

Brand Name Preference as a Function of Vowel Sounds and Product Attribute: Evidence from a Spanish-speaking country

Abstract

In the U.S., Lowrey & Shrum (2007) demonstrated that brand name preference increases when the sound of fictitious brand names fits with product attributes. Clearly, much research needs to be done to determine whether these effects are universal. In Spanish-speaking countries, the influence of language and culture could distort the effects of sound symbolism. Consequently, the objective of this paper is to investigate the effects of phonetic symbolism on brand name preference in a sample of native speakers of Spanish. Consistent with Lowrey & Shrum (2007), this study show that positive vowel sound words were preferred over negative ones for both a beer described as “cold, clean, and crisp” and a beer described as “smooth, mellow, and rich”. However, contrasting Lowrey & Shrum (2007), this study show that back vowel sound words were preferred over front vowel sound words for both types of beers. These results suggest that in Spanish-speaking countries brand names with positive and back vowel sounds can be more effective than brand names with negative and front vowel sounds, regardless of product attribute.

Keywords: Sound Symbolism; Psycholinguistics; Brand Name; Latin America

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1. Introduction

Consumer researchers have begun to investigate the utility of phonetic symbolism for the naming of brands. Phonetic symbolism refers to a nonarbitrary relation between sound and meaning. It suggests that the mere sound of a word (e.g., a brand name), apart from its actual definition, conveys meaning. These sounds could provide cues about how the brand may perform on particular attribute dimensions. In the U.S., using only native speakers of English, Lowrey and Shrum (2007) showed that front vowel sound words were preferred over back vowel sound words when a beer was described as “cold, clean, and crisp”, but back vowel sound words were preferred over front vowel sound words when a beer was described as “smooth, mellow, and rich”. Additionally, Lowrey and Shrum (2007) showed that words with negative vowel sounds were least preferred for both type of beers.

Desirable brand names in one market may be detrimental in another. In Spanish-speaking countries, the influence of language and culture could distort the effects of sound symbolism. Clearly, much research needs to be done to determine whether these types of sound symbolism effects are universal. Consequently, the objective of this paper is to investigate the effects of phonetic symbolism (the impact of sound on meaning) on brand name preference in a sample of native speakers of Spanish.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1. Front versus Back Vowel Sound Effects

Front vowel sounds (in which the tongue is positioned toward the front of the mouth, as with the [i] vowel sound in pip), are associated with perceptions such as smaller, faster, sharper, and lighter, whereas back vowel sounds (in which the tongue is toward the back of the mouth, as with the [ä] vowel sound in pop) are associated with perceptions such as larger, slower, duller, and heavier across English, French, German, and Spanish speakers (Kuehnl and Mantau, 2013; Lowrey and Shrum, 2007; Shrum et al., 2012). In general, and consistent with the phonetic symbolism hypothesis, previous studies have showed that front vowel sound words are preferred for convertibles and knives, and back vowel sound words are preferred for SUVs and hammers (Kuehnl and Mantau, 2013; Lowrey and Shrum, 2007; Shrum et al., 2012).

Spanish speakers have been analyzed by Shrum et al. (2012) and Kuehnl and Mantau (2013) with mixed results. Shrum et al. (2012), using undergraduate students at a U.S. university, show that Spanish speakers prefer back (front) vowel sound words when the product was a SUV or a hammer (convertible or a knife). In an online survey, Kuehnl and Mantau (2013) using other brand names show that native speakers of Spanish prefer back vowel sound words when the product was a SUV. However, the expected preference for front vowel sound words for a convertible was not significant.

