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**The Power of Words: How Language Shapes Brand Perceptions**

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What brands say has been at the forefront of many issues across societies. Aligned with the conference theme, What the World Needs Now, this session provides novel insights into how language impacts brand perceptions. We find that slang, influencer typicality, unfamiliar words, and how brand names sound impact consumer behavior.

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# The Power of Words: How Language Shapes Brand Perceptions

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## SESSION OVERVIEW

Words have tremendous power. The world has witnessed how words can either harm and divide, or heal and unite. What brands say (and when they say it), can have a major impact on how consumers perceive their brands. For instance, while some brands have expressed support this year for issues such as racism, COVID-19 vaccinations, and climate change, others have stayed silent or provided opposing views. In line with the conference theme, *What the World Needs Now*, this session offers novel insights into how language impacts brand perceptions.

If the CDC is planning a communications campaign to encourage the public to receive COVID-19 vaccines, this session could offer insights for more effective communication. First, the message source matters (Pyrah and Wang). If the message comes from the CDC directly, it would be more effective if it avoids using informal language such as slang, because the audience expects formality and authority in messages from brands and institutions. However, the CDC can also encourage the public to share their vaccination experiences on social media. In such social media posts, the use of informal language, such as slang, may help people connect with each other. Second, if the CDC plans to use user-generated content in social media to help convince individuals to get vaccinated, then it may consider using moderately typical influencers (i.e., moderately typical brand consumers), because the public will consider all vaccinated people as more similar (i.e., homogenous) when the influencers are not too typical or too atypical (Junqué de Fortuny and Lee). When analyzing online chatter about related topics, the CDC can also examine and suggest influencers to increase the use of unfamiliar words if their posts are negative (Li and Kronrod). Last but not least, stereotypical perceptions about countries can help new brand names acquire instant brand personality. Whereas Pfizer has a foreign sounding brand name (German) and may hence inherit particular personality traits associated with the country of origin (e.g., rigorous, love of order), Moderna may elicit other country-of-origin associations.

This set of papers opens new avenues of research on how consumer linguistics impacts brands. Overall, these papers offer insights into distinct aspects of language (the use of slang, a holistic view of influencer content, the familiarity of words, and the sounding of brand names) and its impact on consumer perceptions of brands and their messages. Due to the increasing importance of branding and the burgeoning work on consumer linguistics, this session is likely to have a broad appeal to the ACR audience and attract researchers interested in branding, consumer linguistics, and word-of-mouth. More importantly, this session answers the important call of the conference theme, *What the World Needs Now,* with language and brand perceptions being at the forefront of many issues around the globe. The papers represent an advanced stage of completion and offer a multimethod approach. Overall, they comprise 13 studies employing text analysis of online content, a large-scale survey, and experiments. We anticipate that this session will provide novel insights and spark important questions.

## Brands that Use Bae: Does Slang Help Brands?

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Firms often employ slang in their marketing messages, such as Mountain Dew ("Mountain Dew is the bae") and Burger King ("This whopper bruh"), to connect with their target customers (Aaker, Brumbaugh, and Grier 2000), However, the impact of slang on persuasive messaging is unclear. We theorize and show that the use of slang by brands violates consumers' expectations, ultimately harming brand attitudes.

Slang refers to a fluid set of words and phrases that individuals use to establish social identity, cohesiveness with a group, or with a trend or fashion in society (Eble 1996). Two defining characteristics of slang are its informality and sociability. Slang moves discourse in the direction of informality (Dumas and Lighter 1978; Moore 2014), and is socially motivated, to establish one's social identity (Eble 1996) or form camaraderie (Kiesling 2004).

