Music and Consumers' Judgments About a Retail Store

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of an exploratory study into the role of music in influencing consumers’ judgments about a retail store in multiple retail settings. Two contrasting status shops (upmarket versus downmarket) were examined within three different retail categories: clothing, jewellery and footwear, so that a cross-section of retailers was represented. Using thematic analysis, four themes emerged: music and retail store perceptions, music and mood, music and customer type, and the congruency of music with other atmospheric variables. The findings of this study suggest that music can alter consumers’ store perceptions, regardless of the retail and status category. Limitations and directions for future research are also included.

Introduction

Music is an especially attractive environmental cue to manipulate in retail settings due to its relatively low cost, ability to be easily altered, and its influence in evoking certain consumer perceptions. It is also considered an effective means for triggering moods and communicating non-verbally with consumers (Yalch and Spangenberg, 1993). Prior research indicates that in-store music can influence outcomes such as traffic flow, sales volume, as well as time, store, and service quality perceptions. These findings have encouraged retailers to manipulate in-store music to produce certain perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours among consumers. To date, research on the music stimulus has examined the role of music both by itself, and in conjunction with other atmospheric variables.

Milliman (1982) discovered that the manipulation of music in a supermarket setting provided an effective means for achieving certain outcomes, including changes in traffic flow and daily gross sales volume. Four years later, Milliman (1986) found that patrons not only consumed more beverages, but were also inclined to stay longer in a restaurant that featured slow-tempo background music. Yalch and Spangenberg (1990) discovered that shopping time perceptions varied with the type of music played and a person’s age, thus suggesting an adequate fit must exist between in-store music and the store’s intended objectives. Areni and Kim (1993) found that while classical music did not influence people to purchase greater quantities of a product (wine), it did lead them to purchase more expensive bottles. Using a bank video-simulation, Dube, Chebat and Morrin (1995) determined that background music can influence pleasure and arousal, which then affects consumer willingness to engage in a buyer-seller interaction. Finally, Hui, Dube and Chebat (1997) examined the impact of music on consumers’ reactions to waiting for services. The authors proposed that positively valenced music would trigger positive emotional responses to waiting compared to negatively valenced music. However, the manipulation of positively valenced music led to perceptions of a longer wait duration than negatively valenced music.

More recent research has also explored the role of music within the full framework of store atmospherics. For example, Baker et al. (2002) developed and tested a comprehensive store
patronage model that examined the influence of multiple store environment cues on perceived merchandise value and patronage intentions. Their findings based on the music environmental cue indicated that favourable music perceptions alleviate time and effort costs (consumers’ perceived amount of time/effort they spend shopping at a store), as well as psychic costs (consumers’ mental/emotional labour during the shopping experience).

Prior music research has taken a quantitative and/or experimental approach. However, these approaches have provided little insight or understanding about the process by which in-store music influences consumers’ store perceptions. A key contribution of this paper is in its exploratory approach (using qualitative research procedures), where the process by which music can influence consumers is able to be fully explored. Prior music research has also only examined the effects of music in one retail setting per study. This paper will instead examine the effects of music in multiple retail categories and retail status settings. Specifically, three retail categories will be the study’s focus: clothing, jewellery and footwear. In each retail category, two contrasting status shops (an ‘upmarket’ and a ‘downmarket’ status shop) will also be examined.

Methodology and Results

The research procedure involved participants being taken to six retail stores in the Auckland CBD, so that each participant could get a ‘feel’ for the store’s music and overall environment. An intercept approach was taken to recruit six participants, with members of the public being approached while shopping in the CBD. Once participants had been recruited, the research then took place at six retail stores. Participants were aged between 19 to 63, with an equal mix of males and females (i.e., Participant 1, 24/Male; Participant 2, 36/Female; Participant 3, 63/Female; Participant 4, 22/Female; Participant 5, 19/Male; and Participant 6, 48/Male). After visiting each of the six stores, in-depth interviews were then conducted using a semi-structured questioning approach. The interview questions covered areas including the role of music when evaluating a retail store, the role of music in relation to other atmospheric cues, and the relationship between in-store music and consumers’ music preferences. After the interviews, thematic analysis (using the NVivo software package) was used to identify any relevant themes as they relate to the research topic under investigation. A description of the six retailers and the type of music genre played is provided in Table 1. The same musical genre was played in each retail store for each of the six participants.

