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Coffee shop-naming practices in Shanghai

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Abstract: This study examines the naming practices of 303 coffee shop brand names in Shanghai from the perspectives of language choice, linguistic form, and semantic content, which are integral considerations in the naming process. All the collected names were categorized for various characteristics across these three dimensions. The results identify a number of characteristics of the coffee shop names, namely, the dominance of non-Chinese languages, widespread nonstandard forms, and various semantic content themes, including evocative names, emphasis on shop ambiance, business description, inclusion of subcultural elements, personalized names, and the use of positive descriptors and markers of geographical location. A content analysis of these names reveals that coffee shops are typically constructed as exotic, modern, trendy places that are popular among young customers. More notably, coffee shop naming is a trans-spatial practice that transforms the coffee shops into multirole sites and serves as a semiotic assemblage conveying special meaning to patrons; that is, the shops not only serve coffee and other food and beverages but may also provide an exotic cultural atmosphere in which customers receive emotional and spiritual sustenance, interact with friends, and even have surreal experiences.

Keywords: cultural atmosphere; multirole sites; trans-spatial practices; semiotics

1 Introduction

According to a report on China's coffee industry between 2017 and 2021, China's coffee consumption grew at an annual rate of 15%–20%, far higher than the global average growth rate of 2% (Li 2021). With the growing popularity of coffee culture, more coffee shops than ever appeared in China during those years, especially in fast-developing international metropolises like Shanghai. A 2021 survey revealed that Shanghai owns more coffee shops (around 7,000 units) than any other city in the world (Xiao et al. 2021;

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Xing 2021). With the aim of securing their share in this competitive coffee market, the key consideration for these Shanghai coffee shop owners has become how to attract more customers. Shop brand names, being the vital element for store image, play a pivotal role in capturing the patrons' interests. In addition to serving as a social, communicative tool between owners and customers (Chen 2021), they often indicate the owners' desired shop positioning and product characteristics (Susanto 2015). Furthermore, the underlying meanings of the shop names invoke a certain set of cultural associations in the consumers' minds that spur their buying desires (Nuessel 2014). A name does not simply exist as a linguistic label representing its referent and transmitting factual information. Instead, it embodies particular symbolic meanings, reflecting specific cultural values and appealing to emotions (Amara 2019; Edelman 2009). It is thus relevant to investigate these coffee shops' naming patterns to see what specific social meaning is conveyed through these naming practices so the specific sociocultural perceptions toward coffee and coffee consumption can be unveiled.

Previous naming studies have widely discussed the shop-naming practices within a range of business domains, such as transmigrant restaurants and stores (Bletzer 2003; Chen 2018), hotels (Chen 2021; Susanto 2015), hawker centers (Leimgruber 2020), barber and bottle shops (Herbert 1999), and beauty shops (Ong et al. 2013). They mainly outlined the naming strategies of the shops in terms of particular language choice, novel forms, and specific cultural references, with some further revealing the meanings underlying these intentional practices. However, the naming practices in the coffee shop landscape are still underexplored, providing an obvious research gap to fill. The current study aims to explore the naming practices of the coffee shops in Shanghai to find out what is in a name and what messages are tried to be communicated more precisely by focusing on three dimensions in the naming process, namely, language choice, linguistic form, and semantic content. The findings of the study not only contribute to the scholarship of shop-naming strategies, but also offer some insights into the sociocultural meanings invoked by the names, contributing to our understanding of the connection between shop naming and society and the importance of shop naming as a semiotic practice.

2 Coffee shops in Shanghai

Shanghai has witnessed the ups and downs of coffee culture since the coffee bean was first introduced in 1844 (Shi 2020). Nowadays, it has become the city with the largest number of coffee shops in the world. Coffee shops have been integrated into the life of Shanghai people, and the younger generations are the main group who often spend time in these places (Chiya 2018). Statistics show that people aged 20–40 are the main consumer population for coffee shops in Shanghai (Zhou 2021). These people are largely white-collar workers and students (Cheng 2021). With more

intense urbanization, the coffee shop has evolved into a “third place” apart from home and work for these well-educated people to meet, socialize, and relax, alleviating their solitude and anxiety (Oldenburg 2013: 7). Moreover, as the third-wave coffee movement (“Third-wave coffee” 2023) sweeps throughout the world, coffee lovers increasingly pay special attention to the high quality and fresh taste of coffee, especially specialty coffees. To secure a place in an extremely competitive market, coffee shops not only invest great efforts into improving the taste of coffee and exploring new-flavored products, but also pay enormous attention to constructing their brand image via such features as shop names and interior design.

