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## Onomastics and Nicknames of Selected Cars in Nigeria: A Sociolinguistic Study

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*This study unearths the nicknames of selected cars in Nigeria in order to reveal their historical cum onomastic significance within the sociocultural milieu of the automobile users. Data comprise forty-five (45) purposively selected nicknames of some popular cars in Nigeria while Halliday's contextual theory of meaning and VARIES model served as our theoretical constructs. The study is predicated on the analysis of ten (10) interviews and hundred (100) questionnaires distributed randomly among selected respondents. Furthermore, the work indicates that nicknames market and popularise the cars more than the television, radio and other synchronous media, among the natives in Nigeria. Significantly, the new names serve as descriptive/historical instruments for perpetuating events and recording antecedents.*

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**Key Words:** (Advertisement, Car Branding, Nicknaming, Nigeria and Onomastics)

### **Introduction:**

Nigeria is an independent country which comprises over four hundred ethnic groups with distinct languages among which three (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) stand out. But each ethnic division has its unique viewpoint on names. Names are germane to the sociocultural cosmology of the Africans, particularly, Nigerians. Therefore, just as names are critical to determining the prospect of a child in life, so also are they in Nigeria's automobile market. Nicknames of car brands thus aid acceptability, marketability and popularity of the products. Based on the above, this study explores some nicknames of popular cars in Nigeria, and how such (local) nicknames have advanced their sales cum marketability in the country.

## Methodology

This study critiques forty-five (45) nicknames of some selected popular cars in Nigeria. Thus, the study is a continuum on onomastics (the study and science of names and brands). Ten (10) interviews were conducted with some individuals in Oyo and Ogun States respectively, being the domain of two among the three researchers. The method adopted is the simple random technique. The selection was made among commercial drivers, Nigerian Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW), cyclists, students, car owners, vulcanizers, roadside mechanics, tire sellers, car sellers, travelers and many other people. In addition, hundred (100) questionnaires were distributed randomly among youths and older individuals in Osun State on the selection of car nicknames.

## Theoretical Frameworks

Michael Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) inspired the contextual theory of meaning that is, the context of culture and situation. The theory amplifies how certain conditions trigger variation of meaning and supply treasured information to understand the meaning of a text. To Halliday, the context of culture exposes the cultural background behind meaning postulates of any text, while the context of situation implies "the environment of a text" (Halliday, 1989: 109). In this study, the cultural milieu of Nigerians and the circumstances surrounding the production of a car are considered as the factors that influence the choice of a car's nickname by the nicknamers.

Meanwhile, the VARIES model is a set of acronym developed by Nilsen and Nilsen (2006). It captures: V (vocational jargons), A (age-related language), R (regional or religious language), I (informality/formality), E (educational jargons), S (sex language) is also adopted as a theoretical construct. These two theories assisted the researchers in grouping the selected car nicknames via the sociocultural and historical contexts of the car users.

## Towards a Definition of Nickname

Nicknames have been perceived as alternative and momentary identity tags that can provide insights into societal associations, culture and language (De Klerk and Bosch 1997: 101). Ashley (1989:47) on one hand, considers nicknames as *eke* (extra) names issued to ridicule or show preference, and which sometimes, are unofficial forms of personal names or family names, and

they can replace either personal names or family names. Fowler and Fowler (1938:764) on the other hand, perceive a nickname as a “name added to or substituted for a person’s, place’s, or thing’s proper name.” In sum, these critics agree that a nickname is an extra-name superimposed over and above the legal one.

Many other studies have been carried out on nicknames, but mostly from a sociolinguistic perspective. Khuboni (2003) and Mashiri (2004) centre on the social and linguistic functions of nicknames in Shona and Zulu communities; Morgan et al. (1979) have examined the psychological potential of nicknames while Philipson and Huspek (1985) consider bibliographical entry on nicknames. Bechar-Israeli (1995), Davey and Mackinnon (2001) have also explored the patterns and traditions of nicknaming, sociocultural implications, interactional value of nicknames and their implications for societal cohesion or disintegration. While Lakaw (2006) and others have looked at the internet value of nicknames.

