



My music, my world: using the MP3 player to shape experience in London

MIRIAM SIMUN
Harvard University, USA

Abstract

This article examines the ways in which individuals use MP3 players to shape their experiences of the London commute. To investigate MP3 listening practices, I conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with eight DJs and 'listeners' living in London. I argue that MP3 players enable individuals to use music to precisely shape their experiences of space, place, others and themselves while moving through the city. In doing so, individuals experience great control as they transform urban journeys into private and pleasurable spaces. While experienced effects of MP3 player listening were similar among respondents, pre-existing relationships to music appear to relate to motivations for use. This article draws on a variety of social theorists ranging from Simmel and Adorno to Lefebvre to interrogate the experience of control MP3 users describe, and to understand the implications for the autonomy of urban inhabitants.

Key words

city • commute • control • music • MP3 player • privatization • public space

INTRODUCTION

The MP3 player is more personal ... I've got loads and loads [of music] in there, whatever I want to listen to, whatever mood I'm in, whatever I want to do.
(Nate)¹

Every day, people board the double-decker buses, hop on the tube and walk the streets of London plugged into their MP3 players. Sometimes, it seems that the 'headphoned' outnumber the naked ears. Why? What is so appealing about the MP3 player? What does this object offer its users? And why is it so prevalent in London?

As Nate explains above, and I scrutinize below, MP3 player (MP3) users describe an object that endows an unprecedented level of control over the auditory experience while moving through the city. Previous generations of personal stereos were plagued with problems that prevented a smooth listening experience — interruptions, poor sound quality and the need to carry around bulky CDs or tapes - so that many people did not use them daily. In investigating Walkman practices, Michael Bull found that sometimes users stopped listening, because no music was better than the 'wrong' music (2001). MP3s make available such vast music libraries to users that missing the 'right' music is a challenge. The MP3 enables users to construct uninterrupted personal sound bubbles. As Sally describes:

The thing about the iPod that just blows my mind is that I've got all my music, and can listen to anything, as I want it - I can customize my playlist ... I can say, hmmm, none of the playlists are doing it for me, I'll make one... I think the MP3 player is the best thing ever invented, musically.

The capabilities of the MP3 endow users with a great deal of control over the auditory environments of their urban commutes. This ability is becoming ever more essential for a great many city dwellers.

As one Londoner puts it, sitting behind me on the bus, it's a 'luxurious necessity'.² This investigation aims to answer the question 'why?' Why is control over the auditory experience so important to Londoners? How does it transform their experiences? Of the city? Of their commute? Of others? Of themselves? What purposes are served by these transformations? And what does this signify about living in London? What does it signify about them? To begin exploring these questions, I examine the shifts in perception and experience that occur once eight Londoners, coming from all walks of life, 'plug-into' their MP3s and enter, as Michael Bull acutely notes in his research of the iPod, 'personalized soundworlds' (2005: 353).

In this article I describe the different ways in which users call upon music to reconfigure their commuting experiences. Amidst various strategies, respondents consistently described experiencing great control as they

transform London commutes into personal and pleasurable spaces.

I interrogate this experience of control using a number of different theoretical approaches. Does employing the MP3 empower users with greater autonomy in their everyday lives? Or, as Theodor Adorno would have, is the experience of control simply an illusion propagated by the culture industry? Does mediating the city with music pacify users while furthering the 'dissociation' of urban inhabitants that Georg Simmel describes? Or, as Shuhei Hosokawa argues, are these experiences empowering in furthering individuals' abilities to deconstruct, construct and perform personal meanings of the city, of space, of the self?

MP3 users employ music to reconfigure time, space and self as they navigate the urban commute. Using music to direct cognition and emotion, MP3 users redefine their relationship to the people and places they encounter. By inciting such transformations users experience great control. I argue that this control is at once both empowering and illusory. In daily mediating their journeys with music, users construct illusions of an improved urban commute by excluding from their *perceptions* negatively experienced elements of the commute. In controlling their experiences of the urban environment precisely by disengaging from it, MP3 users musically mediate rather than change that which they find problematic. However, in this very disengagement - and in users' ability to choose when, where, to what degree, and in which fashion to do so — users are empowered as actors. For by calling upon music's power as a prescriber of social action (DeNora, 2000), users shape experience, organize the self, and reconfigure their relationships to the urban environment. The result is a reconfiguration of the city itself, as public space is transformed into a collection of private and pleasurable spaces.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach

To investigate how MP3 use affects experience, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with eight individuals living in London. The questions asked about the times and places individuals utilized their MP3s, how they chose which music to listen to while commuting, and the effects they perceived on their thoughts, emotions and overall experiences.

Acknowledging the researcher and the research as actors proved crucial to my investigation, for both actors enter into the findings. I inquire of, and interpret, MP3 practices as a female, a student, a 'listener' and an intermittent iPod user. In questioning users about their practices, I introduced a reflexive component into their experiences. Most respondents appeared to have not previously considered the shifts in perception that occur while listening with MP3s. In describing their uses and experiences, many respondents came to realizations about their practices right in front of me. It is likely that the

reflexivity invoked by the interviews affected some respondents' experiences the next time they used their MP3. In this way, my investigation of MP3 use has further affected the very practices I examine.

The users

MP3 technology enables users to precisely produce the music listening experience, in that a vast number of songs may be called upon to play in the order and grouping of choice. Of interest was how DJs, who have experience producing musical experiences as well as presumably a deeper understanding of music that comes from DJ techniques such as beat-matching and musical flow, might approach transforming their commuting experience with music in different ways. For the purposes of this study a DJ is defined as someone who mixes music, using either vinyl or computer software, and has played in public.