3 Methodology

The current study examines the naming patterns of coffee shops and the sociocultural meanings underlying the coffee shop names. Employing the linguistic description and classification methods that are commonly used in naming studies (Abubakari 2020), the analysis is qualitative and deductive, identifying the common characteristics of the names, describing their linguistic features, and then probing the sociocultural implications of these names.

A total of the top 303 most popular coffee shop names in Shanghai were collected from dianping.com (<https://www.dianping.com/>). Dianping.com is an online consumer platform that provides a comprehensive database of catering establishments in China, including an introduction to the shop, various photographs of the shop façades and the food, and comments posted by the patrons. It also runs a ranking system that ranks all the shops based on their popularity among the public. In the data collection, the façade image of the shop sign provided in each shop’s profile on dianping.com was collected. Shops belonging to a chain were counted only once. All the examples of names cited in this paper are presented in line with how they are displayed on the shop façades. However, since many of the names contain the word “coffee” or “café,” this designation is dropped in the paper in accordance with Chen’s (2021: 2) “simplicity” principle.

In the analysis, all the collected names were noted and classified for different features across three dimensions, namely, language choice, linguistic form, and semantic content. The analysis of the language choice draws support from Ben-Rafael’s (2008) four-structuration principles to help justify the naming practices. This model was developed to explain linguistic diversity in public signs from the perspective of social action. The linguistic forms of the names are categorized based on their morphological structure and orthography. Finally, the names were also grouped into different categories by their semantic content. Since it is difficult to conduct interviews or surveys to consult each shop founder about the shop names given the relatively large data size (Hämäläinen et al. 2021), the classification and

interpretation of the semantic content was based on secondary sources. A thorough online investigation on the implications, motivations, and backgrounds related to the coffee shop brand names was conducted before data classification.

In the classification process, there were a small number of names whose connotations were difficult to pin down despite the online inquiries. In this case, in order to have a more accurate understanding of the names, these names were replaced by other more intelligible examples. In addition, it was noticed that some names exhibited more than one form or semantic type. Multiple identified forms or semantic types in each name were all considered and counted in the statistics. Given the limited space, only several representative examples have been chosen to illustrate the main ideas of the paper.

4 Findings and discussions

4.1 Dominance of non-Chinese languages

Table 1 below presents the language combination of the coffee shop brand names in our data.

Table 1: Languages used in the coffee shop brand names.

Language combination	Frequency	Percentage
Monolingual	197	65.02
English	159	52.48
Chinese	23	7.59
Japanese	7	2.31
French	6	1.98
Italian	1	0.33
Spanish	1	0.33
Multilingual	106	34.98
English – Chinese	85	28.05
Chinese – Japanese	6	1.98
English – Japanese	5	1.65
Chinese – French	2	0.66
English – Turkish	1	0.33
English – French	1	0.33
English – Hawaiian	1	0.33
Chinese – Spanish	1	0.33
English – Chinese – Japanese	2	0.66
English – Chinese – Swedish	1	0.33
Chinese – French – Japanese	1	0.33
Total	303	100.00

As shown in Table 1 above, monolingual English (52.48 %) makes up most of the coffee shop names, followed by bilingual English–Chinese (28.05 %) and monolingual Chinese (7.59 %). It is undeniable that Shanghai is a metropolitan city with many foreign (non-Chinese) inhabitants to whom English signage serves as a referential tool. Despite the shop name being in English, the shop’s menu and other practical information are printed in Chinese or English–Chinese, which is expected in a highly monoglossic society like China. Although China is in fact a multilingual nation, where many regional dialects are still spoken and English is learned at school alongside the non-Chinese languages of the ethnic minorities, it can also be seen as a monoglossic society in which Putonghua acts as the powerful lingua franca among the Chinese people, who identify themselves primarily with that language (Li et al. 2022; Wang et al. 2016).

Figure 1 exhibits two examples of shops with monolingual English names and their menus.

