

AN OCEANSIDE FIELD EXPERIMENT ON BACKGROUND MUSIC EFFECTS ON THE RESTAURANT TAB¹

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Summary.—Amount of purchase in a restaurant was larger when background music was soft than when loud, confirming prior research. Type of music (soft rock or classical) did not matter.

Smith and Curnow (1966) found that shoppers spent less time but not less money in supermarkets when the music was louder. In the present 2×2 between-subjects design field experiment, 80 sets of patrons at a serene, oceanside restaurant in Ventura, California were randomly treated with background radio music (soft rock vs classical) that was either loud or soft in volume. The volume manipulation was pretested by a sample of the waiters and waitresses who also performed the actual volume manipulation in the experiment. Thus, loud vs soft was based on the perceptions of the waiters and waitresses. Their consensus, while not a precise objective measure, was a reasonably clear though gross one. The purchase amount, or “tab,” was significantly larger when the background music was soft in volume ($M = \$21.63$, $SD = 5.17$, $n = 40$) than when the background music was loud ($M = \$18.57$, $SD = 4.06$, $n = 40$; $F = 8.69$, $df = 1/76$, $p = .004$). The type of music did not affect the tab amount or interact with the loudness of the background music. This study was conducted on two consecutive weekdays on which all conditions were executed in random order on each day.

Since the restaurant was located in a “soft,” serene setting, the finding that the tab amount was greater when the music was softer in volume is consistent with the notion that consumers experience greater pleasure when the background music is congruent with the store or restaurant atmosphere (North, Hargreaves, & McKendrick, 1999; Mattila & Wirtz, 2001). Although this explanation has some intuitive appeal, it is speculative because congruency of background music was not directly manipulated in this experiment.

This experiment investigated some very simple background music effects on the amount spent by customers, a single dependent variable of some practical significance. Other studies have shown that various background music features such as music tempo can affect the speed of product consump-

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tion and in-store shopping (Milliman, 1986; McErea & Standing, 1992). Finally, it is important to note that other studies have also shown that individual differences, e.g., musical preference (Caldwell & Hibbert, 2002) and involvement (Park & Young, 1986) can dramatically alter background musical stimuli effects on attitudes and behavior.

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