

**Music, platforms and the digital self:
the negotiation of identity in online
music cultures in the 2010s**

Henry Charles Morgan

Cardiff University School of Music



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Summary

This thesis evaluates the relationship between identity and musical practice in online culture, particularly in relation to the phenomenon of platform capitalism during the 2010s. Working with a concept of musical identity that centres the activity of audiences along with music producers, six case studies investigate how internet users use popular music to negotiate their sense of individual and collective selfhood. Conspicuous consumption is examined as an identity mediator in audience communities and in the work of prominent music critic Anthony Fantano, forming part of a hybridisation of popular music culture with cultural norms unique to the internet. This process is further analysed via the work of musicians associated with online culture, including the band Death Grips and composer Daniel Lopatin. Throughout, parallels are drawn between the nature of music and of digital communication in terms of identity negotiation, demonstrating how these ‘technologies of the self’ work together.

The role of digital platforms is central to this study, which is focussed on a decade that saw the internet transformed by streaming services, social media and a transition towards algorithmic content recommendation. Despite these developments, findings show that internet users continue to exercise considerable agency in their use of music in identity negotiation. The innovative and transformative use of platform affordances that intersect with and support users’ musical practice allows both audiences and artists to produce sophisticated, multifaceted and continually evolving representations of the self. For example, the platform-assisted construction and reflexive interpretation of media assemblages is used to negotiate emergent musical identities in a variety of contexts, enabled by the ‘post-scarcity’ media economy of the contemporary internet. Using a mix of qualitative research methods from netnography and ethnomusicology, this project develops our understanding of music’s role within internet culture and more broadly in the formation and negotiation of human identity.

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Introduction

In a 2018 interview, composer Daniel Lopatin spoke about his social reputation as an internet user. ‘My friends tell me I’m the best of the crew at the internet. I’m the internet boy’ (Pemberton 2018). This identity defined by Lopatin’s affinity with online culture and communication is at the forefront of his music, which draws deeply from the internet for aesthetic inspiration and textual material, obsessing over bygone popular culture, shared cultural memory and the mediation of one by the other. Lopatin’s internet-based identity is further reflected in the way his work is digitally disseminated, as snippets, samples and videos are released across numerous online platforms, continually recycled, fragmented and recontextualised. The composer’s preoccupation with technological mediation is even visible in his artistic alias ‘Oneohtrix Point Never’, a contortion of the broadcast frequency for Boston soft rock station *Magic 106.7* (‘Today’s Hits, Yesterday’s Favourites’). This pseudonym succinctly describes a complex artistic identity by evoking an experience common to many internet users: half-remembered messages, sounds and images mutated far beyond their original forms by cycles of replication and absurd abstraction. Lopatin—the internet boy—understands the way a username can represent a digital identity often quite separate from the physical self, emergent from a life lived online. Rather than just an interest in media and technology, his music evokes an identity constructed through processes of consumption, interpretation, mediation and reinvention.

Born in 1982, Daniel Lopatin belongs to a generation whose relationship with music has been shaped by digital technology from the beginning. Digital formats carry the sound delivered by digital platforms, composed or produced using digital audio workstations. Digital communication has become the backbone of contemporary musical discourse in terms of criticism, discussion and community, while automated digital systems and algorithms guide

consumption of both music and music culture in an increasingly crowded and corporatised online landscape. In this environment, digitally inflected musical identities emerge quite naturally as musicians and audiences alike are now required to master the online world in order to find success and satisfaction in their musical lives. In the 1990s, digital technology represented an exciting new set of tools with which music could be created, experienced, traded and evaluated. But in recent decades these tools—and the opportunities and limitations they bring with them—have become the default.

The digitisation of music culture has been widely studied based on its impact on music discovery (Adar & Huberman 2000, Barile et al. 2015, Barna 2017, Bonini & Gandini 2019, Burkart 2014, Tepper & Hargittai 2009), liveness (Peterson & Bennett 2004, Cormany 2015, Crossley 2018, Heuguet 2016), community (Baym 2007, Beer 2008, Ebare 2004, Kibby 2000, Reia 2014), commerce (Anderson 2006, Baym 2018, Bowrey & Rimmer 2005, David 2010, Fleischer 2017, McCourt & Burkart 2003, Morris 2014, Sinclair & Tinson 2017) and countless other topics. But the primary focus of this project is on the way internet culture interacts with the use of music (by both audiences and musicians) in the development, expression and negotiation of identity. This topic is particularly complex not only due to music's own nuanced and multifaceted relationship with human identity, but because of the unique relationship between identity and digital technology itself. Just like music, networked digital communication can be understood as a 'technology of the self', a toolkit with which practitioners work to understand themselves and project images of their evolving selfhood outward, a process which is itself a crucial component of identity formation. Academic and popular thought surrounding the concept of digital identities has undergone several transformations and fragmentations along with the developing online culture and the technology on which it is based. The resulting plurality of thought around online identity is

mirrored by that of musical identity, as the ways music is used in relation to identity depend on cultural context and on the specific musical tools available to the subject (or subjects) of that identity.

The development of internet technology since the 1990s has seen the World Wide Web mature from a heavily decentralised network of users, communities and services rather separate from the offline world, into a ubiquitous and driving force of global society and a favoured means of communication, information dissemination, entertainment and commerce for companies, governments and billions of individual users. Over the last decade in particular, this process has been largely driven by two related factors: the mobile internet revolution and the accompanying process of platformisation. Firstly, the rapid improvement of mobile internet technology has allowed for the integration of digital networks into every corner of our lives, freeing the web from its previously static confinement generally within desktop computers. Along with mobility, convenience and accessibility to new users (particularly in developing countries), the massive increase in available user data provided by mobile internet use has been an instrumental factor in accelerating the growth and power of digital platforms, which have now come to largely define the online experience as well as creeping into many previously ‘offline’ aspects of our lives. As the next section of this introduction will outline, the increasingly platform dominated nature of online culture seen during the 2010s forms a core aspect of the project’s enquiry into online musical practice. The forces of platformisation play a variety of roles in different social and artistic contexts, nearly always represents a form of change to be navigated and negotiated by my research subjects.

As I have already mentioned, the identity practices of both musicians and music audiences are examined in this project. This decision was based on the idea that it is vital to understand both

production and consumption when examining the social uses of music. In the context of online culture, musical production and consumption are intrinsically linked, reflecting the influencing each other. Exemplified by the work of artists like Daniel Lopatin (whose status as a consumer of music is central to his ability to produce it), this relationship operates as a two-way system in which the internet shapes musical identity practice, just as music culture in turn influences the nature and experience of online identity. Along with the consumption and production of music, an important role is also by the ways music is interpreted and given meaning by participants in online music culture – a phenomenon explored in Chapters Four and Five of this project. Digital platforms act as the substrate on which such negotiations play out, each guiding users' identity practices via the unique affordances and limitations of each platform, while collected data provides a means of responding to user behaviour and boosting future engagement. Technologically or culturally driven shifts in the nature of these platform entities and the balance of power (both between competing platforms and their users) therefore have far-reaching consequences for all actors in the online musical ecosystem, as well as the formal and aesthetic features of music itself.

In pre-digital popular music cultures, displays of music consumption were an important ritual of self-representation (Frith 1997), on the one hand signalling a sense of shared experience and cultural understanding and on the other generating a sense of distinction and individuality for the subject based on their unique tastes and practices. Similarly, the meanings derived from and conferred onto musical texts and artists are central to listeners' sense of the specific messages sent by music, as well as the way drawing associations between that music and a group or individual reflects and generates a sense of identity. The idea of expertise is important in both of these contexts, as in the first case it can empower an audience member to present themselves as particularly aware of or in tune with the music they consume, and in the second,

it can allow additional authority in the process of determining or discovering the meanings of that music, providing additional depth, power and control in the presentation of identity. I am interested in how these processes have been transferred not just into online space, but how their online equivalents interact with the process of platformisation.

I am also interested in the way the structures, aesthetics, philosophies and social norms of online culture have been integrated into the musical identity expression of internet-based musicians. I believe that this can tell us more about the way that online culture (and the platforms that presently dominate it) relates to the use of music as a means of exploring and expressing identity. There are two main ways that this aspect of the project's investigation is linked to the audience processes I just outlined. The first is due to the centrality of media consumption, interpretation and recontextualisation in internet culture. This means that for musicians whose identities are tied to the internet or who simply exist online to any significant extent, digitally mediated consumption and interpretive identity practices form an important part of their creative practice. The second connection is also derived from another key feature of internet culture: its high level of reflexivity. The inherently recursive and self-regarding nature of online discourse and cultural production leads many online artists to explore their personal connection to digital culture in their work, especially in terms of the nature of online identity.

As will become apparent, here 'online identity' does not simply refer to the online expression of already extant human identities such as those defined by race, sexuality, subculture, media consumption, political affiliation and other social groupings. While online cultures have developed ways to pinpoint one's self-identity through sophisticated systems of subcultural signification (see the examples of Tumblr and 4chan discussed below), the things about identity

the internet is best at reflecting are its interconnectedness and fluidity. Many of the online identities examined in this project do relate to and have roots in the categories listed above, but the affordances and limitations of digital technology (and increasingly those of specific digital platforms) allow for more than straightforward 'online equivalents' of Blackness, nerd identity, media fandom, masculinity or the transgender experience. For both individuals and groups of people, internet mediated identity is fundamentally different from offline expressions of identity in the same way that Wikipedia (with all its hypertextual malleability) is fundamentally different from an encyclopaedia sitting on a bookshelf.

As this introduction will shortly explain, musical practice also has a highly complex relationship with the mediation of identity, one that incorporates but often transcends identity categories like race, class, politics and gender. In attempting to bring together these two systems of identity mediation, I have therefore decided to avoid constructing my research questions around such categories. Instead, I have focussed on different ways that identity is expressed, both in terms of particular musical practices like conspicuous consumption, and in the context of ongoing developments in the digital environment wrought by platform capitalism:

- 1) Among online audiences and musicians, to what extent have identity practices associated with pre-digital popular music culture hybridised with those relating to the culture of the internet?
- 2) How has the negotiation of musical identity in online music culture been influenced by the growing power of large digital platforms, particularly in the context of social media communities and music streaming?

- 3) How is the conspicuous consumption of music used online as a way of expressing identity? What does this look like among
 - a) communities and their members?
 - b) prominent social media personalities?
- 4) What is the role of musical meaning in the negotiation of identity among online music audiences, and what is the role of social platforms in these processes?
- 5) How do contemporary musicians engage with the platformisation of online culture in their music, and how does this engagement relate to the musical expression of internet-mediated identity?

Given their breadth, I have chosen to address these questions with six case studies, across which I have engaged with a diverse collection of digital platforms, fan communities, artists and musical works. This approach has allowed me to uncover common threads and themes in relation to the questions, while also underlining that no single example or study could provide insights applicable across online culture as a whole. Following this Introduction, Chapter One will provide a more detailed historical and theoretical background for the project via an exploration of the shared histories of online music culture and scholarly perspectives on the nature of digital identity. Chapter Two will then introduce my methodology, including an account of the ethical challenges associated with online social research, and a more thorough explanation of the case study approach. Chapters Three to Eight then comprise the project's case studies, presented in three pairs based on their focus. Rather than engaging with the above research questions individually, these chapters instead each provide insight into multiple questions, with the first and second questions operating more broadly than those that come after. For example, in addition to addressing the issue of platformisation and the hybridisation of pre-digital and internet-based musical identity practices (RQ1, RQ2), the pair of case studies

in Chapters Three and Four focus on music consumption as a means of expressing identity, first in an online community devoted to music discussion (RQ3a) and then in the work of prominent YouTube-based music critic Anthony Fantano (RQ3b).

Chapters Five and Six, the second pair of case studies, then continue to look at the social expression of identity in online music audiences, but now with a focus on the negotiation of musical meaning (RQ4). First, Chapter Five examines the way that lyric-annotation site genius.com provides its users access to a means of identity expression through displays of musical expertise and insight, but only through participation in a strict community hierarchy. Chapter Six then looks to a specific fan community devoted to industrial hip-hop group Death Grips, where the contested political and aesthetic meaning of the band's music is used by community members to express their own identities through the collective negotiation not only of Death Grips' musical identity, but of the nature of musical meaning itself. The final pair of case studies in Chapters Seven and Eight examines a set of musicians whose work and artistic identity has specific ties to internet culture (RQ5), and the way their internet-mediated identities are expressed through music. Chapter Seven analyses this in the context of the emergent dance music genre Hyperpop and the broader history of 'internet music', while Chapter Eight's final case study returns to focus on the work of Daniel Lopatin and his 2015 album *Garden of Delete*.

In terms of the first two research questions, these three pairs of case studies (supported by Chapter One) will together demonstrate how ways of understanding and expressing identity found among participants in online music culture combine certain logics, values and practices from offline, pre-digital popular music culture with the logics, values and identity practices that have developed specifically as a result of internet culture, both in its earliest and most

revolutionary state in the 1990s to its much more centralised, corporate contemporary context (RQ1). As will be explained in the following section, each of these case studies relate to the forces of platformisation in different ways (RQ2), exploring various dimensions of this multifaceted process and its impact on the equally complex structures that make up online music culture. The next section of this introduction will now briefly elaborate on the platform capitalist processes that drive the platformisation of the internet, discussed in the context of the subjects of my six case studies in order to identify which of platform capitalism's effects are the most relevant to this project. Following this another central concept is discussed: the relationship between musical practice and identity. The introduction then concludes with a more detailed breakdown of the project's structure and the key findings within each of the case studies.

Platform capitalism

The phenomenon of platform capitalism looms large above any academic enquiry into online culture in the 2010s. This decade was defined by an extremely rapid increase in the role played by data-driven, algorithmically organised digital platforms in various aspects of social life including work (Richardson 2021), politics (Enli & Skogerbø 2013, Gustafson 2012, Hutchinson 2021, Nieborg 2019, Thorson et al. 2021), cultural production (Nieborg 2018), commerce (Westermeier 2020, Wichmann et al. 2022) and even intimacy (Sumter et al. 2017). Platforms take many forms, ranging from social media networks like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram to content streaming services like Netflix, Spotify, YouTube and TikTok, as well as market intermediaries like PayPal and the App Store. As I have already outlined, thanks in part to mobile internet technology the mediation of human behaviour by apps and other digital platforms has proliferated rapidly, reaching into, restructuring and even automating areas of life that had previously escaped this level of mediation. This is visible in the growing success

of dating apps, ‘ride hailing’ services and various hot and cold food delivery companies, all of which are governed to some extent by algorithmic systems that reduce human accountability in search of optimising efficiency and profits for the platform owners (Benvegnù & Kampouri 2021). The largest platforms wield a level of political influence comparable to that of small nation states while ignoring the constraints of national borders or governmental oversight.

From the perspective of these operators, platform capitalism might simply represent a new business model (Srnicek 2017), but for many internet users it can mean a near-total overhaul of digitally mediated cultures, community and cultural production in terms of how participants in these activities relate to their practices, to media, and to one another. The maturation and streamlining of platform models over the last decade has helped the internet and its culture become increasingly mainstream, resulting in the gradual dilution or outright dissolution of much of its volatility, flexibility and revolutionary potential (Hutchinson 2021). Until the mid-2000s, much online social or community activity and associated content creation, consumption and culture took place across a vast variety of largely independent forums, websites and blogs, but now much of this activity is restricted to or otherwise dependent on large, corporate platforms that dictate the structures and forms of communication available to users, shaping the content of the information that reaches them.

Another important aspect of this process is consolidation, as these mainstream platforms not only play host to their own unique user practices and cultures, but also often absorb those that previously existed on a greater number of smaller, less centralised platforms. As will be explored in Chapter One, this process of reterritorialisation has been instrumental in allowing those with a stake in these platforms to define how music and music culture operate on the internet, sweeping away the ‘wild west’ of file sharing, internet radio, independent forums and

other isolated musical activities either through passive assimilation or by force. As the internet is increasingly shaped by platforms' collection of user data, the concept of Web 2.0 has now surely been surpassed, but any attempt to claim we are now living through 'Web 3.0' would be vastly oversimplified and too linear to adequately describe the current moment. Many hallmarks of Web 2.0 culture have been disrupted by platformisation to varying degrees. In the context of this project perhaps the most significant of these is Web 2.0's supposed dissolution of barriers separating artists and audiences, and musical production from musical consumption. As will be explored throughout this project, intervention by digital platforms can either accelerate or reverse this trend depending on the specific context and interests of the platform holders.

In response to these changes in the development of online culture and technology, the concept of 'platformisation' has emerged as a means of broadly characterising a diverse set of processes. An early definition of the term describes it as the 'extension of social media platforms into the rest of the web and their drive to make external web data "platform ready"' (Helmond 2015:1). But as the reach and prominence of platforms has accelerated, the scope of their impact has broadened to include 'the penetration of the infrastructures, economic processes, and governmental frameworks of platforms in different economic sectors and spheres of life', as well as gaining a significantly more abstract nature, becoming 'the reorganisation of practices and imaginations around platforms' (Poell et al. 2019:5-6). Interest in platformisation can now be found across various academic disciplines, hence these two more recent definitions covering aspects of the phenomenon from two different scholarly perspectives. The first draws on software studies, critical political economy and business studies; and the second, more abstract definition draws largely from cultural studies and media studies.

For the purposes of this project, each of these three perspectives can be useful. For instance, the behaviour and role of music streaming giants like Apple Music and Spotify could be said to demonstrate any one of these definitions via their consolidation and reshaping of pre-existing online social practices regarding the consumption, dissemination and even production of music, as well as their large-scale transformation of digital infrastructures and economic processes in the music industry. The context of music streaming is relevant throughout this project but each of my case studies engages with various different digital platforms, highlighting different aspects and processes within platform capitalism. For instance, Chapter Three looks into the activities of a Facebook based community in which subcultural ideals drawn from both pre-digital popular music cultures and those from earlier more platform independent online music communities are incorporated into and shaped by Facebook's platform environment. But Chapter Four is focussed on the impact of platform capitalist models on music criticism, and the ways that mastery of multiple platforms has become an important avenue for success for influential content creators.

As well as operating as an investigation of hierarchies and power within a smaller, more platform independent online music community, Chapter Five also provides insight into the way that the platform-led trend towards video content seen in the mid-2010s impacted text-based Web 2.0 musical practice. Chapter Six features elements of both of the first two case studies in its discussion, as it is focussed on a Facebook-based music community, but also observes slightly more resistant uses of social media by musicians and audiences in their expression of subcultural identity. In Chapter Seven platform mastery is again shown to play an important role in the success of contemporary online artists and content creators. Finally, Chapter Eight

examines how the iconography and remembered experiences of pre-platform internet culture play an important role in the expression of their online identities for other internet-based artists.

Having introduced the concept of platformisation and the role it plays in my investigation of expressions of online musical identity, I will now turn to examine the relationship between music and identity in more detail. A significant amount of research exists on both the links between musical practice and identity, as well as identity in online culture. This project contributes to both of these discourses by combining elements from each, moving towards a consolidated theory of online musical identity through its study of a variety of ways in which internet users use their musical consumption, analysis and production in the formation and expression of identity. This contribution concerns both individual and group identity, and also acts as a functional study of the impact of platformisation on online communities of various sizes and with various relationships to those platforms. The 2010s was the decade that saw the internet mature and the establishment of a common cultural understanding of what it means to live one's life online. In its focus on this time period, this project therefore provides insight into the impact of this process on older online cultures and communities, and the ways their practices and ways of thinking about music become incorporated into mainstream internet culture. The following section will now elaborate on the history of academic research investigating the ways that musical practice is tied to human identity. After this, the introduction will conclude with a detailed outline of the content and focus of each case study, and the purpose they serve in terms of addressing the project's research questions.

Music & identity

Both in terms of the individual self and in the collective sense, the connections and affinities between music and human identity have long been explored from numerous angles from within

musicology, psychology, media studies and the social sciences. Despite their theoretical, conceptual and methodological differences, there exists a broad consensus that music can act as a core component in the development and expression of identity for groups and individuals. Most forms of music can be seen performing this function in some capacity, with the contribution of various art music traditions to the development of nineteenth century European nationalism being a particularly well-documented example in terms of collective identity. But this project is primarily grounded in internet-based popular culture, so it is the role of popular music and its surrounding practices that are of particular interest. Some examples of these practices include the formation of subcultures and fandoms, music collecting, communal and personal listening, and the creation of mixtapes and playlists. As will be explored in Chapters Seven and Eight, there are also strong connections between identity and musical performance, as well as compositional techniques like remixing among many others.

