

Pleasure Beats: Using Sound for Experience Enhancement

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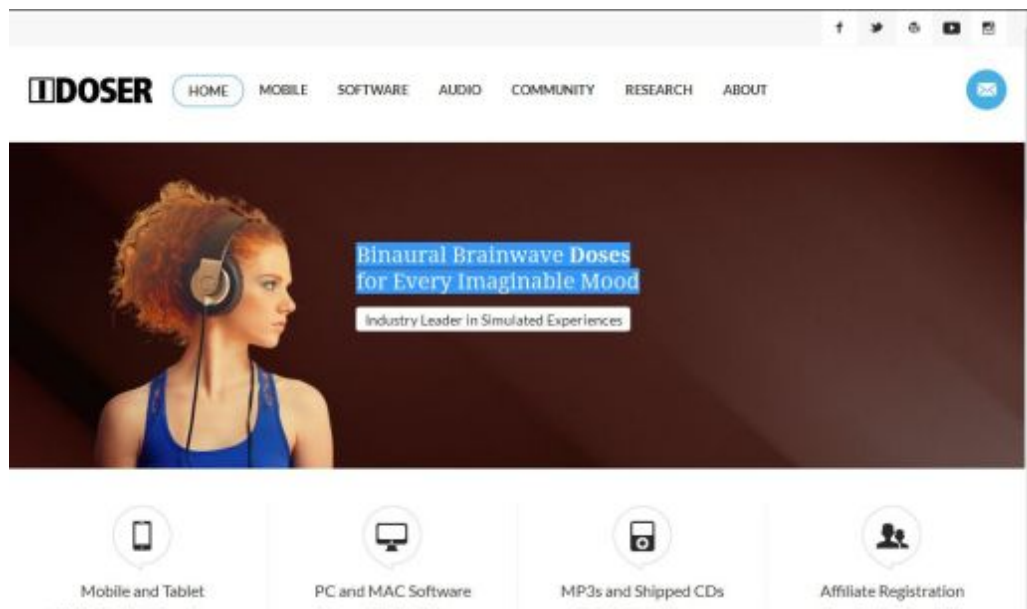
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Abstract

After a rockin' (and seriously informative) series of podcasts from Leonard J. Paul, a Drrty South banger dropped by SO! Regular Regina Bradley, a screamtastic meditation from Yvon Bonenfant, a heaping plate of food sounds from Steph Ceraso, and crowd chants courtesy of Kariann Goldschmidt's work on live events in Brazil, our summer Sound and Pleasure comes to a

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Acoustics, Advertising, Article, Digital Media, Disability Studies



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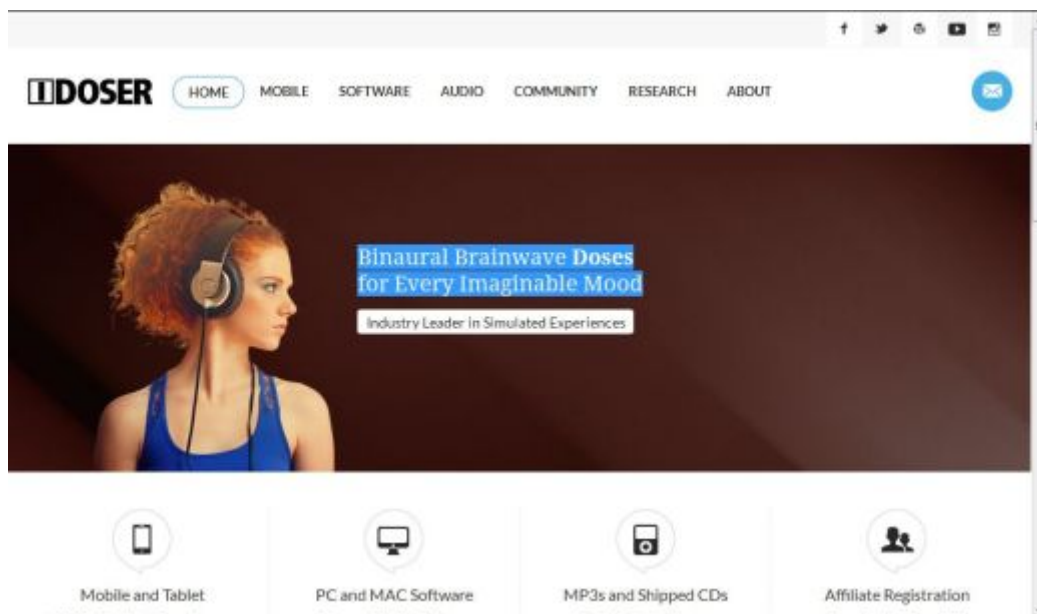
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After a rockin' (and *seriously* informative) [series of podcasts](#) from [Leonard J. Paul](#), a Drtty South banger dropped by SO! Regular [Regina Bradley](#), a screamtastic meditation from [Yvon Bonenfant](#), a heaping plate of food sounds from [Steph Ceraso](#), and crowd chants courtesy of [Kariann Goldschmidt](#)'s work on live events in Brazil, our summer **Sound and Pleasure** comes to a stirring (and more intimate) conclusion. Tune into [Justyna Stasiowska](#)'s frequency below. And thanks for engaging the pleasure principle this summer!--**JS, Editor-in-Chief**

