

A close-up portrait of Alexandra King, an older woman with grey hair and blue eyes, wearing black-rimmed glasses. She is resting her chin on her arms, which are crossed in front of her. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with greenery and a building.

Alexandra King

PORTFOLIO

Writing and Editing

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Alexandra King

Writer, editor, coach

Alexandra has always loved language. She was an early reader, and she loves to tell stories. She began her career in academia, and spent thirty years researching and writing about projects in the psychology of music on her own and with others, training students in writing techniques, and reviewing other people's writing and giving feedback.

An instinctive and supportive guide, she now helps her clients become polished and published authors through a mix of consistent input, sensitive feedback, and firm encouragement. With qualifications in music, education, and psychology, she covers non-fiction in humanities and social sciences, and fiction and memoirs dealing with the big human issues such as love, loss, memory, relationships, and journeys of self-discovery. She also walks the walk, as she writes about lifestyle, health, travel, and music for magazines and is working on her own book about travelling musicians.

You can find out more about Alexandra at [Happy Bluebird](#).

Her academic writing is under her maiden name of Alexandra Lamont, and she now works and writes under her married name of Alexandra King.

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Battling Temptation With Music Motivation

It has been suggested that there are seven different ways that music makes people feel things. Some of these are very immediate and common to all, like the brainstem response to sound, the potential for synchronising activity to the rhythms of music, or the emotional contagion of the emotions expressed in the music.

By Dr Alexandra Lamont

Senior Lecturer in Music Psychology at Keele University

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Listening to music is a very powerful way of changing the way people feel. Some people are very aware of how they use music to make themselves feel different, while others do this more intuitively, but everyone seems to have some degree of control over the way they use music for matching or changing their emotions. Music is used more frequently than any other strategy when it comes to changing the way people feel, and it's most commonly used for distraction, reducing tension and relaxation.

It has been suggested that there are seven different ways that music makes people feel things. Some of these are very immediate and common to all, like the brainstem response to sound, the potential for synchronising activity to the rhythms of music, or the emotional contagion of the emotions expressed in the music. Some are shared within a given culture, like the use of particular musical instruments or tone patterns to signal certain emotional states or the patterns of expectation set up by certain musical styles. And some are much more personal, like the individual associations we develop with particular tracks or the visual images that people might imagine while listening to music.

People listen to music in many different situations to distract themselves from what is going on. For instance, while travelling, people choose music

they like to make the time pass more quickly and to provide a soundtrack to the activity. With exercise, music is used to dissociate from the activity at hand, reducing feelings of pain and also making time pass more rapidly. It even seems to lead to more endurance and effort being put in. Athletes often have their own preferred music that puts them in the right mindset to engage in challenging physical activity and to connect to others through a sense of shared identity. Our new research into music and willpower is suggesting that music might be used at the point of decision-making over exercise habits too, helping people get in the right mood to actually go to the gym as they intended rather than slumping on the sofa after a hard day's work.

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Research has not yet looked directly at how music might help with other health-related decisions such as giving up smoking, but all our findings would suggest that identifying and then using the right pieces of motivational music could have a huge impact in terms of distraction when it comes to moment-to-moment decisions and in terms of breaking unhealthy patterns of behaviour. Thinking about the musical emotion mechanisms, this might work in terms of immediate brainstem response which would divert attention from the behaviour at hand, and in helping people connect to memories in their past and to future thoughts about their ideal self, as well as generally boosting positive thoughts. While music can be a very personal choice, there are certain characteristics of songs that align with the different ways music makes people feel things. This might be high arousal music to boost and distract the mind, or slower paced music to calm and relax. I've helped shape the Minis Motivational Mix playlist with a mix of different types of song to provide some inspiration to people that might be trying to reach specific goals, such as cutting down on smoking. You can listen to it here.

[← GO TO HOMEPAGE](#)





The best-selling Christmas song of all-time: White Christmas.

Christmas earworms: the science behind our love-hate relationship with festive songs

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In the run-up to Christmas, we're subjected to a daily barrage of festive music – on the radio and television, in shops, train stations, restaurants, pubs and bars. In the UK, old favourites by bands such as Slade and Weezer are doing their regular rounds along with newer contenders from Kelly Clarkson and Justin Bieber. And, of course, Britain's two most popular Christmas songs by Mariah Carey and The Pogues are getting their annual airing.