Table 1: Description of the Six Retailers and the Musical Genre Played

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Retailer Status</th>
<th>Retailer Status</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Upmarket</td>
<td>Downmarket</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clothing</td>
<td>Retailer A (Instrumental Jazz)</td>
<td>Retailer B (Top 40 Rock)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewellery</td>
<td>Retailer C (Classic Hits)</td>
<td>Retailer D (Top 40 Dance)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Footwear</td>
<td>Retailer E (Instrumental Jazz)</td>
<td>Retailer F (Top 40 R&amp;B/Pop)</td>
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Four salient themes emerged from the analysis of the interview data: music and retail store perceptions, music and mood, music and customer type, and the congruency of music with other atmospheric variables. Each of the four themes is discussed in turn.

**Music and Retail Store Perceptions**

Prior research suggests that music can evoke certain store perceptions. Those retail stores characterised by an upmarket retail status used music that evoked consumer perceptions of high class, sophistication and quality. Retailer C consistently played a classic hits musical genre. Participant 6 related the music to “songs you know” which evoked a store perception of “good quality because the songs tell you it’s something you know, so it’s... associating those things (songs) with branded quality products”. The two other upmarket retailers elicited similar findings where instrumental jazz music was associated with perceptions of high status, uniqueness and foreignness. Participant 6 further emphasised this by noting that “people go in there and buy stuff where every product is idiosyncratic in the sense that if you walk down the road you won’t see someone else wearing it, it will be unique… and that music conveys that sense of uniqueness”.

Participants’ responses indicated that Top 40 music may help evoke ‘discount’ perceptions. However, an interesting finding for the music used by Retailer B was the different reactions that were evident across the various ages of participants. While all participants commented that the in-store music evoked a downmarket image, younger participants were more positive about the music used. For example, Participant 4 (22 years) had positive associations with the music, suggesting that “when I go in there, I feel young, I listen to their music and I’m used to it... it’s what I listen to right now”. In contrast, Participant 3 (63 years) suggested that the music had a lack of appeal to her, noting “it was too loud and I thought it was distracting. It gave me a headache and it wasn’t easy on my ears”. Similar sentiments were shared for the other lower status shops. Retailer D, a costume jewellery retailer, played modern dance music which seemed to support the store’s desired image of an affordable, fun, youthful social scene. For example, Participant 4 noted “when you go into the shop you can imagine yourself wearing that jewellery to a... club or party… that plays that kind of music”. Participant 6 suggested that the store music portrayed a “cheaper” image, where purchases are more likely to be due to “impulse buying”.

**Music and Mood**

The second theme evident throughout the thematic analysis consisted of the role of music on mood. The three upmarket retailers who used classic or instrumental jazz music all evoked a relaxed consumer mood state. Retailer A’s use of instrumental jazz music seemed to create a relaxing mood as the slow tempo music slowed consumers’ walking pace, thus encouraging browsing. Participant 6 recalled his walking pace as “definitely slow, very slow, take your time”. This in turn, encouraged him to think “there’s no hurry, (just) enjoy the music while you’re enjoying the uniqueness of the clothes”. Participant 1 was also able to recall specific events/occasions that played this type of music, suggesting that “the music they played made me feel like I was in a very nice bar having drinks and talking”. With regard to the classical music played in Retailer C, Participant 4 noted “the music... helps you calm down and look around and really spend that time to try and find something”. In contrast, the lower status retail stores seemed to encourage lively, energetic consumer mood states through the use of faster-tempo Top 40 music. Through the playing of rock music at a high volume level, Retailer B evoked a lively, energetic mood state within younger
aged participants. Participant 4 referred to the music as creating “a happy mood... more towards the jumpy side than the... relaxed side”. The loudness of the store’s music helped create an attraction, as opposed to background feature, with Participant 4 observing that “when you’re walking outside (and if a store is) playing music that sounds like me, then I might think ‘Oh yeah I should go and have a look around’ because it might be something that suits me (since) it’s... what I listen to”. Retailer D also played music that helped to create a lively and energetic mood state. Even though not in the target market, Participant 3 (63 years) stated that the music put her in a “happy mood” as “the music was... bouncy and... the type of products that retailer sells... are for dance occasions which (represent) happy times and fun times”. Similarly, Participant 6 (male) identified the store music as putting him in a “very happy... party (and)... cheerful mood”.