We propose that slang in marketing messages affects brand attitudes in different ways depending on the source of the messages—sent by brands or fellow consumers. In brand messages, consumers desire formality and professionalism (Bullard and Snizek 1988), and when these qualities of formality fall short, perceptions of brand quality diminish (Ofir and Simonson 2001). Additionally, the use of slang assumes a particular familiarity between communicators (Dumas and Lighter 1978), and overly friendly behaviors by unfamiliar others can be met with skepticism by consumers (Main, Dahl, and Darke 2007; Sela, Wheeler, and Sarial-Abi 2012). On the other hand, consumer messages are informal in nature (Westbrook 1987) and socially motivated (Dubois, Bonezzi, and De Angelis 2016; Syn and Oh 2015), matching both the informality and sociability characteristics of slang. Thus, we propose that the use of slang will be inappropriate in brand messages, leading to less favorable brand attitudes. However, the use of slang in consumer messages should be more acceptable.

We test our Hypothesis across 5 studies. In study 1, we showed that in brand messages, the use of slang (versus not) leads to less favorable brand attitudes. Undergraduate students (N = 301) viewed

a tweet that either contained slang or not (slang words validated in a pre-test). Participants reported less favorable attitudes in response to the tweet with slang ($M = 3.82$) than when the tweet did not contain slang ($M = 4.39$; $p < .001$).

In study 2, we tested the interaction effect of slang use and slang source on brand attitudes. Undergraduate students (N = 180) were randomly assigned to a 2 (slang use: present vs. absent) x 2 (message source: brand vs. consumer) between-subjects design. Participants read a product review that either contained slang or not and that was sent from either a brand or a consumer. After reading the review, they reported their brand attitudes. A significant interaction ($p < .05$) revealed that when the message source was a brand, the use of slang lead to less favorable attitudes ($M_{present} = 4.16$, $M_{absent} = 5.25$, $p < .001$). When the message source was a consumer, there was no difference in attitudes ($M_{present} = 4.88$, $M_{absent} = 5.23$, $p > .18$).

In study 3, we sought to extend our results to real purchase behavior. Community members (N = 102; recruitment was halted because of COVID-19 health concerns) were recruited and assigned to the same design as used in study 2. Participants viewed a product description about ChapStick and had a chance to purchase lip balms with their own money. Participants bought fewer lip balms when brand messages used (vs. didn't use) slang ($M_{present} = .48$, $M_{absent} = 1.00$; $p < .034$). Such difference was not found when the message source was a consumer ($M_{present} = .46$, $M_{absent} = .22$; $p > .15$).

In study 4, we tested our mediator through expectancy violations. MTurk participants (N = 503) were randomly assigned to the same 2 (slang use: present vs. absent) x 2 (message source: brand vs. consumer) between-subjects design. After reading a tweet, participants reported their brand attitudes and expectancy violations (adapted from Bettencourt et al. 1997) in a counterbalanced order. A significant interaction ($p < .05$) revealed that the use of slang by a brand negatively impacted brand attitudes ($M_{present} = 5.24$, $M_{absent} = 5.67$, $p = .003$), but there was no difference when the source was a consumer ($M_{present} = 5.86$, $M_{absent} = 5.91$, $p > .8$). The same pattern of results emerged for expectancy violations. As predicted, expectancy violations mediated the relationship of slang use and slang source on brand attitudes (95% CI [-.38, -.13]).

To pinpoint expectancy violations as the mediator, we tested our process with a moderation approach (Spencer, Zanna, and Fong 2005) in study 5. Consumers have different expectations for brands with certain personalities (Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004). The use of slang is congruent with the traits of *exciting* brands (daring, spirited, up-to-date), but incongruent with the traits of *sincere* brands (honest wholesome, and warm; Aaker 1997). Therefore, the use of slang should be more (less) appropriate for brands with an exciting (sincere) personality. Undergraduate students (N = 285) were randomly assigned to a 2 (slang use: present vs. absent) x 3 (brand personality: exciting vs. sincere vs. control) between-subjects design. We manipulated brand personality following previous researchers (Aaker et al. 2004; results from a pre-test confirm a successful manipulation). Participants viewed a brand's social media post and reported their brand attitudes. A significant interaction ($p < .05$) revealed that the use of slang negatively impacted attitudes for the control brand ($M_{present} = 3.58$, $M_{absent} = 4.85$, $p < .001$) and the sincere brand ($M_{present} = 3.60$, $M_{absent} = 4.25$, $p = .027$). However, as predicted, for the exciting brand, there was no difference in attitudes ($M_{present} = 3.87$, $M_{absent} = 4.09$, $p > .44$).