Yorkston and Menon (2004), using undergraduate students in a large northeastern university and two fictitious brand names for ice cream, Frish and Frosh, showed that Frosh (a back vowel sound word) is perceived to be smoother, richer, and creamier than Frish (a front vowel sound word). Lowrey & Shrum (2007) chose beer as a product category in which the implications of the front and back vowel sounds for favorable product attributes are ambiguous. That is, on the one hand, attributes such as cold, clean, and crisp (which are generally connoted

by front vowel sounds) might be considered positive attributes of beer. On the other hand, attributes such as smooth, mellow, and rich (which are generally connoted by back vowel sounds) seem just as likely to be considered positive attributes of beer. Lowrey & Shrum (2007) showed that words with front vowel sounds were preferred as brand names for a beer described as “cold, clean, and crisp”, but words with back vowel sounds were preferred when the beer was described as “smooth, mellow, and rich”. Hence:

H1. In Spanish-speaking countries, brand name preference increases when the sound of fictitious brand names fits with product attributes.

2.2. Positive versus Negative Vowel Sound Effects

Lowrey & Shrum (2007) analyzed whether sounds that are generally considered negative, at least in the English language (e.g., the [yoo] sound in puke), might influence preference for brand names over and above the front versus back vowel sound effect. To test this hypothesis, they constructed artificial words that contained this [yoo] sound as well as ones that contained a more generally positive sound (e.g., the [ā] sound in posh). Lowrey & Shrum (2007) showed that words with negative vowel sounds were least preferred regardless of product attribute. If the effects of the positive versus negative sounding words are as pervasive as Lowrey & Shrum’s (2007) results suggest, it would expect a main effect for vowel sound and no interaction. That is, it would expect that native speakers of Spanish would prefer the generally positive-sounding word as a brand name over the negative-sounding word, regardless of product attribute. Hence:

H2. In Spanish-speaking countries, words with positive vowel sounds are most preferred regardless of product attribute.

3. Research Design

Only native speakers of Spanish, undergraduate students at a Chilean University were included in the sampling frame. The use of homogeneous convenience samples improves the internal validity of experimental results (Calder et al., 1981). A total of 88 students completed the online survey, yielding a response rate of 55%. In line with Lowrey & Shrum (2007), participants were told that they were participating in a study of brand names. Each participant received the survey in Spanish. Participants received a list of ten word pairs that varied only on the front/back or the positive/negative dimension. Artificial words were used in order to avoid obvious semantic associations. Six word pairs represented the phonetic symbolism manipulation of back versus front vowel sounds (Glav-Gliv, Frag-Frig, Brado-Brido, Prash-Prish, Urad-Urid, Plam-Plim; Shrum et al., 2012; order was randomized). Four word pairs represented the phonetic symbolism manipulation of negative versus positive vowel sounds (Roan-Riun, Loarc-Liurc, Shoam-Shium, Toac-Tiuc; order was randomized). Artificial words that contained the [yoo] sound in Spanish as well as ones that contained a more generally positive sound were constructed. Pretesting confirmed that when pronounced or heard, the words were perceived to sound as intended.

In line with Lowrey & Shrum (2007), some participants were asked to indicate which word (e.g., Glav or Gliv) they liked best as a brand name for a cold, clean, and crisp tasting beer, whereas other participants were asked to indicate which word they liked best for a smooth, mellow, and rich tasting beer. Assignment to groups was random. After indicating their preference for the words as brand names, participants provided general demographic information. Next, as a manipulation check, participants rated the words (brand names) using a series of seven-point semantic differential scales (e.g., heavy/light, slow/fast, good/bad, pleasant/unpleasant). Finally, participants were asked to provide their impressions of the purpose of the study. Following the study, all participants were debriefed.

4. Results

4.1. Manipulation Checks

The semantic differential data was analyzed to confirm that the vowel sounds had their intended effects. For words used to test the front/back vowel sound dimension (e.g., Glav vs. Gliv), words with front vowel sounds were rated as lighter, faster, sharper, and smaller than words with back vowel sounds (all p 's < .10). For words used to test the positive/negative dimension (e.g., Toac vs. Tiuc), words with positive vowel sounds were rated as more positive (good/bad, pleasant/unpleasant) than words with negative vowel sounds (all p 's < .10).