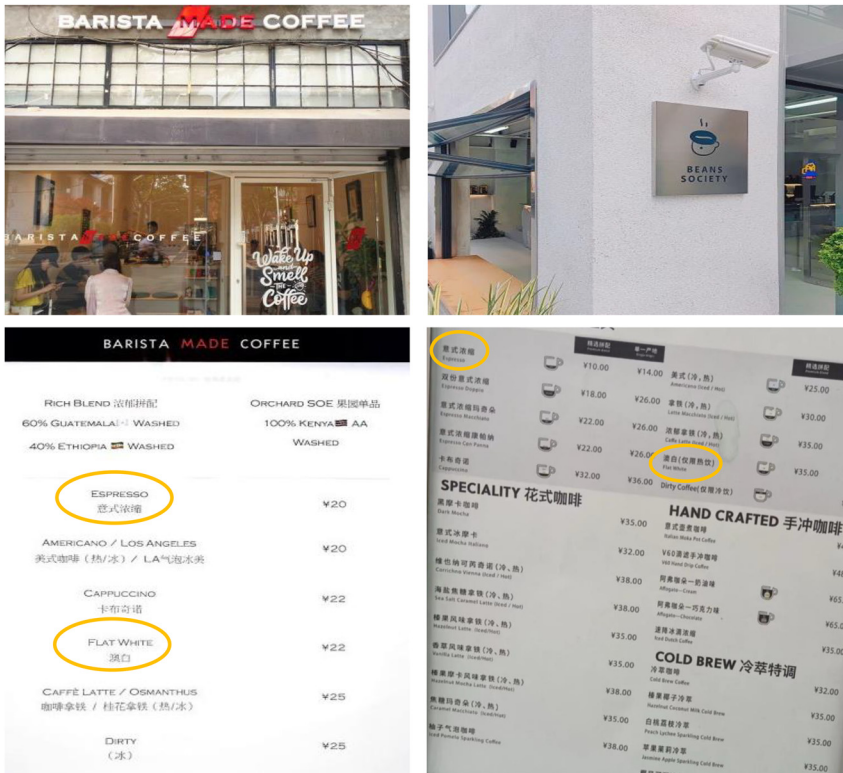


Figure 1: Monolingual English coffee shop brand names and their menus: (a) (left) BARISTA MADE COFFEE; (b) (right) BEANS SOCIETY (source: <https://www.dianping.com/>).

Many Chinese coffee terms are directly transliterated from the Italian/English names (e.g., flat white 澳白, cappuccino 卡布奇诺), which apparently is not more informative than the Italian/English original terms. But the symbolic value this carries is different from that of English. The use of Chinese language here mainly caters to the overwhelmingly Chinese customers, and it also marks a strong identity of the Chinese people living in this monoglossic Chinese society. In contrast, the prominence of English likens the situation of the café and other fashion outlets in Shanghai to those in other *expanding circle* nations, such as South Korea (Tan and Tan 2015) and Uzbekistan (Hasanova 2010). That is, similar to fashion that was introduced from Western society, the café indexes a Western and modern lifestyle in cosmopolitan cities. English certainly performs a symbolic function here, but more likely it plays an ornamental role as a marker of certain qualities that are associated with the coffee shop business, such as Westernization, modernity, prestige, and the like.

Besides English, other languages are occasionally recognized, such as Japanese, French, and Italian. The limited presence of these languages could be seen as adhering to Ben-Rafael's (2008) "*presentation of self*" principle, which refers to the sign-designer's intention to contrast themselves from others by displaying unusual language(s). As most of the shops adopt English language for their names, some owners might turn to other languages to stand out from these prevailing English names. Alternatively, some exotic codes function as markers of ethnic authenticity for owners to assert their ethnic identity according to the "*collective-identity*" principle (Ben-Rafael 2008). Figure 2 below exhibits a Japanese coffee shop named A SHIDAYA 'Ashida's shop.'

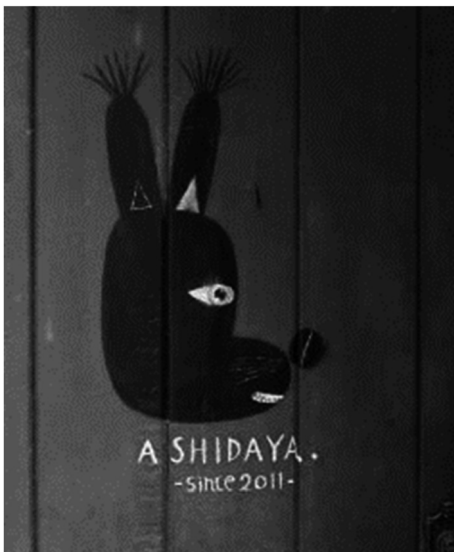


Figure 2: A SHIDAYA (source: <https://www.dianping.com/>).

The coffee shop is owned by a Japanese shopkeeper surnamed *Ashida*. The shop is also famous for its traditional Japanese-style hand-brewed coffee (cafe_style 2018). The Japanese language and the denotation of the name together accentuate the Japanese identity of the owner, while signifying the authenticity of the Japanese-style coffee recipe to potential patrons. Additionally, some exotic languages convey particular cultural meanings associated with the language to the sign-readers out of the “good-reasons” principle, which concerns whether the sign-readers’ perceptions of the signs reach the sign-designers’ expectations (Ben-Rafael 2008), in other words, whether the name is expected to attract the customers to the benefit of the shop owner. The monolingual French coffee shop named *MUSEE DE FLEURS* ‘Flower Museum’ in Figure 3 is one such example.

