

## Use of MP3 Players as a Coping Resource

MARIE S. SKÅNLAND

Norwegian Academy of Music | Norway\*

---

### ABSTRACT

A crucial aspect of maintaining good mental health is to cope successfully with everyday stressors. This article explores the MP3 player as a technology of coping related to the stress of everyday life, in particular two common stressors in the urban environment: crowding and noise. The MP3 player has become a prime medium for everyday music listening, as individuals can carry a vast amount of music with them wherever they go. This unprecedented availability of music raises questions about its impact on the listener, or, as I will refer to him/her, the music user. In order to better understand the effects of this use, this article asks: how are mobile music devices used as a coping resource or device? The research presented here is based on twelve interviews with regular users of MP3 players who live or work in an urban environment. In fusing research on portable music players with research on stress and coping, this article suggests that the MP3 player may be a valuable coping device, enabling music users to enhance their subjective well-being and mental health.

\*Slemdalsveien 11, P.B 5190 Majorstua, 0302 Oslo, Norway

## FROM MUSIC LISTENING TO COPING

The MP3 player has become a prime medium for everyday music listening, as listeners can carry their music with them wherever they go. This unprecedented availability of music raises questions about its impact on the listener. Research on the active use of MP3 players is therefore necessary to develop an understanding of how and why this relatively new technology has become so widespread. More importantly, how does mobile music listening influence the listener, and how can it be used as a resource for individual action?

The anti-social aspects of the MP3 player have been underlined by many. These include critical questions about its consequences for social interaction (*e.g.*, Brabazon, 2008), cautions of hearing damage in relation to the use of headphones and earbuds (Park, 2009; Vogel, *et al.*, 2009; Vries, 2005), and concern regarding safety in traffic when listening to music on personal stereos (Myers, 2010; Neider, *et al.*, 2010). Generally speaking, many scholars present a negative outlook on the use of MP3 players. In contrast, I explore a positive and resource-oriented approach regarding the active *use* of MP3 players. Implementing this resource-oriented approach means that I focus on the specific qualities and consequences of music use through the MP3 player as an active ingredient in individual action.<sup>1</sup> In other words, the research presented here will examine how the MP3 player may be used as a positive life resource for the listener as *user*. More specifically, in this article I ask how MP3 players can function as coping resources in urban environments. A vital aspect of staying healthy is the ability to cope successfully with stressors (Aldwin, 2007; Antonovsky, 1979; Collins, *et al.*, 2003). Employing an MP3 player as a coping strategy against the stressors of daily life can therefore be seen as a way of maintaining good mental health.

It should be noted that I am concerned with the MP3 player as a *medium* of mobile music, not the MP3 player as a technological device. Of course, the technical properties of the MP3 player make music more easily available to its users, enabling them to listen to whatever they want whenever they want. Indeed, the MP3 player is commonly described as easily accessible and simple to use. Focusing on how these technological properties permit particular musical uses, however, demonstrates that MP3 players can take on a specific function in creating private spaces for individual listeners, thus enabling them to focus on their own state of mind (Bull, 2000, 2007; Skånland, 2009, 2010). This is an important characteristic of the MP3 player, because it means that listeners can attend to, manage and regulate themselves with the help of music both inside and *outside* the home.

In focusing on the use of MP3 players outside the home, this article explores the MP3 player as a resource for coping with the stress of everyday life in urban environments. I begin by looking briefly at earlier research on use of MP3 players, followed by a more concentrated examination of theoretical work related to stress and

---

<sup>1</sup> Rolvsjord (2004, 2008) has developed a resource-oriented perspective to music therapy, which implies a focus on the client's individual strengths and potentials. The focus is on the clients' resources rather than on their weaknesses and pathology, but a resource-oriented approach does not exclude work with negative or difficult issues.

coping. I then discuss my own research programme and outline the methods employed, before presenting various research findings concerning the use of MP3 players as a coping strategy. This article concludes with a discussion of these findings in the context of coping with stressors in the urban environment and their overall effects on mental and physical health.

## RESEARCH ON USE OF MP3 PLAYERS

There has been a growing interest in the use of so-called portable media players, such as MP3 players, during the last few years (Beer, 2007; Bergh, DeNora, and Bergh, forthcoming; Bull, 2007; Gran, 2010; Katz, Lever, and Chen, 2008; Lever, 2007; Simun, 2009; Yaksich, 2007). In particular, Bull (2005, 2007, 2009) has carried out the most extensive research on the use of such players. In 2004, he surveyed 1,000 iPod users in Western countries to map how the iPod is most commonly used.<sup>2</sup> Bull argues that users, "...fine tune the relationship between mood, volition, music and the environment in ways that previous generations of mobile sound technologies were unable to do" (2006, p. 136). In other words, it has now become easier to actively manipulate music according to one's immediate desires in a specific time and space.

Bull's 2007 text looks further into the management of time and space, as well as the cognitive management of everyday life. He interrogates the aesthetics of music and the city, as well as interpersonal strategies and privatisation in "iPod culture". In doing so, Bull touches upon some interesting aspects of mobile music listening, such as music's role in self-regulation strategies and the experience of control. However, he does not probe the importance of these aspects for listeners themselves. We remain wondering: Why is it beneficial for individuals to use music as a self-regulation strategy and as a way to increase their experience of control in urban environments, and how does music function in such strategies?

While Bull interrogates the use of MP3 players within a sociological framework, the study presented here is at the intersections of music sociology, psychology and music and health, with an emphasis on music psychology. Within this framework, I aim to illuminate how the MP3 player can function as a resource (and, thus, how MP3 listening can function as a strategy) of subjective well-being and mental health. More precisely, the article aims to shed light on how the MP3 player is used to cope with the stressors of urban environments, particularly crowding and noise. To set the stage for this research, I will next introduce current work in the psychology and physiology of stress and coping.

## THEORIES OF HEALTH, STRESS AND URBAN LIFE

The present study investigates whether the use of MP3 players can be a coping strategy vis à vis common stressors in the urban environment. The following examination of theoretical work related to stress and coping will give an overview of these concepts and how they are related. Put simply, stress is commonly seen as a risk

---

<sup>2</sup> Apple's iPod has been the most selling MP3 player worldwide. Discovering that most of the respondents used an iPod, Bull chose to focus on the use of this particular music player.

factor for the development of illness, and successful coping with stressors can therefore be understood as a way of maintaining positive health. To begin, health is a complex concept which can be defined in different ways.