One aspect of popular music's role in mediating identity (and constructing a notion of 'musical identity') that recurs throughout this project is the conspicuous consumption of popular music. This is used as a means of communicating elements of one's identity to others, as well as a means of introspective self-exploration. As a diverse and highly expressive art form, popular music nearly always carries with it associations of particular experiences, perspectives, places and activities that themselves link to and express different forms of human identity. Popular music's timbres, rhythms and other sonic elements can convey these associations metaphorically, while song lyrics are able to carry meaning as directly or obliquely as the lyricist desires, allowing for both simple unambiguous messaging *and* layered metaphor, subtext or implication. Different genres and use cases (such as dance) develop their own associations, to be subverted and deconstructed just as readily as they can be adhered to. Popular music is also perhaps the musical tradition in which the identity of the performer is

most central to the way it is heard and understood, adding yet another layer of potential associations onto which the listener can grasp. In these ways, the consumption of popular music creates a network of interconnected associations, an assemblage from which the identity of each listener or group of listeners is an emergent property that can be either displayed or simply experienced from within.

Simon Frith has described how the use of statements and knowledge about music as a kind of ‘badge’ of identification is used by listeners to identify themselves and one another (Frith 1981). Frith later expanded upon this idea, stating that the experience of music itself acts to construct our identities, an experience of our ‘self-in-process’ (Frith 1996:111). This echoes the social constructionist idea that identity itself is fluid, constantly rewriting itself, and suggests that our experiences of music have an impact on the way this process operates. In the context of social interaction, multiple instances of this process combine, resulting in an evolving, collective musical identity experienced by each member of the group while still allowing the preservation of individually developing selves within it. The emergence of identity from the aggregation of many musical practices or activities (and the emergence of collective identity in turn) is an idea that will recur throughout this project, assisted by the poststructuralist notion of assemblage, introduced in detail in Chapter Two.

As a part of her research documenting the way music structures everyday experience, Tia DeNora labelled music’s relationship to identity as an ‘aesthetic reflexive’ activity in which musical practice acts as a tool for ‘self-creation and maintenance’ (DeNora 1999:32), providing a form of scaffolding with which individuals develop an understanding of themselves. In this role, music can act both as a method for self-becoming and for remembering past selves, as preferences, knowledge, skills and other aspects of an individual’s musical practice are used to

gauge and articulate the changing nature of their identity. DeNora also points to the role of musical qualities themselves, reporting that people often align aspects of their identities directly with the music they prefer: 'musical materials are active ingredients in identity work, how respondents literally 'find themselves' in musical structures' (DeNora 1999:49). In the study in question this takes the form of highly personal, subjective relationships with musical moments, instruments, sonorities or genres. To briefly illustrate, one interview subject is described as preferring musical features that she personally identifies with: as an alto, she enjoys lower register, 'meatier' sounds (DeNora 1999:50). Here, a combination of musical tradition, aesthetic taste and the socially inscribed meaning of pitches and timbres provides a material, embodied articulation of self-identity that is based on music consumption and performance at the same time.

Just as musical practice helps to construct an image of the self, it also provides others with an idea of who we are, allowing us to maintain an idea of self through our understanding of others' responses to our expressions of self (Cooley 1902:179-185). This concept of the so-called 'looking glass self' will return in Chapter One where it forms part of the contemporary toolkit for understanding internet-based identity, but it is also at work in the way that music allows us to signal identity to one another and to ourselves. Frith and DeNora's understanding of music as a tool or activity used in the negotiation of both social and personal identities shares some key elements with the concept of 'musicking' (Small 1998), wherein music is seen as something that is done, a set of behaviours not limited to the musical object itself or even to its production, but that instead incorporate other forms of participation such as listening, dancing or putting on a record.

Musicking views musical practice as a set of intersecting relationships that appear during individuals' engagement with music, and through which all participants are capable of contributing to the musical experience. This has implications for music's relationship with collective identity, as the sharing of musical experience can be understood as a means of constructing the identity of a group by mediating between the selfhood of each individual member: '...the issue is not how a particular piece of music or a performance reflects the people, but how it produces them, how it creates and constructs an experience – a musical experience, an aesthetic experience – that we can only make sense of by taking on both a subjective and a collective identity' (Frith 1996:114). In this way, musical practice simultaneously constructs—and is constructed by—the collective identities of its participants, identities that are formed, as mentioned above, from an assemblage of their individual self-images.

This circular system has also been discussed by Georgina Born in a particularly systematic approach to untangling the music-identity relationship, pointing to music's mediating role in 'generating and conditioning human subjectivities and socialities, while music is constituted in discourse and practice, as well as through its manifold socialities and socio-technical arrangements' (Born 2011:378). Born's model of musical mediation is a sophisticated attempt to pin down the way that music scaffolds and materialises identity, proposing four interacting 'planes of mediation', acting in combination as an assemblage to generate music's identity effects. The first of these consists essentially of the musicking element – based in performance and other musical practice. The second plane is that of the communities and publics that arise from music, discussed in more detail in the following paragraphs. The third refers to music's interaction with wider social formations such as gender, class, age and nationality; and the fourth is made up of the institutions and structures that dictate and direct the production, dissemination and exchange of music which, in the context of online culture, consist primarily

of digital platforms, as well as the forces of global late capitalism and the structures of the music industry. This model is useful when observing the identity practices surrounding music in the technologically mediated social context of the internet, and—as will be discussed below—this is in fact something that Born has already done in a study of internet-mediated music, though in a slightly different context to that of this project, focussed on genre theory rather than identity (Born & Haworth 2018).

Several scholars working outside musicology have also attempted to codify a concept of ‘musical identity’ (Hargreaves et al. 2002, 2017, Pöder & Kiilu 2015), but the multifaceted nature of our social uses for music make this a difficult task. Interesting contributions have been made to this topic from the fields of developmental psychology (Trevarthen & Malloch 2017), pedagogy (Talbot 2013), and youth culture (Tarrant et al. 2004), especially based on music’s role in delineating social categories like gender (Dibben 2002). However, while several of these accounts attempt to construct a formal model or taxonomy of musical identity for individuals, this approach ultimately fails to describe much that is not already understood through concepts like performance practice, compositional voice and taste. Among these more common ways of talking about individual musical identity, taste is perhaps the most important in the context of this project. It will therefore continue to play a central role in several of its case studies, but aspects such as musical expertise, performance, composition practice and others will be called upon where appropriate, especially in terms of music’s articulation of political and gendered identities.

Taste is also a highly relevant concept when dealing with collective identity, as demonstrated by the idea of subculture, a framework that can also conveniently act as a bridge linking offline and online practices of musical consumption and identity expression. Since Dick Hebdige’s

seminal 1970s study of subcultural behaviour (Hebdige 1979), numerous authors have investigated the use of music consumption and taste as a structuring device both within and between subcultures and scenes. For instance, Holly Kruse identified music taste as a key element ‘delineating subcultural identities’ between members of translocal college music scenes in the USA (Kruse 1993), where music taste was able to connect and distinguish subcultural participants from one another as well as from the dominant mainstream. For the purposes of this project, perhaps the most significant contribution to this discourse was Sarah Thornton’s 1995 study of UK dance music culture, which introduced the idea of ‘subcultural capital’.

Following Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of a cultural capital distinguishing the classes through the literacy and consumption of certain media forms (Bourdieu 1979), Thornton proposed that youth subcultures were similarly engaged in the exchange of a form of social capital defined by participation in and access to certain subcultural codes and practices, among the most prominent of which was the expression of musical taste, along with related participation in social acts of musicking (Thornton 1995). Thornton also identified the important role played by mediating technologies and musical artefacts in this negotiation of identity, as subcultural capital is held to exist within and in relation to objects and locations, physically located in the musical lives of subcultural participants (for instance, vinyl records and nightclubs). This element is particularly relevant here, as even while the internet is devoid of physical objects and locations, the following chapters will demonstrate how this same phenomenon continues to occur in virtual space. Along with these various ways of thinking about music and identity, significant academic work has also gone into understanding the social role of musical subcultures, frequently building on Thornton’s ideas.

Several theoretical frameworks related to the idea of subculture are relevant to this project's case studies, including the notion of fandom, which describes the way certain media audiences derive a 'sense of self' (Sandvoss 2005:96), from conspicuous consumption of specific media and creative engagement with it (Jenkins 1992), often as part of a community, reinforcing an identity tightly linked to a personal sense of one's taste as well as a sense of shared belonging. Just as in the case of subculture, this identity constructs community by offering fans a means of 'textual and social discrimination' to distinguish them from non-fans while also resulting in group stratification, and with it the potential for social mobility within a fandom (Sandvoss 2005:96). The formation of these strata and the codes that define them can be particularly swift in an online setting, where insular communities can form and express a new set of identities and forms of social power that might differ greatly from the identities of the participants in their lives offline. These dynamics also bear significant resemblance to the exchange of capital Thornton observed in 1990s dance music subcultures, where participants' access to and use of capital is significantly diminished outside the subcultural milieu.

Another subcultural framework that describes how music audiences construct collective identity and belonging is the idea of music scenes. This is a particularly relevant tool in the case of online culture as it can also be used to explain how digital platforms develop a sense of place that contributes to users' identities. Traditionally grounded in geography, the notion of scene offers a flexible framework for musical communities and subcultures of all kinds that can be easily adapted to the online context. Scenes can be viewed as assemblages of interconnected, heterogenous actors (both human and nonhuman) that contribute to a particular set of cultural practices and associated identities, acting as an elaboration on the co-constructed networks of identities discussed above in relation to Frith's ideas. Physical and digital environments, social conventions, artists, audiences and media objects all simultaneously

contribute to a scene, which itself can be a part of a translocal network of scenes connected by shared aspects of their component actors and processes (Straw 1997, Crossley 2018). Taking this framework into the online context can show how digital communities interact and mutually construct themselves together with the platforms on which they exist. This also helps to link together online and offline musical activities, as the internet can be used to augment scenes based in real spaces, just as physical events like concerts and meetups can bring materiality to a primarily virtual music scene (Cormany 2015, Arriagada & Cruz 2016, Heuguet 2016).

However, while it can be useful to apply the ideas of subculture, fandom and scene to online contexts, the fundamental shifts wrought by digital technology on the ways audiences access and engage with music have also resulted in far-reaching changes to the ways music relates to individual and collective identity. Since Thornton's landmark study, the use of subcultural theory in relation to popular music culture has received some criticism, mostly due to a perceived nuancing of the relationship between music consumption and subcultural participation (Bennett 1999, Hesmondhalgh 2005). The relevance of subculture theory has also been widely debated in the context of an online culture in which identities are increasingly fluid, and access to information and media that previously defined subcultural membership has been rendered trivial. However, according to this project's findings, the internet is clearly still a site of subcultural activity and the exchange of cultural capital. As will be explained Chapter One, this is due to a hybridisation of identity markers and attitudes inherited from youth-oriented popular music subcultures and more internet-aligned subcultural identities such as the nerd, geek and hacker (McArthur 2009). This phenomenon is exemplified in the concept of the 'music nerd' that appears in Chapters Three and Four. For my purposes therefore, while it is certainly a concept to be handled with care, the idea of subcultural capital is still very useful

when observing online communities in which particularly high levels of contextual literacy are required for the successful participation in subcultural rituals.

Throughout this project I draw on the frameworks and tools discussed in this section in various combinations in order to understand the way that music is used in the construction and expression of identity in various contexts. It will however occasionally be necessary to refer to a general concept of ‘musical identity’ in my descriptions or analysis. On these occasions this should be understood as the image of an individual or collective selfhood that can be constructed, expressed and otherwise mediated only via acts of musicking. As explained at the start of this section, the associations held by musical texts and act as building blocks of identity that are brought together and contextualised through musical practice. By viewing all forms of music-related identity practice as acts of musicking (which of course include performance and listening practices, as well as various social discourses and modes of expression such as taste, expertise and subcultural allegiances), musical identity can be considered as both a coherent and suitably unfixed and flexible idea with which to describe the uses of music examined in this project. This Introduction will now conclude with a more detailed outline of the project’s case studies, their purpose and contributions to address the research questions laid out above.

Project structure

As already stated, the six case studies presented in this project are grouped into three pairs based on the different aspects of musical practice highlighted within them: consumption, interpretation and production. There is also a significant thematic overlap across each of the pairs, and many links exist between non-paired chapters dealing with different ideas. For instance, Chapters Three and Six both look at communities based on the Facebook ‘Groups’ functionality. Some connections between the case studies exist as a result of the method used

for choosing them, which is explained in Chapter Two. While all of the music in this project does not come together to form a cohesive image of a musical movement or scene, it is possible to trace connections between the genres and audiences featured, in a way that provides something like a snapshot of online music culture during the 2010s. These inter-chapter connections culminate with Chapter Eight's final case study, analysing the work of composer Daniel Lopatin, who has already featured in this Introduction as a means of illustrating the key concepts and questions at the heart of this project. What follows is a breakdown of the topics and key findings of the six case studies, as well as an outline of the methods used to approach them.

Chapters Three & Four: consumption

These case studies approach the topic of musical identity expression by investigating a specifically internet-based culture of musical curation, conspicuous consumption, rating and discussion. Chapter Three is centred on a Facebook community dedicated to music discussion. Through a mix of participant observation, surveys and interviews with community members, I analyse the negotiation of identity among a loosely connected subculture of 'extremely online' music fans who meticulously construct their online identities through displays of personal taste and consumption practice. Notions of curation and community canon building are key to this activity, where they act as a means of navigating the post-scarcity musical economy driven by the rise of streaming platforms. Community members produce visual representations of their music consumption and all-time favourites through the strategic use of digital album artwork in a dematerialised, online-only echo of record collecting culture.

Participants are encouraged to develop a knowledge of the community's alternative musical canon, itself defined and disseminated via digital images including flowcharts and genre

guides. This case study demonstrates how online representations of taste can carry subcultural capital. Subcultural communities make use of a combination of platform affordances to further the exchange of this capital, developing sophisticated ritual behaviours and gatekeeping practices, while simultaneously expanding the number of their participants and the influence of their practices. The role of music streaming platforms in this community is also considered, especially in the context of Spotify's annual 'Wrapped' event, which is read as a partial reincorporation of this community's subcultural, audience-derived practices to serve the interests of a major digital platform and associated interest groups within the music industry. Overall, this chapter presents an insight into the operation of online musical subculture in the streaming era, a cultural context it shares with Chapter Four, the second chapter in this pairing.

In contrast to the previous case study however, Chapter Four focuses on the way a single individual constructs musical identity through the use of a variety of platforms and by engaging with online music consumption practices. It investigates popular online music critic Anthony Fantano, whose online identity is tied closely to the sort of consumption practices introduced in Chapter Three, but who also draws on other forms of musical identity related to pre-digital rock journalism and the emergent figure of the social media influencer. With analysis built on Fantano's vast catalogue of online content, I argue that this hybrid identity is generated via a combination of skilled multi-platform engagement and his content's mobilisation of discourses of authenticity drawn from both popular music and online cultural discourses. Fantano's relevance and power as a music curator is reliant on his success as a YouTuber, high level of internet culture literacy and an understanding of his personal impact in a reflexive, ambivalent style that has seen his voice grow to dominate youth-orientated online music criticism over the last decade.

In recent years, increased engagement with other platforms like Twitter and TikTok has allowed Fantano to maintain the influential and popular position his YouTube channel *The Needle Drop* has come to enjoy. Through a combination of this platform-based strategy and the development of a personal rhetoric and critical register compatible with the online values of his audience, Fantano projects and sells a particular set of conspicuous consumption practices that combine the notion of authentic listening with a mastery of digital platforms and of vernacular online culture. Chapter Four details how the aspirational but intentionally attainable and relatable identity Fantano embodies is further materialised by his construction of an ideological other: the critic's musically illiterate comedic alter-ego, whose philistinism is ridiculed and contrasted with Fantano's own tastes and attitudes. This analysis furthers the previous case study's exploration of personal identity construction through music in a platform-dominated environment, while demonstrating how pre-digital figures and identities within music culture have been transformed by the culture and affordances of the internet.

Chapters Five & Six: interpretation

These chapters maintain the project's focus on online audiences but narrow their scope to investigate the role of musical meaning in online music discourse, both in terms of textual interpretation and in a more abstract, self-reflexive sense. In popular music culture, ascribing meanings to music is almost as common as making value judgements but can take many forms from the assertion of authorial intent of a particular message to descriptions of the way that a musical work offers a lens through which to understand the self of the listener, or the world around them (Small 1998:13). This form of musicking often takes place in online spaces, mediated and structured to varying degrees by the platforms on which it happens. In the context of the communities examined in the first pair of case studies, these practices can be understood as a form of mediated consumption, but also as a type of artistic production in which audiences

confer meaning onto musical works or artists via the process of socially navigating the existence of differing interpretations. This is an activity to which the internet is particularly well-suited—and as Chapters Five and Six demonstrate—there are a variety of ways online communities have developed in terms of organising the collective negotiation of musical meaning. This means that in online spaces where these forms of meaning-making are often highly visible and performative, hermeneutical activities and other, more personal forms of meaning-making can act as a kind of performative identity work in their own right.

Using similar methods to Chapter Three, both of these case studies engage with a different form of engagement linked to interpretations and negotiations of musical meaning, and the relationship these platforms have with online social and platform structures. First, Chapter Five looks to the users of the website Genius.com, who form a highly organised and hierarchical community based around the goal of analysing, researching and interpreting song lyrics. This is achieved through a wiki-like affordance of the Genius platform that allows members to annotate lyrics line-by-line for the judgement of other users. Originally called Rap Genius, the site deals with most major forms of popular music but has a particular focus on hip-hop, a genre famous for its intricate, vernacular language steeped in metaphor and wordplay. As a result, contested interpretations are common and a system of voting annotations up and down is employed to determine their validity. However, the community's role-based hierarchy plays an important role in legitimising certain interpretations and forms of lyric analysis, as only the most experienced, enfranchised users can officially approve new annotations. Significant effort is put into maintaining standards of the site's content, resulting in the frequent pruning of user interpretations that are considered inappropriate, irrelevant or implausible by higher level users.

This chapter approaches the topic of musical identity in two main ways. Firstly, by analysing the way these intra-community dynamics of expertise, platform mastery and hermeneutic power interact with the identity formation and expression of Genius.com users, and secondly by investigating the impact of large-scale changes to the website made in the mid-2010s that de-emphasised the user community in favour of an increased reliance on larger platforms like Apple Music and YouTube. These changes came during the internet-wide ‘pivot to video’ and offer an emblematic example of platformisation and its impact on internet-based music cultures. In this case this involved a reduction in the importance of the community’s interpretive activity in favour of a re-centring of authorial authority, resulting in significant changes to the play between identity and community participation among members, not to mention a loss of nuance, detail and open-endedness in the site’s content.

While certain members of the genius.com community do consider the possibility of a more postmodern, fluid understanding of meaning within musical texts, the majority appear to view these meanings as fairly fixed, being based on authorial intent and not subject to significant reinvention by an audience. In contrast, Chapter Six focuses on a group of internet users for whom the meaning of musical objects can change over time, guided by community consensus while also performing highly personalised purposes in the identity work of individuals listeners. This case study returns to Facebook—to a fan page devoted to the American industrial hip-hop band Death Grips—analysing the community’s construction and negotiation of the band’s artistic and political identity based on both their music and their limited (but idiosyncratic) social media presence.

This process is centred on a subcultural ritual developed in the community that allows participants to propose and draw affective, political and aesthetic connections between

numerous online media objects and the band's identity, resulting in an assemblage of paratextual media, the emergent properties of which describe the meaning of Death Grips in the community's collective understanding. Via the work of Daniel Cavicchi (1998), my analysis of this behaviour is based in a model of musical meaning-making proposed in 1984 by ethnomusicologist Steven Feld. For some participants, their activity is viewed as a way for them to subjectively relate and bind aspects of their own identities to that of the music they enjoy. For others, the community's consensus concerning certain political and social aspects of the band's musical meaning forms a safe space for participants from marginalised identities. This insulates the community from intrusion by political rivals whose presence might risk the dilution or corruption of the collectively negotiated identity of Death Grips with opposing interpretations and bigotry.

