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Gender Dimensions of the Alphabetic Characters
with Implications for Branding

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This research explores commonly held beliefs that college-aged consumers living in America expressed about letters of the alphabet. In situations where these consumers make an inference about a product based solely upon its brand name, the beliefs about letters of the alphabet appear to influence beliefs about the product. The informants identified five salient attributes of alphabetic characters: the harshness of the letter's sound, the angularity of its appearance, how quickly the letter is said, the letter's placement in the alphabetic string and the frequency with which the letter is used in the English language. The notions explored in this study reflect a particular culture and may not be readily applied to other groups. However, within this particular socio-economic age group, the beliefs are strikingly consistent.

Although some may claim that "a rose by any other name would smell as sweet," there is substantial research that suggests that listeners or readers endow certain words with meaning that extends beyond the word's literal definition. This research, referred to as phonetic symbolism, has generally investigated inferences that people make based on the sound or appearance of nonsense words. One of the essential qualities of a word or a sound that informants appear to use for their evaluation is the visual or aural sharpness, harshness or percussiveness. In more general settings qualities of angularity, sharpness, roundness and softness have been associated with gender. However, very few of the phonetic symbolism studies focused on the degree to which certain words are perceived as masculine or feminine beyond their literal meaning. The meaning that a word may have beyond its literal definition is often referred to as its "excess meaning."

The excess gender symbolism that words may have is one of the gaps in the broad array of topics covered by existing research. A second area that has not received adequate research is the excess meaning the letters of the alphabet themselves may have. This second area is important because a number of brand names now use letters or sequences of letters that are not rightfully words, for example J-H-L fragrance and WD-40. Previous research has shown that consumers do infer qualities about a product based solely on its brand name. Consequently, this paper will focus on two questions. Do individuals endow the letters of the alphabet with excess meaning or dimensions of gender? And if consumers do endow letters of the alphabet with excess meaning or gender dimensions, do non-word sequences of letters in a brand name for a product influence consumer beliefs about the product?

THE GENDER DICHOTOMY

The dualism that is used within American culture to endow concepts with a gender distinction is widespread. The home is classically the female's domain and outside the home is the male's domain (Sanday 1981; Schneider 1968). Reason, rationality, science and individual goals are frequently associated with masculinity, while passion, intuition, nature and communal goals are frequently associated with femininity (Easlea 1986; Keller 1983; Meyers-Levy 1988; Weinreich-Haste 1986). Further dimensions of the gender duality may be found in one of the instruments that is used to ascertain the level of sex-typing an individual exhibits, the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI). Among the twenty personality characteristics the BSRI classifies as masculine are aggressive, analytical, competitive, forceful, independent, individualistic, self reliant and self sufficient; while among the feminine personality traits are cheerful, childlike, does not use harsh language, gentle, soft spoken, sympathetic, understanding, warm and yielding [italics added] (Bem 1974).

Angularity, sharpness and minimalist design are also masculine characteristics, while roundness, softness, refined design are more feminine. These
classifications appear to hold true whether perceived in product packaging (Schmitt, Leclerc et al. 1988) or in plain geometric figures. To test the gender associations of geometric figures, cross cultural studies have asked respondents to identify stick figures with round and square heads as either male or female. The round headed figure was generally designated the female and the square headed figure the male (Davis 1961). One explanation of this came from Black Elk, an Oglala Sioux elder, who observed that "nearly all the straight lines we see around us are human artifacts put there by human labor" (in Ascher and Ascher 1986, pg. 133), and that the elements of nature, the sky, the seasons, even the whirls of the wind are circular. The association of masculinity with construction and domination of nature (Easlea 1986) and femininity with reproduction and the cycles of nature (Sanday 1981) is consistent with the association of masculinity with angularity and femininity with roundness.

