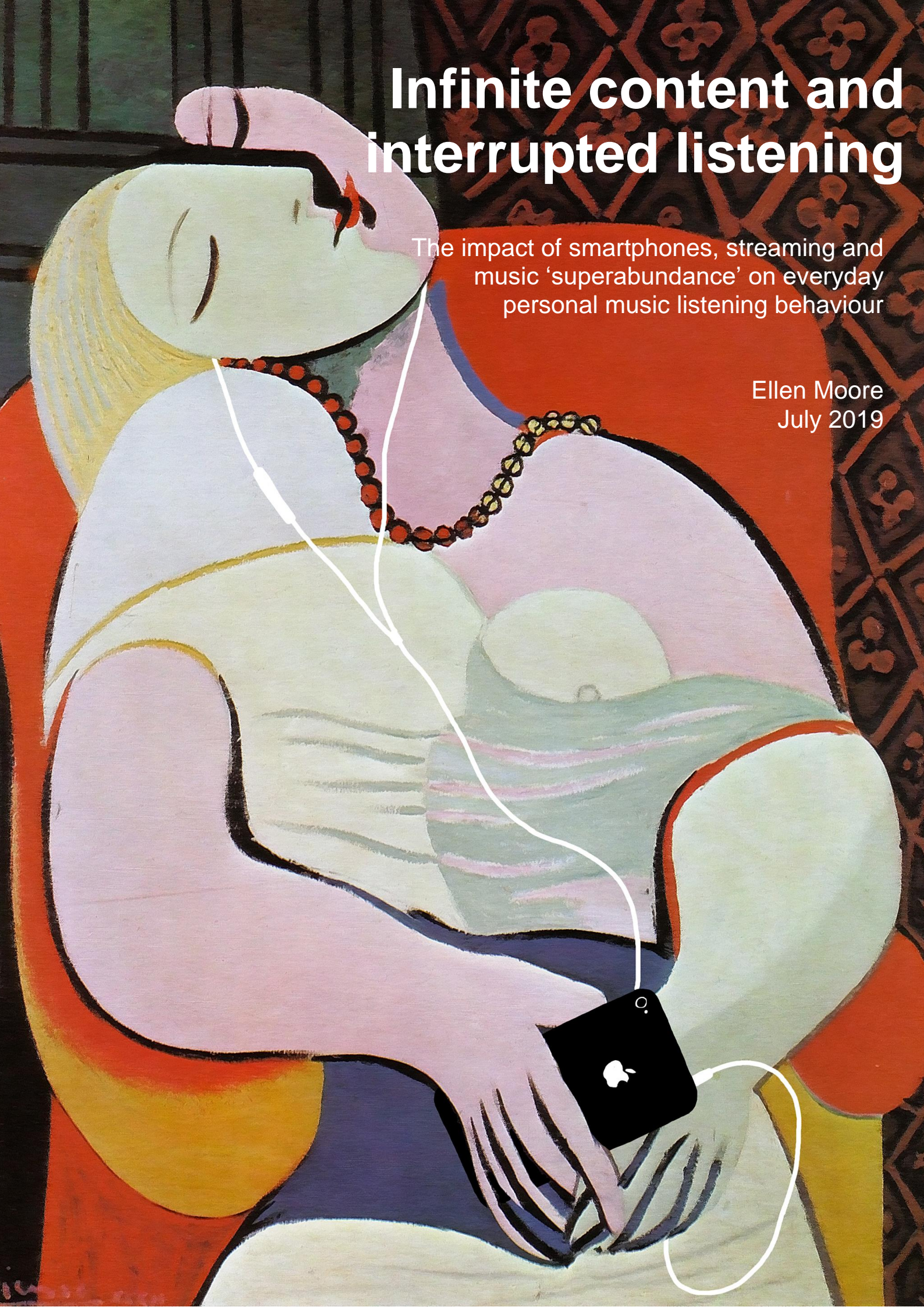


# Infinite content and interrupted listening

The impact of smartphones, streaming and music 'superabundance' on everyday personal music listening behaviour

Ellen Moore  
July 2019







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Foreword:

This paper was first prepared in September 2018 as my final dissertation for the Social Research MSc at Goldsmiths University 2016 – 2018. Thank you to Les Back for being so supportive throughout the writing process as well as all those that gave their time and ideas to be part of this research project.

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Cover image, Dong-kyu (2013) <Music for dreaming> Based on: The dream by Pablo Picasso (1932). Used with permission from the artist

# Contents

<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>On listening and daily life, a literature review .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Why music matters to us .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Music listening in the city, personal listening tools in everyday life .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Streaming and smartphone listening, the new personal stereos .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Using our new tools, how to cope with music super abundance.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Researching music listening.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Using self-reflection as a pilot study.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>The diary interview method .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Research project design .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Sample.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Data collection and thematic analysis .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Ethical considerations and data handling .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Analysis 1. Everyday listening routines and behaviours.....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Moving through the city with music, from defence to discovery .....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Music listening, a ‘workman’s tool’ for open plan offices .....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Experiencing new music.....</b>	<b>21</b>
On repeat.....	22
Archiving from new to nostalgic via the playlist.....	22
Playlists for health .....	24
Taking a break from listening.....	25
Half listening .....	26
Skip this one, the paradox of too much choice .....	27
Earning value .....	28
Streaming and the value of music.....	28
Consumer vs artist.....	28
Accessibility .....	29
<b>Analysis 2: engagement with method and how self-reflection changed perceptions and behaviours.....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>38</b>

## Abstract

Personal music listening has become an effective emotional management tool to cope with crowded spaces and shared workplaces in cities. The smartphone as listening device combined with streaming service as music library provides a personal music listening experience that is constant, superabundant and as easy as breathing (Fleischer, 2015; Johansson et al, 2018). Using diary interviews combined with a 'no music day' intervention, this research project offers insights into everyday music listening behaviours under these new conditions. Data collected with 12 young people in UK cities from June – July 2018 revealed music on smartphones flowing through headphones into everyday life, sometimes interrupted but essential for work and travel. Streaming services made music listening accessible, constant and inexhaustible leading to dissatisfaction with choice, dissociation from the outside world but did not cause a devaluation of music. Engagement in practices such as playlisting, rationing, archiving and concentrated listening provided postdigital strategies and sensibilities to counteract superabundance and lazy listening. Finally, participant responses to the methods engaged in this study show that the self-reflection on music consumption can challenge and change listening behaviours.

## Introduction

Understanding how music listening and new music technologies intertwine with everyday life and broader social change has been the subject of lively scholarly debate for just over two decades (Johansson et al., 2018). The growth of the internet as a means to consume music from the 1990's, the unstoppable rise of streaming services such as Spotify from 2008, and the move to smart phones as preferred listening device (British Phonographic Industry. n.d.) have transformed our relationships to music, listening behaviours and the music industries' business models.

In 2017, 4.3 trillion uses of music from across the globe were reported to the UK Performing Rights Society (Performing Rights Society Limited (PRS), 2017), an exponential rise from 136 billion in 2013. Contributing to this explosion in music use is the aforementioned launch of music streaming services, Spotify's paying subscribers growing from 8 million in 2010 to 75 million worldwide in 2018 (Welch, 2018).

A subscription to a streaming service, combined with a smart phone, Internet connection and headphones, gives the music listener the ability to listen to any piece of music at any time. There is now an irreversible 'superabundance' of music (Fleischer, 2015) and for music consumers like me who have used streaming services for a decade, constantly listening to music is taken for granted, like breathing (Johansson, 2018, p. 49).

This use of music as our ubiquitous companion in everyday life raises the question of how we experience and manage the constant presence and the abundance of the music we love (Fleischer, 2015; Vonderau, 2015 in Johansson et al., 2018). Bull's *Sounding out the City* (2000) was one of the first analysis of the significance and meaning of personal stereo use

and, although there has been ongoing research in this field (such as Johansson 2018; Hagen 2015a, 2015b, 2016; and Hamilton, 2018), this report gives new insights into personal everyday listening and our relationship to music in the age of smart phones, as listening devices, and infinite content.

