


The Name Game: How Naming Products Increases Psychological Ownership and Subsequent Consumer Evaluations

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Naming products is quite prevalent in American culture; however, we are not aware of any consumer research that explores the effects of this phenomenon. Across three studies, we demonstrate that when consumers name products, their evaluations of those products increase (e.g., attitudes, purchase intentions, and willingness to accept). We find that name fit and creativity as well as subsequent psychological ownership drive this effect. We also demonstrate that the naming effect is quite robust—replicating across multiple products, presentation formats, and populations as well as persisting over time. These results contribute to consumer research by opening up a new substantive line of inquiry into the effects of naming products.

Keywords Brand management; Consumer evaluations; Psychological ownership; Product naming

Toyota's "Más Que un Auto" ("More than a Car") campaign encouraged Toyota owners to name their cars and provided close to 100,000 name badges for owners to affix to their automobiles (Diaz, 2015). In a recent commercial, a Liberty Mutual Insurance customer recounts a story about a car she named "Brad." Numerous banks allow customers to nickname accounts, and Build-A-Bear customers register their stuffed animals by name and receive birth certificates to make it official. But is encouraging consumers to name their products beneficial to marketers? While naming products is a phenomenon most Americans can relate to, there is very little academic research on names in general and even less on naming products. Therefore, we examine the effect of naming products on consumer evaluations.

Conceptual Development

Names and Naming

Qualitative research in anthropology and sociology examines the role of names in kinship (Finch, 2008), how parents from different backgrounds choose names to symbolize a child's heritage

(Edwards & Caballero, 2008), and naming rituals across cultures (Kan, 2001). Both surnames and forenames can link an individual to family members and help create familial bonds (Finch, 2008). Similarly, nicknames can also help signify belonging (Kenny, 2014), express affection (Degges-White, 2016; Landau, 2015), and convey an emotional connection (Steinberg, 2013). While we are not aware of any research that studies the effect of consumers naming products, experts acknowledge that there is "great power in naming things" (Degges-White, 2016) and others suggest that "assigning a name to a . . . possession is both a sign of growing affection and a spur to further bonding" (Wattenburg, 2011). Thus, we examine whether these effects extend to instances where firms invite consumers to name products and hypothesize that naming products enhance consumer evaluations. In the next section, we discuss the conceptual basis for this effect.

Psychological Ownership

Naming is an activity generally performed for newborns and new pets or for nonhuman objects (e.g., dolls, stuffed animals, cars) that the namer believes to "be mine"—a sign of psychological ownership. Psychological ownership refers to a

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state in which an individual perceives that an object is “theirs” regardless of actual physical or legal ownership (Pierce, Kostova, & Dirks, 2003). Pierce et al. (2003) share the following anecdote to illustrate: although he did not legally own the truck he drove for work, one driver cleaned, cared for, and even named his truck. This example suggests that psychological ownership may play a role in naming products—even if consumers do not legally own them. Indeed, the act of naming takes time, effort, and ideas, which represent an investment of the self into the object that can lead to feelings of psychological ownership (Jussila, Tarkiainen, Sarstedt, & Hair, 2015; Sarstedt, Neubert, & Barth, 2017). When consumers do take psychological ownership of an object, their evaluations of that object increase (Jussila et al., 2015; Peck & Shu, 2009; Pierce et al., 2003; Reb & Connolly, 2007). Thus, we hypothesize that naming a product increases psychological ownership and subsequent consumer evaluations compared to a product with no name.

Name Features

When choosing a name for their child, parents often select one they like (Edwards & Caballero, 2008) and believe fits with the type of child they desire (Finch, 2008; Zittoun, 2004). Similarly, in naming pets or objects, people often choose names they like and believe fit with their personal representation of the particular animal or object. For instance, an individual might choose “Spot” for a Dalmatian. Similarly, in the Toyota example, owners often chose names that fit with their product experiences, “such as ‘El Milagroso’ (‘The Miraculous’), conceived by one owner who could not believe how many years his ancient Toyota has done right by him” (Diaz, 2015). Consequently, we expect that when naming a product, consumers are more apt to choose a name that fits with their personal representation of the product. We also expect names that fit to be more well-liked, as past research shows that prototypical category members (i.e., those with high fit) tend to be better liked (Loken, Barsalou, & Joiner, 2008). Furthermore, congruity between product elements, such as in product design (Veryzer & Hutchinson, 1998), product packaging (Van Rompay & Pruyn, 2008), or advertising (Lee & Labroo, 2004), can promote more favorable product evaluations. As a result, we predict that better-fitting and better-liked names will enhance both psychological ownership (via increasing consumers’ tendency to judge the product as “theirs” when its name embodies their personal

representation of it) as well as subsequent product evaluations.

