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Article

Plaid, Airscarf, or PDK? - Naming Product Features in Online Configurators

Marketing Review St.Gallen

Provided in Cooperation with:

Universität St. Gallen, Institut für Marketing und Customer Insight

Suggested Citation: Hasenmaile-Aspin, Johanna (2022) : Plaid, Airscarf, or PDK? - Naming Product Features in Online Configurators, Marketing Review St.Gallen, ISSN 1865-7516, Thexis Verlag, St.Gallen, Vol. 39, Iss. 1, pp. 58-67

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/276177>

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Plaid, Airscarf, or PDK?

Naming Product Features in Online Configurators

Product feature names in the automotive industry are becoming more sophisticated, more acronymic, and less descriptive. Along with a categorization of feature names, insights from 26 qualitative consumer interviews, and two online studies, this paper outlines the qualities that feature names should exhibit (regardless of industry) to be perceived as useful by consumers.

Dr. des. Johanna Hasenmaile-Aspin

Imagine buying a new car. You visit different manufacturer websites and, while customizing product features, you read words like ‘Plaid,’ ‘Insane,’ or ‘PDLs Plus.’ How do you feel? Confident or maybe lost?

Mass customization is becoming omnipresent, and manufacturers from different industries are enabling consumers to customize products or services online (e.g., cars, computers, insurances, t-shirts, or sneakers; Freudmann, 2020; Ralph Lauren, 2021; Vinoski, 2020). Over 1400 configurators exist in 17 industries (cyLEDGE, 2021). However, little is known about how product features should be named in such mass customization systems (MCSs). This is surprising because MCSs are a crucial tool for manufacturers. Feature names in the automotive industry are becoming ever more acronymic (e.g., PDLs), more sophisticated (e.g., Tesla’s Insane mode), and creative (e.g., airscarf for neck-level heating). This applies to the automotive and other industries, including insurance (e.g., CDW) and household appliances, as the example of washing machines shows (e.g., CapDosing or WCS).

This paper analyzes how product feature names can be categorized in MCSs, and how they impact consumers’ decision-making and satisfaction. Further, it aims to formulate specific recommendations on how to name product features. The findings are particularly valuable for marketing managers seeking to enhance the customer experience in online configurators.

Product features (hereafter features) are defined as specific attributes or product options. Features (e.g., colors, driving assistance systems; see figure 1) are situated two levels beneath brands (e.g., Porsche) and one level beneath products/models (e.g., 911). Typically, consumers can customize features in a configurator after selecting their preferred model.

Theoretical Background

Complexity in Mass Customization Systems

Mass customization is composed of mass production and customization (Fiore et al., 2004). It has been defined as “a process in which consumers can choose levels from a set of predefined product modules to compose their own most preferred alternative” (Dellaert & Dabholkar, 2009, p. 44). MCSs have attracted much research in the field of consumer behavior (e.g., D’Angelo, Diehl, & Cavanaugh, 2019; de Bellis et al., 2019; Franke & Schreier, 2010; Kaiser et al., 2017; Schlager et al., 2018). They are predominantly based on attribute-based choice architectures, where consumers customize their product sequentially based on different attributes. For complex products like cars, this process can be onerous as it involves several hundred at-

tribute choices (Huffman & Kahn, 1998). Research has therefore suggested minimizing customization effort and increasing enjoyment in MCSs (Dellaert & Stremersch, 2005; Franke et al., 2010). New choice architectures (e.g., customization based on starting solutions or needs) have been presented (Hasenmaile-Aspin & Scharfenberger, 2020; Hildebrand et al., 2014; Randall et al., 2007). Feature naming in MCSs might also play an important role in reducing complexity and improving customer experience. This aspect has yet to be investigated.

Naming Brands, Products, and Features

Language is used to name objects, transmit information, or influence others (Vaas, n. d.). It also helps humans to “understand the world without becoming entirely overwhelmed by it” (Sagan, 1985, p. 130). Consumers, however, seem increasingly overpowered or confused by language, especially by feature names in online configurators.

