Using Music to Study: Variables that Affect a Student's Incorporation of Music in Their Academic World

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Abstract

This study reports relationships made between a student’s personality and his or her preferences to use music while studying. Other behaviors regarding music in a non-academic setting are also discussed. Data from 67 participants suggest that highly organized individuals show a tendency to use music for studying and to make use of playlists they created. They use music to enhance their mood. Many of the dimensions that describe agreeable people are related to using music for academic purposes, but also highly correlated to studying with other people. The results suggest that the way we use music in our lives is intricately connected to our personalities, and our behaviors regarding music can tell us much about ourselves.

*Keywords:* music, personality variable, study
Using Music to Study: Variables that Effect A Student’s Incorporation of Music in Their Academic World

Music is arguably one of the quintessential elements of humanity, it transcends time, culture, geographic regions, and is woven into almost every aspect of our social lives. We are deeply and emotionally attached to music, whether it is self-produced or simply appreciated. This emotional connection is expressed day to day through our uses of music. Examples of our connection to music is evident in studies that look at instances in which music is purposefully used as a background to other activities (Tekman & Hortac, 2002), to regulate mood and to inspire dance and theatre (Schafer & Sedlmeier 2010), as well as other activities that require higher levels of conscious thought (Chamorro & Furhnam 2007) such as reading or writing. Mehl and Pennebaker (2003) found that on average, people spend about 14% of their time listening to music –nearly as much as television and about half of the time spent in conversation. A study conducted by the International Center for Media and the Public Agenda at the University of Maryland with the collaboration of over 10 universities around the world prompted students to go without the use of media (music, television, internet, etc) for 24 hours. Students submitted comments about their experience on their temporary deprivation of media lead researchers to conclude that students used music especially as a background to everyday activities such as driving, working out, studying or relaxing. Another fascinating finding is that students were unhappy about hearing normal noise of the streets and the environment around them (Moeller, 2010).
Music embodies the spirit of every social gathering, whether it is a party, a concert or a political protest. A sad song, especially if attached to an important memory can “induce changes in emotion-related memory and judgment” (Vuoskoski & Eerola, 2012). A single song can evoke memories of a past event – imagine the most recent time you’ve heard “Happy Birthday” sung by your friends and family. The portability of music thanks to smaller devices such as iPods, Zunes, and others, allows us to bring music into our lives like never before. Now students have, at their disposition, music at all times. Indeed, it is not an uncommon sight to see students around campus, with large headphones in bright colors or small headphones with cords dangling down, usually connected to a laptop or a small playback device stashed in their pockets.

**Can music improve a student’s performance?**

Studies on the benefits of incorporating music into an academic regime yield contradictory conclusions. These mixed conclusions can be attributed to the different approaches by researchers. Some researchers will focus on a specific result of performance whereas others study more abstract concepts like spatial intelligence. Deere (2011) has found positive correlations between elementary and middle school math and science scores with the existence of a musical education curriculum, suggesting an extra benefit that these schools have over others that have eliminated their music programs. Using music while performing other daily tasks is found to be common (Tekman & Hortac, 2002), so a study by McMahon et al. (2011) decided to look at common distracters in decision making and determined that self-chosen music (alongside with easy word puzzles) actually make the
participant more likely to make the appropriate choice. Jones and Estell (2006, 2007) carried out a study on high school students and determined that spatial ability, important for subjects like math and physics, notably increased after listening to classical music. In contrast Anderson and Fuller (2010) show that high school students who indicated a preference for using music while studying have lower reading comprehension scores (Anderson & Fuller 2010). These studies attempt to find a marked effect of music on performance, and yet they do not consider individual factors in participants that could show why some students perform better than others with or without music. Focusing on what student’s preferences are can give us a better way to identify what trends in personality dictate specific behaviors regarding the use of music.

