

A decade on the wrist:

how the Apple Watch redefined tech and health



Image source: Apple

Introduction

Ten years after its debut, the Apple Watch has evolved from an iPhone accessory into a globally recognised leader in wearable technology, blending health tracking, digital utility, and brand identity. With over 100 million users and billions in annual revenue, its impact is undeniable.

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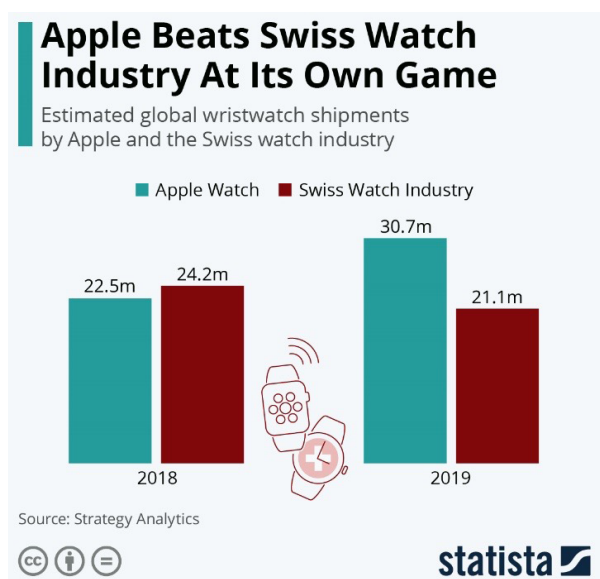
Yet signs of market maturity, slowing innovation cycles, and shifting user expectations now place it at a strategic crossroads. As the global wearables industry moves toward sustainability, ambient computing, and AI integration, Apple's challenge will be to keep the watch relevant, not just as a device, but as a platform that anticipates and adapts to the future of personal technology.

When Apple unveiled the Apple Watch in April 2015, the announcement was met with a mix of intrigue, scepticism, and anticipation. Could the company that redefined the phone, the tablet, and the laptop now turn the humble wristwatch into a device worthy of the digital age? Ten years later, the answer is very much affirmative. The Apple Watch has indeed transformed the way millions of people interact with technology. It blurred the lines between fashion, utility, and personal health, becoming not just a gadget, but a statement of lifestyle and intent.

What started as an accessory to the iPhone evolved into something far more autonomous. Over the years, the Apple Watch took on a growing list of responsibilities: monitoring heart rates, guiding workouts, delivering notifications, conducting ECGs, helping users breathe, sleep, pay, navigate and even detect when they fall. For many, it replaced traditional watches altogether; for others, it introduced the very concept of wearing a watch daily. Yet, this decade-long journey hasn't been without its challenges. While Apple still dominates the global smartwatch market, its share has been gradually slipping. In a world where attention is split between wearables, augmented reality, and AI-driven services, some have started to question whether the Apple Watch is still evolving or if it has quietly hit a plateau.

The evolution of the Apple Watch

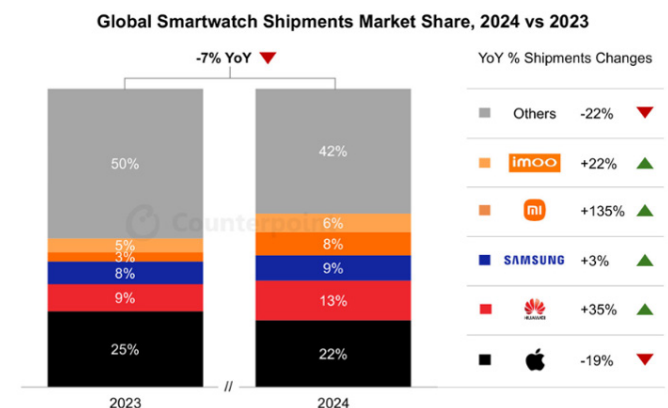
After its launch in 2015, the Apple Watch quickly accelerated to become the market leader in wristwear shipments. According to Strategy Analytics, Apple shipped 30.7 million Apple Watches in 2019, compared to the 21.1 million units exported globally by the entire Swiss watch industry. This represented a 46% volume advantage for Apple in that year alone. The Apple Watch's rise corresponded with growing consumer demand for integrated health tracking, mobile connectivity, and ecosystem compatibility, particularly among younger, tech-oriented demographics.