So are you humming Jingle Bells or All I Want for Christmas while you wrap your presents? Catchy music, "sticky tunes" or earworms, as they have become known, are songs that get stuck in our heads – and while about two-thirds are pleasant or neutral, some can become quite annoying. Earworms are common. Nearly 90% of Finnish adults reported having one earworm a week.

Dreaming of a hit record

Among the cheesy sleigh bells-filled tunes, there are some great Christmas classics – and it's interesting to note that White Christmas by Irving Berlin is not only consistently one of the most well-known Christmas songs but is the best-selling song of all time. It also has the characteristics of an earworm, with melodic shifts and slides around a simple rising and falling melodic shape, and it (like many other songs) contains that scrunchy "Christmas chord". But how does a song like that maintain its popularity over the decades?

The pattern of liking for an individual song over time is held to fit an inverted U-shape curve. According to this, when we first hear a new piece of music we tend to not like it very much. But repetition breeds liking – and repetition both within a song and through repeated listening over days, weeks and months will usually increase our liking in a fairly rapid linear way.

Musically, earworms seem to come more often from songs which have fairly conventional melodic patterns together with something unusual – a key change, or unexpected leaps or repetitions. Just like the well-known negative effects of actually heard background music on concentration and task performance, it seems that earworms can even impair our concentration on other tasks – whether those are songs with lyrics which could interfere with memory or even purely instrumental sequences like the Star Wars theme.

There's a piece doing the rounds written by journalism professor Adam Ragusea, who claims to have identified an elusive "Christmas chord" (a diminished minor 7th flat 5) that might explain the popularity of Christmas songs and why they give us earworms, although not all commentators are entirely convinced. New York-based musician Adam Neely argues it's more about context.

But research suggests that although there could be some common features, the specific songs that evoke earworms are different from person to person. This chimes with what we find when we look at how people listen to music in general. Even very similar types of listeners who live together choose different daily favourite pieces of music – and our music listening and preferences are highly individualised.

What's different about Christmas music is we are all listening to a much smaller pool of musical options at this time of year. Because of the dominance of Christmas music in public settings such as shops and bars or on the radio, we all get a lot more exposure to the same songs than we do at other times of year. So we could argue that Christmas music helps bring us together – whether we love it or hate it.

There's a limit to this repetition effect. Too much exposure sends liking down the other side of the curve, meaning that when we have heard something too much we eventually, and quickly, get quite fed up with it. In our research we find that people regulate their own exposure to their own music over very long periods of time, putting things to one side in favour of new music and constantly keeping their current music fresh.

Following this, coming back to music after a period of time away means it moves back up the liking curve and we can tolerate or enjoy it again. Most of us do this quite intuitively, filing songs away physically or figuratively for later, and we have labelled this kind of listening the "squirrel" approach.

That means a lot of Christmas music, whether we think it's good or bad, will be more popular than it might deserve to be as it usually only gets aired a few months of the year. By the time we're taking down the Christmas tree in January, we've all become thoroughly sick of Mariah and Weezer and so we put them away in the attic with the tree, to be dusted off and enjoyed again next year.

Making a Difference with Music Psychology Research: Strategy, Serendipity, and Surviving a Global Pandemic

Alexandra Lamont¹ 

(Illustrative extract pp. 4–6)

Serendipity, Strategy, and Surviving a Global Pandemic

The research project I use to illustrate how music psychology researchers might navigate the impact agenda draws on a trajectory of my own work on music preferences, conducted on my own as well as with many others. Over the last 15 years, I have been adopting a mainly qualitative approach to understand what music people like and what it means to them (e.g., Greasley et al., 2013; Lamont & Webb, 2010; Sanfilippo et al., 2020), what people's most significant musical experiences are and why (Lamont, 2011), and how preferred music can help in applied contexts such as exercise (Hallett & Lamont, 2019).

I was about to begin a period of research leave which was intended to be spent looking at musical memories as a way into music preference through a series of detailed experimental studies, following up on work done in the previous 2 years (Lamont & Crich, 2021). The additional funds to support this series of studies through research salary and participant payments were unfortunately not forthcoming, and so I had to turn to a Plan B: what could be done with my academic time without additional external funding?