We also examine two other name features that may heighten feelings of psychological ownership: familiarity and creativity. First, when naming a child, parents may use names of family members (Finch, 2008) or names that are popular (Zittoun, 2004)—that is, names that are more familiar to them. Second, past research in other domains suggests that low (vs. high) levels of consumer creativity can lead to lower levels of satisfaction with products (Hildebrand, Häubl, Herrmann, & Landwehr, 2013). Therefore, in addition to fit and liking, we explore whether familiarity or creativity gives certain names an advantage.

In looking at these name features—fit, liking, familiarity, and creativity—each reflects a highly subjective judgment dependent on the idiosyncrasies of a consumer’s personal history. For example, past research notes that judgments of name fit and creativity are a function of an individual’s prior experiences (e.g., due to differences in culture, Paletz & Peng, 2008; occupation, Koslow, Sasser, & Riordan, 2003; etc., Caroff & Besançon, 2008; Hood, 1973). Name familiarity, too, is clearly based on an individual’s personal experiences with names, which vary by family, region, or culture, among other factors. Thus, we suspect that the names consumers give products reflect highly individualized perceptions that vary from person to person. So, although it would be advantageous for marketers to assign names that are comparable to self-names in terms of these name features, finding the best name may pose a challenge due to the high bar that the uniqueness of self-names sets. Consequently, we hypothesize that self-names (provided by the consumer) will be superior to assigned names, increasing both psychological ownership and product evaluations. However, whether certain types of marketer assigned names are better than others remains an open question. For example, one might expect an assigned name that describes the product better (e.g., “Muggy” for a mug) to perform better than an assigned name that is not descriptive and seems more remote from consumers’ representations of the product (e.g., “Bob” for a mug). Therefore, in addition to self-names, we explore different types of marketer assigned names as well.

Overview of Studies

We conduct three studies to assess whether naming a product enhances consumer evaluations. In Study 1, we examine the naming effect by comparing self-names to no name. In Study 2, we compare

self-names to assigned names and test whether psychological ownership mediates this effect. Finally, in Study 3, we investigate how various name features affect perceptions of psychological ownership and subsequent consumer evaluations.

Study 1: The Naming Effect

Method. Forty-eight undergraduate students received course credit for participating in two lab sessions (4 weeks apart). We randomly assigned participants to either a self-name or control (no name) condition. During the first lab session, all participants received a plain yellow stress ball and read that the purpose of the study was to examine whether stress balls are effective in managing stress. Participants in the self-name (but not control) condition provided a name for the stress ball and described why they chose that name. Participants were given instructions to squeeze the stress ball at least once a day. In the second session, participants reported how much money (in USD) it would take for them to sell the stress ball—that is, their willingness to accept (WTA).

Results. Eight participants from the first lab session did not return for the second session, so we excluded them from the analysis. For the remaining 40 participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 20$, 44% female), we log-transformed WTA values (adding 0.01 to zeros to facilitate transformation). As predicted, an ANOVA on log-transformed WTA revealed that participants valued the stress ball more in the self-name than control condition ($F(1, 38) = 4.42$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.10$)—with original prices more than \$1 higher in the self-name condition ($M_{\text{self}} = \$4.07$ vs. $M_{\text{CG}} = \$2.67$). See Figure 1.