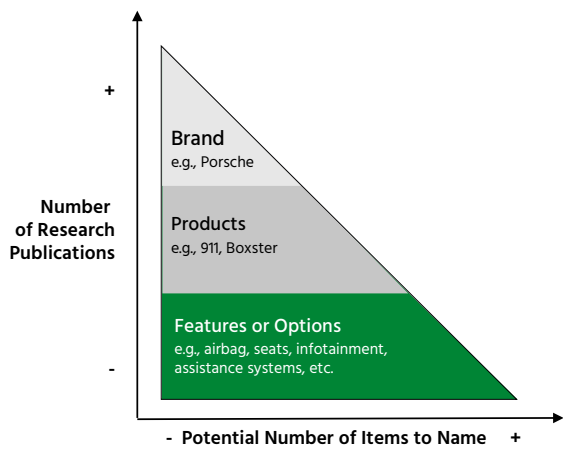
Previous research on naming has mainly focused on analyzing brand names and has indicated that effective names enhance awareness and create favorable product images (Aaker, 1991; Grewal et al., 1998; Keller et al., 1998). Further research has analyzed the role of numbers (Gunasti & Ross, 2010) and sound (Klink & Wu, 2014; Pogacar et al., 2015) in brand names. Research has shown, for example, that unusual spellings can increase brand name memory (Lowrey et al., 2003) and that suggestive and descriptive names are preferred to coined and arbitrary ones (Kohli & Suri, 2000).

Research has also studied product names (Gunasti & Devezzer, 2016; Scharfenberger et al., 2020; Stoner et al.,

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Fig. 1: Naming Pyramid



Source: Own illustration.

2018; Wu et al., 2019). Research on consumer confusion, a well-known marketing problem, has found that product names can mislead consumers to believe that products deliver benefits they cannot (Mitchell & Papavassiliou, 1999).

However, no studies have yet investigated feature names. This is surprising because the number of features is high, particularly in the automotive industry (see figure 1).

Context and Methods

This paper explores feature naming in the automotive industry, a highly relevant and increasingly complex application field of mass customization (Statista, 2021a). Especially in the age of digitalization, where 46% of new car buyers use online car configurators as a source of information (DAT, 2020).

In a first step, given the lack of research, an exploratory study categorized 1091 feature names of eight premium automotive manufacturers to gain initial insights into naming practices. Names were collected from car manufacturer websites (in German), and brands chosen based on sales figures (Statista, 2021b). Feature names were categorized according to the characteristics described in Table 1.

Second, 16 semi-structured interviews were conducted to find out more about how feature names impact customer experience. Interviewees were postgraduate students from a European business school. The interviews were conducted in German via ZOOM and lasted 31 minutes on average. They were video-recorded, partly transcribed, coded, and analyzed using summarizing qualitative content analysis (Mayring & Fenzl, 2014). The interviewees were first asked to customize a car online (choosing from either BMW, Mercedes, Porsche, Tesla, or Volvo). Next, they answered questions about feature names and naming categories. Finally, they were shown other manufacturers’ feature names.

Third, an online study (with 150 students from the same business school as above) examined agreement rates for differ-

Table 1: Categories of Feature Names

Acronyms	Names formed from initial letter(s) of successive terms; differentiation between universal (e.g., LED) and brand-specific acronyms (e.g., PHC for Porsche Hill Control) which are used only by a specific brand.
Associative	Names taken from other areas (e.g., movies, wildlife, chemistry) to highlight special characteristics (e.g., Birch Light Metallic, wade sensing).
Comparative	Names conveying a sense of newer, better equipped, or further developed features (e.g., plus, premium, or high-end).
Descriptive	Informational; names describing or conveying feature benefit or function (e.g., backup camera, airbag).
Vague descriptive	Names that are somewhat informational, but whose precise function remains vague; mostly used for packages (e.g., light package, business package).
Geographical	Names with a geographical designation (e.g., Eiger Grey or Firenze Red).
Invented	Names that are etymological creations or company-owned trademarks (e.g., Pivi for an infotainment system or Parktronic for a parking assistance system).
Lexical	Names with wordplays, capital letters, foreign words, or intentional misspellings (e.g., KEYLESS GO, designo, or SportDesign).
Own Brand Name	Names containing the brand name (e.g., Lexus Intelligent Park Assist, or BMW Head-up Display).
Unusual	Names that are surprising and unexpected (e.g., Plaid for a drivetrain or Thor’s Hammer for headlights).

Source: Based on Arora et al., 2015; Chen et al., 2017, and Lischer, 2015.

