

Compass

What's in a Name?

Why Product Naming in China
is Not as Easy as it Looks





FOREWORD

Naming your product is the easiest part of launching in the Chinese market, right?

Wrong!

I can't count the times we've had clients come to us to do a naming study thinking it's going to be quick, dirty, and cheap. Clients will often ask us to just translate their brand name into Mandarin and test it with a few consumers. Wham, bam, done!

The problem is a product's name is so much more than the characters it uses. There are symbolic, cultural, and linguistic elements all at play. That's why at TSI we're big proponents of transcreation, the process of adding in semiotic, linguistic, and cultural cues into naming. We find naming so important we have an entire practice area with experts who specialise in naming products for Asian markets.

We've been fortunate enough to help several international brands transcreate great names for China. Australia's favourite treat, Tim Tams, came to TSI for the relaunch of their product in China. One of our most in-depth naming studies, we came up with 缇美恬, a name implying relaxed, quiet, reflective experiences. Most recently, we worked with alternative protein company Beyond Meat to develop their name for China. We landed on 别样肉客™, or Unique Meat Eater, a name which resonates with consumers and stays true to the company's mission.

In this month's TSI Navigator™ Compass, we explore just how important it is to get naming right for the Chinese market. Have a read and I'm sure you, too, will realise it's not as easy as using Google Translate.

Andrew Kuiler
Founder & CEO

TSI CONTRIBUTORS



QI ZHANG

With a background and passion for linguistics, Qi is TSI's resident naming expert. Born and raised in Hubei Province, a place famous for a wide range of snacks, she has sensitive taste buds and a love for food. Qi graduated from Huazhong Agricultural University with a bachelor's degree in Food Science and Engineering and has a master's degree in Applied Translation from the University of Leeds.



WILLIAM BRENNER

A true global citizen, William brings a unique combination of strategy and design to the table, working alongside TSI's global client portfolio to realise their brand visions. This is supported by a focus on design-led thinking, meaning the insights he provides are always backed by what consumers actually want. Prior to TSI, he founded design agency DesignWB.



JOHN PABON

Over the past decade, John has examined the societal impacts of China's economic rise and has been honoured as one of the world's top 100 voices on modern China. He also leads TSI's marketing and communications. His previous work includes posts with the United Nations, McKinsey, A.C. Nielsen, and as a consultant with BSR, the world's largest sustainability-focused business network.

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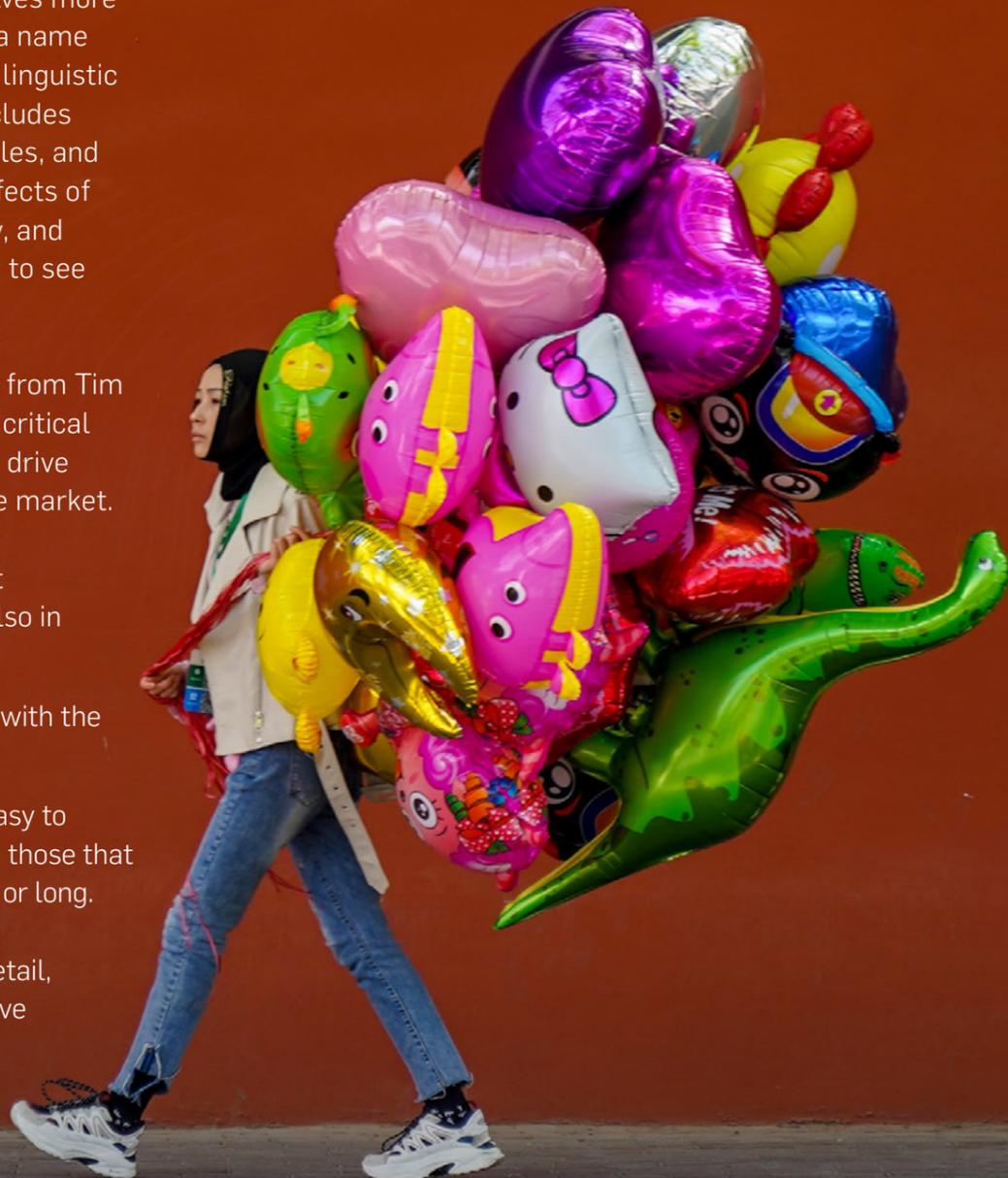
IN BRIEF

