

Music as a design parameter in service environments:

The influence on customer experience and staff experience

Results of a study by FH-Prof. Dr. Cordula Cerha
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on behalf of

akm

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Offering shoppers an attractive shopping experience is considered a strategic lever for differentiating brick-and-mortar retail from its digital competitors. The design of the store atmosphere is crucial in this regard. Using a mixed-methods approach and from different perspectives, this study examines the contribution music makes in service environments to the quality of the experience for both shoppers and employees – and the resulting effects on consumer behaviour. A quantitative acceptance study as well as qualitative interviews and observations at the point of sale were conducted.

The most important findings of the study:

- **Music is used specifically to improve the store atmosphere and increase dwell time and customer loyalty.**
- **Shoppers are highly sensitive to music in service environments, and this has a direct effect on their mood, length of stay, purchasing behaviour and willingness to recommend the store to others.**
- **Positive attitudes and effects on purchasing behaviour are evident when music that is appropriate and tailored to the industry is used.**
- **Popular music enjoys the highest acceptance among music managers, PoS staff and shoppers.**
- **The effect of background music on staff in retail outlets has been neglected in research and practice to date.**
- **The use of music in retail businesses has become more professional, but in many places it is still used without any specific objectives or integration into the retail marketing mix.**
- **AI-generated music is considered by retail managers for cost reasons, but rejected by shoppers as impersonal, inauthentic and lacking in emotion.**

Music improves the shop atmosphere

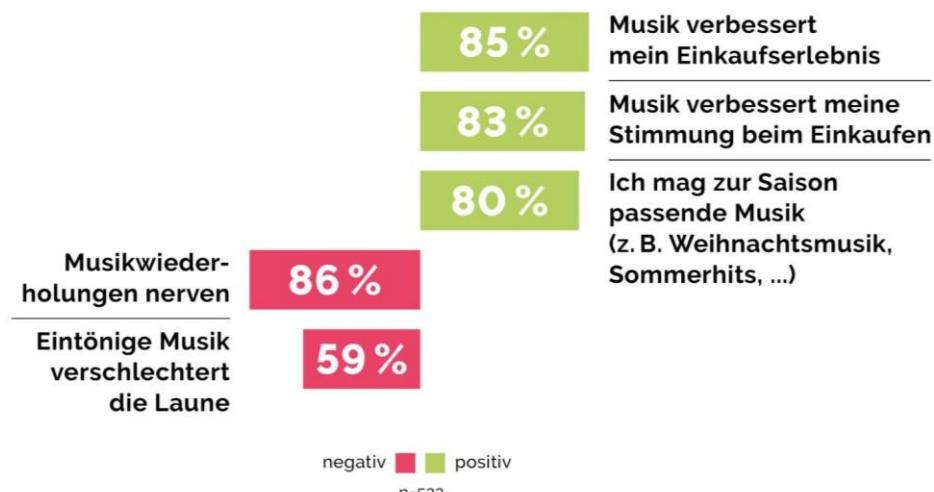
Music is widely used as a means of creating atmosphere in retail and service environments. This is not least because it can be used with comparatively little effort. The aim is to **attract attention, enhance the quality of the shopping experience** and offer **shoppers a positive experience**. As an important environmental factor, music can have a stimulating, relaxing or entertaining effect, depending on the selection and use. After more than 40 years of research into the use of music in retail, there is no longer any doubt that it can positively influence customer behaviour at the point of sale.

The use of music is primarily aimed at **emotional effects**. In service environments, music is intended to create a pleasant atmosphere, mask disturbing background noise, invigorate tired customers and calm stressed individuals. Ultimately, all measures pursue the overarching goal of **influencing purchasing behaviour in line with the respective marketing strategy**. A shop without music is perceived as unattractive and unpleasant by both employees and shoppers.

Music is perceived – and influences behaviour

Both the qualitative field study and the quantitative survey show that shoppers are **highly sensitive** to music in service environments. Music is perceived and positively evaluated by a large majority of customers. 62% of respondents say they stay in the shop longer if they like the music. **Music improves mood and has a positive effect on the length of stay, interest in trying new things and recommending the shop to others.** The use of music can elicit emotional responses in consumers that are relevant to their purchasing behaviour. These findings are consistent with a recent study that concludes that **background music can increase retail sales by up to 8%** (Music Impact Study, 2024). The crucial question is what music is used and how its use can be controlled in order to exploit untapped potential.

