Sound symbolism: a study of /i/ sound in Ivorian brands for men's perfumes

La symbolique du son: une étude du son /i/ dans les marques ivoiriennes de parfums pour homme

Votouan Emma N'Guessan, *Université Alassane Ouattara de Bouaké,*

ABSTRACT:

Entrepreneurship in Côte d'Ivoire evolved a lot. One of the most striking innovation remains sound symbolism in the naming of local Ivorian brands. This article sheds light on the distribution of the /i/ sound in the naming of most successful Ivorian tradenames in men's perfumes and make out their shaped values. This study is composed with three parts. The literature review explains some key notions like the sound symbolism, and brand linguistics. Then, the research methodology section presents how the research has been led, the nature of our data. The findings reveal that the /i/ sound is strategically used to convey other values when we address an Ivorian male customers.

Keywords: *perfumes– brand names – brand linguistics – vowel sounds*

RESUME:

L'entrepreneuriat en Côte d'ivoire connaît une évolution remarquable. Les sons intervenants dans la conception des noms de marques ivoiriennes restent l'une des plus grandes innovations. Cet article étudie l'emploi du son /i/ dans la formation des noms de marques dans les marques ivoiriennes de parfums pour hommes tout en mettant en avant les valeurs qui s'y dégagent. Cette étude est composée de trois parties. La revue de littérature explique les concepts clés comme la symbolique du son et la Linguistique des marques. Ensuite, la méthodologie décrit la nature des données et leur procédure de collecte. Enfin les résultats montrent que le son /i/ traduit d'autres valeurs quand on cible un public masculin.

Mots clés: *parfums– noms commerciaux – Linguistique de marque – sons vocaliques*

1 INTRODUCTION

Brand linguistics is a recent field but provided incredible findings for companies and their brands. Concocting tradenames is nowadays a matter of companies' branding strategy and positioning. In past times, things were done arbitrarily, without real consideration of the tight relation between the sound and it impact on customers' psychology. Termed another way, the linguistic sounds namely vowels are a reservoir of positive benefits for companies brands and services when exploited and selected adequately in the naming process.

We observed during the last decades that modern Ivorian brand names exhibit more rhymes, vowels and melody than it was the case before the new millennium. In fact, ancient products were named after the owner, or to recall the place of origin. Modernity on local market and competitiveness on international arena require Ivorian tradenames to align with some core principles. First, we observe the impressive use of English language in corporate naming process instead of the national language French. Secondly, the brand linguistic recommendations in relation with sound symbolism. In fact, (Carnevale et al, 2017)[1] support that one of the key branding decisions is the formulation of brand names, as they communicate the meaning of the brand.

The theory of sound symbolism opposes the principle of arbitrariness and Linguists support the idea that speech sound such as vowels or consonant carry inherent meaning. Sound symbolism also suggests that, apart from the lexical meaning of words, sounds contained within the word itself convey various meaning to listeners. (Klink, 2000)[2] demonstrated that brand names featuring the high front vowel /i/ sound convey particular product attributes namely smallness, brightness, and femininity to customers. The thesis of N'guessan[3] submitted for instruction at the university Alassane Ouattara of Bouaké, Côte d'Ivoire provided additional and interesting findings about Klink's theory. The topic investigated on

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[1] Marina CARNEVALE, David LUNA, Dawn LERMAN .2017. Brand linguistics: A theory-driven framework for the study of language in branding. International *Journal of Research in Marketing.* Volume 3 (2), pp, 572-591. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijresmar.2017.01.003. Web visited on 13th August, 2025.

[2] Richard. KLINK. 2000. Creating brand names with meaning: The use of sound symbolism. *Marketing* Letters volume 11(1), pp, 5-20. http://dx.doi.org/10.1023/A:1008184423824. Web visited on 1rst may, 2025.

