



Sound symbolism effects across languages: Implications for global brand names

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ABSTRACT

Selecting good brand names for products is a critical step for marketers, and many aspects of a brand name influence brand perceptions. Three experiments investigated the effects of phonetic symbolism (the impact of sound on meaning) on brand name preference, the extent to which these effects generalize to other languages, and the processes that underlie these effects. When choosing brand names, French-, Spanish-, and Chinese-speaking participants who were bilingual in English preferred words in which there was a match between the phonetic symbolism of the words and the product attributes. These results were unaffected by whether participants completed the study in their first or second language, by second-language proficiency, or by whether the Chinese language representations were in logographic or alphabetic form. These findings replicate those of Lowrey and Shrum (2007) and indicate that phonetic symbolism effects for brand name perceptions can generalize across languages, and thus suggest that marketers may be able to embed universal meaning in their brand names.

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1. Introduction

Selecting good brand names for products is a critical step for marketers. Good brand names can enhance memorability, create favorable images, and increase preference for products, and they are an important component in building brand equity (Aaker, 1996). Poor brand names can of course have the opposite effect, with the Ford Edsel as a case-in-point: The pervasive dislike for the brand name has been implicated as a major reason for the failure of the brand (Klink, 2000). It is thus no surprise that the construction and testing of brand names is itself a big business (Kohli & LaBahn, 1997).

The brand naming process is made more difficult by the globalization of markets. Fortunately, commonalities between languages sometimes make it possible to derive benefits from the same brand name in multiple markets. For example, the L'Oreal brand *Hydrovive* has a similar meaning in French and English because the two languages share the letter combinations of the morphemes *hydro* and *vive*, as well as their respective meanings – moisture and life (Lerman, 2007). However, in many cases, desirable brand names in one market may be detrimental in another.

Brand name challenges are magnified further when Western brands are introduced into a market like China, where the language

is based on an entirely different writing system. Consider, for example, the Hydrovive brand in China. The combination of sounds does not map onto the same meanings, or perhaps any meaning, as they do in English and French. In such cases, the marketer must make a choice (Zhang & Schmitt, 2001). One option is to translate the name into Chinese, thus abandoning the sound, to find a name with a similar meaning. The other option is phonetic translation or transliteration, abandoning the meaning to maintain the sound. A third (but more difficult) option is to translate phonosemantically; that is, to translate sound with meaning (Dong & Helms, 2001). Thus, most firms must choose between maintaining the phonetic brand sound and preserving the meaning of the brand name (Francis, Lam, & Walls, 2002; for a review, see Zhang & Schmitt, 2007).

In the examples mentioned, the phonetic qualities pertain to preserving the sound of the name across translations. However, what if the actual sound of the name itself conveys meaning? Moreover, what if the extent of this effect differs across languages? If so, these effects have important implications for considering the sound of the word when constructing new brand names, as well as for the translation strategies that might be adopted. In this study, we investigate this concept and its implications for brand name construction. Numerous studies in psycholinguistics suggest that sounds convey meaning apart from their semantic connotations, a concept referred to as phonetic symbolism or sound symbolism (for a review, see French, 1977). Recent research in marketing has demonstrated that phonetic symbolism has implications for brand name perceptions and preferences (for a review, see Shrum & Lowrey, 2007). However, the extent to which these findings generalize to other languages and writing systems has not been sufficiently addressed, which is clearly

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crucial for applying previous findings to international brand naming contexts.

To address this issue, we report a study that is a replication of previous work (Lowrey & Shrum, 2007), but one whose context is relevant to global brand name construction. Specifically, we investigate the effects of phonetic symbolism across multiple languages, including one with a non-alphabetic writing system (Chinese logographic). Our study uses a bilingual context by testing whether the effects also occur in a consumer's second language and tests whether the effects vary by second-language proficiency. The international context of the investigation allows us to generalize brand name construction recommendations to global marketing and advertising situations.

2. Theoretical development

2.1. Phonetic symbolism and brand name development

Phonetic symbolism refers to a non-arbitrary relation between sound and meaning. It suggests that the mere sound of a word, apart from its actual definition, conveys meaning. Research supporting the notion of phonetic symbolism has shown that the distinct sounds resulting from different letter combinations are consistently associated with the magnitude of concepts such as size, weight, speed, and hardness, at rates above those predicted by chance (French, 1977). For example, front vowel sounds (such as the [i] vowel sound in *pip*), in which the tongue is positioned toward the front of the mouth, are associated with perceptions such as smaller, faster, brighter, and harder, whereas back vowel sounds (in which the tongue is toward the back of the mouth, as with the [ä] vowel sound in *pop*) are associated with perceptions such as larger, slower, darker, and softer. Similar associations have also been documented for consonants (Klink, 2000).