In another parallel with Chapter Five, Chapter Six also looks at the relationship between artist and audience in the negotiation of online musical identity. This is based on the online activity of the members of Death Grips themselves, who engage in disruptive forms of online behaviour related to those of their audience. This is an important aspect of the artistic identity of the band, commenting on the nature of platform-based music promotion and the construction of artists' identities on social media, and encouraging their audience to continue this behaviour. This affinity for and disruption of online cultural norms on the part of the musicians being discussed then forms an important bridge between the second and third pairs of case studies, shifting focus onto online artists and the music that they produce. The two case studies that make up the second pairing engage with the concept of musical meaning in quite different ways, but together demonstrate the variety of roles that musical meaning can play in the negotiation of identity on the internet, whether based in individuals' ability to interpret and express their understanding of texts to a culturally literate audience; the collaborative construction of

abstract identities of meaning surrounding a particular artist; or the artists' own assertion or rejection of their right to determine the meaning of their music.

Chapters Seven & Eight: production

As already mentioned, the final pair of case studies stand apart from the first two in their focus on the negotiation of identity via direct musical expression, rather than on the use of music by audiences. In addition to providing another dimension to the project's understanding of musical identity, many of the ideas found in earlier case studies can still be found in these chapters. Also visible in these case studies is a resurgence of some philosophical ideas commonly found in the early analyses of digital identity carried out in the 1990s (to be introduced shortly in Chapter One), such as post-humanism, disembodiment and fluid selfhood. These concepts form the basis of the reflexive explorations of digital identity observed in these chapters. A recurring theme in the music discussed in these case studies is the dissolution of distinctions between artist and audience, as well as those between listening and musical production. This highlights the connections between these case studies and the rest of the project, engaging with the ambivalent intentions of digital platforms that rely on user participation while also working to reassert cultural barriers and hierarchies disrupted by earlier online culture.

This pair of chapters begins with an introduction to the concept of internet music – a term originally coined to describe music composed or performed using networked digital technology, but that is often expanded to include music that could never have existed without online culture. For as long as music culture has been present online, so have musical production and creativity, growing in complexity and entanglement with internet culture just as musical discourse has. Internet music itself is not the primary focus of this project, but each of the various categories of music-internet relationship outlined in this section have significance

when attempting to develop an understanding of online musical discourse and identity performance, especially given that both of these can themselves appear in musical forms. Among the core contributions of this project is the idea that on the internet, musical forms of identity performance can range from composition to interpretation, discussion and even further. Internet music forms part of this system in its blended use of the internet as a platform, an inspiration and a tool to be used directly for the identity expression inherent in compositional practice.

In Chapter Seven this is demonstrated via the electronic genre hyperpop. This is perhaps the first internet music phenomenon to occur almost entirely in the context of an online culture dominated by large, mainstream digital platforms. The genre came to prominence via Spotify playlists, TikTok trends and the ‘stan’ culture on Twitter and Instagram, all of which have become among the internet’s most prominent theatres of mediated consumption since the late 2010s. As a result of this, hyperpop has reached a significantly larger audience than previous online genres like Nightcore or Vaporwave and is generally regarded as a more legitimate musical movement than these predecessors.

From around 2018, the power and influence of hyperpop in contemporary pop music has grown significantly with its influence audible in mainstream releases and its aesthetic markers becoming as recognisable as popular youth subcultural styles found in visual online culture such as the ‘e-girl’ archetype. Along with hyperpop, such emerging subcultural styles are themselves a result of platformisation, as creators increasingly play to algorithm optimisation and become more proficient at tailoring their content to the medium of mobile-first online audiovisual media along with the platform-guided tastes of its users. The chapter outlines

hyperpop's position as the contemporary face of internet music, situating its aesthetic strategies within the broader context of online music culture and specifically musical identity practice.

I argue that hyperpop aesthetics represent the digital experience, building on earlier internet music strategies such as glitch, 'digital maximalism' and 'digital queering' and the provocative, ambivalent juxtaposition of genre elements (Harper 2016, Waugh 2017). These features are central to the genre's role in expressing online identity, often representing uncanny, hyperreal characters and worlds heavily inflected around the features of online communication and elements of the post internet identity discussed in Chapter One. Analysing the work of two artists, (American duo 100 gecs and Scottish producer/songwriter SOPHIE) the chapter particularly focuses on Hyperpop's capacity as an outlet for internet-mediated identity expression. The aesthetic strategies of the genre combine with the internet's ability to provide all the necessary raw materials (samples, DAWs, plug-ins etc) to create gendered musical personae along with the means to present the resulting identities to a large audience and (from a symbolic interactionist perspective) have those identities validated through the process of the 'looking-glass self'. This experimentation and expression of identities simultaneously transcends and celebrates concepts like gender, embodiment and sincere affective connection, exemplifying how internet music can capture and distil the complexities of online identity in sonic form. These aspects of the genre therefore offer insight not only into the musical expression of digital experience, but also to the digital experiences and identities discussed in the previous chapters.

The final case study of this project returns to focus on the composer Daniel Lopatin, whose work as Oneohtrix Point Never has taken many forms, from ambient synthesizer compositions early in his career to entirely sample-based production, and more recently more traditional

songwriting including collaborations with mainstream musicians like The Weeknd. The focus of Chapter Eight is his 2015 album *Garden of Delete*, which features several of Lopatin's favourite compositional techniques and themes combined with an influence from Science Fiction and cyberpunk media, as well as engaging with philosophical concepts of posthumanism, assemblage and abjection. The album's themes of online media consumption practices and youth-orientated music fandom are explored not only through Lopatin's composition, but also through the way that the album was promoted and disseminated to its audience. This was achieved through the employment of internet-embedded paratext similar to that described in Chapter Six, here applied to a significantly more organised degree, and containing a narrative component featuring several characters, some of which represent different aspects of Lopatin's identity.

This case study explores the unique circumstances surrounding the album's release, which Lopatin announced through the creation and surprise publishing of a loose network of online media, sites and recordings to be gradually uncovered and engaged with by his fans. Through this process, the composer effectively leaked unfinished musical material and media he had sampled on the album, to then be remixed and reposted in various forms by his audience before the finished record was made available. The chapter argues that this process and the materials that surrounded the album's release have enabled it to represent an 'album as assemblage' embedded in cyberspace, one that can be viewed as a phenomenological account by Lopatin of his internet-embedded compositional and consumption practices, as well as an abstract, decomposed representation of the music itself. This map presents the composer's creative process as network of actors including the album's audience, characters and musical influences (both real and fictional), poststructuralist philosophy, digital spaces, and a broad collection of ephemeral internet media that inspired it.

Garden of Delete's engagement with internet-born identity in its music and mode of presentation forms an exploration of the internet as experienced by the composer, and the ways that this experience is often articulated for individuals through the curation of a personal set of media objects as demonstrated by Chapters Two, Three and Six. These themes are explored by a composer who is himself highly engaged with both online pop culture practices and with various philosophical discourses related to internet culture, as well as the aesthetics he employs in his work. As a final case study, *Garden of Delete* therefore acts as a useful endpoint and summary for the project as a whole, consolidating themes from case studies and acting as a critical reflection on the ideas and arguments presented in the earlier case studies.

Rather than attempting to analyse the nature of these processes on a general level or generalise the behaviour of a small group to an every-expanding online culture made up of a plurality of users, platforms and social norms, these six case studies have been chosen to analyse musical identity practice in a range of contexts including online communities, musicians, audience members and prominent individuals within those cultures. This portfolio of case studies provides multiple viewpoints and examples from which answers to the core research questions will emerge. Various themes will surface and add to the project's conceptual map throughout the gradual movement of my focus from discourses of taste and consumption to more direct forms of online musical expression. As the project moves along this spectrum between mediated consumption and mediated production, different cultural frameworks will be required to contextualise the practices being discussed. At the same time, theoretical and methodological approaches also recur throughout the project, drawing additional connections between the practices and cultures under scrutiny.

Next, Chapter One provides a background for the case studies with a pair of intertwined historical accounts. These provide cultural context and introduce key theoretical ideas explored in past studies of online culture, and online musical practice. It does this by presenting the parallel (and occasionally intertwined) development since the early 1990s of online musical culture and of academic models for understanding the nature of identity in digital spaces. In both of these histories, the development of new internet-based technology (peer-to-peer file sharing and the arrival of social media platforms respectively) results in a break from previously accepted social norms and models, eventually leading up to the decade of the 2010s, on which this project is primarily focussed. As well as providing historical context, this pair of narratives introduces many features of internet culture relevant to the case studies and will begin to demonstrate the impact of developing technology on internet-based musical practice.

Chapter One – Digital identity and online music culture

Two intertwined histories

This thesis is primarily concerned with two overlapping phenomena: the online expression/negotiation of musical identity, and the musical expression/negotiation of online identity. That is, it investigates both online cultures of musical consumption (in Chapters Three, Four, Five and Six), *and* the music made by musicians who are themselves inspired by or part of those cultures (in Chapters Six, Seven and Eight). Both of these phenomena take place as a part of ‘online music culture’, a term referring to a flexible set of musicking practices and social dynamics that have developed among online audiences and musicians throughout the history of the internet.

This chapter lays out two intertwined historical narratives that have previously been discussed in relative isolation, but that together provide a cultural and theoretical basis for the analysis found later in the project. Bringing these two narratives together also serves the purpose of demonstrating the gap in existing research concerning musical expressions of online identity in the context of platform capitalism. The shared properties of online communication and musical practice in terms of their role as mediators of human identity represents a significant opportunity for gaining insight into online music culture, and the social and expressive functions of both of these technologies more generally.

The first of these overviews is that of musical cultures and communities online, from the early internet, through the explosion of peer-to-peer file sharing in the late 1990s, the mainstreaming of online culture in the mid-2000s and to the mobile internet revolution and platformisation processes that have largely defined online culture over the last decade. The second historical

account follows the development of scholarship attempting to understand the relationship between digital technology and identity. This broadly began with the postmodern excitement around ‘cyberculture’ in the 1990s, when the internet appeared to many researchers and writers to offer endless possibilities in the realm of disembodied, fluid self-representation and true freedom of expression free from hegemonic and hierarchical social and political structures. But this notion was gradually replaced by a re-evaluation of the internet’s power in the context of its mainstreaming and eventual corporatisation, a process visible in this chapter’s account of online music culture’s journey from peer-to-peer to Spotify.

In this way, these two internet histories are highly interconnected, though they do not cross over very frequently in existing academic literature. This chapter is intended to address this issue by directing attention to their parallels, and particularly to the applicability of existing theoretical frameworks around online culture in a specifically musical context, a list of which appears at the chapter’s end. Nancy Baym has already described the vital role played by musicians and music audiences in the development of online culture since the 1990s (Baym 2018). I will expand on this idea by exploring the relationship’s two-way nature, and the influence of online culture on the way musical practice socially constructs identity. Along with the well-documented impact of the internet on musical access and discovery, the unique experience of digital identity and online discourse—both before and after the arrival of platform capitalism—have become deeply intertwined with the way that online audiences and artists use music to relate to others and themselves.

First, I will introduce the idea of digital identity along with its philosophical context and predicted social impact as outlined by many scholars during the 1990s. After this, the narrative jumps to the turn of the millennium and the file sharing revolution, leading into an introduction

to some of the social dynamics and systems of curation that formed as a result of music's newfound abundance online. The focus then widens once again to examine earliest stages of platform capitalism represented by the birth of social media, before returning once more to online music culture and its own experience of platformisation via the rise of music streaming services. Finally, the chapter ends with a breakdown of the more recent analytical frameworks that have developed to describe the culture of the contemporary internet, and which (along with many of the older concepts introduced earlier in the chapter) form the theoretical basis of this project's enquiry and analysis.

Despite the different scope of the two histories it describes, the chapter is still roughly chronological, simultaneously presenting an overview of useful scholarship concerning online identity and a demonstration of the platformisation process. Seen from two different angles, platformisation is framed as a response to the public need for structure and guidance in digital space, but in each context also represents a problematic narrowing of user freedom and of the internet's vast potential. This interwoven narrative therefore provides the context in which the musical identity practices observed in this project operate, each of which have developed variously reciprocal, resistant or capitulatory relationships with the platforms on which they take place.

Identity & music in early digital culture

Even in the earliest years of personal computer culture, the way computers related to the selfhood of their users was a core aspect of their appeal. Through the incredibly detailed and personal nature of programming early computers, hobbyists built their machines as 'projections of themselves' (Turkle, 1995:41). In an individualistic society rife with commodity fetishism this type of self-reflection through consumption is already ubiquitous and became so

fundamental to the culture of computers that elements of it even followed users online. There, fully digital interaction between humans became the foundation of entirely new cultural forms and behaviours, and fully many digitising pre-existing social practices, including those tied to identity.

But even in pre-internet computer culture music was already being used as a tool in digitally mediated expressions of identity. One example of this is the Demoscene, a subculture originating in the early 1980s dedicated to illegally sharing ‘cracked’ software through the post and exchanged physically at community and corporate events (Green 1995). The ‘demos’ created by these groups of computer hackers would show off the ability of their programmers not just to crack and share copyrighted software, but to produce elaborate audiovisual displays based on complex programming (Figure 1.1). These were often accompanied by original music composed using open source ‘tracker’ software, which resembled simple multitrack sequencers (Hartmann 2010). Programming music in these primitive precursors to today’s Digital Audio Workstations was as much a feat of computer mastery as it was of musicianship, combining these two forms of creative expertise together in an expression of superiority and collective identity for the ‘demogroup’ to which the musician/programmer belonged.

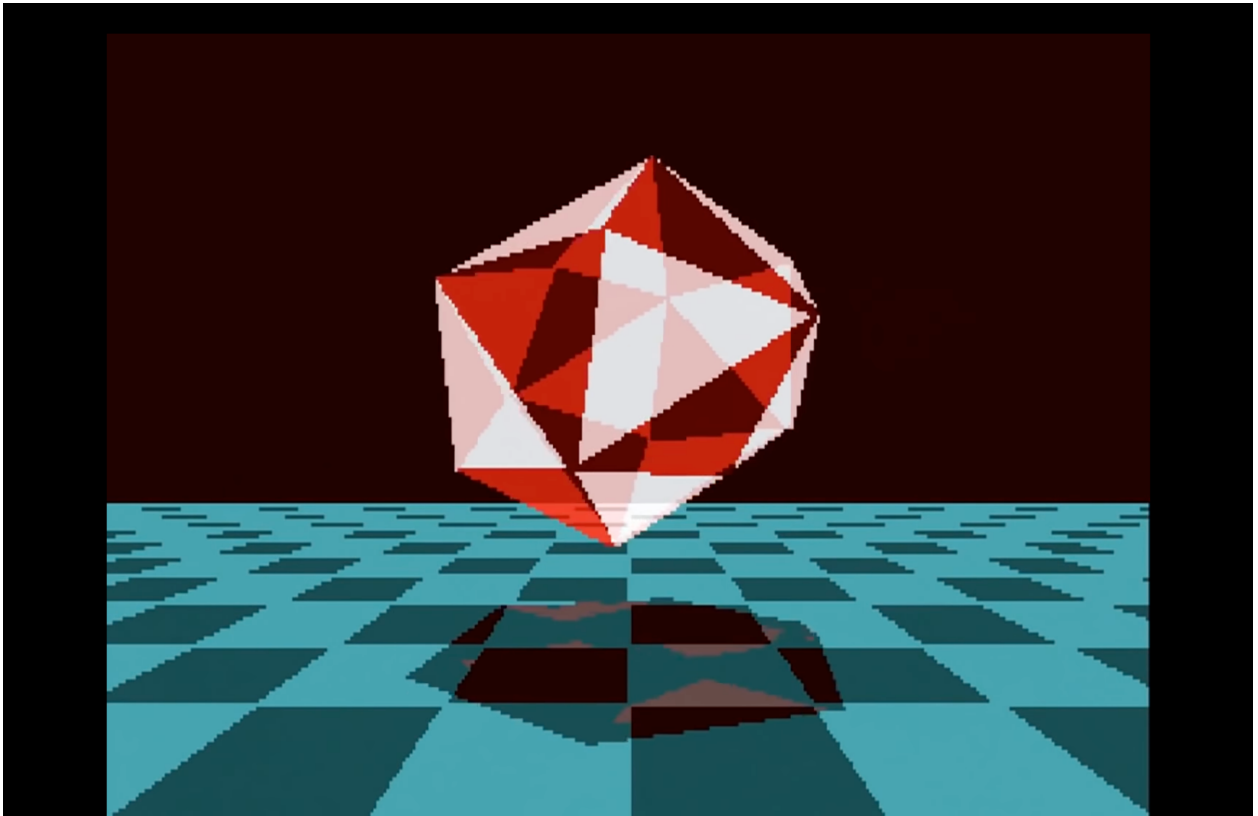


Figure 1.1: A frame from the 1993 demo 'Crystal Dream 2' by the demogroup Triton. The group also created FastTracker, the software used for the musical compositions accompanying this demo.

As internet technology emerged, the disembodied nature of real-time networked computer communication appeared to many as if it was about to revolutionise the expression of identity at the most fundamental level. For theorists interested in the social impact of the early internet, perhaps most important aspects of digital communication was users' lack of physical presence in the spaces in which their interactions took place. Disembodiment was seen as an opportunity for much greater control over the presentation and fluidity of identity, automatically freeing its users from the constraints of the physical. Mark Dery observed that when spending time online, users' identities were 'disengaged from gender, ethnicity and other problematic constructions', freed from 'biological and sociological determinants' (Dery 1993:560-561). From this perspective, personhood on the internet is disassembled, fractured, fluid and many, signalling the possibility of a turn away from what it meant to be human at all. Though platform capitalism

has weakened its revolutionary potential and immediate impact on our day-to-day online existence, this posthuman dream remains a fundamentally powerful idea, often evoked in discourse around new technology and found as an aesthetic and philosophical tool in art inspired by digital culture.

Back in its original context, the notion of corporeal liberation online existed alongside widespread excitement at the internet's potential to 'democratise' discourse, social justice, politics and economics to present a bright digital future for mankind, one espoused in both academic and mainstream media from the early 1990s and well into the first decade of the twenty-first century (Anderson 2006, Barlow 1996, Benkler 2006, Castells 1996, Dibbell 1993, Lessig 1999). As the following section details, this set of ideas continue to be influential in online culture, acting as its driving force during the many legal and ethical battles into which internet users were thrust by a world that was still unready for the possibilities of this new technology.

Though limiting in many ways, the need for internet users to entirely reconstruct themselves from the strokes of a keyboard allowed people to represent themselves in myriad different ways, often switching between multiple identities in quick succession, both in interactions as various 'real' selves and fantastical alter-egos via text-based roleplaying games. This fragmentation and fluidity of the online self was generally understood among researchers as one part of a greater set of cultural developments associated with postmodernism: 'The internet has become a significant social laboratory for experimenting with the constructions and reconstructions of self that characterise postmodern life. In its virtual reality, we self-fashion and self-create' (Turkle, 1995:180).

This is one reason that digital sociality was first studied and understood through a distinctly postmodern lens. Younger academic fields like cultural studies, gender studies and media & communication studies all contributed greatly to early academic work on digital culture, themselves having been born in a postmodern age. Jean-François Lyotard's prescient discussion of the 'information machine' (Lyotard 1979) has had a lasting influence on analyses of digital culture, while Marshall McLuhan's previously dismissed concepts of a network society and 'global village' began to seem increasingly plausible (McLuhan 1964). But of the philosophers often connected with internet culture, perhaps the most influential are the radical poststructuralists Deleuze and Guattari, whose landmark treatise *A Thousand Plateaus* introduced concepts such as the rhizome and the assemblage (1987). The former—a metaphor for non-hierarchical networks and a 'model for thought'—is often used to describe information flow online, whereas the ontological framework Deleuze and Guattari call assemblage describes the phenomenon of emergent properties that can arise from a set of objects.