Hearing new music has been my lifelong love. I spend, as the 12 participants in this study do, a large proportion of time plugged into all the music in the world at a small financial cost. My headphones making the world an easier and brighter place. In 2016, I started to ask myself how this constant listening affects my engagement in the world and relationship to music. A concentrated period of reflexive writing afforded a pilot for this qualitative research project.

This research project uses diary interview data, gathered between June – July 2018, to investigate the listening habits of 12 young people living and working in UK cities. The aims of this research project are to understand what changes streaming services and smartphone listening have made to everyday personal music listening patterns, routines and behaviour and to investigate how this style of listening affects how we value and relate to music.

This report finds that music listening for the participants is intertwined with everyday life and acts as an essential tool and companion for work and travel. Streaming services and smartphone listening make possible a culture of limitless accessibility and discovery, but this can lead to dissatisfaction, oversaturation and distracted listening. The use of diary interview method and an 'abstinence intervention' (a day off from music) proved successful in finding out how participants coped with superabundance of music and revealed postdigital sensibilities. The time spent reflecting on their own music consumption lead to real life changes in perceptions and behaviours for some participants.

## **On listening and daily life, a literature review**

### **Why music matters to us**

When considering why music matters to us, Adorno (in Bull, 2000) argues that we have a desire to transcend the everyday through music and Hesmondhalgh (2013) argues that music has a special relationship to the realm of feelings and emotion. Music has the ability to be linked to intense feelings both socially and within the private self, giving rise to the concept that, as music means something special 'to me', what you like musically is 'who you are' (Thinking Allowed, 2014; Hesmondhalgh, 2013). If music has this meaning and power, it makes sense that a proportion of us might choose it as our constant companion.

Darwin was confused by music and couldn't find a role for it in our survival. However as Professor Alice Roberts explains, it is not just the external environment that contains threats, music helps combat 'inner demons' such as depression, anger and grief and it is the pleasure gained from music might well be adaptive for our survival (The Essay, 2018b). Research on Western populations has repeatedly shown that the regulation of emotion is the most prominent function of music (Randel & Rickard, 2017, p. 471-481). And, as we see in this study and countless others, music and headphones are now part of our survival tool kit to protect us against internal and external stressors. Skanland calling this 'a technology of wellbeing' (2013, 2012).

### **Music listening in the city, personal listening tools in everyday life**

When music listening is personal and mobile, through our smart phones and headphones, it universalises the privatisation of public space, it allows us to control the rhythms of everyday life and create warmth in chilly spaces of urban culture (Bull, 2000, p8). Personal music listening gives us a tool to re-construct urban spaces to our own liking and to stay, if we wish, enclosed in our own private and pleasurable sound bubbles. Anderson (2015, p. 811) claims that we are living in 'the age of neo-Muzak', arguing that streaming services like Spotify are primarily used as a 'personal care product'.

We are not 'optimally designed for the large, densely-populated metropolises of our world' (Adili 2011) living and working in cities like London creates the types of internal and external stresses that music can help us cope with. City life involves the necessity of travelling on crowded public transport, navigating busy streets and working in noisy offices. In all of these situations, music and headphones provide desirable acoustic protection (Bull, 2000, p118). This research project focusses on the value of listening to music whilst travelling and working in a city, as these aspects are explored next in this literature review.

## **Surviving work**

Anderson (2015) suggests that, although music was an important tool in the Fordist industrial society, it has now become an essential resource for individual, intellectual and effective labour. He goes on to suggest that personal music listening may have helped us in this transition from industrial to post-industrial societies. The crucial value of music in work lies in relation to motivation and helping to alleviate the perception of slow alienated time passing (Korczynski, 2014). In *Songs of the Factory* (2014), Korczynski suggests that music at work could be described as 'multitonus musicking', as when listening to music at work, 'people tend not to have a deep immersion of their senses in music. Rather, music is used as a way of preventing the senses from being dominated by the monotonous' (p.12-13).

In the 'digital age', workers have the capacity to work at all times and in all spaces (Fisher, 2010). Offices are becoming increasingly open plan and wearing headphones is seen as a signal to those around you want to be left alone (Digital Human, 2016). This collective use of headphones and understanding of the signals they send shows that music use, even that which is individual, can affect social ordering at the collective level (DeNora, 2000; Korczynski, 2014). Our use of headphones at work perhaps supports Marx's ideas of 'alienated labour' within capitalism. Wearing headphones contributing to the self-estrangement of workers, their estrangement from the products they create, their estrangement from others and their estrangement from their species as a whole (Korczynski, 2014, p. 68).

Anderson (2010) provides a slightly depressing but not inaccurate description of mental labourers using music in open work spaces; saying we are all cocooned with our musical defences, bringing our bodies as 'necessary receptacles' for the 'conscious brain' that works 'impersonally' for our employers. Because music that we choose and the moods and imagination it brings belongs to us alone, the music we listen to at work reminds us again 'who we are' (Thinking Allowed, 2014; Hesmondhalgh, 2013).

## **Streaming and smartphone listening, the new personal stereos**

In 2000, Bull called the personal stereo 'an icon of mobile auditory experience and an international tool of the management of everyday life' (Bull, 2000). He went on to make a clear distinction between the iPod and the mobile phone; the iPod was a 'private utopia', whereas the mobile phone was a device that 'punctuates' daily life. This view was reflected in a comment by one of his interviewees, 'the phone is an evil necessity, I never carry a phone with me, I don't want to make myself available to others' (Bull, 2000, p.68).

Whilst listening to music is still as important to the management of daily life, the tool itself has changed, by 2016 the smartphone had overtaken the MP3 player as the preferred listening device (British Phonographic Industry. n.d.). In 2016, 91% of UK adults under 45



owned a smartphone, phone home screen's becoming the centre of tens of millions of UK citizens' lives (Deloitte LLP, 2016).

As Bull (2000) notes, it is impossible understand the nature of urban culture without also understanding the nature and meaning of the daily use of mobile communication. It is therefore important to understand the impacts of this new listening tool with its endless capabilities and 'punctuations' on both the management of the everyday and our relationship to the music itself.

As well as a change in our listening devices, our music libraries have also become infinite or superabundant due to streaming services (Fleischer, 2015). Mobile listening devices have always offered their owners the unprecedented ability to control and adjust their mood with music throughout their day as they move between different environments (Bull, 2000). Now with streaming services making accessible nearly all of the world's music, choice is also unprecedented.

Listening to new music has never been easier, it is no longer tied to purchasing an 'artefact', either digital or physical, but is available from an always on, always accessible library (Johansson et al, 2018; Sofia et al, 2017). Sexton (2009, in Roy, 2014) calls this a 'gigantic global archive, into which everything that was ever recorded and released implicitly participates'.

Streaming represents a 'pivotal break' with previous methods or conceptions of what it means to be a music collector (Johansson et al, 2018), music added to 'Your Music' archive in one click. Musical collections no longer need to be difficult to acquire, physical, rare or covered in dust to be special to the one that collects them. The participants in this study and other researchers (Andersson 2010; Hagen 2015a) would argue that there is still significant substantial cognitive, aesthetic and emotional investment in a postdigital collection.

## **Using our new tools, how to cope with music super abundance**

The popularity of streaming services or infinite libraries is shown in the growth of subscription figures (in this report's introduction) and the number of services themselves. Since Spotify launched in 2008, various commercial streaming services have been launched including Apple Music, Google Play Music, artist-owned Tidal and the recently launched YouTube Music (Johansson et al, 2018; Savage 2018a). Streaming services have been called the saviour of the music industry (Wolfson, 2018), their revenues making up half the music industry's turnover (Rosenblatt, 2017). However, since their inception they have been accused of grossly failing to offer fair financial recompense to the artists who provide their product (Plaugic, 2015).

