



Universitetet
i Stavanger

**FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES,
NORWEGIAN SCHOOL OF HOTEL MANAGEMENT**

MASTER'S THESIS

STUDY PROGRAM:

Master's degree in Service
Leadership in International Business

THESIS IS WRITTEN IN THE FOLLOWING
SPECIALIZATION/SUBJECT:

International Marketing

IS THE ASSIGNMENT CONFIDENTIAL?

No

TITLE:

More than Words: Exploring the Translation of Foreign Brand Names into Chinese

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of different translation strategies, specifically semantic translation strategy versus cultural connotation translation strategy, on consumers' brand evaluations, which takes into consideration the moderating effect of country of origin (foreign versus Chinese companies). An online experiment with a 2 (translation strategies: semantic versus cultural connotation) \times 2 (country of origin: foreign companies versus Chinese companies) between-subjects ANOVA design is conducted with native Chinese consumers as subjects. The experiment evaluates translated brand names across five product categories. Findings show that participants generally preferred brand names with a cultural connotation translation strategy over the semantic translation strategy, particularly when evaluating brand names of foreign companies. The study contributes to the understanding of the unique role of cultural connotations in brand naming strategies in the Chinese market context and offers insights for international marketers aiming at entering the Chinese market.

Keywords: Translation strategies; Cultural connotations; Brand evaluations; Country of origin

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Acknowledgement

Taking a Master's degree is challenging yet it is one of the wise decisions we both have made in our lives, which we would never regret about, particularly moving from China to Norway and studying at the University of Stavanger. This two-year program has taught us precious lessons both professionally and personally. Academically, we have grown a lot in the past year, starting from brainstorming the potential research topics together with our supervisor in March 2023, to actively researching and writing this thesis until the mid of May 2024. Therefore, we want to seize this opportunity to express our sincere appreciation towards those who support us along this unforgettable journey.

We would like to thank our supervisor, Lars Bergkvist, for the outstanding guidance and support throughout our thesis process. We deliberately chose you to be our supervisor because we enjoyed a lot when we took both International Marketing and Service Marketing courses with you. From which, we knew that you would provide us with valuable challenges that prepare us after graduation. "Who told you that it would be easy?" as you always say.

We would like to thank each other for making an excellent team from the very beginning until the end of the remarkable cooperation. We could always find ways to motivate one another, particularly when we were experiencing writer's block. Most importantly, we both are very grateful for the fact that we are not able to know each other back in China, but become good friends here in Norway.

Lastly, we would also like to thank our families and friends who are always there for us regardless of online communications and time differences. And to our readers, we genuinely hope you enjoy your reading.

Introduction

Brand naming strategies play a significant role for businesses that want to expand internationally. Numerous studies exhibit that localization has brought valuable benefits to companies. Previous research shows that brand localization has a positive impact on brand prestige, which directly influences the customers' purchase intention in new markets (Steenkamp et al., 2003). Therefore, being aware of local preferences and adapting accordingly is the key to corporate success (Özsomer, 2012). This is especially crucial for the brand name, which is not just the vocalized component of a brand (Keller, 1993), but also serves as the foundation for a brand's image (Francis et al., 2002). However, finding a culturally appropriate brand name for a new market is a significant challenge, especially in a culturally nuanced market like China.

The Chinese market with its large customer base and rapid economic growth naturally attracts ambitious companies. In 2023, China's gross domestic product (GDP) was estimated at US\$17.52 trillion, marking a 5.2 percent year-on-year increase (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2024). Nevertheless, many new entrants are struggling with brand naming in Chinese due to the country's extensive intellectual property filings, including the world's largest trademark database (Ma, 2024). Therefore, it is challenging to find a legally registrable brand name within this competitive market (Wu et al., 2019).

Standard Chinese, well-known as Mandarin, is the official language of the People's Republic of China. However, hundreds of varieties of Chinese are spoken in China, and significant cultural differences can be found across the country. Due to the cultural nuances and linguistic complexities, selecting culturally sensitive brand names becomes one of the essential factors for companies to succeed in the Chinese market. It not only interests business

practitioners, but also draws a great deal of attention among marketing researchers and academics.

Earlier research demonstrates that brand names with meaning are more likely to be recalled by consumers than those without (Kanungo, 1968; Robertson, 1989, as cited in Francis et al., 2002). Since 1994, researchers have been exploring how linguistic differences between Chinese and English affect consumer memory and brand recall (Schmitt et al., 1994). They found out that Chinese people tend to rely more on visual processing rather than phonological cues due to the ideographic nature of the Chinese writing system. Thus, Chinese brand names that convey an appropriate meaning are more likely to enhance brand-name memory for consumers (Schmitt et al., 1994). In 1997, Huang and Chan generalized four branding principles based on the analysis of 527 award-winning products from Beijing and Shanghai, identified semantic structure as a key principle in Chinese brand naming. They argued that it is hard to create Chinese names by randomly arranging alphabetic letters in a way that is commonly done in European languages (Huang & Chan, 1997). With an ideographic writing system, Chinese requires brand names to be made up of meaningful words and reflect certain cultural values (Huang & Chan, 1997).

Zhang and Schmitt (2001; 2004) concluded three common translation methods: phonetic translation (by sound), semantic translation (by meaning) and phonosemantic (by sound plus meaning). They highlighted that Chinese consumers prefer semantic translation regardless of whether the brand names were emphasized in English or Chinese (Zhang & Schmitt, 2001). Francis and his colleagues (2002) investigated the brand name standardization/adaptation strategies of Fortune-500 companies within the consumer goods sector in China and Hong Kong. They found that the majority of these companies chose transliteration of the brand names to attain global brand recognition (Francis et al., 2002). However, they pointed out that the effect of

this translation method was limited. Hence, they recommended that multinational companies should localize their brand names by incorporating more positive connotations and product-related meanings into the Chinese brand names (Francis et al., 2002). In addition, a study conducted by Lowrey, Shrum and Dubitsky (2003) revealed that for brands that were less familiar to consumers, the semantic appropriateness of the brand name was one of several linguistic factors positively correlated with brand recall.

Building on the significance of adopting a semantic translation method when translating brand names from English to Chinese, Zhang and Schmitt (2001) also suggested the need for future research to investigate the influence of cultural factors in brand naming strategies. Numerous global brands were observed incorporating various Chinese cultural elements in the Chinese market (Nie & Wang, 2021). These cultural elements encompass symbolic and spiritual meanings that resonate deeply among Chinese people and are distinctly related to Chinese culture contexts (He & Wang, 2017). Notably, brand names that draw from Chinese classical literature have particularly caught attention by customers and practitioners. Examples including “宜家” (yi-jia) for IKEA, “露华浓” (lu-hua-nong) for Revlon, stand out for its unique cultural insights among all foreign brands. The existing studies highlight the value of cultural integration in brand name translation (He & Wang, 2017; Nie & Wang, 2021; Zhang & Schmitt, 2001). However, there remains a gap in research regarding an in-depth examination of Chinese classical literature, particularly in comparison with semantic translation strategy.

Therefore, there is a clear need for further examination into the effective integration of Chinese classical literature into brand naming, particularly within the context of cross-cultural branding. The present research aims to fill this gap by extending current research through the lens of cultural connotations. It examines the relationship between brand naming strategies and

brand evaluations among Chinese consumers, considering the moderating effect of country of origin. Experiments employing SurveyXact were carried out to gain insights into Chinese consumers' evaluations of brand names using translation strategies (semantic translation with or without cultural connotation). The study sheds light on the unique role of cultural connotations, especially the Chinese classical literature in brand naming, offering valuable implications for new entrants seeking competitive advantages in the Chinese market as well as marketing researchers and academics in this domain.

Theoretical Background

Prior research indicates that brand names serve as key identifiers and communicators of brand identity. They present consumers with a variety of cues, including both product-related or non-product-related *attributes*. These cues can relate to a range of *benefits*, including functional, experiential, or symbolic, as well as shaping overall brand *attitudes* (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987; Chattopadhyay & Alba, 1988; Johnson, 1984; Russo & Johnson, 1980; Keller, 1993, p. 4). Such brand associations evoked by a brand name can activate an associative network in consumers' minds, influencing their brand evaluations in various aspects, such as perceived quality, price and purchase intentions (Hong & Shultz, 2002; Kardes, 1994, as cited in Shen & Chen, 2007; Wu et al., 2019). The ideographic nature of the Chinese writing system, in which each character carries a distinct meaning, leads Chinese consumers to rely more on visual processing when encountering brand names (Schmitt et al., 1994). As a result, Chinese brand names that are both semantically appropriate and closely associated with their product category are more likely to enhance brand-name memory for consumers (Lowrey et al., 2003; Schmitt et al., 1994; Tavassoli & Han, 2002). Furthermore, studies indicate that foreign brands can enhance consumer engagement, strengthen purchase intention as well as maintaining competitive advantages by

localizing their brand names with integration of Chinese cultural connotations (Chen, 2020; He & Wang, 2015; Wang & Lin, 2009; Wu, 2008; Zhang & Schmitt, 2001).

Translation Strategies of Brand Names

Chinese Writing System

Extensive research was conducted to examine the relevance between culture and consumer behavior. As Zhang, Schmitt and Haley (2003) stated, “a given culture’s language can play a vital role in determining consumer perceptions, evaluations, and decisions (p. 229)”. Schmitt, Pan and Tavassoli (1994) also highlighted the importance of language in cultures and pointed out that language and communication are closely related to the thought process while behaviors, attitudes, and values change over time (p. 420). To establish a positive brand association, it is significant for foreign companies to understand the complex Chinese Writing system before they can create the Chinese version of the brand names.

