

**EXTREMELY ONLINE: CULTURAL BORROWING, MIXING, AND
TRANSFORMATION IN INTERNET MUSIC**

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ABSTRACT

The formation of distinctive Internet cultures, accompanied by the increasing importance of digital mediations for popular culture consumption, has culminated in both popular and academic discussions around the idea of Internet-based music scenes or communities as a cultural phenomenon, referred to as “Internet genres” or “Internet music.” This dissertation presents a comprehensive framework for and definition of Internet music through ethnographic and textual analyses of three separate scenes: vaporwave, hyperpop, and phonk. It interrogates issues of cultural borrowing and hybridity within these Internet music scenes, and how representations of racial, gender, sexual, and national identity are negotiated by both producers and fans. It also explores how the dynamics of the online platforms through which these scenes manifest (including, but not limited to their tendency toward anonymity, low barrier to entry for producers, and blurred lines between producers/consumers) shape these scenes, including how the algorithm-driven organization of these scenes and the influence of meme cultures impact how different identities and cultures are portrayed through these musics. Ultimately, this project interrogates how social and cultural identities and differences come to be constructed and articulated in online environments, and how in a “post-Internet” age, individuals are increasingly using popular media to make sense of their relationships with digital technologies.

To anyone who has ever sent me a meme,
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Technology has long been considered inseparable from developments of popular music scenes and trends, and how audiences and fans relate to them. The advent and increasing sophistication of Internet technologies, particularly since the start of the 21st century, has led to new social configurations that in turn impact these developments. These technologies have transformed not only our relationship with music as individuals, but also how music comes to be associated with certain communities and cultures, as notions like location, embodiment, and audience are challenged (Ayers, 2006; Lysloff & Gay, 2003; Tofalvy & Barna, 2020). The communities that form around popular music have historically served as incredibly important sites for identity negotiation. However, digital spaces have simultaneously shaped and transformed the rules of engagement within these communities, including how we present ourselves and perform our identities. Academic research at the intersection of popular music and Internet culture reveals distinctive trends that have developed in conjunction with the increasing penetration of digital environments into our everyday lives. This project examines one of the more illustrative examples of this transformation: the emergent phenomenon of “Internet music,” or “Internet genres.”

Observers described musical forms and performances that they identified as falling under the Internet music umbrella as early as the 1970s, though academic literature on the subject did not begin to emerge until the early 2000s. These earlier studies tended to focus on the Internet’s potentials as an infrastructure for musical

transmission (Follmer, 2005; Hugill, 2005). For example, Hugill (2005) preliminarily defines Internet music as “music in which the Internet is integral either to its composition, or dissemination, or both” (p. 431). While later work on the subject has begun to identify distinct genres or styles of Internet music, including vaporwave, synthwave, lo-fi Hip Hop, and many others, cultural critics and scholars are still making sense of these musics as a cohesive phenomenon. As Harper (2017) observes, “there is no such thing as an ‘Internet music’ with a particular set of characteristics, however they’re aestheticised ... ‘Internet music’ is broad and diverse in its aesthetics” (p. 96).

Nevertheless, close analyses of Internet music genres and scenes have also revealed aesthetic commonalities, such as the use of nostalgic imagery, as well as a sense of ‘post-irony’ evoked by the aesthetics of these musics (Ballam-Cross, 2021; Trainer, 2016).

The goal of this project is two-pronged: first, through my analysis of Internet music scenes, I formulate a theoretical framework for Internet music that expands Hugill’s (2005) initial definition of the phenomenon to also include those musics that have been aesthetically influenced by the Internet’s cultural and social dimensions, including through digital platforms (such as YouTube, SoundCloud, Spotify, and others) and their affordances. Building on the robust scholarly work on popular music, digital cultures, and identity conducted in the past two decades, this dissertation also explores the nature of processes of transcultural mixing and influence taking place in Internet music scenes. Specifically, it examines how gender, racial, sexual, and national identity are portrayed within Internet music genres, and determines where, based on their unifying characteristics, the potential lies in these scenes to rethink how these processes of cultural borrowing and mixing take place in digital environments. It also explores how the

affordances of the online platforms through which these scenes manifest (including, but not limited to their tendency toward anonymity, low barrier to entry for producers, and blurred lines between producers/consumers that these platforms allow for) shape Internet music spaces, including how the algorithm-driven organization of these scenes impact how identities/cultures are portrayed through these musics.

This project is primarily concerned with how social and cultural identities and differences come to be constructed and articulated in music in the digital age. In a “post-digital,” or “post-Internet” age, the ubiquitousness of the Internet, and other digital technologies, means that Internet users have reached a stage where we are increasingly using popular media to make sense of our relationship with these technologies (Mazierska et al., 2018), and thus, increasingly more of our cultural referents emerge from digital environments. These referents are easily borrowed, mashed, and mixed up by users with a variety of technological expertise and accessibility, the lines between production and consumption become more blurred, and anonymity obscures clear-cut power dynamics around racial, gender, and national identity representations. Under such conditions, and “in the face of the global circulation of the entire archive of music history promised by the internet,” play with identity and “constructions of otherness” has led to endless possibilities for hybrid formations in popular music (Born & Hesmondhalgh, 2000, pp. 41-42). I thus apply theoretical work around cultural mixing, including globalization, hybridity, and cultural appropriation, to the phenomenon of Internet music, examining who holds the power and ability to shape identity and representations through these scenes as well as who is potentially still harmed through these processes.

My analysis focuses on three Internet music genres as case studies: vaporwave, a type of electronic music characterized by slowed-down samples from 1980s R&B and smooth jazz; phonk, a subgenre of hip-hop based on a revival of the 1990s Memphis rap scene; and hyperpop, an accelerationist synthesis of Electronic Dance Music and traditional pop music. All three of these genres, and their associated scenes, in their own ways exemplify the three characteristics that I will associate with Internet music more broadly—anonymity and identity play; ‘hyper’ hybridity and a proliferation of cultural mash-ups; and a low barrier to entry for producers—each of which adds complexity to notions of cultural borrowing and mixing in digital environments. Throughout this project, I intentionally refer to the spaces I examine as “scenes” in acknowledgement of the fact that my theoretical concerns go beyond what is happening just in the music itself. When we engage with musical texts in these spaces, we are also exposed to the visual and textual information surrounding this music, and as well as information on how other users have interacted with the music via the interface of the particular platform we are using—including comments, “likes,” upvotes, or reshares. Going beyond the music itself, I thus examine the various *technocultures* that surround these musics, which include the “communities and forms of cultural practice that have emerged in response to changing media and information technologies, forms characterized by technological adaptation, avoidance, subversion, or resistance” (Lysloff & Gay, 2003, p. 2).

Through my analyses of these three scenes, this dissertation explores the following research questions about Internet music: What are the defining or unifying characteristics of Internet-based music scenes, and how do the infrastructural characteristics of digital platforms manifest in these characteristics? How do Internet-

based music scenes make sense of the social and cultural dimensions of users' relationship with the Internet? What is the nature of the processes of transcultural influence and cultural mixing taking place in Internet-based music scenes, and how do affordances of digital platforms shape these processes? My analysis will interrogate how identity-based representations in Internet music scenes demand a rethinking of how processes of cultural borrowing and mixing take place in popular media, as we make sense of our changing relationship to technology through popular music. Ultimately, this dissertation asks: How do Internet music genres and their surrounding technocultures reinforce Brock's (2012) observation that "the Internet, as a social structure, represents and maintains Western culture through its content and often embodies Western ideology through its design and practices" (pp. 531-2)? In what ways are Internet genres "global" (or not) and how do they reinforce or complicate notions of temporality, locality, and hybridity? I use the results of my analyses, and my answers to these questions, to develop a new theoretical framework for Internet music, to be outlined in the conclusion.

This project also explores what Internet music reveals about our social and cultural relationship with Internet technologies. As Airoidi (2018) observes, digital technologies have become pervasive across the globe, and are thus becoming less distinguishable from our 'real' lives:

In the last two decades, the digital environment has dramatically mutated. In 2017, over a half of the World population was online. In Europe and North America, this share rises to more than 80% ... Overall, the digital landscape has become increasingly 'real', as well as complex and internally differentiated. (p. 663)

These developments have led to scholars and artists alike contending with what could be referred to as a "post-digital" or "post-Internet" period. Maizerska et al. (2018) clarify

that these terms refer not to the “period when digital technologies or the internet ceased to operate or matter but, on the contrary, when they became ubiquitous” (p. 3). Mosco (2017) similarly states in his monograph *Becoming digital: Toward a post-Internet society* that, in the post-Internet world, we increasingly experience others through digital communication networks rather than face-to-face, while these networks become “embedded” rather than external, resulting in “the human-computer divide increasingly becoming an anachronism” (p. 10). Waugh (2017) has perhaps most thoroughly explored the intersections between this concept of the post-Internet and popular music, finding that

Contemporary youths are at one with virtual environments and digital networks, and these phenomena are intrinsically inseparable from their organic lives and identities. It is not that web users ‘escape’ into these spaces and systems; rather, they are now so ubiquitous that they must be considered part of the ‘real’ world. (p. 235)

Given how crucial digital environments are becoming to users’ identity performance and negotiation, this dissertation thus explores the concept of the “post-Internet” through a particular attention to how Internet music scene members communicate their relationship to the online *and* the offline through their engagement with these musics.

Organization of the Text

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Chapter 2 lays out the project's theoretical framework and provides an overview of previous academic work on theories of cultural borrowing and mixing, including globalization and hybridity. It also addresses the foundational work on concepts like subcultures and music scenes. It then explains how these theories and foundational concepts have been impacted by the development of Internet technologies. Finally, it addresses what scholars have previously found with regard to the influence of forces like

digital platforms, algorithms, and memetic logics on the production, circulation, and consumption of popular culture, including music.

Chapter 3: Defining Internet Music

Building on the literature discussed in Chapter 2, this chapter foregrounds the theoretical goal of this project to formulate a cohesive definition of, and framework for, the term Internet music. It outlines previous academic and popular discourses around “Internet music,” “net music,” “Internet genre,” and other related concepts to show how both scholars and critics of popular music have employed and defined these terms. It discusses how the notion of Internet music has evolved alongside developments in Internet technologies, and studies of the various genres that have been considered under the Internet music umbrella. Finally, using insights from this previous literature, this chapter proposes a new cohesive framework for Internet music, which can be used to understand how this concept builds upon the existing academic literature on digital subcultures and scenes, theories of cultural borrowing and mixing in digital environments, and digital circulation and platforms.

Chapter 4: Methods

Chapter 4 outlines this project’s methodological approaches to the study of Internet music scenes, as well as how these approaches are applied to address the project’s research questions. It explains how the paratextual characteristics of Internet music scenes are analyzed using textual analysis, and how the discursive, or sense-making, characteristics, such as media coverage or social media comments, are considered using discourse analysis and passive participant observation, or “lurking.” It discusses the complementary ethnographic methods that were used specifically to explore

the vaporwave: in-person participation observation and in-depth interviews. It then describes how these methodologies are applied to each particular case study, and the specific elements of each scene that constitute the focus of each analysis chapter. Finally, I discuss how my own identity as a researcher, as well as an ‘acafan,’ impacted my approach to this research.

Chapter 5: Vaporwave

Perhaps the best-known musical style to be classified as an Internet genre, vaporwave emerged online in the early 2010s, circulating on experimental music blogs and visually-focused platforms like Tumblr (Born & Haworth, 2018). Musically, vaporwave can be characterized by the use of slowed-down samples from 1980s and 90s R&B and smooth jazz. These samples are frequently mashed up with audio clips from shopping malls and commercials of the same era, creating a tongue-in-cheek commentary on capitalism and consumerism. The formulaic use of eclectic imagery in vaporwave paratexts and the robust digital culture surrounding it means it is often considered equal parts music scene and meme (Glitsos, 2018).

The academic literature on vaporwave has been robust for a relatively young genre, and has touched on areas including meme studies, cultural studies, and philosophy (Born & Haworth, 2018; Glitsos, 2018; Harper, 2017; Whelan & Nowak, 2018). Chapter 5 explores the current state of the vaporwave scene, and how members of the community imagine the vaporwave community and their place within it, through an ethnographic study of the 2023 music festival ElectroniCON, which is organized by the record label 100% Electronica and is considered the largest in-person gathering dedicated to the genre. A key conflict emerged around the festival organizers’ initial decision to include

indie musician John Maus on the lineup, who has become a subject of controversy for his documented presence at the Trump rally prior to the insurrection at the US Capitol Building on January 6, 2021 (Minsker, 2023). This chapter thus extends considerations of Internet music beyond digital environments, and engages in an analysis of how community boundaries and scene-based identities are continuously negotiated by members of the vaporwave scene both offline and online.

Chapter 6: Hyperpop

One of the more commercially successful genres of Internet music, with affiliations to Grammy-nominated artists Charli XCX and SOPHIE, hyperpop can be defined as pop music with maximalist tendencies, or a “highly exaggerated and self-referential genre of pop music strongly rooted in internet culture” (Dandridge-Lemco 2020, March 2022). References to early 2000s Internet and popular culture abound in hyperpop’s music and visuals: album and track art as well as artists’ social media profiles are replete with the kind of tacky graphic design that is now characteristic of the “Web 2.0” aesthetic. If vaporwave could be considered a visual pastiche, hyperpop is a musical one, replete with references to high-energy artists and genres like Skrillex, Linkin Park, eurodance, and even ska (Kornhaber, 2021). High-pitched vocals, frenetic energy, metallic soundscapes, and tracks clocking in at around the two-minute mark or even less are some of the signature musical markers of the genre, with some tracks and artists also displaying a clear influence from hip-hop or metal.

While the academic literature on hyperpop is sparse (March, 2022a; L. Martin, 2023), popular coverage of the genre has been extensive in part due to its mainstream success (Dandridge-Lemco, 2020; Press-Reynolds, 2022; Pritchard, 2020). This chapter

thus takes media coverage of the genre, alongside online discourses surrounding hyperpop on Reddit and Twitter, as its main objects of analysis, to examine how scene participants negotiate their gender and sexual identities through this music, as well as how the scene as a whole makes sense of the impact of the genre's "platformization" through the creation of the popular Spotify editorial playlist dedicated to hyperpop. Chapter 6 also examines the connections to hyperpop and Japan's popular music industry that have been largely neglected in popular coverage, and the ways in which Japanese hyperpop artists are opening up new constructions for the *kawaii*, or the cute, through their work.

Chapter 7: Phonk

Phonk (pronounced like "funk") can be defined as alternative Hip Hop and a digital revival of the 1990s Memphis rap scene. Musically, phonk can be characterized by the use of samples from Memphis rap, including groups and artists like Three 6 Mafia, DJ Squeaky, and Tommy Wright III, that are then chopped and screwed (a deejay technique characterized by slowing down Hip Hop tracks and applying mixing techniques such as record scratches), and mixed with samples from genres like jazz to create a new sound (Anand, 2020). The online phonk scene initially proliferated on SoundCloud, where it was commonly associated with other alternative subgenres of Hip Hop. In recent years, the genre has become popular as a musical accompaniment for viral trends on various other digital platforms, including TikTok, resulting in more mainstream exposure and the creation of various offshoots of the genre. Most prominent of these offshoots is drift phonk, which as the name implies is typically played over clips of

drifting cars, and features a much more aggressive and sped-up musical style compared to “Memphis” phonk (Beeson, 2024).

Both academic and popular coverage of the genre is still in its infancy, though the genre has exploded in popularity during the 2020s in part due to the popularity of drift phonk (Leight, 2022). Locating phonk within broader discourses about dynamics of cultural appropriation and digital Blackface, this chapter specifically explores the implications of the use of racialized imagery in the genre, and how examinations of these dynamics become complicated in a scene that tends toward producer anonymity. It also interrogates how phonk’s status as global genre of Hip Hop, given its growing popularity in countries like Russia and Brazil, further complicates clear-cut notions of power and race relations that have typically been used to examine instances of cultural appropriation in popular music, and how the work of particular phonk artists like Ryan Celsius expands the genre’s potentials for cultural hybridity.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

This dissertation concludes by drawing larger connections between the case studies considered in this project and other genres that fall under the Internet music umbrella, such as Lofi Hip Hop. In addition to presenting the findings from each analysis chapter, the conclusion also outlines in detail my framework for Internet music. This framework puts forth three main characteristics of Internet music: anonymity and identity play, hyper hybridity, and inclusivity/a low barrier to entry. I explain how each aspect of the framework informs (or challenges) another, and what the framework reveals about musical and cultural trends in the digital age more broadly. Finally, I outline the

limitations and challenges I encountered during the course of the research, and present future directions for the study of digital music.

The following chapter begins the review of the literature most relevant to this project. It engages in an overview of the foundational concepts that are key to understanding the phenomenon of Internet music, including theories of cultural borrowing and mixing, and how social formations take place around music, including key concepts like subculture, scenes, and musical communities. It then considers how these theories have been impacted by digital environments. Finally, it considers theories of digital circulation and platformization, as well as how meme cultures and virality shape digital cultural trends.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theories of Cultural Borrowing, Mixing, and Community

Music as a representational medium helps us make sense of not only the individual self, but the self as part of a particular place, time, or social group; it places us in “imaginative cultural narratives” (Frith, 2007, p. 209). Thus, understanding how media theorists have previously made sense of how culture moves, and how people place themselves around culture, is crucial for understanding issues of music and identity. As Tomlinson (1999) states in the opening paragraphs of *Globalization and culture*: “Globalization lies at the heart of modern culture; cultural practices lie at the heart of globalization” (p. 1). The relationship between transnational and transcultural flows of media and global cultural practices are thus entirely reciprocal. Similarly, Darling-Wolf (2014) argues that the way we envision the global and our place in it would not exist in its current form without the media (p. 13). Studies of cultural flows have considered processes of media flows as one-directional flows of media and power from one nation or region to another, to a more complex accounting for the multiple directions that media can flow simultaneously, as well as the many ways in which the localities through which these media flow are defined and how they define themselves. Thus, this review of the literature first presents the different ways that media theorists have made sense of the process and impact of cultural flows, to begin to understand how the same forces impact how popular music is produced, circulated, and consumed.

Globalization

Understanding globalization and the different interpretations of the concept offered by theorists is crucial to the study of transcultural flows of media. Pieterse (2009)

offers a succinct definition that at the same time reveals the enormity of the subject: “Globalization is an objective, empirical process of increasing economic and political connectivity, a subjective process unfolding in consciousness as the collective awareness of growing global interconnectedness, and a host of specific globalizing projects that seek to shape global conditions” (pp. 16-17). Globalization as a theory emerged in part in response to the cultural imperialism thesis, one of the more prominent theories of transnational cultural influence in the 1970s. Grounded in the ideas of the Frankfurt School and the critical political economy tradition, it relies on the assumption “that economic and political relations of dependency between first and third world create vast inequities—cultural among others—between nations” (Kraidy, 2005, p. 22). Schiller (1979) defines cultural imperialism through referencing elements of Immanuel Wallerstein's world system, which thinks of nations as divided either into the “core” or the “periphery.” Certain nations which represent the interests of the core (primarily the US and Western Europe) determine the conditions and priorities of this system, and dictate the “largely one-directional flow of information from core to periphery” (pp. 5-6). Media theorists eventually began to question the continued relevance of cultural imperialism as other nations emerged to compete with the US and Europe for economic and cultural dominance, and by the 1990s, criticism of the thesis reached its height (Kraidy, 2005).

New frameworks began to consider how scenarios of transcultural influence played out by their emphasis on local resistance to Western dominance, and considerations of how non-Western countries are playing an increasing role in global cultural markets. Hall (1997) describes globalization as constituting “not the unity of the

singular corporate enterprise which tries to encapsulate the entire world within its confines, but much more decentralized and decentered forms of social and economic organization” (p. 30). Indeed, globalization has been defined primarily by its decentralized and multi-dimensional nature: Appadurai’s (1996) influential “-scapes” model for examining dynamics of cultural flows advocates for a movement away from the center-periphery model toward an examination of relationships between different dimensions, or “scapes” of global flows, including ethnoscaples, technoscaples, and ideascapes. These different types of flows can operate in a fragmented nature, and do not simply move from more powerful to less powerful areas.

Central to the scholarly conversations around globalization are the complexities and shifts in what constitutes and/or distinguishes the global and the local. Theories around the local, the national and the global are quite unstable and constantly shifting depending on the cultural context. Darling-Wolf (2014) argues that in popular media, the global, national, and local are mutually constituted in globalized cultural forms: “The fact that the culture we experience as ‘local’ ... is inescapably embedded in broader global processes is increasingly difficult to ignore” (p. 1). Indeed, Tomlinson (1999) notes that “local life occupies the majority of time and space” (pp. 7-9). Therefore, scholars of global media should be cautious about statements that paint global connectivity as a general condition, at the expense of considerations of local experiences. Kraidy (2005) similarly notes that “if globalization is experienced locally, then each place encounters globalization differently. While nodes on the network of global connectivity—such as large cosmopolitan airports—are relatively standardized, local communities...retain their diversity, because of the continuing centrality of local life” (p. 42). As localities continue

to find new ways to interact with the global, close attention to both dynamics is crucial for studies of transcultural media flows.

Two important aspects that highlight the complexity of globalization are worth considering here: deterritorialization, and the influence of multinational corporations on global culture. Deterritorialization reckons with how contemporary forces of migration, tourism, and the formation of global conglomerates, among other factors, can serve to erode the assumed “natural” relations between culture and geography (García Canclini, 1995). For Tomlinson (2007), deterritorialization “means that the significance of the geographical location of a culture – not only the physical, environmental and climatic location, but all the self-definitions, ethnic boundaries and delimiting practices that have accrued around this – is eroding,” while the notion of “culture” is no longer constrained to a local environment (p. 360). Finally, globalization can also be characterized by an increasing international *interdependence*: the growth of regional and multinational organizations means a shift in terms of thinking about what individual nation states can do, and what they can control. This has important implications for the role of media flows in global culture, given that Steger (2013) pinpoints the growth in influence of an increasingly small number of transnational media corporations which he believes largely control and direct “the global cultural flows of our time” (p. 87). Global advertising campaigns led by such corporations, for instance, serve to shape both identities and desires on an international scale. Kraidy (2005) sums up this dichotomy of globalization in his finding that opinions on the concept among scholars of globalization and culture “have coalesced in two competing scenarios: one views cultural globalization as the transfiguration of worldwide diversity into...Westernized consumer culture,” a more

large-scale focus, while “the other regards cultural globalization as a process of hybridization in which cultural mixture and adaptation continuously transform and renew cultural forms,” which reflects a local focus (p. 16). Accordingly, the following section discusses the dynamics of the latter, and how hybridity as a process of mixing and renewal also intersects with identity-based power dynamics.

Hybridity

Hybridity can be a productive construct for unpacking the complex processes and results of transcultural flows of media. The most basic component of hybridity is that of *mixing*: “hybridity is the mingling of cultures from different territorial locations brought about by the increasing traffic amongst cultures...that global modernity produces” (Tomlinson, 1999, p. 142). This concept continues to push studies of culture beyond cultural imperialism’s structural focus. It destabilizes notions of cultural purity and the idea that there exists an ‘authentic’ culture, instead suggesting that all cultures are already always hybrid (Kraidy, 2005). Pieterse (2009) explains that, entering into the twentieth century, under a postmodern or poststructuralist framework, hybridity became an antidote to essentialist notions of identity “because it takes as its point of departure precisely those experiences that have been banished, marginalized, tabooed in cultural differentialism” (p. 55). While Kraidy (2005) warns that the concept’s “extreme polysemy” has the potential to render it theoretically meaningless (p. 66), hybridity has persisted in communication and media studies scholarship as means of making sense of transcultural mixing in popular media, especially music, a cultural form that is often highlighted as having a high potential for hybridity (Born & Hesmondhalgh, 2000; Connell & Gibson, 2002).

Power dynamics are a central point of focus in theories of hybridity, though it complicates these dynamics beyond clear cut notions of the hegemonic and the subaltern. For García Canclini (1995), processes of hybridization create an oblique sense of power: under these conditions, “the classic paradigms with which domination was explained are incapable of taking into account the dissemination of the centers, the multipolarity of social initiatives, the plurality of references...with which artists, artisans, and the mass media assemble their works” (p. 259). In particular, there has been a keen focus in studies of hybridity on how local cultures adapt to, as well as resist, the ubiquitousness of global culture in everyday life. However, Darling-Wolf (2014) finds that a focus in academic work on “local identity politics and the tendency to celebrate ‘subaltern’ speech have sometimes resulted in reductionist interpretations of global processes” (p. 147)—these analyses thus require careful contextualization. As Kraidy (2005) puts it, “a foregrounding of the historical trajectory of terms of cultural mixture can help illuminate the role of power in the transcultural processes that weave the hybrid fabric of transnational culture” (p. 47).

This project considers how power dynamics play out in processes of cultural mixing and hybridity in Internet music, specifically through the lens of cultural appropriation. This term can be thought of as illustrative of a specific power dynamic in processes of hybridization, wherein a dominant identity group borrows from a marginalized identity group, resulting in economic or cultural gains for the dominant group. Rogers (2006) defines cultural appropriation through three main points: first, appropriation concerns relationships among people, though who can make claims of authorship can be contentious (the idea of intertextuality, or the idea that texts always

have multiple authors, comes into play here); it is a *multidimensional* phenomenon (through we should be careful to avoid ignoring the *power* dimensions, which are strongly connected to the political dimensions, of appropriation); and it is widely practiced. The idea of cultural appropriation has been problematized for its binary nature and the challenge of applying the concepts to different cultural contexts. For Manuel (2021), examining the power dynamics of cultural borrowing is an “untenable position,” given that “most cultural borrowing—especially in the modern global ecumene— involves complex and circuitous flows between various groups, rather than historically entwined binaries. Even when binaries are operant, the two groups may not have direct and clear power relationships” (n.p.). However, concerns about cultural appropriation, particularly with regard to different identity dimensions, remain a point of concern in studies of popular media (Sanders, 2016)—particularly as technological developments have eased and accelerated processes of borrowing, a dynamic that will be addressed later in this chapter.

(Sub)Cultural Communities and Scenes

My focus on Internet music as discrete sites of shared interest in musical forms places this project within the tradition of, and continued debate surrounding subcultural theory. The origins of subcultures as a phenomenon of interest in cultural studies originated within the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), but is popularly attributed to one figure from this school: Dick Hebdige. Hebdige’s *Subculture: the meaning of style* (1979) established his sense of the concept of subculture as it relates to the 1970s British punk movement. For Hebdige, the two concepts of subculture and style go hand-in-hand, in that one (style) lends itself to the other

(subculture). Style is represented in objects (the “raw materials,” such as the safety pin or the ripped t-shirt), which give rise to meanings imbued in the subculture while also challenging the hegemonic structures of mass, or commercial culture. In other words, style represents the “communication of a significant difference...it is the superordinate term under which all the other significations are marshaled, the message through which all the other messages speak” (Hebdige, 1979, p. 102).

Subcultures set themselves apart not just through the objects themselves, but also “in the signifying practices which represent those objects and render them meaningful” (Hebdige, 1979, p. 127). Therefore, the meanings of subcultures are always in dispute as the style elements that define them can clash with one another, or become more or less integrated into the dominant (or parent) culture. Hebdige’s CCCS colleagues, Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, focus specifically on the idea of “youth cultures” in the edited collection *Resistance through rituals*, first published in 1975. In distinguishing between a youth culture and its “parent” culture, Hall and Jefferson (2006) explain in the republished volume that “we must, first, see subcultures in terms of their relation to the wider class-cultural networks of which they form a distinctive part” (p. 6). While the subculture will share some commonalities with the culture from which it originated, it must be distinctive enough that it can be differentiated from the parent culture.

Later work on subcultural theory critiqued various aspects of the CCCS model for subcultures, including its characterization of subcultures as bounded groups standing in direct opposition to “dominant cultures,” and its focus on the activities of “youthful white working-class heterosexual males” (Taylor, 2013, p. 197). In his work on the late 1990s British goth scene, Hodkinson (2002) argues for a reworking of the notion of subculture

as it applies to goth, given that thinkers in the Chicago and Birmingham schools tended to pinpoint subcultures as originating through the impossible process of “large numbers of disparate individuals” all at once reacting “in the same way to ascribed social conditions” (p. 11-12). Thornton (1995) similarly concludes her monograph on British club cultures how participants imbue one another with varying degrees of “subcultural capital”, and calls for an investigation of “the micro-structures of power entailed in the cultural disagreements and debates that go on between more closely associated social groups” (p. 249).

Furthermore, McRobbie’s (1990) feminist reading of Hebdige’s work finds that he neglects “the extent to which subcultural bricoleurs draw on patriarchal meanings, the implications of ambiguous sexuality for youth cultures, and the question of gender and the moral panic” (p. 61). Taylor (2013) builds on these critical reactions through an exploration of queer subcultures, to show how queer style in popular music communities “carve space for resistant queer sexualities and merge queer sensibilities with pre-existing cultural forms” (p. 194). Scholars have also explored more neutral terms, like scene, to accommodate for subculture’s shortcomings. For example, Kahn-Harris (2007), in his study of extreme metal scenes, finds the use of the term subculture to be too restrictive, failing to accommodate more “casual” fans and followers of certain musical forms, who are more easily accommodate by the more neutral “scene”: “Neither recognizes the possibility that a variety of forms of involvement and interaction may coexist within a particular space... We cannot, a priori, assume that ‘casual’ fans of extreme metal and those who deal with little else are two totally different classes of people” (p. 19). This study thus represents a continuation of this movement away from the search for youth

‘resistance’ to a ‘dominant’ culture to that has characterized the tradition of subcultural theory, and accordingly aims to paint a full picture of digitally-based music scenes, including activities that subjugate or reinforce commercial interests, across disparate identity categories.

The notion of community has also had an influence on how scholars have made sense of musical collectives, and has developed alongside discussions of subculture and scenes. Benedict Anderson applied this concept to the study of the nation in his formative *Imagined Communities* (1983), which proposes that the nation is a limited concept with well-defined borders, and its citizens are able to recognize those borders through linguistic commonalities, rituals, symbols, and an understanding of the nation’s origination myth. Because the concept of a nation in its totality falls outside of any one citizen’s scope of perception, they are forced to imagine abstract others who share these commonalities as a part of their community. While this notion of the imaginary community has been influential in popular music scholarship (Connell & Gibson, 2002), particularly as transnational flows of media demand a theory of community that can extend outside of geographical boundaries, its usage has also been subject to debate. Shelemay (2011) finds that the term community “has been frozen at the juncture of competing theories of location, mobility, identity, and politics, becoming in the process so ambiguous that to use the term is to be confronted with the necessity to argue for its use” (p. 359). Moreover, while the term can open up space to examine how members of a musical community connect with one another, it can also conceal the varied experiences of individuals with minority identities in these collectives (Hill, 2014).

Experiencing Culture in the Digital Age

Increasing global interconnectedness, particularly since the rapid increase in the development of information and communications technologies (ICTs) in the early 21st century, has had immense implications for how media scholars think about flows of popular media. Similarly, while digital environments have allowed for new forms of connectivity around popular culture and music, scholars have found that notions of audience engagement and community boundaries are being disrupted under these conditions. The following section thus outlines how the ideas discussed in the previous sections have evolved in the digital age.

Digital Cultural Identity, Borrowing, and Mixing

The advent of globalization has been in large part attributed to developments in communication technologies that allowed for greater transcultural movement of culture, and has had immense implications for how media theorists think about flows of popular media. Castells (2010) describes how changes around globalization and digital media have resulted in what he describes as “the discovery of a new social structure in the making,” conceptualized as a network society “because it is made of networks in all the key dimensions of social organization and social practice” (p. xviii). Digital networks in particular have powered social and organizational networks “in ways that allowed their endless expansion and reconfiguration, overcoming the traditional limitations of networking forms of organization to manage complexity beyond a certain size of the network” (p. xviii). These networks are inherently global, though given that globalization is uneven, they often include some social groups and exclude others. Overall, the

existence of these networks has led to the transformation of space and time in human experience, in part through the simultaneity of social interactions that they allow for.

A key aspect of deterritorialization, electronic mediation, creates a more complicated and hybrid sense of local subjectivity as it allows the local and global to connect and communicate simultaneously. Appadurai (1996) highlights this tension in his discussion of how electronic media disrupt notions of the local: “there are numerous new forms of community and communication that currently affect the capability of neighborhoods to be context-producing rather than largely context-driven... These new forms of electronically mediated communication are beginning to create virtual neighborhoods” bounded “by access to both the software and hardware that are required to connect to these large international computer networks” (p. 195). As these technologies developed into the 21st century, scholarship on virtual environments reinforced this early observation. Chun (2006) discusses this transformation of the local in digital environments extensively, finding that electronic spaces displace old notions of space and place—for example, URLs remove the notion of location from geography. Cyberspace thus makes the notion of place unstable, “because places and addresses are not indexical: depending on the stored cookie, [the URL] amazon.com will produce significantly different Web sites” (p. 46). However, the increasing concentration of online experiences on digital platforms suggests that forces of localization are still significant in these spaces. For example, Mohan and Punathambekar (2019) show through their notion of ‘platform localization’ on YouTube how local and regional identities are still highly significant in globally distributed texts, as these platforms mobilize locally specific content in order to maintain influence with different audiences.

Cultural connectedness enabled by new technologies means that the outer world is increasingly penetrating the inner worlds of Internet users in ways previously unimaginable. Innovations like smartphones allow the Internet and social media to have an increasingly ubiquitous presence in our lives, thereby accelerating the imposition of the public sphere on the private self. This in turn has impacts on Internet users' self-identity. Papacharissi's (2010) concept of the networked self finds that the construction of identity performance on social networking sites is informed by, and adapted to, the user's sense of place: "Adept navigation of the social landscapes of SNSs implies that identity is performed, but is also edited across multiplied and converged audiences" (p. 317). The idea of the self, and its place within a particular social milieu, is thus increasingly connected to the digital, particularly through leisure-based activities like sharing on social media, while opting out of such activities creates anxieties around digital disengagement (like FOMO, or Fear of Missing Out) (Kunstman & Miyake, 2022; Turkle, 2011)

Digital platforms and their affordances enable cultural borrowing and appropriation in theoretically complex ways, particularly given the low barrier to entry to the production side of these spaces, "where any user can manipulate audiovisual content (adding subtitles or an audio track, for instance) with basic technical knowledge from a myriad of devices, including a mobile phone, and upload it online to share it with the rest of the world." (Baños, 2019). This presents a complicated situation for the production, consumption, and distribution of music online, given that musical genres have historically tended to require "at least some local identification, and their own internal musical structure, technology, performative contexts, and social and political

environment” (Connell & Gibson, 2004, p. 357). In addition to greater exposure of local music scenes on a global scale, the rise of the Internet means that the previously discussed dynamics of deterritorialization and hybridity are occurring at a more rapid pace. For digital music scenes, low barriers to entry on the producer side, and often blurred lines between producers and consumers, mean that tools like digital sampling, and the nearly unlimited access to music archives that the Internet affords, can hold both emancipatory and oppressive potentials, given that producers in these online scenes are often not held to the same standards regarding copyright as their “mainstream” equivalents. These developments have also had important implications for how identity markers such as gender, race, and nationality are used in digital popular music scenes.

Digital (Sub)Cultures and Scenes

As Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) technologies became available as consumer goods in the late twentieth century, scholars began exploring how the new forms of connectivity they enabled impacted these notions of scene, subculture, and community. Rheingold’s (1993) influential study characterized a computer conferencing system WELL (Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link), which contained a forum where users interacted and discussed all manner of topics, as a “virtual community.” For Rheingold, virtual communities are “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (p. 6). Parks (2010) extends Rheingold’s notion of the virtual community to the social media age, finding that social networking sites (SNS) like Myspace and Facebook “are not communities in any singular sense, but rather function as social venues in which many different communities may

form” (p. 105), though the quality of interactions between users may decrease as these platforms grow in commercial value. Community thus remains an important concept for making sense of how Internet users coalesce around their shared cultural interests. Ray (2017) also finds that the cultivation of a dedicated community through digital interactions with fans and followers has become an important aspect of a producer’s participation in contemporary music culture, as the notion of the “audience” gives way to “associates, collaborators, comrades, and musical compatriots” (p. 110). Nevertheless, Bennett finds as recently as 2019 that “the study of online music fan communities is still in its infancy, with online ethnographies of social media engagement dominating the literature” (p. 232), including Baym’s (2007) work on the evolution of music fan communities in the era of social networking sites.

