

The Functions of Walkman Music

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Abstract

Since its release in 1979, the Walkman has engendered new modes of musical experience for millions of listeners. Its portability and the apparent isolation offered by its headphones enable Walkman users to listen to music in situations where it would otherwise be impossible. They can also use Walkman Music to achieve outcomes for which other forms of music may not be suited.

Eleven functions of Walkman Music, ten adapted from Michael Bull's (2000) strategies of Walkman use and one derived from this study's fieldwork results, are examined here. Following Timothy Rice's (1987) model for ethnomusicological study, the functions' origins in historical musical practice are investigated, as well as their maintenance in social interaction and listeners' individual experience of them. This study demonstrates Walkman listeners are focussed entirely on their Walkman Music in only two functions, either enjoying it or trying to learn it. Four functions involve Walkman listeners' interactions with their surroundings – namely, listeners use Walkman Music to control their environments' soundscapes, to ease their negotiation of places they consider unpleasant, to control personal interactions and, in combination with their surroundings, Walkman Music gives listeners the impression they are viewing or acting in a film for which their music is the soundtrack. Listeners use Walkman Music for its effects on themselves in five functions. They choose rhythmic music for motivation during exercise or music which will influence their mood. Listeners also use Walkman Music to simulate the presence of a companion or because they consider it a more enjoyable or productive use of time they would otherwise consider wasted. Finally, Walkman Music can prompt listeners' memories of past events. While similar observations have been made in previous studies and particularly by Bull, music's role has not been appropriately acknowledged. This study's examination of Walkman Music in terms of the functions it fulfils for listeners corrects this imbalance.

Observations in the literature relating to Walkman use are tested for their resonance with Walkman listeners in ethnographic interviews conducted in Adelaide, Australia. Conclusions are drawn regarding the degree of isolation listeners actually achieve from their surroundings and also regarding the relative novelty or otherwise of the uses to which listeners put their Walkman Music.

Declaration

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being available for loan and photocopying.

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