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# The effects of in-store music on shopping experience and spending in retail: a review and practical implications for the retailer

Maurice R. Lamerus

Institute of Marketing, Beeckestijn Business School, Leusden, The Netherlands

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## Abstract

**Purpose** - The purpose of this paper is to provide the retailer with practical information on the effects of in-store music on the shopping experience of its customers and consumer spending.

**Approach** - The practical implications have been deduced through the review of scientific literature of the last fifty years. It is framed around two central topics relevant to the retailer, (1) enhancing the shopping experience and; (2) increasing the time and the amount of money customers spend in store. The findings and practical implications are discussed using five (musical) components: congruency, preference, familiarity, tempo and loudness.

**Findings** - The literature indicates congruency and musical preference having a strong positive effect on shopping experience and spending. Tempo and loudness appear to have an additional modulatory effect.

**Originality/value** - This paper bridges the gap between academic theory and business practice by providing the retailer with practical information based on scientific research that can be readily implemented.

**Keywords** - Music, Retail, In-store, Shopping Experience, Spending, Retailer, Atmospherics

**Paper type** - Literature review

## 1. Introduction

Ever-increasing competition in the marketplace forces the retailer to differentiate not just on product, price, people, place and promotion, but also in the experience of shopping. The manipulation of atmospherics (by changing the music, light, color, scent, air quality, layout, furnishings, etc.) has become ever more important in order to stand out amongst

competitors (McGoldrick, 1990; Marsh, 1999; Turley and Chebat, 2002; Varley, 2005). Atmospherics of the store can be used to attract and retain customers (Bitner, 1992), enhance brand perception (Baker et al., 2002; Babin and Attaway, 2000; Berry et al., 2002), influence perception of uniqueness of the product (Baker, Grewal and Parasraman, 1994), perception of retail price (Areni and Kim, 1993), the number of purchases bought (Milliman, 1982), and can create an affective relationship with the customer (Schmitt and Simonson, 1997).

Among those atmospheric elements, music is the most powerful (Alpert and Alpert, 1990), and most studied (Garlin and Owen, 2006) component that a retailer can easily and cheaply manipulate to enhance the desired cognitive and affective responses in shoppers (Bruner, 1990; Garlin and Owen, 2006; Oakes and North, 2008). Music has been proven to have a direct effect on shopping experience by influencing the number of purchases, purchase intention (Areni and Kim, 1993; Donavan and Rossiter, 1982; Smith and Curnow, 1966), overall emotional evaluation of the store and quality of service (Herrington and Capella, 1994; Morrison and Beverland, 2003; Morin et al., 2007). Neuroscience gives an even deeper insight into the power of music effecting the mind by showing that it triggers hormonal activity in the hypothalamus, which creates an instant effect on heart rate and blood pressure. Music - if pleasant - can therefore reduce anxiety, stress levels and influence mood (Bennet and Bennet, 2008).

Although background music in retail is already ubiquitous, many retailers do not have a solid strategy or scientific evidence to support the choices of music played (Areni, 2003). However, playing music that is in line with the store and brand certainly can make a difference, not only in boosting sales (Yalch and Spangenberg, 1993; North et al., 1997; Garlin and Owen, 2006; Jacob et al., 2009) but also in enhancing brand awareness (Magnini and Thelen, 2008; Beverland et al., 2006).

This paper will help retailers to make clear-cut, readily implemented, strategic music decisions based on science through the review literature.

## **2. Approach**

Examining peer reviewed journals like Nature, Journal of Marketing, Retailing, Business Research, Services Marketing and Psychology & Marketing yielded more than over one hundred studies written on the effects of in-store music in retail in the last fifty years. For the purpose of this study, only the papers that had meaningful, relevant implications for the retailer have been selected. Of the resulting fifty-three papers, focus of these studies has mainly been on the manipulation of the shopping experience and the effects of in-store music on time and the amount of money spent in-store. Therefore this review has been framed around these two key topics:

- (1) Enhancing the shopping experience
- (2) Increasing time and the amount of money spent in the store

### **2.1 Enhancing the shopping experience**

In this review, 'shopping experience' is defined as the evaluation of the customer of the pleasure and satisfaction of shopping in the store, usefulness of the store, perception of merchandise quality, service quality (sales personnel) and the overall rating of the environment (Kotler, 1974; Bitner, 1992). Creating a pleasurable shopping experience is crucial for a successful retail business (Sherman and Smith, 1986; Dawson et al., 1990; Baker et al., 1992; Tai and Fung, 1997; Sherman et al., 1997; Turley and Chebat, 2002; Varley, 2005).