Digital environments and their segmented nature add further complexity to the notion of subculture. Ebare (2004) finds that in the digital age, subcultural affiliations are eschewed in favor of “inactive” engagement: “many individuals never participate in such social worlds, preferring to rely on well-known sources of music (widely distributed, mainstream CDs) and official sources of information (MTV, radio, and high-profile pop music magazines such as *Rolling Stone* or *Spin*)” (n.p.). At the same time, activities that on their face do not appear to possess potential for resistance to the “mass culture” model, like playlist sharing, can also become part of the activities of or defining features of digital musical subcultures. Indeed, Internet music scenes similarly allow for participation that can fall anywhere on a wide spectrum of active to passive, and consumption to production. This project thus considers the phenomenon of Internet music in the context of the evolution of popular culture research, which as Powers (2022)

observes, has extended beyond the “mass culture debates” of the mid-twentieth century to recognize the “limits of both media power and audience agency.” Furthermore, “in a digital environment where audiences are producers, texts are malleable, and regulatory regimes continue to underestimate the influence of technological infrastructures,” the lines between the resistant potential of active audiences and the power of media conglomerates and digital platforms are becoming increasingly blurred (Powers, 2022, p. 4). This project thus considers how these seemingly contradictory forces work together to produce musical texts that negotiate relationships with technology in new and creative ways.

My own use of the terms “scene” and “community” to describe the Internet music spaces reflects not only how participants describe these spaces, but also emphasizes their incredibly social nature. I also choose to embrace rather than reject the potentially contradictory nature of these terms, given that Internet music, which is all at once influenced by global/local dynamics as well as the ‘location-less’ nature of virtual spaces, is itself a contradictory phenomenon. In this way, my use of “scene” relates to Condry’s (2006) use of the Japanese term *genba* to describe sites of Japanese hip-hop performance: *genba* can be translated from Japanese to “scene” (as in ‘scene of the crime’) or “actual spot,” and is written with the characters for “present, actual, existing” (現) and “location, place” (場). Condry applies this concept to illustrate how hip-hop is constantly remade based on its movement to specific sites:

I propose a method for understanding how the forces driving new cultural styles emerge from the interaction among diverse actors—media industries, artists, fans, writers, and so on—in a way that requires grasping the connections (rather than oppositions) between culture industries on one hand, and creative artists and active fans on the other. Attending to *genba* of cultural production provides immediate access to the intersecting power lines that produce transnational

popular culture, while at the same time allowing us to consider the mutual construction of what are often viewed as dichotomous analytical categories (global/local, producer/consumer, complicit/resistant, etc.). (p. 2)

Recognizing that the activities that constitute an Internet music scene are spread across a diverse array of online platforms and in-person spaces, from music festivals to private Discord servers, I thus treat each site of my analysis as its own digital *genba*, which when considered together construct a larger musical community with shared characteristics and values.

Digital Circulation, Platforms, and Popular Music

A shift in focus from production to consumption within industry logics, the blurring of lines between consumers and producers, the increasing role of digital tools like algorithms to shape content itself, and the power of virality and memetic logics can all be observed in how popular music circulates online, and have in turn impacted the development of Internet-based popular music genres (Born & Haworth, 2016; Mazierska et al., 2015; Tofalvy & Barna, 2020). The following section thus addresses what scholars have previously found with regard to the influence of forces like digital platforms, algorithms, and memetic logics on the production, circulation, and consumption of popular culture and music.

Platformization

Digital environments are increasingly structured by digital platforms, a phenomenon often referred to as “platformization” (Morris, 2020). To understand how this shift has impacted users’ experiences online, specifically how they negotiate identity representations in these spaces, it is important to understand how the affordances of these platforms operate. (p. 2). For Davis and Chouinard (2016), affordances are variable

processes that “mediate between properties of an artifact (features) and what subjects do with the properties of an artifact (outcomes)” (p. 242). They are also highly contextual – affordances are highly dependent on the subject position of the user; in other words, every user experiences their mediated environment differently (Shaw, 2017). As Davis and Chouinard (2016) similarly observe, “the accessibility of those features vary between individual subjects and amid diverse circumstances, fostering an array of possible outcomes. What an artifact requests of one user it may demand of another; what the artifact refuses in one moment, it may later allow” (p. 245). Affordances also have important implications for how users navigate ‘publicness’ and visibility online, as well as the terms of interaction between a user and their imagined audience (Baym & boyd, 2012).

The variability of digital affordances has important implications for how we experience representations of identity in digital environments (Brock, 2018). As Stevens (2021) observes in her work on digital Blackface on Instagram, the “‘language’ of race is embedded in digital platforms by virtue of their affordances, and latent logics of cultural appropriation become more readily accessible to individual users who can effectively harness a given platform’s unique affordances” (p. 2). This study thus takes into account that users can experience digital environments in different ways due to the differing affordances that these platforms may offer each user, and their knowledge of how to utilize these affordances. At the same time, this project makes the assumption that participants in Internet music scenes have reliable access to the Internet, and at least some knowledge about how to navigate and even manipulate these affordances, given the centrality of digital culture to these musics.

Scholars of digital popular music have observed the ways in which platform dynamics have impacted music production, circulation, and consumption. Taylor (2015) discusses the impact of digital technology on music production at length, theorizing the increasing popularity of music sampling as a result of the dominance of finance capital, where exchange value outweighs use value. In an environment where “composers and other artists began to conceptualize previously excluded sounds as appropriable,” new music is no longer music in and of itself, but new potential material for other artists to mine (p. 121). Indeed, the advent of digital technologies, like digital sampling, have shifted the labor environment and “imposed a degree of standardization on musicians’ work across the cultural industries” (Taylor, 2015, p. 138). The introduction of these technologies have transformed the expectations for music producers in terms of their capabilities, but also the speed at which they can produce music. In conjunction with platform affordances such as trending algorithms, or what Gillespie (2016) describes as tools that calculate levels of engagement around platform-based content, this new concern with speed and temporality in digital popular culture suggests that new musical trends, genres, and offshoots are increasingly dictated by what these algorithms determine are popular.

The dynamics of digital circulation of popular music has also had an impact on how identities are portrayed in these musics. For Gillespie (2016), measures of popularity for popular culture, like *American Top 40* radio, can “momentarily bring a ‘public’ into being around this claim of shared preferences” (p. 67). Social media algorithms now play a crucial role in generating these “calculated publics” around the popularity of content shared on these platforms, however, who is represented as a part of these publics is kept

opaque. This can lead to debates about what populations should be considered as part of this wider digital public, such as when topics from Black Twitter are picked up by Twitter's algorithm and elicit "xenophobic reactions" from users (Gillespie, 2016, p. 69). Eriksson et al. (2019) discuss these issues in relation to Spotify and algorithmic recommendations: the increased focus on personalized experiences shows how Spotify, and other digital content providers, are not only delivering content but also framing and shaping online data. However, this focus could lead to prioritizing certain identities over others, given that "such operations are central for turning digital music into goods, but they also constitute a politics of content through which the delivery of music implicates prescriptive notions of the streaming user" (n.p.).

The platformization of digital environments has also led to the predominance of streaming as a primary means of consuming music (Scherzinger, 2019). Following the explosion in popularity of file sharing services like Napster, which led to record profit losses for record labels, consumers became accustomed to being able to access any music they wanted to hear at any time. Corporate streaming platforms entered to fill the gap once the legal crackdowns on file sharing began. For Hesmondhalgh (2021), "while it is universally recognised that legal streaming has, for the time being, ended the recording industry crisis of the noughties, there continues to be an emphasis on business and/or technological change" particularly as these companies, such as Spotify, grow their power and influence (p. 2). Spotify's acquisition of the music analysis firm Echo Nest, which powers its algorithmic recommendations, played into this new function of the platform and led to the launch of Discover Weekly in 2015, a "highly successful addition to the service" (Eriksson et al., 2019, p. 2). Spotify's acquisition of Echo Nest speaks to the

platformization trend in that it contributes to the positioning of its data as ‘platform ready’; moreover, it tends to be oriented toward making these services more social. Moreover, the ultimate objective of these initiatives is to increase cross-platform visibility and gather as much data about users as possible, even when they are not actively using the platform.

The influence of digital and social media platforms are similarly reflected in developments in the circulation of popular music. Under the current “platform paradigm” (Burgess & Green, 2018), much of our social and cultural activity, including sharing and creating content, is mediated by the companies that control these platforms, although they frequently position themselves as neutral intermediaries. Production, promotion, and circulation are now consolidated into one service: platforms therefore “exert significant influence” on the content that users discover and how they consume it. Jenkins et al. (2013) discuss the phenomenon of singer Susan Boyle phenomenon as an example of this influence: the YouTube clip of Boyle’s performance of “I Dreamed a Dream” on Britain’s Got Talent massively outperformed the live broadcast, and she became an international success through the online spread of the clip through social media. The Boyle example also demonstrates how web-based content has not simply displaced mass media, but interacts with it, as content from mainstream networks still continues to feed online streams. These platforms also lead to new bottom-up interactions. As Burgess and Green (2018) describe, “the capacity of audiences to alter the circulation of content is nevertheless causing consternation for companies and artists trying to figure out how to reshape broadcast business and marketing models or to design new businesses altogether”

(p. 15). Indeed, the tensions between “community” and “corporate” interests on YouTube and other platforms animate many of the discussions around platform logistics.

The dominance of music streaming and platformization have also led to pressures to optimize music in terms of its sonic characteristics, data, and infrastructure. Morris (2020) in particular demonstrates how artists are “increasingly orienting their music making strategies toward sounds they think will succeed on the platform, or toward inclusion on playlists that are seen as influential nodes in musical discovery” (p. 5). One of the examples he presents of this optimization is the phenomenon of “fake artists” on Spotify, or artists who have seemingly no presence outside of the platform. It was reported that Spotify was commissioning these artists directly to craft “sonic content that would be algorithmically discoverable even though it was sonically unremarkable”—music based on mood, tone, and activity rather than genre (Morris, 2020, p. 5). Indeed, scholars have noted that music is frequently deployed by platforms like Spotify as tools for mood management, or for providing branded musical experiences for specific activities, like studying or working out (Erikkson et al., 2019). However, Hesmondhalgh (2021) notes that anxieties around streaming encouraging “functional” rather than meaningful, aesthetic musical experience has a longer history in music criticism, that can be seen, for example, in twentieth century critiques of corporate Muzak. In addition, the accusation that streaming encourages bland, unchallenging music (such that might be made by “fake artists”) has been a criticism of developments in popular music for decades, most notably one that was levied at easy listening music. At the same time, streaming platforms are creating new dynamics for music consumption. For example, Hanrahan (2018) finds evidence that these platforms could be compromising users’

ability to encounter a diverse array of music, rather than options personalized toward users' mood or past listening activity, particularly as algorithmic tools work to ensure that users are exposed to content that makes them want to return to the platform.

Scholars have observed how these dynamics of platformization have impacted the relationship between the music consumer and producer. For Ray (2017), “technology has transformed the relationship between artist and audience to the degree that the very concept of ‘audience’ may have lost some of its explanatory power ... in light of rising co-production and collaborative community experience, we might better think of the audience as accomplices to the artist” (p. 110). Therefore, on top of producing work at a greater speed, artists must also build personal relationships with fans to build their brand and stand out in a crowded media environment. The ways in which new music is discovered has also been found to be increasingly shaped by platforms. For Morris (2020), cultural products are now reducible to data, which “adds pressure on musicians and producers to think and act like software developers and coders, treating their music not just as songs that need to reach listeners, but as an intermingling of sonic content and coded metadata that needs to be prepared and readied for discovery” (p. 2). At the same time, Sinnreich (2010) observes that the struggle over musical culture facilitated by these technological developments could help to shift the power of popularity and developments in musical trends from the corporate sector to the consumer. Indeed, Jenkins et al. (2013) question the extent to which technological choices can shape or limit our participatory power, especially because there are multiple media systems through which participatory culture can take place, offering “divergent opportunities for participation, preservation, and mobility” (p. 38-9). However, these opportunities may grow increasingly limited as

the number of spaces where most culture is circulated begins to shrink in the platform era.

Informed by the previously discussed impacts of platformization on musical consumption and production, this project considers how Internet music scenes are shaped through and by processes of digital mediation. It relies on Scolari's (2015) definition of mediation: "how culture is negotiated and becomes an object of transactions in a variety of contexts" (p. 1098). In digital environments, processes of mediation become what Scolari (2015) refers to as hypermediations, or "the complex network of social production, exchange and consumption processes that take place in an environment characterized by a large number of social actors, media technologies and technological languages" (p. 1099). This definition accounts for the complex and rapidly evolving nature of community formation online. Tofalvy and Barna (2020), for example, define virtual music scenes as "those scenes in which face-to-face interaction is no longer the only, or the main, form of participation, and where mediated forms of connection offered by the Internet became constitutive of musical life" (p. 32). Digital platforms play a key role in these mediations: as Jin (2019) notes, the rapid growth of American digital platforms, which function as both cultural producers and cultural distributors, points to a continuation of hegemonic dominance of the overwhelmingly Western companies that control these platforms, though at the same time these platforms provide opportunities for the proliferation of virtual music scenes on a global scale.

Meme Cultures and Virality

Memes are increasingly driving and shaping cultural circulation online, as well as contributing to the production and visibility of new genres of popular culture. For Milner

(2016), “Internet memes depend on collective creation, circulation, and transformation. They’re multimodal texts that facilitate participation by reappropriation, by balancing a fixed premise with novel expression” (p. 14). Shifman (2014) similarly describes memes as groups of digital items “sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance that were created with awareness of each other; and were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users” (pp. 7-8). Given their social and collective construction, memes therefore tend to be reflective of “offline” knowledge around culture and identity, and indeed, the language of memes has increasingly penetrated spaces outside of the nebulous area of “Internet culture”— as, for example, when the language of Internet subcultures crosses into mainstream news media (Phillips, 2015). Shifman (2014) importantly notes that digital environments accelerate these memetic processes, and that this environment of digital sharing is shaped by what Shifman refers to as “hypermemonic” logic: “‘hyper’ refers not only to the fact that memes spread more widely and swiftly than ever before, but also to their evolution as a new vernacular that permeates many spheres of digital and nondigital expression” (p. 23). In a hypermemetic environment, memes take on multiple new dimensions of meaning as they circulate, kicking Jenkins et al.’s (2013) notion of “if it doesn’t spread, it’s dead” into hyperdrive.

While memes can be studied as texts that help us make sense of current events and popular culture, the notion of virality specifically makes sense of how these and other pieces of digital content are spread. Nahon and Hemsley (2013) define virality as a distinctively *social* process, wherein “many people simultaneously forward a specific information item, over a short period of time, within their social networks, and where the message spreads beyond their own [social] networks to different, often distant networks”

(p. 16). Indeed, for Jenkins et al. (2013), media texts are not self-replicating in the sense that virality implies—their spread is very much tied up in human decision-making: “People make many active decisions when spreading media, whether simply passing content to their social network, making a word-of-mouth recommendation, or posting a mash-up video to YouTube” (p. 20). While the effective spread of digital content still requires a human touch, including the crafting of content that could be perceived as authentic and relatable (Marwick, 2015; van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021), platform logics are now playing an outsize role in the cultivation of the viral moment.

Indeed, while discussions of music and virality can be characterized by their focus on content circulating on YouTube (Vernallis, 2013, Frietas, 2022), anxieties around algorithmic content organization and how we are initially exposed to viral media have reached a fever pitch with the incredible popularity of the TikTok platform, a short form video-based platform owned by the Chinese company ByteDance. Hesmondhalgh (2021) points out that critics have positioned TikTok as one of the main culprits for the increasing fragmentation of music listening online, including making music tracks and songs shorter. However, TikTok has proven to be a useful tool for musicians to promote their work, so long as the artist is knowledgeable about how to take advantage of the logics of the platform (Rambarran, 2021; Sadler, 2022). At the same time, users who wish for their content to spread, or go viral, must “reinforce dominant ideologies of capitalism through gaming of hashtags that are associated with events and trends of culture, while also diluting the context and blurring the movement affiliation of users” (Salder, 2022, p. 8). TikTok’s growing significance as a tool for music marketing, and direct competition between platforms resulting in frequent duplication of affordances (for

example, Instagram introduced the Reels feature in 2020 to compete directly with TikTok), means that the logics of virality continue to change and evolve based on the current platform *du jour* (Coulter, 2022).

The logics of digital meme cultures hold important implications for identity representation in digital spaces. Adapting Small's (1998) influential concept of musicking, or all of the features that constitute musical activity (its production, dissemination, performance, and consumption), to digital environments, Paula Harper (2019) finds that current "viral musicking" practices continue to perpetuate and reflect the landscape of the early Internet, where "young-straight-white-male-ness was the assumed norm," and where this demographic constituted most of its most influential users. Thus, "mainstream digital platforms present a constructed 'neutrality' of hostile, gatekeeping normative whiteness...mainstream audiovisual and other digital cultural production relies on appropriation from the derided practices and aesthetics of marginalized groups, deployed to (profitable) celebration as novel by privileged mainstream practitioners" (P. Harper, 2019, p. 30).

Digital memetic practices, and the meme cultures that have emerged around them, have reinforced this identity exclusion in a number of ways. Platformization, or the decreasing number of spaces that users employ to access the Internet, also exacerbates this dynamic: "The metonymy of substituting just a few sites and practices for "The Internet" as a whole reinforces a false standard of white masculinity," and "can lead to a hostile environment for marginalized groups" (Milner, 2016, p. 123). As Phillips and Milner (2017) find, as opportunities for users to play with their identity online proliferate, an ambivalent paradox emerges: while they can deepen our understanding of ourselves,

these tools can also “strip individuals of control...they allow users to play with the identities of others—essentially weaponizing someone else’s mask – by collapsing context, spreading secrets, and hijacking selves” (p. 73). Digital affordances, including anonymity and those that ease the sharing of content, tend to accelerate this emotional distancing, allowing for further opportunities for this kind of “unmoored” engagement. These findings are particularly significant for examining patterns of identity and representation in digital music cultures, given that music has long been considered to be an important vehicle for conveying sociocultural identity and difference, but also holds the potential to suppress transformation and alternatives for different identity formations (Born & Hesmondhalgh, 2000).

Building on the foundational ideas around cultural flows, social formations around culture, and the impact of forces of digital circulation on popular culture discussed in this chapter, the following chapter continues the review of relevant literature. Specifically, it advances Internet music as its own cohesive cultural phenomenon by contending with how scholars and cultural critics have discussed this concept previously. It traces the history of this concept and how it has developed alongside advancements in Internet technologies, and introduces a number of genres that have been considered by scholars under the Internet music umbrella.

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW: DEFINING INTERNET MUSIC

The formation of distinctive Internet cultures, accompanied by the increasing importance of digital mediation for popular culture consumption, has culminated in both popular and academic discussions around the idea of Internet-based music scenes or communities as a cultural phenomenon. Building on the literature discussed in the previous chapter, this chapter foregrounds the theoretical goal of this project to reach a cohesive definition of the term Internet music. It outlines previous academic and popular discourses around the terms “Internet music,” “Internet genre,” and similar terms to show how both scholars and critics of popular music have employed these terms. Finally, using insights from previous scholars, this chapter proposes a new cohesive framework for Internet music, which can be used to understand how this concept builds upon the existing academic literature on digital subcultures and scenes, theories of cultural borrowing and mixing in digital environments, and digital circulation and platforms.

Music on the Internet: Previous Approaches

Early work on the subject of Internet music made sense of the Internet’s relationship with popular music in terms of serving as an infrastructure. Follmer (2005) defines “Net music” as comprising “all formal and stylistic kinds of music upon which the specifics of electronic networks leave considerable traces, whereby the electronic networks strongly influence the process of musical production, the musical aesthetic, or the way music is received” (p. 185). These musical projects interact with electronic networks in a number of ways: for example, interfaces like the defunct *WebPlayer* which allowed the user to play a particular sound arrangement based on typing in a URL opened

up unprecedented levels of interactivity. Around the same time, Hugill (2005) similarly defined Internet music as “music in which the Internet is integral either to its composition, or dissemination, or both” (p. 431). According to this definition, Internet music artists exploit the network to craft a distinctive “Internet aesthetic” in their music, taking advantage of the anonymity of the web, the increasing predominance of the visual in online environments, as well as the blurred lines between composer, performer and listener to subvert “traditional modes of music performance” (p. 432). These earlier insights into the idea of Internet music also emphasized the importance of the Internet as a relatively new medium, or network, for rapid transmission of these musics: as Hugill (2005) observes, “The Internet’s role [in its dissemination] is just as a conduit. At the same time, it has changed our relationship with music drastically. The industry must acknowledge the instantaneity of the medium” (p. 431). Such observations align with utopian narratives around the early Internet that emphasized the technology’s transformative potential, which continued to inform popular and academic discourses about participatory platforms well into the 2000s (Anderson & Revers, 2018).

Later ruminations on the nature of Internet music tend to shift the focus from the novelty of the web as a new method of musical transmission, to the impact of the Internet’s ubiquity in our everyday lives on the characteristics of these musics. Cultural critic Adam Harper’s (2017) aptly titled essay “How Internet music is frying your brain” identifies that the term “is not just music on the Internet, but music heard as being shaped by, symptomatic of, or straightforwardly ‘about’ the perceived effects of the Internet, with the two often conflated.” Harper (2017) discusses how the term has recently been applied to discourses around subgenres of electronic music that proliferate on streaming

platforms like SoundCloud and Bandcamp, and in their aesthetics have built a commentary around “the supposedly degenerative effects of culture’s mediation through the Internet, smartphones and digital simulations” (p. 87). Ideas around information overload, or digital maximalism, caused by overexposure to digital environments, the kitschy nature of a commercialist, ad-saturated Internet, and the uncanny nature of AI and algorithms as replacements for human interaction are all reflected in these genres, visually and sonically. Whelan and Nowak’s (2018) work on vaporwave favors the term “Internet genre” to describe the phenomenon, which they define as a musical genre with a short lifespan, limited visibility and popularity (with vaporwave serving as a notable exception, given that it first emerged in the early 2010s and has become a more widely recognized musical and visual subculture), and which “issues from distinct libraries of music (commonly trawled from YouTube) but also mixes distinct platform-based aesthetics and cultural preoccupations” (p. 42). These sources find that Internet music is deeply informed by the Internet not only as an infrastructure, but as a site of sociocultural meaning-making.

Studies of specific genres of Internet music have begun to emerge as the concept of Internet music or Internet genres has further developed, with vaporwave being the most widely studied (Born & Haworth, 2018; Cole, 2020; A. Harper, 2019; Koc, 2017; March, 2022; McLeod, 2018; Schembri & Tichbon, 2017; Whelan and Nowak, 2018). Other genres considered under the “Internet music” or “Internet genre” umbrella include lo-fi hip hop (Winston & Saywood, 2019), nightcore (Winston, 2017), chillwave and synthwave (Ballam-Cross, 2021), and genres considered to be part of the vaporwave “family,” including witch house, sea punk, and hypnagogic pop (Glitsos, 2018). Genres

that have achieved a greater level of commercial popularity can also be considered under the Internet music umbrella. For example, Waugh's (2020) work examines mumble rap, a genre that he finds has been distinctively shaped by young artists' "symbiotic bond with the Internet" (p. 226) and the musical characteristics of which have been attributed to popular Hip Hop groups and artists, including Migos and Future. As Waugh (2020) observes, many of the prominent artists in the mumble rap scene are referred to as "SoundCloud rappers," owing to the streaming platform that afforded them their notoriety, while mumble rap lyrics are often driven by references to social media and meme culture. The emergence and examination of these genres indicates the increasing influence of users' sociocultural relationship with the Internet, characterized by colloquialisms like "extremely online" (Hannah, 2021), and the impact of both music producers and listeners making sense of this relationship, on musical trends.

Several other characteristics of Internet music are worth considering here. Meme cultures and the notion of virality have become central to the formation of Internet-based music genres, with scholars noting the centrality of memes to vaporwave in particular (Ballam-Cross, 2021; Cole, 2020). The paratextual characteristics surrounding vaporwave and other Internet-based music trends, which fans and observers alike refer to as its "aesthetics," are widely considered by scene participants to be just as important as the music in defining these scenes. This has led to the perception of certain Internet music scenes, in particular vaporwave, as equal parts musical genre and meme, or even constitutive of their own unique meme culture (Cole, 2020). In a similar vein, rules and laws around copyright are often obscured or even completely ignored in Internet music communities, with anonymity of producers serving as an important element to avoid legal

liability (Schembri and Tichbon, 2017). Rohrhuber (2007) recognized this tendency toward “plunderphonics” in Internet-based musics early on in a discussion on “network music.” For Rohrhuber, these acts of borrowing, or digital plundering, are attributed to the music in the digital space acting as a shared object, or “the idea of one single state that participates in more than one context, allowing several persons (or processes) to share one and the same causal milieu” (p. 151). Indeed, Internet music scenes continue this subversion of traditional notions of ownership and copyright through the ease with which users can produce and share music within the scene, with the scenes themselves seeming to act as “shared objects.” This makes it difficult, however, to examine practices of borrowing within theoretically established notions of power and control, and production and consumption, given that cultural objects become communal under these conditions.

Another popular trend reflected in the existing literature on Internet music is its play with representations of place and temporality. The idea of Internet music presents the possibility of music scenes without a “local” foundation outside of the digital context. At the same time, for example, vaporwave has been described as being informed by a distinctly North American nostalgia for cultural artifacts like video game consoles or the shopping mall, while also playing on Western techno-Orientalist tropes, showing that even this “Internet genre” has its roots in a particular locality (McLeod, 2018). While the idea of collapsing temporal boundaries is not new in popular music, technological developments have played an important role in making this play more accessible for cultural producers. For example, Hogarty (2016) observes that “file-sharing websites on the Internet have synced and linked all these old VHS and audio recordings in one place,

enabling us to leap over the historical obstacles of space and time” (p. 47). Scholars have directly linked these musical trends to the affordances of platforms like YouTube, which allows producers of Internet genres to “knowingly reframe aspects of twentieth- and twenty-first-century music and cultural history through the subtle redeployment of earlier and outdated musical, sonic, and cultural signifiers...aesthetic gestures aimed at reanimating cultural memory” (Born & Haworth, 2018, p. 605).

Internet genres similarly engage with older media texts in ways that are informed by producers’ and consumers’ online lives, and are perhaps even intended as comforting for the listener. As Adam Harper (2019) notes, vaporwave’s distinct brand of nostalgia extends to the early days of the Internet, while Ballam-Cross (2021) observes that vaporwave and its offshoots like chillwave and synthwave rely on a particular brand of soothing nostalgia “for times and places that have perhaps existed only in the listener’s imagination” (p. 70). Winston and Saywood (2019) similarly observe that lo-fi hip hop’s particular brand of nostalgia is “is warm, relaxing, and, ultimately, a cocoon of sound which does not demand unease from its listeners” (p. 46). Contrary to Hogarty’s (2016) observation that policies of neoliberalism have led to less experimentation among musicians and thus more homogenization and a lack of originality in industry trends, the play with representations of geography and temporality in creative news ways by emerging artists in these scenes demonstrate new potentials for popular music trends, afforded by recent technological developments.

The rise of the Internet has meant that processes of “content diffusion and cultural adaptation” by non-professional users have “greatly intensified” (Boxman-Shabtai & Shifman, 2016, p. 4). That Internet music scenes have a tendency to reflect, as well as

satirize the “uncritical, and even fetishistic approach to commodification” (Koc, 2017, p. 64) that is characteristic of postmodern art in their aesthetics, through mash-ups of seemingly unrelated artifacts from different popular and consumer cultures, makes them a productive site from which to unpack notions of hybridity and cultural appropriation in the digital age. This study considers how the pastiche nature of Internet music scenes can challenge straightforward notions of concepts like the hegemonic and the subaltern, while keeping in mind that some groups and individuals may nevertheless benefit materially and culturally from their use of these images and elements, while others might be harmed by reductive and flattened portrayals of different cultures and identities.

Indeed, scholars have accordingly begun to explore how dynamics of digital cultural spread have specifically impacted identity and representation in Internet music. Waugh’s (2017) work illuminates how the idea of the “post-Internet,” defined as “the lack of difference between being online and offline: everyone is constantly and ‘symbiotically’ connected to virtual spaces at all times,” informs his approach to identity politics in contemporary music, specifically racial, gender, and sexual identities (p. 235). He finds that “Internet users do not separate their physical identities from the avatars that they present online, instead performing multiple selves on digital media platforms,” using the example of mumble rapper Young Thug, who engages in “digital queering” through a “performative [gender] fluidity and feminized fashion sense” (Waugh, 2020, p. 225). Detailed examinations of portrayals of racial identity in vaporwave by McLeod (2018) and myself (March, 2022) have focused specifically on the potentials for techno-Orientalism in vaporwave paratexts. For McLeod (2018), vaporwave’s “ubiquitous adoption of Japanese characters and artwork featuring Asian technology and in its general

critique of Japanese pre-millennial corporate culture, vaporwave often seems, perhaps unintentionally, to reinforce these stereotypes—though often cloaked under the guise of irony and parody” (p. 134). Both McLeod (2018) and I attribute vaporwave’s tendency to present flattening portrayals of East Asian culture to its prosumer and DIY nature, and its emphasis on reproduction of a particular aesthetic ‘formula,’ not unlike a meme format. This project aims to directly address this emerging area in the literature by not only approaching Internet music as an established, cohesive cultural phenomenon in its own right, but also by focusing specifically on issues surrounding gender, race, sexual, and national identity representations in these scenes, and how these representations interact with existing theories of transcultural borrowing and mixing.

A New Framework for Internet Music

Using the previously discussed literature on Internet-based music scenes as its starting point, this project asks: What scenes or genres of popular music could be considered “Internet music,” and what are the common characteristics of these digital musical formations? My analysis will focus on three genres as case studies: vaporwave, a type of electronic music characterized by slowed-down samples from 1980s R&B and smooth jazz; phonk, a subgenre of hip-hop based on a revival of the 1990s Memphis rap scene; and hyperpop, an accelerationist synthesis of Electronic Dance Music and traditional pop music. All three Internet music scenes in their own ways exemplify the three main characteristics of the framework that I will associate with these scenes, to be discussed further in the conclusion: anonymity and identity play; (hyper-)hybridity and a proliferation of cultural mash-ups; and a low barrier to entry for producers. Each of these

characteristics adds complexity to notions of cultural borrowing and mixing in digital environments.

Building on the foundational literature discussed in the previous two chapters, the following chapter outlines the project's methodological approaches to the study of Internet music scenes, as well as how these approaches are applied to address the project's research questions and the three scene-based case studies.

CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This project critically examines processes of transcultural borrowing and mixing in the emergent phenomenon of Internet music—defined as musics that are influenced by the Internet’s infrastructural, cultural, and social dimensions—with a particular interest in how the dynamics of digitization has shaped representation and identity/community formation in contemporary popular music scenes. This project is accordingly guided by the following research questions:

1. How do the infrastructural characteristics of digital environments manifest in Internet-based music scenes (otherwise known as ‘Internet music’ or ‘Internet genres’)?
 - a. What are the defining or unifying characteristics of these scenes?
 - b. How do digital platforms and their affordances shape these scenes?
2. What are the social and cultural dimensions of scene members’ relationships with the Internet that manifest in Internet music scenes?
 - a. How have Internet music scenes been influenced by meme culture and memetics?
3. How are processes of transcultural influence and cultural mixing taking place in Internet music scenes?
 - a. How do the affordances of digital platforms shape these processes?
 - b. What is the nature of the relationship between the global and the local in these scenes?
 - c. How do these processes intersect with various identity factors, primarily gender, race, sexuality, and nationality?

This dissertation employs a methodologically diverse approach in order to paint a full picture of the Internet music scenes considered in each analysis chapter. Together, these methods address the visual, discursive, and ethnographic aspects of each of these scenes, following Schröder’s (2007) call to consider the whole “communicative circuit” of a media text, “including its textual features, the purposes of its senders, and the

meanings generated by its recipients” (p. 77). I employ textual analysis and Brock’s (2018) critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA) in order to examine the visual and paratextual characteristics of Internet music scenes and how digital environments shape those characteristics. To determine how scene participants and media outlets make sense of these characteristics, this study also engages in discourse analyses of both traditional media coverage of these scenes and public social media communities that focus on discussion of these scenes. Finally, my analysis of the vaporwave scene focuses primarily on ethnographic methods, including in-depth interviews and participant observation to examine how community boundaries and scene-based identities are continuously negotiated by members of the vaporwave scene. By relying on multiple sites analysis to construct my framework for Internet music, I give credence to what Scolari (2015) refers to as hypermediations, or “the complex network of social production, exchange and consumption processes that take place in an environment characterized by a large number of social actors, media technologies and technological languages” (p. 1099). This project thus considers each site of analysis, both online and offline, as important nodes in these networks of hypermediation, which are constantly informing one another in the development of these scenes.

Particularly in the digital age—when communities based around cultural forms are scattered across different locales and platforms, and characteristics of music scenes are mutually shaped by digital platforms and infrastructures—delimiting and labeling digitally-based musical communities remains a challenging project for studies of popular music. This dissertation thus treats Internet music scenes as what Lysloff and Gay (2003) brand as “technocultures,” with their own distinct communities and cultural practices that

are informed by, and often inseparable from, the platforms upon which they emerge. In my analysis of these scenes, I examine “the co-constitutive dynamics involving music platforms and scenes’ values and aesthetic judgments” (Magaudda, 2020, p. 34), to identify the defining or unifying characteristics of these scenes, as well the ways in which participants envisions these scenes and the mutual values that members share. In my analysis, I introduce and explore three Internet music scenes that will serve as case studies for each of the research questions: vaporwave, phonk, and hyperpop. Each of these scenes deals in different ways with issues of identity and representation in digital spaces, how popular music complicates identity representation under conditions of globalization, and how digital environments structure music scenes, including the impact of commercial streaming platforms. Finally, I detail how each scene in its own way exemplifies the primary characteristics of Internet music presented in my framework.

Textual Analysis and CTDA

This project takes a constructivist orientation in considering how texts reflect ideology. According to Brennan (2017), qualitative researchers who take this orientation “insist that while texts ‘function ideologically’ because they illustrate societal principles and values, they do not provide a single ideological vision but instead offer multiple versions of our socially constructed reality” (p. 213). This idea of multiple realities also motivates this project’s critical orientation, and considers “truth to be shaped by specific historical, cultural, racial, gender, political and economic conditions, values and structures” (Brennan, 2017, p. 9). This project thereby employs textual analysis to unpack how media texts might reinforce or challenge certain hegemonic “socially constructed realities” through their representations of gender, racial, national, and sexual identity.

Textual analysis is often used by media scholars who are interested in the potential meanings that arise from a media text as a whole. For McKee (2003), textual analysis “encompasses a broad range of methodologies,” though much of the time, when qualitative scholars engage in textual analysis, they are looking to “understand the *likely* interpretations of texts by those who consume them” (p. 5). Textual analysis is thus extremely useful for parsing cultural meanings in media objects, given that the systems through which researchers can determine the more likely potential interpretations are based on shared cultural understandings.

