

## AN INVESTIGATION OF USER ATTITUDES TOWARDS PUBLIC SPACES WITHOUT BACKGROUND MUSIC

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### ABSTRACT

In the business world, customer satisfaction is a key factor for success. Naturally, all businesses aim to provide as much as possible for their customers. They analyze and try to meet all their needs. Designs for commercial spaces are especially well thought out. Marketing professionals are keen on observing consumer behavior and laying out design principles to increase spending. Background music is one aspect of commercial spaces such as department stores, supermarkets and shopping centers that has been studied for such purposes. The general acceptance that music is pleasing and everyone would like some music to accompany them, has led businesses to focus on choosing the right type of music and determining optimum sound levels without considering an option where music is absent.

Over the last half century, first, the boom in the recording industry and later, the digital revolution has made powerful equipment affordable and music itself accessible. As a result, background music has become almost ubiquitous in the public realm. However, more and more, music is being perceived as disturbing noise. The high levels of sound or the inappropriate choice of music, or both, are seen as the cause of most disturbances. Yet, the use of background music itself is not being questioned. As no community has a common music taste, in public spaces we need to share, elimination of background music should be given more consideration. This paper presents a summary of the literature focusing on background music in commercial settings and reports preliminary results from a questionnaire study for customer preferences with regard to background music in public spaces - cafes and restaurants in particular. The survey dwells on perceptions, expectations and preferences of customers in spaces with and without background music in order to determine if spaces without music are preferred over spaces with music.

**Keywords:** Background Music, Muzak, Music and Noise

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The earliest known sound recording which is done with a phonograph device was made in 1857 by Édouard-Léon Scott de Martinville (Rosen, 2008). Playback capability arrived with Thomas Edison's phonograph in 1877 and the recording and distribution of music quickly turned into a global industry (Edison, 1878). Recorded background music was a new invention for the early 1900s and was very effective in attracting customers and background music in cafes, department stores and restaurants became common. Over the years, many researchers have analyzed its effects on sales and human behavior in commercial settings and tried to define the appropriate type of music and sound levels in order to improve customer satisfaction. The basic assumption has always been that music is desired by everyone. Especially over the last decade as the digital revolution greatly increased accessibility to an ever increasing variety of music; technological advances in electronics have made powerful sound systems affordable. These two factors have led to an explosion of music in public spaces and as a result, our cities have become inundated with background music. It is difficult to find dining or shopping spaces without background music. In many public spaces competing loud music from neighboring stores creates disturbing noise far from being desirable. Today, "places without background music" are suddenly attracting attention. The assessment of this emerging situation where elimination of background music should be considered is clearly necessary in order to have a built environment that is shared and enjoyed by all. This paper presents the results of a preliminary survey about background music in dining places and the 'no music' case. The survey has been conducted in six cafes/restaurants. Three of them are places without music and three of them are places that play background music.

## 2. BACKGROUND

Acoustic comfort is one of the most important factors in occupant satisfaction, as noise comes in first place among discomfort reasons for inhabitants (Kuerer, 1997). Noise is defined as unwanted or disturbing sound. It is clear that sound does not necessarily have to be loud in order to be described as noise. A sound that is perceived as music by some people can be defined as noise by others (Ersoy & Görgülü, 2008).

There are no established universal borders between music and noise. Even in a society where people have many common traditions, the dividing line cannot be drawn, because everyone's perception of music and noise changes in time according to psychological and physiological factors. Due to this fact, music has no single, common definition which is agreed globally (Nattiez, 1990).

Previous research on background music and its effects on sales and human perception, found no significant positive or negative results. Background music can have positive, or negative effects on human behavior and perception, as well no effects at all (Kampfe, Sedlmeier, & Renkewitz, 2011).

During an ordinary day, people are forced to listen to background music in shops, cafes, restaurants, banks, waiting areas, shopping malls, transportation vehicles and many other places. In all these places, music is chosen by business keepers, and not by the users. Due to this imposition, numerous people opt to use portable music players and headphones which they carry with them (Rohrmann, 2003).

