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PROCEEDINGS

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The Effects of Background Music in Different Settings

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Abstract

The trend of background music featured in different everyday situations has first started in 1934 in the USA by a company named *Muzak* which started producing and broadcasting background music. Before officially launching their music products, *Muzak* conducted a series of studies investigating their music's effects on people in various environments such as elevators, grocery stores, restaurants, and hotels. Since the company continued to exist up until 2011 and has served as an example to other companies that are mentioned in this paper, it is evident that the effect of background music has proven to have a significant role in different contexts over the last couple of decades, such as in people's willingness to buy certain goods. The primary goal of this paper was to examine what kind of influences background music can have on people in different contexts: commercial, personal, socio-psychological, mass-culture, and artistic. The emphasis was on how its influence and role affect people and society. The main method in the writing of this paper was a comparative secondary analysis, along with a multidisciplinary approach to the subject. In the literature selection, the primary focus was on sources from the 1990s until now. Having collected and examined the findings of various psychology, sociology, and marketing experts, it became clear that a subtle manipulative intention is hidden behind the strategy of featuring music in different shopping contexts. The goal of this strategy is the maximization of a company's profit by creating a setting where the music relieves stress and gives customers a positive feeling. Additionally background music can also be used in a different, supportive way in mass culture and artistic settings.

Introduction

As humans, we live in a world where communication is of great importance. We invent and articulate words and use sounds or sound signals that are culturally or socially prede-

termined. A study of music's effect on people found that music can influence people's behavior, mood, and way of thinking, which could lead to the development of willingness to buy various goods (Yalch & Spangenberg, 2014). From this perspective, different strategies and custom commercial processing could affect customers' will to buy products.

The first attempts to use background music as a form of subtle psychological manipulation of people date back to 1934, when the first background music company was established in the USA with the brand name *Muzak*. In the same year, they began broadcasting music in grocery stores, restaurants, and hotels. The goal of this music was to relieve stress and give the listener a positive feeling (Isacoff, 2014). In the following years, *Muzak* conducted a series of studies to investigate the effects of their music on people in different environments, so that they could adapt their music product to achieve their preferred result – the consumption of the offered goods. In the following years, they maintained this analytical approach. With this method, they managed to adapt to the new economic trends and exist as a brand for more than seven decades before being bought by *Mood Media* in 2011 (Isacoff, 2014).

Following *Muzak's* example, other companies were founded over the years that also offered background music with the same goal: to arouse positive feelings in listeners by providing them with music that should be heard but not consciously perceived (Suppan, 2016). Since this type of music has the function of triggering feelings of harmony, emotional warmth, well-being, and motivation in the listener (Rösing, 1997), it is also called “functional music” (Eggebrecht, 1973, p. 1).

How did the background music affect people's mood while shopping over the years, and what are the new findings and discoveries in this research area? Is there possibly a need for further research on this topic, and what are the questions that are waiting to be asked? To try to answer this, my observations will be made, alongside the review of the literature from the last thirty years on the influence and effects of background music, particularly in the context of a supposed purchase manipulation intention. By comparing several studies conducted and examining their results, the main goal of this paper is to determine what effects background music can have on people in various contexts and settings, and if the supposed influence has in any way changed throughout the years. One of the main motives behind it is in the likelihood that it sounds familiar to most people, although it seems to me that there is a lack of conscious awareness and knowledge regarding this matter. Therefore, I will try to investigate if this topic requires more attention in the future.

Methodology and Work Plan

Since the topic of background music is widespread in affecting many fields of everyday life such as shopping, marketing, personal economy, budgeting, personal time management, decision making, etc., the approach to it had to be multidisciplinary. For this reason, I included and used the articles from almost all these areas and related research as literature for my work. Featured literature offers various psychological, psycho-social, and marketing investigations of different aspects of music influences applied to commercial spaces which serve as a supporting factor in selling products. The texts about the phenomenon of music influencing different spheres of life will be featured as well.

The descriptions of different types of settings will also be featured based on their application in some commercial spaces, such as shopping malls, supermarkets, jewelry stores, and dental office settings. All these spaces have different methods and strategies for using back-

ground music. I will examine all these settings separately and give individual reports. I will further try to examine claims that this phenomenon is a real-life factor, as real as shopping, using personal time and money, and controlling our self-esteem, sense of belonging, and personal preferences. All these are the individual settings that can allegedly be influenced. In addition to the comparative approach, I will incorporate my own research and conclusions into this paper.

