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ORIGINAL EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

Possessive brand names in brand preferences and choice: the role of inferred control

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Abstract
Marketers frequently use individual names as part of their brand-naming strategy. This research investigates how the use of a possessive (indicated by an apostrophe s) versus non-possessive form in a brand name (Mrs. Smith's vs. Mrs. Smith) affects consumer brand preferences and choice for less familiar brands. Building on the theory of possessions, this work demonstrates that consumers infer a brand as being under control of an owner implied in a possessive brand name. Eight studies using real-world data and field and lab experiments show that this inference results in enhanced brand purchase intentions and money spent on a brand's product. This research also establishes that the focal effect occurs for consumers less familiar with the brand and for those with high desire to relinquish control. The core effect reverses in co-creation contexts because this process enhances consumers' own desire for control and thus conflicts with the inferred sense of an owner's control over the brand. Additionally, the current work shows that the positive effect of brand-name possessiveness applies only when no brand longevity information is mentioned; the effect is attenuated when brand longevity is communicated, because older brands are generally seen as largely in control of their performance. Beyond informing theory on the effects of a possessive form in brand names, the findings aid marketers in identifying specific marketplace outcomes for possessive-form brand-naming strategies.

Keywords Possessive brand name · Control inferences · Branding · Ownership · Possessive form · Brand control · Naming · Brand preferences

> *"When it comes to apostrophes, it seems as though anything goes. When in doubt, just throw one in randomly and don't give it a second thought! Because a tiny little punctuation mark couldn't possibly affect your business. Or could it? If there's one thing most business owners can agree on, it's that details matter."*
> (Q4intelligence, 2017)

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Marketing managers frequently endow a brand with an individual human name to resonate with their customers and make a company appear more personable, trustworthy, and approachable (Hancock, 2017). For example, Lily camera drone takes photos of consumers' adventures, Dave banking app assists customers with banking fees, and a cup of fresh coffee is served at Gloria Jean's. Interestingly, a more nuanced analysis of these brand names points to a subtle semantic variation in the way they are formed. Specifically, marketers use a possessive form entailing an apostrophe in Trader Joe's, Ruth's Chris Steak House, and Mrs. Paul's brand names, whereas a non-possessive form is used in the Warby Parker, Charming Charlie, and Lucky George brand names, for example.

The phenomenon of using possessive (vs. non-possessive) individual names is prevalent and significant in the marketplace. Our analysis of 1657 brand names from the comprehensive YouGov BrandIndex data set (YouGov, 2019; also used in Luo et al., 2013) shows that 22% of all brand names across 21 product and service categories use an individual's

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name, with 8% of brand names using a possessive form and 14% using a non-possessive form.[1] Our further analysis of Amazon's best sellers in ten diverse food and non-food product categories (Amazon Best Sellers, 2021) revealed that between 20% and 38% of all best-selling brands in these categories use individual names, with the use of a possessive form reaching 22% in some categories (Web Appendix B). Given the prevalence and visibility of the phenomenon, with this research we answer the following questions: does this subtle linguistic variation in brand names matter for brand preference and choice, and if so, in what way and why?

As this article's opening quote indicates, branding experts consider the use of an apostrophe (an indication of a possessive form) to impact customers' trust and satisfaction (Q4intelligence, 2017). At the same time, industry practice indicates that consultants, naming agencies, and brand managers frequently rely on heuristics in their decisions to use a possessive form in a brand name and cite this decision as one of the most frequently encountered brand-name challenges (DePuy, 2013; Whitman, 2014). One entrepreneur went as far as stating that the use of a personal name as a brand name is one of the critical questions faced by the founders of new businesses (Meyerson, 2021). Chris Gorges, Founder and CEO of Thompson & Prince brand strategy and design agency, shares: "Sometimes a naming process is simply exploratory and a matter of stress-testing. I do have clients who have paid me to go through the naming process only to then go back and say: 'I am just going to use my name.'" Another expert points out that it might be convenient for some brand names to default to individual names of their founders, while some brands desire to preserve their heritage. This evidence stems from a series of in-depth interviews we conducted with 10 top managers and creatives (C-suite level) of naming agencies to gather insights about the practical marketing relevance of our research (Web Appendix A).

From a theoretical standpoint, extant research highlights that possessive forms have crucial affective consequences for an individual (Shi et al., 2011; Zhou et al., 2013). Despite the widespread use of both types of brand names across a broad range of product categories (Web Appendix B), the lack of managerial guidelines regarding the use of a possessive form in a brand name, and the theoretically relevant consequences of possessive semantic units, no prior studies have examined the effectiveness of using a possessive form as a linguistic cue in a brand name. We attempt to fill this gap.

Overall, we make several key contributions. The first lies in demonstrating that a possessive (vs. non-possessive) brand name leads to greater brand preferences for less familiar brands. In doing so, we extend prior work that shows the impact of linguistic cues in brand names (e.g., phonetic symbolism [Yorkston & Menon, 2004]; semantic appositeness [Lowrey et al., 2003]; personal pronouns [Kachersky & Palermo, 2013]) on preferences for less familiar brands, where consumers have not yet formed attitudes toward the brand.

Our second contribution lies in identifying a novel process underlying the effect of brand-name possessiveness for less familiar brands. We postulate that individuals are likely to view an allegedly owned entity as being under a high level of control by an owner implied in the brand name, because a crucial motivation for ownership is an individual's ability to influence, manage, and control the entity (Dittmar, 1992; Furby, 1978). We further argue that this sense of owner's control enhances consumers' inferences of brand quality and, thus, brand preferences. These lines of theorizing add an interesting nuance to the research on psychology of possessions (Furby, 1991; Pierce et al., 1991), beyond the previously reported observation that psychological ownership has a significant impact on an individual's actual ownership of an item. The current work shows that inferences of another person's ownership are likely to influence observers' evaluations of the target of ownership.

Our third contribution is to identify several theoretically and managerially relevant moderators: consumers' familiarity with a brand, consumers' desire to relinquish control, co-creation context, and brand longevity. First, we demonstrate that the effect occurs for consumers less familiar with a brand because these consumers are more likely to rely on heuristics in forming their brand impressions (Lowrey et al., 2003). Second, our core effect applies only for consumers high in desire to relinquish control due to their preference to give control over their life situations to others (Gebhardt & Brosschot, 2002). Third, we theorize that in a co-creation context, inferences of a greater sense of owner control over a brand with a possessive (vs. non-possessive) name are likely to conflict with consumers' own desire for control (Franke et al., 2009) and hence be aversive, thus reversing the positive effect of brand-name possessiveness. Finally, we demonstrate that when firms highlight a brand's age (e.g., "established in 1878"), consumers will use this information to infer that the firm (with all its experience) is largely in control over final brand quality (Desai et al., 2008), thus attenuating the impact of brand-name possessiveness on brand preferences. Overall, through eight field and experimental studies, we provide converging evidence to support our theory, and we delineate significant implications of our findings for managerial practice.

[1] Out of 21 total product and service categories, possessive brand names were present in 18 categories (mean = 7 per category), while non-possessive brand names were present in 20 categories (mean = 11 per category). Overall, both possessive and non-possessive brand names are relatively equally present and distributed across various product categories. The statistical difference between 8% and 14% is nonsignificant.

Brand-name possessiveness and inferred brand ownership

Marketers frequently use human names as part of their branding strategy. For example, Goldman Sachs introduced Marcus, an online bank offering competitive rates on savings accounts, as their foray into personal lending (Hancock, 2017). The first Trader Joe's grocery store that was opened in 1958 in the greater Los Angeles area was named after the founder, Joe Coulombe. A closer inspection of these tactics shows that these brand names differ in terms of using a possessive or a non-possessive form (Web Appendix B).

Given how subtle the difference between possessive and non-possessive brand names is, a naïve perspective might suggest that these linguistic variations are unlikely to tangibly impact consumer preferences. However, we argue that these two types of brand-name strategies are likely to signal different things to consumers. That is, we postulate that the use of a possessive form in new brand names can lead to consumer inferences that a brand is currently owned and/or operated by a specific external entity (implied in the brand name). In support of this, research shows that perceptions of ownership are easily formed by presenting people with possessive pronouns or an apostrophe (Bryant et al., 1997; Shi et al., 2011). In turn, a non-possessive, less familiar brand name is likely to signal to consumers that a brand is named after a specific person who may not be the current owner of the brand. Our pilot study confirms these expectations (Web Appendix C).

An important question then arises: What marketplace consequences can be generated by such inferences about a brand's ownership based on a possessive form? We address this question next.

Linking inferred brand ownership to control over the brand

Our main prediction here is that people can infer that another individual who appears to own an entity is likely to be in control of this entity (i.e., exert a degree of influence over intended brand outcomes; Burger, 1992). This proposition accords with past research showing that people associate ownership with control (Pierce et al., 2003).

To that end, prior research indicates that other individuals' control over an object is frequently the very salient evidence of possession (Furby, 1978; Kirk et al., 2018). For instance, previous work shows that individuals infer that a person creating an object comes to be in control of it (Levene et al., 2015). Even young children starting from about age four judge that an object belongs to the individual "controlling permission" and making a decision as to whether others may or may not use it (Friedman et al., 2018). Relying on this evidence, we postulate that consumers would also infer a strong sense of owner's control over the brand when a brand name is in a possessive (vs. non-possessive) form.