There are two major types of writing systems identified by linguists: (1) alphabetic systems (2) ideographic systems. Alphabetic systems include Latin scripts (e.g., English, Norwegian), Cyrillic scripts (e.g., Russian, Serbian), Hebrew and Arabic scripts, in which a set of letters is used to represent the sounds of a spoken language. Ideographic systems (e.g., Chinese), in which written symbols or characters represent meanings and concepts that may not correspond to specific sounds directly (Akmajian et al. 1992, p. 467, as cited in Zhang et al., 2003, p. 234). One of the reasons that Chinese civilization has been preserved until today is that Chinese characters are very stable in form. Unlike alphabetic languages, which can easily change the spelling of single words, Chinese characters have remained largely the same for over four thousand years. It is not possible to simply invent a completely new character, as is often done in

alphabetic languages when creating brand names (Huang & Chan, 1997, p. 321). This linguistic feature of the Chinese writing system builds the foundation to translate foreign brand names into Chinese.

It is noted that Chinese is a tonal language, which means the same phonemes may have four possible tonal nuances and each tone corresponds to several homonymic characters. For example, “‘gong’ with the first tone corresponds to at least 10 characters with distinct meanings, including ‘work-[工]’, ‘bow-[弓]’, ‘public-[公]’, ‘meritorious service-[功]’, ‘attack-[攻]’, ‘supply-[供]’, ‘palace-[宫]’, ‘respectful-[恭]’, and a surname-[龚]” (Schmitt et al., 1994, p. 420). Thus, translating an alphabetic brand name into Chinese becomes particularly challenging, as one must select suitable characters among those homonyms.

One of the distinctive features of the Chinese language is its characteristic of unity, where a single word is formed by a single morpheme, which contains just one syllable and is represented by one character (Huang & Chan, 1997, p. 325). In ancient times, Chinese words typically appeared as one individual syllable and thus one character. In contrast, modern Chinese often features words compounded by two syllables and thus two characters (Huang & Chan, 1997, p. 325). Even though these characters work as independent words, many two-character Chinese terms have specific meanings that are not immediately apparent. These meanings may be very different as compared to the meanings of the individual characters alone (Schmitt et al., 1994, p. 420).

An interesting case is the Chinese New Year edition of the Nike Air Force 1 sneakers, which features the traditional Chinese characters “發” (fa), meaning “prosperous” and “福” (fu), meaning “blessing” on the heels of the respective left and right shoes. When seen separately, these characters are symbols of “wealth” and “good luck”. However, when seen together, they

create the word “发福”, which literally means “getting fat” and is commonly used to describe a lifestyle of comfort that leads to weight gain. This unintended pairing conveys an outcome that is typically not seen as desirable, especially in the context of fitness and athletic wear.

Translation with a Semantic Strategy

Zhang and Schmitt (2001) developed a framework that incorporates three different methods of translating brand names from a linguistic perspective - phonetic (i.e., by sound), semantic (i.e., by meaning), and phonosemantic (i.e., by sound and meaning). The phonetic method involves translating the sound of the original foreign brand name into Chinese characters without regard for their lexical meanings. For example, the well-known Scotch whisky brand Chivas Regal is translated as “芝华士” (zhi-hua-shi). The semantic method involves translating the brand name directly from its original language to Chinese, persevering the original meaning. For instance, the brand Apple is translated as “苹果” (ping-guo) in Chinese, which directly refers to the fruit (Chao & Lin, 2017). The phonosemantic method aims to retain both the sound and meaning of the original brand name in the translation. An example of this method is the fast-food franchise Subway, which is translated as “赛百味” (sai-bai-wei), meaning “the taste is better than anything else” (Wu et al., 2019). Each of these translation methods has been adopted by numerous foreign brands entering the Chinese market.

The distinction made by Zhang and Schmitt (2001) between pure and nonpure semantic translation is important when it comes to translating brand names across different languages and cultures. Pure semantic translation occurs when a brand name has a lexical meaning in its original language and this meaning can be directly translated into the target language (Zhang & Schmitt, 2001). The translated brand name retains its original meaning, which is beneficial when the meaning is positive and aligns with the brand’s identity and the product’s characteristics. For

instance, Microsoft has been pure translated into Chinese as “微软” (wei-ruan). The term “微” (wei) means “micro” or “small”, and “软” (ruan) means “soft”, together they convey the idea of software, which is what Microsoft primarily deals with (Zhang & Schmitt, 2001).

In contrast, nonpure semantic translation is used when a brand name does not have an inherent meaning or when a direct translation does not effectively convey the desired brand association or product category (Zhang & Schmitt, 2001). In these cases, the brand name is translated in a way that incorporates additional contexts to evoke the right associations in the minds of the consumers. A good example is Land Rover, which is translated as “路虎” (lu-hu) in Chinese. “路” (lu) means “road”, and “虎” (hu) means “tiger”. The translation does not directly convey the original brand name but instead creates a new image that is associated with off-road capabilities, strength, and prestige, which are the key characteristics of the brand. The choice between pure and nonpure semantic translation depends on several factors, including the brand’s marketing strategy, the cultural context of the target market, and the nature of the product (Zhang & Schmitt, 2001). The goal is to create a brand name that not only is linguistically appropriate but also resonates with the target audience on an emotional level (Francis et al., 2002).

Translation with a Cultural Connotation Strategy

Growing evidence indicates that cognitive and perceptual processes are influenced by culture (Morris & Peng, 1994; Nisbett & Miyamoto, 2005), emphasizing the significant role of cultural connotations, especially in the intercultural communication. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, connotation is defined as the implied meaning of “a word in addition to its essential or primary meaning”. In the field of language and cultural studies, connotation broadens into cultural connotation, which includes extra layers of meaning tied to specific cultures. That is to say, for the same word, gesture, or color, additional meanings or significance

can be perceived and frequently vary across different culture settings (Shi & Jiang, 2015), which explains another crucial reason for studying the effect of cultural connotations on brand evaluations in the present research.

A significant amount of research (Chen, 2017; Li, 2019; Zhen, 2023) explored the different cultural connotations between English and Chinese. Such differences can often be noticed in the preference for color, numerical digits and animals. It was emphasized that Chinese consumers have a particular preference towards colors such as red, yellow; even numbers over odd; and animals such as dragon, tiger, horse, crane and magpie (Chen, 2017; Li, 2019; Zhen, 2023). For example, in Chinese culture, the word for dragon “龙” carries many positive connotations, such as strength, longevity and good fortune. It is closely associated with emperors as it symbolizes power and authority. Whereas in most Western cultures, especially during the medieval period, dragon is a symbol of sin and evil (Shi & Jiang, 2015, p. 103). Bugatti Veyron, a renowned supercar, translated as “布加迪威龙” (bu-jia-di-wei-long). The brand name retains its original sound, while “威龙” (wei-long), which means “mighty dragon”, adds a layer of cultural relevance that highlights the vehicle’s performance and prestige. On the contrary, Chinese battery manufacturer 白象 (bai-xiang), which is translated literally as “White Elephant” in English, failed to break into the U.S. market as the brand name symbolizes an expensive asset or investment that yields little return in Western culture (Wei, 1997, as cited in Kum et al., 2011, p. 594). Contrary to its perceived meaning in English, “white elephant” symbolizes nobility and authority in Chinese culture (Shi & Jiang, 2015, p. 108).

Guo (2016) also provided three additional types of Chinese cultural connotations that foreign companies mainly utilized in brand name translation strategies, which draw reference from cultures related to Chinese auspicious practices, culture related to plants and classical

literature. The words linked to auspiciousness are often used in brand naming strategies such as “喜” (xi), meaning happiness; “福” (fu), meaning blessing; and “吉” (ji), meaning luck. For example, French hypermarket chain Carrefour is translated as “家乐福” (jia-le-fu) in Chinese, which means “happy family with blessing”. Soft drink 7 up, translated as “7 喜” (qi-xi), literally means “seven happiness” (Guo, 2016). By incorporating these cultural connotations appropriately, brand names can be associated with luck, goodwill, and fortune, aligning with the desire of Chinese consumers (Zhou & Hui, 2003).

Among all the distinct Chinese cultural connotations, a specialized naming strategy that integrates classical literature has caught attention. For instance, the Swedish furniture retailer IKEA is translated as “宜家” (yi-jia), literally means “a pleasant home” in modern Chinese (Guo, 2016) and it can be traced back to one of the most ancient classic poetries “Shi-jing” from 3000 years ago, which goes “之子于归, 宜其室家”, meaning “The girl will soon get married and the couple will be happy and harmonious” (Confucius, B.C. 6 / 1996). Similarly, Bird & Bird, the well-known international law firm is translated as “鸿鹄” in Chinese, pronounced “hong-hu”, referring to a mythical bird that often associated with a person with great aspirations. The term originated from the ancient Chinese philosophical work “Lüshi Chunqiu” from 2200 years ago (Lü, B.C. 239 / 2002). The rich traditional Chinese cultural connotations indicate both the product category and positive brand associations to the customers.

Several researchers investigated the possible reasons that cause the lack of cultural connotation vacancy and conflicts between Chinese and English, including geographic conditions, historical backgrounds, mythology, literature, religious beliefs, social customers and values (Li, 2019; Shi & Jiang, 2015). In addition, Chen (2017) also mentioned that the pronunciation system of Chinese plays a vital role. For instance, Chinese people try to avoid the

number “4” in all kinds of situations such as license plates, phone numbers or room numbers because it sounds like “death” in Chinese (p. 533). In the study of Fortune-500 companies in the consumer goods sector operating in China and Hong Kong, Francis, Lam and Walls (2002) discovered that over 27% of the analyzed Chinese brand names incorporated inappropriate Chinese cultural connotations.

