

Age of acquisition and the recognition of brand names: On the importance of being early

Andrew W. Ellis, Selina J. Holmes, Richard L. Wright,

Media Abstract

We start to become familiar with brand names at an early age. Our 'vocabulary' of brand names then continues through later childhood and adulthood. Two experiments conducted by researchers at the University of York and Unilever R&D, UK, showed that young adults recognize early acquired brand names more easily than later acquired brands, and find it easier to associate the early brands more rapidly with the type of product they represent. In a third experiment, a group of older adults aged 50 to 83 years recognized the names of brands that were active when they were young, but which are no longer in circulation, than equally familiar brands introduced more recently. The older participants were quickest to recognize brands which they had known all their lives, and which remain in circulation, demonstrating the additional importance of current exposure. The results mirror the known effects of 'age of acquisition' on the recognition of everyday objects and words. They imply that early learned brand names will retain a potency throughout adult life that later acquired brands will struggle to match. They also imply that new brand names could take a generation to achieve the same fluency and familiarity as established brands.

Journal Abstract

Research in cognitive psychology has shown that words, objects and faces learned early in life are recognized more fluently than similar items learned later. Experiment 1 shows that early acquired brand names are recognized more quickly than later acquired brands. Experiment 2 shows that the age of acquisition effect extends to accessing semantic knowledge about brands. In Experiment 3, older participants

were faster at recognizing early learned brands that are now extinct than more recent, active brand names. Early surviving brands were recognized quickest of all. The significance of these effects for manufacturers and marketing are discussed.