How would such an inference influence brand preferences? Most direct evidence indicates that when a product or service is under full or near-complete control of the producer, consumers infer better product or service quality (van Osselaer et al., 2020). For example, consumer perception of a firm's control over its offering (e.g., a hotel's tour) leads to greater inferences of the quality of the offering (e.g., tour quality) among its customers (Reimer & Folkes, 2009). Such a relationship between control and quality is also in accord with past research on the theory of marketing control (Jaworski et al., 1993), which holds that marketing control (i.e., a firm's influence on behavior of employees) results in greater consumer perception of service quality, largely defined by the moment of a consumer's interaction with the firm (Iacobucci et al., 1995). There is also indirect evidence delineating a significant relationship between control over an entity and quality (Bubshait, 1994; Spector, 1986). For example, an owner's greater control over implementation methods leads to greater involvement in a project, which in turn enhances the outcome quality (Bubshait, 1994).

Overall, the above lines of evidence lead to our theorizing that a brand's use of a possessive name will increase consumers' sense of owner control over a brand and, subsequently, perceptions of brand quality. Greater quality inferences enhance purchase intentions because consumers naturally strive to obtain the best-performing product and place high value on product quality (Chang & Wildt, 1994; Grewal et al., 1998). Given consumer propensity to rely on quality when making purchase decisions across a broad range of services and products, any resulting inferences of brand quality should subsequently drive downstream purchase intentions.

H1 A possessive (vs. non-possessive) brand name will lead to greater purchase intentions and money spent on a brand's product.

H2 The effect of brand-name possessiveness on purchase intentions is sequentially mediated by greater consumer inference of owner control over the brand and brand quality.

The qualifying conditions

Consumers' brand familiarity

We further propose that H1 is qualified by consumers' brand familiarity, defined as a consumer's level of direct and indirect experiences with a brand (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987; Kent & Allen, 1994). Consumers who are highly familiar with a brand are primarily driven by their diagnostic prior brand knowledge, experience, interactions, and the strength of the preexisting relationship they have with a brand (Connors et al., 2021; Khamitov et al., 2019). Indeed, consumer information processing for familiar brands may not operate in the same way as information processing for unfamiliar brands (Machleit et al., 1993); and consumers respond very differently to brands for which they have strong awareness and built-in associations than to less familiar brands (Biswas, 1992; Kent & Allen, 1994). Applied to our context, brand-name possessiveness may not be effective in influencing consumers highly familiar with the brand who had a chance to form strong and well-defined brand perceptions through prior customer–brand interactions (e.g., long-standing patrons of brands like Starbucks and Dick's Sporting Goods or existing members of the Harley-Davidson brand community).

In contrast, the positive effect of brand-name possessiveness should manifest among consumers who are less familiar with the brand because such consumers have not yet developed well-established brand associations (e.g., toward such brands as Jon Robert's Salon, Emily's Place Coffee Shoppe, Lidia's Marinara). This is because consumers with low prior brand familiarity tend to rely on heuristics and are influenced by subtle cues, including linguistic structures (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987; Lowrey et al., 2003). Indeed, linguistic variations in brand names (such as phonetic symbolism [Yorkston & Menon, 2004]; semantic appositeness [Lowrey et al., 2003]) play the most prominent role in impacting preferences of consumers less familiar with the brand. Thus, we propose that brand-name possessiveness enhances brand preferences when consumers are less familiar with the brand, whereas the effect is mitigated for consumers who are highly familiar with the brand.

H3 A possessive (vs. non-possessive) brand name will lead to greater purchase intentions among consumers less familiar with the brand, whereas the positive effect of brand-name possessiveness will be attenuated among consumers who are highly familiar with the brand.

Consumers' desire to relinquish control

Our focal process points to a qualifying effect of consumers' individual differences in desire to relinquish control. This variable is construed as an individual difference that captures both the general level of motivation to not have to make decisions over things that happen in one's life and the overall preference to turn over control to others (Gebhardt & Brosschot, 2002). People with a high desire to relinquish control tend to be comfortable with others being in charge of their decision-making processes (Burger, 1992), feel it is appropriate to let someone else control certain elements of their daily outcomes, and even prefer to leave control to others (Gebhardt & Brosschot, 2002). Hence, encountering a brand that uses a possessive (vs. non-possessive) name and making an inference of an external entity's strong control over the brand should make consumers who are high on desire to relinquish control evaluate the brand more favorably. In contrast, consumers who are low on desire to relinquish control—and thus, have lower preference for others to control every aspect of their interactions (Burger, 1992)—should not put a premium on a brand with a possessive (vs. non-possessive) name. Thus, we predict that a possessive brand name will not lead to greater brand preferences for consumers who do not exhibit great desire to hand over control to others.

H4 A possessive (vs. non-possessive) brand name will lead to greater purchase intentions among consumers who desire to relinquish control, whereas the positive effect of brand-name possessiveness will be attenuated when consumers are low in desire to relinquish control.

Co-creation context

Prior work indicates that consumers develop less favorable brand evaluations if a brand reduces consumers' own experience of control (Bhattacharjee et al., 2014). Researchers show that if consumers feel a brand diminishes their agency in identity-expression, they like the brand less (Bhattacharjee et al., 2014). Brand attitudes are also decreased when a brand limits consumers' control in expressing distinctiveness (Puzakova & Aggarwal, 2018).

In the context of co-creation (for example consumers of LEGO or Threadless contributing to the design and development of new products), consumers' personal control over the co-creation process is a critical factor influencing favorability of their co-creation experience; in other words, consumers expect to be actively involved in and "in charge" of co-created outcomes (Franke et al., 2009; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). If such expectations are met, co-creation processes result in better product evaluations, higher purchase intentions, and higher willingness to pay (Dong, 2015; Franke et al., 2009). Thus, it appears plausible that consumers will develop less favorable evaluations of an entity perceived to be highly in control by an alleged owner. Because a possessive (vs. non-possessive) brand name results in a greater sense of an external entity's control over the brand, we anticipate that consumers engaged in a co-creation process may feel that the brand inadvertently reduces their own ability to be in control; and this perception leads to lower purchase intentions. While the co-creation literature shows that a co-creation process generally enhances purchase intentions (Franke et al., 2009), a possessive (vs. non-possessive) brand name is likely to clash with consumers' own desire for control during a co-creation process, thereby resulting in lower purchase intentions.

H5 A possessive (vs. non-possessive) brand name will lead to lower purchase intentions in a co-creation context, whereas the positive effect of brand-name possessiveness will persist in a non-co-creation context.

Brand longevity

Another important moderator of our core effect is a brand's longevity, defined as the number of years a brand has been in business (Desai et al., 2008). We propose that the positive impact of brand-name possessiveness on brand preferences will dissipate when brand longevity information is communicated to consumers. This is because consumers are likely to view older brands' performance as being overall more controlled and structured. In support of this proposition, prior work shows that older firms have a strong operational infrastructure and reduced operating costs due to a longer learning curve, and they are thus more likely to have greater control over the services they provide (Berry & Parasuraman, 1991; Zeithaml et al., 1990). To that end, Berry and Parasuraman (1991) argue that older firms generally have ample opportunities to retest, improve their offerings, and hence exercise greater control over all service and product elements, which also diminishes product-quality variance.

Furthermore, Desai et al. (2008) note that because older firms are likely to have well-established processes and controls for selecting and training employees, their employees are more likely to deliver consistent and controlled product outcomes. These lines of prior work suggest that consumers rely on this knowledge of older firms' greater control over various elements of product output in forming their brand evaluations. Thus, for older firms, where consumers infer greater control over all business operations, the impact of brand-name possessiveness will be attenuated.

H6 A possessive (vs. non-possessive) brand name will lead to greater purchase intentions among consumers when no brand longevity information is mentioned, whereas the positive effect of brand-name possessiveness will be attenuated when brand longevity is communicated.

Eight studies were conducted to investigate our hypotheses. Our Pilot Study with actual consumption behaviors shows that brand-name possessiveness (vs. non-possessiveness) enhances consumers' actual amount of money spent on a brand's product. In Study 1, we demonstrate that possessive (vs. non-possessive) brand names correlate with higher Yelp brand ratings. Study 2 extends the findings to a consumer packaged-goods context. It also includes a control condition, thereby showing that the core effect is driven by consumers' more favorable evaluation of a possessive brand name, compared to less favorable evaluation of a non-possessive brand name. Study 3 establishes that greater owner control over the brand enhances consumers' brand-quality perceptions and, consequently, purchase intentions (H2). Study 3 begins to rule out several plausible alternative explanations, including (1) perceived name atypicality, (2) inferred owner's competence, (3) brand attachment, (4) the extent to which a brand is seen as more personal and, thus, potentially inducing greater norms of reciprocity, and (5) processing fluency. Next, Study 4 highlights a qualifying role of consumers' familiarity with a brand (H3). Study 5 demonstrates the role of consumers' desire to relinquish control (H4). Study 6 identifies a unique context (i.e., product co-creation) in which the positive effect of brand-name possessiveness reverses, supporting hypothesis 5. Finally, consistent with hypothesis 6, Study 7 establishes that greater brand longevity eliminates the positive effect of brand-name possessiveness on purchase intentions, while also ruling out several alternative mechanisms (i.e., inferences of brand authenticity, accountability, and attribution of identity-relevant features).

