

Study shows lower pitched sounds lead audiences to believe products are larger

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Big sandwich. Credit: Georgia Institute of Technology

Lower pitches in voices or music in advertisements lead consumers to

infer a larger product size, according to a new study by researchers at Georgia Institute of Technology and Vanderbilt University.

Sound is a fundamental element of nearly all marketing communications, from commercials to spokespeople and sales associates, but Michael Lowe, assistant professor of marketing at Scheller College of Business and Kelly Haws, associate professor of marketing at Vanderbilt's Owen Graduate School of Management, indicated that marketers don't have a firm grasp on what it communicates to customers.

"Research to date suggests that managers too often select music and spokespeople by intuition, with limited understanding regarding how these elements might affect actual product perceptions," Lowe and Haws wrote in their new paper for the *Journal of Marketing Research*. "Some degree of importance, then, should be given to understanding what is actually being communicated about the product at a sensory level."

In their paper, titled "Sounds Big: The Effects of Acoustic Pitch on Product Perceptions," the coauthors show in six different studies how the effects of acoustic [pitch](#) on consumer beliefs depend on "cross-modal correspondence," defined as the compatibility of stimuli perceived by one sense, such as sound, with a sensory experience in another, like sight.

One study found that acoustic pitch differences in voice affects perceptions of size. Participants listened to a radio advertisement for a new sandwich at a fictitious sandwich chain where a spokesperson's voice was digitally altered to be higher or lower. Participants who heard the ad featuring the lower-pitched voice believed the sandwich was significantly larger than those who heard the higher-pitched version.

The same trend was observed in a separate study that tested the pitch level of music. Participants viewed a TV advertisement, with voiceover

removed, for a laptop computer and answered several questions about their perceptions. Those who viewed a version of the ad with lower-pitched music perceived the laptop to be larger than those who viewed the higher-pitched variety.

Additional studies traced the limitations and contexts of size-sound associations. One study found that an association between a sound and product is necessary to create the desired size effect. Two others showed this effect is most prominent in ads that facilitate product visualization or when visual product information isn't available at the time of judgment.

The researchers believe this work will be relevant for marketers and researchers alike, as it offers important consideration for ads while setting the stage for further study.

"Even small cues such as differences in acoustic pitch," they wrote, "can lead to measurably different perceptions about the products with which they are paired. We demonstrate an important way in which symbolism in sound extends beyond word symbolism, thus expanding the horizons of research in 'sound symbolism' and sensory marketing more generally."

More information: Michael L. Lowe et al. Sounds Big: The Effects of Acoustic Pitch on Product Perceptions, *Journal of Marketing Research* (2017). [DOI: 10.1509/jmr.14.0300](https://doi.org/10.1509/jmr.14.0300)

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