Table 2: Analysis of Feature Names

Manufacturer	Mercedes	Tesla	Porsche	Land Rover	Volvo	Lexus	Audi	BMW	All
Model	C-Class	Model S	Macan	Evoque***	V90	ES	A4	520i	
Analyzed Features*	149	59	265	168	71	126	157	96	1091
Naming Categories									
Brand-specific acronyms	2% ^{ab**}	0% ^b	5% ^a	2% ^{ab}	1% ^{ab}	1% ^b	0% ^b	1% ^b	1%
Universal acronyms	4% ^b	2% ^b	4% ^b	13% ^a	1% ^b	9% ^{ab}	3% ^b	5% ^b	5%
Associative	8% ^{ab}	7% ^{ab}	6% ^b	2% ^b	16% ^a	5% ^b	10% ^b	6% ^{ab}	8%
Comparative	9% ^{ab}	15% ^a	4% ^b	3% ^b	4% ^{ab}	2% ^b	6% ^{ab}	4% ^{ab}	6%
Descriptive	60% ^b	88% ^a	86% ^a	81% ^a	69% ^{ab}	91% ^{ab}	69% ^{ab}	78% ^{ab}	78%
Vague descriptive	19% ^a	0% ^c	7% ^{bc}	7% ^{bc}	8% ^{abc}	3% ^c	17% ^{abc}	10% ^{ab}	9%
Geographical	1% ^a	0% ^a	3% ^a	6% ^a	0% ^a	2% ^a	2% ^a	6% ^a	2%
Invented	8% ^a	2% ^{bc}	0% ^c	2% ^{bc}	5% ^{ab}	0% ^c	1% ^c	0% ^{bc}	2%
Lexical	16% ^a	2% ^b	5% ^b	1% ^b	0% ^b	23% ^a	0% ^b	0% ^b	6%
Own Brand Name	0% ^b	2% ^b	6% ^b	0% ^b	0% ^b	6% ^b	22% ^a	14% ^a	6%
Unusual	1% ^b	17% ^a	0% ^b	0% ^b	1% ^b	0% ^b	0% ^b	0% ^b	2%
Languages									
German	56% ^c	72% ^{abc}	85% ^a	66% ^{bc}	62% ^{bc}	77% ^{ab}	87% ^a	66% ^{bc}	71%
English	8% ^a	15% ^{ab}	3% ^c	15% ^{ab}	19% ^a	2% ^c	1% ^c	14% ^{ab}	10%
German & English	28% ^a	12% ^b	12% ^b	14% ^b	12% ^b	20% ^{ab}	11% ^b	21% ^{ab}	16%
Others	8% ^a	2% ^b	0% ^b	5% ^b	7% ^{ab}	1% ^b	0% ^b	0% ^b	3%

* The number of analyzed features varies by brand due to manufacturers' different product management strategies (e.g., in terms of standard equipment). Engines, wheels, and upholstery were not considered in the analysis. Feature names were assigned to up to three categories.

** Same letters (a, b, c) indicate no statistically significant differences between the respective values (P < 0.05; ANOVA followed by post hoc Tukey test).

*** Range Rover Evoque. Source: Own illustration.

ent statements from the previous interview findings. The focus was on attitudes toward acronyms and on own brand names.

Fourth, an online study with 100 Porsche owners and fans and 10 telephone interviews with persons from the same target group provided further insights into acronyms, a Porsche-typical naming category.

Results

The analysis of the selected feature names (Table 2) showed that the category descriptive (e.g., seat heating or lane change assist) was used most often (78%). However, only 61% were purely descriptive, while 17% featured multiple categories (e.g., 'LED high performance headlights' was assigned to the categories descriptive, acronymic, and comparative). The share of non-descriptive feature names (22%) seemed quite high, as the main reason for naming a feature is to capture

and convey its benefit or function. Vague descriptive feature names, the second most common naming strategy (9%), were mainly used for equipment packages (e.g., business package). Associative names (8%) were mostly used for exterior colors (e.g., pine grey) or for technical functions (e.g., wade sensing). Acronyms (7%) were either universal (e.g., LED) or brand-specific (e.g., PSM for Porsche Stability Management). Sometimes, brand names (6%) were added to feature names (e.g., Audi sound system). Comparative names (6%) were mainly used for different levels of packages (e.g., advanced, high-end), or to highlight progress and superiority (e.g., plus). Lexical names (6%) were mainly capitalized (e.g., DYNAMIC SELECT). While the remaining categories (geographical: 2%, invented: 2%, unusual: 2%) were not as frequent, they seemed important for some manufacturers. For example, invented names were typical of Mercedes (e.g., Tempomat), unusual ones of Tesla (e.g., Plaid).

