

'I Wasn't Part of The World' Reasons For Not Listening to Mobile Music

EVA SCHURIG

Department of Music | Carl von Ossietzky Universität Oldenburg | Germany*

ABSTRACT

Previous research has investigated the motivations for mobile music listening, while the limiting factors to using such services have been neglected. Therefore, this paper will focus on reasons for not listening to mobile music, particularly among mobile music listeners and people who do not use portable listening devices. Two studies were carried out, the first one considering mobile music listeners ($n = 11$), and the second non-listeners ($n=11$). Participants in the listening group were interviewed twice about their reasons for turning off their devices, once before and once after a period of time, in which they were observed while listening to mobile music. The non-listeners were interviewed about their rationales for not using portable listening devices and their opinions on mobile music listening. Results confirm prior findings particularly with regard to sociable behaviour and traffic safety. In addition, they offer novel perspectives on mobile music listening in everyday life, for instance, that the decision to turn off the music appears dependent on the activity that is carried out while listening, or that music can increase information overload. These results suggest that to achieve a balanced and informed view on mobile music listening, abstinence and avoidance of such activities need to be accounted for.

KEYWORDS

mobile music listening; portable listening devices; non-use; everyday life; urban environment; sociability, listeners, non-listeners

* eva.schurig@uni-oldenburg.de

INTRODUCTION

Mobile music listening can be understood as ‘listening to music over headphones while moving around in public’. Studies on this topic so far have mainly focussed on the devices used (e.g. Krause *et al.*, 2015) and the reasons people choose to listen to music over headphones. It has been found that mobile music seems to help create a sense of privacy (Bull, 2006a), provides the means to block out unwanted stimuli from the environment (Skånland, 2011), and offers a retreat from social life (Richmond, 2006). Additionally, studies on the motivations for mobile music listening reveal that users report psychological benefits such as mood management (Skånland, 2013), energising and motivation (Gopinath & Stanyek, 2013), providing social warmth (Bull, 2007), preventing boredom (Kuch & Wöllner, 2021), and the devices allow avid listeners to listen to music anywhere at any time (Simun, 2009). However, one topic that has rarely been studied is the reasons why some people sometimes do not listen to mobile music, or as Prior (2014) phrases it: “Non-users have been traditionally given a marginal status in technological systems and academic research” (*ibid.*, p. 33). Based on two exploratory studies, the present paper will attempt to fill this gap by focussing on the choices and views of people who do not listen to mobile music.

CONTEXTUAL REASONS

One of the reasons why people do not listen to mobile music or worry about those who are engaged in this activity is traffic safety. As Schönhammer (1989) already found quite early after the launch of the Sony Walkman in 1979 (Sony, 1999), it could be difficult to navigate traffic while being acoustically separated from it. He thought this so obvious that he wrote that this “need not be discussed further” (Schönhammer, 1989, p. 142). Schönhammer did not carry out any research on the connection between using the Walkman and traffic safety, but several other authors did. Goldenbeld and colleagues (2012), for example, explored listening to music while cycling and found that participants compensated by wearing helmets or turning off their devices in demanding situations. Moreover, de Waard and colleagues (2011) revealed that wearing headphones while cycling increased the response time to auditory signals.

Lichenstein and colleagues (2012) looked into accidents leading to injury and death that were headphone-related. They discovered 116 incidents between 2004 and 2011, of which 70% led to death. No causal relationship can be inferred, but the authors describe that there is a danger, because listening to something through headphones can lead to auditory masking and can be a form of distraction.

Other researchers took more active approaches, for instance, by observing participants who were crossing a virtual street while they were either listening to music, texting, or talking on the phone (Schwebel *et al.*, 2012). The authors discovered that listening to music led to more accidents than the other conditions. This contradicts other studies which found that texting is more dangerous than listening to music. Walker and colleagues (2012), for example, observed pedestrians crossing a street in a city in the USA and discovered that listening to music actually led to an increase of watchful behaviour.