As Born and Haworth (2018) observe, “net-based” genres can illustrate different relationships with the Internet: “each manifests a particular moment in the wider evolving technologies and cultures of internet use, as well as how these wider cultures of internet use are in turn mediated by musical practices” (pp. 605-6). The focus of this project is thus to determine how musical texts represent larger societal and cultural forces in online environments. Brock (2018) finds that Internet scholars tend to focus on specific communicative functions of technology, without broadly situating their observations in the larger forces that shape those technologies. His methodological solution to this issue, which he dubs critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA), addresses this problem by “combining analyses of information technology material and virtual design with an inquiry into the production of meaning through information technology practice and the articulations of information technology users *in situ*” (p. 1013), using a conceptual framework based on power relations. Given that it can be applied to any critical cultural theoretical framework (feminist theory, critical race theory, queer theory, and so on), this method is thus useful for considerations of how multiple identity factors are negotiated

within these scenes, with particular attention paid to how platforms and their affordances shape these negotiations. Informed by Brock's (2018) approach, this project thus also examines the influence of particular platform interfaces and characteristics on Internet music scenes.

As Nakamura (2008) importantly describes, in the 1990s, the Internet shifted from being a primarily textual to a heavily visual environment, and this process has only accelerated in recent years with the Internet's convergence with other visual mediums (such as television). In tandem with this development, the Internet has become fully steeped in our everyday lives. Internet music closely reflects these developments: given the importance of visuality to Internet music scenes, paratextual characteristics of these scenes take equal precedence as the "music itself" in terms of the feelings that these musics evoke for the listener (A. Harper, 2019). Brackett (2016) describes paratextual characteristics of a musical text as "stylistic traits, visual associations, and a wide range of discursive connections as well as sonic-stylistic features" (p. 12). Following this definition, this project's analyses of Internet music thus prioritizes such visual and textual resources, including, but not limited to, album art, song and album titles, artist monikers, images of artists, and other objects of meaning that surround the music, to address the third question of how processes of transcultural influence and cultural mixing taking place in Internet-based music scenes. These paratextual characteristics are considered alongside considerations of the affordances of the platforms on which these scenes take shape. To triangulate my findings, I use insights across multiple platforms on which these scenes have a significant presence, including but not limited to SoundCloud, YouTube, and Bandcamp.

Discourse Analysis and Passive Participant Observation

Discourse analysis and passive participant observation are aimed primarily at answering the second research question: what are the social and cultural dimensions of users' relationship with the Internet that manifest in Internet-based music scenes? While, as Brennan (2017) observes, textual analysis is often the favored catch-all term for media scholars when conducting qualitative content analyses, this study draws a distinction between the visual and paratextual characteristics of the musical cultures considered in the textual analysis, and their discursive, or sense-making, characteristics, such as media coverage or social media comments, given that "discourse analysis reminds researchers that it is through our use of language that our reality is socially constructed" (p. 208). Thus, the discourse analysis piece of this project emphasizes what Peräkylä (2008) defines as the method's emphasis on written texts, and considers both conversational and interpretive discourses in Internet music-adjacent communities, as well as mainstream media discourses, like coverage of Internet music artists, genres, and events in journalistic outlets like *Pitchfork*. In considering these two separate analytical foci, this study thus engages in an analysis of meaning creation around Internet music that can, as Helland (2018) calls for, "account for the multiplicity of ways that language interacts with visual and musical modes and how interpretation is influenced by intertextuality, genre, and audience subjectivity" (pp. 26-7).

Discourse analysis has been strongly influenced by the thinking of the philosopher Michel Foucault, as well as the linguist Norman Fairclough. Breaking off from the tradition of semiotics, which took a scientific approach to finding meanings in language, Foucault instead encouraged attention to *discourse*, which he theorized as "a

group of statements which provide a language for talking about—a way of representing the knowledge about—a particular topic at a particular historical moment ... Discourse is about the production of knowledge through language. But ... since all social practices entail meaning, and meanings shape and influence what we do—our conduct—all practices have a discursive aspect” (Hall, 1992, p. 29). Specifically through the critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach, Fairclough (1995) combines social and cultural analysis and textual analysis that “developed in linguistics and language studies—to make them ‘operational,’” finding that language is ultimately shaped by relations of power (p. 54). I thus employ Fairclough’s CDA model alongside Foucault’s theoretical insights into how power is constantly constructed, and contested, through language as a roadmap for my analysis of communicative events around Internet music, as well as the wider forces that co-constitute those events. An important aspect of CDA and related methods for this research is that these methods often involve examination of something that the researcher sees as a “problem in society” (Carvalho, 2006, p. 16). My own research reflects this critical orientation, given representations of gender, racial, and national identity I have previously observed in Internet music that reproduce harmful stereotypes, for example, the use of techno-Orientalist elements in vaporwave paratexts (March, 2022).

Media scholars have drawn parallels between discourse analysis in digital environments and ethnographic methods including participation observation, given that in both cases the analysis is happening primarily at the textual level. However, research exploring the ethics of research in digital environments instead urges researchers to consider the human element of online discourse when conducting this kind of research.

As Yadlin-Segal et al. (2020) observe,

Criticism [of digital qualitative research] might consider that we equate texts with users, and thus confuse textual analysis (making sense of texts) with digital ethnography (direct interaction with users). But that is not the case we advocate here. Our argument is that online texts are inseparable from human subjects, derived from and depended on human interactions, and thus require ethical decision-making when analyzed in digital contexts. (p. 174)

This study thus uses “quasi-ethnographic” methods, informed by the growing corpus of literature on virtual ethnography, including Henninger’s (2020) research on Reddit, one of the primary platforms that this project engages in, to examine these human interactions. As such, it relies on passive participant observation of the communities in question (also known as “lurking”), which enabled me to remain ethnographically nimble as I kept track of rapidly growing and evolving discussions, rather than the long-term observation and participation in the daily lives of informants that characterizes “traditional” ethnographic fieldwork (Murphy & Kraidy, 2003). For Henninger (2020), “quasi-ethnographic methods provide an insight into the community that reduces researcher bias, as the researcher can become a lurker rather than active participant” (p. 1399). At the same time, passive participant observation requires an interrogation of the ethics and politics of lurking. In deciding whether or not to lurk, I considered the discursive and participatory norms of the particular settings under observation, which strategy would result in the most authentic experience on the platform, and the way passive versus active participation could impact the trajectory that future research on this particular phenomena could take (Garcia et al., 2009).

This study follows Henninger’s (2020) approach to her own experiences lurking on a subReddit for medical professionals: in this case, lurking is used to protect “the natural discourse within the community, as the main aim of the study was to observe the

organic tendencies of the group” (p. 1399). Ultimately, Yadlin-Segal et al. (2020) find that, when it comes to lurking, “purposefully public sites such as Reddit, or purposefully visible medium such as the hashtag, can be approached without active disclosure and consent” (p. 172). I concur with this specific approach for my own field sites, the majority of which are purposefully public, and which can often evolve quickly due to algorithmic structures (like Twitter feeds and YouTube comments sections), that if researchers cannot obtain individual consent from users to use content that they have posted online, the researcher should anonymize the content to protect the identities of those users. Social media posts quoted in the text of this dissertation are thus fully anonymized, given that usernames are often adopted across multiple platforms and could be used to discern the user’s identity. In the case that accounts were associated with public-facing figures or groups, including artists, producers, journalists, and record labels, online posts were not anonymized. Finally, when engaging in passive participant observation, I simultaneously consider meanings created by users at the textual level and my responsibility to provide voice and context to these users. I accomplished this by contextualizing the data I gathered using relevant popular media coverage of these scenes as well as my own personal knowledge of the conversations happening around these issues in online discussion spaces, gained from following the vaporwave, hyperpop, and phonk scenes online for several years.

Archiving

In gathering data for the textual and discourse analyses, I spent a month in a “preliminary soak” period, during which I identified the most theoretically productive artists, elements, and conversations to focus on within each scene. I began my data

collection about a particular scene in one location, such as the channel homepage for a particular producer, and then followed hyperlinks from those locations to other channels, videos that this user has uploaded, comments from other users, and so on, in a process that mirrors as closely as possible the process of browsing the Internet. Following this period, I then spent three months revisiting these spaces, gathering the relevant data from my established field sites, and coding it using the themes that emerged from the theory. In conjunction with my research process, I built an archive of these scenes through screenshots of these digital data points and recordings of my browsing sessions using the screen recording program Loom. As Douglas (2010) notes, “building your own media archive...constantly confronts you with the incoherence of the media, their contradictions, the tensions between their preferred, negotiated, and oppositional readings” (p. 11). Particularly in these highly ephemeral online spaces, which trouble the “dichotomy between archive—a fixed entity with a past orientation that is authorized by institutions—and repertoire—a live, embodied, and collectivist practice that is focused on the here and now,” (Hsu, 2017, p. 45) the importance of archiving images, screenshots, audio clips, and other kinds of digital content that I can continuously revisit while building my theoretical argument is paramount.

Ethnographic Methods: In-Depth Interviews and Participant Observation

This project’s analysis of the vaporwave scene presents two complementary ethnographic methods as a means of answering this project’s research questions: in-person participant observation and in-depth interviews. Such methods have proven useful for media scholars, specifically in their explorations of understudied music scenes. As

Rowe (2018) notes in her longitudinal study on young heavy metal fans in Australia, which combined field observations with in-depth interviews:

The types of field observations I initially went looking for (including subgenre styles and practices, gender and age ranges, and moshing styles) have not ultimately featured in the research findings; however, the exercise was still beneficial because my attendance at gigs was a key factor in the relationship building process. (p. 25)

Given that, despite its status as an Internet music genre, vaporwave boasts a robust in-person scene, it was important for me to first do work on the ground in order to develop an understanding of who the key players and participants are, and how potential participants would respond to the presence of a researcher. Boellstorff et al. (2012) find that “through participant observation, ethnographers step into the social frame in which activity takes place” (p. 65); even in moments where I was not actively interacting with scene participants, in-person participant observation provided me with the opportunity to “feel” the scene and its social and cultural characteristics. Previous scholars doing similar research on music consumption and identity have emphasized the importance of fieldwork and understanding observations in the context of historic and cultural events that have transpired in their community of study. Mann (2016) illustrates the importance of acting as a participant-observer in ethnographic research and putting her observations in a historical context in her study on Jamaican popular music:

I attended numerous musical events, including 19 street dances, and I listened, danced to, sang along with, and analyzed the texts and audio of Jamaican popular songs circulating in the Jamaican media landscape ... I begin by situating Jamaican popular music in Jamaican cultural and political history, with a particular focus on the legacies of colonialism that still structure popular music’s significance. Next, I focus on the street dance: a long-running tradition of collective social engagement with popular music that roots creative practices in particular resistant and critical traditions. In the middle section, I explore the material and historical conditions that have allowed the street dance to continue to serve this function. (p. 270)

Similarly, Lornell and Rasmussen's (2016) collection exploring ethnographic studies of performance, identity, and community in various music scenes across the United States identifies "the importance of the fieldwork experience in shaping our view of the music, the way we represent musicians and communities through our writing and other productions, and in opening doors to collaborative research and production" (p. 10). Overall, ethnographic research is an important method identified by scholars of popular music to determine how these scenes shape participant identity, and can also assist the researcher in defining the goals of their project as they develop a relationship with the scene and its participants.

At the same time, "people-centric" methods, such as participant observation and in-depth interviews, come with their own set of theoretical challenges. For McKee (2003), the data that researchers collect from informants can be limited by the questions that are asked, the behaviors that are observed, as well as the potential for the researcher's presence to be seen as "intrusive" in these contexts. Similarly, for Phillipov (2013), "while sociological popular music studies may rhetorically privilege 'real' experience over abstract textualism," methods like participant observations and interviews can only offer insight into those practices that can be "readily observed and articulated" (p. 213). This limitation can lead to issues when trying to determine how members of musical communities create meaning from their experiences. Research into the extreme metal scene, for example, found that while members were eager to discuss "the music itself" (p. 219) they were reluctant to engage in discussions around how the music made them feel, or specific details around how they related to it. Similarly, I have observed in my own research on the vaporwave scene a marked lack of critical reflection,

or what Phillipov (2013) refers to as a “reflexive anti-reflexivity” (p. 219) among both fans and producers in terms of how they make sense of problematic gendered and racial representations in vaporwave paratexts (March, 2022). Thus, I believe a mixed-methods approach to these scenes, which combines textual and discursive analyses as well as observation- or interview-based insights into these scenes, in conjunction with my own self-reflexivity toward the impact of my presence in these spaces, leads to a fuller picture. This fully immersive approach, combined with my pre-existing knowledge of these scenes, helped me to understand the language that participants used in these spaces, and provided me with insights about the social dynamics of these scenes that may not have been gleaned from interviews.

As the nature of fieldwork has evolved, scholars have also raised questions around the practicality and challenges of conducting “traditional” fieldwork and ethnographic work. Dawe (2015) advocates for traditional ethnography as a way of understanding music, asserting that “if we are to understand the significance and impact of popular music as a meaningful musical practice... it is clear that a close engagement with people is completely necessary and that long-term ethnographic fieldwork is absolutely the paramount goal” (p. 13). However, Barz and Cooley (2008) observe that both media studies and media ethnography are grappling with the material conditions of academic research that increasingly no longer allow for these kinds of studies, given that “funds for long-term overseas fieldwork appear to be diminishing, and international travel is becoming less attractive due to a series of wars and direct anti-American sentiment” (p. 12). Aside from these important considerations, Murphy (2011) finds that given its anthropological roots, doing fieldwork has long been considered a rite of

passage for the ethnographer, but the problematic notion of the “field” as imperialist and colonialist has resulted in several ways of reconceiving how the subject and the other interact in the ethnographic text, including a shift away from fieldwork’s locational emphasis to a focus “on linkages and connections” (p. 383). This shift is particularly relevant for researchers of digital spaces, “especially as cyberspace becomes both the ‘place’ and medium through which research is conducted” (Murphy, 2011, p. 383) and cultures and communities are simultaneously becoming more dispersed, and more connected, through digital networks.

Methodological Approaches in the Case Studies

Chapter 5 (Vaporwave): In-Depth Interviews and Discourse Analysis

The analysis chapter addressing the vaporwave scene engages in analysis of ten in-depth interviews with attendees of ElectroniCON 2023 and members of the vaporwave scene, as well as online discourse that took place in vaporwave-centric spaces on X, Reddit, and Instagram. Participants for the in-depth interviews were primarily recruited via social media, specifically channels where members of the vaporwave music scene gather: this included the biggest public subReddit dedicated to discussion of the vaporwave scene, r/vaporwave, as well as two Discord servers, R E V E R I E and Ocean Lounge, which focus on discussions of vaporwave music, aesthetics, and the culture surrounding the genre. Immediately upon IRB approval, I began recruitment of interview subjects via these social media channels by posting the recruitment message to these channels.

In addition, I engaged in participant observation during the festival weekend, which gave me a chance to *feel* the scene: I took extensive field notes, photos, and

recorded video during both days of the festival as well as an adjacent tape swap event that I attended the day after the festival. In my intersecting roles as researcher, festival attendee, and longtime fan of vaporwave music, I sought to strike a balance between an embedded researcher, one who “is in some way aligned with the research subjects, while not actually belonging to the group,” and immersed researcher, one who is an accepted member of the group “authorized (either tacitly or explicitly) by the group to undertake the research” (Nightingale, 2008, p. 119). Outside of my online recruitment, I sought to only strike up conversations with other festival attendees if they happened organically rather than ‘impose’ myself on potential participants—once it was revealed that I was a researcher, almost all of the attendees I spoke with expressed an openness and curiosity to learn more about the project, and several were eager to participate, with some directly recalling the posts that I had made about my research on the r/vaporwave subReddit. This created an impromptu version of snowball sampling, with participants recruiting friends and other members of the vaporwave community during the festival weekend for this study, particularly if they felt that they would be an interesting person for me to speak with.

Ultimately, I recruited 10 participants for this study. Six of the interviews were conducted in-person either in New York City during the festival weekend or in Philadelphia immediately after the festival, while 4 were conducted either over Zoom or over email for the sake of convenience, anonymity, and in some cases the comfort of the participant. Interview questions (listed in Appendix A) touched on topics including the participant’s history of and current involvement with the vaporwave scene, including in-person and online events, how the participant believes that the vaporwave scene has been

shaped by the Internet and Internet culture, how the different cultural influences (Japanese media, etc.) in vaporwave have shaped the scene's general attitudes toward cultural difference, the general attitude of vaporwave scene members around issues concerning gender and racial identity, and how the participant has seen these attitudes play out in vaporwave spaces.

Interviews were transcribed using Adobe Premier Pro's transcription service, and corrections to errors were made by hand. I coded the interviews and organized the different categories of codes using ATLAS.ti, allowing me to take a grounded theory approach when analyzing the data and more easily identify common themes between the codes. In my analysis, I first began with open coding, or coding every interview, line by line, and then proceeded to axial coding, in which I identified commonalities between all of the interviews to reveal the main themes of my analysis (Rasmussen et al., 2016). Finally, I triangulated the results of my analysis, particularly themes and insights that focused on the controversy surrounding the festival, with public online discourse on the X platform, the r/vaporwave and r/100PercentElectronic subreddits, and the Instagram accounts for George Clanton and the 100% Electronica record label. I screen recorded comments sections of posts, in particular those that I believed might be deleted, using the Loom screen recording program. I used this discursive data to add further depth to my participants' responses, integrating comments and X posts that both reinforce and challenge their observations about the controversy into my analysis.

Chapter 6 (Hyperpop): Textual and Discourse Analysis, Passive Participant

Observation

This chapter explores the Internet music genre hyperpop, and its connections to

the larger concept of Internet music, through a discourse analysis of the extensive media coverage that the scene has received, as well as passive participant observation in public online discussion forums by scene participants. I ultimately focused my analysis on two of the largest public forums dedicated to discussion of hyperpop, r/hyperpop and r/PCMusic. This study employs virtual “quasi-ethnographic” techniques to interrogate how fans of hyperpop participate in meaning making to build and shape the hyperpop scene across multiple online platforms (Henninger, 2020), particularly its importance as a “safe space” for minority gender and sexual identities. The data collection period occurred across four months in 2023, during which I first engaged in a preliminary period of immersion through unstructured observations of discussions on both of these subReddits (Hine, 2015). Once I had begun to identify the central themes that emerged during this period of observation, I returned to both subReddits and performed keyword searches for threads that contained phrases related to these themes, including “queer,” “trans,” “Spotify,” and “Spotify playlist.” In doing so, I took a similar approach to Buozis (2019) in his examination of doxxing practices on the r/Serial subreddit: “Far from all subReddit threads can be considered deliberative, or even decent, but as many threads as it took to reach a ‘saturation point’ in determining themes and patterns of discourse were read closely” (p. 364). This resulted in a deep reading and analysis of approximately 30 discussion threads spanning from 2020 to 2023.

People are informed by their socio-cultural contexts when they read media texts. Therefore, any investigations into media discourses must be grounded in the conditions that inform these contexts. Given that hyperpop has received a substantial amount of news coverage compared with other Internet music genres, including from mainstream

outlets like the *New York Times*, I contextualized the subReddit comments using material from news articles spanning from approximately the same time period as the Reddit posts (2020 to 2023). In gathering these texts for the discourse analysis, using Google News, I performed searches for recent media coverage of hyperpop, with a particular focus on articles that provided analysis or discussion of hyperpop or specific artists beyond simple news coverage. The search terms “hyperpop” “hyperpop queer,” “hyperpop trans,” “hyperpop Japan” as well as search terms for specific artists whose work is considered more in-depth in the chapter, including SOPHIE and 4s4ki, were used to gather relevant media coverage. In total, I collected and analyzed 21 media texts, including news articles and a two-part YouTube essay, for this chapter.

Chapter 7 (Phonk): Textual and Discourse Analysis

The analysis chapter addressing the phonk scene takes a two-pronged approach to its critical analysis of the scene, its visual characteristics, and its examination of patterns of racial representations within the scene. It considers both the scene’s paratextual characteristics, as well as a discursive analysis of the language used by scene participants, including producers, on social media. My analysis of the scene’s paratextual characteristics considers album art, imagery used on producers’ social media platforms, and any other visual or textual characteristics of the genre outside of the music itself, to examine how phonk engages in representations of race, Blackness, and Hip Hop culture. Hiller and Barnes (2020) emphasize the importance of paratexts to analyzing the political and cultural ideologies of scene participants in their work on extreme right wing ideologies in Australian black metal: “Using paratextual analysis and readings of their song lyrics and interviews, we capture and understand what ideologies are held by these

artists and how these are communicated to and received by fans... through music, coded language and symbols” and performer personas (p. 39). Such a strategy is even more crucial in an analysis of a digital music scene, given how the anonymity of these spaces means that a phonk performer’s public persona may be entirely limited to the digital avatars they use on Spotify, or images that they post on their Instagram feed.

As Moussa et al. (2020) emphasize, digital texts like memes are multimodal, in that “they mix verbal text, visuals, hyperlinks, and hashtags through an endless process of reappropriation, imitation, and readaptation” (p. 5922). For Kanjere (2019), discourse analyses of online comments are a particularly productive way to critically understand how race, and in particular whiteness, is reproduced in online environments, given that they “offer an opportunity to observe discussions of political issues in a fairly every-day and semi-anonymous environment. Online forum comments responding in particular to questions of race enact white power, privilege and even oppression” (p. 2156). My analysis of phonk thus also privileges the discursive characteristics of this digital music scene alongside its visual characteristics not only to paint the fullest possible picture of the phonk scene, but also to develop a critical perspective on how race is portrayed and/or performed by scene participants. To collect my digital data points, I explored the online spaces affiliated with prominent phonk producers and collectives who are currently active in the scene, including HOLY MOB, DJ Smokey, Soudiere, Von Storm, and others (relying on both my personal knowledge of the scene as well as relative follower counts for this initial exploration).

My analysis focuses on these artists’ presence on X (formerly Twitter) and Instagram in particular, given the former’s focus on text-based discourse and the latter’s

focus on visuality. When exploring these spaces, I first engaged in a “long, preliminary soak” period to further familiarize myself with the scene and find similar producers and artists whose work is explicitly labeled as phonk, until the same themes begin to emerge and saturation has been reached (Hall, 1975). As Steiner (2016) observes, through the process of the long soak, media analysts “need to ‘hear’ (must learn to hear) recurring appeals in different contexts, to recognize repetition. Placement, treatment, tone, stylistic intensification, striking imagery are all ways of registering emphasis” (p. 104). Similarly, I identify the themes and motifs that consistently reoccur in phonk’s paratexts. As described earlier in this chapter, through my exploration of these spaces, I built a research archive of these scenes through screenshots of these digital data points that I revisited as I constructed the overall themes of racial representations and cultural hybridity that I observed in phonk texts.

In addition to online research, I also attended a phonk concert in the Washington, DC area in January 2024. The headliner for this concert was Ryan Celsius, one of the artists whose work I consider in-depth in my discussion of cultural mixing and hybridity in the phonk scene. While I documented the event through photos, videos, and field notes, I remained a passive observer of the event and did not make any attendees aware of my status as a researcher. I thus used my attendance at this event as an opportunity to conduct a different form of Hine’s (2015) unstructured observation, wherein rather than “actively seeking out information and asking participants what is going on” (p. 160), I gained a sense of how it feels to be a part of this scene and setting in an offline context, important given phonk’s growing in-person scene. Ryan Celsius’s stage presence, including the visuals he used during the performance, as well as his promotion of the

event on his social media accounts, also informed my analysis of his use of culturally hybrid texts in his work.

Anonymity in Internet Research

What are the methodological implications, and limitations, of doing research in environments where users might be anonymous or inhabiting multiple identities, including the researcher? The anonymity afforded by the Internet is one of the driving characteristics of the identity play that scholars have observed in Internet genres, as Waugh (2017) finds in his example of what he refers to as “digital queering” in “Post-Internet” music. However, one problematic assumption of online anonymity in general identified by Kennedy (2006) is that this anonymity is inherently empowering or equalizing—because users cannot judge each other at face value, and it is thus easier to engage in identity exploration behaviors, such as play with different cultural markers in online avatars. Indeed, while some “‘markers of difference’ are difficult to detect in online communication, others are easy to identify, so that judgment and discrimination still exist” (p. 864). The limitations of anonymity in Internet research also include the difficulty on the researcher’s part in parsing out the intent of users in terms of sharing or creating content. Important devices like irony may become lost in the interpretive process (Stobart, 2008), which further necessitates the long, preliminary soak to become familiar with the language, discursive strategies and other markers of meaning used in these communities.

Given the increasing complexity of digital spaces, online texts also hold the potential to include many layers of interactions—such as comments, retweets, TikTok “duets,” and countless others—and thus demand a similarly holistic approach. Therefore,

Yadlin-Segal et al. (2020) correctly assert that researchers who look at digital texts “must pay particular attention to the contexts and human element of the text. Researchers should ask, what are the text's history, purpose, connections, and collaborations with other similar texts?” (p. 176). Rather than separating the two methods (textual and ethnographic) entirely, they advocate for not divorcing online texts from the people who created them, given that “online texts are inseparable from the human subjects” that created them (p. 173). Indeed, given the particular ease with which digital texts, like memes, can be divorced from their original context, I strive in this project to provide the voice and intention of the original creators when presenting textual data from digital spaces—and consider the power structures that might be informing both of those factors. Part of this effort entailed a digital version of Stuart Hall’s “long, preliminary soak,” or immersion in a community for a period of time, until the same themes begin to emerge in different contexts or spaces (Steiner, 2016). Since examining three entire “scenes” for a dissertation-level project is admittedly a large task, I take a similar approach to my three case study chapters: in accordance with Garcia et al.’s (2009) observation that “the definition of the field should be appropriate to the research question” (p. 5), I built on my pre-existing familiarity with the discursive and participatory norms of the particular settings associated with these genre communities to zero in on the data that gathered in these communities.

Self-Reflexivity: Identifying the Researcher

As a self-proclaimed fan of each of the genres considered in this dissertation, I have listened to countless hours of this music, followed many of the artists mentioned on social media, and supported these artists through purchases of music, merchandise, and

concert tickets. Therefore, my position in this research is a personal one, resembling Henry Jenkin's construction of the "acafan," which he straightforwardly defined as one who straddles both the world of the fan and the academic (Jenkins, 2011). At the same time, I heed Evans and Stasi's (2014) call for acafans to engage in critical self-reflection around their own engagement with the media text, and couch their observations within broader structures and contexts through the work of digital ethnography, which as they describe "puts into action the organization and politics of community, alongside individual and lived experience" (p. 16). Moreover, while my pre-existing knowledge of these genres and the digital spaces through which I could engage with them greatly informed my data collection, I nevertheless find myself on the periphery of these genre communities, even as an "acafan": while I have attended several in-person Internet music events in Philadelphia, New York City, and Washington, DC (including the two that I attended in the process of conducting research for this dissertation), as well as numerous livestream events, I have not been directly involved in organizing these events, rarely engage in active discussions in online channels and forums (choosing instead to remain primarily a 'lurker'), and I do not produce or perform this music. I believe this allows me to take a relatively 'agnostic' position in my analysis of the social and cultural meanings created by these musics.

Given that my research deals primarily with issues of representations of various dimensions of identity, I would be remiss not to address how my own identity informs this research. As a white cisgender researcher, I hold a relatively privileged subject position within academia, where white faculty remain overrepresented, particularly in coveted tenure-track positions that afford a relative degree of stability and academic

freedom (Matias et al., 2020). As Mayer (2005) observes, “for media researchers, the academy is the field of power relations that structures social relations, access to resources, and future mobility; it is precisely the field that normally remains invisible in research as ‘objective’ or ‘neutral,’ thus inscrutable” (p. 164). Since the racial reckoning that took place primarily in the United States in 2020 following the murder of George Floyd by a white police officer, special journal issues, conference themes, and university-sponsored initiatives focusing on racial equity in the academy abounded, and many white scholars promised they would step back, listen, and reflect, while placing the voices of scholars of color at the forefront. Nevertheless, four years later, attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion-focused scholarship, faculty, administrators, and programs in higher education are on the rise. In March 2024, the University of Florida, where I worked as an administrator and received my MA in Mass Communication, abruptly laid off all of its DEI-focused administrative staff in response to a ban on state funding for DEI initiatives at public universities spearheaded by Republican Governor Ron DeSantis (Thomas, 2024). Having spent the entirety of my career in a university environment, while my research focuses specifically on issues of identity and representation within popular media, my attention to these questions reflects my grave concerns about the future of higher education and academic research more broadly.

I thus aim to center questions of power as they relate to identity categories including race, gender, sexuality, and nationality in my research. This is an issue of particular importance in Internet research, given that in online environments, these categories can be suppressed or erased, as well as promoted or appropriated, often in the interest of power and/or profit. However, despite the often-anonymous nature of the

Internet, as Phillips (2015) importantly observes, “so-called real life necessarily bleeds into online life, and vice versa. Our raced, classed, and gendered bodies are encoded into our online behaviors, even when we’re pretending to be something above or beyond or below what we ‘really’ are IRL” (n.p.). I thus consider how my own identity, as well as the ‘real life’ experiences that inform my cultural and social affinities, particularly as a North American researcher, might be informing my interpretations of online discourses. Finally, I heed Brock’s important warning (2012) for Internet researchers that “examining egregious online racism while ignoring more subtle, structural forms of online discrimination is problematic; equally as problematic is social science and communication research that attempts to preserve a color-blind perspective on online endeavors by normalizing Whiteness and othering everyone else” (p. 546): this project thus considers how certain identity representations might be uncritically normalized by both participants and observers within these spaces, though nevertheless hold the potential for ripple effects across larger cultural environments.

The following chapter begins my analysis of the three Internet music scenes with a focus on vaporwave. Specifically, it examines dynamics of musical community formation, how members of the vaporwave scene imagine its characteristics and shared values, and how they use digital environments to negotiate identity. In the foreground of this chapter is the 2023 ElectroniCON festival, the largest in-person event dedicated to the genre, and a controversy over the festival’s lineup that animated both online discourse and in-person engagement around the event.

CHAPTER 5

WHEN INTERNET MUSIC MOVES OFFLINE: NEGOTIATING COMMUNITY AND IDENTITY THROUGH THE VAPORWAVE FESTIVAL ELECTRONICON

Introduction

This chapter focuses on vaporwave, a genre of Internet music that has received wide consideration from scholars, music critics, and mainstream media publications (Born & Haworth, 2018; Harper, 2017; Whelan & Nowak, 2018). Musically, vaporwave can be characterized by its use of slowed-down samples from 1980s and 90s R&B, smooth jazz, and similar genres, while its formulaic use of eclectic imagery and the robust digital culture surrounding it means it is often considered equal parts music scene and meme (Glitsos, 2018). This chapter explores the current state of the vaporwave scene, and how self-described scene members navigate issues around identity and community, through an ethnographic study of the in-person music festival ElectroniCON, which is organized by the record label 100% Electronica and is considered to be the largest in-person gathering dedicated to the genre. The 2023 iteration of the festival is particularly worthy of attention, as its advertised line-up was mired in controversy over the initial inclusion of American indie musician John Maus.

Through a discourse analysis of conversations on social media surrounding the event, alongside in-depth interviews with 10 vaporwave scene members and festival participants, this chapter engages in an analysis of how community boundaries and scene-based identities are continuously negotiated by members of the vaporwave scene both offline and online. This case study, focusing as it does on an in-person vaporwave event, extends existing analyses of vaporwave and other Internet-based genres that tend to focus exclusively on the presence of these musics in online environments, to examine how

digital mediations of popular culture impact Internet-based musical communities as they move offline.

Background and Methodology

Despite its classification as an “Internet genre” or “Internet music” by scholars and critics (Harper, 2017; Whelan and Nowak, 2018), vaporwave has quickly crossed the threshold from being a primarily online scene to also boasting a rich live scene.

ElectroniCON, which was billed as the “first-ever vaporwave music festival” when it debuted in Brooklyn in 2019, is organized by the producer George Clanton and his vaporwave-oriented record label 100% Electronica. The first iterations of the festival was decidedly vaporwave-centric, with *The Fader* reporting that Clanton had booked “many of the genre’s most celebrated artists” (Gooding, 2019). Tickets for the first festival sold out immediately, according to Clanton, and a Los Angeles-based iteration of ElectroniCON was organized for several months thereafter. Following a two-year hiatus during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, 100% Electronica announced the third iteration of the festival in 2022, to take place once again in New York City at the Knockdown Center in Queens. Marketing for that year’s festival promised that attendees would be exposed to a wider variety of musical genres, including those outside of the vaporwave umbrella: “Don’t worry everyone, ElectroniCON 3 has regular music too. Join us for the legendary event this August in New York City. ElectroniCON3 promises to be bigger and better than those that came before it” (100% Electronica, 2022). Promotional language around the 2022 ElectroniCON thus pointed towards a shift toward incorporating a broader range of musical styles outside of vaporwave, presumably to

broaden the festival's appeal and sell more tickets. ElectroniCON returned to the Knockdown Center for the 2023 iteration of the festival, the focus of this chapter.

As the central figure of what is arguably the largest in-person gathering of vaporwave scene members in the world, Clanton has taken on an almost cult-like status within the community. As Gooding (2019) describes it, aside from his ability to pull together some of the most well-known vaporwave artists in the world for an in-person event, Clanton's "charisma, internet savvy, and a deep connection to the scene has also enabled him to become what some have half-jokingly deemed a 'vapordaddy' ... his ability to bring the community together while promoting his work and others' is unparalleled." Indeed, Clanton, often in affiliation with the 100% Electronica record label, has served as an organizer for numerous in-person and online events that have centered around vaporwave music: as *Beat Magazine* notes, "throughout the Covid-19 lockdown, Clanton fostered a dedicated online community through his Virtual Utopia Twitch live streams. They gave listeners a place to connect and share music during a difficult time" (K. Martin, 2023). Clanton is also credited with spearheading the #TakeBackVaporwave movement in 2017, in response to the appropriation of vaporwave musical characteristics and aesthetics by members of far-right online communities, popularly known as fashwave or Trumpwave (Sen, 2020). At the same time, Clanton's status within the community has also taken on an air of controversy, particularly as the ElectroniCON festival has grown in both size and popularity.

In mid-June, 100% Electronica released the official lineup for the 2023 ElectroniCON festival. The first artist listed on the bill was John Maus, an American musician, singer, and composer who is credited as one of the forebears of the hypnagogic

pop movement, a lo-fi style of music heavily influenced by the popular culture of the 1980s. Maus also holds a PhD in political science and has cited the influence of his work in this program on his music, including naming an album after a Marxist theorist he studied under (Pemberton, 2017). At the same time, Maus's political views have remained somewhat opaque. In 2016, the singer appeared on an Adult Swim show "Million Dollar Extreme Presents: World Peace," which, according to *Pitchfork*, "gained a reputation for promoting racist, sexist, and bigoted viewpoints and symbolism," while its creator, Sam Hyde, "is also an outspoken proponent of the alt-right" (Strauss, 2017).

Further, in 2021, videos and images posted to Instagram revealed that the musician was present at the rally for Donald Trump prior to the insurrection at the US Capitol Building that took place on January 6, with fellow hypnagogic pop producer and singer Ariel Pink. Members of vaporwave-centric communities on social media were quick to take notice of Maus's inclusion on the lineup and point out his murky political history. For example, a post announcing the lineup on the r/vaporwave subReddit, the largest subreddit on the platform dedicated to discussion of the genre, attracted several comments from users that derided the decision to include Maus: one user lamented that Maus was a top billed artist despite his music not technically belonging to the vaporwave genre: "I'm still baffled at how they thought it was a good decision to have Maus not only playing, but as the headliner. And the dude isn't even vaporwave, on top of the Trump stuff." Another user posted the video that shows Maus present at the Capitol, and added: "So sad they decided to help this guy relaunch his career. Been to every Electronicon so far, but I can't give my money to someone like him." Maus has not publicly addressed the reason for his presence in DC on January 6th, though Pink has been explicit about his

support for Donald Trump: he wrote on social media that he attended the rally to “peacefully show support for the president,” and later appeared on FOX News’ *Tucker Carlson Tonight* to describe the fallout in the wake of his trip to DC, including being dropped by his record label (D’Souza, 2021).