PHONETIC SYMBOLISM

Although elements of the gender duality can be used to characterize qualities of words, as a rule, research in phonetic symbolism has focused on size, angularity, movement, pleasantness and warmth without any attempt to explore their gender associations. Early studies of phonetic symbolism found that certain vowels and consonants sound "bigger" than others and when used in a nonsense word are interpreted by the majority of respondents as referring to a large object (Dogana 1967; Sapir 1929). For example, respondents were asked to match nonsense words such as "kas" and "kis", or "mal" and "mil" with various items of different sizes. The words with the /a/ sound were consistently associated with large objects, and the words with /i/ sounds were associated with small objects (Sapir 1929; Tarte and Barritt 1971). Further studies attempted to eliminate sources of bias such as pronunciation bias by asking respondents to select the one of two opposing geometric figures (e.g., large vs. small, or rounded vs. angular) that fit best with pure tones of varying frequencies. Generally, high tones were associated with angular shapes and low tones were associated with rounded shapes in English speakers (O'Boyle and Tarte 1980). In another study, speakers of Swahili and English associated the more percussive, sharper sounding word, "takete," with an angular geometric figure and the more flowing word, "uloomu," with a rounded geometric figure (Davis 1961).

A study of speakers of English, Japanese, Korean and Tamil (Taylor 1963) demonstrated that informants within a particular language consistently associated certain sounds with certain meaning but that the same sound may have different meaning from language to language. For example, English speakers generally ranked G (as in gate) and K as big sounds and T and N as small sounds, while Korean speakers classified T and P as big sounds and J and M as small sounds. Taylor hypothesized that individuals learn to associated certain sounds with certain concepts when a language such as English uses a sound such as G more frequently for words that mean very big (grand, gross, grow) than for words that mean very small (grain).

PHONETIC SYMBOLISM AND BRAND NAMES

Investigators have asked if the sound of a brand name influences consumer perception of the product with that name. Vanden Bergh (1982) and Vanden Bergh et al. (1984) found that nonsense names beginning with a plosive consonant such as C, D, G (hard), K, P, and T stimulate higher recall and higher recognition than names that do not begin with a plosive. Schloss (1981) calculated that among the first letters of the top 200 brand names in 1979, the letters C, M, P, S, A, T, B, and K appeared with greater frequency than one would expect from a random selection from the dictionary. And Heath, Chatterjee and France (1990) found that as the consonant hardness and vowel pitch increased in hypothetical brand names for toilet paper and household cleaners, so did consumer perception of the harshness of the product. Together these studies suggest that harsher or more percussive brand names may have an intrinsic advantage for recall and recognition. However, if consumers transfer qualities of harshness from the brand name to the product, a harsh brand name will only be an asset if strength and harshness are positive qualities in the product, such as an industrial cleanser. A transfer of harshness could be a liability for a product such as baby powder. This suggests that certain words may be appropriate or inappropriate brand names for specific products.
To investigate this question, researchers have asked if there is something in a word that makes the name just seem "right" to consumers as the brand name for a product. Peterson and Ross (1972) asked consumers to rate the appropriateness of various nonsense words for the brand name of a breakfast cereal and the brand name of a detergent. Although they did not investigate which aspects of a word seemed "right" for a given product class, they did find that consumers consistently identified certain words, such as Whummies, with breakfast cereals and other words, such as Dehax, with detergents. Other researchers demonstrated similar results in the product categories of aluminum foil (Chisnall 1974), ice cream and cameras (Zinkhan and Martin 1987). Respondents have also indicated that certain brand names have personality traits; for example, Hofmeister lager was reported to be "cheeky" and Carlsberg lager was "hardworking" (Alt and Griggs 1988), suggesting that the dimensions of excess meaning may be extensive and complex.

Pavia and Costa (1991) studied the inferences that consumers draw from brand names that contain numbers such as Formula 409 and Product 19. Their informants also indicated that certain brand names have personality traits; for example, Hofmeister lager was reported to be "cheeky" and Carlsberg lager was "hardworking" (Alt and Griggs 1988), suggesting that the dimensions of excess meaning may be extensive and complex.