The shopfront festooned with flowers and ornamental plants without doubt informatively echoes the French name. However, iconically speaking, the French language used in the name seems to be intentional, conveying a sense of elegance and grace associated with the flower-style decoration to entice young female patrons.

In sum, the non-Chinese languages in brand names confer different symbolic values on the shop business, such as being a marker of ethnic identity and ethnic cultures. At any rate, the foreign (non-Chinese) linguistic elements tend to serve as a language commodity, conferring a feeling of exoticism on the shops. The use of non-Chinese languages caters to the young customer’s fondness for exotic adventure and a Westernized atmosphere, which they otherwise could not experience without traveling abroad. The various exotic languages with their symbolic cultural



Figure 3: MUSEE DE FLEURS (source: <https://www.dianping.com/>).

connotations (e.g., exoticism, modernity, cosmopolitanism, prestige, elegance) transform or commodify the coffee shop into a foreign and modernized space, appealing to the younger generations, who are deeply influenced by foreign cultures and who aspire for a foreign and modern lifestyle (Yang 2006).

4.2 Widespread unconventional linguistic forms

Table 2 displays the unconventional forms in the coffee shop brand names in our data.

Unconventional forms are invented linguistic forms that are divergent from the conventional forms commonly used in ordinary discourse (Booe 2021; Pitzl 2012). Of the 303 collected names, 115 (37.95 %) names are found to adopt unconventional forms, with some employing more than one unconventional form in the names. Table 2 presents the percentage of each type of creative linguistic form emerging in the names.

Transliteration (18.48 %) is most often adopted. Transliterated names can often be more accurately represented and more easily pronounced by readers who get used to the pronunciation rules (Hogue 2017). Among the transliterated names, for over half of them direct transliteration was applied, in which Chinese or Japanese scripts are romanized based on their pronunciation. Many of these examples are associated with a regional culture. For instance, Romanized Chinese names are often transliterated from a certain Chinese dialect, like Shanghaiese words (*dia* ‘best,’ *HEFA* 喝伐 ‘Let’s drink,’ *NONG* ‘you’), Sichuanese words (*BAS d BAN* 巴适得板 ‘very good’). Japanese expressions or concepts representing a certain Japanese subculture are also attested, such as *IKIGAI* ‘something that motivates someone to live on’ (“Ikigai” 2022) and *Gaman* ‘persistence or tolerance’ (“Gaman (Term)” 2023). Furthermore, some other shop owners preferred to transliterate the Chinese names into a more foreign-like names, such as 虎仔 *FUUYA* ‘tiger child’ (homophone for Huya, the standard romanization of the written Chinese name 虎仔), 片刻 *peekoo* ‘a

Table 2: Unconventional forms in the coffee shop brand names.

No.	Unconventional forms	Frequency	Percentage
1	Transliteration	56	18.48
2	Abbreviation	23	7.59
3	Numerals	15	4.95
4	Punctuation marks	15	4.95
5	Novel blends	11	3.63
6	Others	10	3.30

moment' (homophone for *Pianke*, the standard romanization of the written Chinese name 片刻). What's more, some others use as the homophonic substitute an existing English word or phrase which simultaneously functions as a bilingual pun conveying multiple meanings. Examples include *SeeSaw* 'Western house' (homophone for *Xishe*, the standard romanization of the written Chinese 西舍, which means 'Western house'), *Loyalty* 落雨天 'raining day' (homophone for *Luoyutian*, the standard romanization of the written Chinese name 落雨天), *Lab coffee* 来杯咖啡 'give me a cup of coffee' (homophone for *Laibei Coffee*, *Laibei* being the standard romanization of the written Chinese 来杯). The foreign-like names, in contrast with straight transliteration, can strengthen the impression of Westernization to a greater extent (Chan and Huang 2001), being more inviting to the young customer population who desire a Western and exotic lifestyle.

Overall, 7.59 % of the names are presented in abbreviated forms. Most are initialisms, which are spoken as a list of letters, such as *M2F* 'Machine to Finger,' *WAC* 'What a Coincidence,' *AUNN* 'All You Need Now.' Only few of them are acronyms that can be easily pronounced as a word, such as *LILI TIME* 'Love Is Life Illumed,' *o.p.s.* 'Openmind, Possibility, Space.' Abbreviation can shorten lengthy descriptive names. But more notably, it stylizes the abbreviated "internet slang" invented by the younger generation (Gan 2021).

