

# **The Allure of the Mechanical Watch**

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## Introduction

The mechanical watch has been in use since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and currently remains a very popular accessory despite many technological advancements in timekeeping. With the invention of the quartz, or battery powered, watch in the 1970's, it seemed like the demise of the mechanical watch was imminent. These new quartz watches were more accurate and cheaper to manufacture which allowed them to be more accessible to the public when compared to their mechanical counterparts. This time period was referred to as the Quartz Crisis; however, the history of the mechanical watch does not end here, as the technology experienced a resurgence shortly after in the 1990's. Moving forward to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we saw the popularity of smartphones and smartwatches skyrocket, and many believed this would provide the final blow to the mechanical timepiece, finally rendering it a useless technology, but it didn't. So how can mechanical watches remain relevant when the technology they're built on has been greatly surpassed by quartz watches, smartphones, and smartwatches? We must answer this question because it will allow us to understand the role that older technology can play in society and it can provide us with insight into what our attitudes towards technology really are. If we fail to uncover how we feel towards technology or what we truly want out of it, then we may become susceptible to only accepting the newest new, because we think that "new and improved" always equals better. So how do we answer the question above? I propose that first we must study the main group that has kept this technology going, the mechanical watch enthusiasts, and more specifically their attraction to this form of timekeeping. If we can understand their attraction then we can draw conclusions as to why older technologies can remain relevant in society in spite of more practical options being available, and eventually redefine our definition of "better."

## **The Quartz Crisis**

To fully grasp the sociotechnical system surrounding the mechanical watch, we must first understand the history of this form of timekeeping and how that has impacted its popularity. Mechanical watches are powered by the carefully regulated release of energy from a wound spring and only use mechanical components to keep time (“Quartz vs Automatic,” 2012). They date back to 1812, when the first wristwatch was created for the Queen of Naples, and became increasingly popular throughout the late 1800’s and into the mid 1900’s (“Development of Wristwatches,” 2015). In 1969, however, the quartz watch was first introduced by the Japanese company, Seiko, resulting in a major blow to the mechanical watch industry. Instead of being powered by springs, gears and other mechanical components, this watch was powered by a battery that sent current to a crystal, causing it to vibrate and power a motor to drive the second and minute hands of the timepiece (“Quartz vs Automatic,” 2012). This new breed of watch was more accurate than its older, mechanical sibling, and was cheaper to manufacture and maintain. With the advent of the quartz powered watch, the mechanical watch market almost dissolved into nothing, what the watch world refers to as the Quartz Crisis. According to Joe Thompson, executive editor at the horological website Hodinkee, “by 1985, watch industry employment had fallen to 32,000 from 89,450 in 1970. (It bottomed out at 28,000 in 1988.) Between 1974 and 1983, Swiss watch production fell from a record 96 million units to 45 million” (Thompson, 2017, para. 23). These numbers are staggering and also shed light on a major player in the watch industry: the Swiss. Watch manufacturers such as Rolex, Omega, Audemars Piguet, Patek Philippe, and many more call Switzerland home and have solidified themselves as powerhouses in the watch industry. Although there are mechanical watch brands from Japan, Germany and the

United States, many regard Swiss timepieces as the pinnacle of timekeeping; often admired for their precision and pedigree, they have been the benchmark for mechanical watches for over 100 years and continue that tradition today. For this reason, Swiss companies were to bear the brunt of the effects of the Quartz Crisis, seeing a large decline in nearly every facet of their businesses.

In spite of the unfavorable outlook that came with the Quartz Crisis, the mechanical watch industry made a comeback in the 1990's that shocked the world. As Thompson (2018) explains, "in 1988, Swiss production of mechanical watches rose for the first time since 1982. Their value jumped 17% to the equivalent of \$1.23 billion" (para. 24). Additionally, fast-forward to 2018, and the global luxury watch market, which is dominated by mechanical watches, is valued at \$6.9 billion, with optimistic expectations of growth in the coming years ("Luxury Watch Market Size," 2019). But how exactly was this possible? Some of the success can be attributed to the fact that many of the major Swiss watch companies stuck to what they do best (despite major losses) and bet on the mechanical watch to make a resurgence, instead of succumbing to the pressure to compete in the quartz market. Discussing the mechanical watch establishment, led by Patek Philippe and Rolex, Thompson (2018) explains, "Their continued support for the mechanical, while the rest of the industry scrambled to convert to quartz, was essential to its survival" (para. 16). Additionally, Thompson goes into detail outlining many other reasons for the resurrection of the mechanical, including a vintage watch boom that occurred in the 1980's, a "mechanical watch renaissance" in Italy, and new mechanical movements that had never been done before. All of these reasons explain the way the mechanical watch survived the Quartz Crisis, and while practical, they don't explain the driving force behind the interest in these timepieces. This is where my research deviates from what has been done before. I am attempting to understand why people are interested in mechanical watches to reveal

how they truly feel towards the technology and what motivates their passion. To do this we must look at the group that keeps these watches ticking: the watch enthusiasts.