The presentation by these services of music as a commodity rather than as an artefact has had consequences for how listeners' experience music as a cultural form. Streaming services provide constant access to a huge quantity of music and have been criticised for creating restless listeners who are fatigued by choice and for ultimately contributing to a devaluation of music (Vonderau 2015, p. 727– 729, in Johansson et al, 2018). The band LUMP recently addressed this commodification of their music and restless listening by using the last song on their album to credit all the performers on their record. Making the digital listener pay attention to the artists behind music (LUMP, 2018; Bloom, 2018).

The contradiction between music listeners feeling both highly engaged and 'lazy' is an indication of the wider challenge of how to understand digital and postdigital cultural consumption (Johansson et al., 2018). Some consumer counterstrategies against big data and algorithms involve slowing down music consumption by returning to artefacts, by purchasing limited edition mix tapes on cassettes, for example (Johansson et al., 2018, p 95). We need to understand the postdigital sensibilities that are being developed and adopted within smartphone and streaming listening itself (Fleischer, 2015; Johansson et al., 2018).

We can now experience so much music in daily life that it becomes 'stuffed into the cracks' 'where silence should be' (Sir Roger Scruton in *The Essay*, 2018a). With superabundance being irreversible, Fleischer (2015) suggests fasting from music as way to recalibrate the senses and re-engage properly; an example (from what Fleischer admits was a limited sample) being Bill Drummond's participatory art performance 'No Music Day'. This could be experienced as an exercise in listening or music consumption ethics; after a day without music the listener is faced with questioning how to re-enter the stream of everyday music listening. This idea is incorporated into the methodology of this research project.

This research project aims to build on the current literature in everyday personal music listening by focusing the following:

1. What changes has smartphone and streaming listening made to the everyday music practices and behaviours of those living in cities, focusing on working and travelling
2. How does smartphone and streaming listening and the superabundance of music influence how listeners value music
3. Can a day off from music or an abstinence intervention help to understand postdigital sensibilities

## **Methodology**

Within this section I will first set out the preparatory work behind the choice of methodology, then give an overview of the actual research practice for this project.

### **Researching music listening**

Researching personal listening in everyday life is a relatively new field of enquiry. An innovative methodology is required to capture the details of music listening due to the fleeting nature of the experience and the association with emotion and memory (Jones, 2011 in Hagen & Luders, 2016). Researchers should aim to explore actual behaviour alongside personal narratives and reconstructions of behaviour using a range of methods which will serve to clarify the nature of these interrelationships (Haye and Lamont, 2010).

Bull's ethnographic work in *Sounding and the City* (2000) and *Sound Moves* (2007) was the starting point for understanding how the research of everyday music listening could be approached, with two more recent studies helping to position this project's approach to methodology. Firstly, Craig Hamilton's Harkive Project, an annual, online music research project that gathers stories from people around the world about how, where and why they listened to music on a single day (Harkive, 2018). A worldwide collective diary entry is formed from Twitter responses, for example 'while I get ready for work, listening to my Spotify starred playlist via iPad. Favourites old and new. #harkive' (Hamilton, 2018b). Secondly Anja Hagen's work which focuses on streaming, young people and the self, using a mixed methods approach including music-diary self-reports, online observation and interviews with heavy users of streaming services (Hagen, 2015a, 2015b, 2016c; Hagen & Luders, 2017).

### **Using self-reflection as a pilot study**

As well as reading current research on the subject of everyday listening, I had for two years been reflecting on my own music listening, writing pages of diaries, typing iPhone notes, drawing pictures and making accompanying playlists on Spotify see figure.1. below.



Figure 1.

I questioned how to use my own data and whether it would be appropriate since self-reflexivity has not been embraced by all social scientists. Autoethnography for instance has been labelled self-indulgent, some researchers mistrusting this ‘work of self’ and accusing the postmodern obsession with reflexivity of stalling the research process (Sparkes, 2002b in Holt 2003; Salzman, 2002 in Chang, 2008). However, Chang (2008, p. 91) explains that self-observation is a useful data collection technique for qualitative research because it gives access to covert, exclusive and personal experiences such as cognitive processes, emotions, motive and concealed actions. Self-reflection can help to bring to the surface what ‘is taken for granted, habituated, and / or unconscious matter unavailable for recall’ (Rodriguez and Ryave, 2002 in Chang, 2008).

As this research project concentrates on personal everyday listening of individuals, I decided that looking back at my own practice of questioning music listening habits was relevant and useful. Ahead of this research project I turned to some of the ideas and techniques employed by autoethnographers (Chang, 2008) to discipline the intentionality and collection of my self-observational data so that it might be properly applied to the research process. Delineating why and how I wanted to explore my own music listening and what I wanted to explore in it, helped to articulate the research question.

With this in mind, ahead of deciding on the research method that would be most appropriate, I set myself the task of writing about my music listening in a dedicated and concentrated way. This pilot study and reading of other studies of everyday music listening led to this research project’s focus on the diary interview method.

### The diary interview method

Called the ‘document of life *par excellence*’, diaries have been part of a researcher’s tools to understand everyday life since the 1930s (Plummer, 2001 p. 48 in Alaszewski, 2006, p. 36; Barlett and Milligan, 2015). Although often used in health care settings, there is good



opportunity to develop diaries as a method through which to investigate a wider range of experiences (Kenten, 2010).

Allowing for the recording of real data in natural contexts, diaries provide a rich and highly reliable data source; the voice of the participants are given preference, reflecting an experienced rather than an objective world (Alaszewski, in Cucu-Oancea 2013 p235; May, 2011 in Perry 2015 p.73). Diary-keeping was described by Latham (2003) as an imaginative, pluralistic and pragmatic attitude to methodology and the types of research accounts it provides.

Cucu-Oancea (2013, p 235) explains that there are both epistemological and methodological advantages to the use of diaries in social research. Epistemological advantages include facilitating access to knowledge of phenomena, processes and groups that are difficult or impossible to investigate. In this research project there is more focus on accessing phenomena, specifically the interpretation and meanings ascribed by individuals to their everyday listening. The methodological advantage of diaries is that entries occur at (or very close to) the time in which the experience of interest occurred; this can 'counteract' or even eliminate memory errors and so increasing data accuracy.

This research project also aims to understand an individual's reflections on their own everyday listening behaviours. The diary interview method, pioneered by Zimmerman and Wieder in the 1970's, uses solicited diary keeping, followed by an interview asking detailed questions about the diary entries, and is considered one of the most reliable methods of obtaining information (Bartlett and Milligan, 2015). Interviews provide contextual information for entries, clarification when the entry is concise or ambiguous and an opportunity to better understand an entry's significance for the individual (Kenten, 2010).

Using the diary method allows for a more equal relationship between the researcher and participant, as participants are empowered by having more control over the information they give and how their own feelings and experiences are represented (Kenten, 2010).

I felt that the diary interview method reflected the recommendations from other researchers in the field of researching music in everyday life (Jones, 2011 in Hagen & Luders, 2016; Haye & Lamount, 2010) and that this methodology would be a flexible tool for me to capture the fleeting experiences of music listening and see unseen behaviours alongside reconstructed behaviours and narratives (Bartlett and Milligan, 2015, p5).

### **Limitations of diary interview method**

Diaries, like all methods, are not without their limitations. Keeping a diary requires a time commitment on the part of the participants and a willingness to regularly complete the diary, including a risk that respondents can become fatigued with the process (Kenten, 2010). Participants can also over-disclose information and the diary can raise awareness of negative aspects of their lives (Bartlett and Milligan 2015).

Guidance notes that are meant to offer clarity to participants could influence what they report; they may choose to include data which they believe fits in with the perceptions of the project's remit (Bytheway, 2012). The simple fact of writing for an audience raises the issue of bias and validity. This is not unique to diary-keeping but applies equally to interviewing and other methods of social scientific research (May, 2011).