A small convenience sample of MP3 users was interviewed for this study. 'Listeners' were recruited at central transport stations. DJs were recruited at clubs, rave parties and record shops, with particular effort made to recruit DJs of various musical styles. All respondents had owned a portable MP3 for at least one year and used it while commuting a minimum of five hours per week on average. The hope is *not* to generalize findings to a larger population, but to embark on an exploration of how individuals make use of the MP3 to shape their experiences. Within the sample, the aim was to investigate a range of individual experiences, taking into account gender, age and DJ status.

THEORETICAL CONTEXT

I seek to develop a theoretical context to serve as a departure point from which to analyze the forms and types of experiences users invoke with their MP3s. I construct this milieu at the intersection of the core dynamics that emerged from my research. To begin, the setting: London. The urban space is where the MP3 is engaged, and the place users navigate with mediated perceptions. Enter the catalyst: music. The powers of music as a social, personal, emotional and physical force all come into play as users shape their experiences. Thus, the story unfolds: this is one of meaning-construction, of leisure and of the self.

Simmel and the city

For Simmel, writing of the urban in 1903, it would be no surprise that MP3s are abundant in the capital city of London. The personal soundworld the MP3 facilitates has much to offer users as they navigate the London commute. Simmel's city is categorized by over-stimulation of the senses:

The psychological basis of the metropolitan type of individuality consists in the *intensification of nervous stimulation* which results from the swift and uninterrupted change of outer and inner stimuli ... [impressions of the small town] use up, so to speak, less consciousness than does the rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions. (2003[1903]: 15)

Over 100 years later, MP3 users' descriptions of the London commute exemplify Simmel's analysis of the urban experience. Consider Chao's comment:

London I have difficulties living in, because it's so big, it's so stressful, and it's so different and diverse ... so there's more stimuli than there are in other places, there are more different kinds of people ...

The users interviewed often experience their commutes as overwhelming and stressful. The MP3 enables users to mediate the overwhelming nature of the city that Simmel describes by listening to music.

Simmel focuses on visual stimuli of the city; however, sound is even more impressing. As Fran Tonkiss notes, 'Ears cannot discriminate in the way eyes can - as with smell, hearing puts us in a submissive sensuous relation to the city' (2003: 304). This defenselessness to the urban soundscape (Bull, 2001) is exactly what the MP3 mitigates against.

In coping with this over-stimulation, city dwellers develop what Simmel identifies as the blase attitude — an attitude of indifference. Long before the invention of personal stereos, Simmel described the urban strategy of disassociation: 'What appears in the metropolitan style of life directly as disassociation is in reality only one of its elemental forms of socialization' (2003[1903]: 16). In engaging the MP3, urban users render physical (in the auditory sense) the mental disassociation Simmel writes of.

Bull understands iPod use to be furthering this indifference and dissociation. He argues that the city spaces users navigate '... increasingly lose significance for them' (2005: 353—4). The Londoners interviewed here largely support Bull's finding, in describing using the MP3 to ignore their surroundings. And yet, some users describe a disassociation of a different form — for in gaining control over the auditory environment, users at times become *more* receptive to their surroundings, albeit musically mediated versions. Simmel writes that full engagement with the urban would leave one, 'completely atomized internally and [in] an unimaginable psychic state' (2003[1903]: 15). MP3 use presents an interesting ability to actually engage with the city. As Sally describes, rather than 'switching off, listening to her MP3 enables her to 'switch away' - to an urban space experienced with her choice of music, transformed from overwhelming to personal and enjoyable.

Adorno: On illusion and music

The phrase, the world wants to be deceived, has become truer than had ever been intended. (Adorno, 2003[1967]: 166)

Adorno writes that mass culture — termed 'the culture industry' — trades in illusions. It offers the bourgeois ideology of liberty when under capitalism there can never be liberty for all (Miles et al., 2003: 163). Adorno argues that the growing importance of leisure and consumption activities in mass culture facilitates ideological control and manipulation of the population, and thus their separation from a more 'authentic' social existence (Du Gay et al., 1997: 87). In this way, 'It impedes the development of autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves' (Adorno, 2003[1967]: 168).

One force which Adorno envisions as being capable of restoring autonomy and individuality to people is music. Adorno claims this occurs only when 'progressive' music — as recognized by its 'objective' structure — is listened to by those with the 'developed consciousness of the most advanced professional musician' (1976: 9). Such music challenges individuals to work through tensions and contradictions inherent in the musical piece, thereby engaging them in critical thought — a necessity if individuals are to become autonomous. Adorno asserts that the overwhelming majority of music is not 'progressive', but is a product of the culture industry, just as most listeners are 'culture industry listeners'. Such music holds value only as a commodity, providing listeners with mere gratification through consumption rather than instigating challenging thought. As such, it is only a distraction from their alienation (Adorno, 1976).

