

Do names matter? The influence of names on perception about professionals in Spain

Jose A. Martínez*

Universidad Politécnica de Cartagena, Spain

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Abstract

The aim of this research was to empirically prove if different types of names and surnames influence people perception about the performance of professionals such as psychologists, architects, writers or lawyers. However, across a series of studies using both convenience and random sampling, and employing different performance measures, this research shows that personal names and surnames do not matter. Therefore, common wisdom such as: (1) two surnames are better than one; (2) a name with ridiculous associations should be avoided; (3) names denoting status and distinctiveness are better than common names for high-status professions; are not supported by data. Consequently, results break with the hypothesized marketing belief that brand names may influence perceptions about products

Keywords: brand names, performance perception, professional names

JEL Classification Codes: M30, M31

1. Introduction

Norma Jean, Lee Yuen Kam or Thomas Mapother IV, did not think their names would help them to get success in the “show-business” world. As hundreds of similar examples (see www.zelo.com/firstnames/celebs.asp), they preferred to change their originals names to others with a more “commercial profile”, as Marylyn Monroe, Bruce Lee, and Tom Cruise. This is a common practice for professionals linked to music, movies or television, and this trend is also shared among countries¹.

As these types of professionals are considered products and brands (Luo *et al.*, 2010), then their brand names should be chosen with caution, as a large body of marketing literature

* E-mail: josean.martinez@upct.es.

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¹ See examples in Spain in www.ecoteuve.eleconomista.es/ecoteuve/television/noticias/4495305/12/12/Los-nombres-reales-que-los-famosos-ocultan-descubrimos-su-verdadera-identidad.html.

suggest (e.g. Ang, 1997; Argo *et al.*, 2010; Schrum *et al.*, 2012; Yorkston and Menon, 2004). The reason of this concern is the association between good (bad) brand names and product success (failure). Therefore, elements such as phonetics and words symbolism, rhythm, length, evocation and pronunciation (among others) can be managed in order to create a name. Although there is no law for building a good brand name, marketers, as a very general statement, recommend short names (to enhance recall), names which are easy to pronounce and differentiate from others, and names evoking positive associations linked to the product. Robertson (1989) goes beyond these general suggestions and focuses on two dimensions: (1) the inherent ability of the name to be easily encoded into, retained in, and retrieved from memory, and (2) the extent to which the name supports or enhances the planned strategic positioning or image of the product. Anyway, a name fulfilling the prior conditions, as Tom Cruise, can be from marketing viewpoint as good as a name such as, for example, Arnold Schwarzenegger, because although the latter fails to fit with many recommended requirements, it clearly differentiates from others, and this also enhances recall and recognition.

However, there are many other people working outside the aforementioned industries. These people have no artistic names, and work every day using their original names. But if common wisdom says that names are important for success in music, film or television, do they apply for professions where people do not use to change their names? For example, does a name and surname influence the perception of a professional depending of the uniqueness of them? Does a person with a surname denoting ridiculous associations be perceived differently from a person with a surname denoting status and heritage? These are some of the questions this research addresses in the context of the Spanish culture. Recall that the surname system in Spain (2 surnames) is unique, and different from other cultures and countries, such as USA, UK, Italy or France (see Collado *et al.* 2008 for an extensive explanation).

Collado *et al.* (2008) found that, in Spain, people bearing uncommon surnames tend to enjoy a higher socioeconomic status than people bearing more common surnames. These authors explained their results as a combination of two forces: a low degree of social mobility and the role of the surname as a signaling device for successful dynasties. However, do really people perceive differently the performance of a professional such as a lawyer or an architect in function of the features of their names?

Consequently, the aim of this research is to empirically prove if different types of names and surnames influence people perception about the performance of professionals such as psychologists, architects, writers or lawyers. These professions are deliberately selected because many workers are free-lance; they have their own office and develop their business individually. Under these conditions, their names and surnames, together with their qualification, are their business cards. Although these professionals do not change their names and surnames, they have the possibility to do some interventions on them. For example, a professional can choose to drop their second surname from the business card if he or she feels the surname denotes negative associations. On the contrary another professional could deliberately employ his two surnames instead of only the first surname because of the belief that two surnames indicate distinction and status comparing with only employing the first. However, across a series of studies using both convenience and random sampling, and employing different performance measures, this research shows that names and surnames do not matter. Therefore, results break with the hypothesized marketing belief that brand names may influence perceptions about products.