The Effect of Translation Strategies on Brand Evaluations

When targeting foreign markets, the decision on the choice of brand name is critical to the success of a corporation. One should decide whether to translate the original brand name into the local language or not, and if so, which translation strategy should be considered (Chow et al., 2007). Fundamentally, brand name is a vocalized component of a brand and is intended to “identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors” (Kotler, 1991, p. 442, as cited in Keller, 1993, p. 2). Brand names that are properly translated into the local language are able to bridge potential cultural gaps and are viewed as more adaptive and approachable by the local consumers (Cintas, 2009; Wu, 2008). For example, Pepsi company’s potato chips brand Lay’s is well known as “乐事” (le-shi) in China, which translates literally to “joy matters”. This not only echoes with its brand mission of “bring a smile on consumer’s face”, but also aligns with Chinese consumers’ desire for obtaining good and lucky meanings from things around them (Zhou & Hui, 2003).

Examples demonstrating the failure of shaping appropriate consumer perceptions and brand evaluations are not uncommon in the market. Best Buy, as one of world’s largest retail companies of home appliances and electronic products, failed and eventually exited the Chinese market after eight years of struggling (China Briefing, 2011). Apart from reasons coming from its positioning strategies in China, the local brand name itself failed to add any value but concern

to the offered product. As Best Buy's local brand name is “百思买” (bai-si-mai), which means “purchase after a hundred thoughts”. However, there is an old saying well known among Chinese people that alerts impulse action, which goes “三思而后行”, meaning “think twice before you do” (Confucius, B.C. 4 / 1989). Unconsciously, when it comes to purchase action, the Chinese brand name of Best Buy, “百思买” associates “being cautious” for Chinese consumers, which harms company sales and impedes economic growth to a large extent (HI-COM, 2020). Similarly, Airbnb did not achieve its expansion goal as expected in the Chinese market and part of the reason was related to its local name, “爱彼迎” (ai-bi-ying), translating to “love, each other and welcome”, which does not make sense to Chinese consumers, but evokes pornographic associations (Doland, 2017).

Extensive research on brand name translation strategies and consumer corresponding behaviors emphasizes that Chinese consumers particularly prefer brand names that carry positive meanings and good associations (Carnevake et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2019; Zhang & Schmitt, 2001; 2014). Considering the features of Chinese language mentioned above, such meanings can be efficiently conveyed through semantic translation strategy and semantic with cultural connotation translation strategy.

Semantic Translation Strategy and Brand Evaluations

Previous research in psycholinguistics shows that reading in English is primarily focused on the pronunciation of words, using a phonetic mental framework (Schmitt et al., 1994; Tavassoli & Han, 2002). In contrast, reading Chinese relies more on visual processing, with more engagement of the visual elements of the characters (Schmitt et al., 1994; Tavassoli & Han, 2002). As a result, a Chinese brand name that conveys an appropriate meaning and associates

with its product category is more likely to enhance brand-name memory for consumers (Lowrey et al., 2003; Schmitt et al., 1994; Tavassoli & Han, 2002).

For instance, the Chinese name of the popular car brand Porsche is “保时捷” (bao-shi-jie), which translates word for word into - “guarantee, time and efficiency”. It employs a semantic translation strategy to create interconnection between features of cars and the brand image of quality and efficiency in a catchy manner. This effectively magnifies product benefits compared to its original brand name for the target customers (Zhang & Geng, 2014).

Past research also indicated that Chinese consumers are more likely to purchase products that can resonate with their personal values, personality, lifestyle, and social status (Tse, 1996, as cited in Keh et al., 2016, p. 1348). This resonance increases the likelihood of consumers recommendations to others (Anderson & Narus, 1998). Liu and her colleagues (2020) enhanced the finding by demonstrating how global brands such as Nike and Adidas have successfully achieved this connection with their customers.

Cultural Connotation Translation Strategy and Brand Evaluations

Previous research shows that international companies incline to integrate Chinese cultural elements into brand naming, product designs or marketing communications when entering the Chinese market (He & Wang, 2015; Wang & Lin, 2009; Wu, 2008). In 2017, He and Wang found that the employment of Chinese cultural elements has both direct and indirect impact on Chinese consumer purchase likelihood (He & Wang, 2017). This aligns with the research conducted by Steenkamp and his colleagues (2003). In 2020, a study conducted by Liu, Tsai and Tao (2020) indicated that global brand’s localization tends to enhance its perceived globalness rather than hurting it. Chen (2020) also found that even if a foreign brand has a local name, it can still appeal to local customers as long as the true origin is explicitly informed.

Chinese poetry classics can be widely found as inspirations of many global brands' Chinese names to build familiarity and trust among local consumers. For instance, the American cosmetics brand Revlon adopted “露华浓” (lu-hua-nong) as its local brand name when it entered China in 1996. “露华浓” (lu-hua-nong) originally came from a poem by the famous poet Li Bai, which goes “云想衣裳花想容, 春风拂槛露华浓” - meaning “From the clouds you think of her dresses, from the flowers her face; caressed by vernal breeze, freshened by morning dew” (Li, B.C. 7 / 2024). Because of the classic cultural connection, the name has been publicly recognized as one of the most beautiful foreign brand names by Chinese consumers (Chen, 2020). According to Liu and her colleagues' research (2020), Chinese consumers do recognize and appreciate global brand's cultural localization efforts.

Cultural Integration Effects in Foreign Brand Marketing

Given that the Chinese market is one of the most dynamic and attractive markets globally, numerous studies show that it is significant to comprehend the distinct values, traditions and preferences of Chinese consumers who are deeply influenced by cultural nuances (He & Wang, 2015; Tse, 1996, as cited in Keh et al., 2016, p. 1348; Wang & Lin, 2009; Wu, 2008; Zhang & Schmitt, 2001; 2014). Successfully penetrating the Chinese market largely depends on the strategic integration of Chinese cultural elements into the brand. This approach is crucial for establishing strong connections with local consumers, fostering positive engagement, and ultimately gaining a competitive edge (Carnevake et al., 2017; He & Wang, 2017; Keh, 2016; Liu et al., 2020; Steenkamp et al., 2003; Wu et al., 2019).

Cultural Relevance and Consumer Engagement

Incorporating elements of Chinese culture into brand names is widely used to create a sense of familiarity and trust among the Chinese consumers towards the foreign brands. Apart from drawing inspirations from classical literature as how IKEA - “宜家” and Revlon - “露华浓” were named, foreign brands are prone to be named with traditional symbols that carry cultural significance (Alden et al., 1999; Steenkamp et al., 2003). Chinese people have a particular preference for plants that symbolize positive qualities, such as pine, plum blossom, orchid, bamboo and chrysanthemum (Tay, 2023; Welch, 2013). Each of these plants carries a unique symbolic meaning and is often used in Chinese culture to represent virtues such as perseverance, humility, elegance, integrity, and longevity respectively (Guo, 2016). These symbols are frequently used in various cultural contexts, such as painting, embroidery, gardening, interior design, cuisine as well as cosmetics. For example, the cosmetics brands, Lancome is translated as “兰蔻” (lan-kou), and Estee Lauder as “雅诗兰黛” (ya-shi-lan-dai). The character “兰” (lan), referring to the orchid, beautifully evokes a sense of natural fragrance and elegance (Guo, 2016). This strategic choice effortlessly conveys the grace and beauty that are closely associated with the brands’ target customers. It showcases the companies’ skillful cultural integration efforts which strengthens cultural relevance and enhances consumer engagement (Liu et al., 2020).

Competitive Advantage through Cultural Differentiation

Brand differentiation is vital for standing out in a foreign market. It is a key strategy for both marketing and business success (Kotabe & Kothari, 2016; Li & Zhou, 2010). Coca-Cola initially struggled in the Chinese market with the awkward translation “蝌蚪啃蜡” (ke-dou-ken-la), which literally translates to “bite the wax tadpole”. However, they later

succeeded with “可口可乐” (ke-kou-ke-le), a name that conveys both “delicious” and “happiness”, resonating well with Chinese consumers due to its cultural relevance (Zhang & Schmitt, 2001). This strategic change in brand naming demonstrates the importance of cultural adaptation in marketing communication. As compared to Pepsi, Coca-Cola gains a competitive edge with its iconic red packaging, a color favored nationally in the Chinese market (Zhen, 2023). Empirical data further substantiates Coca-Cola’s prominence within the Chinese market. In 2019, Coca-Cola captured a noteworthy 54.5% share of the carbonated drinks market, while its main competitor Pepsi accounted for around 36% of the market in China (Ou, 2024).

Conceptual Model

The present study is guided by the conceptual model shown in Figure 1. It has been drawn to visualize the proposed research question - how do brand naming strategies, namely semantic translation strategy and cultural connotation translation strategy, impact consumers’ brand evaluations in China, while also considering the moderating influence of country of origin (foreign companies versus Chinese companies)?