[3] Emma N'Guessan. *English brand names: an analysis of argumentation theory between Ivorian and multinational brand names.* "Unpublished manuscript".

the efficiency of argumentation in Ivorian and multinational brand names. In the field of cosmetics, the findings confirmed Klink's theory for multinational names and more importantly corroborated the concept of the /i/ sound effect on Ivorian audiences. In fact, 100% of women brands in Ivorian cosmetics selected as data and containing the /i/ sound exhibited ideas of sweetness, femininity and brightness as developed by the Linguist. However, it is worth mentioning that masculine products of the perfume industry has not been taken into consideration.

This article investigates on the validity of Klink's findings on the /i/ sound attributes with regard to Ivorian brand names for men scents. Put another way, it will analyze a set of men's cosmetic products such as fragrances and perfumes, and to make out if any the additional values behind the /i/ sound and the intention of the brand owner when concocting the name. 16 Ivorian product names are selected for the purpose of this investigation. They are English names of perfumes and fragrances.

The methodological procedures of this article share close similarities with the research thesis. In this paper too, data are random selection from online social media. They are classified in a chart presenting the brand name, the phonetic transcription and the target audience age. The differences to mention are the following. While data in the research paper were analyzed under two theories namely Toulmin's argumentative theory and Austin's theory of meaning, this article exclusively use Klink's theory as a framework. Besides, there is no colorful display of brands pictures and no year delimitation for data selection in this paper. To finish, we only provided a qualitative method in this article. On the opposite, our thesis used both a qualitative and quantitative method.

This article has two valuable benefits. First, it will provide more insights about sound symbolism in the naming of men's fragrances in African countries. In fact, this study tackles the /i/ sound from a different angle in order to move beyond existing results. Secondly, this topic assesses the universal dimension of the Klink's theory.

The outline of this article goes like this. First, after the introduction, we will provide definitions of some terminologies. Some of them are the notions of vowels, brand naming and brand linguistics. In the data presentation section, we will present Ivorian brands in a chart. In

total, 16 names for men perfumes and fragrances will be analyzed to provide conclusive findings with regard to the /i/ sound symbolism. In discussion, we will set the importance of our findings, and highlight the contribution of our study. The general conclusion followed by a bibliography will close this paper.

2 DEFINITION OF CONCEPTS

2.1 Vowel sounds

Vowels are letters that represent speech sounds. In this context, the way a sound is produced is called pronunciation. Both French and English belong to the same language family, which is the Indo-European language family. But they have evolved to become distinct languages with their own unique features and own vocalic system. Although we can observe some similarities among vowel sounds like the French /a/ spelled /ɑ/ with the English sound /æ/, they are not identical at all (Martinet, 1961)[4]. Put simply, English and French has distinct pronunciation and grammatical rules, and in the same vein, their vowel sounds have different impact on hearers.

In English, speech sounds are distributed among vowels, consonants, and diphthongs. They are produced when air leaves the mouth without blockage by the tongue, lips, or throat. It is important to recall that vowel sounds are of two kinds: short and long. Short vowels are produced with only one mouth position and with shorter sounds out of the mouth than with long vowels. They are: /ɪ/, /e/, /æ/, /ʌ/, /ʊ/, /ɒ/, and /ə/. On the other hand, long vowels /i:/, /ɑ:/, /ɔ:/, /ɜ:/, /u:/ are produced with longer sounds than short ones.

The English alphabet is composed with 6 vowel letters namely: a, e, i, o, u, and y.
Apart from them, all other letters in the English alphabet are known as consonants. While there are only a few of them in English, vowels are important in spelling, pronunciation, and grammar. Vowels play a crucial role in the formation of words in general and commercial names in particular. In branding, the frequency of vowels in words helps make pronunciation easier, representing clues about certain characteristics of the products the brand is naming.

2.2 The entrepreneurial ecosystem

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[4] André MARTINET .1961. Eléments de Linguistique générale. Paris : Armand Colin.

Across African countries and more concretely in Côte d'Ivoire, Entrepreneurship provides solutions to issues linked to economic growth and stability. It is also used as a benchmark that measures well-being of a country from the economic development viewpoint. To define entrepreneurial ecosystem, we have to consider the notions of entrepreneurship and ecosystem.

