

Experiencing Podcasts in Situ:

How the Reception Situation Affects Transportation

Daniela Schlütz, Anna Schnauber-Stockmann, Veronika Karnowski & Teresa K. Naab

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Daniela Schlütz (Prof. Dr.)
Film University Babelsberg KONRAD WOLF, Potsdam, Germany
Contact: d.schluetzt@filmuniversitaet.de
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4991-5140>

Anna Schnauber-Stockmann (PD Dr.)
Department of Communication, University of Mainz, Mainz, Germany
Contact: anna.schnauber-stockmann@uni-mainz.de
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6795-1244>

Veronika Karnowski (Prof. Dr.)
Institute for Media Research, TU Chemnitz, Chemnitz, Germany
Contact: veronika.karnowski@phil.tu-chemnitz.de
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2138-255X>

Teresa K. Naab (Prof. Dr.)
Institute for Media and Communication Studies, University of Mannheim, Mannheim,
Germany
Contact: naab@uni-mannheim.de
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7345-2559>

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Data availability statement

The study was pre-registered (https://osf.io/fjx6y/?view_only=674c928665774419be178019f46f9a10). Materials, data, code, and an amendment documenting deviations from the preregistration are available here: https://osf.io/7mdbn/?view_only=89a8c0ad40d248eb8025fe635e38a117

AI Statement

DeepL was used for selected passages during the drafting of the manuscript to optimize the English version.

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Abstract

This study examines portable audio media and their suitability for transportation, understood as a mental shift into the narrative world. We focus on true crime podcasts (TCP) as one of the most successful narrative genres that lends itself to transportation because of the suspenseful content. Research shows that transportation is highly susceptible to situational variations: media context, environmental context, and psychological states influence transportation experiences. Like many portable audio media, podcasts are used in a variety of circumstances (e.g., while commuting or multitasking), which is why they are particularly well-suited for studying situational influences on transportation. In order to adequately reflect this kind of use, we relied on repeated in situ measurement (mobile experience sampling method; 12 days, N = 104 participants, T = 2,929 protocols, 893 TCP). Our results showed that transportation was associated with variations in all three key components of the situational level: Transportation levels were higher during longer listening episodes (media context), when used at home and without co-occurring activities (environmental context), as well as with more focused attention (psychological state). Contrary to our assumption, the use of headphones (media context) did not have a supportive effect on being transported. Theoretical and methodological implications are discussed.

Keywords: audio media, podcasting, transportation, Mobile Experience Sampling Method, in-situ effects

Podcasts in situ:

Wie die Rezeptionssituation das Transportationserleben beeinflusst

Abstract

Diese Studie untersucht tragbare Audiomedien und ihre Eignung für Transportationseffekte, verstanden als mentale Versenkung in die narrative Welt. Wir konzentrieren uns auf True Crime Podcasts (TCP) als eins der erfolgreichsten narrativen Genres, das sich aufgrund der spannenden Inhalte besonders gut für Transportation eignet. Studien zeigen, dass die Rezeptionserfahrung von den jeweiligen situativen Bedingungen der Nutzung beeinflusst wird. Dabei beeinflussen sowohl der mediale als auch der Umweltkontext sowie situativ variierende psychologische Zustände Transportationseffekte. Als mobile Audiomedien werden Podcasts in einer Vielzahl von Situationen genutzt (z. B. beim Pendeln, Sport oder Haushalt), wodurch sie sich besonders gut für die Untersuchung situativer Einflüsse auf das Transportationserlebnis eignen. Um diese Rezeptionsart angemessen zu erfassen, nutzen wir wiederholte situative Messungen (Mobile Experience Sampling Method; 12 Tage, N = 104 Teilnehmende, T = 2.929 Protokolle, 893 TCP). Die Ergebnisse zeigten, dass das Transportationserleben mit Variationen in allen drei Aspekten der Situationsebene zusammenhing: Das Transporterleben war höher bei längeren Hörphasen (Medienkontext), bei der Nutzung zu Hause und ohne Parallelaktivitäten (Umweltkontext) sowie bei konzentrierterer Aufmerksamkeit (psychologischer Zustand). Entgegen unserer Annahme hatte die Verwendung von Kopfhörern (Medienkontext) keinen unterstützenden Effekt auf das Transportationserleben. Der Beitrag diskutiert theoretische und methodische Implikationen dieser Ergebnisse.