Discussion. These results provide preliminary evidence that naming a product leads to higher consumer valuations even after 4 weeks. Although all participants in Study 1 had physical possession of

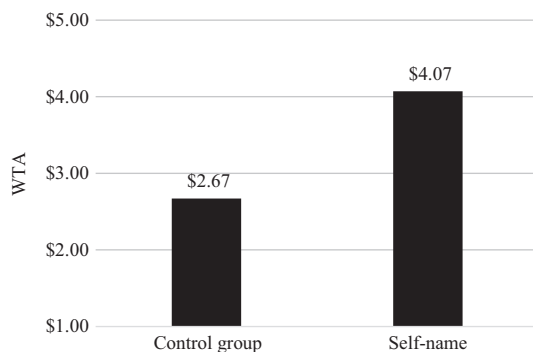


Figure 1. The effect of name on willingness to accept (WTA) (Study 1).

the stress ball, they may vary in the degree to which they felt that the ball was “theirs” (i.e., had feelings of psychological ownership). Therefore, in Study 2, we examine the mediating role of psychological ownership, compare self-names to assigned names, and explore whether names affect purchase intentions.

Study 2: Psychological Ownership as the Underlying Process

Method. Two hundred undergraduate students received course credit for participation in this study ($M_{\text{age}} = 21$, 46% female). We randomly assigned participants to one of four conditions: self-name, descriptive name, nondescriptive name, or control (no name). All participants viewed a picture of a blue stapler—a mundane, ordinary object. In the self-name condition, participants named the stapler, while those in the two assigned name conditions read that the stapler was named “Blue” (descriptive) or “Steve” (nondescriptive). We selected these names based on a pretest that revealed them as the most commonly used descriptive and nondescriptive names given to the stapler. Participants in the control did not see any name. All participants viewed five different pictures of the stapler on a computer screen (each photo for 10 s) before rating the stapler. In the three name conditions, the name of the stapler appeared above each picture. Finally, participants rated their purchase intentions (1 item: 1 “very unlikely” to 7 “very likely”) and feelings of psychological ownership (3 items: 1 “strongly disagree” to 7 “strongly agree,” Peck & Shu, 2009; e.g., “I feel like I own this stapler”; see Methodological Appendix S1 [MDA] for items).

Results. An ANOVA on purchase intentions revealed a significant main effect ($F(3, 196) = 3.75$, $p = .01$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.05$). As predicted, participants reported higher purchase intentions for self-name ($M_{\text{self}} = 4.49$) than the descriptive name ($M_{\text{descriptive}} = 3.75$; $F(1, 196) = 5.71$, $p < .05$), nondescriptive name ($M_{\text{nondescriptive}} = 3.74$; $F(1, 196) = 5.73$, $p < .05$), or control ($M_{\text{control}} = 3.50$; $F(1, 196) = 9.98$, $p < .01$). There were no significant differences between descriptive, nondescriptive, and control conditions. See Figure 2.

We created a psychological ownership index by averaging the means of the three individual items ($\alpha = 0.95$). An ANOVA on psychological ownership revealed a significant main effect ($F(3, 196) = 4.37$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.06$). Participants reported higher psychological ownership for self-name ($M_{\text{self}} = 2.80$) than the descriptive name ($M_{\text{descriptive}} = 1.98$; $F(1, 196) = 7.23$, $p < .01$), nondescriptive name

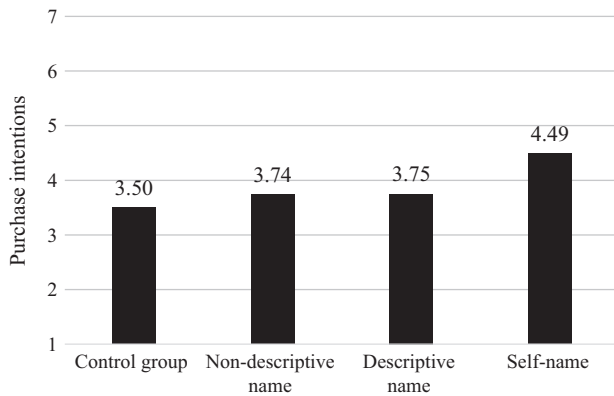


Figure 2. The effect of name on purchase intentions (Study 2).

($M_{\text{nondescriptive}} = 1.95$; $F(1, 196) = 7.76$, $p < .05$), or control ($M_{\text{control}} = 1.79$; $F(1, 196) = 10.78$, $p < .01$). There were no significant differences between descriptive, nondescriptive, and control conditions.

