Perceived Desirability of Given Names: Identifying a Relationship Between Given Names and Associated Personality Traits

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Perceived Desirability of Given Names: Identifying a Relationship Between Given Names and Associated Personality Traits

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Abstract

This study was designed to determine whether participants would have better recall for names with phonetic properties that matched a paired personality trait. In other words, phonetically attractive names paired with positive traits and phonetically unattractive names paired with negative traits should have higher rates of recall than names whose phonetic properties did not match a paired personality trait, such as phonetically attractive names paired with negative traits or phonetically unattractive names paired with positive traits. Given names were deemed to be phonetically attractive or unattractive based on the number of sonorants (soft consonant sounds such as l, m, n, and r) or obstruents (hard consonant sounds such as d, t, k, and b) in the emphasized syllable. Names with a high proportion of emphasis on sonorants were considered attractive for females and unattractive for males. Names with a higher proportion of emphasis on obstruents were considered attractive for males and unattractive for females. Participants were presented with sentences pairing one name with an attractive or unattractive personality trait, and later were asked to recall the names when presented with the traits alone. Contrary to the original hypothesis, participants were found to have better recall for names when paired with mismatching traits than when paired with matching traits.
Perceived Desirability of Given Names: Identifying a Relationship Between
Given Names and Associated Personality Traits

An individual's given name may serve as more than a mere social identity. As a name is a unit of language, it must be considered and valued accordingly in order to appreciate its significance. Marleau- Ponty's philosophy suggests that the world can only be perceived when an individual is introduced to language and is thus able to organize experiences into linguistic labels. Language is thus the tie between the physical existence of a body in a world of blind experience and the understanding of the perceptual world through use of linguistic labels. Using Marleau-Ponty's philosophy of language, Tschaepe (2003) theorizes that the naming of a child also offers a linguistic identity that allows an individual to enter the community of language-users and begin to understand the perceptual world. Not only does the name offer the child a personal key to the significance of language, but it offers other language-users a label with which to identify the new member (Tschaepe, 2003). If a given name is such a label with which the linguistic community may associate the individual, the phonetic make-up of given names could suggest the general identity, positive or negative, that will be associated with the individual by virtue of the phonetic properties of his or her name.

Previous research suggests that such phonetic properties of given names do have some effect on the individuals that bear them. According to a study by Stewart and Segolowitz (1991), the attractiveness of a given name may affect how someone is perceived by his or her peers, or even graded by a teacher. Since numerous studies have shown that mood or emotional context affects memory (Bower, 1981; Gage & Safer, 1985), names, as linguistic labels, may be better recalled when associated with
attributes that share an emotional context similar to the phonetic attractiveness of the name. The current study is designed to determine whether phonetically attractive names will be more readily remembered when paired with attractive traits than when paired with unattractive traits, and vice versa for a phonetically unattractive name, thus suggesting a relationship between phonetic attractiveness and social perception.

Past research has determined the phonetic attractiveness of names by analyzing the number and types of consonants present in the name. Two specific types of consonants have been identified as sonorants, softer sounds such as r, l, m, and n, and obstruents, harder sounds such as t, k, b, and p. Research suggests that female names that contain sonorants are perceived as more flattering and male names that contain obstruents are perceived as more flattering (Perfors, 2004).

Perfors' study selected male and female given names according to the number of sonorants and obstruents present. Perfors hypothesized that female names would be considered attractive if they included a higher number of sonorants and unattractive if they included a higher number of obstruents, due to the traditional image of females as a softer, more nurturing sex. Perfors then hypothesized that male names would be considered more attractive if they included a higher number of obstruents and unattractive if they included a high number of sonorants, due to the traditional image of males as a stronger, more aggressive sex. She paired the selected photographs of male and female friends and acquaintances with attractive or unattractive names. The photographs were posted on a popular website (www.hotornot.com), on which users rate the photographs on attractiveness. Perfors discovered that, in concordance with her hypothesis, the same photographs were rated as more attractive when paired with the
phonetically attractive name than when paired with the phonetically unattractive name (Perfors, 2004).

Although Perfors’ research specifically studied a name’s phonetic properties in relation to perception of physical attractiveness, it is possible that the phonetic properties of a name, like the phonetic properties of a word, suggest a general positive or negative context. In other words, if one was presented with an individual with a phonetically attractive name, the attractive qualities of the name alone may color the perception of all the individual’s traits: attractiveness, intelligence, sociability, ethical conduct, and so forth.