Performance on cognitive tasks are found to be reduced in the presence of background sound (music and noise) compared to silence (Cassidy & MacDonald, 2007). People have to face the negative effects of background music especially when they don't have control over the music and are forced to listen to music which they dislike. Although leaving places where unwanted music is played is an obvious solution, unwanted music has detrimental effects on people when it is not possible for them to walk away (Hallam, 2012).

### 3. OBJECTIVES

The relationship between the kind of music that is played and economic factors like productivity or sales are still being studied by researchers (Gordon, 1990; Guéguen & Jacob, 2010; Wilson, 2003). However, these studies consider the *absence of music* only as a control condition. One of the main goals of this study is to discover if the absence of music is a desired condition that can be an alternative to all the various types of music that are being studied in shops, cafes, dining places and public places.

Popular media and former scientific research on the use of background music established a general understanding of the effects of background music that is based on the following four assumptions:

1. Appropriate background music attracts more customers, encourages them to spend more time on premises and stimulates spending.
2. Background music in dining places enhances acoustic privacy by masking conversations in neighboring tables, and thus allows customers to engage in conversations more comfortably.
3. The genre of music that is being played is an important factor when people are making decisions on where to go.
4. Decisions on background music should be made by company executives according to the firm's sales strategies.

The correctness of these assumptions is what needs to be tested. After all it is clear that background music can be irritating for those who don't like a certain type of music or who don't want to listen to music at a given instance due to psychological reasons. Within this context, this preliminary study also aims to find evidence supporting the following:

1. A significant number of customers seek places with no background music.
2. People can hold conversations in places without background music at least as comfortably as in places with music, if not more.

3. When people are making decisions choosing a place where they will spend a certain amount of time such as cafes and restaurants; quality of service/goods and price range play more important roles than the genre of music being played.
4. Customers' lack of control over the music that is being played is a source of discomfort for them.

#### 4. SURVEY STUDY

##### 4.1. Location and site selection

The survey was conducted in the Beyoğlu district of İstanbul. Six dining facilities have been chosen on the İstiklal Avenue and its near surroundings. Asli Cafe, Dilek Pastanesi, and Özsüt are three café & restaurant establishments that were selected as places that play background music. Helvetia, Saray Muhallebicisi and İnci Pastanesi are three café & restaurant establishments where there is no background music. The locations of these establishments are shown in Figure 1. The three places with music are all franchises and have established background music policies. The three places without background music have no music or television sounds inside the establishment.

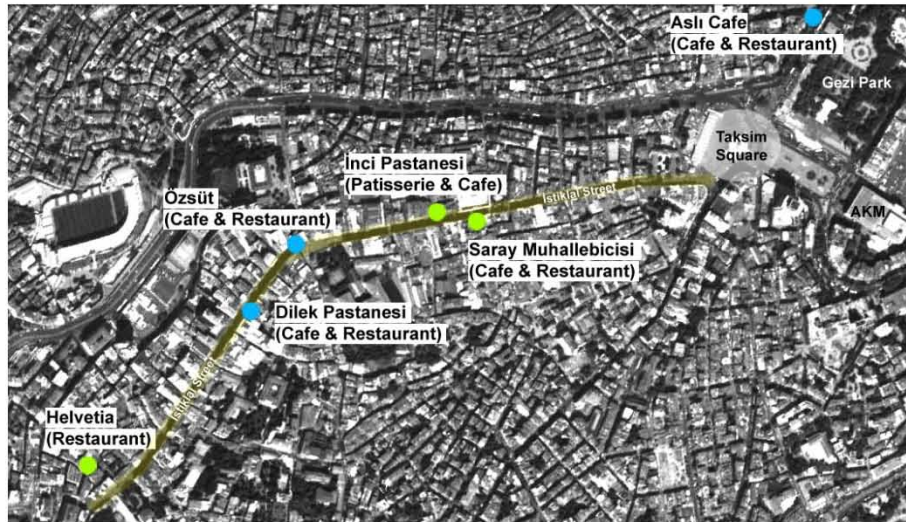


Figure 1. Map showing three 'with music' and three 'no music' survey places.

A total of 118 questionnaires, 40 from cafes with background music and 78 from cafes without background music, have been collected from customers selected at random. The questionnaire consists of two groups of questions. The questions in the first group are general questions that apply to all respondents. The questions in the second group depend on the existence of music in the space.

