Hear Is the Thing: the Influence of Sound-To-Writing Correspondence on Brand Name Processing

David Luna, Baruch College, USA
Marina Carnevale, Baruch College, USA
Dawn Lerman, Fordham University, USA

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David Luna, City University of New York, USA
Marina Carnevale, City University of New York, USA
Dawn Lerman, Fordham University, USA

Abstract
Consumer research suggests that the sound of a brand name may influence consumer preferences. We explore how consumer auditorily process novel, non-word brand names and whether spelling the brand name correctly (e.g., when typing the name on a web browser) affects brand evaluations. Building on psycholinguistic research, we present the results of two empirical studies that investigate the underlying mechanisms of sound and sound-to-writing processing. Both phonetic and semantic associations to the auditorily presented brand name can lead to greater spelling accuracy.

A brand name may be a word or a non-word (i.e., a string of sounds that doesn’t exist as a meaningful word, like Google). Consumer research has investigated some aspects of how brand sounds influence brand evaluations (e.g., phonetic symbolism; Lowrey and Shrum 2007; Yorkston and Menon 2004). However, little is known about how consumers process and later use sounds more generally. Moreover, the stimuli typically used to explore the effects of sound on evaluations have been visual, rather than auditory.

We present the results of two studies that explore how brand names are auditorily processed and how transcribing the auditory stimuli affects brand evaluations. Accurate spelling of a brand name presented auditorily (e.g., radio ads) is relevant because of the potential influence of correct spelling on the ability to find the brand (e.g., either online or at stores).

A string of sounds is said to be a “deep” language, in which phonemes (i.e., sound representations) predominantly lack of a one-to-one relationship with graphemes (i.e., a letter or group of letters that represent a phoneme). The sound-to-writing correspondence of a word determines its level of consistency (Ziegler, Stone, and Jacobs 1997). For example, the phoneme /_@f/ corresponds to different graphemes, such as aff and alf. Therefore, the words staff and half have inconsistent sound-to-spelling mappings. Conversely, some phonemes (e.g., /_@g/) are represented by only one grapheme, so they have consistent mappings (ag), used in different words (e.g., tag, rug). This is an important distinction because it affects the process by which sound is transcribed.

There are two main routes to spelling (Coltheart 1981; Morton 1979). Through the direct route, that typically applies to frequently encountered words (Houghton and Zorzi 2003), individuals access the spelling of a word by retrieving semantic/phonological representations of the word stored in memory. When a non-word or an unfamiliar word is met, however, an indirect route occurs—that is, each of the phonemes is individually transcribed into its corresponding grapheme. Therefore, for novel non-word brand names, the consistency of a sound may facilitate their transcription by decreasing its ambiguity.

Non-word spelling might lead, however, to the use of both routes. For example, in cases of lexical priming (a word that sounds like the non-word is presented before the non-word), individuals can relate the non-word to one for which they already have a phonological representation, so the direct route could be used in addition to the indirect route (Cuetos 1993; Seymour and Dargie 1990).

In this research, we suggest that brand evaluations may be affected by the process of spelling the brand name. Successfully solving the spelling task may positively affect brand evaluations so the elaboration consumers engage into stimulates interest. This, however, should only happen for ambiguous (i.e., inconsistent) non-words.

Study 1
Method. Eighty-nine undergraduate business students participated in the study. We designed a 2 (consistency: consistent or inconsistent) x 2 (spelling prime: prime or no prime) between-subjects experiment. Each participant was exposed to eight audio clips, and, after each of them, had up to three trials to spell the brand name correctly. The sum of the number of trials left unused by each participant was utilized to assess one of the dependent variables: accuracy of spelling. Following the spelling task, the other dependent variable, brand evaluation, was measured through a seven-item scale.

Each audio clip provided the following information: product/service featured in the ad, last words in the website ad, and brand (website) name. We manipulated consistency of the brand names using the norms provided by Ziegler et al. (1997). The priming condition consisted of having the last word in the website ad prime (e.g.,...remove the tag) or not prime (e.g.,...remove the paint) the intended spelling for the monosyllabic, non-word brand name that immediately followed (e.g., Pag.com).