In order to identify a relationship between such a generalized emotional context and a name’s phonetic qualities, this study examined recall of given names when paired with adjectives that are identified with a generally positive or negative connotation. Bower’s theory of state-dependent memory suggested that stimuli are better recalled in the same context as that in which they were introduced. For example, an individual who is in a sad mood will more likely recall other events that were experienced in a sad mood (Bower, 1981). Gage and Safer (1985) also found that emotionally expressive faces are better recognized in the right hemisphere when the participant experienced a similar mood to that which was represented by the facial expression. Therefore, an emotional state that is represented by a particular adjective may affect recall of a name with attractive or unattractive phonetic qualities. The present study intends to discover whether the phonetic qualities of a given name alone will encourage memory of personal attributes that are similar in emotional context to the attractive or unattractive phonetic attributes of the name itself.
Method

Prestudy

A prestudy was conducted to select the adjectives for the study. The goal was to determine which adjectives would be rated most positively or negatively for individuals in the subject’s peer group. Adjectives were selected from the MRC Psycholinguistic Database. The database allows for searches for words across many linguistic and psycholinguistic variables, such as familiarity, pronunciation, length, and average age of acquisition (Wilson, 1987). In order to remain consistent with the number of syllables, letter length, and placement of emphasis of the names, two-syllable words between five and twelve letters long with the emphasis on the first syllable were selected. Words were also selected to control for the variable of familiarity so that it matched the names. The variable of familiarity considers the amount of times an individual has likely been exposed to the word. Since the names selected for the study were in the mid- to upper half of the top 100 popular names, words were selected in the range of 500-700 on a scale of 100-700 to ensure consistency between the average familiarity between names and adjectives. Eighty-five adjectives in the database were found to fit these criteria and were used in the prestudy.

Participants. Twenty-four students aged 18-22 currently enrolled in Lynchburg College participated in the prestudy. They were rewarded for their participation with three extra credit points in their psychology classes.

Materials. The participants were presented with a packet of adjectives. The packet contained eighty-five two-syllable adjectives with the emphasis on the first syllable. Each word was presented with two scales of 1 to 5, one scale marked “female”
and the other “male” (see Appendix A).

**Data and Procedure.** Participants were asked to rate each of the eighty-five adjectives in the packet on a scale of 1-5 in terms of how flattering they felt the adjective would be when applied to females of their own age. They were then asked to rate each adjective again on another scale of 1-5 in terms of how flattering they felt the adjective would be when applied to males of their own age (see Appendix A). A rating of 1 signified “very unflattering” and a rating of 5 signified “very flattering”. Finally, participants were asked to state their gender and year of birth to determine variability of both genders and to check that each participant was of the target age. From this information, the researcher selected adjectives that were typically rated very flattering and very unflattering. The average rating was calculated for each adjective. Those words with an average rating of 3.6 or above were defined as positive adjectives for the purposes of the study and those words with an average rating of 1.4 or below were defined as negative adjectives for the purposes of the study (see Appendix B).

**Present Study**

Two syllable names with the emphasis on the first syllable were drawn from the top one hundred given names in Virginia from 1985 to 1988 for females and males (Social Security Online, 2006). The years 1985-1988 were chosen because they matched the birth years for the participant pool. Names that were popular during these years would be the most familiar to participants, as they would represent the names that were most common among their peer group. The top one hundred names for the state of Virginia were chosen because approximately 55% of the participant pool number was from Virginia (Pope, 2004).
The ranks of the names over the four years were averaged to find the most consistently popular names over the four years for each gender. The average rank of popularity for male names that fit the criteria was 29.65, and the average rank of popularity for female names that fit the criteria was 34.65. Names were then sorted according to whether the name featured a sonorant or obstruent in the first syllable. Based on the previous research, female names with sonorants in the emphasized first syllable were then noted as attractive and those with obstruents were noted as unattractive. Male names with obstruents in the emphasized first syllable were noted as attractive and those with sonorants in the first syllable were noted as unattractive. Ten attractive male names, ten attractive female names, ten unattractive male names, and ten unattractive female names were selected from these criteria (see Appendix C).

Participants. Thirty-two students aged 18 to 22 currently enrolled in Lynchburg College participated in the study. They were compensated with three extra credit points in their psychology classes.

Materials. Two Powerpoint presentations were prepared. Each presentation showed forty sentences. Ten sentence slides were shown at a time, at a rate of five seconds per slide. The sentences were composed of previously selected names and adjectives in the format “(Name) is (adjective).” (see Figure 1).