### **The addition of no music day**

The idea of fasting from music (Fleischer, 2015 – see the literature review) suggested the inclusion of an abstinence intervention within the study. Asking participants to go without their headphones and personal music allows for information to be gathered about the participant's interactions with music. I had experimented with the 'no music days' myself and it had indeed recalibrated my appreciation and raised difficult questions of music appreciation and value. I was curious to see what others would make of this practice.

### **Research project design**

Data collection and supporting materials were designed to minimise respondent fatigue and researcher influence. Participants were also self-selecting; this way it was more likely they would stay engaged with the project. An open call with all information regarding the study was put online, therefore anyone who fitted the selection criteria could make an informed decision to sign up.

To combat participant fatigue, the diary task was made as easy as possible. Participants could record and return their diary in any form that they felt comfortable with and I provided a template if needed. Of course, by giving this freedom to the participants there was some danger of irregularity in the results. However, I wanted to value the knowledge and expertise of the participants as if they were researchers themselves, their diaries giving accounts of daily practices that were 'unmediated' by me the researcher (Perry, 2015, p. 730).

### **Sample**

For the purposes of the study, participants were sought who lived and worked in cities, were aged 21 – 35, and who regularly listened to music through a smartphone, via a streaming service and through headphones. The age group was chosen as it is the group who are most likely to listen via streaming service subscription, as well as being closer to my own age and experience. As of May 2017, Ofcom and Kantar (n.d) reported that 57 percent of 16-24-year-olds, and 41% of 25-34-year-olds reported streaming music during the past three months, compared with only six percent of respondents over the age of 55 (number of respondents, 9,433).

The final sample comprised of 12 individuals, eight female and four male, their ages ranging from 22 – 34, with the average age being 28. Nine lived in London, the others based in Bristol, Liverpool and Newport. They listen to their own personal music through headphones for an average of four hours per day, the highest being eight. All predominantly used their smartphones to listen to music, all used Spotify, and two participants used both Spotify and Apple Music.

Eight were full time employees, four were freelance / self-employed and the majority worked within either the charity or music sector. Eleven of the twelve did some work in offices, eight worked full time in open plan offices. Most were happy in their work generally and the majority said they are coping on their current income (those trying to save or to buy a property in London were the least satisfied). Ten rented and share their houses with partners, friends or family, one owned a flat with their wife and one owned a houseboat.

The participants largely come from similar social and ethnic backgrounds, predominantly White British. This study does not set out to explore difference in music listening in terms of social or ethnic background, but it is worth noting that a broader population sample would be crucial for any future studies.

## Data collection and thematic analysis

Interviews were conducted with all 12 participants ahead of diary collection. This gave me the opportunity to clearly communicate my expectations, collect background information and listening histories of the participants, plus answer any questions. Second interviews were conducted with the six participants that were available to take part. Some full transcripts were written but found it was sufficient for my analysis to produce reports written with key points and quotes.

This second interview gave me the opportunity to ask for elaboration on any interesting points from the diary and to explore with the participants any emerging themes. I was also interested in finding out how the participants felt about keeping a diary and the no music day, and how reflecting on their music listening and experimenting with lack of music might affect their future listening choices and practices. I adapted questions from the solicited diary research work of Kenten (2010) asking each participant the below:

- how did you find keeping the diary?
- did you find it intrusive?
- did knowing it would be read affect the content and was there anything that they did not include?
- will you change anything about how you listen now?

Diaries were returned in a variety of ways including word documents, daily emails and iPhone notes. Participants wrote down reflections either retrospectively or in the moment or a mixture of these, often tidying up their documents before returning them. A quote from a second interview with Ceri sums up accurately how the participants engaged in the diaries.

'I found it quite easy to do even retrospectively.... if I was on the bus I would write a few notes down, if I was at work and there was something distinctive like a change or a mood that I was feeling I would put that down and then I would retrospectively flesh it out a bit'.

'Definitely tried to make it better grammar for you so, if I hadn't have known anyone else was reading it I wouldn't have written proper sentences and things like that. But because I knew someone was reading it I definitely put more effort in to',

Ceri, second interview

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. Using Braun and Clarke (2006 p. 86-93) as a guide, once a proportion of the data had been collected, I started to code the data and developed themes that emerged from the patterns I had coded. As the analysis proceeded, I sought out new literature to refine the ideas and themes further. Nvivo was utilised in this help process to help manage the 35 different pieces of qualitative information. The final themes forming the following analysis section.



## **Ethical considerations and data handling**

This research project was approved by the Goldsmiths University Ethics Officer, clearance was acquired before any research was carried out. Participants signed a consent form and each participant was clearly briefed on what would happen in the project, both via the guidelines and in the pre- interview. General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) regarding data collection and storage were followed. The final documents and transcripts from interviews were all anonymised and aliases given in the analysis.

## Analysis

This analysis will be split into two sections. Section one gives an overview of the everyday listening routines and behaviours of the 12 participants and how this has been influenced by smartphones, streaming services and superabundance of music. I will finish this section with a summary of how participants feel these factors have impacted upon the value of music.

In section two I set out how six participants engaged with the research project showing how the research method was successful in creating awareness of and changing both perceptions and behaviours.

### Analysis 1. Everyday listening routines and behaviours

#### Moving through the city with music, from defence to discovery

For Ceri, Nicole, James, Penny, Daniel, Tobias, Christine, Lucy, Ava, Hugh, Evelyn and Siobhan travelling in any form is where much of their music listening takes place. Here streaming services, smartphones and headphones allow for music to move easily from defence to scenic listening to discovery.

'I headed into work on the Northern line at prime commute time which typically means noise, heat and too many people. I put my headphones in straight away to distract myself and zone out before work'.

Nicole, diary entry

Everyone used music on their commutes through the city, headphones were packed in morning routines and worn to keep safe inside personal worlds whilst in space shared with others. While most participants reported an element of headphones as protection, those nine who lived in London felt this more strongly. Ava and Nicole relied most heavily on theirs to enable them to cope with moving through the city. You can see this demonstrated the use of the words, 'dread', 'protection' and 'survived' in Ava's diary entries below.

'the only tonic for my dread was knowing that I had ear / brain / aura protection from my trusty noise cancellers & the tunes they provide'.

'Without my headphones, especially for this last one, at midnight after an event, after work, I'm not sure I would've survived'.

There were different levels of trepidation about the abstinence intervention (day off from music) however Ava and Nicole found the prospect genuinely frightening and Ava chose to complete this part of the study on a tube free day. Nicole who told me in her pre-interview that she would 'hate' the abstinence intervention but would do it out of determination, wrote

in her diary that not being able to use her headphones made her feel on edge, lethargic, less focused at work and that her day felt longer.

As a self-reported introvert, her headphones are one of few ways Nicole is able to separate herself from 'situations and people' around her when her energy is low. The city became bleak for Nicole without her music.

'Not having the option of private listening certainly made an impact. I especially found that walking around felt much heavier, almost bleak, with only ambient noise, which in London is predominantly traffic, underground roar and muddled conversations, to listen to'.

Nicole diary entry

Longer periods of travelling, whether by foot or by train, were used for more relaxed and imaginative listening. Across the accounts these journeys were written about differently to commuting they were 'the most perfect way to use headphones', music was 'loved' as a 'cinematic sound track to the environment'. Streaming services and smartphones allowed for these auditory environments to be changed instantly to whatever the listener wanted to remember or feel at that moment. Hugh's diary entry below explains this concept well.

'Walking around the city I decided I wanted to listen to Rotary Connection - the beautiful sunny weather reminded me of discovering the band back in the summer of 2004 when it was also beautiful weather. I listened to my favourite song 'Black Gold of The Sun' 4 of 5 times on repeat as I love it so much. I feel nostalgia and it also makes me strut as I walk, which is fun'.

Streaming and smartphone listening allowed the participants to use journeys to discover new music. The word 'use' must be emphasised here, as across the accounts, travelling was a time to be set aside for new music. As Tobias says in his second interview 'I do think you need to make time, sometimes it's a bus journey, if that's 40 minutes, that's a length of an album'.