Key Words: Audiomedien, Podcasts, Transportation, Mobile Experience Sampling Method, situative Effekte

Experiencing Podcasts in Situ:

How the Reception Situation Affects Transportation

Podcasts are very popular, both worldwide and in Germany, especially among younger listeners (DataGlobeHub, 2026; Müller, 2025). They are often listened to on mobile devices (Scherer & Cohen, 2024). Due to the portability and accessibility of mobile devices, podcasts are consumed in a wide range of environmental contexts, for instance, on the go and/or while pursuing other activities such as commuting to work or doing household chores (DataGlobeHub, 2026; Domenichini, 2022; Schlütz & Hedder, 2021; Winkler et al., 2022). The environmental context, along with psychological states of the listener (e.g., the level of attention they pay to the podcast), and media context factors like use duration can affect the listening experience (Chan-Olmsted & Wang, 2022; Harrison et al., 2023; Nyre, 2015). The present study focuses on one particular aspect of this experience, namely being transported into the story world.

Podcasts are considered highly immersive media (Dowling & Miller, 2019; Mehendale, 2019; Richardson et al., 2020; Rime et al., 2022). Immersion is a metaphor “derived from the physical experience of being submerged in water” (Murray, 1997, p. 98) lacking a uniform definition (Chen et al., 2024). Usually, two types are distinguished: Spatial immersion can mainly be attributed to technical features (like ambisonics or binaural audio; Rime et al., 2022), while emotional immersion is a result of a well-designed narrative and relatable characters. Due to the ease of processing narratives (Bullock et al., 2021), the latter type is more important for creating a sense of “being there” than the former. Podcasting combines both immersive elements by using atmospheric soundscapes, binaural recording, and storytelling (Schlütz, 2020). Narrative absorption encompasses transportation as one dimension besides attention, mental imagery, and emotional engagement (Kuijpers et al., 2014). The term transportation, originally coined by Gerrig (1993), was linked by Green and

Brock (2000, 2002) with narrative persuasion and defined as absorption into the narrative world (Green & Brock, 2002).

The ability to get transported into a podcast may, however, conflicts with mobile media settings, as being on the go or multitasking. Therefore, we examine how the three key components of the listening situation (Schnauber-Stockmann, Bayer et al., 2025), that is, *media context* (specifically use duration and headphone use), *environmental context* (specifically location and co-occurring activities), and *psychological states* (specifically attention) influence the situational experiences of transportation. Studies have shown that transportation experiences vary with regard to modality, with audio being particularly effective (Riggs & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2024a, p. 165). Unfortunately, there are only a few empirical studies on audio media. Available evidence suggests, however, that narrative transportation is a key motivation for selecting podcasts (McClung & Johnson, 2010; Perks et al., 2019; Perks & Turner, 2018). It also mediates effects like parasocial relationships with podcast hosts (Scherer & Cohen, 2024). The study therefore looks at the relation between podcast use and transportation experiences and, in particular, the influence of the environmental context.

Empirical studies focusing on audio media are rather rare overall (Riggs & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2024a). Moreover, studies dealing with transportation or similar forms of immersion in stories are often designed as experimental laboratory studies (e.g., Riggs & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2024b; Tchernev et al., 2023) with high internal, but low ecological validity (Reis, 2012). Harrison et al. (2023) and Scherer and Cohen (2024) use survey data on mobile usage and transportation effects of podcasts. Such retrospective and cross-sectional designs, however, do not allow for investigating situational effects on transportation (cf. Naab et al., 2019; Shalev et al., 2025). In order to address these desiderata, this pre-registered study (https://osf.io/fjx6y/?view_only=674c928665774419be178019f46f9a10) examines the use of podcasts in a longitudinal field study. To this end, we use the experience sampling method

(ESM; Myin-Germeys & Kuppens, 2022), which better reflects the specifics of mobile media use. ESM collects granular, momentary (in situ), self-report data (Stone et al., 2023). By asking participants to report on their experience at a specific point in time (usually immediately before the prompt triggering the self-report) rather than retrospectively, validity and reliability of the measurement are improved (Naab et al., 2019; Shalev et al., 2025; Stone et al., 2023). Furthermore, this allows for examining situational influences on transportation.

The present study thus makes several contributions: First, immersive media experiences are examined in greater detail with particular attention to the influence of the three key components of the situational level – media context, environmental context, and psychological states (Schnauber-Stockmann, Bayer et al., 2025). Secondly, it takes a closer look at transportation as a central mediator for the experience of stories, impacting media effects like enjoyment (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2011; Green et al., 2004) or persuasion (Green & Brock, 2000; Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Oschatz & Marker, 2020; Thier et al., 2019; Thomas & Grigsby, 2024). Finally, by using an in situ design, it determines the influences of situational characteristics on transportation in real-world settings, while taking into account an individual characteristic such as transportability, a trait that makes it more likely to become immersed in stories (Green, 2021). Taken together, these features of the research design contribute to a better understanding of mobile audio media such as podcasts, which are consumed in a wide variety of situations in everyday life.