Some of the online criticism to the decision to book Maus focused on vaporwave’s reputation as an especially welcoming scene for the LGBTQ+ community, citing the fact that many of the scene’s foundational artists, as well as scene members, identify as queer and/or transgender. For example, First Class Collective, a DC-based DIY vaporwave record label posted on X in response to the decision, “In case you all didn't already know, First Class Collective is strictly an anti-fascist record label. Vaporwave is a predominant force in LGBTQIA+ expression, and has (and always will be) a safe space for POC” (First Class Collective, 2023). Writer and music curator Louis Chant similarly wrote: “John Maus being on the Electronicon 4 line up does not sit right with me. For a festival that encompasses genres that are safe havens for LGBTQ+ people and people of colour, allowing someone like John into that space that has ties to Trump-related activity is baffling” (Louis Chant, 2023). Several prominent vaporwave producers also commented on the situation, including death’s dynamic shroud, one of the headliners for the festival: the statement they released on social media expressed their solidarity with queer fans and fans of color, and advocated for a “solution” to the issue (death’s dynamic shroud, 2023).

The following week, in response to the backlash, Clanton released an apology post on both his personal social media accounts and those associated with his record label, in which he stated that Maus had agreed to no longer perform at the festival (the

posts have since been deleted from Clanton's Instagram but still appear on the label's Twitter account). Clanton added that

ElectroniCON is defined by its focus on outsider, underground electronic music and inclusive environment. We selected each of the venues that have hosted ElectroniCON events carefully as spaces that have historically held an inclusive space for POC and members of the LGBTQ+ community. We will never allow our singular event to turn into an unsafe space for our POC and LGBTQ+ fans and artists on the bill.

In addition to Clanton's statements, Maus also provided an apology to *Pitchfork*, in which he stated that "I'm sorry that I made the ElectroniCON artists & fans feel unsafe. It seems like a very supportive and inclusive community so I regret I won't be performing this year," and also informed the publication that he would be donating a portion of his cancellation fee to non-profits that focus on LGBTQ issues, including the Trevor Project and Hope Not Hate (Minsker, 2023). Following the festival weekend, Clanton's social media posts, including one in which he was pictured with a cake reading "RIP Electronicon," led fans to wonder on social media if this would be the festival's last year (Clanton, 2023).

Amid the backdrop of the controversy surrounding ElectroniCON 2023, this chapter engages in analysis of ten in-depth interviews with festival attendees and members of the vaporwave scene as well as online discourse that took place on social media around the festival. Participants for the in-depth interviews were primarily recruited via social media, specifically channels where members of the vaporwave music scene gather: this included the biggest public subReddit dedicated to discussion of the vaporwave scene, r/vaporwave, as well as two Discord servers, R E V E R I E and Ocean Lounge, which focus on discussions of vaporwave music, aesthetics, and the culture surrounding the genre. Immediately upon IRB approval, I began recruitment of interview

subjects via these social media channels by posting the recruitment message to these channels. In addition, I engaged in participant observation during the festival weekend, which gave me a chance to *feel* the scene: I took extensive field notes, photos, and recorded video during both days of the festival as well as an adjacent tape swap event, hosted by the Utopia District record label, that I attended the day after the festival. In my intersecting roles as researcher, festival attendee, and longtime fan of vaporwave music, I sought to strike a balance between an embedded researcher, one who “is in some way aligned with the research subjects, while not actually belonging to the group,” and immersed researcher, one who is an accepted member of the group “authorized (either tacitly or explicitly) by the group to undertake the research” (Nightingale, 2008, p. 119).

Outside of my online recruitment, I sought to only strike up conversations with other festival attendees if they happened organically rather than “impose” myself on potential participants—once it was revealed that I was a researcher, almost all of the attendees I spoke with expressed an openness and willingness to learn more about the project, and several were eager to participate, with some directly recalling the recruitment posts that I had made on the r/vaporwave subReddit. This created an impromptu version of snowball sampling, with participants recruiting friends and other members of the vaporwave community during the festival weekend for this study, particularly if they felt that they would be an interesting person for me to speak with. It is important to note the limitations of snowball sampling: for Garcia (2013), it “risks producing an ethnography of a particular social network, rather than of an entire community or scene; that is, one risks mistaking the quirks of a single, interconnected social group for the characteristic traits of an entire population” (p. 11). At the same time, being introduced to different

figures within the scene helped me establish a better sense of the network surrounding the festival, and led to greater diversity of my sample. Finally, I synthesize the results of the interviews with online discourse on X and the r/Vaporwave subReddit to paint a more complete picture of vaporwave scene members' attitudes and opinions about the festival controversy.

Ultimately, I recruited 10 participants for this study. Six of the interviews were conducted in-person either in New York City during the festival weekend or in Philadelphia immediately after the festival, while 4 were conducted either over Zoom or over email for the sake of convenience, anonymity, or the comfort of the participant. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 40. In terms of gender identity, participants who self-identified as male constituted the majority of the sample (n = 6), with the remaining participants identifying as female (n = 2) or genderfluid (n = 1). Participants were also asked to describe in their own words their racial identity: a majority of the participants identified as either white or white passing (n = 7), while one participant described themselves as half-Japanese, half-Irish; one identified as Asian-American/multiracial; and one participant described themselves as Ashkenazi. Following the transcription process, participants were assigned pseudonyms that were used for the coding and analysis process. In line with vaporwave producer and even participant tendencies to remain anonymous within vaporwave communities, often instead assigning themselves an alias to use within the online and even in-person communities that fits within the vaporwave "aesthetic," I assigned pseudonyms to the participants using the Random Aesthetic Username Generator developed by Perchance, first conducting an Internet

search for each generated name to ensure that it was not already in use by an existing member of the vaporwave community (Perchance, 2023).

The length of the recorded interviews ranged from 15 to 62 minutes and followed a semi-structured format: I asked each participant 11 open-ended questions in addition to questions that gathered demographic data about the participants. The questions (listed in Appendix A) touched on topics including the participant's history of and current involvement with the vaporwave scene both in in-person and online contexts, how the participant believes that the vaporwave scene has been shaped by the Internet and Internet culture, how the different cultural influences (Japanese media, etc.) in vaporwave have shaped the scene's general attitudes toward cultural difference, the general attitude of vaporwave scene members around issues concerning gender and racial identity, and how the participant has seen these attitudes play out in vaporwave spaces. Participants were told that they could diverge from the questions in their responses, and I asked several unscripted follow-up questions depending upon the participants' responses. Interviews were transcribed using Adobe Premiere Pro's transcription service, and corrections to errors were made by hand. I coded the interviews and organized the different categories of codes using ATLAS.ti, allowing me to take a grounded theory approach when analyzing the data and more easily identify common themes between the codes. In my analysis, I first began with open coding, or coding every interview, line by line, and then proceeded to axial coding, in which I identified commonalities between all of the interviews to reveal the main themes of my analysis (Rasmussen et al., 2016).

Analysis

Imagining an Inclusive Community

Participants described the nature of the vaporwave community as an inclusive and welcoming space that fosters a sense of belonging and connection with geographically disparate friends. They envisioned the vaporwave scene as a space in which people are easy to meet and generally supportive, and noted that any desire to participate creatively in the scene could be easily fulfilled. Blank Arizona, who designs visuals for live vaporwave events, found that creating a space for oneself in the community could be as easy as finding the thing that you want to contribute, “whether it's musically, whether it's trying to be positive and give information to people or make visual art, whatever it may be. I would have never thought in a million years that I would be able to be involved.” For Futuristic Ecstasy, who self-described as a vaporwave fan who occasionally participates in online communities, including Discord servers, the vaporwave scene “reminds me a lot of some of the convention/fan scene communities that I used to be a part of when I was younger, with a very accepting atmosphere and a focus on having fun with a lot of space for individual difference.”

Slow Nostalgia, a YouTuber and vaporwave producer, similarly highlighted the diverse nature of the scene, and how the feelings of inclusivity and acceptance were particularly evident during live events, noting that “there's a whole blend of people and racial identities and what I love about it so much, too, is everybody's taking a part of it... Like, nobody's kind of left out, especially like in the live scene, which is great.” Participants also highlighted what they perceived as a low overhead for entry into the scene: for Blank Arizona, “anybody can be involved in it. You really just have to put

yourself out there and talk to people. And you'd be surprised at not just how encouraging they are, but also how open they are to new content.” Vaporwave’s perception as an inclusive community was strongly related for participants to the perceived acceptance, or at least outside presence, of individuals with minority gender and sexual identities within the scene. At the same time, its low overhead to entry also meant for participants that a wide range of identities and viewpoints are represented within the vaporwave community. For example, Chilled Consumer, who produces vaporwave music, described vaporwave as a space

that's a lot more welcome to LGBT or minority identities than maybe your average one, [though] it's definitely not perfect. And I think that also just comes down to the fact that anyone can join ... So, there's definitely a variety of opinions. But, I mean, especially just kind of seeing the crowds around ElectroniCON, I would say, it's definitely a more open and welcoming community.

Research that focuses on the social dimensions of the vaporwave scene has revealed challenges with delineating the boundaries of the community surrounding the genre. Whelan and Nowak (2018) question the futility of even identifying a cohesive vaporwave “community,” finding that “genre work” is a more accurate characterization for the activities of those who coalesce around vaporwave music, and leave digital traces that create the impression of an online community: “discursive, cultural, musical, and social processes advance, mediate and inform each other. These messy dynamics leave a media residue, which is the core of what coheres the genre over time, and what sediments the impression of the community for incomers” (p. 455). However, these insights from participants indicate that they imagine a community that is at once socially and culturally disparate, and yet, unified in a way that reflects the “affective coalitions” that shape a music scene (Straw, 1991).

Hill (2014) uses the term “imaginary community,” based on Benedict Anderson’s notion of the nation as an imagined community, to make sense of how fans discuss their experiences with, and impressions of rock and metal scenes that they are a part of. Interviews with vaporwave scene participants similarly reveal how the idea of the vaporwave community becomes “a powerful concept for many fans of the genre. It is imagined, like Anderson’s imagined community, as a communion of equals, but as separate from mainstream society” (Hill, 2014, p. 182). Indeed, despite the very real presence of vaporwave’s influence, both musically and aesthetically, in popular culture, participants at ElectroniCON imagined themselves, and other members of the vaporwave scene, as part of an “othered” community, describing vaporwave music as “weird” and largely inaccessible for a mainstream audience.

90s Software, a vaporwave fan who had attended previous iterations of the ElectroniCON festival, observed that vaporwave producers’ inability, or perhaps lack of desire to enter the mainstream, could be due in part to a lack of motivation for commercial gain: “No one is in this to make a fortune. They're at least trying to recoup their costs, but there's no way to take this to the mainstream because they won't know what the hell to do with it.” When asked what draws a community with different political views together, Blank Arizona responded that “from my own perspective, it's a very much an outsider community, for lack of a better word. And just as a lovable word, there's a lot of weirdos.” Elaborating on this, he felt that some members of the community hold an outsider status in part because of their musical taste: “you can be an outsider because you like a particular genre of music or you identify differently than maybe people around you.” Chilled Consumer, when asked about vaporwave’s potential

for success in a mainstream environment, felt that those who do wish to make a living from their music might choose to “leave” the scene, while taking the influences of the genre with them:

I think part of why vaporwave isn't mainstream right now is just because a lot of people don't enjoy their music being all chopped and screwed ... But, I mean, people who make vaporwave often, you know, music producers, some of those people will say, Well, hey, I like to make money making music. So, I'm gonna go make other kinds of music, but they may take their vaporwave roots with them. Or just people who are fans of the genre, you know, it can be an influence, even if that's not then what that person produces.

Indeed, participants envisioned themselves and other members of the community as going against the grain through their participation in vaporwave spaces, a trend that is commonly observed in examinations of trends born of Internet culture, as Phillips and Milner (2017) observe in their discussion of the “weird Internet.” Though, as Milner (2016) also observes, digital trends can also easily spread through culture until they emerge to “mainstream participation, shifting them from the subaltern to the everyday register” (p. 49). Participants revealed anxieties about the recent growth of the vaporwave scene that could threaten its perceived subaltern status, in part exemplified by the growth of live events like ElectroniCON (to be discussed later in this section).

Elaborating on the vaporwave scene’s inclusive nature, several participants found the vaporwave community overall to be extremely accepting of different identities, with a particular focus on sexual and gender identities, citing the predominance of trans and queer artists in the scene. For 80s Hotline, “overall I would say that the community is very progressive...there’s tons of prominent queer artists and it seems like they don’t really care too much about gender conformity from what I’ve seen of in-person meetups.” Similarly, Blank Arizona commented that

There is a lot of diversity and inclusivity [in vaporwave] ... I mean, very few other musical genres were started by people that are in the trans community or even openly LGBTQ, so even though I'm not necessarily identifying as any of that, I absolutely respect it and I love that it's so easy and you can truly be yourself.

Slow Nostalgia particularly emphasized the ways in which in-person events like

ElectroniCON weekend revealed the inclusive nature of the community:

I think another beautiful thing about the scene is that there's a whole blend of people and racial identities and it's, that's what I love about it so much, too, is everybody's taking a part of it. And I think when you come to these shows, you know, everybody is so different. Like, nobody's kind of left out, especially in the live scene, which is great. I always say, a lot of times the Internet isn't even real. And then when you go into the real world, and you're meeting people, everybody's just friendly. And you know, there's no walls, there's no nothing.

As Hill (2014) observes with womens' lived experiences in metal music communities, this imaginary can also be informed by an idealized vision of the community, and can conceal ways in which power structures impact the experiences of individuals with minority identities. For other participants, discussions of inclusivity within the vaporwave community became more complicated, particularly when the dimension of racial identity was considered. As Futuristic Ecstasy, who identifies as Asian-American/multiracial, explained:

Electronic music has long been a space for queer/trans individuals, so I've found that in terms of gender identities, it's pretty accepting. I don't think it's as progressive for different racial identities, but in my experience it hasn't been widely reactionary either. I think there's an implicit understanding that different cultures all have important aesthetic values—some of which are relevant to vaporwave/remixable.

Euphoric Aether similarly observed that there is “a recognition of the importance of queer people [in the vaporwave scene], but it's less offensive if they're white. And I have seen a number of nonwhite people, queer or otherwise, get really frustrated with ... being left out of certain opportunities.” Visual Sunset, a vaporwave producer who described

herself as half-Japanese, recounted how she personally observed discrimination based on different identity categories within the scene, though she also found that the most extreme expressions of these views tend to be limited to more underground factions of the scene:

I think the predominantly white male perspective of vaporwave has led to a relatively homophobic, transphobic, racist and misogynistic community. I often see female or non-white creators emulate the brands of their white male counterparts, in order to fit in and be accepted. Although I try to associate myself with more forward thinking vaporwavers, I have seen a large underbelly of the scene that could be described as incels, white supremacists or political radicals. Fortunately, the pivotal contributions of many BIPOC and LGBTQ+ artists to vaporwave serves as a good counterpoint to these radical views, and keeps them from taking over the genre.

Participants at ElectroniCON made sense of how in-person events like the festival weekend impacted the feeling of the vaporwave community as an inclusive, welcoming space, and also how the perceived increase in live events versus “URL,” or online events, is impacting the scene more broadly. Slow Nostalgia identified a schism in the community between people who miss the days of the scene being “strictly online, strictly anonymous” and those who embrace the growth of live events, though he chose to see the positive sides of vaporwave having a robust in-person scene, particularly for producers who want to earn money through performing:

I think people just use like the mainstreaming term, right? Which is like, it's a subjective word. Like, what does mainstream mean? Like, right, someone can throw a show in real life? Let's say they have some financial hardships or something and you make some extra money to afford bills or whatever. By playing their music live, and people who like them could go see them. I don't think there's anything wrong with that.

Blank Arizona expressed similar feelings regarding ElectroniCON and the additional events that take place in-person around the festival: “all of these in-person meetings is where you really get to, you know, have that community feel both with the artists and the fans.” Chilled Consumer expressed that in-person events mitigate the

feeling of “otherness” that he experienced as a fan only participating in vaporwave-related activities online:

I think one thing that makes these in real life events very special is that in terms of my personal life, everyone I know only knows about vaporwave because it's something that I'm into. ... It's very nice to kind of come to a space where everyone else has had their own journey through the genre. It's kind of like, oh, I'm not the only person out there who is into this music.

Similarly, 90s Software finds that seeing groups of friends attending ElectroniCON together speaks to the way that the scene is evolving, and perhaps even maturing as fans who discovered vaporwave years ago now have the financial means to attend an in-person event:

I think it's just the transition that people have had from realizing that the digital space can become real. A lot of people flew here! And also it's kind of, maybe as the scene has evolved, if I just take the time from when I started to now, that's 7 years. Someone who was in college now has been trying to get a job and maybe they had enough money to buy a plane ticket.

At the same time, he pointed out that he felt this does not necessarily signify that vaporwave is beginning to enter the “mainstream”; rather, the revival in popularity of 1980s and 1990s consumer culture in design (such as the “Jazz” design used on Solo cups) and other elements of the vaporwave aesthetic give the impression that the music itself has become popular. For several participants, the differences that they felt between online and in-person events in part spoke to the ways in which the Internet has shaped the vaporwave scene since its inception. For Slow Nostalgia:

I would say, when you first come in [to the in-person scene], it could be a little overwhelming if you're like, really focused as a person online, and you only know the vaporwave scene online. And then you come into the real life scene. And the coolest thing about it is the artists and the people who own labels, we are just fans at the end of the day, we're all on the same level. Nobody's above anybody. And that's what I really hope people realize that they're kind of on the fence of coming out to one of these, you know, don't be nervous. everybody's on the same page.

Pink Pepsi made similarly observations with regard to conflict within the vaporwave community, specifically discussions around the decision to include John Maus on the festival lineup:

Talking more about the idea of like, the parasocial. When the Internet world becomes your real world and your reality and you're living in it, you realize how much you're terminally online, that's all. And so that's why this like, Discord drama everyone's talking about, there's a lot of people who talk shit on the internet and then you meet them in real life and then they don't say anything. ... Even though I think the Internet is real, it's a different version of real life. When you get to wear a mask especially.

Participants' envisioning of the vaporwave community as a cohesive group, despite its inherently digital and networked nature, reinforces what previous scholars have observed about the power of the Internet to establish a sense of locality through shared social and cultural interests. Lysloff's (Lysloff & Gay, 2003) early work on the online DIY "mod" scene found that the group constituted an imagined community, wherein its "sense of place is defined specifically in relation to the Internet as opposed to the 'real world' (p. 40); later work on vaporwave and other Internet genres, from lofi Hip Hop to SoundCloud rap, certainly serves to reinforce this early observation (Dunham, 2022; Winston & Saywood, 2020).

At the same time, previous work on virtual communities has observed that the formation and sustainment of these communities is often based on the physical proximity of its members: for example, Parks (2010) found "geographically proximal offline communities are frequently the foundation for "virtual" online communities ... it may be more accurate to say that virtual communities are often simply the online extension of geographically situated offline communities" (p. 120). In a similar vein, Allington et al. (2015) find in their study of social networking and engagement with electronic music on SoundCloud, "despite the apparent 'placelessness' of the internet, expressions of esteem

on SoundCloud appear to circulate primarily (a) within cities, (b) between cities located within the same region, and (c) towards a particular set of cities with large cultural economies and a strong association with electronic dance music,” such as London, New York, and Los Angeles (p. 219). The example of the in-person ElectroniCON festival, emerging as it did out of a rich online scene, suggests that there is truth to both perspectives: while participants agreed that the community’s foundations are firmly based in digital spaces, the festival has switched its host locations back and forth between New York and Los Angeles, and several participants observed how difficult it was to access live vaporwave events outside of urban locales, or establish their own scene within their community.

Participants also employed strategies of exclusion with regard to the vaporwave community, setting it apart from a perceived “mainstream.” Moreover, participant responses reinforce Milner’s (2016) observation that the notion of subculture, while it has evolved since its use by Dick Hebdige, still holds relevance to the formation of “ingroup affiliations and the outgroup antagonisms” within online communities, finding that the term “can still describe how members of a collective discursively cast themselves as antithetical to, apart from, or in opposition to a nebulous discursive ‘mainstream’” (p. 49-50). Participants further applied this negotiation of inclusion and exclusion to the controversy surrounding the ElectroniCON music festival, to be discussed in the next section.

ElectroniCON Controversy: “Us vs. Them”

For Whelan and Nowak (2018), part of genre work “involves forms of revaluation and assessment: of releases, of perspectives, of cultural processes and means of

navigating them, of what are good and bad outcomes for vaporwave” (p. 458). Indeed, while my interview questions did not address the initial announcement of the 2023 ElectroniCON lineup and the resulting controversy over the inclusion of John Maus, nearly every participant was aware of and had their own individual thoughts on the situation and how it impacted the vaporwave community at large, causing it to emerge as a dominant theme of my analysis. In part, the results of the interviews demonstrated how one of the main organizers of the festival, George Clanton, acts as a prominent voice and figure in this particular context of reevaluation and assessment. For example, Euphoric Aether felt that Clanton’s popularity outside of the vaporwave community shaped the conversations around the decision to include John Maus on the lineup, leading to questions around whether or not that discourse reflects the wider values of the community:

[He] has this sense of like, his star is bigger than within the vaporwave community, but he also is the biggest artist in the community ... the wider indie audience that George has cultivated who are coming in without the context of anything of what the vaporwave community represents outside of that. And so, there was a lot of discourse that was happening very fast around this issue with John Maus. And to me, it isn’t really about what Maus did or didn’t do. It’s more about what he represents. And if that’s something we want to have in our community.

The ElectroniCON controversy also served as a means for reevaluating and assessing the boundaries of the vaporwave community. Given their perceptions of the indie artist’s political and ideological affiliations,¹ several of the participants viewed

¹ John Maus’s presence at the January 6th rally sparked online debate about the artist’s political affiliations. While he has not publicly shown support for Donald Trump or other right-wing political figures, Reddit users pointed to FEC records showing Maus had donated to Trump’s reelection campaign, while *Dazed* (Yalcinkaya, 2021) reported that Ariel Pink, a fellow singer who traveled with Maus to DC, had a month prior appeared on alt-right podcast called *Wrong Opinion*, where he stated that “John [Maus] is a thousand and one percent on Team Trump.”

Maus fans and supporters as being separate from the vaporwave community. Pink Pepsi made such distinctions between “us” (members of the vaporwave community) and “them” (fans of John Maus) when discussing the decision of whether or not to attend the festival when it was announced that Maus would be headlining:

I understand being upset, and some of us already bought tickets. But even if you didn't, and you were conflicted on going ... you should still show up. Because if that crowd comes and we don't, we don't make more space for us, they have more room to be there.



Figure 1. A meme posted to X parodies the ElectroniCON lineup using a reference to the January 6th insurrection. Accessed in June 2023; the original post has since been deleted.

Euphoric Aether similarly expressed what they felt was the importance of attending ElectroniCON as a means of holding space for “us”: “I made the decision to come based on my perception of like, yeah, George does have an inordinate amount of

power in this space, but it's still the primary gathering space for us as a community. And I think it is worthwhile to show up in these spaces and be like, we're not just going to hand this over!”

Users on social media expressed similar reactions to the news of Maus’s inclusion. A meme posted to X parodied the inclusion of Maus on the lineup by featuring an image of one of the most recognizable rioters, right wing conspiracy theorist John Chansley (Figure 1). The account for a Canada-based vaporwave cassette tape label Lost Angles wrote on X, “Inviting artists like John Maus to headline a festival apparently representing the mainstream impression of the vaporwave music and subculture movement is so wrong I don’t even know where to begin ... this completely goes against the community values I took pride in being a part of” (Lost Angles, 2023). A screenshot of the statement made by death’s dynamic shroud, when posted to the r/vaporwave subReddit, created a robust discussion in the comments section: as one user stated, “If you’re fine with them keeping him on the lineup, you need to reevaluate what you think this genre is actually about,” while another wrote that “I can’t believe that some people on this sub don’t realize that vaporwave is inherently a pretty left leaning genre. Part of its whole thing is the anti-capitalist and anti-consumerism imagery.” Moreover, in addition to the perceived misalignment of Maus’s political values with the vaporwave community, much of the frustration with Maus’s inclusion also seemed to stem from the perception that Maus’s music would not be considered part of the vaporwave genre (Maus’s music tends to be associated with the hypnagogic pop movement, another difficult to categorize musical style that could be considered a precursor to vaporwave [Trainer, 2016]).

Some participants recognized that the need for the festival to remain financially sustainable could lead to the inclusion of certain performers, and their fans, who are not part of “us” (the vaporwave community). For example, Blank Arizona identified the expansion of the festival lineup into genres outside of vaporwave, and how the need for the festival to be economically sustainable could be in conflict with the desires of the festival attendees to exclude individuals who they do not perceive as members of the community:

And so I feel like that was kind of the start, some people were unhappy because the truth is, you can't have everybody at a festival like this. Last year was pretty special. I'm not sure if you're familiar with the lineup, but there was a lot of classic artists that were on the bill that were all traditionally vaporwave or future funk, whereas this year there were several that I kind of scratch my head at. But then on the other hand, I also know from kind of firsthand experience - it's not a moneymaking machine, I think, like a lot of people assume. So, from a business perspective, how are you going to get people to go? You're going to have to get different demographics. You're going to get different fans of music. I mean, that's how you sell tickets. And I feel like a lot of people consume content without a care of what it takes to produce it or create it or the time. And especially, I'm not a fan of money, but you got to have it, right?

Macronight expressed a similar ambivalence about the festival growing in size, though ultimately expressed that she would not want to deter the organizers (including George Clanton and fellow ElectroniCON performer Neggy Gemmy, who is also Clanton’s fiancée) from making money from the festival:

I do think it could get bigger because George [Clanton] is getting better, Lindsey [Neggy Gemmy] is getting bigger ... so I do think it's possible that stuff can expand. Which again, it would kind of suck because I do like these niche meetups. And it's weird to see people you don't know. It's like, are you online? And they're like no, I just heard about it. It's weird because some of these people I just know and I've known for so long.

These observations by attendees of ElectroniCON echo Wilcox and Compton’s (2023) findings that vaporwave’s perception as an “inclusive” community is challenged when “participants discuss the influence of the community on how they choose to enact

their musician identities. More specifically, this friction is observed when participants consider making money from their music” (p. 71). Indeed, previous literature on vaporwave has largely focused on the genre’s widely accepted status as a complex critique of capitalism and consumerism (Killeen, 2018; Koc, 2017; McLeod, 2018; Whelan & Nowak, 2018), even as Whelan and Nowak (2018) observe that this interpretation may not be synonymous with the views of the entire fan community.

Participants also applied this “us vs. them” dynamic within the vaporwave community itself, finding that individuals who sow discord or express intolerant views are generally ostracized from “mainstream” vaporwave discussion spaces. 80s Hotline connected this idea to the vaporwave “aesthetic,” finding that vaporwave’s nature as a “depoliticized” cultural object that could, like a meme, be appropriated by individuals with a wide variety of identities and ideologies, and has led to an environment where “reactionaries can slip into the cracks and end up building their own niche.” Moreover, 80s Hotline felt that the John Maus controversy and the discourse that it generated created a schism within the community and resulted in a situation where individuals on an extreme end of the spectrum could no longer quietly co-exist amongst other members:

Now with the John Maus situation in particular, that was the event that galvanized the community and shook up the scene so that the cockroaches couldn't hide in the cracks anymore. ... Long story short, most of the community came out against him and got him dropped but the people who came to his defense were almost entirely reactionaries.

Participants described navigating digital vaporwave spaces in such a way that they could avoid undesirable facets of the scene. For Macronight, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, participating in virtual vaporwave spaces “was a lifesaver because everyone was online anyway, so it was just like a whole community. And everyone’s just so welcoming and sweet. And the ones that aren’t don’t really mess with anyone else, or

you can block them.” 90s Software similarly observed the ways in which online vaporwave communities include or exclude individuals who are not perceived as sharing the wider values of the community, including those who take a “purist” approach to the music and scene:

If they come into the subReddit and the Discord shitting up the place they're going to get kicked out. So they don't have a place to be open about how they want to shit on something. It's mostly private communities, groups of people, and if they come in being jerks in public they're going to get treated like jerks in public. The whole idea of being some free speech activist in vaporwave isn't real. Because there are enough marginalized folks on the scene to know that if you're gonna say, pull some dumb shit, it's like, play stupid games, win stupid prizes.

At the same time, online discourse around ElectroniCON on Reddit, X, and Instagram (including comments on the now-deleted post on George Clanton’s Instagram account) revealed plenty of support for Maus and frustration, often stemming from users’ perception that the festival organizers were capitulating to ‘cancel culture,’ when he was removed from the lineup. The Reddit post cited earlier in this section received many comments expressing these and similar sentiments. One user wrote “If I see another dumbass bucket hat kid on Twitter pretending to care about Black people I’m going to throw up,” while another argued that “the foundational backbone of the vaporwave community is obviously straight white men, not ‘women, POC, and LGBTQ members.’ ... There are artists of those three categories in the scene and they’re all welcomed, but the majority of foundational artists are straight white dudes.” Indeed, similar to what 80s Hotline and 90s Software observed, these and many of the more inflammatory comments in this thread were heavily downvoted, which under Reddit’s current design suppresses the comments to the bottom of the thread and also hides them, requiring a user to click on them in order to read them.

While the use of terms like “scene” and “community” to describe a highly fragmented online network can raise its own theoretical and methodological complications, it is clear from participants interviewed for this research that vaporwave scene members imagine a relatively cohesive community that is in a constant process of negotiating who belongs, and who does not. These interviews reveal how self-described members of the vaporwave community see themselves and other actors within the community as engaging in a continuous process of reinforcing both the musical and cultural boundaries of the community, a process that is further illuminated by the controversy surrounding ElectroniCON and the initial decision to include John Maus on the festival lineup. Participants made connections between these dynamics and the controversy surrounding the festival, and discussed the importance of this event for shaping the vaporwave community and its shared values. Chilled Consumer, when asked whether the outpouring of online discourse and comments on the organizer’s decision to remove John Maus, many of which expressed support for the singer, was representative of the scene, responded:

I will say there probably were voices coming from outside. But even within members of the scene, there was definitely a mixture of opinions. And I think, you know, it's something that people care a lot about. Especially with John Maus and [RXK Nephew]². If you're a minority or you're LGBT, you know, you can't

² RXK Nephew, an American rapper who performed at the 2023 iteration of ElectroniCON, was also cited as a controversial choice for the festival by participants in this study as well as by participants in the online discourse around the festival, due to what several users described as homophobic and transphobic lyrics in his music. RXK Nephew’s eccentric musical style has been highlighted by critics, who describe him as a rapper of the “post-truth” era: as *Stereogum* described the rapper, “Nephew has created the genre of ‘Reddit rap,’ where rappers spit conversational bars that belong on a message board about whether or not Jay-Z is in the Illuminati” (Buford, 2022). Soon after Maus was removed from the lineup, Clanton did an interview with the podcast Vaporwave News Network, where he addressed concerns about RXK Nephew’s inclusion by explaining that “it’s horrorcore rap...there’s a lot of grotesque things that he’s saying. If people are trying to start John Maus part two...I would just petition them

turn off politics. You know, you're carrying that with you in your body. So I'm more sympathetic to the idea that you can't always separate that. But also, not everyone in the scene is a minority or LGBT. So, people don't know what they don't know, you know. But I guess I would say everyone means well, but I think meaning well, isn't always gonna get you to the right place.

While participants at ElectroniCON described a cohesive, largely inclusive community, For Shelemay (2011), while music is a powerful tool for community formation, boundaries can always be in flux: “Music helps generate and sustain the collective, while at the same time, it contributes to establishing social boundaries both within the group and with those outside of it...But processes of community formation are not unitary and can vary both between collectivities and within the same collectivity over the course of time” (p. 368). Lucas-Healy’s (2022) dissertation project on vaporwave, which employs participatory creative practice research to understand the lived experiences of members of the vaporwave community, similarly finds that “the textual meaning of vaporwave was far less important to participants than the personally significant experiences made possible by the collective sense of belonging that was fostered through participation in the community” (p. 7).

This research on a controversy within the vaporwave similarly suggests that the genre’s paratextual characteristics, and the sociopolitical messages that those characteristics might communicate to a broader audience (such as a ‘leftist’ critique of capitalism and consumerism), become secondary to how participants define their specific place within the “overlapping network of social networks” that constitute the genre community (p. 123). Indeed, the John Maus controversy shed light on crucial schisms within vaporwave, while also providing a catalyzing event for community unification and

to think twice about it...it’s not my position to police rap as an art form” (Vaporwave News Network, 2023).

belonging (for example, 80s Hotline discussed participating in getting the #DropJohnMaus hashtag trending, and credits this effort with ultimately getting him removed from the lineup). Digital environments also structured how participants interacted with one another and created, or negotiated, this sense of an inclusive community—discussed further in the following section.

Leveraging Digital Affordances: Anonymity, Memetics, and Cultural

Representations in Vaporwave

I would say, you know, in this particular instance with ElectroniCON, [Internet-based communication] it definitely was a negative aspect of it. I think one of the negatives of being in an Internet-based community is you want your information now, everything is instant gratification, instant information. And in many cases, a prepared statement takes time. Also, on the flip side, whenever the comments that are usually quickly made after the first statements, if you don't think that through, it's very easy for your point to be lost in translation or lost or misunderstood. (Pink Pepsi)

As Pink Pepsi alludes to in the quote above, members of the vaporwave community tend to perceive themselves as being very online. The nature and structure of digital environments, and the ways in which they shape interactions among users, thus contributed to how participants engage in community activities, as well as how they present themselves to other members of the community in online or even in-person vaporwave spaces.

Participants at ElectroniCON frequently discussed the importance of anonymity to vaporwave, and emphasized its positive potential for enabling both privacy and a less inhibited level of participation in the vaporwave genre. Several participants identified how anonymity and the use of multiple aliases among vaporwave producers in particular served as an important means of avoiding liability for copyright violations, given the heavy use of samples in vaporwave production (Schembri and Tichbon, 2017). At the

same time, participants also discussed how protecting one's identity could help maintain the nature of the vaporwave community as a "safe space," or even simply to reinforce the separation of their vaporwave-adjacent activities from their "real life." Blank Arizona observed that some vaporwave producers may remain anonymous to protect themselves from overexposure to "chronically online" fans eager to find out more information about them and their music:

I feel like whether they realize that or not, they're very fast to try to get as much information on a person ... and I have spoken to a couple of artists that, you know, there are some fans that I think maybe, they don't necessarily realize the social cues, especially on the Internet, on the Internet you can say whatever you want free of consequence often, or just kind of overbearing fans and people that are, really constantly messaging them or talking to them or trying to get information about tracks and music, having that, you know, anonymity and having that privacy, it's kind of special because a lot of people don't, especially with social media, you're kind of always out there.

Macronight, who is not a vaporwave producer but who said that she often uses a nickname in vaporwave spaces, felt that it was more common than not for members of the vaporwave community to use an alias, and even found that members of the community brought the digital affordance of anonymity into in-person vaporwave spaces. For example, she discussed how a friend who was performing at the Tape Swap event the day following the festival wore a mask while performing not out of fear of harassment from fans and followers, but

Just because sometimes you don't want everyone to know who you are ... I feel like people are more comfortable expressing themselves when they do have some sort of, not false identity, but just something to kind of hide their real life from maybe? Because some people are embarrassed to talk about [their involvement with vaporwave] in real life.

Similarly, for Chilled Consumer, remaining anonymous as a producer serves as a way to say "hey, here's some weird music. I'm going to release it out into the world without my

name, without my face ... You can only judge its quality based on the actual product ... it's kind of a safe way to explore the ideas that you're having.”

