

INVASION OF THE HEARING SNATCHERS

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HOW OUR HEADPHONE HABIT HAS CHANGED THE CULTURE OF THE COOP

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By Susannah Jacob

Last year, over one billion headphones were sold around the world. Agitation grows along with headphone use itself. Has its proliferation plagued our society? How badly is it damaging our hearing? And how, we wonder, does it affect life at the Coop?

Andrew Young has been on staff as a receiving coordinator for one year, on top of two decades of membership. He has noticed an uptick in working members ignoring summons on the loudspeaker. “They couldn’t hear anything.”

A specific incident led Young to believe the Coop needs a strong suggestion if not an official policy limiting headphone use for working members. On a busy weekend afternoon, he saw a member returning a cart to the receiving room, wearing “big podcast headphones...totally oblivious that he was going to hit a four-year-old girl,” Young said. He was able to stop the accident just in time.

Now he raises the issue at the start of shifts. “I just lay it out,” he said, and tends to ask people not to wear headphones or, if they must, consider wearing only one earbud. For Young, this is not just a safety issue, but a “two-pronged argument: safety, and we need to be talking to each other.” He went on, “the Coop is about not being alone. The Coop is a public crossroads, and one of the great things is talking to people and meeting people, and when you have headphones in you miss half the point of the Coop.”

Delivering his start-of-shift spiel made him realize he is not the only one with concerns. “You do run into people who are like ‘F you, I’m listening to this and I don’t care,’ but most people are happy about it,” he said. He surveys teenagers, 15 and 16-year-olds, who come to the Coop to work shifts and “most of them say, ‘I wish phones didn’t exist.’”

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Young believes the Coop should make a strong suggestion to members who are working not to use headphones, much like he does today. As for members who are shopping? “We have no control over that, that’s a whole different animal,” he said, “but I

have seen people get into fights after bumping into each other because they can't hear anything."

Young and other staff members have formed a small committee to talk through policy strategies to address headphone use while working. They are planning to have a formal meeting. "Meanwhile, I'm going to keep talking about it," he said.

Maddy Bruster and Alexis Nowicki are two Coop members, and a couple. Bruster, who works checkout or front-end support, disagrees that the Coop needs a formal policy barring headphones for members who are working. Nowicki, who loves checkout and occasionally restocks, feels more strongly that wearing headphones is dangerous and antisocial. "I think they're basically a hazard, and I think it just creates this barrier if someone is trying to speak to you and be heard by you," said Nowicki. "When you're working a shift, it becomes hard for anyone to assign you a task. And what if something is about to fall on your head? You could maybe not hear it."

"Actually, a box of sirloin steak once fell on my head in the meat locker and it made not a sound," said Bruster.

"I also think that the Coop shift is actually an opportunity to have spontaneous interactions with people and you're cutting yourself off from if you have had headphones on. It's good to be present in the world," said Nowicki. "I take things very personally and so I'm thinking about this as a symptom of a problem with people in general, like, why does my friend want to do a Coop shift with me and be on headphones the whole time?"

"I can see both sides of the issue, but I don't see [headphone use] as really changing the culture," said Jason Sparks, a receiving coordinator who has also been a member for 22 years. As a receiving coordinator, a big part of Sparks' job is explaining things to people. "Sometimes I will be explaining something to someone, and I realize they have earbuds in. They stop me and ask me to start over. I always tell people at the beginning of shifts to keep your ears open."

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Sparks agrees with Bruster that there are some potentially-dangerous places to be absorbed in headphone noise, such as on the sidewalk near the receiving trucks or in the basement. But on the whole, he believes “everybody does it and I don’t think it has an overall negative effect on the social culture of the Coop.”

He points out that if people aren’t listening to something, they are glued to their phones, looking at their screens. “I can’t remember the last time in checkout that the checkout person didn’t check their text messages between every step of checkout.”

Plus, he says, tuning into your headphones offers an understandable reprieve from other oppressive noise. “If you are working eight-to-nine hours a day, every room has its own music playing. You can enter a fugue state.” The Coop, he says, “is not as aurally diverse as you would think...it’s a lot of banal, eighties classic rock we’ve all heard 8,000 times. Maybe you just need a reprieve with a book-on-tape, or a podcast.”

Another upside to the headphone habit is all the extra work the Coop gains. “A lot of time I will have people working on my shift come to ask me if the shift has ended,” he said. “Especially the people with the big, Bose noise-cancelling phones. They ask, ‘Did you make the announcement?’ And I’m like, ‘Yeah, 15 minutes ago.’”

Susannah Jacob is a history PhD student and a proficient operator of the slotted, plastic bag-taper machine in the Coop’s bulk department.