

# Beyond Black & White

Reimagining YSL's Visual Identity Through Nature-Inspired Color

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# Abstract

Yves Saint Laurent has spent decades building an identity around black-and-white style, and that is a big part of why the brand is instantly recognizable. However, in a market where consumers increasingly expect brands to feel alive, personal, and responsive to the world around them, that same style can start to read as static instead of sophisticated. This report presents a report we are calling "Beyond Black & White," where seasonal, nature-inspired colors are added onto YSL's identity while leaving its logo, silhouette, and core heritage untouched. To understand how real people might actually react to this before we take the idea any further, we designed a short qualitative interview study built around five open-ended questions and spoke with five fashion design students from Raffles International College, Bangkok. This report goes on to describe what they told us, alongside how those reactions line up with existing branding research and comparable real-world cases, most notably Louis Vuitton's collaboration with artist Takashi Murakami. We also introduce a companion product concept, a reversible outerwear piece with a monochrome heritage side and a seasonal color side, as a concrete way to test the idea. Finally, the report evaluates the strengths of the concept, the parts that are still only hypothetical, and what would have to be true if a brand such as YSL were to actually proceed with something like this.

# Introduction

Yves Saint Laurent has long built its identity around controlled, timeless design. Since the 1960s, pieces such as the tuxedo jacket for women, paired with its signature black-and-white palette and YSL monogram, have become iconic. By avoiding quick colour fads, the brand stays recognisable across generations.

Today's luxury market is changing. Younger customers want brands to feel fresh and responsive, not stuck in old patterns. Louis Vuitton's 2003 collaboration with Takashi Murakami is a good example: the brand reimagined its classic monogram in new colours, attracting younger buyers without losing its existing audience.

This inspires our proposal for YSL. We do not suggest a full rebrand. Instead, we propose adding seasonal, nature-derived colours to its classic black-and-white base: rose red from flower buds, dusk blue from evening skies and warm gold from autumn light. The logo, silhouette and core brand rules stay unchanged; only the overall mood shifts with the seasons, just like nature.

We also propose reversible outerwear. One side keeps YSL's classic sharp black-and-white style; the flip side uses the seasonal colour palette. Wearers can choose their look each day, so the brand does not force a single identity.

Many heritage luxury brands face the same challenge: how much they can evolve without losing themselves. We believe testing ideas with real audiences works better than only relying on designer intuition. This plan is not final. We designed a short interview study to test its appeal. This report explains our method, results and what early feedback could mean for future development.

# Method

This project uses qualitative open-ended interviews as the research method. It is a small-scale exploratory study to collect opinions on adding nature-inspired seasonal colours to YSL, without large-scale quantitative surveys. The proposal includes the reversible garment concept and the before/after illustration shown below, is an exploratory student design concept and is not an announcement, product, or endorsement from Saint Laurent.

## Participants

Five participants, all fashion design students from Raffles International College, took part in the interviews. The sample size is small because this is a student group project rather than a commercial research study. We chose this group rather than recruiting general consumers because students studying fashion design already have the visual literacy to evaluate a branding concept critically, they think about heritage, silhouette, and color the way a design house would, and as an age group they sit close to the younger luxury consumer YSL would most need to win over with a concept like this.

## Interview procedure

Participants were recruited informally at Raffles International College. Each participant was told the purpose of the interview, that their responses would be used anonymously in this report, and gave verbal agreement to take part before answering. Five open-ended questions were used. The before/after illustration were shared alongside Question 2, and participants answered Questions 2 through 5 with that illustration available to refer back to, while Question 1 was answered first, before the illustration was shown. Full interview questions can be found below.

# Data analysis

All interview responses were grouped into four main themes: views on YSL's classic identity, acceptance of new seasonal colours, opinions on reversible garments, and views on what would make a change like this feel authentic versus opportunistic. Within each theme we looked specifically for points of agreement as well as disagreement between participants, rather than only summarizing the majority view. However, it is important to note that their feedback came from individuals trained to analyze design and brand strategies, so it might not completely show how an average consumer would view the same situation.

**Question 1: When you think of YSL, what comes to mind first — words, colors, feelings?**

This opening question is intentionally broad and asked before participants see any of our concept work. It establishes a baseline for how people currently perceive the brand, which we need in order to later judge whether our proposed changes feel like a natural evolution or a break from that perception.

**Question 2: (After showing the before/after illustration) What's your first reaction to this reimagined version?**

This is the gut-reaction question. We're less interested in a considered, analytical response here and more in the immediate emotional read, since that's closer to how someone would actually respond seeing this in a store window or on social media.

**Question 3: Do you think adding seasonal color would make the brand feel more exciting, or would it make it feel less like YSL? Why?**

This question directly tests our main assumption, that color can be added without weakening the brand. Presenting it as a choice between two outcomes, rather than asking a leading "do you like this" question, pushes participants to genuinely consider the compromise rather than just being polite.

