

Listening Habits as a Mirror: Generation Z's Life Attitudes and Identity Construction

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Abstract: Under the dual confinement of digital platform capitalism and algorithmic logic, mobile music consumption has transcended the boundaries of pure aesthetic entertainment, evolving into a core battlefield for micro-politics and daily practices among contemporary youth. Focusing on Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012), the "digital natives," this study investigates how everyday listening habits—including listening duration, genre preferences, and playlist curation—serve as an "auditory mirror" that reflects life attitudes and identity construction in an accelerated society. Utilizing a mixed-methods design combining online questionnaires (N = 284) and semi-structured interviews (N = 12), this paper applies classical sociological concepts such as Bourdieu's distinction, Goffman's dramaturgical analysis, and digital discipline. The findings reveal that Gen Z's auditory practices exhibit intense emotional routinization and micro-tribalization. On one hand, youth actively employ noise-canceling headphones and personalized playlists to construct micro-emotional sanctuaries as "tactics" to resist alienation and daily anxiety. On the other hand, their aesthetic tastes and identity construction are deeply co-domesticated and enclosed by the hyper-personalized algorithmic landscape of streaming platforms. This study provides crucial empirical evidence for digital youth culture and the sociology of everyday life.

Keywords: Generation Z; Listening Habits; Identity Construction; Algorithmic Discipline; Micro-Sociology; Cultural Capital

1. Introduction: Digital Youth Culture and the Auditory Practice

Walking into a crowded subway carriage in a modern metropolis, a university library at midnight, or a convenience store at dawn, one encounters a definitive visual motif of contemporary youth culture: a pair of tightly

fitted headphones. As true "digital natives," individuals belonging to Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012) live lives structurally mediated by ubiquitous screens and continuous streams of digital audio. Music, which was once conceptualized as a localized, purely aesthetic or recreational object, has been profoundly reconfigured by the mobile internet. It has transformed into a highly fluid, pervasive medium seamlessly embedded into youth's daily commutes, labor routines, social interactions, and nocturnal insomnia.

However, mainstream cultural discourses and commercial market research frequently reduce youth's music listening behaviors to a series of detached, frozen metrics. End-of-year summaries published by major streaming platforms treat users' behavioral variables—such as total minutes played, top genres, and interaction rates—as mere consumer profile data. This market-centric perspective strips young individuals of their agency as active social actors, overlooking the profound psychological defense mechanisms and micro-resistances underlying these numbers. Conversely, certain traditional cultural studies tend to over-romanticize youth music consumption, interpreting it exclusively as a grand, subversive "subcultural rebellion." This detached romanticism fails to grasp the mundane, exhausting, and highly pragmatic reality of ordinary young people who consume music primarily as a psychological stabilizer amid daily structural pressures.

To establish a highly precise sociological orientation, this study rejects abstract, generalized narratives. Instead, it positions the specific, everyday auditory practices of Generation Z under a sociological microscope. We deconstruct "listening habits" into three precise, interconnected empirical dimensions: (1) Time and Space: Listening as Emotional Defense. How do the prolonged listening durations and specific spatiotemporal contexts (e.g., suffocating daily commutes, isolated late-night hours) reflect the defensive life attitudes of

Gen Z, who employ acoustic flows to reclaim absolute private spaces within a hyper-competitive modern society? (2) Symbol and Distinction: The Micro-Tribalization of Playlists. How do highly fragmented and decentralized musical genres (such as independent rock, Lo-fi ambient, underground rap, or traditional wave) operate as digital cultural capital, enabling youth to draw symbolic boundaries between "us" and "them" across virtual fields? (3) Human and Technology: The Paradox of Autonomy Under Algorithmic Domination. To what extent do young individuals possess authentic agency when they meticulously curate playlists and compose poetic commentary to project their identities? How does the personalized recommendation algorithm stealthily capture, codify, and ultimately co-domesticate youth's aesthetic tastes?

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Everyday Life "Tactics" and Acoustic Spatial Defense

In the sociology of everyday life, a foundational inquiry revolves around how individuals navigate, endure, and subvert overarching structural constraints. Michel de Certeau [1] provided a vital paradigm by distinguishing between "strategies" and "tactics." Strategies are the properties of institutionalized power structures—such as corporations, educational systems, and state apparatuses—that possess the spatial capacity to generate, enforce, and maintain structural rules. Tactics, conversely, belong to the weak. Lacking a permanent spatial base, the atomized individual must deploy localized, fleeting, and opportunistic maneuvers within the cracks and fissures of strategic systems to claw back fragments of autonomy.