Analyzing the interviews and the two online studies yielded eight key findings:

1. Some names were misunderstood

“There are relatively many features that you check in detail before making a purchase decision. I have a lot to do with cars [...] but still, I couldn't intuitively decide whether I needed a certain feature or not.” (Nils)

Most feature names in the tested configurators were described as descriptive, self-explanatory, and intuitive. Yet, a notable amount of feature names was more difficult to understand than others. Even experienced participants struggled to understand some names and found the function of some features baffling (e.g., What is a Xenium package? Or what is COMAND Online good for?). In some cases, they confused or misunderstood the benefit of features (e.g., PRE-SAFE System). They also pointed out the risk of not choosing potentially important options because they did not understand them.

2. Acronyms are unknown and only beneficial for manufacturers

“I don't like abbreviations at all, they only help those who work in the company. I don't understand why this is communicated to the outside world. It's of no use to the customer.” (Hannah)

Most of the universal, and almost all of the brand-specific acronyms were unknown to the interviewees. Even Porsche owners and fans struggled to understand Porsche's acronyms: Only for 14% of the 13 tested brand-specific acronyms (e.g., PDLS, PDK) did they know what the feature is about. Interviewees called acronyms difficult, techy, masculine, nerdy, and only for real insiders, while Porsche's acronyms were also considered too similar to each other. Participants felt overwhelmed and saw no benefit of acronyms, as these mainly facilitate manufacturers' internal communication or help shorten user manuals. Interviewees assumed that engineers devise acronyms and that manufacturers might be trying to anchor these acronyms in consumers' minds to build new brands (even though this approach has rarely succeeded in the past). Interviewees were skeptical about brand-specific acronyms, while well-known acronyms were considered okay. Awareness rates were 87% for ABS, 71% for LED, 25% for HUD, 7% for PDC, 6% for HDC, 4% for BLIS, and 4% for EDW.

The online study confirmed the interviewees' slightly negative attitude toward acronyms. Acronyms were described as complicated, as confusing (unless they were ordinary), as evoking uncertainty, and as elusive for laypersons. Besides severely complicating the decision process, they were time-consuming and unnecessarily technical.

On the positive side, interviewees said that acronyms can increase readability and simplify communication among those who understand them. They were found to be logical, easily memorizable (if learned), and speeding up communication. Porsche acronyms were considered typical of and inte-

Management Summary

Mass customization is becoming omnipresent and enables consumers to easily customize products online. Thus far, little is known about how product features are named in such environments. This paper presents a categorization of feature names in the automotive industry. Along with insights from interviews and online studies, it presents specific qualities that feature names in mass customization systems should have to be perceived as helpful by consumers. The results are relevant for practitioners and academics alike.

Main Propositions

1. Feature names have great potential to influence the customer experience in online configurators.
2. Non-descriptive names can lead to features that are not comprehended or misunderstood.
3. Acronyms are largely unknown. They are considered complicated, difficult to remember, unnecessary, and only for insiders.
4. If rarely used, combining a brand name with a feature name communicates exclusivity.
5. Basic features should be given simple and descriptive names, while selected signature features may be assigned special names (e.g., associative, invented, or unusual names).

gral to the corporate identity. Commonly known acronyms (e.g., LED) were said to add value if used wisely. Exaggerated use, however, was found annoying and frustrating. Analyzing the agreement rates for acronym-related statements (7-point Likert scale; 1 – totally disagree, 7 – totally agree) revealed that consumers do not consider acronyms helpful ($M=2.81$, $SD=1.41$). Participants found acronyms suitable for consumers strongly interested in cars ($M=5.37$, $SD=1.45$), yet unsuitable for the average consumer ($M=2.39$, $SD=1.17$). Acronyms were considered confusing and difficult to remember ($M=4.89$, $SD=1.55$), with no benefit ($M=2.48$, $SD=1.38$; all five items are significantly different to the scale midpoint of 4.00, $p<.001$). The Porsche study showed similar results.

