

Small sounds, big deals: How do number sounds influence consumers?

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Consumers remember the sounds of numbers in prices and associate certain sounds with value, according to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

Authors Keith S. Coulter (Clark University) and Robin A. Coulter (University of Connecticut) studied the ability of number-sounds to convey meaning and influence price perceptions.

Previous research has demonstrated that people associate certain vowel and consonant sounds with perceptions of physical size. For example, front vowels (like a long a, e, i) and fricatives (like the English f, z, and s) have been shown to convey smallness, while back vowels (sounds like the /u/ in goose or the [sound](#) in foot) indicate largeness.

"Phonetic symbolism affects price perceptions because consumers typically process, encode, and retain numbers (and hence prices) in memory in multiple formats," the authors write. Consumers encode what a price looks like and sounds like along with a relative numeric value that the price represents (such as, "It is inexpensive").

"Thus, sounds associated with the auditory representation can impact the numeric value associated with the analog representation—that is, small sounds can create the impression of big deals," the authors write.

The authors found that number-sound effects were more likely to occur when a frame of reference (a regular price) was provided. And

sometimes, the sounds of numbers created false impressions of value. For example, participants perceived a \$10 item marked down to \$7.66 to be a greater discount than a \$10 item discounted to \$7.22.

"Number sounds impact price magnitude perceptions only when consumers mentally rehearse a sale price, as they might do when comparing items on a shopping trip," the authors write. "Further, mental rehearsal of the same sale prices characterized by small phonemes in one language and large phonemes in another language can yield differential effects."

More information: Keith S. Coulter and Robin A. Coulter. "Small Sounds, Big Deals: Phonetic Symbolism Effects in Pricing." *Journal of Consumer Research*: August 2010.

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