Another area where listening to music is seen ambiguously is being outdoors. Maslen (2022) interviewed adventurers who generally preferred to take in the surrounding sounds when outdoors and increase their safety by listening to cues from their surroundings. Similarly, Anderson and Jones (2023) discovered that

some hikers prefer to be without headphones while hiking to increase their attentiveness to the surroundings as well as their safety.

Listening to music through headphones can lead to hearing health issues if the sound volume of the music is too high (e.g. Hodgetts *et al.*, 2009; Levey *et al.*, 2011). Kettel and Kuch (2021) found that people who are more sensitive to noise are less likely to listen to mobile music, which is more often the case for older people. If noise-sensitive individuals do listen to mobile music, their reason often is to block out unwanted sounds and therefore control the sounds that reach their ears. Similarly, Argalasova and colleagues (2017) discovered that students living in housing which is exposed to traffic noise listened to more mobile music than students living in quiet surroundings.

Additionally, if people do want to take in their surroundings, as in the example of the adventurers and hikers (Anderson & Jones, 2023; Maslen, 2022), then they would not use mobile listening devices. This was also confirmed by Leong and Gram (2011), who found that most people would not listen to music if they were in a new place for the first time or as a tourist.

It might thus be concluded that listening to mobile music does not take place if listeners want to instead focus on the sounds around them, in order to be safe in traffic and other situations or to enjoy the surroundings with all their senses. The literature cited above points out that mobile music listening is not always purely enjoyable but might pose a risk to the listener, which needs to be balanced against the possible benefits.

Researchers and theorists often disagree about whether mobile music listening is a sociable activity. The discussion started soon after the launch of the Sony Walkman in 1979: Hosokawa (1984) described a loss of the connection to the environment when using the Walkman, Gransow (1985) termed it the “autistic Walkman”, saying that it promotes individualised tendencies, and Vollbrecht (1989) called the Walkman a symbol for individualisation. Chen (1998) observed that listening to the Walkman cuts the listeners off from the environment and prevents others from intruding (*ibid.*, p. 257), while Gergen (2002, p. 232) argued that when people listen to music from somewhere else, they are not present in the immediate environment. Results from several studies show that mobile music listeners seem to be in their own privatised space (Bull, 2004, p. 186) and that non-listeners think of the Walkman experience as isolating, uncommunicative, and egocentric (Schönhammer, 1988). In fact, users often seem to use the device to provoke (*ibid.*, p. 60). A later study by the same author pointed out that mobile music listening seems to be unsociable, because listeners are not engaged in a shared environment (Schönhammer, 1989). A study by Garner (2012), where participants were supposed to imagine different scenarios with mobile music listeners, revealed that people wearing headphones are perceived as less sociable.

There are other voices with regard to the sociability of mobile music listening, however. Beer (2012) wrote that while people appear to be in a kind of bubble, they are, in fact, still open to interruptions from others. Children were revealed to use music in sociable ways by sharing earbuds as a sign of social inclusion (Bickford, 2014), and teenagers would not listen to music alone when with their friends, but would share the music and talk about it (Bergh *et al.*, 2014). According to Heye and Lamont (2010), listening to mobile music and being aware of the surroundings are not mutually exclusive, but rather, they are correlated. Specifically, the authors discovered that a higher awareness of the music is associated with an increased awareness of the surroundings. In his study of mobile music listeners, Prior (2014)

found that 44% of his participants chose to turn off their devices at certain times and in certain places in order to reconnect with their environment and the people in it. This reasoning might also be valid for other mobile music listeners or those who prefer to always engage with their surroundings instead of their own music.

The task that is carried out seems to impact whether an individual decides to listen to music, as Kiss and Linnell (2023) discovered. The authors found that individuals working on complex tasks tend to avoid listening to music as it could be a source of distraction. Task complexity, as well as the arousal levels of the music, typically influence the choice of accompanying music. The researchers found a difference between driving and monotonous tasks, which are simpler, and reading and studying tasks, which are more complex. Notably, a greater percentage of people avoided music in the latter tasks as compared to the former. These results corroborated those of Goltz *et al.* (2021), who found that more complex tasks led to less background music. The authors also discovered that younger generations are more prone to using background music than older adults. Additionally, listeners are clearer in their requirements of the background music when the task is more complex, while they would be less critical if the task is easier. Thus, listeners might choose to turn off their devices if the simultaneous task is complex and requires their focus.

