

## Study finds keys to music in exercise

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For her study, Western postdoctoral scholar Cassie Ellis tapped Kinesiology students to find out how often they exercise, why they exercise and what role music played in their daily routines. She plumbed their playlists and analyzed them to find common themes among motivations, types of exercise and the tone, tempo and genre of their music tastes. Credit: University of Western Ontario

If you want people to exercise, it has gotta be fun. And if you want

people to turn fitness into a habit, you tap into something that keeps them coming back for more.

Music can be that key to getting people moving—and selecting the proper style of music for people to move to can lead to a more beneficial and fulfilling workout, according to a recent Western study.

"We wanted to make [physical activity](#) more enjoyable," said Cassie Ellis, a post-doctoral scholar in the Ivey Business School's Ian O. Ihnatowycz Institute for Leadership.

Ellis explored different components that make exercise fun. Not everyone attended exercise class to socialize, lose weight or gain muscle tone—but everyone came with a playlist, she said.

"Music was universally accepted. But nobody was asking participants what they listened to," said Ellis, BA'11 (Kinesiology and Food & Nutrition), MA'13 (Kinesiology), Ph.D.'18 (Kinesiology).

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"I didn't want to come into it as a musicologist, but wanted to view music as part of an activity," she said. "People listen to music when they are at work, while walking their dogs, socializing, cleaning, during exercise, and more. (They) have access to music anywhere and at any time, regardless of the activity or circumstance. Exercise is simply one subset of music-listening behavior."

During workouts, Ellis found, music acts as a distraction for some—for

women, more than men—and a motivator for others. But it was in correlating musical tastes to exercise types that she found the most useful patterns for her work in leading fitness classes:

- Music set to a tempo 120-140 beats-per-minute pumps people up most during aerobic workouts such as step class or cardio boot camp. Women prefer listening to pop music, while men prefer hip-hop and rap during aerobics;
- Pump down the beat when pumping iron. Anaerobic training, such as weightlifting or circuit training, is more motivating at a tempo slower than 120 beats per minute. Both men and women prefer strength training to hip-hop or rap music, rather than pop; and
- A slow tempo is best, preferably in a minor key, for leisure activities, such as dog-walking.

All these preferences are important because music offers exercisers instantaneous feedback—whether as a distraction or a motivator—even if the reasons they work out can provide a longer-term gratification. By the time their other motivations for exercising start showing results, music has already had the ability to kick-start the process.

Other studies have shown that listening to music not only prompts people to exercise longer, but it may improve their mood during and after the activity. "This [positive association](#) with the activity may result in the behavior becoming a repeated effort and eventually a habit," the study says.

Activity and fitness-class leaders can take note of these findings as they design classes not only with specific types of [exercise](#) in mind but with music choices based on tempo, genre and mode, said Ellis, a fitness instructor with Wellness@Western who also trains fitness instructors.

"My No. 1 goal is that my clients enjoy these classes enough that they want to come back," she said. And whether they're involved in yoga or extreme boot camp, "we should be able to make physical fitness fun for everybody."

The study, "Descriptive analysis of university-student [music](#) preferences during different forms of physical [activity](#)," was recently published in the journal *Psychology of Music*.

**More information:** Cassandra L Ellis et al. Descriptive analysis of university-student music preferences during different forms of physical activity, *Psychology of Music* (2019). [DOI: 10.1177/0305735619847759](https://doi.org/10.1177/0305735619847759)

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