Pilot study: Consumers' actual behaviors

The Pilot Study examines whether brand-name possessiveness influences actual consumer spending on a brand's product in a realistic setting (i.e., a market product test). Our Pilot Study recruited a broad set of participants fluent in English (i.e., 70 university staff and community volunteers; 41% females, M_{age} = 28) at a large public Southeast Asian university where English is the predominant language. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (brand-name possessiveness: possessive vs. non-possessive) and received $5 compensation. We set up a branded booth on the premises of the university in one of the high-traffic areas (Web Appendix C). The data collection lasted over several days and occurred at different times of day in order to minimize the impact of potential confounding variables (e.g., amount of traffic, hunger, energy levels). Upon expressing their agreement and signing a consent form, respondents were asked to answer several filler and demographic questions. Next, they were invited to participate in a market test of a new product (our cover story) in which we asked them to examine the new product introduced by the brand (an individually packaged handmade miniature glass bottle with a delicate snowflake charm; Web Appendix C) and indicate how much they would be willing to pay for this brand's product out of the five-dollar payment they received for their participation in the earlier study (any amount between $0 and $5). Importantly, all willingness-to-pay decisions were binding/consequential and resulted in the product always being provided in exchange for the indicated amount. Upon completing the study, participants were debriefed and thanked. Depending on the assigned condition, the brand name was manipulated to be either Charming

Valeria's Crafts or Charming Valeria Crafts.[2] The study procedure was kept identical between conditions.

On average, the brand name in the possessive form yielded 154.3 cents ($SD_{possessive}$ = 1.00), whereas the non-possessive brand name yielded 74.9 cents ($SD_{non\text{-}possessive}$ = .57). This difference represents an increase of about 106% in the amount of money spent on the product. The findings are robust and hold when we control for time of day. Thus, a brand name in a possessive form yielded 155.9 cents ($SD_{possessive}$ = 1.01), whereas a non-possessive brand name yielded 74.9 cents ($SD_{non\text{-}possessive}$ = .57), ($F(1,66) = 19.379$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .227$). Importantly, the effect of time of day as a covariate was not statistically significant ($p = .119$). Since the normality test showed that the amount of money spent was not normally distributed (Shapiro-Wilk [70] = .861, $p < .001$), we used the square-root transformation of skewed data to conform approximately to normality. A further one-way (brand-name possessiveness: possessive vs. non-possessive) ANOVA with the square-root transformation of the spending amount as our dependent variable revealed a main effect of brand-name possessiveness ($F(1,68) = 15.090$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .182$). The brand name that used the possessive form elicited a greater amount of money spent ($M_{possessive}$ = 115.9 cents) than its non-possessive counterpart ($M_{non\text{-}possessive}$ = 73.0 cents). These findings provide support for H1 with a general population.

Study 1: Effect of brand-name possessiveness in the field

In Study 1, we assess the hypothesized effect of brand-name possessiveness on actual brand-related customer reactions in the field by scraping data from Yelp.com. With over 224 million reviews and counting (Statista, 2021), the site is a prevalent priority resource among consumers and brand marketers alike. We utilized the Yelp rating system as a proxy for consumers' brand preferences, in line with other branding scholars who have relied on Yelp data in their past research (Paharia et al., 2014; Yang & Aggarwal, 2019). In line with our theorizing, we expected that, on average, Yelp ratings of brands using possessive names would outperform the respective ratings of brands using non-possessive names.

Design and procedure

Sample, independent, and dependent variable Given the typical scope of the data collection associated with Yelp reviews, we opted to focus on the restaurant category for two key reasons. First, restaurants are the major form of entertainment and pastime in the United States, representing an estimated $899 billion industry (National Restaurant Association, 2020). Second, restaurant reviews on Yelp present a rich and compelling context, as consumers' interest in restaurant ratings and service providers' aversion to poor restaurant ratings are high (Chen & Lurie, 2013; Keller & Fay, 2006).

To examine whether brand-name possessiveness impacts actual consumer responses to brands, we compared the Yelp ratings of restaurants utilizing possessive or non-possessive brand names (both are individual names) in two markets: Cincinnati, Ohio, and St. Louis, Missouri. To identify these two locations, we first randomly drew two states from fifty states of the U.S. and, second, did a random draw of one city within each state, both using a random number generator from RANDOM.ORG. We identified all restaurants within each of the locations that have either possessive (e.g., Shady Jack's Saloon) or non-possessive (e.g., Johnny Chan Restaurant) brand names and coded each restaurant as such.

For each of the included restaurant brands, we started by collecting the Yelp rating dependent measure (proxy for brand preferences) that stands for an aggregated numeric number of star ratings generated by reviewing customers (ranging from one to five, with five stars reflecting a more favorable overall evaluation). To this end, we extracted all Yelp ratings posted over the fifteen-year time window from February 1, 2005 (initial platform establishment in its current version) to June 6, 2020. The data-collection process culminated in 380 restaurants ($n_{possessive}$ = 299, $n_{non\text{-}possessive}$ = 81) collectively rated 46,540 times (for an average of 122 ratings per restaurant) over the fifteen-year period.

Control variables To establish that our core effect was driven by brand-name possessiveness and not other causal factors, we tried to control for a series of alternative explanations. At the level of restaurant brand, we controlled for differences in the type of restaurant by including its price (1–4 $ signs), ownership structure (0 = individual outlet, 1 = chain), cuisine origin (twelve dummies for different countries), city (0 = St. Louis, 1 = Cincinnati), WiFi presence (0 = absent, 1 = present), payment mode (0 = does not accept credit cards; 1 = accepts credit cards), and whether or not the restaurant has been claimed on Yelp by its leadership (0 = not claimed, 1 = claimed). At the Yelp review level, we used the percentage of reviews that left a photo, number of years since first rating[3] (which can be interpreted as a proxy for brand age), and average number of ratings.

[2] The results of a pretest (n = 40) showed that although familiarity with the name was not high (below the mid-point of the scale), it did not differ between conditions; and participants' perceptions that Valeria was a real person behind the brand was above the mid-point of the scale and did not significantly differ between the two conditions (Web Appendix C).

[3] Given that number of years since the first rating (i.e., time being present on Yelp) can potentially be interpreted as a proxy for brand longevity, we explored its possible moderating role. This variable did not moderate the effect of brand-name possessiveness on brand ratings (b = −.01, SE = .02, $t = -.37$, $p = .71$; 95% CI = [−.05, .03]). We believe that this may be because the restaurant's longer time on Yelp does not necessarily imply the restaurant's greater longevity, as the current version of Yelp's ratings only dates back to 2005.

Results and discussion

Brand ratings As preliminary model-free evidence, it is clear from the descriptive statistics that average restaurant brand ratings of those businesses relying on brand-name possessiveness ($M_{possessive}$ = 3.92, SD = .62 for Cincinnati; $M_{possessive}$ = 4.07, SD = .50 for St. Louis) appear different from those that do not ($M_{non\text{-}possessive}$ = 3.44, SD = .86 for Cincinnati; $M_{non\text{-}possessive}$ = 3.65, SD = .62 for St. Louis). The descriptive statistics and correlation matrix are displayed in Table 1.

To formally test our prediction (H1), we ran a linear regression model with the aggregated restaurant brand ratings as the dependent variable, brand-name possessiveness as the independent variable (0 = non-possessive, 1 = possessive), and a series of the aforementioned control variables. The regression model—explaining 31.2% of the variance in the outcome variable (adjusted R^2 = 0.312)—showed that brand-name possessiveness has a positive and significant effect on average ratings (b = .468, $t(357) = 6.44$, $p < .001$). Importantly, of all factors included in the regression model, brand-name possessiveness best predicts restaurant ratings (see Table 1 for standardized regression coefficients). Quantifying the effect of possessive (versus non-possessive) names on brand ratings and controlling for all other variables, we find that brands with possessive names generated more than a 13% premium in terms of ratings as compared to brands with non-possessive names ($M_{possessive}$ = 4.00, SD = .57 vs. $M_{non\text{-}possessive}$ = 3.53, SD = .77; $F(1,357) = 41.501$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .104$). We present further robustness checks in Web Appendix D.

Discussion The findings of Study 1 show that a brand using a possessive name is likely to generate more favorable brand preferences in the actual marketplace than a brand employing a non-possessive brand name (H1). The size of the effect (almost half-a-star difference on the Yelp 5-star scale) provides compelling initial evidence of the meaningfulness of the focal effect. It may be possible that in the Yelp data an owner actually exercises more control over a brand, so in Studies 3 and 7 we explicitly examine inferences of sense of owner's control over the brand as the underlying process.

Study 2: Extending the effect to consumer packaged goods

First, Study 2 aims to examine whether the positive effect generalizes to the context of consumer packaged goods (as opposed to services); our product was pasta sauce. Our analysis of Amazon's best sellers in canned and jarred tomato sauces (Amazon Best Sellers, 2021) revealed that 26 of the best-selling brands in this category used an individual's name, with 14 being possessive and 12 being non-possessive brand names. Next, Study 2's goal was to establish whether the observed positive effect of brand-name possessiveness arises because of the positive impact of a possessive brand name or the negative influence of a non-possessive brand name. Hence, Study 2 includes a series of control-condition replicates.

Participants, design, and procedure

We randomly assigned 614 Prolific workers (64% females, M_{age} = 29) to one of six conditions following a six (brand-name: possessive vs. non-possessive vs. 4 control conditions) between-subjects design and provided a small financial compensation. We included four control conditions to ensure that our effects are not driven by the nature of a selected brand name.

This study was introduced as one that required participants to evaluate a brand. Respondents were presented with one of six versions of an advertisement for a fictitious pasta sauce brand. The brand name differed based on the condition, and each participant saw only one brand name. In manipulating brand-name possessiveness, we followed prior linguistic research (Bryant et al., 1997) demonstrating that adding an apostrophe followed by an 's' successfully creates perceptions of possessiveness. To increase the ecological validity of our stimuli across all studies, we conducted an extensive search to identify a variety of real-world possessive and non-possessive brand names across a wide range of categories (Web Appendix B). In the possessive brand-name condition, participants viewed an advertisement for a pasta sauce called Uncle Dave's. In the non-possessive brand-name condition, the brand name was changed to Uncle Dave. In the four control conditions, the brand name was modified to City pasta sauce, Four pasta sauce, Grocery pasta sauce, and Eat pasta sauce, modeled after existing brand names of sauces in the marketplace (e.g., Uncle Steve's, Ohio City Pasta Marinara, Twelve Veggie Tomato Sauce). In all conditions, we kept the layout and ad copy constant (Web Appendix E). After viewing the ad, participants reported their purchase intentions measured on a seven-point semantic differential scale: How likely would you be to buy the [brand name]? (unlikely–likely, improbable–probable, impossible–possible; MacKenzie et al., 1986). These three items were combined in a purchase-intentions scale (α = .92). Respondents then provided their demographic information and were thanked for their participation.

