

# LOFI HIP-HOP RADIO: BEATS TO RELAX/STUDY TO

Justin Wang

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## **Introduction**

As of late, the subgenre known as “lofi chill beats,” referred to simply as “lofi” among its online community, has been trending online, especially on YouTube and SoundCloud. This current-day phenomenon has extended across the globe, most prominently among teenage audiences. Given lofi’s trending popularity on prevalent online music platforms, it’s clear that lofi will play a large role in influencing the musical tastes of our current generation of teens and young adults.

## **Research Question**

On Facebook, adolescents and young adults look to lofi as more than just “beats to relax/study to,” even as this term has become shorthand for how lofi circulates.’ Rather, young people seem to see lofi as a firm part of their own culture, going so far as to recreate the famous “YouTube lofi study girl” for Halloween. The rise of the lofi chill beats movement also seems to be correlated with the presidency of Donald J. Trump. As shown on Figure 1 below from Google Trends, there is a severe spike in search results for “lofi” which occurs in the same month that Trump was inaugurated. From there on, searches for “lofi” continue to grow steadily. Yet investigations have not been conducted into why lofi has become so popular over the last several years.

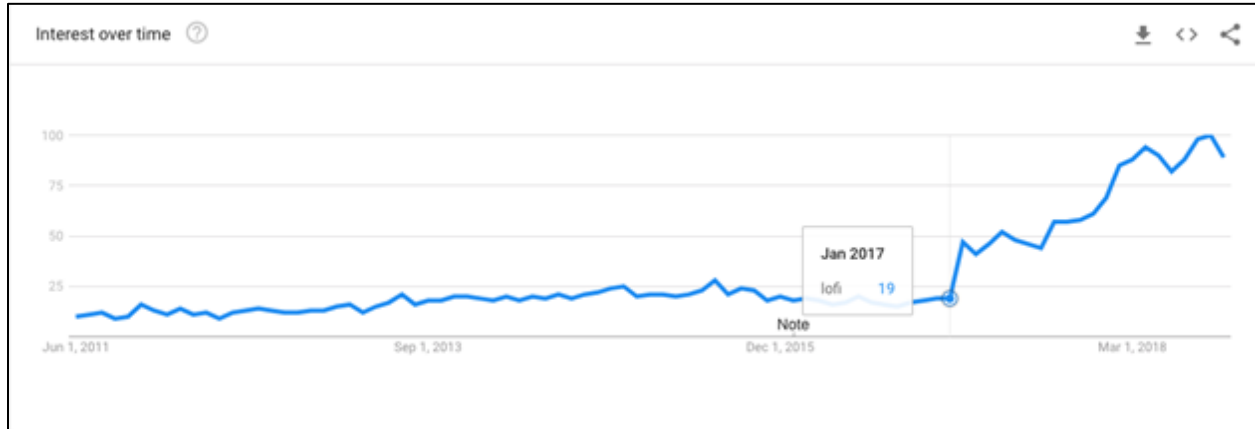


Figure 1. Interest over time in lofi, Google Trends (06/01/2011 to 08/16/2018).

Through this research paper, I hope to investigate the origins behind this close relationship between lofi and the current young generation. Specifically, what do song titles, album/longplay photos, and YouTube comments associated with the chill beats movement tell us about how the current young generation is experiencing the current sociopolitical climate, and their mental health overall?

To answer these questions, I will give a cursory tour of the history behind lofi, including its predecessors, founding artists, and the technology used to produce lofi music. Then I will investigate the rising popularity of lofi's current form—the YouTube and SoundCloud chill beats phenomenon. Through my research methods, I hope to extract common themes that may help elucidate lofi's role in adolescent and young adult life. Finally, I will arrive at conclusions based on my research regarding “lofi chill beats” as a response to current social and political settings, and what my research indicates about our current generation of young adults and adolescents' mental health.