4.2. Vowel Sound Effects

No order effects were noted, and no participants guessed the purpose of the study. The preference results as a function of vowel sound and product attribute can be seen in the Tables 1 and 2. An examination of Table 1 indicates that back vowel sound words were preferred over front vowel sound words for a beer described as “smooth, mellow, and rich”. However, for a beer described as “cold, clean, and crisp”, the predicted opposite pattern was not observed. There is no preference for front vowel sound words over back vowel sound words for a beer described as “cold, clean, and crisp”. Thus, the predicted crossover interaction was not observed. Consequently, H1 is not supported.

Table 2 show that positive vowel sound words were preferred over negative ones for both a beer described as “cold, clean, and crisp” and a beer described as “smooth, mellow, and rich”. Consequently, H2 is supported.

Table 1. Brand name preference as a function of vowel sounds and product attribute:

Front versus back vowel sound dimension

	Front versus back vowel	
	sound dimension	
	Front vowel	Back vowel
Lowrey and Shrum (2007)		
Word pairs: Gommel-Gimmel, Bromley-Brimley, Nallen- Nillen, Toddip-Tiddip, Sottal-Sittal, Ponner-Pinner	words preferred (%)	words preferred (%)
Sample: Only native speakers of English (U.S.)		
Product attribute: Cold/clean/crisp	69%*	31%
Product attribute: Smooth/mellow/rich	42%	58%*
This study	Front vowel	Back vowel
Word pairs (Shrum et al., 2012): Glav-Gliv, Frag-Frig, Brado- Brido, Prash-Prish, Urad-Urid, Plam-Plim	words preferred (%)	words preferred (%)
Sample: Only native speakers of Spanish (Chile)		
Product attribute: Cold/clean/crisp	42%	58%*
Product attribute: Smooth/mellow/rich	31%	69%*

Note: Asterisks indicate a significant preference (p-value < .05, one tailed)

Table 2. Brand name preference as a function of vowel sounds and product attribute:
Positive versus negative vowel sound dimension

	Positive versus negative vowel	
	sound dimension	
	Positive vowel	Negative vowel
Lowrey and Shrum (2007)		
Word pairs: Pawdex-Pewdex, Mawlad-Mewlad, Fawtip-Fewtip, Kawlan-Kewlan.	words preferred (%)	words preferred (%)
Sample: Only native speakers of English (U.S.)		
Product attribute: Cold/clean/crisp	58%*	42%
Product attribute: Smooth/mellow/rich	73%*	27%
This study		
Word pairs: Roan-Riun, Loarc-Liurc, Shoam-Shium, Toac-Tiuc	words preferred (%)	words preferred (%)
Sample: Only native speakers of Spanish (Chile)		
Product attribute: Cold/clean/crisp	66%*	34%
Product attribute: Smooth/mellow/rich	63%*	37%

Note: Asterisks indicate a significant preference (p-value < .05, one tailed)

5. Discussion

Consistent with Lowrey & Shrum (2007), this study show that positive vowel sound words were preferred over negative ones for both a beer described as “cold, clean, and crisp” and a beer described as “smooth, mellow, and rich”. However, contrasting Lowrey & Shrum (2007), this study show that back vowel sound words were preferred over front vowel sound words for both a beer described as “cold, clean, and crisp” and a beer described as “smooth, mellow, and rich”.

The results suggest that in Spanish-speaking countries brand names with positive and back vowel sounds can be more effective than brand names with negative and front vowel sounds, regardless of product attribute. Consequently, in Spanish-speaking countries, creating a successful brand name could depend not only upon the creation of a name that is congruent with the desired positioning, but one that phonetically is deemed appropriate.

While experimental research is not sufficient to establish the generalized non-superiority of front and negative vowel sound words in Spanish-speaking countries, the results support the idea that front and negative vowel sound words might not be more effective than back and positive vowel sound words for numerous product categories in Spanish-speaking countries. This article attempts to encourage similar research in other Spanish-speaking countries that confirms or refutes the results presented in this work.

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