**Question 4: If YSL released a reversible piece, one side classic monochrome and one side seasonal color, would you actually want to wear both sides depending on your mood or the occasion?**

This question moves from brand perception to a specific purchase behavior. It's one thing for someone to say a concept is interesting; it's another for them to say they'd actually wear it. This also lets us test the reversible garment specifically, since it's the most concrete product expression of the whole idea. We treat a participant's stated willingness to wear the piece as an indicator of interest in the concept, not as confirmed purchase intent or evidence of real market demand; that distinction can only be tested through actual purchasing behavior, which is outside the scope of this exploratory study.

**Question 5: What would make you trust that this change is authentic to the brand, rather than just a trend for attention?**

This last question gets at the risk we're most worried about: that the concept could come across as a gimmick rather than a genuine evolution. Asking participants what would build their trust, rather than whether they trust it, give us something actionable, specific conditions we could design toward, rather than a simple yes or no.

## **Before & After Illustrations**

## **Reversible Outerwear Illustrations**

# Results

## **Question 1: First impressions of YSL**

All five participants described YSL in similar terms, centered on black, gold, and elegance, before seeing any of our concept work. P1 said the brand brings to mind "black, gold, elegance, luxury, confidence, and timeless style." P3 described it as feeling "classic and a little bit sexy," and P5 called it "elegant but a bit cold... very Parisian, chic, powerful woman." P2's answer was the shortest of the five, simply "fine tailoring," while P4 pointed specifically to "the signature 'YSL' logo itself in a vertical format" as the first thing that came to mind. The consistency across all five responses, even the very brief ones, suggests that black, gold, and restrained elegance are core to how this audience defines the brand.

## **Question 2: First reaction to the reimagined version**

Reactions to the before/after illustration were positive across all five participants, though the degree of enthusiasm varied. P5 said, "I like it. It still feels like YSL but warmer. The colors are not too bright, so it doesn't look cheap." P3 similarly noted "it still feels like YSL but has a more modern feeling." P2's reaction was more casual and immediate: "woah that would be nice." P4 focused more on inclusivity than aesthetics, noting the reimagined version offers "more colourful options, so less boring to look around," and suggested it could appeal to "people who don't really like black colour." P1 summarized the reaction as feeling "fresh, modern, and interesting while still luxurious." None of the five participants reacted negatively to the illustration itself, though several, particularly P5 and P3, were specific that their approval depended on the color staying restrained rather than bright or cheap looking.

## **Question 3: Excitement versus dilution**

This is where the clearest disagreement in our results appears. Three participants (P1, P3, P5) were straightforwardly positive, agreeing that seasonal color would make the brand more exciting without weakening it, provided the core design stayed the same. P5 put it plainly: "black and white is timeless but sometimes boring. If the color is inspired by nature it still feels classy, not like fast fashion." P4 was also positive on balance but raised a real trade-off, noting that "new people might think it's less like YSL, but existing customers they would still spend their money on them," acknowledging that the brand's perception could shift even if sales didn't suffer. P2 was the most cautious of the five, stating that "adding color would change the audience of YSL, maybe because the YSL people know is more likely black and white," implying a genuine risk to the brand's current identity rather than a purely additive opportunity. This means our core assumption, that color can be added without any risk to brand perception, is not fully supported; two of five participants raised real concerns about audience or identity shift, even while remaining open to the idea overall.

#### **Question 4: Interest in the reversible garment**

This question produced the most consistent enthusiasm of the five, with all five participants responding positively. P5 was the most emphatic: "Yes, 100%. I would wear black for work or formal events, and the color side for weekends or travel. It's like two jackets in one, good value." P1 and P3 both described wearing the monochrome side for formal occasions and the color side for something "more fun." P4 framed the appeal around not needing to buy more clothes, since the piece could "flip and wear it depending on my mood, and will still feel new." P2's response was the briefest but still clearly positive: "yes, absolutely." As noted in the Method section, this enthusiasm reflects stated interest in the concept rather than confirmed purchase intent.

#### **Question 5: What would make the change feel authentic**

In Question 5, students were very detailed and critical in this part, which is what we anticipated because of their background in design. P3 said the design "still needs to keep YSL's main identity, like the silhouette, logo, and elegant style," and P5 agreed that authenticity depends on the brand keeping "the logo and the cut the same," while explaining "the story behind the color, like where it comes from in nature." P1 and P2 echoed this, tying authenticity to "signature style, quality, and craftsmanship" (P1) and to the color change being "genuinely thoughtful and didn't change the original design element and language" (P2). P4 diverged noticeably from this group. Rather than emphasizing preservation, P4 argued it's "essential for brand to just try to attract more young people like Gen Z... rather than sticking it to their original identity no matter what," suggesting that appealing to a new audience should take priority over preserving the current identity if the two are in tension. This is a genuine point of disagreement in our data: four of five participants defined authenticity through preservation of existing brand elements, while P4 defined it through relevance to a new audience, even at the cost of the original identity.