We surround ourselves with music that we like (Schafer & Sedlmeier 2010). Our taste in genre, songs and music artists provides an abundant source of material to study for personality psychologists. Sam Gosling, in his book Snoop (2008), shows how revealing our particular habits and choices are of our personality. Rentfrow and Gosling (2003) found stable and consistent results on the relationship between personality correlates with music preference in a survey of 3,000 participants over various regions in the US. Individuals open to experience preferred complex and reflective music, whereas extroverted individuals preferred energetic and upbeat music. Replicated even in Germany (Langmeyer, Guglhör-Rudan & Tarnai, 2012), these music preferences are consistent across many regions of the world. Our chosen music reflects to other people the mirror image of who we are (Gosling, 2008).
This study will not look at a student’s academic performance but rather the individual differences in personality that influence a student’s choice to use music during academic work. By creating a profile of the student who uses music and one who does not, we can determine what personality traits are more compatible for using music during higher cognitive tasks.

**Personality variables**

The five-factor model of personality by McCrae and Costa (2008) is a self-report measure of traits that produce five areas of personality dimensions: O for Openness to experience, C for Conscientiousness, E for Extraversion, A for Agreeableness and N for Neuroticism/Emotional Stability. The five-factor personality scale has been replicated many times all over the world with consistent results. The chart below will show what traits are most linked with each factor—the left side of the dimension is what best characterizes the factor it is associated with.

**Openness to experience**
- Imaginative – practical
- Spontaneous – inhibited
- Original - conventional

**Conscientiousness**
- Organized – Disorganized
- Careful – careless
- Self-Disciplined – weak willed

**Extroversion**
- Sociable – retiring

**Agreeableness**
- Soft-hearted – ruthless
- Friendly – aloof
- Good-natured – irritable

**Neuroticism/ Emotional Stability**
- Calm – anxious
- Secure – insecure
- Self-satisfied – self-pitying

(Adapted from McCrae & Costa, 2008)

These personality variables will provide this study a basis from which to
study trends in personality and music use, more specifically what differentiates a student who uses media while they study versus one who does not.

**Individual differences in uses of music**

According to Chamorro & Furhnam (2007), personality differences can account for distinct preferences in uses of music. In Chamorro’s study (2007), connections between well-known personality factors (McCrae & Costa 2008) have been made with specific uses of music. For instance, Extroverted people tend to use music as a background during other activities (such as reading, doing hobbies, driving, etc) whereas highly conscientious people experience music in a more rational way, leading to the use of music for cognitive thinking tasks (Chamorro 2007). Individuals with a high neuroticism factor tend to be more affected by the emotional tone of the selected music, and are more likely to use music as a mood regulator (Chamorro 2007). Chamorro’s study has been replicated successfully in both Malaysia and Spain, giving a broader acceptance to personality influences on the choice of music use (2009). A more recent study by Chamorro, Fagan & Furhnam (2010) also found that people high on the Openness factor preferred complex music, whereas Extroverted individuals preferred happy music. In addition, background use of music predicted preferences for social and happy music and emotional music use predicted preference for sad music. Gender differences were noted as well, for males tended to like sad music and use music for cognitive purposes more than females did. As evidenced by Chamorro’s studies, personality variables can tell us a lot about personal preferences and predict behaviors towards use of music. Other factors such as what other daily habits the student engages in and how it affects his
or her decision to use music is necessary to have a more rounded approach to individual personalities.

The Things I Talk About survey (Sehulster, 2006) will provide the study with a fuller picture of the participants’ habits outside of the academic world. This survey asks for the frequency of topics that appear in everyday conversations. For instance, someone who spend a great deal of time talking about cars, will presumably have a lot of memory material about cars (knowledge of makes, series, engine, etc) and thus give us a better picture of what a student spends time and energy on.

**Students’ individual differences in music and study habits**

This study seeks to determine the relationship between music and patterns of study in college students; further, this study will examine how personality variables affect a student’s decision to use music while studying privately, or with others, for class. In addition, the Things I Talk About Survey (Sehulster, 2006) will explore what sort of topics students talk about to broaden and strengthen the connections made between personality and music preferences. The main hypothesis of this study is that people who tend to be more conscientious, and therefore more organized, careful and disciplined will be more likely to use music while they study, and integrate music more in non-academic settings.

**Method**

**Participants**

A total of 67 participants (38 females, 29 males) from the student population of the University of Connecticut Stamford campus took part in this study. Age ranged from
18 to 28 (X=19.40) (SD=3.442). All participants completed the questionnaires during classes.

