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How to Make a Brand More Appealing: Give it a Feminine Name; The advantage is eliminated for products that are entirely functional

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Does a brand name have a feminine or masculine connotation? And does it matter?

A new study suggests it might. The study, recently published in the Journal of Marketing, finds feminine-sounding brands may be more appealing, because they are often perceived as warmer and thereby associated with traits like trustworthiness, sincerity, friendliness, tolerance and good nature.

According to the researchers, several factors determine whether a name is perceived as feminine or masculine. Women's names, for instance, are longer, and are more likely to end in a vowel sound.

In one part of the paper researchers studied how participants reacted to two fictitious brand names—one with feminine linguistic characters and the other with male linguistic characteristics—and found participants often preferred feminine brand names. Participants were 34% more likely to choose a female-named Nimilia YouTube channel than a masculine-named Nimeld YouTube channel. Participants were also three times as likely to choose a Nimilia hand sanitizer than a Nimeld hand sanitizer.

The advantage of feminine brand names was reduced if the product was designed only for men (such as a men's sneaker) and eliminated when the product was entirely functional (such as a bathroom scale). The hand-sanitizer experiment was conducted before the pandemic when hand sanitizer was often viewed as an optional personal product, like body spray, rather than a vital necessity.

"People tend to process certain words instinctively, triggering associations that they may be unaware of," says Ruth Pogacar, an assistant professor at the University of Calgary's Haskayne School of Business and one of the study's co-authors. Psychological research shows people tend to be attracted to other people who are characterized as warm, and brand names may trigger a similar association, she says.

The researchers also studied the linguistic characteristics of actual brands. They looked at an index created by the marketing and consulting firm Interbrand, and found 55% of its top brands, including Coca-Cola, Honda and IKEA, had feminine names, 36% of the brands had masculine-sounding names, and 9% of the brands had gender-neutral names.

The researchers also surveyed 524 people and found positive correlations between actual brands with feminine-sounding names and perceived traits like tolerance, warmth, good nature and sincerity, and participants' willingness to buy or recommend the brand.