialised hierarchies in American branding.

Against this backdrop, Pantone's elevation of white cannot be read as culturally weightless. When a global standard-setter crowns a shade of white as the definitive colour of the year, it risks reinforcing visual codes already bound up with hierarchy, even if unintentionally so. The difficulty is not that Pantone's choice of white will mechanically result in trademark monopolies, but that it feeds into a visual regime trademark law already relies upon. Courts assessing colour marks must decide what appears distinctive, ordinary, or confusing to the consumer, judgments that depend on perceptions shaped by repeated aesthetic standard-setting across design, platforms, and markets. When whiteness circulates as calm, clean, and universal, it enters legal analysis as background rather than as a contested aesthetic choice. As a result, trademark law appears to merely recognise market meaning, while in practice stabilising a visual hierarchy in which restraint reads as legitimacy and deviation as excess. This has downstream effects: once colour standards are enforced through licensing regimes and platform integrations, designers and creators experience this not as abstract doctrine but as constraint, colours that feel ubiquitous become legally risky. Law does not simply protect colour; by recognising it as property, it helps fix how colour is seen, used, and valued.

### Conclusion:

Trademark law [already makes decisions](#) about public morality, distinctiveness, and cultural legitimacy, even when it presents those decisions as technical exercises in consumer perception or market fairness. By determining which colours may function as exclusive source identifiers and which must remain in the commons, the law does more than regulate markets; it curates visual meaning. These are [normative judgments](#) about what society is willing to see enclosed, stabilised, and rendered commercially inevitable.

If colours shape perception and behaviour, and if law structures the commercial life of colour, then intellectual property cannot be understood as merely reactive. It becomes part of the machinery through which certain aesthetics are normalised, reproduced, and protected from

contestation. Institutions like Pantone do not simply reflect taste; when coupled with legal recognition, they help fix it.

As Ivan Illich warned in [\*To Hell with Good Intentions\*](#), the most enduring forms of harm often arise not from overt coercion, but from systems convinced of their own neutrality. The question, then, is not whether aesthetic standards will shape social life – they already do – but whether the institutions that standardise and monetise them are prepared to take responsibility for the exclusions, hierarchies, and silences those standards inevitably produce.

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