

Exploring Brand Naming Tendency of Rice in Japan

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Abstract: In Japan, the declining birth rate, aging population, and shrinking domestic market pose challenges for local economies, especially the agricultural economy. Therefore, branding is essential for agricultural and industrial products to remain sustainable in local areas. This study focuses on the brand name, an element that forms a brand. As previous studies have not sufficiently examined the brand names of Japanese agricultural products, this study examines Japanese staple food, rice. Three hundred and fourteen brand names were surveyed to determine whether they are suggestive or nonsuggestive and contain words describing the properties of rice or related to production. The study analyzed the names through unique Japanese letters, such as Hiragana, Katakana, Kanji, and English. The results found that most Japanese rice brand names are nonsuggestive, and 141 brands are named in combinations of letters that do not follow conventional rules. Furthermore, as the domestic market situation necessitates devising export methods, more unique names and marketing promotions are required. If rice is shipped to the overseas market using a nonsuggestive name, as in Japan, it would be difficult as Japanese words may not convey the product's image. Local consumers require words that are easily understood while retaining the Japanese notation and packaging. This study contributes to the field of brand naming, particularly for Japanese agricultural products.

Keywords: Brand name, Rice, Agricultural products, Export, Japan

1. Introduction

In Japan, depopulation and an aging population have presented a distinct challenge for rural areas, while urban areas face issues of population concentration. To address the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 11 set by the United Nations for urban and rural sustainability, promoting regional brand development and exporting original agricultural products overseas, even in rural areas, is necessary.

Although naming is a crucial factor in branding (Aaker, 1991; Keller et al., 1998), only a few studies have discussed the naming of Japanese agricultural products (Hangui, 2012). Additionally, unique aspects of the Japanese language, such as using four types of letters (Hiragana, Katakana, Kanji, and alphabets) to sell products to non-Japanese consumers overseas, must be considered.

However, in a shrinking domestic market, how do consumers choose products? Effective brand naming that evokes a favorable image to consumers plays a significant role in the revitalization of production areas and the branding of agricultural products. Before examining what kind of name change is necessary for exporting overseas, this study extracted naming trends as a prerequisite for such a change. The subject of this study is rice, the staple food in Japan, and its naming trends are analyzed.

2. Literature Review

Brands are now positioned as critical intangible assets. Every year, Interbrand presents Best Brands and announces the average brand value. The Best Global Brand reached over US\$3 trillion for the first time in 2022, which was the fastest brand value growth rate ever recorded till that year, demonstrating the growing contribution of a company's brand in driving its economic success (Interbrand, 2022).

The American Marketing Association defines a brand as follows: "A brand is a name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's goods or service as distinct from those of other sellers" (American Marketing Association [AMA], n.d.). A brand name is a fundamental core brand indicator and the basis for recognition and communication (Aaker, 1991).

In a series of studies, Keller (1987, 1998) distinguishes between two broad brand categories: suggestive and nonsuggestive brand names. A suggestive brand name conveys relevant attributes or benefits information in a particular product context. Therefore, it is more effective in facilitating and recalling advertised benefits than a brand name without product meaning. Nonsuggestive brand names contain no product meaning and often serve as poor reminders of communication efforts stored in memory.

Saito (2005) categorizes Japanese brand names into image-based and explanation-based names. An image-based name expresses the product's image, the pleasure the consumer gets from using the product, and the impressions the consumer is likely to deliver. Meanwhile, an explanation-based name provides the "selling point" or "ingenuity" of the product, expressing the difference from conventional or other products.

When naming Japanese products, some considerations are based on the language. Four unique characters are used for naming: Hiragana, Katakana, Kanji, and alphabets. Furthermore, if the product is to be sold in overseas markets, reconsidering a name change is necessary.

Japanese brand naming is examined for products such as perfume (Arimitsu, 2012), food (Tamori, 2008; Kiyomi, 2017), and beverages (Nishioka, 2011; Minokawa, 2010). As for agricultural products, an analysis regarding naming strawberries examines the naming characteristics, various intentions, suggestive images, and word sense of the breeder that are communicated to the consumer (Hangui, 2012). However, no studies have yet been performed on rice. Rice has been a staple food for a long time and has not required large-scale marketing activities in Japan. However, its consumption has gradually declined, as noted in the next section. Although the exports of agricultural goods are on the rise, they are lagging behind those of industrial goods in recent years.