Creating a product name for China involves more than just translation. To be successful, a name also has to understand the cultural and linguistic environment it operates within. That includes resonating with consumers, their lifestyles, and needs. When combined with the halo effects of positive brand reputation, visual identity, and competitive positioning, a brand is likely to see higher purchase intent.

TSI's extensive work in product naming, from Tim Tams to Beyond Meat, has shown three critical elements a good name must possess to drive consumer conversion and success in the market.

- First, a name must understand how it translates not only in Mandarin but also in other major dialects.
- Second, a product name must match with the personality of the brand.
- Lastly, names which are simple and easy to share tend to have more success than those that are overly sophisticated, complicated, or long.

This report explores these elements in detail, including examples of companies that have successfully named products for China.



NOTE ON TSI NAVIGATOR™ HEATMAP TECHNOLOGY



Our analysis includes use of Hotsplex heatmap technology. The Hotsplex heatmap is a comprehensive collection of associations on the specific emotional attributes a brand or product expresses. With its 8 different "zones," each representing a different key emotional attribute, the map helps marketers and their partners determine their brand's right emotional space.

One can divide each zone into three sections: core, middle and outside. As associations move from the middle of the heatmap to the outside, they change from positive to negative.

Core section: This represents the key associations every successful brand should elicit among consumers: interesting, successful, competent, reliable, down-to-earth, easy-going, likeable, and cool.

Middle section: Moving out from the core section, the middle section is more contextual and indicative of potential brand differentiators. This is where associations should be matched up with brand values. For instance, the middle section of the "interesting" zone contains words like passionate, creative, sporty, and outspoken.

Outside section: The outside ring of the heatmap contains negative associations. These are, on average, three times as impactful as positive ones and a leading indicator of brand health issues. For instance, the outside section of the "interesting" zone contains words like pretentious, dangerous, and rude.

These associations are all linked. For instance, feeling "interested" can lead to feeling "passionate," but too much of this can lead to feeling "pretentious."

If you have any other questions on the heatmaps, please feel free to contact TSI.

WHY PRODUCT NAMING IS NO SIMPLE FEAT IN CHINA

Naming in China goes beyond using Google Translate. Never mind the legal aspects of naming, like making sure something isn't trademarked, language is more than a series of letters or characters hobbled together. There are wider cultural and linguistic implications. That's why we're big proponents of transcreation, the process of not only translating but also adding in those wider imperatives. That way you come up with something that resonates rather than embarrasses. Believe us...the latter happens way too often.

Take one of China's most popular brands, Coca-Cola. Coke entered the Chinese market back in 1927. Initially, they simply translated the four syllables in their name. This resulted in the amazing brand name 蝌蚪啃蜡, meaning tadpoles eating wax candles! Needless to say, consumers were not thrilled. Sales for Coke weren't the hit they thought they'd be. Eventually, Coke employed one of China's premier linguists to devise the name they still use today, 可口可乐, meaning delicious and cheerful.

At TSI, we have found three distinct impacts naming can have on Chinese consumer sentiment. In this edition of the TSI Navigator™ Compass, we explore the elements a good name must possess to drive consumer conversion and success.

To arrive at these findings we employed our proprietary data intelligence platform, TSI Navigator™, which looks at 10 major F&B categories from consumers all across China to understand drivers and trends in real-time. We also conducted interviews with Chinese consumers in Beijing, Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Wuhan to understand sentiment towards various product names. Additionally, we capitalised on our in-depth understanding of Chinese consumer behaviour, qualitative expert interviews, as well as extensive work in naming, new product development, branding, and packaging design.