Konsument:innen haben eine deutliche Haltung



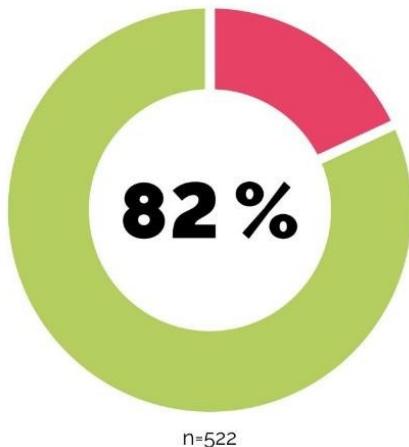
Music can not only evoke positive emotions, but also be met with rejection. **Music that shoppers consciously perceive as unpleasant has a negative effect on their assessment of the shopping venue.** Unpleasant music can be interpreted by consumers as an attempt by the retailer to influence them and trigger a defensive attitude (reactance). A review of recent studies shows that music that does not suit shoppers' tastes can lead to a 6% reduction in sales (Daunfeldt et al., 2021).

Music is perceived as particularly negative when it does not suit the environment. Although playing inappropriate or unpleasant music in a shop is not a reason for respondents to leave the shop immediately, **almost half would reduce the amount of time they spend in the shop.** Respondents find **frequent music repetitions** in service environments particularly annoying, and the majority say that **monotonous music** worsens their mood.

What makes good background music for customers?

A **high degree of alignment with individual music preferences** can make listening to background music in shops enjoyable and lead to a better assessment of the shopping environment, staff and the shop in general. For music in retail to have an activating and motivating effect on customers, it must be perceived as **pleasant and appropriate**.

Die richtige Musik macht den Unterschied



82 % der befragten Konsument:innen ist es wichtig, dass in einem Geschäft oder Restaurant passende Musik gespielt wird.

What is considered "pleasant and appropriate music" depends on the retail sector and the situational conditions. However, the results of the qualitative and quantitative surveys clearly show that **familiarity and recognition** play an important role across all retail sectors. The fact that familiarity with music is interpreted as a quality feature is a relevant argument for the use of popular music. Given the diversity of musical preferences, **popular music and radio hits** are seen as the lowest common denominator when it comes to music selection. The great strength of popular music is that it appeals to a very **broad target group** and can put shoppers in a **pleasant mood**. This is evident from the respondents' statements on the evaluation of popular music:

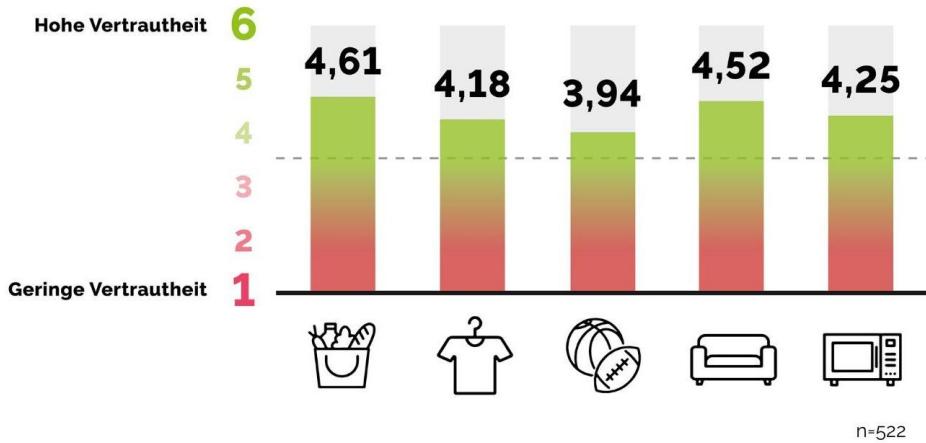
"Popular music has a high recognition value. You always enjoy listening to your favourite songs; they encourage you to shop and make you feel good."

"I prefer mediocre, familiar music to unfamiliar but bad music."

"Music I know lifts my spirits and I can sing along."

That's why popular music is so well-liked by music managers, staff and shoppers. It's seen as the best genre across all product ranges. After pop music, rock and world music are the most popular genres among shoppers.

Kund:innen aller Branchen bevorzugen vertraute Musik



Music is also considered "appropriate" for customers if it **suits the occasion** (seasonal music, e.g. Christmas music or summer hits) or **the product range**. Systematic planning of music use has a positive effect on the perceived fit between the music selection and the image of the retail company. Likewise, the interpretation of In addition to "pleasant music," the **right volume** and **tempo** also play an important role. Music tends to be more noticeable and louder in areas where there is a high propensity to buy. Respondents confirm that music in sports shops can be more stimulating and faster, while shops in other sectors prefer calmer music.