INDIVIDUAL REASONS

Apart from sociability and safety issues, there are several other possible reasons why someone would not listen to mobile music. One of these is the sound quality available through the devices and headphones. Some people, known as “audiophiles” (O’Neill, 2004), prefer high-end sound quality to MP3 formats and would therefore prioritise their home stereo system to portable listening devices. Even though the MP3 format has been discontinued as other formats with small file sizes and better sound quality are available (Dockrill, 2017), a preference for high-fidelity might still influence behaviour.

A condition that applies to only about 5% of the population is musical anhedonia (Mas-Herrero *et al.*, 2012; Mas-Herrero *et al.*, 2014). The researchers discovered that musical anhedonia describes healthy people who do not derive pleasure from listening to music, but are not affected by general anhedonia, which sometimes accompanies psychiatric disorders. With less experienced pleasure during music listening, these individuals might also be less inclined to listen to mobile music.

Mobile music listening might also be age-related, as, for example, individuals born before 1963 (in Germany) appear to prefer other technologies to portable listening devices (Lepa & Hoklas, 2015). DeNora (2000, 147f.) observed that older women are more likely to engage in music listening as the main activity, rather than utilising it as a tool for managing emotions and situations, which are common reasons for mobile music listening (e.g. Kuch & Wöllner, 2021; Skånland, 2013). They would, therefore, not enjoy mobile music listening, which usually accompanies another activity. Another age-related reason for not listening to mobile music is hearing aids (Greasley *et al.*, 2020). It is quite difficult to listen to music through headphones while something else is already in the ear or there are general hearing issues present. There might be options to combine hearing aids and mobile music listening, but, to my knowledge, there is no research on this yet.

According to Wyatt (2005), there are individuals who do not use a specific technology for various reasons. This might be another explanation why some people would not use portable listening devices. Wyatt (2005, p. 76) classified non-

users into four different categories, namely the “resisters” who actively do not want to use the technology, the “rejecters” who have stopped using their devices voluntarily, the “excluded” which are groups of people who have never had access to the technology for a variety of reasons, and the “expelled” who were somehow forced to stop using the technology. This classification shows that not all non-users are potential users. The reasons for this non-use range from not having the need to use it to finding it too difficult or intrusive (Laumer & Eckhardt, 2012; Stewart, 2002; Wyatt, 2005). Non-use can be a sign that a person’s needs are not met (Laegran, 2005) but, equally, Kline (2005) describes that non-use of technology is normal and necessary, because it helps to negotiate the meaning of technology. Similarly, Selwyn (2006) found that non-users have agency, and their reasons for non-use are “limited relevance, utility or even pleasure in the context of their everyday lives”. Sambasivan and colleagues (2009) break up the dichotomy between use and non-use by claiming that “(a)ctive users of technology can also exhibit non-use of devices” (p. 4533). This means that a person does not have to be either a user or non-user, but that there can be moments, where using a technology, or in our case listening to mobile music, is relevant, and other situations where music is not required.

In summary, individual reasons for not listening to mobile music can include technological reasons, such as a preference for high-quality audio or reluctance to use portable listening devices for various reasons. There can also be other personal motives, for instance, a general disinclination to listen to music or a specific age-related habit of listening to music that does not include mobile music. Thus, there might be a range of personal preferences and habits that could influence the decision to use portable listening devices.

AIMS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

While the above literature mentions several reasons that could lead to a non-use of portable listening devices, these have only rarely come directly from listeners or non-listeners. This paper, therefore, aims to fill this gap and answer the following research questions:

- 1) Why do mobile music listeners sometimes intentionally turn off/do not use their portable listening devices?
- 2) What are the reasons why some people do not use portable listening devices at all?

METHODS

Two studies were carried out in a small city in England to inform the researcher's PhD thesis (Schurig, 2019). The studies aimed to be exploratory, so age or gender or any other demographic was not controlled for.