REGIONALITY COUNTS



While Mandarin is China's official language, the country has over 200 different dialects. Some may be quite similar, but others have completely different vocabularies. Even among the ten largest dialects there are unique phonetic rules. These rules can mean a word or phrase fine in one dialect becomes something odd, negative, or even perverse in another. A product's name, therefore, should take into account the way it will be translated not just in Mandarin, but other major dialects as well.

To demonstrate the impact regionality can have on consumer sentiment and purchase intent, look at a telling example from beverage giant 7-Up. Last year the company launched its non-alcoholic Mojito-flavoured soda to Chinese consumers. Based on TSI Navigator™ data, the product has a relatively low overall purchase intent score of 57. Its Mandarin name, 莫7托, points to a possible reason why.

When we filter the product based on region, something interesting happens.



REGIONALITY COUNTS

For consumers in Beijing, where Mandarin is more prevalent, purchase intent jumps to 72. That's likely because the name, a transliteration of the syllables mo-ji-to, describes the product well.



“What kind of name is this? So hard to say it in Guangdong.”

Cantonese consumer



“Interesting name!”

Non-cantonese consumer



“Weird name. It really sounds like a dirty word.”

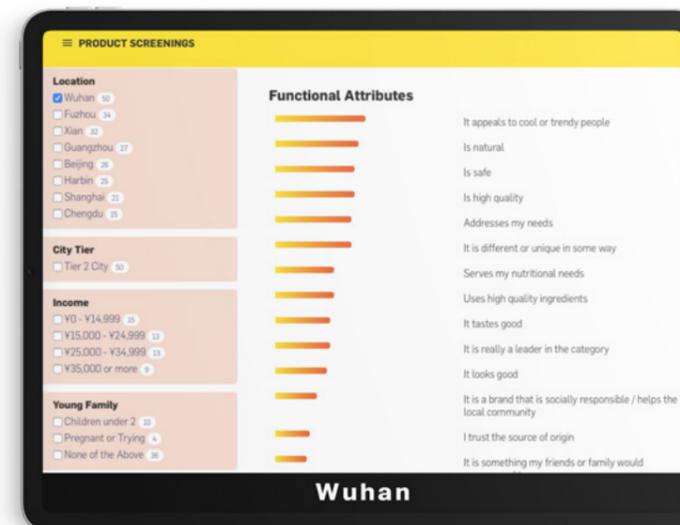
Cantonese consumer

Filtered for the southern city of Guangzhou, however, purchase intent drops to 54. In Cantonese, the major dialect of the region, consumers were embarrassed to say 莫7托. Not only is the name a complicated tongue twister, but online comments show concerns about mispronunciation, noting “...it sounds like a dirty word.”

In Wuhan, the character 莫 is a negative command. It seems Wuhan consumers listened to that command as the purchase intent score there was a low 45.

But it's not just purchase intent. Consumers in Guangzhou and Wuhan had much lower scores on the functional attribute “it tastes good” versus consumers in Beijing. That means the halo effect of a name can change consumer perception of taste, quality, and trustworthiness.

At TSI, we make sure to check all naming conventions with speakers of major dialects before proposing them to clients. That way we help avoid the embarrassment of a character used in error and ensure the greatest potential for success across all of China's disparate regions.



Purchase intent scores for 7-Up's 莫7托 vary considerably between Beijing, Guangzhou, and Wuhan due to complications in dialect translation.



SPLIT PERSONALITIES

Brands have their own distinct personality, just like a human being. And, just like any human being, it's always nice when the public and private personas match. Otherwise we typically have a problem trusting them. Consumers interpret the personality of a brand much the same way. Since the name is usually the first thing consumers learn about a product, it's important it matches the brand attributes being promoted.

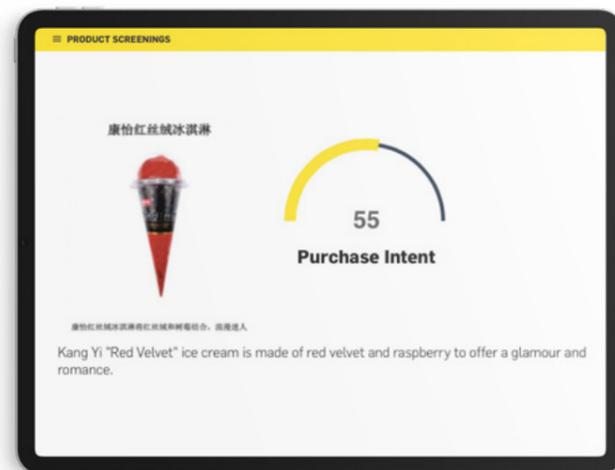
Luckily, you can express much more in a single Chinese character than an entire English word. Savvy brands capitalise on this, using this valuable real estate to promote the personality of their products.

