



Don't stop the music: why it is important that the over 55s stay abreast of new music technology

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Abstract

Music-listening technology is moving fast. As music compact disc (CD) sales fall, music download sales are on the increase. Portable music players (PMPs) can store entire music collections, including music videos, and can plug into home, car and other new music systems. This study examines the attitudes and perceptions of the over 55s towards new music technology, particularly PMPs and downloadable digital music. It also explores whether the over 55s are still interested in listening to music, and what barriers – perceived or actual – exist that limit access to new technology and how any limitations on access to the technology may be affecting their current music experience and compromising future listening.

Statistical data from 50 completed questionnaires are supported by qualitative data from six additional semi-structured interviews. Findings from this study suggest that people over the age of 55 listen to just as much (and sometimes more) music as they ever did. However, the research also reveals that their considerable lack of technological knowledge is the main barrier in their progress to newer music listening formats.

Key words

Music; entertainment; technology; happiness; quality of life; health.

Introduction

Music is a central part of many people's identity and self-expression, and a regulator and changer of moods (Hargreaves & North, 1999). It is omnipresent in our lives, some of it through personal choice and some of it through casual encounters with it in various locations from shops to dentists' waiting rooms.

Broadcaster and Professor of Music Industry at University of Southern California, Jerry Del Colliano, says: *'The iPod is to Gen[eration] Y is what the Walkman radio was to Gen[eration] X or the transistor radio was to baby boomers.'* (Del Colliano, 2008a).

The problem with associating new music technology solely with younger consumers, and

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marketing it accordingly, could mean that it leaves older music listeners at risk of being left behind. Such a process starts at the source. An official promotional launch of Apple's iPod from 2001 (Apple, 2001a) features language and images predominantly geared towards a young audience. Every person who speaks in the video is, without exception, in an age demographic at least one or two decades younger than 55 years old. Moby, who would have been 36 at the time the video was filmed, and who expresses his keenness and enthusiasm for the new iPod, says: 'If I were 16 I'd understand [how to work] it better' (Apple, 2001b).

Even the government refers to young people aged 18–34 as 'the iPod generation' (Helm, 2007). However, the most basic research shows that at least some over 55s are stepping up to be included in the music technology revolution. The Saga website (Margolis, 2006) includes an article about the benefits of iPods (specifically iPods, not generic MP3 players) and has details of how to download iTunes. Saga clearly understands its audience because, of course, those over 55 are the same music pioneers who searched for 'musical adventures' in their youth (Boyd, 2006, p12), yet this growing demographic is on track to become increasingly disenfranchised from an activity that most of them continue to enjoy.

Music has immense power over people's emotional and social lives (Hargreaves, 2005). It is also important to remember that there is a strong relationship between taking part in music and well-being (Laukka, 2007). So, for the purposes of enjoyment, for well-being and, if for no other reason than they have the same right to listen to their music as anyone, it is vital that the over 55s continue to have the opportunity to listen to music of their own choosing in the future.

Aims

Following a review of the current literature, the following main questions were considered.

1. To what extent are the over 55s currently interacting with new music technology?
2. How much do the over 55s understand about the latest advances in music listening technology?
3. What factors are currently mediating the over 55s' experience of music technology?
4. Is there an age effect? Are people less likely to

engage with music and new music technology as they get older?

In order to reach satisfactory conclusions and make meaningful recommendations, in addition to answering the above questions, emergent themes were identified and analysed.

Literature review Technology

Technological advances are aimed at 'early adopters' who tend to be 'well-educated, young, and affluent' (Rogers, 1995 cited in Tanaka, 2000, p2) and recent research (Intel, 2010) shows that over 55s have a below average number of technology-related devices in the home, which places them at imminent risk of losing access to their music. However, some consumer technology manufacturers have recently started to tap into the over-55 market, realising that they often have higher disposable incomes and more leisure time than their younger counterparts.

Some baby boomers are now looking to new technology to entertain and support them through the next phase of their life (Kornreich, 2007), but Bhattacharjee (2007, p2) warns that any 'technological backwardness' in older adults is harmful to their interests and makes them 'vulnerable to societal discrimination'. If older adults collude in being edited out of technological advances, they face being disenfranchised from a number of activities, including listening to their music collection trapped in obsolete formats.