Elaborating on this point, Chilled Consumer found that especially for producers that have gained a lot of success in the scene, anonymity can be a way to avoid the spotlight particularly during in-person events like ElectroniCON, and even a way to continue to experience things “as a fan,” while becoming more well-known and recognizable could take away the appeal of the “mystery and the kind of like facelessness of ... some weird Internet music coming from some strange person on the web.” Indeed, remaining anonymous appears to lend participants in vaporwave spaces a sense of authenticity, reinforcing Mau and Nicholas’s (2020) observation regarding indie electronic music darlings Ladytron, that “issues of identity and authenticity go further than music and musical performance—they are supported by interactive audiences (both in and outside of the culture industry)” (p. 108). Moreover, vaporwave producers’ resistance to being recognized as well-known figures in the scene aligns with Sterne’s (2013) observations about Muzak, or music programmed for commercial environments like shopping malls and corporate offices, which heavily informs vaporwave’s musical style: “The quest for anonymous or ‘unobtrusive yet familiar’ music animates the entire [Muzak] production process ... background music strives toward anonymity and can thus be understood as the inverse of most industrially recorded and disseminated music” (p. 324). Anonymity thus becomes part and parcel of vaporwave’s strategy of appropriating certain features of “commercial” genres, like Muzak, with a twist of ironic criticism.

Participants also touched on the importance of vaporwave’s visual “aesthetic” to meaning-making around vaporwave, which has contributed to its status as a meme genre.

Indeed, Killeen (2018) describes vaporwave primarily as a “digital aesthetic” as well as an Internet microgenre and meme, noting that the formula for a visual vaporwave meme tends to include “alluring images of 1980s consumer exotica (from soda cans and Pacific sunsets to 8-bit computer graphics of highway strips), frequently saturated in purple and pink pastels, shimmering neon, and retro typography” (p. 626). Ballam-Cross (2021) similarly finds that “distinctive visual imagery is a fundamental part of vaporwave, and indeed this may be part of its success” (p. 79). Futuristic Ecstasy found that Internet and meme culture and the vaporwave genre are inseparable:

I see it as very much a culture birthed by the internet and by meme culture. Vaporwave itself is kind of a meme, with repeated elements across different artists and visual elements. I don't think vaporwave would exist without meme culture. The process of copying/repeating/remixing seems rooted in meme media too.

For Euphoric Aether, the aesthetics of vaporwave have seeped into the broader media landscape in part because of its formulaic nature and adaptability to a wide variety of media texts:

People might not even know the word vaporwave, but there will be vaporwave aesthetics in like, a Drake music video or whatever. And I think this is because vaporwave, like the iconography, the borrowing, is very reminiscent of what a meme is. To a degree you could say vaporwave is a meme. And then we built everything up all around the meme.

For Pink Pepsi, vaporwave's memetic nature has led to numerous offshoots that may not even attract a broad listenership, giving examples like laborwave, or socialist vaporwave, and even gaperwave, or vaporwave music played over clips from gay pornography:

“these are like weird offshoots that I'm not going to say people don't listen to, but they're there to be like, okay, that was the meme.” The idea of coining a vaporwave offshoot ‘for the meme’ also aligns with Milner's (2013) concept of the “logic of lulz,” a style of discourse characterized by ironic detachment, and through which it can often be difficult

to discern between earnest and parodic expressions of, in particular, antagonistic viewpoints.

Indeed, participants discussed how vaporwave's emphasis on visuality, and the borrowing and remixing that takes place in the process of its spread and production, can lead to instances of problematic cultural representations. For example, Visual Sunset has observed images of Asian women being "glamorized" by vaporwavers, which has led her to using her race as a "selling point" for her brand as a vaporwave producer. Indeed, the use of imagery from East Asian (primarily Japanese and Korean) culture in vaporwave, as well as the often indiscriminate and nonsensical use of characters from East Asian languages in album and song titles and even artist monikers, has been well documented by vaporwave critics and scholars as an essential part of vaporwave's commentary on consumer culture and its kitschy aesthetic (Ballam-Cross, 2021; Glitsos, 2018; McLeod, 2018). Some scholars have taken their analysis of these elements a step further, likening their use to a fetishization of 1980s and 90s Japanese consumer culture branded by David Morley and Kevin Robins (1995) as techno-Orientalism, where Japan and often other East Asian cultures are uncritically depicted as figures "of empty and dehumanized technological power...the alienated and dystopian image of capitalist progress" (p. 170).

Scholars have drawn connections between the use of these elements and the larger message that the genre conveys. For Cole (2020), vaporwave's use of techno-Orientalist elements reveals its deep ambivalence toward technology, while for Koc (2017), the use of Japanese text and anime characters, and dated gaming artifacts such as the Nintendo Gameboy, is characteristic of "melancholic nostalgia ... created through an aestheticization of the feelings of estrangement produced by the salient characteristics of

late capitalism” (p. 64). Several participants commented on this dimension of the genre when asked about the cultural elements that they feel have influenced vaporwave. For example, Futuristic Ecstasy found that vaporwave’s use of East Asian imagery represented how the genre grapples with larger societal issues:

In my opinion the reason that there’s this fascination [with East Asian media in vaporwave] is that it’s media which deals with a lot of the problems and disappointments of modernity, not just its specific cultural origin. Recently more Chinese elements have started to be incorporated into the vaporwave scene, and I like that a lot. I get the “cultural appreciation” more than “appropriation” vibe. Vaporwave definitely exists in China, so I think some of the appreciation comes from memes that transcend culture.

Chilled Consumer similarly observed a difference between cultural “appreciation” and “appropriation” in how fellow producers used East Asian imagery and text, though also found that the memetic nature of vaporwave can result in the uncritical use of these elements:

I think there are people who just view it as like, oh, well, that's just what is done. So that's just what I'm going to do. Or it's just their experience of, oh, well, I liked anime growing up, so I'm gonna put some Japanese stuff [in my music]. Or I just want to have some special characters. So I'm just going to grab some Korean text and not really pay attention. And I mean, there's definitely some exoticism going on, you know, it's like, oh, I'm just gonna grab, you know, a picture of a woman from a Japanese commercial or something like that. But I do think there's other artists who pay attention to what they're looking into ... And I do know that there are artists who kind of take the time to learn about what they're sampling.

As a result, participants found that vaporwave aesthetics can be, and indeed have been, adapted for a wide range of identity-based and ideological purposes, which can also bring up tensions around community boundaries and who constitutes part of the “mainstream” vaporwave community. Several participants noted that they were aware of fringe online communities that would use vaporwave imagery for nefarious purposes: Macronight noted that there are “bad areas” of vaporwave where there are “edgelords,” defined as an individual who “anonymously posts material that is intended to shock, provoke, and

offend those who read it” (Nilan, 2021, p. 4). Virtual Sunset similarly observed:

Despite the image of Asian women being glamorized by vaporwavers, the image of other minorities is often denigrated. I have seen vaporwavers posting memes that mock Black culture and the Muslim religion, and often misappropriating words from these cultures. ... I see these memes mostly shared in Discord servers or Twitter accounts. These spaces are normally occupied by like-minded individuals, so they collectively enjoy the racist humor of these memes. Sometimes, outsiders such as myself unknowingly enter these spaces, and are upset by what we see.

Blank Arizona similarly noted that, despite the widespread prevalence of acceptance of minority sexual and gender identities in the vaporwave community, particularly in comparison to other genres like rock and country, there also exists online vaporwave-adjacent spaces that are less tolerant of these identities. He observed that participants in these spaces use memes to spread these ideas, and while they are generally banned, or ostracized, from expressing these views in the vaporwave spaces that he frequents, these activities might still lead vaporwave artists to conceal their identities for their safety:

There's definitely a subculture of very racist, or definitely a lot of homophobic fans which tend to get squashed out. I'm a moderator. I haven't come across it in the Discord I'm in, but there's a reason there are whole sections discussing what is appropriate to talk about, what's inappropriate, what would get you banned. And the memes, yeah, there's a lot of ugly memes out there. And I do think it's kind of a battle because you know, what came first? Do people hide their identity because of the hate or do they stop because of the hate? Or you know, do they come out because of it to try to fight against it? You know, it kind of really just depends on the artist to artist.

Futuristic Ecstasy also pointed toward the ways in which the scene’s online nature might lead to more subtle instances of microaggressions or discrimination, finding that “I think because of the online nature of many vaporwave communities, there are a lot of sheltered people who don’t understand how taxing microaggressions are in day-to-day life for minorities.”

For Gal et al. (2016), memes are a key part of community norm formation in online communities: “The memetic practice is not merely an expression of existing social-cultural norms, it is also a social tool for negotiating them. The relationship between memes and norms is thus twofold: memes both reflect norms and constitute a central practice in their formation” (p. 1700). Far from representing a cohesive stance on how different cultural elements are portrayed within the vaporwave scene, responses from participants at ElectroniCON demonstrate that issues such as memetic uses of imagery and text from different cultures and identities remain complex discussions that are continuously under negotiation by members of the vaporwave community. While this in part reinforces Wilcox and Compton’s (2023) findings that vaporwave musician and fan critiques of critical analyses of vaporwave reveal a “tension between how vaporwave is communicated to the larger public and perceived by individuals who identify as both vaporwave musicians and fans” (p. 65), the sentiments shared by participants in this study also shows that members of the community from a variety of backgrounds are aware of issues that are discussed by a wider public, including both critics and scholars, and are actively making sense of what these issues might mean for both themselves and other members of the community from different identity backgrounds.

Conclusion

This chapter uses the 2023 ElectroniCON music festival, the largest in-person event dedicated to the vaporwave genre, as the backdrop for understanding the social and cultural dimensions of the vaporwave community, how participants define the community and their place within it, as well as how the genre’s online origins shape community interactions, even in in-person spaces. In doing so, it builds on more recent

work on the genre that has moved away from textual and aesthetic-centric analyses that has informed much of the vaporwave literature to date, and instead seeks to understand this subculture through direct interactions with self-identified community members (Lucas-Healy, 2022; Wilcox & Compton, 2023). As Whelan and Nowak (2018) observe with the genre work activities surrounding the vaporwave scene, “the actual people who participate in genre work make up a very disparate and fragmented group with significant differences in levels of visibility and participation over time and across platforms...the appearance of community or ‘groupness’ is attributed on the basis of the digital trace of their interaction” (p. 455). Indeed, even with a relatively small sample size of 10 participants, the individuals I interviewed expressed a wide range of involvement with and participation in the vaporwave scene, though they nevertheless envisioned vaporwave as a cohesive musical community. In particular, they cited similar themes with regard to the online discourse surrounding the festival’s initial decision to include the controversial artist John Maus on the lineup, demonstrating their exposure to the same digital traces that provide that sense of community.

In response to questions about how Internet culture has shaped the vaporwave scene, participants cited vaporwave’s status as a meme genre, the role of irony and authenticity in communication and self-expression within the scene, and the ways in which the affordances of digital environments shape scene interactions, including the importance of anonymity and the ability to block or ignore individuals who express opinions or behaviors contrary to the perceived norms of the scene. Going beyond vaporwave’s classification as an Internet genre by scholars and critics, most prominently Adam Harper (2017), responses from participants demonstrate how deeply these

environments and networks are tied up in their relationship with the vaporwave scene, and how the music and culture of the scene helps them make sense of their own relationship with the Internet. This evolution is well captured by Waugh's (2017) description of the "post-Internet," or the blurring of lines between the offline and online as Internet technologies become more ubiquitous. For Waugh, under these conditions, youth "are at one with virtual environments and digital networks, and these phenomena are intrinsically inseparable from their organic lives and identities. It is not that web users 'escape' into these spaces and systems; rather, they are now so ubiquitous that they must be considered part of the 'real' world" (p. 235). At the same time, participants drew precise distinctions between the ways that the vaporwave community manifests in online versus offline environments.

Previous vaporwave literature has largely understood the audience for this music as a relatively homogenous group (i.e., a largely Anglo-American, or white and Western) (Koc, 2017; Whelan & Nowak, 2018). I come away from this research unable to definitively draw a similar conclusion. During my participation in the ElectroniCON music festival, I observed a diverse crowd of attendees that appeared to represent a multitude of gender and racial identities (though this could be attributed to the fact that the festival was held in New York City, an incredibly diverse urban area). At the same time, the top-billed artists at the festival were decidedly less diverse, which could indicate a potential barrier to participation in this particular space, alluded to by participant Euphoric Aether in their discussion of vaporwave's racial inclusivity. Given the diversity of perspectives on inclusivity in the vaporwave scene represented in this sample, further research on identity-based dynamics in vaporwave communities is warranted, particularly

research that pushes beyond North American geographical boundaries. For example, Mercado Méndez's (2022) dissertation focuses on the perspectives of Caribbean Hispanic vaporwave producers, and reveals a rich Latin vaporwave scene, in which producers employ and adapt vaporwave's language of memetics and nostalgia to craft vaporwave offshoots that reflect their own social and cultural experiences.

Finally, participants described the often-problematic nature of cultural representations in vaporwave, and how they felt the genre's growth into "mainstream" spaces could impact its perception as a "safe space" for individuals with minority sexual, gender, and racial identities. This chapter thus points toward a need for researchers to both deepen and broaden their analytical focus on vaporwave and other Internet genres, and investigate how these scenes are evolving using a community-focused approach. This need becomes particularly urgent when the development of these scenes result in the emergence of more dangerous offshoots like fashwave and Trumpwave, subgenres that take ideologies associated with the alt-right movement and Nazism as their aesthetic and musical inspirations, and which have gained substantial listenerships in part due to their promotion by figures like Richard Spencer (Larsen, 2022; McLeod, 2018).

The following chapter explores the hyperpop genre, specifically how sexual and gender identity is negotiated through discourses about the scene on social media and in traditional media coverage. It highlights the importance of queer and trans identity to narratives about the scene, as well as the complexities of the Spotify hyperpop playlist as the genre's 'origin story.' Finally, it elaborates on a dimension of hyperpop that is understated in media narratives: its close connection with Japanese popular and musical

culture, and the way this influence interacts with expressions of gender identity within the scene.

CHAPTER SIX

SAFE SPACES AND SPOTIFY: EXPLORING SEXUAL AND GENDER IDENTITY IN THE HYPERPOP SCENE

Introduction

I'll admit that I'm very, very protective of the scene. It's very personal to me, it's empowered me so much as a gay person who lives in a terrible place in America. It's brought me so much joy and, after so much criticism and mocking from outside the community, it really just feels like this personal, private, special thing in my life. So seeing all these cishet boys on [r/indieheads](#) who can't fucking handle [100] geqs or treat the whole scene like it's just a meme and ironic, it bugs me.

A 2020 Reddit post on the [r/pcmusic](#) subreddit, dedicated to discussion of one of the most well-known music labels to be associated with hyperpop, PC Music, begins a conversation on the state of the scene's popularity with a title that asserts, "Hyperpop' getting more and more mainstream is probably a good thing." Within the comment threads, users discuss the meanings of loaded terms like "mainstream" and "gatekeeping" as they apply to the hyperpop scene, the implications of hyperpop's exposure to a wider audience via the music's inclusion on Spotify playlists and acknowledgement from music critics, and what that exposure might mean for a scene that they consider a safe haven for the many queer and trans individuals who find comfort in virtual hyperpop spaces.

Hyperpop emerged in the early-to-mid-2010s, though it arguably did not enter the wider cultural consciousness until closer to the end of the decade. While it is difficult, as with most Internet-based music scenes, to nail down a cohesive definition of hyperpop, musically, it could perhaps be most accurately defined as pop music with maximalist tendencies, or a "highly exaggerated and self-referential genre of pop music strongly rooted in internet culture" (Dandridge-Lemco 2020; March 2022a, p. 2; L. Martin, 2023). Indeed, references to early 2000s Internet and popular culture abound in hyperpop's

music and visuals: album and track art as well as artists' social media profiles are replete with the kind of tacky graphic design that is now characteristic of Web 2.0, while the music itself is replete with references to Skrillex, Linkin Park, Eurodance, and even ska (Kornhaber, 2021). High-pitched vocals, frenetic energy, metallic soundscapes, and tracks clocking in at around the two-minute mark or even less are some of the signature musical markers of the genre, with some tracks and artists also displaying a clear influence from hip-hop or metal.

This chapter explores the Internet music genre hyperpop, and its connections to the larger concept of Internet music, through a discourse analysis of the extensive media coverage that the scene has received, as well as public online discussion by scene participants on platforms like Reddit and X. This discourse analysis reveals three main themes around meaning-making in the hyperpop scene: the importance of queer and trans identities to the scene, its resistance to a cohesive definition and resulting characterization as a “genre-less” genre, and the controversial importance of a Spotify playlist in bringing hyperpop into the public consciousness. Finally, this chapter identifies an important, but underexplored, aspect of hyperpop: the mutual interdependence on Japanese popular music and artists to the scene's development. It traces the influence of another Internet music genre that is heavily influenced by Japanese culture, nightcore, to the development and maturation of hyperpop's musical and social features. This chapter thus establishes the connections to hyperpop and Japan's popular music industry that have been largely neglected in popular coverage of the scene.

Background and Methodology

Hyperpop has been shaped over its lifetime by a number of underground artists and smaller net-based record labels, though one London-based label has been particularly influential: PC Music, which was founded by electronic music producer A.G. Cook in 2013. PC Music is cited most often as the harbinger of hyperpop in popular coverage of the genre: shortly after its founding, *Pitchfork* describes how the label “quickly established itself as a home for slick hyperpop production, experimental spins on the future of electronic music, and presentations that inverted consumerism” (Corcoran, 2023). The label achieved this success through marketing techniques such as releasing music under fake aliases, which Cook was known to do frequently, as well as its affiliation with artists that would come to achieve success outside of the strictly hyperpop space, such as the English singer Charli XCX and the late Scottish producer SOPHIE. PC Music’s catalog lacked racial and geographic diversity, however, tending to skew heavily Western-centric, with many signed artists located in New York or the United Kingdom. PC Music’s first and only Black artist, the Stockholm-based Namasenda, announced her departure from the label in 2023, just a few months before the label announced that it would no longer be releasing new music.

To date, perhaps due to its status as a relatively young genre, hyperpop has not been extensively addressed in published academic literature on digital music scenes. Conversations around the genre in academic spaces are beginning to emerge: the 2023 meeting of the International Association for Popular Music in Minneapolis, MN featured an entire panel dedicated to papers discussing hyperpop, wherein all of the papers discussed its complex relationship to queerness and gender identity (IASPM, 2023).

Indeed, much of the academic work that has been done on hyperpop has been pioneered by younger or early-career scholars: for example, a summer research project by an undergraduate student at Bowdoin explored why hyperpop attracts so many queer and trans listeners, and how the music potentially fosters a “queer future-oriented thinking” (Goldfine, 2023). As with other Internet music genres, the historicization and negotiations of meaning within the hyperpop scene (questions as fundamental as: what is hyperpop? Would this artist be considered hyperpop?) has thus occurred mostly through discussions on online forums, including on subreddits dedicated to discussions of the scene, Discord servers, YouTube video essays, and Twitter threads. Not as common is the sheer amount of coverage that hyperpop has received from mainstream media outlets such as *Vice* and the *New York Times*, indicating a general cultural interest in the scene and its development that is lacking in considerations of other Internet music-based scenes, which have not received the same level of coverage, despite arguably exerting the same amount of influence on broader cultural trends.

Therefore, this chapter takes a grounded approach to its considerations of media coverage and online discussions of hyperpop, letting the predominant themes that emerge in these conversations guide the analysis. This chapter theorizes these sites of discussion and meaning-making, informed by Condry’s (2006) use of the term to describe sites of hip-hop performance and participation in Japan, as *genba* (which can be translated from Japanese to “scene” (as in ‘scene of the crime’) or “actual spot”). For Condry, thinking of music scenes as *genba* creates an understanding of “how the forces driving new cultural styles emerge from the interaction among diverse actors—media industries, artists, fans, writers, and so on—in a way that requires grasping the connections (rather than

oppositions) between culture industries on one hand, and creative artists and active fans on the other” (p. 2). This analysis brings the *genba* from the underground Tokyo club or the recording studio to the subReddit, to discern how participants in these digital *genba* form their understandings of hyperpop in an increasingly top-down environment. These discussions foreground three main themes about hyperpop: first, the importance of queer and trans identities to the scene, its frequent characterization as a “genre-less” music genre that resists definition, and the controversial catalyst at the center of hyperpop’s relative “mainstream” exposure as compared with other Internet music genres: the Spotify hyperpop playlist.

This chapter explores the Internet music genre hyperpop, and its connections to the larger concept of Internet music, through a discourse analysis of the extensive media coverage that the scene has received, as well as passive participant observation in public online discussion forums. I ultimately focused my analysis on two of the largest public forums dedicated to discussion of hyperpop, r/hyperpop and r/PCMusic. As described earlier, this study employs virtual “quasi-ethnographic” techniques to interrogate how fans of hyperpop participate in meaning making to build and shape the hyperpop scene across multiple online platforms (Henninger, 2020), particularly its importance as a “safe space” for minority gender and sexual identities. The data collection period occurred across four months in 2023, during which I first engaged in a preliminary period of immersion through unstructured observations of discussions on both of these subReddits (Hine, 2015). Once I had begun to identify the central themes that emerged during this period of observation, I returned to both subReddits and performed keyword searches for threads that contained phrases related to these themes, including “queer,” “trans,”

“Spotify,” and “Spotify playlist.” In doing so, I took a similar approach to Buozi (2019) in his examination of doxxing practices on the r/Serial subreddit: “Far from all subReddit threads can be considered deliberative, or even decent, but as many threads as it took to reach a ‘saturation point’ in determining themes and patterns of discourse were read closely” (p. 364). This resulted in a deep reading of approximately 30 discussion threads spanning from the years 2020 to 2023.

People are informed by their socio-cultural contexts when they read media texts: therefore, any investigations into media discourses must be grounded in the conditions that inform these contexts. Given that hyperpop has received a substantial amount of news coverage compared with other Internet music genres, including from mainstream outlets like the *New York Times*, I contextualized the subReddit comments using material from news articles spanning from approximately the same time period as the Reddit posts (2020 to 2023). In gathering these texts for the discourse analysis, using Google News, I performed searches for recent media coverage of hyperpop, with a particular focus on articles that provided analysis or discussion of hyperpop or specific artists beyond simple news coverage. The search terms “hyperpop” “hyperpop queer,” “hyperpop trans,” “hyperpop Japan” as well as search terms for specific artists whose work is considered more in-depth in the chapter, including SOPHIE and 4s4ki, were used to gather relevant media coverage. In total, I collected, coded, and analyzed 21 articles, defined as written works (either informative or editorial) that appeared in a media publication, and a two-part video essay on YouTube for this chapter.

Analysis

Hyperpop and Queer Identities

Reinforcing the notion established in this dissertation's framework for Internet music, hyperpop serves as an important site for gender and sexual identity play and exploration. Media discourses and online conversations around hyperpop place a strong emphasis on the importance of queer and gender non-binary identities to the scene. As Will Pritchard (2020) notes for *The Independent*, "it's impossible to fully understand hyperpop without considering its Extremely Online context and its significance among LGBTQ+ youth. Many of the genre's key players are trans; queerness and hyperpop have been called 'inseparable.'" In a "starter kit" feature on the genre, *Thrillist* (Bell, 2022) interviewed fan and owner of the Hyperpop Updates Twitter account Bryson Hetzel, who characterizes hyperpop as "probably one of, if not the, most LGBTQ-dominated genres, both in its artists and its fans." Hetzel supports this claim by providing an extensive list of trans and nonbinary artists affiliated with hyperpop, as well as artists, collectives and labels that boast "a lot of [queer] fans, which represents a large faction of listeners."

Social media conversations also reinforce this characterization of the scene as particularly welcoming to minority sexual and gender identities. In a Reddit thread titled "Why is Hyperpop and PC Music so inherently queer?" users explore a variety of reasons for why the scene is so strongly associated with these identities. For several users, the musical and visual aesthetics of hyperpop, described as "flamboyant," "unconventional," and "camp," create a space for a "safer," or even "euphoric" expression of marginalized sexual and gender identities in particular. For example, as one user commented on the thread:

For me personally I think besides the actual sound of the music the aesthetic and topics are usually things that queer people relate to. It's also very flamboyant, dramatic, and aesthetically interesting and not the norm at all. I think through all this there's also a sense of community around hyper pop and it feels more "safe" to express yourself than in mainstream pop. I think the freedom in sound and aesthetic is just so inviting for queer people including myself and it gives me a sense of belonging. I personally think it runs deeper than just the sound.

Others attributed this association to the work of specific artists who have been connected to hyperpop and who publicly identify as gender or sexual minorities, including SOPHIE, Laura Les, a trans woman who makes up one half of the critically favored hyperpop duo 100 gecs, and American singer and songwriter Slayyyter, who identifies as bisexual (Damshenas, 2019). For another Reddit user, "their music allows me to experience extreme facets of myself that aren't necessarily parts I want to (or do) live out, but parts that exist within me in a sort of microcosm. The concepts and personalities their music explores allow me to explore those same facets of myself and my own world." Hyperpop's affiliation and affinity with queer, trans, and gender non-binary identities, expressed through online discourse and reinforced in mainstream media coverage of the genre, continues a long tradition of participation in subcultural production, including in electronic dance music (EDM) subcultures, serving as a means for identity expression for queer people. Both musically and visually, hyperpop also exaggerates pop music's history of "queer sensibility" identified by Hawkins (2015) as pioneered by the gender play of artists like Little Richard. Through its analysis of the various digital *genba* of hyperpop, this chapter thus makes sense of this scene as a digital "queer subculture," identified by Taylor (2013) as a space "where queer feelings, identities, experiences and politics are frequently expressed and negotiated in aesthetic terms: that is, through style," with popular music being a "meaningful" agent of style (p. 194).

The characterization of the hyperpop scene as a safe space for gender and sexual minorities is often focused on particular queer and/or trans artists who are seen as foundational to the development of the scene. Most notable among these figures is SOPHIE, whose affiliation with the PC Music label and collaborations with various hyperpop-adjacent acts has led to her being one of the artists discussed most often in the context of hyperpop and queerness. In addition to the outsize influence on the hyperpop genre described in media and scene participant narratives, SOPHIE, who died during an accident in 2021 while traveling in Greece, has also been described as a “cultural pillar” for the queer community (Hansford, 2022). Though SOPHIE had been producing and releasing music since 2013, it was not until 2017 that she used her voice and likeness in a musical release, in the official music video for “It’s OK to Cry.” The video was widely considered a “coming out” for the musician, though she was quick to complicate this characterization in media interviews, telling *Teen Vogue* that ““I don’t really agree with the term ‘coming out’.... I’m just going with what feels honest”” (Lhooq, 2017). Despite this ambivalence toward her first public expression of her trans identity, SOPHIE’s influence on the hyperpop scene, and her contributions to a sense of the hyperpop community as being a safe space for queer individuals could have been crafted in a very intentional way, as implied by SOPHIE in an interview with *i-D*:

I’ve never really been particularly into karaoke-style performance or a drag race style thing. That’s not an influence on me. I’ve always dreamt of creating some sort of community atmosphere, which is queer, fluid, diverse, genderless, dynamic... I guess I felt like a lot of the culture around club nights in London was very macho when I started doing music. I did want to bring something different, to try and open up a different space for people. (White, 2018)

SOPHIE’s vision for a queer and dynamic musical community reflects what Garcia (2014) observes within the larger history of EDM: specifically, he explores “an

alternate history of sexuality in club culture” for *Resident Advisor* that very much finds its roots in queer communities. In the wake of the mainstreaming of dance music in American in particular, however, many of the main players in these scenes are now “of the straight male variety.” Interestingly, in the Reddit thread in which scene participants try to make sense of hyperpop’s “inherent” queerness, several users make this connection to queer histories within broader club culture, finding that hyperpop created a space where queer DJs could be accepted for a less mainstream style of production: as one user notes, “a lot of hyperpop stems from queer EDM and club DJs in the '00s who were not well received from straight communities due to avant garde and over the top music production”; one user goes even further to argue that electronic music itself is “inherently queer” given that one of the inventors of the MOOG synthesizer was Wendy Carlos, a trans woman. These comments connect to previous academic discussions that document electronic music as a site for expressing queerness and challenging patriarchal forces within electronic music cultures—based on this discussion on the r/hyperpop subreddit, fans imagine themselves as an active part of this history through their participation in and engagement with the scene and music (Manuel-Garcia, 2014; Woloshyn, 2017)

Despite this continued sense of exclusion from mainstream club culture, Manuel-Garcia (2014) finds that “queer dance music scenes continue to thrive today, even if they're mostly off the radar of mainstream dance music media,” in large part because “it's easier for minorities to remain central to a music scene when it's small, local and personal. Once it becomes a massive global phenomenon, it's much harder for marginalized people to stay inside the frame of attention.” As Phillips (2015) argues in her study of online trolling communities, the “mainstream” of culture consists of “tropes

and ideologies born of capitalism and supported by the entertainment industries. The corporate mainstream, in other words, which asserts itself as natural, necessary, and monolithic despite the diversity and fragmentation of concomitant culture(s)” (n.p.). For participants in the hyperpop scene, the predominance of queer and trans artists in the scene, coupled with what they describe as anti-capitalist or anti-consumerist activities of labels like PC Music (whose artists advertise fake products or even take on fake identities), contribute to the scene’s resistance against mainstreaming and commercialization that help it retain its status as a “safe space.” Discussions around hyperpop and queerness on r/hyperpop therefore will often consider how the “mainstreaming” of the genre could compromise this safe space status for queer and gender non-conforming individuals. In the thread from r/PCMusic quoted at the top of this chapter, one user cites the exposure that American online music critic Anthony Fantano has afforded the scene, specifically artists affiliated with the PC Music label. However, the user feels that the increased exposure has resulted in a greater presence of “straight men” into hyperpop spaces. As one user laments,

My concern [with the mainstreaming of hyperpop] is that it's just the latest trend in society stabbing us in the back. Music has a concerning history when it comes to stuff like this. I think it likely will become mainstream but the risk is that it will be at the cost of it becoming a sanitized version of what it is now.

The use of the term “sanitized” in this comment and discussions surrounding the perceived influx of cisgender heterosexual men into the hyperpop space seems to anticipate the same fate that Taylor (2013) observes has befallen other queer music subcultures, wherein “the queer subculturalist’s voice and their cultural products have been subsumed into heterosexual narratives of stylistic resistance and ‘hipness’” (p. 198).

Avdeeff's (2021) study of online reactions to Taylor Swift's 2019 single "You Need to Calm Down" importantly notes how approaches to critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA) tend to be reliant on frameworks of counterpublics and imagined communities—however, this approach can present issues when the idea of what constitutes a "community" becomes complicated because members are scattered across digital platforms. This work on hyperpop aligns with Avdeeff's observation that, in an era when users are often drawn together through platform affordances such as hashtags, online discussion around certain musical artists or genres may not necessarily "demonstrate strong alignment with communities based on counterpublics, the subaltern, and so on" but instead resemble something closer to an "ambient affiliation" that has emerged around shared reception of a media text (p. 91). Slippages can thus occur between the characteristics that scene participants identify when they construct musical imagined communities around Internet music genres, and how well those scenes actually reflect those characteristics. As a user notes in the r/Hyperpop thread on the scene's "inherent" queerness:

A small rant but I think while HP is definitely a queer dominated space artistically, I wouldn't call it inherently queer. Genres evolve, not all the music is about queer identity, the musical style isn't really unique, and while some artists might use it as a way to express themselves, music is subjective and fans can take away very different meanings from something that the artist didn't intend and that isn't wrong. We don't want HP to be an exclusionary club that only a fraction can be part of, that's just going to lead to a faster death.

These slippages could also be reflected in the demographics of the scene: the results of a demographic survey posted to r/Hyperpop in 2023 reveal that 114 of the 262 respondents identify as male and not queer, with several users expressing shock at the results in the comments. However, these results could potentially be a reflection of the

demographics of the platform more so than the demographics of the scene, given that a majority (over 60% as of 2022) of the platform's users identify as male (Statista, 2022). Nevertheless, as this chapter has demonstrated, online discourse within the hyperpop community is rife with frank and open discussion of hyperpop's strong connection to gender and sexual minorities, with frequent contributions from users who identify as such. For Corts (2016), the affordances of individual platforms dictate how identity presentation takes place – “the programming behind each digital platform dictates the sign system, limiting how communication can flow between participants” (p. 114). This open communication is perhaps afforded by Reddit's relatively anonymous nature, requiring posters and commenters to display only a username and an avatar, consisting of several slightly different variations of the platform's mascot, a “genderless alien” named Snoo which serves as a blank canvas upon which users and communities can map themselves (Pardes, 2018).

Discussions taking place in hyperpop's digital *genba* around the importance of gender and sexual identity expression to the scene reflects larger trends around community formation and representation in digital environments. Indeed, the overrepresentation, or increased visibility, of sexual and gender minorities has been observed with other Internet-based music scenes, as this dissertation's analysis of the vaporwave scene also reveals. In Waugh's (2020) work on mumble rap, also known as SoundCloud rap due to the notoriety that underground rap artist gained through the platform, he notes that “the anonymity of the Internet enables ‘individuals to experiment with various guises of their identity such as bodily form and sexuality’ (Elund, 2012), forming a generation increasingly comfortable with queerness and a fluid sense-of-self”

(p. 225). At the same, the ease of entry into the scene, and the increasing amount of attention that hyperpop is receiving from media outlets and critics, raises anxieties about the ability for the hyperpop scene to remain a digital version of what Mann (2016) refers to as an “exilic space” (p. 268), or a space where members of a marginalized community can come together to practice cultural intimacy and participate in the collective defining of the self. As the next section demonstrates, platforms also play a significant role in these anxieties, and potentially impact participants’ abilities to engage in digital cultural intimacy in hyperpop spaces.

Hyperpop: A Genre-less Genre?

I don't know if I wanna die
Hyperpop playlist Spotify
Never knew I'd get this far, just thought I might
You bought all your likes, you got botterflies
Under your skin like botfly
(Fraxiom, 2020)

As Chicago-based hyperpop producer Fraxiom’s playful lyrics for their song “fly with ü” indicate, scene participant and media discourses around the hyperpop scene cite the 2019 launch of the “hyperpop” editorial playlist on Spotify as a defining moment for not only bringing hyperpop into the wider cultural consciousness, but also defining what hyperpop means musically. As of March 2024, the playlist has over 433,000 “likes,” and has also achieved a high level of appeal amongst users of the streaming platform. As one *Vice* article describes it, “according to its main editor, Lizzy Szabo, the playlist has one of the highest save-rates (the number of songs people save to their own libraries) on the entire platform” (Enis, 2020). The playlist has also afforded a greater level of media coverage for hyperpop: the *New York Times* describes the significance of the Spotify playlist, as well as its contributions to the debate around what hyperpop “is,” finding that

the playlist began as a direct response to the online popularity of hyperpop group 100 geecs (Dandridge-Lemco, 2020). As Szabo recounts in an interview for the article, “The fact that so many people were talking about this project inspired us to look deeper and see if there were other artists making music like this that we didn’t know about” (para. 7). The influence of the Spotify playlist in both shaping and measuring hyperpop’s popularity—while not the first instance of the “platformization” of the scene (given that many hyperpop artists initially cultivated a following through SoundCloud, to the point where their work was often referred to as “SoundCloud music” [Simon, 2021])—challenges the notion of hyperpop as an inclusive scene with a low barrier to entry (that is, one that is not predicated on a song’s inclusion on a popular Spotify editorial playlist) and has thus become a point of controversy within the community.