Adorno describes the numerous forms of distraction music provides. Many of these are found to be present among MP3 practices. First, he classifies 'culture industry listening' as an addiction comparable to smoking. Just as a cigarette satisfies a lacking rather than adding pleasure, 'We define [the need for music] more by our displeasure in turning off the radio than by the pleasure we feel, however modestly, while it is playing' (Adorno, 1976: 15). This addiction is a way for individuals to compensate for the problems of everyday life:

The addict manages to cope with the situation of social pressure, as well as that of his loneliness, by dressing it up, so to speak, as a reality of his own being; he turns the formula 'Leave me alone!' into something like an illusory private realm, where he thinks he can be himself. (Adorno, 1976: 15)

Here Adorno's writings are striking in comparison to the assertions of MP3 users of the control they experience via the pleasurable personal spaces they create with music. Adorno would regard this experience of control

as illusory. Users are improving their experiences precisely by disengaging from, rather than challenging, that which they find problematic during their commutes. Further, in disengaging from the commute and entering personalized soundworlds, users assert individuality through its very antithesis -music that is a product of mass culture. For Adorno, MP3 practices would represent an extension of the illusion provided by music, and a compensatory expression of individualization amidst a world bereft of it.

Many users report invoking their MP3s to pass time. Adorno criticizes this function as aiding the integration of individuals into an alienated world:

... music colours the desolation of the inner sense. It is the decoration of empty time ... people dread time, and so they invent compensatory metaphysics of time because they blame time for the fact that in the reified world they no longer feel alive. This is what music talks them out of. It confirms the society it entertains. The colour of the inner sense, the bright detailed imagery of the flow of time, assures a man that within the monotony of universal comparability there is still something particular. (Adorno, 1976: 47-8)

In a reified world everything has come to be equated with exchange value, and thus the world achieves 'universal comparability'. Adorno describes the individual's realization of the loss of particular, intrinsic value as 'the void' (1976: 47). He describes individuals, rather than suffer this 'void', rejecting all self-reflecting thought, thus exchanging suffering for 'emptiness'. Music is used to dress this emptiness. For Adorno, the necessity for individuals to 'decorate' the time of their commutes with music stems precisely from the very understanding of commuting time as 'wasted' time. By 'dressing up' time with music and in turning 'empty time' pleasurable, MP3 users distract themselves from their alienation while further integrating into a world manipulated by the culture industry.

For Adorno, the MP3 would represent an object configured by the culture industry, encouraging addiction to the distraction offered by music by enabling constant listening — both proving and furthering our alienation. However, while the illusory nature of MP3-mediated experience is portrayed in users' descriptions, it is not the only force at hand. For while the culture industry inscribes uses within products to dictate users' behaviors, consumers are not mere 'objects' as Adorno claims (2003[1967]: 164). Furthermore, while Adorno purports growing disassociation to be an alienating force, Daniel Miller criticizes Adorno's 'authentic' conception of the past as conservatism (cited in Du Gay et al., 1997: 87). In the contemporary world, categorized by fragmentation and space-time compression (Harvey quoted in Bull, 2000: 194), users' disconnection from their environment can be viewed as a representation of autonomy and mobility amidst a globalized world (Hosokawa, 1984).

Configuring spaces of leisure: Lefebvre

Writing in 1947, Lefebvre argues that responsible for both the survival of global capitalism and the failure of state socialism is what the two systems share: the alienation that has come to encapsulate everyday life (Aronowitz, 2007). Analyzing the everyday, Lefebvre sees a new form of leisure arise in industrialized society. No longer are demanding activities considered leisure — leisure must now offer liberation from worry and necessity: *relaxation* (Lefebvre, 2002: 229). As such it is defined in opposition to work: 'the worker craves a sharp break with his work, a compensation. He looks for this in leisure seen as entertainment or distraction. In this way leisure appears as the non-everyday in the everyday' (2002: 233). Lefebvre argues that conditions of change require the re-entry of pleasure back into the everyday (Aronowitz, 2007: 136). This notion posits the MP3 in an interesting role.

Users' descriptions of MP3 experiences embody Lefebvre's conception of leisure. Respondents describe invoking the MP3 to distract themselves from unwanted thoughts about the day of work they face, or turning obligatory, stressful commutes into spaces for relaxation. However, MP3 listening also enables leisure - pleasure - to enter *into* the obligations of the everyday. Lefebvre writes of 'constrained time' — demands such as transport and errands — and the problem that 'compulsive time increases at a greater rate than leisure time' (1971: 53). By engaging the MP3, users turn their 'constrained time' *into* leisure — transforming, as they describe, their 'boring' and 'stressful' commutes into times of entertainment and relaxation.

Despite the distraction depicted in MP3 use, it is important to nevertheless understand these experiences as creative, pleasurable and oppositional (Bull, 2005: 346). As Lefebvre writes:

Although the sociologist cannot describe or analyse [these forms of leisure] without criticising them as being (partly) illusory, he must nevertheless start from the fact that they contain within themselves their own spontaneous critique of the everyday. They *are* that critique in so far as they are *other* than everyday life ... They can thus hold a real content, correspond to a real need, yet still retain an illusory form and a deceptive appearance. (2002: 233-4)

The illusory nature that can be understood in MP3 practices does not detract from their power. Respondents describe MP3s as enabling them to transform the commuting time into pleasurable time — into leisure, and in this they accord individuals autonomy over their experiences. This very transformation of experience, while partly illusory, can be understood as in itself a critique of the everyday. Furthermore, while Lefebvre looks to a past where leisure included traits of work (for example, in the creation of art), the present sees users employ their MP3s to enter traits of leisure into the realm of work.

Reclaiming control: Beyond illusions

Tia DeNora criticizes Adorno's epistemological conception of music's meaning as limiting. While some uses of music may be deemed illusory, DeNora points to how individuals are actors in appropriating various personal meanings, and subsequent uses, of music (2000: 24). Further, DeNora terms music an 'affordance structure' — 'a place or pace for meaning and life world making, a resource for doing, being and naming aspects of social reality, including subjectivity and self (2000: 40). In understanding music as a 'resource', its power emerges.

