

For this project, my cultural artifact is headphones in gym culture. After peer feedback, I clarified that this artifact is not just common but socially meaningful. I interviewed three regular gym-goers: my spouse who trains independently, a friend I lift with weekly, and a classmate who uses the campus gym. I chose them because they represent different workout styles, but all rely on headphones. This helped me see how the artifact functions across the community, not just in my own experience. Headphones are not only for music. They act as a social signal. When someone has them on, it usually means they are focused and not open to conversation, creating an unspoken system of communication in the space.

This artifact matters because it represents focus, boundaries, and personal space. The gym is shared, loud, and social, but headphones let people create a sense of privacy inside that public environment. Several interviewees described it as “personal time,” which shows how the object helps people mentally separate from others. One person explained they even wear headphones without music just to avoid interaction. That shows the artifact is not just about sound, but about controlling social access. It helps people manage attention, confidence, and self-improvement, which are key values in gym culture.

Headphones connect strongly to rhetoric because they communicate meaning without words. They function as nonverbal communication that still sends a clear message and expects an audience to understand it. People in the gym learn to “read” headphones as a symbol over time, which connects to literacy as a social practice. This relates to the writing-studies idea that writing mediates activity. Like writing, headphone use mediates activity. It shapes when interaction happens, when silence is expected, and how people move through the space.

My interviews reinforced this. Each person connected headphones to focus and emotional control. They described music as motivation, but also described the headphones themselves as a barrier and a boundary. Without them, the gym would feel more socially open but also more distracting. This comparison helped me understand that the artifact shapes the balance between community and individuality.

For the multimodal part, I am developing more than just general images. I plan to use side-by-side photos of gym-goers with and without headphones to visually show differences in posture, eye contact, and approachability. I am also considering an audio component comparing gym background noise to personal music through headphones. This supports my argument that meaning is created through sensory and social experience, not just written language.