Take, for example, Cornetto ice cream. What are your first impressions looking at the visual identity of the product? It's bright, lively, and carefree. Now consider the verbal identity with their Mandarin name, 可爱多. This translates into "lots of cuteness," a name fitting its external personality. This is also reflected in the emotional heatmap for Cornetto. Here, we see the warmest associations are with attributes like "cute" and "active," another indication of the impact a name can have on consumer brand perception.

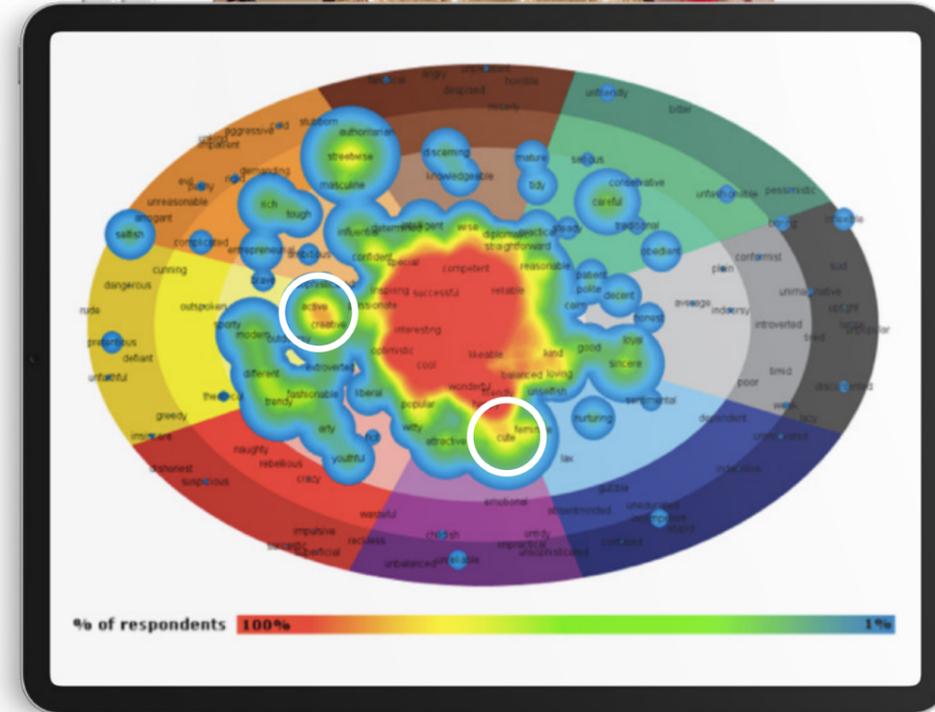
Jumping on China's fitness craze bandwagon, a local chicken snack brand aimed at bodybuilders decided to name themselves 小鸡收腹. Meaning "chicken with tight abs," the offbeat name works well with their target segment. Even in emotional heatmaps we see a higher prevalence

of association with more masculine attributes, clearly what the brand was going for.

But, what happens when your product name doesn't mesh with its personality? Consumers can quickly see through this and express their displeasure in lower purchase intent. One example is a local ice cream brand called 康怡, which means "healthy and happy." Its product does not have any claims related to health (it's ice cream after all) and heavy colouring implies artificial dyes. These draw the product further away from having a healthy personality. As a result, its purchase intent score, as well as functional associations with taste, quality, and nutrition, are low.

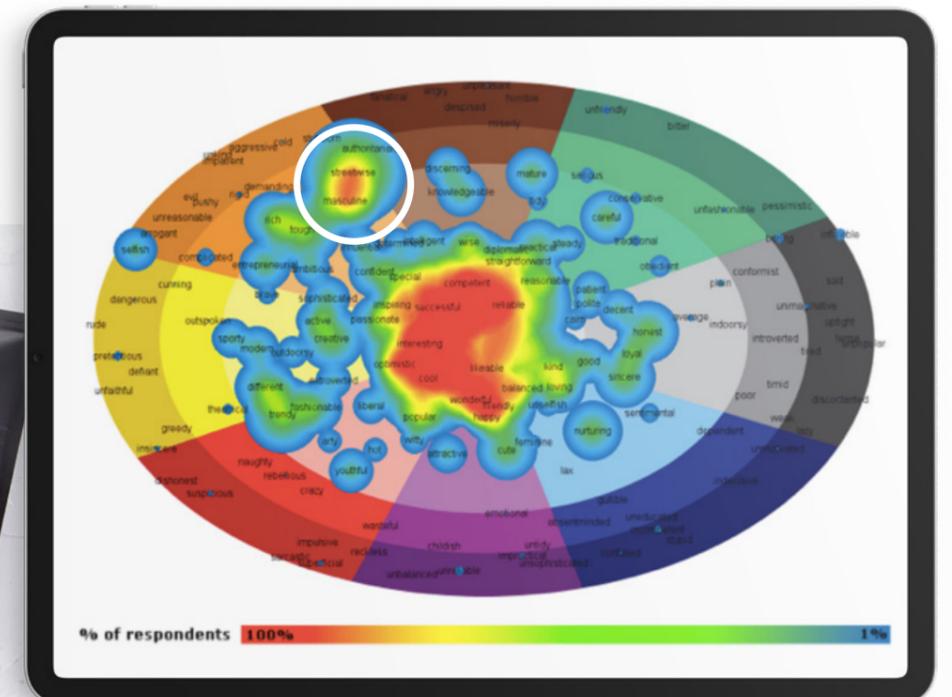


When a brand name doesn't match its personality then purchase intent can drop significantly, as it did for 康怡.