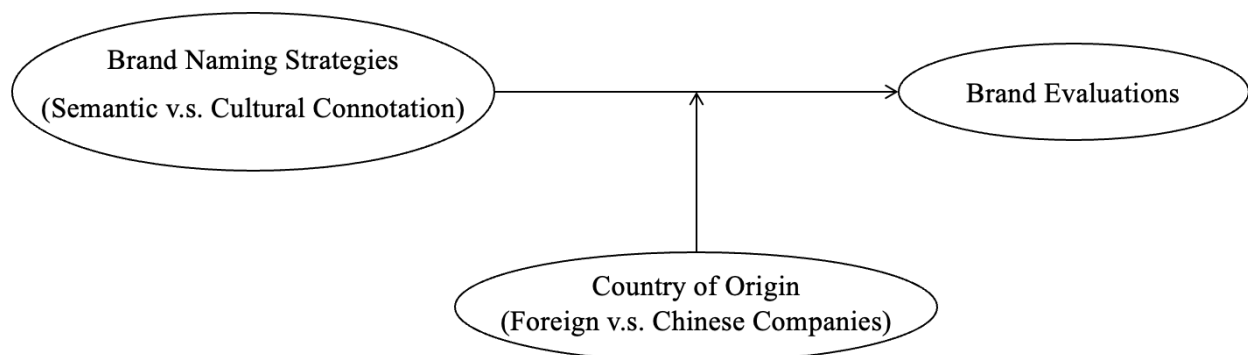


Figure 1. Conceptual Model

Prior research in brand naming strategies and consumer behavior (Zhang & Schmitt, 2001) shows that Chinese consumers who are exposed to Chinese brand names evaluate more positively to brand names translated by the semantic method than the phonetic. Similar results were found between semantic translation strategy and phonosemantic translation strategy in the same experiment. They suggested that both translation strategies are processed by Chinese native speakers primarily with respect to the meaningful semantic components (p. 319). As mentioned previously, Chinese consumers in general prefer to make decisions based on the association of positive meanings, which are strongly influenced by Chinese culture. Therefore, the brand naming strategies of this research include a semantic translation strategy and a cultural connotation translation strategy. Thus, it is hypothesized that:

H1: Brand names with a cultural connotation translation strategy will be more favorably evaluated than brand names with a semantic translation strategy among Chinese consumers.

H2: Country of origin moderates the effects of brand naming strategies on brand evaluations such that the effect is stronger for foreign companies than the Chinese companies.

Method

An experiment utilizing the SurveyXact platform was undertaken to examine the impact of brand name translation strategies on the brand evaluations of Chinese consumers, with the consideration of the moderating effect of country of origin. The investigation comprises a pretest followed by the main study, adopting a between-subjects ANOVA design that involves two key factors: brand naming strategies (semantic versus cultural connotation) and country of origin (foreign companies versus Chinese companies).

Generation of Stimuli

A quantitative pretest for deciding the stimulus names for the main experiment was conducted. Six common product categories ranging from bottled water to desk lamp were selected and three English names within each product category were created. To ensure a non-bias approach in the research, an AI tool - ChatGPT 3.5 was utilized to generate entirely fictitious English brand names. The command given to the AI was as follows: “Please generate 10 fictitious one-word product names for each of the following six categories that are not existing or registered in real life - bottled water, sneaker, headphone, desk lamp, chips and laundry detergent”. The created English brand names consisted of either three or four syllables, with consonants and vowels that are representative of the English language (Selkirk, 1982, as cited in Zhang & Schmitt, 2001).

Pretest

The pretest method for foreign brand names was based on the prior research (Zhang & Schmitt, 2001) where 20 European respondents were approached to participate in a questionnaire to evaluate the generated stimulus by rating on seven-point scales on the two following questions: (1) “How familiar each name sounded to you?” (1 = “not at all familiar” and 7 = “very familiar”); (2) “Please indicate to what degree you think this name is a likely brand name for the product” (1 = “not at all likely” and 7 = “very likely”). The full questionnaire can be found in Appendix A. The results showed that the mean of each stimulus did not differ significantly from each other within the same product category. Thus, all foreign brand names were kept.

Then, Chinese brand names with a semantic translation strategy and a cultural connotation translation strategy were created based on the foreign brand names. The Chinese

brand names with a semantic translation strategy employed characters that contained meaning which related to its product category - the nonpure approach for semantic translation mentioned earlier (Zhang & Schmitt, 2001). The brand names with a cultural connotation translation strategy were created based on the semantic names with an emphasis on incorporating associations from Chinese classical literature. All Chinese brand names are compounded by two characters as Huang and Chan (1997) proved that Chinese consumers have a particular preference for two-syllable brand names. 30 Chinese native speakers participated in the questionnaire to evaluate the two types of brand names on familiarity and brand-name likelihood as well as one extra question: “Do you find any classical cultural associations in this name?” (1 = “not at all” and 7 = “very many”). The full questionnaire is provided in Appendix B.

The aim of the Chinese brand name pretest is to select one pair of stimuli for each product category. Hence, pairs with no significance on cultural association ($p > 0.05$) were excluded because it is necessary to ensure the Chinese brand names contain cultural connotations at an obvious level. In addition, pairs with no significance on familiarity ($p > 0.05$) and brand-name likelihood ($p > 0.05$) were selected as it is crucial to maintain a similar level of familiarity and brand-name likelihood in brand name pairs. Furthermore, pairs that had significance on either familiarity or brand-name likelihood ($p < 0.05$) were excluded in order to prevent unwanted bias.

As a result, the product category of chips was removed as none of the pairs in the category met the above criteria. The remaining product categories all contained suitable brand names. Interestingly, for the headphone category, there were two qualified pairs that met the filtering requirements, namely “音波” (yin-bo) - “余音” (yu-yin) pair and “悦音” (yue-yin) - “天籁” (tian-lai) pair. Considering the significant role the cultural connotation playing in the present

study, “音波” (yin-bo) - “余音” (yu-yin) pair was chosen because of its greater significance on cultural association ($p < 0.01$). The final stimulus brand names of each product category chosen for the main experiment were marked in bold as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Stimulus Brand Names and Pretest Results

| Product Category | English Brand Name | Semantic | Semantic with Cultural Connotation | p-value |
|----------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------------|---------|
| Bottled water | PureAqua | 净泉 (jing-quan) | 清源 (qing-yuan) | |
| Familiarity | 2.7 (2.15) | 1.90 (1.81) | 2.57 (1.83) | .079 |
| Likelihood | 5.0 (1.59) | 4.20 (1.88) | 3.07 (1.68) | .009 |
| Cultural Association | | 4.03 (1.90) | 3.03 (1.85) | .028 |
| | CrystalFlow | 清流 (qing-liu) | 山涧 (shan-jian) | |
| Familiarity | 1.45 (1.00) | 2.97 (2.20) | 2.67 (2.15) | .256 |
| Likelihood | 2.75 (1.33) | 2.83 (1.37) | 4.07 (1.64) | <.001 |
| Cultural Association | | 3.77 (1.85) | 4.57 (1.89) | .043 |
| | Refreshia | 源泉 (yuan-quan) | 甘露 (gan-lu) | |
| Familiarity | 1.25 (0.55) | 3.57 (2.22) | 4.03 (2.37) | .236 |
| Likelihood | 2.70 (1.30) | 3.73 (1.66) | 4.40 (1.98) | .098 |
| Cultural Association | | 3.67 (1.83) | 4.53 (1.68) | .004 |
| Sneaker | MoveMax | 极步 (ji-bu) | 致远 (zhi-yuan) | |
| Familiarity | 1.55 (0.89) | 2.77 (2.01) | 3.37 (2.50) | .240 |

| | | | | |
|----------------------|-------------|-------------------------|------------------------|-------|
| Likelihood | 3.20 (1.47) | 4.43 (2.03) | 2.63 (1.65) | <.001 |
| Cultural Association | | 2.40 (1.52) | 4.37 (2.09) | <.001 |
| | FlexiRun | 灵健 (ling-jian) | 逍遥 (xiao-yao) | |
| Familiarity | 1.90 (1.17) | 2.37 (1.85) | 2.93 (2.48) | .234 |
| Likelihood | 4.10 (1.48) | 2.83 (1.62) | 2.50 (1.28) | .283 |
| Cultural Association | | 3.27 (1.96) | 4.57 (1.91) | .007 |
| | GlidePro | 阔步 (kuo-bu) | 悠行 (you-xing) | |
| Familiarity | 1.70 (1.08) | 3.27 (2.39) | 2.30 (1.86) | .011 |
| Likelihood | 2.10 (1.12) | 3.07 (1.76) | 2.70 (1.62) | .295 |
| Cultural Association | | 3.50 (1.98) | 3.53 (2.05) | .926 |
| Headphone | AudioWave | 音波 (yin-bo) | 余音 (yu-yin) | |
| Familiarity | 2.70 (2.05) | 3.17 (2.36) | 3.50 (2.39) | .265 |
| Likelihood | 4.30 (1.89) | 3.00 (2.05) | 3.33 (1.63) | .366 |
| Cultural Association | | 2.70 (1.76) | 4.73 (1.89) | <.001 |
| | SonicBliss | 悦音 (yue-yin) | 天籁 (tian-lai) | |
| Familiarity | 2.80 (2.21) | 3.27 (2.00) | 3.90 (2.47) | .073 |
| Likelihood | 3.65 (1.95) | 4.13 (1.76) | 4.00 (2.18) | .666 |
| Cultural Association | | 3.50 (1.78) | 4.40 (2.01) | .017 |
| | EchoSync | 同声 (tong-sheng) | 临境 (lin-jing) | |
| Familiarity | 2.35 (1.93) | 3.17 (2.36) | 3.13 (2.11) | .919 |

| | | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------|------------------------|----------------------|-------|
| Likelihood | 3.15 (1.66) | 3.03 (1.79) | 4.00 (2.05) | .035 |
| Cultural Association | | 2.67 (1.81) | 4.27 (2.00) | .001 |
| Laundry detergent | BriteWash | 焕洗 (huan-xi) | 浣纱 (huan-sha) | |
| Familiarity | 1.85 (1.23) | 3.17 (2.23) | 3.47 (2.39) | .375 |
| Likelihood | 3.80 (1.79) | 3.40 (2.14) | 3.40 (1.85) | 1.000 |
| Cultural Association | | 3.03 (2.09) | 5.43 (1.81) | <.001 |
| | SparkClean | 无垢 (wu-gou) | 不染 (bu-ran) | |
| Familiarity | 1.85 (1.35) | 3.33 (2.50) | 3.17 (2.61) | .538 |
| Likelihood | 3.65 (1.60) | 3.07 (2.02) | 2.80 (1.88) | .408 |
| Cultural Association | | 3.30 (2.26) | 3.57 (2.18) | .455 |
| | PureBurst | 洁净 (jie-jing) | 无尘 (wu-chen) | |
| Familiarity | 1.70 (1.17) | 4.07 (2.56) | 3.60 (2.33) | .075 |
| Likelihood | 2.45 (0.94) | 4.43 (2.08) | 3.10 (1.77) | <.001 |
| Cultural Association | | 3.30 (2.20) | 3.53 (2.19) | .573 |
| Chips | CrunchCraft | 脆爽 (cui-shuang) | 醉味 (zui-wei) | |
| Familiarity | 1.90 (1.29) | 3.57 (2.43) | 2.50 (2.05) | .005 |
| Likelihood | 3.40 (1.10) | 3.27 (1.89) | 2.33 (1.63) | .003 |
| Cultural Association | | 2.23 (1.65) | 2.87 (1.91) | .023 |
| | CrispSavor | 薯乐 (shu-le) | 趣味 (qu-wei) | |

| | | | | |
|----------------------|-------------|----------------|--------------|-------|
| Familiarity | 1.75 (1.12) | 3.37 (2.14) | 3.63 (2.53) | .496 |
| Likelihood | 3.35 (1.23) | 5.07 (1.66) | 3.53 (2.11) | <.001 |
| Cultural Association | | 2.40 (1.65) | 2.23 (1.57) | .455 |
| | SnackSpires | 脆香 (cui-xiang) | 回味 (hui-wei) | |
| Familiarity | 1.40 (0.88) | 3.63 (2.30) | 3.70 (2.51) | .763 |
| Likelihood | 2.65 (1.73) | 3.93 (1.76) | 3.97 (1.99) | .919 |
| Cultural Association | | 2.97 (2.03) | 3.43 (1.81) | .152 |
| Desk lamp | ShineRay | 曙光 (shu-guang) | 致志 (zhi-zhi) | |
| Familiarity | 1.20 (0.52) | 3.57 (2.51) | 2.97 (2.14) | .161 |
| Likelihood | 2.70 (1.59) | 4.40 (1.92) | 3.17 (1.74) | <.001 |
| Cultural Association | | 3.87 (1.96) | 4.07 (1.86) | .628 |
| | RadiantGlow | 好学 (hao-xue) | 无倦 (wu-juan) | |
| Familiarity | 1.15 (0.37) | 3.77 (2.47) | 2.77 (2.03) | .014 |
| Likelihood | 2.80 (1.32) | 3.57 (1.92) | 3.27 (1.82) | .349 |
| Cultural Association | | 3.20 (1.95) | 3.97 (2.04) | .065 |
| | Brillight | 时光 (shi-guang) | 朝夕 (zhao-xi) | |
| Familiarity | 1.35 (0.81) | 3.40 (2.54) | 3.63 (2.39) | .371 |
| Likelihood | 3.55 (1.43) | 3.53 (2.00) | 3.67 (1.94) | .595 |
| Cultural Association | | 3.37 (1.96) | 4.60 (2.11) | <.001 |

All products

| | | | |
|----------------------|------|------|------|
| Familiarity | 1.81 | 3.24 | 3.21 |
| Likelihood | 3.29 | 3.66 | 3.33 |
| Cultural Association | | 3.18 | 3.98 |

The Chinese stimulus brand names were presented as Chinese characters together with the pronunciation presented in Hanyu Pinyin (Romanized Chinese) in the parentheses. The Chinese semantic brand names are based on the prototypical characteristics of the product categories and the meanings are as follows: jing-quan meaning “pure spring”; qing-liu meaning “clear stream”; yuan-quan meaning “water source, fountain”; ji-bu meaning “extreme step”; ling-jian meaning “flexible and health”; kuo-bu meaning “stride”, yin-bo meaning “sound wave”; yue-yin meaning “pleasant sound”; tong-sheng meaning “sound of echo”; huan-xi meaning “brand new like after washing”; wu-gou meaning “no stain”; jie-jing meaning “clean”; cui-shuang meaning “crisp and refreshing”; shu-le meaning “happy chips”; cui-xiang meaning “crisp and delicious”; shu-guang meaning “dawn”; hao-xue meaning “hardworking” and shi-guang meaning “time”.

The brand names utilized the semantic translation with cultural connotations approach are based on the semantic names but adding more classical cultural connotations and the meanings are as follows: qing-yuan meaning “clear water source”; shan-jian meaning “mountain stream”; gan-lu meaning “honey dew”; zhi-yuan meaning “make it further”; xiao-yao meaning “stroll in freedom”; you-xing meaning “wandering”; yu-yin meaning “lingering sound”; tian-lai meaning “sound of nature”; lin-jing meaning “lively immersing”; huan-sha meaning “washing clothes in ancient classical literature”; bu-ran meaning “not stained”; wu-chen meaning “dust-free”;

zui-wei meaning “enchanted by the flavor”; qu-wei meaning “joy flavor”; hui-wei meaning “delicious aftertaste”; zhi-zhi meaning “dedicated”; wu-juan meaning “tireless” and zhao-xi meaning “dawn and twilight”.

Main Study

Following the results of the pretest, an experiment was conducted to examine how brand name translation strategies influence Chinese consumers’ brand evaluations with the consideration of the moderating effect of country of origin. Thus, a 2 (brand naming strategies: semantic versus cultural connotation) \times 2 (country of origin: Foreign companies versus Chinese companies) between-subjects ANOVA design was employed, which consists of four conditions in total:

Experiment Condition 1: Evaluate foreign company's Chinese brand names with a semantic translation strategy.

Experiment Condition 2: Evaluate foreign company’s Chinese brand names with a cultural connotation translation strategy.

Experiment Condition 3: Evaluate Chinese company’s Chinese brand names with a cultural connotation translation strategy.

Experiment Condition 4: Evaluate Chinese company’s Chinese brand names with a semantic translation strategy.

Given the limited resources and available time for the study, convenience sampling was employed in the main experiment. Approximately 240 volunteers were approached. They were all Chinese native speakers who were undergraduate students from universities in Shanghai, China. The participants had studied English for several years and they were able to read and understand English at a similar level. Their English proficiency could well represent the targeted

customers in major cities in China such as Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen and Guangzhou, where foreign brands typically launched their products initially.

The participants were randomly assigned to one of the experimental conditions to answer identical brand evaluation questions anonymously for all five product categories. The moderating effect of country of origin was manipulated through the introduction part in each questionnaire. Respondents were informed that the study aimed to help either foreign or Chinese companies with international positioning to find Chinese brand names that are suitable for development in the Chinese market. The translation strategies were not mentioned in the respective questionnaire.

In the presented study, the dependent variable, brand evaluation was assessed with three differential scale items adopted from Zhang and Schmitt (2001) with a seven-point Likert scale: (1) “To what extent do you think this Chinese brand name will facilitate the success of the product in the marketplace?” (1 = “not at all” and 7 = “large extent”); (2) “How likely is it that the Chinese brand name will be judged favorably in the marketplace?” (1 = “not at all likely” and 7 = “very likely”); and (3) “How much do you think consumers will be satisfied with this Chinese brand name?” (1 = “not at all” and 7 = “very much”). Five brand names for the corresponding product categories (bottled water, sneaker, headphone, laundry detergent and desk lamp) were presented in a random order across the four conditions. The integrated questionnaire of the main study can be found in Appendix C.

To ensure the quality of the data, extra efforts were dedicated. Specifically, an attention check question was included in the questionnaire, positioned before the demographic question inquiring about gender and age. The question read: “Please choose an alternative. You should not answer this question if you read it; it is designed to check your attention”. (1. Strongly agree; 2.

Agree; 3. Don't agree / Don't disagree; 4. Disagree; 5. Strongly disagree). Participants who failed this attention test were excluded from the data analysis.

In addition, to ensure the questionnaire was suitable for Chinese local consumers, it was administered in Chinese. Back translation method was employed, as endorsed by Zhou, Yang and Hui (2010), which involved initially translating the questionnaire from English to Chinese and then back to English. This process aimed to ensure idiomatic equivalence of the Chinese and English version (p. 208) as shown in Appendix C. To address potential linguistic discrepancies, as highlighted by prior research (Zhang & Schmitt, 2001; Zhou et al., 2010), two native Chinese speakers who were unaware of the objectives of this research, were enlisted as judges. They compared the original English questionnaire with its back-translated version. Their evaluations found that more than 95% of the items conveyed identical meanings across both versions. Based on their recommendations, minor modifications were made to the Chinese questionnaire to improve the accuracy of the experiment.

Results

A total of 247 respondents initially participated in the experiment. However, during the data analysis phase, 5 participants were identified and excluded due to their failure in the attention check question. Consequently, 242 valid data sets were gathered in the experiment, with an average participant age of 21 and an equal gender distribution. In particular, Group 1 (participants who evaluated foreign company's Chinese brand names with a semantic translation strategy), consisted of 60 participants (Male = 32, Female = 28, $M_{age} = 20$). Group 2 (participants who evaluated foreign company's Chinese brand names with a cultural connotation translation strategy), consisted of 59 participants (Male = 30, Female = 29, $M_{age} = 21$). Group 3

(participants who evaluated Chinese company's Chinese brand names with a cultural connotation translation strategy), consisted of 60 participants (Male = 28, Female = 32, $M_{age} = 21$). Group 4 (participants who evaluated Chinese company's Chinese brand names with a semantic translation strategy) consisted of 63 participants (Male = 31, Female = 32, $M_{age} = 20$).