## **2.2** Increasing time and the amount of money spent in the store

The papers that have been reviewed have studied the effects of in-store music on time spent in the store, purchase intention, number of purchases, average amount spent, willingness to buy and increased spending (Jacob, 2006; Morrison et al., 2010; Caldwell and Hibbert, 2002; Herrington, 1996; Milliman, 1982; Sullivan, 2002).

The findings per topic are grouped in five components:

(A) Congruency

(B) Musical preference

(C) Familiarity

(D) Tempo

(E) Loudness

### **2.A** Congruency

Congruency is the term used if the music fits with another aspect of the store. Music can be congruent with a scent, perception of the store, product, target audience or perception of the brand. The occurrence of congruency is established by conducting market research.

### **2.B** Musical preference

Musical preference refers to the music taste of the target audience. It is typically measured with a questionnaire.

### **2.C** Familiarity

Familiarity is described as how familiar a piece of music is to the shopper. It is usually determined by a questionnaire. In the literature, familiarity is closely related to preference, but as Sweeney and Wyber (2002) have shown, familiarity does not necessarily equal preference.

### **2.D** Tempo

Tempo of music is measured in beats per minute (BPM). The reviewed papers have mainly studied the difference in effect between slow music (below 72 BPM) and fast music (above 92 BPM).

### **2.E** Loudness

An objective measurement of loudness is expressed in decibels. However, loudness can be very subjectively experienced, so scientists always rely on market research to test the volume with the target audience to find out if the music is perceived as soft or loud.

### **3. Findings**

The findings are discussed in light of the two central topics and along the five (musical) components.

#### **(1) Enhancing the shopping experience**

##### **Congruency**

Most of the studies on congruency have been focused on music in combination with scent. Several interesting findings have emerged:

- If the music is congruent with a scent, it significantly increases the pleasure and satisfaction of shoppers (Morrison et al., 2010).
- Mattila and Wirtz (2001) showed that when ambient scent and music are congruent with each other in terms of their arousing qualities (in their case slow music with calming lavender scent or fast music with a stimulating grapefruit scent), consumers rate the environment significantly more positively, exhibit higher levels of approach and impulse-buying behavior, and experience enhanced satisfaction than when these atmospheric elements were at odds with each other.
- Michon and Chebat (2004) found that the combination of fast music and citrus odor positively altered the shoppers' perception of the mall environment.

Music and scent seem to have a synergetic relationship, enhancing positive effects if they are congruent, and lessening the effect if not.

One other interesting finding was to do with the relationship between the tempo of the music and how crowded a store was:

- Shoppers found a store more useful and the shopping experience more pleasant if the music's tempo matched how crowded the store was. Slow music worked best if the store was crowded and fast music worked better where the store was emptier (Eroglu et al., 2005).

##### **Musical preference**

The research clearly indicates not only on an emotional, but also on a cognitive level, that music has a strong, positive effect on shoppers if they like it:

- Dube and Morin (2001) found that music rated high on the pleasure intensity scale of shoppers, positively influenced their behavior towards the shopping environment and sales personnel and thus elevated their overall evaluation of the store.
- North et al. (2000) discovered that if customers rated the music as fun or upbeat, they perceived the environment also as more fun or upbeat. Ratings of music seem to mediate the perception of the environment.
- Researchers Sweeney and Wyber (2002) have demonstrated that music that was liked had a major positive effect on the consumer's pleasure, the arousal of senses and their perception of service and merchandise quality.

##### **Familiarity**

Contrary to expectations, individuals reported greater pleasure shopping when listening to unfamiliar music compared to familiar music (Yalch and Spangenberg, 2000).

### **Tempo**

The literature on the effects of tempo is ambivalent. Although some researchers (Andersson et al., 2012) have found a positive effect if the music is up-tempo, most of the studies tend to show a more favorable effect when the music is slow:

- Slow music had a more positive effect on a store's rating than fast music did if no scent was present (Michon and Chebat, 2004).
- Slow music produced significantly more positive responses than fast-tempo music in terms of satisfaction, relaxation, and positive disconfirmation of expectations of wait duration in a store (Oakes and North, 2008).
- Although not a huge difference, slow music enhanced service quality more than fast music did (Sweeney and Wyver, 2002).
- Eroglu et al. (2005) found that people reported to avoid shopping in a store that played fast music.