Plan B began prior to COVID-19 as an in-person study of members of the public's favorite music along the lines of the BBC radio program *Desert Island Discs*, familiar to many music fans and Radio 4 listeners in the United Kingdom (Magee, 2012). The program, which has been running since the 1940s, is based around the premise that guests are invited to imagine they are being cast away to a desert island. They preselect eight pieces of music to take with them, and are then interviewed about their life story and their music choices in a narrative life history interview. Celebrity guests are chosen from all walks of life, and the interviews shed light on their personal lives, the importance of key events, and the relevance of their music choices.

The BBC has created an archive of the program with details of the guests and their choices from 1942 onwards and audio recordings of the programs themselves from the 1980s (BBC, undated). While there can be limitations to the credibility of public-facing narratives (e.g., Littler, 2017), this resource nonetheless provides a rich source of data on the highly personal nature of people's relationships with music (Brown et al., 2017), and has also inspired a few music-psychological studies. Knox and MacDonald (2017) explored the music chosen across the entire span of the

program in relation to the personality of the celebrity, measured by proxy in relation to their occupation type. Using machine coding, they were able to identify some trends in chosen music, such as a preference for sophisticated music found by more artistic occupations and a preference for unpretentious and contemporary music by more socially oriented occupations. At a more individual level, Loveday et al. (2020) explored a selection of 80 interviews looking at the connections between personally relevant music and the self-defining period in autobiographical memory. They found that half of the music choices dated to between 10 and 30 years of age, with songs most often linked to memories of a person, period, or place. Their findings provide important confirmation of the importance of identity in social development, and of the longevity of memories around music across the lifespan.

I had already begun my own exploration of this archive looking at what it could highlight about music preferences (Lamont et al., 2018), and Loveday and I have articulated the similarities and differences between our memory and preference perspectives on this dataset in an earlier paper (Lamont & Loveday, 2020). My intention was to continue the *Desert Island Discs* study by interviewing members of the public about their own eight favorite pieces of music and their life stories. Prompted by conversations with prospective participants who said they had their own list ready to go, I had anticipated that these conversations would be pleasant and engaging ways into music preferences that would shed light on influences, the emotions music evokes, and what kind of music different people chose. Using Sloboda's categorization of impact, this study was theoretically grounded and based on existing literature, and I hoped it would have a Level 2 outcome in that it might shed light on elements of musical preference which would have implications for people working in more applied areas.

The Impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally changed many aspects of life, but its impact on research has been dramatic (Corbera et al., 2020). Research priorities around the world have sharply shifted toward the applied and utilitarian, and the pace of such research has also quickened (Dinis-Oliviera, 2020). At what was originally set as the highest level of lockdown at my own institution in the second quarter of 2020, *only* COVID-19-related research was permitted to take place. As restrictions eased they did so in relation to the extent to which they were "critical", with funded critical research on other topics allowed first, followed by funded *or* critical research.

This has led to a proliferation of COVID-19-related funding opportunities and research studies, with many researchers looking creatively at how they could apply their knowledge, skills, theories, and approaches to what is arguably the second most urgent (after climate change) but certainly the most immediately impactful social and

political priority of our times. Studies have sprung up around not only the science of the virus (and in music, issues such as aerosol transmission in rehearsal spaces, e.g., Mürbe et al., 2021) but also from a more human perspective on attitudes toward vaccination (Sherman et al., 2020), studies of social isolation and loneliness (Banerjee & Rai, 2020; Williams et al., 2020) and, more recently, work looking at more adaptive coping strategies for dealing with COVID-19 such as gratitude (Jans-Beken, 2021) or spirituality (Kang et al., 2020). In music psychology, many researchers have pivoted toward COVID-19-related projects, gathering data on many aspects of the role of music during the pandemic. A MUSICOVID international research network sprang up in April 2020 with an initial event in May 2020 including around 250 network members, and this has led to a Frontiers Research Topic on the role of music during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hansen et al., 2021b), with 43 articles accepted to date covering topics such as the pandemic's impact on arts professionals, online improvisation and singing, parenting and caregiving. Some of this research has focused on topics, including the emotional impact of COVID-19 on music choices and connections to music related to the current project, such as Krause et al.'s (2021) study of music listening improving life satisfaction at the start of the pandemic, or Yeung's (2020) study finding nostalgia affected Spotify listening habits under lockdown.

