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Sounds That Make You Smile and Share:

A Phonetic Key to Prosociality and Engagement

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ABSTRACT

The importance of names has been demonstrated for decision making related to individuals as well as companies. While previous researchers have focused on traits such as the fluency of names, we present three studies that focus on the role of the "hard e" or [ē] sound in relation to helping behavior. Because pronunciation of the [ē] sound requires a facial movement that mimics a smile particularly when the sound occurs at the end of a name, our research complements previous findings generated by the theory of embodied cognition in which biting on a pencil or chopstick evoked behavioral and mood changes. Study 1 finds that participants are more likely to help someone whose name ends with the [ē] sound while Study 2 utilizes a broader set of contrasting sounds and finds a basic preference for the [ē] sound that is specific to women. Study 3 shows that women are significantly more likely to recall addressing their parents as Mommy or Daddy when soliciting help rather than Mom or Dad. Our findings complement previous research concerning motherese and highlight a phonetic cue for prosocial behavior that appears to offer insights for marketing and management. Just as the current studies are important in understanding interpersonal interactions, the findings have direct relevance for marketing campaigns that focus on consumer engagement.

Keywords: Marketing; Brand Names; Sounds; Cooperation; Engagement

Introduction

During the 2012 Olympics' Opening Ceremony parade, one of the broadcast announcers in the United States introduced the delegation from Djibouti and quickly quipped that the nation has "one of those names that make you smile." Given that the African nation of fewer than one million residents located near the Southern end of the Red Sea carries little or no valence for most Americans, the broadcaster was undoubtedly referring to the fact that proper pronunciation of the country's name requires a person to approximate a smile with the "hard e" or [ē] sound at the end of the name.

While other aspects of the word Djibouti – including unfamiliarity with its meaning – might also cause someone to smile, the broadcaster's observation is intriguing in light of previous research demonstrating that forced smiles – generated by biting on a pencil or a pair of chopsticks – can induce greater propensity to laugh (Strack, Martin, and Stepper 1988) and better stress reactions (Kraft and Pressman 2012). More specifically, the idea that pronunciation of a name might elicit a comparable kind of reaction to the "pencil test" is powerful since names are part of regular social interactions whereas the experimental manipulations that require chewing on a pencil, for example, are not.

In this article, we apply the theory of embodied cognition (e.g., Barsalow, 1999; Landau, Meier, and Keefer, 2010) that motivated the "forced smile" research and focus on the degree to which the [ē] sound might function as a kind of phonetic cue for engaging in – and soliciting – prosocial behavior. In light of previous research concerning "motherese" (e.g., Grieser and Kuhl 1988), we also investigate whether women might react and/or use the [ē] sound more frequently than men. In addition to being important in understanding interpersonal behavior, our interests

have direct relevance for consumer engagement marketing campaigns. It is notable background for our studies that large, successful firms disproportionately include the [ē] sound in their brand names (Pogacar et al. 2014).

Names are Important

Previous research has focused on the existence of interpersonal preferences for certain names – such as those that are easier to pronounce (Laham, Koval, and Alter 2012) – as well as inferences that people draw from names as a function of variables like length of the name (Mehrabian and Piercy 1993) and whether it is associated with a particular ethnic group (e.g., Fryer and Levitt 2004). In a similar vein, Leirer, Hamilton, and Carpenter (1982) examined the impressions that people make when a person's first name is "formal" (e.g., Edward), "familiar" (e.g., Ed), and "adolescent" (e.g., Eddie) and acknowledge that people often have a degree of discretion with respect to how formally they present themselves – through their name – to others. Additional topics studied through names include Kulig's (2013) finding that people prefer to have unique names while Guéguen, Pichot, and Dreff's (2005) report that people tend to respond more favorably to others who share their names.

Beyond describing preferences and inferences that people have in relation to names, it is valuable to recognize how naming biases might translate in behavioral decision-making. Based on studies of investment decisions, for example, researchers have found that companies whose names are more fluent or easier-to-pronounce tend to be valued more highly than other firms (Alter and Oppenheimer 2006; Green and Jame 2013). In an experimental field study, Bertrand and Mullainathan (2004) sent identical applications to potential employers with names that are

commonly found among African Americans (e.g., Lakisha and Jamal) and European Americans (e.g., Emily and Greg) and found that employers were significantly less likely to respond to the African American names. More recently, Silberzahn and Uhlmann (2013) studied a large sample of Germans and found that people with "Noble-Sounding" last names tended to be employed in higher status occupations than the rest of the sample. As a point of practice to be taken from these findings, Cotton, O'Neill, and Griffin (2007) argue that employers should be sure that names are removed from resumes before they screen applications given the pervasiveness of naming preferences and the likelihood that undue discrimination results.

