



The sound of silence: Why music in supermarkets is just a distraction



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ABSTRACT

Retailers use music in the service environment to try to change consumer behaviour with a view to increasing spend, or improving consumer mood. Previous research has largely focused on music but ignored the effects of other noises within a servicescape: yet all noises can impact consumers' affective states, and their behaviour.

This study examines the role of both planned and other sounds within the supermarket environment. In particular, this study investigates the cognizant and emotional reactions of supermarket customers, and explores their shopping intentions in the context of shoppers' understanding of and reaction to the sounds they perceive.

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1. Introduction

Any environment in which a consumer must be present in order to receive goods or services is a service environment. Due to the intangibility of most services, the service environment (servicescape) plays a very important role: and often these are designed to influence the consumer to spend more money or to increase the intention to return and therefore increase future spending (Bitner, 1992; Caldwell and Hibbert, 2002). The various elements that comprise the servicescape include controlled elements such as fixtures and fittings, colours, the shape of the space, signage and also controlled and uncontrolled sounds and smells (Oakes and North, 2013; Puccinelli et al., 2009; Grove and Fisk, 1997).

Prior research focusing on sound within the service environment has almost exclusively concentrated on the *planned* use of music, and is based on two main assumptions. First, the notion that consumers can be influenced by retailers through the use of music, and secondly, that the effect of this can be seen in isolation rather than as a holistic part of the servicescape i.e. that changing the music alone can impact consumer behaviour. These two assumptions are largely based on a further underlying assumption that consumers' cognizance of the music does not play a role: i.e. that the effect of sound (essentially music) is emotional or subliminal and affects consumption behaviour unconsciously (e.g. Spence et al., 2014; Oakes and North, 2013; Sirohi et al., 1998;

Novak et al., 2010; Mattila and Wirtz, 2001; Dubé et al., 1995; Milliman, 1982; Smith and Curnow, 1966).

In reality, many sounds that occur in servicescapes happen in an unplanned manner, such as the sound of customers talking, children crying, extraneous external or machinery sounds, such as till noises, tannoy sounds, or items being dropped etc. Such unplanned sounds can be described as "aleatory". The intended effect of any *planned* sounds may be altered by the existence of these aleatory sounds, so that consumers perceive a 'net' effect of the two aspects of the soundscape in conjunction (Donovan et al., 1994; Morin et al., 2007). For example, it may be that enjoyable music is spoilt for some customers by the sound of traffic pervading the store, or children shouting or misbehaving. Independently, the customer may have a different emotional response to each, but they may also exhibit one overall response to the combined sounds, in the same way that according to Lin (2004), the customer perceives the service environment holistically through 'gestalt', a psychological perspective in which people 'group' items which share traits, with the result that the servicescape is perceived as one entity (Rosenbaum and Massiah, 2011; Raab et al., 2013)

Previous research into the use of music and its effect on consumer behaviour also omitted to consider the environment's effect on the music, or indeed the other sounds in the service environment (Oakes, 2000). An ambient noise level of 72.6 dB can impact conversation (Hodgson et al., 2007). As such, consumer behaviour may be affected positively or negatively because materials can absorb and reflect different frequencies. The loudness of the background sound will also be affected by the area's capacity to absorb particular frequencies (Bradley et al., 1999). Further, the

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shape and angles of the surfaces within an area can create complex reflection patterns which can affect speech intelligibility, and therefore have the potential to impact on consumer behaviour (Bradley et al., 1999). Therefore, any effect of music can be location dependent.

This research therefore aims to further investigate the impact of sound in supermarkets. Specifically, the research aims to investigate how consumers and staff perceive the soundscape and to explore any conscious reaction that music has on consumers and staff. In addition, consumer views on how the sound affected their time spent in store as well as their overall spend is investigated.

2. Background

This literature review examines the complexity of sound in servicescapes in supermarkets in particular, as well as prior research on the impact of the type of music and its affect on people.

The servicescape influences consumer behaviour through their relationships with it (Bitner, 1992; Belk, 1975; Russell and Mehrabian, 1976; Yalch and Spangenberg, 1990; Lin, 2004). Bitner (1992) reduces servicescape variables to 11 environmental dimensions in three sets that are designed to be indicative, but not exhaustive: “ambient conditions (temperature, air quality, noise, music, odour, etc.), space/function (layout, equipment, furnishings, etc.), and signs, symbols and artefacts (signage, personal artefacts, style of décor, etc.). Using variations of these factors, retail and other service environments can be uniquely branded to achieve the desired brand positioning (Morrison and Beverland, 2003).

