Brand Names, Numbers and Forgiveness: the Leet Effect

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This article explores branding with numbers and its impact on the decision to forgive. The authors propose that on brand transgression, a leet (i.e., numbers in a name) (vs. alpha) brand name increases forgiveness. This research identifies construal level and emotional arousal as psychological process through lab and biometric studies.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Whether you purchase a revolutionary new garden hose that explodes under pressure, or receive an upgrade that then makes your apps inoperable, there can be moments when customers feel the brand has not met expectations, or even transgressed them. A transgression leads to complaints, poor reviews, and taking business elsewhere. Therefore, forgiveness is an issue most firms will deal with at some time. Among all the ways a firm can work to alleviate the negative impact of a transgression, the brand name has not been investigated. In this research, we explored how a leet (a word with an alphabetic character changed to a numeric digit) brand name, compared to an alpha brand name, affects forgiveness. This research contributes to the literature on forgiveness, branding and inconsistency in a unique and novel way.

We propose that consumers find a leet brand name paired with a utilitarian product as inconsistent, since a leet brand name is perceived to be fun and playful and utilitarian products are primarily associated with instrumental and practical product benefits (Dhar and Wertenbroch 2000). Such inconsistency results in a concrete mindset, because when people are required to form impressions based on inconsistent attributes they tend to think and focus on alternative and concrete details (Cochran 1976; Trope and Liberman 2010). Further, a concrete mindset triggers less emotional arousal (Critcher and Ferguson 2011). In sum, when paired with a utilitarian product, a leet brand name would elicit concrete thinking and result in less emotional arousal than an alpha brand name. Given that forgiveness is an emotion-focused coping strategy that reduces negative emotions after experiencing a transgression (Worthington and Scherer 2004), we propose that after a brand transgression, less emotional arousal with a utilitarian product and leet brand name (vs. alpha) will generate greater willingness to forgive.

We conducted two pretests and four studies to explore these propositions. Pretest 1 employed a 2 (brand name: leet vs. alpha) between-subjects design. Participants in all the studies were randomly assigned to one of the conditions. Participants first saw a picture of a backpack, the brand name, and a product description to manipulate the utilitarian attribute. Next, participants answered questions about whether the brand name is associated with hedonic characteristics. The results confirmed and found that leet brand names triggered an association of being more playful and fun than alpha brand names ($t(130) = 2.50$).

Pretest 2 examined consistency and employed a 2 (brand name: leet vs. alpha) between-subjects design. Participants saw a picture of a backpack, the brand name, and a utilitarian product description and then answered questions about consistency. The results ($t(198) = 3.46, p < .001$) confirmed that consumers perceived a leet brand name paired with a utilitarian product as being more inconsistent than an alpha brand name paired with a utilitarian product.

Study 1 examined how a leet brand name with a utilitarian product leads to changes in concrete mindset and thus increases willingness to forgive. Participants saw a picture of a ballpoint pen, the brand name (leet vs. alpha), and the utilitarian product description. Participants then answered the mindset questions and questions about their willingness to forgive the brand in case the ballpoint pen leaked. The results confirmed the mediating role of mindset between brand name and forgiveness ($\beta = -.12; 95\% CI [–.293, –.027]$).

Study 2 measured self-reported emotional arousal when a leet brand name is associated with a utilitarian product on forgiveness. Participants saw a picture of a pair of shoes, the brand name (leet vs. alpha), and the utilitarian product description and read a transgression story. They then answered questions of emotional arousal and forgiveness. The results showed that a leet brand name paired with a utilitarian product leads to lower emotional arousal than an alpha brand name paired with a utilitarian product, after brand transgressions ($\beta = -.303; 95\% CI [–.58, –.09]$). Emotional arousal successfully mediated the relationship between brand name forgiveness.

In Study 3, we provided a biometric measure of arousal. We measured implicit emotional response using eye tracker hardware with iMotions software. Participants read the brand name (leet versus alpha) for a pencil. Subsequently, they read a story about a brand transgression that the pencil was not biodegradable and did not sharpen well. The results confirmed that a leet brand evoked less negative emotional arousal than an alpha brand ($F(1, 58) = 3.64$).

Study 4 explored the impact of mindset and emotional arousal on forgiveness through serial mediation. We employed a 2 (brand name: leet vs. alpha) between-subjects study design. Participants saw a backpack, brand name, a utilitarian product description, and answered questions about mindset, emotional arousal, and forgiveness. We found that for a utilitarian brand, a leet brand name activated a concrete mindset which evoked less emotion arousal, thus leading to more forgiveness for the brand than an alpha brand name ($\beta = -.06; 95\% CI [–.13, –.007]$).

Theoretically, our work contributes to the literature by extending our understanding of emotional arousal and its impact on forgiveness. This work also extends research in decision making by demonstrating the impact of inconsistency on concrete thinking and its effect on brand forgiveness. Specifically, for construal level, we replicate the impact of emotional arousal. Finally, regarding the theory of brands, we illustrate different types of processing in conjunction with utilitarian products and uniquely provide evidence of the impact of a specific type of brand name on the willingness to forgive. Our exposition of the effects of leet brand names on forgiveness also adds to the literature in consumer cognitive psychology. Understanding how consumers interpret numbers in brand names (or not), and the resulting consumer decision to forgive may provide a new perspective on brand names and forgiveness. This research has far-reaching impact on transgressions that occur at some time for all brands.

REFERENCES


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