## HEALTH

The conceptual framework of the present research is based upon a sociological model of health. In this model, health is seen as a positive state of wholeness and well-being. For example, it is not unusual for people with various disabilities or illnesses to describe their health as “excellent” (Blaxter, 2004; Fugelli and Ingstad, 2001). Health is something that can be experienced in tandem with illness. The sociological model therefore sees health more as an experience of quality of life than an absence of disease, in contrast to the biomedical model of health. Næss defines life quality in this way: “An individual’s quality of life is strong to the degree to which the individual’s conscious cognitive and affective experiences are positive, and low to the degree to which the individual’s conscious cognitive and affective experiences are negative” (Næss, 2001, p. 10). This definition correlates with definitions of subjective well-being, understood as the experience of “life satisfaction and frequent joy, and only infrequently experiences of unpleasant emotions such as sadness or anger” (Diener, Suh, and Oishi, 1997, p. 25). Hence, we see a close relation between the sociological model of health, life quality and subjective well-being.

Research on the uses of music in everyday life has made it apparent that individuals use music in ways that can be related to health promotion (DeNora, 2007; Ruud, 2002). Since music as resource is related to positive health and health promotion, adapting a positive and holistic understanding of health is an appropriate approach to the study of the relationship between music and health. *Well-being* and *coping* are seen as vital aspects of positive health (Blaxter, 2004; Hjort, 1994; Mæland, 2005), and the present study interrogates the role of private music listening in coping and enhancing subjective well-being.

## STRESS

To gain a better understanding of how music listening might be used to cope with stress, we should recognize what stress actually is. Simply put, stress involves a stressor and a stress response (Antonovsky, 1979; Collins, *et al.*, 2003). Stressors include both physical and mental challenges to the body that threaten homeostasis. Examples of physical stressors are physical injury, physical exertion, noise, overcrowding and extreme heat or cold. Psychological stressors include time-pressured tasks, speech tasks and overcrowding, among other challenges (Collins, *et al.*, 2003). Particularly interesting in the context of this article is that overcrowding is both a physical and psychological stressor. Indeed, I will show that this is something that many of my informants experience on a daily basis when they commute to work or school.

Stress does not necessarily cause disease, but it has been established as a risk factor for the development of illness as well as for the worsening of an existing ailment (Collins, *et al.*, 2003). The ability to regulate stress levels is therefore central to the

maintenance of good health. As Antonovsky (1979, p. 70) maintains, “stressors are omnipresent in human existence”. The goal is therefore not to exclude stressors from our lives, but rather to manage the tension that accompanies them. Good tension management leads to positive health, or “health ease” in the words of Antonovsky (1979, p. 71).

Let me quickly clarify what forms of ‘stress’ I will be discussing. Selye (1975) differentiates between eustress and distress; response which is damaging or unpleasant is defined as distress, while eustress is a positive response to stressors. Similarly, Antonovsky (1979) distinguishes stress from tension; tension as a stress response can lead to stress and can therefore be damaging, but it can also be perceived as pleasurable and even be salutary. In this article, I am mainly concerned with the stress responses which are defined as distress by Selye. I have therefore chosen to refer to these responses as ‘stress’ for the sake of simplicity.

### **STRESSORS IN THE CITY**

Individuals who live or work in urban environments experience stressors related to their commutes on a daily basis. These stressors can be placed in the category of ‘daily hassles’ (Lazarus and Cohen, 1977). In the context of my research, the most interesting examples mentioned in this category are noise and pollution, and, even more relevant, “the hazards of commuting to work during rush hour” (1977, p. 93). These stressors are examples of difficulties people experience when their physical surroundings are harsh or uncomfortable, and when the circumstances are perceived as destructive to their individual well-being.

Crowding is another commonly experienced stressor in the city. Dubos (1991, p. 88) claims that “crowding affects the response of the individual and social body, not only to infection, but also to most of life’s stress”. However, the author points out that as the world has become more urbanized, people have adjusted to constant and intimate contact with large groups. Nonetheless, Dubos points to the fact that sustaining a certain distance from other people is probably a real biological need for humans, just as it is for animals, but that this need is culturally conditioned. In large cities, individuals normally maintain a certain reservation towards each other, and keep a slight physical distance when possible. According to the literature, this is the case in most Western urban environments, including Oslo (where the present study took place).

As Altman and Vinsel (1977, in reference to Hall, 1966) describe, intimate distances between individuals generally span zero to eighteen inches and personal space spans one and a half to four feet.<sup>3</sup> They explain that having strangers within the intimate distance may be perceived as overwhelming because of highly increased sensory inputs, and this intrusion beyond the personal distance is assumed to produce tension, anxiety and discomfort manifested by the tension in our bodies. This “stimulus overload” results in a physical disengagement, whereby individuals

---

<sup>3</sup> Hall’s (1966) description of spatial distances is based mainly on qualitative observations and interviews with middle class, healthy adults from the U.S. A large percentage of the subjects were from business, and many could be classified as intellectuals. The cultural context of Hall’s research is therefore similar to the context of this study.

physically compose themselves to avoid making physical or eye contact with their surroundings:

In crowded urban settings, people seem to be more-or-less isolated from one another, a product, says Milgram, of their tendency to disengage to protect themselves against the excessive stimulation that would ensue if they interacted with others in more than a cursory or superficial way. In other words, such behavior is a form of coping with the stress of overload. Thus, in subways and trains, on streets and elevators, and in other public contexts, people barely even look at each other, each going his or her own way and following private agendas. (Lazarus and Cohen, 1977, p. 95, with reference to Milgram 1977[1972])

Physical disengagement from our immediate surroundings, therefore, is an important coping device in crowded environments.

Noise is another stressor in urban environments. “We have no ear lids. We are condemned to listen”, writes Schafer (2003, p. 25). Bull and Back (2003) point to the fact that everyday life is increasingly accompanied by reproduced sounds. Further, they describe cities as more noisy than ever, which is mirrored in more complaints about levels of noise. On the one hand, sounds hold different meanings for listeners; they might enable people to form personal and manageable spaces. On the other hand, sounds can become unwanted experiences of noise, perceived as threatening to the subject (Bull and Back, 2003).