In the contemporary digital landscape, headphones and mobile streaming applications function precisely as the ubiquitous "tactics" of Generation Z. When confronted with an unescapable, heavily structured urban environment—be it a mandatory corporate office space or an exhausting, competitive academic lecture hall—the act of putting on headphones is far from passive escapism. It represents a micro-spatial appropriation achieved through embodied technological usage. By actively modulating the acoustic intake, the social actor establishes a rigid sensory boundary that segregates the self

from the immediate public space, executing a tactical guerrilla maneuver that carves out an untouchable, psychological sanctuary within an otherwise alienated reality [1].

2.2 Aesthetic Taste, Fields, and Symbolic Distinction in the Digital Field

Pierre Bourdieu's [2] seminal work established that "taste" is never an innocent, purely subjective manifestation of individual aesthetic judgment. Instead, taste is the structured and structuring manifestation of the habitus, deeply conditioned by an individual's structural position within social space, which simultaneously reacts back upon social fields as a primary instrument of distinction. Traditional cultural sociology has heavily documented the rigid symbolic boundaries separating upper-class "highbrow" cultural consumption (such as classical music or opera) from working-class "lowbrow" consumption (such as mass-market pop).

However, within the highly digitized, hyper-fragmented landscapes navigated by Generation Z, these traditional, macro-level dichotomies have largely lost their explanatory power. Symbolic distinction has undergone a process of radical hyper-refinement and "micro-tribalization." The boundaries are no longer drawn merely along economic lines but are meticulously constructed through specialized cultural sub-fields: independent rock, shoegaze, vaporwave, math rock, synth-pop, or niche sub-cultural soundscapes [2]. In these digital fields, youth utilize their aesthetic preferences to accumulate localized recognition. By curating and displaying distinct musical tastes, they project legible identity signals to identify potential cultural allies ("the in-group") while systematically excluding and stigmatizing tastes deemed mainstream, commercialized, or uncritical ("the out-group") [2].

2.3 Front Stage Presentation and Back Stage Healing: A Dramaturgical Analysis

Erving Goffman's [3] dramaturgical analysis provides an invaluable micro-sociological lens for decoding identity performance within virtual interactive spaces. Goffman posited that social life functions akin to a theatrical stage, bifurcated into a "front stage" and a "back stage." On the front stage, individuals engage in highly calculated, stylized performances, adopting specific "facework" and expressive equipment to project an idealized self-image that

conforms to the normative expectations of an observing audience. Conversely, in the back stage, the performer can safely step out of character, drop the exhausting social masks, and openly process vulnerability, exhaustion, or deviance without the fear of immediate social sanction.

Digital music streaming networks (such as NetEase Cloud Music and Spotify) are structurally designed to facilitate this dramaturgical split. Public profiles, shared tracks on social media feeds, and meticulously curated public playlists constitute the digitized "front stage." Here, young social actors strategically weaponize specific cultural symbols-selecting tracks that signify independent thinking, elite artistic appreciation, or profound melancholy-to actively curate their ideal digital persona [3]. In sharp contrast, hidden "private playlists," alongside repetitive midnight loops of ambient lofi tracks or uncritical commercial pop songs, represent the digital "back stage." In this unobserved sanctuary, youth disengage from their external social performance, utilizing acoustic rhythms to perform deep, private emotional labor and psychological maintenance [3].

2.4 Digital Discipline Under Algorithmic Platform Capitalism

As cultural sociology converges with digital studies, contemporary critical scholars have increasingly deconstructed the utopian illusion of technological empowerment. Within the ecosystem of streaming media, the cultural power once held by traditional gatekeepers-such as professional music critics, institutional radio stations, or major record labels-has been entirely concentrated into the black-boxed recommendation algorithms of platform capitalism. These platforms operate via data surveillance, data tracking users' granular behavioral outputs: every millisecond of playtime, skip rates, precise timestamp interactions, and playlist saves [4].

This algorithmic logic manifests as a highly sophisticated, decentralized form of digital discipline. Distinct from historical disciplinary power, which operated through violent negotiations, spatial enclosures, and direct prohibitions [5], algorithmic discipline functions through a highly seductive, affirmative mechanism. It never overtly forbids an individual from listening to specific content; rather, it relentlessly tracks,

flatters, and magnifies the individual's existing desires [4].

By continuously feeding the user hyper-targeted cultural content that mirrors their historical behavior, the algorithm structurally traps the individual within highly homogenized acoustic echo chambers. This gives rise to a profound paradox of youth identity construction: while Gen Z social actors passionately believe they are exercising absolute autonomy and showcasing an authentic, idiosyncratic identity through their curated tastes, this "authentic self" is, in reality, a heavily standardized commodity calculated, optimized, and mass-reproduced by the algorithmic matrices of platform capitalism [4].