In the above studies, all the scholars agree that nicknames are encrypted symbols used either in public or private, and their meanings can only be decoded when they are interpreted within the context of the cultures where they originate.

### **Nicknaming in Africa**

Adejumo and Odebunmi (1999) examine the nicknaming of Nigerian currency notes. Ajileye and Ajileye explore the stylistic values of Yoruba nicknames. Odebode (2005) studies names and nicknames in Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman*. Odebunmi (2008) examines naming patterns and functions in Chinua Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah*, while Adebileje (2012) writes on nicknames used by Yoruba brides for in-laws. As a corollary, Odebode (2010b) considers naming systems during Yoruba wars. In spite of these several attempts to investigate nicknames in Nigeria, none of the scholars have examined nicknames of cars from an onomastic standpoint. But for Olaosun (2013) who explores car appellations in Nigeria from a stylo-rhetorical perspective, and Neethling (2007) who studies name customization on cars’ registration plates among South African elitist car users, no onomastic endeavour has been made on car nicknames in Nigeria as argued in this study.

### **Car Nicknaming in Nigeria**

It should be noted that Nigerians are imbued with a creative prowess to naming because in many Nigerian communities, the naming tradition is profound and performed orally. Names in

## Onomastics and Nicknames of Selected Cars in Nigeria: A Sociolinguistic Study

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Nigeria are viewed as trademarks of every human being. Indeed, it is the license of every newly born child in the community. Meanwhile, Odebode (2010: 24) submits that nicknames are given based on new traits of an individual after birth. If the traits in human beings qualify them for nicknames, then cars also deserve nicknaming based on their external features and performances after manufacturing. In this regard, this study moves further from just human nicknames to car nicknames in Nigeria.

Car nicknaming is relevant contextually because, without a local nickname, the car may not enjoy widespread recognition. Since most cars are imported, or rather put, *Tokunbo* ('arrived from overseas'), many Nigerians do not always wish to inquire about the ages of the cars but the brand. For instance, Toyota Camry 1996 Model is nicknamed *Tiny Light* in Nigeria since 2010. Car rebranding, therefore, assists in concealing the age(s) of the automobile. Besides, it is more convenient for Nigerians to handle the abbreviated local car nicknames rather than the lengthy manufacturers' European brand names and models. Similarly, the car nicknames are comical and have a therapeutic effect on those who hear the nicknames.

Furthermore, the Nigerian populace is divided into different social class: the rich, the middle-class and the poor. Many times, the last two social class engage more in the local rebranding of cars, depending on the general acceptability of the cars. In Nigeria, cars have been nicknamed since the early 1970s, notably, among the Yoruba (an ethnic group in Southwest Nigeria, Africa). Though there are other versions of car nicknames among different ethnic groups, this study is concerned with only the general and most popular car nicknames in Nigeria.

The selected car nicknames are equally used by both the educated, as well as the illiterate. In primordial times, among the Yoruba people, brand new sedan/sport cars were described in the local dialect as *Obokun* (broad and fat), heavy-duty vehicles as *Oko Ejo* ('vehicles that move like snakes') or *Ajagbe* ('vehicles used intentionally for carrying cargos'), truck cars as *Gbegilodo* ('vehicles for carrying logs of wood from a stream'), among many others. It was during the oil boom in Nigeria that Volkswagen Beetle was manufactured and officially known as Volkswagen Type 1. The car gained prominence then, and it was sooner rechristened in Nigeria with nicknames such as *Ijapa* (tortoise) and *So kinso* (the occupant beside the driver needs to get down before those at the backseat can alight).