Overall, we find that the use of slang by brands violates consumers' expectations and, hence, harms attitudes. However, because expectations for consumer messages differ, the use of slang is more acceptable in consumer messages. Unless a brand has a particular personality (i.e., exciting) that aligns with the use of slang, this research serves as an important caution against its use by brands.

## Influencer Typicality and Brand Reference Group Associations

### EXTENDED ABSTRACT

A wealth of research (e.g. Bearden and Etzel 1982, Escalas and Bettman 2005, Berger and Heath 2007, White, Argo and Sengupta, 2012) has explored how reference group associations can influence consumer behavior. However, less is known about how cultural meanings are transferred to brands (e.g. how brands gain reference group associations, e.g. Batra 2019). Given the development of an economy of consumer influencers (Khamis, Ang, and Welling 2017; Marwick 2015; Senft 2013) and the digital "megaphones" (McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips 2013) that consumers now enjoy in social media, the potential for the creation of reference group associations has never been greater. In this project, we explore how influencers might transfer reference group meanings to brands, by analyzing consumer descriptions of brands after exposure to influencer content.

We leverage research on stereotype change (Hewstone and Hamberger 2000; Maurer et al. 1995) to predict how influencer content can strengthen or change the meanings associated with a brand. An important variable affecting stereotype change is the *perceived typicality* of the person relative to their group (Weber and Crocker 1983). While prototypical individuals strengthen existing stereotypes (e.g. a football player who is dumb), atypical individuals may be able to change stereotypes (e.g. a football player who is a smart). Furthermore, highly atypical individuals (e.g. a football player who is a Rhodes Scholar) can lead to "subtyping," whereby they are seen as "exceptions to the rule" and may even strengthen pre-existing associations about a group (Taylor 1981). As brand reference group associations have also been described in terms of stereotyping (Grubb and Hupp 1968; Levy 1959; Sirgy 1982), we extend insights from the stereotype change literature to the topic of branding, reference groups and social media.

We designed a survey inspired by Tucker (2015), constructing a set of 125 Instagram posts published by social media influencers (averaging 150,000 Instagram followers) about one of 25 major brands. The set of posts was constructed from a major influencer networking site, and we selected the top five posts per brand (averaging 5,000 likes) based on number of likes per post. After participants viewed a post[1], we asked them to provide five nouns and five adjectives describing the type of person who wears the brand. Subsequently, for each text entry provided, we asked participants to indicate whether the word or phrase was characteristic of people who wear the brand (1 = Very uncharacteristic, 7 = Very characteristic) to capture reference group "association strength". To capture the perceived typicality of the influencer, we asked participants whether the influencer in the post was typical of someone who wears the brand (1 = Highly atypical, 7 = Highly typical). Finally, to explore the perceptions held regarding the homogeneity of a brand's consumers, we asked "how similar to each other are people who wear this brand" (1 = Extremely dissimilar, 7 = Extremely similar). All items were adapted from the stereotype change literature.

We found that influencer typicality is associated with a brand's perceived homogeneity ($\beta = .082$, $t = 4.78$, $p < .001$), and that this relationship is actually quadratic ($\beta = .074$, $t = 9.31$, $p < .001$). Second, we found that typicality is associated with reference group associa-

1 Note that a subset of our participants did not view influencer posts and served as a baseline condition upon which we could compare main survey participants' responses

tion strength (β = .083, t = 6.48, p < .001), and that this relationship is also quadratic (β = .043, t = 7.39, p < .001). Using Hayes' MEDCURVE, we found evidence of curvilinear mediation. The linear effect of typicality on perceived homogeneity was significant (β = .083, t = 4.77, p < .001), as was the quadratic effect (β = .074, t = 9.31, p < .001). Also, the effect of perceived homogeneity on association strength was significant (β = .149, t = 10.65, p < .001). Yet typicality remained significant on both linear (β = .071, t = 5.61, p < .001) and quadratic effects (β = .032, t = 5.54, p < .001) after accounting for the intervening role of perceived homogeneity.