For music can function to:

[help] to invoke, stabilize and change the parameters of agency ... By the term 'agency' here, I mean feeling, perception, cognition and consciousness, identity, energy, perceived situation and scene, embodied conduct and comportment. If music can affect the shape of social agency, then control over music in social settings is a source of social power; it is an opportunity to structure the parameters of social action. (DeNora, 2000: 20)

I use DeNora's definition of agency in analyzing the empowering possibilities of MP3 practices. By calling upon music to gain control over their perceptions, thoughts and conduct, MP3 users reconfigure their role within the spaces they navigate. The MP3 can thus be understood to empower individuals with agency in defining their relationship to the city. No longer submissive to the auditory forces of the urban, individuals actively use personal meanings of music to reconfigure their understandings, actions and place in the city.

Shuhei Hosokawa criticizes the Adornian standpoint towards the Walkman as that of the 'cultural moralist', and thereby limiting understanding (1984: 67). To conceptualize both object and music solely as products of the culture industry, imposing the ideology of capitalistic society, is to limit understanding of what happens as users bring the MP3 into their everyday lives. The MP3 is used by different users in a multitude of ways; it not only detracts from sense but also adds to it; its use is not only illusory but also creative.

For Hosokawa, donning the MP3 reconfigures not only the meaning of users' environment, but also their space in the city. For:

De-territorialized listening ... induces an autonomous 'head space' between his Self and his surroundings in order to distance itself from - not familiarise itself with - both of them. The result is the mobility of Self. (Hosokawa, 1984: 175)

In this way, users are in their 'own' city, while the city accommodates them their 'own' space. Respondents describe listening to the MP3 to 'reinforce themselves' amidst the overwhelming nature of the city, reflecting Hosokawa's notion of mobility of the self.

Hosokawa argues that to understand the Walkman 'we should analyze it ... as an *effect-event* in the pragmatic and semiotic transformation of the urban. To think about it is to reflect on the urban itself...' (1984: 166). The Walkman enables users to deconstruct and reconstruct meanings of the city — and in doing so, to transform it. For the city is constituted not only by the messages it produces, but also by its inhabitants' *re-actions* to these messages (Hosokawa, 1984: 172). As MP3 users transform urban public spaces into personalized soundworlds, they reconfigure not only their relationship to the city, but also the city itself.

ANALYZING EXPERIENCES

MP3 users reconfigure time, space and place as they travel through London. Placing headphones in the ears they not only exclude sounds of the environment, but engage with music of their own choosing. In doing so, users describe gaining control over their experiences. DeNora writes of music's ability to '... seal off an environment, and to regularize that environment by predetermining the types of sonic stimuli it will contain' (2000: 60). The MP3 users interviewed utilize music to carve out personal spaces as they navigate the physical spaces, places and people encountered during the commute. Time is also reorganized within their personal soundworlds. The MP3 enables users to reconfigure the public urban commute as personal spaces of leisure.

Escaping time, place, and others

Bull writes of how through Walkman and iPod use individuals place themselves 'elsewhere' in the urban environment (2001, 2005). Usage among the Londoners interviewed supports Bull's finding, as the most prevalent descriptions among respondents were the ways in which the MP3 enabled them to escape the environment of the commute:

When there's loads of noise around me, and there's too many people around me... I can hide with my music. Nothing else really matters, what's going on around me ... It lets you step out of it for a little while. (Darrell)

It just shuts out the world ... (Nate)

I listen to it to get a bit more space in London. Everything is just so close to you in London, on the tube, on the bus, you're sat really close to somebody, and it's just kind of nice to know that they're not going to talk to you because you're listening to music. (Sheila)

MP3 users employ music to 'shut out' and 'step out of' their surroundings, excluding the outside world from their experience, and signaling to others their partial absence from the public spaces they inhabit. In doing so,

individuals carve out personal and private spaces while moving about the city. Reflecting Walkman practices (Bull, 2001: 187), Sheila describes how erecting auditory boundaries can be experienced as a reformulation of boundaries of physical space. Thus, the MP3 enables users to escape the cognitive, emotional and even physical experience of the environment, as well as unwanted interaction with others. Respondents cite the relaxing effect of this dissociation.

Users also employ the MP3 to escape time. Keisha finds her redundant commute boring, and the music she plays occupies her mind:

I use it whenever I'm walking anywhere ... it makes things go quicker. (Keisha)

Keisha revels in the MP3's capabilities to enable her to precisely construct her experience of time. She describes how she invariably chooses 'shuffle' with her iPod, playing songs in random order, so that not even the music can be used as a marker of time. Thus, the time of her obligatory commute passes by unnoticed.

Navigating presence

While 'escaping' is the most prominent MP3 practice emerging from respondents' descriptions, users describe actively navigating various levels of presence with their MP3s. Most users have the object always at hand while moving about London. Once the MP3 is engaged, users choose the *degree* of attendance and presence they grant to the places they navigate.

Sometimes users call upon music to complement and aestheticize, rather than escape, their surroundings. As Sheila describes:

You're more a part of something or less a part of something depending on what mood you're in ... If I'm in a busy place and I'm in a busy mood, I'll put on something beat-y, and enjoy being a part of it.

Chao describes how listening to Middle Eastern music while travelling through a predominantly Arabic neighbourhood causes him to think about others he encounters:

You can kind of just generally watch people, and think about their lives, and what they might do ...