The over 55s

The over 55s are a growing demographic, but this is not currently being appropriately reflected in music psychology research participant samples or in the marketing of music technology products (in particular portable music players (PMPs) and digital music downloads).

The enormous benefits of listening to music do not stop after one's 55th birthday. Drawing on a sample of 65–75-year-old people, Laukka (2007) found that they continued to benefit from listening to and participating in music.

Musical identity

Music plays a key role in people's identity. Most people have music that is special to them, music

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that evokes memories of particular times and places and music that helps them access parts of themselves more easily. Music even has the power to unlock parts of our identity that may have been lost through degenerative disease (Sacks, 1990, p348).

Methods

This research comprised both qualitative and quantitative elements. Initial data were gathered informally from advertisements, editorial and pilot interviews. The formal part of the study was carried out by distributing approximately 200 questionnaires (50 were returned by people aged 55 and over) and interviewing an additional six participants aged 55 and over.

Findings Qualitative

Of participants aged 55–64, 83% said that music was important to them, compared with 54% of participants aged 65 and over. This was echoed in the participants' music listening habits, with 67% of 55–64s and 62% of over 65s listening to the same amount of music as they had always done.

Barriers

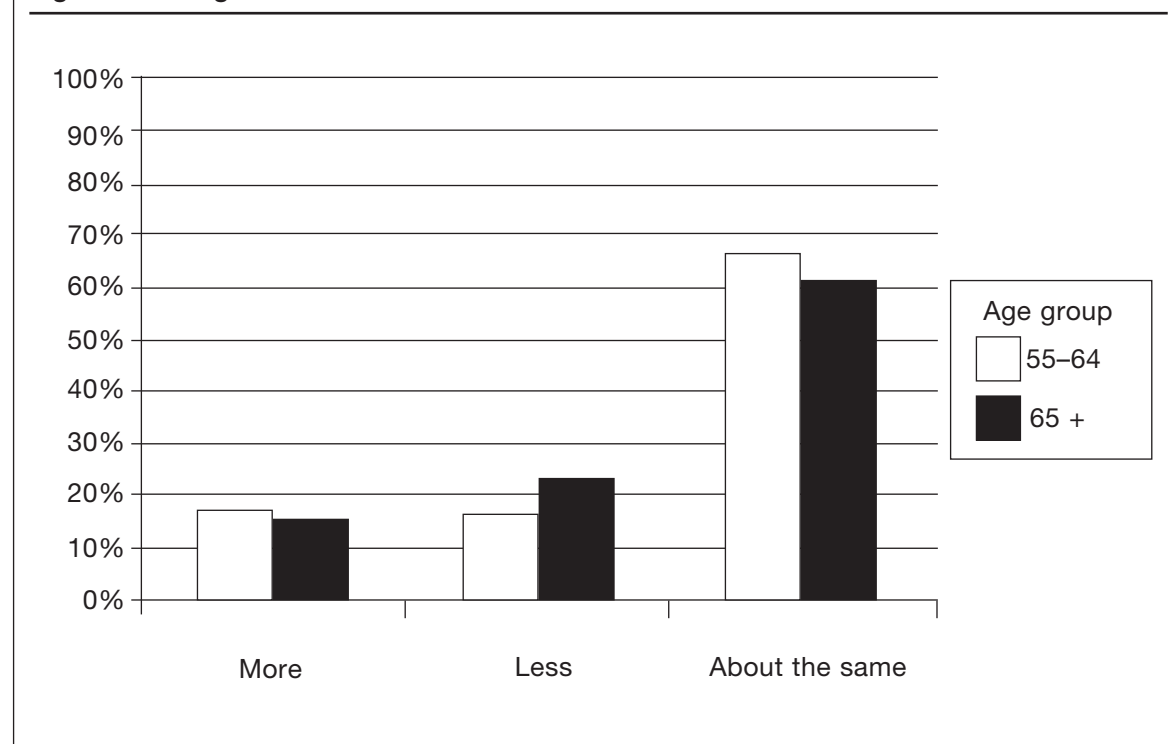
When participants were asked if anything got in the way of their listening to more music, there was a large and statistically significant difference between the two age groups. Of 55–64s, 35% said nothing gets in the way of their listening to more music compared with 67% (almost twice as many) of over 65s. Only five per cent of 55–64s said they didn't have enough time to listen to more music, compared with 60% of over 65s (this was split into 30% specifically citing 'time' and a further 30% citing 'work'). As the older sample is above state retirement age, these figures are not that surprising. However, the over 65s cited 'other interests' (10%) and 'TV' (14%) as activities that take them away from music listening.

