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Plugged in or tuned out?

Portable technology presents new questions for parents, society

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Those tiny white earphones represent more than just the newest way to listen to music.

They symbolize a generation's disconnect from society, a group content to tune in and then tune out everyone around them.

Either that, or those bitty earbuds and their attached mini music players actually link listeners to each other, binding them together by similar tastes and a shared passion for songs.

The verdict is still out on the sociological implications of Apple's iconic iPod, the stylish credit-card size music player that lets people listen to almost anything almost anywhere.

A bridge linking listeners or a wall erected between them?

"It's too early to tell what the repercussions will be," says Warren Zanes, vice president for education at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum.

Apple sold 14 million of the portable players in the last quarter of 2005 alone - that's more than the population of Ohio. Recognized by the white wires snaking out of their ears, users are on the school bus, in the office, at the grocery store.

"Everyone I know has an iPod or wants an iPod," says Eric Barnett of Lakewood, a business student at Cleveland State University.

They're also the latest trophy in a long line of techie toys that cultural observers fear will isolate users from society.

Elayne Rapping, a professor of American studies at the University of Buffalo, worries that listening to music, once the glue that bound a generation together, is an increasingly solitary experience.

"People are walking through society and they're not really part of what's going on," she says. "They're in their own little world."

She points out that movie theaters are suffering because people would rather stay home and watch a DVD on television. Even then, most kids have TVs in their bedrooms, so watching the tube is no longer the family activity it was two decades ago.

"We're more and more isolated in our own spaces," she says.

But Zanes, who teaches a class on the subculture of popular music at Case Western Reserve University, says iPods are no more isolating than portable radios were 50 years ago, when kids in the 1950s escaped to their rooms to listen to music without their parents' ear.

Music has always found a way to bring young people together, says Zanes.

Years ago, kids met in a basement; today, they meet online. Through file sharing, chat rooms, shared playlists and instant messaging, kids can create their own communities through music, says Zanes. "It might actually be the road out of isolation."

Dale Cook, director of the Research Center for Educational Technology at Kent State University, agrees that technology just as easily can be used to promote interaction as to stifle it. Cell phones, podcasting, even computer games, all keep kids connected in ways that were unfathomable in the past.

"The reality is that these kids are learning and interacting in different ways," says Cook. "I don't see people intentionally hooking up to these devices because they don't want to talk to anybody."

Indeed, young adults and teens, who grew up watching their parents work the StairMaster with a Walkman on, say their generation's updated version actually promotes interaction through music sharing.

"If anything, it's a good thing," says Stephanie Gautam, a 17-year-old senior at Laurel School in Shaker Heights. "You learn about music your friends like."

Josh Berggrun, a ninth-grader at Orange High School, says his iPod makes it easier for him to share music with his friends. They trade playlists, the personalized music groupings downloaded from Web sites or copied from CDs.

They even share iPods - two earbuds, two listeners, one song.

A Mayfield High School student said he and a friend watched a movie recently on his iPod during a particularly boring school assembly - not exemplary academic conduct, perhaps, but not the picture of anti-social behavior either.

And new accessories that allow you to plug your player into a speaker system make it easier to share music with a basement full of friends.

"It's more an argument about who gets to choose the music," says Brunswick parent Steve Muniak, whose three kids - ages 11, 13 and 15 - all have personal digital music players.

As for those kids who do like to listen alone, a little down time with music may not be such a bad thing, says Janet Sharp, a Cleveland Heights psychotherapist.

"They may look isolated but they don't feel isolated," says Sharp. "It can be a way of feeling closer to one's own feelings. The effect can be similar to the adult Beethoven listener's transcendence."

Zanes agrees that the iPod and similar technologies may lift listeners to a level higher than an ordinary stereo can.

"When I'm walking on the Case campus and I see people plugged in, I'm encouraged," he says. "The music is more inescapable when you listen like that. It's listening in a very, very focused way. It might be this generation's way of removing itself from all of life's distractions."

Etiquette

and limitations

Sharp acknowledges, though, that too much solo listening might be indicative of a bigger problem. Kids who isolate themselves through music may be isolated in other ways.

Author Stacey DeBroff, whose titles include "The Mom Book," suggests banning the players during dinner, family gatherings and church or temple.

Most schools prohibit kids from playing them during the day, and some summer camps are telling kids to leave them at home.

"We want kids to connect with each other when they're here," says Kathryn Purcell, dean of students at Laurel School's upper campus in Shaker Heights. iPods, she says, "are an easy way to signal to someone, 'I don't want to talk to you.'"

Jevon Cooper, a graphic design student at Cleveland State, is aware of the message he sends when his iPod is on. So he takes his earbuds out when someone approaches him, even though he can hear with them in.

"People don't think I'm paying attention to them," he says. "I want to make sure they know I am."

Even Cook, the KSU technology guru, knows when to unplug.

"My girlfriend said to me the other day, 'I don't see you using your iPod very often.' And I said, 'That's because when I'm with you, I'm with you.'"

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