By mediating perceptions through music, users enjoy the urban environment. Users attend to an experience of the city they themselves, in part, construct through their soundtrack of choice. Bull writes extensively about the urban strategy of aestheticization of experience through music (2001, 2005). He describes how '[with the iPod] the world is thus brought into line through acts of privatized, yet mediated, cognition' (2005: 351). Chao and Sheila exemplify this notion — using music to construct personal

meanings of the places and people they encounter on their commute, they participate in musically mediated, personal versions of their surroundings.

For some users, reconfiguring their environments with music can actually make them *more* receptive to their surroundings. Framing the urban experience with music relaxes them and allows them to enjoy (mediated) interaction with the city.

...because I'm listening to music, I find it calms the voices in my head, so sometimes it [makes me] more receptive to what's going on ... (Sally)

It's making my mood happier, so it improves what I'm looking at, so I'm more interested in what I'm looking at, more interested in people, or the view ... (Sheila)

With the MP3, Simmel's complete disassociation from the city is now rendered physical, yet no longer inevitable. The use of music to control mood enables users to enjoy surroundings they may otherwise disengage from by helping them gain control over their relation to the urban environment. Mediating the commute with music, MP3 users engage with personally constructed, privately experienced versions of the urban spaces they navigate.

Londoners reconfigure time, space and place as they construct personal soundworlds with MP3s. The predominant configuration of the constructed space is one of escape — from the overwhelming nature of the urban commute, from time, from others, and from the stresses of the day. Users revel in this ability to escape, yet at times they choose to enter back into their environment. Crucially, for some users the MP3 enables them to *avoid* complete disassociation from the city by enabling them to enjoy musically mediated versions of the commute. Individuals enjoy shaping their experiences as they use the MP3 to navigate various levels of presence and reconfigure their commutes as personal and pleasurable spaces.

Interpreting the object and configuring the self

By entering personal soundworlds, users reconfigure the self. DeNora explains aesthetic reflexivity, a strategy individuals employ to understand, perform and reconcile the self amidst the fragmented modern world:

Following Simmel, recent social theory concerned with 'modernity' has conceived of the rise of aestheticisation as a strategy for preserving identity and social boundaries under the anonymous and often crowded conditions of existence. (2000: 51-2)

The MP3 serves as a management tool. The ability to transform public spaces into personal ones through music is not new to the MP3 (Bull, 2001). However, MP3s introduce an unprecedented level of precision in constructing musical experience while on the move. By using music to

control thoughts, feelings and memories, users not only carve out personal spaces while navigating the city, but use music to configure the self within these spaces.

Drawing a parallel between the MP3 and other ICTs, I cite Daniel Miller and Don Slater's research of the internet. They write of Trinidadians 'molding' spaces on the internet to culturally specific shapes and purposes (2000: 10). Similarly, MP3 users very much 'mold' their commute into '*personally* specific shapes and purposes'. MP3 users create relevant soundtracks in order to carve out personal spaces within which they sustain mood, emotion and purpose while traveling amidst the rapidly changing stimuli of the city - thereby organizing the self, while on the go, with music.

Chao has a number of 'molded spaces' that he calls upon at will. He explains that: 'You need to have music to fit all of your moods'. In using music to control mood, he facilitates whatever activity he chooses. Chao's MP3 thus functions as a prescriber of action:

It focuses my thoughts more, and I have more control over them, and I can use it cathartically, so if I want to think about a relationship, I can choose music that will remind me of that and it will bring out emotion, or if I want to think about something I can focus on it. Also, if I'm going out, I put something on with a bit of bass, and it can motivate me. I think it makes you feel more confident ... you can psyche yourself up for things.

The MP3 provides Chao access to his entire music collection from which to configure his person, enabling him to create personal and activity-relevant soundtracks as he moves through the city. In this way the MP3 allows Chao, in any place and time, to summon the version of his self he chooses.

For many users, the MP3 serves as a tool of personal reinforcement. DeNora writes of the way users identify with certain music, and by listening to this music they both express and perform the self. As Boris describes:

I just really, really love the music that I like, I don't have all these different types of music, its mostly just techno, really hard stuff ... so it just always reinforces my, [pause] reinforces me.'

Later in the interview, he mentions the importance of this ability in London:

I think the reason why you need the cocoon ... is because in London it's very easy to lose yourself, to just bleed into the background ... when you've got your music on you're more you, and more able to keep yourself a bit separate from the madness around you.

Boris describes how he purposely moulds a personal space within the chaotic commute, which can at times dominate him. Within this space 'his' music serves as a reinforcement, an enabler to carry the self, now mobile, through the city.

Transforming the at times taxing London commute by entering into private soundworlds, users mould personal spaces in which they use music to organize and reinforce the self. They call upon the vast amount of music housed in their MP3s to condition emotion, action and experience, thereby configuring the self while moving through the city. In this way users separate from their surroundings while performing the self amidst them — resulting in, as Hosokawa describes, an autonomous and mobile self.

Patterns in configuration

The descriptions above recount the diverse ways in which individuals use MP3s to shape experience of the London commute. No patterns emerged among users of varying gender and age in the sample examined. Users from outside the UK described using the MP3 to escape dreary weather, as well as what Sally describes as the 'anti-social' nature of London. In comparing DJs and 'listeners' usage of MP3s, the experienced effects are similar. However, motivations for MP3 use and the effect of MP3 listening on music consumption practices differ between the two groups.

For DJs, motivation for MP3 use is overwhelmingly clear: to listen to music. Consider Barrel's comment at the start of the interview:

I can't live without my music. I have to have music everywhere I go ... it's been my life since day one.