#### 4.2. Results

The results of the first group of questions reveal that 50% of our respondents were women. Respondents were between the ages of 13 and 55 with an average of 28. 98% of respondents were either university graduates or students at a university.

##### Respondents' past experiences with disturbing background music

In the past, 68% of the participants were interrupted by background music in a cafe or restaurant while they were speaking with their friends. 65% of the participants had to ask the staff to lower the sound or to turn the music off because the music was disturbing. 53% of respondents had to leave a place or have decided not to go into a place because of disturbing background music. The observed decrease in the percentage of respondents, seen in Figure 2, is expected as the level of disturbance increases from simply interrupting conversations to causing customer complaints to forcing customers to leave. However, it should be noted that the figure of 53% for respondents who have either avoided or left places due to disturbing background music only underlines the fact that disturbing background music has become very common.

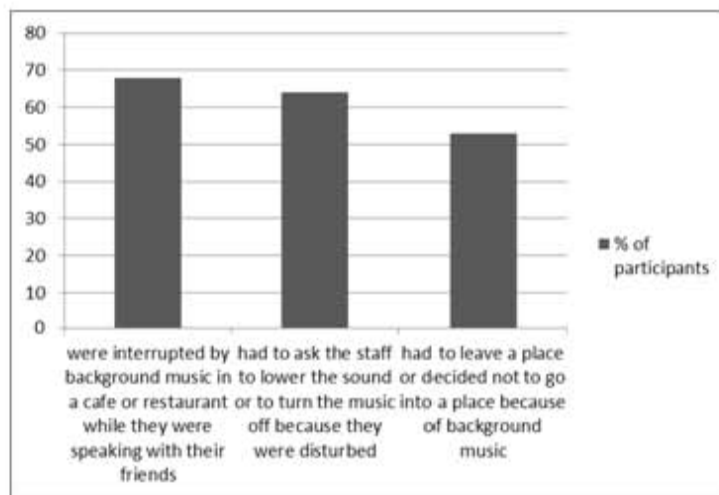


Figure 2. The percentage of participants according to stages of discomfort caused by background music.

##### Respondents' ability to voice their preferences

It is natural to assume that people would wish to control the music that is being played, but surprisingly only 44% of respondents declared that it is uncomfortable when they cannot choose the music that plays at places they go to. Yet, we should not forget that in public places many of us are content with letting someone else choose and this might account for the 66% who are happy to have no say in the choice of music.

It is also assumed that people can complain when background music is disturbing to them. However, 76% of respondents felt they were forced to listen to background

music which they dislike in public places they go to. This rather high value hints at the fact that in most public places it is impossible to communicate such preferences. Furthermore, even when we have the communication channels in place, there are many who would choose to stay quiet and avoid conflicts. 16% of respondents stated that they would hesitate to complain about disturbing music. Although 16% seems like a small percentage, this value represents a significant number of people who need to be considered when making assumptions about what customers/people want. When they have no control over the music, almost half of the respondents, 45%, prefer to turn off the music completely but this option is rarely considered.

#### **Respondents and speech privacy**

92% of people in the places without music and 98% of people in places with music; a total of 95% of the surveyed people could talk to their friends easily and comfortably inside the place.

#### **Respondents' choice of locale and music**

Without considering the background music or lack of it, when asked to mark the reasons for choosing a cafe, respondents mention the quality of food/drinks the most. The following vote counts have been recorded for each of the reasons mentioned: Food quality (87), Location (46), Price (38), Architectural and interior design (22), View (21), Friend's recommendation (11), Arrived with a group (8).

At locales with background music, respondents were asked to mark, on a 5-point Likert scale (from "No influence" to "Most important factor"), how much of an influence the existence of background music had on their decision to choose the café. Most did not believe it had a significant influence. The average vote was 2.3. At locales with no music, respondents were asked to mark, on the same 5-point Likert scale, how much of an importance the lack of music had on their decision to come to the café. The result was even lower. The average was 1.9.