**Procedure and measures**

Participants took the Music/Study questionnaire (Perez) first, in the presence of their instructor, who administered the surveys. After the Music/Study questionnaire, participants then filled out self-report inventories (Big Five, Things I Talk About). All surveys were done individually and anonymously, and were handed back in an envelope to ensure they were from the same participant.

(a) **Five Factor Inventory (Big Five, Costa & McCrae, 1992)** A 30 item personality dimension scale, self-rated from 1 to 5 on pairs of words, with 1 being on the left side of the scale and 5 being the right side. For example, when given “worrying…..calm” participants will be asked to rate themselves by choosing where they fall on the spectrum between worrying and calm. If they consider themselves very calm, participants will put a 5. (see Appendix 1)

(b) **Things I Talk About (Sehulster, 2006)** A 27 item self-rated inventory on the estimated frequency of certain topics (i.e. fashion, school, films, etc) in participant’s daily conversations. This inventory uses a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being “never or rarely” and 5 being “very often”. (see Appendix 2)

(c) **Music/Study Questionnaire (Perez)** A non-timed, 40 item, self-report questionnaire regarding study habits. Participants were asked to report how many classes they were taking, along with the amount of time they estimated to spend during the week. Questions regarding where participants studied and whether they studied with other people or used media (i.e. tv, music player, etc) was found in
conjunction with the frequency of use of common media players such as the radio, television and portable media devices. It was also of interest to the researcher to see how participants obtained their music, and a series of questions was designed to determine whether participants were more inclined to use a pre-determined list of self-selected music or to “shuffle” songs from their music library and “scan” through tv/radio stations. The section after participants are asked to rate on a scale of 0 to 3 whether they would use any of the following items to improve their mood. Amongst these items, driving, food, people, and events are included to see the overall preference for music. In addition, there is an open-ended writing section at the end with a few questions on what genre of music is preferred, and the participant’s personal opinion on using music while studying. (see Appendix 3)

Results and Discussion

Apart from looking at how many students use music during studying, the Music/Study Questionnaire (Perez) also takes into consideration the individual’s academic load and behaviors concerning music use outside of the academic world. Of the 67 participants, 55.2% take 5 to 6 classes and 40.3% take 3-4 classes. The majority of participants are full time students. The self-reported time invested in studying ranges from 1-2 hours with 25% of students, 3-5 hours with 35.8%, 6-8 hours with 25.4% and 9 hours and above with 10.4% of students. A majority of participants, 40, claimed that they study with other people, with 20 participants who picked never and 4 participants study with other people very often (3 participants did not respond). Surprisingly, there is no correlation between the amount of credits (classes) taken and the amount of time spent studying.
Studying with other people was highly correlated with an agreeable (as opposed to disagreeable) personality \((r=-.351, N=67, p<0.01)\). The positive or negative sign of the correlation here and with those correlations reported below is a function of the numerical coding of the variables. Those with sympathetic (as opposed to unsympathetic) personalities allowed others to study in their room together \((r=.357, N=67, p<.01)\), good natured (as opposed to irritable) \((r=.250, N=67, p<.05)\) and well-organized people (as opposed to disorganized) personalities also study with other people in their own room \((r=.390, N=67, p<.01)\). Weaker correlations showed weak-willed (as opposed to self-disciplined) personalities \((r=-.256, N=67, p<.01)\), broad interests (as opposed to narrow interests) \((r=.245, N=67, p<.05)\) and down-to-earth (as opposed to imaginative) \((r=-.246, N=67, p<.05)\) as other personality characteristics that show the likelihood of studying with other people.

Of the sources of recorded music, there is a high preference for using iPods or other portable media devices frequently (49.3% of participants), which indicates participants’ music is often on their person, ready to be listened at their disposition.

Reading is a cognitive task that requires concentration; this question was included to determine how many people used music as a background to reading. Of the participants that use music to read five (5) claimed often, yet a majority of 33 participants sometimes uses music while reading, with 28 participants who never use music while they read. With 38 participants using music at all during reading, there is a fairly even split between use and no use of music.