Sounds, Meanings, and Behaviors

Researchers interested in marketing implications for the creation of brand names have examined the degree to which specific types of sounds might be variably attractive to people. Klink (2009), for example, finds that women appear to respond more favorably to "front vowels" – "i" and "e" – whereas men demonstrate a preference for "back vowels," "o" and "u." Illustrative of the "sound symbolism" that marketing researchers have debated (e.g., Ohala, Hinton, & Nichols 1994; Yorkston and Menon 2004), Klink (2000) reviews patterns whereby front vowels – when compared with back vowels – tend to be viewed as "smaller, lighter (relative to darker), milder, thinner, softer, faster, colder, more bitter, more feminine, friendlier, weaker, lighter (relative to heavier) and prettier." Similarly, Klink (2012) reports that brand names with front vowels are more likely to viewed as sophisticated and sincere whereas back vowels are better for creating an image of ruggedness. In a study of consumer intentions that applies Klink's work, Baxter, Ilicic, and Kulczynski (2014) report evidence that consumers

respond significantly more favorably when there is a fit between a brand's sound symbolism (e.g., rugged) and its product attributes.

A basic assumption of the sound symbolism research is that there can be a relationship between phonetic sounds and symbolic meaning. In contrast with the view that the relationship between a signifier and sign is arbitrary and idiosyncratic (De Saussure, Baskin, Meisel, & Saussy 2011), sound symbolism researchers tend to presume that there can be meaningful relationships between sounds and meaning that are universal and not language-specific. As Yorkston and Menon (2004) review, "sound symbolism has been observed to exist in native languages in North America, Latin America, Asia, Australia, and Africa, as well as more developed languages such as English, Finnish, French, German, Modern Greek, and Japanese" (2004, p. 43). More specifically, while Lowery and Shrum (2007) highlight that Socrates was an early promoter of the view that there exists a degree to which sounds can convey universal meaning in contrast with the view that sounds arbitrarily fit with meaning across languages, Maglio et al. (2014) offer the conclusion that "growing evidence for the phenomenon of phonetic sound symbolism argues against such a complete arbitrariness of language."

In our case, we are interested in examining the degree to which the specific sound [ē] – because of the physical action that its pronunciation entails – might influence affective and behavioral outcomes. Our interest in this question applies the concept of embodied cognition (e.g., Barsalow, 1999; Landau, Meier, and Keefer, 2010) alongside the perspectives of sound symbolism researchers. In effect, our focus on the [ē] sound highlights a case where the concept of embodied cognition – as illustrated by the "forced smile" research – is the underlying reason for any sound-symbol relationship.

Given that the [ē] sound fits the patterns of "baby talk" or "motherese" (Caporael 1981; Caporael, Lukaszewski, and Culbertson 1983; Grieser and Kuhl 1988), we also expect that women demonstrate more affinity and response to the sound than men. Our expectation of gender differences is consistent with previous research showing that women's names – among English speakers, at least – tend to disproportionately feature the [ē] sound (Cutler, McQueen, and Robinson, 1990) and people generally demonstrate an unconscious affinity for names that are similar to their own (e.g., Jones et al., 2002; Nuttin, 1985). In other words, one reason to expect women to respond more favorably to the [ē] sound is that it is more likely going to be part of their own names (e.g., Mary, Jenny, or Shirley).

Overview of the Present Research

Through a set of three studies, we investigate the existence of a preference for words with the [ē] sound. Study 1 examines how people would like and help individuals with unfamiliar names that vary according to whether they include the [ē] sound while Study 2 assesses whether a basic preference for the [ē] sound exists against a broader set of contrasts. Study 3 tests the extent to which people differentially address their parents as Mom or Mommy and Dad or Daddy as a function of whether they are soliciting helpful behavior. While Study 1 focuses on the importance of the [ē] sound in relation to engaging in prosocial behavior, Study 3 examines whether the [ē] sound is used to help solicit prosocial behavior. In both cases, we are interested to understand whether the sound function as a cue that facilitates prosocial behavior whereas Study 2 – with its broader set of comparison sounds – reinforces the value of the contrast-pairs in Studies 1 and 3.