To assess mediation of psychological ownership, we ran a mediation analysis with a multicategorical independent variable (Hayes & Preacher, 2014). We compared each condition to self-name, controlling for the other two conditions (i.e., self-name vs. descriptive name controlling for nondescriptive name and control; self-name vs. nondescriptive name controlling for descriptive name and control; and self-name vs. control controlling for descriptive and nondescriptive name). A bootstrap analysis (PROCESS, model 4; Hayes, 2013) supported mediation of the effects of descriptive name (coded as 0; 95% CI of the indirect effect [0.10, 0.75]), nondescriptive name (coded as 0; 95% CI of the indirect effect [0.10, 0.70]), and the control (coded as 0; 95% CI of the indirect effect [0.20, 0.78]) versus self-name (coded as 1) on purchase intentions. See Figure 3.

Discussion. These results provide additional support for the naming effect: self-names increased purchase intentions compared with assigned names

or no name. We also found that psychological ownership mediates this effect. While we did not find any significant differences between descriptive and nondescriptive names, we questioned whether descriptive names may, in general, lead to more favorable product evaluations. To examine this trend in more detail, we had two coders (blind to the research hypotheses) rate each self-name generated in this study on five dimensions: descriptiveness, fit, liking, creativity, and familiarity (1 “Not at all” to 5 “Very much”). Consistent with our theorizing, fit, liking, creativity, and familiarity varied substantially between coders (all Krippendorff’s $\alpha < 0.32$). Only descriptiveness showed an acceptable level of reliability ($\alpha = 0.81$). While only one-third of the names’ mean ratings were at or above the midpoint for descriptiveness, correlations of the raw ratings between descriptiveness and the four name features revealed that perceptions of name fit ($r = .60$, $p < .001$) and liking ($r = .48$, $p < .001$) were significant (creativity: $r = .01$, $p = .93$; familiarity: $r = -.08$, $p = .45$). These results support our expectation that interpretations of meanings of names are highly subjective. Accordingly, we still expect self-names to be superior to assigned names. These findings also suggest that when assigning names, it is worth examining whether descriptive (vs. nondescriptive) names are more successful due to an increase in fit and liking. In Study 3, we implement a within-subjects design to examine these results more thoroughly as well as to identify name features that drive our self-name effect.

Study 3: What Name Features Drive Naming Success?

Method. We employed a mixed design where product was a between-subjects factor and name condition was a within-subjects factor. We randomly assigned MTurk respondents ($N = 121$,

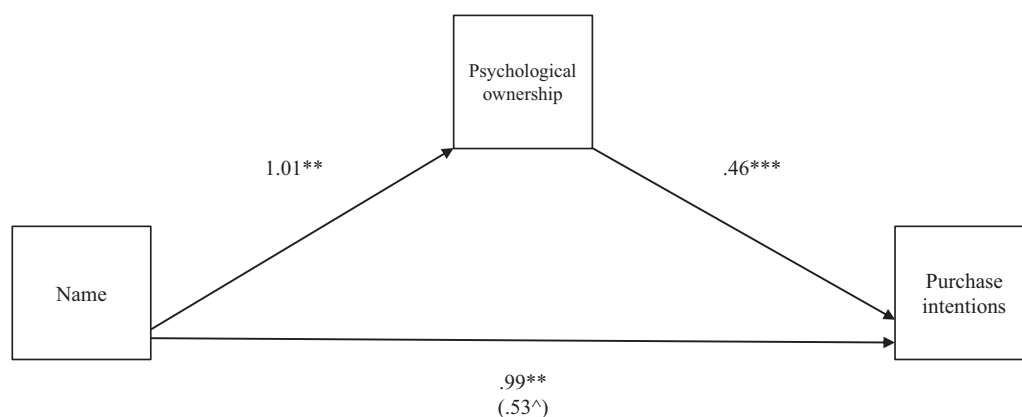


Figure 3. Mediation model for self-name versus no name (Study 2).