Results and discussion

Because none of the differences among the four control conditions were statistically significant (p's = .34–.95), we collapsed them in a single combined control condition. The results of a one-way ANOVA (brand name: possessive vs. non-possessive vs. collapsed control condition) with purchase intentions as the dependent variable showed a significant effect

Table 1 **Panel a**. Descriptive statistics and correlation matrix in Study 1

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Brand ratings	3.90	.64	–											
2. % of 4- to 5-star brand ratings	70.98	18.92	.95**	–										
3. Brand-name possessiveness	.79	.41	.30**	.30**	–									
4. Price	1.61	.64	−.02	−.05	−.01	–								
5. Ownership structure	.56	.50	−.34**	−.34**	−.05	−.08	–							
6. City	.49	.50	−.16**	−.14**	−.10*	−.17**	.09	–						
7. WiFi presence	.38	.49	−.06	−.07	.01	.16**	.02	−.13*	–					
8. Payment mode	.98	.15	−.04	−.05	.003	.12*	.07	.02	.02	–				
9. Claimed on Yelp	.79	.41	.02	−.01	−.05	.14**	.08	.05	.22**	.05	–			
10. % of reviews left photo	17.05	11.70	.25**	.28**	−.002	−.03	−.12*	.06	.02	−.04	−.09	–		
11. N of years since first rating	8.28	4.04	−.08	−.08	.02	.20**	−.21**	−.16**	.001	.006	−.001	−.23**	–	
12. Average number of ratings	122.5	241.7	.13*	.11*	−.02	.23**	−.13*	−.14**	.09	.05	.12*	−.004	.20**	–

*$p<.05$. **$p<.01$. For dummy variables/categorical variables with two levels, Phi coefficient is reported instead of Pearson r

Panel b. Regression analysis of effect of brand-name possessiveness on brand ratings in Study 1

Variables	β	*t*-value	Variables	β	*t*-value
Brand-name possessiveness	.30	6.44**	France cuisine origin dummy	.11	2.51*
Price	−.08	−1.66	Greece cuisine origin dummy	.01	.27
Location type	−.27	−5.74**	Iran cuisine origin dummy	.04	.81
City	−.12	−2.50*	Ireland cuisine origin dummy	.04	.84
WiFi presence	−.09	−1.90	Italy cuisine origin dummy	.08	1.56
Payment mode	.01	.22	Japan cuisine origin dummy	.04	.87
Claimed on Yelp	.11	2.36*	Mediterranean cuisine origin dummy	.10	2.32*
% of reviews left photo	.22	4.86**	Mexico cuisine origin dummy	.09	1.92
N of years since first rating	−.13	−2.73**	South Korea cuisine origin dummy	.001	.03
Average number of ratings	.11	2.45*	Syria cuisine origin dummy	.06	1.39
China cuisine origin dummy	−.10	−2.34*	Other cuisine origin dummy	.07	1.46

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. USA cuisine origin represents a base/reference category

of brand-name possessiveness ($M_{possessive} = 5.37$ vs. $M_{non\text{-}possessive} = 4.98$, $M_{controls\ collapsed} = 4.89$; $F(2,611) = 4.30$, $p = .014$, $\eta^2 = .014$). That is, participants reported higher purchase intentions when a brand name was in the possessive form compared to both the non-possessive ($p = .058$) and the collapsed control ($p = .003$) conditions. There was a non-significant difference between the non-possessive and control conditions ($p > .59$). Importantly, respondents generated greater purchase intentions when a brand name was in the possessive form compared to each of the individual underlying control-condition replicates (City: $p = .041$; Four: $p = .033$; Grocery: $p = .003$; Eat: $p = .029$). For the purposes of robustness, we conducted two additional studies: (1) with new control conditions and (2) with the brand names without a descriptor (i.e., uncle; Web Appendix E).

The findings of Study 2 extend the outcomes of Study 1 in a more controlled experimental setting using a consumer packaged-goods category (pasta sauce). Results show that a possessive brand name is likely to elicit higher purchase intentions than a non-possessive brand name. The findings of Study 2 also demonstrate that the effect is driven by the more positive impact of a possessive brand name (vs. the negative effect of a non-possessive brand name).

We conducted two additional studies to generalize to different contexts (i.e., bakery [Web Appendix F] and hair-salon brand). The hair-salon study included a control condition (presented in Web Appendix G) to provide further evidence that the effect is driven by the more positive impact of brand-name possessiveness. The results confirmed the findings obtained in Study 2.

Study 3: Inferences of sense of owner's control over the brand as process

The primary goal of Study 3 is to directly illuminate the mechanism underlying the impact of brand-name possessiveness on consumer brand preferences. That is, Study 3 tests this serial mediation (brand-name possessiveness → sense of owner's control over the brand → brand quality → purchase intentions) to gain a deeper insight into the process (hypothesis 2).

The second goal of Study 3 is to examine several possible alternative explanations for our findings. Overall, Study 3 aims to rule out these alternative processes: (1) consumers' brand attachment, (2) consumers' inferences of a brand as more personal that may induce greater norms of reciprocity, (3) inferred owner's competence, (4) processing fluency, and (5) perceived brand-name atypicality.

Although we theorize that the positive effect of brand-name possessiveness on consumer brand preferences is driven by a greater sense of the referenced entity's control over the brand, there could be alternative psychological mechanisms that might explain our core effect. First, it is plausible that consumers may perceive an individual behind the brand in a possessive form as more real or actual (vs. fictitious). Because consumers are more able to form an attachment with a real person as opposed to a fictitious person (Thomson, 2006), they may form greater brand attachment when a brand's name is in a possessive (vs. non-possessive) form, which in turn may lead to greater brand preferences (Park et al., 2010). Another possibility is that possessive names make brands and the firms that own them seem more personal. Because of a general human tendency to form communal relationships with other persons that induce norms of reciprocity (Clark & Mills, 1993), perceiving brands as more personal may induce greater norms of reciprocity that enhance perceptions of quality.

Third, when a consumer identifies a specific individual as the owner, this inference can potentially communicate greater competence (Zhou et al., 2019), including judgments of confidence, capability, skillfulness, and competitiveness (Aaker et al., 2010). The inferences of greater competence may in turn lead to greater quality perceptions and subsequent positive downstream brand outcomes. Fourth, it is also possible that the possessive form introduces a lack of fluency, attracts greater attention, and makes consumers process the brand name in greater depth. Finally, although we demonstrated earlier that both possessive and non-possessive brand names are equally prevalent in the marketplace, we further examine the possibility that non-possessive brands may be viewed as odd or atypical.

Participants, design, and procedure

We randomly assigned 182 Prolific workers (51% females, M_{age} = 31) to one of two conditions (brand-name possessiveness: possessive vs. non-possessive); they received a small financial compensation. The participants were invited to join a study about brand evaluations and were asked to imagine that they were looking for moving services. They were next presented with an advertisement for a (fictitious) moving-service brand. The brand name was manipulated to be either Ultimate Raimond's (i.e., the possessive condition) or Ultimate Raimond (i.e., the non-possessive condition; Web Appendix H). The participants provided their purchase intentions and responded to a set of process variables. The survey ended with a brief demographics section.

Measures

Purchase intentions were assessed with the same items we used in Study 2 (α = .92). Inferences of sense of owner's control over the brand were assessed with four items (i.e., based on your intuition, how do you perceive the brand? (1) all moving outcomes are fully controlled in this business; (2) all decisions regarding this brand's business are under high control; (3) there is a sense of control for the business outcomes; and (4) they are in full control of the moving outcome). Answers were collected on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). These four items were combined in a scale representing the sense of owner's control over the brand (α = .93). Next, adopted from prior work (Frazier & Lassar, 1996; Kwak et al., 2015), brand quality was measured with three items on a seven-point semantic differential scale (e.g., based on your intuition, please rate the overall quality of the brand from 1 (very low quality, very inferior, very low performance) to 7 (very high quality, very superior, very high performance; α = .94).

Brand attachment was measured with four items adopted from Park et al. (2010) (e.g., to what extent is [brand name] part of who you are?; to what extent do you feel personally connected to [brand name]?; 1 = not at all, 7 = very much; α = .87). Consumers' inferences of a brand as more personal were assessed with two items: (1) at [brand name], they closely attend to your needs; and (2) at [brand name], they give personal attention (α = .93). Norms of reciprocity were captured using five items adopted from Kwak et al. (2015) (e.g., at [brand name], they care for you; at [brand name], they enjoy responding to your needs; 1 = not at all, 7 = very much; α = .92). Perceived competence was assessed with four items adopted from Fiske et al. (2002) and Kervyn et al. (2012) (i.e., to what extent do you believe that the person who owns [brand name] (1) seems to be competent; (2) seems to be capable; (3) seems to be confident; (4) seems to be self-assured; 1 = not at all, 7 = very much; α = .92). Next, we reviewed prior measurements of fluency in the literature (Fang et al., 2007; Graf et al., 2018; Torelli et al., 2012) and selected two items that fit our context (i.e., please tell us how difficult it was to evaluate [brand name]: 1 = very difficult to evaluate, required a lot of effort; 7 = very easy to evaluate, required very little effort; α = .89). Finally, brand-name atypicality was measured with two items (i.e., atypical, odd; 1 = not at all, 7 = very much; α = .70).

