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Alliteration Alters: Its Influence in Perceptions Fo Product Promotions and Pricing

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We investigate alliteration—the repetition of initial sounds in two or more consecutive and/or closely adjacent words—in the formation of pricing perceptions. We find that consumers evaluate alliterative presentations higher than nonalliterative presentations (i.e. 4 Fables \$40 vs. 3 Fables \$29) even when nonalliterative presentations represent a better deal.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Alliteration is the repetition of the initial sound in a word across two or more consecutive and/or adjacent words in a sentence or phrase. Alliteration is common in brand and organizational names (e.g. Best Buy, Coca-Cola, Better Business Bureau), is used extensively in advertising copy, political speeches, poetry and prose, and can facilitate memory and recall (Lea et al. 2008). Alliteration is one of many rhetorical devices, the main purpose of which is to persuade via effective communication (see McQuarrie and Mick 1996 for a framework). As noted by McQuarrie and Mick (1996), rhetoric is used widely, but little has been done (excluding the framework they present) to further theoretical understanding of how rhetorical devices influence consumers. Empirical research in this area is even more rare. Many questions remain in this field of research. Do rhetorical devices in the consumption domain truly exert influence on consumers? If so, in what way? Furthermore, what are some potential mental processes driving any observed effects? We present evidence that alliterative pricing presentations can positively influence price perceptions as well as process evidence for the observed effects.

In this paper we focus on the use of alliteration in communicating pricing for multiple items. We theorize that alliteration has a positive effect on evaluations such that alliterative prices (9 for \$90) are evaluated higher than objectively better nonalliterative prices, such as 9 for \$.88, because the alliteration imparts a rhythm to the presentation that “sounds” better. Additionally, we theorize that if brand or product name is included in such pricing presentations, and whether than name is alliterative or not can also influence perceptions. For instance, we predict that “3 Threbybles \$30” will be rated higher than “3 Fables \$30” because all components are alliterative in the former presentation and therefore “sounds” better. We present three studies that demonstrate this effect and provide evidence that supports our contention that the repetition of phonological units in alliterative prices “sounds” better, which in turn influences perceptions of the deal presented.

In study 1 ($n = 118$) we compared two types of price presentations for multiple items (a fictitious soap brand): one where the quantity, brand, and price were all alliterative, and one where quantity and brand were alliterative, the price was not (e.g. 10 Teven for \$10 vs. 10 Teven for \$9.70). Participants found the fully alliterative presentation (10 Teven for \$10) to be a more attractive offer, more attention grabbing, had higher purchase intentions for the product, were happier with the deal, and thought the deal was a better value, than the alternate presentation (all $ps < .03$). In each case, the effects were fully mediated by participant’s perceptions of whether the deal “had a ring to it” or “sounds right” (bootstrap mediation; Preacher and Hayes 2008).

In study 2 ($n = 244$) we used a different product (fictitious shirt brands) and compared the price presentations used in study 1 with two additional presentations, one where quantity and price were alliterative, but the brand was not (e.g. 3 Fables \$30), and one where nothing was alliterative but the product was less expensive (e.g. 3 Fables \$29). Planned contrasts revealed that participants who saw the fully alliterative presentation (e.g. 3 Threbybles \$30) were more likely to buy the product, thought the deal was more attention grabbing, were happier with the deal, and thought it was a better

deal than any other type of presentation (all $ps < .05$). As in study 1, all the effects were fully mediated by participant’s perceptions of whether the deal “had a ring to it” or “sounds right” (bootstrap mediation; Preacher and Hayes 2008). Additionally, we rule out other potential process explanations including message recall, unit cost calculation difficulty, cost importance, attention, brand name typicality, and verbal/visual processing style (Childers, Houston, and Heckler 1985).

Study 3 was a 2 (Price/Quantity Presentation: Alliterative vs. Nonalliterative) x 2 (Cognitive Load: High vs. Low) full factorial between-subjects experimental design ($n = 108$). Nonalliterative price/quantity presentations (e.g. 2 for \$19) always represented an objectively better deal than alliterative price/quantity presentations (e.g. 2 for \$20). Cognitive load was achieved by asking participants to remember 7 words (high load) or 2 words (low load). We reasoned that rehearsal of the words in high load conditions would inhibit the positive effect of alliteration on price perceptions by disrupting the repetitive rhythm present in the price presentation. Therefore alliteration effects should persist under low load, but not high load conditions. Analysis of the data revealed significant two-way interactions for six dependent variables (all $ps < .05$). Planned contrasts revealed that the means were in the predicted direction, individuals who read alliterative price/quantity presentations while experiencing low cognitive load thought the offer was more attractive, were more likely to buy the product, thought the deal was more attention grabbing, had higher purchase intentions, and thought the deal was better and presented more value than in any other condition (all $ps < .05$).

In summary, this work presents the first (to the best of our knowledge) empirical demonstration that alliterative price presentations can influence perceptions of promotions. We contribute theoretically to the understanding of how rhetorical devices, such as alliteration, can influence consumers. More specifically, we provide process evidence supporting our contention that the rhythm-inducing effect of alliteration “sounds right” to consumers, which in turn influences perceptions. Furthermore, we can “turn off” this effect by interrupting the alliteration’s repetitive rhythm via memorizing nonalliterative words. We situate this research at the intersection of phonological theories in marketing (e.g. Argo, Popa, and Smith 2010; Lowry and Shrum 2007; Yorkston and Menon 2004) and the use of rhetoric in marketing (McQuarrie and Mick 1996).

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