Is suggestive branding…suggested?

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis presents work carried out by myself and does not incorporate, without acknowledgement, any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge, it does not contain any materials previously published or written by another person except when due reference is made in the text and all substantive contributions by others to work presented, including jointly authorised publications, are acknowledged.

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Abstract

This thesis aims to establish the prevalence of suggestive brand names, and the prevalence and effectiveness of suggestive Distinctive Brand Assets. Prevalence refers to how often suggestiveness is seen in the market in various contexts (i.e., different categories, industries, and countries). Effectiveness relates directly to how well-known the suggestive Distinctive Asset branding is ('Fame') and how well it is associated with the correct brand ('Uniqueness').

Whilst there are many strategies a marketer could adopt, almost three-quarters of industry practitioners see suggestive brand names as a better alternative to non-suggestive brand names (Romaniuk, 2022). Although literature has explored suggestiveness for over one hundred years (Viehoever, 1920), including seminal branding work by Keller et al. (1998) and more recent research (Gunasti et al., 2020), there has been little evidence of their usage in the market (Arora et al., 2015), and nothing on the effectiveness of suggestive Distinctive Assets as a branding tool.

Specifically, this thesis provides two studies with original contributions:

- Determining the prevalence of suggestive names and non-name elements (Distinctive Assets, e.g., logos) across different categories, industries, and countries.

- Examining the effectiveness of suggestive Distinctive Assets as a branding tool, including quantifying the performances among asset types (e.g., logo vs tagline) in different categories and industries.

- Undertaking and assessing a novel approach to data collection through artificial intelligence, harnessing GPT-3.5, GPT-4, GPT-4V and GPT-4o.

The first study determines the prevalence of suggestive brand names, and the prevalence and effectiveness of suggestive Distinctive Assets.

Study 1: How prevalent are suggestive brand names and Distinctive Assets? An AI-human approach

Study 1 examines 4,611 brand names across 244 categories in three industries and three countries to understand the prevalence of suggestive brand names across various contexts. Data is collected through scraping brand names from major online retailers in Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom. The study determines if marketers' beliefs on the importance of suggestive branding (Romaniuk, 2022) translate into implementation. The results indicate that suggestiveness is seen in market, however less commonly than non-suggestive counterparts, constituting an average 28% of the brands in the market. When extending, for the first time, an examination of 597 Distinctive Assets across 12 categories, four industries, and three countries – finds suggestiveness comprises, on average, 38%.

The prevalence of suggestive direct and indirect branding is low. However, the most prominent variance was for direct branding across industries, wherein durables scored the lowest prevalence (10%), followed by consumer goods (20%), and services substantially higher (56%). Further, the sub-optimal outcomes for suggestive Distinctive Assets substantiate the choice not to implement suggestive branding. Across all industries analysed, suggestive assets perform inferior to non-suggestive assets – although differences in Fame and Uniqueness performance are minor. Study 1 thus finds that whether a marketer uses suggestive or non-suggestive branding should not have a revolutionising impact on their brand.

This study was undertaken at an overarching level in the context of Distinctive Assets. As a study on the effectiveness of suggestive Distinctive Assets had never been undertaken before (nor had a prevalence study), it was essential to establish initial benchmarks. A deeper exploration into the data is necessary to determine whether, under different circumstances, suggestive or non-suggestive Distinctive Assets may be more effective. Thus, study 2 examines the effectiveness across Distinctive Asset types.

Study 2: Evaluating Suggestive Distinctive Asset Types

Study 2 quantifies the effectiveness (i.e., Fame and Uniqueness) for all Distinctive Asset types (e.g., taglines and logos) and compares the performance between suggestive/non-suggestive elements. The Distinctive Asset data is expanded to 1,162 assets across 21 categories and four industries to determine these findings robustly. These were secondary data collected from independent studies commissioned by a market research company. The second study aims to determine whether there are instances wherein suggestive Distinctive Assets may be of benefit to use as opposed to non-suggestive, and vice versa. Findings indicate circumstantial benefits in using suggestive Distinctive Assets, as there are with non-suggestive.

Overall, findings show that shape-based Distinctive Assets performed the strongest and colour the worst, with the rest of the asset types performing similarly (i.e., audio, word, story, face, and design-based elements). When analysing suggestiveness, shape had small and medium effect sizes (Fame: d=0.48 Uniqueness: d=0.66) and word-based assets produced medium and large effect sizes (Fame: d=0.62 Uniqueness: d=0.84), with both asset types performing best as non-suggestive. Conversely, audio and design assets performed best as suggestive. Study 2 offers deeper insights into the results of Study 1, highlighting that suggestive and non-suggestive Distinctive Assets each have their place in branding strategy, with effectiveness contingent on type.

These two studies formulate the crux of this thesis. Each was initially written as a pilot study, peer-reviewed, and presented as a conference paper at the Australian and New Zealand Marketing Academy (ANZMAC) 2023 in Dunedin, New Zealand. Study 1 has been accepted into the International Journal of Market Research. Study 2 is under review in the Journal of Advertising Research. Both journals are A-Level on the Australian Business Deans Council 2022 list. One further conference paper on GPT-4(Visual) has been presented at the Informs Society for Marketing Science (ISMS) 2024 in Sydney, Australia. Each study is presented in this thesis.

The findings derived from this thesis deliver critical implications:

- As a minority of brand names (28%) and Distinctive Assets (40%) are suggestive, marketers should re-evaluate whether their beliefs are adequately reflected through their end branding strategy.
- Use of a human-in-the-loop approach has effectively reduced monetary costs and increased the efficiency of data collection, so future researchers can endeavour to adopt a similar method in their research.
- The exploratory nature of the studies has meant several foundational benchmarks have been established; thus, the groundwork has been laid for future researchers to replicate and extend upon the research.
- The differences in performance across Distinctive Asset types indicate that marketers should tailor their branding strategies to favour the more effective types.