$M_{\text{age}} = 32$, 42% female) to one of two products: a white mug or blue stapler. All participants rated self-name, descriptive name, and nondescriptive name conditions for the product. For the self-name condition, participants named the product. For the descriptive name condition, the object was named “Muggy” (mug) or “Blue” (stapler). For the nondescriptive name condition, the object was named “Bob” (mug) or “Steve” (stapler). “Muggy” and “Bob” were the most common descriptive and nondescriptive names (respectively) for the mug, as generated by participants in a separate pretest. We randomized name order and to prevent fatigue, participants completed single item ratings of attitudes (1 “Not at all” to 7 “Very much”), purchase intentions (1 “Very unlikely” to 7 “Very likely”), and psychological ownership (1 “Strongly disagree” to 7 “Strongly agree”). Participants also rated six items that capture the name features of liking, fit, creativity, and familiarity (1 “Not at all” to 7 “Very much”) (see MDA for items). Using these same measures in a pretest, the results of a factor analysis revealed that fit, appropriateness, general liking of the name, and liking of the name for the specific product loaded onto a single factor which we call the fit index. Familiarity loaded onto a second factor, and creativity did not load highly on either factor, so we investigate these two name features separately (see MDA for factor loadings).

Results. A mixed ANOVA (where product was the between-subjects factor and name condition was the within-subjects factor) revealed a significant main effect of name on attitudes ($F(2, 238) = 59.07$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.33$) and purchase intentions ($F(2, 238) = 56.29$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.32$); neither the main effect of product nor the two-way interaction were significant ($p > .05$). Participants reported higher attitudes ($M_{\text{self}} = 5.34$) and purchase intentions ($M_{\text{self}} = 4.84$) for self-names than assigned descriptive (attitudes: $M_{\text{descriptive}} = 4.26$, $F(1, 238) = 34.60$, $p < .01$; purchase intentions: $M_{\text{descriptive}} = 3.89$, $F(1, 238) = 29.17$, $p < .01$) or nondescriptive (attitudes: $M_{\text{nondescriptive}} = 3.36$, $F(1, 238) = 117.87$, $p < .01$; purchase intentions: $M_{\text{nondescriptive}} = 2.98$, $F(1, 238) = 112.57$, $p < .01$) names. Participants also reported higher attitudes ($F(1, 238) = 24.75$, $p < .01$) and purchase intentions ($F(1, 238) = 27.13$, $p < .01$) for descriptive versus nondescriptive names. See Figure 4.

A mixed ANOVA on psychological ownership revealed a significant main effect of name ($F(2, 238) = 88.70$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.43$) and two-way interaction ($F(2, 238) = 4.45$, $p = .01$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.04$); the main effect of product was not significant

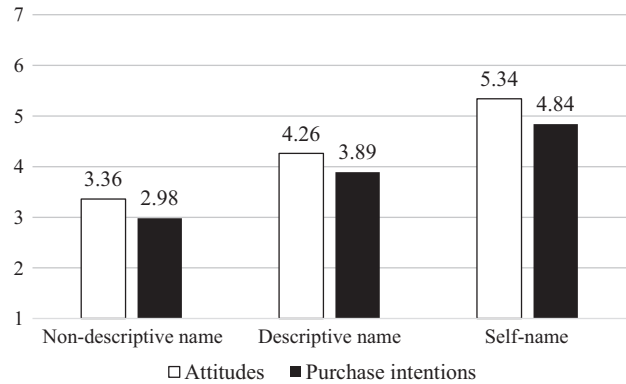


Figure 4. The effect of name on attitudes and purchase intentions (Study 3).

($p > .10$). Of interest and consistent with our attitudes and purchase intentions results, participants reported higher psychological ownership for self-names ($M_{\text{self}} = 4.98$) than assigned descriptive ($M_{\text{descriptive}} = 3.17$, $F(1, 238) = 74.23$, $p < .01$) or nondescriptive ($M_{\text{nondescriptive}} = 2.22$, $F(1, 238) = 171.72$, $p < .01$) names. Participants also reported higher psychological ownership for descriptive versus nondescriptive names ($F(1, 238) = 20.15$, $p < .01$). (This pattern replicates for means and contrasts by product; see MDA.)