Apart from understanding the mental health of the millennial/Gen Z generation, I seek to learn more about “lofi chill beats” in general, which occupies a unique niche within hip-hop. Hip-hop music, especially hip-hop dance music, generally involves singing or rapping over sharp beats, with some exceptions. “Chill beats” music is set apart from most hip-hop music by its mellow sounds, calm beats, and lack of lyrics. In addition, “chill beats” often samples lyrics from more traditional

forms of hip-hop instead of including original lyrics. I believe that to truly understand all aspects of hip-hop, “lofi chill beats” hip-hop must also be included in the academic conversation.

### **Lofi and Chill Beats**

In this section, I will look at two PhD theses by Jones and Harper to develop a background behind the development of lofi. Established in the 1990s, lofi originates from the DIY music movement. According to Jones, a track that is referred to as lofi is defined as “a recording that sounds as if it were produced in a non-professional setting” (42). Fidelity refers to how accurately an audio copy reproduces its source. From a sound engineering perspective, “low-fidelity” music often includes clipping, tape hiss, and vinyl warbling. Luke Winkie of *VICE* believes lofi is characterized by “introspection... and seeks to engage with elements of human emotion.” Possibly due to the advent of the Internet, coupled with growing consumerism, some hip-hop artists and listeners craved a poignant, personal touch to hip-hop, a return to the simple days of mixing and sampling tracks at home. To create what Jones calls an “organic, honest, and non-commercial” mood (52), artists turned to low-end, consumer-grade technologies to produce and disseminate their music.

Chill beats producers today often work from their own garages and directly serve listeners their tracks through either SoundCloud or Patreon. 1990s lofi and current day lofi also both harken back to previous musical “ages.” In the 1990s, the “new age” technology was the CD, and the “old age” technology was the cassette and vinyl record. Now, the “new age” technology is the Internet, while the “old age” includes the CD, cassette, and vinyl record. Despite the difference in technology, music from both periods include vinyl warbling, clipping, and other rough, unpolished processes of mediation that Harper calls an “aesthetic.”

By the summer of 2009, as Harper points out, a “culture of watery VCR transfers and Fisher-Price cassette rips” translated into a sort of “1980s-inspired psychedelic music” (334). Often confused as one genre, this form of music is usually divided into two subgenres, “hypnagogic pop” and “chillwave.” Hypnagogic pop is described as music that is at the “threshold of conscious perception” (335). Artists

such as Ferraro and Ariel Pink were experts at this art, emphasizing the tape hiss and background atmospherics of their tracks to create what Keenan of *Wire* terms an “echo, an after-image” of the 1980s. As hinted by its name, hypnagogic pop is most well-known for how it emulates psychedelic effects, and how most listeners believe it is best enjoyed while high. Chillwave, on the other hand, is more known for how it recalls the slackers of the 1990s. Dominated by “thick/chill synths,” chillwave sounds like it is “something that was playing in the background of an old VHS cassette” (Harper 337). Both hypnagogic pop and chillwave were attempts by artists to recreate the aesthetic of the 1990s, just as the lofi artists of the 1990s attempted to recreate the aesthetic of their musical ancestors.

Hypnagogic pop and chillwave then evolved into the lofi that netizens are used to seeing in their YouTube recommendations. Current day lofi is an amalgamation of other “chill” and soothing forms of music, such as jazz and R&B. For example, a lofi artist who goes by the moniker ninjoi. reimagined the classic jazz piano solo “Misty” as a higher-pitched, more uppity yet calming track that flexes the ability of modern day DJing software. Furthermore, taking the mellow, toned down beats of vintage instrumental hip-hop artists J Dilla and Nujabes as inspiration, lofi artists like Jinsang and jrd. have remixed popular hip-hop tracks like Nas’s “Life’s a Bitch” and songs associated with popular anime series or movies such as “One Summer’s Day” from Studio Ghibli’s *Spirited Away* in addition to creating their own original tracks.

Lofi’s means of distribution is unique among all forms of hip-hop. Most online sources started reporting on the YouTube phenomenon of “Lofi Hip Hop Radio to Relax/Study to” (e.g. *VICE*’s Winkie, *DJBooth*’s Maroulis, and *Polygon*’s Alexander) during the summer of 2018. According to Winkie, this phenomenon consists of streams playing 24/7 chillhop delivering “the chillest, most amicable vibes” to its listeners. The most prominent of these, a YouTube stream run by an anonymous user named ChilledCow, gathered 1.7 million subscribers by July 2018. As of October 28, 2018, ChilledCow’s channel now has 2.1 million subscribers.