Cornetto ice cream's emotional heatmap scores align with attributes like "cute" and "active," fitting of the brand.

We see masculine attributes in the emotional heatmap for 小鸡收腹.



IT'S ALL GREEK TO ME

Not only does a name have to translate the right way and match a product's personality, it also needs to appeal to a wide consumer base. The more evangelists you can create, the more likely they are to share just how much they love your product to family and friends. In today's technology-laden landscape, building buzz is a critical part of the marketing mix.

As a popular product's name will be written, spoken, and typed out countless times, it's important that name is approachable, memorable, and easy to share. Short and simple is always going to be better than long and complicated. Just ask soda maker, 汉口二厂. While their translated name, "the second manufactory in the city of Hankou," leaves much to be desired, you can't argue with its simplicity. Not only is the strange name unique and memorable, but the script is almost easy enough for a non-Chinese speaker to write out.

Another good example is ice cream brand, Pree. From our experience, Chinese consumers prefer English brand names to also have a Mandarin name. That way they can use the Chinese name to search online and speak about with friends more easily. Pree is a rare example where consumers accept the English name by itself, likely because of its simplicity and ease of pronunciation. This is very different from one of Pree's major competitors, Haagen-Dazs. Chinese

consumers prefer to use the brand's Mandarin name so much, it's rare to find anyone who actually knows the English name.

A complicated name can also aggravate the very consumers you're trying to convert. The characters in sparkling coffee drink 炭火 mean coal and ice, respectively. While the first character is common, the second is a very ancient character that has fallen out of use. By trying to be too sophisticated, the brand name has actually ostracised many consumers. Some even went online to complain the name was so infuriating as it made them feel illiterate.

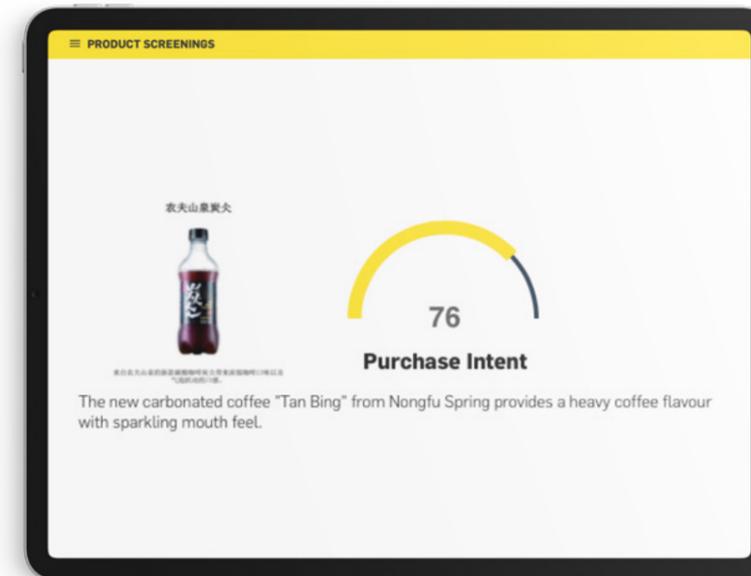
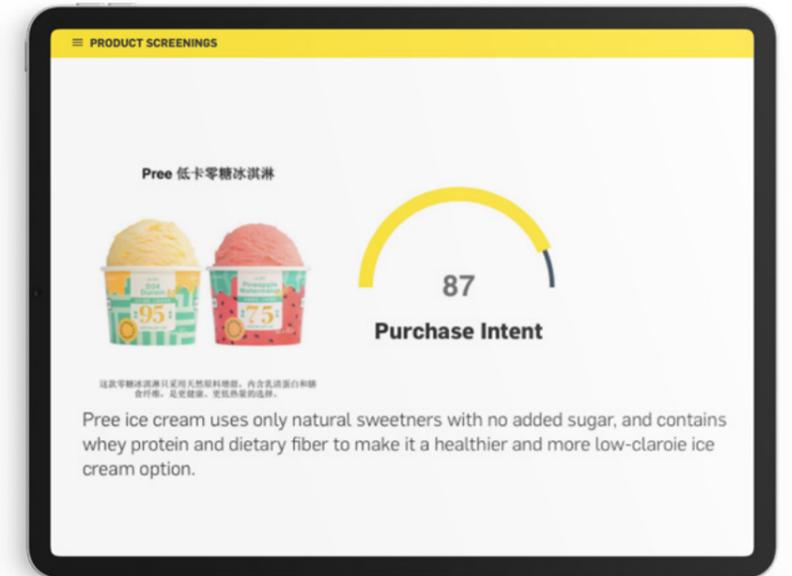
"If this product fails, its name will be 50% responsible for its failure."

