BRAND NAMING: SOUND SYMBOLISM, BRAND PREFERENCE AND BRAND PERFORMANCE

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Abstract
The aim of this study is to highlight the importance of sound symbolism for Romanian marketing and advertising applied research. Previous research showed that the phonetic structure of brand name communicates its characteristics, i.e. it drives consumers to assess certain features and performance of the product. We assumed that when consumers encounter an unknown brand name, they automatically infer characteristics from the meaning conveyed by the sounds (e.g. phonemes). Therefore, we supposed that a brand name for a shampoo (artificially created on experimental purpose) containing back vowels is evaluated better by consumers when they compare it to another brand name with front vowels. Furthermore, we tested the influence of the stops and fricatives consonants in inferring certain attributes of product. To this end, fifty nine students (N=59) participated in a research based on questionnaire. The results revealed that subjects evaluated better the brand names containing back vowels than brand names with front vowel. No effect was obtained regarding the presence of stops and fricatives consonants in assessing the brand performance.

Keywords
brand; sound symbolism; advertising; social psychology; brand names

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Introduction
Brand naming is considered one of the major determinants in the process of positioning and advertising of different goods and services. Releasing new brands on the market means naming them for triggering implicit positive associations in the mind of the customers. Therefore, a new product should not only be branded, but it should determine a positive evaluation towards its features in order to overtake competing brands on the market. Although marketers and advertisers have been aware of the quality of the product names, it is only recently that they prize the utility of sound symbolism research for fitting the creative concept of the brands.

Factors affecting perception of brand names: previous studies
Analyzing what kind of processes and factors could affect brand names evaluation, marketers and social psychologists have been focused, particularly, on five factors as follows: personalizing the brand (Wansink, Painter, & van Ittersum, 2001), fluency of words/brand names (Alter & Daniel Oppenheimer, 2006); name-letter effect (Brendl, Chattopadhyay, Pelham, & Carvallo, 2005; Nuttin, 1985); alpha-numeric brand names (Gunasti and Ross, 2010) and sound symbolism (Wu, Klink & Guo, 2013; Lowrey &

Shrum, 2007; Yorkston & Menon, 2004; Klink, 2001). We will review below the studies regarding this topics.

Fluency

One of the main research in brand naming belongs to American psychologists Adam Alter and Daniel Oppenheimer (2006), who investigated the impact of the psychological principle of fluency (that people tend to prefer easily processed information) on short-term share price movements. After they did three experiments – one in lab and the other in real-world stock market – they had found that fluently named stocks outperformed stocks with diffluent names in the short term. These results imply that easily processing of a stimulus (conceptual fluency) mediate human behavior and major decisions, in this case where to invest money or who to be trust. An important factor affecting the fluency is familiarity: stimuli that have been previously encountered and stored in memory are processed more easily than their unknown counterparts (Fennis & Stroebe, 2010). Consequently, the ease and effortless a piece of information is processed the better is evaluated by consumers. Thus, the more fluently a brand name is perceived, the more familiar is considered.

Personalization of brands

Descriptive brand names such as Jack Daniels, Psychedelic Sorbet or the Booming Onion could impact sales or make a customer believe the food tastes better. The straightforward names have a positive impact on sales, attitudes and purchase intentions, but they did not influence how much money customers would pay for the descriptively labelled (Wansink, Brian, James Painter, and Koert van Ittersum, 2001). In a field experiment at the cafeteria of Midwestern University, Braian Wansink and his collaborators showed that descriptive labels, including geographic labels (Cajun and Italian), nostalgia labels (Homestyle or Grandma's) or sensory labels (tender or satin) trigger more favorable associations for foods as compared to the others names. The authors manipulated few of the menu's items so as to be as basic label (e.g., grilled chicken) or as descriptive label. Based on data collected with a questionnaire, authors revealed an increase of sales for food with descriptive labels, with around 56% of consumers saying that they selected them as compared with 44% of sample who preferred food with regular labels.

