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The effect of pleasantness of store music on customers' engagement and trust

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Retailers are increasingly looking to foster customers' engagement and trust to build strong customer relationships. One way to achieve this goal is by using music to create an attractive store atmosphere. This study tested the role of retail store music in facilitating customers' engagement and trust. We also examined the mediating effect of customer engagement in this relationship. Responses obtained from surveying 464 shoppers in three supermarkets of the same chain in China were analyzed with Amos 22.0. The findings suggested that perceived pleasantness of store music had a positive impact on customer engagement, which, in turn, positively affected customer trust. This study enhances understanding of the impact of store music on customers' engagement and trust, and provides retailers with practical insights into building customer relationships by using music cues in their stores.

Keywords
retail stores, store music, store atmosphere, customer engagement, customer trust, customer relationship

Article Highlights

- Pleasantness of store music was found to be positively related to customer engagement, which was, in turn, positively related to customer trust.
- Customer engagement was identified as a mediating mechanism that promoted the positive effect of pleasantness of store music on customer trust.
- Our findings provide practical insights into building customer relationships by using music cues in stores.

Today, more than ever, customers are playing an important role in contemporary marketing thought due to their collaboration and participation in marketing activities (Kotler et al., 2019). Thus, customer relationship management has become a priority for organizations as well as being of interest for academia (Boulding et al., 2005). This paradigm shift in marketing has made the key factors of relationship management, that is, customer engagement and trust, increasingly important (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Nammir et al., 2012). *Customer engagement* is an emotional bond established between the customer and a brand or firm (Moliner-Tena et al., 2019). *Trust* occurs when an emotional bond is established between individuals (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Previous studies have reported that customer engagement functions as a precursor to firm value (Kumar et al., 2010), customer value (An & Han, 2020), and customer relationships (So et al., 2016). Likewise, customer trust is considered a contributor to business performance (Sako, 1998), relationship quality (Wong & Sohal, 2002), and relationship maintenance and development (Aurier & N'Goala, 2010). Research has documented the effect of customer engagement and trust on customer relationships; however, to date no studies have simultaneously investigated the connection between customer engagement and customer trust in a retail store context.

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Customer engagement and trust are critical to improving customer loyalty in the retail industry (Monferrer et al., 2019; Sun & Lin, 2010). Retail stores make an effort to design a unique store environment to increase customer engagement and foster customer trust, which, in turn, contribute to a favorable shopping experience (Melia & Caridà, 2020; Mohd-Ramly & Omar, 2017). Of the various ambient factors to which customers are exposed in the retail environment, music is viewed as an effective way to affect customers' responses (Jain & Bagdare, 2011; Michel et al., 2017). Research has highlighted store music as a critical influencer of shoppers' behavior and satisfaction (Morrison et al., 2011), store loyalty (Muhammad et al., 2014), and repurchase intention (Thirumalazhagan & Nithya, 2020). However, little is known about the impact of store music on customer engagement and customer trust. Therefore, this study examined whether the perceived pleasantness of store music affects customer engagement and customer trust in a retail store context in China.

The Current Study

In a retail context, customer engagement involves the connection and relationship between the customer and the retailer (Grewal et al., 2017). Strong customer engagement means a high-level relationship of customers to the brand or the retailer (So et al., 2016). Designing attractive store environments is a crucial strategy for building the customer–retailer relationship (Kumar & Kim, 2014) and has the potential to affect customer engagement. Music has been considered as an essential part of the store environment in the literature. As a core ambient cue in the retail store context, music creates a unique, favorable, and memorable experience for customers (Jain & Bagdare, 2011). The pleasant experience of interacting with the store environment, including store music, has been found to enhance customers' engagement (Jeloudarlou et al., 2022). Thus, we advanced the following hypothesis:
Hypothesis 1: Pleasantness of store music will be positively related to customer engagement.