Music and Customer Type

The third theme that emerged from the thematic analysis is the assumptions that consumers make about a retailer’s target market based upon the music being played within a store. For example, Participant 2 thought that the jazz music being played by Retailer A represented a “more sophisticated... exclusive type of shopper”, whereas “teeny boppers would hate the music”. In contrast, for Retailer B, the associations made about the music for Participant 2 were that of “a teenage boy around about 16-17 (years of age) skateboarding... wearing his cap around the other way and wearing a tank top and cut offs and just having a good time”. Similarly, the R&B music played by Retailer F led Participant 2 to suggest that the target customers for that store were not the “top income earning people”, but more the “average working person (or) perhaps younger people that don’t have much money to spend or young mothers that have got children to worry about”. After inquiring how R&B music allowed the participant to create this assumption, she suggested that those types of target customers “like R&B music”, and further suggested that “R&B music reminds me of young teenagers who don’t have a lot of money”.

The Congruency of Music with other Atmospheric Variables

Similar to past research efforts (e.g., Baker et al., 2002), the findings of this study suggest that retailers typically integrate music with other atmospheric variables to portray a desired store image. Retailer A incorporated music with other atmospheric cues such as lighting and store layout to enhance consumers’ perceptions of a sophisticated image. Participant 1 described the store’s lighting as “reflecting off the walls to give off a classy feel which complemented the store’s music and clothing”. He further commented that the store layout “was not cluttered at all, but instead it was nicely spread out so you could see everything, which goes along with the music and the sophistication”. Similarly, the other two high status retail stores also successfully integrated music with other atmospheric cues like store lighting and colour to help convey and enhance the store’s desired image.

The low status shops in two of the three product categories also used music along with other atmospheric variables to reinforce and further enhance the store’s desired image. A notable exception to this was Retailer D. While the store used Top 40 dance music, bright lighting, colourful merchandise displays and younger aged shop employees to evoke a social, youthful and fun store image, one incongruent factor of the store’s overall environment was suggested by Participant 6 with regard to the store’s layout. While the participant predicted the store’s merchandise would be cluttered to help convey its “party, social, fun” setting, he was quite surprised to find discover “that the store wasn’t cluttered”. This contrasted with his prior
expectations of the store, which was evident by his comment, “I would have expected this sort of loud music to have lots and lots of stuff like Retailer B, where there were clothes for Africa everywhere, but it didn’t seem to be the case”. This finding may suggest that the effects of ambient environmental cues are more noticeable when they contrast with expectations.

Conclusions

This paper provides two key contributions regarding the role of music in retail atmospherics. To date, prior research has examined the effects of music in a single retail setting. This paper has instead examined the role of in-store music across multiple retail categories, and within these, across different status shops. The second contribution of this paper is its exploratory approach (using qualitative research procedures). A key advantage of the approach used is in its ability to explore the deeper underlying perceptions of consumers that quantitative research is less effectively able to achieve.

The findings highlight the need for retailers to use in-store music in a way that is consistent with the retail store’s desired image. This research suggests that the use of instrumental and/or classic hits music helps portray a sophisticated, prestigious and high class image, regardless of the product category of the retail shop. In contrast, the Top 40 music genre seemed to be influential in eliciting downmarket, bargain perceptions within consumers. As this research primarily focused on only one atmospheric stimulus, it is necessary for managers to recognise the importance of interrelating the music cue with other atmospheric variables to portray a strong, dominant and influential image in consumers’ minds. When designing a retail store, managers should try to ensure that all atmospheric dimensions (e.g., choice of music played, the presence of a scent, the brightness of lighting, store temperature, etc) interrelate to create a desired store image. A retailer should also choose music that matches the objectives of the retail store and its specific market situation. As Milliman (1982) proposed, some retailing situations are suited to slowing customer movement down, thus encouraging customers to stay in-store longer (and also hopefully increasing browsing and further purchase behaviour). Other retail situations are more suited to increasing customer movement in order to encourage the pace of in-store traffic flow and in turn, to increase sales volume.

Research Limitations and Future Research Directions

Two limitations have emerged from this study, which encourage future research. First is the small sample size of six participants. This lack of representativeness limits the ability of this paper to make firm suggestions about retail strategy. However, in saying this, the aim of this research was to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the role of music, and the results of this study should be examined collectively with previous research contributions. As prior music stimulus research has examined the effects of music in one retail setting per study, future research should examine the effects of in-store music on consumers’ store perceptions across a variety of retail settings.

A second limitation of this study consists of participants’ prior perceptions of the retail stores they visited. It is possible that participants’ past experiences of shopping at a retail store could have influenced their thoughts, rather than their perceptions being influenced by the in-store music itself. Future research should also examine the role of music on store perceptions in settings where participants’ past experiences are not capable of influencing their current
store perceptions. This could be carried out through, for example, the creation of prototype stores which are deliberately created within a video-tape setting. As such, many of the findings that are outlined in this paper can be further investigated using experimental research to establish if there are causal links between some of the constructs discussed in this study.
References