Branding is needed to support production areas and prevent depopulation. Therefore, naming is one of the essential elements of branding. Initially, general rules were followed to name rice. One of the rules stated that the varieties produced at national research institutes should be written in Katakana, while those produced at prefectural research institutes should be written in Hiragana. Recently, this rule has been eliminated to devise new uncomplicated rules. In addition, the following trends in naming are noted: First, naming is done after the experimental station (AES) or production area where the variety was bred. Secondly, the nature of rice determines its naming. For example, "Wase" means an early ripening variety (Yamagata Agrinet, 2022).

Therefore, this study examines how rice is named to be chosen by consumers and support rural development. Changing brand names is essential to export effortlessly.

3. Current Status of Rice in Japan

Rice is a staple food in Japan. However, with the declining population, the demand for rice is on a downward trend, decreasing by about 80,000 tons annually. Sales prices have also been on a long-term downtrend, with prices in 2021 and 2022 falling below the previous year's average. The number of paddy rice farmers has decreased by 20% in the five years since 2010. Farmers are also aging, with the average age of farmers now at 66.8 years (Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, 2017).

Therefore, branding is one of the solutions to survive in the market and sustain rural areas. Currently, Koshihikari (コシヒカリ) is the most significant rice brand, with the largest acreage planted since 1979 (稲作の現状). Applications for new brand registration to the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) have been increasing since 2009 (nikkei4946, 2017).

While the domestic market is shrinking, rice exports have begun and grown since 2012, reaching 5.93 billion yen (22,833 tons) in 2021. However, in the grain category, wheat was 8.3 billion yen in 2020 and 10 billion yen in 2021, a 20.3% increase over the previous year, while rice only increased by 11.6%. This data reveals that agricultural products are underperforming. The export value of vegetables, fruits, etc., is at 28.3% of the previous year's level. Strawberries, which appeared in the former study, recorded a record high of 4.1 billion yen in 2021, an increase of 54% over the previous year (Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, 2021). Gaining a competitive advantage domestically and exporting abroad to increase profits and revitalize local economies has become a significant issue in Japan.

4. Research Methodology

The data was retrieved from the list of the Status of the old Establishment of Brand Name of Producing Area for 2022 Agricultural Produce by MAFF. This study focused on wetland rice in the list, which included 923 brands by prefecture. Of these, 314 brands were extracted, excluding duplicate brands.

First, we determined suggestive or nonsuggestive names for all brands noted in the next section. We specifically focused on the presence or absence of the word "rice," words related to its taste, and words that indicate convenience, such as "ready-to-cook," as clues. In addition, we examined words describing the properties of rice. For example, "Chikara" means varieties that can be harvested in large quantities, "Wase" means early fruiting varieties, "Nishiki" are sake brewing variety, and "Masari," "Kogane," and "Honami" indicate the condition of the rice paddies and the quality of the rice.

Second, we surveyed the brand names to determine whether they included the name of the test station where the variety was bred or the place of origin containing the expression of the place (old place) where the variety was previously produced. Finally, we classified the brand names by letters.

5. Results and Findings

Brand names that describe the nature of rice include "Akita Parari" (onomatopoeia indicating texture), "Sanuki Yomai" (good rice), "Manpuku Surari" (whole rice), "Tsubuzorai" (consistent excellence), and 11 brands with words such as "Masari," "Kogane," and "Honami," indirectly indicating the condition and quality of the rice fields (Table 1). The results suggest that brand names with suggestive connotations were underrepresented in the total.

Products such as food and beverages, which are easily visible and recognizable, are not much different from other products, and consumers are generally aware of them. Therefore,

customers are unlikely to actively seek out information (Nishioka, 2011). Additionally, when products are similar to other products, it is not necessary to indicate their characteristics. For these kinds of products, it is becoming a trend to adopt nonsuggestive and image-based names.

Although these names do not directly evoke rice, many of them are positive words that conjure up a good image, such as "Yume" (dream), "Hikari" (light), and "Kokoro" (heart). The name "Yuki" (snow) is also expected due to the characteristics of the producing region but does not directly suggest the place of production.