Some shop names are composed of numerals and/or punctuation marks. Examples include *1+Garden*, *café109*, $(m)^3$, % *ARABICA*. Punctuations and numbers are common in the brand names. Sometimes, the numbers are specifically used for their sound in English, such as *M2F* 'Machine to Finger,' Some punctuation marks serve as an ideogram of a specific object; for instance, "%" in % *ARABICA* represents a coffee bean. Alternatively, a mathematical symbol makes the names simpler and less wordy, such as "+" instead of "plus" in *BITTER COFFEE + COCKTAILS* and "&" instead of "and" in *Wait & See*. These alphanumeric names not only look trendy but also arouse the interest of internet-savvy youngsters (Danesi 2011).

A handful of names are formed by blending two words or a word and a morpheme, sometimes with the merged elements clipped or overlapped. Examples of novel blends in the brand names include *blatage* (black + percentage: the coffee in the shop is named according to different percentages of black coffee), *COFFICERS* (coffee + officers: someone who holds a position of authority in coffee making), *LIMIX* (light + mix: every customer who comes here is like a beam of light, and they mix together in the shop), and *AROMAISM* (aroma + -ism: the shop advocates aromatic coffee).

On top of the above nonstandard forms, some other haphazard unconventional patterns are occasionally observed as well. They include code-switching (米仓 *Pop*: Yonekura, a Japanese given name), coinage (*ZOONIMO*), bilingual homophones (譚: the surname of the founder, homophone for the written Chinese 谈 'talk'), and

multilingual homophones, i.e., words that have different meanings in different languages (*PARAS*: ‘paratroopers’ in English, ‘stop’ in Spanish, ‘best’ in Finnish).

Quite a few coffee shop founders resort to nonstandard linguistic forms in naming. These irregular forms may serve as deliberate eye-catchers, making the shop names stand out visually. Alternatively, they may also perform a playful function in name decoding, bringing the name-readers more fun and pleasure (Luk 2013). But more markedly, these unconventional and playful names accommodate the youngsters’ internet-savvy manners and idiosyncratic affinity for irregularity, hipness, and fun. Through the witty wordplay and bizarre visual shapes in the brand names, the cafés appear more stylish, modern, and trendy.

4.3 Various semantic content themes

Table 3 uncovers a variety of semantic contents emerging in the coffee shop brand names in the data.

4.3.1 Evocative names

As seen in Table 3, a significant number (40.92 %) of coffee shop brand names were identified as evocative names delivering a specific idea or concept by using a metaphor or a suggestive referent (Harvey 2022). Some evocative names outline the shop’s business philosophy, namely, the guiding principles of running the business. For example, *adhoC* denotes the shop’s core value that each encounter with customer is accidental and temporary but special, and so each walk-in customer is treated seriously in the café. *WRITER* expresses the founder’s expectation that the baristas can spread the coffee culture and influence customers with a cup of coffee in the same way that a writer does with a pen. *Compass* indicates the shop’s unchangeable

Table 3: Semantic features in the coffee shop brand names.

No.	Semantic features	Frequency	Percentage
1	Evocative names	124	40.92
2	Ambiance	74	24.42
3	Business description	55	18.15
4	Subcultural elements	36	11.88
5	Personalization	35	11.55
6	Positive descriptors	14	4.62
7	Geographical location	13	4.29

mindset of pursuing high-quality and professional coffee. Beyond that, a number of shops indicate their positioning in the shop names. For example, some coffee shops have commonly employed the word “lab,” such as *T12 Lab*, *Café Lab 317*, *25 COFFEE LAB*. This word carries a connotation of “lab concept shop,” which indicates the shop’s mission of exploring and selling newly invented products as well as the shop founder’s devotion to “innovation,” “professionalism,” and “futurism,” much as the scientists working in a lab (Din-Don 2013; He 2022). It serves as the owner’s marketing tool to position the shop as a site of interaction with a coffee expert and declare their aspiration for making professional, high-quality, and innovative third-wave specialty coffee beverages.