In this study, we focus in particular on true crime podcasts (TCPs) as they are extremely popular (DataGlobeHub, 2026; Domenichini, 2022; Pew Research Center, 2023; Sherrill, 2022; Vitis & Ryan, 2021; Winkler et al., 2022). Although often classified as a sub-genre of narrative journalism, Suter et al. (2026) argue that TCPs extend well beyond this, including “conversational formats, monologic storytelling, and productions that approach the aesthetics of radio drama” (p. 2). TCPs usually present real criminal cases as a mixture of investigative reporting and radio drama. They transport moral messages and social truths

through entertaining narratives (Punnett, 2018). By placing individual criminal cases within a broader social context, they take on greater significance, for example, in relation to the judicial system (Boling, 2019; Boling & Hull, 2018; Yardley et al., 2019). Because TCPs balance information and entertainment, Graham and Stevenson (2022) refer to them as “popular criminology” (p. 214). Although violent media content is generally more popular among men (Reich, 2021), the TCP audience is predominantly female (cf. Boling & Hull, 2018; Guzy et al., 2015; Naseer & St. Aubin, 2023; Pâquet, 2021). This observation is often attributed to women's greater fear of violence and victimization and their need to cope with their own experiences of crime (Vicary & Fraley, 2010). In addition, podcasts connect women to online communities with shared experiences fostering a deeper, sometimes feminist understanding of these experiences (Rodgers, 2022).

TCPs are usually narrated as well as presented in an exciting way, using specific narrative techniques to create suspense (Baumann, 2022, p. 362). This makes them particularly suitable for immersion (cf. Bezdek & Gerrig, 2017; Graham & Stevenson, 2022; Kläs & Birkner, 2020; Schlütz, 2020; Sherrill, 2022) and, thus, an apt object of our study.

Theoretical Background

Narrative transportation as a mental process

The term ‘transportation’ was originally coined concerning reading books as a “journey to and from narrative worlds” (Gerrig, 1993, p. 241). Accordingly, Tchernev et al. (2023) described transportation as “an audience’s mental shift from ‘here’ (the real world, including the audience’s memories, knowledge, and personality) to ‘there’ (the narrative world, with its own characters, events, and rules)” (p. 313). The association with narratives (rather than technical features as stated above) makes this concept particularly suited for the present study. Overall, transportation into narrative worlds can be conceptualized as an integrative melding of attention, imagery, and feelings (Green & Brock, 2000, p. 701).

There are two different models for explaining mental processes during transportation: the Transportation-Imagery Model of Narrative Persuasion (Green, 2004; Green & Brock, 2002; Green et al., 2004) and the more extensive Model of Narrative Comprehension and Engagement (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2011; Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008, 2009). Both models understand narrative transportation as a dynamic mental process in which the recipient's attention is completely focused on the story so that the real-life environment fades into the background. Furthermore, recipients build up a close relationship with the characters in the story and create rich mental images during reception (for a distinction from identification, see Tal-Or & Cohen, 2016). All three aspects (cognitive engagement/attentional focus, emotional engagement, and mental imagery) have been described with regard to audiobooks (Gregg, 2022) and podcasts (Kalch & Schlütz, 2022). While Green and colleagues' work stresses the crucial role of mental imagery in transportation, Busselle and Bilandzic identify narrative understanding as a core process underlying narrative engagement. As mental imagery is a vital and highly engaging part of processing audio media (cf. Richardson et al., 2020), this study follows Green and Brock and relies on transportation as a concept to capture immersion.

The experience of being transported is associated with both stable personality traits (Bilandzic et al., 2019; Dal Cin et al., 2004; Mazzocco et al., 2010) and fluctuating situational factors, that is, the media context, the environmental context, and psychological states (Schnauber-Stockmann, Bayer et al., 2025). Overall, about two-thirds of the variance in media use can be attributed to situation-specific variables (Schnauber-Stockmann, Scharkow et al., 2025). With regard to transportation, Gnams et al. (2014) showed that situational factors account for up to 69 percent of the observed variance in the experience. When it comes to stable individual characteristics, transportability is the most important one (Lissitsa & Laor, 2021; van Laer et al., 2014; Zheng, 2014). Transportability is a situation-independent individual tendency that influences the propensity to be transported in a specific situation

(Bilandzic & Busselle, 2011), where highly transportable individuals can more easily become immersed in stories (Green, 2021). Because podcasts are consumed in diverse everyday situations via mobile devices, the media context, environmental context, as well as psychological states should be recognized as key components in research on narrative transportation.

