





The connotative meanings of sound symbolism in brand names: A conceptual framework

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Highlights

- This study provides the first systematic review of sound symbolism in brand names.
- The study identifies the connotative meanings associated with sound symbolism in brand names.
- Higher-frequency sounds are associated with higher evaluation and lower potency.
- Lower-frequency sounds are linked with lower evaluation and higher potency.

Abstract

Phonetic elements of brand names can convey a range of specific meanings. However, an integrated understanding of the sound symbolism of brand names remains elusive. Here, we classify sound symbolism in brand names based on three key dimensions of the semantic differential (evaluation, potency, and activity). In particular, we demonstrated that the sound symbolism of brand names can be explained in terms of the two dimensions of evaluation and potency (but not activity). The presence of higher-frequency sounds (front vowels, fricative, and voiceless consonants) in brand names tends to be associated with concepts linked to higher evaluation and lower potency, whereas lower-frequency sounds (back vowels, stop, and voiced consonants) tend to be more strongly associated with concepts linked to lower evaluation and higher potency. This study provides an integrative understanding of sound symbolism in brand names in terms of semantic differential meanings.

Introduction

According to many commentators, the brand name is one of the most important assets possessed by a brand (e.g., Keller et al., 1998, Klink and Wu, 2014). Brand names often represent the first point of contact between the consumer and a given brand, thereby helping to set the consumers' initial impressions and expectations concerning the latter (Keller et al., 1998). For this reason, companies have increasingly been investing their resources (both time and money) in trying to develop the most effective, and hopefully successful, new brand names. Although brand names are sometimes created on the basis of nothing more than the founders' intuitions, a meaningful brand name is beneficial for most businesses, thereby highlighting the importance of this field of research (Ries & Trout, 2001).

Research has demonstrated that brand names provide a useful mean of conveying relevant information about product features and/or benefits to consumers (Keller et al., 1998, Pathak et al., 2021, Pathak and Motoki, 2021, Pavia and Costa, 1993). A number of major new product failures in the marketplace have been attributed to the choice of an inappropriate brand name (e.g., as in the case of the ill-fated Ford Edsel; Wallace, 1975; see also Klink, 2001).

One promising strategy is to create brand names using sound phonetics, specifically sound symbolism (Klink, 2001, Spence, 2012, Sprott and Liu, 2016). Sound symbolism can link phonetic sounds to certain meanings (e.g., soft sounds to pleasant product attributes; Klink, 2001). Over the past few decades, a number of consumer researchers have investigated the role of phonetics in brand naming (e.g., Klink, 2001, Lowrey and Shrum, 2007, Yorkston and

Menon, 2004) and as a result, empirical research on the relevance of sound symbolism in brand naming has broadened rapidly (e.g., Roche et al., 2015, Spence, 2012, for reviews). By systematically manipulating the vowels and consonants in brand names, a growing body of evidence demonstrates that the specific sounds present in brand names (e.g., /i/ or /o/) help convey specific meanings or prime particular product attributes (e.g., smallness, sweetness; Klink, 2000, Motoki et al., 2020).

This study relies on the theory of the meaning of concepts originally proposed by Osgood et al. (1957) to provide an integrative framework for understanding the symbolic meanings that customers are likely to associate with specific brand names. Several studies have demonstrated that speech sounds embedded in (hypothetical) brand names can convey various meanings or attributes (e.g., small, sweet, heavy, friendly, soft, mild, strong, healthy, bitter; e.g., Klink, 2000, Motoki et al., 2020). However, the integrative and theoretical understanding of the role of sound symbolism in the creation of brand names remains a topic that is still comparatively unexplored. Why and how do the sounds that may be contained in brand names convey or prime various attributes? What psychological mechanisms can explain this phenomenon? One intriguing possibility relates to the connotative meaning of speech sounds (Sidhu & Pexman, 2018). Relying on the theoretical framework of the semantic differential meaning of concepts (Osgood et al., 1957), this research aims to provide an integrative and theoretical understanding of the role of sound symbolism in brand name development.