Assemblage can be a particularly useful tool for understanding the relationships between media texts, users and specific practices in digital space. More recently Manuel DeLanda has expanded and clarified the concept for use in a variety of sociological and artistic contexts (DeLanda 2016), focussing on the contingent relationships between the component parts of an assemblage and its emergent properties, whereby levels of organisation (coding), and homogeneity (territorialisation) of an assemblage's component parts (segments) act as variables capable of influencing its emergent properties like the values in an equation. This highly instructive framework is applied to online musical and music-adjacent phenomena throughout this project, having particular relevance to Chapter Eight's musical case study, though it also plays a key role in Chapters Three and Six.

Despite the relative cooling of its influence on contemporary scholarship about digital culture, the marks made by *A Thousand Plateaus* remain significant in that culture's own self-image, particularly in art made through or about online processes. In the mid-1990s, Warwick University's cybernetic culture research unit (ccru) combined Deleuzian theory with genre fiction and electronic music to describe post-internet culture's blurring of formal and cultural boundaries while building on then-contemporary 'cyber' aesthetics. The ccru is also notable for producing several figures who went on to define online culture and music in the following decade, including Steve Goodman (A.K.A Kode9) of the pioneering UK Dubstep label Hyperdub and Mark Fisher, whose acclaimed and influential writings on cultural theory and pop music in his blog *k-punk* have been credited with transforming online music criticism in the early 2000s (Reynolds 2017). More recently, Fisher's book *Capitalist Realism* has also become something of an internet meme among the online Left. These connections make the two-way relationship between internet music culture and the philosophy of digital identity clearly visible. Though the aesthetics and theory associated with entities like the ccru have both now passed into relative irrelevance in contemporary scholarship, they remain a well-known and influential part of the heritage of internet culture.

As the internet's population grew, several scholars pointed out that on this larger scale than had been seen on the early internet, social behaviour online was not accurately reflected by postmodern theories of online identity (Carr 2010, Morozov 2011, Curran et al. 2012). Instead, as will be explored later in this chapter, the arrival of various online platforms in the 2000s eventually led to a departure from these models in favour of approaches grounded in sociology and psychology. These developments largely eclipsed work concerned with disembodiment and identity-fragmentation partly because the new forms of digital interaction made possible by rapid advances in internet communication were becoming increasingly entangled with the

platforms on which they took place. Compared to the text-only communities of the early internet, these platforms all came with their own specific sets of affordances and limitations that greatly expanded and shaped the way in which users could communicate and express themselves. As well as this, the concept of digital disembodiment was complicated by the internet's newfound mobility and sensory immediacy. This began with early video hosting and users' ability to upload photos to social profiles, and has now developed into video streaming, short-form, high-definition video (vertically aligned to fit on a phone, and to present the human body more fully) and even rapidly improving virtual reality technology. Meanwhile, datafication, targeted content and other forms of algorithmic surveillance allowed for a vast increase in the continuity of users' online identities.

But before this process was underway, for several years around the turn of the millennium, certain elements of online culture seemed to be living up to their earlier transformative promises with the arrival of efficient peer-to-peer file sharing. As the following section will explore, this moment in the history of the internet proved to many of its users that digital technology was indeed a potent tool capable of restructuring and democratising society, or at least, shaking major industries to their core. And though they had always overlapped in certain ways (an enduring example being the 'cyberpunk' aesthetic), this was the first context in which the collective identity of internet users truly combined with the resistant, revolutionary spirit often found in subcultures around popular music to develop the set of identities and values that would eventually develop into those examined in this project.

Peer-to-peer, Napster & hacker identity

Nancy Baym describes how fans of pop music played an important role in the early history of the internet, developing active and close-knit communities centred on discussion and consumption long before the industry recognised the internet's musical potential:

By the time musicians and industry figures realized they could use the internet to reach audiences directly, those audiences had already established their presences and social norms online, putting them in unprecedented positions of power. (Baym 2018)

Gathering online had allowed music audiences to disrupt the previously quite static balance of power between fans, artists, and labels – decentralised, direct networks of audiences and artists that destabilised previous structures and hierarchies, just as many had predicted the internet would do to culture in a broader sense. But record labels took little notice of this cultural impact until the late 1990s and the advent of peer-to-peer (P2P) technology began to threaten their profits directly by allowing fans and musicians to trade their music over the internet for free. The industry's sudden realisation of this threat resulted in a combination of legal action and fervent media coverage, painting online music fans as morally bankrupt pirates and in the process inadvertently promoting the technology to millions of consumers. The most prominent early P2P network Napster was founded in 1999 and used primarily to exchange and disseminate MP3 audio files of copyrighted popular music. Napster operated in its original form for less than three years, but its legacy has influenced many subsequent technological, cultural and legal developments around online access to music.

Matthew David has argued that anti-P2P actions taken by the industry were tantamount to a 'criminalisation of culture' mobilised in response to audiences' bottom-up attempt to

restructure the musical economy and challenge industry logics of ownership and intellectual property in a post-scarcity information age (David 2010). Regardless of whether most Napster users shared these revolutionary motives, the genie was now out of the bottle – the technology to circumvent traditional forms of musical copyright on a mass-scale existed, was well-known and easy for consumers to use. As audiences awoke to this possibility, Napster’s successors learned to utilise more sophisticated means of operation, making things harder for the network to be shut down and lessening the legal risk placed on service operators.

Much has been written about the legal implications of Napster and P2P in general (Bownrey & Rimmer 2005, Ku 2002); the cultural impact of the digital music commodity (McCourt & Buckart 2003, Sandywell & Beer 2005, Magaudda 2011, Fleischer 2017) and the profitability of popular music under these new market conditions (Wikström 2009, Wade Morris 2015b). In terms of this project, the most interesting accounts relate to the way that P2P usage was linked to certain identities both in the press and within the online communities supported by the technology. Just like recording formats, sharing and listening practices carry with them complicated systems of cultural capital that are used in the construction and expression of identity among those who use them. As it related to P2P, this system of musical identity was shaped by the high-profile legal disputes surrounding P2P and the accompanying media representations of groups and individuals associated with file sharing in the minds of the public. One result of this was the cross-pollination of pre-internet logics of music sharing around cassette and mixtape culture with the burgeoning ethics and aesthetics of early cyber culture. During this period the internet was not yet truly mainstream, and still strongly associated with the techno-libertarian ideals of free cultural exchange defined by Steven Levy’s ‘hacker ethic’ (1984). Hacker values are themselves deeply entangled with the broad but well-established

concept of the nerd or geek, a form of identity that plays an important role in many aspects of online culture, and which will therefore be unpacked later in this chapter.

In light of this connection, hacker communities sought out new ways to disrupt and confound the music industry's attempts to retain control of its audience's access to and ability to share music (Himanen 2001, David 2010). Coming from the other direction, many music fans and musicians were first introduced to digital culture through P2P, resulting in online communities coalescing around the technology, developing their own economies of subcultural capital that aligned the hacker identity with music sharing, blending logics of resistant expression and expertise found in both popular music subcultures and those based on digital technology. Assisting in this process, external characterisation of online music sharers during this period painted them all as equally deviant and guilty (Woodworth 2005). Despite their relatively broad demographic and age-range, in the press Napster users were mostly imagined as young teenagers whose adolescence could be directly mapped onto this new, disruptive technology and its disregard for the moral norms of conventional ownership (Spitz & Hunter 2005).

The P2P revolution also had a significant impact on the musicians whose music was being shared. The media portrayal of sharing platforms as hives of underground criminality and of musicians as victims of theft formed the online continuation of an ideological dispute around intellectual property in popular music that long pre-dates the internet, and in which the role of musicians is significantly more complicated than Lars Ulrich suggested during Metallica's much-publicised court case against Napster in 2000. P2P services offered a free means of dissemination for small or unsigned artists without the budget for their own distribution, encouraging musicians to break with logics of musical commodification and value in ways that are still evident in contemporary music culture (Reia 2014). Some artists even used these

networks to spread their work virally, such as famously internet-savvy then-seventeen-year-old rapper Soulja Boy, who uploaded his demos to the P2P service LimeWire re-named to resemble the week's most popular downloads, 'gate-crashing unsuspecting desktops like the crunkest of Trojan horses' (Garvey 2015).

Just as in the case of social media, young people growing up around file sharing technology were developing a fundamentally different attitude to its use and potential. Formal arguments against musical copyright have existed for some time (Oswald 1985), but with general audiences now aware of the importance of sampling and remixing (largely thanks to the global success of hip-hop and various dance genres in the 1990s), the issue of 'stealing' music was no longer clear-cut to a growing section of mainstream audiences. The internet represented not just a revolution in access to cultural material but in its use and flexibility too, as the combination of media convergence and 'remix culture' utterly transformed norms of media consumption, reproduction and use for everyday internet users (Jenkins 2006, Lessig 2008). This environment clashed greatly with industry accusations of theft and criminality. Instead of scaring a generation of would-be thieves straight ('you wouldn't download a car'), millions of internet users began to reconfigure their logics of musical authenticity for both producers and consumers in a way that aligned the values of digital culture with their online musical practice.

Post-scarcity music culture: curation & community

Long before the arrival of P2P, hopeful predictions had been made regarding the changing nature of the music industry, and the rise of so-called 'unpopular pop' that would not only make music more interesting but also help marginalised artists survive in the industry (Momus 1991). Along with the many heady predictions of the internet's democratising power, many therefore hoped that file sharing would result in the emergence of a 'long tail' in the music industry

(Anderson 2006), in which increased access to music would encourage audiences to seek out and develop their individual tastes. Napster and the discourse around it may have fundamentally transformed how audiences used and accessed music, but the freedom of discovery offered by the internet did not lead to totally individualised taste and consumption. Instead, many users sought out new sources of recommendation to replace those traditional structures of musical dissemination that had been thrown into chaos by file sharing (boyd and Ellison 2007; Nowak 2016).

The need for new curators during this period was illustrated by the short-lived but influential popularity of the MP3 blog, which took advantage of technology allowing users to download music directly through their internet browser. This model was able to integrate music journalism and promotion into the music sharing ecosystem and represented an early step towards a re-stratification of the online music sharing ecosystem, as blog operators took up a role of curatorial influence and authority over their audience. This was not quite the platformisation of access and recommendation seen more recently in streaming platforms, but still demonstrated audiences' need for structures to guide their online music consumption.

In its departure from the digital ideal of a totally decentralised music sharing, this relationship can also be mapped onto pre-capitalistic structures of musical interaction and dissemination, as demonstrated by Margie Borschke (2014), who suggests that the MP3 blog demonstrates a return to previous values of copying and passing down musical material, as well as the revalorisation of authorship:

MP3 blogs can be a form of individual expression linked to both online identity formation and new kinds of online sociality and community participation that were also dependent on the increased visibility of consumption practices. [...] While

bloggers, like DJs, create an aesthetic experience using preexisting recordings without permission and attempt to elicit response from those who encounter their use of these recordings as expression, they simultaneously rely on, enact, and seek pleasure in romantic ideals of creative expression and gestures. (Borschke 2014)

MP3 blogs derived subcultural capital from the visibility of the ‘tastemaker’ mediator/curator at their helm in a way that brings romantic logics of traditional authorship, taste and authenticity back into digitised space. This process is still reliant on audience participation, but for that audience it constitutes a reconfiguration of logics of online musical identity from those found in P2P communities. Research into P2P cultures has shown that rather than being mutually held up via networks of users all of whom share their music collections with one another, most file sharing communities rely on a small number of ‘power users’ to provide the majority of material downloaded by others in a similar manner to the ‘poster/lurker’ ratio common to many digital media platforms today (Adar & Huberman 2000, Cooper & Harrison 2001). On MP3 blogs, the hierarchy is even wider, as blog owners take on the role of both (dis)intermediator and curator, disseminating files to many readers.

Even in online music communities not dedicated to file sharing, evidence supported the continued importance of social dynamics in influencing listeners’ personal music choices, with individual users acting as opinion leaders and mavens guiding those in their social circle towards music they have discovered in exchange for social capital and respect (Tepper & Hargiatti 2009). Though they have been slightly recontextualised by today’s culture of music streaming and large-scale communities on mainstream platforms, my findings in Chapters Three and Five greatly support this idea. This need for socially grounded sources of recommendation was also a key factor in the growing prominence of online musical

subcultures during this period, and it was during this time that many of the social dynamics and norms associated with today's online music discourse first developed.

The internet allows users to quickly find others who shared their preferences and values, facilitating the growth and development of similar groups to those found in pre-digital musical culture like the subcultures, scenes and fandoms described in the Introduction. These online communities continued many of the same activities that defined their offline counterparts, including the fostering of musical talent and new forms of artistic expression (as explored in Chapter Seven), and the mutual development of musical identity through discussion, disagreement and the development of community canons of collectively approved works, a phenomenon discussed in Chapter Three. But these groups were also shaped by the continually evolving affordances and limitations of online communication, creating a distinct online music culture with its own practices, norms and value systems.

In online settings, the physical objects that make up important aspects of a scene or fandom can still play a role in user activity. For example, by users sharing images of their record collections or videos of themselves wearing certain clothes. But when scenes, fandoms and other subcultural communities are grounded in virtual space, material practices that previously acted as the core sources of commonality, identity and organisation (such as fashion and gig attendance) are often replaced by more abstract markers of belonging:

Youth cultures may be seen increasingly as cultures of 'shared ideas' whose interactions take place not in physical places such as the street, the club or the festival field, but in the virtual spaces facilitated by the internet. (Peterson & Bennett 2004)

In certain ways, this development allowed subcultural participation to broaden, as many individuals who would not previously have had access to these scenes and communities were able to use the internet to develop their engagement as both fans and scene participants, complicating the distinction between subcultural insiders and more ephemeral participants. In 2008 David Beer described how Web 2.0 technology and its associated platforms (specifically Wikipedia, YouTube and Myspace) offered internet users the means to gather and expose themselves to the specific knowledge, experiences and media required to get to grips with a particular genre, subculture or artist.

Though social media was still in its infancy at this stage, Beer also recognised the power of users potentially directly encountering famous pop stars through their social media pages. In addition to potentially lowering the bar for entry to some communities, this also creates new forms of subcultural capital by association with the famous figure, allowing fans to develop symbolic or parasocial relationships, becoming ‘friends’ with an artist or following their Twitter feed, tracking them through various forms in various online locations as cultural objects (Beer 2008). These dynamics were later examined by Paul Booth in his analogy comparing digital fan activity to an Alternative Reality Game (ARG), a form of interactive narrative device that involves the use of many different interrelated media texts as well as creativity, problem solving and even roleplay on the part of the players (Booth 2010, Niemeyer & Garcia 2017, De Beer & Bothma 2016). This comparison is not only instructive in its view of online audience behaviour, but is particularly pertinent to Chapter Eight, in which I will discuss ARGs in more detail.

P2P and Web 2.0 technologies provided users with broader opportunities for subcultural participation, but online communities nevertheless managed to maintain the use of subcultural

capital in systems of gatekeeping, distinction and social hierarchy. In the absence of geographical connections or visual signifiers of belonging such as clothing, types of subcultural capital that previously formed just one part of a scene's internal structure gradually become members' primary method for expressing belonging. As a result, rather than visual style, members of online music subcultures have been observed to prioritise displays of expertise and taste, especially in terms of alignment to the perceived community consensus (Ebare 2004, Whelan 2006).

Digital identity & early social media

Having outlined some of the still-present dynamics that entered online music culture during this period, this section returns to the broader development of scholarly perspectives relating to online identity, and the changes made to previous assumptions after the internet first entered the mainstream. Despite its undeniable implications for economics, identity and social behaviour, one mistaken idea often found in early academic commentary on online culture was the assumption that most users would take advantage of the internet's potential for anonymous, flexible sociality and abandon their lived identities along with their bodies when logging in. Laura Robinson has criticised the way that earlier studies extrapolated the experimental identity practices of their subjects (invariably computer-literate, mostly white college students) to the public at large (Robinson 2007:94), leading to the false impression that the average person would use digital communication in the same way.

Instead, as the internet's population rapidly expanded in the 2000s, a high proportion of online interaction was taking place via increasingly vivid and stable simulacra of users' offline selves. This was thanks to the appearance of early social media platforms that assisted those less tech-literate internet users in their use of the web, easing them into the concept by representing an

extension of offline interaction. This was a key step in the process of platformisation, as online newcomers were herded into social silos offering powerful but comparatively limited opportunities for online connection. To the average internet user, the prospect of losing oneself likely felt more dangerous than exciting, and social media platforms could alleviate some of this anxiety.

Alongside the mainstreaming of the internet through social media platforms, large vernacular and mostly youth-oriented internet communities emerged on sites and platforms, providing an alternative internet experience more akin in some ways to that which came before: more exclusionary and yet more expansive. These online countercultures certainly leant into the internet's radical potential more than the burgeoning online mainstream, but they were still shaped by the affordances and limitations of the platforms on which they existed. Among these communities, Tumblr and 4chan in particular are often seen to represent the two diametrically opposed political streams within internet counterculture during this period (Nagle 2017, Peralta 2010). While often somewhat reductive, this framing can be useful to understand how elements of the early web's cyberculture ideals survived despite platformisation; with 4chan's political libertarianism, enforced anonymity and provocative humour on one hand, and Tumblr's intersectional social progressivism, fluid understanding of gender and commitment to audience agency on the other. But this dichotomy misses what both platforms shared beyond their sectarianism, gatekeeping and social toxicity: the innovative and highly productive expression of community values through memes and other forms of metatextual creativity. As the flow of viral media saw these cultural products filter through to the mainstream on Facebook and other popular platforms, this style of communication and the ideas it propagated became the foundation of online vernacular discourse, its influence palpable throughout mainstream conversation on major platforms today.

Another pertinent aspect of these communities was the conspicuous consumption of specific media including underground music, films and (particularly on Tumblr) highly organised and productive forms of media fandom. User identity was based on these communities' existence as alternatives to the more mainstream options in online culture, helping them to become centres for the expression of 'nerdy' identities based around computer literacy and the voracious, enthusiastic consumption of often esoteric or niche cultural products. These practices had long been an important part of online culture, but these large, well-known communities offered them a more organised form of collective identity, the legacy of which persists online today. Like that of the hacker culture that preceded them, the identity of these communities is also associated with the idea of the nerd (and the essentially identical 'geek'), which has historically been defined by 'a specific class-inflected form of masculinity, masculine dress code, leisure activities, and personality traits' (Alfrey & Twine 2017). Nerds are often associated with technological mastery and expertise based in niche cultural products, and with the mainstreaming of digital technology and the growing power of Silicon Valley have more recently have become a key part of the new hegemonic masculine formation that 'fuses the technological genius and suffering of geekiness with the disruption and innovation of entrepreneurialism' (Mendick et al 2021). Researchers into nerd identity note its complex relationship with gender and intrinsic relationship with computer culture and online community (Dunbar-Hester 2008, Starr 2018), even positioning the nerd as a type of subcultural identity defined largely through online communication (McArthur 2009).

The conflation of this nerd identity with subcultural practices and values from music culture has resulted in the emergence of the loosely defined figure of the 'music nerd': an obsessive fan whose engagement with music is heavily mediated by technology, and who typically

participates in online communities dedicated to music consumption and discussion. This term is not used for self-identification (beyond one major exception discussed in Chapter Four) but can provide a basic profile for a certain type of online music consumer – one who is well-versed in online vernacular culture, and for whom a systematic, digitally-augmented relationship with music contributes to their self-image.

To varying extents different online communities have become associated with this form of musical practice, including those dedicated to particular artists such as murmurs.com (the home of R.E.M.'s expansive online fandom) (Bennett 2011a, Bennett 2011b), as well as those catering to a broader range of musical tastes. As Chapter Three examines in detail, these communities are frequently sites of collective musical identity formation that can result in the emergence of taste consensus and canon building, associating particular artists or records with that community, and with the idea of 'nerdy' internet-based music fans more generally. Perhaps the most emblematic example of this is the 4chan imageboard community /mu/ (Figure 1.2), which reached a peak of influence in online music culture in the early 2010s and—despite its relatively small userbase—continued to exert a significant influence on online music discourse throughout the decade.



Figure 1.2: The banner image for 4chan's music imageboard /mu/, incorporating elements from the album artwork of several records popular in the community.

