



Towards a Strategic Business Onomastic Model: Developing a Conceptual Framework for Small Enterprises in South Africa

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Abstract: Objectives: This study examines the strategic role of business naming among small enterprises in South Africa, proposing the Strategic Business Onomastic Model (SBOM) to illustrate the relationship between naming typologies and entrepreneurial strategies., **Prior Work:** Although business naming is recognized as a key element in brand identity and market positioning, its strategic relevance in small enterprise development remains underexplored, particularly in the South African context. Existing literature has primarily focused on large firms, leaving a gap in understanding how naming practices influence strategy in smaller, resource-constrained environments. **Approach:** Guided by an interpretivist epistemology and employing a qualitative case study design, the research investigates naming practices across various sectors in Gauteng Province. The study draws on empirical data to explore how naming decisions reflect and influence strategic intent. **Results:** The findings reveal four dominant naming typologies—descriptive, arbitrary, religion-based, and founder-based—each associated with specific strategic orientations. These naming choices affect organizational flexibility, market positioning, and the articulation of long-term goals. **Implications:** Intentional naming is shown to be a strategic act that contributes to competitive advantage and business growth. By linking naming categories to appropriate strategic postures, the SBOM framework offers a contextualized guide for aligning business identity with entrepreneurial intent and **Value:** The SBOM model contributes to both theory and practice by offering a novel lens through which to understand naming as a strategic tool. It provides practical insights for entrepreneurs, small business incubators, and policymakers seeking to foster sustainable enterprise development.

Keywords: Business onomastics; Branding; Small businesses; Onomatology

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1. Introduction

Business names function as important identifiers and strategic tools in establishing entrepreneurial presence and positioning in competitive markets. South Africa is known as the rainbow nation, where multicultural dynamics, linguistic diversity, and socio-economic challenges shape business landscape, the act of naming is often personal, symbolic, and sometimes arbitrary. While big corporations invest significant financial and human resources into naming as part of their brand architecture, small businesses frequently make naming decisions without any strategic guidance, often driven by intuition or cultural affinity.

Despite its potential impact, onomastics in the small business domain has received limited academic attention (Abimbola & Vallaster, 2007; Wong & Merrilees, 2005). This article addresses this gap by conceptualizing the Strategic Business Onomastic Model (SBOM), a framework that links naming typologies to entrepreneurial strategies. By exploring how small businesses in South Africa navigate naming as both a symbolic and strategic act, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how names shape business trajectory, brand communication, and competitive advantage.

2. Literature Review

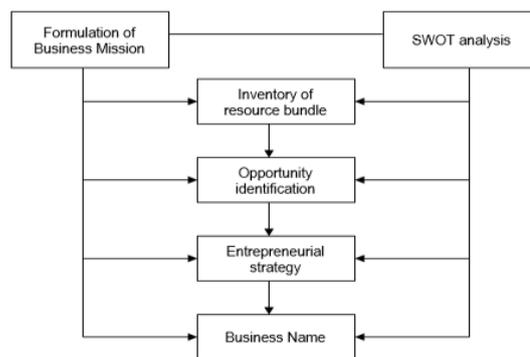


Figure 1. Research Conceptual Framework

Source: Sibanda (2023)

The conceptual framework presented above is grounded in theoretical insights drawn from leading scholars in branding and strategic management, including Aaker (1991), Aaker (1996), Kapferer (2004), Krake (2005), Keller (1997), and Keller

(2002). These scholars collectively assert the symbolic and strategic relevance of naming in brand development and organizational positioning. In contrast, the earlier perspective advanced by Mills (1882)—which argues that names function merely as referents devoid of meaning—stands refuted in light of empirical evidence indicating that business names carry semiotic and strategic weight.

The extant literature on business naming has predominantly focused on surface-level considerations, offering limited exploration into the underlying motivations “why” and processes “how” guiding name formulation in small enterprises. This gap renders it difficult to assess whether naming can serve as a strategic tool for economic performance and long-term sustainability. Accordingly, the above conceptual model introduced here seeks to bridge this gap by incorporating empirical findings on small business onomastics within the South African context, specifically in the Gauteng Province.