To analyze the data, mean scores of these 242 responses across the items were calculated. Then the mean of these scores across the product categories were calculated and used as a dependent variable named Fivebrandsmean. The collected data were subsequently analyzed with a 2 (brand naming strategies: semantic versus cultural connotation) \times 2 (country of origin: Foreign companies versus Chinese companies) between-subjects ANOVA. The statistical design compares the mean scores across the four groups and examines the interaction effect between brand naming strategies and the moderating effect of country of origin on consumers' brand evaluations.

The ANOVA results indicated no statistically significant differences for any of the factors examined. Specifically, the translation strategies ($F = 0.97, p = 0.33$), the country of origin ($F = 0.47, p = 0.49$), and their interaction ($F = 0.29, p = 0.59$) did not show a significant impact on the brand evaluations, as represented by the dependent variable Fivebrandsmean. These results are detailed in Table 2.

Table 2. Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Dependent Variable: Fivebrandsmean

| Source | Type III Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. |
|--------------------------|-------------------------|-----|-------------|----------|-------|
| Corrected Model | 3.318 ^a | 3 | 1.106 | .569 | .636 |
| Intercept | 5765.560 | 1 | 5765.560 | 2968.390 | <.001 |
| Country | .914 | 1 | .914 | .471 | .493 |
| Translation | 1.879 | 1 | 1.879 | .968 | .326 |
| Country * Translation | .559 | 1 | .559 | .288 | .592 |
| Error | 462.272 | 238 | 1.942 | | |
| Total | 6229.716 | 242 | | | |
| Corrected Total | 465.590 | 241 | | | |

a. R Squared = .007 (Adjusted R Squared = -.005)

The results showed subtle differences in brand evaluations when it comes to brand name translation strategies. To be specific, the cultural connotation translation strategy demonstrated slightly higher mean scores across all product categories, with a range of 4.87 to 5.02. This was marginally higher than the scores for the semantic translation strategy, which ranged from 4.72 to 4.90, as shown in Table 3. Notably, the highest mean score for the cultural connotation strategy was observed for desk lamp category (product category 3) with the brand name “朝夕” (zhao-xi). Whereas for the semantic translation strategy, the highest rating was given to laundry detergent category (product category 5) with the brand name “焕洗” (huan-xi).

One possible explanation for the observed differences in brand evaluations is the cultural resonance of certain brand names. For instance, the brand name “朝夕” (zhao-xi) for desk lamps evokes associations of diligence and dedication through its symbolic representation of “dawn and twilight”. This cultural connotation may foster a deeper emotional connection with consumers, as

compared to its semantic counterpart. In contrast, for laundry detergent, consumers may prefer brand names that directly convey the product's functional attributes. A semantic brand name like “焕洗” (huan-xi), suggesting a fresh, “brand new” appearance after washing, may resonate more strongly with consumers in this product category. This preference for functionally oriented brand names over culturally themed ones could explain the higher rating for the semantic translation strategy in the case of laundry detergent. These observations suggest that consumer perceptions may vary between the two brand naming approaches, depending on the product category, although the differences in mean scores are relatively minor.

Table 3. Translation * ProductCategory

Measure: BRAND NAMING STRATEGIES

| Translation | ProductCategory | Mean | Std. Error | 95% Confidence Interval | |
|-------------------------|-----------------|-------|------------|-------------------------|-------------|
| | | | | Lower Bound | Upper Bound |
| Semantic | 1 | 4.724 | .138 | 4.451 | 4.996 |
| | 2 | 4.764 | .138 | 4.493 | 5.036 |
| | 3 | 4.848 | .139 | 4.575 | 5.122 |
| | 4 | 4.734 | .134 | 4.470 | 4.999 |
| | 5 | 4.900 | .138 | 4.627 | 5.172 |
| Cultural Connotation | 1 | 4.961 | .141 | 4.684 | 5.238 |
| | 2 | 4.874 | .140 | 4.598 | 5.150 |
| | 3 | 5.017 | .141 | 4.739 | 5.295 |
| | 4 | 5.008 | .137 | 4.739 | 5.278 |
| | 5 | 4.989 | .141 | 4.712 | 5.266 |

The results also revealed a moderating effect of country of origin on brand evaluations across five product categories. Participants slightly preferred brands that were manipulated to

appear as originating from foreign companies, with mean scores ranging from 4.83 to 4.98, over those from Chinese companies, which had mean scores from 4.79 to 4.91, as illustrated in Table 4. Interestingly, the desk lamp category (product category 3) and the laundry detergent category (product category 5) were again rated highest for foreign-origin brands and Chinese-origin brands, respectively.

The subtle variations in preference related to the moderating impact of country of origin may arise from Chinese consumers' tendency to perceive foreign brands with higher quality, innovation, and prestige within certain product categories. This perception was particularly evident in the desk lamp category in this study. Conversely, Chinese-origin brands may leverage factors such as familiarity, trust, and national pride, leading to slightly higher brand evaluations in specific product categories like laundry detergent.

Table 4. Country * ProductCategory

Measure: COUNTRY OF ORIGIN

| Country | ProductCategory | Mean | Std. Error | 95% Confidence Interval | |
|---------|-----------------|-------|------------|-------------------------|-------------|
| | | | | Lower Bound | Upper Bound |
| Chinese | 1 | 4.786 | .139 | 4.513 | 5.059 |
| | 2 | 4.805 | .138 | 4.533 | 5.077 |
| | 3 | 4.797 | .139 | 4.524 | 5.070 |
| | 4 | 4.805 | .135 | 4.539 | 5.071 |
| | 5 | 4.908 | .138 | 4.635 | 5.180 |
| Foreign | 1 | 4.896 | .141 | 4.618 | 5.174 |
| | 2 | 4.832 | .140 | 4.556 | 5.108 |
| | 3 | 5.070 | .141 | 4.792 | 5.348 |
| | 4 | 4.936 | .137 | 4.665 | 5.206 |
| | 5 | 4.980 | .141 | 4.703 | 5.257 |

Although results showed similar mean differences in brand evaluations for both brand naming strategies and country of origin, the weak directional effects predicted were indeed found. The pattern of the results is visualized in Figure 2. Participants generally preferred brand names with a cultural connotation translation strategy ($\bar{X} = 4.97$) over those with a semantic translation strategy across all five product categories ($\bar{X} = 4.79$). Additionally, regardless of translation strategies, brand names of foreign companies were more favorably evaluated than those of Chinese origin ($\bar{X} = 4.94$ versus 4.82).

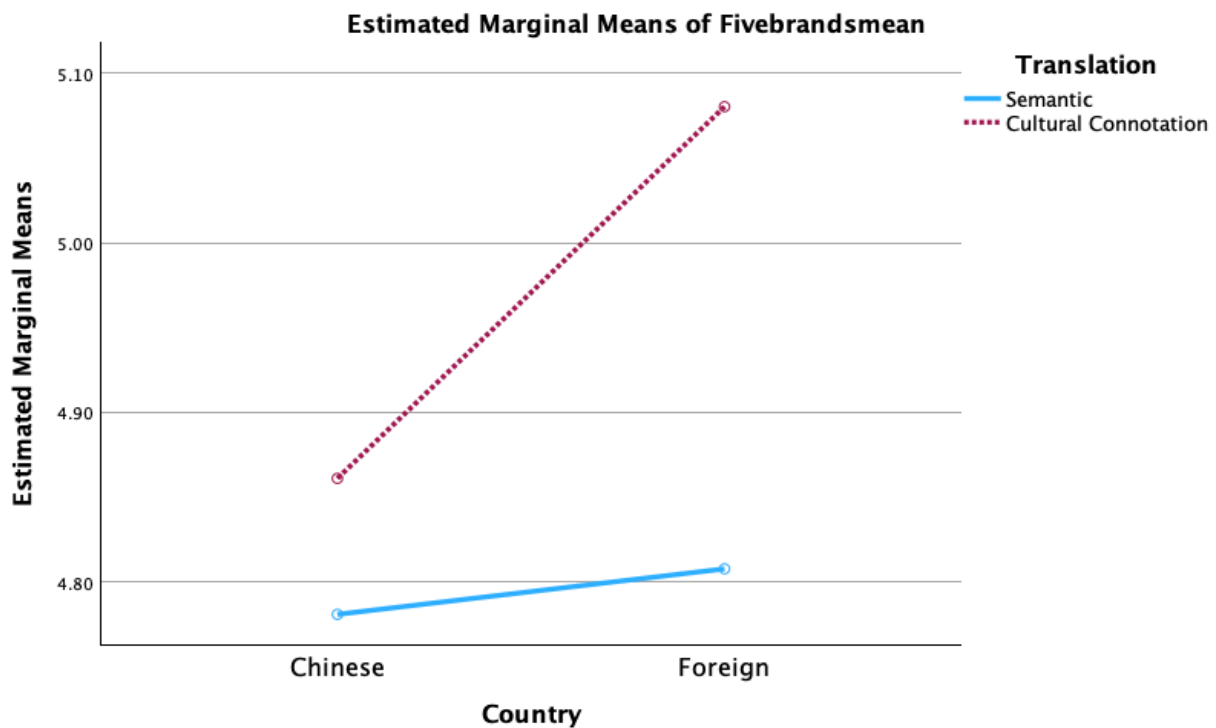


Figure 2. The Effect of Brand Naming Strategies and Country of Origin on Brand Evaluations

Even though these distinctions are subtle, the study's hypotheses - that brand names with a cultural connotation translation strategy are more favorably evaluated than brand names with a

semantic translation strategy among Chinese consumers, and that this effect is moderated by country of origin, being stronger for foreign companies - are not entirely unsupported. In other words, these intriguing tendencies, although not reaching statistical significance, highlight the need for further nuanced investigation.