## Literary Analysis

In this section, I will explore articles written by pop magazines such as *VICE* and *Polygon* to understand what experts in the field understand about the “lofi hip-hop” YouTube phenomenon. Then I will review peer-reviewed articles related to music and stress to find more details behind why the current generation is listening to chillhop. Finally, I will find articles describing how online communities and commenting influence people’s emotions or encourage them to be more open.

Winkie presents a theory by a D.C. based DJ named Celcius, who claims that the “chillhop renaissance” is a result of young adults in their late-20s wanting to experience childhood vibes again. During the early 2000s, Adult Swim featured hallucinatory, mellow grooves in their bumpers (which still carry on today), while the now-extinct Toonami brought anime shows *Samurai Champloo* and *Cowboy Bebop* to Western audiences for the first time. Notably, *Samurai Champloo*’s soundtrack was produced by one of chillhop’s forefathers, Nujabes, explaining the relation between lofi hip-hop and Japanese culture. Maroulis agrees that chillhop is “inextricably linked to the anime shows of the late ‘90s/early 2000s.”

While this is certainly a valid theory, I believe that it only paints part of the picture of the YouTube phenomenon. ChilledCow and their competitor Chillhop Records both opened their YouTube accounts during early 2015. Yet, according to the Google Trends graph (Figure 1), significant interest in lofi only started in January 2016. Had there been a gradual increase in searches for “lofi” by the time January 2016 rolled around, then I would be less sure of another reason as to why and how the “lofi hip-hop” phenomenon occurred.

Given how millennials have been deemed the most stressed generation in recent history by the American Psychological Association, it is possible that listening to lofi is a way for today’s youth to cope with their troubles and anxieties. A study by Thoma et al. determined that listening to music impacts how stressed we are, specifically affecting the autonomic nervous system (ANS), and to a lesser extent, the endocrine and psychological stress response, meaning that our subconscious stress is indeed impacted by music (1). However, the sample of people in Thoma’s study was limited to females, which may introduce a biological bias. Nevertheless, the most

notable finding in the study was that the ANS recovered faster after subjects listened to relaxing music. In other words, the subject returns to a normal state mentally, stressed or not, after listening to relaxing music. Given that the two musical excerpts were from a Renaissance composer (for a slow and comforting stimulus) and a heavy metal band (for a fast and arousing stimulus), I believe it is safe to say that the stimulus induced by chillhop lies much closer to that of the Renaissance excerpt than to that of the heavy metal excerpt. All in all, researchers understand that there is a notable change in physiology induced when people listen to relaxing music that suggests relaxation.

This study indicates that it's plausible that today's youth could be listening to lofi chill beats because of how stressed they are. To further corroborate this theory, I will look to a social community within YouTube: the YouTube comments section. Before I investigate, I hope to form a foundation of what within an online community may suggest a stressed community.

Schultes dives into an in-depth analysis of the YouTube comment section, where he and his team found that "users express their emotional attitude towards a video via short shout outs" and that "users frequently communicate their emotions in comments" (671). The study also claims that there exists a class of comments which they deem "inferior," as those comments contributed nothing to the overall conversation in the comments section. As psychologists Yzer and Southwell conclude about such new mediums of conversation, our interactions are not changed by what we use to communicate, but different mediums will enable users, with a shade of anonymity, to interrupt a normal conversation with a stray, accidental bark (1). Given this, I know that most comments will be useful in determining how stressed YouTube listeners are, but I will also have to eliminate some "inferior" comments as outliers if they seem to deviate from the norm of conversation in the comments sections.

