

The Effects of Musical Fit on Choice Between Competing Pairs of Cultural Products

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ABSTRACT: Previous studies have claimed that music can prime the selection of certain products and influence consumers' propensity to spend because it activates related knowledge of the world and subsequently raises the salience of certain products and behaviors associated with that music. Music that corresponds with the attributes of certain products therefore can prime the selection of those products. Ethnically Chinese Malaysian participants were presented with six pairs of products, each containing a Malay or an Indian version of the product in question, and asked to state a preference for one from that pair. Malay or Indian music was played simultaneously in the background. Product choices corresponded with the ethnicity of the background music played. This demonstrates that music 'fit' can influence product choice when consumers do not have a clear existing preference for one product over another.

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PREVIOUS research has operationalized musical fit as the process by which music that primes certain aspects of knowledge of the world can prime customers to behave accordingly. For example, North, Hargreaves, and McKendrick (1999) found that customers were more likely to buy French wine from a supermarket display when French music was played and to buy German wine when German music was played. The authors argued that the information primed by the music raised the salience of one type of wine over the other and caused customers to select that wine. Other work has focused on the stereotypical notions of affluence and sophistication primed by classical music and how these might predispose customers towards higher levels of spending. For instance, Areni and Kim (1993) found that customers in a wine cellar bought more expensive wine when classical music rather than top 40 music was playing in the background. The authors argued that classical music primed stereotypical notions of 'luxury', and that this priming caused customers to buy the more expensive wine. Similarly, North and Hargreaves (1988) found that customers were willing to pay more for their food and drinks in a cafeteria when classical music rather than other musical styles was played: interviews with customers indicated that they believed that classical music expressed notions of sophistication and luxury. Similar studies, carried out in restaurants, have reached very similar conclusions (e.g. Grewal, Baker, Levy, & Voss, 2003; Lammers, 2003; North, Shilcock, & Hargreaves, 2003; and Wilson, 2003).

The present research investigates if a 'fit' between the music and products can influence Malaysians' product preferences. Malaysians are made up of three major ethnic groups, namely Malays (54.1%), Chinese (21.3%) and Indians (7.5%), and while participants might be expected to have a tendency to prefer products from their own ethnic group, the present research investigated the impact of music from two cultures on preferences between products associated with those two cultures among participants drawn from the third cultural group. More specifically, would ethnically-Chinese participants prefer Malay goods over Indian goods when these are presented in the context of Malay music, but prefer Indian goods over Malay goods when these are presented in the context of Indian music? It is possible, however, that the phenomenon of musical fit is unique to the West or to Western musical styles, and supporting data from elsewhere in the world would add to a growing consensus by broadening both the range of customers known to be affected by musical fit, but also the range of musical styles that are shown to bring it about. At present, every study except one has focused specifically on the impact of Western classical

music on the amount that customers are prepared to pay. Just as significantly, only North, Hargreaves, and McKendrick (1999) have investigated specifically the impact of musical fit on selection between *competing products* rather than the amount that customers spend, and supporting data is needed. The present research is a much stricter test of North, Hargreaves, and McKendrick's findings, since participants in the present research are given six opportunities to choose one product over another.

The present study employed two different musical styles and one 'no music' control condition. Ethnically-Chinese Malaysians listened to either Indian, Malay, or no music while being presented with 24 pairs of products. For each pair, participants were required to state which of the two products they preferred. For six of the 'test pairs' however, one of the options was clearly Malay whereas the competing alternative was clearly Indian. The total number of Indian and Malay products selected was calculated, and it was predicted that within the test pairs, participants who heard Indian music would select Indian products, whereas participants who heard Malay music would prefer Malay products.

METHOD

Participants

90 ethnically-Chinese Malaysians took part in the study. They were divided into three groups of 30, with each group comprising 15 females and 15 males, $M = 25.13$ years, $SD = 8.80$. Participants were recruited by approaching students in the library at University Putra, Malaysia. Testing was conducted individually in a quiet room on campus.

Materials and Design

A pilot study was first designed to ensure that the music chosen was recognizable as either classical Malay or classical Indian music among the population from which the sample for the main study was drawn. The time frame for presenting each pair of products was also tested with the pilot study group. It was concluded that seven seconds time frame was the most appropriate and reasonable time frame for participants to decide between the products shown in either 'picture A' or 'picture B'.

The research employed a between subjects design in which participants were played either Malay music, Indian music, or 'no music'. The classical Malay music was taken from the CD *Muzik Tarian Malaysia*. The specific track used was *Serampang Pantai*. The classical Indian music was taken from the CD *Master Pieces* by Dr N. Rajam. The track used here was *Raga Deshi*. The music was played through a pair of AVF HM560 headphones attached to the laptop that also presented the pictures of the products.

Each pair of products was presented on a PowerPoint slide on a laptop. The pictures of products were of at least 100KB and were downloaded from the internet. Pictures of two similar products (e.g. a Canon digital camera and a Kodak digital camera) were positioned side by side on one slide. Beneath each picture was a statement of the product shown (e.g. "B. Canon digital camera").