Discussions

Brief Summary of Results

Building on the literatures on brand name translation strategies and brand evaluations (Keller, 1993; Shen & Chen, 2007; Wu et al., 2019; Zhang & Schmitt, 2001; 2004), this study explores the impact of two distinct translation strategies — semantic translation strategy versus cultural connotation translation strategy — on consumers' brand evaluations, taking into consideration the moderating effects of country of origin (foreign versus Chinese companies). The findings offer valuable insights that deserve attention. First, the study reveals that, regardless of the country of origin, brand names with a cultural connotation translation are more favorably evaluated than brand names with a semantic translation by Chinese consumers. Second, across both brand name translation strategies, foreign brand names are more favorably evaluated than Chinese brand names. This suggests that the country of origin has a moderating influence on the relationship between brand naming strategies and brand evaluations.

Theoretical Implications

This study makes several contributions to the existing literatures. First, this research contributes to the brand name translation strategies. Building on prior work (Francis et al., 2002; Huang & Chan, 1997; Zhang & Schmitt, 2001), this research provides a new perspective on

cultural connotation translation strategy, which delves into the effect of Chinese classical literature on brand evaluation. While previous studies highlighted the significance of cultural relevance in semantic translations (Francis et al., 2002), this study further explores the impact of both semantic and cultural connotation translation strategies with the consideration of the moderating effect of country of origin on consumer brand evaluations. The findings indicate a preference among Chinese consumers for brand names with cultural connotations over purely semantic translations.

Second, this research also contributes to the brand evaluation literature (He & Wang, 2015; Liu et al., 2020; Steenkamp et al., 2003; Wu, 2008; Zhou & Hui, 2003). Brands would benefit from its localized brand names that integrate Chinese cultural elements (He & Wang, 2015; Wang & Lin, 2009; Wu, 2008). The results in the present study show that foreign brands, regardless of their translation strategies, are slightly more favorably evaluated than the Chinese brands, indicating an appreciation towards foreign companies' efforts in adapting to Chinese culture. However, it is discovered that the difference in brand evaluations between the two translation strategies for a single country of origin does not achieve statistical significance. This may be attributed to Chinese consumers' general preference for brand names that convey positive meanings and associations (Carnevale et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2019; Zhang & Schmitt, 2001; 2014). All the Chinese brand names created for the experiment were designed with this preference in mind, ensuring they carry positive cultural connotations. Consequently, the semantic names with positive meanings are also evaluated favorably by the respondents.

Finally, the findings of this study also align with the results in several other publications on the effect of country of origin. Maheswaran, Yi Chen and He (2013) pointed out that the

effect of country of origin was usually stronger in Asia. It is commonly believed that consumers in developing countries generally prefer foreign brands over domestic brands (Zhou & Hui, 2003). As long as the country of origin is clearly stated on the packages, foreign brands with local brand names maintain their appeal (Chen, 2020). This is aligned with the present study's results. When the country of origin is informed at the beginning of the experiment, regardless of translation strategies, foreign-origin brand names are more favorably evaluated than those of Chinese-origin. It is shown in this study that the country of origin does moderate the impact of different brand naming strategies on brand evaluations. It is therefore important to reveal the country of origin to consumers in the Chinese market.

Managerial Implications

The current research indicates that Chinese consumers tend to favor brand names translated with cultural connotations over those that are merely semantically translated. There is a clear appreciation from Chinese consumers for brand names that resonate with traditional Chinese values and culture. Therefore, it is important for both domestic and international companies to integrate cultural elements when targeting the Chinese market (He & Wang, 2017). In addition, practitioners also need to pay attention to the type of product which significantly influences consumer preferences when selecting brand name translation strategies. Wu, Sun, Grewal and Li (2019) found that Chinese consumers may have different preferences between semantic versus phonetic brand names depending on the type of vehicle, with a preference for semantic brand names for domestic or entry-level vehicles and phonetic brand names for foreign or high-end vehicles. This suggests that alternative brand naming strategies, such as phonetic translation, could be more effective for certain premium products.

The study further confirms the moderating influence of country of origin in the Chinese market. Both semantic and cultural connotation translated names for foreign brands are rated more favorably than those of Chinese brands. It is important to note that the actual origin of a foreign brand should always be clearly disclosed to consumers in order to strengthen the positive effect of the country of origin, whether through product packaging or advertisements (Chen, 2020). Furthermore, it is crucial for businesses to recognize that the effect of country of origin is not an isolated factor but is closely tied to the perceived quality of the product. Zhang (2015) emphasized that the effect of country of origin will be strengthened when companies consistently deliver high-quality products. This suggests that a focus on quality is essential for brands to succeed in the Chinese market.

Meanwhile, with the rapid growth of domestic brands with high qualities and reputation in the international market, Chinese consumers may reconsider their relationships towards local and foreign brands (Liu et al., 2020, p. 129). The effect of country of origin became weaker in recent years in the Chinese market due to the rising nationalism among Chinese consumers (Liu et al., 2020). Foreign companies would not stand out easily even with its renowned country reputations. Thus, conducting a comprehensive analysis about the Chinese market, particularly the relative Chinese culture is necessary in order to gain a sustainable competitive edge.

Limitations and Future Research

The study exhibits several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the stimuli of foreign brand names were generated by an AI tool, which potentially enhances efficiency but may not align with established real-world branding standards or lack validation within authentic market contexts. Additionally, the corresponding Chinese brand name stimuli were created solely by the authors of the present study, which is inevitably limited by their own cultural and

linguistic competencies. It is therefore recommended for future research to utilize additional resources, such as the expertise of linguists or professionals in the field of brand naming, to ensure a more professional approach to stimulus development.

Second, the product categories selected within the study were limited to fast-moving consumer goods such as bottled water, sneakers, headphones, laundry detergent, and desk lamps. The moderating effect of country of origin on these goods may be less significant compared to luxury items like sports cars or high-end hotels (Zhang, 2015). Therefore, the nature of the product categories included in this study may have influenced the respondents' brand evaluations regarding the moderating effect of country of origin. Future research is recommended to include different product categories and services, such as luxury goods, airlines to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of brand naming strategies on brand evaluations.

Third, the choice of brand naming strategies employed in this study also has its limitations. The ideographic nature of Chinese characters means that each character contains meanings and concepts, including those brand names with a semantic translation strategy. Brand names with a cultural connotation translation strategy were developed based on the semantic counterparts, which implied that the closer the semantic alignment of the created brand names, the lesser the difference between the two translated alternatives. For example, in the laundry detergent category, both “焕洗” (huan-xi) - meaning “brand new like after washing” and “浣纱” (huan-sha) - translating to “washing clothes in classical literature” indicate the product attributes at a similar level. Moreover, there are many other translation strategies that were not able to be explored in the present study. Thus, future research is suggested to investigate alternative strategies that may create more significant distinctions. For example, the incorporation of a

phonosemantic translation strategy, with or without cultural connotations, could be considered to examine brand evaluations across diverse consumer demographics and contextual settings.

In addition, the current study utilized non-probability sampling, specifically recruiting university undergraduate students in Shanghai via an online survey platform for convenience. While this approach is practical, it can lead to less precise results and often yields samples that are not fully representative (Neuman, 2014, p. 248). It is important to acknowledge that the sample in this study may not accurately reflect the perspectives of China's entire population of 1.4 billion individuals. To enhance the generalizability of future research, it would be beneficial to employ probability sampling techniques.

Finally, the present study did not take into account the pronunciation of Chinese brand names, which is a significant factor given that Chinese is a tonal language. In such languages, the same sequence of phonemes can have different meanings based on the pitch contour, with four distinct tones corresponding to different pitches. Prior research indicates a preference among Chinese consumers for brand names with high-pitched sounds, as these are perceived as more sonorous and pleasing to the ear (Huang & Chan, 1997). Therefore, future studies could incorporate the linguistic feature of tone when designing experiments. This could also help to identify linguistic factors that may influence the effectiveness of different brand name translation strategies.

Conclusion

It is attractive yet challenging when it comes to global branding from the perspectives of both marketing practices and business practices. To maximize market value and achieve corporate success, it is important to decide whether to translate the original brand name or not, and which translation strategy should be considered when entering a new foreign market. The

present study explores how brand evaluations are influenced by the complex interactions between brand name translation strategies and the moderating effects caused by country of origin in the Chinese market. Based on the experiment involving 247 native Chinese consumers, it is discovered that there are subtle preference differences regarding brand names across different product categories as well as origins.

The findings suggest a general preference for brand names with cultural connotations over purely semantic translations. This further implies that brand names that resonate with traditional values and cultural symbols are generally valued by Chinese consumers. Meanwhile, the study also illustrates the moderating role of the country of origin, as brand names of foreign companies are evaluated more favorably than the Chinese ones, regardless of the translation strategies. Nevertheless, the difference in brand evaluations between translation strategies for a single country of origin does not attain statistical significance, the observed directional effects within the dataset are consistent with the hypotheses posited in the study. This highlights valuable insights into consumer preferences as well as the need for continued investigation on the topic.