Returning to my own proposed research, I found myself in a situation that will be familiar to many researchers, particularly those engaged in doctoral or funded research under time pressure, needing to adapt my study to the new research environment and reconsider the entire project from the ground up. Crisis often forces a re-evaluation, and this was a substantial one. The first and most pressing issue was ethics at Level 1. What, if anything, could a music psychologist do in a global pandemic? Was it ethically responsible to ask people struggling with lockdown, illness, and caring responsibilities to actually take part in what initially seemed like a frivolous piece of research? As Jowett put it (2020), "researchers should consider whether asking people to participate in research at this time will put them under any additional unnecessary stress". To spend my time usefully and contribute something of value involved a radical rethink.

In addition to my own work on the emotional significance of musical experiences and memories (e.g., Lamont, 2011), over the 2010s, several researchers had been highlighting the multiple benefits of engagement with music listening¹. An increasing focus on the functions of music listening was becoming clear, stemming from early work by Juslin and Laukka (2004). T. Schäfer and Sedlmeier (2009) highlighted the importance of mood, arousal, and emotional benefits, and Groarke and Hogan (2016) illustrated how younger adult listeners emphasized mood regulation and social connection while older listeners

emphasized transcendence and personal growth as the most important outcomes. In particular, research was illustrating that when people experienced distress they often sought solace in music (Garrido & Schubert, 2011, Skånland, 2013, Taruffi & Koelsch, 2014, Van den Tol & Edwards, 2011).

A key influence in my rethinking was Schäfer and colleagues' investigations of music as social surrogacy. In an attitude study (K. Schäfer & Eerola, 2020), they found music was felt to be a temporary substitute for social interaction through the process of evoking memories of either time or place (cf. Loveday et al., 2020). In an experimental approach (K. Schäfer et al., 2020), they found that music listening (to either comforting or distracting music, but importantly chosen by the participants) reduced loneliness and enhanced empathy.

This evidence prior to the pandemic that music listening could serve an important role of comfort and solace in challenging times provided the impetus for a rethinking of the original interview project about favorite music which would not only address Level 1 ethical principles, but move further on in terms of giving something valuable to people dealing with challenging situations. The pandemic-enforced lockdown in 2020 provided such an opportunity to not only gather important data on how listeners were using and responding to their favorite music, but also provide them with a potentially beneficial resource in the toolkit. In the original *Desert Island Discs* interviews, a researcher would visit the guest in advance to gather their chosen favorite records and essentially plan out the interview, including agreeing on the topics to be covered. The process of identifying eight favorite pieces of music might not be straightforward, and this allowed guests time to make considered choices. I had already intended to ask for some advance preparation on the part of my participants in choosing their music, so it was a relatively simple step to reframe the work entirely and provide the materials to allow participants to carry out the entire process in their own time.

Another important addition to the project emerged from developing the do-it-yourself toolkit. On the BBC program, guests are interviewed for approximately 45 min and, as first introduced by Kirsty Young in the 2000s, a short clip of each track is played to them during the interview. Guests sometimes provide immediate responses to the music during the interview. The challenge of asking people about music listening situations has been a long-standing one in music psychology research. Typically, in-depth interviews ask people to reflect back on their experiences at some considerable distance from the event (Rubin & Rubin, 2012), and many interview or focus group studies about music follow this approach (e.g., Saarikallio & Erkkilä, 2007; T. Schäfer et al., 2014; van den Tol & Edwards, 2011). Some research has adopted different techniques to try to circumvent this. For instance, in our interview study of favorite music and people's music collections (Greasley et al.,

2013), participants were interviewed at home and invited to play the music they were talking about. Similarly, Sanfilippo et al. (2020) asked people to shuffle their iPod or other listening device and play the results before reflecting on what the music meant to them. Leaving participants to work through a toolkit in their own time allowed me to invite participants to actively engage with their own music. Rather than just reflecting on the eight pieces, they were asked to actually play them and then give a written response, akin to the solicited diary technique described by Meth (2017). This additional element both enhanced the research findings in terms of accessing hitherto challenging kinds of data and also provided a resource: a listening toolkit that would most likely evoke a sense of nostalgia, connection, and comfort for participants.