A wealth of names bear encouraging connotations which provoke positive responses, such as hope (e.g. *DAYBREAK* symbolizes a new day with hope and a new beginning; *HARU ESP.* ‘spring’ suggests revival and hope), love (e.g. *ALOHA* ‘hello,’ a Hawaiian expression for greeting, representing love, peace, and warmth; *LILI TIME* ‘love is life illumed’), happiness (e.g. *RESUME* denotes that customers can resume their happiness after drinking coffee in the shop; 复觅乐 *F’MILE* ‘Keep looking for happiness’), joy (e.g. *JOY IN*, *Giggling*, *pipsmile*), possibility (e.g. *HALF* symbolizes the unfinished and unknown possibilities in life), energy (e.g. *UMAH*: U represents voltage and MAH stands for capacitance), comfort (e.g. *THE Hug mug*: coffee is like a hug in a mug). Interestingly, one name is found to be relatively discouraging, i.e., *Outopia*, meaning utopia doesn’t exist. The name seems to be related to the *Sang* 丧 youth subculture featuring feelings of defeatism, pessimism, and loss (Tan and Cheng 2020).

Some other names construct the coffee shop as a space for customers to flee to (*ESCAPE*, *PPTCAFE*: to forget about ppt), to escape from clamor (*Dugout*: customers can forget the city noise and unhappiness in life in this cozy shelter; *WHITE NOISE*), to live in seclusion (云隐 ‘Cloud concealment’; 古一 ‘Ancient One’), to be immersed in illusion (*DayDreaming By Monos*: indulging in impractical illusion; 週休七日 *ZHOU XIU QI RI* ‘Seven days off a week’). In addition, a number of founders prefer to depict their cafés as a social venue for customers to meet. The names of these shops typically include referents suggesting sociality, like *coffee society*, *Coffee Groupies* 咖啡聚落 (meaning a place where human beings live in a compact community), *Encounter Café* (suggesting a place for people to encounter friends). It reflects the owners’ attempts to construct their coffee shops as a space for social gatherings, which echoes the finding by Ferreira et al. (2021: 21) that coffee shops play a role beyond being a place for selling coffee, becoming a “space of connection and community” where people can get together, relax, and socialize out of home and work.

Lastly, some instances render the ideals youngsters chase after, like freedom (*Café de la Renaissance*, *LIBRE*, *glider*), independence (*BLACKSHEEP*: indexing

independence and principled nonconformity, alluding to a song by an American rapper and producer, OmenXIII), and etiquette (*MANNER, GentleMaker*).

Though the ideas invoked or described by the names are manifold, they largely manifest what emotional and spiritual experiences can be acquired by visiting these shops, such as getting away from work and reality, releasing emotions and gaining positive energy, meeting and chatting with people, putting on identities that are different from the ones they are expected to perform, among others. These emotional and spiritual experiences are seemingly marketed as commodities, as they are featured in the shop brand names.

4.3.2 Ambiance

Among the data, 24.42% are names referring to the unique ornamented ambiance and surroundings of the shops. The majority are themed concept coffee shops with the shop decorated in a specific theme. A themed shop often employs specific theming to attract customers by creating a unique and special experience (“Theme Restaurant” 2022). The themes in our data vary from vintage (*1617; A CALLING Studio; 古董花園 Antique Garden*), metal music (*abcPlayer; hi REC.*), bathroom (*BATHE*), pet (*CATIER人类研究所 ‘Catier Human Research Institute’; Husky go!; PINKPIG*), camping (*CAMP781*), cartoon characters (*naomao; SHONEN JUMP*), space (月球 ‘moon’; *into the force*: The Force is a physical and spiritual concept in Star Wars), drama (*THE FRIENDS*), arts (*Van Gogh Café SENSES梵高艺术咖啡馆*); brightness (*LIGHTS; SHIMMER*), flowers (*FLOWERPLUS; 1+Garden*), nature (*Creeper Coffee; Sylva Lab; HABITAT*), plainness (*Looose:Meaning陋室铭 ‘The Crude House’*), country living (*The Cottage Café*), and shelters (*Dugout*). Other cafés are named according to their distinctive location or surroundings. These locations often possess an uncommon and eye-catching view, such as *NEWSSTAND, ROOF P.M., LA COUR* ‘courtyard,’ and *DOVE SPACE*. These ambiance referents in the names reflect that the distinctive themed shop decorations or attractive scenic views, more than the coffee products, are taken as the featured products in these coffee shops.