In a first time, the adjective entrepreneurial stems from entrepreneurship. The word refers to an individual or a small group of partners who strike out on an original path to create a new business. The business can be in food and restaurant operations, in cosmetics or technology. It can also be in the manufacturing of toys, or any other domain in relation with human's life and meant to fulfill a particular need observed on the market.

Then an ecosystem is an environment that is suitable for life. Put another way, an ecosystem is an environment where entrepreneurship can be promoted, undertaken and flourish with benefits for the owner and the users of the services. (Mason and Brown, 2014)[5] confirms that the entrepreneurial ecosystem is a set of different individuals who can be potential or existing entrepreneurs, organizations that support entrepreneurship that can be businesses, venture capitalist, business angels. The purpose of an entrepreneurial ecosystem is to promote the creation of new businesses but also allow them to grow. After the definition of the notion of entrepreneurial ecosystem, we need to make a crucial criterion in related to it.

Uniqueness is the criterion that defines the development of entrepreneurship and it ecosystem. Uniqueness is characterized by countries cultural differences, governmental policies and private institutions. In fact, as the lifeblood of any society, culture is an umbrella term encompassing the social behavior and norms in human societies and the knowledge, beliefs, arts, laws, customs, capabilities, and habits of the individuals in these groups[6]. As a case example, in the year the 1970s, the entrepreneurial ecosystem of Israel developed without any natural resources, military essentials, and far from the relevant market of their products.

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[5] Collin Mason and Ross Brown. 2014. *Entrepreneurial Ecosystems and Growth-oriented entrepreneurship. Final report to OECD, Paris.* 30, pp 77-102. http://www.researchgate.net/publication/260870819. Web visited on 25th October, 2025.

[6] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/culture

In Ireland, the ecosystem evolved with free education, global multinationals, and the European market's proximity in the year 1970s. In China, it developed in the context of various policies based on regions and a totalitarian political system[7].

These differences as supported earlier are tailored by cultural habits and political policies to reach economic development. In some other cases, the natural resources are another driving forces of the entrepreneurship in a country.

2.3 Brand Linguistics

2.3.1 The characteristics of good brand name

In linguistics, it is assumed that an arbitrary relationship exists between sounds and meaning (De Saussure, 1986)[8]. The prime role of the study of Linguistics is to understand the nature of language in general by investigating features, communication systems, and behaviors in society. Brand linguistics studies how language is used to create e brand identity and influence consumer perception and behavior. It is an interdisciplinary field that encompasses Linguistics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics to understand how language in branding affects consumers' feelings, attitudes, and purchase decisions. Somme key aspects include analyzing brand names to make out the naming strategies.

Sound symbolism is the principles that defines the use of sound in brand naming. It is worth mentioning that creating audibly pleasant names with meaningful messages is extremely challenging as the names somehow decide on the fate of the product. It is known as the first connection between companies and customers. Keller et al (1998)[9] corroborate that brand names are the centerpiece in the introduction of brand campaigns. Therefore, marketers should create names by combining imagination, inspiration, genius, and with some sense of melody.

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[7] Emma N'Guessan. *English brand names: an analysis of argumentation theory between Ivorian and multinational brand names.* "Unpublished manuscript".

[8] Ferdinand De SAUSSURE. 1986. *Course of general linguistics (3rd edition).* Chicago: Open Court.

[9] Kevin Keller, Susan Heckler, Michael Houston. 1998. The Effects of Brand Name Suggestiveness on Advertising Recall. *The Journal of Marketing*, volume 61, pp 48-57. http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/1251802. Web visited on 10th June, 2025.

No matter the length, the sound, or the vowels and consonant intervening, brand names are meant to convey relevant information about a product's features and benefits. As such, some semantic characteristics are associated with good brand names, including meaning and distinctiveness. First, the brand name should convey meaning about the product's attributes (Klink, 2001)[10]. Immediately identifying product's intended features are crucial to trigger customers' interest and create brand memory.