As the main hypothesis is concerned with organization as facet of personality, there are interesting connections to how organized people tend to
listen to music in their lives. On portable music devices there are different options as to how to organize and listen to music. Many simply catalogue songs by artist or genre. A playlist can be created with music that you choose out of your entire music library. Another way of listening to music is to put on “shuffle mode” which randomly mixes songs for you. Just as in a car you can program your favorite radio stations to find them quickly instead of scanning for a certain station, a playlist is a list of songs organized for easy and fast access. Participants who consider themselves organized preferred to listen to playlists they have created (as opposed to playing random music) \( r=-.256, \ N=67, \ p<.05 \) and frequently use pre-set radio stations instead of scanning stations \( r=.260, \ N=67, \ p<.05 \). A step-wise regression was done for using a playlist on one’s iPod versus putting one’s iPod on shuffle while controlling for sex, and agreeable and organized people were shown to prefer a set playlist. In addition, people who tend to talk a lot about music from the Things I Talk About survey (Sehulster, 2006) also are more likely to use a playlist. The Analysis of Variance yielded a highly significant F score of 6.673 (df=4,61; \ p<.000 \) for these three variables.

Another segment of the Music/Study questionnaire looks at behaviors that participants do to enhance their mood. Using their favorite (self-selected) music out shadowed all other items with 62.7% of participants reporting frequently resorting to their music to improve their mood. Other correlations build a picture of which participants tended to use music to improve their mood: sociable people (as opposed to retiring, \( r=.310, \ p<.05 \)), conscientious people (as opposed to negligent, \( r=.250, \ p<.05 \)), creative (as opposed to uncreative, \( r=-.272, \ p<05 \)), friendly people
(as opposed to aloof, $r=-.329, p<.01$), people who have broad interests (as opposed to narrow interests $r=-.345, p<.01$) and curious people (as opposed to incurious, $r=.246, p<.05$). For items in Things I Talk About survey, participants who tended to talk about music ($r=.433, p<.01$) and beauty ($r=.261, p<.05$) were also more likely to use their own music to improve mood.

Using linear step-wise regression to determine the predictive value of the correlations found between behaviors such as preferring to use music to enhance mood and using media during study time, this study has found several connections between personality variables, personal interests with music use during academic work for students. The Music/Study Questionnaire asked participants to note where they spend most time studying (i.e. library at UConn, study room, etc) and whether they used media while they studied. Results from a step-wise regression show that spontaneous and agreeable people prefer to study in the public library (ANOVA $F$ score of 7.373; df= 2, 63; $p<.001$), which is consistent with people who consider themselves agreeable, and as noted previously they are comfortable studying in public, and tend to study with other people as well. For use of media in the public library, there was a tendency of good-natured people (under Agreeableness) to use music whereas conscientious people more than others preferred not to. Other results regarding participants high on the conscientiousness factor clearly show they prefer a private setting and studying alone rather than with other people; studying at the public library might not be the right environment for conscientious students to use media while they study. For studying at library in UConn, sympathetic, as well as uncreative and disorganized people reported spending more
time there (ANOVA F score 5.226; df= 3, 62; p<.003). The uncreative and disorganized did not seem to fit the picture, but perhaps due to the increased volume of students the weeks before midterms and finals, it might not be too far from reality that these kind of students frequent the library the most, when needed. On the other hand, students who considered themselves at-ease (as opposed to nervous) were more likely to use media while they studied in the library (ANOVA F score 8.691; df=1, 64; p<.004). Participants who considered themselves, down-to-earth (rather than imaginative) and original, preferred to coup up in the study rooms available at the library –probably seeking a more private setting for their study routine (ANOVA F score 6.011; df= 2, 63; p<.004). Only two (3%) participants responded yes to using media in the study room at the library. Study rooms are strictly for quiet work, which could explain the lack of media use. Similar areas on campus (quiet areas) have comfy seats and a table available for students to use for studying and to socialize with friends. Using the same process of linear step-wise regression, results found that for people who study on the quiet areas around campus tend to be organized, uncreative, down-to-earth and self-pitying (ANOVA F score 5.538; df= 3,62; p<.000). For these same study areas, media use was found to be prevalent amongst organized participants. Other characteristics found were uncreative, down-to-earth and self-pitying (ANOVA F score 6.228; df= 4, 61; p<.000). A high score for self-pitying refers to the emotional stability factor which could mean music could be used to regulate mood. Out of all the personality variables, organized people spent more time studying in their rooms at home (ANOVA F score 4.712; df= 1, 64; p<.034). Using music at home can be a source of
inspiration for working on homework and school projects. Uncreative people and
good natured people are more likely to use media in their own room at home
(ANOVA F score 4.899; df= 2, 63; p<.011).