We considered the text responses provided by our participants. For each participant, we computed two measures capturing the tightness of reference group associations: the degree of differences among a participant's responses (termed "embedding variation"), and the number of reference group categories mentioned by the participant. These measures were constructed by associating each participant's individual words or phrases with a unique ConceptNet word embedding vector (Speer, Chin and Havasi 2018). For the second measure, we employed a Weighted Dirichlet Process Gaussian Mixture Model to link each response to one of 100 overarching reference group clusters, and we took a greater number of clusters mentioned to reflect a more diverse set of brand associations held by the participant. By employing Hayes (2017) PROCESS Model 6 in two separate exercises, we found that typical influencers generated greater perceptions of homogeneity, which increased participants' strength of reference group associations and ultimately reduced participants' embedding variation (effect = -.0013, SE = .0004, LLCI = -.0020, ULCI = -.0006) and the number of clusters participants described for the brand (effect = -.0054, SE = .0022, LLCI = -.0098, ULCI = -.0013).

Overall, these findings suggest that when influencers post on social media, their perceived typicality for the brand can shift the perceived homogeneity of a brand's consumers, strengthening or changing the groups that come to mind for the brand. Furthermore, at certain levels of atypicality, influencers may begin to lose their ability to increase perceived homogeneity and weaken reference group associations. Finally, a word embedding analysis revealed that typical influencers can tighten brand associations by increasing the likelihood that participants will think of brand descriptors that are both more similar and representative of fewer reference group categories. In short, this work bridges cultural theories in consumer research (e.g. McCracken 1989), insights on stereotype change, and novel methods in computer science, to better characterize the effects of influencer content on brand reference group associations.

## The Role of Word Familiarity in Positive and Negative WOM

### EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Word of Mouth (WOM) has a significant influence on product evaluations and purchase decisions (Park, Lee, and Han 2007; Trusov, Bucklin, and Pauwels 2009; Mauri and Minazzi 2013). Extending current research, we focus on the influence of word familiarity on these processes.

As language is developing, novel, unfamiliar words keep emerging and appearing in WOM. Therefore, it is important to understand the role of word familiarity in the effect of WOM. Familiarity is defined as knowledge regarding something/someone following previous encounters with that something/someone (Bridger, Bader, and Mecklinger 2014; Zajonc 1968). On the one hand, familiarity leads to positive attitudes and liking because of the pleasure with the familiar (Zajonc 1968, 1980; Alter and Oppenheimer 2008; Garcia-Marques, et al. 2010). On the other hand, excessive familiarity elicits boredom and disliking (Kronrod and Lowrey 2016), while unfamiliarity can increase the feeling of interest and novelty (Kashdan and Silvia 2009; Turner and Silvia 2006). Extended to language, these mixed results beg the question: how will familiar and unfamiliar language in WOM influence readers?

Importantly, WOM can be positive or negative. Previous research suggested that linguistic familiarity has a different effect within positive and negative contexts (Kronrod and Lowrey 2016). We build our predictions relying on this notion and on the finding that when processing negative information, people are more diagnostic and attentive (Lee, Park, and Han, 2008; Homer and Yoon 1992; Maheswaran and Meyers-Levy, 1990), and tend to collect and expect new information (Noguchi, Gohm, and Dalsky, 2006). In contrast, in positive contexts, people tend to use heuristic processing and more holistic top-down thinking (Bless, 2001; Erber and Erber, 2001; Fiedler, 2001). In other words, people in negative situations are more likely to be in an information seeking mindset, compared with positive contexts.

