When Lower Is Better: the Impact of Activated Number Interpretation Frames on Reactions to Alpha-Numeric Brand Names

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The success of alpha-numeric brands depends partly on consumers’ reactions to its name. As such, the liking of the number that is included plays a crucial role. Three studies show that reactions to alpha-numeric brand names comprising larger/smaller numbers depend on the magnitude interpretation frame that is contextually activated.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Brand names play a vital role in the construction of a brand image that can affect the consumers’ purchase decisions (Kohli and LaBahn, 1997). As brand names frequently comprise numerical components, resulting in alpha-numeric brand names, number liking should be an important consideration of marketers interested in creating effective brand names. Besides associations with specific, often culturally determined, meanings (e.g., the number 7 is lucky) (Batigg and Spera 1962), structural characteristics of numbers (e.g., magnitude) may affect their liking. As people exhibit a general tendency to rely on magnitude information in their judgments, even when non-diagnostic (Silvera et al. 2002), this research investigates whether brand name conveyed magnitude information affects alpha-numeric brand preferences.

It is not clear how the magnitude of the numerical part is evaluated. Often when relying on magnitude information people endorse the idea that “bigger is better”. People often favor bigger objects (Silvera et al. 2002); Larger assortments are evaluated better (Broniarczyk et al. 1998) and increasing the number of attributes accompanying a brand increases its favorability (Carpenter et al. 1994). Similarly, people also prefer larger numbers and this translates to object preference; colors are perceived as better when labeled with larger versus smaller numbers (Fias and Fischer 2005). Of particular relevance, Gunasti and Ross (2010) show that consumers’ preference for alpha-numeric brands increases when the magnitude of the numerical part increases.

Situations in which small objects are highly valued are also prevalent. In today’s society it is a challenge to build the smallest microchip, cellular phone or laptop computer. Body weight is typically evaluated more favorably when it is lower (Meier et al. 2008). In addition, lower numbers are better for many health indicators, golf scores, product grades, etc. As such, two opposing magnitude interpretation frames may exist and color people’s judgments; in addition, priming research has shown that people’s interpretation of information depends on concepts that are currently active. In addition, priming cues may not only activate specific conceptual information, but also information processing procedures (Meyers-Levy 1989).

That both concepts and procedures can be primed suggests interpretation frames (i.e., procedures by which meaning is attached to concepts) can also be primed. As such, contextual information may affect alpha-numeric brand preferences dependent on whether it evokes a “larger is better” or “smaller is better” magnitude interpretation frame. Three studies yield evidence for this proposition.

Studies 1a (n = 122) and 1b (n = 122) rely on attribute specification to cue magnitude interpretation frames. Participants were presented with two printer (Study 1a) or refrigerator (Study 1b) brands and chose one of both. Each choice set varied along 2 dimensions (Tables 1a and 1b). The brands were described by units of expression representing a higher is better or smaller is better logic. In addition, brands were described by neutral terms (Brand A and Brand B) or by alpha-numeric brand names (CR-P-9 and CR-P-91 for printers; DMB-4 and DMB-96 for refrigerators).

Most importantly, when brands are described by a neutral label, changing the logic of the attribute units does not affect brand preferences. However, when brands are described by alpha-numeric brand names, changing the logic of the attribute units flips brand choices. When expression mode represents a “lower is better” (“higher is better”) logic brands including a small (large) number are chosen more often compared to when expression mode represents a “higher is better” (“lower is better”) logic (Tables 2a and 2b). These results demonstrate the importance of matching the number of an alpha-numeric brand name to the contextually evoked magnitude interpretation frame.

Study 2 (n=122) demonstrates that magnitude interpretation frames may also be evoked by brand slogans and that these frames may also guide absolute evaluations of alpha-numeric brand names including numbers that are generally judged as small (e.g., 1) or large (e.g., 100). In this study, participants inspected an advertisement of a new soda can ‘Valens’ (see Figure 1 for an example), which varied along two dimensions: the magnitude of the number included in the alpha-numeric brand name (No Number = ‘Valens’ vs. Small = ‘Valens 1’ vs. Large = ‘Valens 100’) and the slogan that was used to promote the product (Lower-is-better interpretation frame = ‘Leave everyone behind’ vs. Higher-is-better interpretation frame = ‘Take it all’). Next, participants rated the attractiveness of the can they had been exposed to on a one-item 101-point scale.

Table 1a: Attribute Scores of the Printer Choice Options in Study 1a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute Expression logic</th>
<th>Attributes</th>
<th>Brand A CR-P-9</th>
<th>Brand B CR-P-9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Higher is Better</td>
<td>Printing Speed # pages per minute</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ink Price # pages for 1€</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower is Better</td>
<td>Printing Speed # seconds to print 1 page</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ink Price # cents to print 1 page</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1b: Attribute Scores of the Refrigerator Choice Options in Study 1b

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute Expression logic</th>
<th>Attributes</th>
<th>Brand A DMB-4</th>
<th>Brand B DMB-96</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Higher is Better</td>
<td>CO2 Emission # seconds to emit 100 gr</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Price Expenditure # minutes for 1€</td>
<td>353</td>
<td>286</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower is Better</td>
<td>CO2 Emission # grams per hour</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Price Expenditure # cents per hour</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Most importantly, matching number magnitude onto the magnitude interpretation frame generated higher brand attractiveness ratings, whereas mismatching decreased the attractiveness ratings (see Figure 2).

This finding shows that not only relative preferences, but also absolute evaluations of brands may be influenced by activated magnitude interpretation frames. Studies 1 and 2 activated magnitude interpretation frames by changing brand-related information which is important, as these elements are under control of brand managers. Though, study 3 assesses whether contextual information, unrelated to the target brands, also affects alpha-numeric brand preferences, by using a different cue. Participants (n=103) rated the attractiveness of brand promotions, either announcing a price discount or a package premium (see Figure 3 for an example). Next, participants indicated their preferences for three pairs of printers. Each choice option was presented with a picture and an alpha-numeric brand name.

The pictures and the left-right presentation of brand names were counterbalanced within pairs across participants. Priming different types of brand promotions significantly influenced participants’ brand choices (see Table 3). Evaluating a price promotion (package...
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Premium) leads participants to prefer a printer comprising the lowest (highest) numerical portion.

The current paper contributes to research investigating how alpha-numeric brand names’ numerical part affects their appeal. We focused on the impact of the conveyed magnitude. While Gunasti and Ross (2010) demonstrated alpha-numeric brands to benefit from including a higher number, our research demonstrates that this depends on the activated magnitude interpretation frame.

REFERENCES

Table 3: Choice Shares of the Printer Choice Options in Study 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Promotion Logic</th>
<th>3-WS-Epson</th>
<th>97-WS-Epson</th>
<th>Canon 3 KFS</th>
<th>Canon 7 KFS</th>
<th>Canon 73 LGD</th>
<th>Canon 77 LGD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Higher is Better</td>
<td>34.0%</td>
<td>66.0%</td>
<td>34.6%</td>
<td>65.4%</td>
<td>38.5%</td>
<td>61.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower is Better</td>
<td>64.0%</td>
<td>36.0%</td>
<td>66.0%</td>
<td>34.0%</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>