3. Methodology

3.1 Quantitative Stage: Data Collection and Variables

The quantitative phase targeted urban youth belonging to Generation Z (aged 14 to 29). Survey distribution was conducted across various online platforms utilizing a combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling methodologies, yielding a final valid sample size of $N = 284$. The survey instrument was organized into four specialized modules: (1) Socio-demographic Profile: Capturing gender, precise age, educational attainment, occupational status, and geographic location. (2) Behavioral Auditory Metrics: Measuring average daily listening hours, primary situational contexts of consumption, categorical genre preferences, and the volume of self-created playlists. (3) Subjective Life Attitudes: Utilizing a 5-point Likert scale to measure perceived structural stress (the pressure of societal "involution" or neijuan [6]), levels of daily loneliness, and primary methods of emotional regulation. (4) Digital Identity Behaviors: Quantifying the ratio of public versus private playlists, frequency of music sharing on external social media, and level of textual interaction within platform comment sections. The accumulated data was processed via SPSS to analyze descriptive statistics and primary bivariate correlations.

3.2 Qualitative Stage: Semi-Structured Depth Interviews

The qualitative phase served to historicalize and flesh out the statistical data, focusing on capturing the "subjective meaning-making" of the social actors. Twelve informants were

purposively sampled from the survey respondents based on their distinctive auditory profiles (e.g., extreme high-duration listeners, hyper-niche subcultural consumers, and self-identified algorithm-dependent users). Semi-structured interviews lasting between 60 to 90 minutes were conducted virtually, recorded, and transcribed verbatim. The structural coding process focused on micro-phenomena: the specific linguistic metaphors used in naming playlists, the psychological transitions occurring during late-night listening loops, and the deeply ambivalent relationships youth maintain with platform automated recommendations.

4. Empirical Findings and Discussion

4.1 The Sociology of Temporal Density: Music Listening as an "Emotional Sanctuary"

The quantitative data paints an undeniable picture of high behavioral attachment and temporal immersion among Gen Z listeners. Out of the 284 valid respondents, an overwhelming 61.2% reported an average daily music listening duration exceeding 2 hours, with 42.3% spending more than 3 hours per day enclosed in audio streams. Crucially, the spatial-situational contexts of consumption were heavily concentrated in three structural anchors of daily life: "daily commuting" (78.2%), "simultaneous accompaniment during labor/study" (65.4%), and "nocturnal insomnia or pre-sleep periods" (54.1%).

Bivariate correlation analysis revealed a statistically significant positive relationship between an individual's "perceived structural stress" and their "daily listening duration" ($\beta = 0.34$, $p < 0.01$). This statistical link exposes a stark sociological reality: Generation Z does not consume music out of a surplus of idle leisure time. On the contrary, they utilize acoustic flows as an active defensive measure against temporal saturation and psychological exhaustion within an increasingly accelerated social structure [6,7]. During the qualitative phase, Informant A (a 22-year-old female university senior preparing for hyper-competitive postgraduate entrance examinations) articulated this defensive maneuver with vivid structural clarity:

"Every single day I have to sit in the university library for over ten straight hours. The only time I feel like my life actually belongs to me is when I put on my noise-canceling headphones and play looping Lo-fi ambient tracks. The moment

the noise-canceling function clicks on, the rustling of papers, the anxious sighs of other students, and that invisible, choking pressure of competition are instantly wiped out. Music is the absolute only physical and mental territory in this massive academic machine that I retain total, uncompromised control over."

Analyzed through the lens of micro-sociological everyday practices, Gen Z's high-duration listening habit constitutes a localized "tactical" intervention against systemic alienation [1,8]. In modern urban environments, public spaces are heavily institutionalized and rationalized; spaces like crowded subways or hyper-competitive study environments are designed for functional efficiency, offering zero privacy for the individual's inner self.

Here, the headphone acts as a technological "spatial boundary switch." By deploying customized audio streams, the youth social actor successfully executes an acoustic insulation of the self, transforming a hostile or indifferent public space into a temporary, portable, and entirely sovereign emotional sanctuary.

4.2 Symbols and Distinctions: "Micro-Tribalized" Identity in Front Stage Performances

The structural architecture of modern streaming networks ensures that musical taste is never entirely a private affair. Public profiles, user level indicators, and automated end-of-year listening summaries effectively convert an individual's auditory history into a high-visibility "digital business card." The quantitative data indicates that 68.7% of Gen Z respondents invest significant creative effort into custom-naming their public playlists and selecting stylized visual covers. Furthermore, 52.4% of respondents explicitly admitted that they utilize the tracks shared by others on social media feeds as a primary diagnostic tool to evaluate whether someone is "intellectually or culturally compatible."

This behavior clearly illustrates how Bourdieu's [2] concept of distinction operates within contemporary digital fields. Within the discourse of Gen Z, a rigid, highly visible symbolic hierarchy organizes musical sub-genres, primarily structured around an ideological opposition between the "mass-market mainstream" (commercialized pop) and the "authentic alternative" (niche independent sub-genres).