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With the exception of Pavia and Costa, none of the other studies relating phonetic symbolism to brand names specifically investigated dimensions of gender. However it is clear that consumers infer certain product qualities based on the brand name (see also Holbrook 1981) particularly when it is difficult for the consumer to evaluate intrinsic attributes of the product (Mazursky and Jacoby 1985). Further, consumers use qualities that have strong gender associations such as harshness, angularity, roundness and softness as cues for brand attributes. Consumers also indicate that certain words seem more appropriate as brand names for particular products and for particular geometric shapes. Geometric shapes, in turn, have been associated with gender.

This raises some interesting questions which we shall attempt to explore here. Do the letters of the alphabet have excess meaning, personalities or dimensions of gender? Can the excess meaning, if it exists, be related to attributes that have been identified in other studies such as angularity and aural harshness? And does the excess meaning, if it exists, influence consumers' beliefs about products that use non-word sequences of letters in their brand names?

METHODS

The research reported here was part of a larger project investigating the excess meaning that consumers associated with brand names containing sequences of letters and numbers. The research questions were characterized by their openness; the direction the informants answers would lead was unknown; and the methodologies or instruments previously applied to related issues were inappropriate. Consequently, it was not possible or appropriate to define the hypotheses and specific methodologies which will address those hypotheses prior to data collection. Other researchers facing similar problems have used emergent design successfully (Belk forthcoming; Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989; Costa and Belk 1990; McCracken 1989; O'Guinn forthcoming; Sherry and McGrath 1989; Sherry 1990). The approach used in their studies guided the work reported here.

In brief, the course and methods of research were:

1. Non-reactive research involving a literature search for relevant studies, with particular emphasis on the dimension of gender;
2. Initial qualitative depth interviews with adults and children of both genders to elaborate and clarify further dimensions of the research questions;
3. A further literature search to identify and analyze relevant studies on brand name perception;
4. Eight focus groups conducted to probe notions about brand names and the perceived geometric shapes.
appropriateness or inappropriateness of brand names for various products. The focus group informants were students in an evening course in introductory marketing at a state University. The focus groups contained 6-10 individuals each;

5. Open-ended questionnaires administered to 44 MBA students. Presented with non-word sequences of letters identified as brand names of fragrances, the participants were asked to identify the target market and appropriate position for the fragrance with the given brand name.

While it has been suggested that informant selection for focus groups emphasize homogeneity as much as possible (Bellenger, Bernhardt and Goldstucker 1989, Levy 1979), we deliberately constructed the focus groups to include both genders in order to stimulate discussion and represent divergent perspectives, as advocated by Bessell (1971), Kelman and Lerner (1952), Peterson (1975), Smith (1954), and Tynan and Drayton (1989). Most participants were between 20 and 35 years old and had similar socioeconomic backgrounds.

An open-ended interviewing technique was employed in which further information from informants was elicited primarily through exact repetition of the informant's previous few words in an inquisitive tone. That is, if the informant states, "The dog ran after the bone," the researcher inquires, "after the bone?" Although the moderators were guided by the agenda of issues to be discussed, appropriate moderating techniques were used to avoid leading questions. Alternative ways of asking questions and probing were also used (Douglas 1985), and the discussions between the two moderators following each focus group reduced bias through investigator triangulation.

This research proceeded from an held by Geertz (1975) and others that "man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun" (Geertz 1973, p. 5). The webs of significance form the structure of an individual's culture and are the shared understandings, attitudes, beliefs and meanings that the individual experiences. However, a large portion of the culturally shared meanings and symbols lie outside the "objective awareness of members of a given society" (Barrett 1984, p. 135). Focus groups allow such unexpressed, underlying, culturally based perceptions to be explored. The discussions in the focus groups probed for feelings and attitudes rather than attempting to identify the informants' underlying cognitive processes that lead to particular responses. Consequently, the focus groups' texts reflect the informants' shared cultural beliefs about the various research issues.