We begin by explaining sound symbolism in general and briefly explain phonetic terms (e.g., vowels and consonants). Next, we review previous findings in the field of sound symbolism concerning brand names and develop the theoretical framework behind the phenomenon. Finally, we identify several outstanding issues that can only be addressed by future research to further our mechanistic understanding in this area.

Section snippets

Sound symbolism

Sound symbolism refers to the claim that the mappings between the phonetic properties of speech sounds and their meanings are non-arbitrary (e.g., Knoeberle et al., 2017, Sidhu and Pexman, 2018). The debate on phonetic sounds and their meaning is by no means new, dating back to at least 400 BCE (Plato, 1892). Almost a century ago, Köhler and Sapir both demonstrated empirical findings supporting the existence of sound symbolism (Köhler, 1929, Sapir, 1929). Köhler showed that when presented with...

Conceptual framework of sound symbolism in brand names

Our aim is to use Osgood et al.'s (1957) theory of semantic differential (evaluation, potency, and activity) as the underlying theoretical foundation for building a conceptual framework that can explain the use of sound symbolism in brand name development. Although two decades of research in this area has generated a wide range of empirical findings (e.g., Spence, 2012 for a review), an underpinning theoretical framework and integrative understanding remain elusive. Moreover, to date, research...

Identifying relevant publications

We first identified relevant publications using a search term (see Appendix A for details). The studies identified using the search terms are listed in Appendix Table A2. A flowchart of the systematic review is shown in Fig. 3....

Data coding

We classified each of the attributes reported in previous research based on three principal semantic differential dimensions (i.e., Evaluation, Potency, Activity; Osgood et al., 1957). Attributes were selected from the main dependent variables of the identified studies...

The connotative meanings of sound symbolism in brand names: An empirical follow-up test

A follow-up study was conducted to empirically test our theoretical framework based on semantic space. Our coding analyses of the semantic differential meanings of previous research revealed that evaluation and potency (but not activity) underlie the sound symbolic effects in brand names. Our follow-up study empirically tested for the semantic differential meanings underlying the sound symbolic effects of brand names by focusing on some attributes (e.g., sharpness, light weight, ruggedness)...

Semantic space of sound symbolism in brand names

Our coding analyses of the semantic differential meanings and the results of our follow-up study revealed that the evaluation and potency (but not activity) dimensions underlie the sound symbolic effects in brand names. A visual illustration of the putative semantic space of sound symbolism in brand names is shown in Fig. 4. Specifically, brand names with front

vowels, fricative consonants, and voiceless consonants are likely to be regarded as having higher evaluation (e.g., good) and lower...

Summary of findings

The results of this study demonstrate how connotative meanings are associated with sounds present in fictitious brand names. Relying on the three core semantic differential dimensions of meanings (namely Evaluation, Potency, and Activity; Osgood et al., 1957), we demonstrate that vowels and consonants in (hypothetical) brand names are associated with attributes related to evaluation and potency, but not to activity. Specifically, our findings suggest that front (back) vowels, fricative (stop)...

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Kosuke Motoki: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Jaewoo Park:** Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Validation, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis. **Abhishek Pathak:** Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Validation, Methodology. **Charles Spence:** Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Validation,...

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper....

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Charles Spence is a professor of experimental psychology at Oxford University. His prize-winning research at the Crossmodal Research Laboratory investigates the factors that influence what we eat and what we think about the experience with world-leading chefs and food and beverage companies. He is the author of the Prose prize-winning “The perfect meal” with Betina Piqueras-Fiszman (2014, Wiley-Blackwell), the international bestseller “Gastrophysics: The new science of eating” (2017; Penguin Viking) – winner of the 2019 Le Grand Prix de la Culture Gastronomique from Académie Internationale de la Gastronomie, and author of *Multisensory Packaging Design* (2019; Palgrave MacMillan). He has published more than 1,000 peer-reviewed scientific articles. He is a regular on TV and Radio, and has been profiled by *The New Yorker* (<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/11/02/accounting-for-taste> ↗; see also Charles Spence – *Sensploration*, *FoST* 2016; <https://vimeo.com/170509976> ↗).

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