2. Empirical studies

2.1. Study 1

Method

First of all, I achieved a small qualitative study employing the Quandary Resolution technique (Fransella, 2003). Therefore, participants had to choose between two alternatives, writing down the advantages of each of the alternatives, and also the disadvantages.

Before completing the quandary, participants had to read an introduction explaining the problem under study: *A young lawyer called “Antonio Martínez Morcillo”, who cursed both Masters Degrees in Civil Law and Penal Law, decided to open his own buffet in the city where the study was developed. However, the young lawyer doubted about employing only his first surname “Martínez”, because his second surname could be perceived as ridiculous due to his association with food* (recall that “morcilla” means blood pudding). Participants had to help the lawyer to decide between the two options.

The name “Antonio” and the first surname “Martínez” were chosen because they are the name and the surname most prevalent in the region of Spain where this study has been carried out (www.ine.es). Therefore, they were very common for the individuals interviewed. Eight adult participants fulfilled the quandary (25% men, with a mean of 35 years old).

Results and discussion

All participants preferred the option reflecting the full name “Antonio Martínez Morcillo”. In general, participants acknowledged that “Antonio Martínez” was good because it was short and easy to recall. However, it was very common and difficult to differentiate. “Antonio Martínez Morcillo” had the advantage to enhance attention, recall and recognition, because of the peculiar connotations of the second surname. Nevertheless, some participants recognized the ridiculous associations of the second surname could not benefit the lawyer, but no one of them considered this fact as a determinant one to choose the other option.

Therefore, these exploratory results confirm that participants acknowledged some of the basics premises of marketing regarding brand names. However, even in that situation, all of them preferred the name with a priori negative associations, because they felt that from an aggregate level, its advantages would overcome its disadvantages.

2.2. Study 2

Method

The second study was an extension of the first one, adding some new conditions for the analysis. In this new study, the name “Antonio Martinez” was compared again with “Antonio Martínez Morcillo”. In addition, I added a third one: “Eugenio Prado Carvallo”. The aim was to analyze the inclusion of a completely different third option, where the names and the two surnames were not listed among the first 100 most prevalent (www.ine.es): Eugenio was in the position 100, Prado was in the position 308, and Carvallo was in the position 9840. Therefore, the third full name was not a common name, it did not have any negative connotation, and finally its rareness could be associated with distinction and status.

Three hundred participants (100 by each condition) were interviewed via telephone by a specialized Spanish marketing research company. Participants were randomly selected within the same city where the study was designed, and also were randomly assigned to each condition. In this case, the interviewer asked a single question to participants: *the university of the city has proposed to the architect XXX (one of the three conditions tested) to build a new*

research lab building. This architect specifies in his project that the work will last 12 months. Sometimes, there is a delay in the construction of buildings. How many months do you think this work would be delayed? Less than 3 months; Between 3 and 6 months; More than 6 months.

Consequently, participants had to evaluate the performance of the architect in function of the name provided, but obviously they were not actually conscious about the aim of the research. In this case, performance was measured by the hypothesized delay time participants assigned to each architect, i.e. to the extent that delay time increased then perceived performance decreased. The only condition to participate in the survey was to be at least 18 years old. The whole selected random sample had a mean of 57 years old and was predominantly composed by women (71.33%). However, there were no significant differences between groups regarding sex and age, so the distribution of these variables was similar by group.