# Discussion

Collectively, these results indicate that the core idea, adding nature-inspired seasonal color without changing YSL's logo or silhouette, was well received by most participants, but it was not unanimous, and the disagreement that emerged is worth taking seriously rather than treating as noise. Most participants, particularly in response to Question 5, defined authenticity as strict preservation of existing brand elements alongside a genuine, explainable color story. P4's answer to both Question 3 and Question 5 pulls in a different direction, prioritizing audience growth over identity preservation, and P2's caution in Question 3 raises a real risk that color, even if additive in our own framing, might still be read by some current customers as a shift away from what they associate with the brand. Rather than resolving this tension, our results suggest both views exist within even a small, design-literate sample, and a brand actually pursuing this idea would need to weigh which group it is optimizing for.

This aligns with Johansen and Gregersen (2024), who argue that a visual identity has to evolve alongside changing contexts to remain genuinely authentic. Most of our participants' responses support that idea, provided the evolution is gradual and explainable; P4's response complicates it slightly, suggesting that for at least some viewers, evolution toward relevance can be valued even above continuity with the past. That's a meaningful nuance our original framing didn't fully anticipate, and it shapes how we had actually recommend executing this concept if it moved forward: less as a single fixed formula, but more as a gradual rollout that can be evaluated and adjusted based on real reception.

The Louis Vuitton and Murakami comparison holds up reasonably well against this more nuanced picture. What made that collaboration succeed was not just that the colors were attractive; it was that LV kept the underlying monogram completely intact and treated the colorful version as an addition to the existing product line, not a replacement for it. Customers who wanted the classic brown monogram could still have it. Customers who wanted something louder had a new option. Our reversible garment concept follows the same logic at the level of a single product: instead of two separate product lines, one garment holds both identities, and the customer decides which one they want to present on a given day. Notably, this design may directly address the tension raised in Question 3 and Question 5, since it does not force a choice between the two participant viewpoints; a customer who values preservation can simply wear the monochrome side, while a customer drawn to color has that option too, without either group's version being discontinued.

If a brand were to actually build this reversible piece, several practical assumptions would need to be validated that our interviews did not test. The concept assumes double-faced construction, such as bonded or double-woven fabric like double-face wool or silk faille, with fully finished seams on both sides so no raw edges show when the garment is reversed, and a lining-free or minimal-lining structure to keep it wearable in either orientation. These techniques are standard in reversible outerwear but are more labor and fabric intensive than single-sided construction, and typically increase production cost relative to a comparable non-reversible piece.

It is also worth being honest about where this study itself is limited. Five interviews is a small sample, and all five participants are connected to the same fashion college, which means we captured one specific kind of perspective, informed, visually literate, and design-trained, rather than a broad cross-section of YSL's actual customer base, which spans different ages, cultural backgrounds, and income levels. Design students also are not necessarily representative of luxury spending behavior; someone can find a concept visually compelling as a student and still not be the person actually buying it, which is why we have been careful throughout this report to describe Question 4's results as stated interest rather than demand. There is also a meaningful difference between what someone says they would want in an interview and what they would actually do with their money in a store, so these responses should be treated as directional rather than conclusive. Beyond the research itself, the concept carries practical business risk: seasonal rotations and reversible construction both add production complexity and cost.

None of these limitations mean the idea isn't worth pursuing. They mean it's worth pursuing carefully, starting small, and treating this interview study as step one of a longer process rather than a finished validation. Given that even a small, sympathetic, design-trained sample produced real disagreement about how far the brand should bend toward color and a new audience, a genuinely limited pilot, one product, one season, positioned honestly as an experiment, seems like a more appropriate next step than a full rollout.

# Conclusion

YSL's black-and-white identity is one of its strongest assets, and nothing in this proposal argues for abandoning it. What we're proposing is narrower and, we think, lower-risk than a rebrand: layering a seasonal, nature-inspired color system on top of the brand's existing heritage, with a reversible garment as the clearest way to let customers experience both sides of the brand at once, literally.

Because an idea like this is easy to fall in love with from the inside, we built a small interview study around five questions and spoke with five fashion design students from Raffles International College before treating the concept as anything more than a proposal. Most participants responded positively and defined authenticity through preserving the brand's existing elements, but not all of them agreed; two participants raised real concerns, one about the brand's identity shifting in the eyes of current customers, and one arguing the brand should prioritize a new audience over preserving its original identity if the two come into conflict. Combined with comparable cases like Louis Vuitton and Murakami and general research into how heritage brands maintain authenticity while evolving, this suggests the concept has real potential, with the reversible garment as its most compelling and least divisive expression, but only if the color story is introduced gradually, explained honestly, and tested further before any larger commitment.

The next step, beyond this report, is straightforward: widen the interview pool beyond design students to general consumers across different markets, and use whatever gaps show up between the two groups to refine the concept before it goes any further. A brand doesn't have to choose between timeless and alive. With the right pacing and the right story behind it, it can be both, and let the person wearing it decide which one they need that day.

# References

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