STUDY 1

Participants and recruitment

Participants were recruited through word of mouth, advertising at the researcher's workplace, through church noticeboards, the researcher's Facebook page, and through the university's research website. Eleven mobile music listeners, aged between 20 - 42 ($M_{\text{age}} = 28,4$; $SD_{\text{age}} = 7,3$), took part in this study. Four of them were female, 7 male, and all used portable listening devices in their daily lives.

Design and Data Collection

The study consisted of three parts: first, semi-structured interviews about the participant's general music listening behaviour, their devices, their choices regarding mobile music listening, their musical preferences, and the situations they encounter during mobile music listening were carried out (the interview manual is available in Schurig, 2019, p. 255f.). These lasted from 20 minutes up to an hour.

Several days later, the participants were shadowed, i.e., followed around while they were asked to “do what you normally do” when listening to mobile music. They were observed and occasionally approached and asked about what they were listening to and why. Shadowing is a form of participant observation first used by DeNora (2000), who followed a participant while both participant and researcher vocalised their impressions and thoughts into an audio recorder. For the purpose of this research, this approach was adapted so that only the researcher spoke into an audio recorder whenever something interesting about the participant's behaviour or surroundings was observed (e.g. when there was music playing in a shop), while the participant listened to music. Shadowing was not meant to be ecologically valid, but instead provided the opportunity to understand what the participant was talking about in the first interview, and to notice behaviour that was not mentioned before (e.g., because it was not conscious). Additionally, it gave the participant the chance to explore their own behaviour and thus enabled them to talk about it more easily.

Directly after the shadowing, which lasted from 10 minutes to 3 hours (depending on the weather and the activities of the participant), a second unstructured interview was carried out for 10 to 20 minutes. This interview was different for every participant because it was based on what was observed and discussed during the shadowing, and it was an opportunity to explore topics with more depth than was possible (and aimed for) during the short interruptions throughout the shadowing.

Ethical approval for both studies was obtained from the University of Exeter, and all names mentioned in this paper are pseudonyms.

STUDY 2

Participants and Recruitment

The second study took place with 11 non-listeners who were not using mobile listening devices at the time and/or had never used them before. They were aged 28-76 ($M_{\text{age}} = 45,8$; $SD_{\text{age}} = 16,5$), and one of them was male while the rest were female.

Design and Data Collection

All of these respondents took part in short (5 to 20 minutes) semi-structured interviews about their thoughts on mobile music listening and their reasons for not engaging in this activity (for the interview manual, please see Schurig, 2019, p. 257).

Analysis (both studies)

All the interviews and recorded information were transcribed, and then analysed with NVivo using Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Several themes within the topic of not listening to music (concerning listeners as well as non-listeners) emerged in the analysis: relating to other people, relating to the surroundings, discomfort, simultaneous activities—in addition to reasons that are specific to listeners or non-listeners. These five themes will be presented and discussed in relation to previous research. The focus here will be on intentionally choosing not to listen to mobile music; thus, incidents such as a device running out of battery or breaking will not be presented.

RELATING TO OTHER PEOPLE

The interviewed listeners were often mindful of other people in their surroundings who may have wanted to interact with them. Potential interactions can occur in shops, for instance, where shop assistants offer their help or cashiers explain the payment procedure. Wearing headphones in these circumstances might therefore lead to discomfort and a raised awareness that music listening might not be beneficial for communicating with other people, as exemplified by Ben's experience.

Sometimes I go shopping with music, yeah. But I usually feel strange listening to music when there are people around and when I should interact with them. (Ben, listener, 24 years old)

Listeners might not be alone when they commute, hike or cycle. Unanimously, they agreed that it would be impolite to continue listening to music when friends or acquaintances are around and want to interact. Koko points out that this is particularly valid if someone is doing you a favour. It seems that not ignoring them would not be the most considerate approach; instead, it would be more courteous to interact with them.

I personally wouldn't like this kind of behaviour and probably, I don't know people that would be glad about like seeing you with the headphones in his own car and he asks you something and you - there, he didn't hear me. He's with the headphones, so he's not here. (Koko, listener, 25 years old)

While the mobile music listeners are aware of the social norms and rules of being in public, and are able to differentiate between situations that require their presence and availability, this availability is still a matter of their choice. If they want to interact, they take off their headphones, but they might keep them on if they do not want to interact, therefore retaining control. Thus, passers-by would not easily be able to start a conversation with them.