### **Qualitative Coding of Titles**

Often, the most telling part of what a song is about or what it is intended to connote lies in the song's title. In order to find common keywords in the most popular lofi songs, albums, and compilations, I turned to qualitative coding. I gathered the

**lofi hip-hop radio: beats to relax/study to**

titles of the first 20 or so hits for “lofi” and “chill beats” on Google and SoundCloud respectively. I used two different search terms as they essentially refer to the same genre online but produce different search results because different streamers/producers use the two terms interchangeably in their titles.

However, after my first round of qualitative coding, I found that most of the results that were popping up in my search feed were titled along the same lines as ChilledCow’s “lofi hip-hop - beats to study/relax to,” as pictured in Figure 2 below. This is presumably due to other streamers and channels hoping to draw netizens looking for ChilledCow’s streams to their less popular streams and compilations. I grouped all of these hits into one of two categories named “beats to study/relax to” or “jazz/chill,” which as a whole comprised around a third of the titles I found on Google and SoundCloud.

| Compilations/Radio                                    | Round 1                   | Round 2     | Round 3    | Secondary Group              |
|---|---------------------------|-------------|------------|------------------------------|
| Google/Youtube  |                           |             |            |                              |
| "lofi"  |                           |             |            |                              |
| lofi hip hop radio - beats to relax/study to          | "beats to relax/study to" |             |            |                              |
| lofi hip hop radio - chill study/relax/gaming beats   | "beats to relax/study to" |             |            |                              |
| lofi hip hop radio - beats to chill/study to          | "beats to relax/study to" |             |            |                              |
| staying in. [lofi / jazzhop / chill mix]              | lazy                      | lazy/tired  | lazy/tired |                              |
| lofi hip hop radio - relaxing beats to study/chill/sl | "beats to relax/study to" |             |            |                              |
| City Rain   Lofi HipHop                               | rain                      | rain        | rain       |                              |
| lofi hip hop radio - beats to sleep/relax to          | "beats to relax/study to" |             |            |                              |
| Heavy Rain   Lofi HipHop                              | rain                      | rain        | rain       |                              |
| lofi hip hop radio - beats to study & relax           | "beats to relax/study to" |             |            |                              |
| morning stroll. [lofi / jazzhop / chill mix]          | morning                   | lazy/tired  | lazy/tired | beginning/end of time period |
| 24/7 lofi hip hop radio - beats to chill/study/relax  | "beats to relax/study to" |             |            |                              |
| RONIN Asian Lofi HipHop Mix                           | asian                     | Japanese    | Japanese   |                              |
| 24/7 lofi hip hop radio - beats to study/chill/relax  | "beats to relax/study to" |             |            |                              |
| RAINING IN P A R I S                                  | rain                      | rain        | rain       |                              |
| 24/7 lofi hip hop radio - smooth beats to study/sl    | "beats to relax/study to" |             |            |                              |
| Autumn Vibes [Jazz Hop / Lo Fi / Chill Mix]           | fall                      | rain/autumn | rain       | b/c autumn related to rain   |
| Chill Study Beats 5 . jaxx & lofi hiphop Mix [2018    | chill                     | chill       |            |                              |
| homework. [lofi / jazzhop / study mix]                | hw                        | work        | work       |                              |
| bad day. [lofi / jazzhop / chill mix]                 | bad day                   | bad vibes   | bad vibes  |                              |
| 3:30 am ~ lofi hip hop / jazzhop / chillhop mix [st   | late night/early m        | lazy/tired  | lazy/tired | beginning/end of time period |

Figure 2. A snip of the Excel sheet used to qualitatively code song/compilation titles. Note the large number of “beats to relax/study to” results.

In order to find more descriptive keywords that could connote moods or other uses of lofi, I decided to look at the suggested results that YouTube and SoundCloud prompted after clicking on each hit I found on Google and SoundCloud. Given that these were still lofi tracks, I believe that these results accurately reflect the overall tone of the genre. Titles ranged from “staying in.” to “we've never met but can we have a coffee or something,” and from “RAINING IN P A R I S” to “bad day.”

After three rounds of qualitative coding, reducing the number of categories with each iteration, I found that there were three main categories of titles apart from the “study” and “chill” categories: “lazy/tired,” “beginning/end of time period,” and “relationships to others.” The first category consists of titles which concerned lounging around, or overall weariness, like “staying in.” and “praying for sleep.” It seems that channels and artists create their tracks with their target audience’s stress in mind, which makes sense given the APA’s conclusion that the millennial generation is the most stressed of any generation that they studied.