Results

Purchase intentions A one-way (brand-name possessiveness: possessive vs. non-possessive) ANOVA with purchase intentions as the dependent variable showed a significant main effect of brand-name possessiveness. That is, participants indicated greater intentions when the brand name was in the possessive form than in the non-possessive ($M_{possessive}$ = 4.87 vs. $M_{non\text{-}possessive}$ = 4.38; $F(1,180) = 5.51$, $p = .02$, $\eta^2 = .03$). This finding further supports H1.

Underlying process We first ran two one-way (brand-name possessiveness: possessive vs. non-possessive) ANOVA models with (1) inferences of sense of owner's control over the brand and (2) brand quality as the dependent variables. The results revealed that both these variables were higher when the brand name featured the possessive form rather than the non-possessive (sense of control: $M_{possessive}$ = 4.98 vs. $M_{non\text{-}possessive}$ = 4.56; $F(1,180) = 5.56$, $p = .019$, $\eta^2 = .03$; brand quality: $M_{possessive}$ = 5.14 vs. $M_{non\text{-}possessive}$ = 4.69; $F(1,180) = 6.27$, $p = .013$, $\eta^2 = .034$).

To gain deeper insight into the process, we further tested the serial-mediation model (the results are presented in Web Appendix H). That is, we conducted a regression model with brand-name possessiveness as the independent variable, sense of owner's control over the brand → brand quality as serial mediators, and purchase intentions as the dependent variable (Model 6; Hayes, 2017) using an approach with 5000 bootstraps. The results revealed a significant path from brand-name possessiveness to purchase intentions through serial mediation (sense of owner's control over the brand → brand quality; b = .13, SE = .07; 95% CI = [.03, .30]). These outcomes provide evidence for the serial mediation through the sense of control by an inferred external entity over a brand to enhance perceived brand quality, thus supporting H2.

Alternative explanations A one-way (brand-name possessiveness: possessive vs. non-possessive) multivariate ANOVA (MANOVA) with participants' ratings of brand attachment, perceived competence, inferences of a brand as personal, perceived norms of reciprocity, processing fluency, and brand-name atypicality as the dependent variables yielded a significant effect of brand-name possessiveness (Wilks' $\lambda = .91$, $F(1,175) = 3.03$, $p = .008$, $\eta^2 = .094$). The impact on brand atypicality was nonsignificant ($M_{possessive}$ = 3.46 vs. $M_{non\text{-}possessive}$ = 3.77; $F(1,180) = .59$, $p > .197$). However, brand-name possessiveness enhanced brand attachment ($M_{possessive}$ = 3.42 vs. $M_{non\text{-}possessive}$ = 2.75; $F(1,180) = 9.25$, $p = .003$, $\eta^2 = .049$), perceived competence ($M_{possessive}$ = 5.54 vs. $M_{non\text{-}possessive}$ = 5.00; $F(1,180) = 10.08$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = .053$), inferences of a brand as personal ($M_{possessive}$ = 4.75 vs. $M_{non\text{-}possessive}$ = 4.27; $F(1,180) = 5.36$, $p = .022$, $\eta^2 = .029$), perceived norms of reciprocity ($M_{possessive}$ = 4.22 vs. $M_{non\text{-}possessive}$ = 3.75; $F(1,180) = 5.67$, $p = .018$, $\eta^2 = .031$), and processing fluency ($M_{possessive}$ = 5.12 vs. $M_{non\text{-}possessive}$ = 4.46; $F(1,180) = 7.97$, $p = .005$, $\eta_2 = .042$).

In light of these significant outcomes for alternative process variables, we conducted multiple-mediation analyses (PROCESS Macro Model 4 with 5000 bootstrapped resamples; Hayes, 2017) with inferences of sense of owner's control over the brand, brand attachment, perceived competence, inferences of a brand as personal, perceived norms of reciprocity, and processing fluency entered simultaneously as mediators of the effect of brand-name possessiveness on purchase intentions. The only significant mediator that emerged in this model was inferred sense of owner's control over the brand (b = .12, SE = .08; 95% CI [.01, .35]). The indirect paths were nonsignificant through brand attachment (b = .09, SE = .07; 95% CI [−.005, .26]), perceived competence (b = .10, SE = .09; 95% CI [−.04, .33]), inferences of a brand as personal (b = −.003, SE = .07; 95% CI [−.15, .13]), perceived norms of reciprocity (b = .09, SE = .09; 95% CI [−.02, .35]), and processing fluency (b = .05, SE = .05; 95% CI [−.03, .17]).

Discussion

The findings of Study 3 support our theory of a serial mediation: a possessive (vs. non-possessive) brand name generates greater inferences of a sense of owner's control over the brand, thus leading to greater brand-quality inferences and enhanced purchase intentions (hypothesis 2). Study 3 also rules out several alternative explanations for the core effect through (1) consumers' brand attachment, (2) consumers' inferences of a brand as more personal that may induce greater norms of reciprocity, (3) inferred owner's competence, (4) processing fluency, and (5) perceived brand-name atypicality. Overall, Study 3 expands our conceptual understanding of the processes that drive the impact of brand-name possessiveness on brand preferences. Finally, Web Appendix I reports another study that presents further evidence for the underlying serial mediation (sense of owner's control over the brand → brand quality) in the context of cleaning services, while also ruling out an alternative account based on brand warmth.

Study 4: Consumers' brand familiarity as moderator

The main objective of Study 4 is to provide support for our theorizing that the core effect of brand-name possessiveness occurs among consumers who are less familiar with the brand (H3). To examine this idea, we identified two real-world brands (i.e., two coffee shops in Texas) and measured participants' familiarity with these brands.

Participants, design, and procedure

Two hundred and forty-eight (248) MTurk workers (38% females, M_{age} = 37) were randomly assigned to one of two conditions in a between-subjects design (brand-name possessiveness: possessive vs. non-possessive); they received a small financial compensation for participating. We set the MTurk qualification criteria such that all participants were residents of the state of Texas, U.S.A., because our stimuli included two coffee shops in this state. We also included a scale to measure participants' familiarity with the brand (our moderator).

Study 4 was introduced as a study about brand evaluations. Respondents were presented with one of two versions of a Facebook page of an actual café brand. We identified a pair of coffee shop brands (possessive: Emily's Place Coffee Shoppe vs. non-possessive: Rosella Coffee) in Texas following specific criteria as follows: (1) coffee shops were located in relative proximity to each other (i.e., San Antonio Metropolitan Statistical Area, Texas), (2) both brands included a familiar name of the same gender (i.e., female name), and (3) coffee shops were similar in value offered (one dollar-sign per Google and Yelp ratings). The results of a pretest (n = 79) showed that participants' attitude toward both names did not differ (Web Appendix J). After viewing the café Facebook page, participants reported their visit intentions (measured with the same items as in previous studies; α = .64) and indicated their familiarity with the brand (1 = not at all familiar, 7 = very familiar) and with the name used in the brand name (1 = not at all familiar, 7 = very familiar). A one-way (brand-name possessiveness: possessive vs. non-possessive) ANOVA with name (used in a brand name) familiarity as the dependent variable revealed no significant effect of brand-name possessiveness on name familiarity ($M_{possessive}$ = 6.10 vs. $M_{non\text{-}possessive}$ = 5.90; $F(1,246)$ = 1.97, p > .16). The study ended by collecting demographic information.

Results and discussion

A one-way (brand-name possessiveness: possessive vs. non-possessive) ANOVA with visit intentions as the dependent variable revealed a significant main effect of brand-name possessiveness. That is, participants indicated greater visit intentions when the brand name entailed a possessive form than a non-possessive one ($M_{possessive}$ = 6.32 vs. $M_{non\text{-}possessive}$ = 6.15; $F(1,246)$ = 3.96, p = .048, η^2 = .016).

Next, we tested a regression model with brand-name possessiveness as the independent variable, and brand familiarity and visit intentions as the dependent variables (Model 1; Hayes, 2017) using an approach with 5000 bootstraps. The results showed that both the effect of brand-name possessiveness (b = .81, SE = .27; 95% CI = [.29, 1.24]) and the interaction between brand-name possessiveness and brand familiarity (b = −.12, SE = .05; 95% CI = [−.20, −.02]) were significant. That is, the effect of brand-name possessiveness on visit intentions was significant among participants who were less familiar with the brand (b = .42, SE = .12; 95% CI = [.18, .66]). In contrast, the positive effect of brand-name possessiveness on visit intentions was attenuated among participants who were relatively more familiar with the brand (b = .03, SE = .11; 95% CI = [−.18, .24]). A floodlight analysis further revealed that the effect of a possessive (vs. non-possessive) brand name was significant and positive for consumers scoring below 5.80 (b_{JN} = .17, SE = .08, $t(200)$ = 1.97, p = .05; Web Appendix J). Overall, the results of Study 4 support our theorizing with real coffee-shop brands, showing that brand-name possessiveness enhances consumers' brand preferences when they are less familiar with the brand, whereas the effect is mitigated for consumers who are highly familiar with the brand.

Study 5: Consumers' desire to relinquish control

The main objective of Study 5 is to obtain preliminary evidence for our underlying mechanism by examining an important boundary condition that is directly linked to the focal mechanism: desire to relinquish control. That is, Study 5 tests H4.

Participants, design, and procedure

Two hundred and five (205) MTurk workers (46% females, M_{age} = 34) were randomly assigned to one of two conditions in a between-subjects design (brand-name possessiveness: possessive vs. non-possessive) and received a small financial compensation. We also included a scale to measure individual differences in desire to relinquish control. High scores on the scale are associated with preference for others to be in control and a desire to leave decisions to others about things that happen in one's own life.