If I want to speak to someone, I just switch it off and turn my headphones off. (Jonathan, listener, 32 years old)

The headphones are a visible sign of (non-)availability that the non-listeners are easily able to interpret. The primary reason for non-listeners to avoid mobile music is their perception that this behaviour is unsociable. Most of the interviewed non-listeners agree that listening to music conveys the impression of not being available for conversation or not attending to one's surroundings. Since they do not want to communicate unavailability, they do not listen to mobile music.

Well, like I said, they look a bit introvert. You feel like - oh they're wearing that, don't talk to me. And I don't think that's a nice ... I don't like it that much. (Josie, non-listener, 58 years old)

The contrast opened here between the listeners and non-listeners reflects the literature on the topic. On the one hand, the listeners are aware of what is socially required, just as the participants in Prior's study (2014) were. They are also conscious of seeming disconnected and in their own little world, which might not be how they want to appear to friends or acquaintances. This corresponds with Schönhammer's (1989) finding that mobile music listening appears unsociable due to the listeners' apparent absence. On the other hand, the non-listeners reacted exactly like the participants in Garner's (2012) experiment, who reported that listening to music over headphones makes a person appear to be less approachable and more introverted.

So how can these two positions – behaving sociably but still seeming to be disconnected – be reconciled? There are two possible explanations: Firstly, if mobile music listeners decide to behave sociably, then it is their choice and under their control. Anyone who might want to talk to them at another time would not be able to reach them as easily, which might be perceived as unsociable. Secondly, as I pointed out in my PhD thesis (Schurig, 2019, p. 206), a listener who is sociable would take off their headphones to be available for conversations with surrounding people. But once they are without headphones, they would no longer be identifiable as a listener. Thus, a sociable listener would be indistinguishable from a non-listener. As a result, the non-listeners might only remember situations where a listener was unsociable, because they were recognisable as a listener.

RELATING TO SURROUNDINGS

Listening to mobile music might not only prevent interactions with people, but can also lead to a reduced perception of the surroundings. This is one of the reasons why non-listeners do not engage in mobile music listening behaviour. Julia describes the feeling of isolation from the environment that she encountered when trying out mobile music listening, which she experienced as so profoundly negative that she never tried it again.

I plugged myself in and I felt quite claustrophobic, because I felt I wasn't part of the world. I felt that I was in my own little world, in a little bubble and I couldn't hear what was going on and I like to know what is going on around me. (Julia, non-listener, 61 years old)

Julia does not like the feeling of being shut in and, therefore, being unable to relate to the environment, which corresponds with Prior's (2014) findings. Being separated from the environment is usually a reason for listening to mobile music (e.g., Krause et al., 2015). Bull (2005) introduced this concept of perceived private space even in crowded situations as “auditory bubble”, which is usually experienced as positive because it gives a semblance of control over their auditory world back to the listener (e.g., Bull, 2006c; Dibben & Haake, 2013; Weber, 2009). In Julia's example, the auditory bubble is experienced as unpleasant, as she wants to be aware of what is happening around her through sight as well as sound.

If mobile music listeners decide to fully engage with their surroundings, they would choose not to listen to their own music. As Ben implies, taking in the surroundings with all senses, which includes listening, might lead to a heightened enjoyment of it.

You get the atmosphere when you don't listen to music. Because otherwise you're really stuck, and you don't interact with anyone else, you're in your own world. So sometimes when I feel like - ah, maybe I should pay a bit of

attention to the outside world - then I wouldn't listen to music. (Ben, listener, 24 years old)

This wish for a closer connection and, therefore, a deeper enjoyment of the surroundings is particularly present when the mobile music listeners are in nature. Most of the interviewed listeners would not want to listen to music if they are in nature on purpose. Being in the city, however, often involves commuting or having a task in mind, as well as noise and sounds that are not enjoyable to the listeners, so they would want to cover these sounds through self-chosen ones. In natural surroundings, the ambient sounds are an integral part of the experience, making listeners want to hear them.

