



# ASSOCIATION FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH

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## **The “Name-Ease” Effect and Its Dual Impact on Importance Judgments**

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We demonstrate that naming (vs. not naming) a finding elicits feelings of ease, which increase or decrease the finding’s perceived importance depending on whether people are assessing its understandability or memorability. When judging understandability, feelings of ease reduce the finding’s perceived importance. This is because people exert effort to understand important information, and so reversely infer that information requiring effort to understand is important. When judging memorability, feelings of ease enhance the finding’s perceived importance. This is because people recall important information more easily, equating ease with importance. Thus, merely naming a finding enhances or reduces its perceived importance depending on the inferences people make.

### **[to cite]:**

Aparna Labroo, Soraya Lambotte, and Yan Zhang (2010) , "The “Name-Ease” Effect and Its Dual Impact on Importance Judgments", in NA - Advances in Consumer Research Volume 37, eds. Margaret C. Campbell, Jeff Inman, and Rik Pieters, Duluth, MN : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 634-634 .

### **[url]:**

<http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/15021/volumes/v37/NA-37>

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### EXPANDED ABSTRACT

Existing research has established that subjective feelings of ease can arise while processing a target stimulus. For instance, prior exposures to a target stimulus or improved clarity of visual features of the stimulus can result in the perceptual features of the stimulus being processed more easily, and increased expectancy of seeing the stimulus can make processing of its meaning feel easy (Lee and Labroo 2004; Reber et al. 1998; Zajonc 1980). It has further been argued that because things that are personally relevant and important are processed more easily, once feelings of ease arise people mistakenly make a reverse inference that ease must equal personal relevance and importance. Thus, feelings of ease can increase perceived importance of a target stimulus, its perceived relevance, and liking towards the stimulus.

In the current research we argue that merely naming (vs. not naming) a finding also elicits subjective feelings of ease. But in contrast to existing studies, we further show that the impact of ease on perceived importance of the finding can depend on whether people are making inferences about how understandable or how memorable the finding is. In particular we suggest that feelings of ease that arise from merely naming a finding, might be associated with how memorable or how understandable the presented information is. If people associate ease with how memorable the information is, the finding appears more important. This is because things that are important are usually recalled more easily, but people also mistakenly reverse this inference. Thus, information that feels easy-to-recall is also judged more important. However, if alternatively, ease is associated with understanding the information, the finding appears unduly simplistic, less novel, and unimportant. This is because usually people exert more effort to understand information they think is important, and they thus equate importance with effort-to-understand. But when trying to understand information, people also invert this relationship and infer that feelings-of-effort imply importance. In this case, feelings of subjective difficulty, not ease, increases the perceived importance, and naming a finding makes it feel easy-to-understand and trivial. We test these effects across five experiments.

Across five experiments, participants evaluate a popular research finding: a psychological effect, an economic principle, a jury decision, or a medical condition. In experiment 1, we established people’s natural inference in evaluating a finding’s importance. Participants evaluated a psychological effect or an economic theorem that was named or not named, and endorsed which strategy they had used in evaluating importance afterwards. We found that naming a finding always increased feelings of ease, but its effects on importance were driven by the extent to which participants reported having judged the finding for memory or understanding.

In the subsequent experiments, we manipulated ease of processing by either associating a name with the finding or not, and attributed those feelings of ease either to recalling or understanding the information. Specifically, experiments 2a-b examined the presence of a name (vs. no name) atop the descriptions of a jury decision or a psychological effect, and resulted in participants finding the information more important when making a memory-based evaluation in which participants were primed to focus on recall but less important when making a stimulus-based one in which they were primed to focus on understanding. A post-test revealed that includ-

ing the name increased the perceived ease-of-processing. However, depending on whether ease was associated with recalling or understanding the information, ease increased or decreased, respectively, the perceived importance of the findings. In experiment 2b, we further explored this interaction and found that ease of processing mediated the effect such that ease-of-recall was positively correlated with importance, while ease-of-understanding was negatively correlated with importance.

Finally, in experiments 3a-3b we extended these findings to judgments pertaining to the importance of funding research for a medical condition. We additionally investigated who is more likely to fall prey to such reverse inference rules: people who pay more or less attention to information. We predicted that although low attention people usually fall prey to heuristics, in the case of these particular inference rules it is people high in attention who will more likely fall prey to such rules. This is because people who pay more (vs. less) attention to information are also those people who are more likely to put effort to understand information that is important. Thus, they will be more likely to associate effort-to-understand with importance. Also, ironically, it is these high attention people who will be more likely to recall important information more easily, because they probably attended to the important information more carefully when they came across it. Thus, for them, ease of recall is also more likely to be associated with perceived importance of information. We found that this is indeed the case.

As a set, these studies thus demonstrate that merely naming a finding always increases ease of processing the information, but ease can increase or decrease perceived importance of that finding depending on whether decision makers associate ease with memory or with understanding. Thus, the direction of impact of naming a finding on its perceived importance is moderated by the inference rule people use (memorable or understandable) and the extent of influence of naming a finding on its perceived importance is mediated by the feelings of ease that result from naming the finding.