

# “Can’t live without music”: Engaging and disengaging from music listening

Amanda E. Krause, Margaret S. Osborne, & Solange Glasser

Department of Psychology, James Cook University  
Melbourne Conservatorium of Music, The University of Melbourne

## BACKGROUND

Globally, people spend up to 18 hours listening to music per week – and more than 2.6 hours per day (IFPI, 2019). Compared to 54% of IFPI’s (2019) participants who said they “love” or are “fanatical” about music, only 2.5% of participants said that music was “unimportant” to them. Given the prominence of music in people’s lives, it is important to understand people’s reasons for listening to music and their perceptions of the value of music in their lives. Investigations of music in everyday life are dominated by a functional perspective, drawn from work using the theory of Uses and Gratifications (Katz, et al., 1974; Krause & Brown, 2021; Lonsdale & North, 2011; Schäfer et al., 2013).

One way to expand our understanding of the value and role of music in everyday life is to ask an axiological question, namely “do you value listening?”. This places value at the center of the question, draws significance to, and leaves open to interpretation, both listening as valued as a *means in and of itself* and also listening as valued as a *means to an end*. Another way is to interrogate the inconclusive, equivocal literature citing both positive and negative impacts of music accompanying everyday life activities (Kämpfe et al., 2011).

### Aims and Research Questions

This study considered if, and why, people value music listening and also probed instances when they may not want to listen to music in everyday life. This research was therefore guided by two questions:

- (1) How is the value of music listening expressed?
- (2) Are there any times/situations when people do not want to listen to music?

## METHOD

University of Melbourne ethical approval 1953591.1

### Sample:

- N = 319 Australian residents
- 76.50% female, 22.90% male, 0.60% non-binary
- Aged 18-56 (M = 20.64, Mdn = 19, SD = 4.82)

### Online questionnaire (Qualtrics):

- Voluntary, though those who participated through the University research participation scheme received course credit.

### Measures:

- Demographics (age, gender, country of residence)
- Average daily hours spent listening to music (M = 2.99)
- 1-7 rating of the importance of music in their life (M = 6.14)
- Level of musicianship (Kreutz, et al., 2008)
- Two exploratory, open-ended, short response questions posed
  1. “Do you value listening? If so, how?”
  2. “Are there any times/situations where you do NOT want to hear/listen to music? Please elaborate”.

## RESULTS

### Valuing Listening

The presentation of the question, “Do you value listening? If so, how?”, was exploratory and did not specify music listening; therefore, an initial round of coding was used to select the subset of responses that referred to music listening (n = 102). The thematic analysis undertaken on the responses that clearly addressed value with regard to listening to music yielded 13 themes (Table 1).

Table 1

| Categories          | Number of responses | Percent of responses | Percent of cases* |
|---------------------|---------------------|----------------------|-------------------|
| Appreciation        | 32                  | 22.20                | 31.40             |
| Emotion             | 25                  | 17.40                | 24.50             |
| Time and engagement | 23                  | 16.00                | 22.50             |
| Cognitive           | 14                  | 9.70                 | 13.70             |
| Mood regulation     | 11                  | 7.60                 | 10.80             |
| Escape              | 8                   | 5.60                 | 7.80              |
| Narrative           | 8                   | 5.60                 | 7.80              |
| Identity            | 7                   | 4.90                 | 6.90              |
| Social              | 7                   | 4.90                 | 6.90              |
| Purpose             | 5                   | 3.50                 | 4.90              |
| Physical            | 2                   | 1.40                 | 2.00              |
| Study               | 1                   | 0.70                 | 1.00              |
| Money               | 1                   | 0.70                 | 1.00              |
| <b>Total</b>        | <b>144</b>          | <b>100.00</b>        | <b>141.20</b>     |

Almost one-third of participants stated that music listening was an activity they valued and appreciated because of its beauty and/or the enjoyment they received from listening, suggesting respondents placed value in music listening as a ‘means in and of itself’ – a phrase supported by philosophical and ethical considerations of intrinsic value.

Respondents clearly acknowledged music’s intrinsic value, irrespective of tandem extrinsic motivations they may have for using music to fulfill various functions. Additional responses acknowledge music’s worth by stipulating ways in which engagement with music is demonstrated through the currency of time: both in quantity and quality.