One of my greatest pleasures is lying in bed, eyes closed and headphones on. I attune to a single stimuli while being enveloped in sound. Using sensory deprivation techniques like blindfolding and isolating headphones is a simple recipe for relaxation, but the website [Digital Drugs](#) offers you more. A user can play their mp3 files and surround themselves with an acoustical downpour that increases and then develops into gradient waves. The user feels as if in a hailstorm, surrounded by this constant gritty aural movement. Transfixed by the feeling of noise, the outside seems indistinguishable from inside.



Screenshot courtesy of the author

Sold by the i-Doser company, Digital Drugs use mp3 files to deliver [binaural beats](#) in order to “simulate a desired experience.” The user manual advises lying in a dark and silent room with headphones on when listening to the recording. Simply purchase the mp3, and fill the prescription

by listening. Depending on user needs, the experience can be preprogrammed with a specific scenario. This way users can condition themselves using Digital Drugs in order to feel a certain way. The user can control the experience by choosing the “student” or “confidence” dose suggestive of whether you’d like your high like a mild dose of marijuana or an intense dose of cocaine. The receiver is able to perceive every reaction of their body as a drug experience, which they themselves produced. The “dosing” of these aural drugs is restricted by a medical warning and “dose advisors” are available for consultation.



Screenshot courtesy of the author

Thus, the overall presentation of Digital Drugs resembles a crisscross of medicine and narcotic clichés with the slogan “Binaural Brainwave **doses** for every imaginable mood.” While researching the phenomena of Digital Drugs, I have tried not to dismiss them as another gimmick or a new age meditation prop. Rather, I argue the I-Doser company offers a simulation of a drug experience by using the discourse of psychoactive substances to describe sounds: the user becomes an actor taking part in a performance.

By tracing these strategies on a macro and micro scale I show a body emerging from a new paradigm of health. I argue that we have become a psychosomatic creature called the inFORMational body: a body that is formed by information, which shapes practices of health undertaken to feel good and form us. This body is networked, much like a fractal, and connects different agencies operating both in macro (society) and micro (individual) scales.

Macroscale Epidemy: The Power of Drug Representation

Heinrich Wilhelm Dove described binaural beats in 1839 as a specific brain stimuli resulting in low-frequency pulsations perceivable when two tones at slightly different frequencies are presented separately through stereo headphones to each of the subject’s ears. The difference between tones must be relatively small, only up to 30 Hz, and the tones themselves must not

exceed 1000 Hz. Subsequently, scientific authorities presented the phenomena as a tool in stimulating the brain in neurological affliction therapy. Gerard Oster [described the applications in 1968](#) and the [Monroe Institute](#) later continued this research in order to use binaural beats in meditation and “expanding consciousness” as a crucial part of self-improvement programs.

I-Doser then molded this foundational research into a narrative presenting binaural beats as a brain stimulation for a desired experience. The binaural beats can be simply understood as an acoustic phenomena with application in practices like [meditation](#) or [medical therapy](#).

I-Doser also employs the unverified claims about binaural beats into a narration that consists of the scattered information about research; it connects these authorities with YouTube recordings of human reactions to Digital Drugs. Video testimonies of Digital Drugs users [caused a considerable stir among both parents and teachers in American schools](#) two years ago. An American school even banned mp3 players as a precautionary measure. In the YouTube video one can see a person lying with headphones on. After a while we see an involuntary body movement that in some videos might resemble a seizure. Losing control over one’s body becomes the highlight of the footage alongside a subjective account also present in the video. The body movements are framed as a drug experience both for the viewer who is a vicarious witness and the participant who has an active experience.