Results and discussion

Results are showed in Table 1, indicating the frequency of response for each condition. Fisher's exact test was .42, i.e. a non-significant value, which indicates that the stimuli provided did not affect the responses of the participants (Pearson Chi-square also reported a non-significant value)

Table 1. Results of the Study 2

Stimuli		Less than 3 months	Between 3 a 6 months	More than 6 months
<i>Antonio Martínez</i>	(common name)	6	31	63
<i>Antonio Martínez Morcillo</i>	(common name with negative associations)	12	24	64
<i>Eugenio Prado Carvallo</i>	(non-common name denoting status and distinction)	12	23	63

Fisher's exact test: .42; Pearson Chi-square: .43

The interpretation of results is straightforward: A extremely common name with only one surname (Antonio Martínez), a full name with a negative connotation (Antonio Martínez Morcillo) and a full name denoting status and distinction compared with the other two names (Eugenio Prado Carvallo) yielded a similar pattern of responses from participants. Consequently, “brand names” did not determine any variation in the individuals’ perception of performance.

2.3. Study 3

Method

The third study specifically tested the adequacy of reporting only the first surname or the two surnames. Recall than in the first and second studies “Antonio Martínez” was tested against “Antonio Martínez Morcillo”, i.e. a second surname with negative connotations. In this new study, both surnames were common surnames (within the 50 most prevalent) and they did not elicit any negative association. The stimuli were “Francisco Gómez” and “Francisco Gómez Ortega”. The decision between these two options is very common in professions such as writers, where there is great heterogeneity in the form of reporting the surnames (see

www.redescriptoresespa.com/images/directorio.htm for a directory of writers who write in Spanish). However, some people could perceive that a writer with two surnames could be synonymous of distinction and quality. Recall that there are many examples of successful writers who employ two surnames (Mario Vargas Llosa, Gabriel García Marquez, Gonzalo Torrente Ballester, Juan Eslava Galán, Fernando Sánchez Dragó, etc.), instead of only the first one.

A convenience sample of 108 students had to respond to several simple questions after reading the following introduction: *The writer XXX (one of the two conditions tested) recently launched his novel “The passing nights”. In this book, this author narrates the story of a young man who has insomnia. This man, spend his sleepless nights developing a parallel story about his life, confounding at the end both worlds, the real and the imaginary. Through the 500 pages of the book, XXX brilliantly recreates the travel of a man between his lucidity and dreams, showing the contrast between the despair of living a non-dreamed reality, and the gallantry of trying to keep sane within a wave of disappointment.*

I measured two forms of perceived performance; firstly participants had to estimate the price of the book available in a famous Spanish retailer; secondly, participants had to judge the interest elicited by the book using a 0-10 continuous scale. Therefore, it would be expected that if the second surname effect exists, this would yield significant variation in one of in both of the aforementioned variables. Participants were randomly assigned to the two conditions, and also sex, age, love of reading (using a 0-10 scale) and their experience were measured and considered as control covariates. This latter variable was approximated by the participant's estimate of the number of novels read, and it was log-transformed for the analysis.

Results and discussion

Table 2. Results of the Study 3 (unstandardized regression coefficients)

	Price (OLS)	Box-Cox regression	Price (robust)	Price (median)	Interest (OLS)	Interest (Logit fractional)	Interest (robust)
<i>Second surname (No/Yes)</i>	-.36	.024	-1.75	-2.75	-.21	-.093	-.08
<i>Love of reading</i>	-.51	-.019*	-.60**	-.88**	.51***	.222***	.45***
<i>Novels read</i>	1.46*	.060**	1.12*	1.32	-.05	-.017	-.11
<i>Age</i>	-.26	-.006	-.02	.08	.05	.018	.02
<i>Sex</i>	3.11	.089*	1.24	2.83	.02	.112	.38
<i>Constant</i>	25.08	2.73	22.65	22.11*	2.48	-1.07*	3.78
<i>R-square</i>	.08				.28		
<i>R-square reduction^a</i>	.0005				.0018		

* $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$

^aR-square reduction when “second surname” is dropped

Results of the OLS estimates with robust standard errors are shown in Table 2. Because of the asymmetry of the distribution of prices I also ran the analysis using the Box-Cox transformation (Harden and Hilbe, 2012). Following Wilcox (2010) I also computed a robust

regression and a median regression in order to address the highly non-normal dependent variable. Some of the prior analyses were repeated with the interest variable, which it was moderately non-normal, adding the Logit Fractional estimation (Papke and Wooldridge, 1996), because of the dependent variable was actually a proportion. However, the effect of adding a second surname was no significant for any case. In addition, the reduction of the explained variance when this variable was dropped from the model was negligible.