Drawing upon the results that emerged in the focus group data, a list of four hypothetical and three actual fragrance brand names were selected. Told only that fragrances may be targeted to either men or women, adults or children, the hypothetical and actual brand names were presented as brand names of fragrances. For each brand name, the participants were asked if they were familiar with the brand of fragrance. Those participants who professed no prior awareness of the brand name were asked to identify the target market for the fragrance and to provide a brief description of how the product should be positioned. These informants had not been exposed to the themes from the focus groups, nor had they participated in the focus groups. Each informant completed the task independently of the other participants. The findings from this exercise expanded the focus group data.

As part of emergent design both relevant and irrelevant dimensions of a phenomena are identified. In our study, the sequence of research activities outlined above consistently produced the same themes in phonetic symbolism and brand name perception. Recognizing the salience of these factors, the remainder of our research program investigated these themes in greater depth. However, we maintained openness in both our research formats and on-going analyses, and alternative explanations emerged and were explored. Thus, as suggested by Kidder (1981), we used both persistent observation and negative case analysis. We also used peer debriefing and member checks at various points in the research process. In addition, to provide a database available to other researchers for analysis, the initial depth interviews and the focus groups were audio-taped.

The data obtained through the focus groups and questionnaires were extremely consistent. Closure is acheived in naturalistic inquiry when, through purposive sampling, redundancy occurs (Lincoln and Guba). The repetitiveness of the data
suggested that "closure" had been achieved and that the data could be effectively analyzed.

The Five Salient Attributes of Alphabetic Characters

The focus group informants affirmed the importance of the aural and visual qualities of the alphabetic characters. Consistent with earlier studies, harsh sounds and angular appearance were attributes associated with masculinity. Letters that sounded softer or appeared more rounded were deemed to be more feminine. However, the informants identified three other attributes of alphabetic characters that were not explicitly recognized in earlier works. The first of these is associated with aural harshness and is the degree to which a speaker can draw out the pronunciation of the letter. The second newly identified attribute is the letter's placement in the twenty six character alphabetic string. The third is the frequency with which the letter is used in the English language. No one attribute is sufficient to identify the letter's excess meaning or gender dimension. Instead, the five attributes appeared to mix together in the informants' minds to provide a composite assessment. All five of these attributes of letters will be discussed below, with most emphasis placed on the three newly identified features.

With regard to aural distinctions, informants contrasted descriptors such as smooth, soft and subtle with hard and harsh. Aurally harsh, blunt, or hard letters, such as X, T, and K, were believed to be emphatic, powerful and masculine. In contrast, softer sounding letters or phonemes like H, CH, Q and S were perceived as weak and more feminine. Vowels, in general, were also found to be softer, more open, weaker and feminine.

According to the informants, the aural softness or harshness of the letters is often, but not always, reinforced by visual appearance. In many cases the visual appearance of a letter appeared to be secondary to its auditory impact in determining the letter's gender associations. For example, H is completely angular, yet it is perceived as much weaker and more feminine than the angular letter, X. The visual appearance of a letter cannot be discounted however, since even harsh sounding letters can be made more feminine by writing them in flowing script. For example, in discussing an advertisement for the product Special K\textsuperscript{1}:

(FG\#5)

M: Well, what's the new Kellog's product where they have the large K, and they show the woman in the bathing suit? [This is an ad for the product.]

F: Special K.

M: And she ends up in the shape of the K [in the commercial], and they change [her] into the word [for the product] itself. Is K feminine?

F: It doesn't sound feminine.

M: But I think, too, it comes back again to the way they've written it.

M: It's not a block K, it's a big scrollly K.

M: And I think that maybe it [Special K] started out having more masculine appeal, and they wanted to change its image.