Physical barriers

There are individual differences in the rate of deterioration of eyesight, hearing and dexterity, but it tends to be progressive, as exemplified in the results from the questionnaires.

Fewer participants aged 55–64 reported physical barriers, but this trend was not reflected entirely across the board. Of 55–64s, 17% said that they had hearing problems compared with

Figure 1: Change in music habits



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21% of over 65s. Interestingly, only four per cent of 55–64s and five per cent of over 65s said their respective hearing difficulties prevented them from listening to more music.

The difference between the age groups in terms of dexterity was marked: eight per cent of 55–64s, compared with 35% of over 65s, reported problems with fine movements in their hands and fingers.

Eyesight problems can cause difficulty with reading the on-screen text on a PMP. However, many mobile phones now have the facility that enables users to change the size of screen text.

Technology and knowledge gaps

Of participants aged 55–64, 29% used a PMP compared with just four per cent of the over 65s. Those who did not own or use one cited the main reasons as being ‘no perceived need’ or ‘not interested’.

If music is as important to these participants as they claim, their lack of interest and ‘no perceived need’ in owning or using a PMP suggests that the participants who answered the question in this way do not fully appreciate the looming obsolescence of the compact disc (CD) and cassette tape formats. It is also unlikely that they completely understand the potential applications of a PMP, such as ‘playlisting’, ‘shuffling’ and its ability to be played through larger sound systems. There seemed to be a general misconception that PMPs were for use solely with headphones.

Mentions of and references to podcasts are becoming common on TV and radio. For example, at the time of writing, the BBC Radio 4 website had 44 current podcasts available for download; these are usually mentioned during

or at the end of the respective programme broadcasts. However, only 42% of 55–64s and 15% of over 65s claimed to know what a podcast was. These figures are very concerning if podcasting really is the next radio (Del Colliano, 2008b).

In addition, most participants admitted they would not know how to download a music track to a PMP (see *Table 1*).

Discussion

Listening to music was very important to all participants, but the study revealed considerable individual differences in attitudes towards new technology. There were significant knowledge gaps and misconceptions evident, as there were in the quantitative element of the study. Of course, the current attitudes and perceptions have been formed in a climate where new music technology has not been intentionally directly marketed to any of the participants. Better access to technological knowledge could undoubtedly address and change the more negative attitudes.

Such education could be facilitated through the same community education channels that teach the older generations how to use PCs and through broader marketing of the products. There is also some evidence that a culture of sharing salient information orally (from younger to older generations) seems to have developed around music technology. There is precedence of passing technological information between generations in this way and this may be how some over 55s will now keep in step with new developments. It is clear that diffusion has taken place, and it is the ‘iPod generation’ that seems to be scaffolding the over 55s in learning about new music technology.

Table 1: Participants’ level of technological knowledge and experience

	Percentage who know what a podcast is	Percentage who have downloaded a podcast	Percentage who know how to download a track onto a PMP	Percentage who have downloaded music onto a PMP	Percentage who have copied a CD onto a PMP
55–65s	42%	8%	38%	21%	29%
65+	15%	0%	4%	0%	0%

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Some interviewees had genuine physical barriers that could compromise their ability to use new music listening technology, but the main attitude seemed to be one of living with and accommodating barriers. In the face of inevitable and increasing physical barriers, such attitudes are encouraging. There could be a tipping point where music may become less relevant (profound hearing loss) to older people, but PMPs are developing to include games, web browsing and other activities.