Given the similarity between the vehicle and a ‘tortoise,’ it took no time before the nickname ‘Ijapa’ was given to the car. Though it is a Yoruba zoonym (animal name), it sticks to the car like a second skin. Peugeot 504 and other previous series were also nicknamed, (*Pijo*, a sound modification of the real name). The two car brands rose to become the toast of young Nigerian graduates who were rewarded with them after completing their university education. However, three main factors influence the nicknames given to cars. These are size, speed and shape, otherwise known as *the 3s of a car*. There are some secondary factors like descriptive/external features (dashboard, boot, car lights, front and back views), durability, gender and economic status of car users, car nicknames based on ethnicity car nicknames coined from popular film, song and television advertisements among others. 18

It is essential to note that the media advertisements of cars have not been able to equal the effectiveness of these local car nicknames as far as identifying and marketing cars in Nigeria is concerned. In fact, currently, almost every locale in Nigeria has a nickname for her popular commercial transport. This study reveals that Nigerians do not just give nicknames to cars, except, the nicknames merge with relevant and apparent features in such cars. In addition, they do not just buy cars for fancy or prestige, though, it is part of the reasons; rather, they base their choice of cars on factors such as the durability of a car engine, fuel consumption, ruggedness, endurance of a car on the poor roads in the country. Subsequently, the external features (speed, shape and size) are then considered.

### Contextico-VARIES Model

Halliday’s Contextual theory of meaning, with emphasis on the context of culture and situation is fused with VARIES model to derive ‘Contextico-varies’ as the study’s theoretical framework to analyse the following car nicknames:

**Table 1: Contextico-VARIES Analysis of Selected Car Nicknames in Nigeria**

S/N	Car Names	Car Nicknames	Car Features	VARIES Classification
1.	Toyota Camry 1995 model	Orobo	Thick and big	<u>Informality</u> Informal language is reflected in the use of Yoruba language. ‘Orobo’ is a Yoruba word used to refer to plus size individuals or things.
2.	Toyota Camry 1998 model	Millennium	Slim model car for the 2000s	<u>Informality</u> This is a slang used for most things produced at the turn of the millennium (the year 2000)

# Onomastics and Nicknames of Selected Cars in Nigeria: A Sociolinguistic Study

3.	Toyota Camry 2003-2005 model	"Big for Nothing" or "Big Daddy"	Masculine superiority /Outsized	<u>Sex</u> This reflects the male sex. The term 'Big Daddy' is commonly used as a name for wealthy, influential men, and it is ascribed to the car model as a result of its size and the caliber of users.
4.	Toyota Camry v6 2002 model	"Envelope"	Shape of the rear-light	<u>Informality</u> The nickname 'envelope' is a slang used in relation to the physical features of the car model.
5.	Toyota Camry 2007-2010 model	Muscle/Voltron	Thickness and powerfully built	<u>Informality</u> 'Muscle' is a slang ascribed to the car model as a result of its look while 'Voltron' reflects the physical attributes of a fictional character
6.	Toyota Corolla 1991/6 model	"First Lady"	Feminine elegance	<u>Sex</u> The nickname is a direct reference to a title ascribed to the female gender
7.	Toyota Corolla 2003-2007 models	Bank Type	Stylishness	<u>Vocation</u> This car model is considered to be classy and it is popularly used in Nigeria by Bank staffs
8.	Toyota Avalon	Long John	Lengthy shape	<u>Sex</u> This nickname reflects the male gender basically because of the name 'John'
9.	Toyota Starlet/Nissan Micra	Rabbit	Miniature shape	<u>Region</u> <u>This nickname got ascribed to the car model because of its perceived similarities to the rabbit, an animal commonly found in tropical areas such as Nigeria</u>
10.	Nissan Pathfinder	Lorry	Big rear shape and boot	<u>Informality</u> <u>This is a slang for a car model which is perceived to share some features with a lorry</u>
11.	Toyota Hiace 2004 till date	Hummer bus	Well-built like Hummer Jeeps	<u>Education</u> <u>It is observed that the combination of the lexemes that make up the compound word 'hummer bus' is reflective of an illiterate or low level of educational attainment.</u>
12.	Toyota Highlander	Carton Wagon	Large and outsized	<u>Informality</u> <u>It is observed that this nickname is more like a negative slang referring to the size of the car model in comparison to its inner space.</u>
13.	Toyota Tundra 2010 model	The Bully	Outshine lower models	<u>Informality</u> <u>This nickname occurs as a slang which is reflective of the perceived higher quality of the car model in comparison to others within its range</u>
14.	Honda Accord 1986	Pure Water	Pure water is the name ascribed to a common product made up of sachets of drinking	<u>Education</u> <u>In similarity to the function of social strata, this nickname reflects the perceived class of users to be non-educated individuals who can only afford a low-priced and ordinary car such as this particular model</u>