Situational influences on transportation

With regard to situation-dependent parameters, empirical evidence points to several media and environmental context factors as well as psychological states that can potentially influence the transportation experience. One important media context factor is the length of the individual usage episode (Harrison et al., 2023) with longer narratives being more conducive to being transported (Green, 2021) because there is more opportunity to witness the story unfold and to build imaginary. For audio-visual content, Warren (2020) showed a positive association of viewing session length and transportation. *We thus assume that the duration of a listening episode is positively associated with transportation (H1).* In addition, transportation varies depending on how well the reception situation is shielded from other influences. Such an “auditory bubble” (Bull, 2010, p. 56) or “cocooning effect of personal listening” (Scherer & Cohen, 2024, p. 6) can be created by using headphones (media context) that convey a feeling of closeness (Lieberman et al., 2022). This form of shielding is particularly important in the context of podcast consumption, as podcasts are most often accessed via mobile media and accompany users throughout their everyday lives (Harrison et al., 2023). As a result, listening frequently takes place in dynamic and potentially distracting environments—on public transport, while running errands, or during multitasking—rather than in the controlled, stationary settings traditionally associated with practices such as television viewing. Accordingly, *we postulate that the use of headphones (H2a), especially with a noise-canceling function (H2b), is positively associated with transportation.*

We also assume that transportation experiences are influenced by environmental context factors. Since empirical evidence is both scarce and inconclusive (cf. Green & Appel, 2024), we assume that transportation is more likely when listening to TCP in the privacy of one's own home, because of the more relaxing and less distracting environment compared to, for example, listening in traffic. Scherer and Cohen (2024), however, found that mobile podcast use was associated with higher transportation. As they worked with a cross-sectional design that relied on retrospective and therefore potentially inaccurate self-reports (cf. Naab et al., 2019), we phrase the following research question: *How is listening on the go vs. listening at home associated with transportation (RQ1)?¹*

Podcasts are often combined with other activities such as commuting or housework (Harrison et al., 2023), for instance, to increase productivity (Zeng, 2011) and make time pass more quickly (Perks & Turner, 2018). As for the effects of multitasking, empirical results are mixed. Emde-Lachmund et al. (2017) found that listening to podcasts while performing other activities was detrimental because it distracts attention. Scherer and Cohen (2024), on the other hand, argued that listening to podcasts (which utilizes only a single modality) frees up attentional resources for other senses, allowing listeners to become narratively transported even while engaging in activities that require other senses. In particular, users seem to appreciate the opportunity to focus on audio content while performing a less desirable secondary activity. In this sense, Wang and Tchernev (2012) argue, “the ‘myth’ of multitasking actually is partially caused by the ‘misperception’ of the efficiency of multitasking and by positive feelings associated with the behavior, which is emotionally satisfying but cognitively unproductive” (p. 509-510). In this vein, Scherer and Cohen (2024) assume that perceptions of mobility and multitasking have an additive effect on transportation into an audio story. They argue that listeners use these experiences to immerse themselves in

¹ Deviating from the preregistration, we formulated a RQ instead of a hypothesis, given ambivalent results in prior studies.

a narrative that helps them psychologically detach from secondary activities they are engaged in, thereby maintaining a consistent “space” even though they are physically moving around.

*We therefore ask how co-occurring activities are associated with transportation (RQ2).*²

Finally, psychological states of the listener can impact transportation. Specifically, it is pertinent to consider the role of focused attention in shaping the experience of narrative transportation through podcasts. Research shows that transportation and focused attention, while related, are not the same (Riggs & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2024b). Attention is an essential component of narrative transportation, which can vary over the course of a story, for example, in response to suspenseful elements (Bezdek & Gerrig, 2017). Therefore, we *hypothesize that more attentive listening is positively associated with transportation (H3).*³

Method

We used mobile experience sampling (cf., Myin-Germeys & Kuppens, 2022) to test the hypotheses and to answer the research questions on situational influences on podcast listening. In choosing this method, we prioritized an ecologically valid approach to measuring media behavior at the situational level (Schnauber-Stockmann, Bayer et al., 2025). As discussed above, we focused on TCPs because their suspenseful narratives are particularly suitable for transportation, as indicated by a particularly high episode completion rate of 85% (Singh, 2024). Furthermore, the genre is extremely popular which facilitates sampling (which is not a minor issue for MESM studies).

Procedure

MESM data were collected between 9/5 and 10/2 2023. The study was pre-registered (https://osf.io/fjx6y/?view_only=674c928665774419be178019f46f9a10). The authors were solely responsible for the study. It was not financially supported by any third parties.

² Deviating from the preregistration, we formulated a RQ instead of a hypothesis, given ambivalent results in prior studies.

³ Compared to the preregistration, we made slight changes in wording and the number changed.

Materials, data, code, and an amendment documenting deviations from the preregistration are available on OSF (https://osf.io/7mdbn/?view_only=89a8c0ad40d248eb8025fe635e38a117).