And Boris' concluding remark:

It's a force of habit, that's what drives it ... always listening to new music, always listening to *music*.

Barrel's instinctual description and Boris' emphasized conclusion depict how using the MP3 changes their commutes: it enables them, above all else, to listen to music.

None of the 'listeners' interviewed mentioned the act of listening to music as motivation for using their MP3s. Rather, 'listeners' revel in their ability to use music to construct experience. As Chao describes imagining an upcoming trip without his MP3, he never mentions missing his music as a consequence:

I just have images of being in a group of 45, and just getting really stressed out and needing some alone time, and just chilling out to it ...

Sheila purposely bought her MP3 so that she could use it at work, as a distraction. Thus, when not seeking distraction, she does not use it:

I use [my MP3] less at weekends, if I'm traveling somewhere than yeah ... I'm quite happy at weekends just wandering around, thinking.

While for DJs the MP3 is a tool to listen to music, the 'listeners' interviewed view their MP3 as a tool to control thoughts, emotions and experience - and use it as such. This difference recalls Adorno's distinction of 'progressive' versus 'culture industry listeners'. Adorno asserts that culture industry listening is about the distraction music provides rather than listening to the music itself. 'Listeners' emphasis on the effects of music rather than simply *listening to music* with the MP3 reflects Adorno's listener typology.

The differing conceptualizations of MP3 listening are further expressed in users' attitudes toward maintaining their MP3s' music collection. DJs described habitually updating music and editing playlists. Sally has an intricate rating and playlist management system that she maintains several times a week. Keisha describes putting new music on her MP3 regularly, but this means she must take something off, as it is filled to capacity:

It's a horrible ritual ... it doesn't take me long to figure out what to put on there, because it's new, and I want to listen to it, but taking stuff off is hard ... it feels weird.

Conversely, the 'listeners' interviewed either rarely or *never* changed the music on their MP3s, and found the maintenance process, as Gemma describes, 'a bit of a chore'. This difference is understandable when considering the differing motivations. Those motivated to listen to music rather than just experience its effect are willing to spend time and enjoy putting new music on their MP3s. Lefebvre's conception of leisure is useful in understanding this difference in attitude. For 'listeners' seeking music's sensory effects, updating MP3 collections requires updating old effect-inducers that have lost their power. For DJs who seek to listen to music, updating MP3 collections is an exciting time to choose what to next incorporate into their auditory worlds. Thus for 'listeners' the obligatory and time-consuming nature of up-keep signifies it as *not* leisure, while for DJs it remains a part of the leisure-categorized MP3 experience.

Differences also emerged in the effect the MP3 had on music consumption practices. DJs mainly note the MP3's ability to make their music collection available for mobile listening. 'Listeners' describe how the MP3 listening has changed their relationship to music, and listening habits.

I listen to more music now because it's made it easier to listen to it. (Nate)

Because you need to have music to fit all of your moods, you identify holes in your music collection, and you look for stuff, and try it out. If I didn't have it I wouldn't have a need for as much music. This way, you go through things faster. (Chao)

For some 'listeners', the ease of MP3 listening while commuting means that they listen to music more. For others, MP3 listening has changed the ways

they understand and collect music — Chao's notion of 'music holes' depicts a conceptualization of music as a tool for mood management.

While DJs describe MP3 listening as endowing them with feelings of control, they emphasized the ability to explicitly *listen to music* that the MP3 granted them. 'Listeners', on the other hand, use MP3s largely to manage experience, and listen to more music in their everyday lives as a result. This distinction suggests that individuals' 'pre-existing relationship to music relates to the ways in which they understand and use MP3s.

IMPLICATIONS

Respondents depict an MP3 categorized by an abundance of possibilities for interpretation. Users describe MP3 practices that can be understood as both 'emancipatory' and 'pacifying', and even single uses that incorporate both tendencies simultaneously. Users gain control over their experiences by erecting auditory boundaries and constructing private spaces. In so doing, they disengage from rather than challenge that which they find problematic within the urban commute. And yet, by employing music to assert agency in configuring their experiences and actions, MP3 users gain real control in organizing their thoughts and emotions, and defining their relationship to the spaces they navigate.

A cocoon of illusion

In some ways, what Adorno wrote of music over 40 years ago appears to exactly describe MP3 practices. Consider Nate's statement:

We all do the same thing, we get the same time train every day, get to the same job ... but, it can all change a little bit if you just got, if you're listening to whatever you choose to listen to, it's a bit of a choice, it makes a little bit of a difference. If you can make a little bit of a difference that's a good thing, that's the way I see it.

Nate's words recall Adorno's assertion that music '... solves conflicts for them only in appearance, in a way that can hardly be solved in their real lives' (1991: 67). By using the MP3 to reconfigure his mundane commute to work as a personal space he controls, Nate appears to partially solve his dissatisfaction with the boredom and lack of choice he expresses. Experiencing this practice as a solution may prevent 'real' solutions to the problems Nate faces.

For many users the feelings of control, personal space and personal reinforcement the MP3 affords have become addicting:

You get certain needs from having it ... fit's] part of a coping mechanism.
(Chao)

In a way it is like a psychotropic drug or something... I didn't have my iPod for a couple of months, and I think I was just perpetually pissed off, because I couldn't - I wouldn't want to hear something, or I would not want to be in a situation ... you can't be so reliant on a piece of technology. But I am. (Sally)

Adorno writes of the addict defining the need for music more in the displeasure of its absence than the pleasure of its presence, and of using music to cope with social pressure by entering an 'illusionary private realm' (1976: 15). The comments above are striking in their reflection of Adorno's words.