Study 5 was introduced as a study about brand evaluations. Respondents were presented with one of two versions of an advertisement for a fictitious café brand. Brand-name possessiveness was manipulated by adding an apostrophe after a brand's name (i.e., Artful John Café / Artful John's Café), consistent with the previous studies (Web Appendix K). After viewing the café advertisement, participants indicated their purchase intentions and responded to the scale for desire to relinquish personal control (our moderator variable). The study ended by collecting demographic information.

Measures

Purchase intentions (α = .92) were measured with the same items as in previous studies. Desire to relinquish personal control was assessed with three items (Gebhardt & Brosschot, 2002) where participants indicated their agreement with the three statements on a seven-point Likert-type scale (i.e., I wish I could push many of life's daily decisions off on someone else; there are many situations in which I would prefer only one choice rather than having to make a decision; I like to wait and see if someone else is going to solve a problem so that I don't have to be bothered by it). These three items were combined in an index of desire to relinquish personal control (α = .78).[4]

Results and discussion

A one-way (brand-name possessiveness: possessive vs. non-possessive) ANOVA with purchase intentions as the dependent variable uncovered a significant main effect of brand-name possessiveness. Participants reported greater purchase intentions when the brand name contained a possessive form than a non-possessive one ($M_{possessive}$ = 5.40 vs. $M_{non\text{-}possessive}$ = 4.96; F(1,203) = 4.898, p = .028, η^2 = .024).

We further tested a regression model with brand-name possessiveness as the independent variable, desire to relinquish personal control as the moderator, and purchase intentions as the dependent variable (Model 1; Hayes, 2017) using an approach with 5000 bootstraps. The results revealed that the effect (brand-name possessiveness → purchase intentions) was significant and excluded zero (b = .60, SE = .28; 95% CI = [.04, 1.16]) among participants relatively high on desire to relinquish personal control, who reported higher purchase intentions when a brand name was in the possessive (vs. non-possessive) form. In contrast, the positive effect of brand-name possessiveness on purchase intentions was mitigated among participants who were relatively low on desire to relinquish personal control (b = .21, SE = .28; 95% CI = [−.35, .77]). These outcomes suggest that consumers who are low in desire to relinquish control do not possess a high desire to control others, thus cues of greater control over the brand (emanating from a possessive form in a brand name) do not conflict with consumers' low desire to turn over control to others. Web Appendix K presents the results of a floodlight analysis. Overall, the results of Study 5 establish the moderating role of individual differences in desire to relinquish personal control, thus providing further support for the role of inferred owner's control over the brand.

Study 6: Co-creation context

The major goal of Study 6 was to further demonstrate the underlying mechanism through a moderation approach by examining the qualifying role of a co-creation process (H5). We predicted that the positive effect of a possessive (vs. non-possessive) brand name would be reversed in co-creation contexts.

Participants, design, and procedure

We randomly assigned 256 MTurk workers (46% females, M_{age} = 38) to one of four conditions following a 2 (brand-name possessiveness: possessive vs. non-possessive) × 2 (co-creation context vs. control) between-subjects design; the participants received a small financial compensation. Study 6 was introduced as a study that required respondents to evaluate a brand. Participants were presented with one of two versions (possessive vs. non-possessive brand name) of an advertisement for a fictitious brand of gingerbread house. Depending on the assigned condition, brand-name possessiveness was manipulated so that the brand name was either Crafty Michael's (i.e., the possessive condition) or Crafty Michael (i.e., the non-possessive condition). Each participant saw either the Crafty Michael's gingerbread house or the Crafty Michael gingerbread house brand name. The gingerbread house characteristics included such descriptors as colorful recipe and delicious taste (Web Appendix L). In both ads, we kept the layout and brand description constant. Co-creation context was manipulated by modifying the extent to which participants could customize their gingerbread house. We subjected participants to a seven-step customization task (Web Appendix L) in the co-creation context condition, but no such task was administered in the control condition. This approach is consistent with and adopted from prior work on co-creation and customization (e.g., Franke et al., 2009). After viewing the ad, participants stated their purchase intentions and answered questions regarding their demographics. Purchase intentions were assessed with the same items we used in the previous studies (α = .94). Web Appendix L presents the results of several pretests. The first pretest (n = 147) demonstrates that our manipulation of co-creation context was successful. The same pretest results also ruled out potential differences between a possessive and non-possessive brand name in terms of several alternative process variables (i.e., brand-name atypicality, perceptions of a brand name as fictitious (vs. real), the extent of anthropomorphism, brand-name attractiveness, appropriateness, perceived luxury, grammatical correctness). A final pretest (n = 121) ruled out a

[4] One of the items in the original paper was a reverse-coded one. A principal components analysis with Varimax rotation using the four original items coded for desire to relinquish personal control suggested that whereas the three regular items exhibited loadings of .78 or above, the fourth reverse-coded item loading equaled .41. For this reason, and because adding the reverse-coded item substantially reduced the scale's internal reliability below an acceptable level (a = .71), we proceeded with the three items.

possibility that brand-name possessiveness induced a greater impact on consumer perception of an individual referred to in a brand name as a real person (Web Appendix L).

Results

The results of a 2 (brand-name possessiveness: possessive vs. non-possessive) × 2 (co-creation context vs. control) ANOVA with purchase intentions as the dependent variable showed a significant interaction between brand-name possessiveness and co-creation context ($F(1,252) = 10.160$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = .039$). Neither the effect of brand-name possessiveness ($F(1,252) = .105$, $p = .746$) nor co-creation context ($F(1,252) = .103$, $p = .749$) was significant. Further planned contrasts (Fig. 1) revealed that in the control condition, participants reported higher purchase intentions when the brand name was in the possessive (vs. non-possessive) form ($M_{possessive} = 5.54$ vs. $M_{non\text{-}possessive} = 4.98$; $F(1,252) = 4.328$, $p = .038$, $\eta^2 = .017$), consistent with the results of Studies 1 through 3. In contrast, in the co-creation context condition, participants reported lower purchase intentions when the brand name was in the possessive (vs. non-possessive) form ($M_{possessive} = 4.85$ vs. $M_{non\text{-}possessive} = 5.54$; $F(1,252) = 5.856$, $p = .016$, $\eta^2 = .023$). Interestingly, in the co-creation context, consumers also reported lower purchase intentions when the brand name was in the possessive form compared to the respective control condition ($M_{co\text{-}creation} = 4.85$ vs. $M_{control} = 5.54$; $F(1,252) = 6.271$, $p = .013$, $\eta^2 = .024$). However, we found that when the brand name was in the non-possessive form, the co-creation process enhanced consumers' purchase intentions for the product ($M_{co\text{-}creation} = 5.54$ vs. $M_{control} = 4.98$; $F(1,252) = 4.034$, $p = .046$, $\eta^2 = .016$). Overall, our findings indicate that while a co-creation opportunity generally enhances consumers' product preference (Franke et al., 2009, 2010), the inclusion of a possessive brand name reduces the effectiveness of a co-creation strategy by potentially conflicting with consumers' own desires to be in control of their co-created outcomes.

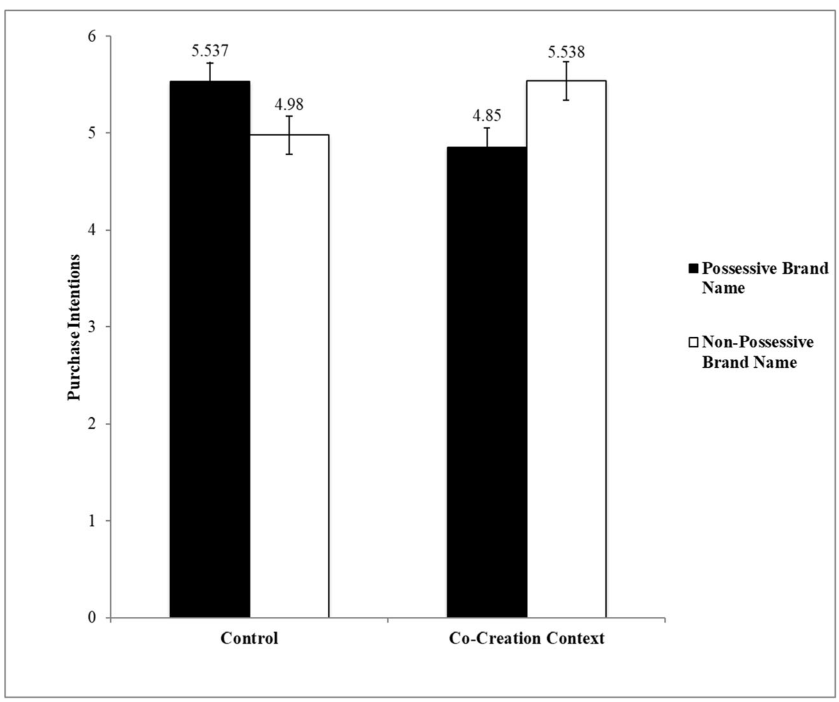
Discussion

The results of Study 6 establish the moderating role of a co-creation context. That is, consistent with the results of the previous three studies, the findings demonstrate that brand-name possessiveness (vs. non-possessiveness) leads to greater brand purchase intentions when consumers do not engage in a co-creation task. However, this positive effect of brand-name possessiveness reverses when consumers participate in a product's co-creation process, thus supporting hypothesis 5. These results suggest that a greater inferred sense of control over the brand by an entity referenced in the name is likely to conflict with consumers' own desire to be in control of the co-creation output.