Across the accounts, streaming services connected to smartphones and the Internet allowed for new music to be remembered and downloaded or delivered and updated directly by various playlists and discover functions. You can see this pattern in all of the diaries received but I have given some examples below.

'It (Spotify) recently told me that a reggae artist I'm a fan of has a new album out... So today I remembered & 'downloaded' it to listen on the way to work'.

Ava diary entry

'I walked through Brixton and ended up on Spotify radio again and discovered some grime I hadn't listened to before — which was great, and then made me think to listen to Little Simz'.

Evelyn diary entry

1. Commute Home – listening to New Music Mix on Apple Music, add some music to my July Playlist.
2. Commute home – Listen to new music mix on apple music.
3. Commute to work – New music Friday! I get way too over excited and download all the new music on Apple Music that I think I might like, artists I like who have a new song out, artists I think I may like and just artwork that I like. Listen to new music on commute, delete loads of it on tube as I realise it's mostly rubbish.

Siobhan diary entries

### **Music listening, a 'workman's tool' for open plan offices**

Nine of the participants were employed full time in open plan offices, 11 out of 12 participants did some work in offices. Most felt happy in their environments generally but did describe how headphones and music became even more essential if their working environments changed. More emotional stress or the environment becoming too quiet or too loud led to participants plugging in headphones. Reflections on the use of music and headphones at work feature prominently across all diaries and accounts suggesting that open plan offices require headphones to make them tenable work places. The below quotes from Nicole and Daniel summarise how essential headphones and music are to the participants' working lives.

'Mondays are universally horrible and listening to music privately plays a big part in motivating me during my work day (and generally)'.

Nicole diary entry

'It's noisy (the office) and the temperature is either really really hot or really really cold, because it's made of glass, I'll often use my music and sticking my headphones in as a way of concentrating more and kind of chopping out what's happening in my surroundings. It's quite a bubbly office which is great but sometimes you just need to shut yourself away by putting on an album or something'.

Daniel pre-interview

As Siobhan said 'I find it quite easy working with lots of people, everyone usually has their headphones in' showing that in her office this is the collective norm (De Nora 2000). Tobias mentioned that the electronic music he listens to reflects sometimes repetitive, robotic nature of his work, hinting at the fact that jobs are slowly becoming more automated 'that might happen of course, becoming robotic'.

Reflecting what has been established in previous analysis such as Bull (2000, 2007) and Korczynski (2014) across the accounts the most common uses for personal music listening in offices were to:



- Block interruption from others
- Help in times of stress
- Help concentration
- Relax
- Use the rhythm to motivate faster work
- Manage moods
- Enjoy monotonous tasks

Although talking about purposely estranging themselves from others through music, there was not any suggestion of alienation from the labour itself (Korczynski 2014). The music used more as concentration or motivator.

### **Experiencing new music**

‘There is something great about hearing a track for the first time. Like that Jon Hopkins one this morning. It was going and going and then it took a turn and there was all this piano and key changes and I was like this is amazing. I feel like I have just let go of some serotonin or something’.

Evelyn second interview

Running through the accounts is a devotion to and enthusiasm for finding new music. Evelyn describes this as a ‘serotonin release’. Daniel said new music gives him ‘a kind of physical boost’; the finding of, anticipation for and actual listening transforming his mood.

Streaming services and their individually tailored playlists downloaded directly to smartphones facilitate the constant discovery and saving of new music. Most mentioned in the accounts were Spotify’s ‘Release Radar’, ‘New Music Friday’ and ‘Your Daily Mix’. These types of playlists have been described as the ‘most powerful medium in music’, with streaming services pouring resources into developing algorithms and hiring teams of curators to create them. ‘Millions of people tap play on them each day, and some — like Spotify’s Discover Weekly — give you a reason check your phone every Monday morning for a new collection of songs exclusively tailored to your tastes’ (Singleton, 2017). The participants in this study were no exception and looked forward to these weekly playlists. They listened to them especially on journeys (which we saw earlier) to broaden their musical tastes and horizons.

As well as relying on the streaming service algorithms, some participants also found new music through collaborative playlists made with peers, which Hugh describes as a ‘great resource’. Participants often use the ‘radio’ function, which will keep playing music by similar artists after you have finished your ‘intentional’ listening period. Some will also use functions like Spotify’s ‘Fans Also Like’ section which suggests artist similar to the one that is known to them. Participants also access playlists that are curated for specific genres or

events such as a playlist to mark Pride weekend (Ceri) or a folk playlist called 'Lost in the Woods' (Penny).

### **On repeat**

Streaming services and portable smartphone listening allows for (nearly) all the world's music to be available at all times and it was interesting to see variation in how the participants consumed their new favourite songs.

Faced with infinite nature of music listening, Daniel was keen to make sure that he savoured his new songs, talking about such music as you would about indulgent food if on a diet. He explains how he would try to 'ration' how much he listens to his favourite songs, sandwiching them between other less exciting music.

When I talked to Ceri about how she responds to a new favourite song she says 'if I love a song, I will listen to it over and over and over and over again. I might listen to it 30 times in one day' sometimes she gets bored but most of the time she says it will be hard to give up, she will have to 'wean' herself of the 'hit' of that song, phasing it out.

In his second interview, Tobias recount a theory about why he loops music; repeating listening is him 'trying to extract something from the music' to 'imprint and ingrain' in himself a memory of that time in his life. Which is most likely as music listening in early adulthood is often how we remember particular emotions and anecdotes, it goes on to be the music that reminds us 'who we are' and 'were' in the future (Loveday 2018, Hesmondhalgh, 2013).

### **Archiving from new to nostalgic via the playlist**

Streaming services like Spotify on smartphones are both portable infinite music libraries and personal sound track archives. The most common way participants archive is to save the songs that they are enjoying that month into a monthly playlist, many then make this into a yearly playlist. They are actively sound tracking their lives or creating as Lucy puts it 'musical time capsules' which when listened to help them access past narratives. Lucy described this process to be in her pre-interview below:

'it's just the way I gather things, I have listened to or something that have popped into my head over that month'.

'So, if I listen back to a certain month, I would be like oh my god! I was heartbroken over this boy, or I did this event, or I did this gig with these people'.

'Sometimes you look back and think about who you were in at that point and go, what was I even doing? Who am I?'

Ceri who archives in a similar fashion says that she prefers her monthly playlists the more familiar they become. In her diary entries she describes how after this familiar preferential

playlist finishes, she lets Spotify choose the music for her, sometimes these automated choices will be added in to the next month's playlist along other new music. For Ceri and other participants there is a cyclical process for a piece of music. A process that moves from new song to favourite song to saved song and finally to nostalgic song.

The selective nature of these activities, searching, saving and the construction of personal playlists do suggest significant cognitive, aesthetic and (as we see in the next few paragraphs) emotional investments rather than simple lazy listening (Andersson 2010, p. 62; Hagen 2015a in Johansson et al., 2018).

## **Playlists for health**

Within the study of music in everyday life, the one prominent observation, regardless of methodology, is the importance of emotional reasons for listening (Randel & Rickard, 2017; Skånland, M 2012, 2013). Hugh sums this up when he said ‘in terms of mental health and well-being and feeling good, undoubtedly, it’s good for you. I think that’s kind of a given. I imagine it gets the neurons going’.

In the diaries all participants regularly reflect on how music helps them emotionally. I want to draw attention to the playlists that are more than time capsules but serve as portable self-prescribed mental health interventions. Playlists have been described as ‘powerful’ and ‘indulgent’ by Ava, and ‘euphoric’ by Hugh. Ceri describes the playlist that she made when she was overcoming a period of depression; she compares it to a meditation similar to mindfulness which she can do anywhere.