"If I type pinyin, the first result I get is 探病 (tan bing, which means to visit a patient)."

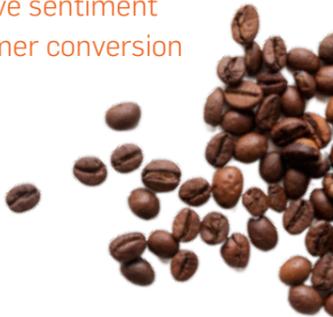
"It looks like Japanese kanji, but you are a Chinese brand."



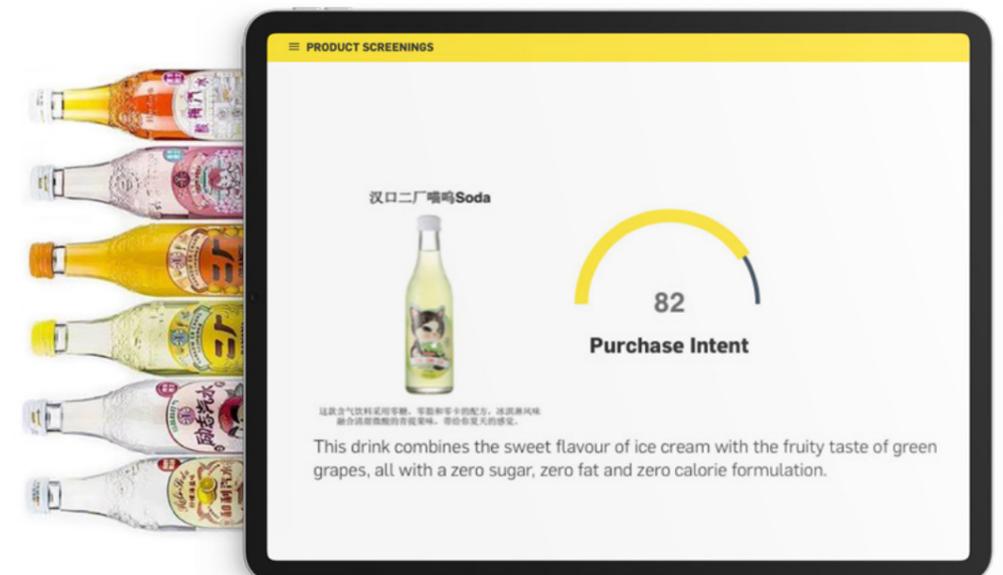
Having an English name that is simple to pronounce, and share, gives Pree a purchase intent score of nearly 90.



Although it has an above average intent score, 炭火 may experience long-term negative sentiment impacting consumer conversion over time.



With its unique name, 汉口二厂 sees a high purchase intent score.



HOW TSI APPROACHES NAMING: A CASE STUDY FOR **BEYOND MEAT**

Beyond Meat is one of the fastest growing food companies in the world, offering a portfolio of revolutionary plant-based meat alternatives. Looking to launch its business in China, Beyond Meat needed to better understand Chinese consumers and localise its brand name, tagline, and product names. They engaged TSI to help them in that process.

Beyond Meat understood the intricacies of naming for China. Complicating matters was the category itself. While plant-based diets have a long history in China, alternative meats are still a fringe product. How would Beyond Meat simultaneously stay true to their mission while conveying the meaning of their tagline “Go Beyond” to convert consumers?

To land on the perfect parlance for Beyond Meat, we employed our proprietary SPRINT methodology. Through this, we were able to validate Beyond Meat’s Mandarin brand name, tagline, and individual product names.

Our SPRINT methodology

The speed of consumer change in China means there is little time to waste in the new product development process. To address this, TSI created our SPRINT methodology. While normally used for NPD work, SPRINT’s five-phase process was adjusted to provide Beyond Meat with validated naming conventions in minimal time.

Through a process of immersion, ideation, and consumer validation, we were able to test various concepts. The final name, 别样肉客™, performed well with consumer appeal and brand fit. Consumers also associated the name with being new, different, and unconventional, adjectives Beyond Meat wanted associated with their brand.

On April 22, 2020 Beyond Meat officially launched in China under the Mandarin name, 别样肉客™. In English this translates to Unique Meat Eater, a very appropriate name for the brand. Their launch collaboration with Starbucks and Oatly has expanded reach and exposure for the brand among Chinese consumers.