Despite the growth of these large alternative online cultures, the increased amount of oversight by both powerful tech companies and national governments seen during the 2000s appeared to spell the end of the dream of a decentralised, utopian digital culture. In the revised 2006 edition of *Code: and Other Laws of Cyberspace*, Lawrence Lessig admits that he was wrong in sharing the assumption that 'governments couldn't touch life online' (Lessig, 2006:ix), and that an unregulated internet was possible, or even still desirable. Perhaps most telling however is the 'apostasy' of Sherry Turkle (Curran et al. 2012), whose 2011 book *Alone Together* presents a much less optimistic image of the internet's future than she had sixteen years earlier in the seminal *Life on the Screen*. In the period between the two books, Turkle observed the longer-

term social impact of internet mediated interaction, finding that users' relationships with technology were often marked by the deferral of direct human interaction.

Turkle's more recent work suggests that reliance on the myriad forms of mediation offered by digital communication can result in an inward turn that leaves us in some ways more isolated than before despite our connectivity. In the context of music culture, this effect might be illustrated via audiences' increasing reliance on algorithmic recommendation to guide consumption that accompanies this. Several of my case studies explore social responses to the hyper-individualisation of music consumption that has resulted from this process, in the form of communities based around developing a sense of musical identity through social interaction, human recommendation or independent research in Chapters Three, Four and Five, or the work of musicians fixated on the experience and values of pre-platformisation internet culture in Chapters Seven and Eight.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the internet underwent a set of fundamental transformations. In the public eye it went from being a hive of deviant subcultures and criminal sharing to a useful platform for shopping, connecting with friends and (later) for consuming all forms of media. But for many of its scholars and veteran users, this change took it from a revolutionary tool for transcending governments, economics, hierarchies and even selfhood, to a new and admittedly volatile social arena operating under many of the same assumptions as are found offline. In line with this development, I will now bring this chapter's account of the development of online music culture up to date, describing the process of platformisation that took place alongside the rise of social media outlined in this section: the advent of music streaming.

Spotify & curation in the platform age

The so-called 'streaming era' is the immediate social and technological context in which the project's six case studies are situated. Following the above discussion of the online music sharing cultures and subcultural communities that grew in the wake of P2P and Web 2.0 technologies, this section centres the relatively recent development of music streaming services, along with some of the key academic insights into their impact on the musicking practices of online audiences. In particular, it examines the role of playlists curated by both human and non-human actors for Spotify, currently the most popular streaming platform.

In 2003, Apple's iTunes Store first offered users a legitimate online platform for downloading music. This may have begun the process of musical platformisation and corporate reterritorialisation of digital distribution, but it did not necessarily mean the end of illicit music sharing cultures. MP3 blogs and P2P communities remained essential sites of production and exchange for digital files and subcultural capital. With the industry now officially backing internet-mediated music access, a renewed interest was sparked in the concept of the imaginary model of the Celestial Jukebox, by which 'all music' could be available to listeners with a click or verbal command (Burkart 2014). Originally coined in 1994, a version of the concept appeared to be around the corner in October 2008 as Swedish company Spotify launched its music streaming service claiming to provide users with instantly available recorded music from every genre they could think of. Spotify and its competitors in the world of music streaming mark the completion of a shift 'from ownership to access' (Eriksson et al. 2019:44), whereby the music files themselves are stored on a remote server, to be consumed from a distance.

By the time Spotify emerged, other cloud-based services had existed for some time, but Spotify promised to perfect the model in no small part through its extensive application of strategies

and practices that had proved successful in the world of P2P networks. During Spotify's beta launch, the service began by hosting company staff's own files, many of which had previously been illicitly downloaded (Eriksson et al. 2019:43). Even its comparatively colossal contemporary incarnation is not limitless, with many major artists and records still not on the platform. But for many users, this model did exactly what it claimed, marking an end to the era of MP3 hoarding and ever-expanding iPod hard drives while remonetising music consumption for those at the top of the industry through a 'freemium' model that combines a free, ad-supported version of the platform with an ad-free version for paying subscribers.

The shift away from music ownership marked by the success of streaming platforms has prompted further academic enquiry into the idea of music as commodity, reimagining Spotify and its competitors as producers of a commodity defined by the affordances of their software, rather than the distributor of a cultural product with intrinsic value of its own (Wade Morris 2015a, Fleischer 2017). In effect, one is paying for a service that includes access, social tools, and recommendations, rather than the music to which that platform provides access. While former collectors may experience a sense of loss in this model, the experience of 'psychological ownership' (through which familiar immaterial objects are tied to users' identities in various ways) has still been observed in relation to streaming services (Sinclair & Tinson 2016), helped in part through the highly customisable user experience offered by playlists and recommendations. The digital music file retains commodity status in many non-streaming contexts, but on Spotify a listener need no longer treat it as one, 'trying out' hundreds of songs before adding one to a virtual collection or playlist. This has the potential to dissolve barriers that previously left certain music functionally out of reach to certain audiences who did not have the means to sample them or develop the cultural literacy required to engage with them fully.

On the other hand, platform-based streaming also privileges certain musical features and listening practices in such a way that could lead to increasing levels of homogeneity in what music is consumed. This could be seen as marking the death of the musical long tail mentioned above, as streaming platforms' role as curators combines with broader cultural dynamics of celebrity, social influence and the 'superstar effect' that pervade contemporary internet culture (Mulligan 2014). This means a smaller number of artists benefitting both from a higher proportion of the audience and a significantly higher amount of revenue from the platforms, making it harder for mid-sized artists to make ends meet. There remains a sizeable audience of music aficionados willing to search for underexposed music individually (and at times as a collective), attempting to make the most of the variety and access that the internet still affords its users (Coelho & Mendes 2019), especially via streaming platforms that thrive on user-uploaded music such as SoundCloud, Bandcamp and YouTube. However, we now unquestionably live in the streaming era—the age of the freemium celestial jukebox—and this paradigm has been instrumental in shaping the contemporary online music culture that this project examines.

As curated collections of musical texts designed to perform specific functions for their users, platform-based playlists are a useful microcosm for discussing the state of contemporary online music culture. Among other things, Chapters Three and Four of this project both examine activities that attempt to replace or at least supplement the automated and platform-based processes of recommendation discussed in this section of Chapter One. In addition to being the most popular streaming platform globally, Spotify is also by far the most popular music streaming service among survey respondents contacted relating to this project's case studies.

Historically, the creation of mixtapes has been understood as a deeply personal activity but can also play an important social role as a curated gift or shared experience, and as a display of creativity, knowledge or belonging. Like users' identities, in the digital realm playlists become much more fluid and flexible objects than their forebears on physical media. They are capable of being continually updated and reordered as tastes and music availability change, as well as being created collaboratively over time by multiple users. Anja Hagen draws on Baudrillard and Walter Benjamin to discuss the juxtapositions at play within users' manually compiled playlists on streaming platforms: between abundance and the pleasure of the specific; and between long-term favourites and passing fancies (Hagen 2015:640). This demonstrates the shared nature of music and the internet as technologies of the self. Just as the computer keyboard became the sole tool for dramaturgical self-representation on the early internet, now users can use precisely chosen arrangements of recorded music to do this job, without losing any of the reflexivity and ambivalence of internet culture in the process.

Recent research into the role of playlists tracks their expansion and affective properties in personal or social contexts as a reflection of a reconfiguration of music's purpose and spacial omnipresence in our lives. Playlists materialise the affective connections between songs as a persistent digital artefact with its own internal coherence and purposes. Siles et al. (2019) describe this as the production of 'affective genres', a notion reflected in Spotify's categorisation of playlists based not just on genre (Indie, R&B, Caribbean), but moods (Chill, Party, Sleep), purposes (Workout) and audiences (Student, Children/Family). In this landscape, playlists form 'fusions of musical substance, sociotechnical assemblages, and sociomaterial practices that respond to the exigencies of affect' (Siles et al. 2019), that can help us with a task, access a specific emotion, take us back to a specific time or location place and help us to discover or embody a certain model of ourselves. But 'listener' playlists are a much more

personal kind of affective genre, derived from the experiences or imaginations of a particular user. These user-designed playlists retain some of the social function of a mixtape as they are easily shared, kept hidden or passively put on public display in user profiles, but top-down curated playlists also form an important part of the economy of taste and choice. While earlier analysis points to listener choice and control as motivators for audiences' playlist practices (Hagen 2015), Spotify's own playlists represent a deliberate relinquishing of control on the part of their users.

Moving on from the listener category, Spotify creates two main types of top-down playlists for its users. The first of these are 'algorithmic', that is, automatically generated user-specific lists based on past listening. For example, Discover Weekly provides personalised recommendations for artists the algorithm determines a user might enjoy. But algorithmic playlists can also be generated on demand via functions like Song Radio, which uses a particular song as a jumping-off point providing similar music from artists mostly familiar to the user. Such guidance has been called the 'automation of taste' (Barile & Sugiyama 2015), and Jeremy Wade Morris describes how recommendation technologies work to curate their users' tastes to better suit platform holders:

Far from neutral purveyors of predictions, recommendation systems measure and manufacture audiences to provide targeted suggestions for popular cultural goods and exert a logistical power that shapes the ways audiences discover, use and experience cultural content. (Wade Morris 2015b)

The constant surveillance of audience behaviour that goes into this process is entirely typical of platform capitalism and is enacted across the internet to (among other things) provide users with targeted advertising and political content 'suitable' to their sensibilities. Wade Morris

calls the companies responsible for this process ‘infomediaries’ (after Bourdieu’s cultural intermediaries), locating them ‘at the intersection of data mining, taste making and data manufacture’ (2015b). Spotify needs to sell its users a branded musical experience to differentiate itself from its competitors without allowing its customers to make the brand-damaging logical leaps that follow such a need (‘how can services compare to one another if they are supposed to be infinite?’) Within this branded experience users also exercise control over their listener playlists, their library of liked content, and subscriptions to human-curated playlists. Given the role that managing a music collection can play in the formation and expression of musical identity, it is interesting that to the platform, such metadata is significantly more valuable than the musical data they send out to users. ‘The likes, plays, stars and comments provide the trackable, actionable data on music habits which can then be used to generate other kinds of sellable data’ (Wade Morris & Powers 2015). The musical identity users create via Spotify’s affordances becomes a highly detailed, self-illustrated ‘data self’ handed directly over to the platform owners.

The last group of Spotify playlists are the ‘editorial’ category, compiled by human curators employed by the company. These exist in competition with independent, boutique playlist companies such as 22tracks, presenting curators as experts with deep and up-to-date musical knowledge, capable of making playlists that are engaging but also function as a narrative, conveying ‘musical personality and individual style with [a curator’s] own unique taste’ (Barna 2017). Here curation is essentially elevated to a form of artistic expression explicitly aligned with an ideology counter to the mainstream, or at the very least one that aims to uplift underrepresented artists in a way that services like Spotify would and could never achieve. Many of Spotify’s editorial playlists would seem to corroborate this assumption, providing a frequently updated, genre-based experience with wide or mass-appeal, or to suit a particular

function (e.g. *Songs to Sing in the Car*). However, *Rap Caviar*, an editorial playlist with nearly fifteen million followers (as of December 2022) has become famous for propelling many of Generation Z’s social media-based rappers to sudden mainstream success through its role as a pipeline from the smaller platform SoundCloud. Press coverage of the playlist often foregrounds the fact that it is ostensibly curated by a single person (explicitly *not* a team of besuited Spotify board members or record company executives) playing a role akin to a radio DJ while driving the popularity of new artists and guiding the tastes of a vast and youthful audience better than any contemporary radio service could manage.











#	TITLE	ALBUM	DATE ADDED	
1	 Rich Flex E Drake, 21 Savage	Her Loss	5 days ago	3:59
2	 Just Wanna Rock E Lil Uzi Vert	Just Wanna Rock	5 days ago	2:04
3	 California Breeze E Lil Baby	It's Only Me	5 days ago	2:58
4	 One Up E Central Cee	No More Leaks	5 days ago	2:40
5	 To The Bone (feat. YoungBoy N... E Quavo, Takeoff, YoungBoy Neve...	Only Built For Infinity Links	5 days ago	4:43
6	 Major Distribution E Drake, 21 Savage	Her Loss	5 days ago	2:51
7	 In My Head E Juice WRLD	In My Head	5 days ago	3:12
8	 Break My Heart E Rod Wave	Break My Heart	5 days ago	2:49
9	 300 Blackout E Kodak Black	Kutthroat Bill: Vol. 1	5 days ago	2:46
10	 Stop Breathing E Roddy Ricch	Stop Breathing	5 days ago	1:51

Figure 1.3: The first ten tracks of Spotify’s *Rap Caviar* Editorial playlist in November 2022.

Despite this branding, rather than a neat divide between human and non-human actors across different playlists, recent research presents a more nuanced relationship between these actors

in the logics of curation for both editorial and personal algorithmic playlists. Bonini & Gandini (2019) point out that these two forms of curatorial logic are never truly separate. As human curators increasingly rely on data driven tools and analytics to support their decisions, ‘the weight of one’s personal gut in guiding the choices of music programmers has not disappeared, but it has been greatly reduced, in favour of editorial pressure and assistance provided by software’ (Bonini & Gandini 2019). Of course, the reverse is also true: a Spotify algorithm’s behaviour is never truly out of the hands of the developers who develop, teach and hone their software over time.

Algorithmic decisions about what new song to recommend or how to extrapolate a ‘Song Radio’ playlist from a single track are influenced by human-derived ideas of taste, mood and appropriate levels of exploration, as well as the company’s own incentives to guide its users towards particular artists on the basis of its own growth and relationships with record labels. This assemblage of human and non-human curation process is described by Spotify as ‘algotorial’. Such a hybrid model of human and non-human actors is not limited to top-down forms of music curation but can also be used to better understand individual choices and the development of an internet user’s personal musical tastes. In the context of platformisation, nearly every aspect of the user experience online is controlled by algorithmic processes determining whether to display certain posts to a user, what order to show them in, and what content to highlight via notifications and repetition.

Further complicating the picture, listener playlists are also a site of curation and influence far beyond the personal and social functions outlined mentioned above, as brands, influencers and prominent individuals of all levels maintain public playlists that users can follow. Playlists are often linked intertextually with TV shows and films in the form of custom soundtrack

compilations made by Spotify users, often tied to fictional characters either compiled by fans as sonic mood boards or occasionally by a screenwriters and actors from their personal accounts, offering insight into the identities of the characters they write and play. Fan communities for *The Simpsons* and groups of anarchist political activists count among the online communities the author has personally witnessed co-construct Spotify playlists as a form of group entertainment and identity expression. True to the fashion of a reterritorialised online music platform, Spotify benefits from its relative ubiquity to become the site of numerous forms of cultural, subcultural, commercial, and even pedagogical musical production, collecting the information this activity generates to tighten its control on audiences, continuing the cycle and sculpting its users' identities as it goes. Just as formats can leave a mark on a music culture, streaming platforms are already shaping global music culture on a scale significantly beyond the scope of this project.

Having brought together two previously separate lines of academic enquiry, this chapter has presented a single intertwined narrative regarding the history of online communication, technology and identity in the context of music culture. However, I have not yet touched upon many of the more recent analytical frameworks that have been developed in the examination of internet culture, and which I will be utilising throughout the case studies in Chapters Three to Eight. This chapter therefore concludes by introducing these concepts and frameworks, and their relationships with the histories previously discussed, as well as with one another. Together with the older theories discussed earlier in this chapter, these contemporary frameworks comprise the basis for my own analysis. But beyond this, many of these ideas (or versions of them) have also become a part of the discourse of online culture, and its reflexive negotiation of its collective identity. This phenomenon of the internet's cultural self-representation will become increasingly relevant in the second half of the project.

Contemporary frameworks for digital identity

Symbolic interactionism

Following the perceived failure of the postmodern identity model espoused in the 1990s, new theoretical approaches emerged to describe how internet users construct and enact their identities in digital space, and the way that digital platforms can shape communication during this process. An important tool in understanding this process is symbolic interactionism, which views identity as a reflexive negotiation between the individual and their surroundings. Rather than existing in any essential form, the self is emergent from social interaction, unable to exist in the absence of others' judgement, whether real or imagined (Robinson 2007). This principle is linked to the 'looking-glass self', described in the Introduction, in that it is based upon how an individual imagines how they appear to others, and what their judgements might be (Cooley 1902). The symbolic interactionist model has the advantage of being easily applied to group contexts, as individual identities can be aggregated into a symbolic whole in these judgements. Chapters Three and Five demonstrate this process among online music audiences and the unique ways users choose to present things about themselves through conspicuous consumption, their cultural literacies and ability to engage in subcultural discourse.

Symbolic interactionism is useful for understanding some social behaviour online, but it is important to remember that despite platformisation, internet users operate in multiple social modes and identities simultaneously, interacting with groups that vary greatly in their level of familiarity with a user's offline persona. In a very short space of time a typical user might take part in a family group chat; send congratulations to a work acquaintance; take part in a discussion with a group of likeminded but online-only peers in a semi-public fan group and

react publicly to a breaking story sent to their newsfeed via a major news publication. The rapid switching from different social selves, along with potential changes in subcultural and linguistic context is not fully accounted for by the symbolic interactionist understanding of a single, continuous (if evolving and unstable) identity. Issues of anonymity, pseudonymity and ambivalence further complicate this model, suggesting that symbolic interactionism requires additional support from other systems to be useful to this project.

Dramaturgy

The work of Erving Goffman was central in developing a model of socially mediated identity, in particular the concept of dramaturgy, first introduced in 1959. In a dramaturgical understanding of social interaction social life is viewed through the metaphor of theatre, as individuals and groups literally act out their roles, performing social signifiers and negotiating agreement as to their meaning. Goffman refers to this as ‘self-presentation’, and the skill employed to ensure the ‘right’ character is given-off is ‘impression management’ (Goffman 1959). Applying Goffman’s dramaturgy in an online context, Robinson builds on earlier work published by H. Miller in 1995 – the same year as Sherry Turkle’s influential accounts of online roleplay and fluid identities. G. H. Mead’s (1934) categories of social signs as ‘given’ and ‘given off’ are applied in the context of online communication, and can provide additional space for multiple, simultaneous selves and registers to be expressed by internet users.

Supporters of dramaturgical and symbolic interactionist approaches to framing identity in online communication tend to believe that a continuous ‘I/me’ pairing does form, but still retains the fluidity and ‘never-finished’ quality of identity from looser postmodern interpretations. A similar model of the semiotic exchange of identity signalling is also reflected in the idea of category assessment, by which we organise and stratify those with whom we

interact. In the context of this project this idea is important due to the constant exchange of subcultural capital present in communities of music consumption (Thornton 1995). There is also space in this approach for understanding digital deception, both of others and the self, and how different modes of self are articulated in different contexts and locations. Scholarship investigating major social media platforms further supports the validity of dramaturgical models, as users report performing consistent identities on their timeline (Van Dijck 2013), constructing their identities with a new ‘rehearsal’ stage of communication that takes place before posting publically (Ditchfield 2020). Such behaviour is made possible by the ubiquity and specific affordances of social media platforms; and the relationship between these affordances and identity work will be explored in detail in Chapters Three and Six, which analyse musical discourse and consumption practices in the subcultures of the Facebook Group network.

Embodiment

Contemporary social media users are more obviously embodied as the users of the early web, but online bodies still have a highly complex relationship with their offline counterparts. Bodies can be destabilised by editing software, sophisticated real-time filters and artefacts of digital failure like pixelation and glitch. The web is now a highly visual place, but what can be seen is less trustworthy than it was before. In this way, online bodies might be as fluid and fragmented as the ‘written into being’ bodies of MUD users. According to José van Dijck, the ease of manipulation and communication of digital images has altered their role in society: ‘Even if the functions of capturing memory, communicative experience and identity formation continue to coexist in current uses of personal photography, their rebalanced significance reverberates in crucial changes in our contemporary cultural condition’ (van Dijck 2008:70).

Following this, Nancy Thumin has observed practices of self-presentation online that go beyond direct representation, favouring more abstract associative elements linking the individual being represented to the sign or object doing the representing, requiring high levels of contextual literacy and understanding (Thumin 2012). Corroborating this is work published on the online practices of self-representation through subcultural rituals of sharing images of objects associated with the users both metaphorically and literally. Similar conceptions of self-representation via 'practical activity bound by localised literacies' will be explored in much greater detail in Chapter Three in the context of identity expression through ritual consumption and discourse in internet music communities (Tiidenberg & Whelan 2017:143).