Truax (2001) characterizes sound as having a mediating effect on the individual and the environment, and therefore as creating relationships between the two. “Noise seems to be the source of negative mediation of such relationships, an alienating force that loosens the contact the listener has with the environment, and an irritant that works against effective communication”, he explains (2001, p. 94). While so-called ‘objective’ definitions of noise are concerned with the properties of sound, such as nonperiodic vibration and the sound’s intensity level, a generally accepted subjective definition is that noise is “unwanted sound” (Schafer, 1977; Truax, 2001). Because noise is unwanted sound, we can react to it as we would to any other stressor, resulting in tension, discomfort and reduced well-being (Truax, 2001).

Ruud (2005) writes that our quality of life is affected by noise. He mentions that the experience of noise can result in negative emotions such as anger, disappointment, dissatisfaction, withdrawal, anxiety, distraction, agitation or exhaustion. Stedje (2009), who has written a Master’s thesis on soundscapes in nursing homes, believes that sonic environments affect our health, and claims that there are both healthy and damaging sonic environments. She calls for an awareness of the sounds we are surrounded by in daily life; sounds that are *perceived* as noise, *are* noise, she states. As Stockfelt (1994, p. 23) points out: “The only possible judge of what constitutes a good soundscape for a specific individual in a specific situation is the individual herself”. He claims that almost everyone, everywhere and everyday, spends a considerable amount of time and money to create a more positive soundscape, precisely by playing music. Viewing this individual *use* of music to enhance well-being from another perspective, DeNora (2000) points out that music can be used to

literally seal off an environment of our liking. We use music in everyday life to substitute, disguise or complement other sounds which are difficult to do anything about. The use of music is, in other words, the most common way to create desired soundscapes (Stockfelt, 1994).<sup>4</sup> It therefore seems relevant to ask the question of whether music listening, and the use of MP3 players in particular, can function as an efficient coping strategy against the urban stressor of noise.

### COPING STRATEGIES

As seen above, individuals living in urban environments are frequently exposed to stressors in the city, particularly noise and crowding. As Antonovsky (1979, p. 89) so clearly observes, “even the most fortunate of people and groups know life as stressful to a considerable degree”. Therefore we cannot, and should not, avoid stressors (Antonovsky, 1979; Selye, 1975). The difference between people who become stressed and those who do not lies in their coping abilities.

Coping is defined by Monat and Lazarus as “an individual’s efforts to master demands (conditions of harm, threat, or challenge) that are appraised (or perceived) as exceeding or taxing his or her resources” (1991, p. 5). While poor management of tension leads to poor health, good tension management leads to maintenance of or improved health (Antonovsky, 1979). The active management of tension, then, is the essential element of coping.

Folkman and Lazarus (1991) differentiate between coping strategies that divert attention from the stressor and coping strategies that aim to change the subjective meaning of the person-environment relationship or one’s appraisal of the situation.<sup>5</sup> Further, Monat and Lazarus (1991) distinguish between problem-focused and emotional-focused coping. Problem-focused coping is about doing things for the sake of improving the disturbed person-environment relationship. Emotional-focused coping refers to “thoughts or actions whose goal is to relieve the emotional impact of stress” (Monat and Lazarus, 1991, p. 6). Examples of the latter coping style are avoiding thinking about the stressful matter, distancing or detaching oneself, or trying to relax. Is it possible that the MP3 player can be used as a coping strategy in any of the ways explained by Folkman and Lazarus (1991) and Monat and Lazarus (1991), and if so, how does it work?

Aldwin (2007, p. 8) states that, “how a person copes with a particular stressful situation may add to his or her coping repertoire or may alter a person’s outlook on the controllability or uncontrollability of the environment (*e.g.*, locus of control or explanatory style)”. She explains that all individuals develop certain management skills to help them deal with life. She refers to these as proactive coping, actions (such

---

<sup>4</sup> Truax (2001) differentiates between ‘sonic environment’ and ‘soundscape’. While he defines ‘sonic environment’ as all sounds – both the heard and unheard – within an environment, he uses the term ‘soundscape’ to describe the information exchange between the environment and the people living in it, and stresses a communicational approach. Although I am mostly concerned with the sounds that are perceived by listeners, I choose not to distinguish between ‘sonic environments’ and ‘soundscapes’ in this context.

<sup>5</sup> A person-environment relationship is a relationship between two different systems: the physical environment and the person. An environment consists of various stimulants that influence both psychological and physiological responses in humans. It is widely accepted that a strong relationship exists between physical environments and human health and well-being (see Suresh, Smith and Franz, 2006).

as brushing teeth or dealing with common tasks at work) with the purpose of preventing the occurrence of a problem. When these actions become routinised everyday skills that prevent stress, they are no longer coping strategies, according to Aldwin, but life management skills. Is it possible that individuals can employ their MP3 players as a way to deal with everyday urban life and prevent stress in such routinised ways that music listening also becomes a life management skill, perhaps by masking noise, enabling us to shape our own soundscapes, or creating physical disengagement with crowded environments? In the following sections, I will answer this complex question by presenting findings from my study after briefly outlining the methods employed.

## RESEARCH METHODS FOR UNDERSTANDING MOBILE MUSIC LISTENING

In order to understand how individuals may employ their MP3 players as a coping resource, to maintain or promote their subjective well-being and mental health, I sought to investigate people's experiences with this use in everyday life. The research presented here is based on interviews with six men and six women between the ages of 18 and 44 years. The informants are apparently healthy. Although this is a study within the field of music and health, I have chosen to focus on how 'ordinary' people use music in relation to stressors in everyday life. This means that the findings may be relevant to a larger group of individuals, including both ill and healthy people.