“And I don’t know if it’s because they remind me of getting through a tough time or just because they are really upbeat and happy songs. But my mood instantly changes. It’s almost like that playlist has a bit of a mindfulness effect in a different way. It helps me chill out a bit and sort of whenever I put that on it helps me realise that things aren’t that bad which kind of is similar to mindfulness, just being in the moment and really appreciating what you’ve got I guess’

Ceri second interview

In this description, the remembering of past experiences is also helpful. Routledge and co-workers (2011) explain that ‘nostalgia, as a source of meaning, may be of great value to physical health and psychological well-being both when people respond to specific existential threats and, more generally, when they navigate the inevitable existential challenges of life’. They propose that the crucial question is how to ‘harness the power of nostalgia to assist those struggling to find meaning in life’. I would argue that this could be what Ceri and others are doing when they make and listen to playlists as mood intervention.

## **Too much music? Problems with and practices for coping with superabundance**

So far within this analysis we have seen that streaming, smartphones and headphones are ever present in our participants’ lives; providing protection, joy and unlimited access to the music that they love. However, there were some aspects of the new normal of experiencing music that the participants felt negative or uneasy about. The participants demonstrated some behaviours that could be called postdigital sensibilities which served as a response to these complex feelings toward the music they loved.

## Taking a break from listening

'I had to stop halfway through the afternoon because my ears were aching from having the earphones in for too long (unfortunately, this happens to me regularly).'

Penny diary entry

'Love having it at my fingertips, but I do want to make a conscious effort to make sure I don't get too involved with it and kind of forget real life if that makes sense?'

Ceri second interview

We have seen that participants spend and enjoy time plugged into their music at work and whilst travelling. This music listening averaged four hours a day but can be up to eight. As the quotes show above this can cause disassociation from 'real life' (Ceri) or physical ear ache (Penny).

Most participants successfully completed an abstinence intervention (a day without their headphones and own music). Most said they would not want to do this for much more than one day, underlining how normalised consistent listening is for the cohort. As Tobias explains, it is now a 'shared perception that someone with earphones in should not be disturbed unless completely necessary' or 'statement of isolation'. These visual 'do not disturb' signs making it up to us to show when we do or don't want to engage (Digital Human 2016)

The abstinence day helped to get a clearer picture of what participants miss when then plugged into headphones and playlists, which I have summarised below:

- sounds of world around them
- hearing the sounds they make
- hearing music in their own heads
- experiencing boredom
- connecting to their own thoughts
- talking to strangers
- talking to colleagues
- engaging fully in some tasks
- time passing
- socially stressful situations
- awareness of journeys being taken
- experiencing silence

Participants also reflected on how silence or taking a break from music ultimately helps to enjoy music more. Nicole instantly 'made up' for the 'headphone-less day' by listening to more than her normal five hours the following day. Christine said the no music day gave her music listening more concentration and clarity, similar to a break from work. Hugh sums up eloquently below why taking a break in music consumption leads us to enjoy music more

and why it should perhaps become one of our postdigital sensibilities.

'In music and in life I think it's about tension and release and you enjoy the release more when you have the tension. If you have constant music, there is no release. So, you don't appreciate it as much. So, by having silence it means when you do get the music you really enjoy it'.

Hugh second interview

## Half listening

Using music as background to tasks and travelling leads participants to not only disengage with the world around them but to also only half listen to the music itself; they are consuming without digesting (Fleischer 2015).

'At work, it's like I am half listening and half engaging in the outside world. I normally have like one earphone in'.

Daniel pre-interview

Some of this distraction comes from the environment and tasks that the music is accompanying, interruptions from work colleagues for example. For the purposes of this analysis, I will concentrate on the reflections surrounding the specific distractions or 'punctuations' (Bull 2007) that are related to listening on smartphones. Daniel, who worries about how he engages with music throughout his account, says in his diary how the messages and emails also received to his smartphone for makes it harder for him to listen to music free from distractions.

'I'm trying to get better at actively listening to albums free from distractions....BUT having a smart phone makes this so difficult. Constant messaging, emails, checking, refreshing, all make it difficult to properly listen to an entire album. Something to work on, maybe'.

Tobias also finds himself trying to listen to music and message at the same time reflecting that it leaves both activities wanting, he is not respecting the music nor is he properly engaging with his friends. He hints at that this distraction due to the device is part of a broader problem saying 'I think we are all learning that, slowly aren't we? There as just so many things you can do, but the things you do the best, are the ones you can just purely concentrate on'.

Evelyn mentions a similar problem, whilst she leaves Spotify rolling through new songs on her commute, she reflects that she might have heard new music she liked but didn't remember or notice because she 'was so engrossed in checking emails on the train'. On another day when she doesn't reply to the emails that make her 'anxious', she focuses on listening to a whole album on her phone which was 'nice and relaxing'.

The combination of computer or smartphone and music device means that music is played through a machine that we also use for work, which is always connected to emails (as Evelyn and Daniel mention) as well as calendars, calls and social media accounts. In his study of factory workers, Korczynski (2014) said that the radio, although it was also a machine, was not perceived as part of the alienating work structure 'unlike the machines of labour'. We see how this relationship has started to change participants are half listening and half working on the same machine.

### **Skip this one, the paradox of too much choice**

There is just so much choice! I just open up my Spotify account and either aimlessly scroll through my library and just not know what to put on. Or just sit there with a mind blank for like 30 seconds just thinking, okay, well who do I like, what music am I in to, what is right for now?

Daniel pre-interview

Tried to listen to my discover weekly, I felt like I had no patience and kept flicking through tracks to find one I instantly liked, I did really want to discover something new so I listened to new music Friday.

Evelyn diary entry

The two reflections from Daniel and Evelyn above show that the infinite choice and availability of music on streaming services presents the paralysing problem of too much music to choose from. This leads to frustration for the participants, explaining the popularity of algorithmic curated playlists which, as we can see in Evelyn's diary entry above, sometimes are deemed unsatisfactory. Ceri who loves Spotify and looks forward to her playlists remarks in her diary that she never really thought about how 'Spotify is essentially telling me what to listen to when I choose music this way'.

This overwhelming choice also led to the following: the idea that music choices needed to be perfect for the situation, impatience for songs not liked instantly, not engaging fully in traditional albums and forgetting a favourite piece of music soon after it's been discovered. The aforementioned factors are not only influenced by the amount of choice, but the way streaming platforms are presented or used on phones, where it is made easy to move on quickly, words like flicking, skipping and scrolling can be found throughout the accounts.

Although it was mentioned by others, it was Daniel who was most concerned by this issue returning to this idea throughout his accounts. He described that having access to a vast quantity of music via Spotify on his smartphone as being 'destructive'. He felt that music had become 'an app' like any other on his phone, comparing it to the image based social media platform, Instagram. Music had become 'temporary' and he now engaged in the same 'endless scrolling', as he did when looking at images shared on social networking but in an auditory sense. When he compares his current streaming listening (on Spotify) to his

'artefact' based listening (buying albums), he reflects that he doesn't listen 'so intently' or become 'fully immersed'. Daniel explains that playlists, although beneficial to discovery, take songs 'out of context' and make them easier to skip 'you can just, skip if it's not engaged you in the first 10-20 seconds and it's so easy to do that'.

## **Earning value**

As reported by Hagen (2015a), some participants felt that this overabundance of choice and the ease in which you can discover and move on from music makes music listening too easy. Ceri suggests this by saying 'I'm picking what I'd like to listen to but not necessarily thinking that hard about it', but she doesn't have an opinion on whether she thinks this behaviour is good or bad.

Others felt that there is more reward and value in music if it has been harder to find and you have taken the time to listen more intensely. Tobias said in his second interview that 'music is now far more accessible and far more disposable and that's why I was proud to listen to a whole album'. In order to get his reward for finding music, Daniel likes to look outside of streaming, the roster of his favourite record labels 'beating' Spotify where he feels that 'you just have to move your thumb a little bit and it's (new music) just given to you'.

These could be practices that cultivate a postdigital sensibility taking place in our wider 'renegotiation of the relationship between collective and individual modes of experiencing music and music's meaning overall' (Fleischer, 2015).