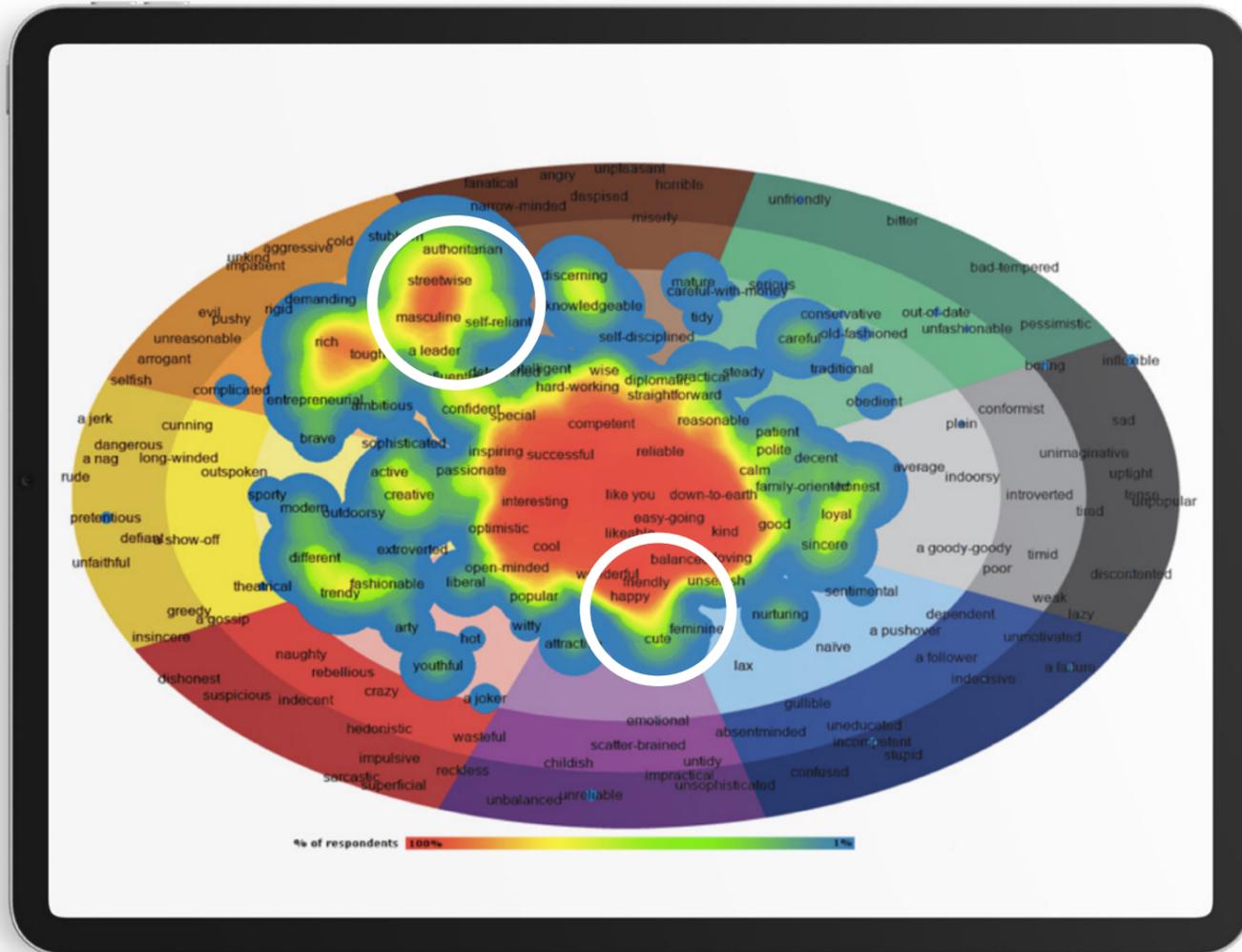
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别样肉客



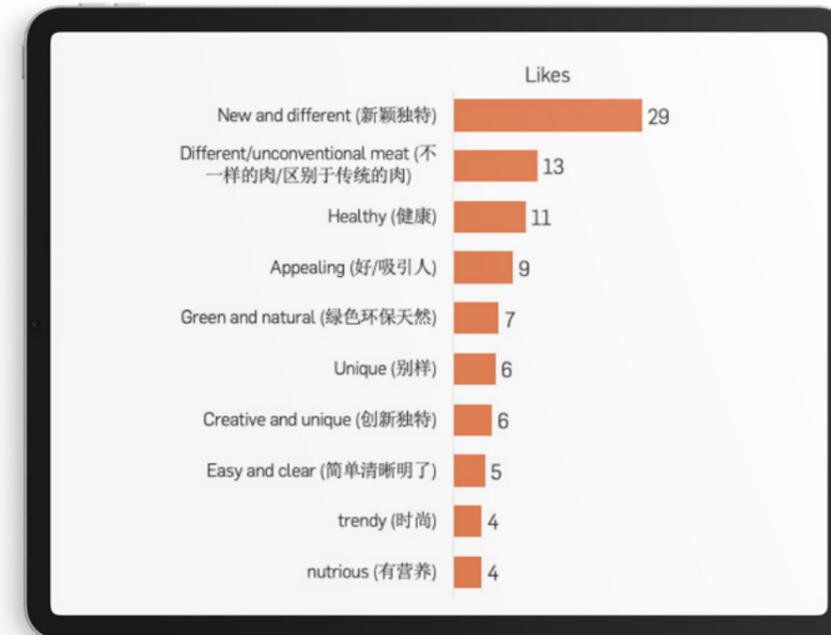
HOW TSI APPROACHES NAMING: A CASE STUDY FOR **BEYOND MEAT**

Heatmap associations for 别样肉客™ include being streetwise, cool, and happy.



