THE CREATIVE IPOD LISTENER

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In this paper we suggest that people's iPod listening and their interactions with iTunes software result in experiences that are suffused with emotional, physical and social potential. Listeners can use music in order to manage, enhance or facilitate different situations, affective states, processes or activities. This paper will explore how this is informed by listeners' complex understanding of musical genre and style in their collection.

Introduction

Studies of iPod (and mp3) listening have primarily focussed upon the listeners' wish for auditory control and their attempt to withdraw from public spaces.

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This focus has led to a skewed understanding of iPod listening as being an exclusive and excluding activity where listeners are only interested in their personal listening experiences and their individual auditory version of the world. However, the technology of the iPod and mp3 affords more than just an auditory 'shield' from the world. This paper describes a range of possibilities that includes emotional, physical and social potential when listeners engage with and manage their music through interfaces such as iTunes and while listening 'on the move'. We argue that listeners, through a complex understanding of their music, can creatively design their listening experience according to different situations, use music to manage their emotions and space, and in the process contribute to their sense of well being and adding to their sense of self. But first, we will briefly examine the technology involved and its affordances.

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The iPod - design and technology

People's listening experience via an iPod or other mobile mp3 players is greatly influenced by the associated design and technologies. Firstly, the compressed size of mp3 files means that listeners can easily carry their entire music collection with them. Although the compression may sacrifice some of its audio quality, listeners can quickly and easily choose the exact track to listen to whilst on-the-move and under different situations. The mp3 format makes it easy to buy and share music, and applications such as iTunes facilitates the organisation of the music according to genre, mood, artist, tempo etc, allowing listeners to create different types of playlists, and to add meta-tags (ID3 tags) to their music. Thus, people's interactions with mp3 when listening to the iPod is very different from the interactions with and listening to analogue music which have previously involved taking either the LP, tape or CD in your hands, placing it in the stereo and perhaps reading on the cover or flicking through the booklet. With the

iPod, listeners manage the music on their computer without having any direct physical contact with the music. Furthermore the possibility of listening using the shuffle mode affects the way we listen to mobile music and the experiences we have while listening. Whether shuffling from different playlists or from the entire music library listeners have less control over their listening thus allowing themselves to be surprised, captivated or even to encounter meaningful experiences like coincidence and serendipity.[iii]

Thus, besides supporting the individual's shielded listening, the affordances of the iPod (discussed above) allow people to not only develop an awareness of their music, but also its social and psychological potential in different situations. In this light, listening is not only about finding your favourite song. People can use music to stage different activities for self and/or with others under varying contexts. Our discussion will present this as the different types of agencies afforded to listeners when using the iPod.

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The agencies can be described as either having a social function, a mood managing function, or as being connected to an activity.

iPod agency

SOCIAL AGENCY

iPods can be plugged into sound systems for social listening. They are often used at parties where people in turn take on the role as DJ mixing the music from their private music library or using self-constructed playlists that suit the current mood. In more intimate situations, iPod listening can be part of a group activity and be central for the constitution of social situations and collective memory.

" My friends whom I have not seen for nearly a year were visiting. So we were looking at old photos from high school while listening to music that we used to love during that time. My iPod was plugged into the sound system. At one stage Laura pointed to a photo and reminded us that in that photo we are dancing to a Timberlake song and then at the end of that current song, the iPod threw us the same Timberlake song from the photo! Spooky! The coincidence heightened the party mood! We all shouted and started dancing!" (Xana, 2007)

Another example of the social agency afforded by the iPod is found amongst music enthusiasts (both amateurs and professionals). One informant reports for instance how a party band is using drum tracks on their iPod instead of an actual drummer. On their band poster they are promoting and branding themselves by focusing on their unusual instrumentation. On the poster it says: 'iPod on drums!'

 Besides allowing for shared listening experiences, the iPod can also be used as a way of developing and communicating one's personal taste in music and in the process, one's personal identity.

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MOOD MANAGEMENT AND MOOD CHECKING

The use of music to manage personal moods and feelings has been emphasised by many (e.g., Bull, 2005, 2008; Leong, 2009; Simun, 2009). Here, we want to examine how this is executed. Researchers usually examine listeners' emotional 'peak experiences', such as whether they are very happy, sad, angry or other strong and easily definable emotions.

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Under such situations, listeners often know exactly what they want to hear and what will put them in the desired state of mind. Nola explains:

"Lets say that I have a broken heart. That is a classic. […] Then you can have this empty feeling […] And you can enhance that feeling and perhaps give it meaning for instance by listening to depressing music and in that way having a sort of cleansing moment or by creating a space that makes sense of the emotion you are feeling. […] At the same time the music can help to enhance or support any happy emotions. That is amazing." (Nola, 2010)

However, more frequently than not, our emotional states are often somewhere in between these extremes, which makes a definition of the private mood and the subsequent choice of music challenging. Here, we show that under certain circumstances, listeners use the shuffle mode as a way of 'checking in' or locating their own emotional state.