The study comprised three phases: It started with a cross-sectional survey that collected individual data at the person level. The questionnaire began by obtaining written informed consent. The respondents were then asked about their use of podcasts in general and TCPs in particular. These data are used to describe the sample and/or as control variables in the analyses (see below; see OSF for the complete questionnaires in the original language). Subsequently, respondents who had agreed to participate in the MESM study were again asked to give informed consent. Pretests were conducted prior to the field phase in order to optimize both content and process.

The next step was a 12-day mobile experience sampling phase.⁴ Respondents received invitations via SMS for four MESM protocols per day. We conducted a „quasi“ MESM study (Schnauber-Stockmann & Karnowski, 2020), that is, the protocols did not refer to the immediate situation in which the signal was received, but participants responded with regard to the last podcast episode since the last signal. We used a semi-random sampling method with predefined time intervals to specifically target the time slots that most respondents had indicated as their “podcasting primetime” in the preliminary survey (4 to 10 p.m.) (see also Winkler et al., 2022). The study was implemented with SoSci Survey (Leiner, 2019). Both alerts and protocols were displayed via smartphone. In the MESM protocols, participants reported whether they had listened to a podcast since the last signal. If so, they reported on their latest usage episode. Whereas most questions referred to podcast use in general, only participants who had listened to a TCPs received all questions relevant to the current analyses (see below).

⁴ Deviating from the preregistration, the field period was 12 instead of 14 days due to technical difficulties on two days (no signals sent).

The final part of the study consisted of a post-questionnaire measuring transportability and reactivity issues with regard to the experience sampling methodology (e.g., perceived study burden, behavioral changes due to study participation).

Sample

The population consisted of regular TCP listeners (at least two TCP listening sessions per week) aged 16 and older. Participants were recruited via specific social media groups and through snowball sampling (convenience sample). As an incentive, headphones worth around 250 euros were raffled off. The preliminary questionnaire was completed by 256 participants, of whom 196 (77%) agreed to take part in the MESM study. Of these 196 potential participants, 173 completed at least one MESM protocol. Ultimately, 104 individuals from this group participated in the post-survey. One participant did not report any TCP use during the field period, resulting in the final person-level sample size of 103 for the following analyses (i.e., 53% of those who agreed to participate in the MESM study). The mean age of the final sample was 31.7 years ($SD = 7.82$), 84% identified as female, 14% as male, and 2% as diverse. The skewed gender distribution corresponds to usage statistics: TCPs have a predominantly female audience worldwide (Domenichini, 2022; Fathallah, 2022; Naseer & St. Aubin, 2023; Vitis & Ryan, 2021).

On average, each participant completed 28.2 ($SD = 11.5$, $Min = 1$, $Max = 47$) out of 48 MESM protocols (average compliance: 58.7%), resulting in a total of 2,929 protocols. The average completion time was 0.56 minutes ($SD = 0.41$, $Min = 0.03$, $Max = 3.33$). 893 protocols related to TCP episodes and formed the final sample at the situation level. All other protocols were excluded from the following analyses.

Measures

Pre- and post-questionnaire

In addition to sociodemographic data describing the sample at the person-level (e.g., age), two control variables were measured: transportability and gender. Transportability was included to measure trait variations (complementing the transportation measure in the MESM that captures state differences). Transportability was measured with 20 items on a 5-point Likert-type scale (translated into German by the authors) following Dal Cin et al. (2004), including items like “I can easily envision the events in the story” or “I can easily lose myself in the story.” Two items („I find it difficult to tune out activity around me” and „My mind often wanders”) correlated negatively with the scale (although reversed in advance) and were therefore excluded. The remaining items showed satisfying internal consistency ($\alpha = .88$) and were combined into a mean index ($M = 3.39$; $SD = 0.62$). Gender was included to control for its effect on perceptions of crime reporting and TCPs as stated above.

MESM protocol

The central dependent variable was the transportation experience in the listening situation. It was measured using the German transportation scale by Appel et al. (2015) (6 items, e.g., “I felt mentally drawn into the story”, 5-point Likert-type scale). The scale displayed sufficient internal consistency and was thus compiled into a mean index ($\Omega_{\text{between}} = .90$, $\Omega_{\text{within}} = .72$).

As independent variables, we measured the media context factors duration of use (in hours and minutes) and use of headphones (no headphones, headphones with or without noise cancellation) as well as location (4 response options: at home, on the go (e.g., walking, cycling, taking the bus), work/study place, other place; dichotomized for the following analyses into at home vs. on the go or at other places), and co-occurring activities (7 response options: no co-occurring activity, household chores, personal hygiene/body care, work, other media use, sports, eating, relaxing/falling asleep, other activity; dichotomized into co-occurring activity vs. no co-occurring activity) as environmental context factors. Finally, the

psychological state attention was recorded on a fully verbalized 5-point scale from 1 “inattentive” to 5 “concentrated”.