3. Own brand names communicate exclusivity

According to interviewees, adding the brand name to a feature can communicate exclusivity and quality, besides creating the impression that a manufacturer has developed the feature itself. However, brand add-ons to standard features (e.g., smartphone integration) seemed weird, as other manufacturers also offer such features and might even have the same suppliers. As Franca said: “When you customize a BMW, it's obvious that it's all about BMW options.” Participants recommended that companies use add-ons sparsely (i.e., only with innovative or in-house features). Moreover, this naming strategy should be used solely for brand-character-building features. Tesla, for example, could label a specific charging feature with their brand name.

The online study confirmed that feature–brand combinations appear exclusive ($M=4.68$, $SD=1.71$), but also superfluous ($M=4.60$, $SD=1.60$; both significantly different to the scale midpoint of 4.00, $p<.001$).

4. Terms such as “plus,” “professional,” and packages were perceived as vague

Interviewees struggled to grasp feature names involving comparatives. For instance, a “business package” and a “business package plus” seemed hard to distinguish. Some participants would prefer the additional function to be described instead of just the word “plus” being appended.

Participants found certain package names difficult to understand or could not picture the package contents (e.g., night package). They felt overwhelmed by Mercedes' variant packages (e.g., advanced, high-end). Some interviewees mentioned that they would feel dissatisfied unless they chose the best version, therefore disliked such packages. They an-

ticipated regretting their decision when not choosing the best package, thinking that they might miss a relevant function. Instead, they preferred precise and easily understandable package names (e.g., winter or park assistance package). Names should focus on benefits or needs instead of being creative as this might prove overwhelming. Most participants preferred Volvo's and BMW's package names to those of Mercedes, as the former two brands use simpler names.

5. Same names should be used for same features

“I would prefer a uniform standard across brands. Otherwise, it's very confusing when brands name their own things as fancily as possible.” (Joel)

Participants suggested naming the same features the same way, as Porsche's lane-keeping assist system presumably does the same as that of Mercedes. This would enable easy comparisons between the features of different brands. Interviewees mentioned that manufacturers might use feature names to set themselves apart from other manufacturers or to justify price differences. The online study confirmed that the same features should be named the same way ($M=6.05$, $SD=1.16$; significantly different to the scale midpoint of 4.00, $p<.001$).

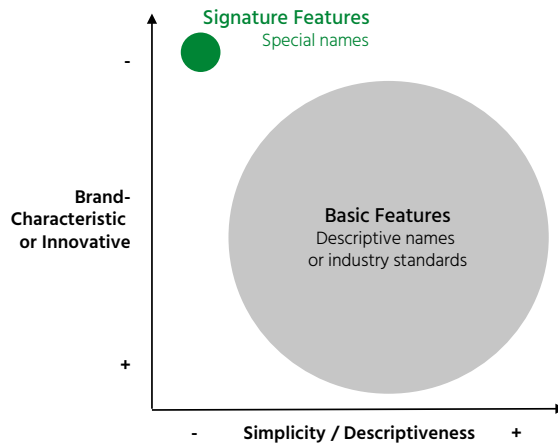
6. Simple and functional names for basics and special names for signature features

“Industry standards in particular should be named without brand-specific terminology.” (Matthias)

Participants preferred short, simple, intuitive, and pragmatic names. Naming should be consistent throughout the brand and fit the brand image. Participants liked Tesla's simple, entirely intuitive, and self-explanatory naming (e.g., auto park) as this makes unique feature names stand out. Participants proposed naming basic features according to industry standards. Only a few features should be given a fancy name, and those features need to be unique and characteristic of the brand. Names should still be somewhat intuitive. Volvo, for example, could highlight a safety feature with a special name and advertise it accordingly.

The online study confirmed that signature features ought to be given special names ($M=4.52$, $SD=1.62$). Names should be intuitive ($M=5.62$, $SD=1.29$), and feature function should be immediately evident ($M=5.99$, $SD=1.10$; all three significantly different to the scale midpoint of 4.00, $p<.001$).

Fig. 2: Feature Naming Model



Source: Own illustration.

7. Associative names exude exclusivity and stimulate the imagination

Participants stated that associative color names sound beautiful, amplifying, and exude a certain exclusivity. However, some struggled to understand associations with gemstones or minerals (e.g., what does obsidian black look like?). Participants liked easily conceivable names (e.g., arctic blue) or where associations created special feelings (e.g., Mediterranean blue conjured up holiday feelings).

