

## THE EFFECT OF MUSIC UPON THE RESTAURANT CUSTOMERS' PERCEPTION AND CHOICE

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### **Abstract**

*This paper studies how music affects restaurant customers' perceptions and choices when ordering. Music is a factor that affects the operation of the human brain. The human brain has a memory system that uses the amygdala to rate experiences as positive or negative and their capacity. These memories lead humans to reconsider each experience as repeatable or non-repeatable. When evoked under specific conditions resembling a past situation, certain feelings and emotions can dredge up memories and affect behaviours accordingly.*

*Music is a factor that relates to specific experiences more often, providing the stimulation that the brain needs. The study explores the influence of music's tempo, genre, and loudness as part of the restaurant ambience as a stimulus that guides the perception based on memory, not reality. Music develops specific feelings and emotions based on one's previous experiences. Those feelings and emotions affect one's perception and can lead to a different decision than when the influence of music is absent.*

*The research scrutinises the role of music in affecting the emotional environment and, thus, the customer's overall perception of their needs and desires. The alternation of their perception leads to decisions depending on the specific conditions. The study's outcome is that music can affect how we perceive a situation, leading us to a different behaviour regarding menu selection.*

**Keywords:** *Music, consumer behavior, perception, choice influence.*

### **1. Introduction**

The thrill of music is a two-way street. A piece of music has the potential to affect the listener emotionally and intellectually, irrespective of the setting. Most songs do not reach their audience in settings created explicitly for music (concerts, music halls, etc.). On the contrary, most day-to-day consumption of music takes place in casual locations ranging from homes to

cars and movie theatres to bars. Even the introduction to this paper is being written in the accompaniment of a march by Johann Strauss Sr., which would seem rather strange to the famous composer, who envisioned his music being used to celebrate the victory of the Austrian Empire against its enemies rather than the afternoon labour of a researcher surrounded by the walls of his office.

Nevertheless, the setting also has the potential to affect the way listeners consume music. Composers use notation to write music down, thus creating an archetypal form that can be reproduced across space and time [Klavan, 2021]. However, the performance context can weigh heavily on the experience and, depending on place and moment, invest a music piece with new meaning or colour. Reciprocity between sound and location transforms everyday or mundane events into rich, cultural or personal experiences, confirming Plato's belief that "rhythm and harmony find their way into the inmost soul and take the strongest hold upon it" [Schoen-Nazzaro, 1978].

Dining at a restaurant is another casual location where patrons consume music inadvertently. Empirical evidence suggests that music can affect restaurant customers' perceptions and choices when ordering. The amygdala, a small, almond-shaped structure inside our brain, processes emotions and links them to our senses, memories, and learning. The amygdala enables us to remember how to do certain things and handles things we see or hear as inputs for social understanding and communication [Whalen and Phelps, 2009].

The human brain uses a memory system anchored on the amygdala to rate the capacity of each experience and define it as positive or negative. These memories enable humans to reconsider each experience as repeatable or non-repeatable. Specific conditions resembling past situations can evoke feelings and emotions that dredge up memories and affect behaviour accordingly. It is no accident that Aristotle, the other great ancient Greek philosopher, recognised music's benefits in stirring peoples' minds, whether simply to imbue their lives with delight or to influence their character [Saunders, 1981].

Music often relates to specific happenings and provides stimulation required by the brain. Tempo, genre, and volume influence the ambience of dining establishments and influence memory. The result is the generation of a range of feelings and emotions based on personal previous experiences that affect an individual's perception and can lead to a different decision compared to what would have happened had music been absent. Music influences the emotional environment and the customer's overall perception of needs and desires in a restaurant. Subsequently, the alternation of perception leads to decisions depending on the specific dining conditions and can result in a different menu selection behaviour.