The model demonstrates the interconnectedness between business mission formulation, resource configuration, SWOT analysis, opportunity identification, and entrepreneurial strategy, culminating in the selection of a business name. It proposes that naming is not an isolated act but an outcome of strategic deliberation informed by internal capabilities and external market dynamics. The study thereby contributes to the deeper understanding of how business names may be intentionally aligned with entrepreneurial strategy to foster differentiation, market fit, and enterprise resilience.

2.1. Theoretical Gaps and Framework Need

While existing literature recognizes the semiotic power of names (Inskip, 2004; Wong & Merrilees, 2005), there is a lack of conceptual models linking naming practices with entrepreneurial strategy. The proposed SBOM aims to fill this gap by providing a framework that illustrates how naming choices both reflect and influence strategic intent, organizational structure, and market orientation in small businesses.

3. Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research methodology situated within the interpretivist paradigm. The interpretivist approach acknowledges the subjective meanings entrepreneurs attach to naming and strategy, emphasizing depth of understanding over generalization (Creswell, 2009). The study adopted a case study design, allowing in-depth exploration of naming practices among 20 small businesses across the educational, hospitality, and professional services sectors in Gauteng Province.

Participants were selected purposively, with an emphasis on business owners, managers, or marketing personnel involved in strategic decision-making. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews and observations, recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis. ATLAS.ti was used to facilitate coding and theme development. The study reached theoretical saturation when no new themes emerged from additional cases. Ethical clearance was obtained, and participant confidentiality was maintained throughout.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1. Founders' Family Names

The analysis showed that many business owners in Gauteng adopt names based on the founder's personal identity, often using combinations of their own and/or family members' names. This was done to preserve legacy, foster loyalty, and signal ownership. For instance, Respondent 4 named their business using a combination of his and his wife's names to symbolize shared ownership and foundation. Similarly, Respondent 12 noted that naming the business after the family ensures continuity across generations.

Businesses employing family names typically pursue a narrow cost strategy, targeting niche markets where personal connection and customer loyalty are paramount. As observed, these businesses often maintain a rigid organizational structure, focusing on personalized service. Respondent 4 confirmed this by highlighting strong relationships with long-standing clients who have become "like family". This naming approach is best suited for ventures where the founder wishes to maintain strong control, preserve cultural values, and serve a stable, loyal customer base. As Respondent 11 poignantly noted, naming a business is deeply personal—akin to naming one's child—and cannot be outsourced.

4.2. Religious Names

Businesses that adopt religious names often do so to signal ethical conduct and spiritual values, reflecting a sensitivity to community expectations. Respondent 6 emphasized that names carry spiritual implications, asserting that names can shape a venture's destiny. A religious name communicates a moral compass and alignment with communal values, potentially fostering trust among customers. Such businesses generally operate in environments where ethical reputation and cultural alignment are vital. The model suggests that this naming typology aligns well with a narrow, niche market focus. Their decision-making is often rigid, and they are more likely to build small but loyal clienteles. Businesses choosing religious names are advised to emphasize transparency, ethical behaviour, and community involvement.

4.3. Arbitrary Names

Entrepreneurs who select arbitrary names typically aim for uniqueness and memorability. Respondent 16 shared that their name was chosen through a Google search for something distinctive. This choice often supports a differentiation strategy where standing out in a crowded market is a priority. These businesses are characterized by greater organizational flexibility and technological adoption. As noted by Respondent 16, having a company website and online booking system allowed their business to grow faster than competitors. The SBOM recommends that such firms adopt a broad, differentiated strategy suited to dynamic environments where innovation, adaptability, and brand distinction are critical.

4.4. Descriptive Names

Descriptive names clearly communicate the nature of the product or service offered. This typology is useful for businesses seeking to inform potential customers quickly and clearly about what they do. According to the findings, businesses using descriptive names typically adopt a broad market strategy and maintain a flexible organizational structure. Such firms are better suited for growth and scalability, as their name directly aligns with customer expectations and market clarity. This naming convention is particularly advantageous in sectors where functionality and accessibility are valued over symbolism or legacy.