Based on the differences in mindset between positive and negative contexts, we predict that unfamiliar words have a replenishing effect on attitudes when processing negative WOM, because these words fit with consumers' diagnostic and detail-oriented processing of information, and their information-seeking mindset. However in positive WOM, these effects are attenuated. Thus, we predict that word familiarity interacts with WOM valence, such that:

*Hypothesis 1:* *unfamiliar words in negative WOM lead to higher attitudes and purchase intention, compared with familiar words. In positive WOM this effect is attenuated.*

*Mediation of information seeking mindset*. In this work we also investigate information seeking mindset as a potential underlying mechanism. Prior literature showed that unfamiliar words are viewed as novel stimuli (Kashdan and Silvia 2009; Turner and Silvia 2006), and that novel stimuli are consistent with states of seeking novel information (Berlyne, 1954, Loewenstein, 1994). Thus, we suggest that the reason that unfamiliar words replenish the effect of negative WOM on attitudes is that they are consistent with the increased information seeking mindset in these contexts. Formally,

*Hypothesis2:* *Information Seeking mindset mediates the interaction effect of word familiarity and WOM valence on attitudes.*

We test our Hypothesis across four studies that examined the effect of word familiarity on consumer decisions in positive and negative WOM. **Study 1** is a text analysis of a thousand online Amazon reviews for various products obtained from an online source available for academic use. We found a significant interaction between word familiarity and WOM valence ($p$ = .046), such that for negative reviews, unfamiliar words increase helpfulness ratings ($M_{unfamiliar}$ = 4.84, $M_{familiar}$ = 2.79, $p$ = .001), whereas for positive reviews, word familiarity does not matter ($M_{unfamiliar}$ = .98, $M_{familiar}$ = .70, $p$ = .66). In **Study 2a**, participants read an online product review for a backpack which used familiar (e.g., bright, weak) or unfamiliar (e.g., glistening, frangible) words, and indicated purchase intentions. Supporting H1, we found that unfamiliar words in negative WOM lead to higher purchase intention ($M_{unfamiliar}$ = 2.67, $M_{familiar}$ = 2.03, $p$ = .039). However, the effect of word familiarity was not significant in positive WOM ($M_{unfamiliar}$ = 4.03, $M_{familiar}$ = 4.13, $p$ = .75). **Study 2b** replicated this interaction effect with a different product (a film) and WOM type (a tweet). In negative WOM, unfamiliar words lead to

higher purchase intention ($M_{unfamiliar}$ = 3.76, $M_{familiar}$ = 2.96, $p < .001$), whereas this effect is not significant in positive WOM ($M_{unfamiliar}$ = 4.61, $M_{familiar}$ = 4.35, $p = 0.19$). **Study 3** tested the interaction effect with a different product (a jacket), and also tested the potential mediator of seeking more information. Supporting H2, the moderated mediation analysis showed that seeking information mediates the interaction effect of word familiarity and WOM valence on purchase intentions (B = .2832, SE = .0791, 95% CI: [.1373, .4536]). We also explored attitude certainty as the potential mediator, and the results showed that in positive WOM, unfamiliar words significantly reduce attitude certainty ($M_{unfamiliar}$ = 4.34, $M_{familiar}$ = 4.80, $p < .000$), which is consistent with our theory.

This research extends the literature on the way WOM influences consumer decisions, as well as the research on familiarity, by analyzing the different effects of word familiarity in positive and negative WOM. Using valence as a moderator contributes to our understanding of the way WOM aspects can have a different effect depending on the valence of the text. We also identified information seeking as a mediator that can explain how word familiarity works when reading positive and negative WOM about products.

From a practical standpoint, this research can help marketers and managers make better predictions about future sales based on WOM and design better marketing plans based on the understanding of what textual characteristics make up the most influential WOM. It also provides insights for sellers about how to understand the effects of negative WOM. Marketers could take our findings into consideration when solving questions about the most influential WOM or considering ways to promote their products.