Informant B (a 20-year-old male sophomore at a non-elite university, a passionate independent rock fan) articulated this taste-based hierarchy during his interview session:

"I would rather die than allow a single mass-market TikTok viral hit to appear on my public streaming profile. If someone's profile is filled with those industrial, factory-assembled commercial pop songs, I immediately know we have absolutely nothing in common intellectually. My public playlists are strictly curated with post-rock, math-rock, and shoegaze bands from Northern Europe. It isn't just about entertainment; it's a public statement about my aesthetic standards. It signals that I refuse to blend into the mindless, uncritical mass public."

Deconstructed sociologically, the public playlist operates as a vital currency for accumulating "digital cultural capital" [2]. Within these digital sub-fields, traditional socioeconomic markers are completely hidden; instead, social status and cultural authority are derived from the scarcity of one's aesthetic taste and the depth of one's subcultural textual knowledge. Youth social actors display specialized, obscure musical knowledge to validate their intellectual sophistication and achieve micro-tribal validation [2,3].

4.3 The Algorithmic Confinement: The Disciplinary Paradox of Digital Autonomy

The most critical sociological dimension of this study emerges when we investigate the structural limits of youth autonomy: when Gen Z social actors actively deploy their listening habits and playlist curation to build an authentic identity, to what degree is their agency genuinely self-authored? The quantitative data offers a sobering reality check: an overwhelming 81.3% of respondents stated that their primary method for discovering new music and expanding their aesthetic palate is through automated mechanisms-such as the platform's "Daily Recommendations," "Personalized Radars," or automated shuffle modes. Concurrently, 73.6% confessed to experiencing a profound psychological dependency on these systems, agreeing with the sentiment that "the platform's algorithm genuinely understands my inner moods better than I do."

The sociological reality underlying these metrics is profound: the aesthetic tastes, cultural boundaries, and personal identities of Generation Z are being systematically co-domesticated and

enclosed by the algorithms of platform capitalism [4].

Informant C (a 24-year-old corporate worker in a technology company) described this automated capture of taste with intense critical awareness:

"At first, I thought the personalized recommendation system was a miracle. It was uncanny how it always managed to push the absolute perfect track that matched my exact mood or aesthetic vibe at that specific hour. But after utilizing the app for two years, a strange sense of dread set in. I looked at my listening history and realized I have been structurally locked inside a transparent box labeled 'City Pop' and 'Electronic.' The algorithm constantly feeds me slight variations of what I already like, permanently freezing my taste in place. I used to think I was expressing my unique individuality by choosing these tracks, but now I see I am just dancing inside a digital cage constructed by the platform. My taste is a manufactured product."

Viewed through a critical lens, the automated curation models of streaming giants execute a highly effective form of digital discipline over youth consciousness [4,5]. The genius of this disciplinary power lies in its affirmative, desire-driven mechanism. It completely discards the heavy-handed, negative restrictions of historical censorship or traditional institutional authority. The algorithm never tells the user "you are forbidden from listening to this." Instead, it operates through a mechanism of radical indulgence: it continuously monitors the user's granular physical feedback-every micro-second of engagement, every lack of a skip, every track save-and feeds that data into predictive models that relentlessly flatter and intensify the user's historical desires [4].

5. Conclusion and Critical Reflexivity

By treating the mundane, everyday music-listening habits of Generation Z as a rigorous sociological object, this study has mapped the intricate, tension-filled interactions separating digital technology, youth subjectivity, and contemporary social structures. When we utilize everyday listening habits as a sociological mirror, we see far more than the movement of digital audio data; we witness the profound psychological defense mechanisms and structural dilemmas of a generation navigating an accelerated world [6].

In summary, the auditory practices of Generation Z operate across a dualistic front: (1) On the

Micro-Phenomenological Level: Music consumption functions as an essential, highly agentic "everyday tactic" [1]. Faced with the overwhelming structural exhaustion of an increasingly competitive society [6,7], young actors skillfully convert noise-canceling technology and custom playlist curation into a portable emotional defense system. They strategically display specialized tastes on the digital front stage to secure micro-tribal alignment while utilizing acoustic rhythms on the back stage to process private isolation, demonstrating an undeniable drive for self-care and authentic self-expression [3]. (2) On the Macro-Structural Level: This very subjectivity is continuously vulnerable to total containment by the political economy of platform capitalism [4]. The intricate symbolic boundaries and taste distinctions youth perform to separate themselves from the mainstream are, to a severe extent, systematically calculated, optimized, and delivered to them via personalized recommendation engines, effectively transforming authentic cultural expression into

homogenized consumer data profiles.

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