Effects of Articulatory Suppression on Phonetic Symbolism Effects on Brand Name Preference

L. J. Shrum, University of Texas at San Antonio
Tina M. Lowrey, University of Texas at San Antonio

Recent research suggests that phonetic symbolism—the notion that the sound of a word can convey meaning apart from the word’s actual definition—can influence brand name preference (Lowrey and Shrum 2007). In this study, we show that front and back vowel sounds influence brand name preference, but only when phonetic information is allowed to enter the phonological (memory) store. When phonetic information is allowed to enter the phonological store (by simply having participants read the brand names to themselves), front vowel sounds (which connote attributes such as fast and small) are preferred over back vowel sounds (which connote attributes such as big, powerful) when the product category is a two-seater convertible but the pattern of results is reversed when the product category is an SUV. However, when phonetic information is blocked from entering the phonological store through an articulatory suppression manipulation (counting out loud while reading the brand names), the phonetic symbolism effect is eliminated.

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SESSION SUMMARY

A significant amount of research is beginning to accumulate that investigates the effects of psycholinguistic factors on various aspects of marketing communication (Lowrey 2007). Examples of these factors include phonetic symbolism (effects of sound on meaning), polysemy (multiple meanings), and metaphor, just to name a few. Linguistic theory has also been usefully applied to translations and dual language processing in the context of brand names and marketing communications (Carroll, Luna, and Peracchio 2007; Zhang and Schmitt 2007).

Although attention to the topic of psycholinguistics is indeed increasing, it is nevertheless a fairly recent phenomena, and hence the topic of this special session. In this session, we look specifically at how linguistic factors can impact brand and brand name evaluations.

The first paper, by Jennifer J. Argo, Monica Popa, and Malcolm C. Smith (“Harmony’s Affective Impact on Brand Evaluations”), looks at the affective outcomes when “harmony” between linguistic components of a brand name and auditory stimulation occurs. Across three experiments, Argo et al. show that brand name evaluations are more positive when brand names contain schemes of sound than when they do not, but that this effect is greater under auditory (reading names out loud) than under visual (reading names silently). They also show that these effects transfer from simple evaluations of brand names to evaluations of the brands themselves, even after product usage (tasting ice cream), and are stronger for those with a greater “ear for harmony” compared to those with a lesser ear for harmony.

The second paper, by L. J. Shrum and Tina M. Lowrey (“Effects of Articulatory Suppression on Phonetic Symbolism Effects on Brand Name Preference”), extends previous work on phonetic symbolism effects. That research has shown that sounds of words (e.g., those made via back vs. front vowels) influence preferences for brand names. Brand names for which the attributes suggested by the sound are congruent with the attributes of the product (e.g., brand names whose sounds suggesting small and fast are liked better as names for a two-seater convertibles than as names for an SUV). Shrum and Lowrey investigate a possible boundary condition of this effect by looking at how the extent to which phonetic information enters the phonological memory store influences phonetic symbolism effects. Models of memory (e.g., Baddeley, 1986) indicate that in order for sound to have effects from words that are read, the sound representation of the word must be transferred to the “phonological memory store” in the brain. Research has shown that this effect is automatic for heard sounds but not for sounds that are associated with read words. Thus, the transfer of information into the phonological store can be interrupted through “articulatory suppression,” that is, suppressing the articulation of the read word. Shrum and Lowrey present evidence that when information is able to enter the phonological store (e.g., simply reading a word silently), phonetic symbolism results obtain. However, when the transfer of the phonetic information is blocked through an articulatory suppression manipulation, phonetic symbolism effects are eliminated.

Taken as a whole, the session provides a very focused look at the effects of linguistic factors on brand name perceptions. The findings have important implications for brand-naming strategies and should be of interest to consumer researchers working in the theoretical areas (memory, information processing) as well as the marketing domain areas (e.g., brand names).

ABSTRACTS

“Harmony’s Affective Impact on Brand Evaluations”
Jennifer J. Argo, University of Alberta
Monica Popa, University of Alberta
Malcolm C. Smith, University of Manitoba

There has been a significant increase in the rate of growth of brand names being introduced to the marketplace. For example, in 1999 over 290,000 applications for trademarks were submitted in the United States, almost double the number introduced five years earlier (PTO Today 2000). Given that brand names are capable of enhancing awareness and creating favorable impressions for a product (Aaker and Keller 1990; Keller 1998), and that some product failures have been attributed to ineffective brand names (e.g., Ford Edsel; Hartley 1992; Klink 2000), it is not surprising that companies spend millions of dollars in naming and maintaining their brands.

Recently, marketing researchers have begun to explore a variety of strategies that companies may use to create effective brand names. Some naming strategies produce brand names that explicitly convey information about the product (e.g., Lowrey, Shrum, and Dubitsky 2003). Other naming strategies may result in names that are not as obviously connected to the product’s features.

One example would be the use of sound symbolism which focuses on the linguistic structure of brand names and its impact on consumer perceptions (e.g., Brendl et al. 2005; Klink 2000, 2001; Yorkston and Mello 2005). While research has demonstrated that linguistic characteristics of brand names can cognitively impact product evaluations (e.g., Lowrey and Shrum 2008; Yorkston and Menon 2004), in the present research, we suggest that affect may also be influential. Furthermore, we propose that affect may arise on exposure to a brand name due to the harmony (i.e., the enjoyment that arises from a word or groups of words due to their sound, rhythm, and/or rhyme; Ferguson 1961).