The informants are Norwegian and live in Oslo or surrounding areas. The only condition for participation in the study was that they used their MP3 players regularly. To recruit participants, I posted information about the study at different locations in Oslo and circulated it via email to acquaintances (asking them, in turn, to forward the information to their own contacts). Three of my informants contacted me after seeing a poster, one contacted me after reading about the project in the Norwegian media,<sup>6</sup> and eight contacted me after being referred by a mutual friend. The latter 'snowball sample' seemed, therefore, to be a more effective way of reaching informants. My sample consisted of subjects from a Western, urban culture. They can generally be described as wealthy and well educated. Although this was not intended, the fact that so many of the informants were educated was likely due to the way they were recruited – most of them via mutual acquaintances – since individual members of the same social set usually belong to the same social class.

The interviews investigated how my informants use music on their MP3 players in relation to cognitive, emotional and bodily aspects of their daily lives, as well as their experiences of their environments, personal boundaries and social and private spaces.<sup>7</sup> The interviews were semi-structured and based on an interview guide with twenty questions concerning their experiences with their MP3 players. The informants were asked why they choose to use their MP3 players, and in what situations they normally use them. Do they feel that this music listening affects them in any way?

---

<sup>6</sup> A journalist from a Norwegian newspaper interviewed me in summer, 2009. This interview was quoted in several other media outlets.

<sup>7</sup> The interviews were conducted in Norwegian. The quotes used in this article have been translated by a professional translator.

How do they choose music, how much do they listen, and how do they feel about the music? How do they use MP3 players in different situations: on a good day, when they are tired, on the way to a party, and so on? And how does private music listening affect their experiences of their environments and other people? Finally, I asked the informants whether they have had any negative experiences using their MP3 players, and to reflect upon their daily lives without the player. These interviews were exploratory in the sense that I was able to improvise during the course of the conversations, following interesting leads. Nevertheless, the interview guide functioned as a framework for the conversations, and all the informants were asked more or less the same questions.

The interviews, which lasted about one hour each, were transcribed and coded according to major themes, including: 'use of the MP3 player' (with subthemes such as choice of music, listening outdoors versus indoors, and the importance of the MP3 player), 'self-regulation' (including affect regulation, cognitive regulation and bodily regulation), and 'coping' (including boundaries, sense of control, and coping with the urban environment). In this article, I will focus on the latter subtheme: coping with the urban environment.

## **MUSIC LISTENING IN URBAN LIFE: SOME FINDINGS**

Below, I present my main findings on the use of MP3 players as coping resources in the urban environment as they relate to different categories of coping: internal stressors, crowding and noise.

### **COPING WITH INTERNAL STRESSORS**

When I asked my informants whether they use music when feeling stressed, they often defined 'stress' as being in a hectic situation, being busy, or having a lot to do. Most of them responded that they would not use music in those situations, but rather focus on the tasks at hand. If they used music in such situations, it would not be to calm down, but rather to keep up the tempo as to be able to finish their mission. However, it seems that my informants can use music as a way of regulating stress which is not related to specific tasks. This includes dealing with so-called internal stressors such as rumination. As one observed, "If I'm mentally stressed, like if I've got a lot on my mind that I can't stop worrying about, I sometimes use music to try to control it a bit, to try to focus on something else" (female, 26 years). Even if she does not seem to be aware of it, this informant also seems to use music to regulate herself when she is in what I interpret as stressful situations. As she continued:

Today, I'm a bit off my schedule, and I've been lagging behind trying to get everything done that I have to do. So, that makes me a little stressed-out and cranky. And then I had to come to this interview, and just travelling here, I had so much time to just sit and look at people or begin to think. And then I have to work with myself, like, "Ok, it's all right. It doesn't matter. Pull yourself together. It'll be fine. Life is good." A little like this. And if I'd had my music with me, I bet I'd have turned it on and found some [...] music that I know is fun and cheers me up, gives

me a good feeling. And I think I would've listened to it on my way here, and felt a little happier. Or more content. Yes. Absolutely. (female, 26 years)

This woman regulates stress by focusing on the music instead of her thoughts. She says in the first quote above that she can use music to take control over her stressful thoughts and focus on something else. In the second quote, she explains that she needed to work actively with herself to 'get it together' after her morning turned into a stressful situation. She believed, and said she had experienced, that music is helpful in such a situation. By listening to music she enjoys, she can help herself become happier, more content and less stressed. In other words, music works as an efficient means to regulate stress and mood, whereas the same regulation would take much more effort and energy without the music at hand.

### **COPING WITH CROWDING**

One of my informants who commutes to work said that he "easily turns to music, so there is perhaps a preventative effect" when it comes to being stressed (male, 43 years). He said that he enjoys his trips to work – although it takes about an hour each way and includes changing between several different modes of public transport – and credits the ability to listen to music for this enjoyment. It seems in his situation that music can divert his focus from his stressful surroundings and enable him to avoid being caught up in the stress of the commute. As he notes:

I'm actually quite happy with my commute, and the length is just fine. It could be a bit more comfortable on the tram sometimes, but that's how it is. But that's also because of my music. I've got something that takes the focus away a little from all the stress and the crowd and heat, and the tiredness and people screaming, and the racket. In a way, all that stuff becomes a bit remote from me. I see that it's there, and I manage to respond if something happens around me, but give me a good song and already 3-4 minutes have disappeared. So I don't need many songs before I'm [half way there] [...] So it takes about one album from when I leave home [laughs] and get to work. So, that's really quite an all right time. (male, 43 years)

This informant described the stress of commuting to work as mainly related to crowding and noise. For him, listening to his MP3 player helps him block out both the sounds of his surroundings (perceived as noise) and the experience of being in close distance to other people, described as 'cramped and warm and tiring'. Thus, he avoids the negative physical and psychological tension that would otherwise be a consequence of commuting.

Most of the informants in my study have discovered that using an MP3 player can function as an alternative coping strategy in settings where increasing one's physical distance is not an option. Listening to personal music was often described as a way of making the situation more tolerable. This is likely because the music creates a psychological distance from other people. As another informant described:

I use public transport during rush hour [...], and sometimes it's not very pleasant, particularly on the way home, with loads of people and it's crowded and hot and all that. I think that with a little music in my ear I become like...