## **2. Literature overview**

The effect of music on food and beverage consumption in hospitality facilities has recently attracted noticeable scholarly attention. Tourist consumption patterns at a destination have several distinct components (accommodation, shopping, transportation, entertainment, food and beverage, etc.), and the quality of each travel product influences tourist behaviour [Ramkinssoon, 2023]. Researchers have spent considerable time and resources attempting to determine the value of food and beverage consumption as a percentage of the overall tourist expenditure. Results vary according to region or study, but the overall perception is that tourists often invest a significant portion of their budget on meals, especially food representing the local cuisine [Türker and Süzer, 2022]. However, tourism is only one aspect of food and beverage consumption in hospitality facilities. Domestic consumption is also responsible for substantial volumes of business in restaurants. According to readily available data, households in the European Union dedicate seven per cent of their total consumption expenditure to catering services (restaurants, canteens, cafés, etc.). In absolute numbers, these

households spent over €600 bn (equivalent to 3.8% of European Union GDP) in hospitality facilities in 2018 [Eurostat, 2020]. Determining the effect of background music on customer behaviour, consumption volumes, and satisfaction can positively impact a substantial industry and shape the experience of millions of restaurant employees and patrons. The relationship and importance of music with the visitor and gastronomy have been highly appreciated by the French, trying to connect it with various tastes and wines (Manola, & Palanta, 2020).

A recent study on the perception and composition of background music in hospitality facilities in the Czech Republic focused on many key concepts and concerns. Market professionals have long realised the importance of connecting the visual appearance of products and services with auditory stimulation (i.e. music). Since music plays a crucial role in shaping the atmosphere in a given space and the atmosphere is fundamental in regulating purchase behaviour, the proper style of music can become a potent marketing and purchasing tool. A survey of music played in various dining establishments (restaurants, fast food outlets, tea rooms, patisseries, and coffee houses), which was conducted in 2019, employed a novel method of direct observation and focused on the selection of background music before attempting to interpret the respondents' subjective judgement. The researchers determined that almost two-thirds of establishments offer patrons a mix of popular songs from radio broadcasts or playlists. They focused on five musical attributes (loud versus quiet, fast-paced versus slow-paced, hard versus soft, arousing versus relaxing, and complex versus simple) and attempted to determine how customers perceived these. Perhaps surprisingly, the study's authors discovered that the existence of what they described as "universally positively accepted music" does not necessarily result in high levels of satisfaction. Business owners and managers may settle on popular songs because they are the most straightforward option available, but they risk hurting their bottom line since most customers do not seem to respond positively to the cheapest and least refined music selection [Weberová *et al.*, 2022].

Another group of researchers recognised the ambivalent conclusions of the growing body of research on the role of music as a stimulus in the tourism and hospitality sectors. Rather than focusing on a specific setting, the authors of that influential study turned their attention to the meta-analysis of dozens of studies regarding the influence of music. They determined that the design and not the mere presence of music affected the customers' "organismic reactions and behavioural responses". Once again, the authors focused on five dimensions of music: its presence, volume, tempo, congruence, and liking. Their conclusions vary depending on the parameters of each dimension. Regarding the tempo, which plays a significant role in our research, it seems they detected what they describe as a "small to moderate and marginally significant effect on customers" but not a substantial result on total expenditure or consumption. Although managers consider music essential in creating an atmosphere and influencing their customers' feelings and behaviour, the relationship between songs and consumption is neither straightforward nor easy to determine. There are simply too many factors that must align to achieve the managers' desired outcome: the patrons' liking for the available music, the harmony between the music and the other elements of the "servicescape", and the quality of the product. Ethnicity, age, gender, income, and education must be considered when designing the appropriate music background for each establishment. One shoe does not fit all [Trompeta *et al.*, 2022].