In a broader perspective, this study implements the ongoing exploration on cross-cultural consumer behavior and global branding strategies. It demonstrates the significance of linguistic and cultural nuances in determining consumer perceptions and evaluation of brands across various product categories, particularly in diverse and emerging markets like China. By bridging the gap between theoretical insights and empirical findings, this research possesses several practical implications for multinational corporations attempting to address the complexities and challenges of global markets. As globalization continues to blur geographical boundaries and cultural barriers, it is essential for multinational companies to comprehend the complicated

interrelationship between language, culture, global branding as well as dynamic consumer behaviors.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Pretest Questionnaire for Foreign Brand Names

Survey of Brand Names

Dear participant,

Thank you so much for taking your time to participate in this questionnaire.

This questionnaire encompasses six distinct product categories, each featuring three brand names along with two questions. The aim of the questionnaire is to check the familiarity and likelihood of brand names in relation to the product category.

Your answers to this survey are very important for our study, and we greatly appreciate your participation. The questionnaire is designed to be completed within approximately 10 minutes, and your responses will be collected anonymously to ensure confidentiality.

Your thoughtful insights are sincerely appreciated.

| Product Category | Bottled water | Sneaker | Headphone | Laundry detergent | Chips | Desk lamp |
|------------------|---------------|----------|------------|-------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Brand Name | PureAqua | MoveMax | AudioWave | BriteWash | CrunchCraft | ShineRay |
| | CrystalFlow | FlexiRun | SonicBliss | SparkClean | CrispSavor | RadiantGlow |
| | Refreshia | GlidePro | EchoSync | PureBurst | SnackSpires | Brillight |

1. Please indicate how familiar this name sounds to you. (1 = “not at all familiar and 7 = “very familiar”)



2. Please indicate to what degree you think this name is a likely brand name for the product. (1 = “not at all likely” and 7 = “very likely”)



Appendix B: Pretest Questionnaire for Chinese Brand Names

关于品牌译名的问卷调查

各位好,

非常感谢您抽出宝贵的时间参与本次问卷调查。

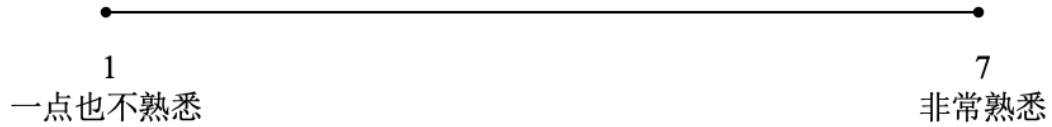
此问卷涵盖六个产品类别, 每个类别有虚构的六个品牌译名, 并附带三个问题。问卷旨在从品牌译名的熟悉度(*指的是以前是否听过或看过类似的译名, 有一种似曾相识的感觉), 被选为相应产品类别的品牌名字的可能性, 以及译名的古典文化意象三个维度进行评估译名。

您的回答将对品牌命名以及后续研究的方向起到关键作用。问卷预计需大约10分钟完成。为保护您的隐私, 您的回答将以匿名方式收集。

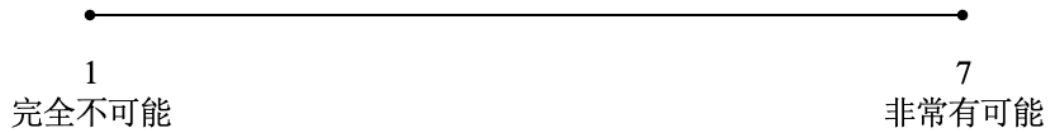
再次感谢您的参与。

| 产品种类 | 瓶装水 | 运动鞋 | 耳机 | 洗衣用品 | 薯片 | 台灯 |
|------|-----|-----|----|------|----|----|
| 译名 | 净泉 | 极步 | 音波 | 焕洗 | 脆爽 | 曙光 |
| | 山涧 | 逍遥 | 天籁 | 无尘 | 醉味 | 好学 |
| | 甘露 | 灵健 | 悦音 | 不染 | 回味 | 朝夕 |
| | 清流 | 悠行 | 同声 | 洁净 | 脆香 | 时光 |
| | 源泉 | 阔步 | 余音 | 无垢 | 薯乐 | 无倦 |
| | 清源 | 致远 | 临境 | 浣纱 | 趣味 | 致志 |

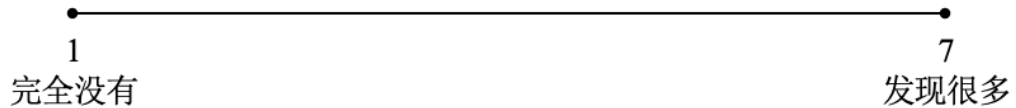
1. 你对该译名的熟悉度。（1 = “一点也不熟悉”，7 = “非常熟悉”）



2. 该译名被选为产品品牌名字的可能性。（1 = “完全不可能”，7 = “非常有可能”）



3. 你在这个品牌名字中有发现任何古典文化意象吗?（1 = 完全没有，7 = 发现很多）



Appendix C: Main Study Questionnaires

English Version

Dear participant,

Thank you very much for taking your time to participate in this questionnaire.

This questionnaire is designed to help [foreign companies / domestic companies] with international positioning to find Chinese brand names that are suitable for sustainable development in the [Chinese / domestic] market. The questionnaire covers five product categories, their English brand names as well as pending Chinese names, accompanied with three questions.

Your answers will play a key role in brand naming and subsequent research directions. It takes approximately 5 minutes to complete the questionnaire, and your responses will be collected anonymously to ensure confidentiality.

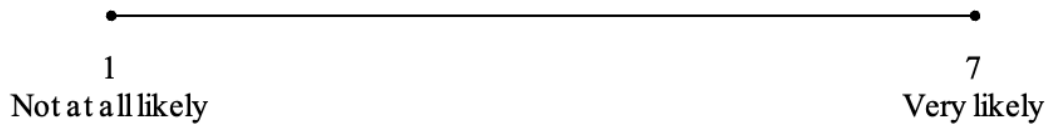
Thank you again for your participation.

| | | | | | |
|------------------|---------------|----------|-----------|-------------------|-----------|
| Product Category | Bottled water | Sneaker | Headphone | Laundry detergent | Desk lamp |
| English Name | Refreshia | FlexiRun | AudioWave | BriteWash | Brillight |
| Chinese Name | 源泉 | 灵健 | 音波 | 焕洗 | 时光 |
| | 甘露 | 逍遥 | 余音 | 浣纱 | 朝夕 |

1. To what extent do you think this Chinese brand name will facilitate the success of the product in the marketplace? (1 = “not at all” and 7 = “large extent”)



2. How likely is it that the Chinese brand name will be judged favorably in the marketplace? (1 = “not at all likely” and 7 = “very likely”)



3. How much do you think consumers will be satisfied with this Chinese brand name? (1 = “not at all” and 7 = “very much”)



4. You should not answer this question if you read it; it is to check your attention. (1. Strongly agree; 2. Agree; 3. Don't agree / Don't disagree; 4. Disagree; 5. Strongly disagree).

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Don't agree / Don't disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

5. Your age: ()

6. Your gender:

- Male
- Female

Appendix C: Main Study Questionnaires (Continue)

Chinese Version

您好,

非常感谢您抽出宝贵的时间参与本次问卷调查。

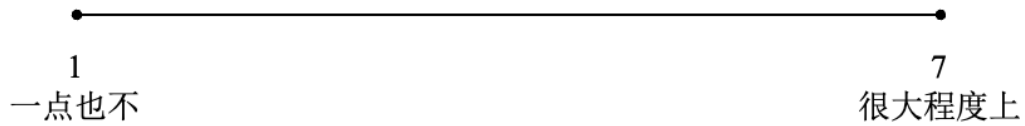
此问卷旨在帮助具有国际定位的 [外国公司 / 本土公司] 寻找适合在 [中国 / 本土] 市场发展的品牌中文名。该问卷涵盖五个产品类别, 英文名及其待定的中文名, 并附有三个问题。

您的回答将对品牌命名以及后续的研究方向起到关键作用。问卷大约需5分钟完成。为保护您的隐私, 您的回答将以匿名方式收集。

再次感谢您的参与。

| | | | | | |
|------|-----------|----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| 产品种类 | 瓶装水 | 运动鞋 | 耳机 | 洗衣用品 | 台灯 |
| 英文名 | Refreshia | FlexiRun | AudioWave | BriteWash | Brillight |
| 中文名 | 源泉 | 灵健 | 音波 | 焕洗 | 时光 |
| | 甘露 | 逍遥 | 余音 | 浣纱 | 朝夕 |

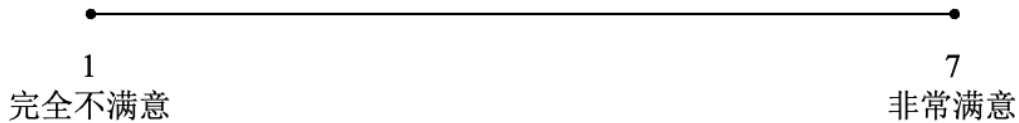
1. 您认为该品牌中文名将在多大程度上促进该产品在市场上取得成功？（1 = “一点也不”，7 = “很大程度上”）



2. 该品牌中文名在市场上获得好评的可能性有多大？（1 = “完全不可能”，7 = “非常有可能”）



3. 您认为消费者对该品牌中文名的满意程度如何？（1 = “完全不满意”，7 = “非常满意”）



4. 请选择一个选项（如果您阅读到该题，请不要作答，此为注意力检测题。）

- 非常赞同
- 赞同
- 不确定
- 不赞同
- 非常不赞同

5. 您的年龄：（ ）

6. 您的性别：

- 男
- 女