4.3.3 Business description

Names describing the business of the shops, such as the characteristics of products and services, can often be found in the data. In most cases, they include terms which suggest a certain feature of the coffee, such as a characteristic of its ingredients (*MULTIPURE*, for its coffee made from pure water; *Strawberry Hill*, for its strawberry-flavored coffee), the origin of the coffee bean (*%ARABICA*, referencing the Arabica coffee bean varietal; *DeHome*, referencing a place in Yunnan Province; *DIONYSUS*, referencing a type of filter roast coffee bean), the distinctive coffee-

making style (*algebraist*, suggesting the coffee-making scheme is worked out mathematically; *MANUAL ESPRESSO BAR*, connoting purely handmade coffee; *Cuiqu DRIP*, indicating the coffee is made by the drip technique), an attribute of the shops (*1/10*, highlighting their principle of donating 10 % of the coffee sales to a Shanghai Charity; *Zakka & Coffee* ‘groceries and coffee’; *Cafe109*, alluding to their opening times from 10 am to 9 pm; *LTO*, an abbreviation of “limited time offers”; 明珠生活美学馆 ‘Pearl Life Aesthetics Museum,’ implying a place for things relevant to life aesthetics, such as coffee, book, arts). These names indicate that the owners try to make their shops outstanding by impressing the customers with their innovative coffee flavor, exclusive coffee beans, fresh or traditional coffee-making techniques, and the shop’s multifunctional services or unusual properties.

4.3.4 Subcultural elements

A range of subcultural elements can be observed. One typical element is the use of dialect from different places in China, such as Shanghainese (*HEFA* 喝伐 ‘Let’s drink’; *dia* ‘best’), Sichuanese (*BAS d BAN* 巴适得板 ‘That’s extremely great!’), or Southern Fujian topolect (*GABEE* ‘Coffee shop’). The dialect here indicates the ethnic identity (e.g., Shanghainese, Sichuanese, Fujianese) of the owner, which may be used to evoke ethnic relations with the local patrons. In addition, it reflects that coffee shops are becoming localized and culturally assimilated, with Westernized café culture increasingly adapted to the needs and preferences of the local Chinese people.

Beyond that, the names embrace a variety of popular cultural symbols, mostly from foreign cultures, such as movies (*Marienbad*; *ONE DAY*; *Flipped*), cartoons (牛奶蜂蜜猫眼石 ミルクハチミツ猫眼石 ‘milk honey cymophane,’ adapted from the Japanese comic cartoon *Gem Merchant*), legend (*Artemis*; *Onirii*), faraway places (*LES HALLES*; *kamogawa*; *IZUMO*), TV series (*Bazinga*, a word popularized in the American sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*), music (*In Dough WE TRUST*, the name of a music artist and a word play on the motto “In God we trust”), movie characters (古一 ‘Ancient One,’ a character in *Marvel Comics*), ancient civilizations (*SUMERIAN*). Patronizing these shops seemingly will transport the shop visitors to the fantasy cultural world described in the names.

The names containing subcultural elements present a diverse and rich cultural image, which implicates the influence of various (sub)cultures on the Chinese locals due to globalization. Incorporating Chinese dialects into the coffee shops may attract the in-group people who speak the same dialect or the young people who fancy tasting the fresh Chinese-style coffee, while the exotic cultural symbols grab the attention of young people who are greatly influenced by the foreign culture. More crucially, the subcultural elements, either dialects or popular cultural symbols, can

project a collective ethnic identity or international and chic identity for those who visit the shops.

4.3.5 Personalization

Overall, 11.55 % of the names are personalized in different ways. Some contain personal names that are possibly the names of the shop founders, like *Ben's*, *MIAR's*, *Gregorius*, *NANA*. Interestingly, most of these personal names, are non-Chinese names (e.g. English, Japanese). Presumably the founders want to be conceived as coming from overseas countries, enhancing the appeal of exoticism of the products they provide.

Other names stem from the founders' stories, experiences, interests, or other individual characteristics. Instances include the owner's favorite place (*Big Sur*, indicating the owner is attracted by the view in Big Sur), interest (*Fight Club*, the owner of which is a boxer, and his medals and belts decorate the shop), physical attributes (*不右 no right*, whose owner is left-handed), the Chinese Zodiac (虎仔 *FUUYA*, which was built by three girls whose zodiac sign is the tiger.), family (*DJ WCL*, where WCL is the owner's son who loves playing DJ), best-loved book (*STRANGER*, because *The Stranger* by Albert Camus is the owner's favorite novel), pet name (店滯三 'Shop Shisan,' 滯三 'Shisan' being a homophone for the written Chinese 十三 'thirteen,' the name of the owner's kitten.). The coffee shop becomes a stage for the owners to present themselves and where they make friends with like-minded people. Many founders appear to start the coffee shop business for storytelling or fulfilling their visions, which provides a good venue for founders to reach out the customers and build up emotional contact with them (Tsuji-mura 2018). The founders try to captivate like-minded friends who are attracted to the stories or experiences which are connoted by the personalized names, fulfilling the goal of building up a community made up of like-minded people (Chen 2015).