## **Streaming and the value of music**

Throughout the analysis so far, I have set out some of the participants' positive and negative perceptions of their music listening practices. As the previous paragraphs hint at, our current way of consuming music in a mobile, infinite continuous and low-cost way raises some questions about how we value music now. Ideas of value appear throughout the accounts, but I asked a version of the following question to the six participants that took part in a second interview, 'could you tell me your thoughts on how we can value music when it is so accessible completely infinite and low cost?'. What follows are some of the themes that came through these conversations.

### **Consumer vs artist**

It is interesting to see how the wider debate of fair financial payment for music creators (that we saw in the wider music industry in the literature review) flows underneath the participants' enjoyment of streaming services. Ceri hints at this when she says that Spotify brings her a lot of happiness and she couldn't live without it, she couldn't think of a downside apart from CD sales for bands.

Tobias represents most of the sample saying that for consumption, sharing and variation



streaming is really good it feels like 'a golden age for the consumer, for the artist I am not so sure'. Hugh likes Spotify as a consumer but says it has '100% devalued music', which is now a commodity we feel entitled to at a low cost, streaming services 'as I know, and you know and lots of people know' do not contribute the same financially to artists'.

Daniel says he tried to 'resist Spotify for as long I could' and in the last 3 years it has 'completed changed the way I consume music and the way I think and feel about music as well and not necessarily for the positive'. He feels that some of this change is because he is paying less money for more music, he is investing less time to listen. Christine however feels that music will 'still move people in the same way' regardless of the cost that the value now comes from 'connection to music and it is playing a part in people's everyday lives and giving more people the power to create and communicate'.

### **Accessibility**

Taking Christine's idea of giving more people access to music in everyday life, other participants talk about streaming services and mobile devices make music more open and democratic than before. Hugh saying that people feeling entitled to music is exciting 'isn't it fantastic that we all now take music as something that we should be given for free'. The fact that music cannot be defined so rigidly by genre anymore for Tobias means that 'everyone is in to everything and there are various conclusions you can draw, positive or negative but I think in the end people are becoming more cultured because they are exposed so many different cultures'. Evelyn reflects that music can't have decreased in value because everyone still wants to listen to new music 'music lovers are always going to be music lovers and that's not going to change. It just makes it easier for people to listen all the time'.

Similarly, on the popularity of Spotify the former head of Digital at Universal Records, Paul Smernecki said "streaming had democratised access to music by making it easy and cheap, even for those who were previously unwilling to buy it... I think streaming has woken people up to how music can really find its place in your life" (Ellis-Peterson 2016).

The participants in this study engage with music more widely than through Spotify on their phones. Weekends are for playing records on the sofa, singing along to music in the street and going to concerts. All those participants that I asked the value questions of placed a high value on live music. Hugh saying that is harder for his age group to appreciate concentrated listening on recorded music 'because we were born when we were born. I suppose people do sit down and concentrate on music but that's a concert now', that live music as Evelyn suggests will always be a 'high artform'.

## **Analysis 2: engagement with method and how self-reflection changed perceptions and behaviours**

In this second section of my analysis, I will show how the diary interview method and abstinence 'no-music day' intervention was not only highly effective in supplying rich qualitative material for the study, as we have seen in the previous section, but also led to participants questioning and changing their listening behaviours.

As discussed in the methodology, participants were self-selecting and were already interested in reflecting on their music listening in a structured way. Their thoughts on engaging with the study and questioning their own behaviours were all positive. Some had specific motivations and aims for what they wanted to get out of the study, often these became the goals to change or actual changes in future behaviour.

To give a narrative of this process I will highlight accounts from the participants who took part in the second reflective interview. Setting out each person in turn, I will summarise their motivations for taking part, reflections on current behaviour and changes in perception of or actual behaviour.

### **Ceri**

Ceri wanted to take the time to think about her music and headphone use, was it becoming something she relied on to get her through the day and was it anti-social at work. She was also interested to find out more about why she chose the music she listened to was she letting Spotify take over her choices.

Ceri found it harder than she thought on the abstinence day experiencing boredom as we can see in her diary below:

- 11am: Feeling quite bored and unfocused. Wish I could put some music on for a distraction.
- 12pm really bored. Very little focus and no music to distract me. The day seems to be dragging
- 1pm Normally put music on after lunch to motivate me. Really struggling with the quiet. I think a lot of that may do with the office being empty rather not being able to listen to music

Despite this she did report changing her listening and reflects on how some time away from listening could be a good thing. Ceri says that since doing the study she has been using her headphones less throughout the day, even at work, saying in her diary 'I was sort of quite happy with the silence, happy typing away'. But she is not sure if that just might be how she is behaving at present.

Reflecting on the study she says that she recognises that there are far more positives than negatives with music, but music is always going to remind you of something 'you hear a song that makes you sad you're going to be reminded of that moment'. So, she thinks 'it is good to switch off every now and then and really just listen to the sounds around you'. Comparing this to spending time away from devices like smartphones so that 'really actually just live life a bit'.

## **Christine**

Christine wanted to question why and was intrigued to 'deep dive' into her listening habits, the week-long diary becoming part of her listening process. As someone who is rarely without their headphones, often 'double packing' just in case, she thought that the abstinence intervention would have 'moments that would be more blissful and moments that would be more frustrating'.

Christine reflected in her diary and second interview that being without music has had a positive impact on her listening since doing the study. She now aims to 'take a step back from her listening', to listen when inspired to do so, make active choices and not to see herself as a 'receptacle for sound'. This break from sound, like a break from work, makes it easier to concentrate on and enjoy the music overall. Significantly, she has stopped using headphones as a barrier whilst moving around the city, even when she doesn't have music playing.

All of these changes have made her feel more present in the city. I have shown how these thoughts and changed developed through the research project below:

I occasionally read on my commute as well, but I find that, even if I do that, I am wearing my headphones. Even if I don't have any music on. That's kind of like a solitary perspective of, I need my stuff, my art and my music and my reading and I need to be in my own world, and headphones helps that.

Christine pre-interview

Feel peaceful and happy to have realised not listening is ok! Enjoying conversation more.

Christine diary entry

Not having my headphones in all the time when I am walking around has had a positive effect on my daily commute and my daily life I think. I think it makes time slow down a bit more, that silence because your kind of more aware of your surroundings and what you're doing and why you're doing it.

It's okay not to just like fill your ears with as much music as possible and that's actually a really positive thing, like having a break at work, helps your day and you are working when you are working so I think that has helped.

## **Evelyn**

Like Ceri, Evelyn wondered if she was becoming reliant on music to go about her daily life and wanted to spend more time concentrating on listening to new music 'I started of the week thinking oh I really wanted to improve my music listening, myself, not myself, but my curiosity'.

Evelyn saw improvements in her engagement with new music, she concentrated more on these listening experiences saying, 'what's the point in me having this wonderful walk every morning and listening to the same tracks over and over'.

She found out that her 'mind wanders when I listen to music in different ways... to thinking of future events where that track might be playing or imagining a kind of soundtrack accompaniment when I hear different tracks'.

On her no headphone day Evelyn reflected in her diary 'Thursday - no headphones day! I walked to Herne hill - I couldn't imagine going to Brixton without headphones!'. She said that she enjoyed times of more focus on her environment and her emotions which moved between positive and negative but there was no reflection to whether she would use headphones less after the study.

## **Daniel**

Daniels overall aims in taking part in the study were to think about how streaming services had affected his behaviour and how he and others valued music. Throughout his account there was much discussion about how he wanted to move away from listening to anything just as background noise and how he should find more time to concentrate on music especially whole albums.

Daniel who packs his headphones as part of a morning routine chose to abstain on a day that he was not in London and did not travel which made it easier for him. Going for a walk on this day he said that, although he had an urge to grab the headphones he had left at home 'it was nice to listen to the birds, footsteps, wind through the leaves. I was definitely more aware of my surroundings'.

Looking back on his diary in his second interview, Daniel explained how he could see that his musical choices were acting as a mood litmus test. His more downbeat, instrumental music listening at the beginning of the week transformed to more upbeat after a time away from the city. This was a reflection that was not made by any of the other participants.