The International Dimension

Another change in working habits that has emerged through the pandemic is the ease with which we now communicate online. Setting up an international team would have seemed a daunting task prior to the pandemic, with the need to coordinate diaries, technology, and resources. However, in serendipity, I had an Italian intern working with me on an Erasmus-funded project in early 2020 and since we could not pursue this research which required face-to-face contact, we diverted the project to generating an Italian language version of the study. Talking about the project with colleagues and having launched it in English and Italian, it became clear that there was demand for a Spanish language version, and I was able to recruit a willing academic researcher to support this, and a team of Greek research colleagues and friends volunteered to create a Greek language version. It felt like a long way from the small Plan B sabbatical project, but I have been extremely grateful for the input and support of the team (Catherine Loveday, Liila Taruffi, Benedetta Sbröllini, Amalia Casas-Mas, Christina Anagnostopoulou, Christiana Adamopoulou, Katerina Drakoulaki, Angeliki Triantafyllaki, Joy Vamvakaris, and Tasos Mavrolampados).



Figure 1. Desert Island image used for promotion (Source: image by Hoobychubes from Pixabay).

The Desert Island Discs Toolkit

Due to the international nature of the project, no assumptions could be made that potential participants would know about the BBC's *Desert Island Discs* program. Thus, participants were given a brief explanation of the premise behind the original program and asked to imagine themselves in the same situation of being cast away on a desert island with only eight pieces of music (as well as a book and a luxury). Figure 1 shows a visual representation of the island scenario used for promotion. The toolkit was developed to structure the phases of engagement and to be offered in as flexible a manner as possible. Two different versions were produced: a Word file for participants to complete offline, or a series of 10 interlinked Qualtrics surveys to follow through the steps. The first step was a preparation phase: participants were asked to identify their eight favorite pieces of music, and if responding online, to also give some background demographic data. Following this came a listening and reflecting phase, where they were asked to take each of the eight pieces, in turn, listen to it, reflect on its importance, and describe this in text form: "why is it important to you?". After the eight pieces came a final reflection, where participants were asked to look back over the listening experience, talk briefly about their own life story to provide context, and following the format of the BBC program, to select a book and a luxury to take with them as well as choosing their favorite from the eight pieces. Finally, participants were asked to reflect on the desert island scenario and, if relevant, compare it to lockdown.

As noted earlier, one major advantage to this in contrast to the original design was the addition of the listening step in the central phase of the research. This allowed participants time to reflect and to explore any well-being benefits, as well as to listen to as much of the music as they wanted (which might be an entire symphony or opera). Other advantages were that participants were free to complete the study as quickly or slowly as they wished, and the flexibility in the mode of presentation was also helpful to meet different levels of technical competence and access to the Internet. The final benefit from a research perspective was that once submitted, after joining up participants' responses from each step of the online study, data were ready for analysis without requiring a long process of transcription.



How can we make friends as adults? Getting stuck into new activities is a great starting place, but the internet can also sometimes give us a helping hand

Building Adult Friendships: A Personal Journey

24 November 2025 • Alexandra King

I'm on my eleventh new group of friends. Or maybe it's twelve – it's hard to keep count.

Some people stay close to the area they grew up in and keep in close contact with their school friends, family friends, and so on throughout their lives. This happens more often to those who don't move away for college or university or work, but also to people with close families who stay in the same location. It's more common in certain parts of the world to stay close to your roots, and more likely to happen when life throws additional demands such as children or ill health into the mix.

But lots of us move around and change our lives over time, and this often results in our older friendships drifting and thus a need for new friends. Many people go to university and have at least one group of university friends who, if they gel well, will stay around later on. Work can be another source of friends, and people who change jobs might have distinct groups of friends from different workplaces. Then there's our local area, community groups and activities, friends of friends... It should be easy, but making friends as an adult feels a bit more daunting somehow. People don't always make the effort to keep in touch when their own circumstances change, and while we can often pick up with old friends after extended periods of time, we inevitably lose something of that day-to-day connection, and we can end up feeling lonely.