Table 1: Names containing words that describe the properties of rice

	Japanese name	Alphabetical notation		Japanese name	Alphabetical notation
ちから(Chikara)					
1	くまさんの力	Kumasannochikara			
わせ(Wase)					
2	越路早生	Kosijiwase	3	トドロキワセ	Todorokiwase
にしき(Nishiki)					
4	うこん錦	Ukonnishiki	5	土佐錦	Tosanishiki
6	黄金錦	Koganenishiki	7	みのにしき	Minonishiki
ひかり(Hikari)					
8	コシヒカリ環 1 号	Kosihikarikan1go	9	朝の光	Asanohikari
10	ちゅらひかり	Churahikari	11	ささひかり	Sasahikari
12	ゆきひかり	Yukihikari	13	なすひかり	Nasuhikari
14	みつひかり	Mitsuhikari	15	ヒカリ新世紀	Hikarishinseiki
16	能登ひかり	Notohikari	17	まいひかり	Maihikari
まさり(Masari)					
18	あきまさり	Akimasari	19	たからまさり	Tkaramasari
こがね(Kogane)					
20	黄金晴	Koganebare	21	黄金錦	Koganenishiki
22	瑞穂黄金	Mizuhokogane	23	ふさこがね	Fusakogane
ほなみ(Honami)					
24	あきほなみ	Akisonami			

Source: <https://www.maff.go.jp/j/seisan/syoryu/kensa/sentaku/>

*The alphabetical notation is the author's phonetic reading of the Japanese name

Table 2 shows the names, including the place name of the test station or place of origin. Only 39 of the 314 types utilize the imagery evoked by the name of that place.

Table 2: The name of the test station or the name of the place of origin, including the name of the old place

	Japanese name	Alphabetical notation		Japanese name	Alphabetical notation
1	とねのめぐみ	Tonenomegumi	21	北陸 193 号	Hokuriku193go
2	あきたさらり	Akitasarari	22	つがるロマン	Tsugaruroman
3	つくば SD2 号	Tsukuba SD2gou	23	いわてっこ	Iwatekko
4	出羽きらり	Dewakirari	24	ハナエチゼン	Hanaechizen
5	せとのにじ	Setononiji	25	あいちのかおり	Aichinokaori
6	宮崎 52 号	Miyazaki52go	26	みえのゆめ	Mienoyume
7	豊橋 1 号	Toyohasi1go	27	越路早生	Kosijiwase
8	みえのゆめ	Mienoyume	28	京式部	Kyoshikibu
9	京の輝き	Kyounokagayaki	29	清水 1 号	Shimizu1go
10	吉備の華	Kibinohana	30	さがびより	Sagabiyori
11	辻ノ川 1 号	Nutanokawaichigo	31	松山三井	Matsuyamamitsui
12	南国そだち	Nanngokusodachi	32	とちぎの星	Tochiginohoshi
13	能登ひかり	Notohikari	33	たかたのゆめ	Takatanoyume

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14	はぎのかおり	Haginokaori	34	あきたばらり	Akitaparari
15	さぬきよいまい	Sanukiyoimai	35	つくばSD1号	TsukubaSD1go
16	あいちのこころ	Aichinokokoro	36	三重23号	Mie23go
17	ムツニシキ	Mutsunishiki	37	山形95号	Yamagata95go
18	兵庫ゆめおとめ	Hyougoyumeotome	38	むつほまれ	Mutsuhomare
19	五百川	Gohyakugawa	39	東北194号	Tohoku194go
20	みのにしき	Minonishiki			

Source: <https://www.maff.go.jp/j/seisan/syoryu/kensa/sentaku/>

*The alphabetical notation is the author's phonetic reading of the Japanese name

Tables 3 and 4 show the names by letters (Hiragana and Katakana). Hiragana is a cursive Japanese syllabary used primarily for natives. Katakana is mainly used to indicate a foreign word.

Following the previous rule, 138 issues were written in Hiragana, and 35 brands were in Katakana. Some are in English and easily understood (Snow pearl, Milky princess, Milky Queen, Milky summer). One hundred forty-one brands are named in a combination of Hiragana, Katakana, Kanji, alphabets, or numbers, accounting for nearly half the total.