			water sold at a low-price in Nigeria	
15.	Honda Accord 1994 model	"Honda Hala"	Hausa name due to its speed	<u>Informality</u> <u>This variable is reflected in the inclusion of a word from the Hausa language in the nickname</u>
16.	Honda Accord 1996	Bulldog	Firmness	<u>Region</u> <u>This nickname has its origin in the name of a particular breed of dogs imported from England into Nigeria</u>
17.	1996 Honda Accord R Type	Tiger Face	Front View	<u>Informality</u> <u>This is a slang that ascribes the physical feature of the car model to that which is perceived to resemble a Tiger's face</u>
18.	Honda accord, 1997/98	Bullet	Swiftness in speed	<u>Informality</u> <u>This is a nickname used to refer to the speed of the car model</u>
19.	Honda Accord 1999 model	"Honda Baby Boy"	2001 Tyrese Gibson and Snoop Dogg's movie titled "Baby Boy"	<u>Sex/Age</u> <u>The nickname reflects two social variables. The word 'baby' reflects a young age while 'boy' reflects a young male.</u>
20.	Honda Accord 2003-2005 model	"End of discussion"	Coined from a TV manufacturer advert	<u>Education</u> <u>The use of the phrase from the car advert reflects the educational attainment of the initial users before its widespread use</u>
21.	Honda Accord 2006-2010 model	"Discussion Continues"	Advancement on the previous model rear light	<u>Education</u> <u>This coinage of this nickname reflects the educational attainment of its first users before its widespread use by all and sundry (the educated and non-educated)</u>
22.	Honda Accord 2011-2012 model	Anaconda /"Evil Spirit"	Scary headlamps	<u>Religion/ Region</u> <u>The nickname 'evil spirit' is a pointer to the religiosity of many Nigerians who believe in supernatural powers and think that anything that looks hideous is evil. The nickname 'anaconda' reflects the region, and it is the name of a reptile found in South America</u>
23.	1996 Honda Civic	Thank you Daddy	It was prevalent as car gifts from rich older men popularly known as sugar daddies to their girlfriends	<u>Sex</u> <u>This nickname reflects the male gender</u>
24.	1980 Mercedes Benz 200	Regular	Evenly-shaped and symmetrical	<u>Informality</u> <u>This is a slang used to describe the well-aligned nature of the car model</u>
25.	1990 Mercedes Benz 300	V Nyansh	V-shaped boot and largeness of	<u>Informality</u> <u>This nickname is inclusive of a word from Nigerian Pidgin English 'nyash' which</u>

# Onomastics and Nicknames of Selected Cars in Nigeria: A Sociolinguistic Study

	model		the rear	<u>means posterior or buttocks</u>
26.	1982 Mercedes Benz 200E	V Boot	V-shaped boot and largeness of the rear	<u>Informality</u> <u>This nickname is used to reflect the shape of the car model</u>
27.	1984 Mercedes Benz 190E	Baby Benz	Lower version of modern Mercedes Benz	<u>Age</u> <u>This nickname reflects that the car is a 'younger' version to its previous car models</u>
28.	1985 Mercedes Benz 300SEL	Shagari	Used by a Nigerian president	<u>Region</u> <u>This is a nickname common to the Northern part of Nigeria</u>
29.	1993 Mercedes S500 class	Beast	Powerful	<u>Region</u> <u>It is a nickname commonly used to describe some extraordinarily powerful machines</u>
30.	2000 Mercedes Benz S500	Smiley	Headlamp looks like a smiley emoji	<u>Informality</u> <u>This is a nickname that reflects the perceived physical attribute of the car model</u>
31.	BMW series	Be My Wife	Single David Bowie in 1977	<u>Sex</u> <u>This nickname reflects the female gender</u>
32.	2002 BMW 3 Series	Coja	Nigerian government bought few for 2003 Coja Games in Abuja	<u>Vocation</u> <u>This nickname is ascribed to a Sports event</u>
33.	BMW 5 series 05	Cobra	Swiftness	<u>Region</u> <u>This is the name of a reptile found in the tropical areas of Nigeria</u>
34.	BMW Z3W	Clown shoe	Long-shaped bonnet provokes humour	<u>Informality</u> <u>This nickname is used to reflect the physical features of the car model.</u>
35.	Volkswagen Beetle	'Ijapa/Tortoise/Bug'	Curvy shape	<u>Informality/ Region</u> <u>'Ijapa' is a Yoruba animal name which means, 'tortoise' and it can be found in Nigeria</u>
36.	Mack trucks	'Kill and go'	Built with heavy metals	<u>Informality</u> <u>This nickname refers to a situation wherein it is possible for a Mack truck to be involved in an accident but comes out unscathed while the other vehicle (regardless of the brand or model) would be destroyed</u>
37.	Mitsubishi L300	Babyface	Popularly used by commercial drivers	<u>Age</u> <u>This nickname reflects a young age</u>
38.	Volvo GL750series	"Coffin"	Rectangular-shaped front and rear	<u>Vocation</u> <u>This car model is considered to be shaped like a coffin/casket and it is often used in</u>