Purpose-Oriented Usage of Music

As an important medium and channel for communication in all spheres of human life, music is also applied to situations within various emotional contexts. I believe that music has the power to affect people's psychophysical condition. If applied correctly, it could have a therapeutic effect proven through many established clinical positions about applied music therapy that have been brought to life worldwide in the last decades (e.g., Gutgsell et al., 2013).

Being aware of the wide range of possibilities that the purpose-oriented usage of music can offer, it is no coincidence that this knowledge has served as a tool in various fields of life. It comes as no surprise that a need for companies such as *Muzak* has emerged as the answer to the research of the human psyche in the context of the lasting profit-oriented development.

Music usage can be divided into 2 categories based on either presence or absence of free will while listening to it. The music that is personally chosen, where the listener is in control over all the specifications, fits into the first category, while the 'functional music', also referred to as 'background music', fits into the second category, when all the specifications are controlled by the provider of services. The most common examples of service providers that use this form of music are shopping malls, stores, manufacturing plants, office workplaces, waiting rooms, restaurants, and hotels. This music ought to be of conceivably simple structure and should have a high degree of familiarity for the emotion-

ally positive opening towards the music to be achieved (Rösing, 1997).

The Effectiveness of Music in Various Settings

To determine if and to which extent the connection between music and human behavior is present, psychologists Adrian North and David Hargreaves presented several research studies in different everyday settings and published them in their book *The social psychology of music* (1997). The results of these studies suggested that music has the power not only to influence people's moods and emotions but also to influence the behavior of people in consumer product choice and shopping behavior. It should also be noted that these studies suggested that music could shape people's attitudes toward different surroundings and their perception of time (North & Hargreaves, 1997). Their proposal is that contemporary society uses music to achieve people's desired psychological states in everyday situations, which was also the focus of their studies (see Hargreaves et al., 2005; North et al., 2016).

With an aim to analyse the theory of ineffectiveness of music, a German musicologist and psychologist Klaus-Ernst Behne (1999) has done a meta-analysis of 153 empirical studies investigating the effects of background music on non-musical activities. After the analysis, he revealed that he couldn't prove that music significantly affected non-musical activities in one-third of the examined studies (Behne, 1999). According to Behne (1999), it is required to consider the possible flaws of the experimental methods and peculiarities of academic usage that could result in under or overestimating the actual ineffectiveness of music. He estimated that no effect could be expected in more than 50% of everyday situations of listening to music and that this was due to music becoming habituated and largely present. The author also recognized an individual music preference and personality traits as deciding factors in proving the accuracy of this theory.

Due to massive and fast technological breakthroughs in contemporary society, music has become a widespread cultural medium and property. As a part of almost everyone's life, it plays an important role in social communication and personal individualization and development. Having in mind my own experience as a musician where I'm having trouble focusing on anything else but music that is being played in the background, it comes as no surprise that some groups of people, such as musicians, are to an extent immune to some aspects of functional music application.

Shopping Center Music

Shopping centers represent places built to meet the needs of different consumers. The positioning and organization of stores, restaurants, and restrooms are controlled, but also the selection and volume of music, smells, and temperature (Turley & Milliman, 2000). It is one of the topics of particular interest for researchers from the fields of marketing and psychology. From my point of view, it is mainly because of the overall level of controlled conditions in department stores. It is hard to avoid making a parallel between laboratory experiments and live experiments on people concerning controlled conditions and constant changes of parameters going on in commercial spaces.

According to Helmut Rösing (1997), the music in shopping centers is usually professionally made background music, characterized by low volume, namely three decibels above the noise level. The sounds of this music are more discreet and are intended to blend in. It is also mentioned that the music may vary depending on the department and its target customer group. It is chosen and adapted to achieve a better atmosphere in the store's departments, increasing the impulse purchase rate and optimizing communication between the staff and customers. Rösing (1997), however, later stated that music is only one of many factors that can influence consumer behavior and that it, therefore, has a limited impact on shopper behavior. However, he acknowledged that volume does

have some importance to consumers. Based on the study of a US supermarket, it was hypothesized that louder music might lead to shorter dwelling time of customers. The tempo was also thought to impact customer double-checking, with a faster tempo presumed to result in a shorter decision-making period and a slower tempo supposed to result in a longer dwelling time (Rösing, 1997).