Study 1: Names and Helping

Method

Participants. Forty-seven undergraduate students (27 women and 19 men and 1 unreported) were recruited from undergraduate business classes and participated in exchange for partial course credit.

Procedures. We selected three popular names from outside of the United States – Akami, Tomi, and Ramsi – since (1) participants would most likely be personally unfamiliar with anyone with one of the names and (2) each of the names lack any kind of gender association for most native English speakers. With these assumptions, using a within-subjects design, we asked participants "For the set of questions that follows, please pay careful attention to the PRONUNCIATION or PHONETIC SPELLING of each of the names that we will ask you to rate." Then, in randomized order for AKAM-EYE, AKAM-EEE, TO-MEYE, TO-MEEE, RAMS-EYE, and RAMS-EEE, we asked participants to provide three ratings in response to the questions: How much do you like this name?; How much do you think your best friend would like this name?; and, How likely would you be to help someone with this name? Participants were asked to use a 9-point scale ranging from "not at all" (1) to "a great deal" (9).

In addition, after participants had completed their responses to the main prompts, we also asked open-ended questions – "Do you tend to like people whose names end with a "hard e" or "EEE" sound? What do you like about their names? – to gain a better sense of any patterns that might be apparent in the data.

Results and Discussion. Across our full sample, average scores from each participant for the EEE and EYE variants were calculated and compared. Because there were no interaction effects between the condition and gender, *p*s > .28, gender was collapsed in the following analyses. As indicated in Table 1, paired-sample *t* tests revealed that participants were more likely to like those with EEE names, t (46) = 5.12, $p < .001$, $d = .75$, than those with EYE names. Additionally, participants were more likely to think that their best friend would like the EEE names, t (46) = 4.69, $p < .001$, $d = .69$, and more likely to personally help those with EEE names, t (46) = 2.00, $p = .05$, $d = .29$.

Insert Table 1 Approximately Here

In response to the open-ended question that we posed, participants who favorably rated EEE names wrote “EEE sounds better,” “sounds cheery,” “sounds nicer,” and “sounds softer.” For those who did not favor EEE names, a theme among responses was that EEE names “sound childish” while another participant observed EEE names were preferred “when I was younger maybe, but now that I am older it just seems like a kid’s name.” Someone with a preference for EEE names echoed this theme by noting that “it makes them sound cuter and younger, more like a child but as people grow older I think it makes them still sound younger with the hard e sound at the end.”

Study 2: Sound Preferences

Method

Participants. Forty-four undergraduate students (29 women and 15 men) for whom English was their primary language were recruited from undergraduate business classes and participated in exchange for partial course credit.

Procedures. Using the phonetic illustrations that Klink (2000, p. 9) developed for 11 variant pronunciations of vowel sounds in English, we provided participants with randomly ordered index cards that included the phonetic depiction and the illustrative word with the relevant phoneme or sound circled. For example, one of the cards presented participants with "ē" and "bee" with the "ee" circled. The other 10 cards – following the table of illustrative words provided by Klink (2000) – circled the letters corresponding to the main vowel sounds found in the following words: food, hit, test, ban, put, hate, home, caught, dusk, and cot.

Participants were instructed "On a scale of 1 to 5, please indicate how much you like the vowel sounds that are illustrated through specific words in each of the index cards that you have been provided. Please silently **_enunciate_** the illustrative words from the index cards and then record your LIKING score in the row whose number matches with the number on your index card." For the 5-point scale, 1 was "very much dislike," 3 was "indifferent," and 5 was "very much like." Through this within-subjects design, we gained a total of 11 Liking ratings from each participant before asking a number of demographic questions.