Summary of main findings

- Music is important to people over the age of 55.
- Hearing difficulties increase with age but only four per cent of 55–64s and five per cent of over 65s said it got in the way of their music listening.
- There is a strong age effect for dexterity: eight per cent of 55–64s and 34% of over 65s reported having problems with fine movements in the hands and/or fingers.
- Of over 65s, 40% had no perceived need of a PMP compared with 67% of 55–64s.
- A considerable lack of technological knowledge is evident in the over 55s.
- There was a significant age effect for technological knowledge with 42% of 55–64s knowing what a podcast is, compared with 15% of over 65s.
- Of over 65s, 96% did not know how to load music onto a PMP compared with 62% of 55–64s.
- There were no statistically significant gender differences in terms of music technological knowledge.
- The identity of PMPs tends to be strongly associated with the younger generations.
- The under 55s are informally passing technological information and PMPs to the over 55s.

Conclusions and practical implications

The over 55s are currently interacting with new music technology in a limited way, and this varies between individuals. The main factor mediating the over 55s' experience of music technology is a lack of technological knowledge. The vast

majority would not currently be able to download music onto a PMP even if they owned one, and few participants seemed to fully appreciate the extent of current and future applications and uses of the units.

Despite their increasing physical limitations, including cumulative and gradual sight and hearing loss, the older generations are still listening to music and some are positively embracing new music technology. However, potential disenfranchisement from music listening seems inevitable for those who are not keeping abreast of the developments in music listening technology. Industry warnings that even MP3s are on track to becoming obsolete (Crotty, 2007) mean that some of the participants in this study are already about to become two (or even three) technological steps behind. This could mean that the current older generational cohorts may have limited access to the established benefits (including significant health benefits) of listening to music as technology leaves them behind.

Most participants in this study were listening to as much music as they ever did, yet the over 55s currently seem to be almost invisible to the manufacturers and promoters of PMPs. This is ethically questionable as it has serious implications for the over 55s' levels of understanding of what will soon be common knowledge.

Major marketing changes and minor manufacturing adjustments, such as larger button remote controls and large font digital displays, would address this. Currently, if an older person moves into sheltered accommodation or supervised care, separation from their belongings would almost certainly include the temporary or permanent loss of any music collection, but it is so easy for that collection to be as portable as a bar of soap. It also means that people in this situation can listen to their music quietly with the use of headphones. This would help them to retain their sense of self at a time that they most risk losing it.

There is an opportunity for younger people to pass on their skills and knowledge to older people on the use of new music technology. This could provide an ideal intergenerational activity in much the same way as the passing on of computer skills from young to old has been demonstrated in many parts of the country.

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When Steve Jobs called John Sculley to ask him to become president of Apple, he reportedly said: 'If you come to Apple you can change the world' (Jones, 2005, p8). It is open to debate whether the world has been changed, but the latest models of PMPs available on the market have certainly grabbed the attention, elicited the interest and stirred the desire of young people all over the world.

The job now is to broaden the target audience to include the time-rich, cash-rich segment that is the over 55s; there are over 15 million of them in the UK alone, and most do not yet know how to use a PMP or understand how that knowledge can change their lives. It would not take much to up-skill motivated over 55s, and for a groundswell to begin that would leave only the most determined clinging solely to older formats. There is an opportunity for the market leaders in PMPs to lead the way in ensuring that the musical worlds of older people do not start to fall silent.

Implications for practice

- Listening to music is part of full and enjoyable life – over 55s need to be facilitated in learning about new music technology so that they can continue to listen to music and enjoy the many health benefits of doing so.
- The passing on of music technology skills from young to old could be a valuable intergenerational project, particularly for care homes.
- A lack of knowledge about new music technology can lead to the over 55s becoming disenfranchised from listening to new music and, eventually, their own music collections.
- A lack of interest in learning about new music technology may suggest a fear of new technology in general, but may also indicate limited understanding of how new music technology can be used for the listeners' benefits.
- Practitioners could also facilitate coaching/training sessions for their service users (and staff) on how to get the best from a PMP. Some units can hold not only music but commercial and personal videos (including footage of family and friends), TV programmes, classic and new films, personal photographs, useful and entertaining applications (including health

advice and fitness videos suitable for all ages), games, radio, learning materials and books, and can be used with headphones or speakers or plugged into stereos and TVs.

- It is acknowledged that there are applications available to facilitate those with sight difficulties, but manufacturers should take into account the physical limitations of people over the age of 55 when designing their products.

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