Buyer Beware of Your Shadow: a Dual Process Explanation of Name Letter Branding and Avoidance

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It has been shown that people subconsciously gravitate toward brand names that resemble their own. For example, Matt prefers Mars Candy. We propose a process explanation that casts this effect as automatic, and suggests the opposite is possible, that motivated consumers can be repelled by name letter brands. Drawing from literature on self-protection and the heuristic-systematic model, we hypothesize that motivation determines the direction of influence of name letter brands. We show that experimental participants with the motivation and ability to self-protect avoid name letter brands, while those whose ability to self-protect has been subverted persist in their name letter brand preference.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/15058/volumes/v37/NA-37

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EXPANDED ABSTRACT

According to the work on implicit egotism (Pelham, Carvallo and Jones 2005) and name letter branding, people subconsciously gravitate toward others, professions, and brands (Brendl et al. 2005) with names that ever so slightly resemble their own. For example, Denise has a propensity to fall in love with Dennis, become a Dentist, and prefer Dove chocolate. These tendencies are in line with many other effects in which people prefer things associated with the self (e.g., mere ownership; Beggan 1992). What is counter-intuitive is that these tendencies extend to negative performance outcomes (Nelson and Simmons 2007). In other words, Denise is also likely to earn more D grades. It has been proposed that this paradox arises because preference for name letter objects is an automatic effect. Can consumers defend against their own vanity?

As with other automatic effects, we suggest there are boundaries to name letter branding and implicit egotism. Building on the idea that these effects are automatic, we propose that a reversal is possible when people are motivated to protect their feelings about themselves. Specifically, people should be motivated to protect their self-concepts from associations that reflect poorly on the self (Snyder, Lassegard and Ford 1986). When an association with a negative product is established via a shared name letter, people should be motivated to distance themselves from that association. But, self-protective action requires cognitive resources even if the contents of the process are not consciously accessible (Murray et al. 2008). We propose that when Denise’s cognitive resources are being utilized on academic exams, for instance, it depletes the resources required for self-protective activity (i.e., distancing from D grades). But if those resources were available, we predict that people would prefer name letter objects less when it comes to negative stimuli. This effect, called name letter avoidance, fits with name letter branding within the context of the heuristic-systematic model (Chaiken 1980). In name letter branding, name letters are processed heuristically and consumers automatically prefer the brand to identical, non-name letter brands. In name letter avoidance, the inconsistency between one’s positive self-beliefs and the presence of one’s name letters on a negative product result in systematic but still subconscious processing that enables distancing (Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken 1997; Murray et al. 2008).

We first tested these ideas in an experiment with a 2 (product valence: positive, negative) x 2 (cognitive load: high, low) mixed design, in which participants assigned brand names to a series of products. Participants first received a cognitive load manipulation in which they were asked to hold either a one-digit (low load condition) or an eight-digit (high load condition) number in memory (Gilbert and Osborne 1989). They then assigned one of two brand name choices to several products. Included were one product that was pre-tested to be positively valenced (flat screen television) and one product that was pre-tested to be negatively valenced (rifles). The television names were constructed as XXXyyva, where XXX represents the first three letters of the participant’s own name for the name letter (NL) choice, but represents the first three letters of a fellow participant’s name for the non-name letter (NNL) choice. Similarly, the rifle brand name choices were constructed as XXXylyok. Results showed that under high cognitive load, people chose the NL name at a rate greater than chance for both the television (NNL $\chi^2(1, n=98)=4.08, p<.05$) and the rifle (NNL=59, NNNL=39; $\chi^2(1, n=98)=4.08, p<.05$). However, under low cognitive load, people chose the NL name at a rate less than chance for the rifle (NNL=38, NNNL=58; $\chi^2(1, n=96)=4.17, p<.05$), but still chose the NL name at a rate greater than chance for the television (NNL=61, NNNL=35; $\chi^2(1, n=96)=7.04, p<.01$).

To identify the scope of name letter avoidance and test the affective underpinnings of the distancing mechanism, we also tested our framework using risk in lieu of product valence, as risk has been linked to self-protective behavior (Josephs et al. 1992). This study employed an Internet auction scenario and used a 2 (cognitive load: high, low) x 2 (risk: high, low) x 2 (seller name: name-lettered (NL), non-name-lettered (NNL)) between subjects design. Participants first read a passage stating that either 80% (high risk condition) or 5% (low-risk condition) of Internet auction participants encountered fraud. Following the passage, cognitive load was manipulated as in the first study. Participants then evaluated an Internet auction listing for a calculator. The seller’s name was constructed as XX_Math, where XX represents the first two letters of the participant’s own name in the NL condition or the first two letters of a fellow participant’s name in the NNL condition. They then rated their purchase intent, attitude toward the seller, and perceived risk. Under high cognitive load, participants demonstrated greater purchase intent for the NL seller in both the high-risk (MNL=2.97 vs. MNNL=2.08, p<.05) and low-risk conditions (MNL=2.70 vs. MNNL=2.03, p<.05). Under low load, participants had lower purchase intent for the NL seller under high risk (MNL=1.79 vs. MNNL=2.60, p<.05), but still had higher purchase intentions for the NL seller under low risk (MNL=3.05 vs. MNNL=2.06, p<.05). Under high risk the influence of name letters on purchase intent was mediated by attitude toward the seller, suggesting that derogation is the mechanism for distancing in name letter avoidance.

Name letter avoidance is different from name letter branding in that it has a motivated component in the form of self-protection. In turn, the self-protection system requires some degree of mental resources to enable distancing. The framework tested here demonstrates that name letter branding can be automatic, but that people are capable of correcting its maladaptive effects and distancing themselves from potentially damaging associations.

REFERENCES