A simple Google search about mechanical watches and the robust following that this technology has developed quickly becomes apparent. Mostly in the form of countless blogs and forums, many websites provide a space for mechanical watch enthusiasts to convene and discuss their passion. Arguably the most popular site is Hodinkee, which is a play on the Czech word *hodinky*, meaning wristwatch, describing itself as “the preeminent resource for modern and vintage wristwatch enthusiasts” (“Our Story,” n.d., para. 1). Where Hodinkee sets itself apart from the other websites is its segment called Talking Watches, a video series in which they interview notable watch collectors, from athletes and musicians to tech innovators and business moguls (Clymer, 2013). Whether it’s blogs or video interviews, these websites indicate that there is indeed a subculture who demand these old-school timepieces and that there are a lot of people who eat, sleep and breathe this technology. Many of the people in this group refer to themselves as WIS, or Watch Idiot Savants, and they all have unique stories on how they discovered the world of horology (the study and measurement of time) and why they are so infatuated with the technology (Shteyngart, 2017). These self-proclaimed enthusiasts come from all different backgrounds and attribute their seemingly infectious passion to a plethora of reasons. To study these reasons and this infatuation is to gain a better understanding of the feeling that mechanical watches evoke in people. We must study this group to comprehend the complexities associated with being passionate about an obsolete technology, most notably the conflict that arises between being new and being “better.”

## **Diving into Data Collection**

In order to answer the question posed by this paper, a deep analysis of the watch enthusiast had to be conducted. Data being collected for this project came mainly from primary documents such as blog posts, forums, articles and video interviews. To understand the watch enthusiast, I read what they had to say by finding places where this group convenes. Watch U Seek, TimeZone, and Hodinkee are a few different online websites that promote the flow of dialogue for these likeminded, mechanically-inclined individuals. I found the website Watch U Seek very helpful in this regard, as it has many forums that discuss the stories of watch enthusiasts. Additionally, Hodinkee's Talking Watches segment provided great insight into the influence of celebrities on this sociotechnical system, so transcribing the video interviews proved to be another valuable source.

To conduct content analysis on the qualitative information, I implemented the practice of coding, or labelling, my data in an attempt to discover patterns of reoccurring themes (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003). In practice, this consisted of coming up with preset codes or tags that would answer the question of how watch enthusiasts describe their attraction. These codes originally included: Aesthetics/Design, Workmanship/Craftsmanship, Tradition (passed down), Movement, Sentimental Value, and Status. As I read through the forum posts and discovered any additional codes or themes, I would add them. For instance, at the end of my data collection stage, I had added the following codes: Document Special Occasion, Practicality, History/Story, Just Cause, Enjoyment and Pop Culture. To present the data in a way I could begin to understand common trends or beliefs among watch enthusiasts, I created an Excel spreadsheet with all of the forum posts. Then, using the codes listed above, I went through the posts and marked where they appeared. By utilizing this method, many interesting patterns were observed in the data collected.

Below, I will go into detail about the most common and important trends that I saw when analyzing my sources.

Before discussing my data in depth, I think it's important to address a common preconceived notion that mechanical timepieces have been successful due to conspicuous consumption, or in other words, because people buy them to publicly display their wealth. Although this seems like an easy conclusion, my data overwhelmingly disagreed with this belief, as I will show in the following sections. Additionally, it is important to point out that there is a wide range of prices for mechanical watches, starting in the hundreds of dollars and expanding to the thousands and sometimes millions. Lastly, I am not ruling out conspicuous consumption as the reason for some people buying mechanical timepieces, however, in conducting research I rarely found this to be the case.