Background Music in Supermarkets

During the study (Vida et al., 2007) which was conducted in two supermarkets in a capital city of a state of the European Union, music was played at a moderate volume during data collection. Study participants were interviewed by trained interviewers on music and customer satisfaction. Some, 332 participants, with a response rate of 54.8%, indicated that they paid attention to the background music and wanted to complete the questionnaire. This study was conducted throughout the week at different times of the day. However, the day or time of the week did not show significant differences in people's responses and behaviors. The results of this study indicated that shoppers' preference for music, as well as music that matched the store image, positively influenced the length of time spent shopping but that this only indirectly affected consumption. However, no direct influence of music on shoppers' behavior and the amount of money spent in the store was found (Vida et al., 2007).

Perception of Time While Shopping

It is important to understand the motives behind service providers deciding to play specific type of music in their store settings to understand the frame of the outcome that would be desirable to them. Therefore, it is no coincidence that a considerable amount of research was conducted to find the relations mainly between the tempo of music and time spent in store. While reviewing some of them, I came across the concept of atmospherics (Kotler, 1973, p. 52). Also,

It refers to the design of an environment through the use of colors, lighting, sounds, and furnishings to stimulate perceptual and emotional responses by consumers and ultimately affect their behavior. (Yalch & Spangenberg, 1990, pp. 55–56)

In 1990 Richard Yalch's and Eric Spangenberg's review of the research studies related to music as one of the most frequently used atmospheric factors, it was criticized that those studies are focused more on real-time rather than on customer's perception of time while shopping. In this regard, the results of psychological research related to this topic made clear that the tempo of sounds can influence a customer's perception of time (see Yalch & Spangenberg, 1990). Depending on the speed of sounds, it could then consequently lead to them perceiving that the time fled faster than it did, resulting in them leaving the store setting earlier. There was a particularly interesting field experiment that was conducted in a department store which was described in their article (see Yalch & Spangenberg, 1990). The criteria comprised the shoppers' mood, age, time spent shopping, and unplanned purchase. Groups were divided by age 24 and younger and 25 and older. Both background and foreground music were being played and systematically varied across 2 neighboring parts of the department store. It was also important to observe a time of the day to establish a possible difference in behavior between purpose-oriented shoppers and random shoppers just browsing through. The findings pointed out that the customer's perception of time varied depending on age.

In this case, younger shoppers reported that they've spent more time shopping than they have planned while being exposed to the background music. The older shoppers shared that in their case, they've spent more time in the store while foreground music was being played. Furthermore, the design of the research didn't allow them to determine whether it was the actual or the perceived time that was being varied in both mentioned cases. Contrasting the expectations of Yalch and Spangenberg (1990),

the type of music did not play a role in differences related to the time of the day. For this reason, the authors concluded that it shouldn't be a goal to satisfy customer's personal music preferences but that the music should be varied across different parts of the store to attract customers of different age.

Jewelry Store Setting

Following my 'desk' research, I even came across an article under the name *The guide to perfect music choice for your jewelry store* (Merchandiser, 2017). The idea behind these instructions is to ensure the right setting for the successful selling of chosen jewelry for interested parties. For instance, it is advised that the antique jewelry type should be sold while classical music is playing in the background. Names such as Chopin, Strauss, Vivaldi, or Mozart were mentioned as good choices for such occasions. Having in mind that the prices of antique jewelry are not such that everyone could afford them, it only seems logical to me that the type of music that is being selected for the in-store setting is there to attract customers that are wealthy, well-educated, and possibly with a specific musical taste. Accordingly, values such as tradition, refinement, prestige, and reputation, to name a few, are being promoted through this choice of music while selling the products.

Dental Office Setting as an Illustration

Another example of consumer oriented application of music caught my attention, is the musical choice in dental care offices in Belgrade, Serbia. Firstly, I would like to distinguish the types of these facilities based on their respective pricing and status, which is the determining factor in establishing their preferred customer profiles. Some phenomenological analysis of field-gathered data gave the grounds for further, more objectively conducted research.

High-end offices are distinguished by refined style and expensive interior design, modern equipment, pleasant waiting-room atmosphere, polite personnel, long waiting lists, and

high pricing. Regarding their typical music of choice, it is almost without exception classical music with a rare variation of ambient music. Having this in mind, it seems to me that these high-end offices want to create an environment where quality, tradition, and stability serve as defining factors of their philosophy of work. One of the factors in achieving this is represented through the usage of classical music, together with the typical traits that this type of music symbolizes.

