Sound and consumer behaviour

Lesson 4.1.2 | Consumer psychology

Core ideas

Background sound can influence consumer mood, arousal, perceived atmosphere and willingness to stay.

Music tempo can affect pace of movement; slower music may encourage browsing, while faster music may increase movement speed.

Volume affects comfort because sound that is too loud can increase stress or push some customers away.

Music style or fit can signal brand identity and change how products or services are interpreted.

Sound may influence spending indirectly through time spent, mood, attention and perceived waiting time.

Research on sound must separate music effects from confounds such as crowding, price, staff, lighting and shopper purpose.

Key terms

Background music: Music played in a store or service setting while customers shop.

Tempo: The speed or beat of music.

Volume: The loudness of sound in the environment.

Arousal: A person's level of alertness or stimulation.

Mood: An emotional state that can affect consumer decisions.

Music fit: How well music matches the brand, product or setting.

Perceived waiting time: How long a wait feels to the customer.

Atmospheric cue: An environmental feature that can influence consumer experience.

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Further detail and evidence

Key study: North et al. (2003) tested whether classical background music increased restaurant spending, extending earlier wine-purchase research.

A field experiment used 393 customers at one upmarket English restaurant: 120 heard classical music, 142 pop and 131 no music. Customers formed an opportunity sample and were unaware of the study.

The independent variable was music condition; the dependent variable was spending per customer. Different customers experienced different conditions, an independent-measures design.

Across 18 evenings, each condition occurred once on each opening weekday. Volume and 152 minutes of music before repetition were controlled.

Mean spending was £32.51 with classical music, £29.46 with pop and £29.73 without music; coffee spending was £1.06, £0.80 and £0.53 respectively.

The proposed explanation was an upmarket atmosphere encouraging spending, not proof that every restaurant benefits from classical music.

Apply situational explanations and environmental determinism, while recognising that music does not explain every purchasing decision.

Music can influence perceived atmosphere, pace, expectations and spending. Style, tempo, volume and fit with the setting are separate variables: evidence for classical versus pop music does not by itself establish a tempo effect.

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Continued

Noise and taste: Woods et al. (2011) compared food ratings under quiet and louder background noise. Sweetness and saltiness were rated lower with loud noise; liking did not show the same clear effect. A second experiment examined texture, including increased perceived crunchiness. Reported sensory intensity is different from changing the food's ingredients.

Applying the ideas

North's real restaurant bills provide behavioural evidence, while Woods' controlled tasting task measures perception. A restaurant might alter music to fit its desired image, but should separately test whether noise makes conversation difficult or changes enjoyment. Spending more is not automatically greater satisfaction.

Evaluation and connections

Natural customers and objective bills support ecological validity; one restaurant, unmeasured customer differences and absent prior informed consent limit generalisation and raise ethical issues.

North kept playlists/volume procedures consistent and rotated conditions across weekdays, helping comparison. Customers were not individually randomly allocated, and one restaurant limits generalisation. Woods offers repeated-measures control, but tasting small samples in a study differs from a meal. Explain the specific outcome supported by each method.