Luxury brands and linguistics: What does luxury sound like?

Abhishek Pathak and Gemma Calvert
Source: WARC Exclusive, August 2017
Downloaded from WARC

This article covers the specific linguistics of successful luxury brand names and offers a scientific framework for what makes a brand name portray luxury to consumers with ‘sound symbolism’.

- Sound symbolism, a branch of linguistics, is the idea that certain sounds carry meaning.
- Luxury brand names are perceived as significantly more novel than the everyday brand names, and that by simply adding a late-acquired phoneme to a hypothetical brand name, the perception of that brand could be flipped from basic to luxury.
- Affricates - one of the most distinctive vocal attributes of luxury brand names - are a consonant sound that cause excessive friction in a sound for example, the ‘ch’ sound in Gucci and the ‘z’ sound in Haagen Daaz.
- The study found that affricates are more common in luxury brand names despite the fact that they are considered unpleasant when used in everyday brand names.

Luxury is a subjective concept; what may be a luxurious treat to some can be an everyday item to others. However, there are traits that help identify a brand as a luxury item. How a brand name sounds, how it rolls off the tongue, and how the brain interprets and processes each sound within the name can deliver a wealth of information to consumers.

Recently, together with Dr Carlos Velasco of the BI Norwegian Business School in Oslo, we set out to uncover what it is that makes a brand sound luxurious and whether it may be possible to establish a scientific framework for the formulation of luxury brand names.

What’s in a name?

It may seem as though brand names are just made up words, but corporations invest millions of dollars and regularly take years to develop the perfect brand name.

Sound symbolism, a branch of linguistics, is the idea that certain sounds carry meaning. This is obvious in onomatopoeic words (words that sound like the thing they refer to) such as ‘fizz’, ‘bang’ and ‘whoosh’, but there
are a range of other, more subtle, sounds that can suggest variations in attributes like size, femininity or exclusivity.

A seminal study on brand names by the anthropologist-linguist Edward Sapir in 1929 asked people to compare the attributes of two fictional names. For example, the brand ‘Mal’ was perceived as larger in size to the brand ‘Mil’. This is because, according to sound symbolism, the low vowel sound in ‘Mal’ (low because the jaw is open and the tongue position is low) is linked to power, size and intensity when compared to the high vowel sound in ‘Mil’ (when the jaw is closed and the tongue position is higher).

Existing research focuses on the information that brand names can pass on to consumers, but there is little research in the area of luxury brands, the differences between luxury and everyday brand names, and how a name can influence the appeal of luxury goods.

The study

We hypothesised that the relationship between perceived luxury and the sounds in a brand name goes beyond the complexity of the name. Our theory centres on the chronology of sounds that humans learn as they develop. The first sounds that children learn, such as lala, mama and dada, are simple and easy to form. Early speech focuses on concrete familiar things such as people, animals and toys, and words are created using these basic sounds. As children mature, they start to understand words and sounds that make up abstract concepts such as ‘quiet’, or ‘think’ and things that may not yet have experienced such as ‘jungle’ or ‘chimp’. These words use more difficult sounds such as ‘sh’, ‘j’ and ‘ch’ that young children can struggle with.

Our study used this chronology as a framework to build hypothetical brand names that would sound luxurious compared to everyday sounds. Hypothetical brand names that are made up of sounds – or phonemes – learnt early in childhood (i.e. before the age of two years in our study) were predicted to elicit feelings of familiarity, simplicity and concreteness, whereas brand names that included sounds mastered in late childhood (defined as after the age of five) should give a feeling of distance, rarity and abstraction.

We first found evidence in support of our hypothesis amongst existing luxury and basic brand names. We then tested the hypothesis by exposing people to hypothetical brand names and asking them to rate the names for various qualities. Fifty respondents between the ages of 18 and 60 years from the USA were recruited for the study using Amazon Mechanical Turk (an online marketplace for sourcing human skills). Pairs of brand names were formed by first using early acquired phonemes to create a basic brand name; for example ‘Biea’, then creating a corresponding luxury brand name ‘pair’ by including a late-acquired phoneme such as ‘sh’: ‘Bishiea’. Twenty-eight hypothetical brand name pairs were created by adding three late acquired phonems - a ‘sh’ sound and two ‘th’ sounds (as in ‘this’ and ‘think’).

We then conducted an experiment to confirm whether the brand names that included late-acquired phonemes were rated as more luxurious than their corresponding early-acquired phonemic brand names and if they were perceived as more novel. Respondents were exposed to the brand names in a random order, spoken by a female computer-generated voice. The results showed that the luxury brand names were indeed perceived as significantly more novel than the everyday brand names, and that by simply adding a late-acquired phoneme to a hypothetical brand name, the perception of that brand could be flipped from basic to luxury.

In a further experiment, respondents were asked to categorise the brand names they heard into one of five basic product categories (for e.g., chips, toothpaste etc) or one of two luxury categories (for e.g., diamond jewelery, yachts). Respondents categorised a significantly higher number of luxury product categories for the brand
names having a late acquired phoneme than for the names created from early-acquired phonemes.

These results confirm our hypothesis that the presence of late-acquired phonemes in brand names is an indicator of whether consumers will consider the name to represent luxury.

**Luxurious sounds**

Affricates are one of the most distinctive vocal attributes of luxury brand names. Affricates are a consonant sound that cause excessive friction in a sound for example, the ‘ch’ sound in Gucci and the ‘z’ sound in Haagen Daaz.

The study found that affricates are more common in luxury brand names despite the fact that they are considered unpleasant when used in everyday brand names.

It is also suggested that such unconventional linguistic features can help luxury brands to convey exclusivity and distinction, as we rarely see these speech patterns in everyday conversation. Conversely, everyday brand names that include the most common, easily vocalised speech patterns help to confer these brands with familiar appeal.

The study also found that in many languages there is a common preference for two syllabic names and evidence that multi-syllable luxury brand names (i.e. longer brand names) create an illusion of rarity – which also helps consumers interpret them as premium brands.

**What this means for corporations**

Not every company has the budget available to invest in brand experts and psycholinguists. A brand name is often decided internally, especially for startups and entrepreneurs. The names for digital brands like Airbnb, Ebay and WhatsApp were given very little thought as there were more pressing matters to solve when these companies where formed.

These results could help to create a framework that can give such companies guidance on brand naming and how different sounds are interpreted by consumers. These days many companies have similar product offerings but at different price points (e.g., a chocolate bar for $2 and $5); the findings of this research can help firms decide on premium brand names for higher priced products and basic brand names for lower priced products.

Judging the fit of a name to a product is usually a subjective matter. If sounds and their meanings could be formalised, then corporations and branding agencies can use this information to both create and support their brand name ideas.

**About the authors**

Dr. Abhishek Pathak
Research Fellow, ACI

Dr. Abhishek Pathak finished his PhD at Nanyang Technological University in 2015 with his research expertise spans the areas of sound symbolism and perceptions of luxury versus basic brands.
Gemma Calvert
Professor of Marketing, Nanyang Business School

Gemma Calvert is Professor of Marketing at Nanyang Business School, and Director for Research & Development at the Institute for Asian Consumer Insight, NTU Singapore. A pioneer of neuromarketing, she helps companies to break into Asian emerging markets through deeper understanding of Asian consumers.