<https://youtu.be/H4O4JQnHAbw>

This type of footage as evidence was popularized as early as the 1960s when military footage showed reactions to psychoactive substances such as LSD.



<https://youtu.be/n-rWnQphPdQ>

In the same manner as the Digital Drugs video, the army footage highlights the process of losing control over one's body, complete with subjective testimonies as evidence of the psychoactive substance's power.

This kind of visualization is usually fueled by paranoia, akin to Cold War fears, depicting daily attacks by an invisible enemy upon unaware subjects. The information of the authority agencies about binaural beats created a reference base that fueled the concern framing the You Tube videos as evidence of drug experience. It shows that the angst isn't triggered by technology, in this case Digital Drugs, but by the form in which the "invisible attack" is presented: through sound waves. The manner of framing is more important than the hypothetical action itself. Context then changes recognition.

Microscale Paradigm Shift: Health as Feeling

On an individual level, did feeling better always mean being healthy? In *Histoire des pratiques de santé. Le sain et le malsain depuis le MoyenAge*, Georges Vigarello, continuator of the Foucault School of Biopolitics, explains that well-being became a medicalized condition in the 20th century with growing attention to mental health. Being healthy was no longer only about the good condition of the body but became a state of mind; feeling was important as an overall recognition of oneself. In the biopolitical perspective, Vigarello points out, health became more than just the government's concern for individual well-being but was maintained by medical techniques and technologies.

In the case of Digital Drugs the well-being of children was safely governed by parents and media coverage creating prevention in schools from the "sound drugs." Similarly, the UAE called for a ban on "hypnotic music" [citing it as an illegal drug like cannabis or ecstasy](#). Using this perspective, I would add that feeling better, then, becomes a never-ending warfare; well-being becomes understood as a state (as in condition and as in governed territory).

Well-being is also an obligation to society, carried out by specific practices. What does a healthy lifestyle actually mean? Its meaning includes self-governance: controlling yourself, keeping fit, discipline (embodying the rules). In order to do it you need guidance: the need for authorities (health experts and trainers) and common knowledge (the "google it" modus operandi). All of these agencies create a strategy to make you feel good every day and have a high performance rate. Digital Drugs, then, become products that promise to boost up your energy, make you more endurable, and extend your mind capabilities. High performance is redefined as a state that enables instant access to happiness, pleasure, relaxation.



"Submerged" by Flickr user Rene Passet, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

inFORMational Body

Vigarello reflects that understanding health in terms of low/high performance—itself based on the logic of consumption—created the concept of a limitless enhancement. Here, he refers to the information model, connecting past assumptions about health with a technique of self-governing. It is based on senses and an awareness of oneself using “intellectual” practices like relaxation and “probing oneself” (or knowing what vitamins you should take). The medical apparatus’s priority, moreover, shifted from keeping someone in good health to maintaining well-being. The subjective account became the crucial element of a diagnosis, supporting itself on information from different sources in order to imply the feeling of a limitless “better.” This strategy relies strongly on the use of technologies, the consideration of a sensual aspect and self-recognition—precisely the methodology used for Digital Drugs’ focus on enhancing wellbeing.

Still, this inFORMational body needs a regulatory system. How do we know that we really feel better? Apart from the media well-being campaign (and the amount of surveillance it involves), we are constantly asked about our health status in the common greeting phrase, but its *unheimlich*-ness only becomes apparent for non-anglo-saxon speakers. These checkpoint techniques become an everyday instrument of discipline and rely on an obligation to express oneself in social interactions.

So how do we feel? As for now, everything seems “OK.”

<https://youtu.be/XSZfvpMOXws>

Featured image: “[Biophonic Garden](#)” by Flickr user Rene Passet, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Justyna Stasiowska is a PhD student in the Performance Studies Department at Jagiellonian University. She is preparing a dissertation under the working title: “Noise. Performativity of Sound Perception” in which she argue that frequencies don’t have a strictly programmed effect on the receiver and the way of experiencing sounds is determined by the frames or modes of perception, established by the situation and cognitive context. Justyna earned her M.A in Drama and Theater Studies. Her thesis was devoted to the notion of liveness in the context of the strategies used by contemporary playwrights to manipulate the recipients’ cognitive apparatus using the DJ figure. You can find her on [Twitter](#) and [academia.edu](#).



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[On Sound and Pleasure: Meditations on the Human Voice](#)—Yvon Bonenfant

[This is Your Body on the Velvet Underground](#)—Jacob Smith