The aural harshness and the visual angularity dimensions are influenced by the speed with which a speaker can say the letter. For example, in saying the letter S one may draw out the sound in a hissing manner, while the letter X is usually said quickly. Informants associated speed with masculinity, forming a complex connection between harshness, bluntness, and quickness. Softer, rounder, drawn out sounds were feminine, romantic and, according to one male informant, whimpy. The quality of speed was often extended to products whose brand names were spoken quickly. For example, because X was said quickly and sounded "fast"it would be appropriate in the brand name for a product that went fast. On the other hand, W takes a comparatively long time to say and was deemed bulky and industrial, and a poor choice for inclusion in the brand name of a sports car. The letter W has the additional liability of being perceived aurally as a vowel since it sounds like "double U:"

(FG\#1)

M: Now we have a 280 Z. So now we want to show something that's flashy, we're
going to put something like that in there or an XT that sounds really fast or something.

F: And an AW wouldn't really ... it's softer vowels.

(FG#7)

M: Yeah, X marks the spot, like a Z, it's hard, instead of an S, where it flows.

M: Yeah, they're hard sounds too [X and Z], both of them, you know? Like X is a hard sound and Z is a hard sound.

F: Yeah, they're masculine, firm letters.

F: ... I've been thinking about the difference between the letters that I thought were feminine and the letters that I thought were masculine, and it seems like the similarities and differences are in the sounds. P, T, X, Z, B [the masculine letters] they're consonants, and they're sharp consonants. Where [the feminine ones] A, H, G, M, N, mmmmmmm, hhhhhhuu, aaah are much softer sounding than kuh, tuh, puh.

(FG#6)

M: Yeah, if we are going to compare letters, N is masculine, M is feminine.

M: I think M, the way you say M, it ends, I don't know, I think it ends on more of a lower, a lower sound, so maybe ...

F: I think M flows longer, and N just stops.

(FG#8)

M: When you say XY or XZ, they kind of go fast, especially for a sports car, it kind of makes it seem like it's a fast car. That's not like Q.

The speed with which one says a letter was frequently related to the letter's placement in the alphabetic string. Letters at the beginning of the alphabet have a different meaning than those at the end with the alphabet progressing in complexity from beginning to end. In some cases, attitudes towards the various letters were traced to the experience of learning the alphabet. The beginning part of the alphabet is easy for children to learn and these letters (A, B, and C) are said more slowly, are more basic and simple. The informants believed that saying the alphabet gets tedious somewhere around the middle (M and N) and is difficult to learn at the end (from R onward). Consequently, letters that appear earlier in the alphabet are more basic, simple, said more slowly and are potentially more feminine. Letters in the middle are boring or vague, and letters at the end are powerful, dangerous, hard and potentially more masculine.

(FG#3)


M: Simplicity seems to be at the beginning, maybe because as the child goes along and you can get the first part and by the time you get clear to the end, you've gone through everything. It's deep.

(FG#8)

M: It seems to me like, at the end of the alphabet, it seems like everybody wants to hurry and get to the end of the alphabet, and then like Z and X, you really whiz through those.

(FG#1)

F: I think you also connote [sic] that [a brand name like ABC11] with something feminine because women and children are a lot of times grouped together. But usually we think of people, when they're thinking of marketing strategies and they're trying to gear towards children, like you said, they use ABC or 123 or stuff like that. And maybe gear towards women too.

Generally, letters that are less frequently used in the English language were believed to have a "unique"quality, especially the masculine letters X and Z. The letter Q was often grouped together with X and Z as a unique letter although it evokes different feelings. Q is unusual, feminine, somewhat scientific and technical; it does not have
the same feeling of speed, power or masculinity that X and Z have. While Y is at the end of the alphabet, it is used more frequently in our language and it has a homonym that is extremely common, 'why'. Letters that were believed to be common were A, B, N, T, L, and the other vowels:

(FG#3)

M: Actually with letters, also if you use a letter that's not commonly used, it also tends to stick a little longer, like if you use a Q, or an X or a Z versus something like an A that's everywhere.