5. Towards the Development of a Revised Conceptual Framework

The analysis of empirical data indicates that small enterprises operating in Gauteng Province exhibit strategic orientations consistent with Porter's (1980) generic competitive strategies. Porter identifies two key dimensions in business-level strategy: the source of competitive advantage and the scope of market targeting. The first dimension pertains to whether a firm competes by minimising operational costs (cost leadership) or by offering unique value propositions (differentiation). The second-dimension concerns whether the firm targets a broad customer base or focuses on a specific market segment. The findings suggest that naming practices among small businesses are often implicitly aligned with these strategic dimensions, thereby informing the development of a revised conceptual framework.

The SBOM thus provides a roadmap for small businesses to align their naming practices with appropriate strategic orientations, enhancing market relevance, operational coherence, and long-term viability.

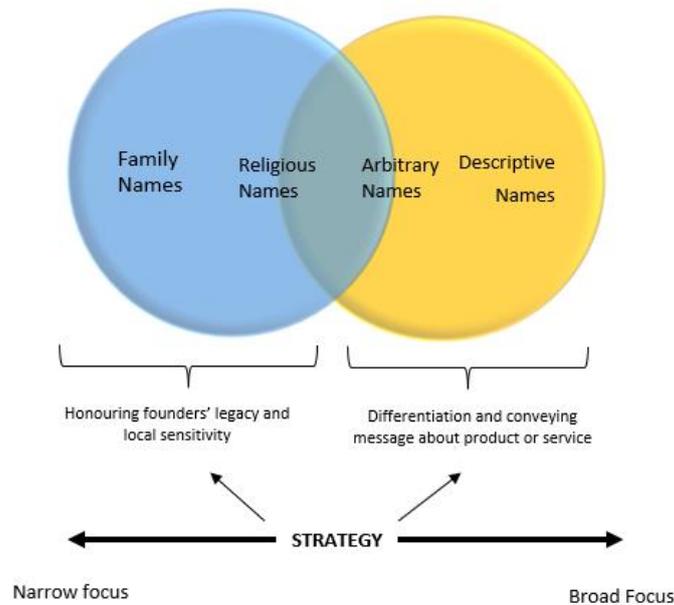


Figure 2. The Strategic Business Onomastic Model (SBOM): Revised Conceptual Framework

Source: Sibanda (2023)

The SBOM above presents a visual and conceptual framework that classifies naming practices into four main typologies—family names, religious names, arbitrary names, and descriptive names—positioned along a continuum of strategic focus. The left end represents a narrow focus, often aligned with legacy and cultural sensitivity, while the right end represents a broader market orientation, tied to differentiation and communication of value propositions.

At the core of the model are two key strategic rationales:

- **Honouring Founders' Legacy and Local Sensitivity:** Found predominantly in family and religious names, this approach reflects deep cultural or personal values.
- **Differentiation and Communication of Value:** Evident in arbitrary and descriptive names, this approach is more market-driven, aligning with broader and more dynamic customer bases.

By mapping name types to strategic orientations, the SBOM offers small enterprises a guide for aligning naming decisions with organisational strategy.

6. Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

This study underscores the strategic significance of business naming within the small enterprise sector in South Africa. Through the development of the Strategic Business Onomastic Model (SBOM), it becomes evident that naming practices are far from trivial; they embody the intersection of personal identity, cultural resonance, market orientation, and strategic intent. The SBOM offers a practical and conceptual tool for entrepreneurs to align naming choices with business strategy, particularly in contexts marked by socio-economic complexity and cultural diversity.

Findings reveal that family and religious names often support narrow strategies grounded in loyalty, legacy, and cultural sensitivity, while arbitrary and descriptive names align with broader, differentiated strategies aimed at innovation and scalability. The model not only contributes to the theoretical discourse on business onomastics and small enterprise strategy but also offers actionable insights for incubators, policymakers, and entrepreneurs seeking to enhance strategic coherence through intentional naming.

Future research may expand the model's application across other provinces or compare its relevance in different national contexts. Additionally, longitudinal studies could explore how naming influences brand evolution and customer perception over time. Ultimately, the SBOM framework encourages a shift from intuitive to strategic naming, empowering small businesses to better navigate identity, differentiation, and growth in a competitive economy.

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