				<u>Nigeria for mortuary ambulance services</u>
39.	Lexus RX-300	"Ajebo"	It is popularly used by wealthy young men for s/he who is pampered and is described as anyone who is "eating butter." Thus, aje denotes (to eat).	<u>Informality</u> <u>This is a nickname derived from Nigerian Pidgin English and it refers to anyone of anything that is considered delicate and expensive</u>
40.	Avalon	Gee	Popularly used by young men	<u>Sex</u> <u>This nickname reflects the male gender. 'Gee' means Guy or Gentleman</u>
41.	Peugeot 407	Jet	Jet-like front shape	<u>Informality</u> <u>This nickname is used to reflect the physical features of the car model.</u>
42.	Cadillac Escalade	Chairman	High profile car	<u>Education</u> <u>This reflects the upper social class cum educational attainment of most of the car users</u>
43.	2015 Lexus LX570	End of Ocholi	A former Nigerian Federal minister dies in the car model during a car accident	<u>Region</u> <u>This nickname is unique to Nigerians as a result of the popular Nigerian individual that the car model was nicknamed after.</u>
44.	Infiniti fx35	Dwarf	Low-built car	<u>Informality</u> <u>This nickname reflects the considered height of the car model</u>
45.	Mazda 6	Ninja Face	Spectacular front view	<u>Informality</u> <u>The nickname reflects the perceived similarities of the car model to that of a Japanese Ninja's face</u>

### Classification of Selected Nigerian Car Nicknames

#### 1) Car Nicknames based on External Features (Shape, Size, Lights, Front and Back View)

"Envelope," Long John, Rabbit, Lorry, Carton Wagon, Tiger Face, Anaconda/"Evil Spirit," Regular, V Nyansh, V Boot, Smiley, Clown shoe, 'Ijapa/Tortoise/Bug,' Babyface, "Coffin," Dwarf, Ninja Face and Jet.

#### 2) Car Nicknames based on Movie/Television Advertisements/Song

"Honda Baby Boy," "End of discussion," "Discussion Continues," and "Be My Wife."

### 3) Car Nicknames based on Speed

Bullet and Cobra

### 4) Car Nicknames based on Durability

"Muscle/Voltron," Hummer bus, Bulldog and "Beast."

### 5) Car Nicknames based on Gender/Status

"Big for Nothing" or "Big Daddy," "First Lady," Bank car, "Thank you Daddy," "Ajebo," Gee (yahoo) boiz ride and Chairman.

### 6) Car Nicknames based on Circumstances

Millennium, The Bully, Pure Water, Baby Benz, Shagari, Coja, 'Kill and go' and End of Oholi.

### 7) Car Nicknames based on Nigeria's Ethnic Group

Orobo and Honda Hala.