The prominence of the Spotify playlist in discussions around hyperpop has resulted in the perception of an artist’s inclusion in the hyperpop space as a “top-down” process, contrary to the imagined values of anti-mainstreaming and anti-capitalism shared by scene participants. In an article for the independent music journalism site *No Bells*, Press-Reynolds (2022) described hyperpop as “another recent example of a platform-pushed, foisted-from-above label” (para. 9) The article’s interview with hyperpop artist quinn provides the artist’s perspective on how the growth in popularity of the playlist caused it to become a “sort of SparkNotes for industry carpetbaggers. After that initial boom, the labels swarmed and snatched the artists with ‘the most appealing sound,’ quinn told me, and ‘milk[ed]’ the creativity out of them” (para. 11) As Holt (2007) observes, the establishment of “genre networks” in popular music has continuously occurred alongside the professionalization and commercialization of those musics. Discourse also

plays a key role in meaning-making around genre: “Naming a music is a way of recognizing its existence and distinguishing it from other musics. The name becomes a point of reference and enables certain forms of communication, control, and specialization into markets, canons, and discourses” (Holt, 2007, p. 3). Despite, or perhaps because of the Spotify playlist origin narrative, participants in the hyperpop scene, including both producers and fans, have thus exhibited a sense of resistance to the notion of hyperpop as a cohesive genre label.

Members of the hyperpop community also express ambivalent feelings about the genre label. For a series of YouTube video essays titled “Hyperpop Origins” (YouTube essays serve as another important digital *genba*, or site of bottom-up meaning making, for Internet-based music scenes), creator Noah Simon interviewed over 20 producers and scene participants about the history and foundations of hyperpop, to “explore where that term came from, and what it means (if you can even define it) to the people involved in developing that community” (Simon, 2021). In the first of a four-part series of videos, interviewees emphasize the term’s lack of a stable definition: one interviewee referred to the term hyperpop as a “scissor label,” or a term that exists but does not yet have a cohesive definition, while another attributes the lack of genre categorization as a tool for discouraging gatekeeping and elitism within the community. At the same time, interviewees described a sense, particularly in the early days of the scene’s formation, that the hyperpop *community* itself was quite stable and cohesive. Moreover, when asked how to describe the sound of hyperpop, interviewees tended to have a clear and consistent answer: a pop genre with maximalist tendencies. As producer Cosmicosmo describes it, hyperpop asks the question: “how far can you push electronic pop to the

edge of being...annoying?" Importantly, this series of video essays positions community members and hyperpop "insiders" as the ones drawing these genre boundaries.

Despite its apparent lack of explicit genre affiliations or consistent musical characteristics as described by community members, media discourses and online conversations draw clear affiliations between hyperpop and other musical genres, most notably pop and EDM. In an article for *VICE*, which in its title describes hyperpop as a "genre tag for genre-less music," Enis (2020) pinpoints hyperpop as originating from the nightcore scene on SoundCloud, or "a style of pitch-shifted pop remix that's often paired with anime cover art," that now commands millions of views on YouTube. Nightcore's most popular tracks, which can amass millions of views on YouTube take pop hits Cascada's "Every Time We Touch" (2006) and Ian Van Dahl's "Castles in the Sky" (2002), and speed and pitch-shift them up, sometimes, but not always, with additional production elements. Nightcore and hyperpop both represent self-referential genres of pop music that have emerged as a reflection of a disillusionment with capitalism, as well as the influence of online environments, including nostalgia for the Web 2.0 era (Yalcinkaya, 2022). As Winston (2017) notes in her ethnographic exploration of the nightcore scene, the genre's "use of the corporate mainstream, as in accelerationist philosophy, can also be read as strongly countercultural, and the genre's broader relationship with late capitalism is more ambivalent than it may seem on the surface" (p. 6). Hyperpop similarly appropriates elements from mainstream pop music in its production and even in its marketing tactics, while at the same time resisting an easy association with the genre tag.

The notion of genre, specifically the notion of pop as a musical genre, has long been a slippery concept. Holt (2007) points out that the specific cultural and commercial dynamics of popular music, tensions between standardization and originality, and unique forms of production and marketing, contribute to a condition of constantly changing and transforming genre identities and boundaries. At the same time, an increasing interest in musical hybridity has drawn attention away from strict musical categorizations. For Frith (2001), pop music functions as a form of commercially produced music that is accessible to the general public, designed to appeal to everyone, and ideologically is driven by profit and commercial reward. At the same time, pop music is a paradox; it's meant to appeal to all, but also the individual: “[Pop] is not about realizing individual visions or making us see the world in new ways but about providing popular tunes and cliches in which to express commonplace feelings...But to work, pop must do this in sufficiently individualized ways to appeal to us as individual listeners” (p. 96). Online discussions around hyperpop, and the popularity of the Spotify playlist, similarly illuminate this tension between mass and individual appeal: one user on the Reddit thread discussing the “mainstreaming” of hyperpop goes so far as to reject the label given Spotify’s use of it to name the playlist:

At the end of the day, “Hyperpop” is just the name of the genre that Spotify gave a playlist with this music in it. [I don’t know] if I’m the only one who feels this way but with something as abstract as PC music and 100 geecs in the age of the internet being popularized by a corporation really rubs me the wrong way.

For this user, the creation and popularity of the Spotify playlist stands in direct contradiction to the spirit of the music itself—the very spaces that led to the formation of the scene now presenting as a type of “digital entrapment” (Scherzinger, 2019), wherein

the logics of the Spotify platform govern generic boundaries, as well as which artists are contained within those boundaries (and thus, receive more exposure).

Indeed, activities around the development and promotion of the Spotify hyperpop playlist appear to be in direct contradiction with the anti-consumerist and anti-capitalist nature of the scene touted by both observers and scene participants. For example, the *New York Times* covered one controversy, in which the PC Music label founder A.G. Cook did a “takeover” of the playlist, a feature wherein artists, prominent figures in the music industry, and even celebrities will choose songs to be temporarily featured on an editorial playlist. In Cook’s selections for his takeover, members of the community felt that he had pushed out smaller artists who relied on the paycheck and the exposure from the Spotify plays. As the article describes it: “Drawing connections between old and new, as he explained later in a thread on Twitter, Cook added songs by J Dilla, Kate Bush and others—artists that were decidedly not part of the of-the-moment hyperpop universe. The fresh names appeared at the top of the playlist, bumping down many of the regulars” (Dandridge-Lemco, 2020).

Scene members negotiate the existence of the playlist in multiple ways: in a 2021 thread on r/hyperpop titled “i noticed most of the ‘hyperpop’ playlists on spotify are controlled by corporate hands with an agenda...,” posted by a now-deleted account, the user promotes a playlist they created to contrast with said which features both “recognizable artists and a sprinkling of smaller acts.” Amongst users promoting their own music, one comment on this thread points toward both the benefits and drawbacks of the Spotify editorial playlist: “It can be kind of gross how streaming companies guide the scene. At least the nice thing about Spotify’s hyperpop playlist is they do a lot of artist

takeovers. Recently Dorian [Electra] and ALG [Alice Longyu Gao] have done takeovers, and put on some underrated artists.” The involvement of artists perceived as being “closer” to the scene thus makes the playlist takeovers more “authentic,” unless the artist makes decisions seen as compromising the perceived sense of the scene’s inclusivity, as demonstrated by the A.G. Cook takeover. Despite the “gross” intervention of a corporate platform, scene participants recognize the significance of the Spotify playlist to meaning making around hyperpop, and producers and artists like A.G. Cook use the playlist as a means of building their brand, further blurring the lines between notions of authenticity and commercialization.

The rejection of the hyperpop label, and even the claim that hyperpop is “dead” are a few of the strategies used by producers and scene members to retaliate against a perceived digital entrapment, and issues of authenticity that arise as hyperpop gains in popularity. As a 2022 *Dazed* article (Yalcinkaya, 2022), which addresses the supposed “death” of hyperpop, notes:

Almost all of those given the label have grown disillusioned with the term, or grown irritated by its constraints. For example, a press release for 18-year-old hyperpop breakout midwxst’s *Back in Action* EP urged critics to steer clear of the term. ‘He’s part of this group of young kids leading this new subset of music... but he’s definitely not boxed into the hyperpop sound and on his new music he flows beyond the genre,’ it read.

In avoiding or eschewing the “hyperpop” genre label, hyperpop scene participants thus appear to be employing a “defense mechanism” for navigating these complex issues of authenticity, commercialization, and mainstreaming that have long been confronted by members of underground music scenes. Other Internet-based music genres have employed similar strategies. Adam Harper (2019) found that “one popular talking point about vaporwave has been that it is ‘dead,’ in the typical subcultural narrative of an

underground scene killed off by outside observers” (p. 121), an observation made in part in response to the genre’s growing popularity on Bandcamp and the many offshoots of the genre that have emerged since the 2010s.

The rejection of genre categorizations by members of musical subcultures is certainly not new: Gunn (1999) observes this tendency among fans of “gothic” music as the scene emerged from the underground and became associated with commercially successful artists like Marilyn Manson and Nine Inch Nails. At the same time, fans continued to reinforce generic and canonical boundaries through generating “adjectival codes that serve to fix the music in relation to existing and previously signified musics” (p. 44), demonstrating the enduring power of genre categories. While the concept of genre remains crucial for music marketing, platforms like Spotify are nevertheless reacting to the perception that it is less ‘authentic’ to be affiliated with a genre. As music and cultural critic Amanda Petrusich (2021) discusses in *The New Yorker*, streaming services like Spotify are more so basing their sorting of music into playlists based on “vibes,” which she describes as “an idea that’s perhaps even more ineffable than genre, but which also seems considerably more in tune with how and why people listen to music.” As the significance of the Spotify playlist to hyperpop demonstrates, the increasing commercialization of the Internet means that issues around authenticity and subcultural capital such that might have been agitated by a punk band signing with a major record label in the 1970s are now increasingly being defined by the activities of digital platforms, and the ways in which artists, producers and fans respond to those activities.

Cute, But Scary: Hyperpop's Digital and Global Influence

One question often raised in investigations of music on the Internet is the continued significance of place and locality, and whether digital environments and platforms are replacing a clear means of geographical identification within musical cultures, flattening the idea of the local, or replacing locally-based connections with globally networked ones (Allington et al., 2015; Audette-Longo, 2017; Bennett & Peterson, 2004). Hyperpop's status as an Internet genre raises similar questions when considering the cultural influences that have contributed to the scene's development. One critical aspect of hyperpop's formation that has largely been neglected in popular media coverage of the scene³ is the influence of Japanese popular culture in the development of both its musical and paratextual characteristics. While this influence is addressed, it is often done so in a passing or oversimplified manner, or even in a way that plays on cultural stereotypes. For example, in photos from a hyperpop-themed rave taken by *Rolling Stone* (2023), the caption for one shot of an attendee wearing cat ears and fuzzy boots read: "The influence of anime and Japanese fashion was also everywhere. At times, it looked like a petting zoo in Harajuku." At the same time, a rich hyperpop scene has emerged in Japan, with the Western and Japanese hyperpop scenes appearing to influence one another through artistic collaborations.

Music has historically been made sense of using concepts of space and place (Connell & Gibson, 2002). However, attempts to trace the musical genealogy of hyperpop will likely lead to another Internet-based genre known as nightcore. Winston (2017) defines nightcore, which first emerged in the early 2000s, as "the production of

³ With a few notable exceptions, including the detailed coverage of Japan's hyperpop scene by journalist Patrick St. Michel through his blog *Make Believe Melodies*.

hyper-fast dance-pop music with pitched-up vocals...based around tracks lifted wholesale from mainstream pop, rock, and electronic dance music (EDM) time stretched and pitch-shifted upwards, often, but not always, with additional original production” (p. 2). The term was coined by two Norwegian producers who began experimenting with speeding up trance tracks for a school project, and eventually began distributing their music, which was spread on a global scale through peer-to-peer file sharing services like LimeWire (the two producers were profiled by the *New York Times* as the popularity of sped-up remixes began to catapult on TikTok [George, 2022]).

Nightcore’s connection to the foundations of the hyperpop scene has been well-established by both producers and observers—prior to the ubiquity of the hyperpop label, SOPHIE’s music was often referred to as nightcore, while PC Music’s founder A.G. Cook cites nightcore, alongside Japanese pop and Korean pop, as one of the primary influences for the label’s musical style (Arcand, 2016; Live in Limbo, 2016). Indeed, numerous parallels exist between the two genres: both would undoubtedly be considered Internet genres—for Winston (2017), the nightcore scene “blurs the boundaries between its artists and its fans to the point of nonexistence, disseminates its musical commodities almost exclusively online, and both relies upon, and reflects back in its sonic content, the flow of information afforded by the internet” (p. 3). Nightcore and hyperpop productions also tend to focus on augmented vocals, with both tending toward pitching upwards to inhuman, and yet distinctly feminine levels. Winston’s preliminary exploration into the nightcore scene also posits that it might be a more open and welcoming space for female and gender non-confirming artists as compared to other electronic music scenes, bringing to mind SOPHIE’s early vision for what would become the hyperpop scene.

Nightcore and hyperpop's mutual focus on femininity in both their music and paratexts demonstrates an active negotiation of the *kawaii*, roughly translated from Japanese as "cute," shaped by the influence of Japanese popular culture on both of these scenes. An exploration of nightcore on YouTube, a popular platform for consumption of the genre where videos can command tens of millions of views, demonstrates the frequent use of images of characters from Japanese *anime* in its paratextual characteristics. An overwhelming majority of the videos labeled as nightcore, be they individual tracks or compilations, follow a remarkably consistent visual formula: the covers for these videos contain images of feminine-presenting anime characters, often against a brightly colored, abstract background (see Figure 2 for an example). Often, these youthful characters appear to be in romantic or even sexually suggestive situations or postures. Moreover, both genres' experimentations with vocal pitch, as Bell (2016) observes with Vocaloid voice synthesis software, represent potential sites of personal or cultural identity subversion or transgression. Indeed, studies of vocal pitch have shown that:

Higher-pitched voices tend to be associated with femininity and attractiveness, so one key aspect of nightcore is that its vocals are by definition feminized, regardless of the gender of the source material's original singer...Nightcore's manipulation of vocals into something always and invariably feminized questions this, positioning itself as a polar opposite to the wider social default of masculinity (Winston, 2017, p. 8).

In combination with the sped-up tracks and pitched-up vocals, nightcore tracks thus elicit a distinctive sense of youthfulness and femininity: in other words, the *kawaii*. However, hyperpop takes this one step further.



Figure 2. The cover image for a nightcore track uploaded to YouTube features an image of an anime girl. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TiVIFMbwXOc>

As Darling-Wolf (2004) observes, “in Japanese popular culture, changes in gender roles are symbolically linked to Western influence, through emphasis on the fact that women first gained access to education in the Meiji (1868–1912) period of conscious Westernization” (p. 327). In hyperpop, however, this process appears to be a mutual negotiation between Japanese and Western artists. By engaging with Japanese popular culture in numerous ways, hyperpop artists and scene participants are also engaging in a negotiation of the meaning of *kawaii*, in both an abstract and literal sense. Before her death, SOPHIE was rumored to be working on a collaboration with Japanese pop artist Kyary Pamyu Pamyu, whose eccentric music and fashion is strongly associated with the notion of *kawaii* and the Harajuku fashion scene (Tokyo Fashion News, 2011). In the midst of this potential collaboration, the two artists did an interview together for *DAZED* (Denney, 2014), wherein SOPHIE presented Kyary with different objects, including a live octopus, who then decided whether the objects were “cute” or not.

For Yano (2013), the term *kawaii*, particularly its role within the context of the spread of Japanese consumer products and culture across the globe, connotes not only the

cute and feminine, but also the sexualization of young or young-looking women in particular. Miller (2011) similarly finds that the notion of the *kawaii* in the production and imagination of “Cool Japan” excludes complex or creative perspectives from female cultural producers in favor of an ethos strongly influenced by *otaku*, or male geek culture: “Women and girls are contained in Cool Japan ideology and its association with an uncomplicated idea of cuteness, and are not usually represented as shaping, resisting, creating or critiquing Japanese popular culture” (p. 19). While nightcore’s use of images of young women from Japanese *anime* might fit these more straightforward definitions, hyperpop’s use of the *kawaii* on its surface appears to challenge these uncomplicated notions of cuteness, innocence, and girlhood. In a think piece for *The Fader* (2014) that further draws connections between the work of SOPHIE, Kyary Pamyu Pamyu, and the wider hyperpop world, the author describes the two artists as revealing the “deep, dark side of the hyper-cute aesthetic...They bring the seemingly opposite poles of ‘cute’ and ‘creepy’ together,” in part through their “maximalist” take on *kawaii* that arguably destroys it.

Another Japanese artist who has found recognition outside of Japan, 4s4ki (pronounced like the Japanese “asaki”), similarly plays with the notion of the *kawaii* in her work, while media promotion of her work emphasizes its global appeal, representing the simultaneous importance and influence of the global and the local. 4s4ki’s music and presentation as an artist, similar to Kyary Pamyu Pamyu, blend notions of femininity and the *kawaii* with darker elements like violence and struggles with mental health (often in relationship to technology). For example, in FAIRYTALE, a collaborative track with

Australian artist Zheani, 4s4ki blends her signature pink bob and soft singing voice with lyrics like:

Sweet thing
Don't cry
Gonna scream you to sleep
It's a lullaby
Limbs ripped
She's bleeding
Goodbye

Her profile on her official site highlights the success that she has achieved both within Japan and overseas, describing her as “one of the female artists attracting worldwide attention” (4s4ki OFFICIAL SITE, 2024). *Pitchfork*'s review of her 2022 album “Killer in Neverland,” significantly mentioned her inclusion on the infamous Spotify hyperpop playlist since she signed to a major label: “a recent transition to a more abrasive, chaotic production style landed her on Spotify's influential hyperpop playlist and further extended her underground reach” (Miyachi, 2022). At the same time, true to hyperpop's genre-less tendencies, the article discusses how this new album “resists easy definition.” St. Michel (2022) similarly observes in a profile on the artist how, “she became tagged as Japan's hyperpop representative, owing to her love of vocal effects and eagerness to bounce around subgenres. 4s4ki has nothing against this mark, but also never volunteers herself as hyperpop”; rather, the label was “placed upon her, as hyperpop so often is.” 4s4ki's affiliation with hyperpop is thus part and parcel of her overseas success, making the Internet genre akin to Appadurai's (1996) notion of a “mediascape,” wherein digital platforms like Spotify have become essential tools for access to the global cultural flows of hyperpop music.

4s4ki is not the only artist to follow this pattern. Another Japanese artist affiliated with the hyperpop scene, MANON (who sports a girlish pink bob similar to 4s4ki's), conducted an interview with *i-D* magazine about her song "Troll Me," which she procured in collaboration with the group SIX IMPALA (Chito, 2022). MANON cites the discovery of hyperpop pop (specifically through the Spotify playlist) and her collaboration with the global hyperpop group, as enabling her to explore the "dark" side of MANON: "Cute was at the forefront before, when I was producing my music alone, but since I've been collaborating I've also been able to write lyrics about parts other than the introverted 'cute' me."

Overall, hyperpop's relationship to Japanese popular culture, including its play with the notion of the *kawaii*, appears to be far more subversive than its use in its 'parent' genre, nightcore. Japanese hyperpop artists in particular, like 4s4ki and MANON, are engaging with the global dynamics of hyperpop, and expanding this notion of the *kawaii* in a way that reifies and expands the nation's "gross national cool" (a term coined by America journalist Douglas McGray to announce Japan's emergence as a cultural superpower [2002]), though they are doing so within the context of an Internet music genre that is frequently positioned in opposition to commercial music genres like pop, which lends a greater sense of authenticity to these efforts. At the same time, discussions of these artists and the language used to promote their music emphasizes the importance of global exposure through digital infrastructures, such as inclusion on the Spotify hyperpop playlist. This reinforces platform effects such as those observed by Morris (2020), wherein music is treated "not just as songs that need to reach listeners, but as an intermingling of sonic content and coded metadata that needs to be prepared and readied

for discovery” (p. 5). Carfoot (2016) theorizes that the agency that arises from listeners’ explorations of music “emerges through co-constitutive relationships between discovery-as-object and discoverer-as-subject,” which are inextricable from the logics of Western colonial violence and domination (p. 178). He concludes through both theoretical work and interviews with musicians engaging in intercultural collaborations that “global forms of popular music production and consumption—such as those typical of World Music—tend to replicate colonial thinking by positioning non-Western musics as Others to be discovered, and by understanding such discovery as an expression of agency on the part of the music consumer” (p. 185). Rather than falling into this simple Western/Other dynamic, however, Japanese hyperpop artists are engaging in the same rejection of the “top-down” genre labeling dynamic through an ambiguous affiliation with hyperpop.

Conclusion

This analysis of hyperpop contributes to my overall framework for Internet music in a variety of ways. With regards to platform power, the importance of the Spotify playlist to the historicization of the hyperpop genre as well as popular media coverage of the genre speaks to this project’s first research question regarding how infrastructural characteristics of digital environments manifest in Internet-based music scenes.

Throughout the course of the genre’s brief life, hyperpop has evolved from music that was freely distributed via net labels to now having to reckon with the dynamics of its distribution on commercial streaming platforms and the ways in which these dynamics can result in the inclusion or exclusion of certain artists, including artists of color. It also addresses the second research question concerning how the social and cultural dimensions of users’ relationship with the Internet manifest in these scenes, in that the

free expression of queer and trans identities and characterization of hyperpop as a “safe space” for these identities is, for scene participants, highly dependent upon its status as an underground, Internet-based music scene.

Finally, my analysis of hyperpop’s use of Japanese cultural elements demonstrates how processes of transcultural influence and cultural mixing are taking place in Internet-based music scenes and allowing for new ways for scene participants to explore their identities, given the outsize influence of Japanese notions of gender and femininity, including notions of the *kawaii*, on Western hyperpop and vice versa. At the same time, the refusal of the Japanese musicians considered in this chapter to claim the hyperpop label, which reflects an attitude in the scene of hyperpop as a “genre-less” genre label, makes it difficult to trace or attribute those influences in a manner that is consistent with narratives of the “West” and the East Asian “Other.” As a result, while hyperpop has largely been considered in media coverage as a Western-centric genre despite Japan’s outsize influence, a deeper examination into the Japanese hyperpop scene reveals artists exploring their relationship with the *kawaii* and technology in creative new ways. Through a consideration of work by Japanese hyperpop artists, this chapter demonstrated how hyperpop as an Internet music genre represents a complex amalgamation of global influences afforded by digital flows of culture, which at the same time complicates efforts to identify a “local” foundation for the scene.

The final analysis chapter focuses on the phonk scene, a digital subgenre of Hip Hop that is directly inspired both visually and musically by the 1990s Memphis rap scene. The chapter specifically considers racialized representations and discursive patterns used by participants in the phonk scene through the lens of cultural

appropriation, and how these activities can thus be tied to the phenomenon of digital Blackface. It also examines phonk as a genre of global Hip Hop that is rapidly growing in popularity on the TikTok platform, and considers how producers are also expanding phonk's use of cultural referents beyond Memphis to form new creative possibilities for the genre.

CHAPTER 7

THE END OF THE UNDERGROUND? RACIAL IDENTITY AND HYBRIDITY IN PHONK

Introduction

As this research has demonstrated, Internet-based music scenes are increasingly moving beyond the communities where they developed, and entering the wider cultural consciousness through mainstream media coverage and spread across platforms. A November 2022 article in *Billboard* highlighted one such genre, phonk, that is commanding millions of likes, streams, and other forms of engagement on Spotify and TikTok, and which was prominently featured on the soundtrack for the tenth installment of the *Fast and Furious* franchise (Leight, 2022). This chapter explores phonk, commonly defined as a genre of alternative Hip Hop⁴ and a digital revival of 1990s Memphis rap music, as a genre of Internet music, and how processes of cultural/identity borrowing and mixing take place within this growing global music community. Musically, phonk can be characterized by the use of samples from Memphis trap and other Hip Hop genres that are then chopped and screwed (a deejay technique characterized by slowing down Hip Hop tracks and applying mixing techniques such as record scratches), and mixed with samples from genres like jazz to create a new sound (Anand, 2020). The online phonk scene initially proliferated on SoundCloud, where it was commonly associated with other alternative subgenres of Hip Hop, such as cloud rap,

⁴ How to stylize the name of the genre and musical culture has been the subject of debate in Hip Hop studies. I use the spelling “Hip Hop” throughout this project, which for Iglesias and Harris (2022), who successfully advocated for the official spelling to be changed with the American Psychological Association (APA), represents how “Hip Hop is an African diasporic phenomenon not bound by space and time and is made up of a collective consciousness from global cultures. Hip Hop is a culture” and a proper noun, and is thus capitalized as such (p. 124). I retain any alternate spellings in quoted material.

a hazy fusion of trap and lo-fi Hip Hop. In recent years, the genre has become popular on various other digital platforms, including TikTok, resulting in more mainstream exposure and the creation of countless offshoots, most prominently drift phonk, where the music is played over stylized footage of street racing and drifting cars. Phonk's increased popularity has also served as a catalyst for a growing number of in-person events, including The End of Underground tour in North America organized by Ryan Celsius, an influential phonk producer whose work will be discussed in-depth later in the chapter.

This chapter pays particular attention to how racial representations occur within the digital phonk scene. While the characteristics of phonk's paratexts illustrates the general tendency toward cultural mixing and hybridity in Internet music trends like vaporwave and chillwave (Trainer, 2016), what has remained less explored by scholars studying these genres are the implications for how different identities, in particular racial identities, are portrayed in these scenes. This chapter examines this question of racial identity and appropriation through the lens of phonk, significant given that phonk production is largely animated by the use of samples from Hip Hop, a genre that itself continues to grapple with questions of cultural and racial essentialism. At the same time, phonk's status as a genre of global Hip Hop, given its growing popularity in countries like Russia and Brazil, complicates clear-cut notions of power and race relations that have typically been used to examine instances of cultural appropriation in popular music. The remainder of the chapter thus examines the work of phonk producer Ryan Celsius to explore the ways in which phonk's hybrid mixing opens up new potentials for global Hip Hop and Internet music.

Background

What is Phonk?

Phonk's close association with digital music streaming platforms like SoundCloud, Spotify, and TikTok, its underground nature, and general lack of an in-person scene puts it in good company with other Internet genres. Moreover, phonk employs a similar method to other Internet genres of mashing up a variety of cultural elements in both the music and the scene's paratexts, resulting in an eclectic pastiche (McLeod, 2018). At the same time, phonk is both musically and visually strongly informed by the 1990s Memphis rap scene and Hip Hop culture more broadly. Producers will mix the woozy, ambient beats of their tracks with sounds that signify gang violence, such as gunshots or iconic quotes from the *Scarface* films, which might then be followed by a clip from a Reefer Madness-era educational film in a tongue-in-cheek reference to the weed culture that is quintessential to phonk. In terms of its paratextual characteristics, phonk incorporates a mix of visual elements that borrow from both the original Memphis rap era and other nostalgic cultural ephemera, like *The Simpsons* and *He-Man*.

While the term "phonk" and the Memphis rap revival were initially associated most prominently with Black American artists like Lil Uzi Vert and SpaceGhostPurrp during the advent of the genre in the late 2000s, many of the most well-known producers who have emerged on the scene in recent years are from a wider variety of racial and geographic backgrounds. The work of this new generation of phonk producers is rising in popularity on social media apps, most prominently TikTok, where the #phonk hashtag commanded over 5.4 billion views in 2022 (Monaghan, 2022). Many of the most well-known phonk collectives (collaborative groups of producers that generally tend to guide

phonk listenership), including two that will be discussed in-depth in this chapter, HOLY MOB and Always Proper, are made up of mostly non-Black artists. This demographic trend appears to persist with up-and-coming artists: for example, in an article for *Hunger* titled “Meet the elusive teenage TikTokers leading music’s ‘phonk’ explosion,” Jolley (2023) highlights a group of producers who appeared at a Phonk Nation party in Amsterdam, meant to showcase both popular and emerging artists in the scene, and who are credited with increasing the awareness of the genre in the cultural mainstream. A search of the featured artists’ public-facing web presence reveals that there were no Black producers in the lineup for the event, nor were any featured in the article. The racial makeup of popular phonk artists has informed wider perceptions about race and whiteness in the scene: for example, a 2023 thread posted to r/memphisrap asks “Is phonk just gentrified memphis rap?” with the user who posted the thread observing that the majority of phonk artists are “pasty suburban white kids calling themselves ‘playas’ and ‘thugs.’”

Phonk producers are heavily reliant on references to the 1990s Memphis rap scene in shaping the visual and musical characteristics of the genre, its other paratextual characteristics (including song titles and social media handles), and even the language that scene participants use to communicate with one another. Memphis has solidified its place as a significant geographical site in Hip Hop history, and popular coverage of the scene’s history provides important context for the modern day phonk scene’s aesthetics. Memphis rap and by extension, phonk, are strongly informed by a sense of place. Niewiadomska-Flis (2022) observes that the slow tempo of chopped and screwed music that typifies the Memphis rap style “resonated with the hot and humid climate” in the

South (p. 313). For MacAdams (2019), early Memphis rap was “lo-fi music from an embattled city made for—and by—people on the margins.” The music was often produced in bedroom studios, lending a DIY feel to the music which was typically released on cassette rather than on CD or vinyl and distributed directly from the artist to their fans.

Most of the rappers who started their careers in the 1990s Memphis rap scene never saw mainstream success, with the exception of a handful of artists, most notably Three 6 Mafia, whose song “It’s Hard out Here for a Pimp” won an Academy Award for Best Original Song in 2006. Memphis rap has also been characterized by its use of occult and Satanic imagery, as well as imagery and audio from classic horror movies, hence the frequent use of the term “horrorcore” to refer to this particular dark and violent brand of Hip Hop. Terich (2021) explains this parallel between Hip Hop and the horrific as resulting from the specific environment in which the music was produced:

To put the menacing, gritty sound of ’90s-era Memphis rap in context, the city was in the midst of one of its worst eras for crime, with 198 homicides occurring in 1993. The harshness and violence of the music—rendered in unmixed, unmastered tape-hiss fidelity—was sometimes exaggerated via use of occult imagery and a penchant for shock value.

Memphis rap’s revival is said to have begun in the early 2010s, with Floridian rapper and producer SpaceGhostPurrp at the helm.⁵ Widely considered the “father” of Soundcloud rap and phonk, SpaceGhostPurrp popularized the use of the term “phonk” and worked

⁵ In December 2023, SpaceGhostPurrp commented on his involvement with the formation of the phonk scene on X (from an account that has now been suspended), responding to a post that contained a screenshot of a Spotify playlist titled phonk origins featuring a track from white producer Lil Ugly Mane: he wrote “Yall white people always fucking up black american culture with yall cap ass shit yall be saying...n— lost they lives behind this type of culture yall be cappin on, Phonk is from Memphis.” His post not only identifies issues of cultural appropriation that animate discussions around race in phonk, but also reinforces the genre’s ‘authentic’ geographical origins, which his post implies that the current generation of producers cannot access.

with well-known Memphis rap acts like Juicy J, demonstrating the deep connection between phonk and the original Memphis scene. SpaceGhostPurrp was a controversial figure during his heyday and remains a sort of a pariah in the Hip Hop world: a 2018 *Daily Beast* article on the rapper describes him as “now virtually unreachable, isolated in Miami without a cellphone, hawking beats for \$10 and tweeting out bitter missives on a series of now-suspended accounts” (Hitt, 2018). Many of the more prominent figures in the phonk scene now consist mainly of producers rather than emcees, who often remain either completely or partially anonymous. For example, a 2022 *Billboard* article on the rising phonk scene highlights Los Angeles-based producer Kordhell, who had recently become one of the 500 most popular artists on Spotify thanks to breakout hit “Murder on My Mind,” and who wears a leather mask that completely conceals his face in all marketing and promotional photos (Leight, 2022). These producers are also scattered across the globe, hailing from Canada and the US, Brazil, Russia, and Ukraine.

Cultural Borrowing and Appropriation in Hip Hop

Considerations of racial dynamics and racial essentialism in the scholarly literature on Hip Hop have been extensive (Condy, 2006; Harrison, 2009; Hess, 2005; Perry, 2004; Rodriguez, 2006; Rose, 2008). Hip Hop holds a contested status in scholarship on the genre as either strictly a Black American musical tradition, or as a hybrid genre which arose from, and has taken its current form as a result of, an amalgamation of cultural influences. Perry (2004) staunchly argues for the former, finding that “hip-hop music is Black American music. Even with its hybridity: the consistent contributions from nonblack artists, and the borrowings from cultural forms of other communities, it is nevertheless black American music” (p. 10). Hess (2005) points

out, on the other hand, that critics of Perry's position have privileged Hip Hop's hybridity and "multicultural involvement," including on the part of the genre's female and Puerto Rican pioneers (p. 375), to push back against the notion that Black identity is essential to Hip Hop practices. While Hess acknowledges how notions of authenticity in Hip Hop are closely tied to Black American identities and experiences, with the emergence of white rappers like Vanilla Ice and Eminem, notions of authenticity to the Hip Hop 'ethos' have also been used to claim a place in the Hip Hop scene. However, given Hip Hop's history as a genre that resists dominant social and cultural forces, audiences and emcees alike recognize how whiteness continually acts as an appropriative force, particularly in the US context. Accordingly, "white artists after Vanilla Ice have shown a more critical awareness of both their whiteness as a minority position within the music and of rap history" (Hess, 2005, p. 373). Rodriguez's (2006) fieldwork similarly demonstrates how white members of a local Hip Hop scene in Massachusetts "use hip-hop to position themselves in relation to their peers as savvy cultural insiders who are smoothly moving through a cultural milieu of blackness. Put more sociologically, scene members use hip-hop as a mode of distinction" (p. 664). These scholars have thus established how Hip Hop can be used by white participants in particular as a means to establish cultural capital in these particular contexts.

Instances of cultural borrowing and appropriation, particularly with regard to racial representations, can be particularly difficult to unpack in music, given its "apparent status" in scholarship as a nonrepresentational medium (Born & Hesmondhalgh, 2000, p. 8). However, unfettered musical borrowing has important implications for a "splitting" of identities, particularly when white artists borrow from Black ones, as Hesmondhalgh

(2006) argues in his analysis of sampling in Moby's 1999 album *Play*, which makes heavy use of samples from Black performers and styles like gospel and blues. These instances of borrowing "indicate an escalation of 'difference, power, control, ownership and authority'" and ultimately politicizes practices that the artist "could once claim more innocently as matters of inspiration, or as a purely artistic dialogue of imitation and inspiration" (Hesmondhalgh, 2006, p. 55). Moreover, these practices can lead to "diminutive" and "caricatured" depictions of those cultures that are borrowed from (Hesmondhalgh, 2006).

Examinations of the imagery and aesthetic elements used by producers in this scene thereby raise questions about racial representation and cultural borrowing within the phonk scene, and whether the activities of white phonk producers in particular can be tied to the phenomenon of digital Blackface, or what Lauren Michele Jackson (2017) defines as "the relative anonymity of online identity to embody Blackness" (n.p.). At the same time, unlike the Hip Hop scenes and artists discussed in the previously mentioned literature, though phonk artists are placing themselves within the context of US Hip Hop history through the association with Memphis, phonk largely lacks a physical or local space through which to contextualize these instances of appropriation or borrowing. As phonk has grown on a global scale and produced a myriad of offshoots, it has moved beyond a simple appropriation of Memphis rap aesthetics to a more hybrid musical form that pushes this genre far beyond its geographical "roots," and thereby brings considerations of racial representations within the phonk beyond the US context that often informs conversations about race in rap and Hip Hop.