We also recorded response latency as a control variable, that is the time between the usage episode and its report in the MESM protocol (44% of the reported podcast usage situations had taken place within one hour before the protocol, 36% between 1 and 4 hours ago, 20% more than 4 hours ago).

Data Analysis

To test the hypotheses and answer the research questions, we conducted multilevel analyses (MLA) using the R packages lme4 and lmer test (Bates et al., 2015; Kuznetsova et al., 2017). Situational transportation was the dependent variable, listening duration (H1), use of headphones (H2a and b), location (RQ1), co-occurring activities (RQ2), and attention (H3) were the independent variables. Transportability (trait variable), gender, and response latency were included as control variables. All metric situation-level predictors were person mean-centered, metric person-level predictors were grand mean-centered.

Results

The core contours of the situation level can be described as follows: The level of transportation recorded was moderate across all usage situations ($M = 2.52$, $SD = 0.85$; $Min = 1$, $Max = 5$). On average, a usage episode lasted over an hour ($M = 68.30$ minutes, $SD = 56.80$, $Min = 1$, $Max = 480$), and respondents were rather attentive ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 0.84$, $Min = 1$, $Max = 5$). Headphones were used in 52% of all usage episodes (34% without noise cancellation, 19% with noise cancellation), respondents listened to TCPs at home in more than half of all reported situations (57%), and were engaged in a co-occurring activity in 81% of all situations. The most common co-occurring activities were household chores (22%), relaxing/falling asleep (12%), followed by work (6%), sports (6%), personal hygiene/body

care (5%), other media use (5%), and eating (4%). Table 1 contains the zero-order within- and between-person correlations.

[Table 1 about here]

Confirmatory Analyses

Table 2 reports the results of the MLA. The ICC of 0.57 shows that 57% of the variation in transportation can be attributed to the person level and 43% to the situation level.

[Table 2 about here]

Supporting H1, a longer duration of a listening episode was associated with higher transportation ($b = 0.01, p = .002$; H1 supported). Using headphones, with or without a noise-canceling function, did not affect the transportation experience ($b_{no_noise-canceling} = 0.01, p = .912, b_{no_noise-canceling} = 0.05, p = .427$; reference category: no headphones), thus H2a and H2b were rejected. Listening to a podcast at home vs. on the go or at other places ($b = 0.12, p = .011$; RQ1) increased the level of transportation and being engaged in a co-occurring activity was associated with lower transportation ($b = -0.18, p = .002$; RQ2). Finally, higher levels of attention were associated with higher transportation ($b = 0.27, p < .001$; H3 supported).

Exploratory Analyses

In order to better understand the impact of the environmental context, we explored the effects of different co-occurring activities on transportation (Table 3). To do so, we ran an MLA with transportation as the dependent variable and the dummy-coded co-occurring activities (reference category: no co-occurring activity). Six out of eight co-occurring activities lead to lower levels of transportation: personal hygiene/body care, work, other media use, sports, relaxing/falling asleep, and other activities (residual category). Only household chores and eating did not impact transportation.

[Table 3 about here]

Discussion

The present study dealt with a portable audio medium and its suitability for immersive experiences. We focused on narrative transportation understood as a mental shift into the narrative world resulting from a dynamic mental process that integrates attention, imagery, and feelings (cf. Gerrig, 1993; Green & Brock, 2000). This effect was originally described with regard to written texts, but can also be caused by other media modalities such as audio (i.e., Riggs & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2024a). Research shows that transportation is highly susceptible to situational variations (Harrison et al., 2023). Thus, the aims of our study were twofold: First, we wanted to expand the theoretical understanding of transportation experiences (cf. DeAndrea & Holbert, 2017; Slater & Gleason, 2012). In doing so, we addressed conceptual questions, particularly the influence of situational factors on this reception phenomenon. This is especially relevant as podcasts, accessed via mobile media, accompany us throughout our daily lives and are therefore consumed in a wide range of situational circumstances. Second, we extended the range of the theory by testing it in a context which has rarely been addressed in research so far, namely portable audio media (a less studied modality; cf. Riggs & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2024a; Riggs & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2024b). We examined narrative TCPs, because, like many other audio media, they are used in a variety of situations (e.g., in transit or while multitasking), making them particularly well suited for investigating situational influences on narrative transportation.

The study contributed to our understanding of transportation processes in examining narrative portable audio media in situ. Rather than relying on participants' reports of their typical listening habits, we used repeated in situ measurement to improve the accuracy of the results (as recommended by Harrison et al., 2023). We identified the following situational influences on the transportation experience: Overall, transportation levels were higher during longer listening episodes (H1), when listening at home (RQ1), without co-occurring activities (RQ2), and with more focused attention (H3). Somewhat surprisingly, shielding oneself from

the environmental context through the use of headphones did not have a supporting effect on narrative transportation (H2a, b). One reason could be that the use of headphones is tailored to the situation and they are only used when background noise might be distracting, but not when it is quiet. Another reason could be that a lack of headphones is compensated by listening effort (cf. Herrmann & Johnsrude, 2020).