*Q: It's easier to endure?*

Yes, a little like 'valium light' [laughter]. I'm just listening to something I like and not having to hear everything around me. Because there's a lot of noise around me and people talking on their mobiles and many other conversations I don't really need to be a part of. (male, 43 years)

This man described the pleasure of distancing himself from his surroundings with his private music. He portrayed his music as 'valium light', because it enables him to be in otherwise stressful and uncomfortable surroundings without being too affected by the experience. The music creates a private, pleasurable soundscape, as well as a psychological distance from the people around him. Even if he is standing in the middle of a crowd where it is "cramped and warm", listening to music helps him block out what he perceives as wearing and makes the experience of commuting more pleasant.

Other informants also described the experience of cramped buses or metros as more tolerable when they have their personal music. One man (24 years) explained that listening to his MP3 player is like creating one's own personal space, "That you don't stand together with all the others when you listen to music, you block them out a little, you can stand by yourself a little, even if you're standing close to other people". In other words, music listening creates a psychological distance from the crowd around him, and allows him to feel like he is by himself, even if he is in fact in a crowd.

This experience of being alone is a consequence of MP3 player use that most of the informants regularly enjoy, and even seek out. "I listen to my iPod most when I'm walking outside by myself. It's my private space", said another informant (female, 43 years). One of the other women described the 'bubble' created by the music as a private space where she can be left alone:

It's like that bubble we talked about, the fact that I shut out the world a little. It's only me listening to that music; it's only me who knows how I feel then and there. When you sit there with those two plugs in your ears, no one asks you unnecessary questions [laughs], you're more at peace. (female, 27 years)

For this informant, the wearing of earplugs signals that she wants to be left alone, and so she carves out some personal time by listening to her private music. Moreover, she said that she is the only one who knows how she feels at that moment. Consequently, her music listening becomes a truly private experience, despite the fact that she is in a very public space. In other words, she achieves privacy without the need for a physically private space. One can create a private, sonic room by putting on a headset, which can function similarly to closing the door to one's physical room. For my informants, this private room becomes a valued space.

## **COPING WITH NOISE**

My informants also consciously use their MP3 players to block out sounds and noise from their surroundings. Most of them enjoy the ability to retract from the environment, and particularly to shut off what they perceive as noise, "Like on the

train, there's a lot of people chattering away on their mobile phones as well as other noise, and it's wonderful to use music to shut it all out" (male, 44 years). Another informant similarly explained that her music helps her to block out other people's conversations and other sounds she does not wish to hear:

*Q: If I understand you correctly, you don't actually relate to your surroundings at all?*

I try not to, really. Unless something's going on that's completely crazy, I try my best to avoid that, because there are people talking on the phone, and if they talk on the phone then I listen to it involuntarily. [...] or babies who scream. I don't have anything against babies, but it's very difficult to listen to screeching babies for long. Or people talking to each other, so that I listen to their conversation without wanting to because I can't block it out on my own. (female, 24 years)

The need to drown out other people's conversations was a recurring issue in the interviews. My informants obviously find it disturbing to listen in on phone calls and private conversations. One man told me that he finds it difficult to relax when people around him are chatting. It also makes it more difficult to focus on one's own state of mind when one is constantly drawn to conversations in which one is not taking part. By listening to private music, my informants find it easier to relax and direct their focus towards their own state of mind.

The MP3 player enables these informants to block out sounds from their surroundings, and is used particularly to drown out what they perceive as noise:

*Have you used music consciously to block out sounds from your surroundings if you find them too noisy?*

Absolutely. And especially on planes and such, I've bought a blocking thingy that helps me block out background noise, and that makes travelling quite a different experience. I've really increased my life quality during the journey [laughter] by avoiding to listen to the engines and the clamor from all the passengers and stuff. In addition to the experience of listening to the music itself, all I hear *is* the music. So I definitely use it actively to block out these kinds of drone and clamor generally. (female, 27 years)

The woman above said explicitly that music listening can help to increase her quality of life, at least the quality of her experiences in the short term, precisely by offering a pleasurable substitute to the noise of her surroundings. Another informant expressed, perhaps more clearly than the others, how music offers him a coping strategy to combat stress. If he feels stressed, it becomes more difficult to handle it without music or some other tool. As he notes:

I have less control [without music]. So it's difficult to go in deliberately and direct the things I want. You're stressed, you know you're stressed, like, "Yeah, I'm stressed, I know I'm stressed, but I don't have time to be so stressed." So, in a way, I have to try and change direction. But if I don't have anything to help me do this, it becomes very difficult. (male, 24 years)

It seems that the MP3 player can function as a valuable resource for coping with the stress of everyday life, in particular the stressors of the city, but also internal stressors

such as rumination. As the man above puts it, if you do not have anything to help you – that is, a coping strategy – regulating stress becomes very difficult indeed.

## DISCUSSION – THE MP3 PLAYER AS COPING RESOURCE

The urban environment can be characterized by stimulus overload. Carrying out their daily commutes in such an environment, my informants are met with two main stressors on a daily basis: crowding and noise. They explain that commuting to work can be experienced as harsh, warm, cramped and tiring. It seems, however, that the ability to listen to their personal and private music selections while commuting enhances their well-being and transforms the entire commute into tolerable, and even desired, time.

These men and women describe their daily commutes as ‘cramped’, among other things. Using public transport, they often end up standing in the middle of a crowd. Being physically close to strangers can feel uncomfortable, particularly as one feels that one’s private space is being invaded. However, the MP3 player can function to create a private room and a psychological distance to other people. Listening to an MP3 player is described as an experience of creating a ‘bubble’, where the surrounding world is shut out. This ‘bubble’ is described as a feeling of standing by oneself, even if one is in the middle of a crowd. Music thus makes the situation easier to bear, like ‘valium light’ in the words of one informant. Hence, these individuals consciously choose to use their MP3 players to withdraw from their environments, and perceive it as pleasurable to do so.

Different forms of noise are also part of their daily environment, and adapting a strategy to manage noise is therefore necessary and important to them. The listening use of MP3 players seems to function as such a strategy. While we have no ear lids, and therefore cannot choose to ‘turn off’ sound impulses from our surroundings (as we can choose to shut out visual stimuli by shutting our eyes), the personal stereo empowers the ears to do just that. “Technology has come to the aid of the ears through the invention of headphones”, Bull notes, “empowering the auditory self” (2007, p. 12). However, does the MP3 player really screen out the urban soundscape? In reality, the music is probably often interrupted by the sounds of the city (Beer, 2007). Mobile music might often function more as a complement to other sounds rather than a substitute. However, the subjects in this study speak of their MP3 use in terms of creating personal soundscapes, and shutting out what they perceive as noise. With new technologies, such as earbuds that function as ear defenders and headphones designed to block out background sounds, the soundscape of the city can more easily be disguised in favour of one’s personally curated soundscape.

