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## What's in a name? Why feminine-sounding brand names have an advantage in the marketplace

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CARA VANDERMEY/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

In a recent study, university students were given the option to take home either a bottle of hand sanitizer or a small amount of cash. (It's worth noting this exercise took place before COVID-19.) The sanitizer was labelled with two made-up brands. The bottles read either Nimilia or Nimeld—that is, names with linguistic characteristics that were either feminine or masculine. For the 150 subjects, Nimilia proved the most popular option. The cash incentive was next. Nimeld came decidedly last.

It turns out that, when all else is equal, feminine brand names have an advantage in the marketplace, thanks to a stereotype-fuelled unconscious bias, according to a series of studies from researchers at the universities of Calgary, Montana, HEC Paris and Cincinnati. Research shows that people associate femininity with warmth. That, in turn, makes a

connection to related traits like sincerity, trustworthiness and good-naturedness. “A brand with no inherent gender can be imbued with masculine or feminine stereotype traits (like warmth) via its name—which managers can leverage to influence brand outcomes,” conclude the researchers, who published their findings in the *Journal of Marketing*.

A name’s linguistic gender isn’t always obvious. It is conveyed unconsciously through a word’s length, sounds and stress. Feminine names tend to be longer, end in a vowel and stress second or later syllables. Nike, Ikea and Coca-Cola are all linguistically feminine—and according to this research, all benefit from the same halo effect.

The researchers started by analyzing the Best Global Brands list published by Interbrand, an international consulting company, which ascertains value using a mix of financial metrics and consumer loyalty. Going through 20 years of data, the academics found that top-ranked brands—including the aforementioned giants and others, like Honda and BMW—are about one and a half times more likely to have linguistically feminine names. Moreover, a company’s Interbrand rank was more closely tied to name gender than the number of years it had been in business. Four subsequent studies measured subjects’ reactions to brand names in a lab setting; these trials supported the theory that feminine labels meant increased brand loyalty for everything from hand sanitizer to YouTube channels.

Our brains have evolved to prioritize warmth above all else when making snap decisions, according to work by social psychologist Susan Fiske. Think of early *Homo sapiens* encountering strangers on the savannah. A fast assessment of warmth—do they mean well or are they angling for a fight?—would distinguish friend from foe. (The next most important judgment is competence; if a stranger isn’t warm, we have to figure out how much of a threat they pose.)

Other studies have considered how to use unconscious metaphorical associations to make brands more desirable. One study found that people preferred an ice cream called Frosh over one called Frish because the “aw” sound implies creaminess. Research out of the University of Alberta found names with phonetic repetition, like Tutti Frutti, create a positive emotional response. Another from HEC Paris—written by L.J. Shrum and Tina Lowrey, two of the co-authors of the current study—found that people prefer names with vowels made with the front of the tongue raised to the roof of your mouth, like the “i” in pip) for two-seater convertibles and those with back vowels (shaped with the back of the tongue toward the soft palate, like the “o” in pop) for SUVs. The former sounds are thought

to be associated with concepts like “fast” and “small,” and the latter with “large” and “soft.”

Importantly, all of the above effects are rooted in how we make unconscious connections. “There seems to be an automatic process of association between a name and the warmth attribute; that is, people don’t seem to be aware of the gender associations a name brings up. And that gives brands a lot of flexibility,” says Ruth Pogacar, assistant professor at the University of Calgary’s Haskayne School of Business. In other words, Nike can brand itself as a leader in a unisex product like sneakers while still benefiting from the warmth of a linguistically feminine name.

But the halo effect conferred by a feminine name is neutralized when a product is primarily used by men or is strictly utilitarian, like bathroom scales and batteries. The researchers suspect the warmth response is emotional and that judgments about the latter product categories may be more cognitively driven.

It’s worth noting the feminine effect applies primarily to made-up words. The meanings of real ones blur the effects of their linguistic gender. And of course, in the real-world marketplace, a host of other factors play into a brand’s image. Therefore, it’s probably not worth changing the name of an existing product to a more linguistically feminine one. “These effects occur where the brand name is unknown, so you’d use these principles when you’re first trying to develop a brand name,” says Shrum. And since the research is based on English linguistic conventions—and cultural stereotypes around gender observed in North America—the effect wouldn’t necessarily hold true everywhere.

A name obviously isn’t the sole determinant of success. “Even bad brand names can build traction and become beloved for many other factors,” says Shrum. Consider Smucker’s, the jam and jelly maker. Its marketers seemed to intuit the brand’s challenging name and opted to lean in, giving us the famous slogan: “With a name like Smucker’s, it has to be good.” Still, for fledgling firms looking to make a name for themselves, the linguistic details are certainly worth considering. Avoiding words that rhyme with “yuck” is probably a good place to start.

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