The main goal of this paper was to determine how much personality
variables and common everyday conversational topics influence a student’s choice
to use music when studying for classes. Results support the hypothesis that
organized people are more likely to use music when studying alone. Conscientious
people are also more likely to study in private areas, such as quiet areas on campus
or in their own room. Participants who consider themselves agreeable are more
likely to use music in public spaces, as well as study more often with other people.
The frequency of the uncreative personality variable for using media could suggest
that people who seek to use music while studying are actively trying to motivate
themselves or find the right setting for critical and creative thinking.

This study originally included a question on handedness to add in as an
influencing factor on whether students used music or not for studying. Yet
handedness was taken out of the study entirely due to 13 participants who left the
question blank. The main limitation of this study is the number of participants; more
participants are needed to make any conclusive statements on the use of music as
correlated with self-reported personality variables of participants. In addition, some
questions could have been worded more clearly, to show participants exactly what
is being asked: for example when asking participants if they paused music or simply
turned the volume down when answering a phone call, several participants
misunderstood the question, leaving it blank. Future studies may want to further
explore the relationship between personality variables and the use of media while studying; there are opportunities to test different groups in other countries, and the possibility of considering factors such as handedness which might have an impact on a student's inclination to use media for higher cognitive tasks.
References


### The Big Five...

Please rate yourself on the following 30 personality dimensions. Use the following scale: If the left hand end of the dimension characterizes you, rate yourself a 1. If "sort of" the left hand end of the dimension characterizes you, rate yourself a 2. If the right hand end of the dimension characterizes you, rate yourself a 3. If "sort of" the right hand end of the dimension characterizes you, rate yourself a 4. Use 5 if neither the left nor right hand end of the dimension is you, then rate yourself a 5. Place your number in the space to the right of the dimension.

1. Retiring       Sociable
2. Worrying       Calm
3. Conventional   Original
4. Irritable      Good natured
5. Negligent      Conscientious
6. Fun Loving     Sober
7. At Ease        Nervous
8. Down to earth  Imaginative
9. Ruthless       Soft-hearted
10. Careful       Careless
11. Reserved      Affectionate
12. High Strung   Relaxed
13. Creative      Uncreative
14. Rude          Courteous
15. Reliable       Undependable
16. Friendly       Aloof
17. Secure        Insecure
18. Broad Interests Narrow Interests
19. Forgiving      Vengeful
20. Disorganized  Well-Organized
21. Spontaneous   Inhibited
22. Self-pitying   Self-satisfying
23. Simple        Complex
24. Callous        Sympathetic
25. Weak willed   Self-disciplined
26. Quiet         Talkative
27. Hardy          Vulnerable
28. Incurious     Curious
29. Agreeable     Disagreeable
30. Quitting      Perservering

(Appendix 1)
HOW FREQUENTLY I TALK ABOUT THINGS!

2010

Your age _______ Psych. Course: _______

In general, how frequently, how often do you talk about events, experiences, those kinds of things in the general TOPICS listed below? Next to each, place a number indicating the relative frequency with which you discuss the topic, say, your average week or month. When you're done, please do the fill-ins on the other side.

Use the following scale for the rating of frequency:

5 I very often or very frequently talk about this topic, daily, even many times a day.
4 I talk about this topic more than occasionally, many times during a week.
3 I occasionally talk about this topic, maybe once a week, a few times in a month.
2 I talk about this topic only infrequently, maybe once in a month or a few.
1 I never or very rarely talk about this topic.

Scale 1: Frequency Rating.