In addition to being meaningful, a brand name should be distinctive (Klink, 2000)[11]. Then comes distinctiveness in brand names. It is achieved by forming words or parts of words that are novel or unique (Lowrey et al., 2003)[12]. Similarly, (Higgins, 1996)[13] mentions that distinctiveness refers to the extent to which the attributes of a construct are unique or stand out compared to other similar ones. Apart from the linguistic inputs that compose the name, distinctiveness in branding is measured concerning the brand strategy. Brand strategy encompasses the values of the brand, the mission, the vision and the purpose. Put another way, brand value are about what guides the behavior and activities. The vision is what the brand is meant to accomplish, and the mission what it intends to create in the market. The purpose is the prime reasons why the brand exists in the market. All these components of the brand strategy plays a huge role in creating and reinforcing brand distinctiveness in the minds of the public.

Another point worth considering is (Kotler and Armstrong, 2008)[14] opinion about product benefits and qualities. For them, a sound brand name should directly imply the benefits and the qualities to the public. Furthermore, it should be easy to pronounce,

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[10] Richard Klink, R. 2001. Creating meaningful new brand names: A study of semantics and sound symbolism. *Journal of Marketing: Theory and Practice*, volume 9, pp 27-34. https://www.jstor.org/stable/40470030.

[11] Klink, R. 2000. Creating Brand Names with Meaning: The Use of Sound Symbolism. *Marketing* Letters volume 11(1), pp 5-20. http://dx.doi.org/10.1023/A:1008184423824.

[12] Tina LOWREY, Tony DUBISKY. J. SRUM. 2003. The relation between brand name Linguistic characteristics and brand name memory. *Journal of Advertising,* Volume 32(3), pp 7-77.

[13] Tory HIGGINS. 1996. *Knowledge Activation: Accessibility, Applicability, and Salience. Social Psychology: Handbook of basic principles*. New York: Guilford Press.

[14] Philip KOTLER, and Gary ARMSTRONG. 2008. *Marketing: An Introduction*. New York: Prentice-Hall.

recognizable, and memorable. It should also be distinctive, legally protectable, extendable, and not have any negative meanings. Similar criteria were mentioned in studies conducted by Charmasson (1988)[15] as well as McCarthy and Perreault (1987)[16].

To finish, Chan and Huang (1997)[17], presents some core criteria brands should display from the marketing, legal and linguistics view point. In sum, the brand should be suggestive of product benefits (marketing consideration), legally available (legal aspect), and easy to pronounce (linguistic aspect).

2.4.1 Klink concept on /i/ sound

The notions of meaningfulness, distinctiveness, legally protectable and easy to pronounce explained earlier are the external features of brand names. The most crucial aspect lies in how impact on customers' psychology. Klink's concept explains how high front vowel sounds, particularly the vowel sound /i/ can influence the perception and the memorability of customers. In fact, the theory provides clues about how brands are perceived even before audience interact with them, what known as sound symbolism. The "i" vowel is described as bright, sharp and high-pitched and is assimilated to cheerful, friendly, and energetic brands. It is the case of brands like Nike, Skype, or Kiki.

Another aspect worth mentioning is the psychological impact. Researchers suggested that customers associate certain sounds with specific meanings or emotions. Put another way, Klink established that high front vowel /i/ as in ("beat" or "bit") is consistently associated with 3 specific attributes namely the physical properties like smallness, thinness, and sharpness;

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[15] Henri CHARMASSON. (1988). *The Name is the Game – How to Name a Company or Product.* Dow Jones-Canada: Homewood.

[16] Jerome MCCARTHY and William PERREAULT. 1987. *Basic Marketing: A Managerial Approach (9th ed.).* Canada: Homewood.

[17] Allan CHAN and Yuan HUANG. (1997). *Brand naming in China: A linguistic approach. Marketing Intelligence & Planning* volume 15(5), pp 227-234. http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/02634509710177297. Web visited on 25th August, 2025.

the sensory traits such as brightness, coldness, bitterness; and to finish abstract qualities namely softness and femininity[18].

Finally, his notion sheds light on the feelings such as happiness, satisfaction, joy, smallness, sharpness, and is the most favorable choice for brands seeking to communicate these qualities to their customers.