Stephanie Wilson turned her attention to the effect of music on purchase intentions in a restaurant. Unlike other studies that took a broader look at pertinent research, Wilson focused on a specific restaurant and explored the result of different kinds of music (and no music) on the atmosphere as perceived by patrons and the amount these patrons were willing to spend. Her study covered two weeks, and the results seem to correlate (at least somewhat) with the conclusions of other research projects regarding the effect of easy listening on restaurant customers. Following earlier surveys, Wilson determined that a pleasurable environment

generates what she calls “approach behaviour” towards the establishment and encourages customers to engage in a positive relationship with the restaurant. Music that corresponded positively to the patrons’ desire for pleasure and arousal encouraged them to return to the dining area and increased the level of interaction with others in it. Although determining the exact influence of music on actual sales proved challenging due to numerous factors, it became clear that the “wrong” type of music did affect the customers’ willingness to engage with the dining establishment and the amount of time they were willing to spend there. In a most telling example, Wilson’s research demonstrated that classical music was considered “inappropriate” for the restaurant she was studying, resulting in fewer people remaining there after 11 pm (compared with other musical styles like popular, jazz, or easy listening). The implication was clear: the appropriate music encouraged customers to spend more time and money in the restaurant [Wilson, 2003].

Given the apparent importance of securing the “right” type of music for the dining establishment, the research of Wen et al. attempts to determine the impact of background music on dining experiences in ethnic restaurants. As customers’ ability to travel globally improves over time and ethnic foods become more readily accessible to a broader market, ethnic cultural experiences in artificial settings come under greater scrutiny. This is perhaps an area of the overall dining experience where the atmosphere plays a significant, if not crucial, role in establishing an authentic relationship between patrons and business. Wen et al. were inspired by the National Restaurant Association’s report recognising authentic ethnic cuisine as among the top ten hot trends in the restaurant industry. These restaurants often assume the role of cultural ambassadors and introduce ethnic culinary culture to local consumers. However, restaurant patrons are no longer satisfied with a simple ethnic menu but eagerly expect an overall ethnic atmosphere of costumes, service style, and music. There seems to be a growing need and determination to ensure that the latter is appropriately associated with the origin of the cuisine served in the ethnic restaurant to positively influence the customers’ perception of the establishment [Wen *et al.*, 2020].

Another seminal study on the effect of musical style on restaurant customers’ spending was published in 2003 and determined that the “correct” background music could increase actual spending at a restaurant. North et al. played classical and pop music in a British restaurant over eighteen evenings (there were also some evenings when no music was played). They calculated the mean amount of money spent per head for each table for each course of the meal (from starters through main courses to desserts and coffee), as well as expenditures on bar drinks, wine, the overall drink bill, the overall food bill, and the total amount spent. They were also careful to measure time spent at the restaurant. Their results seem to correspond with the findings of other researchers in the literature, whereby pop music does not seem to be the panache or most appropriate solution to the problem of background music. They also discovered that classical music resulted in more actual spending (and people were willing to spend more money if classical music played in the background). Their research confirmed that the structural components of music (tempo, volume, mode) and its preferential dimension (whether familiar or liked) influenced the level of satisfaction with the restaurant and increased purchase intentions, patronage, and sales volume. Classical music encouraged people to select more expensive products, but there was also a correspondence between cuisine and the atmosphere. Customers in Mexican or Japanese-themed restaurants preferred a mixture of pop and traditional music and increased their spending accordingly [North *et al.*, 2003].

The conclusion from the literature review is that music can affect customer behaviour at a restaurant. Still, more research is required before we can fully understand all the factors influencing purchasing patterns and overall engagement with the dining experience. Various studies have highlighted inconsistencies between music conditions and spending [North and

Hargreaves, 1998]. Another important factor in customer behavior is the awareness that must govern all the actions and choices of people who work for tourism. (Manola & Papagrigoriou, 2020) Musical preferences, tempo, music style, volume, or perception of the store atmosphere are known to influence behaviour. Researchers have determined that slow-tempo music actually increases the duration of the meal and that music preference (i.e. how much the customers enjoyed the music they were listening to while dining) had an even better correlation to the time they spent at the restaurant than the tempo. Finally, time spent in the restaurant was the best predictor of money spent on the meal [Caldwell & Hibbert, 1999]. Despite the plethora of relevant studies, the relationship between music and food consumption remains a hotly debated research topic that would greatly benefit from more experimental studies exploring the effects of music on eating behaviour.

