



WORDS BY SARAH BOODRAM

## *Joy to the Consumer*

### Christmas and Spending

**“**Retailers don’t play Christmas music because it coincidentally brings happiness.**”**

There’s nothing more that gets you in the Christmas spirit than hearing Christmas music. When the Christmas season arrives retailers stream a continuous supply of Christmas music, and consumers purchase. This is no coincidence.

As we enter the Christmas season, hearing festive melodies in retail stores is inescapable. Creating a store environment is vital to a retailer because these environments persuade consumer behaviour.

Consumers buy the idea of Christmas. By playing Christmas music, marketers embellish tangible items with intangible qualities like hope, unity, and joy, to persuade us into believing that these qualities can be obtained by purchasing the associated products. The truth is, when we walk into a department store booming Christmas carols, are we really going to get any of these things from purchasing a 130 dollar perfume set?

Retailers introduce music into stores to trigger emotions from their customers. This enhances the consumer experience because music generates indexical representations.



Indexical representations exhibits that we directly associate music with an extramusical object or event. Emotions previously attached to those objects or events transfer onto the music that accompanies it. When music retrieves extramusical associations, it is called heteronomous music. Indexical representations in music can either be positive or negative. In the study "Remembrance of Things Past: Music, Autobiographical Memory, and Emotion", researcher Hans Baumgartner examined the ways a piece of music becomes associated with an autobiographical episode from a person's life every time the person hears the music. When Baumgartner asked what kinds of personal experiences are associated with pieces of music, 84% of his participants recalled positive personal experiences. All subjects classified these recollections as past and present romantic involvements, times spent with friends, and vacations. Participants recalled only 6 out of the 19 autobiographical episodes to be negative. Baumgartner further noted that the indexical representations recurred from the music pieces were vivid and emotional. His participants tended to relive the original personal experiences when they heard particular music and were also accompanied by descriptive imagery.

For instance, hearing "Joy to the World" could actually bring joy. You may remember singing this carol in your school choir as a child, projecting feelings of nostalgia. Conversely, hearing "Joy to the World"

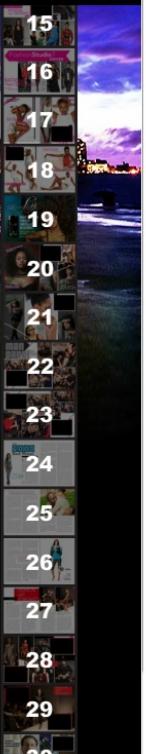
might resurface memories of the time when you separated from your significant other around the Christmas season, therefore creating negative emotions. When you are in a retail store that is playing "Joy to the World" in the background, it may trigger any of these kinds of emotions. These emotions can transfer onto the items in the store, and influence your buying decision. Thus, Christmas becomes associated with commodities.

But, the composition of songs also influences whether the music invokes positivity. Retailers don't play Christmas music because it coincidentally brings happiness. Music involves components that allow it to be emotionally stimulating. The positivity Christmas music projects involves its choice of musical arrangements.

In Mind, Music, and Imagery, Stephanie Merritt, author and psychology professor at University of Missouri-St. Louis, states that patterns in music stimulate emotional patterns. For instance, when we hear tension in music, it triggers different physical, emotional, and mental responses that have the same energy pattern. Musical mood induction is a technique that exposes individuals to evocative music and asks them to use the music as a background for their moods. In the study "On the induction of depressed mood in the laboratory: Evaluation and comparison of the velten and musical procedures", David M. Clark, researcher for the Department of Psychology at the



“Musical mood induction is a technique that exposes individuals”



University of Oxford, conducted the musical mood induction procedure. He demonstrated that individuals who listened to depressing music reported higher levels of sadness and anxiety. Clark further concluded that individuals listening to depressing music preferred isolated and passive activities, compared to those listening to more uplifting music that preferred social and active activities.

For the most part, Christmas music is considered uplifting. This, as a result, evokes happy, joyous, cheerful, and merry emotions. The patterns in music that allow a piece to generate these emotions are created by its musical arrangements. For instance, "Jingle Bells", "Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer", and "Oh Christmas Tree", among others, are almost always played in major keys. So, it's no wonder that Christmas music makes people uplifted.

Since Christmas music generates these moods, retailers, evidently, play Christmas music in their stores to create a positive atmosphere. This, of course, attracts customers who feel happy when they hear this type of music.

But, what about those who feel negative towards the entire Christmas holiday? If Christmas music does not appeal to them, would this affect their consumer behaviour during the season?

Whether Christmas music retrieves negative or positive associations, almost every commodity incorporates it. Traditionally, advertising differentiates one product from the other. When the Christmas season arrives; however, every product appears the same. All products communicate identical messages of sharing the Christmas spirit and, most importantly, sharing the love. We have no choice but to buy these Christmas-embellished commodities. ■



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