Across three experiments we test the proposition that harmony elicits positive affect which in turn favorably impacts consumers’ evaluations of brands. To achieve this, we test whether evaluations are influenced by two factors believed to be fundamental to creating harmony during brand exposure: the linguistic structure of the brand name evaluated (i.e., the name either contains a rhetorical scheme or not) and the sense that is stimulated (i.e., visual or auditory). Overall we predict that consumers will evaluate a brand more favorably when it is comprised of a rhetorical scheme of sound and the stimulated sense is auditory. Moreover, we identify a condition under which harmony exists objectively but does not influence affect or evaluations, by measuring consumers’ individual differences in responsiveness to harmony (i.e., the extent to which they have an “ear for harmony”).

Study 1’s objective was to test our prediction using brand names currently available in the marketplace. The brand either contained a linguistic scheme of sound or was neutral. The study instructions were used to achieve the stimulated sense manipulation. Those participants in the auditory condition were asked to read
the brand names that appeared in an experimental booklet out loud while those participants in the visual condition were instructed to read the brand names to themselves. In total, participants evaluated eight different brands (one with a figurative element and one without) from four different product categories. After exposure to each brand name participants indicated the extent to which they liked the brand name. Results revealed that brand name evaluations were higher when the linguistic structure of a brand name included figurative elements (i.e., schemes of sound) as compared to when these elements were absent (i.e., neutral). More importantly, these brands received the highest overall evaluations when the auditory sense was stimulated but did not differ when the brand had a neutral linguistic structure and/or the stimulated sense was visual.

Study 2 aimed to provide a more controlled investigation of the impact of harmonic elements on product evaluations through the creation of two different pairs of brand names (that were matched on length and sound characteristics). One brand name in each pair contained an element of figurative language whereas the other brand name did not (i.e., was neutral). Participants were provided with a sample of two purportedly different brands (one brand had a figurative element while the second did not) of ice cream to evaluate. Prior to testing the samples, participants in the visual condition were shown the name of the first ice cream, tasted it and then repeated the process for the second sample. Those participants in the auditory condition were asked to read the first ice cream name out loud, taste it, and then repeat the process for the second sample. Unknown to participants, the samples were from the same container of ice cream. After tasting both ice samples, participants evaluated the brand and indicated their affective reactions to each brand. Results demonstrated that participants had the highest level of brand evaluations and experienced the most positive affect in the auditory condition when the brand name was figurative compared to the other conditions. Finally, mediation analysis provided support for the notion that the effects on brand evaluations were driven by consumers’ positive affect.

Study 3 explored whether the individual difference – responsiveness to harmony – moderated our results. We expected that product evaluations would be higher for those participants high in responsiveness to harmony (since they are easily impacted by harmonic elements) when a brand name is comprised of a rhetorical scheme of sound and the stimulated sense is auditory versus when the brand has a neutral linguistic structure and/or the stimulated sense is visual; differences in evaluations for a product were expected to be attenuated for participants low in responsiveness to harmony. To explore this, study 3 used the same procedure as study 2 except that after evaluating the brands, responsiveness to harmony was measured using the Primary Measures of Music Audition Test (PMMAT). Overall, the results of the analysis were consistent with our predictions. In summary, the present research explores and tests the possibility that exposure to brand names when harmony is created will positively impact consumers’ affect and in turn favorably influence evaluations.

“Effects of Articulatory Suppression on Phonetic Symbolism Effects on Brand Name Preference”
L. J. Shrum, University of Texas at San Antonio
Tina M. Lowrey, University of Texas at San Antonio

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. These sounds derive from phonemes, which are the smallest units of sound (e.g., the sound of the letter “p”). Whether sounds are systematically related to certain meanings or their relation is arbitrary has been debated at least since 400 B.C. In Plato’s dialogue, Cratylus (Plato 1892), Hermogenes and Socrates discuss this very issue. Hermogenes takes the position that the relation is arbitrary, but Socrates disagrees. Socrates concedes that across all words, the relation may sometimes be arbitrary, but that good words are ones in which their sound and meaning are congruent (see also Fitch 1994; Klink 2000). This debate can also be seen in the works of Ferdinand de Saussure (1916), who argues that the relation is arbitrary, and Otto Jespersen (1922), who argues for a systematic relation.

Research on phonetic symbolism has a long history (for a review, see Shrum and Lowrey 2007). Recently, research in marketing and consumer behavior has begun to investigate the implications of phonetic symbolism for brand name perceptions (Lowrey and Shrum 2007; Yorkston and Menon 2004). That research has shown that sounds of words (e.g., those made via back vs. front vowels) influence preferences for brand names. Brand names for which the attributes suggested by the sound are congruent with the attributes of the product (e.g., brand names whose sounds suggest small and fast are liked better as names for a two-seater convertibles than as names for an SUV).

In this paper, we present the results of a study intended to better understand how these effects occur cognitively. Models of memory (e.g., Baddeley, 1986) indicate that in order for sound to have effects from words that are read, the sound representation of the word must be transferred to the “phonological memory store” in the brain. Research has shown that this effect is automatic for heard sounds but not for sounds that are associated with read words. Thus, the transfer of information into the phonological store can be interrupted through “articulatory suppression,” that is, suppressing the articulation of the read word.

We tested this possibility by manipulating whether information was allowed to enter the phonological memory store. We found that when information was allowed to enter the phonological store (e.g., when participants simply read the word silently), the general phonetic symbolism results obtain: participants preferred words as brand names when the concepts connoted by the dominant vowel sound of those words (e.g., fast, small) were consistent with the attributes of the product category (e.g., two-seater convertible) than when they were not (e.g., SUV). In contrast, when transfer of phonetic information into the phonological store was inhibited through an articulatory suppression manipulation (having participants count out loud while reading the brand name), the effects of phonetic symbolism were eliminated.