Affect & affective publics

The diversity of online culture requires a theoretical toolkit capable of adapting to the often contradictory, reflexive and highly diverse landscape of the contemporary internet. To this end, Zizi Papacharissi's 2014 book *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics* frames digital culture and networked communication in terms of emotion, suggesting that groups form and organise themselves online based on affective responses and the emotional resonance of sharing experience. This idea bears some resemblance to Deleuze & Guattari's rhizome in its understanding of the multidirectional movement of information through digital space, and forms part of the broader 'affective turn' seen in the humanities and social sciences since the late 1990s. In the context of platform capitalism, the flow of affect between individuals and groups is highly dependent on the specific affordances of the platforms on which interaction is taking place, resulting in social phenomena that manipulate these affordances to achieve specific effects and generate continuity between different events. An example core to Chapters Three and Six is the use of emotional 'reactions' by Facebook users to clearly convey affective data through the use of a very simple platform affordance. Another is the meme/concept of

‘ratio’ originally found on Twitter, in which a user is considered humiliated if the number of likes their post receives is outstripped by (presumably derisive) comments and quote-tweets.

Ambivalence

Another affect-adjacent contribution to scholarly analysis of online communication focuses on the pervasive ambivalence resulting from the internet’s complex interplay of emotion, identity, and sincerity, combined with the platform affordances and limitations discussed above. This topic is outlined by Phillips and Milner in their 2017 book *The Ambivalent Internet: Mischief, Oddity and Antagonism Online*, which explores the fundamental impossibility of fully reducing digital communication in terms of meaning or intent – it is perpetually ambiguous, couched in layers of context, play and irony. In the context of online trolling, statements are often made in a superposition of sincerity, where depending on the outcome, the author may or may not decide to have been being serious (Figure 1.3). Ambivalence of feeling and ambiguity of meaning are social norms in online culture and the art that engages with it. In the context of identity, this ambivalence functions like a mask, building layers of affect that can result in a sense of deindividuation of users within a community, but which can also end up reinforcing or liberating identities that cannot be safely expressed in offline spaces. Ultimately, the power of online communication to blend fact with fiction offers users unprecedented control over their personal expression, but can paradoxically also remove that control through impersonation, deindividuation and context collapse. This ambivalent tension can be witnessed throughout this project, as it results in the blurring of lines between ‘the mask of individual identity and the reciprocal influence of the audience’ (Phillips & Milner 2017:73).

< BIC For Her Medium Ballpoint Pen - Black, Bo...



A keen skier



Great product!

Reviewed in the United Kingdom on 3 September 2012
My husband has never allowed me to write, as he doesn't want me touching mens pens. However when I saw this product, I decided to buy it (using my pocket money) and so far it has been fabulous! Once I had learnt to write, the feminine colour and the grip size (which was more suited to my delicate little hands) has enabled me to vent thoughts about new recipe ideas, sewing and gardening. My husband is less pleased with this product as he believes it will lead to more independence and he hates the feminine tingling sensation (along with the visions of fairies and rainbows) he gets whenever he picks it up.

3,325 people found this helpful

Helpful

Report

Figure 1.4: Ironic Amazon reviews like this one are cited by Phillips & Milner as an emblematic example of ambivalent online identity-play.

Additionally, since the negotiation of meaning and affective expression are important issues within popular music culture, Phillips & Milner's work can be useful in unpacking the nuances of communication both in and about music in digital spaces. Ambivalence is also an important part of the mechanism through which internet culture reflects and reworks elements of its self-image on a broader level. As shown in Chapter Seven, older ideas and ideals such as posthumanism, trolling, techno-libertarianism, disembodied identity and the potential of online culture for democratisation and de-stratification continue to haunt the web as memes and ideologies through which the internet understands itself, circulating the shared online consciousness and informing the identity of those who take part in it. Like the tastes and other musical practices discussed in this project, familiarity with these kinds of ideas remains a source of distinction online, producing an ingroup of those literate in certain forms of

ambivalent communication and these forms' various associated aesthetic, philosophical and political allegiances.

The intense experience of being bombarded with media and ideas of all kinds at all times has created a sense within online culture that the juxtaposition and coexistence of extremes is normal and even desirable. This phenomenon is closely related to the idea of an ambivalent internet, where everything is able to exist together, all the time, always ready to be accessed. Information, individuals, media, feelings, products for purchase, everything. The juxtaposition of incongruous or unmatched material is a very common way in which art aesthetically evokes or otherwise engages with the idea of online culture, in maximalist soundscapes and visual art, the blending of genres and various other forms of combining or piling together heterogenous objects to create a functional but heavily de-stratified assemblage. This feature is common to much of the music discussed and analysed in the second half of this project, drawing not only on the lived experience of the platform dominated internet, but also on the philosophical ambivalence that has always underlined online communication.

Conclusion

This chapter has laid out vital social and technological context ahead of my case study chapters, each of which will continue to unfold and progress the project's understanding of its research questions, the interconnected phenomena of internet-mediated expressions of musical identity and musically mediated expressions of online identity. By beginning with Napster and the P2P revolution and then tracking the development of online musical subculture into the current 'streaming era' of music access, this chapter has outlined platform capitalism's ultimate triumph over online music piracy and introduced the ongoing tensions relating to the role of platforms and human actors in the curation of music in online music culture. In addition to

preparing a theoretical and historical groundwork for the insights found in the project's case studies, this review of existing literature demonstrates the relative lack of published research relating to the identity practices of musicians and music audiences in the context of the widespread platformisation of online culture.

This platformisation process, is largely represented in this chapter by the birth of social media and the rise of music streaming. In the context of these two historical narratives, this process can be understood as stemming from a combination of powerful actors' attempts to reclaim lost profits and take advantage of lucrative new markets. But it was also driven in part by the desires of mainstream internet users daunted by the personal and social freedoms offered by digital networks. In terms of identity, despite the internet's transformative potential it seems that most users are happy to exercise relative stability and continuity of the self in their digital interactions. However, in many online social contexts this potential for new forms of identity expression is employed to varying degrees and remains a point of significant fascination among musicians and artists exploring the online experience and the social impact of digital technology in their work. Before embarking on the six case studies examining these aspects of online music culture, the next chapter will first detail the project's methodology and ethical implications, including a breakdown of the case study structure itself.

Chapter Two – Methods & ethical considerations

Having introduced the historical and technological context in which this project's case studies exist, I will now discuss the development and application of my research methodology and the ethical considerations made before and during its completion. This discussion forms the main body of the chapter, but before this I will provide justification for the project's structure and case study approach. Due to the diversity of technological and social contexts among the six case studies, each has presented different methodological and ethical challenges. These case studies are concerned with the practices of several different groups of internet users across a number of different digital platforms and involving various media forms, meaning that a one-size-fits-all approach to gathering data is not appropriate or possible. I have therefore drawn together a number of different methodological tools, with every chapter requiring a slightly different strategy. These tools have been taken primarily from two separate but related methodological toolkits – one designed for studying the contextual uses and meanings of music, and the other specifically developed for social media research. This chapter introduces and discusses these two toolkits, and then breaks down the individual approach required for each case study, including the specific ethical considerations that needed to be made for them.

The case study approach

In answering this project's research questions I have chosen to base my enquiry and analysis on a set of six related case studies in order to highlight the fundamental plurality, instability and multifaceted nature of both online culture and musical practice. The principal advantage of structuring a project like this is that it allows for significant insights to be made into and across various different forms of musical practice in various contexts, providing multiple perspectives from which to investigate the nature of identity in online music culture. This

would be significantly more difficult if I were to take a different approach to the project's structure, such as attempting to address my research questions by exploring the range of different musicking practices that take place on a single digital platform, website or community. While doing this might generate valuable insight from which broader conclusions could be extrapolated, it would ultimately be limited by its narrow context. My preliminary investigations into this topic suggested that due to the plurality of ways in which the internet is used in the construction and performance of musical identity, my research questions could not be adequately answered by limiting my study to a single platform or community.

Rather than emanating from some original or centralised source, internet culture and the norms that define it are emergent properties of an assemblage of communities, users, practices and texts. The development of new technologies and the constantly shifting importance of different platforms that comes with it both present additional challenges in terms of answering questions relating to internet culture, along with social factors like the rise and fall of fashions, trends and modes of communication among users, and the sheer quantity of secondary media to which this communication frequently refers. This is further complicated by the multifaceted nature of musical practice (musicking), which in different contexts can comprise any combination of elements like consumption, production, performance, composition, collection, analysis and numerous other forms of engagement.

In addition to the sheer breadth of online social behaviour, the fluid and multifaceted nature of identity itself discussed in Chapter One also feels quite incompatible with a single-study approach. For instance, it is very unusual for internet users to take part in a single online community or genre of digital interaction that expresses or negotiates their identity. Instead, a user's online identity is derived from a collection of behaviours, norms and practices across

different platforms, all contributing both to the experience of their own identity, its expression in online space, and the reactions this expression evokes in other users. Along with the dynamic, layered qualities characteristic of both internet culture and musical practice, this property of identity led me towards a research approach that was similarly flexible and multifaceted. By looking deeply into multiple contexts, platforms and forms of musical identity practice, the case study approach I have chosen has allowed me to identify broad trends within music-orientated cultures and subcultures online. The efficacy of this approach is also supported by the fact that many of these trends can also be observed in online communities and on platforms beyond the scope of this research – a point that will be returned to in the project’s conclusion.

I selected case studies from a variety of online locations, discourses and subcultures, but have also tried to maintain a sense of connectivity and continuity between them in a way that partially accounts for the complex relationships between communities and platforms. This model is designed to represent the plural—but not infinite—forms and locations of musical identity practice that might be encountered by a musically inclined internet user whose association with online musical identity is broadly comparable to that of the participants and practitioners examined in this project. I do not intend to generate a model of a ‘typical’ user, but rather to demonstrate the ways that numerous different practices, platforms, communities and forms of music operate together to generate user identity, as well as displaying the different forms of identity that can exist across a group of contexts. The case study selection process therefore drew on my own online experiences but also, crucially, those of the earliest subjects of this project, whose cross-platform, inter-community and genre-agnostic activities guided the final selection. During the early, exploratory stages of the project I scouted a large number of potential case studies on many different platforms and in numerous social contexts, relying on

my initial findings to direct me outward to any other locations, communities or prominent individuals that might allow me to build a more rounded picture of the practices I was uncovering.

For example, while investigating the culture of the '>implying we can discuss music' Facebook Group community featured in Chapter Three, I observed repeated discussions of YouTube channel *The Needle Drop*, solidifying my choice of Anthony Fantano as the case study for Chapter Four. Similarly, after observing the fans of the band Death Grips (now featured in Chapter Six) I noticed significant crossover between this community and other internet-based artists, the work of whom I had previously analysed for my MA dissertation project. This discovery led me to decide on the topics for Chapters Seven and Eight. Chapter One alluded to the connections that broadly link the various musical artists relevant to the case studies. These connections are partly the result of the process I have just outlined, but they also exist due to the specific time period on which the project is focussed. For instance, two of the most watched reviews on *The Needle Drop* concern artists mentioned in this project – Death Grips and Kendrick Lamar. But rather than implying the existence of a mappable network of internet-adjacent artists with Anthony Fantano at the centre, this is simply because these two artists were particularly celebrated by critics and audiences alike throughout the 2010s, and both of these albums received rare 10/10 scores from *The Needle Drop*. These case studies exist as part of the same zeitgeist, such connections arising naturally between their separate notes in the assemblage that made up a decade's online music culture.

So while connected, the Chapters Three to Eight do not represent a 'complete' image of a networked subculture or music scene. They should instead be considered a sample of the types of communities, forms of musicking and other identity practices observed in thousands of

communities across many dozens of digital platforms. Some of the ideas presented in this project skew towards the demographics of its research subjects, which while geographically diverse are typically internet-savvy, English-speaking and overwhelmingly drawn from the Generation Z or Millennial cohorts. However, the spread of the case studies in terms of their varied focus on the importance of musical consumption, interpretation and production can be applied to broader cultural and demographic contexts online, and the specific findings from my chosen case studies should be considered examples of the types of musical identity practice being engaged in all over the internet, by countless groups and individuals outside the scope of the chosen case studies.

This section has explained and justified the project's case study approach, as well as outlining the process of choosing the case studies themselves as a reflective (while not necessarily representative) example of the breadth of online musical identity practice. The following section will go into more detail concerning the research methods and tools drawn upon in the investigation of these case studies, including an outline of the historical relationship between the two main methodological strands of the project. The first of these takes inspiration and guidance from approaches popular in the field of ethnomusicology and the second draws from the much more recently developed, internet-specific method of netnography.

Research methods

Ethnomusicology

As explained in the chapter opening, this project uses a broad combination of methods and tools in attempting to address its research questions. In general however, my approach draws mainly from two specific methodological traditions. The first of these traditions is the field of ethnomusicology, and the second is netnography, a relatively new methodology with origins

in market research, but that has been expanded for use in various forms of scholarship concerned with the use of the internet. Ethnomusicology emerged in the early twentieth century and is distinct from other forms of musical study primarily due to its holistic, culturally grounded and often empirical approach to understanding musical practice. Ethnomusicology is historically associated with the study of traditional and particularly non-Western musics but can be more accurately understood as a set of music-oriented research practices that foreground cultural context, attempting to work outside the constraints of older traditions of musicology in which forms of analysis and study typically treat certain musical traditions (particularly Western art music) with primacy.

Popular music studies—the academic discipline within which this project is most accurately situated due to its focus on popular music audiences, fans and practitioners—emerged in the early 1980s and is therefore much younger than ethnomusicology. In addition to sharing many of its features with the ‘new musicology’ turn of the same era in its incorporation of approaches and ideas from queer theory, feminism and cultural studies, popular music studies also takes many methodological cues from ethnomusicology. But while the analysis in this project certainly fits within popular music studies, I have not chosen to identify my research methodology solely through this discipline because it often incorporates a much larger range of methods and approaches than those applied in this project. I think it is instead more accurate to identify my research approach as following a common combination of approaches found in ethnomusicology, centring the experiential, participatory method of ethnography (itself derived from anthropology) supported by other data gathering methods such as interviews, transcription and often highly contextualised analysis of musical texts themselves in terms of form, harmony, timbre and genre, but focussing primarily on the ways people use and relate to music.

As will become clear, this set of approaches has significant overlap with netnography, the other methodological toolkit I have drawn from in this project. But unlike netnography, it has been specifically developed for the purposes of understanding musical practice, and particularly the way that this practice constructs relationships, and identities both collective and personal. An ethnographic approach is very useful for a researcher investigating research subjects for whom specific factors (whether geographical, religious, subcultural or technological) play a significant role in shaping the role of music in a given cultural context. Ethnography has been an important tool for gaining an understanding of music's social role (Cohen 1993, Thornton 1995), as well as its particular meaning to the participants or occupants of the studied context. Research within ethnomusicology also often understands the breadth of musical practice in a similar manner to this project. Just as one of the fundamental questions of ethnomusicology is 'what counts as music?' (Blacking 1973, Hargreaves et al. 1997, Beech & Broad 2018), the question of what counts as online musical practice is important to all of my case studies.

I am not the first researcher to consider the potential synergies between this field of study and digital communication, as several ethnomusicologists have spoken about the internet's potential as a tool and location for their research (Reily 2003, Wood 2008, Alge 2011). A particularly instructive early discussion of the principles of ethnomusicology being applied in an online context comes from Abigail Wood, who has explored the question of 'how ethnomusicologists might seriously engage with the internet as a research site.' (Wood 2008:170). Wood then introduces the notion of 'E-Fieldwork' by applying approaches and frameworks commonly utilised by ethnomusicologists to the then-emergent phenomenon of what she terms 'internet-music-culture' through participant observation of a Jewish music mailing list. The resulting observations about online music culture clearly demonstrate the

potential of this approach, including several ideas that have already been introduced in this project such as the importance of language in online musical practice, the formation of community around these behaviours, and even the use of music to represent collective and individual identity. Though they were clearly made in a time before the rapid growth of platform-dominance and in which the role of images and video was negligible, Wood's observations still offered a useful starting point for the design of my own methods.

Ethnomusicology's focus on place, identity and forms of musical practice outside of performance and composition have provided important lessons to this project, both in terms of my methodology and my overall theoretical and conceptual approach. But while the approaches and methods commonly used in ethnomusicology are certainly useful in providing a basis for the study of music in an online context, in order to successfully engage with the contemporary, platform dominated online landscape, a more internet-specific methodological framework must also be applied. Just as Wood described 'E-Fieldwork', many forms of internet-based ethnography have been proposed and demonstrated under a variety of names including 'online ethnography' (Rahm-Skågeby 2011), 'digital ethnography' (Pink et al. 2015) and many others. But for the purposes of this project, Robert Kozinets' method of 'netnography' has by far the most flexibility and utility.

Netnography

Originally developed in the mid-1990s as a means of examining early science fiction fan communities online, netnography is a set of methodological tools designed to allow a researcher to enter a digital space and study its occupants' behaviour. Robert Kozinets, the method's originator and principal developer, defines netnography in this way:

a specific set of related data collection and creation, analysis, interpretive, ethical and representational research practices, where a significant amount of the data collected and participant-observational research conducted originates in and manifests through the data shared freely on the Internet, including the myriad of mobile applications. (Kozinets 2015:19)

While rather unwieldy, this description notably describes netnography not in relation to its non-digital descendants like ethnography, but through its fundamental relationship with online data. Kozinets sees this data as the ‘online traces’ of online activity by internet users, capable of taking forms such as ‘textual, graphic, photographic, audiovisual, musical, commercially sponsored, genuinely grassroots, political, fannish, and many other things’ (Kozinets 2020:3), and characterised as increasingly ‘plentiful, variegated, complex and widespread’. If made freely available on open social media platforms, these traces are seen as public social information that can act as the basis for research.

Netnography shares many of its elements with the methods used by ethnomusicologists, with an emphasis on researcher presence during observations and on participatory interaction with the studied context. This is contrasted with other qualitative online methods that can involve automated data gathering, such as ‘scraping’ websites for relevant data or simply recording all interactions in a specific online location over a particular timeframe, for later analysis. The term netnography has at times been broadened by some researchers to also include these more passive and automated data collection methods, but as Costello et al. (2017) have argued, without direct human involvement the effectiveness of the method in qualitative research is significantly reduced. This is because while it is more time consuming and difficult than automated data gathering, direct participation by the researcher conducting the netnography is vital for the development of continuity and narrative to the picture of online spaces that research

is able to develop. As a result, the version of netnography utilised for this project avoids automation and instead more closely follows Kozinets' model, in which data collection can be split into three forms: 'investigative', 'interactive' and 'immersive'.

Firstly, 'investigation is an unobtrusive process focusing on the selection and collection of social media data' (Kozinets 2020). This involves several stages that include searching for an appropriate cultural context in which to begin answering your research questions; scouting and identifying specific appropriate digital environments for data collection within that context; selecting relevant data from those environments and finally, saving that data and storing it securely. For instance, a researcher might first select a platform on which to focus their data gathering, then a particular location on that platform such as a page, group or sub-network. After this, specific relevant data from that location is personally identified, obtained and stored. Data obtained from this process might take the form of screenshots, or 'printing' webpages into more compressed formats such as PDFs, both of which were techniques used widely during data collection for this project. Though this is similar to the 'scraping' methods described above, the key distinction here is the researcher's direct involvement with every step of the process, ensuring not only that relevant data is selected but also that the context in which that data originally existed is not lost.

The next group of data collection practices in netnography are interactive collection operations, which are described as being both elicited and co-produced. They typically involve identifying and engaging with potential research participants either by public or private means, such as posting a question openly in the researched environment, or by contacting users individually via platform affordances like direct messaging functionality. The data resulting from this can be collectively generated, such as in the form of community discussion or in public comment

threads elicited by the researcher, or can be individualised, in forms like survey answers and interviews taking place either through private messaging or face-to-face conversation. While technically occurring offline, in-the-flesh interviews can supplement netnographic methods without compromising the methodology's online focus. Regardless, all the interviews conducted for this project took place over the internet, in a combination of instant messaging and video calls on Zoom and Skype.