Alpha-numeric brand names

Alpha-numeric brand names are used mostly for most technical products and cars so as consumer to make easily associations between numbers and different qualities of the brands. After developing a taxonomy of alphanumeric brand names (such as ABs type), Gunasti and Ross (2010) found that higher versus lower numeric portion of brand names (e.g., X-200 versus X-100) is preferred more even when it is objectively inferior to other choice alternatives. Consumers with low need for cognition apply "the higher, the better" heuristic to select brands labeled with ABs and choose products with higher numeric portions. At the same time, consumers with high need for cognition involved more cognitive process for making inferences based on brand name–attribute correlations (Gunasti, 2010).

Name-letter effect and implicit egoism

Name Letter Effect (NLE) – that is people like letters contained in their name more than other letters (Nuttin, 1985) – has been amply replicated in the field of consumer psychology (see e.g. Brendl, Chattopadhyay, Pelham, & Carvallo, 2005) and was largely applied in promoting goods in certain countries (see Share a Coke in 150 countries including Romania). The research of Pelham et al. (2002) showed that an

important percentage of people choose states, cities and occupations with names resembling their own (e.g., that Lauras are lawyers and Florences live in Florida). This phenomenon is called implicit egotism and has been observed in many cultures around the world. In the field of advertising, Brendel et al. (2005) reported that the causal effect of implicit egotism works outside the lab, in a real market situation. Not only that people's names influence their choices, but also they prefer a brand name that resemble (i.e. Tonya) with their name rather than a real well-known brand (i.e. Twix).

Sound Symbolism

Sound Symbolism – the nonarbitrary relation between a sound of a word and its meaning – has been widely recognized as an important factor in how individuals infer specific meaning from unfamiliar brand names (Wu, Klink & Guo, 2013; Lowrey & Shrum, 2007; Klink, 2001). A brand name is composed of sounds called phonemes. These phonemes have two functions. First, they are the basic components of language and are used to form syllables and words. In fact, a brand name is also a computed series of syllables that turn out in a word with or without meaning. Second, phonemes can provide meaning by means of sound. Consequently, consumers infer meaning and evaluate the performance of products based on the cues provide by sounds of brand names (Yorkston & Menon, 2004).

In a set of studies conducted by Richard Klink (2000, 2001, 2003), he showed that the presence of back-low (*a, o, u*) and high-front vowels (*e, i*), in brand names could conveys attribute qualities of smallness, lightness, mildness, thinness, fastness, coldness, bitterness, femininity, weakness, lightness, and prettiness. Furthermore, Klink (2001) brought empirical data about the effects of sound symbolism in affecting consumers' evaluations of various brands. In addition to vowel sounds, research documents that consonant sounds also convey inherent meaning based on the length of the sound they produce (Klink, 2000; Lowrey, Shrum & Dubitsky, 2003). Stops and fricatives differ in their manner of articulation. The letters p, t, b, g, d, and k (or hard c) are considered stops. Fricatives (s, v, z), on the other hand, have less closure of articulators than stops. Approaching the sound symbolism, scholars demonstrated through laboratory experiments that frond vowels and fricatives were more associated with smaller and more angular shapes than were back vowels and stops (Klink, 2004). In another allied work, E. A. Yorkston and G. Menon (2002) found that when consumer chose between two brands of ice cream, *Frish* and *Frosh*, they preferred the latter (*Frosh*) instead of the former (*Frish*) as a result of associating the sound [ä from *Frosh*] with attributes such as bigger, heavier and slower. More recently, T.M. Lowery și L.J. Shrum (2007) establish evidence that people prefer particular words as brand names when the attributes connoted by the vowel sounds of the word are congruent with the attributes of the products. Specifically, when the back vowel sound [ä] was juxtaposed with the front vowel sound [i], the vowel [ä] sound word was preferred only when the attributes implied by the sound (*large, slow, dull*) had positive implication for the product (i.e. SUV, hammer).