Results and Discussion. We conducted a 2-way mixed model ANOVA in which the sound condition (the average Liking of [ē] versus the average of all of the other sounds) was a

within-participants factor and gender (male versus female) was a between-participants factor. This analysis revealed significant differences between the [ē] condition and non-[ē] condition, F (1, 42) = 9.62, p = .003, $\eta^2_{partial}$ = .19, which was significantly qualified with gender, F (1, 42) = 6.86, p = .01, $\eta^2_{partial}$ = .14. When we conducted separate paired-sample t tests focusing on male and female samples, the preference for [ē] is significantly stronger than the preference for non-[ē] sounds among female participants, t (28) = 4.81, p <.001, d = .90; however, the preference for [ē] is not significant among male participants, p = .76.

Study 3: Mom, Mommy, Dad, Daddy

Perhaps the most commonly used names that end in the [ē] sound are the words Mommy and Daddy. In light of our findings from Studies 1 and 2, we conducted Study 3 in order to determine whether people differentially use the variants of Mommy and Daddy instead of Mom and Dad when they are seeking help.

The prediction suggested by Study 1's finding that the [ē] sound increases the probability that someone will help another person is that people will use Mommy or Daddy more frequently when soliciting help. In other words, while Study 1 suggests that unfamiliar names can be phonetically modified – by forcing smiles – to elicit significantly more help from women, Study 3 examines the degree to which people soliciting help from their parents might use the same [ē] sound variants as part of their solicitations. In the case of Study 3, the solicitation targets (i.e., parents) would not be expected to enunciate the [ē] sound when they hear Mommy or Daddy. Consequently, Study 3 does not examine to the degree to which the [ē] sound is more effective at eliciting help from parents; instead, Study 3 aims to assess whether people demonstrate a

tendency – consistent with Study 1 – to use names that end in the [ē] sound when seeking assistance in a real-world setting.

Beyond Study 3's practical value in relation to parenting, theoretical explanations for why "Mommy" or "Daddy" might be expected to be more evocative of help from parents include the [ē] sound's relatively low "weight" (Cutler et al., 1990). In this vein and consistent with cross-species or evolutionary views of human behavior (e.g., Morwitz, 2014), it is reasonable to expect that children signal – truthfully or not – their helplessness in situations in which they seek help as subordinates to potentially generous others. While the field of evolutionary psychology is increasingly applied to questions involving market exchange (e.g., Griskevicius et al., 2009; Miller, 2009; Saad, 2007), Study 3 adopts the view that children – as *de facto* consumers of parental services – make use of the meanings associated with the [ē] sound as a tactic to increase the chances of gaining help. Lest such an approach sound overly cynical – particularly with respect to explaining children's behavior, a basic tenet of evolutionary psychology is that evolved biases tend to be unconscious (e.g., Kniffin, 2009) and can demonstrate themselves at very early ages (e.g., Haig, 1993).

Method

Participants. Forty-two undergraduate students (27 women and 15 men) were recruited from undergraduate business classes and participated in exchange for partial course credit.

Procedures. Using a within-subjects design, we asked participants the following questions: "When you were a young child and you needed to ask your mother for help or a favor, how often did you call her Mom or Mommy?" and "When you were a young child and you

talked with your mother about a regular day at school, how often did you call her Mom or Mommy?" After participants completed a number of unrelated filler tasks, we asked them the same questions in relation to their Dad or Daddy. Participants were asked to rate their responses on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (always mom/dad) to 7 (always mommy/daddy). Three participants indicated that the question was not applicable for them; consequently, our analysis focuses on 39 participants (25 women and 14 men).

Results and Discussion. We conducted a 2-way mixed model ANOVA in which the situation condition (helping versus regular conversation) was a within-participants factor and gender (male versus female) was a between-participants factor. With respect to the hypothesis that children would utilize the [ē] sound versions when they wanted help from a parent, the main effect of the situation condition was marginally significant, F (1, 37) = 3.17, p = .08, $\eta^2_{partial}$ = .08, which was qualified with a marginally significant interaction, F (1, 37) = 3.17, p = .08, $\eta^2_{partial}$ = .08. As illustrated in Figure 1, though, separate paired-sample t tests focusing on male and female samples are clear that women were more likely to call for Mommy when they asked for help than when they asked her regularly, t (24) = 2.43, p = .02, d = .49, while there was no such difference among men, p = 1.0.