## Country Brand Personality DNA: Creating Instant Brand Personalities for New Brands

### EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This research introduces "Country Brand Personality DNA" – the unique combination of four personality traits associated with a country – and explores the way this unique DNA can be "inherited" by brand names that sound like they originated from a particular country. Drawing from literature on branding, country of origin, and country stereotypes, we test how foreign sounding brand names can trigger associations with their country of origin, eliciting associations with a specific set of personality traits that are associated with that country.

Literature on brand personality has established that people associate specific personality traits with brands (Aaker, 1997). Literature on country of origin (COO) shows that consumers have certain expectations of products, such as quality, depending on their COO (Bilkey and Nes 1982; Johansson, Douglas and Nonaka 1985; Maheswaran 1994). Extending these literatures, and using the DNA metaphor, we suggest that countries have a "Country Brand Personality DNA" - a unique and identifiable combination of four personality traits that are associated with the country. Just like the four chemical bases that make up the genetic code that is stored in DNA, we suggest that brand names that sound like they originated from a particular country "inherit" that country's personality DNA, resulting in consumers associating the unique combination of that country's four DNA traits with the brand. This inheritance occurs through the process of instant activation of stereotypical personality traits associated with the country. Thus, a country can act as a "parent" to the "child" brand by passing down its own distinct personality DNA to the brand name that sounds like it came from that particular country.

We therefore predict that: 1. People are able to associate a set of four personality traits uniquely with particular countries; 2. Consumers associate similar traits with brand names that sound like they came from these countries. Thus, a brand name that resembles a particular country-of-origin language should carry the perceived DNA (four personality traits) of its parent country.

We conducted three studies to test our predictions. We examined the combinations of four personality traits that are associated with two different countries: France and Japan. **Study 1** was designed to test the prediction that countries have a Country Brand Personality DNA – a unique combination of four Core Genes (personality traits); 203 participants rated 29 personality traits on the extent to which they could represent France, or Japan, if these were people. Results of this study suggest that the Country Brand Personality DNA for France consists of the following traits: *Glamorous, Sophisticated, Elegant and Romantic*. As for Japan, we found the following traits: *Reliable, Intelligent, Stable and Dignified.* These traits loaded on the same one or two factors in a factor analysis, and had the highest ratings of the extent to which they were considered representative of their respective countries.

Next, **Study 2** tested the prediction that brand names that sound like they originate from a certain country "inherit" the Country's Brand Personality DNA, that is, the four personality traits uniquely associated with that country. 392 participants ranked the 29 personality traits from Study 1 on the extent to which the traits accurately described each of four fictitious brand names (2 French sounding and 2 Japanese sounding). Subsequently, participants guessed the COO for each of the four brand names. 195 participants guessed the country correctly, and analyses were conducted with this sub-sample. Results showed, as predicted, a significant overlap between the human traits that participants assigned to each of the brand names and the four traits of the corresponding country's Brand Personality DNA. Specifically, the four DNA traits of France were rated as significantly more representing the French brand names than the Japanese brand names, and vice versa. Finally, **Study 3** aimed to provide further support to our theory by testing whether typical French or Japanese human first names evoke the same associations with the four unique personality traits as the countries and the foreign sounding brand names did in Studies 1 and 2. The study followed the same procedure as Studies 1 and 2, except that participants rated typical French and Japanese human names (e.g. François and Fujiko). As expected, participants associated typical foreign first names with a similar set of four personality traits as we found in Studies 1 and 2, representing their COO Brand Personality DNA.

In summary, results suggest that countries possess a personality DNA – a unique combination of four personality traits, and that when brand names are recognized as being from a particular country, they "inherit" the country's DNA, such that they evoke these same personality traits as those associated with the country itself. Our study is the first to identify inheritable country personality traits and to link them to branding, thereby contributing to existing research on branding, and informing brand managers on the use, process, and outcomes of foreign brand naming. Consequently, this work provides a new and promising avenue for branding managers and entrepreneurs: Utilizing the new Country Brand Personality DNA model as a marketing tool could allow marketers, brand managers, and entrepreneurs to create brand names that can instantly evoke a strong brand personality, which could help improve the efficacy of branding and marketing strategies of firms worldwide.

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