The interviews revealed no clear tendency regarding the consumer preference of associative feature names. Feature function should be clear. If this cannot be guaranteed, a potentially more boring (i.e., descriptive) name should be used. Thor's Hammer, the associative name of Volvo headlights, was discussed controversially. Some interviewees found it funny and mystic (a good metaphor and related to Volvo's Scandinavian origin). Others, however, associated nothing with the term or considered it too far-fetched.

8. No real benefit of English names in German-speaking countries

Participants agreed that language-wise feature names should be named consistently. Mixing languages was not considered user-friendly. One interviewee mentioned seeing no reason for mixing languages, except that it might sound cool. Interviewees expected German manufacturers to use fewer English features

than non-German ones. This was confirmed by the online study, where 48% of respondents expected a German manufacturer to use German names (versus 19% for non-German manufacturers). The fact that Tesla uses more German terms than some German manufacturers prompted one interviewee to shake his head. Further, feature naming should also consider elderly consumers, who might struggle to understand English names.

General Discussion

This paper shows that many current feature names in online configurators do not match consumer needs as they are too acronymic, too diverse, and too vague. Consumers become confused or are misled by non-descriptive feature names. Not even owners are aware of the brand-specific acronyms for features that they probably have in their products, implying that potential new customers might struggle even more. Consumers prefer simple and descriptive names for basic features and would like names to directly convey feature benefit(s) or function(s). Therefore, basic features which are not especially brand-characteristic or innovative should be given simple and descriptive names, or, if available, follow industry standards (figure 2). Signature features which are innovative or build brand character could be assigned special names (e.g., associative or unusual names). This paper also reveals that such feature names need to be carefully selected and used rarely. Acronyms, comparative and vague names should be kept to the minimum.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

This research contributes to the literature on mass customization and advances the understanding of the importance of naming features (beyond products and brands). Previous research has suggested minimizing customization effort and increasing enjoyment in MCSs and has presented various approaches. Crucially, however, it has not yet addressed an essential factor: feature naming. The research presented here shows that feature names play an important role in customer experience and can be simplified. It is one of the first in-depth studies on feature names—a highly relevant level of the naming pyramid given the large number of features.

This research also has practical implications. First, it illustrates that companies have partly lost sight of consumer needs regarding feature naming. Automotive manufacturers seem to be concentrating more on internal company requirements than on consumers' needs when designing mass customization systems (Fanderl et al., 2019; Jacobson, 2019). Product managers seem keen to express themselves through



Foto: © Stockphoto

Lessons Learned

Feature names in mass customization systems must be based on consumer needs to facilitate the customization process and increase satisfaction:

1. Ensure consumers correctly understand feature function to avoid confusion. The function of language is to transmit information.
2. Use simple, descriptive, and precise names. Use industry terms for basic, non-differentiating features and avoid company-specific names.
3. Naming just a few signature features (e.g., brand-characteristic or innovative features) with special names will strengthen exclusivity and brand image and might create new sub-brands.
4. Signature features may be combined with the brand name or with associative or unusual expressions to create special names (which should still be somewhat intuitive).
5. Whenever possible, avoid vague add-ons (e.g., 'plus') and unspecific feature names (e.g., for packages).

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fancy names. However, they do so unsupported by market research on whether consumers understand the chosen names. Second, this research highlights areas of concern regarding naming and derives five recommendations for naming features (see Lessons Learned). Companies can improve customer experience by (again) focusing on naming needs. This will increase consumers' satisfaction and reduce their confusion and uncertainty. It will also reduce the need for explanation (e.g., in stores) and might increase revenues.

Future Research

Future research could generalize the present findings and recommendations for feature names beyond cars and in additional population groups. It might analyze specific naming

categories in more detail (e.g., which categories should be used for which features and which target groups). Experimental study designs could more specifically examine how specific naming categories impact satisfaction, brand attitudes, or revenues, and whether complex names make products look more sophisticated, for example. In addition, the interplay of feature names, section headlines, and descriptive texts in MCSs might be an interesting area to investigate. Further, the internal perspective of the company should be considered to obtain a holistic perspective.

By the way, are you still wondering what Plaid, PDK, and PDLS stand for? Plaid is Tesla's drivetrain and goes back to Spaceballs, a Star Wars parody. PDK stands for Porsche Doppelkupplungsgetriebe, and PDLS is the Porsche Dynamic Light System. 

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