Methodology

Similar to Stevens' (2021) synthesis of visual and discursive data to examine Blackfishing practices among Instagram influencers, this chapter takes a two-pronged approach to its critical analysis of the phonk scene, its general characteristics, and its examination of the dynamics of racial and cultural representation within the scene. It considers both the scene's paratextual characteristics, as well as a discursive analysis of the language used by scene participants, including producers, on social media. My analysis of the scene's paratextual characteristics considers album art, imagery used on producers' social media platforms, and any other visual or textual characteristics of the genre outside of the music itself, to examine how phonk engages in representations of Blackness and Hip Hop culture. Hiller and Barnes (2020) emphasize the importance of paratexts to analyzing the political and cultural ideologies of scene participants in their work on extreme right wing ideologies in Australian black metal: "Using paratextual analysis and readings of their song lyrics and interviews, we capture and understand what ideologies are held by these artists and how these are communicated to and received by fans...through music, coded language and symbols, and [performers'] personae" (p. 39). Such a strategy is even more crucial in an analysis of a digital music scene, given how the relative anonymity that these spaces afford means that a performer's public persona may be entirely limited to the digital avatars they use on Spotify, or images that they post on their Instagram feed.

As Moussa et al. (2020) emphasize, digital texts like memes are multimodal, in that "they mix verbal text, visuals, hyperlinks, and hashtags through an endless process of reappropriation, imitation, and readaptation" (p. 5922). For Kanjere (2019), discourse

analysis of online comments are a particularly productive way to critically understand how race, and in particular whiteness, is reproduced in online environments, given that they “offer an opportunity to observe discussions of political issues in a fairly every-day and semi-anonymous environment. Online forum comments responding in particular to questions of race enact white power, privilege and even oppression” (p. 2156). My analysis of phonk thus also privileges the discursive characteristics of this digital music scene alongside its visual characteristics not only to paint the fullest possible picture of the phonk scene, but also to develop a critical perspective on how race is portrayed and/or performed by scene participants.

To collect my digital data points, I began by exploring the online spaces affiliated with prominent phonk producers and collectives who are currently active in the scene, including HOLY MOB, DJ Smokey, Soudiere, Von Storm, and others (relying on both my personal knowledge of the more influential producers in the scene as well as relative follower counts for this exploration). My analysis focuses on these artists’ presence on X and Instagram in particular, given the former’s focus on text-based discourse and the latter’s focus on visuality. When exploring these spaces, I first engaged in a “long, preliminary soak” period to further familiarize myself with the scene and find similar producers and artists whose work is explicitly labeled as phonk, until the same themes begin to emerge and saturation has been reached (Hall, 1975). As Steiner (2016) observes, through the process of the long soak, media analysts “need to ‘hear’ (must learn to hear) recurring appeals in different contexts, to recognize repetition. Placement, treatment, tone, stylistic intensification, striking imagery are all ways of registering emphasis” (p. 104). Similarly, I identify the themes and motifs that consistently reoccur

in phonk's paratexts . In my exploration of digital phonk spaces, I built an archive of through screenshots of these digital data points that I revisited as I constructed the overall themes of racial representations and hybridity.

Analysis

Three key themes emerged from my analysis of cultural and racialized representations in the phonk scene: 1) phonk producers are informed by the Memphis rap scene and incorporate these cultural elements in phonk's paratexts, while at the same time the digital scene lacks a "local" site, resulting in Memphis becoming a floating signifier; 2) white phonk producers frequently display an emulation of the "gangster"/Hip Hop lifestyle through phonk's paratexts and phonk producers' social media presence (representing the most direct connection to Jackson's [2019] definition of digital Blackface); and 3) white phonk producers also engage in instances of linguistic Blackface in discourse around phonk on social media as well as in phonk paratexts, including song and album titles. These characteristics have informed discussions of racial representations in the online discourse surrounding the scene. Finally, this chapter identifies phonk as an increasingly global genre, and engages with the work of phonk producer Ryan Celsius to unpack the inherent hybridity of the genre as it emerges from the underground.

Phonk's Homage to Memphis Rap

Both musical and visual influences from the 1990s Memphis rap scene are highly prevalent in phonk's paratexts. For example, phonk producers frequently use "666," a number commonly associated with the devil in Christianity, in reference to the Memphis rap scene's Satanic aesthetic: in addition to countless song titles that contain the "number of the beast," several phonk producers use "666" in their social media handles, including HOLY MOB producer Markitan. Phonk producers DJ Smokey, Soudiere and NxxxxS's

collaborative EP titled *Trip Thru Hell* and Soudiere’s songs “Devil’s Son” and “Seeing Demons” from his *Out of Time* EP all demonstrate the influence of 90s Memphis rap’s Satanic aesthetics on modern-day phonk, albeit without the same urban backdrop. Phonk producers have continued to embrace this homage to the horrorcore aesthetic even as the

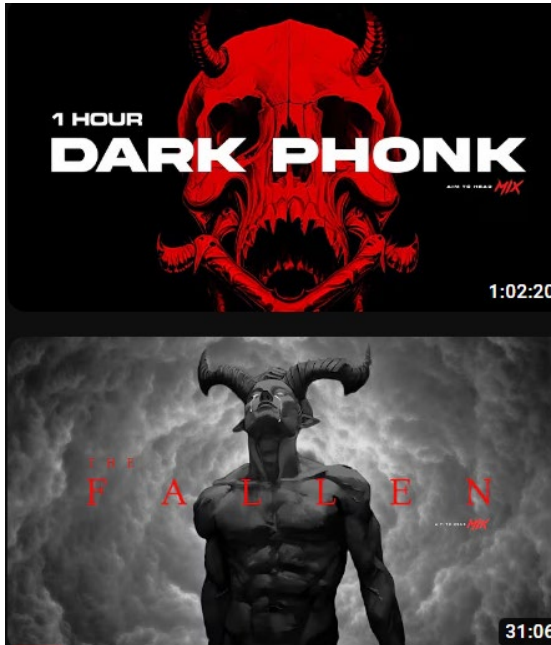


Figure 3. Cover images from dark phonk mixes uploaded to YouTube feature Memphis rap-inspired imagery. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/@aimtoheadmix1915>

genre grows in notoriety. Algerian phonk producer Dxrk ㄨㄣ, whose music was featured on the *Fast and Furious* “Drift Tape,” collaborated with producer RAIZHELL on a song called “Devil Ride,” and was also approached by English singer Sam Smith to do a remix of their song “UNHOLY” (Spotify, 2023). These kinds of images and themes are even more prevalent in an offshoot of phonk referred to by fans

as “dark phonk,” which, as the name implies, tends to feature darker subject matters more prominently in its music and paratexts, including depression, suicidal

behavior, and violence (Figure 3).

Similar to the collaborative nature of the Memphis rap scene, phonk production is shaped by the presence of collectives, or groups of artists who frequently collaborate with one another and release joint singles and mixtapes. HOLY MOB (stylized in all capital letters), perhaps the most well-known example of one of these collectives within the

current phonk landscape, was formed in late 2016 by a group of Brazilian phonk producers, though its membership has evolved to represent artists from the United States and Europe. A comparison between the aesthetics used by the HOLY MOB collective in their music's paratexts, particularly the album covers for their mixtapes, shows that they borrow much of the visual characteristics from 1990s Memphis trap artists like Three 6 Mafia. Indeed, many phonk producers borrow aesthetic elements from these artists, such as the DIY style of design used on these album covers.

The aesthetic inspiration for these covers stems from graphic design company Pen and Pixel, which has designed many of the iconic album covers for rappers from the American South. As the company boasts on its website: "The bling-encrusted lettering. The outrageous photos superimposed on lavish backgrounds. The wild colors. There's no denying that Pen & Pixel covers are one of the defining elements of American '90s hip-hop" (Pen & Pixel, 2019). Indeed, a comparison between *HOLY MOB VOLUME 1* (the first of the collective's collaborative mixtape) and Three 6 Mafia's *The End* (Figure 4) reveals a number of parallels and stylistic inspirations. Both covers prominently display the album title in bright, arched text, and reflect an outer space theme, a common motif in Southern Hip Hop specifically. The astronaut on the cover of *HOLY MOB VOLUME 1* even takes a similar stature as the members of Three 6 Mafia, while the Styrofoam cup makes reference to consumption of lean associated with the Hip Hop lifestyle (to be discussed further in the following section).



Figure 4. A comparison between the album cover art for HOLY MOB’s *Volume 1* (2017) and Three 6 Mafia’s *The End* (1996).

Phonk’s taking its visual and paratextual inspiration from the 1990s Memphis rap scene is reflective of Internet music scenes and their general tendency for re-appropriation and mixing of cultural materials—for example, multiple scholars have observed vaporwave’s use of imagery from 1980s and 90s consumer culture, which is reminiscent of the techno-Orientalist anxieties that surrounded Japan’s economic rise to power during that same time period (March, 2022; McLeod, 2018). In addition to its visuals, this tendency to borrow from Memphis rap can also be observed in phonk’s musical characteristics. A review of songs tagged as “phonk” on the sampling directory website WhoSampled.com shows that current phonk producers draw from rappers and groups integral to the development of Memphis rap, including DJ Squeezy, Juicy J, Project Pat, DJ Paul, Tommy Wright III, and many others (WhoSampled, 2024).

Importantly, phonk’s taking direct inspiration from these artists is also reflective of the Hip Hop tradition of sampling. As described in the mini-documentary *WELCOME TO HELL: The History and Influence of MEMPHIS RAP*, Memphis producers engaged heavily in sampling practices while rejecting the traditional rules established in Hip Hop—producers would loop samples from horror movies, and mash those up with soul

samples, synth melodies, and other cultural texts to create their sounds. That artists would continuously sample and re-sample each other's music, which sometimes would lead to conflicts and accusations of theft, was part of what led to the gritty sound. Memphis rap was highly DIY in both its production and distribution, a culture that translates well to the bottom-up structure of the SoundCloud platform, where the phonk scene initially proliferated (Turismo, 2018). Indeed, given the environment in which this music was produced, Memphis rap sampling practices align well with what Self (2002) observes as the drawback of considering sampling practices outside of its historical and cultural roots: "evaluating sampling in a scholarly framework of Western artistic movements and ideals fails to recognize it for what it originally was: a folk tradition that emerged from the shared experiences of economically disadvantaged minorities" (p. 352).

As Hip Hop has expanded outside of this tradition, sampling remains a ubiquitous practice within the genre, and holds a particular significance for Hip Hop as both a technological and cultural practice more broadly. As Swiboda (2014) observes, "in African American and African-derived contexts...quotation connotes vernacular signifyin(g)," a term that scholars of Hip Hop have used "to describe the many vernacular figurations that can be found at work in all the elements of hip-hop" (p. 4). Indeed, signifyin(g) draws attention not only to the technological significance of sampling practices, "but also to the materially and technologically inscribed cultural and historical forces at work in acts of signifyin(g)" (Swiboda, 2014, p. 4). Nevertheless, sampling remains a fraught issue in Hip Hop (Sewell, 2014), particularly as the genre has gained a great deal of commercial success, with near-constant lawsuits between producers and record labels disputing the use of uncleared samples.

As with other Internet genres, phonk presents a low barrier to entry for potential producers, which can in part be tied to the development and increasing sophistication of sampling technologies and the ease with which they can allow for entry into these scenes. As Jones (2009) describes it, technological advances such as “the digitization of recording and compression of songs twinned with the internet,” as well as “computerized sampling and personal computing allowed recording and mixing at a fraction of the cost of professional studios, removing the distinction between producers and consumers and enabling new forms of creativity” (p. 111). YouTube videos featuring tutorials on creating phonk beats abound, while users trade advice on production and sampling techniques on the subReddit r/Phonk. As a result of this musical saturation, many of these producers will avoid any legal attention, given their low listenership. However, as phonk continues to achieve mainstream notoriety, it is likely that more opportunities for monetization will present themselves to the most prominent phonk producers, as well as the artists they sample, provided appropriate credit is given. Leight (2022), for *Billboard*, illuminates this possibility for drift phonk in particular, and reactions from two of some of the most oft-sampled Memphis rap figures, DJ Paul and Kingpin Skinny Pimp:

Because many of drift phonk’s most successful producers are based thousands of miles from the source of the samples that animate their work, they may have little understanding of Memphis hip-hop lineage — or of the lines they are sampling. But DJ Paul and Kingpin Skinny Pimp, at least, have said they are happy to be poached from. Phonk’s recent popularity has offered both a new source of income and a new source of exposure: The two are often credited as featured vocalists on tracks with hundreds of millions of streams.

This section of my analysis of phonk has sought to illuminate how phonk producers drive an immense amount of aesthetic and musical inspiration from the 1990s Memphis rap scene. As the above quote demonstrates, this derivation holds significance

for questions of appropriation, and who benefits from these appropriations, in the digital age as phonk becomes more popular. For example, while Hesmondhalgh (2006) discusses the complexities of providing proper credit and compensation when a musical sample becomes farther removed from its source material—as is the case with *Play*—he nevertheless identifies that “accreditation is a vital part of the ethics of these cases” (p. 72). As this *Billboard* article acknowledges, as phonk exits the “underground” and increasingly enters the “mainstream,” the issue of copyright, credit, and monetization is one that observers will need to pay increasing attention to.

Moreover, by taking aesthetic and musical inspiration from the world of 90s Memphis rap, many phonk artists are drawing on a specific local imaginary that they have most likely never experienced for themselves. Memphis rap thus becomes a floating signifier, or a “signifier without a specific signified”—a symbol of a place that at the same time can have multiple meanings imposed onto it (Buchanan, 2018). Ryan Celsius, discussing the significance of Memphis rap to phonk during an interview, describes how references to Memphis as a sense of space, or place, is mixed by phonk producers with other musical elements to create an “experimental” genre:

Phonk in general is such a community created thing ... It's one specific sound that's like, part of the joke almost. You can say it's inspired by Three 6 Mafia, Memphis, Houston, chopped and screwed, DJ Screw, these people are definitely influences on many of the sounds within the genre but not all of them. These combinations, we fuck with it and we might add some more shit ... There's some of what I like to call dirt, like gritty Memphis phonk, where all of the 808s are completely distorted out to mimic the feeling of being in a car where the motherfucking trunk is about to pop off! In the context of this experimental genre, you can do those things ... So phonk will have things like that inter-spliced within it. These ideas of like, let's distort this shit for the sake of putting you in a space. (The-Re-Up Podcast, 2024)

As D’Errico (2015) observes with the development of the dubstep scene, and how the “bleak, alienating” London suburb of Croydon served as the perfect backdrop for the composition of this dark subgenre of electronic music, Memphis serves as an affective structure of feeling for phonk producers (p. 7; Appadurai, 1996). Phonk participants can similarly, then, treat Memphis rap “as a simultaneously physically localized and eternally reified national style,” even if they have never experienced this local for themselves. Just as dubstep artists and audiences contrast the “Croydon Sound” with the “watered-down imitation” of American dubstep, Memphis rap “thus becomes a frozen monument, not necessarily dead, as it is eternally embalmed as a ‘national’ style within the transnational network” of phonk (D’Errico, 2015, p. 9).

Phonk’s Emulation of the “Gangster” Lifestyle

An analysis of the social media profiles of the most active phonk producers finds that white producers will often put on visual display an aspirational lifestyle associated with commercial Hip Hop artists in particular, of frequent consumption of recreational drugs, and ownership of weapons, and other forms of criminality (Rose, 2008). For example, French producer Soudiere, who has nearly 25,000 followers on Instagram, often makes allusions on social media to his consumption of purple drank, or lean, a mix of prescription strength cough syrup containing codeine and soda. Lean has been associated with Hip Hop culture for decades: as Tettey et al. (2020)

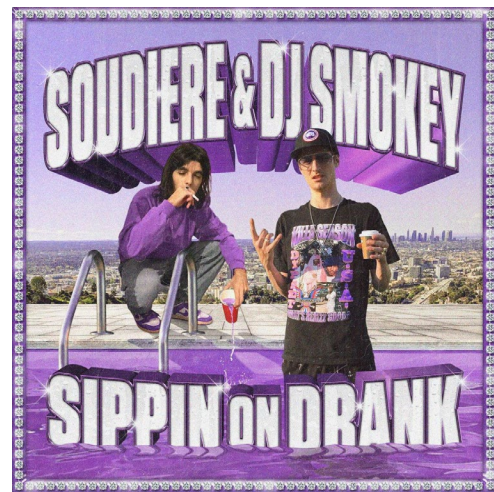


Figure 5. The art for Soudiere and DJ Smokey’s collaborative track Sippin on Drank. Source: <https://soundcloud.com/youngpirelli/sippin-on-drank-w-dj-smokey>

observe, Memphis rap group Three 6 Mafia’s 2000 track “Sippin On Some Syrup” was



Figure 6. The Spotify cover photo for phonk collective Always Proper. Source: <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/5nMugxt e2CoyjoKiakdb8S>

the first mainstream song to focus on the use of lean. A collaborative track between Soudiere and Canadian phonk producer DJ Smokey, “Sippin on Drank,” leans heavily into this theme of lean consumption—the blinged-out, Pen & Pixel-inspired track art features the producers sporting woozy-looking facial expressions while imposed in front of a pool filled with the purple liquid (Figure 5). Phonk producers’ use of this theme in song imagery, titles, lyrics, and on social media thus promotes and glamorizes what Tettey et al. (2020) find to be a serious public health challenge, part and parcel of the opioid epidemic, that has resulted in adverse health consequences and even death.

Emulation of the Hip Hop ‘lifestyle’ (Rose, 2008) can be additionally found on display on these producers’ social media profiles. DJ Smokey, who has almost 43,000 followers on his Instagram page, has posted photos of himself on his Instagram wearing a ski mask and a grill whilst brandishing various types of weapons, including a crossbow, a

shotgun, and what appear to be automatic weapons. References to drug use are also frequent on Smokey's social media: he can often be seen holding up gallon-sized Ziploc bags filled with marijuana in his posts, and has openly discussed in media interviews how his college career ended after he was caught with a quarter pound of weed on campus (No Jumper, 2016). Smokey has achieved significant success in the phonk scene and is one of the names that emerges most frequently in discussion of phonk: his SoundCloud page has almost 90,000 followers, and he frequently collaborates with other well-known producers. How Smokey presents himself online, as appearing to emulate a lifestyle associated with Hip Hop culture, therefore has important implications for how the phonk scene is shaped. Russian producer Berrymane (who lists his location on Bandcamp as Memphis, Tennessee) uses an image of a Black man wearing a ski mask as his avatar on multiple platforms, including Spotify, where he has amassed almost 15,000 listeners per month. The Spotify featured photo for phonk collective Always Proper also shows one of the producers wearing a black ski mask (Figure 6). The ski mask, an accessory that has been historically associated with criminal activity, and has more recently become a fashion trend in part due to its association with Hip Hop culture, has also made an appearance in other phonk paratexts (Wheeler, 2023).

Another prominent producer, Lil Ugly Mane, has incorporated similar themes that emulate this lifestyle in his music and lyrics. Unlike most other phonk producers currently active on the scene, he performs as an emcee on many of his tracks, and has collaborated with artists associated with Memphis rap's initial digital revival from the 2010s, including artists from SpaceGhostPurrp's collective Raider Klan. Lyrics for his

track “Throw Dem Gunz” from his breakout album *Mista Thug Isolation* incorporates themes like gun and weapon ownership, drug use, and displays of wealth:

If you got big guns throw 'em up
Break that ho, split that dutch
Stick 'em up, bitch, stick 'em up
We don't give a fuck
Got some scribbles let 'em know
Stack yo money, sniff that blow
Tell me how that pussy hittin' bitch
You know I keeps it low

(Genius, 2023)

Soudiere’s most recent release as of this writing, “All We Do is Trap” from April 2023, similarly incorporates these themes by featuring clips from the original music video for one of the songs that the track samples, Bankroll Fresh’s “Trap” (2015), as well as clips from the 1992 film *Juice* and the 2002 film *Paid in Full*, both crime dramas set in Harlem. The use of this imagery and language reflects Harrison’s (2009) observation in his ethnography of underground Hip Hop scenes in the Bay Area that young people in particular engage with Hip Hop not merely as a source of expression, but because they perceive the associated activities, such as consuming marijuana, to be enjoyable. This leads to a “triangular relationship between white male juvenility, intoxication, and buffoonery through imitated blackness”— particularly concerning for Harrison given that “the way contemporary identities are constructions, particularly racialized ones, is that they tend to be much more experimental, temporary, and fleeting than an invested racial politics insists upon” (p. 162).

The emulation of a lifestyle associated with Hip Hop observed in the phonk scene aligns with what previous scholars have observed about appropriations of the Hip Hop genre and the lifestyle that this music is often aligned with. Rodriguez (2006) finds in an

ethnographic study of white youth's engagement in a local Hip Hop scene that "the mass marketing of racially coded cultural symbols such as Hip Hop allows whites to experience a felt similarity with communities of color...they seek to acquire the characteristics of blackness associated with being cool" (p. 649). Rose (2008) similarly observes that "the more prominent, creative, and charismatic artists are, the more likely they will be to generate desire for and imitation of the styles, personas, and ideas expressed. This is especially true of those who find the most lived-experience connection to such images" (p. 73). Indeed, Internet-based music scenes like phonk allow producers and other participants to wear racialized identities quite literally like a mask, though these nevertheless might be activities that these producers engage with on a regular basis rather than just for the sake of musical promotion.

Moreover, as phonk continues to gain mainstream popularity, it reinforces the widespread nature of the language of Hip Hop and its growing ubiquity in our cultural consciousness, language that participants in music scenes can access and use for their own art regardless of whether it reflects their lived experience—what Harvey (2021) recognizes as rap's "fully crossing the linguistic threshold into a casual component of everyday vernacular" (p. 257). At the same time, Haupt's (2012) argument about South African duo Die Antwoord's use of Blackface is partially predicated on the idea that these artists are "privileged" and "well-resourced" compared to the working-class subjects of their work, citing the high production value of their first music video. That the phonk scene remains largely DIY, underground, and digital complicates the straightforward idea that these artists have class-based privilege or even make any money from their work. However, that these artists often operate fully online and retain either

full or partial anonymity by doing so means that they can more easily take advantage of what Harvey (2021) observes as rap's ascendance on, borrowing the term from Stuart Hall, the "escalator of cultural prestige" and subsequent transformation into "raw material for digital reappropriation" (p. 257).

As Rose (2008) observes, commercial Hip Hop in particular has had a tendency to promote the same stereotypes surrounding Blackness as a means of marketing to a middle-class white audience. By engaging in a form of digital Blackface, white phonk producers participate in this particular dimension of Hip Hop, which serves to essentialize or erase other dimensions of the Black experience in the US. In the global context, producers may have even less direct knowledge of how these representations drive a commercial market that reinforces structural racism. While the term digital Blackface is still, as Jackson (2019) points out, a fledgling term in scholarship, examinations of the phenomenon reveal how cultural trends, including memes, perpetuate the digital commodification of Blackness on a global scale (Matamoros-Fernandez, 2020; Sobande, 2021). Indeed, Sobande (2021) employs a number of examples of racial representations online to expand how we can think about a concept like digital Blackface: it can be "multifaceted, not always directed at specific individuals, and can be marketized" (p. 137). With regard to the phonk scene, however, it is difficult to determine how much these artists are benefiting financially, in part due to the anonymity that these spaces offer. These observations nevertheless hold relevance to phonk, where producers can build *cultural* capital, gain listeners and followers, and in turn develop their musical careers through the employment of musical and visual aesthetics borrowed from Hip Hop, more specifically images that signify proximity to Blackness.

Phonk's Linguistic Characteristics

The use of language and linguistic patterns associated with Hip Hop culture and Blackness is a key component of producer and scene participants' online engagement with the phonk scene. My examination of discursive strategies used by both phonk producers and participants in the scene finds that instances of linguistic appropriation, or the use of linguistic features of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is highly prevalent in the phonk scene in both phonk paratexts and social media spaces where phonk fans and producers gather. Song titles like "Break out da Glock" and "Yo Bitch a Fiend" are common in phonk, as is the use of AAVE in Twitter posts and Instagram captions and comments by producers. The specific use of AAVE in digital spaces associated with their music thereby reflects "a very particular type of [AAVE] use" identified by Eberhardt and Freeman (2015): "a non-native user performing the language in a native-like manner, commodifying blackness for increased profitability in the marketplace" (p. 304). Discursive engagement with phonk music and producers online seems to demand a certain style of linguistic engagement with the genre, regardless of whether this linguistic style aligns with the user's "real life" identity.

As with the other appropriative trends discussed in this chapter, linguistic appropriation in popular music, specifically Hip Hop, is not new. Eberhardt and Freeman (2015) engage in an analysis of white Australian rapper Iggy Azalea's linguistic patterns in both her music and her public speech, and how they reinforce stereotyped ideas around Blackness and ultimately constitute what the authors refer to as a form of linguistic minstrelsy. Harrison's (2009) discussion of white emcees emphasizes their claims to legitimacy in underground Hip Hop scenes through their use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), and warns that "ignoring their presence in the interest of

promoting some sort of Hip Hop black essentialness is, in my view, shortsighted and intellectually flawed” (p. 84). Similar patterns among phonk producers, who incorporate their own “quirks” into their image while at the same time employing cultural signifiers associated with the Hip Hop scene (in terms of their dress, social media presence, and use of AAVE) brings up similar questions around “racial and hip-hop essentialism” (Harrison, 2009, p. 85).

The use of AAVE on social media, both by producers and then by users responding to them, appears to function as a means of establishing authenticity, credibility, and proximity to American Hip Hop culture. Indeed, interactions with phonk producers on social media often involve words and phrases that can be attributed to AAVE, regardless of the poster’s race. For example, phonk scene participants frequently use the word “mane” online, an alternative way of saying “man” and slang that has been directly attributed to dialectical patterns used by residents of Memphis (McKenzie, 2015). Phonk producers also use AAVE as a way to engage with each other and with their followers on social media. For example, white phonk producer Von Storm, who has also become an influential figure in shaping phonk history through his alternate persona and YouTube channel under the name Yokai, posted on X on April 2023, “who up grappling wit they self doubt.” Another white producer, yungmaple, replied to the tweet with an animated GIF of two Black men greeting each other with a special handshake (Von Storm, 2023a). The use of AAVE by white phonk producers is also prevalent on Instagram: producer Soudiere frequently incorporates these elements in his captions, for example, an April 2023 post, accompanied by a video of the French producer

skateboarding, reads “I be really in the field i ain neva seen the bleachers” (@soudiere777, 2023).

For Eberhardt and Freeman (2015), linguistic Blackface is defined as “a form of ‘figurative blackface,’” where white users of AAVE draw on “linguistic and other symbolic elements that signify racialized ideologies to a wide U.S. audience” (p. 304). Highlighting white female Hip Hop artists Iggy Azalea’s use of AAVE in her music, the authors importantly observe a distinct lack of critical awareness of her own whiteness and privilege in Iggy’s construction of her Hip Hop persona, while at the same time she leverages her whiteness in her music videos in particular as a way of self-Othering and establishing her novelty in the Hip Hop scene. For Jackson (2019), the use of AAVE by white individuals is part and parcel of strategies they use to distinguish themselves socially and culturally from other white people: “speaking the language of hip, learning it on their tongue, seems one step closer to being interesting and distinct from their upbringing and destiny. White people speak black to feel alive” (n.p.).

For Helland (2018), language serves an important role in the establishment of authenticity in Hip hop spaces: “In the case of hip hop, English and AAVE slang index a hybrid identity...which shows that English, and specifically AAVE, serve yet another symbolic and intertextual function: when integrated into local languages as part of global hip hop super-vernacular, they are designed to show hip hop authenticity and a glocal identity” (p. 30). The same holds true for the phonk community, which privileges the use of AAVE and other language specific to the American context despite its nature as a global genre. At the same time, perceptions around racial dynamics within the scene can inform conversations about who can use specific racially charged language. For example,

a video posted to X in January 2024 shows a hectic fight scene on a balcony with the caption “DJ Yung Vamp got his ass beat cuz he beatin on a homegirl.” It is thus implied that the individual in the video being beaten is DJ Yung Vamp, a Belgian producer well-known within the phonk scene who is also a member of the Purple Posse phonk collective (Stuck Magazine, 2020). In the video, a racial slur can clearly be heard being used. When several comments under the video questioned this—for example, one user replied “Honestly just wondering why I only see white dudes in this video and hear the n word being dropped”—Vamp himself responded: “my mum from North Africa and she’s Muslim, and way darker than those white ass boi [sic].” Yung Vamp thus appears to highlight this aspect of his identity, significant given Belgium’s own issues with racism and Islamophobia, including legislation that prohibits wearing of religious garments in university settings colloquially known as the “headscarf ban,” to access a sense of authenticity within the conversation about race (though it is unclear from the conversation if he is the one in the video who used the slur) (El Hammouchi, 2020). While the slur’s specific connection to the traumatic history of American slavery connects questions around its use to a particular historical and cultural context, and despite phonk’s status as a global Internet genre, this exchange shows how perceptions around race within the phonk community are still deeply informed by narratives of racial and cultural essentialism within American Hip Hop.

Indeed, that not all phonk producers are based in the same region, or even on the same continent, means that these individuals will therefore have different relationships with race and Blackness, informed by their specific social, cultural, and historical contexts. At the same time, these producers’ and phonk community members’

remarkably consistent use of AAVE within online discourses, including language that can be directly linked to Memphis, shows how the scene is directly informed by a local context, despite its global nature. However, these patterns of communication more so resemble a direct borrowing of this specific vernacular in order to communicate or signal authenticity in a digital context, rather than the “complex linguistic remixing” and “multilayered uses of language” observed by Alim et al. (2009) in local Hip Hop scenes in their edited volume on global Hip Hop cultures.

Authenticity, Hybridity, and Global Phonk

Phonk is undoubtedly a global genre. Indeed, many producers in the phonk scene are based not just in North America, but in other countries and continents, including France, Belgium, Brazil, Russia, and Ukraine. Moreover, the scene’s digital nature easily allows for international and transcultural collaborations, with producers who live in different countries frequently collaborating on tracks or releasing mixtapes as part of global collectives. This investigation into the phonk scene indicates that white producers exhibit strategies of appropriation of Black and Hip Hop culture that reflect Jackson’s (2017) definition of digital Blackface: the online commodification of Black identity by non-Black individuals. At the same time, phonk’s status as an Internet genre means that its generic and stylistic boundaries are constantly evolving beyond this appropriative formula.

For example, many of the most popular artists from a popular phonk offshoot referred to as “drift phonk,” hail from Russia and Ukraine. Rather than taking direct inspiration from Memphis rap aesthetics, drift phonk’s aesthetics emphasize the use of images and videos of drift racing, a growing culture of motorsports based off of a

technique wherein the driver oversteers at high speeds in either a street or professional environment, representing a significant departure from the Memphis locale, given drift racing's global popularity and origins in Japan (Briel, 2024). Musically, drift phonk relies more on high energy, often aggressive beats as opposed to the woozy, chopped and screwed samples from Memphis rap that could characterize "classic" phonk. As participants observe, the rising popularity of drift phonk has also led to a splintering of the scene in terms of both community and musical styles employed by producers, making it difficult to determine if drift phonk should be considered "authentic" phonk. (SynerrBeatz, 2023). Discussions of phonk's increasing popularity on TikTok brought on by drift phonk abound on the subReddit r/Phonk, including a January 2023 thread in which a user asked "Do ya'll think TikTok is ruining the phonk scene?" Many respondents directly correlated phonk on the TikTok platform with drift, or "aggressive" phonk, while others debated whether or not phonk's increasing popularity has driven "OG phonk" or "Memphis phonk" into the underground, or has instead resulted in more popularity for these producers.

Alongside issues of cultural appropriation and authenticity that phonk elicits, its many offshoots and influences continue to expand the genre's musical and aesthetic influences beyond its origins in Memphis. Producer and visual mixtape creator Ryan Celsius's use of visually hybrid aesthetics in his work speak to the unique creative potentials of the phonk scene. Ryan Celsius, who is Black, keeps a relatively low public profile, though his work as both a phonk producer and curator has played an important role in shaping the genre in recent years. Multiple opportunities for engagement around his work (including a dedicated Discord channel) simultaneously ensure that his fanbase

remains both widespread and tight-knit (Lajeunesse, 2019). Given his large following, Ryan Celsius is also an influential figure in shaping the phonk scene. He frequently performs at in-person events, including his 2023 End of Underground tour, and other shows across the US, including one in Washington, D.C., in January 2024 that I attended. He also frequently collaborates with other phonk producers on both music and digital content. For example, he was featured in a video produced by Yokai called “SoundCloud Game Show,” a video series that demonstrates the deep knowledge that producers need to have about marketing their work on this platform and also serves to bring more attention to lesser-known producers, thus giving shape to and creating connections within the digital phonk community (Yokai, 2024)

Ryan Celsius’s YouTube channel, which boasts over half a million subscribers, is where most of the engagement with his work happens: he uploads new mixes and phonk tracks frequently, and currently he has two live streams on his page that are constantly playing phonk and phonk-adjacent music. In these mixes, Ryan Celsius pairs music by phonk artists with visuals borrowing from a variety of aesthetic inspirations from both Japanese and American popular culture, from the popular anime series *Chainsaw Man* to the American horror movie *Candyman*. Perhaps the most influential project has been his TRAPPIN IN JAPAN series of phonk mixes, which garner millions of views on YouTube, and feature continuous shot-style footage from Japan (Figure 7). These videos provide the viewer with a sense of immersion, as if they themselves are traveling throughout the country or exploring the streets of Tokyo. In 2023, he also released the collaborative mixtape *TRAPPIN IN SOVIET* with phonk producer 3STYLEGOD, who according to their online presence is based in Russia. The YouTube upload of the

mixtape features historical footage of Russian urban life and architecture (RyanCelsius, 2023).



Figure 7. The cover photo for Ryan Celsius’s YouTube mix “Trappin in Japan Volume 4” features an image of an *anime* character and rapper Ice Cube. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8j1bKSoVg1E>

Ryan Celsius’s work thus represents an interesting example of what McLeod (2013), using Stevens’ (2008) discussion of musical borrowing between Japan and the West, brands as “conscious hybridity,” or “a central feature of Hip Hop and the recent African American sampling of Japanese culture. In each case it appears to be a strategically indigenising hybridity, constructed of creative re-uses of each other’s cultural products—products which were themselves originally heavily hybridised” (p. 272). The complex amalgamation of global cultural references that Ryan Celsius uses in his work, that are influenced, but not directly lifted, from phonk’s roots in Memphis rap can also be made sense of using Darling-Wolf’s (2008) notion of *mondialisation* to describe French rap:

Viewed as a constantly negotiated concurrent process of fragmentation and fusion, *mondialisation* may be used to deconstruct essentializing dichotomies and open opportunities for the examination of unlikely coalitions. Under such a model, French rap may not only be interpreted as a process of hybridization of an Afro-American genre but also as a process of creation of a social world in which

individuals are assertively defining their position in relationship and separation from other worlds—the French sociocultural environment, African American street culture, and the cultural legacy of colonialism. A world in which hyphenated identities might combine into something new. (p. 202)

Applying the notion of the *genba* (Condry, 2006) to Internet music scenes also demonstrates how a myriad of robust digital *genba*, associated with particular nationalities are beginning to emerge within phonk. For Condry (2006), the concept of *genba* is “useful for broadening our understanding of the mutual construction of cultural forms (like hip-hop) beyond ‘producers vs. consumers’ to include other actors (artists, record companies, media, fans, etc.) in dynamic feedback loops” (p. 13). Indeed, while these global sites of phonk activity may not represent “local scenes” in the traditional sense, given that these producers may rarely or ever meet in person, media narratives have begun to locate the importance of producers’ national identity in making sense of phonk’s global reach, and have highlighted the development of live shows and local scenes, which began in North America and has since spread beyond the continent. 2023 Spotify data revealed that the most-streamed artists on Spotify from Brazil were associated with the phonk genre, with the article reporting these results attributing these artists’ popularity to the use of their music in popular TikTok trends (BNN, 2023). Russian phonk artists have also received considerable media coverage and even nods from the Memphis rap DJ and producer DJ Paul (Inman, 2021; Leight, 2021), while France is also credited with boasting a robust phonk scene (O’Flaherty, 2021).