Trust is one potential consequence of customer engagement (Vivek et al., 2012). The positive link between customer engagement and customer trust has been reported in prior studies (Islam & Rahman, 2016; Li et al., 2020). So et al. (2016) found that customers of a retail store brand with high-level engagement show high brand relationship quality in terms of trust and satisfaction. Brodie et al. (2013) stated that more highly engaged customers of a virtual brand community show enhanced loyalty, connection, empowerment, satisfaction, commitment, and trust. Customers with high-level engagement tend to build a trusting relationship with the store. Thus, we formed the following hypothesis:
Hypothesis 2: Customer engagement will be positively related to customer trust.

Music is considered to act through the mediators of mood and emotion (Landay & Harms, 2019), implying that store music has great potential to influence customer emotional states, which, in turn, lead to marketing outcomes. Walsh et al. (2011) observed that customer emotion plays a key mediating role between the store environment components of music and aroma, and marketing outcomes. Customer trust represents a long-term marketing outcome (Guenzi, 2002). Thus, store music may affect customer trust through customer engagement, and we formulated the following hypothesis:
Hypothesis 3: Customer engagement will mediate the relationship between pleasantness of store music and customer trust.

The research framework is shown in Figure 1.

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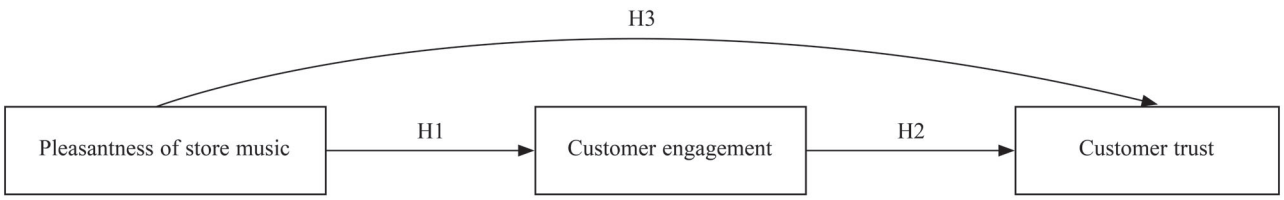

Figure 1. *Research Model*

Method

Procedure

The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of our university. We cooperated with three supermarkets from the same chain, located in Shanghai, China, to conduct the survey. The target population was restricted to shoppers queuing up at the supermarket checkout counters, who were approached at different times of the day, and were asked to answer two questions: "Have you bought products from this store in the last 2 weeks?" and "Are you over the age of 18?" A paper-and-pencil questionnaire with a cover letter explaining the purpose of the survey was used to collect data. Respondents were told that participation was voluntary and confidential, and advised that they may withdraw from the study at any time.

Participants

We obtained 464 valid responses (response rate = 80.14%) from 280 (60.34%) women and 184 (39.66%) men with a mean age of 34.76 years (*SD* = 9.52, range = 23–42). Among the respondents, 243 (52.34%) were not married and 221 (47.66%) were married. In terms of educational level, 162 (34.91%) held a bachelor's degree, 145 (31.25%) had a postgraduate qualification, and 157 (33.84%) had a level of education of college or below. Additionally, 239 (51.51%) worked in the private sector, 140 (30.17%) worked for the government, 57 (12.28%) owned a business, and 28 (6.04%) worked in other industries.

Measures

Back-translation was used for Chinese translation of measures originally developed in English, with the help of a bilingual researcher. A 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree* was applied to measure all items.

Pleasantness of Store Music

Pleasantness of store music was measured with Yang et al.'s (2022) scale, which includes two positive items and one negative item: "The store has pleasant music," "The store has appropriate music," and "The store has bothersome music." Reverse scoring was employed for the negative item.

Customer Engagement

Customer engagement was measured with Monferrer et al.'s (2019) four-item scale, with item phrasing tailored to fit our study context: "I feel valued in my interactions with the store," "I feel an emotional link with the store," "I feel as though I have a personal relationship with the store," and "I feel that people in the store are concerned about me as a person."