### **Aesthetics and Design**

Aesthetics/Design was one of the most utilized codes in the data set. Simply put, it explains that watch enthusiasts are attracted to the overall design of the timepieces, and this is what drives their obsession. I found that this label was used often because a common sentiment among this group is that first and foremost, the looks of the watch are of paramount importance. One user, when asked what drives their purchases, put it bluntly, stating that they look for “A timekeeping device that I find aesthetically pleasing. You can keep the rest of the baggage” ([Mediocre], 2015, p. 1). At first glance, you wouldn't be mistaken in thinking that aesthetic is a very surface level interest, one that could commonly be linked with status or “showing-off.” Time and time again, however, I saw this code be associated with Workmanship/Craftmanship, Movement and even Enjoyment. Although some enthusiasts may just glance at a watch and deem it pretty, it seems that most are interested in the way it was designed and the level of detail

or effort that was put into creating it; something deeper than just looks. One user wrote, “I was drawn to watches because of their delicate mechanical intricacies and how they work together in harmony” ([CaliMex], 2018, p. 1). In an age where robots are taking over the assembly process of most products, it is often hard to come by handcrafted designs that rely on skilled craftsmen to produce them. It is clear that creating these mechanical intricacies requires a unique expertise that is seemingly fading from society, but one that is definitely valued by the watch enthusiast. Additionally, some enthusiasts describe mechanical timepieces as functional art, arguing that because they’re obsolete their main function is to appeal to the senses, rather than serve an actual purpose or in other words, tell time (“The Art and Expression of Watches,” 2019). Through this view of watches as art, we can see where the enjoyment comes into play, and it is deeper than just aesthetics. Although a watch may look “cool,” the watch enthusiast most likely is more interested in how that design makes them feel or even more so, how that watch is an expression of what they value. Whether that’s the workmanship that went into creating it or the intricate mechanical movement ticking away like a heartbeat, the mechanical watch provides an opportunity for some to exercise or experience their appreciation for detail, time, and effort.

### **The Importance of Sentimental Value**

Another theme that I identified was the reoccurrence of the Tradition/Passed Down code. Oftentimes, watch enthusiasts explain their introduction to the technology by stating that a watch was passed down from their parents or grandparents. Although this was a common tag, the important pattern that arose had more to do with the other labels that were almost always associated with tradition. Sentimental Value is one such label and it explains that a watch enthusiast is attracted to the technology because of some personal, sentimental reason. For example, one user who was stationed in Iraq for the US Army explained: “I decided I wanted to



buy something that if I didn't come back maybe some piece of me would and a watch made the most sense to me. I wanted to leave it to my father. Something he could wear to remember me by without calling any attention to what he was wearing” ([5thofjuly], 2019, p. 1). Once again, we see a common theme that demonstrates that buying a mechanical watch to actually tell time is of secondary importance in most circumstances. In this instance, the soldier bought the watch so that his father could remember him when he wore it (in the tragic case that he had to); a personal and sentimental reason that has nothing to do with telling time. In addition to sentimental value, Documenting Special Occasions was often paired with the Tradition code. A good example of this came from one user, who described one of his most important watches; “...I was turning 33 and for my birthday my father wanted to bequeath his Omega Seamaster Professional to me that he had been diving with for over 15 years. Since I am a diver, we decided to tie the watch to a diving experience and setup a new tradition for generations of family divers to come” ([TheHorizon], 2016, p. 1). Here we see that the person was not only receiving a timepiece to mark his birthday, he was also starting a tradition of passing down this particular watch and the stories that come with it. Many similar posts by WIS explained that they enjoy purchasing watches to commemorate important events in their lives, whether that’s graduating school, getting engaged or starting a new job. Whatever the occasion, some feel that a watch can document something important in their lives and bring them back to the special times they’re trying to remember.

### **The Personal Stories Told Through Watches**

The underlying driving force for many of these forums and WIS websites is that it provides a platform for people with a common passion to share their stories with watches. This can explain why the History/Story code was a popular label in the data. The key here is to notice

that the majority of the people utilizing these sites are interested in hearing other people's stories and the history behind their collections, purchases and so on. Whether that story explains that they bought a watch for its craftsmanship, or that they own a watch that was worn during World War 2, the story explaining the journey that a watch has taken carries meaning for a WIS. One user started a forum and wrote: "I wanted to start a thread dedicated to your watches and your stories because I love to hear about what watches mean to people and why. And because I think more people should think of their watches as carriers of meaning" ([TheHorizon], 2016, p. 1). Here we see that through storytelling, a watch's meaning can be expressed and the significance it holds is tied to the storyteller. Additionally, a common sentiment among the forums was that a story or history of a watch should be unique to that individual watch. In other words, the story shouldn't be a marketing ploy by the brand or manufacturer, it should be a personal story that explains the life of the watch in question. One user explained it well, stating: "Stories that brands link to their watches are simply part of their marketing strategy--I ignore those completely. Stories about a particular watch such as one of mine--handed down to five different generations in our family--those stories mean a lot (to me)" ([timefleas], 2019, p. 1). From the data I gathered, it seems like many watch enthusiasts can describe their attraction to the technology through their enjoyment of hearing about the journeys these watches have taken and through sharing their personal stories with likeminded individuals.