(FG#6)

F: ... Maybe 'cause they're unusual [X and Z] and that's what their product is, unusual, they have something, you know, out of the ordinary. You don't use Z and X in every single word you write, like you do A's and B's.

(FG#2)

F: Which is why I think the X and Z are kind of unique letters so they're put on cars or something to show that they stand out.

M: ... Q seems scientific to me.

F: ... You have to think harder at Q.

M: Like what about M and N. Those are boring.

Finally, when attempting to describe why a certain letter had particular qualities, the informants repeatedly used words beginning with the letter to describe the letter. This lends support to the hypothesis that speakers associate specific sounds with the concepts that the sound is used to articulate. For example, in discussing the letters S and X [italics added]:

(FG#7)

M: I don't think of R as a soft thing, like s, say s.

F: ...I think it may even be the form of the letters, the shape of the letters.

M: It's more shapes than angles.

M: Because of the shape and the way it sounds, the words say sensual, sexy [all of this said in a smooth, low voice].

(FG#8)

F: I see that [X] a lot on cars, and it sounds like sex.

F: ...And it could have something to do with when they refer to all the extras on a car, or when they talk about deluxe models, that they all have kind of an X.

COMBINATIONS OF LETTERS

The focus group informants also suggested that when letters with opposing attributes are combined, the combination canceled the individual features. Thus, if the feminine letter R "signifies softness and comfort" (FG#7, M), and is combined with the masculine letter X, "The X and the R seem to cancel each other outright" (FG#7, M). These opposing characteristics, with their underlying meanings, can signal to the consumer that he or she is purchasing a "well-rounded" product:

(FG#7)

M: ... That product [Mazda RX7] has two functions; rather than just jet speed, it's got, you know, it's comfortable and pleasurable to be in.

In the following exchange, the informants became engrossed in the idea that letters can express distinct, perhaps human qualities. Again, synergy is created through the combination of two opposing letters:

(FG#7)

M: ... If I were going to give G a personality, it would be very shy in the corner, not being noticed.

M: But as soon as you put it with a T, it
M: Does GT all of a sudden become more strong than just plain T?
M: Well, T is pretty strong; G isn't. But [GT is] a lot stronger than G.
M: ... But does the G even add anything to the T?
M: Maybe it tempers it, maybe it softens it a little bit. T is pretty harsh by itself.

Additional Gender Associations of A and X

Although not specifically delineated by the informants, the gender dichotomy also underlies the occasional use of A to denote superiority and X to denote quality and power. A is a less sophisticated, simpler letter, and one which is learned early in childhood. In school, a dominant part of childhood and young adulthood, the A is a mark of success and the X is a mark of failure. The informants felt brand names using an A were often items associated with food preparation, a traditional female task. The number most commonly associated with A is '1', the lowest non-negative number. In general, the letter A, which was deemed feminine, and is a symbol for quality in the sense of excellence and superior grading:

M: A is more subtle and has to do with the level of quality. You can associate, like A coming first, you are stressing quality as a major feature of this item.

In contrast, brand names with an X are usually constructed by combining X, perhaps some other letters, and a large number. In these instances, X is sharp, harsh, technical, and fast. By the time a child learns X and Z, learning the alphabet is no longer "fun." It is now serious business, and the child realizes that the alphabet is used to make words, to do things. The informants associated X with fabricated, complex, powerful products. The masculine letter X is also a symbol for quality in the sense of "more is better." That is, when high quality means high performance, superior speed, or more technology, then X is an appropriate indicator of quality:

M: I wouldn't want produce marked with an X.
F: I wouldn't want my milk to be unique, I'd want it to be the same.
M: ...That kind of thing you'd want something that graded A. 'Cause that means, when you're grading something, that means that's quality, whereas X, that's something that's at the bottom of the line. Unless you come to cars when X means ...
M: We're brought up in a school system where the grading system is A to F. A being the best, F being the worst.