Mid-range dental offices are not characterized by an expensive interior design or refined style, but they mostly provide a good price-quality ratio. Their music of choice is mostly popular radio station music. This argues that music doesn't represent an important factor in their business strategy. Consequently, it is to conclude that their music of choice is not used to attract any specific type of customers or represent their work philosophy through this medium.

Café del Mar as a Popular Background Music Example

Café del Mar is a good example of extensive usage of popular background music, and it has become a notable part of modern culture inside the context of background music. The story started in 1980 in the local Ibiza café under the name *Café del Mar* which is located in Sant Antoni de Portmany. Following the establishment of the *Café del Mar* trademark, a series of music CDs were published from 1994 onwards. First compilations were created by famous DJ Jose Padilla.¹

My impression is that one of the intentions behind these releases was to create widely present music compilations of ambient and background music that is not very engaging to listen to. The goal of this music was not to catch attention but to instead add some characteristics to the existing ambient. It was a way of transferring culture that served as a model for future

¹ For more information about *Café del Mar* see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caf%C3%A9_del_Mar

modern practice, where mostly younger people were recognized as a target group.

Having this in mind, it has become clear to me that this data supports the thesis that background music is a matter of planning, composing, producing, and mass culture, at least during the last 2 to 3 decades. I have listened to many such compilations during my childhood, as my parents had a significant collection of Café del Mar compilations. With this experience, I also found that these non-formal background compilations can be very useful for every life situation that does not require people's full attention. In other words, these compilations seem to be a perfect fit for relaxing.

Soundscape Image as an Artistic Synesthetic Touristic Guide

While working on this paper, the focus was on determining to which extent music can have an influence on people while shopping or consuming services – with or without them being conscious of any influence attempt. Contrary to that, I was inspired to shed some light on 71-minute audio art portrait of the Japanese island Naoshima *When Loud Weather Buffeted Naoshima* by David Sylvian (2007)² as I find it to be an example of using music as a medium to attract people artistically. This music represents an artistic audio portrait of the island Naoshima which is well known for its contemporary art museums and projects throughout the island. The music was ordered and financed by island's contemporary art museum Fukutake and its art foundation, after which it became a part of an art installation and exhibition, Naoshima standard 2.³ In the words of one of the unknown reviewers on Amazon,⁴ this artwork was explained by the following, inspirational words:

² For more information about David Sylvian see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Sylvian#cite_note-7.

³ Exhibition took part from October 2006 to April 2007, Naoshima Fukutake Contemporary Arts Museum.

⁴ See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amazon_\(company\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amazon_(company))

Out of the ambient, drone, space, prog and a thousand other categories of written, performed or recorded works, *When Loud Weather Buffeted Naoshima* belongs to a small and still relatively obscure family of sound art. If you're wondering where music might next proceed, *When Loud Weather Buffeted Naoshima* both instructs and illuminates. (Napkin, 2007)

I would like to add another impression from the work of Jasmin Kathöfer (2019) *When Loud Weather Buffeted Naoshima: A Sensory Walk*. She suggested that she was best experiencing this music through a slow walk with MP3-player and headphones to confront the two worlds – one that is recorded and caught in Sylvian's auditive description and the other that sounds as an echo of the natural world of the island. Kathöfer (2019) later concludes:

When loud weather [...] – by linking the areas of walking, listening and sound recording concerning the specific location – not only represents an atmospheric artistic interaction with Naoshima, but also offers the possibility of an aesthetic-theoretical examination of the ecological and cultural environment of the island and the situatedness of the walking person in it. Walking is after all not only walking, but always a positioning at a certain place at a certain time and thus a certain sensescape. (p. 100)

Naoshima is visited for the art museums and spring-enjoying tourism more than for its summer holidays. As it is repeatedly under the strikes of strong winds, it is not strange that Sylvian's soundscape consists of a number of atmospheric sounds. For this reason, I also thought that Kathöfer's term *sensescape* seemed suitable for this description.

Where is my real contribution to examining Sylvian's soundscape project? I think it is possible to use the soundscape as an art medium and synesthetic field of sensory impressions. From a commercial point of view, that complex musical picture could result in more visits to Naoshima for art and music lovers in pursuit of getting to

understand and love the island of Naoshima. From the visitor's point of view, it can create complex and unique sensory impressions while confronting their personal inner-world and objective real world outside the island. From the researcher's point of view, it can give a non-biased, positive influence without manipulative intentions.