Design and Procedure. Each presentation was divided into four sections of ten names each. In order to determine the names and adjectives to be used in each Powerpoint, the forty names were each assigned a random number and ordered accordingly. Names were then paired with either a positive or negative adjective for their sex, selected from the pre-study results at random. Although there was considerable
overlap in adjectives that positively described both males and females and adjectives that negatively described both males and females, the same adjective did not appear twice in the same section of ten to prevent confusion in the participants. The slides appeared on each presentation as a series of simple sentences. In the first Powerpoint, Powerpoint A, the first and third sections paired phonetically attractive names with positive adjectives and phonetically unattractive names with negative adjectives, whereas the second and fourth sections paired phonetically attractive names with negative adjectives and phonetically unattractive names with positive adjectives. In the second Powerpoint, Powerpoint B, the first and third sections paired phonetically attractive names with negative adjectives and phonetically unattractive names with positive adjectives, whereas the second and fourth sections paired phonetically attractive names with positive adjectives and phonetically unattractive names with negative adjectives. The two presentations allowed each name to be presented with both a positive and negative adjective without exposing participants to conflicting information for any name. In order to determine which participants would view Presentation A and which would view Presentation B, two sessions were created. Participants in the first session were shown Powerpoint A, and those who participated in the second session were shown Powerpoint B.

After each section of ten sentences was presented, the participants were presented with ten numbered recall sentences. The recall sentences were identical to the ten sentences in the previous section, with the exception that the name was absent and appeared as a blank on the screen. (see Figure 2) Recall slides were presented at a rate of ten seconds per slide. Participants were asked to “fill in the blank” by writing the name
that belonged in the sentence next to the corresponding number on their answer sheet.

Finally, at the end of the experiment, participants were asked to record their gender and year of birth.

Results

A paired samples t-test was conducted to determine if there was a difference in the percent of participants that correctly recalled the names paired with matching adjectives (M = 52.9545, SD = 16.69) and the percent of participants that correctly recalled the names paired with mismatching adjectives (M = 53.2045, SD = 15.13237). No significant difference was found between the percent of participants that correctly recalled the names paired with matching adjectives and the percent of participants that correctly recalled the names paired with mismatching adjectives $t(39) = -.069, p = .946$. (see Figure 3)

Another paired samples t-test was conducted to determine if there was a difference in the means of the number of correctly recalled names paired with mismatching adjectives (M = 11.4194, SD = .78941) and the number of correctly recalled names paired with matching adjectives (M = 9.9677, SD = .76970) recalled by participants. On average, participants recalled significantly more names paired with mismatching adjectives than names paired with matching adjectives, $t(31) = -2.438, p = .021$. (see Figure 4)

Discussion

Contrary to the hypothesis, the results indicated that a phonetically attractive name may be better remembered when paired with a negative adjective, and a phonetically unattractive name when paired with a positive adjective. One explanation
for these results is the issue of distinctiveness among the names. Since many of the names used had similar beginning letters due to the popularity of ‘‘J’’ and ‘‘K’’ names in the mid- to- late 1980’s, it may be that a lack of differentiation among the attractive names led participants to better recall the more differentiated unattractive names. However, an examination of the rate of recall showed that the names that had the highest recall included names with popular first letters.

There was also a considerable overlap of adjectives used to describe positive or negative qualities about males and females. For example, participants rated stupid, shallow, heartless, greedy, shady, lonely, vulgar, and boring as negative qualities for both males and females. Similarly, happy, sincere, friendly, honest, thoughtful, funny, and loving were rated as positive qualities for both males and females. Although there was some overlap, each section of ten sentence slides did not repeat the same adjective, whether it was applied to a male or a female, and so each of the ten names that were presented were paired with a distinct adjective. Also, since eight out of ten negative adjectives were identical for males and females and seven out of ten positive adjectives were identical for males and females, it is unlikely that the repetition of adjectives would have had a significant effect.