The complexity of investigating the effect of servicescape on consumer mood, affective state or behaviour means that much of the extant literature has limited each study to one or two variables such as smell, lighting or music (see Table 1 for a summary of this). However, even with this relatively simplistic approach, problems can arise due to the effect being different on different people (Russell and Mehrabian, 1976 p62; Ladinig and Schellenberg, 2012). Oakes and North (2008) reviewed previous work in in this area and identified many problems with understanding the effect of music including: congruity between retail store and the type of music, congruity with other ambient sensory stimuli, consumer profiles, etc.

Table 1
Ambient store recordings analysis.

Date	Location in store	Sound level	Soundscape elements
22 Feb 14	Bakery	70 dB	Machine 'hum' noise (20–200 Hz) highest level and most prominent (0 to -10 relative dB), music (peaks at about 2 K Hz), voices, impact sounds of items and baskets being placed and handled, footsteps.
22 Feb 14	Checkout area	75–80 dB	Voices, footsteps, security alarm, checkout beeps, impact sounds of goods being handled, fan heater 'hum', EQ peak at 350–450 Hz. 20–100 Hz dominant constant sound (heater).
22 Feb 14	Entrance	70–75dB	Fan heater 'hum' (20–70 Hz), music, item being dropped, other impact noises, voices, trolleys being pushed, baskets being used.
22 Feb 14	Freezer Aisle	72–73 dB	Freezer compressor motor 'hum', freezer cabinet doors being shut (sudden transient +20 relative dB), packaging being handled, trolleys being pushed, voices, music (very quiet), voices (very quiet), unidentified metallic noise
22 Feb 14	Fruit and veg	75 dB	Machine 'hum' (most prominent, 20–70 Hz), music (peaks at about 2 kHz), voices (faint), impact sounds, packaging (rustling sounds), baskets being used.
22 Feb 14	Refrigeration Aisle	70 dB	Chiller unit motors 'hum' (most prominent 20–70 Hz at +5 relative dB), impact sounds, voices (very faint), music (very faint), baskets being used.
25 Feb 14	Refrigeration Aisle 1	75–80 dB	Chiller unit motors 'hum' (most prominent 20–70 Hz at +5 to 0 relative dB), music, voices, impact noises.
25 Feb 14	Checkout	70 dB	Impact sounds, packaging sounds, voices, music with low frequency more audible, machine noise 'hum' (20–80 Hz at -5 to -15 relative dB), footsteps, checkout beeps.
25 Feb 14	Confectionery Aisle	70 dB	Music, voices, impact sounds, machine noise 'hum' (20–200 Hz at -5 to -15 relative dB)
25 Feb 14	Freezer Aisle	70 dB	Freezer unit motors 'hum' (20–200 Hz at -5 to -12 relative dB), advert on shop public address system, music, voices (baby crying 500 Hz at 0 relative dB), impact sounds, checkout beeps, footsteps, baskets.
25 Feb 14	Refrigeration Aisle 2	75–80 dB	Music, voices, chiller unit motors 'hum' (20–200Hz at -5 relative dB), faint impact noises.

2.1. Servicescapes in supermarkets

A servicescape must meet the basic needs of all who need to be within it including staff and customers. It must provide adequate heat, ventilation and lighting and be free of hazards such as trip risks and dangerous noise levels. In order to achieve the desired market positioning and to encourage the desired consumer behaviour, elements such as noise and lighting must provide more than the perfunctory requirements and are used to create atmosphere and particular ambience or effect (Bitner, 1992; Caldwell and Hibbert, 2002).

Supermarket servicescapes are “elaborate” and complex (Bitner, 1992, p59; Kent, 2003) environments, as a large number of different functions are carried out, such as consumers choosing products, consumers paying for products, staff distributing stock, cleaning and tidying, consumers removing their shopping, managers working on the shop floor, maintenance of machinery, administration and even catering (Langdon, 2003). Servicescapes can be used to communicate brand values and for brand positioning through the design and aesthetics of the servicescape, but must also function as areas in which services and transactions can take place (Kent, 2003; Lozar, 1974). For example, each of the ‘big four’ supermarket chains in the UK have distinct colour schemes, but the servicescapes function in similar ways (Langdon, 2003). Each store has aisles containing the products. Customers select what they want from the shelves, or the specialist bakery, butcher, fishmonger and delicatessen counters, and then pay for the products at a checkout that will either be self-service or staffed. Every one of the ‘big four’s’ stores functions in exactly the same way in order to facilitate transactions: in general, every supermarket follows a similar layout with fruit and bread usually placed at the front of the store and frozen products placed towards the end of the route.

2.2. Music and consumer behaviour

Music has many roles in the lives of most people (Lull, 1985) including: recreational, hobby, profession, ceremonial, religious and social, such as parties, weddings and funerals. Until recently, the lack of research on emotional experiences and responses to music has been argued to be significant and unstructured (Saarikallio and Erkkilä, 2007). Music can cause both affective and cognitive reactions in listeners, which may affect mood, and in turn, behaviour, such as the speed of accomplishing tasks

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