

THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair



When they hear the music, some people want to dance. Other shoppers want to flee. Justin/flickr, CC BY-SA

Contested spaces: you can't stop the music – the sounds that divide shoppers

March 8, 2017 6.24am AEDT

This is the third article in our Contested Spaces series. These pieces look at the conflicting uses, expectations and norms that people bring to public spaces, the clashes that result and how we can resolve these.

Authors



Michael James Walsh

Assistant Professor of Social Science,
University of Canberra



Eduardo de la Fuente

Senior Lecturer in Creativity and
Innovation, James Cook University

Sound is everywhere. In urban areas, it forms part of how we feel about and negotiate various social settings.

The space we focus on here is the retail environment. Based on interviews with shoppers about the kinds of music and sounds encountered, we are examining how and why the acoustic dimension can either heighten or diminish the shopping experience.

When successful, music in retail spaces stimulates positive corporeal and other sensory responses in shoppers. The other side of the coin is that a majority of interview participants reported unpleasant musical experiences in retail situations.

Interviewees who liked to hear music when shopping reported that it added a sense of rhythm to what they were doing. It made the experience feel more dynamic or lively than otherwise might have been the case.

Some shoppers reported being so energised by the music that they worried they might engage in conspicuous behaviour such as dancing, singing and other conduct not usually found in retail settings. One participant said she was so responsive and captive to music in the shops that she feared being considered a “public weirdo” by retail staff and other shoppers.

Those who had negative responses to music included consumers who sensed that the music played in certain stores was “discriminatory”. This was because it seemed aimed at particular gender or age groups that excluded them.

Volume was another important source of disquiet. The greater the volume, the greater the imposition these shoppers felt.

Some shoppers avoided altogether “noisy” or “loud” retail spaces. Others reported getting through the shopping experience faster than they would have liked. And some resorted to the “privatisation” of their aural experience by using personal musical devices.

In what ways does music offend?

But why should music and sound be contentious in retail settings? There is a long history of people using music and sound to augment the experiences of events like festivals, community and religious celebrations, as well as markets and fairs.



One possibility is that consumers are concerned that retail atmospheres are designed to manipulate them into buying things through music and other forms of sensory conditioning, such as lighting, smell, temperature and colour



Some shoppers may feel music is part of a retail strategy to manipulate them into buying more. pixabay

schemes. However, this doesn't really explain why some consumers reported feeling dislocated or not "at home" in retail environments.

Music and sound can often offend shoppers for other reasons, we suggest. Following the insights of microsociologist **Erving Goffman**, we think the acoustic environment of retail shopping is a complex "interaction order", which is more fragile than we realise.

We contend that music and sound can impinge upon what Goffman termed the "territories of the self". This refers to the physical and mental space that the individual expects others will provide to them. Thus, music that is perceived as "noisy", "loud" or "annoying" – as reported by the interview subjects – threatens the boundaries that the individual seeks to protect, and expects others will observe.

Unlike vision or touch, sound is much more difficult to control or protect oneself one from; sound spills across thresholds and enters into situations where it is unwelcome.

Equally, when interview subjects reported annoyance at retail environments starting to resemble nightclubs or pubs, they were highlighting concerns about what Goffman called "frame disputes". Music can counteract "situationally appropriate" framing, if the shopper comes to feel that the acoustic environment is not providing the right scripts, cues or definition of the situation.

Can and should retailers stop the music?

So how might retailers respond to the kind of "territorial offences" that some of our interview subjects identified?

Some have reacted to the frictions generated by sound, and other types of sensory overload, by introducing "quiet hour shopping". As one Adelaide lifestyle website reported, at Frewville Foodland:

The lights will be dimmed, music and pager messages switched off, volume of the 'beeps' on the check-outs lowered, there will be no coffee grinding and strong smells will be reduced where possible.

We applaud attempts to creatively redesign the shopping experience and to provide consumers with sensorially enriched retail environments. However, we would caution against simplistic understandings of the impacts of sound on the retail experience; nor do we condone seeing music and sound as something that should be avoided.

It is true that humans possess a limited capacity to process auditory information. At worst, this leaves scope for exploitation in the form of **sonic torture** and **sonic weaponry**. But it is also true, as our respondents reported, that music and sound can enrich experiences by enhancing the mood, tempo and liveliness associated with certain activities.

The last thing we want is for all retail spaces to sound the same. As experimental composer and Zen Buddhism practitioner **John Cage** noted:

There is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make a silence, we cannot.

We tend to be annoyed because, when we bump into them in the supermarket aisle, sounds don't say "excuse me". However, if Cage is right and there is no such thing as a silent retail space, we might as well as learn to share supermarket aisles with sounds beyond our control and sounds not on our playlists.

You can read other pieces in the series as they are published here.

 [Music](#) [Cities](#) [Shopping](#) [Noise](#) [Sound](#) [retailing](#) [Sounds](#) [Urban noise](#) [Soundscape](#) [Cities & Policy](#) [Shops](#)
[Shopping malls](#) [Contested Spaces](#) **You might also like**
We are what we eat: the demise of the ethical grocery shopper

Ready, steady, shop: shopping as sport

Virtual reality tech may make 'going shopping' in real life a thing of the past

Shopping goes mobile