The final data collection method outlined by Kozinets is immersive data collection, and this is one of the aspects of netnography that is most necessary to avoid the decontextualisation that often results from more automated methods of online data collection. Immersive data gathering involves longer-term participation and presence in the scrutinised space by the researcher, tracked through journals and notes. This process is closely related to its offline equivalents in ethnomusicology, where an ongoing ethnography at a research site is recorded by the researcher in the form of field notes, often to be narrativised later in a first-person account of the experience. This immersive approach to data collection was a near-constant, ongoing part of my netnographic engagement with this project's case studies, as I have spent months (and in some cases years) following and participating in the relevant online communities on an almost daily basis. This has allowed me to develop an understanding of the contexts and meanings behind the data I have gathered from these locations through other means, and significantly shaped my approach to elicitation, guiding the questions in my surveys and my approach during interviews.

As the next section details, all of these forms were used during the data gathering process for each of my case studies, though not necessarily in the same combination, and always also guided by the older methods of ethnomusicology. The three-part taxonomy of collection

strategies laid out by Kozinets has been very useful in organising my data collection, providing me with a clear understanding of my goals as a researcher as well as the purposes of my actions. It has also given me a clear image of how and when the issue of research ethics should be considered. Data gathering is a point of tension for ethical research practice when observing online communities, where anonymity, data security, privacy and informed consent are all factors when considering how to approach investigative data collection, how to engage and interact with research subjects and participants, as well as how to strike an appropriate tone and determine appropriate content for inclusion in any accounts of immersive data collection. The specific actions I have taken in consideration of these issues—along with those of vulnerable populations and sensitive topics—are all also explained in the following section.

At the beginning of my project, when determining the right way to address its research questions, one of the most important challenges was finding a methodology that was able to be used in a variety of different digital platform environments over a large period of time, without a loss of contextual information. I was therefore drawn to netnography due to its flexibility, and its principal developer's iterative approach to its development, ensuring that it continues to be useful in a changing online world. Kozinets has updated his guidance for researchers hoping to use his methodology several times since its first applications in the 1990s and 2000s (Kozinets 2010, 2015, 2020). These updates can be mapped onto the development of online culture discussed in Chapter One, changing in response to the forces of platformisation and the mainstreaming of the internet. For instance, by 2015 Kozinets was able to expand on the most effective use of his method for different platforms like Facebook and Twitter, acknowledging the different opportunities and challenges presented by the features, affordances and limitations of each.

In 2020, after several years working on this project, Kozinets' most recent guidebook on netnography was published. If I had access to this resource earlier in the development of my methodology, I might have even more closely followed the guidance in my research design, and therefore been able to solely describe the project methodology as being based in netnography. I have instead engaged in a data gathering process that keeps fairly close to standard netnographic guidelines but that has also incorporated interaction with musical objects in various forms such as music video, streaming, MP3 and MIDI files. In addition, digital objects (for instance, images of album artwork in Chapter Three) have been treated as musical artefacts rather than merely as data traces. This element of my approach more closely follows ethnomusicological practice, looking to understand objects such as recordings and visual media in terms of their role and meaning as entities that represent, refer to or directly contain specific musical experiences and texts. In line with this, Chapters Six, Seven and Eight include the analysis of online music and lyrics along with netnographic methods of data collection and analysis.

Before further elaborating on the methods used in each chapter, I will acknowledge the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the project. While the pandemic certainly disrupted my ability to write and access certain publications from my home, it had very different impact on the digital environments in which I was conducting my research. In addition to many online communities becoming significantly busier (in the US, average daily time spent on Facebook in 2020 rose by around twenty percent from the year before (Dixon 2022)), I experienced a surge of interest from users I had previously contacted for interviews, presumably due to their being confined to their homes with little to do. As a result of this effect, I was able to gather significantly more information from interviews during this period, with Chapters Three and Six being the most impacted, as both are focussed on Facebook-based communities in which

the pandemic's impact was particularly visible. The pandemic had a less significant impact on Chapters Four, Five and Seven and Eight as the majority of interactive data gathering for which had already been completed by the end of 2019.

2020 was also the year that the short-form video app TikTok exploded in popularity among English-speaking users, quickly becoming a key site of development for online popular music culture. If this had happened earlier in this project's development, I would have liked to engage more directly with TikTok, potentially devising a case study based on the platform, and with more time this is something that my flexible methodology could have allowed for. But this was not possible under the time constraints of the project, and TikTok has therefore been mentioned only in passing in the main body of the project, receiving more attention in the conclusion as a vital site for future research.

Chapter by chapter: methods & ethical considerations

Chapter Three

This is the first of two case studies in this project based on a Facebook 'Group' community, the other being Chapter Six. The community in question, '>implying we can discuss music' (hereafter: '>implying') is active and very large with more than eighty thousand members and is therefore fertile ground for both ethnography and immersive data collection. However, the Group's Private status resulted in one of the more difficult ethical challenges encountered during the project, and one that was only resolved with the guidance of the JOMEC Research Ethics Committee at Cardiff University School of Journalism, Media and Culture. This committee is based in the school at which my secondary project supervisor Dr Lucy Bennett works and was consulted during my application for ethical review for the project. Both Dr Bennett and my primary supervisor Dr Carlo Cenciarelli agreed that it would be best to go

through both the ethics board of Cardiff University School of Music (where the project is actually based) and the JOMEC Research Ethics Committee in order to ensure the project's compliance with the most up to date standards for ethical research on the internet. The ethical guidelines consulted during the design of my methodology were those published by the Association of Internet Researchers, whose third edition of research ethics guidelines were approved in 2019 and have been consulted and followed throughout work on the project (franzke et al. 2020).

The main ethical challenges for my collection of data from >implying revolved around the issues of privacy, and of publicly available information. As a Private Facebook Group, posts and comments made there are not automatically made available to anyone with an account on the platform and are instead only visible to members. However, the Group has over eighty thousand members and membership is extremely easy to obtain, either by invitation from an existing member or through request and summary approval by a moderator or administrator. So, while different Facebook Groups can be distinct in their privacy policies, it is reasonable to suggest that for a Private Group of this size, gaining access to the content within is not significantly more difficult than it is for one that is Public. In fact, creating a Facebook account (the minimum requirement for access to a Public Group) involves email verification, which could be considered a more significant hurdle than being accepted into a Private Group as large as >implying. This argument was accepted by the JOMEC Research Ethics Committee, ruling that the data was easily accessible enough to be considered publicly available, and that if it were anonymised, it could be used in the project. This was fully compatible with my planned methodology, as I intended to anonymise all participants, using pseudonyms when mentioning in writing, and covering up profile pictures and names in any figures that might include them.

My earliest engagement with >implying took place in 2018, in the form of intermittent notes on community activities, the characteristics of its discourse and perceived links to other online music subcultures. Investigative data collection in the Group began the following year, via a variety of methods including Facebook's own 'Save' functionality, which allows links to threads and posts visible to the user to be stored in an archive for later retrieval (though if the post in question is deleted at any time the link will go dead). I used this affordance liberally, saving several threads per week during the primary months of my activity in the community. During this period, every few weeks I would review the most recently saved threads, selecting the most pertinent ones and either creating JPEG screenshots or PDF documents from them depending on whether their relevance was primarily visual or based on discussion. I then saved these files in a secure folder on my home computer for later analysis. This method is largely reflective of my approach to investigative data gathering throughout the project.

After several months of both immersive and investigative data gathering for this case study, I began to use more interactive methods, engaging with the members of >implying directly both publicly and—once a user had indicated their interest in participating—through private messaging. At the start of my work in the Group (and several times after this), I had announced my presence as a researcher via posts of my own. But based on the responses, as a new member who did not typically contribute much to community discussion, the Facebook algorithm did not seem to show my posts to a large number of users. Given the size of the Group and its high speed of turnover in terms of content and discussion, I quickly realised it was essentially impossible to ensure that my presence would be known by every active community member.

This was also a problem when eliciting respondents for the survey I created based on my first months of data gathering in the Group, as maximising the number of users who saw and

responded to the post was difficult. As I will explain below, when gathering interactive data for Chapter Six under similar circumstances, I was able to effectively solve this issue, resulting in a significant difference between the two chapters in terms of the volume of survey data obtained. My survey was hosted online at kwiksurveys.com and took the form of a standard qualitative questionnaire asking a mix of multiple choice and more open-ended questions, which are detailed in Chapter Three itself, along with selected results.

In terms of identifiable data, the survey asked only for users' Facebook names and ages, allowing responses from members under the age of eighteen to be immediately deleted and not included in the project. The questionnaire contained questions asking for the consent of respondents for their answers to be used in academic research and outlining their right to withdraw their contributions at any time. They were also asked whether they would be happy to be contacted in the future for further contribution to the project. Users who had indicated their willingness to be contacted in this way were then located in the Group's membership list using the names they provided in the survey, and messaged using Facebook's secure, in-built private messaging platform, Messenger.

A total of three interviews were held with users as a result of this method, enacted in a semi-structured form and with a casual tone intended to identify myself as a researcher familiar with the vernacular and subcultural activities of the Group, but also as an outsider curious to understand the interviewees' relationship with the community and their views on its culture, as well as their activities within it. This was only made possible by the months of immersive and investigative netnography that preceded it, and had the interviews taken place earlier in my research plan, I do not think I would have been as able to elicit such thoughtful and detailed responses from the interviewees. The interviews all took place over either Skype or Zoom, and

were recorded and later transcribed, with interviewees being offered access to both the recording and transcript of their interview. Ahead of time they were sent information regarding the project and were required to provide verbal, informed consent before beginning. Interviewees were also asked to sign an informed consent form sent to them upon the interview's completion.

One of the interviewees, a member of >implying's administrative team, offered to send me visual materials created by him, that were of relevance to the community practice of 'chartposting' discussed in Chapter Three, which I accepted. Due to the significant overlap between Group members and the audience of Chapter Four's subject Anthony Fantano, a question was asked about Fantano's work in three interviews, resulting in insights that went on to be used in Chapter Four's analysis. As mentioned above, this outline of the research methods used for data gathering in Chapter Three is reflective of my research practice for Chapters Four, Five and Six, as are the measures taken to ensure informed consent was obtained. I will now go on to briefly explain how the methods for these chapters differed, including any other ethical considerations that were made.

Chapter Four

Unlike >implying, the case study at the centre of Chapter Four is located on YouTube, a platform with no ambiguity regarding the distinction between private and public data. The bulk of my data gathering for this chapter took the form of investigative methods: watching YouTube videos and monitoring YouTube comments, both of which involved taking and saving screenshots of relevant examples as described above. However, one area in which this chapter diverged from Chapter Three in terms of method was in my engagement with multiple social media platforms in my research. Anthony Fantano not only has a significant following

on YouTube, but also on Twitter and TikTok, as well as the livestreaming platform Twitch. Fantano had been active on Twitter for several years prior to the start of this project, but his use of these other two platforms has grown significantly in the last two years, as TikTok is a comparatively new platform, and Twitch has become increasingly popular for non-gaming related content since around 2019.

Though I observed Fantano's activity on all of these platforms during my data collection for this chapter, I therefore focussed primarily on Fantano's use of Twitter as a means of connecting to his audience, and particularly the way these interactions are later folded into his content on YouTube. This involved making searches on Twitter for posts that were later used in videos posted to his YouTube channel, to ensure that I was aware of the context in which they were originally made, and to better understand any nuances in this cross-platform activity. While my data gathering for this chapter only began in earnest in 2018, I have been familiar with Fantano's work as a critic since around 2010, which helped greatly in developing my approach to this case study in the context of the project's other areas of focus.

Chapter Five

One of the most self-contained chapters in the thesis in terms of methodology, the vast majority of data gathering and research for this chapter took place over a relatively short period in March 2019. This is quite contrasted with the other case studies, and chiefly the result of an early draft of the findings being submitted for publication in a postgraduate academic journal in mid-2019 (Morgan 2020). This case study is concerned with the control of musical meaning-making and social hierarchies specific to the community of the website Genius.com, which unlike the subjects of Chapters Three and Four exists outside of mainstream social media platforms (beyond some limited integration with Apple Music). This therefore required me to adjust my

methodology to engage with the limitations and affordances of Genius.com, as well as learning to decode the website's well-developed system of symbology and vernacular expression that is linked to both the controlled interpretation of music by community members and the subsequent system of organisation among them, based on the in-site currency of 'IQ'.

One challenge was identifying and contacting individual users for the interview, for which I was forced to use the site's direct messaging system that I was later informed by several respondents is rarely checked by most users. Three semi-structured interviews were conducted for this case study in a similar style to those for Chapter Three, but with the principal difference being my comparative lack of familiarity with the site, resulting in significantly more exploratory questioning by me, and more general clarification on the part of the interviewees. My knowledge of the history and context of the Genius.com community was expanded significantly in this way, in contrast with many of the other chapters, for which I discovered that a base level of familiarity with community values and practices on my part was a prerequisite in order to elicit useful responses from many interviewees.

Another key consideration for this case study's interviews was the preparation required, involving detailed examination of interviewees' own contributions to the Genius.com website in the form of musical interpretations. This was necessary in order to guide my questioning and to understand the interviewees' position in the site's complex hierarchy ahead of our conversation. Though the vast majority of my research for this chapter took place only on Genius.com, the impact of platformisation on the site involved crossing my focus over to the website's rapidly growing YouTube channel, suggesting that like the previous chapter, Google's ubiquitous video hosting platform is becoming increasingly entangled with and reliant upon more socially oriented digital platforms.

Chapter Six

In some ways this chapter is a counterpart to Chapter Three, as it is also based on a Facebook Group community and was initially approached in a near-identical way in terms of data collection and overall methodology. However, the Group in question, 'DEATH GRIPS SNITCHPOSTING' (hereafter 'DGSP') did not pose the same issues regarding ethical use of its content, due to its status as a Public Group. Additionally, I was able to contact the community's sole administrator relatively early in my data collection before I had completed or disseminated a survey to its members. This user (who is well-known and respected in the community and whose posts were treated more favourably by the Facebook algorithm as a result of generally receiving a high level of engagement) agreed to make a post of his own informing the Group of my intentions and requesting that they take part in the project by responding to the survey, a link to which was included in the post.

Thanks to this strategy, I received nearly twenty times as many survey responses compared to my earlier efforts in >implying, despite the Groups' comparable sizes (>implying has around eighty-one thousand members compared to DGSP's seventy-three thousand). This high number of survey respondents (n=348) allowed for a more accurate analysis of the community's demographic makeup, as well as a more diverse set of responses and perspectives. Due to the nature of the questions, the data attained from this survey was rich and provided a much more fertile base for analysis than was available to me when writing Chapter Three. I was also able to organise and carry out eight interviews with community members, including a brief discussion with the Group's administrator on Facebook Messenger.

These advantages certainly had a meaningful and positive impact on the depth and reliability of interactive data for Chapter Six when compared to interactive data elicited during my netnography for Chapter Three, but that does not necessarily make the analysis or conclusions for Chapter Six superior to that of its counterpart. The central practice studied in Chapter Three involved the public posting and discussion of digital images of album artwork, an activity that was most appropriately captured using a combination of investigative and immersive methods (i.e. screenshots and fieldnotes) supplemented with interactive data co-constructed via surveys and interviews.

In contrast, the user practice at the centre of Chapter Six's analysis was much more discursive and conceptual than it was visual and was tied to each users' understanding of a deeply layered abstract concept known as 'DG'. Uncovering the details and meaning of this idea and its accompanying practice could not be done fully via investigative and immersive methods such as those used extensively for Chapter Three. Instead, the meaning of the practices at the centre of Chapter Six's case study became clear to me only through the collection of a large amount of co-constructed, thick data elicited via many answers to specific survey questions and long form discussions with interviewees. The data required to analyse and understand the two Facebook-based case studies was therefore appropriately matched by the comparative availability of each data type during my research.

Finally, despite the Group's Public status simplifying the issue of data privacy, the content of discussions (as well as issues brought up in interviews with its members) did raise additional questions regarding sensitive topics and potentially vulnerable populations. The political extremism encountered and resisted by some members of the community had the potential to be a difficult topic to discuss, and I was therefore extremely mindful of this when this topic

came up during interviews and survey answers. While I acknowledged its importance during the interviews, I did not deliberately steer the discussion towards it myself and avoided referring to it specifically when designing the survey for this case study. Similar consideration was made when dealing with issues of gender and sexual identity, as several interviewees reported being victims of discrimination or targets of abuse on this basis during their discussions. Along with all others these participants have been anonymised, but in cases where potentially sensitive topics or traumatic experiences were discussed, participants were specifically asked whether they were comfortable for these elements to be included in the data collected for analysis in this project.

Chapter Seven

The methodology for the final two chapters of the project was significantly different than for the first four case studies, as no interactive methods or co-constructed data were collected. Instead, immersive and investigative methods were applied to the relevant online contexts to gather data for analysis, but for Chapter Seven's case study of the online genre hyperpop, these methods were combined with methods more associated with popular music studies. These include formal, textual and thematic analyses of musical texts, as well as the application of genre theory and historiographical approaches to understanding the relationship between past and present internet-based music genres and the broader traditions of internet music.

The analysis of hyperpop is built upon historical discussions of three other musical traditions that emerged online during the 2000s and 2010s, and therefore situates the genre historically while contextualising its unique relationship with platform capitalism. This chapter's foregrounding of textual analysis is intended to complement and contrast with the previous four case studies' more audience-focussed approach, as well as acting as a preparation for the

final chapter, which pulls together ideas from earlier chapters of the project but primarily uses similar methods to those used for Chapter Seven.

Chapter Eight

While this chapter involved no elicitation of interactive data in the form of interviews and surveys, the investigative and immersive process was perhaps more complex than for any other case study in the project. This was due to the nature of the online environments being scrutinised, which consisted of a number of websites and blogs holding together an assemblage of heterogenous media such as MIDI files, videos and images, dated web design, academic documents and cryptic blog posts. As the chapter will explain, this network of media was actually created to be intentionally confusing to anyone attempting to map it, but it had also fallen into disrepair in the three years between its creation in 2015 and the start of my research into this case study.

Digital research tools designed to facilitate the examination of outdated online media were indispensable during this project, particularly the Internet Archive and its ‘Wayback Machine’, a tool that offers access to ‘snapshots’ of old websites saved from years before. Also useful during the investigative design for this chapter were archived threads on the Reddit platform, collectively made by individuals who had themselves explored and attempted to catalogue the contents of the online locations relevant to this case study, resulting in a kind of non-elicited co-creation of data, a collaboration with fellow music researchers, separated by several years. Attempts at contact with these users were made via their Reddit accounts, but none appeared to still be active.

Conclusion

This chapter has explained the methodology of the project and the ethical considerations made during its completion. The mix of approaches combining those of ethnomusicology with Kozinets' netnography have allowed for a high level of flexibility across the six case studies. This has been important not only for adapting my methods for different platforms and types of research subjects, but also in the case of unforeseen differences in the availability of data, as seen between the initially very similar Chapter Three and Chapter Six.

Following the Association of Internet Researchers' current guidelines (franzke et al. 2020), I feel that the ethical considerations made throughout carrying out my methodology were more than sufficient for ensuring the safety of my research subjects and myself. Having explained the context and methods for this project's case studies, I now present the following six chapters in three pairs.

Chapter Three – >implying we can discuss music: conspicuous consumption & taste as self-portrait

The first pair of case studies explore the relationship between identity and internet mediated music consumption. This topic serves to further establish the features of online music culture and its discourse that remain relevant throughout this project, as well as underlining the way popular music is discussed and shared in an online environment increasingly defined by digital platforms. Chapter Three first explores the modes of listening (and talking about listening) used to construct and project selfhood and collective identity in online communities dedicated to music discussion. Chapter Four then elaborates on this specific form of projected musical selfhood and platform-mediated participation in online discourse, focussing on an individual whose highly visible online footprint depends on their successful participation in that discourse. This individual (YouTube-based critic Anthony Fantano) acts as an example of the features and values of this discourse and culture both to his own audience and for the purposes of this project, providing a detailed insight into the kinds of platform mastery and conspicuous music consumption first introduced in Chapter Three.