Apple's success was built on a combination of careful strategy and product versatility. Rather than relying on a one-size-fits-all approach, the company released multiple variants to appeal to different audiences: the affordable Apple Watch SE for casual users, the standard Series models for mainstream consumers, and the rugged Apple Watch Ultra targeting athletes and adventurers. This multi-tiered product philosophy mirrored Apple's iPhone strategy and worked just as effectively.

Integration into the wider Apple ecosystem further cemented the Watch's role in daily life. Seamless pairing with the iPhone, AirPods, and Mac made it feel indispensable to those already immersed in Apple's world. Features like Apple Pay, Siri voice commands, and hands-free notifications gave it an edge that no traditional timepiece could match. For some users, the Apple Watch even began replacing their iPhone during certain activities, from workouts to grocery shopping.

However, despite Apple's long-standing dominance in the smartwatch sector, signs of market maturity and competitive pressure have become increasingly visible. According to data from Counterpoint Research, Apple's global market share declined from approximately 25% in 2023 to 22.5% in 2024, making it the only brand among the top five smartwatch vendors to lose share year-over-year. Shipments fell sharply from 43 million units in 2022 to 34 million in 2024, representing a 19% decline in deliveries over that period. Nonetheless, Apple retained the leading position in the global market, followed by Huawei (13%), Samsung (9%), Xiaomi (8%), and Imoo (6%), the latter of which has seen strong growth primarily in Asian markets. This shift reflects increasing competition from lower-cost and feature-diverse alternatives, particularly in emerging economies.



The slowdown cannot be pinned solely on competition. Over the past few product cycles, critics and consumers alike have noted a lack of groundbreaking hardware innovations. New models typically offer modest speed boosts, slightly better sensors, and minor tweaks in design, all appreciated but rarely game changing. Battery life, a sore spot since the beginning, remains capped at roughly 18 hours, forcing daily recharges. In a world increasingly dominated by longevity and sustainability, this is a noticeable weakness.

Even though Apple has maintained a loyal user base, with surveys showing that over 90% of Apple Watch owners plan to stick with Apple for their next smartwatch, the broader industry trend is harder to ignore. The watch's early years were marked by explosive growth and cultural momentum. Today, it feels more like a mature, reliable appliance: trusted, refined, but no longer thrilling.

Between utility and overexposure: the Apple Watch in today's world

A decade into its life, the Apple Watch finds itself suspended between two very different roles. On one hand, it is praised as a personal health companion, a smart, always-on assistant that monitors the human body in real time. On the other, it is increasingly viewed as a device that risks reinforcing the very digital dependency many users are trying to escape.

The health-oriented features of the Apple Watch are among its most celebrated. Over the years, Apple has expanded its biometric capabilities far beyond basic heart rate tracking. The introduction of ECG functionality, blood oxygen monitoring, fall detection, and detailed sleep analytics has placed the watch at the forefront of consumer health tech. In some cases, users have reported early detection of heart anomalies or critical falls that led to life-saving interventions. In the near future, Apple is expected to push further: blood pressure monitoring may arrive as early as 2026, and glucose monitoring, long considered the "holy grail" of wearable health, remains under active development. Satellite connectivity, already available in iPhones for emergency SOS, is expected to make its way into future Ultra models, allowing essential communication even when off-grid.

Yet despite these advancements, the watch's presence on the wrist has raised broader concerns. Can a device that vibrates, nudges, reminds, and updates dozens of times a day truly be a tool for digital wellness? While Apple has added features intended to support mindfulness, breathing apps, focus modes, screen-time awareness, the watch remains fundamentally designed for constant engagement. Its role as a "second screen" for the iPhone means that instead of eliminating distraction, it often makes it more subtle and pervasive.