Table 3: Names that were written entirely in Hiragana

	Japanese name	Alphabetical notation		Japanese name	Alphabetical notation
1	ななつぼし	Nanatsuboshi	70	ほしじるし	Hoshijirushi
2	ゆめびりか	Yumepirika	71	おいでまい	Oidemai
3	あきたこまち	Akitakomachi	72	おぼろづき	Oboroduki
4	とねのめぐみ	Tonenomegumi	73	ほしのゆめ	Hoshinoyume
5	ゆめひたち	Yumehitachi	74	まっしぐら	Massigura
6	さわびかり	Sawapirika	75	さとじまん	Satojiman
7	やまのしずく	Yamanoshizuku	76	てんたか	Tentakata
8	あきたさらり	Akitasarari	77	ぎんさん	Ginsan
9	まんぷくすらし	Manpukusurari	78	しふくのみり	Shihukunominori
10	さわのはな	Sawanohana	79	みずかがみ	Mizukagami
11	せとのにじ	Setononiji	80	ふくひびき	Fukuhibiki
12	たからまさり	Takaramasari	81	ゆめおぼこ	Yumeobako
13	あやひめ	Ayahime	82	ゆめさやか	Yumesayaka
14	ふっくりんこ	Fukkurinko	83	やまだわら	Yamadawara
15	いわてっこ	Iwatekko	84	あきだわら	Akidawara
16	ゆめかなえ	Yumekanae	85	つやひかり	Tsuyahikari
17	ゆめみづほ	Yumemizuhoh	86	きらりん	Kirarin
18	あいちのかおり	Aichinokaori	87	ほしまる	Hoshimaru
19	みえのゆめ	Mienoyume	88	どんぴしゃり	Donpisyari
20	まいひめ	Maihime	89	ふさおとめ	Husaotome
21	とがおとめ	Togaotome	90	きぬむすめ	Kinumusume
22	こいもみじ	Koimomiji	91	さいこうち	Saikouchi
23	あきろまん	Akiroman	92	はいごころ	Haigokoro
24	ふくまる	Fukumaru	93	にこまる	Nikomaru
25	はいほう	Haihou	94	さがびより	Sagabiyori
26	なつほのか	Natsuhonoka	95	ゆきひかり	Yukihikari
27	みえのえみ	Mienoemi	96	なすひかり	Nasuhikari
28	いなほっこり	Inahokkori	97	あわみのり	Awaminori
29	さわかおり	Sawakaori	98	つくしろまん	Tsukushiroman
30	たちはるか	Tachiharuka	99	ゆめみしま	Yumemishima
31	とくだわら	Tokudawara	100	いただき	Itadaki
32	えみまる	Emimaru	101	あさゆき	Asayuki
33	はれわたり	Harewatari	102	かけはし	Kakehashi

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34	ふさこがね	Fusakogane	103	とよめき	Toyomeki
35	ゆめおうみ	Yumeoumi	104	てんこもり	Tenkomori
36	あきまさり	Akimasari	105	ちゅらひかり	Churahikari
37	さきひかり	Sakihikari	106	あきげしき	Akigeshiki
38	ふくのこ	Fukunoko	107	ゆめしなの	Yumeshinano
39	にじのきらめき	Nijinokirameki	108	おてんとそだち	Otentosodachi
40	あきのそら	Akinosora	109	きたくりん	Kitakurin
41	ゆきさやか	Yukisayaka	110	まなむすめ	Manamusume
42	きらほ	Kiraho	111	ちほみのり	Chihominori
43	げんきまる	Genkimaru	112	はなさつま	Hanasatsuma
44	はぎのかおり	Haginokaori	113	ゆきむすび	Yukimusubi
45	あきたぱらり	Akitaparari	114	たかねみのり	Takaneminori
46	つぶぞろい	Tsubuzoroi	115	いちほまれ	Ichihomare
47	みねはるか	Mineharuka	116	はるみ	Harumi
48	どんとこい	Dontokoi	117	なつきらり	Natsukirari
49	ふくのいち	Fukunoichi	118	あきまつり	Akimatsuri
50	さぬきよいまい	Sanukiyoimai	119	ほっかりん	Hokkarin
51	ひとめぼれ	Hitomebore	120	ゆきおとめ	Yukiotome
52	おきにいり	Okiniiri	121	こころまち	Kokoromachi
53	どまんなか	Domannaka	122	あきだわら	Akidawara
54	あいちのこころ	Aichinokokoro	123	ゆめまつり	Yumematsuri
55	あきさかり	Akisakari	124	こなゆきひめ	Konayukihime
56	はたはったん	Hatahattan	125	えみだわら	Emidawara
57	なついろ	Natsuiro	126	さんさんまる	Sansanmaru
58	ゆきのめぐみ	Yukinomegumi	127	はれわたり	Harewatari
59	つきあかり	Tsukiakari	128	めんこいな	Menkoina
60	ゆみあずさ	Yumeazusa	129	たきたて	Takitate
61	まいひかり	Maihikari	130	きんのめぐみ	Kinnomegumi
62	いただき	Itadaki	131	なごりゆき	Nagoriyuki
63	えみのあき	Eminoaki	132	なつしずか	Natsushizuka
64	そらゆき	Sorayuki	133	ゆきむつみ	Yukimutsumi
65	むつほまれ	Mutsuhomare	134	つぶゆき	Tsubuyuki
66	ゆきのはな	Yukinohana	135	こしいぶき	Koshiibuki
67	はえぬき	Haenuki	136	ふくのさち	Fukunosachi
68	みつひかり	Mitsuhikari	137	にじのきらめき	Nijinokirameki
69	ふくむすめ	Fukumusume	138	みのにしき	Minonishiki