Recent research has extended the concept of phonetic symbolism to brand name perceptions and preferences. For example, when presented with fictitious brand names, people perceived names with back vowels to be associated with concepts such as thicker (ketchup), darker (beer), and creamier (ice cream) compared to names with front vowel sounds (cf. Klink, 2000; Yorkston & Menon, 2004). More recent research has extended these findings to show that brand attitudes and preferences can be enhanced when the fit between the phonetically induced perceptions of a brand name and the product's attributes is maximized. Lowrey and Shrum (2007) constructed fictitious brand names that varied only by one vowel, which represented the manipulation of the front/back vowel sound distinction (e.g., *tiddip* vs. *toddip*). Relative to back vowels, front vowel sounds are perceived to be faster, smaller, sharper, cleaner, and crisper. Consistent with the phonetic symbolism hypothesis, front vowel sound words were preferred over back vowel sound words, by approximately a 2–1 margin, when participants were asked to choose a brand name for a convertible or a knife. However, the opposite was true when participants were asked to choose a brand name for an SUV or a hammer – again by approximately a 2–1 margin.

Although research on phonetic symbolism and brand names suggests that the sounds of brand names influence brand name preferences, there are clear limitations of these studies that inhibit their applicability to international contexts. These limitations include the fact that the majority of research has been conducted only in English and in the United States, has used only alphabetic writing systems, and has not accounted for possible language proficiency effects when the brand name is foreign-sounding or presented in a second-language context.

2.2. Hypotheses

To address these shortcomings in the literature, we conducted a replication of Lowrey and Shrum (2007), but varied a number of

factors to test the extent to which the findings generalize across situations that are applicable to international brands. The primary hypothesis we tested is that particular words will be preferred as brand names when the phonetic connotations of the words are consistent with the product attributes. We also varied the language in which the study was presented (English, Spanish, French, and Chinese), whether the language was the first or second language for bilingual speakers, and for Chinese language administrations, whether the writing system was alphabetic or logographic. We also measured language proficiency. For all of these language factors, our expectations were less clear. First, although phonetic symbolism effects have been noted in several languages (Ulman, 1978), it is not clear whether the magnitude of the effects is similar across languages (Brown, 1958; Sapir, 1929). Second, although fluent and non-fluent speakers process second-language information differently (Luna & Peracchio, 2001; Zhang & Schmitt, 2004), it is not clear whether such processing differences influence phonetic symbolism effects. Third, theorists hold differing views on whether phonetic symbolism effects should be observed for logographic word representations (cf. Chua, 1999; Fang, Horng, & Tzeng, 1986; McCusker, Hillinger, & Bias, 1981; Perfetti & Zhang, 1991).

3. Experiments 1a–1c

3.1. Method

Data collection was conducted in three countries (Experiments 1a–1c) to test our hypotheses. The experiments represented a close replication of Lowrey and Shrum (2007), which crossed vowel sound with product category. Spanish-, French-, and Chinese-speaking participants who were fluent in English expressed preferences between brand name pairs that differed only in their primary vowel sound (front vs. back) and did so as a function of product category. In addition, Chinese-speaking participants received brand name stimuli that were constructed using either alphabetic letters or logographic symbols. We also manipulated the languages in which the experiments were completed – whether participants completed the experiment in English or a different language – and we measured their proficiency in the two focal languages.

3.1.1. Participants, procedure, and measures

Participants in Experiments 1a–1c spoke French, Spanish, or Chinese and were bilingual in English. Participants in Experiment 1a ($n=106$, 58 women, 47 men, 1 missing; $M_{age}=23.7$ yrs., $SD=2.57$) were undergraduates at a French university, participants in Experiment 1b ($n=88$, 39 women, 48 men, 1 missing; $M_{age}=23.6$ yrs., $SD=5.53$) were undergraduates at a university in the United States with a substantial proportion of Hispanic students, and participants in Experiment 1c ($n=181$, 104 women, 77 men; $M_{age}=31.8$ yrs., $SD=7.56$) were Chinese participants who were recruited by students in a graduate research course at a university in Taipei.

Participants in all three experiments received the same set of stimuli in the form of questionnaires that differed only in the language in which they were administered. Participants were told that they were participating in a study of brand names. In the first part of the questionnaire, participants were presented with a series of six word pairs (due to translation errors, only four word pairs were used in Chinese logographic conditions). Each word pair differed only by one vowel, which represented the phonetic symbolism manipulation of front versus back vowel sounds. Artificial words were used to avoid semantic associations. Although the artificial words are technically not translatable because they have no meaning, the instructions were translated across languages, a process that was expected to prime that language's pronunciations and sound associations. The order of presentation was counterbalanced, and all words were evaluated separately by individuals who were bilingual in

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