

Music Congruity Effects on Product Memory, Perception, and Choice

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Available online 26 June 2015

Abstract

Music congruity effects on consumer behavior are conceptualized in terms of cognitive priming of semantic networks in memory, and operationalized as congruent with a product's country of origin (Experiment 1), or congruent with the utilitarian (Experiment 2) or social identity (Experiments 2 and 3) connotations of a product. Hearing a specific genre of music (e.g., classical) activates related concepts in memory (e.g., expensive, sophisticated, formal, educated), which influences the memory for, perception of, and choice of products. Consistent with this account of music congruity effects, three laboratory experiments show that playing music of a specific genre during initial product exposure improved subsequent recall of conceptually related (i.e., congruent) products compared to unrelated products (Experiment 1), affected product choice in favor of congruent products (Experiment 1), and affected how much participants were willing to pay for congruent products (Experiments 2 and 3).

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Keywords: Atmospherics; Music; Retailing; Congruity; Recall; Choice

Introduction

Laboratory and field experiments over the last four decades have demonstrated various effects of what has been referred to as 'background', 'atmospheric', or 'in-store' music, on consumer perception and behavior (Bruner 1990; Garlin and Owens 2006; Turley and Milliman 2000). Various objective characteristics of music like volume (Kellaris and Rice 1993; Morrison et al. 2011), tempo (Caldwell and Hibbert 2002; Kellaris and Kent 1994; Milliman, 1982, 1986; Oakes 2003), key (Kellaris and Kent 1992, 1994), texture (Kellaris and Kent 1994), and subjective aspects of music like arousal (Dube, Chebat, and Morin 2007; Mattila and Wirtz 2001), familiarity (Bailey and Areni 2006; Yalch and Spangenberg 2000), liking (Caldwell and Hibbert 2002; Dube, Chebat, and Morin 2007; Hui, Dube, and Chebat 1997; Morin, Dube, and Chebat 2007), complexity (North and Hargreaves 1998), and perceived mood (Alpert

and Alpert 1990; Alpert, Alpert, and Maltz 2005) have been manipulated and shown to influence a wide range of perceptions and behaviors, including actual purchases, purchase intentions, actual shopping time, actual waiting time, actual dining time, perceived shopping time, perceived waiting time, specific store perceptions, overall store evaluations, customer–employee interactions, and salesperson effectiveness (Garlin and Owens 2006; Oakes 2000; Turley and Milliman 2000).

But perhaps the most influential aspect of music, in terms of its effect on retail sales, is what has been variously referred to as the 'genre', 'format', or 'style' of the music (i.e., classical vs. hip hop vs. country, etc.). A common finding has been that congruity between the connotations of the musical genre, format or style and certain products can influence sales and perception of the latter. One particular musical genre – classical – has received a considerable amount of attention in the literature. For instance, Baker, Levy, and Grewal (1992) and Grewal et al. (2003) found that playing classical music resulted in perceptions of higher quality service and merchandise. Likewise, North and Hargreaves (1998) found that classical music created a greater willingness to pay for each of fourteen items on sale at a cafe, compared to pop music, easy listening, and a no music control condition; the mean total amounts were UK£17.23, UK£16.61, UK£14.51, and UK£14.30 respectively.

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North, Shilcock, and Hargreaves (2003) similarly found that classical music in a restaurant was associated with higher spending per head (UK£32.52) than either pop music (UK£29.46) or no music (UK£29.73). Areni and Kim (1993) reported effects of even greater magnitude; classical music led to wine cellar customers spending a mean of US\$7.43, whereas pop music led to a mean of only US\$2.18. Collectively, these studies show that classical music induces consumers to spend more money, and to purchase more expensive items, than other genres of music (c.f., Wilson 2003). However, because these experiments took place in actual retail settings, they cannot fully specify the cognitive processes by which classical music induces greater spending relative to other musical genres. This research presents a theoretical account of the cognitive processes involved in musical congruity effects, and reports the results of three laboratory experiments demonstrating the effects of musical congruity on recall, product perceptions, and choice.