Populäre Musik trifft den Geschmack der Mehrheit

nicht störend
 wohlfühlen
mein Geschmack anziehend
 für jeden etwas dabei
 positiver Vibe angenehm abwechslungsreich Atmosphäre
bekannt/vertraut mitsingen und -summen
 Erlebnis inspirierend passend im Hintergrund
 modern lenkt nicht ab populär passend
 positive Stimmung weckt Kauflust

n=522

Effects of background music on employees

The results of the study point to the enormous impact of music on staff, which has been underestimated in both scientific literature and practice to date. Employees report very negative experiences with unusual music systems, but without music, something would be missing in the shops.

Due to the fact that staff are exposed to music much more intensively than shoppers, it can be assumed that the effects on this target group are significantly stronger. The **interaction between staff and shoppers** also has indirect effects on consumer behaviour. The quality of customer service and the friendliness of staff are key success factors for the shopping experience in brick-and-mortar retail.

With one exception, **all employees surveyed prefer to work in a shop with music**. Music can be used as a key motivational factor and source of energy. Many of the respondents emphasise that music masks distracting background noise, creating a more pleasant atmosphere. The following statements illustrate the role that music plays in the workplace for the employees surveyed:

"I think it's important to have something playing in the background. Otherwise it would be too dull ... Ten hours without anything, that would be too much. So I think we need music."

"So if the music stops playing for technical reasons, it's no big deal. It was strange, though. [...] It's totally unfamiliar, and of course you could hear the boxes rattling or something falling down somewhere. And of course it's much more pleasant with music."

Here, too, it is important to find a common denominator for musical taste. This lies in the realm of **popular music**. In this context, the employees surveyed repeatedly mention "radio music" and "chart hits" as appropriate.

"I think it's classic pop. Something lively, but a bit rhythmic, not too aggressive like all that electronic music. [...] I think that's generally tolerable for everyone, or even very pleasant."

"Pop, rock, so [...] tolerable music. So nothing that goes to one extreme or the other."

By far the biggest challenge for staff in relation to the use of music in shops is **the repetition** of the songs played.

The impact of the atmosphere and background music on the mood and motivation of employees also has an **indirect effect on the customer experience**. The interaction between shoppers and employees, who have to deliver on the retail brand's promise at the point of sale, is particularly relevant here. There is **still untapped potential here for using music – even outside shop opening hours – to motivate employees in a targeted manner**.

Untapped potential

Music is used by those responsible with the aim of improving the quality of the shopping experience, increasing the length of time shoppers spend in the store and, as a result, contributing to better customer loyalty. Those responsible for music who were surveyed agree that **music plays an essential role in creating the store atmosphere**.

"Music is absolutely essential. I can't think of anything worse than a shop where there's complete silence [...]. I think it simply creates atmosphere," said one person responsible for music. Music creates a "feel-good factor", provides "a different flair" and helps to "keep customers happy".

A key advantage of music is its targeted applicability: it can contribute to improving the quality of the customer experience, appealing to emotions and reducing stress.

"It should generally have a calming effect. We assume [...] that when someone goes shopping, they are basically stressed. [...]"

In addition, music helps build brand loyalty, appeals to specific target groups and can convey concrete experiences. One respondent reported on an experiment with shopping evenings where DJ music was used – with the aim of generating momentum and appealing to a younger target group in particular.

The results of the study show that the majority of music managers focus on **popular music**, with a broad musical repertoire playing an important role.

"When do we like music? When it neither bores us nor overwhelms us. And the more often I've heard a piece of music, the less likely it is to overwhelm me and the more likely it is to bore me."

"It is always associated with quality. That means I go somewhere and then I hear Ed Sheeran. That's quality. Or I go somewhere and they're playing songs I don't know. [...] That's quality, I don't want to say inferior, but lower quality music."

Experiments with functional or AI-generated music were often discontinued after a short time – a pattern that can be traced in five documented cases and is therefore not an isolated incident. This shows the enormous influence of background music on staff.

"It was rather demotivating, it had a rather negative effect on the psyche. That's what the shop manager told us. And it was really at the insistence of the staff on the shop floor that the shop manager cancelled this project or test. [...] That was an eye-opener for us, we hadn't expected that at all."