In sum, Klink theory highlights how marketers and brand strategists can exploit the /i/ sound for distinctive, appealing, emotional names that resonate with their target audience and become competitive.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 The selection of data

As a recall, this article investigates the validity of Klink theory on /i/ sound in the Ivorian food and cosmetic industries. We randomly selected 16 Ivorian brand names, pertaining to the perfume industry that dominated the local market during the last decades. By the term dominated, we refer to the ones with high distribution on both traditional and modern markets and with good position in customers' daily use. The selection has been led on social media like Facebook by observing the most popular products with high engagement and interest from the customers. Also, we supported our selection with most popular TV advertisements during the last years. It is worth mentioning that the products are composed of local names that is to say brands owned and manufactured by Ivorian companies and also some few foreign brands manufactured in our country under license.

Our data are presented in a chart with the following details: the brand name, then the phonological transcription, and the target customers. Finally comes profound analysis of each piece of data for readers to have a deeper insight into before giving a brief conclusion.

3.2 The presentation and analysis of data

3.2.1 The /i/ sound in Ivorian perfume brands for men

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[18] https://share.google/aimode/kyrYLCJBZmt7bXYRCI. Web visited on 3rd January, 2026.

Brand name	Phonetic transcription	Age range
Victory	/vɪktər/	Teenagers
Diplomatic	/dɪplə'mætɪk/	Young adults
Signature	/sɪgnətʃər/	Young adults
Ambition	/æm'biʃən/	Young adults
Aqua Magic	/kərəʊ waɪ t/	Young adults
Confidence	/kɒnfɪdəns/	Young adults
Free Spirit	/frɪ : spɪrɪt/	Young adults and teenagers
Gravity	/ grævɪtɪ /	Young adults
Mystic Blue	/msɪtɪk blu :/	Young adults
Aqua Marine	/ækwə mərɪ :n/	Young adults and teenagers
Incidence	/ɪnsɪdəns/	Young adults and adults
Chic	/ʃ ɪ :k/	Young adults and teenagers
Nimitz	/ nɪmɪts/	Teenagers
VIP Black	/vɪ: ai' p ɪ blæk/	Teenagers
My Dream	/ma ɪ dr ɪ :m/	Young adults
Day by Day Men	/d e ɪ ba ɪ 'de ɪ m e n/	Young adults and teenagers

Table 1

Source: Personal construction

The cosmetic industry presents 16 brands for men's perfumes. There are as follows: *"Victory", "Diplomatic", "Signature", "Ambition", "Aqua Magic", "Confidence", "Free spirit", "Gravity", "Mystic Blue", "Aqua Marine", "Incidence", "Chic", "Nimitz", "VIP Black", "My Dream", "Day by Day".* Among them, we have 3 brands conceived for

teenagers. They are: *"Victory", "Nimitz",* and *"VIP Black".* Then, 8 names namely: *"Diplomatic", "Signature", "Ambition", "Aqua Magic", "Confidence", "Gravity", "Mystic Blue", "My Dream"* target young adults. In a final place, come 5 brands made for both young adults and teenagers. They are: *"Free spirit", "Aqua Marine",* "*Incidence", "Chic",* and *"Day by Day".*

3.2.2   The findings

We report the findings of the /i/ sound in the following lines.

First of all, we observe that the sound /i/ appears the most in young adults' perfumes. As a recall, 8 names out of 16 are young adults' products. Around the world and in most culture, young adults is an age assimilated to self-expression, conscious consumption, individuality, freshness, and more cautiousness about their choices. At this age, they are driven by a strong personal identity that values comfort, quality. In fact, perfumes influence the mood and behavior of individuals (Borgave and Chaudhari, 2010)[19]. As such, choosing a fragrance involves more than just picking a product that with a good smell. It's about matching the scent to the wearer's personality, maturity and lifestyle. And companies' roles are to propose offerings are meant to fulfill these needs well.