Music Congruity, Cognitive Priming and Spreading Activation

Although it is typically thought of as an objective aspect of music, like tempo or texture, the genre or format of a musical composition is actually a subjective judgment (Aucouturier and Pachet 2003). Consumers essentially amalgamate a range of objective musical features into a categorization of a song as ‘light classical’ versus ‘instrumental jazz’ (Rose and Wagner 1995). Moreover, two consumers listening to the same composition might classify it into different genres depending on their idiosyncratic conceptions of what makes a piece ‘classical’ versus ‘jazz’. However, when a composition is perceived as belonging to a specific genre, the cultural meanings associated with that category become associated with the piece (Fiske 1993; White 1997).

Scott (1990) was perhaps the first to identify this potential effect of music in a marketing context, describing music as being “meaningful, language-like” and called for research that “draws on notions of culture, rhetoric, and symbolic action” to understand persuasive effects of music (p. 233). Subsequent researchers elaborated on this aspect of music. MacInnis and Park (1991) referred to the “fit” of music as reflecting “consumers’ subjective perceptions of the music’s relevance or appropriateness to the central ad message” (p. 162). Likewise, Kellaris, Cox, and Cox (1993) proposed that music “enhances message reception when the music evokes message-congruent (vs. incongruent) thoughts” (p. 114). Zhu and Meyers-Levy (2005) identified multiple aspects of music, one of which was labeled “referential meaning, which is context dependent and reflects networks of semantic-laden, external world concepts” (p. 333).

These descriptions of music can be embedded into a broader theoretical framework which conceptualizes music congruity effects in terms of cognitive priming of concepts and spreading activation along related semantic networks in memory. Collins and Loftus (1975) argue that concepts can be represented as semantic nodes within a network in memory, and the properties of those concepts can be represented as relational links

connecting one node to another. Each of the nodes that are linked to a given node will have links to other concept nodes, and so on, which creates a vast semantic, interconnected network of concept nodes. When one node in memory is initially activated via external stimulation, the spread of activation expands outwards, first to all the nodes linked to the initially activated node, then to all the nodes linked to each of those, and so forth. Anderson (1983) believed that the key process of memory performance is the retrieval function, which is performed through spreading activation in the interconnected semantic network contained in the long-term memory. He developed a general theory of cognition, which focused on the processes of memory, known as the Adaptive Control of Thought (ACT) theory.

The ACT theory represents knowledge in a semantic network, and focuses on how memory processes are defined within this network. Anderson also developed the concept of cognitive units which consist of units of memory involving a unit node and a set of elements within this node. Concepts, images and temporal strings of words can all be thought of as cognitive units. The links between nodes are not of the same strength, however. All memory traces or links between cognitive units/nodes have a type of signal strength associated with them. The first successful trial or stimulation will establish the memory trace with the strength of one unit, and each subsequent trace will increase the strength by one additional unit. The strength of a memory trace is important in determining its probability and speed of retrieval. Once traces are formed between units they are not lost, but they can decay if they are not regularly activated. If traces are activated regularly, they will strengthen, and spreading activation may occur more rapidly. This effect of this process is that we can more readily retrieve cognitive information about regularly associated concepts. In summary, our experiences throughout life establish a vast interconnected network of semantic nodes, which are connected by links of varying strength. Each node can be thought of as a cognitive unit, which can be activated by external stimuli. Levels of activation of subsequent nodes are dependent on the degree of association to the initially activated node. The present research will address some of the implications of musical congruity in the context of these well-established concepts.

Berkowitz’s ‘priming effects’ perspective (Berkowitz and Rogers 1986) represents a bridge between ACT and processes involving music in commercial contexts. It holds that presenting mass media stimuli with a particular meaning (e.g., a movie featuring a violent battle) primes concepts that are semantically related (e.g., aggressive thoughts), thereby increasing the likelihood that the related concepts are activated and employed (see Jo and Berkowitz 1994). The activated mental constructs influence how a person perceives and evaluates other constructs (see Domke, Shah, and Wackman 1998). Cognitive structures that have recently been activated are said to be advanced to the top of a mental set of files, making them easily accessible for a limited time period (see Wyer and Srull 1989). If applicable, these schemata will be employed in evaluations taking place in the immediate future.

Schubert, Hargreaves, and North (2014, p. 1) applied this framework to musical likes and dislikes, arguing that,

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