

# Reflection of Findings: The Usage of Headphones in Digital Culture

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### *Introduction*

To observe culture, one must observe the self. That is the basic definition of an autoethnography. Regarding technology, I asked myself: “What do I use the most on a daily?”. The obvious answer was my phone, and I felt it was not only too common of an answer but also wouldn’t yield anything I would find interesting to self-analyze. And the secondary answer, my laptop, was in a similar state. I decided to think past the two and landed on something almost everyone uses. Headphones. For the purposes of this autoethnography, I elected to study five days of use. This is because my use of headphones tends to vary much more compared to my phone or laptop, since headphones can be used more passively. Each day was noted with a rough estimate of time of day, as well as general usage for periods longer than half an hour or so.

### *Usage*

Unsurprisingly to myself, the most frequent usage of my headphones was to simply listen to music. Otherwise, they would sit on my neck. The reason why I include this in my usage is because they’re often intentionally there for aesthetic purposes. Even if the headphones aren’t connected to any device, I often took them with me around to places. I also used my headphones to access sites such as YouTube and to call my friends.

#### Usage of Headphones Across a Five-day Period

Main Usage	Sub Usage	Number of Mentions
Listening to music		11
	<i>Heading to locations</i>	7

	<i>Discovering music</i>	<i>1</i>
	<i>Doing housework</i>	<i>3</i>
Idle		<i>6</i>
	<i>As an accessory</i>	<i>5</i>
	<i>Recharging</i>	<i>1</i>
Other		<i>3</i>
	<i>Calling friends</i>	<i>2</i>
	<i>Relaxing</i>	<i>1</i>

There are quite a few things to note about each usage type and their frequency. To begin with the most common usage, listening to music for me is both intentional and passive. I passively listened to music based on however my songs were shuffled and occasionally listened to a specific album of my choice. However, it should be noted that I do not use apps like Spotify or YouTube Music to listen to music. There is no algorithm behind the app I use to listen to music, and all music available to me is hand-picked. The method of discovery is, however, technically algorithmic. I use YouTube to find songs I like similarly to Spotify and YouTube Music. It should be noted that YouTube's method of recommendation tends to favour the user's own choice rather than simply playing the next song. I like to do housework while listening to music because I like listening to music.

As for idle usage, I do need to recharge my headphones to keep using them. Since this was a necessary function, I decided to count it as idle usage. Otherwise, I used it as an accessory on all five days. Many people my age or similar, including myself, find headphones to be fashionable. Most outfits I wear tend to work with my headphones as well. The other usages are calling, which is intentional, and relaxing. Relaxing here refers to using my headphones with my phone, so I would count it as passive usage.

*Reflection*

From looking at my headphone usage, one thought came to mind about current culture: sci-fi is today. Think about it: a sci-fi world where everyone carries crazy mobile technology and wears strange equipment. The difference is just in advancement, and that we're accustomed to it all. Science fiction also tends to hold plotlines exploring "if we all use the tech, who owns it?", such as *Cyberpunk 2077* (Cyberpunk 2077: Ultimate Edition Walkthrough Team, 2022). In Tristan Harris's TEDTalk *How a handful of tech companies control billions of minds every day*, he discusses exactly what the title suggests. He calls for the public to avoid becoming complacent, and to be conscious of what content they consume (Harris, 2017). His Talk accurately describes a few problems with current digital culture: everything we do online is tracked and used to control populations.

I used to use Spotify to listen to music because I wanted to support artists. However, the company holds a lot of controversies including its CEO deciding to invest \$700 million into military technologies (Tronco, 2025). Instead, I started to use Bandcamp to buy albums from artists directly and pay what I can. Personally, I want to take Harris's advice and become more conscious of media I consume. Recently, companies have begun to sell "licenses to play" games instead of allowing consumers ownership of the game (Samantha, 2025). This is only possible due to everything becoming digital, and as such I've decided to start burning physical copies of music I own. Physical copies of media are more important now than ever, as companies can't revoke them.

Regarding musicians and their work, music has been culturally relevant forever. The current music culture is almost like a competition: who's the biggest fan, who knows the most songs, who knows the least popular, etc. Online, there are some spaces that talk about

the concept of being “niche”. This is where listeners talk about good musicians that people rarely know of and wear it like a badge of honour. Behaviour displayed here is like what Bailey Parnell speaks on in her TEDTalk, *Is Social Media Hurting Your Mental Health?*. She describes very accurately how we assign value to ourselves in a digital comparative world (Parnell, 2017). How people in these online spaces function tends to follow being “the perfect worker”, except for listening to music. They must be effective at finding good music, must have the best taste, must keep working at listening to music.

However, music is an art form meant to be enjoyed. Just look at the physical designs of headphones. What started as a tool for working with audio became a music sensation once Sony released its Walkman, a portable cassette player, in 1979 (Losse). Its standard design changed too, from a basic frame to cushioning added in every place necessary. Headphone usage and music culture are entwined, and listening to music should not be the competition that it is in current digital culture today. Art holds power, and I believe that “the perfect worker” is unable to truly value art because they value efficiency.

Headphones are an important piece of technology that allow for connection in a special way. Listening to music is a connection to the musician behind it; their feelings and message are expressed through the song. Sherry Turkle’s TEDTalk *Connected, but alone?* touches on the lack of connection through current digital culture. Turkle mentions how youth feel less able to speak with peers face to face and interestingly mentions how we should be “cultivating the capacity of solitude” (Turkle, 2012). She mentions this specifically because people rely on technology to feel connected but end up feeling isolated. I want to argue that headphones help cultivate this ability for solitude. Its design is comfortable for relaxation; its primary usage is for audio. I’ve used them to do all sorts of tasks alone and to also be alone. They are surprisingly a good device to learn how to sit in solitude and just simply listen.

Another culture deeply connected to music is fashion. Punk, goth, and emo bands pioneered crazy looks to go with their music and politics. Fans copy outfits that musicians wear on stage. And with the design change of the headphones since the release of the Walkman, headphones entered the fashion space as a stylish accessory. The usage of headphones isn't novel, and a headphone is a nice piece of convergence culture.

### *Conclusion*

Headphones and other auditory devices are often overlooked in terms of technology. However, they are a prominent piece of not only music but fashion culture as well. Their usage spans much further past modern day technology, and yet they lack any change to their core design. From my self-analysis of my headphone usage, I can conclude that while music and fashion are still relevant so will headphones. Devices for audio input are an important piece of how we interact with digital culture today. Even if headphones fade into the background, they take the forefront of all sorts of cultures today.

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