There were 24 pairs of products employed, but the only pairs of interest were six featuring a choice between similar Indian and Malay items. The first pair was a choice between a plate of Indian *tikka masala* and a plate of Malay *rendang* curry. The second pair was a choice between a Malay *gambus* and an Indian sitar. The third pair was a choice between Malay *keropoks* and Indian *papadams*. The fourth pair was a choice between an exhibition of Malay and Indian cultural dancing. The fifth pair was a choice between a Malay *gendang* and an Indian *tabla*. The final pair was a choice between Malay *popiahs* and Indian *samosas*. The six pairs of Indian and Malay items appeared as the fourth, eighth, twelfth, sixteenth, twentieth, and twenty-fourth slides in the PowerPoint presentation.

Procedure

Participants were tested individually between 10.00am and 9.30pm over two weeks in a quiet study room at the library in University Putra, Malaysia. Participants were shown the 24 pairs of products on a laptop and heard music via headphones attached to this. The music was played at a constant volume which was considered to be sufficient to be heard clearly. Immediately after seeing each pair of products, participants stated their preference between them by writing 'A' or 'B' on a piece of paper.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A one-way ANOVA was carried out to determine whether the different types of music (and no music) influenced the number of times that each participant chose the Malay over the alternative Indian product. Each participant's score represents the number of times that they selected the Malay product. Because responses were made using a two-alternative forced choice, this measure fully accounts for the data obtained and generated the following predictions: mean scores should be highest for the Malay music condition (congruent product-music); lowest for the Indian music condition (incongruent product-music); and intermediate for the no music condition. The analysis revealed a significant main effect of background music, $F(2, 90) = 10.16, p < .001, \eta^2 = .19$. The mean number of times (and *SD*) that a Malay product was chosen when Malay music was playing was 3.53 (1.17); and the mean number of time (and *SD*) that an Indian product was chosen when Malay music was playing was 2.47 (1.17). Conversely, the mean number of times (and *SD*) that an Indian product was chosen when Indian music was playing was 3.93 (1.46), and the mean number of times (and *SD*) that a Malay product was chosen when Indian music was playing was 2.07 (1.17). The mean number of times (and *SD*) that a Malay product was chosen when no music was playing was 2.80 (1.13), while the mean number of times (and *SD*) that an Indian product was chosen when no music was playing was 3.20 (1.13). Tukey HSD tests indicated that there were significant differences between the Malay and Indian music conditions in the number of Malay products recalled. There were no differences between either of the two music conditions and the no music condition on this measure.

The results provide a clear indication that musical fit can influence product choice, and can do so outside the West, using non-Western music. Specifically, the pieces of Indian and Malay music played were able to activate cultural knowledge that primed the selection of one corresponding type of product over another. When there was no music played, participants were not primed to choose one product over the other, and in that case the choices indicated no reliable preference for Indian or Malay items. Quite possibly, musical context effects occur only when people have no preference for one product over the other. For instance, in the case of the present research, we might have expected ethnically-Malay participants to favor Malay products and ethnically-Chinese participants to favor the Chinese products, regardless of the background music.

This possibility is consistent with the recognition heuristic which states that a known alternative will be selected over an unknown one. Likewise, the results support a second aspect of the heuristic: when both alternatives are unknown, participants will search for contextual cues to aid them in decision-making. Thus, participants will tend to choose the product most strongly associated with any music that is playing in the background. The musical-fit effect has several implications for advertisers. Firstly, advertisers would do well to ensure that any background music involved in advertisements should fit with, and hence reinforce, the product. Practitioners should also employ well-known pieces of unambiguous music or rely on the stereotypes associated with a musical genre. If consumers have no prior experience of the background music then they may not perceive the communicative intent of that music.

In a Malaysian context, retail outlets should be sensitive to the diversity of this multi-cultural society, using appropriate music to enhance sales. For example, a local supermarket that sells Malay food or products would be prudent to play Malay music, thereby reinforcing the products sold. However, playing Malay music in a supermarket situated in an ethnically Chinese area may not have a similar effect, as customers may not derive the same communicative intent from that music.

Despite participants being aware that the background music was either Malay or Indian, mere demand characteristics do not easily account for the results. Firstly, the experiment here involved choice between Malay and Indian products, which were embedded within a large number of other choices, such that they did not stand out. Participants were unlikely to have inferred that the six target trials were of central importance in this study, reducing the chances that responses are explainable as demand characteristics. Secondly, no attention was drawn to the background music, and background music is notoriously unattended when used in the presence of a primary task (such as following the plot of a film, or shopping). Thirdly, even if some explicit decision making took place, it would likely reflect the degree to which explicit decision-making naturally occurs in marketing, and therefore it should not be ignored. For example, a teenager at a record store may be more likely to select a hip-hop CD if other hip-hop music is playing in the background, because the background music explicitly reminds them that they enjoy that style of music. Quite possibly, the results reflect a combination of implicit and explicit processes.

Future research may investigate the effects of musical fit on products that are unfamiliar to participants. Lack of familiarity with products may leave participants even more susceptible to the influence of external cues such as musical fit. Secondly, participants in this study had seven seconds to decide between each of the two competing products, which arguably provided ample time for musical fit effects to influence choices. Further research might provide a stricter test for the musical fit hypothesis by examining brief product exposure times. Finally, the present

research was limited to ethnically-based choices, and future tests of the musical fit effect may be conducted on products that have weak or absent ethnic connotations.

END NOTES

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