What we perceive as noise can be extremely wearing, and the MP3 player offers a ‘remedy’ for this, not by offering silence, but rather by enabling individuals to create a personalised, desired sonic environment. Consequently, the MP3 user does not create a ‘quiet bubble’, but instead produces a stable, chosen, enjoyable soundscape. Not having to listen to tiring sounds “enhances the quality of life whilst travelling”, according to one of the informants. Hence, my informants experience using their

MP3 players to actively maintain well-being. To clarify, music in itself does not necessarily improve individuals' well-being because musical perception, as with other sounds, is highly individual. For example, music played in public can be experienced as extremely invading, and people go to great lengths in campaigning against public music. Rather, MP3 players offer a unique way of shaping one's personal sonic environment according to one's personal taste at any point in time and space.

Now, at the outset to this article, I noted that the 'isolating' effects enabled by the technology of MP3 players and other personal stereos have been critically questioned. The most important question in this context is whether this form of isolation should be itself seen as an obstacle to maintaining well-being and positive health.<sup>8</sup> However, there is no reason to believe, based on the research presented here, that listening to MP3 players is seen by individuals as a substitute for social interaction. Instead, my informants listen to music when they are alone, or wish to be left alone. For these informants, the private music listening experience works as a supplement to other musical activities which include robust social relations, such as listening to music with friends or attending concerts with others. Therefore, private music listening is not in itself a threat to health promotion. Even if my informants seek isolation when they listen to their MP3 players, they do not feel lonely, and there is no reason to believe that the MP3 use leads to a perception of loss of social support. The private space they create using music should instead be seen as a resource for rest and self-maintenance; the informants explain that creating a 'private room' with their music enables them to relax precisely by blocking out unwanted stimuli. Thus, my informants listen to private music in order to find rest and gather strength.<sup>9</sup>

The use of the MP3 player enables my informants to create boundaries around a personal space, and to control their aesthetic and social environment. This leads to an experience of control, and I suggest that these aspects of private music listening is an important part of the use of the MP3 player as a coping strategy. We have seen that without music, or some other resource, it takes significantly more effort to manage or regulate stress. The MP3 player thus gains a double function. First, it helps to reduce stress by blocking out stressful environments, thereby helping individuals calm themselves. Second, the music itself helps individuals gain control over thoughts and drag their focus away from destructive rumination or unwanted (but seemingly involuntary) listening activities. These are both strategies that divert attention from the stressor (*i.e.*, Folkman and Lazarus, 1991).

Moreover, by listening to music they enjoy, individuals become more satisfied and experience reduced levels of stress. This coping strategy is about changing the appraisal of the situation (*i.e.*, Folkman and Lazarus, 1991). Cognitive appraisal includes a judgment of the implication an event has for the individual's well-being. A key factor contributing to the appraisal is the judgment of available coping resources (Lazarus and Cohen, 1977). Individuals who have learned how to use their MP3

---

<sup>8</sup> Social support must be included as an important aspect of subjective well-being, positive health and life quality (Hjort, 1994; Næss, 2001; Ruud, 2002), and isolation of individuals is therefore not desirable.

<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that use of MP3 players also affords interaction through, *e.g.*, talking about music, sharing music and identifying membership in social groups. In sum, MP3 players are used by individuals to create isolation (essentially an ontologically secure space), but its use does not necessarily prescribe isolation.

players as coping devices will know that they have an available coping resource with them at all times, and perhaps evaluate ‘the hassles of commuting’ differently than someone who has not learned to use the MP3 player as such a resource. It seems that the informants in this study have learned to use their MP3 player as a coping strategy.

As we have seen, Monat and Lazarus (1991) differ between problem-focused and emotion-focused coping. The use of MP3 players as a coping strategy must be said to be mainly emotion-focused because it is generally used in situations that are not about to change, such as being on a cramped bus on the way to work, and listening to music is not a strategy of changing one’s physical environment. It can function to divert attention from the stressful environment, or alter the significance of one’s activities in order to feel better about them (*i.e.*, Monat and Lazarus, 1991) – for example by listening to music on the way to work, and accordingly transforming the time spent travelling into desired time for leisure activities. However, when personal music listening is used to change one’s sonic environment, it may also include aspects of problem-focused coping.

I would suggest that the experience people have with music is a vital contributing factor in how they use it as a coping strategy. Because most people in Western culture listen to a large amount of music throughout their lives, we can assume that they develop the knowledge of how to use music as a resource. This is confirmed by DeNora (1999, 2000, 2007) and Ruud (2002, 2005, 2010), among others. Among the many functions music can serve, music can be used to cope with stressors in everyday life. Furthermore, drawing on Aldwin’s (2007) explanation of management skills, it is probable that individuals who use music as a coping strategy for longer periods of time actually develop management skills using music. Hence, the MP3 player may be described as a distinct resource to cope with stress in everyday urban life. By extension, I would suggest that if MP3 players can function as a coping resource and engagement in private and portable music listening can make the informants’ everyday experiences more manageable, use of MP3 players are a resource in maintaining and possibly increasing individuals’ subjective well-being (*i.e.*, Diener, 2009; Diener, Lucas and Oishi, 2005) and positive health (*i.e.*, Antonovsky, 1987; Fugelli and Ingstad, 2001, 2009; Hjort, 1994).

## SUMMARY AND FURTHER QUESTIONS

In this article, I have examined the use of MP3 players as a coping strategy. Listening to private music enables individuals to carve out a personal space, which enhances their sense of control. This is an essential aspect of the ability to cope with the stressors of everyday life. Furthermore, the use of MP3 players allows individuals to withdraw from their environments, creating a psychological distance from people within close proximity and masking unwanted sounds, such as people chatting on the phone or babies crying. Thus, the use of MP3 players may turn time spent commuting into tolerable, or even desired, time.

