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Phonetic Symbolism and Brand Name Preference

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Phonetic symbolism refers to the notion that the sounds of words convey meaning apart from their semantic connotation, and research in this area has a long history. A number of researchers have shown that certain vowel sounds (e.g., the ih in “mill”) convey certain impressions (e.g., small, fast) whereas other sounds (e.g., the ah in “mall”) convey other impressions (e.g., large, slow; see Sapir 1929). Recent consumer research has sought to apply these notions to the phonetic symbolism of brand names (Klink 2000; Lowrey, Shrum, and Dubitsky 2003; Yorkston and Menon 2004). In two of these studies, researchers have shown that specific vowel sounds convey perceptions related to size, taste, and attractiveness (Klink 2000; Yorkston and Menon 2004). These studies have also shown that names in which phonetic symbolism compliments the
product category (e.g., creamy ice cream, Yorkston and Menon 2004; soft shampoo, Klink 2001) are preferred over brand names without such complimentarity.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Phonetic symbolism refers to the notion that the sounds of words convey meaning apart from their semantic connotation, and research in this area has a long history. A number of researchers have shown that certain vowel sounds (e.g., the *ih* in "mill") convey certain impressions (e.g., small, fast) whereas other sounds (e.g., the *ah* in "mall") convey other impressions (e.g., large, slow; see Sapir 1929). Recent consumer research has sought to apply these notions to the phonetic symbolism of brand names (Klink 2000; Lowrey, Shrum, and Dubitsky 2003; Yorkston and Menon 2004). In two of these studies, researchers have shown that specific vowel sounds convey perceptions related to size, taste, and attractiveness (Klink 2000; Yorkston and Menon 2004). These studies have also shown that names in which phonetic symbolism compliments the product category (e.g., creamy ice cream, Yorkston and Menon 2004; soft shampoo, Klink 2001) are preferred over brand names without such complimentarity.

One explanation for these findings is the front/back distinction for classifying vowels, which refers to the highest point of the tongue when pronouncing a sound. For example, the highest position of the tongue is more toward the front of the mouth for *bee* than for *bin*, and more toward the back for *boot* than for *bin* (Klink 2000). Klink found front vowels conveyed meanings of smaller, quicker, sharper, whereas back vowels conveyed the opposite qualities of larger, slower, duller.

What has not been investigated in a marketing context is whether there are vowel sounds that are generally perceived as positive or negative (regardless of attribute congruence). In a recent study of the names of political candidates, there was indirect evidence for such an effect (Smith 1998). Smith hypothesized that certain vowel sounds are often used to express disgust (e.g., phooey, "eeewww"). Thus, candidates with last names containing such sounds (e.g., Dewey, Buchanan) might be less favorably perceived than other candidates. Using county election rosters, Smith found that 73% of favorably-named candidates won their elections.

We conducted two experiments that were designed to extend the research on the relation between phonetic symbolism, attribute congruence, and brand name preference, and to also investigate the possibility that certain sounds convey generally negative meaning. In the first experiment, we created a series of fictitious brand names that varied only by one vowel, which consequently varied the sound of the word (whether the sound was a front or back vowel sound). Thus, participants were given word pairs such as nillen/nallen, gimmel/gommel, and so forth, and asked to choose which word they preferred as a brand name. We also varied (between subjects) the product category of the brand such that the attributes connoted by the front vowel sound (small, fast, sharp) would be complimentary for one product category (convertible, knife) but not the other (SUV, hammer). Conversely, the attributes connoted by the back vowel sound (large, slow, dull) should fit with the one category (SUV, hammer) but not the other (convertible, knife). We also varied a different sound that is associated with generally negative meaning (the *ew* sound noted earlier). Within the same study, participants also chose between fictitious word pairs such as pewdex/pawdex, fewtip/fawtip for the same product categories.

We expected that participants would prefer words with front vowel sounds over words with back vowel sounds when the product category was a convertible or a knife, but that they would prefer words with back vowel sounds over words with front vowel sounds when the product category was an SUV or hammer. Thus, we expected a sound by product category interaction. This in fact was what we found. In general, the predicted word preference emerged by about a 2-1 margin and the interaction was significant. However, we expected a different pattern of results when the words contained sounds associated with disgust. In this case, we expected the words with *ah* sounds to be preferred over words with *ew* sounds, regardless of product category. These expectations were confirmed as well, again by about a 2-1 margin.

In the second experiment, we changed the procedure slightly. Rather than varying product category, we instead held the product category constant but primed attributes associated with the product category. We used beer as a product category, and asked participants to choose which word (from the same word pairs used in the first experiment) they preferred for either a "cool, clean, crisp" tasting beer or a "smooth, rich, creamy" tasting beer (this manipulation was between subjects). We expected that words with front vowel sounds would be preferred over words with back vowel sounds for the former description but just the opposite for the latter description. However, as in the first experiment, we expected that the words with *aw* sounds would be preferred over words with *ew* sounds regardless of the primed description. This was in fact the pattern of results we observed.

Conclusion

The results provide strong evidence that sounds of words do convey meaning and that this meaning has implications for brand name preference. We demonstrated these effects in a rigorous and controlled environment. We used non-words in order to avoid previously formed perceptions of words or brand names. We varied only one letter in the word pairs to avoid effects of other linguistic variables. Within this context, we were able to show that the preference for words with particular vowel sounds varied as a function of products and their associated attributes. However, this was the case only when the vowel sounds used were in the form of *im* versus *om* words. When the same distinction was made, but the front vowel sound was also culturally associated with expressions of disgust (*ew* words), the *ew* words were always less preferred than the *aw* words.

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