### **Loudness**

The only real effect that could be found in the studies on volume and shopping experience, is that males and females perceive loudness of music differently. The difference is small but it seems that women find softer music more pleasant than men when shopping (Andersson et al., 2012).

## **(2) Increasing time and the amount of money spent in store**

### **Congruency**

Again, strong synergetic effects are found on music being congruent with scent. Michon and Chebat (2006) discovered that music in line with odor (in this study fast music with citrus scent) significantly increases consumer spending. Incongruent sensorial stimuli have a strong negative impact on consumer spending. In their study, the combination of congruent background music with ambient scent accounted for a non-negligible two percent in spending variance!

But scent is not the only element that should be aligned with music. It also has a positive effect to make music congruent with the product, store or target audience:

- Music congruent with target market increases number of purchases and money spent (Yalch and Spangenberg, 1993).
- If music is congruent with the product, it enhances the sales of that product (North et al., 1997). In this case, French music boosting the sales of French wines and German music doing the same for German wines. Responses to a questionnaire suggested that customers were unaware of these effects of music on their product choices.
- Music in line with the establishment (e.g. drinking songs in a bar) increased the length of time customers stayed and the average amount they spent (Jacob, 2006).
- Jacob (2009) found that romantic songs in a flower shop significantly increased the amount of money spent by customers, supporting the finding that music in line with the store has a positive effect on spending.

### **Musical preference**

There exists a body of evidence showing that liked music has a major positive effect on time and the amount of money spent in the store:

- In a much cited paper by Levy and Grewal (1992), the authors demonstrated that pleasure and arousal produced by music mediates the willingness of shoppers to buy.
- Liked music, especially if it is happy, greatly increased shopping intentions (Broekemier et al., 2008).
- Liking of the music has a positive effect on spending (Garlin and Owen, 2006).
- Caldwell and Hibbert (2002) found that liked music had a positive correlation to an increase in time and money spent in an establishment. This result supports the finding of Herrington (1996) who found that shoppers who liked the music, spent significantly more time and money in the store.

### **Familiarity**

Merely playing popular music because it is familiar to everyone does not seem to be the optimal strategy according to the scientific literature. Analyses by Yalch and Spangenberg (2000) revealed that individuals reported themselves as shopping longer when exposed to familiar popular music but, in reality, shopped longer when exposed to unfamiliar music.

### **Tempo**

Again ambiguous findings on the effects of tempo. Andersson et al. (2012) found that fast music significantly increased money spent. Especially in combination with odor, fast music has a positive impact on spending (Michon and Chebat, 2006; Mattila and Wirtz, 2001). However, in two well-cited studies, in 1982 Milliman, demonstrated the exact opposite: that shoppers and patrons spent more time and money when the music was slow. Others have found the effects of tempo on spending negligible (Sullivan, 2002; Herrington, 1996).

### **Loudness**

A famous study done by Smith and Curnow (1966) showed that people spend less time in a store when loud music is played although no differences in sales were observed. Morrison et al., however, (2010) found the opposite with young female shoppers and demonstrated that they shopped for longer when loud music was playing whereas Sullivan (2002) demonstrated that soft music and generally liked music lead to spending a longer time in a restaurant. Although not (yet) proven, the contradicting findings seem to suggest that age has a mediating effect.

## **4. Conclusion**

It should be evident by now that in-store music is a powerful tool to have in the marketing belt of the retailer to easily and cheaply enhance the shopping experience and increase consumer spending.

One of the most solid and consistent findings, is that when the target audience likes the music played, this has a broad range of favorable effects. From positively influencing the perception of the whole store, to increasing the amount of time and money spent in store.

Another strong effect is found in congruency. If the music is a match with an atmospheric element like scent, or in line with the brand message of the retailer, this can have a host of positive effects on the shopping experience and level of spending.

Although tempo and volume have a less clear effect according to the literature, it is still worth paying attention to. In general, the evidence tends to favor slow music in order to create a pleasant shopping environment and to boost sales over fast music. The literature on loudness of the music is divided. The safest strategy may be to use market research in order to determine the preference of the target audience in terms of how loudly music should be played in store.

In summery, the following steps could be taken by the retailer to maximize the positive effects of in-store music:

- Conduct market research to discover the musical palette and preferred volume of the target market.
- Determine the brand values the store wishes to communicate.
- Ensure that every element in the store (layout, lighting, display of merchandise, scent, service personnel) is in line with the brand message.
- Translate those preferences and brand values, together with music experts, into a playlist that is congruent with the store's environment and target audience.

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