This tension is amplified by the rise of digital minimalism. Movements like "slow tech" and "digital detox" are gaining ground, especially among younger generations who are wary of the mental and emotional toll of constant connectivity. For these users, wearing a device that tracks every step, measures every heartbeat, and pushes notifications throughout the day may feel less like empowerment and more like surveillance. The promise of convenience is offset by a creeping sense of always being "on."

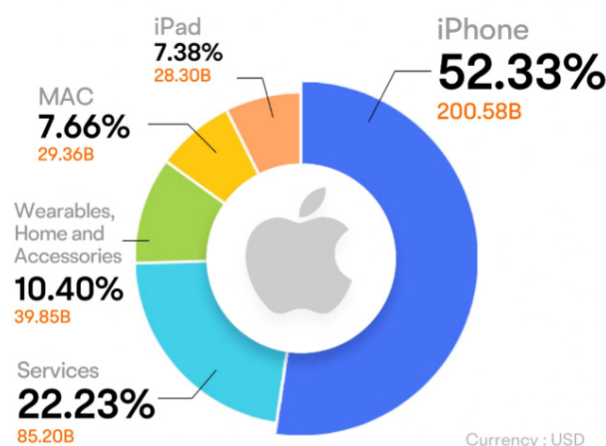
Environmental and health concerns also linger. The Apple Watch, like all wireless devices, emits electromagnetic fields (EMF) due to Bluetooth, Wi-Fi, and cellular connections. While these levels are within regulatory limits, their cumulative effect on the body, particularly during 24/7 wear, is not fully understood. Likewise, the production and disposal of smartwatches raise sustainability issues. Although Apple has committed to carbon-neutral goals and uses recycled materials in some components, the annual release cycle encourages frequent upgrades, leading to increased electronic waste.

Still, one cannot overlook the Apple Watch's enduring utility. For millions of users, it has become an invisible part of daily life, waking them up, reminding them to move, alerting them to calls, helping them pay, and guiding them home. Its value is most keenly felt not in flashy keynote moments, but in quiet routines and emergencies.

Financially, however, the Apple Watch continues to be a pillar within the company's broader wearables strategy. The "Wearables, Home and Accessories" category, which includes the watch, AirPods, and HomePod, generated approximately \$40 billion in revenue in 2024, accounting for roughly 10% of Apple's total income. Independent analysts estimate that the

watch contributes around \$11–13 billion of that figure, making it not just a strategic accessory but a key part of Apple's recurring revenue model, especially when bundled with Apple Fitness+ and HealthKit integrations.

Apple's Revenue Breakdown by Segment



Source: moomoo app.
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Looking ahead, Apple appears to be prioritising software evolution over hardware reinvention. The announcement of Apple Intelligence, its generative AI initiative, suggests a watch that will offer not just passive data collection but real-time interpretation and adaptive functionality. Early use cases under development include stress-level detection via heart-rate variability, mood tracking using voice tone analysis, and contextual suggestion systems for scheduling and fitness.

At the industry level, this aligns with a broader trend toward invisible computing, wearable technologies that blend seamlessly into everyday life. Concepts such as modular wristbands, textile-integrated sensors, and biometric patches are in development by multiple Original Equipment Manufacturers and startups. Apple, known for shaping rather than following hardware trends, may eventually pivot the watch into a broader platform, one that prioritises ambient, frictionless interaction over visible screen time.

Conclusion

As it enters its second decade, the Apple Watch stands as both a commercial success and a technological milestone. It has redefined the modern wristwatch, merging health monitoring, productivity tools, and seamless ecosystem integration into a single wearable device. Yet, the market it helped shape is no longer defined by novelty. Users today expect longevity, environmental responsibility, and features that enhance digital balance rather than constant connectivity.

To remain ahead, Apple must go beyond hardware refinements and lead on issues that matter: predictive health analytics, ambient intelligence, and form factors that adapt to real-world habits. The Apple Watch's next chapter will depend not only on what it can do, but how subtly, intelligently, and responsibly it can do it. Its future lies in becoming not just a screen on the wrist, but a truly integrated layer of personal technology, quietly essential, invisibly powerful, and always one step ahead.

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