"Walking to Uni to submit my assignment and I had my iPod in my hand constantly pressing forward in shuffle. I am not quite sure how I am feeling and I am using the skip button to try and find a song that fits this mood." (Josh, 2007)

And when listeners succeed in managing moods through their music listening, they are relieved. It gives them a feeling of accomplishment or success:

"It is one of those small victories in everyday life […] It is not a giant boost of happiness but more like pressing the elevator button and discovering that the lift is already there at your floor. If this happens at the University it is the greatest joy of all. You feel on top of it all." (Frederik, 2010).

ACTIVITY BASED AGENCY

The organization of the music according to mood management is closely connected to the activities that accompany the listening. Often the choice of music will depend on a combination of the current mood of the listener and the activity that is carried out while listening to music. If the activity requires energy the listener can use the music to get in the right energized mood. The iPod user is very aware of these qualities of the music and of mobile listening and this consciousness shows in the organization of the music. One iPod user for instance reports how she listens to her playlist 'Run for it' when she goes out for a run. The numbers on this playlist are carefully chosen in regards to tempo and mood and the order of the songs is organized to fit a certain development in intensity throughout the workout.

Patrick donates blood once every two months and he chooses a particular playlist to listen on his iPod:

"I have one playlist of a classical composer that I listen to when I'm giving blood at the blood bank, cos I can get through a whole symphony in that time, makes the time goes very fast" (Patrick, 2007)

Several informants also use the iPod at the grocery store. One of them is easily affected by the crowd and the noise level of this place. He uses the private soundtrack to shut out the many inputs that characterize this public place. Another listener uses the small breaks in a day, for instance while standing in line at the grocery store, to create positive experiences for herself.

"A lot of people say that they listen to music to avoid wasting time. They think they are wasting time while standing in line in Aldi [a supermarket chain]. I feel like listening to music gives me different experience […] It cannot make the trip to the supermarket shorter, but it can make it more exciting. It gives it meaning." (Rocha, April 2010).

As mentioned the iPod can have a practical function for listeners that work with music either professionally or as a hobby. One informant, Frederik, a drummer, uses metronome tracks when rehearsing to help him keep time. Furthermore he uses the iPod to prepare for band rehearsals:

"...And if I am going to rehearsal and I am not prepared, then I cal prepare my self using the iPod on my way there" (Frederik, 2010)

The negotiation for music that best fit the activity appears to be learnt through previous experiments and with particular goals in mind.

"When I choose a playlist for work, I need something that keeps it light and kind of happy, bouncy. You don't want something that depresses you and the customers. For drawing, it's about keeping my attention focused on what I am doing. For drawing, I am the biggest procrastinator, takes me forever to draw things. So I need some music that didn't distract me completely. Need it to keep me chained to my desk." (Xana, 2007)

Our empirical material has also revealed that iPod listening is not suited for every situation. For instance most informants do not use mobile sound media when they are tourists in a new city.

"Let's say that I'm in Mumbai for the first time. Then I wouldn't feel qualified to create a space there […] does that make sense? […] Well I think by automatically blocking out things from the beginning I would drown the great experience it could be seeing a place for the first time." (Nola, 2010)

'Frederik' also explains how the music can be a disturbing element when you are in a new city. However, it depends on what you are hearing, he says:

"It mustn't be attention-demanding music. […]It mustn't be great art haha…"(Frederik, May 2010)

AGENCY OVER PLACE AND SPACE

By using their iPods plugged into sound systems, some listeners show how they enact agency over their environment – the place and space they happen to be in. This can be related to who else are in the space. For example, Xana 'broadcasted' certain tracks from her iPod through the home sound system as

a weapon against her flatmate whom she was not getting along with. This was because her flatmate, Emma watches certain TV shows loudly that annoys Xana. In fact, this cheered her up.

"Thinking about procrastination and how I should be doing work. Also about how stupid Em's TV shows are. Action: choose music that I know Em hates and play it loudly – so music as weapon of noise pollution. Wahaha!" (Xana, 2007)

Xana also uses her iPod to feel more comfortable and 'in charge' of her environment at work. In her new job, she deals a lot of with strangers. So when she was told that she was allowed to bring and play her music at work, she carefully curated a playlist to make her feel in control and more confident.

"I have a playlist with songs that reminds me of happy times, my good friends, family and so on, as well as songs that I know that are popular with most people. By having these familiar songs and being in charge of the soundscape of the shop, I feel more confident when dealing with strangers." (Xana, 2007)

The creative iPod listener

These different ways of using the iPod bear witness to a new type of listener – one that has a well-developed comprehension of the potential of music and mobile listening. As mentioned the design of the iPod and the 'materiality' of mp3 files bring about a different interaction with music when buying it and listening to it. Even though people don't have any physical contact with the mp3 files, the above examples of the different agencies attached to mobile music listening seems to indicate that people's relation to the music is as personal, emotional and extraordinary as ever. The physical interaction is now with the iPod. The listeners carry it close to their bodies, and while listening they are often in continuous contact with it as they manage the volume and the order of the songs. One informant even explains how he does this on the move without even looking at his iPod. This familiarity with the iPod suggests intimate relations between the iPod and the listener. In some situations the listeners feel that they need the music in order to be comfortable