### **3. Methodology and data collection**

The study's population comprises consumers, managers, and business owners of restaurants, coffee shops, and bars. The qualitative research was based on interviews and participant observation in 120 establishments in Greece. The data was gathered via direct observation during opening hours and interviews at a later time or date. Data collection began in early June 2022 and continued through September 2022, when the desired number of participants had been recruited. Herrington's study on the effects of music in service environments proved invaluable in designing the scale of music congruency and enjoyment by the patrons [Herrington, 1996]. The research included filtering questions to confirm that participants were qualified and had dined out or consumed beverages in restaurants, bars, or coffee shops before taking the survey. Equally important was to ensure that customers remembered the music accompanying their dining or drinking experience.

### **4. Discussion and implications**

There are three principal ways in which music interacts with the human brain. First comes the tempo, i.e. the speed or pace of a given composition. Tempo is changeable, depending on the genre of a piece of music and the performers' interpretation, but its effects on the human body are discernible in the increase of the heartbeat pace and corresponding behavioural changes. Researchers have associated tempo with the speed of consumer behaviour and the amount of money spent. When the rhythm was slower, shoppers tended to take their time going through the store, and gross sales increased. A fast rhythm at a restaurant encouraged diners to eat faster. At the same time, slow music in the same establishment made patrons eat at a more relaxed pace and increased alcohol consumption [Milliman, 1986].

The volume level is another critical factor associated with the atmosphere and human psychology. When the music is perceived as too loud, it creates a sense of unease. At the other end of the spectrum, when the music is considered too low, there is a pervasive feeling of insecurity and risk exposure. This (perhaps unexpected) feeling probably originates in the impression that our conversations can be easily overheard, meaning a breach of privacy. There seems to be no way around this. A medium volume level that does not obstruct communication is ideal in a restaurant.

Genre is another crucial element in the relationship between humanity and music. Listeners and performers use their mental frameworks and expectations to conceive what is new through categories that are already familiar to us. At the broadest definition, a genre is a cognitive category for sorting music. Pieces of music that belong to a shared tradition or set of conventions are understood to belong to the same genre. Restaurant patrons use genres (consciously or subconsciously) to get an idea about what they are listening to [Gelbart, 2022].

This “horizon of expectations” is quite powerful and associates specific genres with particular experiences: reggae is almost inextricably intertwined with summer holidays, rock and roll with celebrations and large social gatherings, and jazz with high-end dining. These stereotypes result in specific behaviours that many people follow without even realising.

The primary purpose of music in a restaurant (or bar or coffee shop) is to create the proper ambience that will interfere with the brain as it processes the experience. The ambience will encourage patrons to develop ‘approach behaviour’ towards the establishment and enhance the effects of pleasure. Each individual interprets their exposure to the ambience in a unique way. However, there is no denying that every person will register some form of influence from the perceived environmental psychology [Mehrabian and Russel, 1974].

Music is the most potent factor affecting the human brain and creating an emotional state. As such, a piece of music is the cornerstone upon which the mind constructs an edifice of feelings enhanced by contributions from the other senses. In these circumstances, other ambient factors come into play to generate a fuller palette of emotional responses to the surroundings. Lighting is crucial in creating an establishment's atmosphere, whether by exposing or shielding individuals from the general public and other patrons or generating a feeling of safety (especially when the lights are low). Lighting also affects our perception of honesty, resulting in a potential contradiction of its usefulness. Low lights can produce suspicion and a lack of confidence; such trust issues can negatively impact consumption. Finally, decoration is another vital aspect of in-store ambience. Decoration underpins the images that customers connect with specific experiences. When an image resembles something seen or experienced in the past, it can bring about similar feelings and result in equivalent expectations. If these past experiences were positive, there would be a tendency to increase consumption to relive the previous experience.