It was interesting how much you can kind of glean from what you are listening to. Yeah just the fact of you know how my music was shifting with my mood and how I was feeling on that day completely impacted the music choices I was making.

Daniel second interview

Daniel was interested enough to want to continue this self-reflection exercise perhaps using playlists alongside his own written diary 'what I am listening to or even just like the genre and something about how I am feeling. Linking the two together'.

## **Hugh**

Hugh reflected that he had never 'given myself time to think about whether Spotify is a good or a bad thing really' and felt the study gave him chance to 'dedicate some time to thinking about how I listen to music and made me more aware of my listening habits'.

Hugh didn't have a problem being without his headphones but listened to the sounds more, recording the sound of the train as it was interesting.

Through the study Hugh realised that he used headphones more than he thought 'I thought about getting better headphones (laughs). Because actually I do use them a lot so maybe I could get better ones'. Before doing the study, Hugh hadn't thought of himself as a playlist listener, he thought of himself as more of an album listener 'but I guess I am going down that road'.

He said that since taking part he might be 'listening to more music' but explains this 'could be a coincidence, with the weather being so nice and just walking around'.

## **Tobias**

Tobias didn't have any specific aims, but he was enthused by the idea of keeping a diary and found that after reflecting on his musical listening habits that he did have a set routine, which he didn't really recognise until he put it down on paper.

Tobias was incredibly confident that the no music day would be easy for him but found it harder than he thought whilst travelling, feeling irritated that he could not use the go to distraction of music that like everyone else. On this journey he reflects that he was 'listening to a train journey of people listening through their earphones', some of whom due to being plugged in were 'blissfully unaware of how gross they were being'. 'It was completely quiet. I felt as if I could be approached and I didn't want to be'.

This annoyance made Tobias think of his own listening habits in terms of instant gratification 'these days with everything, food, music, entertainment, your instantly gratified.'

But I couldn't do that, so I felt like a spoilt little child. Because that's how I treat music now. Oh, I'll put some music on'.

Although learning more about how he views music, Tobias wouldn't change anything about his listening habits overall, as he feels that they are habits that are completely on his own terms. Music, he says is 'one of those flexible entertainments where I can put wherever I want in my life. So, I wouldn't change anything'.

Forming 'postdigital sensibilities' means questioning the cultural commodities we use (Fleischer 2015). We see that most participants had not particularly paid attention to their listening habits before and the preconceptions they had about their own habits and behaviours were different to the reality. For example, Tobias being less able to cope without his music distraction than he expected, Hugh being a playlist listener and Christine not needing her headphones as much as she thought.

The break from music listening gave participants an understanding of what was lost and gained from constant music listening. It presented an opportunity to find out that engaging with the outside world was calming, that there wasn't a need to be a receptacle for sound' (Christine) and one could make active choices when inspired to listen. Christine, Evelyn and Ceri will be using music less as a barrier to feel more present in everyday life.

Despite the superabundance of music, we see that these six listeners do try and care for the thing that they love and resist distracted listening. Questioning why we listen and the moods that it is related too will continue to be part of Christine's and Daniel's listening process.

## Conclusion

'It's okay not to just like fill your ears with as much music as possible and that's actually a really positive thing'.

Christine second interview

The intention of this research was to produce new insights into everyday listening and our relationship to music in the age of smartphones and the infinite content provided by streaming services. For participants in this study, non-stop music listening can lead to dissociation from the wider world and a distracted relationship with the music itself. Using a smartphone as a personal listening device contributes to this distracted relationship as communication activities, sometimes anxiety-inducing, are carried out simultaneously to music listening. The idea that a personal listening device could be a utopia (Bull 2000) has become disrupted or punctuated by these new communication functions.

Personal listening is interwoven into the fabric of daily city life for participants. It is a tool to be used for work and traveling through the city, to improve or defend from the environment. Streaming services now allow for daily music discovery on journeys and for the city environment to be updated instantly when desired with a new cinematic or nostalgic soundtrack that is 'right for right now' (Evelyn). Listening to music through headphones has become necessary for participants to work successfully in open plan offices and shared work spaces. Headphones are now accepted as part of the wider social ordering of spaces (DeNora, 2000); from tube carriages to the desk opposite, they create 'do not disturb' (Tobias) signs for the people wearing them.

Participants took part in a no music day intervention, which worked as an exercise in listening ethics and to demonstrate the disconnection that comes from constant listening. Without their headphones they became more engaged in the outside world, the sounds of the city and their own thoughts. Some enjoyed the auditory space and have vowed to engage in this behaviour more often. Others found this unbearable and doubled their music listening the following day. Even those who were confident in being without headphones, found that not having the choice to plug into their go-to distraction and protection led to feelings of frustration and alienation.

Streaming services deliver new music direct to committed listeners eager to find their next favourite song. This is then either saved into an active archive or forgotten when they move on to the next thing. Significant cognitive and emotional effort go into managing these digital archives leading to the creation of personal playlists that can be both 'time capsules' (Lucy) and 'health interventions' (Ceri); nostalgic listening helping us to remember past selves and find comfort in past narratives (Routledge et al 2011).

The superabundance of music offered through streaming services presents the participants

with paralysing amounts of choice. This is made easier to deal with by the streaming services curation of playlists and radio features. This easy way of listening together with music being presented as 'just another phone app' (Daniel) makes music feel disposable and leads to disengagement. A sense of achievement was found by participants in concentrated listening, experiencing an album from beginning to end, and to finding new music without relying on the streaming service algorithm.

Despite an underlying discomfort about the adverse impact of streaming services upon on music creator's livelihoods, participants felt that these services give more people connection and access to music, and that it is a 'golden age' (Tobias) for the music consumer. They felt that music, regardless of cost, is playing a more important part in our lives than ever before. Also hinting that live music experience is now the 'higher art form' (Evelyn).

Asking participants to reflect on their music consumption behaviour and take part in a cultural intervention (no music day) through diary interview method led to change in participant behaviour. After taking part in the study some participants have changed, or aim to change, the way they listen to music. They aspire to pay more attention to their own choices, to go without music whilst travelling through the city to experience the world around them, and to continue to take breaks from music. Taking part in the study made some realise that the way they consumed music was different to what they had presumed; one participant hopes to continue the listening review exercise on their own terms in the future.

To gain a more balanced view on personal music this research project could broaden its sample in terms of social background, ethnic background, location and age. Facilitating conversation between generations of music listeners would be an especially interesting exercise. Now that recorded music is so ubiquitous, might live music be considered a more desirable art form? Is there a difference between people who only access music online compared to those who also attend live music events? Certainly, it raises the question what aspects of music now relate to higher social status (Bourdieu, 1993; Prior, 2013; Peterson and Simkus, 1992 in Prior, 2013).

The example of Ceri using her playlist as a self-prescribed mental health intervention invites the opportunity to build on the work of Skånland (2012 & 2013) and research the importance of playlists in health. Organisations such Playlist for Life (2018) use listening histories in the care of dementia patients as a 'cheap, simple and powerful way to harness the power of music to make living with dementia easier and happier'. I would argue there is potential for this to be applied universally, especially for those who become suddenly isolated or hospitalised, their soundtracks providing a way to access the self and harness the power of nostalgia.



This study has demonstrated the usefulness of diary interview method combined with the addition of an abstinence intervention in understanding and changing consumption behaviours. There is scope for this method to be used within other fields where consumption practices need to be challenged such as society and environment.

This research project has shown that smartphones and streaming services offer participants the unlimited opportunity to consume the music they love but that despite distracted listening and all having the world's music at their fingertips participants do not consider music any less valuable (Hagen, 2015a). Engaging in postdigital sensibilities or practices such as playlisting, self-searching, archiving and concentrated listening to help counteract superabundance. In the age of infinite content, questioning and taking breaks from consumption reminds us that, as Hugh reported, 'in music and in life, it's about tension and release, by having silence you the enjoy music more'.

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