Although there was a difference for recall between names paired with mismatching adjectives and names paired with matching adjectives, the difference was very small (see Figure 4). However, it is possible that names were better recalled under the mismatching adjective condition due to a surprising effect of the positively or negatively charged name appearing in the opposite emotional context. Research conducted by McDaniel and Einstein (1986) found that bizarre or very distinctive
imagery is more effective for recall when other, more common encodings exist in the same learning task, although bizarre imagery is not necessarily more effective for recall than common imagery in all situations. For example, the researchers found that creating a bizarre image as a memory device to help recall information was not necessarily more useful for recall than creating a common image as a memory device when a learning task presented information to be encoded identically. However, when some information presented during a learning task was encoded in a common way and other information in the same task required a more distinctive type of encoding, the information that was encoded distinctively had better recall (McDaniel & Einstein, 1986). Since each presentation had twenty slides that presented names that matched the emotional context of the adjectives and twenty slides that presented names that did not match the emotional context of the adjectives, participants may have encoded the matching names differently than the mismatching names. The names that did not match the emotional context of the adjectives may have had better recall due to a more distinctive encoding process than the one used to learn the names that matched the emotional context of the adjectives.

It is also possible that the theory on which the name selection is based was at fault. Sonorants and obstruents may have a phonetic effect that is heavily related to traditional ideas of masculinity and femininity. However, in the past two decades there has been a growing trend towards more sensitive-sounding names for males and more aggressive, ambisexual sounding names for females (Rosenkrantz & Satran, 1994). Perhaps the participants, members of a modern generation in which female Ryans and Jamies and Tylers are more common, do not view femininity and masculinity of a name in the same traditional terms. Since Perfors' study was conducted on hotornot.com, she
was not aware of the age or cultural range of her participants. Therefore, her results may have been skewed by many participants from different generations, who would understandably have different perceptions of attractive qualities in males and females. A future study may run another prestudy in which names are evaluated by participants for attractiveness or unattractiveness.

It is also possible that there might have been a significant effect in the favor of better recall for names with matching adjectives than with mismatching had it been possible to choose names solely based on representation of sonorants and obstruents. However, because it was necessary to control for familiar names, the names that were selected were not comprised of all sonorants or all obstruents, as many such names would be unfamiliar to the participants. In the unattractive females group, every name included a sonorant that appeared somewhere in the name, and many unattractive male names included an obstruent as well. Although these attractive phonetic attributes were not as prominent in the selected names as the unattractive names, they may well have colored the perception of the name more than was predicted.

As indicated by previous research, the linguistic identity of an individual is indeed affected by the phonetics of his or her name. Although the effects in this study are contradictory to the hypothesis and some previous research, the effect may be due in part to a changing idea of masculine and feminine identity and attractiveness. As given names continue to reflect the growing softness of the male image and toughness of the female image, research will benefit from exploring the role of phonetics in forming a social linguistic label.
## APPENDIX A

1. **PRECISE**
   
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>female:</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>male:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. **HUMANE**
   
<table>
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<tr>
<th>female:</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>male:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. **SEVERE**
   
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<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>male:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. **VULGAR**
   
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<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>male:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. **RIGID**
   
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>female:</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>male:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. **ACTIVE**
   
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>female:</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>male:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B

Attractive Adjectives for Males

Happy
Sincere
Charming
Friendly
Honest
Thoughtful
Funny
Loving
Active
Pleasant

Attractive Adjectives for Females

Happy
Sincere
Honest
Friendly
Thoughtful
Loving
Likeable
Pretty
Funny
Gentle
Unattractive Adjectives for Males

Stupid
Shallow
Heartless
Greedy
Shady
Lonely
Vulgar
Boring
Ashamed
Awkward

Unattractive Adjectives for Females

Stupid
Heartless
Shallow
Greedy
Shady
Vulgar
Lonely
Bitter
Failing
Boring
APPENDIX C

Attractive Male Names

Jesse
Derek
Dustin
Jacob
Kenneth
David
Justin
Thomas
Jason
Joseph

Attractive Female Names

Lisa
Lindsey
Megan
Erin
Amy
Mary
Rachel
Amber
Margaret
Anna
Unattractive Male Names

Ronald
Tyler
Jeffrey
Nathan
Aaron
Matthew
William
Brian
Ryan
Daniel

Unattractive Female Names

Holly
Courtney
Heather
Jamie
April
Kelly
Katherine
Crystal
Caitlin
Casey
Figure Captions

*Figure 1.* Sample sentence slide of a phonetically unattractive male name paired with a negative adjective.

*Figure 2.* Sample recall slide of a negative adjective with the name removed to prompt recall.

*Figure 3.* Percentage of participants that correctly recalled names in matching and mismatching conditions.

*Figure 4.* Number of correct responses for matching and mismatching names by participants.
Daniel is awkward.
_____ is awkward.
Figure 3
Figure 4
References