The dining establishment and its ambience with all its elements is only half the equation. The other half consists of customer behaviour, which is far more complex and challenging to interpret. At the most basic level, why people decide to consume is often unclear. In most cases, their reasons are not noticeable since we do not typically choose to visit a place to eat or drink just because we are hungry or thirsty. We could quickly satisfy these fundamental bodily requirements at home or on the go. There must be some reason(s) that is far more substantial or exciting to encourage people to select a particular restaurant, bar or coffee shop where they will spend time and money. Among the most commonly invoked incentives are the desire to meet new people or old acquaintances, enjoy a novel experience, satisfy curiosity, or simply be able to declare that we participated and attended. Some people simply care to boast about the experience they had.

Our consumption motives vary depending on the occasion, but on every occasion, there is an intention to consume potentially. The decision-making process underpinning consumption in the culinary sector is often affected by feelings during the dining or drinking establishment visit. People tend to select based chiefly on their inner (and not-so-obvious) desires. The process begins long before patrons visit a place and can be safely traced to the decision of where they would prefer to go.

A variety of factors shape consumer perception. At the most fundamental level are the needs, i.e. those elements people need to address simply to stay alive (food and water are the most obvious). However, once the basic needs are satisfied, another layer appears in the form of likes and preferences that contribute to the method people select to address the fundamental need (for example, someone may prefer to eat pasta to satisfy their hunger as opposed to boiled vegetables or a juicy steak). At a higher level, the preference may become a want, i.e. a more intense approach to the old problem of satisfying an elemental need. The culmination of the process mentioned above of consumer perception is expectation, which can be described as the feeling people would like to have after consuming the product they settled upon (in the

case of dining at a restaurant, the flavours lingering on the palette after the meal). In many cases, people decide without consciously knowing the real reasons for their choices. The result is then considered rather unsatisfactory, giving rise to negative experiences and unreasonable complaints.

Appreciating the role of memory is essential to better understanding the effect of music on restaurant customers. Our memory is a storage place for previous experiences, including fundamental aspects such as how they felt, what parts were enjoyable, and what features were disappointing. Given the crucial role of feelings on human functioning, memories affect perception from their base at the amygdala, which is the area of the brain processing feelings as they arise in any given situation and ranking them according to intensity and significance. Whenever people encounter similar conditions, the amygdala brings forward whatever feelings were associated with them in the past in a process determining the human desire to repeat or avoid a particular experience. The emotions caused by the music are also related to the personal experiences of each customer, a fact that is an unpredictable factor for the tourism entrepreneur (Manola, 2020).

Past experiences shape memory and give rise to expectations. Any common elements between previous and current situations dredge up memories and associated feelings. If the emotions are positive, humans make decisions based on the expectation of recreating that beneficial sensation (for example, they will order the same course or drink). On the contrary, if the feelings are negative, people will turn their attention to another choice (they will order a different drink or avoid the bar altogether). Underlining all these choices is the expectation to experience something of emotional, mental, or practical value or at least escape the negative connotations and impact of a previous "wrong" option.

The amygdala's role in this process demonstrates that the brain does all the work. Feelings and experiences are strongly associated, and the intensity of the emotion is directly correlated to the strength of the connection. There is also a direct link between repetition and strength. The frequency by which a feeling is recalled in similar situations determines the durability of the connection, with constant repetition resulting in tenacious associations. Similar circumstances force the brain to redevelop older feelings to match the new situation (a process usually described as nostalgia). As the common elements between past and present conditions increase, there is a corresponding development of comparable feelings.

The human brain changes the way it perceives a situation. When developing a solid set of feelings, the brain remains so focused that it does not notice any differences and tends to create expectations that are often impossible to meet. The stimulation from positive feelings inundates the brain with dopamine, oxytocin, endorphins and serotonin, i.e. chemicals strongly associated with happiness and joy. In these situations, the brain anticipates the same (or even higher) stimulation level as in the remembered experience. Anything less registers as a disappointment. When confronted with negative past feelings, the brain typically tries to initiate a more positive line that will stretch from the new situation to the future and re-emerge in every similar situation.