To gain more insight into why certain names result in better outcomes, we examined the impact of the fit index ($\alpha_{\text{self}} = 0.86$, $\alpha_{\text{descriptive}} = 0.93$, $\alpha_{\text{nondescriptive}} = 0.90$), creativity, and familiarity on psychological ownership and subsequent consumer evaluations (see Table 1 for means). To assess this within-subjects serial mediation, we ran the MEMORE macro (Montoya & Hayes, 2016). Because the macro only allows two repeated-measures conditions at a time, we ran three name comparisons (nondescriptive vs. descriptive name, nondescriptive name vs. self-name, and descriptive name vs. self-name). Bootstrap analyses supported serial mediation of the fit index and creativity for all three comparisons (see Table 1 for details). As one might expect, increases in the fit index and creativity (but not familiarity) led to increases in psychological ownership and subsequent attitudes and purchase intentions. See Figure 5 for one example of the repeated-measures mediation model.

Discussion. Using a within-subjects approach, we replicate the superiority of self-names and find that assigned descriptive names are also more successful than assigned nondescriptive names. In addition, we tested several name features and found that name fit and creativity increased

Table 1
Means and Serial Mediation Results (Study 3)

Mediator	Condition	Mean	SD	Comparison	Attitudes 95% CI	Purchase intentions 95% CI
Fit index	1. Nondescriptive name	3.13	1.71	1 vs. 2	(-0.67, -0.19)	(-0.88, -0.29)
	2. Descriptive name	4.71	1.60	1 vs. 3	(-1.08, -0.39)	(-1.31, -0.49)
	3. Self-name	5.63	1.22	2 vs. 3	(-0.28, -0.06)	(-0.35, -0.08)
Creativity	1. Nondescriptive name	2.71	1.82	1 vs. 2	(-0.31, -0.01)	(-0.34, -0.01)
	2. Descriptive name	3.15	1.89	1 vs. 3	(-0.69, -0.21)	(-0.76, -0.29)
	3. Self-name	4.37	1.93	2 vs. 3	(-0.25, -0.04)	(-0.29, -0.05)
Familiarity	1. Nondescriptive name	5.74	1.70	1 vs. 2	(-0.07, 0.33) NS	(-0.08, 0.31) NS
	2. Descriptive name	3.94	2.08	1 vs. 3	(-0.11, 0.12) NS	(-0.11, 0.11) NS
	3. Self-name	4.79	1.97	2 vs. 3	(-0.10, 0.02) NS	(-0.12, 0.02) NS

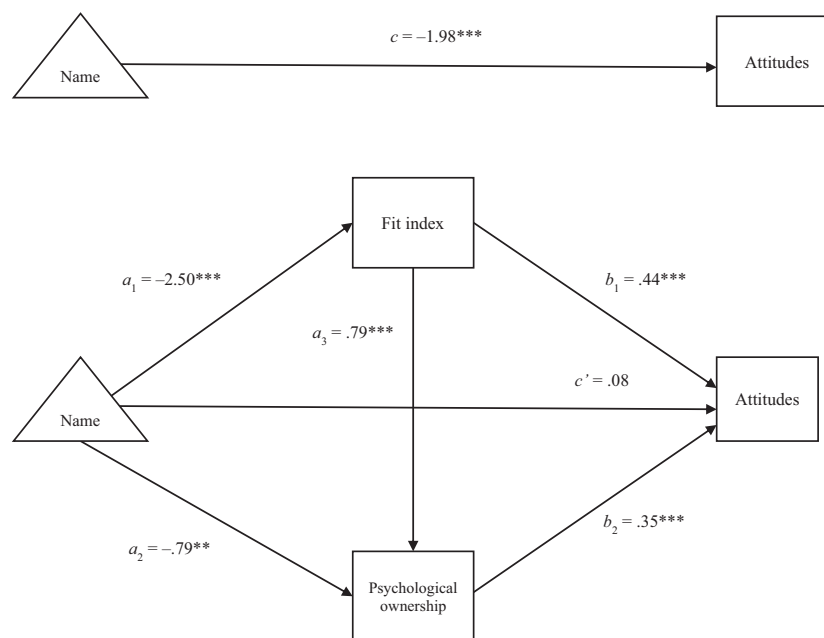


Figure 5. Serial mediation model for self-name versus nondescriptive name (Study 3).

psychological ownership and subsequent consumer evaluations, providing initial evidence that certain types of names have advantages over others.