The results for RQ1 contradict Scherer and Cohen (2024), who reported a positive, incremental effect of mobility on participants' absorption when self-reported multitasking was moderate to high (Scherer & Cohen, 2024). This effect (i.e., the positive correlation between perceived mobility and transportation, which is qualified by an interaction with multitasking) could be a consequence of the different study designs (cross-sectional/retrospective vs. longitudinal/in situ). The authors argued quite plausibly that perceptions of mobility and multitasking could have an additive effect on transportation into an audio story, as listeners use these listening experiences to immerse themselves in a narrative that helps them psychologically detach themselves from co-occurring activities (Scherer & Cohen, 2024).

Our study did indeed reveal some differences between co-occurring activities. Most of the co-occurring activities examined (like personal hygiene/body care, work, other media use, sports, relaxing/falling asleep) impaired the transportation experience (RQ2). This supports earlier findings on narrative podcasts and multitasking (Emde-Lachmund et al., 2017). Household chores and meals, however, did not appear to have an influence on the listening experience in the present study. The results also showed that the combination of different sensory modalities – such as listening to TCPs while doing housework – occurred more frequently than the combination of similar modalities. This is in line with Baumgartner and Wiradhany (2022), who argued that combinations of media multitasking in which both activities rely on the auditory modality are less frequently chosen. Our findings also align with their argument that media multitasking combinations are selected in a cognitively adaptive manner: Individuals tend to pair activities that result in lower cognitive demands

(Baumgartner & Wiradhany, 2022). The combination of different modalities makes multitasking and task switching relatively easy and therefore more likely. Or, as Sharon (2023) puts it: “The invisibility of sound calls for a complementary activity that would utilize the eyes and hands” (p. 333).

Secondly, the present study made a methodological contribution by using a design that adequately maps variations in mobile media use and therefore has significant conceptual implications. MESM allows for collecting granular, momentary, self-report data (Stone et al., 2023). This design enhances ecological validity by collecting data in the field in the context of everyday life (Reis, 2012). By applying the method in the context of transportation, we have added to the many laboratory studies on transportation effects that have prioritized internal validity.

Finally, our study contributes to the emerging field of podcast studies, which understands podcast as a technology, an aesthetic artform, as well as a cultural practice (Sharon, 2023). The present study particularly looked at the latter aspect, namely, podcasts as an everyday practice. However, our focus was not on the cultural aspect of podcast use. Instead, by describing the situation-specific use of podcasts, we have laid the foundation for further research.

We set out to better understand the context of podcast listening. More specifically, we were interested in the relationship between media context, environmental context, psychological states, and transportation. Our findings partly reproduced those of Harrison et al. (2023), who found that podcasts are consumed in a variety of contexts. Our results also complemented these by showing how specific media and environmental context factors as well as psychological states affected the listening experience. By this, we went “beyond the immediate communicative functions of podcasts to the wider context of their integration into people’s lives” (Sharon, 2023, p. 333). While the present study has merely described the

situation-specific use of podcasts, further research should focus on a critical, holistic understanding linking technical and socio-cultural aspects of podcast use.

Limitations

Despite the conclusive results of the present study, we have to acknowledge the following limitations. Our study design, although quite elaborate, was still based on a convenience sample consisting of (German) TCP users. The associated self-selection bias, the specific homogeneity of the group (mostly female TCP fans), and the focus on a specific genre significantly limit the generalizability of the results. Other podcast genres or designs (particularly less story driven types; Suter et al., 2026) might be less prone to situational effects on transportation. The correspondence of the overall results with other research, however, supports their validity. Furthermore, despite possible inaccuracies, we relied on self-reports to collect data on psychological states in situ. Transportation is particularly prone to measurement errors, as it is by definition a state of reduced attention (Appel et al., 2015). It may therefore have been challenging for respondents to provide accurate information on their experience in situ what might have affected reliability. Richardson et al. (2020), for instance, showed that participants' reporting of engagement states differed from their physiological responses. Interestingly, they reported more engagement with video content while the automatic measures indicated higher levels of engagement with audio content. The authors suggest "that spoken narratives require the participant to be an actively engaged listener, whereas videos deliver rich stimulation to a more passive viewer. The pictures in the listener's mind may not be as vivid and as detailed as those onscreen, and so auditory narratives are rated explicitly as less engaging; yet the imaginative generation of those images requires greater cognitive and emotional processing, and so they are physiologically more engaging" (Richardson et al., 2020; last para.).