In some ways, 40 years on, the illusion becomes real. MP3 users emotionally, cognitively and even physically experience a private realm. And, by signifying absence with headphones, others they encounter may regard them as absent from the shared social space. But the illusion of *solution* through music remains — for problems of the urban space and of everyday life continue. In fact, for some MP3 users the Mttmediated urban space becomes unbearable. While the control the MP3 gives users does allow them to attend to their musically mediated environments in an enjoyable way, this very mediation prevents users' full participation in urban space — thereby negating the public nature of this space. Thus, Hosokawa's assertions are realized: in reconfiguring their relationship to the city, users reconfigure the city itself. Sherry Turkic describes similar findings of how the adoption of mobile technologies transform communal spaces into spaces of social collection (2008). With MP3 adoption on the rise,³ important questions are raised about the future of the urban public.

Hidden empowerment

Despite the strong resonance of Adorno's claims among some user descriptions, MP3 listening is not simply an illusory and pacifying practice. In some ways, users do succumb to the status quo, for they disengage rather than challenge, cope rather than instigate change. But in this very disengagement — and users' ability to choose when, where, to what degree, and in which fashion to do so — users are empowered as actors. By using music to construct experience, users reconfigure their relationships to the spaces they navigate. Bull writes of iPod users 'as creating spaces of freedom for themselves through the very use of technologies that tie them to consumer culture ...' (2005: 346). For, in using music to shape experience of time, space and others, MP3 users take control over what they engage with, experience their commute as pleasurable, and construct their own meanings of the city.

Rey Chow writes of Walkman listening in communist China as the 'freedom to be deaf to the loudspeakers of history' (1997: 139). He tells of the ability for Chinese users to 'silently sabotage' the state's attempt to dominate public thought by using Walkmans to go 'missing'. In this way, the practice

empowers Chinese actors by enabling them *not* to hear (Chow, 1997). This raises the question: what do London MP3 users become 'deaf to'?

In a city filled with media messages — from tube announcements Chao tells of, to the TV adverts on the bus Nate complains about, to what Sally describes as 'music blaring from the shops' — the MP3 enables users to, in some ways, 'silently sabotage' the domination of mass culture. While employing both object and music of the culture industry, users resist surrendering to prescribed location-specific auditory messages arranged for their reception.

Every Londoner interviewed keeps their MP3 on in shops, preferring their music to the one being played. This in itself is an act of defiance. Consider the extensive 'marketing music' industry. Music is used to influence a range of consumer behaviors and choices (see DeNora and Belcher, 2000). DeNora writes that to control music is to control the 'framework for how people perceive (consciously or subconsciously) potential avenues of conduct' (2000: 17). By choosing to disengage from the aural environment of commercial places, MP3 users impose control in configuring their own behaviors and actions.

The MP3 endows users with the ability to precisely shape their experiences with music while moving through the city. This ability is both empowering and problematic. Entering personal soundworlds, users gain control over their emotions, thoughts and attention while they navigate London. In so doing, they assert the self, while also disengaging from stimuli and thoughts that may be challenging. Further, by controlling their soundtracks, users are empowered to configure their own behaviors and construct personal meanings of their urban journeys. However, in reconfiguring their relationship to the environment, they also reconfigure the environment itself, negating the very public nature of the urban spaces they navigate.

CONCLUSION

An exploration into the shifts in experience that take place as individuals use MP3s while navigating the city portrays a multitude of forms of mediations, serving a number of purposes. However, this has been only an exploration. MP3 practices uncovered here require further investigation. An expansion of this study would potentially uncover additional strategies and patterns of usage. Further studies might include non-habitual MP3 users — sporadic users may illuminate other, negatively experienced effects of MP3 use. An expanded study may also construct a more specified typology of users with varying musical backgrounds to further explore the differences in MP3 usage. Research of MP3 use to date has been restricted to users in northern, primarily Christian cultures.⁴ Investigating MP3 use in southern cities and other cultures may prove illuminating.

An expanded study could further be refined by:

- 1 conducting follow-up interviews with users, as the initial interview introduced a reflective component to MP3 use which may have altered users' following experiences;
- 2 examining not only individuals' descriptions of MP3 use, but also observing the practices; and
- 3 requesting users to keep a diary of their different types of usage to learn more about each use as well as its prevalence in the strategy repertoire.

The research presented portrays the crux of MP3 practice: users shape their experiences of the London commute by mediating them with music. By calling upon music as an 'affordance structure' (DeNora, 2000) — music as a place, pace and resource — MP3 users reconfigure space, place and time as they enter into, as Bull terms, 'personalised soundworlds'. By creating personalized soundtracks, users configure their emotions, thoughts and actions and, thereby, the self. Thus, individuals achieve Hosokawa's notion of 'the mobility of the self. Now separate from the environment, users assert the self and construct personal meanings of the public spaces they inhabit.

In mediating the urban space by controlling the auditory environment, users cope with the overwhelming nature of the city. In so doing, individuals transform the obligatory commute — Lefebvre's 'constrained time' — into leisure. And while the popular strategy of 'escape' among MP3 users embodies the indifference and disassociation Simmel describes of the urban inhabitant, individuals use the MP3 to actively navigate their level of presence within the shared social space, at times enjoying engaging with a mediated city rather than completely disassociating.

