

What's in a name? For young Chinese consumers, it's about culture mixing

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Bringing a product to the Chinese market can be a major hurdle for a burgeoning company looking to expand abroad. But according to new research from a University of Illinois expert in consumer behavior and global marketing, for a Western brand to crack the Chinese market, the name's the thing.

Young, educated Chinese consumers who are highly bicultural - that is, conversant with both Eastern and Western cultures - tend to more favorably evaluate brand translations that keep both the sound and the meaning of the original name, says Carlos J. Torelli, a professor of business administration at Illinois.

"China is challenging for Western companies, and the name-translation issue is particularly challenging. But there is the potential to strategically decide whether you want to be seen as more of a Western brand, more of a Chinese brand, or seen as a brand seeking a happy medium," he said.

The study, which will be published in the *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, examines how integrative responses to culture mixing, in the context of Western brand names translated into Chinese, can influence consumer evaluations of products.

"Specifically, we examine young, educated Chinese consumers' evaluations of three types of brand name translations: by sound, by meaning and by sound plus meaning," Torelli said.

Results show that younger, more educated and more cosmopolitan Chinese consumers tend to favor "phonosemantic" brand translations, which integrate both sound and meaning into a product's name.

"What we found is that if you're targeting young Chinese consumers, they tend to be more bicultural," he said. "The established view of Chinese consumers is that they are conservative in the sense that they value tradition and conformity, whereas Westerners tend to be more open to new experiences or are individualistic in the sense that they emphasize new things like autonomy and pursuing one's own goals."

Younger Chinese consumers, however, were born after the one-child policy and have much more exposure to the West than previous generations.

"When they are the target, since they are much more Westernized in their values, they have a more bicultural mindset. So young Chinese consumers fall somewhere in the middle, modulating between those two poles of valuing tradition and embracing what's new."

Because of that, the researchers hypothesized that young Chinese consumers would respond much more favorably to cultural mixing.

"We found that the foreign name connects them with that aspect of cosmopolitanism that they valued, but the Chinese understanding of the brand also connects with their Chinese identity, which is also important to them," Torelli said.

It also signals that the company is being sensitive to their language.

"It's a foreign brand that's making an effort, and is respecting and valuing the culture, thereby integrating the Western values of self-expression and autonomy while also paying tribute to traditional Chinese

value of conservatism," he said. "So there's a double path that leads to positive feelings toward brands."

But why go to the extra effort if you could just do a phonetic translation?

"That's what most American companies do when they go somewhere else - they don't rebrand, they simply translate the name," Torelli said. "If the country uses the alphabet, then you don't have to do anything. It's maybe how you pronounce it that changes."

The problem is that Chinese is a logographic language.

"There are no letters in Chinese. There are characters that have sounds," he said. "So the project started out of the notion that, when you translate to Chinese, you have a decision to make at the get-go. And that decision is, when you tell whoever it is who's going to take that name in China, do you translate it phonetically? If you take that route, then it's going to sound weird to Chinese consumers. It will sound similar to how it sounds in the home market, but it will sound foreign to Chinese consumers. OK, then why don't you just translate the meaning? Many brands have meaning, like Pampers or Suave. Others, like 7UP, don't. These are names that are suggestive in the home language. So you can't do a straightforward translation."

According to Torelli, it all points to the broader cultural mixing phenomenon.

"The idea is that, more and more in everyday situations, we're starting to see symbols of two cultures juxtaposed in the same place. Sometimes we like that, sometimes we don't. And that has marketing and branding implications."

For marketers, the benefit is if you're an American or Western European

company trying to break into the Chinese market, "you might want to think carefully about adopting a phonosemantic translation for your product," he said.

"That might be the best approach, especially if you're targeting this young, affluent, cosmopolitan market."

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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