Study 7: Brand longevity as moderator

The main objective of Study 7 was to provide further evidence for our underlying mechanism by examining another important boundary condition that is directly linked to the focal

Fig. 1 Interaction figure in Study 6



mechanism: brand longevity. Because a brand using a possessive (vs. non-possessive) form elevates perceptions that someone else is in control of the brand, the favorable impact of brand-name possessiveness on brand preferences is likely to be attenuated for older brands, for which consumers generally infer greater sense of control over all business operations. That is, Study 7 tests whether brand longevity moderates the positive impact of brand-name possessiveness on brand preferences (hypothesis 6).

The second goal of Study 7 was to rule out several alternative process mechanisms that our previous studies have not yet considered: (1) authenticity, (2) accountability, and (3) attributions of identity-relevant brand features. Web Appendix M presents theoretical discussion and results regarding possible additional alternative mechanisms, none of which emerged as a predictor of our core effects.

Participants, design, and procedure

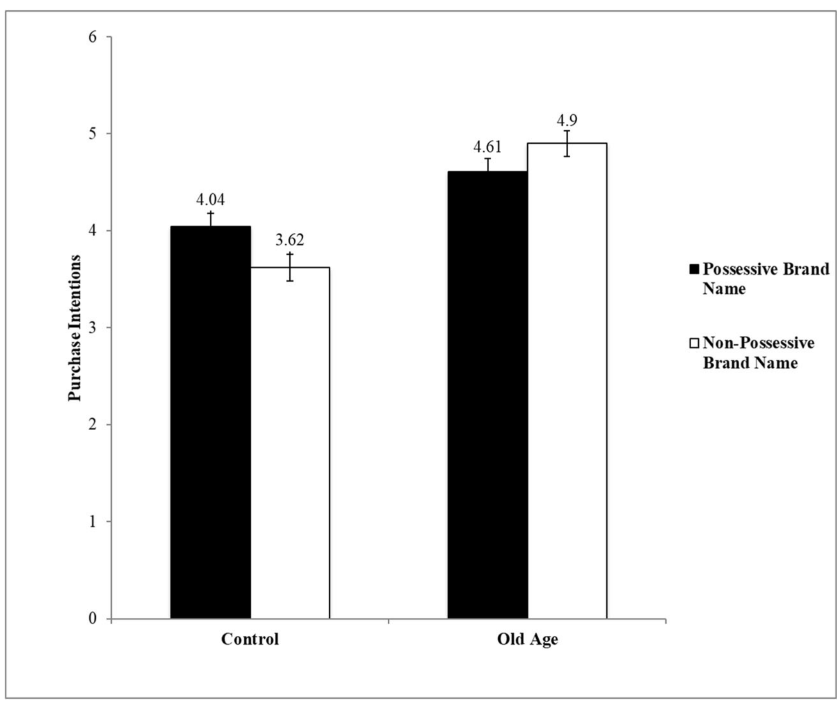
Four hundred and eighty-two (482) Prolific workers (63% females, $M_{age} = 36$) were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (brand-name possessiveness: possessive vs. non-possessive) × 2 (brand longevity: old age vs. control) between-subjects design; they received a nominal financial compensation. Participants were invited to take part in a study about brand evaluations and presented with an advertisement for a novel (fictitious) brand of catering service. Depending on the assigned condition, the brand name was manipulated (Web Appendix M) to be either Crafty Mark's (i.e., a possessive condition) or Crafty Mark (i.e., a non-possessive condition), consistent with the previous studies. To manipulate brand longevity, we added the statement "established in 1901" in the ad copy. All conditions kept constant the rest of advertisement's layout and the brand description.

After viewing the advertisement, participants indicated their purchase intentions and responded to our mediating and alternative process variables. The study ended with demographic information and the demand probe; none of the participants identified the true nature of the research question. Purchase intentions ($\alpha = .94$), a sense of owner's control over the brand ($\alpha = .91$), and brand quality ($\alpha = .95$) were measured with the same items as in previous studies.

Results

Purchase intentions A two-way (brand-name possessiveness: possessive vs. non-possessive) × (brand longevity: old age vs. control) ANOVA with purchase intentions as the dependent variable uncovered a significant interaction effect between brand-name possessiveness and brand longevity ($F(1,478) = 6.997, p = .008, \eta^2 = .014$), with no main effect of brand-name possessiveness being significant ($p > .63$). A significant main effect of brand longevity also emerged ($F(1, 478) = 47.183, p < .001, \eta^2 = .090$), which is consistent with prior work demonstrating the positive impact of brand longevity on brand preferences (Desai et al., 2008). Further planned contrast tests (Fig. 2) show that participants reported greater purchase intentions when the brand name entailed a

Fig. 2 Interaction figure in Study 7



possessive (vs. non-possessive) form in the control condition ($M_{possessive}$ = 4.04 vs. $M_{non\text{-}possessive}$ = 3.62; $F(1,478) = 4.780$, $p = .029$, $\eta^2 = .010$; Web Appendix M), while the effect of brand-name possessiveness was attenuated when the brand longevity information was communicated ($M_{possessive}$ = 4.61 vs. $M_{non\text{-}possessive}$ = 4.90; $F(1,478) = 2.401$, $p = .122$, $\eta^2 = .005$). This finding provides additional support for H6.

Underlying process To examine the underlying process, we first performed a two-way (brand-name possessiveness: possessive vs. non-possessive) × (brand longevity: old age vs control) ANOVA with inferences of sense of owner's control over the brand as the outcome variable. The results revealed a significant interaction effect of brand-name possessiveness and brand longevity ($F(1,478) = 6.856$, $p = .009$, $\eta^2 = .014$). That is, participants reported higher inferred sense of owner's control over the brand when its name included the possessive form rather than the non-possessive one in the control condition ($M_{possessive}$ = 4.52 vs. $M_{non\text{-}possessive}$ = 4.22; $F(1,478) = 4.306$, $p = .039$, $\eta^2 = .009$), but the effect of brand-name possessiveness was mitigated when the brand longevity information was communicated ($M_{possessive}$ = 4.79 vs. $M_{non\text{-}possessive}$ = 5.03; $F(1,478) = 2.638$, $p = .105$, $\eta^2 = .005$). We note in passing that a significant main effect of brand longevity also surfaced ($F(1,478) = 26.052$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .052$), which is consistent with our theorizing that consumers view older brands as being in greater control over brand outcomes. This finding is consistent with our arguments that viewing older brands as being in greater control over brand outcomes attenuates the impact of brand-name possessiveness on brand preferences.

Furthermore, we tested a serial moderated-mediation model (Model 83; Hayes, 2017) of the positive effect of brand-name possessiveness on purchase intentions through a sense of owner's control over the brand → brand quality as a function of brand longevity information (the results are presented in Web Appendix M). This serial moderated-mediation index was significant (b = −.32, SE = .13; 95% CI = [−.58, −.08]); the indirect path from brand-name possessiveness to purchase intentions through sense of owner's control and brand quality was significant in the control condition (b = .18, SE = .09; 95% CI = [.01, .35]) and became nonsignificant when the brand longevity information was communicated (b = −.14, SE = .09; 95% CI = [−.33, .03]). This finding from the control condition further supports our hypothesis 2.

Discussion

Overall, the results of Study 7 establish the moderating role of brand longevity. In particular, consistent with the outcomes of previous studies, the findings demonstrate that brand-name possessiveness (vs. non-possessiveness) increases purchase intentions in the control condition. However, this positive effect of brand-name possessiveness is attenuated when a brand's longevity is communicated. Thus, these findings support our hypothesis 6. Study 7 also rules out several alternative explanations for the core effect (Web Appendix M). Overall, Study 7 expands our conceptual understanding of the processes that drive the impact of brand-name possessiveness on consumers' purchase intentions for a brand.

General discussion

Drawing from psychology of possessions, ownership, and linguistics theories, eight field and experimental studies with different real-world brand names active in the marketplace and with varying populations (i.e., Yelp reviewers, community volunteers, university students, MTurk and Prolific participants) systematically demonstrate an impact of brand-name possessiveness on brand ratings, purchase intentions, and willingness to pay for a less familiar brand. The Pilot Study shows that brand-name possessiveness (vs. non-possessiveness) enhances consumers' actual amount of money spent on a brand's product. Field Study 1 demonstrates that a possessive (vs. non-possessive) brand name leads to higher Yelp brand ratings. Study 2 extends the results to the consumer packaged-goods context and shows that the core effect is driven by respondents' enhanced purchase intentions toward a possessive brand name (vs. lower purchase intentions toward a non-possessive brand name). Study 3 formally establishes the core mechanism: consumers infer a greater sense of owner's control over the brand when a brand name is in the possessive (vs. non-possessive) form, and this subsequently results in increased brand quality perceptions and enhances brand purchase intentions (H2). At the same time, Study 3 rules out several plausible alternative explanations, including (1) perceived name atypicality, (2) inferred owner's competence, (3) brand attachment, (4) the extent to which a brand is seen as more personal and, thus, potentially inducing greater norms of reciprocity, and (5) processing fluency. Next, Study 4 demonstrates a qualifying role of consumers' familiarity with a brand such that the effect emerges only among consumers who are less familiar with a brand and dissipates for consumers who are highly familiar with the brand. Study 5 examines an underlying process via a moderation approach by investigating the role of consumers' desire to relinquish control. Study 6 identifies a specific context (i.e., co-creation) in which the favorable effect of brand-name possessiveness reverses, lending support for H5. Finally, Study 7 reveals that the positive effect of brand-name possessiveness on purchase intentions is attenuated when brand longevity information is communicated, as consumers no longer infer greater control by an alleged brand owner. Lastly, Study 7 casts doubt on several other alternative mechanisms related to brand authenticity, brand accountability, and attribution of identity-relevant characteristics.