It seems that the MP3 player can function as a coping resource on several levels, from coping with internal stressors, such as destructive or distracting thoughts, to coping with external stressors, such as noise and crowding. The experience one has using the MP3 player as a coping resource might turn MP3 player listening into what Aldwin (2007) terms a management skill. Hence, learning how to use MP3 players as a coping resource may turn the listening experience into a preventative coping strategy, enabling individuals to deal with prospective stressors *before* they lead to tension and stress. In averting the tension and negative effects that accompany certain stressors, the use of MP3 players may function as a strategy for preventing ill-health and promoting good health and subjective well-being.

The informants in the present study have evidently learned how to use their MP3 players as coping resources. Is it possible to teach other groups of individuals to make use of personal, private and portable music as a coping resource, perhaps in other environments besides the urban? It could be interesting to carry out a study utilizing action research, working with a group of individuals to reflexively use private music listening in situations where they feel vulnerable. Could the MP3 player, for example, be a resource for individuals who are hospitalized? Or could private music be an efficient coping resource for individuals who are chronically ill, to be used, for example, when waiting for a doctor's appointment? Because the MP3 player enables individuals to bring a vast amount of private and personal music with them as they venture *outside* their homes, it would be particularly interesting to further investigate how portable music devices can function as resources in specific situations where individuals find themselves in environments that feel unfamiliar, unsafe or uncomfortable. In such instances, music could perhaps function as a sonic 'safety blanket'.

## REFERENCES

- Aldwin, C. M. (2007). *Stress, Coping, and Development. An Integrative Perspective*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Antonovsky, A. (1979). *Health, Stress, and Coping*. San Francisco/London: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Antonovsky, A. (1987). *Unraveling the Mystery of Health. How People Manage Stress and Stay Well*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Beer, D. (2007). Tune out: Music, soundscapes and the urban mise-en-scene. *Information, Communication & Society*, 10(6), 846-866.
- Bergh, A., DeNora, T., and Bergh, M. (forthcoming). Forever and ever: Mobile music in the life of young teens. In J. Stanyek and S. Gopinath (Eds.), *Handbook of Mobile Music*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Blaxter, M. (2004). *Health*. Cambridge/Malden: Polity Press.
- Brabazon, T. (2008). The Isolation of the iPod People. *Times Higher Education* 3 April 2008. Retrieved 23.04.10, 2010 from <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storyCode=401340&sectioncode=26>
- Bull, M. (2000). *Sounding Out the City: Personal Stereos and the Management of Everyday Life*. Oxford: Berg.
- Bull, M. (2005). No dead air! The iPod and the culture of mobile listening. *Leisure Studies*, 24(4), 343-355.
- Bull, M. (2006). Investigating the culture of mobile listening: From Walkman to iPod. In K. O'Hara and B. Brown (Eds.), *Consuming Music Together: Social and Collaborative Aspects of Music Consumption Technologies* (pp. 131-149). Dordrecht: Springer.
- Bull, M. (2007). *Sound Moves: iPod Culture and Urban Experience*. London: Routledge.
- Bull, M. (2009). The auditory nostalgia of iPod culture. In K. Bijsterveld and J. v. Dijck (Eds.), *Sound Souvenirs: Audio Technologies. Memory and Cultural Practices* (pp. 83-93). Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Bull, M., and Back, L. (2003). Introduction: Into sound. In M. Bull and L. Back (Eds.), *The Auditory Culture Reader* (pp. 1-18). Oxford/New York: Berg.
- Collins, F. L., Sorocco, K. H., Haala, K. R., Miller, B. I., and Lovallo, W. R. (2003). Stress and health. In L. M. Cohen, D. E. McChargue and F. L. Collins (Eds.), *The Health Psychology Handbook. Practical Issues for the Behavioral Medicine Specialist* (pp. 169-186). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- DeNora, T. (1999). Music as a technology of the self. *Poetics*, 27, 31-56.
- DeNora, T. (2000). *Music in Everyday Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- DeNora, T. (2007). Health and music in everyday life: A theory of practice. *Psyke & Logos*, 28(1), 271-287.
- Diener, E. (2009). Subjective Well-Being. In E. Diener (Ed.), *The Science of Well-Being: The Collected Works of Ed Diener* (pp. 11-58). Dordrecht: Springer.
- Diener, E., Lucas, R. E., and Oishi, S. (2005). Subjective well-being: The science of happiness and life satisfaction. In C. R. Snyder and S. J. Lopez (Eds.), *Handbook of Positive Psychology* (pp. 63-73). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Diener, E., Suh, E., and Oishi, S. (1997). Recent findings on subjective well-being. *Indian Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 24, 25-41.
- Dubos, R. (1991). The living world. In A. Monat and R. S. Lazarus (Eds.), *Stress and Coping. An Anthology* (pp. 87-96). New York: Columbia University Press.