General Discussion

To our knowledge, this is the first empirical assessment of the effects of naming products. We found that self-naming products increases consumer evaluations relative to assigned or no names—an effect that replicated across multiple products, presentation formats, and populations, and persisted over time. When consumers were invited to name a product (vs. viewing a product with an assigned name), they rated the name as better fitting and more creative,

which increased their feelings of psychological ownership of the named product. These feelings of psychological ownership, in turn, led to more favorable product evaluations. Serial mediation analyses supported this chain of effects. Further, although not significant in our between-subjects study, assigning a descriptive name was more successful than assigning a nondescriptive name in a within-subjects study. Results indicate that this effect was due to increased fit and creativity of the descriptive (vs. nondescriptive) names. However, before drawing conceptual or managerial conclusions, further research is needed. Results may be a function of the specific names chosen in our research.

Although we observed some benefit of descriptive assigned names, self-names were generally

superior. In other words, our participants rated both descriptive and nondescriptive assigned names as less fitting (i.e., these names had lower fit, were less appropriate, and were less well liked) and less creative than self-names, which led to decreased feelings of psychological ownership and subsequent product evaluations. The question arises as to whether a marketer is ever able to assign a name to a product that is as good of a fit and as creative as one chosen by the consumer. More research is needed to answer this question. One possible outcome is that, assuming a marketer could find a name that fits as well and is as creative as the name chosen by a consumer, then assigning that name should be a good substitute for self-naming. However, because these name features are highly individualized (i.e., perceptions vary from person to person), choosing an assigned name for a population of consumers that matches their individualized judgments of fit and creativity is a challenging task. Future research might examine how crowdsourcing product names affects name fit and creativity, psychological ownership, and subsequent sales.

A second possible outcome is that there is something about the process of self-naming that contributes to the name's inherent superiority over and above the name's fit/creativity. For example, the process of self-naming may include some of the same processes as self-design, including mastery or involvement by the creator, that are not captured by our mediation results but result in the perception that the self-names are better fitting and more creative than assigned names. More systematic research is needed to determine under what conditions alternative mediation is supported.

Our research findings have other limitations. First, we used fictitious assigned names in our studies that were preselected by the experimenters. While we did select assigned names that were the most popular self-names among participants in a pretest, our results nevertheless could be unique to the particular names selected or the particular product categories studied. Second, while we consistently found benefits of self-naming over no names, the evidence for superiority of self-naming over assigned names was weaker. Finally, all of our participants live in the United States. It is unclear whether the naming of inanimate objects extends to other cultures. Further work is needed to substantiate our findings, using additional names and product categories, more systematically exploring name features, and expanding to other populations of consumers.

Building on the studies we presented, future research could delve more deeply into how

branding impacts the naming effect by investigating self-naming in the presence of weak versus strong brands. Existing product names could also be examined to try to tease out the effects of brand versus product names (e.g., iPhone's Siri or Amazon's Alexa). Additionally, while we examined utilitarian goods, future work could explore the impact of naming hedonic goods or services.

Practitioners may want to try to encourage self-names over assigning names. Future research could incorporate real-world contexts, such as examining whether prompts to name products in shopping baskets (or the entire basket) in physical or online stores affects sales. Some firms already encourage naming products via name badges or through product registration (e.g., Build-A-Bear). Storefronts or online shopping could also be conducive contexts for self-naming products. It might also be useful to explore if the naming effect holds in a donation or nonprofit context. For example, would animal shelters benefit if they allowed potential donors or families to name an animal before adoption rather than donating to or adopting an animal that already has a name?

Other potential avenues for future research include exploring individual difference characteristics (e.g., persuasion knowledge, skepticism, preference for function over form) or examining potential floor/boomerang (e.g., poorly performing products) and ceiling effects (e.g., beloved dolls or stuffed animals). Naming research might also compare the naming effect before versus after purchase, or track the effects of changes based on usage or over the life of the product (e.g., legendary blues singer B.B. King named his guitars "Lucille" after purchase, Kerekes & O'Neill, 1996). Finally, while we invited consumers to name products, future work could assess the phenomenon of spontaneous naming and compare it to the results reported here. Suffice it to say, we believe naming products is a phenomenon most U.S. consumers can relate to and presents a substantive area rife with research opportunities.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's website:

Appendix S1. Methodological details appendix.