

# iPod Users Go Into the Closet

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Author and speaker Seth Godin is on his fifth iPod, but he's never once worn the telltale white earbuds.

Why not? Because Godin doesn't want to be recognized as an iPod owner.

Godin is a closet iPod user, one of a small cadre of iPod lovers loath to be identified as an iPod lover.

For closet users like Godin, it's the way the earbuds scream, "Woo hoo, look at me, I've got an iPod!"

"I'm not looking forward to being identified on the street," Godin said. "I don't know why. I don't like it." (Curiously, Godin said he's "proud" of his laptop's Apple logo when he gives presentations to thousands of people, but dislikes the idea of getting the iPod nod on the subway).

To others, using non-white headphones is a reaction to the growing hordes of iPod fans clogging the sidewalks and subways. Others don't like wearing corporate logos, even earbuds.

Godin, who lives in New York, said he knows plenty of other New Yorkers who also refuse to wear the white earpieces. Most rationalize it, he said, saying they get better audio from different headphones. But in reality, they're asserting their individuality.

"It makes me feel individual to customize it," Godin said. "Even if it's just changing the headphones. That's the irony of the whole thing. Most of the people who are Apple's biggest cheering section are people who go out of their way to wear what everyone else is not wearing and eat where not everyone else is eating. They're the kind of people who like to customize their life and feel like they're independent."

As the iPod moves fast into the mainstream (Susquehanna Financial Group predicts Apple and Hewlett-Packard will sell 1 million iPods a month this holiday season), more and more users are going back into the closet.

"I started to feel like a walking iPod ad," said one New Yorker, who preferred to remain anonymous, in print and in person. "I actually dug out an old pair of black headphones to use with mine."

Closet iPod use is particularly acute among early adopters, said consumer behaviorist Tom O'Guinn, because they don't want to be identified with the Johnny-come-latelies.

"The phenomenon in question is 'desired marginality,'" he said. O'Guinn said for some Mac users, for example, Apple's marginal status and low market share is a "source of pride." And as the iPod goes mainstream, some early adopters are affronted by its lack of exclusivity.

Michael Bull, a lecturer in media and culture at the University of Sussex in the United Kingdom, concurred.

"As iPods become more popular, so their cultural cachet is reduced," Bull said. "Quite a few U.S. users note with alarm the increase in numbers of iPods they see in the streets. Before there was a kind of specialness in recognizing another early adopter, a recognition of cultural superiority."

Drew Neisser, president and CEO of Renegade Marketing Group, a New York advertising firm, said Apple has been working hard to keep the iPod fresh and fashionable, and may eventually offer different color earbuds to distinguish different groups of users.

"Apple is at a critical fork in the road when it comes to the iPod," he wrote in an e-mail. "You can already begin to see the initial iPod pioneers, who embraced the value of individuality, shunning the storm of homogeneity that's growing with each new purchase."

But if some hipsters and early adopters are clandestine about their iPod ardor, is the iPod in any danger of becoming unfashionable? Several professional style watchers say not likely: The iPod couldn't be more fashionable.

Claire Brooks, editor of *L style Report*, a trend-tracking newsletter, said: "It's no longer particularly hip to own an iPod, but it's definitely not passé either. The iPod has moved from hip accessory to lifestyle classic almost immediately, which is something very few brands are able to do, and certainly none of the competitive offerings."

"The only people I've met who are closet users are middle-aged ex-college rockers who have a guilt complex about rediscovering the bad-boy tunes of their youth," she said.

Janet Ozzard, executive editor of Style.com, the website for *Vogue* and *W*, said the iPod isn't even close to becoming unhip.

"Most people I know are so in love with theirs that they spend weekends hanging out at the Apple store in SoHo stocking up on accessories," she said.

DeeDee Gordon, co-founder of trend-spotting firm Look-Look, said hipsters are fully aware the iPod is no longer cutting-edge, but that's not a deterrent.

Blogger Josh Rubin, who publishes Cool Hunting, said it's "totally hip" to own an iPod.

"I don't know of anyone who is embarrassed," he said. "Anyone. There's a whole white-cord subculture here in NYC. It's like an unspoken brother/sisterhood on the subways and in the streets."

Rubin, however, admitted he personally doesn't use the white headphones -- for reasons of better audio quality, naturally. "So I guess I'm proud," he said, "but stealth."

Author Godin related a revealing story about a friend who became "very upset" with the white earbuds.

"He felt he was being used by Apple," Godin said. "Everyone who got on the subway, he got that look. So he got a pair of black earbuds."

Godin continued, "He gets on the subway, being very independent and a maverick, which is what New Yorkers like to do, and he sees another guy across the car wearing black headphones. And this guy pulls out an iPod to adjust the volume. My friend catches himself giving this guy *the look*, the I've-got-an-iPod-too wink."

Godin concluded, "It proves people like it when they find other people like them. People who don't like being part of the main tribe still like being part of a smaller tribe."