Insert Figure 1 Approximately Here

For the questions involving Dad/Daddy, the main effect of the situation condition was significant, F (1, 34) = 4.47, p = .04, $\eta^2_{partial}$ = .12, which was qualified with a significant interaction, F (1, 34) = 5.80, p = .02, $\eta^2_{partial}$ = .15. While women were more likely to call for Daddy when they asked for help, t (22) = 3.04, p = .006, d = .63, there was no such difference among men, p = .34. Thus, it is clear that women – and not men – recall using the [ē] sound (Mommy and Daddy) address much more frequently when asking for help.

General Discussion

The findings reported in our studies point to an important effect of the [ē] sound that appears to be most strongly pronounced by women. Our findings regarding the importance of gender appear to complement previous research concerning "motherese" (e.g., Grieser and Kuhl 1988). Beyond relying on the concept of embodied cognition and the related expectation that physically producing the [ē] sound helps to activate a prosocial exchange, the findings with respect to women do fit with previous research showing (1) that women tend to have names that include the [ē] sound (Cutler et al., 1990) and (2) people generally like sounds that are part of their own names (e.g., Jones et al., 2002; Nuttin, 1985). The findings also fit with the expectation that because (1) the [ē] sound conveys a degree of helplessness (e.g., Cutler et al., 1990; Lowery and Shrum, 2007) and (2) people are generally likely to respond favorably to calls for help (cf. de Waal, 1997), then it would make sense from the perspective of evolutionary psychology that there would be evolved tendencies to use the [ē] sound as a phonetic cue for prosocial behavior.

While the explanations that we propose for the findings are sensible, one limitation of the present research is that there are other potential mediating mechanisms. For example, Maglio et al. (2014) consider the [ē] sound – as an illustration of "front" vowels – and find robust effects whereby people tend to think more precisely in response to cues that include the [ē] sound. Applying work by Maglio and Trope (2011) that reports that priming people to think more precisely tends to elicit more concrete thinking processes and juxtaposing that finding with Cialdini's (2008) general finding that people tend to be more responsive to precise, actionable requests for prosocial behavior, it is plausible the relationships that we examine in the present research are partly explainable by such a set of mediating mechanisms. With respect to potential implications for consumer behavior, it is equally plausible in light of Wright et al. (2012) and Kardes, Cronley, and Kim (2006) that a pathway exists whereby the [ē] sound evokes precise, lower-lever construal that, in turn, favorably influences the perception of advertising claims.

A second limitation of our studies involves our reliance on participants in English-speaking environments; consequently, future studies are needed to examine the degree to which these patterns might apply across cultures and across languages. Such studies would also help elucidate whether the patterns that we reported are culture- or language-specific or, as is suggested by the concept of embodied cognition (e.g., Barsalow, 1999; Landau, Meier, and Keefer, 2010), universal An additional limitation is that Study 3 relies upon recall and beyond the potential for general problems associated with memory, it is possible that male participants were more reluctant to acknowledge using Mommy and Daddy since the terms do not fit masculine gender roles (e.g., Caporael 1981). Indeed, the mixed pattern of results that we found for male respondents in the present research poses a puzzle that future research will be able to address. More specifically, future studies concerning the use of Mommy and Daddy would also

best draw upon live interactions and would have the benefit of addressing the independent question of whether appeals that include the [ē] sound might be relatively more effective.

Because our studies indicate that the [ē] sound appears important for eliciting cooperation from others, our findings highlight a naturalistic mechanism through which individuals and companies might engage others in cooperative activity. In contrast with studies that rely upon highly artificial tasks such as walking and singing in synchrony (e.g., Wiltermuth & Heath 2009) to elicit greater cooperation, it is valuable to recognize that the [ē] sound appears to function among women as a subtle but important phonetic cue for cooperation. Similar to retail-focused nudges such as Hornik's (1992) finding that sales can be increased when salespeople physically touch customers (e.g., on the forearm), our findings should help inform firm-level strategic questions regarding brand names and their relative likelihood to engage customers.

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TABLE 1. Comparison of Mean Ratings Based on EEE or EYE Variants

	EEE	EYE	*t*
Like the Name	4.25	3.21	5.12**
Best Friend Would Like the Name	4.23	3.38	4.69**
Help Someone with the Name	5.82	5.43	1.99*

** $p < .01$
* $p = .05$

FIGURE 1: Women Call Their Parents Daddy and Mommy More Frequently When Asking for Help
(1 = always mom/dad, 7 = always mommy/daddy)