If I walk in nature, then I'm there to walk in nature and then I wanna experience nature and then I wouldn't want to listen to music. (Max, listener, 42 years old)

Although safety is not a concern in these circumstances, the aim for focussing on the surroundings when in nature corresponds with the findings by Maslen (2022) and Anderson and Jones (2023). The hikers in both of these studies preferred to be aware of their surroundings and enjoy the nature they are in.

Nature is one environment that mobile music listeners want to perceive with all their senses. Hayley describes another. She explains that her decision to listen to music is influenced by the novelty of the environment. A new environment needs to be experienced and actively studied, while a familiar environment is navigated with the help of music.

If I've been to the same place like many times and I listen to music, it will make it different depending on what I'm listening to. But then if it's the first time I go there, I want to experience it as it is and like the sea, the waves, the wind, the people shouting. (Hayley, listener, 24 years old)

Here, Hayley describes what Urry (2002) calls the “tourist gaze”, which Bull (2012) outlines as experiencing and actively studying, instead of merely navigating the environment. Thus, Hayley wants to experience new surroundings with all their facets, which includes sound, so she would not listen to music then (see also Leong & Gram, 2011). In familiar surroundings, however, music would add variability to the experience.

Another reason for not wanting to listen to music over headphones is when music is already present in the environment, for example, buskers in the streets, as Koko points out. If mobile music listeners like the music in their surroundings, then they might want to listen to that instead. However, if it is disliked but played at a high sound volume, then listeners might be prevented from focussing on their own music, so they decide to turn it off. Apart from the statement below, Max also explains that he prefers to listen to one piece of music at a time and not two overlapping ones, which is why he chooses to listen to the music from his surroundings if it is louder than his own music.

Sometimes I stop there, sometimes I film them [street musicians]. I like to like there are some that are really actually good, quite good. (Koko, listener, 25 years old)

But if I'm walking through an environment where music is playing so loudly that I can't listen to my own music, then I put my music off. (Max, listener, 42 years old)

The insight that the volume of surrounding sounds influences the volume of the mobile music or the decision to turn it off corresponds with findings by Kettel and colleagues (2021), who discovered that people who are more sensitive to noise are more likely to not listen to mobile music. In this study, this information was not collected, but it might have added an explanation for the behaviour of some of the non-listeners. Kettel and colleagues (2021) note that listening to music can help individuals cope with annoying sounds, but only to a certain extent. If the noise is too loud, this would necessitate listening to music at a high volume as well, which would be counterproductive for individuals who are sensitive to noise. Here, this was confirmed by someone who probably is not sensitive to noise, given his frequent use of headphones to listen to music. Thus, the findings add the insight that even someone who is not sensitive to noise might turn off their music if the surrounding sounds are too loud.

Additionally, the nature of the surrounding sounds impacts the behaviour of the listeners. If the sounds are perceived as pleasurable, then listening to one's own music might not be a priority. Conversely, if the ambient noise is perceived as annoying, then the listeners might prefer their own music. Music in the environment, it seems, is also more likely to interfere with one's own music than noise, for example.

DISCOMFORT

Apart from disliking the feeling of detachment from the surroundings when listening to mobile music, some non-listeners did not like the technology itself. Isabel, for example, stated that her earphones did not fit properly which distracted her from the activity she wanted to carry out while listening to music.

And when I thought about running and listening to music myself at the same time, I found it very difficult. Because I used to lose my headphones all the time. They weren't very good, you know. I was so frustrated. (Isabel, non-listener, 40 years old)

Michael, a listener, on the other hand, dislikes earphones (that go into the ear) and thus bought headphones (that cover the ear). These, however, make him feel conspicuous, which is why he only uses them on the train occasionally. During the shadowing session, he was pleased that it was raining and he could wear a hood, so his headphones were not visible.