As I do not recognize any manipulative intent in this unusual application of music, I felt that I needed to dedicate a part of this work to giving this example because I found it to be different than the previously described settings where music is being regularly and strategically applied. It is my opinion that the main difference between the purposes of *When Loud Weather Buffeted Naoshima* and other mentioned forms of background music application is that I really could not recognize the objective as being the maximization of the profit.

Conclusion

The subtle form of psychological manipulation of people through background music dates back to 1934 when *Muzak*, the first background music company, was established in the USA and began broadcasting its music as well as making a revolution in the context of sales and in-store music conception.⁵

This kind of strategic appliance of music is an occurrence that remains largely and inescapably present in the modern world that we live in. Looking through this perspective, I see people as victims of a capitalist economy and its certain programmed value systems. It is further to note that people seem to be mostly unaware that their wish of belonging to a certain group, of being accepted as a valid member of society, of demonstrating their financial power, etc., is being reinforced by this system.

It was a challenge to think about this topic and work on this paper, knowing that a thin line separates subtle manipulation from marketing or commercial strategy. Having said this, I realize that greater people's efforts usually lead

not only to commercial results, but to a better product and customer satisfaction. With this in mind, I still found that some types of influences described in this paper were noticeably oriented exclusively towards maximizing the company profit – no matter the other costs.

While studying the literature and sources as preparation for writing this paper, I understood that some authors recognized that phenomena such as background music and manipulation intent were not easy to investigate. Exactly for this reason, the findings and conclusions of authors, as well as interpretations of the results, managed to change from significant to not significant after some time and further research. With this in mind, it is almost impossible to find any spontaneous approaches to sales in top companies, which can be well explained by the fact that there is a popular term for such occurrence, which is called sales strategies. Even if most of the influences are without a doubt legal and very subtle in changing people's psychosocial and decision-making properties, I still couldn't see them as anything other than a manipulative intent.

While writing this paper, I examined many different examples of sales strategies. I recognized these strategies in different everyday situations and classified them by their place of application. For instance, the overall level of controlled conditions seemed to be substantial in department stores and inside shopping centers.

Supermarkets are also places where the store actively attempts to influence the customer's actions. Specific in-store music is being chosen to create or recreate certain feelings or just to promote and support some of the pre-planned values.

A functional connection between time spent inside the shopping facility and the tempo of the music was also noticed while examining different sources related to this topic. The results of psychological research in this field showed that the tempo of sounds can influence customers' perception of time. Depending on the speed of sounds, there is a possibility that the customers

⁵ See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muzak>

could leave the store setting earlier. Contrary to this, music of certain tempos could also lead to prolonging the shopping time of these same customers.

Some companies have strategies for developing the company or store image that promotes them and their pre-meditated values. I covered two examples of this strategy using specific type of music in the settings of jewelry stores and dental office settings in Belgrade, Serbia, as illustrations. As an example of this principle, the usual pick of in-store music could also come with the objective to attract certain types of customers. For this reason, it was advised that the jewelry stores that are selling antique jewelry should play classical music, preferably compositions by Chopin, Strauss, Vivaldi, or Mozart (Merchandiser, 2017).

In opposition to some of the previously mentioned applications of music, I examined one different case of music usage where music was used as a medium to attract people artistically by creating a soundscape art image as a synesthetic description of the Japanese island Naoshima composed by David Sylvian (2007). I could not recognize the objective behind this as the maximization of the profit or manipulative intention. Having said this, I want to underline that this was a crucial difference that helped me establish this conclusion.

As a final conclusion, I need to emphasize that the topic of music being used as a people-influencing tool is very real in the way that it is always accompanying us during our shopping time and while using our personal time and money, background music is there to try and play with our emotions and perception of time. It is also concerning that it also plays a role in controlling our feelings of self-esteem, sense of belonging and that it can dictate our personal preferences, if the circumstances are met.

As it has become apparent to me that there is a lack of conscious awareness and knowledge in people regarding this matter, I think that the subject of music and background music should be made into a public matter, with the hope that we can begin having more choice in our deci-

sion-making process as both customers and as people. For that reason, I believe that this topic rightfully deserves more attention in the future.

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