Theoretical contributions

Our findings contribute to several streams of research. The present work augments the budding research on the effectiveness of brand names (Wu et al., 2019). Specifically, by uncovering a differential impact of possessive versus non-possessive novel brand names, our work goes beyond the prior research examining alphanumeric (Gunasti & Ross Jr., 2010; Yan & Duclos, 2013), first-person (vs. second-person) based (Kachersky & Carnevale, 2015), phonetically symbolic (Lowrey & Shrum, 2007; Shrum et al., 2012), difficult-to-pronounce (vs. easy-to-pronounce; Aksu et al., 2018), or name letter (Kachersky, 2011) brand names. Although the use of both possessive and non-possessive names is a widely prevalent tactic across a broad range of product categories (Web Appendices A, B), scant research has systematically investigated nuances associated with this brand-naming technique. In response, we shed light on this subtle linguistic variation in brand names and its potential to enhance downstream brand judgments, brand ratings, purchase intentions, and the amount paid for a brand's product. In addition, our work adds new insights to a related area of research (Kachersky & Carnevale, 2015; Kachersky & Palermo, 2013) that examines personal pronouns integrated in brand names (e.g., iPhone, MySpace, YouTube). That is, in contrast to this prior work showing that personal pronouns in brand names facilitate consumers' own sense of ownership toward brands, we demonstrate that a possessive form in a brand name enhances consumers' inferences of another entity's sense of ownership, thus leading to important downstream brand consequences. Interestingly, we also add to the understanding of the use of individual names in branding. To the best of our knowledge, the topic of individuals' names is typically not studied as the primary research objective in and of itself. However, past work used individual names as a part of the brand-anthropomorphism manipulation (Kwak et al., 2015; Wan & Aggarwal, 2015) or identified a positive impact of feminine (vs. masculine and neutral) individual names on brand performance (Pogacar et al., 2021). With the current work, we shed light on the implications of using a possessive form of individual names in branding practice.

The second theoretical contribution of this work lies in determining a novel underlying mechanism of the focal effect. That is, possessive brand names convey an increased control by an owner which, in turn, enhances perceptions of a brand's quality. In doing so, our work also contributes to the literature delineating the relationships between perceived control over an entity and inferred quality (Reimer & Folkes, 2009; van Osselaer et al., 2020). Moreover, we add new insights to the literature on possessive forms (Pierce et al., 2003; Shi et al., 2011; Zhou et al., 2013) by highlighting that the process underlying the impact of a possessive form in brand names is primarily cognitive-based (i.e., inferences of a sense of owner's control over the brand), in contrast to the affective-based explanations highlighted in past work (e.g., Walla et al., 2007, 2008; Zhou et al., 2013).

Third, prior research on consumer–brand relationships (CBR) demonstrates that a consumer's bond with a novel brand has a dynamic nature that evolves over time and across multiple interactions (Aaker et al., 2004; Fournier, 2009; Mathur et al., 2012; Park & MacInnis, 2018; Park & Roedder John, 2018). Our findings add to an understanding of the development of consumer–brand relationships by showing that a possessive form in new brand names can substantially elevate brand ratings, purchase intentions, and even money paid for a brand's product, thus indicating that reliance on brand-name possessiveness may help early establishment and development of consumers' relationship with a less familiar brand. Importantly, we are by no means arguing for the relative importance of the possessive brand name as compared to a multitude of other factors that can significantly contribute to consumers' brand preferences and downstream behavior (e.g., actual brand quality, size, product category, industry); our major claim is that brand-name possessiveness is an important, conceptually and practically interesting, meaningful, and yet overlooked factor in the prior CBR literature.

Finally, our work contributes to the burgeoning research stream on co-creation (Franke et al., 2009; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Prior co-creation work outlines factors that lead to brand and company success in such contexts, including but not limited to allowing customers to customize products on the basis of expressed preferences or self-expressive customization (Franke et al., 2009; Kaiser et al., 2017; Klesse et al., 2019), factoring in customer participation readiness (Dellaert, 2019; Dong et al., 2015), and framing customer participation in "you are designing" terms (Dong, 2015). Building on this work, we contribute to the literature by showing that whereas, in general, a possessive name helps a brand generate higher purchase intentions than does its non-possessive counterpart, the brand-name possessiveness effect reverses when a brand's product is co-created. In other words, these findings speak to the detrimental role of possessive brand names when consumers prefer to exercise their own control (i.e., in the co-creation context).

Managerial implications

Managerial practice indicates that shortlisting and ultimately selecting an effective new brand name can be an expensive and challenging endeavor (Andra, 2018; Forbes Agency Council, 2017; Interbrand, 2019; Keller, 2015; Shapiro, 2017), a sentiment echoed by 10 top managers and creatives (C-suite level) of naming agencies in our exploratory in-depth interviews. To complicate the matter, potential sources of funding for companies to recruit brand-naming agencies can be rather limited. In light of these marketplace challenges and funding constraints, our research is insightful in highlighting a crucial linguistic cue that marketers can rely on to enhance new customers' brand perceptions. More specifically, our research shows that the use of a possessive form in a brand name increases purchase intentions by about 8–13% (Studies 1–7) and the actual amount of money spent on a brand's product by about 106% (Pilot Study). The fact that such a subtle semantic variation in brand names can have an impact on brand purchase intentions and willingness to pay for a brand's products points to a meaningful impact on downstream brand preferences and choices. Indeed, close to half-a-star difference on the 5-star scale of Yelp renders the potential size of this effect nontrivial for managers.

Our research also shows the importance of considering consumers' own feelings of control in brand-related experiences. For example, the current findings indicate that it might be more effective to use a non-possessive form in a brand name when the nature of the business involves consumers' participating in a product co-creation process, because a possessive brand name is likely to detract from consumers' experiences of their own control over their co-creation outcomes. Relatedly, when a brand with a possessive name has already existed in the marketplace for an extended period, it may be less beneficial for such a brand to introduce new brand strategies related to customer participation. Interestingly, the present findings demonstrate that it might also not be optimal to rely on a possessive brand-name strategy when a large proportion of a brand's customer base comprises individuals highly desiring personal control in their own and marketplace activities (e.g., people in positions of power, people with high financial status). Finally, our results reveal that it may be less effective to communicate information regarding a brand's age for a brand using a possessive form in its name, as this communication is likely to diminish the effectiveness of brand-name possessiveness on consumers' purchase intentions.

Extensions and directions for future research

Several interesting research extensions emerge from our work. For example, because the favorable effect of a possessive brand name arises from enhanced inferences of a sense of owner's control over a brand, it is possible that other factors (beyond those examined in this research) that diminish perceptions of a brand's control can attenuate the effect of brand-name possessiveness. For example, manipulating a brand name to appear irresponsible and lacking control (e.g., Sloppy Sam's Restaurant) might reverse the effect. Along the same lines, directly emphasizing a brand's irresponsible behavior (e.g., an irresponsible handling of furniture by a moving company) might also backfire (Khamitov et al., 2020; Kübler et al., 2020) with a possessive (vs. non-possessive) brand name. Additionally, because an entity's size negatively correlates with the ability to control that entity (Lepoutre & Heene, 2006; Pierce et al., 2003), perceived company magnitude/scale is likely to impede consumers' ability to infer a greater sense of owner's control over the brand from a possessive form.

Furthermore, although our core effect held across multiple product and service categories (e.g., moving services, pasta sauce products, crafts, catering, café), future work may examine the variations in the phenomenon dependent upon product category. For example, luxury brands generally tend not to use possessive brand names (Gucci, Tory Burch, Chanel, Tiffany), with some minor exceptions (Christie's, Sotheby's). Thus, an interesting opportunity for future research would be to examine the impact of brand-name possessiveness in the context of luxury goods. It is possible that in this context, and in other creative industries, the effects obtained in the current work will be attenuated because the perceived designer's creative control (the extent to which the same entity takes responsibility for all stages of the creative process; Valsesia et al., 2016) for a luxury product can be high, irrespective of a possessive form used in a brand name.

Although our Study 4 shows that consumers with a low desire to relinquish control do not exhibit greater preferences for possessive brand names, future research might see a reversal of our core effect for consumers with high desire for control or power. For example, a voluminous body of work indicates that consumers engage in compensatory consumption in an effort to restore control (Cannon et al., 2019; Mandel et al., 2017) because the need for control is such an important psychological need. Thus, for consumers high in desire for control, the effect of brand-name possessiveness may reverse.

In this research our core effect held for both familiar (e.g., Michael, John, Dave) and less familiar names (i.e., Tatiana, Valeria); nonetheless, it is worthwhile to examine whether the effect would emerge with unfamiliar or foreign names (e.g., Nam Kee, Fawaz Al Hokair). It is possible that the effect might be attenuated since the perception of a real person behind the brand might be diluted. In addition, future work might investigate whether first names make consumers infer more control than last names. Because a first name may suggest one person, whereas a last name may imply either one person or a family, perceptions of control could be diluted for groups, as it may be difficult to infer who has control in a group. Furthermore, although our examination shows that less familiar brands tend to utilize a product-category description (e.g., Dick's Sporting Goods vs. JCPenney) in their communications to consumers (Web Appendix B), future work might also examine whether including or omitting a product category next to a brand name could change the direction of the effects. Finally, future research might address possible cultural differences (e.g., East vs. West coast of the U.S.) in influencing our results, as perceptions of tradition (and desire for authenticity) and even inferences of control may vary cross-culturally or in different areas of the country (Moulard et al., 2021). Web Appendix N presents the potential implications of our work for future research.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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