### Not Wanting to Hear / Listen to Music

The second question acted as a counterpoint to valuing listening, and explored times and contexts where participants did *not* want to listen to music. Coding yielded a set of 8 higher-order themes of reasons for not listening to music summarised in Table 2.

Table 2

| Categories                 | Number of responses | Percent of responses | Percent of cases* |
|----------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|-------------------|
| Interference               | 192                 | 52.50                | 64.20             |
| No                         | 45                  | 12.30                | 15.10             |
| Environmental context      | 41                  | 11.20                | 13.70             |
| Affective response         | 38                  | 10.40                | 12.70             |
| Music qualities            | 22                  | 6.00                 | 7.40              |
| Prefer silence             | 22                  | 6.00                 | 7.40              |
| Prefer other sounds/ media | 5                   | 1.40                 | 1.70              |
| Yes                        | 1                   | 0.30                 | 0.30              |
| <b>Total</b>               | <b>366</b>          | <b>100.00</b>        | <b>122.40</b>     |

\* Percent of Cases indicates what percentage of respondents provided a statement that was coded to that theme as a reason not to listen to music. It is possible to have over 100% because each response could pertain to more than one theme.

Almost two-thirds of participants explicitly stated that they did *not* want to listen to music due to the interference it presented to an activity in which they wished to focus or concentrate, such as studying. Interestingly, our findings are the inverse of Lonsdale and North’s (2011) study of reasons why people listen to music, where mood management and use of music to help concentration in work or study were rated most highly.

The inverse relationships of value and engagement across both research questions also speak to the choices people make as ‘personal DJs’ - that people are aware of what music they need to hear in different situations and times, and that the decision of what music is ‘right’ depends, in part, on its ‘fit’ for the listener’s purpose and/or situation (Krause & North, 2014).

## DISCUSSION

By taking a macroscopic approach with the present research, we posit that Uses and Gratifications theory can be interpreted as inhabiting one of two branches of an axiological theory of value, with aesthetics on the other branch (see Figure 1). While Uses and Gratifications is an appropriate framework to understand music listening from the perspective of *listening as valued as a means to an end*, it may be less able to interpret music listening’s worth when identified as a *means in and of itself*. However, within the axiological theory of value the two branches are not mutually exclusive: the distinction between means and ends is a fuzzy line. We posit that forms of musical engagement, such as music listening, can fall within this intersection.

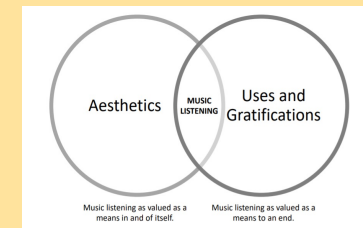


Figure 1. An axiological theory of value in music listening

Examining the themes together provides the opportunity to consider how people’s values may drive their listening preferences, practices, and desires. For instance, focused attention and interference may operating in an inverse relationship. There is also evidence for the manifestation of value through one’s active time and engagement spent with music (mapping to those who stated there was not a time where they did not want to hear or listen to music). Further work is needed to explicitly probe the potential adverse effects people may experience when listening to music.

## REFERENCES

- IFPI (2019). *Music Listening 2019: A look at how recorded music is enjoyed around the world*. Retrieved from <https://www.ifpi.org/downloads/Music-Listening-2019.pdf>
- | Kämpfe, Sedlmeier & Renkewitz (2011). The impact of background music on adult listeners: A meta-analysis. *Psychology of Music*, 39(4), 424-448. | Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch (1974). Utilization of mass communication by the individual. In Blumler & Katz (Eds.), *The uses of mass communications: Current perspectives on gratifications research*. Sage. | Krause & Brown (2021). A uses and gratifications approach to considering the music formats that people use most often. *Psychology of Music*, 49(3), 547-566. | Krause & North (2014). Contextualized music listening: Playlists and the Mehrabian and Russell model. *Psychology of Well-Being: Theory Research and Practice*, 4: 22. | Kreutz, Schubert & Mitchell (2008). Cognitive styles of music listening. *Music Perception*, 26(1), 57-73 | Lonsdale & North (2011). Why do we listen to music? A uses and gratifications analysis. *British Journal of Psychology*, 102(1), 108-134. | Schäfer, Sedlmeier, Städtler, & Huron (2013). The psychological functions of music listening. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 4: 311.