The second category goes hand in hand with the first, since early mornings and late nights are often associated with stressors like sleep apnea and overwork. Other tracks included in this category reference the start or end of a day, week, or season, like “last days of summer” or “Monday chillin’”. Many of these titles connote a form of resignation, as if a break was about to end, or a long period of work is about to start. A possible explanation is that audiences for these tracks are eager to take breaks when they come, or are not looking forward to their “last days of summer” coming to a close. Some just want a way to start their “Weekend Relaxation.” In general, it seems that this category of titles can be seen as a reflection of its listeners’ need for rest or mental preparation for an approaching period of stress, much like the previous category.

The final category is related to any form of relationship between people, though most of the titles I found hinted at romantic relationships. Such titles included “it’s because of you” and “Stay With Me.” While lofi listeners are stressed about many aspects of life, from applying to jobs to finding a place to live, a large portion of the lofi audience may be listening to lofi to cope with romantic needs. Indeed, in today’s Internet and social media-fueled society, today’s youth feel pressure to “get cuffed,”



as their friends share more about their romantic lives and dating apps like Tinder become more and more prevalent.

A unique aspect of the titles that my qualitative coding skipped over is the “aesthetic” of the titles. Because I had solely focused on the meaning and connotations of words, I had overlooked some titles’ glaring similarities in font and letter case. Taking “Raining in P A R I S” as an example, we see that the French capital is written in all caps with each letter spaced out. I will further explore this unique text style later in my analysis, as the aesthetic appears throughout the online lofi community.

### Visual Analysis of Song/Album Photos



*Figure 3. “lofi” and “chill beats” compilation on the left.  
“lofi,” “jazzhop,” and other less-related genres included on the right.*

Even though lofi hip-hop is a sonic medium, the album/compilation photos and visuals associated with the genre provide additional insight into the atmosphere that lofi invokes. Upon first glance, many lofi streams use distinctive colors with common themes. In order to better visualize the common colors shared between lofi songs, compilations, and streams, I created a photo mosaic. This method allowed me

to recreate a photo associated with lofi albums using other lofi albums to find which colors are used the most.

I acquired my photos by searching for “lofi” and “chill beats” on Google Images, and saved 250 of these photos manually so that I could see whether each photo was really a part of lofi culture or just related to some other topic like low-fidelity audio engineering. I first tried using the photo featured on ChilledCow’s stream as my overall mosaic photo, since ChilledCow’s stream uses the “studying anime girl” that is known throughout the hip-hop world as “that lofi hip-hop girl.” However, the photos I found online did not have a matching color palette. After cycling through the “studying raccoon,” the old “studying anime girl,” and similar photos, I realized that many of the pictures had a distinctive purple and blue hue, accompanied by a neon, fluorescent pink. I chose the Bart Simpson picture as shown in Figure 3 above not only because it distinctly shows each major color in the lofi aesthetic, but also because the subject, Bart, is a part of the genre’s aesthetic as well. Meme-ing is a part of lofi culture, and Bart Simpson is a popular image used in memes about lofi hip-hop.

With my initial 250 photos, I formed a relatively well-homogenized photo mosaic with pink, purple, and blue as distinct regions of color. To test whether this color palette was unique to lofi as a genre and not related to other similar genres like chill/vaporwave, I decided to include images associated with those genres into the photo mosaic. The result was a heterogeneous photo mosaic with clearly misplaced colors. The drastic change in mosaic homogeneity indicates the distinctiveness of lofi’s color scheme.

In a form of literary analysis, I read through Valdez and Mehrabian’s classic study on the effects of color on emotions to see what conclusions I could draw from lofi’s main color scheme. The paper stipulates that blue, purple, and related hues are “associated with [being] ‘secure, comfortable’ and ‘tender/soothing’” (396). Regarding pink, they concluded that it “elicited less anxiety than red” and caused subjects to find events like rape and murder “less upsetting” when described on pink paper as opposed to white and blue.