“TSI’s culturally led creative naming process resulted in the perfect name for our China brand launch. Their sprint approach was not only effective, they were a pleasure to work with and highly responsive to our brand needs.”

-Will Schafer
VP of International Marketing



Consumers overwhelmingly viewed the product as being new and different.



CONCLUSION

It's easy to see why simply naming a product in China isn't actually simple at all. The importance of having a regionally appropriate name friendly to consumers and consistent with your product's personality can contribute to its success. Of course, there's also the halo effect of your brand reputation, visual identity, and competitive positioning that impact whether or not a consumer is going to buy what you're selling.

While we wouldn't recommend you try naming on your own, there are a few things to keep in mind when transcreating a brand name for the Chinese market.

- The Holy Grail is to combine the pronunciation of your brand name, transliterated, with some greater meaning behind the name. That way consumers can easily recognise your brand in marketing collateral and other channels.
- What is your character combination delivering for consumers? Is the name easy to pronounce or a tongue twister? Does it have a positive meaning or something more sinister? Can people read it or does it use one of the more obscure Chinese characters?
- It's also important to think through the ideology of each character. Chinese is a complex system of character combinations. While individual characters might mean one thing on their own, they may very well take up an entirely different meaning when in a group.

At the end of the day, your brand name is what consumers will ultimately resonate with. In our hyper-connected society, it's also the gateway to positive adoption or negative buzz. Getting it right, rather than having it done cheaply, is a critical part of a successful China marketing mix.



ABOUT TSI

At The Silk Initiative, we use insight, strategy, and innovation to future-proof global food and beverage brands. Our business is to create and validate data-driven brand strategy solutions for our clients' future ambitions.

TSI is one of the world's few food and beverage brand consultancies sitting at the intersection of insight, strategy, innovation, and creative development. We work with partners across research and development, marketing, and consumer insights. From our base in Shanghai, we help clients around the world make smarter brand and product decisions by combining our tools and services, excellent advisory, future-focused thinking and tangible, actionable assets.

We do this through three distinct practice areas to help companies discover, innovate, and scale their market opportunities.



Discover. Whether it's short-term brand diagnostic work or comprehensive brand positioning, we take a comprehensive look at your category, consumers, and competitors to provide a complete assessment of opportunities and future risks, helping you feel informed and competent as a brand owner.

Innovate. Our proprietary innovation development and visual design approaches bring brand, product, pack, and communication platform ideas to life. This gives your business culturally inspired, relevant solutions that will get noticed in the market today and in the future.

Scale. Our rigorous brand validation techniques help our clients understand the measurable future return on investment of their brand strategies. This ensures you have the confidence, excitement, and motivation to maximise your market potential.



In addition, our proprietary tool, **Navigator™**, is the industry's first dynamic data intelligence platform that collects, analyses, and visualises the China food and beverage landscape. Navigator™ looks at 10 major F&B categories from consumers across 8 key cities in China to understand drivers and trends in real time. The tool is designed to help companies make smarter decisions in food and beverage in China, particularly when it comes to innovation.

ABOUT THE TSI NAVIGATOR™ COMPASS

TSI strongly believes in the importance of quantitative data when analysing and determining consumer trends. Qualitative insights are good, but only go so far. Numbers, however, speak volumes. That's why we created TSI Navigator™, the industry's first and only dynamic data intelligence platform that collects, analyses, and visualises the China food and beverage landscape. Navigator™ explores 10 F&B categories across 8 of the most important cities in China, cities where companies are looking to for growth.

The monthly TSI Navigator™ Compass is based on TSI Navigator™ trend analysis, quantitative analysis, literature reviews, and qualitative interviews with industry leaders. It also draws on TSI's industry expertise in linguistics, semiotics, culture, consumer products, food and beverage, and wellness.

This research is part of The Silk Initiative's continued examination of consumer trends throughout the region. With this report, The Silk Initiative (TSI) aims to educate foreign and domestic brands on the latest topics prevalent to business success in the food and beverage, consumer packaged goods, fast moving consumer goods, and wellness sectors.

This edition was written by William Brenner, John Pabon, and Qi Zhang, with contributions from members of the TSI China team. The authors wish to thank external interviewees and other TSI colleagues who provided feedback. Any errors that remain are those of the authors. Please direct comments or questions to John Pabon at john@thesilkinitiative.com.

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The TSI Navigator™ Compass:

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