### Discussion and Findings

Significantly, there are some of the car nicknames in the above classification that are worthy of consideration. For instance, Toyota Camry 2007-2010 model nicknamed, "Muscle/Voltron" and Honda Accord 2011-2012 model dubbed, "Anaconda/Evil Spirit" link their popularity to two prominent Hollywood films. "Anaconda" is the title of a 1997 Hollywood adventure and horror film by Peruvian director, Luis Llosa which centers on a South American mystical and gigantic non-venomous boa species. The importation of the name of this magnificent snake (zoonym) indicates the influence of American culture on Nigerian youths. It also suggests that this car nickname is not a figment of imagination, but an accurate depiction of a snake which kills its prey by constricting.

Similarly, Voltron is an offshoot of an American animated television series produced by Steve Sterling in 1984; it features a team of astronauts who pilots a giant Super 'Autobots' known as, 'Voltron,' a car-shaped robot capable of changing into humanoid shapes. Honda Accord 1996 model, on the other hand, is nicknamed, 'Bulldog,' a 13<sup>th</sup>-century breed of a dog built for strength and the bull-baiting game in England. The implication of car nicknames such

as; Voltron, Anaconda and Bulldog is that they evoke nature, power, style, sports and everything automakers and nicknamers would like to associate with their cars.

The 2002 BMW 3 Series is nicknamed, 'COJA' and it relates to significant social and political events in Nigeria. This model got its name after it was purchased for ministers and delegates at the COJA games in Abuja in 2003. COJA is the French acronym for Comité d'Organisation des Jeux Africains, meaning, 'Committee for the Organisation of the African Games,' but Nigerians refer to the sports event itself as COJA. The car nicknamed COJA was the official car of the event and became popular after the event.

Another example in this category is Toyota Corolla 1991/6 model, "first lady," which is a reference to the military era in Nigeria when the head of state, as well as the state governors, gave extraordinary power to their wives through the creation of the office of the first lady. It was<sup>24</sup> this car that was the official car for this esteemed office of the first lady. Likewise, Shagari, the first Nigerian civilian president, used the 1985 Mercedes Benz 300SEL during his tenure in Nigeria's second republic in 1979. Thus, the car was nicknamed after him.

The Honda Accord 2003-2005 model nicknamed, "End of Discussion" is metaphoric and hyperbolic. It denotes that all car products manufactured before the car were not so ideal for attracting the public's attention. The car's nickname, therefore, connotes that the car is the peak of the manufacturer's automotive innovation as at the time while there is a superior automotive order in Honda Accord 2006-2010 model nicknamed, "Discussion Continues" which suggests that the old model has been rebranded.

### **Conclusion:**

Finally, the selected car nicknames in this study do not in any way denigrate the official brand names of the cars; instead, they advertise, dignify and make the cars more marketable in Nigeria. Analysis of the selected car nicknames reveals that currently, Nigerians have a predilection for Toyota Camry and Honda Accord products due to their affordability, durability and moderate fuel consumption. Meanwhile Volkswagen Beetle, Peugeot, Mercedes Benz retain preferential spots only in the past, they are now considered as outmoded car products because, few Nigerians use the newer models of the car brands, unlike their old versions. The discussed car nicknames also unearth the peculiarity of each car and the situations that surround their usage in Nigeria. It also evaluates their popularity, acceptability, sociocultural and historical

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# Onomastics and Nicknames of Selected Cars in Nigeria: A Sociolinguistic Study

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implications of the cars to the Nigerian society given the economic status of each car user in Nigeria.

This study has exposed several factors that underline the car choices of Nigerians and which significantly, will benefit not only onomasticians but also car buyers and manufacturers enthused about the endorsement of their cars in Nigeria. The study also overlaps with such fields as anthropology, marketing, cartography, technology, oral literature, media, politics, psychology, linguistics and history, thereby reflecting the multidisciplinary nature of the study.

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26

**Appendix:**

Fig. 1:



Volkswagen Beetle model (*Ijapa/Tortoise/Bug*)

Fig. 2:



Volvo GL 750 Series (*Coffin*)

Fig. 3:



Honda Accord 1998 model (*Baby Boy*)

# Onomastics and Nicknames of Selected Cars in Nigeria: A Sociolinguistic Study

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Fig. 4:



Honda Accord 2011-2012 model (Evil Spirit)

Fig. 5:



Toyota Camry 1999 model (Pencil/Tiny light)

Fig 6:



Toyota Camry 2007 model (Muscle)