### **Watches in Pop Culture**

The last label that stood out to me was the Pop Culture tag. I found myself reading a lot of posts describing how WIS developed their passion from viewing movies with characters like James Bond. One example read, "...But I didn't really get the watch "bug" until I watched Casino Royale and saw the 2220.80 Seamaster. Still don't own that one. Still want it though"

([wschertz], 2016, p. 1). Additionally, another user wrote: “A long, long, long time ago, I saw a black and white Robert Mitchum movie. In one of the scenes, they focused on his watch and it was a Rolex. I was hooked” ([TedG954], 2019, p. 2). Here we see that a movie, along with what the characters portrayed in the film are wearing, influenced some viewers into exploring the world of mechanical watches. More research would need to be done to understand exactly why this occurs, whether it’s due to an aesthetic appeal or attempting to embody the characters on screen, but my data does not indicate an explanation for this. However, from the data collected, we can determine that there is a clear connection between what pop culture icons wear and the interest of WIS.

Films were not the only way I saw pop culture influence the mechanical watch community. Hodinkee’s extremely popular Talking Watches video segment continued to support the idea that celebrities and athletes have a major impact on the popularity of timepieces. I would be remiss if I didn’t discuss the particular segment with singer-songwriter and record producer, John Mayer. Not only is this the original episode that initiated the fame associated with Talking Watches, it has close to 2 million views on YouTube and allows us to gain valuable insight into the world of collecting timepieces. I transcribed an interesting quote from Mayer’s segment below:

It’s not materialistic as much as people may think. You have to have these [looks at his watches] to say you collect. Who knows if it’s a tick or if it’s, you know, a blessing in some way or another but people have that tick. I have that tick. I’ve had it since I was born. People say, ‘Well, I have the time right here, it’s 1:58’ and that’s not what it’s about. For me, I get into things very deeply when I get into them. I got into the guitar and I never stopped. Yeah, it’s excessive in some way, but there is an excessiveness to ambition as well. (Hodinkee, 2013)

When dissecting this quotation a few important aspects stand out. The first statement reiterates a conclusion that has been supported by my data thus far, as Mayer emphasizes that this passion is not a materialistic pursuit at heart. Additionally, he notes that telling time is not the main reason he is infatuated with mechanical watches, something the data backs as well. Lastly, he mentions the excessiveness that is associated with this watch “bug” and how it relates to having ambition. Something that I concluded early on while conducting research was that this passion is not practical and you can most definitely describe it as excessive in some ways. However, Mayer is trying to explain that this should not be taken negatively, as it provides WIS with the ambition to expand their collection, research watches and ultimately share their experiences with others. But how does this relate to pop culture’s influence on the watch enthusiast? It seems as though there is comfort associated with knowing that an icon like John Mayer shares a passion with you, especially when you can describe that passion as being excessive, or impractical. WIS may not be able to relate to Mayer in many ways, but knowing that he is a WIS himself provides a connection and strengthens the community.

### **Significance**

Through studying mechanical watch enthusiasts and what drives their attraction to this technology, it became apparent that this obsolete form of timekeeping has remained successful due to reasons other than practicality. Although there is not one answer explaining why every WIS loves mechanical watches, I gained a better understanding of the many aspects that drive this passion. Whether that’s aesthetics, sentimental value, sharing stories or even pop culture, it is interesting to see what WIS value because it shows us how they truly feel towards this technology. This is profound, as recognizing how we feel towards a technology, including why we use it and what we want out of it, allows us to truly define what we mean by “better.” In the

case of the mechanical watch, although it's technologically antiquated, it provides something that "new and improved" devices cannot; something intangible, emotional or deeper in meaning. This is why we cannot fall into the trap of determining that the newest new is always better, because better is subjective to the individual and not always based on practicality or efficiency.

Expanding this understanding to other technologies is where I would like to continue researching or encourage others to advance what I have written about here. It would be fascinating to see if other seemingly obsolete technologies have remained successful due to a similar reason uncovered in this report.

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