

The iPod zombies are more social than you think

December 16 2013, by Nick Prior



A budding romance? Ed Yourdon

Teenagers get a bad rap for zoning out on their iPods at every given opportunity, but they may not be the unsociable narcissists they are often portrayed as. In fact, they are often skilled users who manage their devices in surprisingly social ways.

Those who take the tube or bus to work will recognise the scene. A bus

full of [pod people](#), white buds plugged into their ears, seemingly oblivious to the outside world. In the street, teenagers and adults alike are cocooned in their sonic enclaves, apparently oblivious to the world around them.

But a study we conducted of 155 first-year students at the University of Edinburgh found a surprising diversity in how such devices were used. When the students recorded how they used their MP3 players on a daily basis, we found they were not only sharing playlists and DJing at parties with them, but managing mental conditions and using them as a defence against harassment.

Escape pod

Public debate regularly places the [blame for a decline in civic values](#) at the door of "privatising" technologies such as the iPod and the mobile phone. At best, mobile audio devices are said to filter out the noisy city, allowing [users](#) to control their own environment on their mundane journey to work. At worst such devices are assumed to completely isolate social beings from one another, turning them into atomised consumers who actively withdraw into their own zones of security.

In a 2008 episode of *The Simpsons*, the citizens of Springfield become so addicted to their gadgets they end up as servants to a new master race of iPods, controlled via the very white ear-buds they so desire.

The little academic research that exists broadly follows the drift of these characterisations. [Sound Moves](#), the most influential study of iPods by Professor Michael Bull, shows how users' strategies of withdrawal and control are designed to place them in a bubble of "accompanied solitude".



The zombies are coming and they're dressed by J Crew.

The plural iPod

Our study, which will be published in the journal *Poetics* in February, suggests otherwise. Less than half of our [young people](#) used their iPods as a protective barrier against the city, and the majority were more plural, conscious and circumspect in their uses.

Far from surrendering to a pattern of withdrawal, many users reported how the [device](#) forced them to confront the ethics of sharing a communal space with others.

They struggled with the appropriateness of using the device in certain social situations, such as waiting for friends or entering shops. They modified the way they used their devices with a nod to what was actually happening around them. One student confided that she regularly switched her iPod on and off to catch "snatches of conversations,

birdsong, even traffic noise".

The "social" dimension of mobile audio devices rarely catches people's attention. Yet around a third of users reported that they used their devices to connect with others. Some shared ear-buds with friends while maintaining conversations. Others docked devices into speakers in domestic settings or used the device in social media-based ecologies of sharing, posting links on Facebook to songs they'd just listened to, for instance.

More than one respondent noted how they had formed close and enduring friendships as a result of flicking through the playlists made by strangers at parties. Others said they found out about new music in face-to-face situations where the MP3 player was passed around and playlists discussed.

Different strokes for different folks

Even in the relatively homogeneous sample of the study, variations were apparent in how users interacted with their MP3 players, suggesting that our reactions to these devices is more varied than simply plug in, tune out.

Several female students noted that they used their MP3 players to avoid unwanted male attention by pretending to use the device to give off the air of unavailability, even when it was switched off. Variations in use were also dependent on class differences, where cost and taste – including whether users listened to classical or pop music – were reflected in the extent to which devices were actually used.

One student stated that he couldn't afford an MP3 player and criticised the research as exclusionary, a reminder of basic social inequalities in the ownership of gadgets. Another explained how listening to classical

music on his iPod enabled him to keep his hallucinations under control.

Just as the iPod usurped the Walkman in our lives, the smartphone is gradually replacing MP3 players. Now that so many mobiles have the capacity to store all the music we want, we are packing both devices less and less. It will be interesting to see if the way we use these devices continues to change as a result. Music-sharing apps such as Soundwave, 8tracks and Soundcloud are becoming popular among young people so the future may well be even more social and even less pod shaped.

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