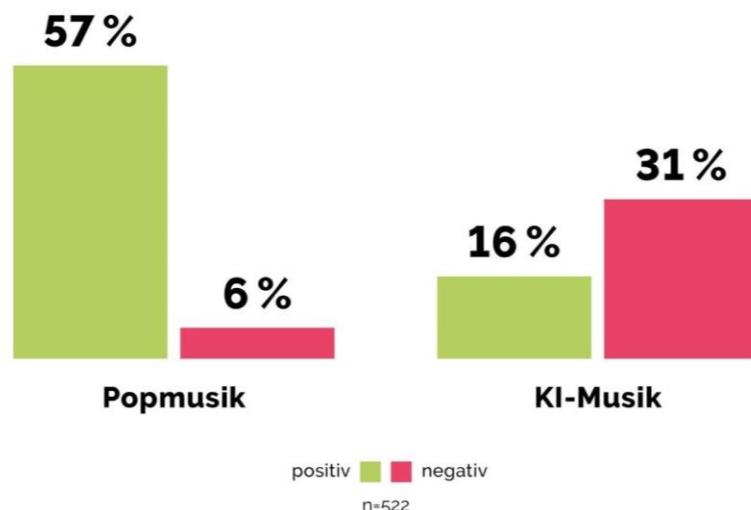
The use of music in retail is highly professionalised, with the majority of companies working with music service providers. Given that the cost of using music is a challenge for all the companies surveyed, it is surprising that the respondents unanimously admit that **the use of music is not evaluated, or only evaluated in an unsystematic manner**. This means that there is **still untapped potential** for the **targeted and strategic use of music for retail branding**.

Implications for action lie primarily in the systematic evaluation of the use of music by companies. Opportunities for differentiation in the competitive environment exist through better coordination of the use of music to specific occasions, situations and target groups, right through to the personalisation of music.

Customers reject AI-generated music

Music managers rate the potential of AI-generated music more highly and consider it for cost reasons. However, **legal issues** and the **lack of familiarity** with the music titles also argue against the use of AI-generated music, according to the music managers surveyed. Customers are very sceptical about AI music: AI music is often rated negatively, with respondents expressing **concerns about quality** and saying that the music seems **artificial, impersonal and sometimes alienating**, and that they consider this music to be **less emotional and moving**. The majority of respondents agree with the statement that AI-generated music is unfair to the artists or composers whose music is used to train the AI.

Popmusik schlägt KI-Musik bei der Kundenbewertung deutlich



A recent example from the United Kingdom illustrates the failure of AI-generated music in retail. In September 2024, after only a few months, the English food retailer ASDA reversed its decision to use AI-generated music. The decisive factors were negative reactions from consumers and store employees, as well as a petition from employees. The petition stated, among other things:

"Asda employees across the country are fed up with royalty-free AI-generated music. It hinders concentration and causes immense stress for our Asda retail employees. For example, our Asda plays the same 20 songs all day long. [...] Now I leave Asda feeling queasy because I'm not only exhausted from the physical work, but also mentally drained from listening to what they're playing."

The use of AI-generated music is also being discussed very critically by Austrian consumers on Reddit:

"I was at [furniture discount store] in Eugendorf today and couldn't quite believe it, but I'm 87.5% sure they're now playing AI music too. If this is the future... in [food discount store], at [furniture discount store] and everywhere else, AI noise playing in the background. Please don't. :("

"Welcome to the brave new world where companies can't even afford to annoy their customers with background noise anymore. The main thing is to have enough money for advertising brochures."

The study makes it clear: music is an underestimated but effective lever for shaping service environments – for customers as well as for employees. However, there is still untapped potential for its targeted, strategic use in customer loyalty and employee motivation. **For companies that place particular emphasis on individuality, quality or brand identity, the use of high-quality, curated music remains essential.**

Study approach & methodology

The study is based on a mixed-methods approach that combines desk research and expert interviews on previous findings, a qualitative field study with observations and surveys at the point of sale, and a quantitative consumer survey (CAWI, n=522). The focus is on the motives for using music in service and shopping environments, the effects on the experience and behaviour of shoppers and staff, and consumers' attitudes towards the use of popular music, functional music and AI-generated music in service environments.

Short biography FH-Prof. Dr. Cordula Cerha

FH-Prof. Dr. Cordula Cerha is a marketing expert with over 25 years of experience. She teaches and conducts research at the Institute for Retailing and Data Science at the Vienna University of Economics and Business, at the Institute for Communication Design at the University of Applied Arts Vienna, and at other university institutions. Her current research interests lie in the field of strategic retail marketing and consumer behaviour in brick-and-mortar and online retail.

AKM

What would the world be without music? AKM and austro mechana ensure that music creators – i.e. people who compose music, write lyrics or publish it – are remunerated for the public use of their works. As non-profit collecting societies, they mediate between music users and authors. The income from performance licences is passed on to the rights holders as royalties. In close cooperation with their partners, AKM and austro mechana conclude around 75,000 contracts annually – the majority of which are with customers from the retail and catering sectors. In addition, both organisations undertake social and cultural tasks to promote Austrian music.

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