- Folkman, S., and Lazarus, R. S. (1991). Coping and emotion. In A. Monat and R. S. Lazarus (Eds.), *Stress and Coping. An Anthology* (pp. 207-227). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Fugelli, P., and Ingstad, B. (2001). Helse – slik folk ser det [A lay perspective on health]. *Tidsskrift for Den norske legeforening*, 30/2001, 3600-3604.
- Fugelli, P., and Ingstad, B. (2009). *Helse på norsk: God helse slik folk ser det [Health in Norwegian: A lay perspective on positive health]*. Oslo: Gyldendal Akademisk.
- Gran, N. (2010). 'iPod' og bobler ['iPod' and bubbles]. *Akademiet for Æstetikfaglig Forskerutdanning*, 5, 1-35.
- Hall, E. T. (1966). *The hidden dimension*. New York: Doubleday.
- Hjort, P. F. (1994). Et spørsmål om sunnhet? – Mot et nytt helsebegrep [A question of soundness? - Towards a new conception of health]. In P. F. Hort (Ed.), *Helse for alle! Foredrag og artikler 1974 – 93* (pp. 86-96): Utredningsrapport nr U 1 – 1994, Statens institutt for folkehelse, Avdeling for samfunnsmedisin, Seksjon for helsetjenesteforskning.
- InStat (2008). The worldwide PMP/MP3 player market: Shipment growth to slow considerably. Retrieved 23.04.10, 2010 from <http://www.instat.com/abstract.asp?id=27&SKU=IN0804079ID>
- InStat (2009). Competitors scramble for hot features as PMP/MP3 player market loses steam. Retrieved 23.04.10, 2010 from <http://www.instat.com/press.asp?Sku=IN0904511ID&ID=2581>
- Katz, J. E., Lever, K. M., and Chen, Y.-F. (2008). Mobile music as environmental control and prosocial entertainment. In J. E. Katz (Ed.), *Handbook of Mobile Communication Studies* (pp. 368-376). Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Lazarus, R. S., and Cohen, J. B. (1977). Environmental stress. In I. Altman and J. F. Wohlwill (Eds.), *Human Behavior and Environment. Advances in Theory and Research* (Vol. 2, pp. 89-127). New York: Plenum Press.
- Lever, K. M. (2007). *Mobile Music Technology, Communication Isolation and Community Building: An Analysis of College Students' Use of Digital Entertainment*. Unpublished Ph.D., The State University of New Jersey, New Brunswick.
- Monat, A., and Lazarus, R. S. (1991). Introduction: Stress and coping - some current issues and controversies. In A. Monat and R. S. Lazarus (Eds.), *Stress and Coping. An Anthology* (Third ed., pp. 1-15). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Myers, B. (2010). Deadly accidents involving iPods alarm officials. Retrieved 16.08.10, 2010, from <http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/local/Deadly-accidents-involving-iPods-alarm-officials-88484767.html>
- Mæland, J. G. (2005). *Forebyggende Helsearbeid – i teori og praksis [Preventive health work - theory and practice]* (Vol. 2). Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Neider, M. B., McCarley, J. S., Crowell, J. A., Kaczmarek, H., and Kramer, A. F. (2010). Pedestrians, vehicles, and cell phones. *Accident Analysis & Prevention*, 42(2), 589-594.
- Næss, S. (2001). *Livskvalitet som psykisk velvære [Quality of life as mental well-being]*: Norsk institutt for forskning om oppvekst, velferd og aldring.
- Park, A. (2009). iPod safety: Preventing hearing loss in teens. Retrieved 23.04.10, 2010, from <http://www.time.com/time/health/article/0,8599,1881130,00.html>
- Rolvjord, R. (2004). Therapy as empowerment: Clinical and political implications of empowerment philosophy in mental health practices of music therapy. *Nordic Journal of Music Therapy*, 13(2), 99-111.
- Rolvjord, R. (2008). En ressursorientert musikkterapi [A resource oriented music therapy]. In G.

Trondalen and E. Ruud (Eds.), *Perspektiver på musikk og helse: 30 år med musikkterapi*, Skriftserie for Senter for musikk og helse (Vol. 2008:3, pp. 123-137). Oslo: NMH-publikasjoner.

Ruud, E. (2002). Music as a cultural immunogen – Three narratives on the use of music as a technology of health. In I. M. Hanken, S. G. Nilsen and M. Nerland (Eds.), *Research in and for Higher Music Education. Festschrift for Harald Jørgensen* (Vol. 2/2002, pp. 109-120). Oslo: NMH-Publications.

Ruud, E. (2005). *Lydlandskap: om bruk og misbruk av musikk [Soundscapes: on use and misuse of music]*. Bergen: Fagbokforlaget.

Ruud, E. (2010). *Music Therapy: A Perspective from the Humanities*. New Hampshire: Barcelona Publishers.

Schafer, M. (1977). *The Soundscape. Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*. Rochester, Vermont: Destiny Books.

Schafer, M. (2003). Open ears. In M. Bull and L. Back (Eds.), *The Auditory Culture Reader* (pp. 25-39). Oxford: Berg.

Selye, H. (1975). *Stress without Distress*. New York: New American Library.

Simun, M. (2009). My music, my world: using the MP3 player to shape experience in London. *New Media & Society*, 11(6), 921-941.

Skånland, M. S. (2009). (Mobil) musikk som mestringsstrategi [(Mobile) music as a management strategy]. In E. Ruud (Ed.), *Musikk i psykisk helsearbeid med barn og unge* (Vol. 5/2009, pp. 13-130). Oslo: NMH-Publikasjoner. Skriftserie fra Senter for musikk og helse.

Skånland, M. S. (2010). *MP3-Players as a Technology of Affect Regulation*. Paper presented at the 11th International Conference on Music Perception and Cognition, Seattle, Washington, USA.

Stedje, K. J. (2009). *Lydmiljø i sykehjem [Soundscapes in Nursing Homes]*. Unpublished Masters, Norwegian Academy of Music, Oslo.

Stockfelt, O. (1994). Cars, buildings and soundscapes. In H. Jäviluoma (Ed.), *Soundscapes. Essays on Vroom and Moo* (pp. 19-38). Tempere/Seinäjoki: Tempere University: Department of Folk Tradition/Institute of Rhythm Music.

Suresh, M., Smith, D. J., and Franz, J. M. (2006) Person environment relationships to health and wellbeing: An integrated approach. *IDEA Journal*, 2006, pp. 87-102.

Truax, B. (2001). *Acoustic Communication* (Second ed.). Westport, Connecticut: Ablex Publishing.

Vaage, O. F. (2009). Norsk Mediebarometer 2008. Retrieved 23.04.10, 2010 from <http://www.ssb.no/medie/>

Vogel, I., Verschuure, H., Ploeg, C. P. B. v. d., Brug, J., and Raat, H. (2009). Adolescents and MP3 players; too many risks, too few precautions. *Pediatrics*, 123(6), e953-e958.

Vries, L. d. (2005). MP3s may threaten hearing loss. Retrieved 23.04.10, 2010, from <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2005/08/25/health/webmd/main796088.shtml>

Yaksich, M. J. (2007). *Plugged in: A qualitative analysis of the ways iPod users produce and experience social connection*. Unpublished Masters, University of Maryland, College Park.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Marie S. Skånland** is currently a Ph.D. Scholar at the Norwegian Academy of Music in Oslo, where she is affiliated with the Centre for Music and Health. She holds an M.A. in Musicology from the University of Oslo.