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Customer Trust

Customer trust was measured using four items adopted from Sun and Lin (2010): "I feel that the store is trustworthy," "I believe that the store wants to know about my interests," "I have confidence in the products and services of the store," and "I feel that the store has the ability to provide good products and services."

Results

First, we performed a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to test the distinctiveness of the study variables, chi square/degrees of freedom = 1.14, goodness-of-fit index = .98, normed fit index = .97, relative fit index = .97, root mean square error of approximation = .02. The means, standard deviations, reliability values, and correlations of all the variables are presented in Table 1. The correlations for the study variables were significant and positive. Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values ranged from .76 to .90. Average variance extracted values ranged from .52 to .54 and were greater than the squared correlations between the corresponding pair of constructs. All the results met the required thresholds, indicating adequate reliability and validity.

Table 1. *Means, Standard Deviations, Correlations, and Cronbach's Alphas for Study Variables*

Variable	α	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3
1. Pleasantness of store music	.85	3.58	0.94	1		
2. Customer engagement	.89	3.65	0.75	.47**	1	
3. Customer trust	.90	3.57	0.86	.25**	.53**	1

Note. $N = 464$.
** $p < .01$

The path analysis results of structural equation modeling showed that the relationship between pleasantness of store music and customer engagement was significant and positive, $\beta = .47$, $p < .01$, 95% confidence interval (CI) [0.37, 0.56]. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported. Moreover, customer engagement was positively related to customer trust, $\beta = .53$, $p < .01$, 95% CI [0.44, 0.61], supporting Hypothesis 2. To test Hypothesis 3 we conducted a bias-corrected bootstrapping analysis with 5,000 resamples. The results showed that the indirect effect of store music on customer trust via customer engagement was significant, $\beta = .25$, $p < .01$, 95% CI [0.18, 0.32]. Thus, Hypothesis 3 was supported.

Discussion

The current research proposed that store music may play a crucial role in affecting customer engagement and, subsequently, customer trust in the retail store context. All of our hypotheses were supported. The effectiveness of store music has been examined in the retailing literature, yet no prior studies had explored the influence of store music on customer engagement and customer trust, both of which have a critical impact on the customer relationship (Aurier & N'Goala, 2010; So et al., 2016; Wong & Sohal, 2002).

Our results show store music is an important influencer of customer engagement. This is consistent with the suggestion that store music plays a critical role in inducing customer response (Jain & Bagdare, 2011; Michel et al., 2017). Moreover, the positive store music–customer engagement link is in line with the prior retailing and service literature, indicating that store atmosphere serves as an antecedent to customer engagement (Choi & Kandampully, 2019; Mohd-Ramly & Omar, 2017).

The findings reveal there is a positive connection between customer engagement and customer trust, which is consistent with the studies conducted by Islam and Rahman (2016) and Li et al. (2020). The results provide empirical evidence that customer engagement plays an important role in enhancing relationship quality (So et al., 2016). The study also contributes to the retailing literature by empirically validating customer trust as an outcome of customer engagement.

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Our results show that store music may indirectly influence customer trust through customer engagement. To our knowledge, no previous study has examined the mechanism by which store music affects customer trust; therefore, our findings supplement the literature. By linking store music with customer engagement and customer trust, this work sheds light on the processes underlying these associations.

The emergence of relationship marketing has strengthened the need for retailers to take into account customer engagement and customer trust in fostering customer relationships. Our results provide retail stores with important information to assist them in creating an attractive store environment that facilitates customer engagement and leads to enhanced customer trust. To achieve this, retailers may consider using music cues to create an attractive store environment.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Some limitations should be mentioned. First, the utilization of cross-sectional data did not allow us to establish causal links. Future research could test the causal relationships using longitudinal or experimental designs. Second, this study was conducted in China so the results might be influenced by Confucian culture. People's music perception and cognition are dependent on their culture, which shapes music preferences (Morrison & Demorest, 2009). Future research could repeat this study in other cultural settings. Third, the music in this study had no lyrics. There are significant differences in the influence of background music with and without lyrics (Shih et al., 2012); thus, future research could use background music with lyrics to replicate our study.

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