When brand names is meaningless, sound symbolism – images, qualities and emotions that people unconsciously associate with vowel sounds and consonants – has a certain weight in consumer choices. The phonetic principles have been recently included as one of the main direction in marketing research as well as within branding companies. As the member of the Lexicon Branding1 declared "in an economy where

[1] Lexicon Branding, Inc is an U.S. marketing company specializing in brand naming. They created the famous brands such as *Toyota*, *Pentium*, *Blackberry* and conducted a global research program called *Sounder* to determine whether certain phonemes are more effective than others when communicate attributes of the brand. Source: lexiconbranding.com

global brands are the norm rather than the exception, a greater understanding of sound symbolism has put Lexicon that much closer to our ultimate goal of deciphering and implementing what we call the universal language of branding" (lexicombranding.com).

As far as we know, no research has been conducted to test the effect of sound symbolism of the Romanian language. Therefore, the present study represents an exploratory research on the influence of sound symbolism in communicating brand characteristics. Specifically, we assumed that when consumers encounter new and unfamiliar brand names, they often infer brand features from the meaning conveyed by the intensity and frequency of the sounds as they roll on the tongue via the airstream (i.e. the vowels and consonants).

Methodology

Based on the previous research, we framed and tested the following four hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. Consumers evaluate the intrinsic proprieties of a brand name containing fricatives (i.e. *Simeli*), as better than a brand name containing stops (i.e. *Pimeli*).

Hypothesis 2. Consumers evaluate the intrinsic proprieties of a brand name containing front vowels (i.e. *Simeli*), as better than a brand name containing back vowels (i.e. *Sameli*).

Hypothesis 3. Brand names with front vowels (i.e. *Simeli*) are associated more with feminine brand characteristics than brand names containing back vowels (i.e. *Sameli*).

Hypothesis 4. Brand names with stops (i.e. *Pimeli*) are associated more with masculine characteristics than brand names containing fricatives (i.e. *Simeli*).

Procedure, sample and developing of questionnaire

Fifty nine (N=59) students enrolled in a Social Psychology Master level course participated in a study for an extra credits in April 2014. Participants were aged between 23 (N=26) and 24 (N=23). They had to fill in a questionnaire regarding the evaluation of for fictitious brand names for a shampoo (*Simeli/Sameli*; *Simeli*/*Pimeli*). The brand names have been created according to the principles of phonology mentioned earlier. Consequently, I manipulated only four phonemes: front vowel (S*i*meli) and back vowel (S*a*meli), stop (*P*imeli) and fricative (*Si*meli). I asked subjects to choose which of the four names (*Simeli/Sameli/Pimeli/Simeli*) would be appropriated for designating a hair-loss treatment shampoo. Secondly, they had to mention which brand name fits the category "products for women" versus "products for men". The questionnaire also assessed the preferences of the respondents concerning Romanian letters, the evaluation of each brand name on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly agree*; 5 =*strongly disagree*) and socio-demographics (gender, age, income, education, residence).

Results

Preference for Romanian letters. As can be seen from the Table no.1, the most attractive letters in the Romanian alphabet are A (16,9 %) , L (13,6%), P (11,9) and C (10,2 %) as opposed to the letters M, O, D and Y, with around 2% of subjects saying that they prefer it. The research did not reveal any gender effects because in the sample, females (N=46) outnumbered males (N=10).

Table 1. Preference for certain Romanian letters

Romanian letters	N	%
A	10	16,9
D	1	1,7
L	8	13,6
M	1	1,7
O	1	1,7
P	7	11,9
Y	1	1,7
Total	56	94,9

Preference of brands according to the stops and fricatives. The difference between the usage of fricatives and stops in a brand name did not turn out to be statistically significant. For designating a hair-loss treatment shampoo, the respondents preferred the name which began with a stop consonant, *Pimeli* (35,5%) as compared to a fricative consonant (*Simeli*, 30,5%). Otherwise, the percentage of the subjects saying they preferred the name *Pimeli* instead of *Simeli* is not statistically significant. This is also showed by the values of ANOVA ($F=0.46$; $p=0.94>0.05$) test which is higher than 0.05.