The internet has made it a bit easier to handle the demands of making new friendships. In a piece in today's Guardian, [Emily Bratt](#) talks about the ease of finding friends in her 30s through direct friend-finding sites like Bumble BFF and Timeleft, as well as connections made indirectly through sites like Spareroom. When I moved to London in the 2010s, some of my own internet friends from a women's forum became very close real-life friends as I found myself in the same location as them. I met my husband indirectly this way (having tried and failed on all the dating sites!).

But there is nothing that compares to being physically in the same place and spending time with people face to face to develop new friendships. In my small French village, over the past five years I've developed close friendships through all kinds of shared activities that range from the more traditional drinks and dinners to chopping logs, rescuing furniture from floods, going on historical walks, and moving a huge jacuzzi. We've put up marquees, searched for hidden treasure (no, I'm now not a millionaire), cried on each other, danced in the streets, and fallen asleep on each others' sofas. Most of us have a bit more free time, and most of us are also looking for the connections we left behind us in our previous lives (there are a lot of people from elsewhere who've ended up here).

Loneliness is absolutely terrible for our mental health, and friendships are so important. Cultivating them in later life is just as necessary as it was on the first day at primary school, and even if we do need to put a bit more work into nurturing them as adults, the payoff is so worthwhile.

friendship, happiness • Positive thinking, Quality of Life



It's exactly a year since I left my long-term academic career, in a role I used to love. Was the problem the fit between me and the job, or had things just changed?

Does your job fit?

30 September 2025 • Alexandra King

It's exactly a year since I left my long-term academic career, in a role I used to love. At the turn of the millennium I signed up with enthusiasm for what I thought would be a glittering career full of inspiring conversations, opportunities to make a real difference in my own research and in teaching and training future generations, some international travel, and freedom to organise my time and my own direction. But after 25 years I realised that the university and I were pretty much done, and that I didn't want to continue putting myself through the daily grind. I hadn't fully realised the extent of it until I stopped working, but I was burnt out. So what was going on?

The amount of 'fit' between the person and the environment is a long-standing concept in psychology, but has only recently been linked to burnout. There are five dimensions to fit at work: person-job fit, person-organization fit, person-vocation fit, person-group fit, and person-supervisor fit. If some of these aren't right, the employee will likely not be very happy, but if many of them aren't right, this leads to emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and low occupational effectiveness – which add up to burnout.

In a [recent study](#) researchers from Guangzhou, China compared the effects of person-organisation fit and person-job fit, looking at their effects on work pressure and burnout. Their participants were quite young, with an average age of 33, and had not worked at their companies as long as I did (average 2 years in current role). But their findings were clear that lower person-job fit led to both higher work pressure and burnout, and lower person-organisation fit led to higher work pressure.

Did this help explain things for me? In part, as my job had changed a lot over the years. Initially I was working in my specialist area, with a fairly free rein to pursue my interests, with some talented students and inspiring colleagues. But over time this shifted gradually to a point where there were too many students to build personal engagement with, not enough time for the exciting research, and an overwhelming deluge of procedures to follow and keep up with – similar to the [technostress I wrote about recently](#). Both I and quite a few of my colleagues, through no fault of our own and despite our best intentions, were becoming emotionally exhausted, more cynical, and not delivering our best work.

To be fulfilled at work, the idea of fit is obviously important, with the most important fit being between you and your role. But the Guangzhou researchers also conclude that minimising work pressure can help protect against burnout – and this can be done through things like effective time management and stress management reduction skills.

And why the bee? It symbolises recovery after burnout. By the riverside in rural France where I am lucky to live and enjoy life now, we found this little bee earlier in the summer, dehydrated and suffering from heat exhaustion. We fed it beer and sugar water, and slowly but surely it regained enough energy to walk and then fly away. Like the bee, we can get out of burnout, but only by changing things and taking control of our situations.

- Burnout, Positive thinking, Quality of Life



Alexandra King

Key contact information

Alexandra works in rural France from her riverside property, but is happy to travel if needs be for the right customer! She is a UK national, and is also registered as an *Entreprise Individuelle* (EI) in France under the name of Bluebird, with a portfolio of international clients.

Please set up a discovery call with Alexandra to discuss how you might work together. It's often a good idea to 'meet' to see if things gel.

DISCOVERY CALL: [BOOK HERE](#)



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