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Fluency of Brand Names: Effects of Ease-Of-Pronunciation on Non-Word Memory and Product Judgments

Antonia Erz, Copenhagen Business School,Denmark

Bo T. Christensen, Copenhagen Business School,Denmark

The ease or difficulty of word pronunciation can affect judgments. We experimentally show that linguistic fluency has a direct effect on liking and a U-shaped effect on memory of words. We further demonstrate that the fluency of fictitious brand names affects judgments about the novelty and performance of innovative products.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Whereas research on brand names has been dominated by the notion that brand names should be semantically meaningful, fluency research has shown that there is meaning beyond the content. The ease with which we pronounce names of people and objects can have tremendous effects on how high we may climb the career ladder (Laham, Koval, and Alter 2012), how much we might invest in stocks (Shah and Oppenheimer 2007), and if we find a roller coaster safe or adventurous (Song and Schwarz 2009). Building on this knowledge, fluency theory provides us with opportunities to examine the effects of non-word brand names. These can have advantages over semantically meaningful names, meaning they might be easier to introduce globally, ease copyright issues, and, bearing no pre-defined meaning in the name, ease the introduction of brand extensions.

We first experimentally investigate how well easy and difficult non-words are liked and how well they are recognized. We then examine how the fluency of novel, fictitious non-word brand names affects the perception of product novelty and people's perception of how well the product may perform.

Fluency, the ease or difficulty with which a stimulus is accessed, retrieved or processed, can be informative in its own right and affects judgments and preferences (Schwarz 2004). As summarized above, authors generally found a positive effect of linguistic fluency – the ease of pronunciation – on preference. Based on these findings, we hypothesize that fluent non-words will be preferred over disfluent non-words.

Although research on linguistic fluency has quite consistently shown a direct effect of fluency on judgmental measures, it has not been investigated whether and how it affects memory. Fluency generally increases familiarity (e.g., Jacoby and Woloshyn 1989), so we propose that fluent non-words should be recognized easily. We further propose that very disfluent non-words should be better recalled than moderately disfluent non-words. Two lines of research support this proposition. Firstly, investigating the indirect effect of fluency (e.g., Alter et al. 2007), authors have found that disfluent stimuli prompt systematic processing. Thorough processing, in turn, should let people recognize words better at a later point. Secondly, it has been shown in different settings that simple and complex stimuli led to higher arousal than moderately complex ones (e.g., Berlyne 1967). Since arousal informs memory, easy-to-pronounce and difficult-to-pronounce non-words should be better recognized than moderately disfluent non-words. We therefore hypothesize that there will be a U-shaped relationship between the fluency of non-words and recognition.

Since brand names are generally considered a different word class than non-words (Gontijo et al. 2002), we also sought to investigate fluency effects of non-words as brand names. We were specifically interested in how the well-established effect of fluency – disfluent stimuli being perceived as more novel and more risky – reflects on judgments of novel technological products. We hypothesize that products with fluent (vs. disfluent) names will be perceived as more familiar (vs. more unfamiliar) and that participants will show higher (vs. lower) confidence in the performance of a product with a fluent (vs. disfluent) name.

Stimuli: Following the approach of Laham and colleagues (2012), we created 300 English non-words with the online word da-

tabase MCWord (Medler and Binder 2005). After an extensive pre-selection, 30 non-words were tested by 35 undergraduate students for their fluency and by 31 students for their suitability with the product category of cameras. Participants found fluent non-words easier to pronounce than disfluent non-words ($p < .001$). Fluent and disfluent non-words could be deemed unsuitable for cameras with their group means being below the scale mean (all $ps < .001$).

Study 1: In an online study, 30 undergraduate students evaluated these 30 non-words in a random order. They were asked to indicate how much they liked each non-word and, after a distraction task of 5 minutes, had to fill in a memory test for 32 non-words of which 12 had been shown before. As hypothesized, fluent were preferred over disfluent non-words ($p < .001$), and fluent and disfluent non-words better recognized than moderately disfluent non-words ($p < .001$).

Study 2: Six non-words from the pre-study were selected as fictitious brand names for novel digital cameras and combined with six different one-sentence descriptions. In a repeated measurement design with 24 undergraduate students, we found that cameras with more fluent names were perceived as more familiar ($p < .05$). We could not find a linear but a curvilinear effect of fluency on confidence ($p < .001$). Fluent names evoked more confidence in the product's performance than less fluent ones. However, very disfluent names also led participants to believe that the product might work well.

Our findings have theoretical and managerial implications. The direct effect of fluency on liking of non-words supports findings from extant fluency research. More importantly, to our knowledge, effects of linguistic fluency on memory have not been investigated. Although we tested non-words, the effect we found supports the notion from anecdotal brand name research that distinctive names, in this case disfluent, might serve the requirement of brand names for recognizability. Future research should further test memory effects of brand name fluency.

The second experiment produced a direct fluency effect on product familiarity, a finding with important managerial implications: perceived product novelty has to and can be managed through the name to achieve the optimal balance which neither scares consumers off nor blurs a product's originality. The expected direct effect of fluency on confidence was only supported insofar that very fluent as opposed to moderately fluent names increased confidence. However, participants showed also higher confidence ratings when the product was presented with very disfluent names. A post-hoc explanation may lie in the use of incrementally rather than radically innovative products as stimuli. Disfluent names might have caused more thorough processing which, in turn, might have led participants to not only rely on the name as a heuristic cue as in the case of fluent names but also on the product description. The presented features of the products could be easily imaginable as fully functional, therefore increasing confidence ratings. Future research should further test the interaction of brand-related information and name fluency.

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