4.3.6 Others

Positive descriptors are also noticeable. It is understandable that owners want their shops to be the best and attempt to declare their food is the best, which prompts them to incorporate positive descriptors in shop names in the restaurant business (Chen 2018). Many examples in our dataset contain descriptors suggesting pleasant sensory experience, like *AROMA*, *AROMAISM*, *yummy*. A few of them involve a word or morpheme indicating high potential, excellence, profession, or superior quality, such as *dia* 'very good,' *PROS* 'professionals,' *SUPERNOVA*, implying the shop is so brilliant that it powerfully inspires others; *Liu* 鑒 'Superior-quality gold,' indicating that the coffee has gold-status excellence.

Finally, some shops are named according to the geographical position they are located in. Examples include street names (e.g., *Remi*, from Remi Road), street numbers (e.g., 六六 ‘sixty-six’ derives from street #66), nearby landmarks (e.g., 口袋 ‘pocket’ derives from its nearby plaza named Pocket Plaza), the building where the shop is located (怡和 1915 ‘pleasance and peace 1915,’ because the building is named 怡和 and was built in 1915). Mention of surrounding locations may function as the mnemonic device to make the sign easier to remember, as sign-readers recognize a shop in its geographical context.

Brand naming ordinarily seeks to create a memorable name that can also reflect product characteristics (Charmasson 1988). However, this analysis shows that, generally, coffee shop brand names spotlight a variety of themes beyond the coffee products being offered. For example, a fair number of evocative names visualize the coffee shop being an emotional and spiritual site for customers to escape from stress and fatigue, to boost energy, to socialize, and to assume identities they desire. The ambiance-referent names highlight the distinct thematic atmosphere designed in the coffee shop; the foreign cultural elements conjure up an exotic and fantasy cultural world in the shop visitor’s minds; personalized names evoke a sense of community made up of like-minded people who are attracted to the founder’s stories or experiences associated with the names. These various types of names place more emphasis on the emotional, thematic, communal, and cultural experiences being undergone by visiting these shops. These diverse experiences appear to be taken as commodities for marketing in these coffee shops. The coffee shop names deliver appealing and imaginary associations to the minds of the young coffee customers about what can be acquired by visiting the shops. The young customers no longer patronize the coffee shops solely for buying a coffee; they do so with the “added value” of enjoying an exclusive and wonderful experience in such a place, albeit temporarily.

5 Conclusions

This study analyzed the brand names of Shanghai coffee shops from the perspectives of language choice, linguistic form, and semantic content. The analysis identified the following features, namely, dominant use of non-Chinese languages, widespread nonstandard linguistic forms, evocative names, emphasis on shop ambiance, business description, inclusion of subcultural elements, personalized names, positive descriptors, and markers of geographical location. The analysis shed light on some sociocultural meanings implied by the names. Firstly, in language choice, the dominant presence of non-Chinese languages in the shop brand names are not primarily for communication but for adding the symbolic value of exoticism,

prestige, and modernity to the coffee shops at an emblematic level, which are ideologically believed to be more enticing to the target young customers who desire a foreign and modern lifestyle. Secondly, quite a few coffee shops employ nonstandard forms. These irregular forms not only make the shop names more arresting and playful, but also give a sense of trendiness and modernity to the shops, which conforms to the youth customer group's penchant for fun and chic. Lastly, the semantic content of coffee shop names suggests that coffee shops provide a place not purely for selling coffee beverages, but, more than that, for providing the emotional, thematic, communal, and cultural experiences indicated by the names. The coffee shop brand names do not always highlight the coffee products, but they accentuate the experiences of drinking coffee in their shops, turning the coffee shop into an *experience commodity*. In essence, the coffee shop brand names in Shanghai depict the coffee shops as exotic, modern, and trendy establishments popular with the young, but more impressively they portray a multirole site offering emotional and spiritual sustenance, social interaction, fantasy themes, and cultural experiences. The process of naming coffee shops thus serves as a trans-spatial practice transforming the coffee shop into a "space" where patrons can not only enjoy their favorite coffee but also undergo unique emotional or fanciful experiences. It becomes a semiotic assemblage conveying special meaning to the potential customers.

The current study contributes to the scholarship of business names and Chinese semiotic studies, by providing insights into sociocultural meanings conveyed through the coffee shop names and pointing out that coffee shop naming is a trans-spatial semiotic practice. However, the focus chiefly lies on the linguistic traits of morphology and semantics. Future research may put more emphasis on the sound symbolism and phonological structure of the names, which will provide different insights.

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