 Even though there is a bodily familiarity between the listener and his iPod, the listening experience, when using headphones, is very different from hearing music on a stereo or at a live concert. The iPod listener will not have the same bodily reactions of the bass resonating in his chest or the bass drum vibrating through his body. However it seems that iPod listening still engages the body and that the combination of body movements and music are essential to the experience:

"It creates a possibility for contemplation. Partly because the body is activated… like walking to the beat of the music…that is pretty normal, I think […] 120 beats per minute that fits just right." (Jeppe 2010)

As mentioned the listening also affects the body by the energy and tempo of the songs getting the listener ready to perform physically or calming him down after a busy day. According to Shuhei Hosokawa (who has examined *The Walkman Effect*, 1984) the body is central to the concept of the Walkman. In fact he states that:

"Whether it is the Walkman that charges the body or, inversely, the body that charges the Walkman, it is difficult to say. The Walkman works not as a prolongation of the body (as with other instruments of musicam obilis) but as a built-in part or, because of its intimacy, as an intrusion-like prosthesis…" (Hosokawa, 1984:176)

Hosokawa believes that the Walkman opens up the body and initiates a process of aestheticisation of urban space. Furthermore the listening process becomes a way of interpreting our selves as the music seems to come from within our own bodies. When applying this notion of a musical interpretation of the self to our current examination of musical agencies it seems to characterise the process of managing personal moods though mobile music listening. By constantly (perhaps unconsciously) evaluating one's personal mood and organizing the music according to one's physical and emotional needs the listener is trained in and becomes familiar with his own reactions to certain situations and to different music genres. The mobile sound media becomes tools in a personal education of the self.

The compressed quality of the mp3 files also affects the role of the listener. According to Jonathan Sterne an mp3 file takes up a tenth of the space of a song on a CD. This extensive compression works because the listener unconsciously fills in any missing auditory information making the music seem the same as when it was heard on a CD or the like. However, somewhere in the middle ear we can detect these reductions in detail and complexity.

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This change in the quality of the music also affects how we listen. As mentioned many iPod listeners report how they use the mobile music to manage their mood or create memorable experiences in different situations. Nevertheless when they really want to focus their listening and enjoy a piece of music they primarily listen on their stereo at home or go to live concerts.

 It is interesting then, how the mobile listening, if it is not necessarily a focused listening, can give the listener strong emotional experiences. The French sociologist Antoine Hennion explains this by describing how iPod listeners construct their own passivity letting themselves be swept up in the music and in the emotion.[viii] So instead of popular music pacifying the listener, as Adorno describes it, the listener actively chooses to surrender to the music and create a personal and emotional experience. As such the listener is very much in control throughout the listening. Even when he himself might describe it as 'losing himself in the music' the experience will often be staged and designed.

This controlled and staged listening can however in some situations influence the experience of situation's authenticity. The listener Nola describes how it feels when she becomes aware of her own staging of an emotional listening situation:

 "…and it was like 'uh, now I'm in the country, and it is so beautiful' […] and then suddenly there was this song, that did not fit in at all […] and it was so funny because I suddenly realised what I was trying to do, and that sometimes I fail at it, and how ridiculous it sometimes can be, right?" (Nola, 2010)

Conclusion

This paper has presented different ways people exert agencies during music listening through their iPods. We have shown how the iPod is used in many different situations and with different emotional, physical or social needs/agendas. Throughout, iPod users are found to understand implicitly how different kinds of music can affect both their sense of self and its influence over different social situations, whether or not they actually succeed in managing their situation and mood. But regardless of the outcome, the iPod listener is found to interact actively with the music, and sometimes in novel and perhaps

a more unexpected manner. Thus, far being the listener who is locked and immersed in their sound bubble, iPod listeners are actively involved in their soundscape: creatively tuning, adjusting, and designing a soundtrack that not only support their sense of self, identity, mood, and aspiration, but also their activities and surroundings.

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  2. *Cf. J.J, Gibson "The Theory of Affordances," Perceiving, Acting, and Knowing eds. R. E. Shaw and J. Bransford, (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1977).*
  3. *For more on listening experiences while using shuffle mode see Tuck Wah Leong: Understanding Serendipitous Experiences when Interacting with Personal Digital Content.*
  4. *Quotes are taken from fieldwork conducted in both Australia (2007) and Denmark (2010) to understand people's listening experience of the iPod. Names of informants have been anonymized.*
  5. *Valcheva, Playlistism: a means of identity expression and self-representation.*
  6. *Juslin and Sloboda, Music and Emotion, 548*
  7. *Sterne, "The Mp3 as a Cultural Artefact", 834.*
  8. *Gomart & Hennion: Music Lovers. Here taken from Juslin & Sloboda: Music and Emotion.*