Even though the pink in the Bart Simpson photo mosaic was neon, I saw a substantial amount of “millennial pink” in my initial search results. According to an article on *Girls Are Awesome* by Ulrika Luksevica, millennial pink is “a symbolism meant specifically for mental health.” It has a calming effect and an ability to reduce “anger, aggression, resentment, abandonment and neglect” (Luksevica), further indicating lofi’s role in managing stress among the millennial generation.

### **Digital Research Method and Qualitative Analysis of YouTube Comments**

While the titles and photos revealed common themes related to lofi’s use, aesthetic, and mood, I needed to find specific examples of these themes popping up in lofi’s discourse, which in this case happened to take place in the YouTube comments section. To do this, I delved into the comments sections of six lofi compilations, which as a whole represented the entire gamut of categories I divided the compilations into with my qualitative coding of titles. For each compilation, I selected the 6-7 most descriptive, upvoted comments. Some of the most upvoted comments were not quite as meaningful to my analysis since they appear frequently on YouTube videos that aren’t related to lofi, like “who’s listening to this in [some given month of some given year]?”. I elected to ignore those comments in my analysis of lofi’s unique characteristics.

To make visualizing patterns in a multitude of comments easier, I implemented qualitative coding again. I went through each of my documented comments and marked down words relating to their individual messages, grouping more and more messages together with each iteration, for a total of three rounds. Grouping these comments together was much more difficult than grouping song/album titles, since the comments could fit into multiple categories. The most popular groupings included “anxiety/depression,” being “part of a positive community,” and “romantic relationships.” Other notable categories included “writing a poem,” “school studies,” and “rain.”

My method of acquiring YouTube comments led to stratified categorization, since song/compilation titles naturally lead to related comments. For example, the majority of “L O V E S I C K”’s comments related to “romantic relationships.” To

make sure my categories were as unbiased as possible, I checked to see if each of the major categories I created was well represented across the six different YouTube videos. Also, in the process of disregarding comments that weren't meaningful, I wasn't able to capture another common motif among YouTube comments. The unique lofi typeset (e.g. "L O V E S I C K") seen in song/compilation titles was relatively common among those not-so-meaningful comments.

According to Reddit user C-Ron, this typeset is a result of using Japanese typefaces/keyboards to write out English words. Reddit users suggest that this all caps, spaced out typeset is a reference to vaporwave and chill/vaporwave/lofi music's roots in Japanese culture. So while the typeset itself may not have any sentimental value, it indicates that the songs/compilations I've discussed in my research have all been related to lofi.

## **Conclusion**

My qualitative coding of song/album titles, visual analysis of song/album photos, and digital research method of delving into the lofi online community all served to further an argument that interest in lofi is due in large part to the high-stakes, high-stress environment many 20-year-old or so netizens are a part of today. Despite the slight changes in methodology I had to make along the way, each was done with the understanding that my analysis as a whole would stay unbiased.

Qualitative coding revealed why young audiences listen to lofi, while my digital research method further explored these reasons. To survey the overall atmosphere lofi creates, I turned to visual analysis. Most people listen to radio streams and compilations as background music while they prepare for that next midterm or final, or just to relax on their beds with a cup of java or a good book of poetry. A significant proportion of the audience may also suffer from lack of sleep, whether it be waking up early in the morning or sleeping late at night. Others also turn to lofi to cope with loss, whether it be breaking up with a romantic partner, or something more severe like the death of a loved one. The colors I found associated with lofi corroborated these findings, with dark blue/purple hues serving as a comforting color wrapping around the pink that acts as a symbol for the stressed-out millennial generation.

Looking back at the Google Trends graph (Figure 1) that incentivized me to research this topic, I realize that I cannot make any direct conclusions relating the Trump administration to the rise of lofi. However, there is no doubt that, given recent news, the current political situation contributes to the high stress and anxiety that the millennial generation is experiencing. Much like millennial pink, the lofi hip-hop genre is a symbol for an anxious, emotionally tensed generation of youth.

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