Global phonk complicates the notion that musical genres all require “at least some local identification, and their own internal musical structure, technology, performative contexts, and social and political environment” (Connell & Gibson, 2004, p. 357). Rather, as an Internet genre, it exhibits complex interactions between the global and an *imagined*

local (Memphis and American Southern Hip Hop). While producers like Ryan Celsius are increasingly bringing in a wider variety of global cultural signifiers into their work, at the same time, discourses around phonk and authenticity (with authenticity being equated with proximity to Memphis rap) continue to reify “characterizations of the United States as hip-hop’s most globally significant cultural center” that are complicated by the growth of transnational rap and Hip Hop scenes (Darling-Wolf, 2014, p. 86). The complexity and hybridity afforded by phonk’s digital flows means that the local cannot simply be equated with authentic, and the global with the inauthentic. The two forces are now more than ever shaping one another.

Conclusion

Overall, my analysis reveals how participants in the phonk scene use visual and linguistic indicators to align themselves with a particular racially charged identity, informed in part by Hip Hop’s roots in the experience of being Black in America (specifically Memphis, in the case of phonk), as a means of conveying their authenticity in these spaces. This identity play reinforces Nakamura’s (2013) prescient idea of racial tourism in cyberspace, specifically in “textual and graphic chat spaces” (a precursor to social media), where producers are often anonymous: as Nakamura observes, “though it is true that users’ physical bodies are hidden from other users, race has a way of asserting its presence in the language users employ, in the kinds of identities they construct, and in the ways they depict themselves online, both through language and through graphic images” (p. 31). As an emerging music scene gaining in mainstream popularity, racialized representations in phonk take on patterns of appropriation that have long

existed in popular music and gives them a fresh new feel, in part aided by their digital delivery on platforms like YouTube and Spotify.

At the same time, the nature of power dynamics within these representations are also obscured by phonk's often anonymous nature, true to the Internet music framework. This can make it difficult to parse the identities of participants within the scene, as well as who benefits both financially and culturally from these practices. While this analysis has thus far focused on artists with prominent public profiles, this anonymity can make evaluations of borrowing and appropriation within the scene complex, given that it can be difficult to discern who is doing the borrowing, and from whom, within digital phonk communities. For Manuel (2021), examining the power dynamics of cultural borrowing has thus become an “untenable position” under conditions of globalization, given that “most cultural borrowing—especially in the modern global ecumene—involves complex and circuitous flows between various groups, rather than historically entwined binaries. Even when binaries are operant, the two groups may not have direct and clear power relationships” (n.p.). Considerations of the potential positive or negative impacts of instances of cultural borrowing and appropriation will thus need to depend on the specific modes and domains of those appropriations, and what values are threatened by the appropriative practices, hence my focus in this analysis on racialized representations by white producers.

This research into racial representations in the phonk community breaks from previous examinations into the racial dynamics of Hip Hop, given that these producers are engaging in musical borrowing from the Memphis rap scene primarily via their use of digital sampling, rather than as emcees, and the activities of the scene in question take



Figure 8. A meme parodies the popularity of phonk's usage in TikTok edits. Source: <https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/2530365-white-people-at-the-function>

place almost entirely through online platforms like SoundCloud and Spotify (Leight, 2022). Given the insular nature of the phonk scene, white producers may also be avoiding the kinds of critiques and analysis that have been applied to the work of mainstream Hip Hop artists like Vanilla Ice, Iggy Azalea, or Eminem, whose music and image have raised critical questions about the relationship of whiteness and authenticity to Hip Hop. At the same time, immersion into the digital phonk scene reveals that members are continuously negotiating these issues of race and the use of language within the community, even if producers are not subject to mainstream scrutiny.

Phonk's lack of a "local" scene means that scene participants have continued to link notions of cultural and racial authenticity to the Hip Hop subgenre's geographical 'origins' in Memphis. At the same time, the digital movement of phonk as it increases in mainstream popularity further complicates the situation, as its spread from platform to platform, from SoundCloud to Spotify to TikTok, hastens this process of

decontextualization and brings it further from the Memphis signifier as it becomes a trend for global consumption. Discourses around drift phonk, and debate about whether the offshoot could be considered “real phonk,” reveal how phonk’s interlocutors want to keep this music closely connected to its cultural and geographic origins. They resist the growing understanding and popularity of the music as a TikTok “sound” that can be attached to largely unrelated, but trending styles of video—such as Wojak edits, or videos that place the eponymous male, bald meme character in a variety of situations which often serve as a commentary on cultural expectations around masculinity (parodied in a meme that was created from the “White People at the Function” template, and subsequently made the rounds in meme creation communities on Reddit, shown in Figure 8) (Haworth, 2023; KnowYourMeme, 2024). Under these conditions, cultural borrowing and mixing in phonk comes to resemble Roger’s (2006) notion of transculturation, wherein cultural elements are “created more closely from and/or by multiple cultures, such that identification of a single originating culture is problematic, for example, multiple cultural appropriations structured in the dynamics of globalization and transnational capitalism creating hybrid forms” (p. 477).

Nevertheless, while the growth of the phonk scene has led to increasing diversity in the scene’s aesthetics, and its anonymous nature makes it difficult to parse out issues of power, permissions, and compensation (Rogers, 2006), ultimately, this analysis shows how issues of identity and representation in digital music scenes deserve continued attention, particularly considering the producers themselves are aware of these issues. Most relevant to the study of racial representations in an Internet-based music scene is Jackson’s (2019) observation that, regardless of the degree to which the participating

users are aware of the potential harm they may be causing, circulation of digital content is never a neutral act: “Even those willing to be convinced that blackness is both reviled and relied upon for what happens on the internet...tend to feel uneasy about the suggestion that the out-and-out racism of anonymous users bears any relation to their own, very casual, user behavior. But we all drink from the well poisoned by the anti-blackness that wants everyone to forget when blackness goes viral” (n.p.). For example, in February 2023, white phonk producer Von Storm posted on X a screenshot of a post from the r/phonk subReddit that pictures members of HOLY MOB with the title “Why does everyone making ‘drift phonk’ look like this and is their use of Memphis rap exploitative?” Von Storm captioned the post “LMAO,” assumedly in part because a scene insider would not categorize the work of HOLY MOB producers as drift phonk (Von Storm, 2023). This interaction suggests a self-aware and sardonic approach to issues of racial and cultural appropriation in phonk, though ultimately most producers considered in this chapter have avoided directly confronting or addressing accusations of racial appropriation, at least publicly on social media.

This exploration into the phonk scene, the first scholarly consideration of the genre that I am aware of, presents various avenues for additional inquiry. First, given the critical stance I took with regard to the appropriative activities within the phonk scene, I did not speak with any phonk producers or members of the community, instead choosing to act as an unobtrusive “lurker” in order to observe the natural discourses and behaviors of members of those involved with phonk (Henninger, 2020). However, additional research that engages directly with phonk producers and scene participants would potentially be beneficial to questions of intentionality in these acts of borrowing.

Moreover, this chapter does not address the stark absence of female producers in the phonk scene, which represents a much larger issue within Hip Hop culture (Darling-Wolf, 2014). As Harrison (2009) also observes in his ethnographic work on underground Hip Hop in the Bay Area: “Within underground hip hop, although progressive ideals are commonly upheld, women continue to struggle for access to its more participatory roles. Furthermore, on the whole, issues of gender are conspicuously absent from the subcultural discourse” (p. 168). Future research into the phonk scene would benefit from a particular attention to these gender dynamics and what they tell us about the future of Hip Hop in the digital age.

Based on this project’s analysis of the three Internet music scenes, vaporwave, hyperpop, and phonk, the following chapter concludes the study. It summarizes the findings from each case study and what they reveal about how the infrastructural characteristics of digital environments manifest in Internet-based music scenes, how the social and cultural dimensions of users’ relationship with the Internet that manifest in Internet-based music scenes, and how processes of transcultural influence and cultural mixing taking place in Internet-based music scenes. It outlines a new framework that can be used by scholars to identify and analyze Internet music scenes moving forward, and highlights three major characteristics of these scenes: anonymity/identity play, hyper hybridity, and a low barrier to entry/prosumer environment. Finally, I discuss the limitations and challenges that I encountered in the process of pursuing this research, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

When I tell friends, family, and colleagues that I am conducting dissertation research about Internet music, a surprising number of them have had a similar response: a moment of thought, followed by the suggestion, “you mean like, Lofi girl?” A digital musical phenomenon and meme that has inspired cultural references and offshoots across the globe, Lofi Girl originally began as a French YouTube channel playing a 24/7 stream of lo-fi Hip Hop, featuring an image of a solitary girl studying in her room with a view of a cityscape and a pet cat perched on the windowsill. The mellow, instrumental beats have provided countless YouTube users (the channel that the Lofi Girl stream is hosted on has over 14 million subscribers as of April 2024) with music for both productivity and relaxation, while the image of Lofi Girl has inspired parasocial relationships, mental health awareness PSAs, and even a foot-tall figurine based on the character (Stephen, 2021; Taber et al., 2019). It makes sense, then, given Lofi girl’s global cultural spread, that this would be one of the first examples that would come to mind upon hearing the term “Internet music.” Indeed, while my analysis does not touch on this particular musical phenomenon, Winston and Saywood’s (2019) research on lofi Hip Hop mirrors this dissertation’s findings about the Internet music genres it examines, and is thus worth quoting at length:

[Lofi hip hop] is both a product of and an escape from socioeconomic pressures; its meaning is derived from both fantasy and reality, engaged in with equal sincerity; it is experienced alone, but used as a means of interpersonal care and connection; it both acknowledges the loss of a past never experienced or known, and immerses itself comfortingly in that past and its loss, repurposing it within the present rather than using it to self-consciously critique that present. We suggest that this may be a result of lofi hip hop’s community being made up primarily of producers and listeners too young to remember a time before Web 2.0; for them, technology may simply be an axiomatic aspect of normality to be navigated, and

to even attempt to apply a narrative of degeneration to their experience is to assume a prior state of being which they, themselves, are fully aware they have never experienced, and will never experience. (pp. 51-52)

My research similarly demonstrates how Internet music serves for its fans, followers and listeners as an escape, a safe space, and a way to inhabit different identities (or conceal them). It helps us navigate our deeply personal relationships with digital environments at a time when these technologies have become a ubiquitous presence for many, and turned into an increasingly mainstream aspect of digital global youth culture. As Winston and Saywood (2019) observe, Internet music genres like lofi Hip Hop offer a creative, emotional, and social outlet, a source of pleasurable engagement in an increasingly commodified online environment.

At the same time, as Internet music becomes a more cohesive phenomenon, and its affiliated genres and scenes achieve a greater level of mainstream exposure through their spread across multiple platforms, these features of Internet music scenes can become compromised. My analysis revealed how the platformization of Internet music, demonstrated by examples like the creation of the Spotify hyperpop playlist as well as phonk's explosion in popularity on TikTok, has led to anxieties and questions from scene members around what constitutes an 'authentic' performance within these genre spaces, as well as a perceived divide between the 'underground' and the 'mainstream.' These patterns are not new. Rheingold (1993) made a prescient observation about the impact of the corporatization and commercialization of online environments on virtual communities: "The odds are always good that big power and big money will find a way to control access to virtual communities." Indeed, several decades after Rheingold's call to ensure "this new sphere of vital human discourse remains open to the citizens of the

planet before the political and economic big boys seize it, censor it, meter it, and sell it back to us” (p. 6), we now face an environment where digital platforms and texts are inextricably tied up with wealth and power. Among many other major developments that illustrate this dynamic in recent years, the outcome of the 2016 American presidential election demonstrated how Internet memes, and the platforms on which they spread, play an increasingly crucial role in shaping media narratives and even political power (Miltner, 2018), and in 2022, controversial businessman and one of the wealthiest individuals in the world, Elon Musk, purchased the platform Twitter (later rebranded as X). While it may be too late to heed Rheingold’s warning, researchers can still pay particular attention to how these platform dynamics shape and impact cultural communities.

Members of Internet music communities operate as networked selves, who for Papacharissi (2010) are able to navigate the affordances of social networking sites (SNSs) to perform, edit, or redact multiple identities across multiple social landscapes. However, as Phillips and Milner (2017) find, as there are more opportunities for users to play with their identity online using these digital affordances, an ambivalent paradox emerges: these “tools can strip individuals of control...they allow users to play with the identities of others – essentially weaponizing someone else’s mask – by collapsing context, spreading secrets, and hijacking selves” (p. 73). My analysis demonstrates how similar issues have emerged within Internet music scenes. For example, while conducting research for a separate study on techno-Orientalism within the vaporwave scene, I encountered a Reddit thread titled “Separating the music from the Asian fetish,” posted by a user who identifies as being of East Asian descent. This user observed that the

“abundant use” of Japanese language and “fetishization of Asian women” on vaporwave album covers led to feelings of vulnerability and discomfort, particularly when “I see an album cover with a picture of a girl that looks like me, but they’re disappearing, or their faces have been erased.” Alongside the potentials that Internet music offers for identity play, this example also speaks to the dehumanizing nature of digital racialized representations in these spaces. As Kanjere (2019) cautions, “what ‘leaving race behind’ often manifests as online is an assumed white identity being applied as a default to all participants” (p. 2165).

Lessons from the Three Case Studies

My first analysis chapter, focusing on the vaporwave scene, uses the 2023 ElectroniCON music festival, the largest in-person event dedicated to the vaporwave genre, as a backdrop for understanding the social and cultural dimensions of the vaporwave community, how participants define the community and their place within it, as well as how the genre’s online origins continue to shape community interactions, even in in-person spaces. My informants expressed a wide range of involvement with and participation in the vaporwave scene, though they envisioned vaporwave as a cohesive musical community. In particular, they gave similar insights regarding the online discourse surrounding the festival’s initial decision to include the controversial artist John Maus on the lineup, demonstrating their exposure to the same digital traces that provide that sense of community. As Lucas-Healy (2022) found in his own community-centric study on vaporwave, “in essence, vaporwave is significant because it offers nascent potential, a feeling that anyone involved can do things that would not otherwise be possible, because of the support structures offered by the community” (p. 7). Ultimately, I found that while the inclusive nature of the vaporwave scene and its perception as a “safe

space,” particularly for individuals with marginalized sexual and gender identities, has persisted even as vaporwave has grown in popularity, uncertainty and ambivalence about the vaporwave scene’s future has emerged as vaporwave artists achieve broader exposure.

The case study of the hyperpop scene explored, through examinations of social and mainstream media discourses, how the scene has been impacted by dynamics of platformization: hyperpop has evolved from music that was freely distributed via net labels to now having to reckon with the dynamics of its distribution on commercial streaming platforms and the ways in which these dynamics can result in the inclusion or exclusion of certain artists, including artists of color. It also addressed how the social and cultural dimensions of users’ relationship with the Internet manifest in these scenes, in that the free expression of queer and trans identities and characterization of hyperpop as a “safe space” for these identities is, for scene participants, highly dependent upon its status as an underground, Internet-based music scene. Finally, I demonstrated how hyperpop’s use of Japanese cultural elements allows new ways for scene participants to explore their identities, given the outsized influence of Japanese notions of gender and femininity, including notions of the *kawaii*, on Western hyperpop and vice versa. Through a consideration of work by Japanese hyperpop artists, this chapter demonstrated how hyperpop as an Internet music genre represents a complex amalgamation of global influences afforded by digital flows of culture, which at the same time complicates efforts to identify a “local” foundation for the scene.

My analysis of the phonk scene focused on how participants use visual and linguistic indicators to align themselves with a particular racially charged identity,

informed in part by Hip Hop's roots in the experience of being Black in America (specifically Memphis), as a means of conveying their authenticity in these spaces. At the same time, the nature of power dynamics within these representations are also obscured by phonk's often anonymous nature, true to the Internet music framework. While the 'underground' nature of the phonk scene can make it difficult to parse the identities of participants within the scene, as well as who benefits both financially and culturally, many of the instances of identity performance by white producers considered in this chapter served to reinforce negative stereotypes around Blackness. The second part of this chapter complicated this argument by considering the work of phonk producer Ryan Celsius, who demonstrates potential in the phonk scene for a more complex process of hybridization that resembles adaptation more than appropriation, and opens up new potentials for phonk that go beyond a simple borrowing of Memphis rap aesthetics. It discussed phonk's expanding status as a genre of global Hip Hop is expanding the genre's cultural referents beyond the 1990s Memphis Hip Hop scene.

While the work of producers like Ryan Celsius presents new creative possibilities for the genre, the rapid growth in global popularity of the genre, hastened by its circulation on TikTok, also elicits anxieties around mainstreaming and authenticity for scene participants. For example, the phonk scene originally proliferated on the streaming platform SoundCloud, which allows for unique interactivity on the part of its users by giving them the ability to comment on and "react" to specific parts of an uploaded mix or track. This affordance feeds into the perception of SoundCloud as a "bottom up" platform (Hesmondhalgh et al., 2019), while the visual emphasis on the waveform of the track rather than an image or video of the producer reinforces a sense of anonymity that is key

for the phonk scene. Indeed, the genre's shift from SoundCloud to platforms like TikTok, where visibility holds greater importance and algorithmic structures serve as a much stronger moderator of content, has brought attention from a more diverse audience to the phonk scene. As I observed in discussions on social media, this has also led to a splintering of the scene in terms of both community and musical styles employed by producers.

A Framework for Internet Music

In his essay on Internet music, Hugill (2005) focuses on the example of lowercase music, a genre that in his description evokes an "Internet aesthetic" through "quiet recordings of small or overlooked sounds" (p. 430). Despite this, Hugill (2005) does not consider lowercase music to be a type of Internet music. Rather, he describes it as

Music that evokes and metaphorically expresses the Internet, but does so mostly away from the network itself. It is a contemporary music that reflects an aspect of its own culture. This then leads to a first attempt at a definition of Internet music: music in which the Internet is integral either to its composition, or dissemination, or both." (p. 431)

I argue that the rise of streaming platforms and the increasing ubiquitousness of digital systems of music production and consumption since the 2000s requires a rethinking of this definition, as the Internet is now integral to the composition or dissemination of a much wider variety of musics, and Internet technologies have become more fully integrated into the production and distribution of culture. My research demonstrates that Internet music has in fact become all of these things at once: like the example of Lofi Girl discussed at the beginning of this chapter, Internet music is deeply embedded in digital networks through each phase of Small's (1998) notion of musicking: its production, dissemination, performance, and consumption. Moreover, Internet music evokes and

metaphorically expresses a particular kind of sociocultural relationship with the Internet, while engagement with these musics is often informed by producers' and listeners' own relationships with these technologies.

My framework for Internet music employs three main characteristics of Internet music scenes: its anonymous nature, and the resulting identity play that it affords; a tendency toward cultural hybridity and a proliferation of cultural borrowing and mash-ups; and a low barrier to entry for participants and their perception as “inclusive” spaces, which can lead to issues around cultural and musical authenticity and gatekeeping. Moreover, all of the aspects of this framework can and do inform (and in some cases, contradict) one another, while some aspects of the framework may be more prominent in some genres as opposed to others. The complexities of this framework open up an ambivalent space for the future of Internet music, wherein one day all musics might become caught up in these dynamics.

Anonymity and Identity Play

Scholars have previously identified anonymity as a central feature of the vaporwave scene (Glitsos, 2018; A. Harper, 2019; Wilcox & Compton, 2023). This study extends this feature to Internet music scenes more broadly, and demonstrates that even in Internet music scenes with a robust in-person presence, participants still use strategies of anonymity for comfort, protection from overzealous fans, or even to express authenticity. Anonymity was also used by vaporwave producers, even in an in-person context, to navigate the dynamics of parasocial relationships, and allowed them to enjoy the in-person ElectroniCON festival “as a fan.” Similarly, while she would later come out as a trans woman, the highly influential hyperpop producer SOPHIE similarly stayed

anonymous early in her career, citing the influence of other electronic musicians like Aphex Twin who cultivated an air of “mystery” around their personal lives a mystery to the public in hopes of keeping the focus on their work (Lhooq, 2017).

The anonymous nature of Internet music scenes also affords participants the ability to engage in the kind of identity play that has long been observed in research on digital spaces. The Internet has opened up spaces for identity exploration that individuals may be unable or unwilling to explore in person: as Baym (2015) notes, “with [the anonymous Internet’s] potential to liberate people from the constraints of their social context, people may also be seen as becoming more honest in mediated encounters” (p. 34). At the same time, scholars of the Internet and identity have been careful to complicate notions of identity play that reflect reductive narratives around the early Internet, which had an overwhelmingly white and male user base. Following her work on the concept of “identity tourism” in her book *Cybertypes*, Nakamura (2008) later updates this concept to account for the increasing diversity of Internet users: “I locate the Internet as a privileged and extremely rich site for the creation and distribution of hegemonic and counterhegemonic visual images of racialized bodies” (p. 13). At the same time, Brock (2012) observes that whiteness, or a complete lack of identity signifiers, still overwhelmingly functions as the Internet’s “default” identity: “online fixity is the assumption that online visitors either occupy an online ‘normal’ identity: White, male, middle class, and hetero; or they are so diverse that their cultural origins cannot (or should not) be ascertained” (p. 538). Anonymity can thus serve to destabilize the growing diversity of digital spaces by erasing these identity dimensions entirely.

Internet music can thus be used to consider the many complex ways that identity negotiation, be it concealment, self-actualization, or appropriation, can take place in digital environments. Kennedy (2006) similarly urges scholars of identity and virtual environments to consider that identity and anonymity as concepts are both too “fixed to recognize the fragmentation, temporality and contingency of the experiencing subject,” and argues that research on internet identity should “acknowledge, for example, the distinction between being and feeling in internet identities, concepts like identification, affect, ‘as-if’ and becoming” (p. 872). Indeed, approaches to identity play across each scene varied. While concepts like acceptance and nurturing of gender non-confirming identities were identified as important to members of the hyperpop community and the vaporwave community, phonk participants demonstrated a notable ambivalence toward racial identity and how identity play within the community can often manifest in problematic ways. This discussion naturally leads into the next dimension of the framework, Internet music’s tendency toward cultural hybridity.

(Hyper-)Hybridity

My analysis demonstrates how Internet music displays a highly consistent tendency toward cultural hybridity, borrowing, and mash-ups. While this characteristic of cultural hybridity has long been observed in popular music more generally, Internet music tends to be described by observers as a visual and musical postmodern pastiche of seemingly unrelated elements that evokes our ability in the digital age to ‘copy and paste’ culture: such as vaporwave’s mashing up of Nintendo 64 controllers and palm trees; phonk’s woozy melding of clips from *The Simpsons* with Three 6 Mafia samples; and hyperpop’s unexpected fusion of bubbly pop music with metal and hip hop. As Darling-

Wolf (2014) reminds us, “globalized hybridity is so much part of our contemporary condition that we rarely stop to think about it...the global, national, and local are constantly and simultaneously (re)negotiated in the production, distribution, and consumption of popular cultural forms” (p. 144). I would further argue that the phenomenon of Internet music throws these (re)negotiations into hyperdrive: cultural signifiers are mixed, disconnected, and reconnected at a breakneck pace characteristic of online meme cultures (Waysdorf, 2021). Countless offshoots of relatively young musical subgenres can emerge in an incredibly short period of time, in some cases, as one interview participant observed with vaporwave offshoots, just “for the meme,” or for the mere purpose of amusing other fans who are in on the joke.

Ruminations on the development of digital technologies and the Internet often focus on the increasing scale and speed of availability of information these technologies have enabled, and the resulting scenario of “information overload” for the user (Boczkowski, 2021). At the same time, these observations about the nature of attention in the information age have long been made by thinkers like Herbert Simon in the 1960s and Alan Turing in the 70s, and arguably border on the cliché (Hindman, 2018). Nevertheless, the incredibly hybrid nature of Internet music scenes serves as an ambivalent commentary on the impact of these technologies on our lives. Harper (2017) finds that Internet music represents a sort of meta-commentary on what he describes as “the supposedly degenerative effects of culture’s mediation through the Internet, smartphones and digital simulations” (p. 87). Ideas around information overload, or digital maximalism, caused by overexposure to digital environments, the kitschy nature of a commercialist, ad-saturated Internet, and the uncanny nature of AI and algorithms as

replacements for human interaction are all reflected in these genres, visually and sonically. For Han (2022), the use of the prefix “hyper-” to describe culture under present conditions demonstrates how the “process of globalization, accelerated by new technologies, *de-distances* cultural space,” causing them to overlap and intersect, and ultimately “implode” (p. 9) Ghasemi (2020) makes similar use of the prefix “hyper-,” proposing hyperhybridism as the “successor” to postmodernism:

Hyperhybridism opens up some spaces for the arrival of new forms and contents, new cultures and colours, new genres and genes, new disciplines and fields; however, what it offers is not totally new and navigates between sameness and difference, oldness and newness ... To put it differently, hyperhybridism consists of innumerable alternatives that altogether make up the whole of what we become or produce, making us and our products kaleidoscopic, situational and contradictory (p. 159).

Contrary to Whelan and Nowak’s (2018) definition of an “Internet genre” as a musical genre with a short lifespan, limited visibility and popularity, my framework thinks of these musics as part of a constant process of evolution, negotiation, and spread symptomatic of hybridity in the digital age.

At the same time, Internet music’s hyper-hybrid nature brings up issues of representation and cultural power. While vaporwave has previously been thought of as having a largely Anglo-American, or white and Western audience, as discussed in the previous section, the segmented and anonymous nature of these scenes makes it impossible to determine their racial and geographic composition with any certainty. Nevertheless, Internet music’s meta-commentary seems to presuppose that its audience has experienced a level of digital connectedness resulting from the Internet being a near-constant presence in work or leisure activities, in the form of personal computers or smartphones. Research on uses and histories of Internet and digital technology

developments across cultures indicate that this is far from representative of a universal relationship with these technologies, particularly outside of the Global North, where the infrastructures that enable this kind of constant connectivity are often taken for granted (Shome, 2019). This presupposition, as well as some of the more problematic instances of cultural representation in Internet music scenes, raises the question of who holds the cultural influence, or power, in these spaces. Returning to Ghasemi's (2020) notion of hyperhybridity, while Internet music can function as "a means for including and juxtaposing different and in cases contradictory elements," my analysis complicates the idea that it always necessarily "promotes the politics of difference and tolerance" (p. 159). Rather, like phonk's increasing distancing from the Memphis rap scene upon which it is musically based, I find that Internet music's postmodern approach to cultural mixing often results in a sense of detachment and decontextualization from the very cultures that it borrows from. Nevertheless, as the third aspect of the framework reveals, Internet music scenes are imagined as spaces where anyone can become involved, and that present a myriad of opportunities for creative and self-expression.

Inclusivity/Low Barrier to Entry

Internet music scenes are frequently described as "inclusive" spaces by scene members. This term was used both to describe the sense that anyone with an Internet connection can get involved in the scenes both socially and creatively, and in the case of vaporwave and hyperpop, the perception that these scenes demonstrate an unusual level of acceptance and representation of minority gender and sexual identities. The low barrier of entry for participation in these scenes is reminiscent of the term "prosumer," which Taylor (2015) defines as "someone who is part producer, part cocreator, and part

consumer” (p. 135). Indeed, scholars have already applied this term to the vaporwave scene specifically (McLeod, 2018; Schembri & Tichbon, 2017). Schembri and Tichbon (2017) in particular find that “working consumers [in vaporwave] are taking on multiple cultural roles and are argued to be more accurately described as cultural curators, rather than cultural producers, consumers and/or intermediaries” (p. 192). While producers of Internet music play a key role in shaping these scenes, other creatives, including visual artists, playlist curators, and even zine makers can play a role in shaping this music. For example, Ryan Celsius, who has become a highly influential figure in the phonk scene, is arguably less known for his music production and more for the mixes that he curates, alongside elaborate visuals that he designs for his YouTube channel. Moreover, individuals can play more of an outside role in co-constituting these imagined communities, their shared values, and generic boundaries as compared with “mainstream” music genres.

This sense of inclusivity in part stems from the online nature of these scenes, in that they tend to privilege private rather than public activities. This subverts what Hill (2014) finds in her study of gender in metal music communities, where the notion of the “fan” is frequently informed by those who are publicly visible in scene activities: “those who are able to participate fully in the public life of the subculture or the scene become the dominant representation of fans, although there is no overt definition of ‘fan’, which suggests it must be an outdoor or public activity” (p. 176). Hill seeks to expand this definition through her study, which highlights the importance of female fans’ engagement with metal in more intimate spaces (at home, in the car, through headphones, etc.). Similarly, participation in Internet music, even musical production and collaboration, can

be, and often is, enacted entirely in private spaces, and through platforms that can allow for complete anonymity.

Indeed, digital platforms have in part allowed for this low barrier to entry. For example, the proliferation of the phonk scene on SoundCloud, and the continued centering of the platform in phonk spaces (as Yokai's SoundCloud game show series on YouTube demonstrates) reinforces Hesmondhalgh et al.'s (2019) observation that, for its core audience of EDM and Hip Hop producers and fans, "SoundCloud enshrines a sense of vernacular abundance...this has led to a relative emphasis on anonymity, manifested in the frequent use of multiple aliases by producers, and the downplaying of performers' visual images. The abundance has partly been made possible by use of low-cost digital technologies" (p. 3). At the same time, Internet music's rise in popularity on platforms that are perceived as highly commercialized, or possessing more of a top-down structure, such as Spotify and TikTok, elicits anxieties about the impact of mainstreaming on the inclusive nature of these genres, as demonstrated by the example of the Spotify editorial playlist that popularized the hyperpop genre.

While this section has presented a framework for making sense of the concept of Internet music, as with any other cultural category, further interrogation serves to blur the boundaries between vaporwave, hyperpop, phonk, and a myriad of other musical forms that were not as deeply considered in this project. For example, Martin's (2023) discussion of the hugely popular production style known as slowed and reverb, which has strong genealogical ties to Internet genres like vaporwave and synthwave but could be applied to any type of music, points to the wider accessibility of digital music trends: "Any interested individual or group can release its own slowed and reverb remixes of

popular works, or potentially create its own slowed music with minimal technical skill and free downloadable audio-video editing software, all aided by countless DIY instructional videos on YouTube and TikTok” (p. 10). The fuzziness of Internet music’s boundaries, and the consideration that each aspect of this framework could be applied to other forms of digital culture, begs the question: could *all* music and musical trends one day be considered ‘Internet music’?

Limitations and Future Directions

My main limitation in this research, given that I was dealing primarily with virtual communities, was determining and delimiting the boundaries of those communities. Burrell (2017) suggests navigating these issues in the context of digital ethnography by treating the fieldsite as a “network,” wherein selection of spaces of interest is a continuous process as the researcher gathers data, and can end when meaning saturation begins to occur. For these reasons, I limited my digital ethnographic and discursive work to media coverage, as well as public forums of discussion on social media platforms including Reddit and X (formerly Twitter), which alone offered ample data through which I was able to observe similar meanings emerging across each of these scenes. Discord, an instant messaging platform that allows for both voice and text communication, has also served as a valuable space for musical communities, given that its voice chat affordance allows for users in different locales to compose music together, while its server format can enable artists to establish their own spaces for two-way communication with fans (Zimmerman, 2022). While I am a member of several Discord communities dedicated to the discussion of the genres I analyzed, I did not use the information I gleaned from these servers as data, given that these communities also come

with an expectation of privacy (Discord servers can only be accessed using a unique invite code). Future research could thus focus on the unique perspectives that these digital *genba* can offer, after permission to conduct the research is sought from server moderators and community members.

As dissertation research so often is, my in-person ethnographic research was also bound by time and funding limitations. As La Pastina (2005) observes, traditional notions of ethnography, often defined by the researcher's long-term immersion in a community, can pose a financial and personal toll for researchers unwilling or unable to spend long periods of time away from their families, while the resulting "inability to generalize from ethnographic data should not be seen as a weakness but rather as part of a methodological process that allows scholars to attain a deeper understanding of particular processes" (p. 11). At the same time, "generalizability might be reached in limited ways through replicability of ethnographic studies across several sites" (La Pastina, 2005, p. 11). While I thus served to triangulate my research findings across multiple scenes and sites, I was only able to conduct thorough in-person research on the vaporwave scene, given the timing of the ElectroniCON music festival and that I was easily able to travel to New York City to attend. Despite my characterization of vaporwave, hyperpop, and phonk as Internet music, all of these genres have robust in-person scenes that could be accessed if time and funding allowed. Future research could thus expand the ethnographic element of this research to examine in greater depth the social and cultural dimensions of these scenes in in-person spaces, such as festivals, shows, and other kinds of meetups. This would also require an 'insider' status that I did not possess when I initially set out to do this research, given that many of these events require membership in, or knowledge of,

particular sub-networks (for example, 100% Electronica did not advertise the Tape Swap as an official festival event; I only became aware of the event when I was told about it by an informant).

Finally, given the issues around identity representation and cultural borrowing and mixing that I observed within these scenes, I believe that research on Internet music would benefit from a greater diversity of perspectives. As a white, queer, cisgender researcher, I endeavored to give a voice to different identity-based perspectives when possible, but, as Mayer (2005) importantly observes, whiteness can still function as a power structure in ethnographic audience research. Even while the academy aims to decenter whiteness through a focus on identity politics, in the process of decentering, the academy, functioning as what Mayer describes as a “field of power,” relies on a monolithic assumption of whiteness as the dominant body, institution, and ideology. Intersectional perspectives in particular could add complexity and depth to this research, especially considering how, while gender and sexual minorities tend to be overrepresented in these scenes, my research points to the notion that people of color may have different experiences within Internet music communities.

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APPENDIX A

ELECTRONICON RECRUITMENT MESSAGE AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Recruitment Message Text

For all social media channels (Reddit, Discord):

Hello! My name is Lucy, and I am a PhD candidate in Media and Communication at Temple University. I am conducting research on the vaporwave scene for my dissertation project and am recruiting participants for a 30-45 minute interview, to take place at the ElectroniCON music festival in Queens, NY, or a nearby location during the festival weekend. Any self-identified members of the vaporwave community over 18 years of age who will be in attendance at the ElectroniCON festival are eligible to participate.

The interview will consist of open-ended questions about your relationship to the vaporwave scene, your thoughts and feelings about the vaporwave scene and music, and your thoughts about racial and gender dynamics within the scene. You may also be asked to elaborate on your initial responses to the interview questions in a virtual follow-up interview 1-2 weeks following the initial interview, to take place over Zoom or e-mail.

You will be assigned a pseudonym that will be used for the published research, though risks from taking part in this research include a possible breach of confidentiality if the computer and/or drive containing participant information is lost or stolen. You may choose to withdraw your consent to participate at any time.

If you have any questions or you would like to volunteer to participate in this research, please send me a direct message or email me at tuj96953@temple.edu.

Interview Questions

Questions about demographics:

1. What is your age?
2. Where do you live? Where are you originally from?
3. What is your occupation?
4. How would you describe your gender (in your own words)?
5. How would you describe your racial identity (in your own words)?

Questions about involvement in vaporwave scene:

1. How long have you been involved with the vaporwave scene? How did you first get involved in the scene?
2. How would you describe your current involvement in the vaporwave scene (fan, producer, etc.)?

3. Aside from this festival, what kind of vaporwave-related events or vaporwave-related activities do you participate in either in person or online? Are you a member of any vaporwave-centric communities, either online or in person?
4. What do you enjoy about these events or the vaporwave scene in general?
5. In your opinion, how has Internet culture shaped the vaporwave scene? How has vaporwave been shaped by meme culture, for example?
6. How do you think the different cultural influences (Japanese media, etc.) in vaporwave have shaped the scene's general attitudes toward cultural difference?
7. How do you think these influences have shaped the scene's attitude toward racial and gender identities?
8. How would you describe the general attitude of vaporwave scene members around issues concerning racial and gender identity?
9. In what ways have you seen these attitudes play out in in-person or digital vaporwave spaces?
10. How do you think these attitudes are shaped by the broader internet and meme culture?
11. Is there anything else you would like to add? Do you have any questions for me?