Finally, the paper did not take into account the dynamics of immersive experiences. Transportation theory in general tends to view immersion as a fixed psychological state (but

see Bezdek & Gerrig, 2017). Although our study design would have allowed for time-sensitive analyses, this was not the focus of this paper. To explore this question further, it would be necessary to conduct a “true” MESM study (Schnauber-Stockmann & Karnowski, 2020) with a random sampling frame and a high number of short time units (occurrences, snapshots or slices of time; Schnauber-Stockmann, Bayer et al., 2025). This would provide a detailed representation of use episodes and the associated experiences, enabling a reliable analysis of the dynamics of the transportation experience. Additionally, it would be interesting to record the exact content that was listened to in the moment in question. This would make it possible to link specific narrative content to transportation experiences.

Conclusion

Our study on how the use situation affects transportation complements previous research on several levels: On a theoretical level, the study has contributed to a better understanding of situational transportation experiences, particularly with regard to the influence of the key components of the situational level, that is media context, environmental context, and psychological states. This was further substantiated by the in situ design using mobile experience sampling methodology with its high external validity. Finally, the investigation of an auditory medium (podcasts) has expanded our knowledge of the influence of modality on transportation processes. Overall, the main contribution of the present study is the empirical confirmation of the (perhaps trivial) insight that individual behavior varies across time and circumstances. For media and communication research, this means that the specific media use situation is influential and should be taken into account both theoretically and methodologically, particularly in the context of mobile communication, where media use occurs amid a theoretically unlimited variety of environmental contexts. We hence share the perspective of Schnauber-Stockmann, Bayer et al. (2025), who emphasize: “We thereby call for media and communication researchers to approach the situational level as more than just

“noise” by acknowledging its theoretical and empirical importance to scholarship moving forward” (p. 33).

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Tables**Table 1: Zero-Order Within- and Between-Person Correlations**

	Transportation	Use duration	Attention	Location	Co-occurring activity
Transportation		.12***	.37***	.06	-.13***
Use duration	.05		.02	.01	.03
Attention	.43***	.02		.00	-.17***
Location (1 = home)	-.01	.15	-.10*		.28***
Co-occurring activity (1 = yes)	-.17	.15	-.26*	.55***	

Note: Coefficients above the diagonal line: within-person correlations, coefficients below the diagonal line: between-person correlations.

Table 2: MLA with transportation as the dependent variable and use duration, headphone use, location, attention, and co-occurring activities as independent variables

	b	CI	p
<i>Fixed Effects</i>			
(Intercept)	3.55	3.24 – 3.86	<0.001
Use duration	0.00	0.00 – 0.00	0.002
Headphones (ref.: no)			
Without noise-canceling	0.01	-0.11 – 0.13	0.912
With noise-canceling	0.05	-0.08 – 0.18	0.427
Location (1 = home)	0.12	0.03 – 0.22	0.011
Co-occurring activity (1 = yes)	-0.18	-0.28 – -0.07	0.002
Attention	0.27	0.22 – 0.32	<0.001
Response latency	0.02	-0.02 – 0.05	0.356
Gender (1 = female)	0.01	-0.31 – 0.33	0.959
Transportability	0.61	0.43 – 0.79	<0.001
<i>Random Effects</i>			
σ^2	0.25		
τ_{00} serial	0.26		

Note: $ICC = 0.57$, $N_{Person} = 101$, $N_{Situation} = 857$, $Marginal R^2 = 0.26$; metric L1 variables are person mean-centered, metric L2 variables are grand mean-centered.

Table 3: MLA with transportation as the dependent variable and different co-occurring activities as independent variables (reference category: no co-occurring activity)

	b	CI	p
<i>Fixed Effects</i>			
(Intercept)	3.67	3.36 – 3.97	<0.001
Household chores	-0.10	-0.23 – 0.03	0.134
Personal hygiene/body care	-0.24	-0.44 – -0.04	0.021
Work	-0.29	-0.50 – -0.09	0.006
Other media use	-0.41	-0.62 – -0.20	<0.001
Sports	-0.25	-0.46 – -0.04	0.017
Eating	-0.12	-0.33 – 0.10	0.283
Relaxing/falling asleep	-0.28	-0.44 – -0.13	<0.001
Other activity	-0.24	-0.38 – -0.11	<0.001
Response latency	0.02	-0.02 – 0.05	0.395
Gender (1 = female)	0.01	-0.31 – 0.32	0.962
Transportability	0.59	0.41 – 0.76	<0.001
<i>Random Effects</i>			
σ^2	0.29		
τ_{00} serial	0.25		

Note: $ICC = 0.57$, $N_{Person} = 101$, $N_{Situation} = 868$, $Marginal R^2 = 0.23$; metric L1 variables are person mean-centered, metric L2 variables are grand mean-centered.