BRAND NAMES FOR FRAGRANCES

The brand names of fragrances were selected for the following exercise, in part, because of the approximately 800 fragrances marketed in the United States in 1990, there are thirteen fragrances with non-word alphabetic brand names. Many of the thirteen potential candidates had additional consumer cues, such as Mr. J, Mr. K, and O de Lancome. The three real non-word alphabetic brand names that were selected for this part of the study were KL, MCM and Y. Because the focus groups indicated that combinations of letters may have aggregate meaning, the names K, L, M and C were also of interest. Consequently, two questionnaires were developed. The first presented the respondent with the five brand names: K, L, Y, and MCM. Two of these were
actual brand names (Y and MCM) and two were components of actual brand names (K and L). The second questionnaire used the five brand names: M, C, Y, and KL. Again two names were real (KL and Y) and two were components (M and C). Each time that a fragrance brand name was presented, the respondents were asked if he or she were familiar with the particular brand. All brands were unknown to all of the respondents. Twenty-one participants received the first questionnaire and twenty-three received the second.

A general classification of the target market and positioning that each of the brand names evoked in the respondents is shown in Table 1. The phrase "high end" is used for fragrances that were described as very expensive and for the wealthy; the phrase "mid to high end" is used for fragrances that are moderately expensive and available in department stores; the phrase "low end" is used for fragrances that are generally sold in grocery stores, discount stores, etc. Although the brand name K was deemed an appropriate fragrance for both males and females, as a masculine fragrance it was sometimes associated with wealth (K as an abbreviation for thousand or carat). However, the letter K used alone in a brand name often evoked the image of K-Mart in the respondents, lending a low end aura to the product. The letter L was perceived as overwhelmingly feminine and was often associated with love, elegance, and romance. The complex interplay of alphabetic characters is evident in the evaluation of the brand name KL. The harshness of the letter K was tempered by the letter L. Similarly, the femininity of the letter L was reduced by the letter K. The respondents indicated that as a man's fragrance, KL was for active, macho, powerful, tough men; some associated the name KL with "kill." As a fragrance for females, respondents usually targeted for the professional, on-the-go, independent successful women.

The brand name M was deemed appropriate for males and was judged to be a masculine, macho scent. The brand M could also be used for upper class, ambitious or older women. The brand name C was associated exclusively with women and children and only one respondent indicated that a fragrance with the name C should be targeted at successful women. The less aggressive images associated with the name C were tempered when the letters M and C were combined into the name MCM. The name MCM may be perceived as masculine for a number of other reasons, among these that the three letters look like a monogram and the movie company with a similar name, MGM, uses a male animal (a lion) for its symbol.

The brand name Y was associated with mystery, supporting the association that the focus groups made between the letter Y and the word "why." Y was also associated with youth and with saying "yes," something the respondents felt was a feminine characteristic. In actuality, all three of these fragrances, KL, MCM, and Y, are fragrances for women. Y was introduced in 1964 by Yves Saint Laurent and is a mid to high end fragrance described by the firm as "delicate and subtle" (Fragrance-Foundation 1990). In 1983 Parfums Lagerfeld introduced KL which is described as "seductive gathering of sumptuous flowers, pungent spices and smoldering woods"; in 1989 Michael Cromer LTD. introduced MCM which is "oriental with a topnote of modern fruity wood" (Ibid.).

Two features clearly distinguish this part of the study from the focus group information. First, this questionnaire restricted the respondents to one product category, fragrances. Fragrances rely heavily on marketing and are subject to considerable cultural influences (e.g., someone may feel that fragrances are inappropriate for children regardless of the brand name). However, these results were only meant to provide some additional data to the focus groups and to act as a starting point for future research. Second, the brand names were presented only in written form. Hence, effects such as the aural harshness or speed of articulation might be less important to the respondents than shape or other words that may be evoked by the sight of the letter. In fact, the word association process appeared to be very strong with description of the fragrance user frequently using the letter of the brand name (e.g., macho and masculine for M, and elegant and love for L).