Respondents were also asked if their decisions would be affected in case the establishment reversed its policy on the use of background music. 75% of respondents at locales with background music stated that their decision would remain unchanged if music was eliminated. However, only 50% of respondents at locales with no music stated that introduction of music will not affect their decision.

#### **Respondents and control of music**

Given the option of controlling the music in the cafe, 47% of respondents in locales without background music chose to keep the music off. 53% of participants, on the other hand, wanted music to be turned on. Their preferences for music genres were widely varying. The most preferred genres were classical music, pop, and Turkish classical music.

Presented with the same option, in cafes with background music, 83% of respondents did not want to turn off the music. However, 50% of the respondents who didn't want to turn off music did want to change the genre of music. The most desired genres of music were rock, Turkish classical music, classical music, pop and hip-hop. Overall 57% of the respondents were displeased with the music.

### 4.3 Limitations

One limitation of this questionnaire survey study is in its representativeness. The survey has only been conducted in a small number of cafes all located in a single neighborhood. Another limitation lies in the fact that the survey was conducted only during the day. Yet, expectations and many variables with regard to built environment such as noise levels differ during night time. The major limitation of the sample is the fact that, while establishments that do not use background music are hard to find, the current sample includes an equal number of cafes that play no music. The rationale behind this biased sampling strategy for this preliminary stage of the study was to be able focus on the various differences in motivations and attitudes of the clientele that frequent the “musicless” establishments in order to increase the forecasting potential. Future work needs to expand the study with a more representative sample.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The results of this preliminary survey lead the study to *redefine* the emerging situation without background music.

The first assumption that, “Appropriate background music attracts more customers, encourages them to spend more time on premises and stimulates spending” seems to be contradicted by the results where 53% of participants declared that in the past, they had to leave a place or decided not to go into a place due to background music. Another contradictory result is that half of the respondents in cafes without music claim they would go elsewhere if background music started playing.

The second assumption that, “Background music in dining places enhances acoustic privacy by masking conversations in neighboring tables, and thus allows customers to engage in conversations more comfortably.” is refuted with the survey result that 68% of the participants were interrupted by background music in a cafe or restaurant while they were speaking with their friends. Also, 92% of people in the places without music and 98% of people in places with music; a total of 94% of the surveyed people could talk with their friends easily and comfortably. Both in places with and without music occupants are equally comfortable in carrying out conversations.

The third assumption that, “The genre of music that is being played is an important factor when people are making decisions on where to go.” likewise seems to contradict with the current survey results. In cafes with music, respondents’ average 5-point Likert scale rating for the influence of the existence of music on their decision to choose the cafe was 2.3. Furthermore, in places with background music, 75% of respondents stated that their decision to choose the café would not have been affected (would remain unchanged), if there was no music in the cafe, suggests that the assumption was wrong. However, the survey was inadequate in determining clear importance factors for this decision making process.

The fourth assumption that “Decisions on background music should be made by company executives according to the firm’s sales strategies.” is again contradicting this study’s results. 76% of respondents feel they are forced to listen to background

music which they dislike in public places they go to; and 45% of respondents would like music to be turned off rather than listening to music which they are not able to control.

The results of this preliminary survey provide promising results towards challenging the established assumptions mentioned above hinting at the evolving soundscape in the urban fabric. Yet, the study only provides limited evidence to support the four hypotheses mentioned in the objectives. In places with no music, 50% of respondents wish to leave the locale if background music is introduced implying half the customers are there because the lack of music is an important factor in their decision making. However, the results are contradictory when this question is asked directly to the respondents. They do not believe the lack of music has a strong influence on their decision. This can be explained by a misstatement of the question and needs further study. The results do show that conversations are almost equally comfortable under both settings although the places with music seem to have a slight edge. The results identify quality of food, location, and price as the most important factors influencing the decision on choosing a café but are inadequate to make a comparison with the existence of background music. A separate survey will be required to study this relationship. Finally, results show that in places with background music, 17% would choose to turn the music off and half of the rest (41%) would choose to change the genre of music. This implies that 58% of customers are displeased with the background music.

Even this preliminary survey has shown that the modus operandi in many public places with regard to background music requires careful reconsideration. More studies are certainly needed in order to establish an in depth understanding of acoustic comfort parameters in public spaces.

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