Music is strongly related to feelings and experiences. Therefore, it has the potential to affect brain operations strongly. Music is the more potent stimulus that a) recreates feelings and b) prolongs that recreation for a long time. Music can also recreate feelings regardless of the person's location. People can experience positive feelings from their summer adventures when they hear a song on the radio amid the most brutal winter or are "trapped" in a monotonous working environment. When these feelings arise, it is common for human beings to seek solace in products consumed during the summer heyday (especially food and drinks). It is a standard case of brain operations inadvertently employing music to guide feelings, create emotions, and lead to specific reactions that will assist the person in enjoying something good or avoiding something crummy.

Under the influence of music, feelings often result in a re-enactment of specific past experiences. The mind opens to a combination of emotions that resemble those it encountered in a similar previous situation. If the influence is profound, people can even recall specific lines or actions associated with the past when they received the same musical stimulus.

This re-enactment directly influences the increase (or decrease) of consumption during a culinary experience. A group of positive memories encourages patrons to consume more to enhance the anticipated joy and vitality. On the contrary, a group of negative memories often reduces consumption because past experiences prevent the brain from placing the necessary trust in its expectations. At the most fundamental level, music thus stimulates perception and creates an ideal reality. The stronger the former experience, the stronger the corresponding stimulation. The chemicals produced by the brain under the influence of music contribute to an illusive reality affecting perception. The distorted perception intervenes in the decision-making process and changes consumption patterns (compared to what we could expect should the music not have generated the memories).

The research's results are pretty unambivalent and confirm (to a large extent) results previously noted in the literature. A flurry of recent studies has attempted to evaluate the relationship between music, restaurants, and their patrons. Most of them demonstrated the positive impact of music enjoyment on consumers as a stimulus to purchase higher-priced items [Areni & Kim, 1993] and consume more food [Stroebele & Castro, 2006] or as an encouragement to spend more time at the restaurant [Wansink and VanIttersum, 2012].

Factors like music genre, volume, and tempo can strengthen the illusive perception and specific decisions in these areas can generate particular outputs. When we combine high tempo and an energetic genre (for example, rock and roll), there is an increase in consumption. On the contrary, a high tempo combined with a soft or relaxing genre (such as jazz, cinematic music, or nature music) will decrease consumption. Lower consumption is also associated with a slower tempo, regardless of genre. However, in the latter case, there is an increase in the time spent on the premises. The worst outcome is associated with the incorrect volume. When the music is too loud or quiet, patrons spend less for the reasons already identified in the literature. Volume must be maintained at a comfortable level since it will increase consumption and result in more relaxed social interactions among customers.

## **5. Limitations and future research**

This study has certain limitations. First, the recruitment method was limited to a specific number of restaurants, bars, and coffee shops. Response rates have been adequate, but a larger sample size could always be used to ensure that results firmly correspond to reality. Future studies may choose to employ different methods to recruit participants or even encourage a more significant number of business owners and customers to provide their input. Second, this study looked at restaurants and bars without identifying differences based on location, popularity, or the cuisine's nationality. Future studies may wish to explore these aspects of the dining experience and explore how music affects their customers in a more detailed manner. Testing the results of this study in a different context while considering other factors (lighting, decoration, etc.) will enhance our understanding of the complex relationship between restaurants and customer perception. Third, more research is required to explore the role of genre in determining levels of consumption of food and beverages. This study did not delve too deeply into different consumption patterns based on genre, a research field of great pertinence to numerous establishments catering to customers eager to enjoy ethnic cuisine. Fourth, the study was based on self-reported data, resulting in a risk of social desirability bias. Finally, research for this study was conducted in Greece. Although there is no reason to believe that the country should be considered an exceptional case, it is always desirable to



have comparable data from other countries and maintain a healthy scepticism regarding the generalisation of these conclusions.

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