Crucially, the 'listeners' interviewed here came to conceptualize music as a tool for experience management, and to use the MP3 as such. It was only the DJs that emphasized the ability the MP3 endowed them with to explicitly *listen to music*. Despite differing motivations, all respondents use their MP3s to reconfigure the London commute into personal and pleasurable spaces.

MP3 users experience a high degree of control in transforming the London commute into the personal and private experiences they construct with music. Followers of Adorno may interpret this control as illusory and pacifying, as individuality is paradoxically asserted through a product of mass culture, and the experience of control through selective disengagement distracts users from truly challenging the problems of everyday life. Adorno's 1967 notion of the music 'addict' resonates particularly strongly with users' description of the reliance they grow to have on the MP3. However, although the control MP3 users describe may be partly illusory, it is also real. As individuals wrestle control over the auditory experience from

busy streets, others they encounter and media messages, they exert control over the prescriber of action that is music — thereby asserting the self and engaging with personally constructed, and privately experienced, meanings of what they encounter. In this way, MP3 users redefine their relationship to the urban spaces they navigate. Crucially, the power to control individual experience with MP3 players comes at the cost of shared experience of public space — raising troubling questions for the future of participatory publics and collective agency in urban spaces.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank Don Slater for his critique and support, and Claire Alexander and Nick Smith for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper. An earlier version of this article was submitted in fulfillment of the dissertation requirement of the BSc. in Sociology, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK.

Notes

- 1 All respondents have been given pseudonyms: Nate, 38, a recruitment consultant from London; Sheila, 31, a corporate lawyer from Shropshire, UK; Darrel, 27, a professional DJ from Jamaica; Keisha, 32, a student and DJ from Reading, UK; Sally, 21, a student and DJ from Trinidad; Gemma, 20, a receptionist from New Zealand; Chao, 20, a student from Cardiff, UK; and Boris, 34, a social researcher and former DJ from London.
- 2 Bus 243, November 2005.
- 3 The global MP3 market grew from 35 million units in 2004 to 140 million units in 2005 (In-Stat, 2006).
- 4 Bull's 2005 research of iPod users includes respondents from the UK, USA, Switzerland and Denmark.

References

- Adorno, T. (1976) *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*. New York: Continuum.
- Adorno, T. (1991) 'Culture Industry Reconsidered', *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Adorno, T. (2003[1967]) 'The Culture Industry Reconsidered', in M. Miles, T. Hall and I. Borden (eds) *The City Cultures Reader*, pp. 163-8. London: Routledge.
- Aronowitz, S. (2007) 'The Ignored Philosopher and Social Theorist: On the Work of Henri Lefebvre', *Situations: Project of the Radical Imagination*, URL (consulted November 2007): <http://ojs.gc.cuny.edu/index.php/situations/article/view/175/207>
- Bull, M. (2000) *Sounding Out the City: Personal Stereos and the Management of Everyday Life*. Oxford: Berg.
- Bull, M. (2001) 'The World According to Sound: Investigating the World of Walkman Users', *New Media & Society* 3: 179-97.
- Bull, M. (2005) 'No Dead Air! The iPod and the Culture of Mobile Listening', *Leisure Studies* 24(4): 343-55.
- Chow, R. (1997) 'Listening Otherwise, Music Miniaturized: A Different Type of Question among Revolution', in P. Du Gay, S. Hall, L. Janes, H. Mackay and K. Negus (eds) *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*, pp. 135-40. London: SAGE.

- DeNora, T. (2000) *Music in Everyday Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- DeNora, T. and S. Belcher (2000) "'When You're Trying Something on You Picture Yourself in a Place Where They Are Playing this Kind of Music", - Musically Sponsored Agency in the British Clothing Retail Sector', *The Sociological Review* 48(1): 80-101.
- Du Gay, P., S. Hall, L. Janes, H. Mackay and K. Negus (1997) *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*. London: SAGE.
- Hosokawa, S. (1984) 'The Walkman Effect', *Popular Music* 4: 165-80.
- InStat (2006) 'Portable Digital Audio Players: Market Growth Exceeds Expectations', URL (consulted December 2007): <http://www.instat.com/catalog/Ccatalogue.asp?id=27#IN0603155ID>
- Lefebvre, H. (1991) *Critique of Everyday Life*. London: Verso.
- Lefebvre, H. (2002) 'Work and Leisure in Everyday Life', in B. Highmore (ed.) *The Everyday Life Reader*, pp. 225—35. London: Routledge.
- Miles, M., T. Hall and I. Borden (eds) (2003) *The City Cultures Reader*. London: Routledge.
- Miller, D. and D. Slater (2000) *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach*. London: Berg.
- Simmel, G. (2003) 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', in M. Miles, T. Hall and I. Borden (eds) *The City Cultures Reader*, pp. 12-19. London: Routledge.
- Tonkiss, F. (2003) 'Aural Postcards: Sound, Memory and the City', in M. Bull and L. Back (eds) *The Auditory Culture Reader*, pp. 303-9. Oxford: Berg.
- Turkic, S. (2008) 'Always-on/Always-on-you: The Tethered Self', in J. Katz (ed.) *Handbook of Mobile Communication Studies*, pp. 121—38. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, URL (consulted April 2009): http://web.mit.edu/sturkle/www/Always-on%20Always-on-you_The%20Tethered%20Self_ST.pdf

MIRIAM SIMUN investigates the implications of new technologies on human interaction, education and public space. She conducts research at the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University. She received her BSc in Sociology from the London School of Economics in 2006.

Address: Berkman Center for Internet & Society, 23 Everett Street, Second Floor, Cambridge, MA 02138, USA. [email: msimun@gmail.com]