[...] with this phone I got some earphones that go right in your ear and I find it uncomfortable. So the earphones that I do have are quite big and I feel quite conscious about wearing them around. So just more about being embarrassed perhaps. (Michael, listener, 41 years old)

Another source of discomfort while listening to mobile music is heat. Jonathan, for instance, comes from a country with hot summers where wearing headphones can be very uncomfortable in the heat, which prevented him from using them at this time of year.

But maybe not in the summer, because the headphones were just too hot. Burned my ears and it's not a good feeling. (Jonathan, listener, 32 years old)

There are many different kinds of head- and earphones available nowadays, and I argue that if someone really wants to listen to music, they might be able to find the technology that would suit them best. It might, however, need some trial and error and thus depends on the priority of mobile music listening for an individual. Thus, if mobile music listening is not crucial for someone and their headphones or device

do not fit or suit, then this might be one reason why someone would not listen to mobile music in certain situations, as often, or at all.

SIMULTANEOUS ACTIVITY

Both listeners and non-listeners turn off their music if music listening would interfere with their simultaneous activity. One of these activities is thinking. If he really needs to think about something, then music would distract him and, therefore, Jonathan would rather turn it off.

Maybe if I'm worried, I have to think about something, I decide not to listen to music. (Jonathan, listener, 32 years old)

Isabel, on the other hand, made a conscious decision to stop listening to mobile music because it took away time that she needed to think and study. She finds that she cannot listen to music and concentrate on something else as well and since she started studying, she decided to focus on this instead of the music.

I used to love music, I mean listening to music, but since I went to study more, I need to pay attention to study. So I had to give up something. And that was the first thing I gave up. (Isabel, non-listener, 40 years old)

Shopping is another of the activities that might prevent music listening. On the one hand, if mobile music listeners go grocery shopping and do not have to think about what they are buying, then music can be listened to simultaneously. In that case, some of the listeners would also choose the self-checkout, so they would not have to stop their listening to interact with the cashier. If they have to think about their choices when shopping, however, they might decide not to listen to music. There are some situations when shopping would actively prevent music listening, though. Annabel, for instance, describes going clothes shopping, for which it is often necessary to try them on first. Changing clothes, however, without interrupting the listening experience can be challenging, especially if the headphones are quite big or not wireless. Clothes shopping would therefore be an activity where the portable listening device is turned off occasionally.

And in H&M I think, so when you're changing, you can't have your earphones in. (Annabel, listener, 28 years old)

There is a range of activities that seem to be improved through accompanying music, for instance, doing chores or running (Sloboda *et al.*, 2009), but the results here also show that the opposite can be the case. This means that not only does the music need to fit an activity, but the activity has to lend itself to music listening – either because of the situation itself or because of the possibility of wearing headphones. Moreover, as Jonathan and Isabel point out, there might be situations in which the activity is more enjoyable or achievable without music, in which case listening to music would be distracting.

One important simultaneous activity is navigating through traffic, particularly on a bicycle. The safety of mobile device users in traffic is a major concern for all the interviewed non-listeners. This is especially valid for cycling while listening to music, which is seen as very dangerous by all of the interviewees. While some of the non-listening participants state that it would depend on how loud the music was played or whether both earphones were used or only one, the general consensus is that it is not a good idea to participate in traffic while using portable listening devices.

I don't have a helmet, but lots of people have a helmet, and they also have headphones. I'm like – come on, you're kind of losing the .. if you're wearing

a helmet to be safe, then maybe the headphones aren't a good idea. (Steven, non-listener, 29 years old)

The opinions of the listeners on this topic are more mixed. There are some participants who cycled with music and tried to mitigate the risk by displaying more cautious behaviour or relying on luck. Others, such as Jonathan, decided not to listen to music while cycling for safety reasons.

I don't listen to music when I when I cycle, because I think it's too dangerous. (Jonathan, listener, 32 years old)

Both the listeners and the non-listeners were aware of the potential safety hazard mobile music listening could turn out to be. Mobile music listening might not always be dangerous (Walker *et al.*, 2012), but all the participants implicitly or explicitly agree with Lichenstein and colleagues (2012), that listening to something through headphones can mask potentially important sounds from the environment and therefore pose a danger to the listener. The listeners' reaction to this can vary, but one reaction pointed out here and also described by Goldenbeld and colleagues (2012) is to turn off the portable listening device.