Therefore, adding a second surname did not yield any effect on participants' inferences about the price of the book neither participants' degree of interest elicited by the novel.

2.4. Study 4

Method

The final study of this research aimed to test again some of the hypothesis analyzed in the previous studies and then to add new ones. Therefore, I wanted to replicate some previous results using other context of analysis and then to compare the perceived performance of professionals when new names were employed.

First of all, I replicated the results of the Study 2 and the Study 3 using a lawyer instead of an architect or a writer. Participants had to infer the price charged by hour by the lawyer after reading an introduction similar to the Study 1. In addition they had to indicate the level of skills and capabilities of that professional using a continuous 0-10 scale. In this case, participants were not aware about that names were precisely the stimuli being tested, so they read few lines about the academic background of the lawyer. Besides the names "Antonio Martínez" and "Antonio Martínez Morcillo", I also added a third name with a second common surname "Antonio Martínez Díaz", and a name with completely different connotations, as "Eugenio Prado-Carvallo Noguera". This latter name was chosen because of its similarity with the name tested in the Study 2, but with the difference of employing a double-barreled first surname, and also a second non-common surname. This type of large names was identified by Collado, Ortúñoz and Romeu (2008) as names reflecting status and social success.

Secondly, I tested again a common name "Antonio Martínez Díaz" against two different status-signaling names employed before. "Eugenio Prado Carvallo", and "Eugenio Prado-Carvallo Noguera". In addition I added a third name "Eugenio Prado de Noguera". This latter name was a succinct modification of the other prior names, by adding the preposition "de", which is socially perceived as a signal of coming from a high-status family². In this case, the professional being studied was a psychologist, and participants had to indicate the price by hour they were willing to pay together with the level of skills and capabilities of this professional, using a continuous 0-10 scale. Participants had to answer to these questions after reading a simple introduction about the academic background of the psychologist.

A convenience sample of 223 participants fulfilled the straightforward questionnaire. Data were collected via email and personal interviews. Participants were predominantly men (58%), with a mean of 31 years old, and all of them were randomly assigned to the different conditions created.

² Some well-known politicians in Spain have deliberately changed their surnames by adding this preposition (<http://www.elplural.com/2009/11/11/%e2%80%9cla-bien-paga%e2%80%9d-se-cambio-el-apellido-para-aproximarse-al-linaje-aristocratico/>).

Results and discussion

Results of the comparison among the different measures of performance are showed in Table 3. All distributions were non-normal, and importantly asymmetrical for the price variable. Therefore, I computed the median together with the mean. In addition, for the price variable, and following Wilcox (2010), mean was 20% trimmed because of its extreme variability and the presence of outliers. Confidence intervals around the median were computed using the percentile bootstrap procedure with 1000 replications. Regarding the mean, confidence intervals around the effect size (robust Cohen's D) were calculated using the suggestions of Algina, Keselman and Penfield (2006a;b).

Table 3. Results of the Study 4 (95% confidence intervals)

	Skills (median)	Skills (trimmed mean)	Robust effect size	Price (median)	Price (trimmed mean)	Robust effect size
Lawyer						
<i>Antonio Martínez</i>	8 (7 ; 8.5)	7.8	n.s.	50.0 (30.0 ; 60.0)	48.6	n.s.
<i>Antonio Martínez Díaz</i>	7 (7 ; 8)	7.4	n.s.	51.2 (50.0 ; 60.0)	52.9	n.s.
<i>Antonio Martínez Morcillo</i>	7 (7 ; 8)	7.3	n.s.	55.0 (40.0 ; 76.5)	60	n.s.
<i>Eugenio Prado- Carvallo Noguera</i>	8 (7 ; 8.5)	7.7	n.s.	60.0 (47.5 ; 80.0)	61.2	n.s.
Psychologist						
<i>Antonio Martínez Díaz</i>	7 (7 ; 8)	7.2	n.s.	50.0 (47.5 ; 60.0)	52.5	n.s.
<i>Eugenio Prado Carvallo</i>	7.5 (6 ; 8)	7.2	n.s.	40.0 (30.0 ; 60.0)	45.6	n.s.
<i>Eugenio Prado- Carvallo Noguera</i>	7 (7 ; 8)	7.2	n.s.	50.0 (40.0 ; 55.0)	47.1	n.s.
<i>Eugenio Prado de Noguera</i>	8 (7 ; 8)	7.7	n.s.	35.0 (30.0 ; 40.0)	35.5	.46**