Source: <https://www.maff.go.jp/j/seisan/syoryu/kensa/sentaku/>

*The alphabetical notation is the author's phonetic reading of the Japanese name

Table 4: Names that were written entirely in Katakana

	Japanese name	Alphabetical notation		Japanese name	Alphabetical notation
1	スノーパール	Snow peal	19	ゴロピカリ	Goropikari
2	ヒエリ	Hieri	20	ホウレイ	Hourei
3	イクヒカリ	Ikuhikari	21	レイホウ	Reihou
4	ハナエチゼン	Hanaechizen	22	ミルクークイーン	Milky Queen
5	トドロキワセ	Todorokiwase	23	ササシグレ	Sasashigure
6	アケボノ	Akebono	24	ミルクィーサマー	Milky summer
7	アキヒカリ	Akihikari	25	アキツホ	Akitsuhou
8	ササニシキ	Sasanishiki	26	ツクシホマレ	Tsukushihomare
9	フクヒカリ	Fukuhikari	27	コシヒカリ	Koshihikari
10	ヤマヒカリ	Yamahikari	28	キヨニシキ	Kiyonishiki
11	ヒカリッコ	Hikarikko	29	サキホコレ	Sakihokore
12	ハツシモ	Hatsushimo	30	ホシユタカ	Hoshiyutaka
13	ミルクィープリンセス	Milky princess	31	ムツニシキ	Mutsunishiki

14	チヨニシキ	Chiyonishiki	32	トヨニシキ	Toyonishiki
15	ミズホチカラ	Mizuhochikara	33	ナツヒカリ	Natsuhikari
16	キノヒカリ	Kinuhikari	34	ミネアサヒ	Mineasahi
17	ピカツンタ	Pikatsunta	35	ヒノヒカリ	Hinohikari
18	オオセト	Ooseto			

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study analyzed the trend of rice branding in Japan, especially regarding its brand names, against the backdrop of a shrinking domestic market and local economic challenges. The results showed that most rice brand names are nonsuggestive. Additionally, presently, many words are not bound by conventional rules. In many cases, a suggestive name may be more appropriate for a new electrical appliance, as its performance cannot be judged by appearance. However, rice is easily recognizable, and consumers are generally aware of these products, so rice brand names are typically nonsuggestive, as with other food products.

As the domestic market for rice saturates and consumption of staple foods by younger generations declines, new ways of marketing must be devised. While there is limited need to change to nonsuggestive names in the domestic market, more unique characters and marketing promotions are required. However, exporting rice using a nonsuggestive name, as in Japan, may be difficult, as it would not convey the product's image. To showcase Japaneseness, a name that local consumers can understand while retaining Japanese notation and packaging is necessary.

For active overseas exports of rice-based sakes, some have succeeded by changing their names and developing brands that differ from their domestic counterparts. The RIHAKU Sake Brewing Company has given each of its Japanese-language brands a nickname. For example, "Rihaku Special Junmai Nigori Sake" (李白特別純米にごり酒) is named "Dreamy Clouds," and in Australia, it is called "Blue Purely" to create a positive image (Nikkei Style, 2020).

Asahi Shuzo, one of the famous Japanese breweries, will begin local production in the United States. The products manufactured will be branded differently from those sold in Japan. The name "Dassai Blue" is derived from the Japanese saying, "Blue comes from indigo and is bluer than indigo," with the hope that the brand will surpass "Dassai," which is already sold in Japan (Yokoyama and Onomitsu, 2022).

In the next stage, this study does not conduct a questionnaire survey to determine what images consumers conjure up from each brand name and whether these images lead to purchasing behavior. Additionally, it does not analyze the image that foreign consumers obtain from the characters. Translating a Japanese brand name into the local language in a similar manner to the alcoholic beverages mentioned above is challenging. The difference between the image held by the Japanese and that held by local consumers must be considered. Therefore, a questionnaire survey must be conducted, and a comparative analysis of the Japanese brand names and the translated brand names should be performed based on the study results.

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