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The Power of a Feminine Brand Name

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A brand's name is often the first interaction a brand or firm has with a consumer, and it has more power than most individuals or companies realize. A brand's name can influence consumers by setting expectations and first impressions.[1] Although this may seem insignificant, everyone has experienced the impact of an exceptional or subpar first impression. This research shows that linguistically feminine brand names enhance attitudes and choice, and are even correlated with better brand performance. This work contributes to the current body of knowledge by showing how linguistically feminine names activate associations with "warmth" (good-natured sincerity) based on the stereotype content model, and how this affects brand outcomes.

Stereotype Content Model

This work draws on the stereotype content model to investigate perceptions of brands with feminine associations. The stereotype content model is based on the idea that people evaluate others (including brands) based on two social perception criteria—warmth and competence—and these evaluations shape people's reactions both emotionally and behaviorally.[2] Previous studies have shown that the determination of warmth is more important and is established before the determination of competence.[3] Consumers are more likely to favor (and thus, make more purchases and retain brand loyalty to) brands that have warmer qualities. This research combines stereotype content model and psycholinguistics to show that consumers perceive linguistically feminine names as warm, which increases positive attitudes, choice, and is associated with better brand performance.

Impact of Perceived Gender in Brand Names

First, it is important to understand the methods used to quantify brand name gender. Three factors—length, ending sound, and stress—make a brand name masculine, neutral, or feminine.[4] Feminine names generally have more syllables and end with a vowel sound, while masculine names are generally shorter and end with a consonant.[5,6] Additionally, masculine names are more likely to begin with a single stressed syllable (ROB-ert) while feminine names typically stress the middle or later syllable (ro-BER-ta).[7] Based on these three factors, Nestlé can be compared with Gap in terms of perceived gender, with Nestlé being linguistically feminine and Gap linguistically masculine.

This research showed that linguistically feminine brand names were correlated with positive brand performance. After compiling an annual list of top brands and analyzing the ratio of linguistically masculine and feminine brand names, linguistically feminine brands were associated with a higher rank on the list. It is important to note that this association showed correlation, but is not enough to demonstrate causality.

The second study examined whether feminine brand names are preferred because they are perceived as warmer, i.e., whether warmth mediated the effect of brand name gender on consumer attitudes. The results showed that feminine brand names are associated with warmth and positive attitudes, but these effects are again correlational and not enough to establish causality. The next two experiments provided causal evidence for the feminine brand name advantage by having participants make consequential choices about how to spend time and money. Results showed that feminine brand names increased perceived warmth, and warmth in turn increased people's choice of which media to watch and which products to take home.

Boundary Conditions of the Feminine Brand Name Advantage

After demonstrating the positive impact of brand name femininity, this research further qualifies the impact. Specifically, the feminine brand name advantage is greater for certain product categories but is neutralized for certain users.

The fourth study examined the impact of the type of product category on the feminine brand name advantage—specifically, hedonic or utilitarian products. Hedonic products are fun and enjoyable, while utilitarian products are useful, functional, and practical.[8] This experiment showed that when a product was hedonic, the feminine brand names were favored even more, but when a product was utilitarian the masculine brand names were slightly favored. Additionally, when products were hedonic, feminine brand names increased warmth perceptions, which enhanced positive attitudes. Utilitarian products, on the other hand, did not receive a boost in attitudes due to perceived warmth.

The last experiment examined the interaction between brand name gender and typical user gender on brand attitude and warmth. When the typical user was male (i.e., men's sneakers), masculine and feminine brand names were equally well-liked. This is consistent with the successful brand performance of both Converse (linguistically masculine name) and Nike (linguistically feminine name). In other words, the feminine brand name advantage was neutralized when the typical user was male. When the typical user was female, the feminine brand name advantage remained intact.

It is important to note that this study was conducted on English-speaking participants, therefore, findings may differ in different languages and different cultural contexts.

Implications for Managers and Conclusions

Overall, linguistically feminine brand names were seen to have a positive impact on historical brand performance, and on consumers' attitudes via perceptions of warmth. Furthermore, this finding held in field tests with time and money consequences for the consumer. The feminine brand name advantage was increased for hedonic products, decreased for utilitarian products, and neutralized when the typical user was male.

Our research highlights factors that should be taken into consideration when naming a real estate brokerage or company. Do your clients value warmth, trustworthiness, and sincerity? If so, a linguistically feminine name—longer, ending in a vowel—may help communicate those qualities. However, you might also consider the type of properties do you plan to list. For example, commercial properties might be considered utilitarian whereas clients probably value hedonic qualities in a residential or vacation property. Each of these factors should inform naming decisions, which might lead to advantages in the real estate market.

Recommended Reading

Pogacar, Ruth, Justin Angle, Tina M. Lowrey, L. J. Shrum, and Frank R. Kardes (2021), "Is Nestlé a Lady? The Feminine Brand Name Advantage," *Journal of Marketing,* 85(6),101-117.

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Dr. Tina M. Lowrey's (PhD – University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) research interests include exploring brand symbolism specifically through children's perspective and applying psycholinguistic theory to marketing communications. She has published research in *Journal of Consumer Research* and *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, among others. Dr. Lowrey also serves on editorial review boards of the *Journal of Consumer Psychology, Journal of Advertising,* and *Media Psychology.*

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Dr. Frank R. Kardes' (PhD – Indiana University) research, which focuses on consumer decision making, persuasion and judgement, has been published in *Psychology & Marketing, Journal of Marketing, Marketing Letters,* and *Journal of Services Marketing.* Dr. Kardes also serves on the editorial boards for *International Journal of Research in Marketing, Journal of Consumer Psychology, and Journal of Consumer Research.* In addition, he is a recipient of the Distinguished Scientific Achievement Award of the Society for Consumer Psychology.

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