1. SPORTS I LIKE _______
2. CARS/RACING _______
3. TELEVISION SHOWS _______
4. ABOUT PEOPLE _______
5. WEATHER _______
6. FOOD I ENJOY _______
7. HOBBIES I HAVE _______
8. MUSIC I LISTEN TO _______
9. TECH/INVENTION _______
10. TRAVEL AND PLACES _______
11. MY WRITING _______
12. FILMS I ENJOY _______
13. POLITICS _______
14. HEALTH MATTERS _______
15. ROMANCE IN MY LIFE _______
16. MY FAMILY _______
17. MY WORK _______
18. RELIGIOUS TOPICS _______
19. BEAUTY _______
20. FASHIONS/OUTFITS _______
21. MY HOUSE _______
22. TRAFFIC ISSUES _______
23. NATURAL DISASTERS _______
24. SHOPPING _______
25. PSYCH ISSUES _______
26. SCHOOL ISSUES _______
27. PARTYING _______

(Appendix 2)
Music/Study Questionnaire (Perez) (Appendix 3)

Sex: M ____ F ____ Age: ______

Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior N/A (circle one)

Handedness (left, right, ambidextrous)

Study Habits

How many classes are you taking? a. 1-2  b. 3-4  c. 5-6  d. 7+

How often do you study per week?  a. 1-2 hrs  b. 3-5 hrs  c. 6-8 hrs  d. 9+ hrs

Where do you prefer to study?
In the first blank, please indicate how many hours in a typical school week do you spend studying in the locations listed below.
In the second blank, please place a Y or N for yes or no, do you study with others (yes), where (no) means you tend to study alone.
In the third blank, please place an M if you listen to music while you study, place a V if you have visual material on while you study (TV, DVD, etc.). Leave blank if you have no media on while you study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Hours?</th>
<th>Others?</th>
<th>Media?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public library</td>
<td>_____</td>
<td>_____</td>
<td>_____</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@ UCONN Library</td>
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<tr>
<td>Study room in lib.</td>
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<td>_____</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Game room</td>
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<td>_____</td>
<td>_____</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student lounge area</td>
<td>_____</td>
<td>_____</td>
<td>_____</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quiet areas on campus</td>
<td>_____</td>
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<td>@ Home</td>
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<td>Other rooms</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other ___________</td>
<td>_____</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Do you study with other people? a. Never  b. Sometimes  c. Often  d. Always
Media Habits

Sources of recorded music: please use the scale below to rate the frequency with which you listen to music from the following sources.
3 = frequently, very often
2 = sometimes
1 = rarely
0 = never

__ ipod/zune/mp3 player
__ iphone/droid/smart phone
__ tv
__ radio
__ cd player in car

How many live concerts do you go to in an average year? _________

Do you read with music in the background? a. Never  b. Sometimes  c. Often  d. Always

When you listen to music, are you more likely to select a playlist or specific CD or are you more likely to listen to whatever happens to be on (random)?
______________

If you were listening to music and someone called you, would you pause the music or merely turn it down? ____________

Do you channel surf on the TV? a. Never  b. Sometimes  c. Often  d. Always

If you were watching TV or a DVD and someone called you, would you pause the TV (if you could) or DVD? _____________

How often do you listen to the radio?  a. Never  b. Sometimes  c. Often  d. Always

When listening to the radio what are you most likely to do?
   a. Have set favorites on particular stations
   b. Scan through stations

Do you use the shuffle option on your music player? a. Never  b. Sometimes  c. Often  d. Always
Use the following scale to rate the frequency with which you make the choices listed below:
3 = frequently, very often
2 = sometimes
1 = rarely
0 = never

1. If you wished to elevate or improve your mood how often do you seek the presence of or do:
In the blank to the immediate right, place the frequency rating; in the longer space to the far right, fill in the activity or relationship, and male/female where relevant. For instance, if you frequently seek the company of a family member, it’d be

Example: a. a family member __3__ ______my mother__________

a. a family member ____ ________________________________
b. a close friend _____
c. romantic partner_____ 
d. a professional ___
e. exercise _____
e. a pet ____
f. favorite music ___
g. favorite TV show _____
h. favorite food ____
i. favorite place to dine _____
j. favorite book ____
k. favorite hobby ____
l. favorite work ____
m. favorite movie ____
k. take a long drive _____
Descriptive part

Does music help you remember material studied for exams? Please write a sentence or two on an example.

What genre of music do you use to study with?

Please list 5 of your most used study songs, if applicable.

Is there a particular aspect of music that helps you study? (example: beat, lyrics, genre, etc) In a sentence or two, please explain why to the best of your ability.