REASONS SPECIFIC TO LISTENERS OR NON-LISTENERS

Apart from the motives mentioned above, there are also reasons for not listening to mobile music that are specific to either listeners or non-listeners. The listeners, for instance, report that they reach a point when they are no longer interested in listening to music. They feel that they have had enough, their ears are ringing and that it is time to stop. In the words of Annabel and Hayley below, music is then experienced as pollution, as additional information that needs to be processed.

Sometimes it's quite nice to actually not listen to anything. 'Cause we have so much information in our society. (Annabel, listener, 28 years old)

'Cause I think sometimes music can be a pollution as well. It could kind of take away from the experience, rather than giving it an extra thing. (Hayley, listener, 24 years old)

Interestingly, these statements reveal the opposite of Bull's (2014, p. 104) idea, that mobile music listening is always experienced as pleasurable. Information overload affects the efficiency of an individual and hinders them from using the available information to its full potential (Bawden *et al.*, 1999). A study by Schroder *et al.* (1967 cf. Schick *et al.*, 1990) found an inverted u-shaped connection between information processing abilities and environmental complexity. The former increase with the latter until a certain point is reached, which is different for every person. After that, information processing abilities decrease with increasing environmental complexity. Listening to mobile music is one way to overcome information overload (Bull, 2006b), although, as described by Annabel above, it can also be information itself. Nevertheless, Annabel (and other participants) also listen to music to tune out their environment to overcome information overload, so whether music helps against information influx or is experienced as pollution seems to depend on the listener and the situation. DeNora (2000), for instance, found that older women perceive music in shops as pollution and argues that this might be because these women are used to listening to music as the main activity rather than having music in the background. Thus, previous experiences with music seem to influence current perceptions of music in different situations as well.

When asked why they stopped listening to mobile music, some of the non-listening respondents had difficulties explaining it. They said that they gradually fell out of

the habit and could not pinpoint a specific decision. Steven, for instance, forgot his device and found out that he could manage without it and then never thought to use it again, while mobile music listening was not important for Paula and when she forgot to charge her device it meant that she stopped listening to mobile music altogether.

So it wasn't a conscious decision, I think. I think I just suddenly maybe forgot to take it to work one day so I cycled without it and then the next day I thought - oh, I don't need that. I don't need that. And then eventually [...] when I moved house it went - it's [the MP3-player] around somewhere, but I never really searched for it or anything like that. But there was nothing particularly that made me stop. (Steven, non-listener, 29 years old)

E: And do you remember why you stopped?

P: Probably because my device ran out of battery and then I never got round to charging it, like it's just it's not something I really think to do. (Paula, non-listener, 28 years old)

Again, it is noticeable that the presence of mobile music listening depends on the priority of this activity for a person. With both Paula and Steven – and other non-listeners – this might have changed over time and is no longer as necessary or preferable to them as it once was. Therefore, even if someone listens to mobile music now, this does not mean that they will always prefer to do so.

CONCLUSION

In this study of mobile music listeners and individuals who do not use portable listening devices, several themes emerged in answer to the question of why both of these groups sometimes turn off their devices or never use them in the first place. The themes explored were situations in which a person wants to relate to other people, relate to their surroundings, experiences discomfort with regard to their headphones, simultaneous activities that interfere with mobile music listening, as well as information overload or the priority having changed over time.

In summary, the two studies reported here have found a range of reasons relating to the listener and their preferences, as well as the context – including surrounding people. If it does not fit, then music is often not listened to. Furthermore, the studies also discovered that none of the listeners would always listen to music, while some of the non-listeners had previously used their portable listening devices. Overall, individuals have valid and considered reasons for listening to music as well as not listening to music, and it is important to consider this when researching mobile music listening, as these reasons might be different for each person and depend on the circumstances as well.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eva Schurig is a postdoctoral research assistant at the Carl von Ossietzky Universität Oldenburg. Her experiences cover qualitative as well as quantitative research in areas such as mobile music listening, musical activities of young people or hearing health. She is part of the editorial board of the Yearbook of Music Psychology

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