** $p < .05$;

Antonio Martínez: common name containing one surname

Antonio Martínez Díaz: common name containing two surnames

Antonio Martínez Morcillo: common name with negative associations

Eugenio Prado Carvallo: non-common name denoting status and distinction

Eugenio Prado de Noguera: non-common name denoting status and distinction, containing the preposition "de".

Eugenio Prado-Carvallo Noguera: non-common name denoting status and distinction, with double-barreled first surname

As results indicate, all confidence intervals overlapped among the different conditions for the lawyer's case, and also among the disparate conditions for the psychologist's case, except for three specific comparisons. Therefore, the willingness to pay for participants evaluating "Antonio Martínez Díaz" were significantly higher than for participants evaluating a status-signaling name, such as "Eugenio Prado de Noguera". This result is important, because it is

contrary to the hypothesis that an extremely common name would not help to add value to a brand compared with a distinctive name.

3. Concluding remarks

Personal brand names do not matter. Names do not influence people perception about the performance of professionals such as lawyers, architects, psychologists or writers. After achieving several studies and methods under different test situations, and employing disparate measures of perceived performance, there is no empirical evidence suggesting any effect sustaining hypotheses such as: (1) two surnames are better than one; (2) a name with ridiculous associations should be avoided; (3) names denoting status and distinctiveness are better than common names for high-status professions. And this breaks with the common wisdom of marketers.

Acknowledging some limitations of this research (e.g. only a few disparate names were tested, wide confidence intervals for the estimates of the Study 4), I think there is enough evidence for, at least, questioning some recommendations that the marketing literature suggest for creating successful brand names.

Nevertheless, further research is needed in order to analyze other types of names that have not been tested in this research, such as foreign surnames, or names denoting racial or ethnical origins. For example, prior evidences have suggested some conflicting results regarding the influence of names on life outcomes. Bertrand and Mullainathan (2004) found that resumes with traditional names are substantially more likely to lead to job interviews than are identical resumes with distinctively Black names. However, Fryer and Levitt (2004) found no evidence of a causal impact of Black names on a wide range of life outcomes, such as years of education of the woman or the father of her child, mother's age at first birth, private insurance coverage, her baby's birth weight, and number of total children born to date.

Moreover, Gavira, Medina and Palau (2010) and Laham, Koval and Alter (2012) studied related questions under some boundary conditions. Therefore, the first authors found that atypical names (extremely unusual names) had a large impact upon earnings in Colombia. The second authors found that easy-to-pronounce names (and their bearers) are judged more positively than difficult-to-pronounce names. However, an extension of these studies should be carried out for the Spanish context, because atypical names and difficult-to-pronounce names are associated with foreign persons or individuals living in very concrete geographical zones of Spain. Therefore, the Spanish context is somewhat divergent. For example, most atypical names come from Latin-American, African, Asian or East-Europe people, whilst difficult-to-pronounce names are also linked to these lands, and to political and cultural specific areas of Spain, such as the Basque Country and Catalonia. I have deliberately avoided including these types of names in this research, because of the possible confounding effect of political, cultural, ethnic or racial prejudices, but I acknowledge it would be an interesting question to study.

The extension of this study to professions linked to music, film or television would also be of interest. And maybe thus we could answer some questions such as: Would Thomas Mapother IV be also the best paid actor of Hollywood instead of Tom Cruise?

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