The intervention of the /i/ sound in these names cope with these functions well. *"Confidence", "Signature"* and *"Diplomatic"* convey ideas of power, confidence, success, triumph, and authority. These brand names make the wearer feel like a winner, elegant and successful.

Then the *"Ambition", "My Dream*" and *"Gravity"* recall the ideas of attraction, confidence, and deep connection with oneself, aspiration and sophisticated experience.

To finish, sound symbolism in *"Mystic Blue", "Aqua Magic"* unveil the mystery, deep emotion, enchantment and magic and unforgettable aura.

To close this first section about these brands for young adults, one can put this conclusion forward. Names are not given randomly but with the real intention to reveal and almost stress

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[19] Sachin Borgave and J.S. Chaudhari. 2010. Adolescents' preferences and attitudes towards perfumes in India. *Journal of Policy and Organization Management*, Volume 1 (2), pp 01-08.

on young adults' masculinity, ambition, and authority. In total, the sound symbolism is a sign of conformity and validity between the sound effect and the brand's functions.

Then we continue with the sound in female and teenagers' brands "*Victory", "Nimitz", "VIP Black".* They communicate on masculine strength and masculine sophistication.

Finally come the brands for both teenagers and young adults. As a recall, we have: *"Free spirit", "Aqua Marine",* "*Incidence", "Chic", and "Day by Day".* In spite of their age difference, teenagers and young adults share some similarities when it comes to self-identity and good smell. Relying on the findings made out following the analysis of the perfumes brands of each category, one can say that *"Free spirit", "Aqua Marine",* "*Incidence", "Chic",* and *"Day by Day"* are good names to put forward self-esteem, self-care and masculine beauty no matter the age.

It is worth recalling that according to (Klink, 2000)[20] the /i/ sound used in brands convey specific meanings or prime particular product attributes namely smallness and sweetness. By selecting names with /i/ sound, the Ivorian marketers go beyond (Klink, 2000) theory. In other words, smallness and sweetness are not the unique values behind the front vowel /i/. When addressing masculine audience, namely teenagers and young adults, the /i/ sound symbolizes the attributes of masculinity, self-esteem, fresh attitude, authority and positive vibration.

4. Discussion

This paper provides a deeper analysis of (Klink, 2000)'s theory on sound symbolism. The linguist assimilated the /i/ sound to sweetness and smallness. In our thesis on argumentation theory in English brand names we made out additional values that communicate the /i/ sound depending on the industry and the target audience. We concluded that values of femininity, gentleness when addressing a female audience, spicy and crispy foods when used to name food brands.

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[20] Richard, KLINK .2000. Creating brand names with meaning: The use of sound symbolism. *Marketing letters,* Volume 11, p 5-20.

In this article, we study male perfumes for teenagers and young adults to make out the hidden values apart from the ones made out by previous works. Two main results can be made out.

First on the target audience, namely the young age and young adults. These ages are crucial in men's life as it is a turning point for them to develop their tastes, consolidate their lifestyle, and build their identity. Male customers in the perfume industry are in constant seek of safety, wellness, and comfort. Perfumes and senses are among the main canal they express themselves. As such, selecting a male audience to analyze the sound symbolism theory in an African country is a valuable contribution.

Then, our methodological procedures used in this article revealed that the /i/ sound exhibits different ideas depending on both the target audience and the offerings. /i/ is one of the most polyvalent sound to consider when selecting or concocting brand names to communicate various products attributes no matter the audience and the industry.

5. Conclusion

This work sheds light on the tight relation between the sound and it impact on customers' psychology. It investigates the place of /i/ in Ivorian perfumes name for men and to make out the values hidden. We selected 16 Ivorian brand names locally manufactured and owned by Ivorian companies or produced under license. We submitted our data to a profound analysis and made out the following conclusion.

The sound symbolism theory offers a solid insights about the selection of speech sounds that is to say phonemes to subconsciously link to products attributes. In our case, /i/ is attributed to masculinity, power, self-esteem and authority when used to name men's brands for perfume products.

For other researches, we suggest an investigation on Ivorian male customers' motivation when selecting a perfume brand with the /i/ sound.

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