**SUMMARY**

This study asked what commonly held beliefs out informants share about the letters of the alphabet rather than asking why the informant held specific beliefs. As in previous research, we may point to
circumstantial evidence to explain why an attribute such as angularity is masculine or softness is feminine, but no such evidence may stand as absolute proof. Rather than argue this theoretical issue, we have focused on what our informants believe and what this may mean for the naming of products. This study is subject to limitations since the respondents were all students, primarily in the age group 20-35 years old. Most were American; all were living in the United States.

The complex interplay of the five attributes identified by the focus groups may be seen in their evaluation of various letters. The letters that were frequently identified as masculine were X, Z, W and K. The most masculine letter, X, exhibits the "masculine" aspect of each attribute, being angular, harsh sounding, said quickly, at the end of the alphabet and used infrequently in the alphabet. The letter W, which only receives "masculine" ratings for angularity and appearance at the end of the alphabet, is masculine but is not as powerful, dangerous or racey as X. The letter Z, which is angular, the last letter of the alphabet and used infrequently is masculine but without the excess meaning of functionality that W has. The letter K appears in the middle of the alphabet but has the masculine attributes of harshness and of being totally angular and said quickly. The fragrance brand name exercise supported the notion that K, by itself, is not perceived as an elegant feminine brand name. The letters X and Z were uniformly deemed appropriate components of brand names for technical, fast, complex, slightly threatening, male-domain products.

Many of the focus group informants indicated that G (soft), S, O, Q and A were feminine. The letters G (soft), S, and O are all rounded, can be said softly or drawn out and are frequently used. The letter S was deemed somehow "better" than G and O, perhaps because of its placement at the end of the alphabet and its familiarity through extremely common usage. The letter Q was the least feminine of this group, perhaps because of its novelty in the language, its use as the shorthand for "question" and its somewhat technical excess meaning. The letter A has a unique place in the informants' minds due to its place of honor in the alphabet, its early association with superior performance in school, its non-threatening common usage and its association with quality in traditional tasks. The letter A was appropriate for food products or products where excellence was not measured strictly by "more is better." Informants believed that letters with soft sounds were feminine and should be used, for example, in the brand names for personal products. This notion was supported in the fragrance brand name exercise where products named C, L and Y were strongly associated with women.

The data from the fragrance brand names questionnaire suggest that brand names formed exclusively from an alphabetic character may have excess meaning beyond the attributes identified by the focus groups. This meaning can often be traced to other words beginning with a particular letter such as an association of K with Karat or K-Mart, M with macho, Y with "why" and C with children. The excess meaning that comes from using a letter as a stimulus for words beginning with the letter may be at odds with impressions drawn from the attributes identified in the focus group, particularly if the letter is used to identify gender (e.g., M for male, B for boy, W for woman, G for girl, etc.).

Taken as a whole the focus group responses and the fragrance brand name study indicate that consumers perceive excess meaning in the letters of the alphabet. Their beliefs about the letters often have gender dimensions. Further, their beliefs about the letters used in a non-word brand name may extend to the product with that name. This suggests that the consumer evaluation of a product based with a non-word alphabetic brand name may be an extremely complex process relying on deep, culturally based notions with potential gender dimensions. Of course, additional research is needed to further clarify the excess meaning of alphabetic characters.

1The exact source of a quote is given using the following notation: "M" means that the speaker is a male, "F" that she is female. FG#1 means that the discussion took place during the first of the eight Focus Groups. In a series of quotes from one focus group, ellipses at the beginning or the end of a sentence are used to indicate that comments did not follow one another directly, but were nevertheless part of a continuous discussion.
REFERENCES


Peterson, Robert A. and Ivan Ross (1972), "How to Name New Brand Names," *Journal of Advertising Research*, 12 (December), 29 - 34.


Vanden Bergh, Bruce G., Janay Collins, Myrna Schultz and Keith Alder (1984), "Sound Advice

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Perceived Target Market / Position for Fragrances With Various Brand Names

TABLE 1