Tabel 2. Preference of stop versus fricative brand name

Brand name	N	%
Simeli	18	30.5
Pimeli	21	35.6
I don't know/don't respond	17	28.8
Missing responses	3	5.1
Total	**59**	**100**

The preference of brands according to the front and back vowels When the subjects chose between a brand name made up of front vowels (*Simeli*) and one with back vowels (*Sameli*), they preferred the latter, *Sameli*. Almost 39% of

subjects declared that they preferred the name *Sameli* instead of *Simeli* for designating a hair-loss treatment shampoo.

Tabel 3. Preference of back versus front vowels name

Brand name	N	%
Sameli	23	39.0
Simeli	16	27.1
I don't know/don't respond	17	28.8
Total	56	94.9
Missing responses	3	5.1
Total	59	100

Sound symbolism and brand performance

The outcomes of evaluating products according to their characteristics, namely how much the subjects believed that either *Sameli* or *Simeli* designated a hair loss shampoo, were statistically significant ($F=134.083$; $p=0,001<0.05$). On average, subjects tend to believe that *Sameli* is more efficient than *Simeli* in preventing hair loss.

Table 3. ANOVA test

	Sum of squere	df	Mean square	F	Sig
Between Groups	32.862	2	16.431	134.083	.000
Within Groups	6.495	53	.123		
Total	39.357	55			

In this research, the brand names are equally rated, whether they began with fricatives or stops. The presence of stops or fricatives had no effect in the evaluation of brand characteristics – whether they contained. Subjects rated brand name *Simeli* (almost 29%) as efficient as *Pimeli* (almost 30%) for shampoos preventing hair loss (Tabel 4).

Tabel 4. Evaluation of Pimeli and Simeli brand name

Brand name	N	%
Simeli	17	28.8
Pimeli	18	30.5
I don't know/don't respond	21	35.6
Total	56	94.9
Missing responses	3	5.1
Total	59	100

Sound symbolism and brand characteristics

When testing the hypothesis – i.e. brand names with front vowels (*Simeli*) are associated more with feminine brand characteristics than brand names containing back vowels (*Sameli*) – subjects rated *Sameli* and *Simeli* as having the same effect. On the other hand, *Simeli* was categorized as a more feminine (62,7%) product than *Pimeli* (16,9%). In other words *Pimeli* is perceived as being (62,7%) more masculine than *Simeli* (15,3%).

Conclusion

In this article, we provided empirical support for three of our four assumptions. On one hand, students evaluate better the performance of brands containing back vowels [a] than front vowels [e]. Meanwhile, the presence of stops [p] and fricatives [s] did not turn out to have any effect regardless the preference for brand names. The prevalence of evaluating brand names with sound vowel [a] as better than others, in this case the usage of back vowels (*Sameli*), could be linked to the mere exposure effect (R. Zajonic, 1968). In Romanian language, girls' first names and feminine nouns often end in *a*. Consequently, most students from our research assigned feminine attributes to a brand name that contains an emphasis on the vowel a. The subjects might automatically associate the familiarity of the vowel [a] with their attractiveness. On the other hand, we can explain these results taking into account that in the current sample female outnumber male. The larger presence of women (F=49) as compared to men (M=10) could led to the preference for more feminine words (in this case, *Sameli*) and, consequently, to their better evaluation.

Following the outcomes of present research, no effect of stops and fricatives were obtained, whether the subjects chose the brand name for a shampoo or they assess their performance. But when it comes to convey meanings and communicating characteristics, as the results of the present research revealed, vowels possess an inherent meaning of womanliness while consonants, in this case the stop [p] from *Pimeli*, are perceived as more masculine than word with fricative [s, *Simeli*]. In this respect, our research is consistent with previous ones (Klink, 2000; Yorkston & Menon, 2004; Lowrey & Shrum, 2007) with respect to the effect of stops on brand characteristics.

To conclude, several limits must be taken into account, such as the short number of participants in the study and their similarities in terms of socio-demographics characteristics. Further research on phonetic symbolism could investigate how other variables, for instance the type of product (food, electronics, automobiles, body care products) fit with the sounds as well as with the concept of the brand. Nevertheless, our study could be considered a starting point in developing the applied advertising research in Romania as long as it provides empirical evidence that the sounds generated by vowels and consonants count in the perception of young people as well in defining the brand on the market.

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