Both chapters examine the interlocking collection of digital platforms on which this activity takes place and consider how the use and mastery of these platforms itself signifies and legitimises the identities being mediated with them. Numerous platforms of varying sizes and purposes are observed at work, the unique affordances of each exerting an influence on the way music mediates identity for participants and generate a sense of shared belonging. Major platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Spotify provide access to and shape the experience of community and musical objects themselves. But smaller platforms, websites and online tools also play a part, allowing users to participate in online discourse more easily by

tracking and cataloguing their music consumption; offering an endless source of information and expertise about the music they consume; or by helping them produce the memes, jokes and other forms of creative practice that form an important pillar of identity expression in online music culture. After the historical context provided in Chapter One, Chapters Three and Four exemplify the experience, values and activities that defined online music culture in the 2010s. Their focus on consumption provides an initial perspective that is then adjusted in the two pairs of case studies that follow in Chapters Five to Eight to include the role of musical meaning and of musical artists in that culture.

Musical selfhood in the streaming era

This chapter investigates curation and recommendation in the context of music streaming, demonstrating the impact of platformisation on a Facebook-based music community. The combination of music streaming services with the centralisation of online communities on social platforms like Facebook has produced a culture in which access to music is trivial and consumption highly individualised, but users' desire to distinguish themselves through music remains. The increasing prevalence of algorithmic music recommendation has also destabilised the role of discourse in music subcultures as a means of taste development and distinction for its participants, in terms of disguising those participants both from the mainstream and from one another.

In certain online communities these tensions have inspired a push towards finding new methods of human-based curation and recommendation, along with new social practices designed to represent individual tastes and consumption practices. These practices represent an audience response to the platformisation of music consumption but are also shaped by the platformisation of online community, relying on an array of platform-based online tools and

guided by the affordances and limitations of the social platforms on which they take place. Socially, these practices operate in a somewhat similar way to the music sharing communities observed in the P2P era, held together by ‘trust relations’ based in expertise, taste and consumption practice (Ebare 2004). However, the record collection as a key site of trust and capital accumulation is largely missing, having been rendered relatively insignificant by streaming technology and visible only as an occasionally evoked signifier of musical identity used in memes and related visual communication.

‘>implying we can discuss music’ (hereafter: ‘>implying’) is a Facebook Group with over eighty thousand members, focussed on the discussion of popular music. As explained in Chapter Two, my investigation is based in a netnographic blend of participant observation in the community and data obtained from users via survey and semi-structured interview. In total, five participants were interviewed, all of whom have been anonymised with the use of pseudonyms. While not the sole birthplace of the values and practices discussed in this chapter, >implying is a good candidate for study due to its accessibility, size and location on Facebook. In the context of newer, more youth-orientated social media platforms, Facebook is no longer such a driving force in online culture, but during the 2010s it has nonetheless managed to maintain some relevance in this arena through the consolidation of older, typically more platform-independent forms of online community.

In particular, the Groups functionality has allowed communities of all sizes to flourish on Facebook since the mid 2010s, bringing subcultural practices onto the most popular social platform on the internet. >implying represents an online music culture that retains some of the consumption practices, social dynamics and subcultural values that developed online during the P2P era (Ebare 2004, Whelan 2006). But these values and practices have been shaped

significantly by the forces of platformisation, most easily visible in the community's reliance on streaming platforms for consumption, and on the Facebook platform for its very existence. In terms of Born's model of musical mediation (2011), the Group therefore extends through three of the four mediating planes, as music mediates both individual and collective identity as well as the institutions (digital platforms) on which these practices take place.

The following sections will outline the cultural context of Facebook Groups, and how the affordances of the Facebook platform shape the practices found in the >implying community, such as the way that affordances like the 'reaction' function act as an affectively charged expression of users' taste and music consumption, while also guiding newer members' understanding of consensus within the community, acting as mediators of musical identity on both individual and collective level. After this, >implying will be introduced in more detail, exploring its historical ties with earlier online music communities, and discussing the findings from my survey and interviews.

I will then finally move on to discuss some of the specific practices found in the community that assist with the formation, expression and negotiation of musical identity, both for the Group as a whole, and for its members as individual music consumers. This identity is defined by reflexive engagement with one's (and one another's) music consumption, enabled by the specific use of platform affordances. The shared literacy of both musical and online subcultural norms that defines this activity a shared sense of identity via membership to a nerdy form of online music culture, but also offers participants the ability to construct and articulate complex individual identities to one another through the use of the association of various identity markers with specific works of popular music. One such practice, known as 'chartposting' is a particularly instructive example of this, amounting to something like an evolving self-portrait

of taste and consumption for the members who engage in it. Ultimately, I argue that this practice plays a central role in socially mediating music consumption as a form of identity for the members of >implying, in a way that both resists and incorporates the conditions brought about by the platformisation of online music culture.

Facebook Groups

The following sections will act as a brief introduction to the culture of Facebook Groups based around music fandom and discussion, a context central to the case studies at the centre of both this chapter and Chapter Six, which focuses on a different Facebook community. The Facebook Groups functionality is a relatively old feature of the platform, but during the 2010s its use changed significantly, shifting from a collection of local community and novelty Groups into a network of bustling online communities engaged in the discussion of niche media, politics and humour that bears many similarities to the culture of web forums. Facebook Groups are diverse in their cultural norms and values, and different communities maintain complex relationships with one another through shared membership or notoriety.

To account for this, umbrella terms are often used to describe inter-community cultures on the platform, like ‘Leftbook’ for left-wing political Groups and ‘Musicbook’ for those based on music culture. Within Group culture these formations might be seen as analogous to scenes in the way they relate to one another, as well as internally between their constituent parts. While Musicbook also includes communities dedicated to sharing or identifying music, the two Groups studied in this project are both specifically dedicated to discussion. In light of the diversity of Group culture, this overview will avoid excessive generalisation, but some social commonalities do exist between most Groups, especially those relating to Facebook’s user interface, rules and the role of privacy. To help explain the social impact of these affordances

and limitations, some elements of my approach are borrowed from the ‘platform biography’ method, which maps digital platforms over time based on the development of features and their use (Baym & Burgess 2020).

Facebook Groups have not replaced or supplanted the forms of online community that have thrived since the early internet, nor can they compete with newer forms of user-led cultural innovation found on platforms like TikTok. But the diversity of discourses and communities hosted on the platform has led to the aggregation (and as some might say, dilution) of subcultural behaviours developed elsewhere online. In the specific case of the community discussed in this chapter, one particular cultural influence is predominant: the 4chan-based music community /mu/, briefly mentioned in Chapter One. /mu/ is known for its combination of 4chan’s notoriously antagonistic discourse and crass humour with a specific set of musical consumption practices and norms. But while the Facebook community discussed in this chapter can be understood as a direct descendent of /mu/, through the efforts of moderators and the Group’s platform context, the more objectionable aspects of /mu/’s culture have been largely erased. Still, as I alluded to in my discussion of the loosely defined ‘music nerd’ figure in Chapter One, the forms of consumption and internet musicking described in this chapter absolutely have a basis on 4chan, reflecting the site’s countercultural identity based in familiarity with internet culture and the associated goals of gatekeeping, canonicity and the development of personal taste.

In its inheritance of cultural practices developed in smaller online communities, Facebook Group culture is a quintessential example of platformisation’s reterritorialisation of the internet, where large media platforms mobilise the power of their ubiquity and tightly honed technological resources to consolidate internet culture on an increasingly small number of

platforms. In Facebook's case, this means bringing a set of practices and values that developed on thousands of individually owned and managed sites together under one corporate umbrella. This process is not lost on the members of these Groups, who previously took part in communities elsewhere, and was brought up several times in interviews, suggesting that for these users, any loss in freedom or community independence they experienced was balanced out by the convenience provided by the platform's ease of use:

It's really weird because I know myself and a lot of people who get involved in these communities usually come from anonymous communities on the internet, and Facebook is on the opposite end of the spectrum, right? They know what you had for lunch, what colour your underwear is, all the details. But the Groups functionality makes it very easy to assemble people around very particular interests, and people seem to approach these Groups a lot differently than they do the more public aspects of Facebook.

– Michael

Existing research supports this, finding that Facebook Groups are a frequent site of support for subcultural behaviour, encouraging social activities like knowledge sharing and coping with stress in quite a different way to the 'mainstream' Facebook environment (Pi et al. 2013, Pitkänen 2017, Braasch et al. 2019), all while the platform harvests users' data and exerts a certain amount of control over online norms and discourse. Facebook Groups are therefore an influential contemporary manifestation of online subculture under the platform capitalist model. The following sections describe how the particular affordances and limitations of the Groups functionality has been so successful in its consolidation of online subcultural activity, and how these communities make use of this functionality in the cultivation of identity and exchange of subcultural capital.

Rules & privacy

Facebook Groups are considered a separate social space from the main website, allowing users to interact with individuals outside their Friend list, altering the social contract on which the rest of the platform operates. Despite this, elements of the identity struggle observed in academic analyses of the platform still exist within Facebook Group culture (Van Dijck 2013, Ditchfield 2020), since users' accounts are still tied to their personal profiles. This offers fellow members some insight into their 'real' offline identities (if only through the name, location and profile picture), or significantly more if the user's profile is public. Facebook's insistence that members use their real names on the platform also bears significance for dynamics and practices that rely on the building and maintenance of identity, removing some amount of mediation between online and offline personas and reputations, even among strangers or online-only acquaintances.

Groups are either Public or Private; the former status allowing membership to anyone with a Facebook account and the latter requiring entry through invitation by an existing member or permission granted by a community administrator. Despite these significant differences, all kinds of communities of each type exist. Generally speaking, the largest and most active Groups tend to be public, but private communities can also become very large and well-known outside their membership. At over eighty thousand members, >implying we can discuss music is unusually large considering its Private status, but this privacy still provides some amount of exclusivity, acting as a cultural airlock that promotes the development of collective identity. Private status is important in the case of Groups hoping to foster and maintain a level of subcultural authenticity or orthodoxy, but as will be demonstrated later in Chapter Six, the Public status of some Groups can actually be an important part of their identity as a community.

Before a request to join many Private Groups will be considered, the user in question must complete a short survey. This survey will often simply request confirmation that the applicant will abide by any community rules, or asks a fun question related to the Group's focus. In some cases this survey is used as a screening tool intended to weed out intruders from communities with political differences, or to quite literally gatekeep subcultural knowledge and capital in Groups based around specific forms of media; barring entry to any users who cannot provide the correct response to an obscure quote from *The Simpsons* or name their favourite three songs by the band to which the Group is devoted. This practice is old enough that it has lately become common to see it parodied or deconstructed, but still remains a good illustration of the ways that Group culture mobilises Facebook's affordances in the maintenance of subcultural structures and hierarchies.

On the other hand, tensions arise from the presence of self-consciously anarchic and insular online cultures on such a mainstream platform. This is visible in certain Groups' resistance against platform oversight via a 'no reporting' rule that discourages users from reporting bad behaviour to Facebook, instead insisting that the Group's own moderation team be contacted to pass judgment directly. This is because Groups are frequently unceremoniously deleted by Facebook for Terms of Service violations, a fate that can be more easily avoided if discipline is kept in-house, in accordance with each Group's particular system of values. The danger of Group deletion is evidenced with the demise of Patrician Music Chartposting (PMC), another large Facebook Group exhibiting many of the same practices covered in this chapter. PMC was removed from Facebook without warning in late 2020 when a discussion about musician and convicted murderer Varg Vilkenes was automatically flagged by Facebook after a Terms of Service update (Moynihan & Søderlind 2003).

As mentioned above, most Groups maintain a set of additional rules determined by the admin team. These generally reiterate Facebook's policy on hatespeech and harassment, but also act to guide the particular culture of the community. For example, >implying has a rule discouraging political discussion, but another that permits and explicitly encourages 'shitposting', a term describing many of the absurdist, disruptive forms of digital activity associated with internet youth culture (Walker 2016, McEwan 2017, Phillips 2019, Maddox & Creech 2021). Somewhat similar in spirit to the older concept of trolling (Phillips 2015, Dynel 2016), though often less outright antagonistic, shitposting has over the last decade become increasingly tied to the expression of subcultural belonging in internet communities, where it marks a nexus between online cultural values of ambivalence and creative, chaotic humour with the performance of specific cultural literacies.

Shitposting is increasingly understood and seen on mainstream platforms, showcasing both the platformisation of online subcultures and the influence of those subcultures on internet culture more broadly. It has long formed an integral part of many online music communities, with similar behaviours being traceable to pre-internet music subculture as well. In describing this phenomenon, Emre Ulusoy uses Nietzsche's Dionysian conception to describe the way music consumption and discourses can result in the radical transformation of identity with the framing of 'subcultural escapades' (Ulusoy 2015). Applying this idea to communities like >implying demonstrates how the Group's Dionysian nature is reinforced not only through similarities with the escapades and consumption practices of offline musical subcultures, but by their cross pollination with an online culture that is itself defined by Dionysian identity transformation. The 'controlled chaos' of the environment this combination of discourses creates both accelerates and destabilises the identity work of individual members and the Group more

broadly (Ulusoy 2015). This makes sense of the many borderline inscrutable online spaces that engage in the Dionysian escapades of meme and shitposting cultures and will continue to be relevant in later chapters.

Reactions

Development of the Facebook platform has been shaped by attention manipulating Silicon Valley innovations like the ‘infinite scroll’; a very successful feature that guides user behaviour and that is particularly good at maintaining user engagement (Rondon 2013, El-Ariss 2013). One such affordance instrumental in shaping the culture of its Groups is the react function. Essentially an expansion of the ‘like’ button that is now ubiquitous across the major social networks, reactions (or sometimes ‘reacts’) allow users to engage affectively with a post or comment in a single click, logging a response of love, laughter, surprise, anger or sadness. This serves an important role to Facebook itself as a detailed source of user data (Oremus 2016), but reactions bear significant potential to users, too.

While the feature serves a familiar and important function in mainstream Facebook sociality, in Group culture it plays a central role in building and demonstrating both consensus and distinction, as reactions to a post or comment are aggregated and clearly displayed below it in order of popularity. This instils each reaction with a small amount of affective power that can indicate the general response to a post by those who read it, based on the proportion of different reactions. In the context of a Group dedicated to a niche topic or cultural interest, this helps familiarise newer users with community norms or the generally agreed-upon meaning of a given post.

For example, the laughter reaction is commonly used as a derisive response to a post or comment, so if a post (other than one that was intended to be humorous) receives mostly laughing reactions from those who choose to interact with it, this demonstrates strong disagreement or dismissal among at least some users that can help to shape perceptions of the post's topic among community members, even by members who might be unfamiliar with it that topic, or the reason for this response. This effect is small but powerful in aggregate, guiding the understanding of community norms and expectations, and offering a form of discursive engagement that creates the impression of a tangible impact on Group culture for an extremely low investment of social capital and effort on the part of the reacting user.

As a result, users are more likely to engage with Group content through reactions than any other means. This is supported by the limited data gained from survey respondents, with several users reporting that reactions are the only way they contribute to >implying at all. This has significant implications for certain notions common to social media researchers, particularly the '80/20 rule' and related concept of the 'lurker', which both suggest a majority of the population of a digital space do not directly contribute to its discourse in any way (Nonnecke & Preece 1999, Nonnecke et al. 2006).

It would be very difficult to determine what proportion of Facebook Group members are true lurkers and which only contribute via reactions, but it seems likely that reaction-only members would revert to true lurker status if the option to react was rescinded, suggesting that just as the like button did when first implemented (Ocampo 2011), reactions greatly raise the overall level of engagement, but also provide an opportunity for greater discursive interaction. While an important social factor for any Facebook Group, this idea is particularly pertinent to those built around discourses of personal taste and orthodox opinion about media for their economies

of subcultural capital. Reactions can be used to efficiently log members' personal tastes and perspectives on any opinion voiced or media text mentioned by another user. On the other hand, there is also a good chance that reactions reduce the amount of verbalised discussion, offering as they do a means of supporting or criticising a post without the need to articulate oneself through language. In this way, reactions could certainly be seen as yet another means of funnelling user interactions into increasingly codified and platform-derived means of personal expression, reducing every nuanced musical opinion to one of five affective responses.

While reactions perform this function across Group culture, on >implying their impact seems to be particularly strong. Unlike those based on discussing TV shows with a finite number of episodes, some Groups like >implying focus on a broad enough subject that no one member could possibly be familiar with every topic or media object likely to be discussed. Those members who recognise or understand the content of a post are more likely to respond with a reaction than in any other way, building up a set of reactions that guide that post's interpretation by other members, including those ignorant of the object under discussion. For instance, if a post mentions a relatively obscure artist or album and not every member who sees the post is familiar with it, the reactions to the comment or post in question provide an easy-to-parse breakdown of the dominant and minority opinions of members in the know.

This has the potential to guide unfamiliar onlookers' own impression of that artist should they ever encounter their work or wish to seek it out in the future; a process rendered trivial by peer-to-peer and streaming. In this case, reactions themselves act as carriers of subcultural capital and discursive meaning—both vital tools for community practices of recommendation and admonishment—forming a streamlined and immediately visible conveyance of consensus,

division or apathy among users. In large, active discussion communities like >implying this often results in a highly charged affective atmosphere, one in which each and every contribution to musical discourse is first defined by the emotional reactions it garners. This environment also lends itself particularly well to contested identity practices (both individual and communal) and the exchange of subcultural capital through communicating opinions about music and music consumption. As many comments consist only of a reference to a musical work (most often in the form of an image of an album cover), reactions allow individual users to express their affective relationship to that work. Furthermore, in the aggregate of many responses to a single post, an observer is often able to ascertain the overall status of a particular record or artist in the membership's collective imagination.

>implying we can discuss music

Community culture

>implying identifies itself as 'Facebook's biggest music discussion group', a claim that may well be accurate, as while several larger music-related Groups exist, these are designed primarily for sharing and promoting members' own music. Sharing links to particular music available on streaming platforms is also common in >implying, as requests for recommendations are a vital component of community discourse. However, because other users' access to these platforms is often assumed, posting images of album artwork remains the principal way to recommend or refer to music.

As online culture has become more visual, album artwork has come to play an increasingly important role in internet musicking practices, being used to build on and rework the affective and semiotic associations associated with the physical record sleeve to become key digital objects in the exchange of subcultural capital and meaning in music discussion communities. The exercise and manipulation of this meaning forms the backbone of many activities that

define the culture of >implying, as thumbnail images of album artwork are arranged, juxtaposed and placed in a wide variety of visual contexts that convey users' relationships with the music they consume. This practice is then reinforced by the platform, as Facebook's algorithm is known to prioritise posts featuring images over those with plain text (Mosseri 2018).

This practice is one that certainly predates Facebook Groups, with many distinctive features of its discourse being directly traceable to 4chan's music imageboard /mu/. As I have already mentioned, the musical value system and consumption practices at the heart of >implying's culture has been heavily influenced by that of 4chan's music board. This is far from unique, seen across several large communities dedicated to the discussion and sharing of music both in and outside the context of Facebook Group culture. In the case of >implying, this influence takes the form of a loose system of musical logics common to many members of the community. These include a preoccupation with notions of taste and canon; a preference for eclectic consumption; the pursuit of exposure to new musical knowledge; and experiences and a propensity for tracking or monitoring one's consumption with digital technology. This tracking frequently leads to the codification of musical tastes and opinions with the use of lists, ratings and time-based roundups such as those discussed later in this chapter.

This characteristic set of practices is rarely acknowledged as a specific paradigm by its adherents but is sometimes referred to via various in-jokes and memes including the labels of 'patrician' and 'plebeian', which are applicable to both musical subjects and objects as a declaration of good or bad taste. Typical of online vernacular discourse, these memes are used as ambivalent discursive tools enabling users to acknowledge and even condemn certain behaviours, all while continuing to operate within the paradigm. Given the history of online

vernacular counterculture within which 4chan is situated, these practices can be understood as a set of internet-based modes of consumption linked to the post-P2P communities discussed in Chapter One, combined with pre-digital musical practices often associated with record collection and obsessive music fandom like those famously featured in Nick Hornby's *High Fidelity* (1995).

This is one example in which the term 'music nerd' might be appropriately used as it captures the systematic and technologically mediated nature of this form of musicking, but as I have already stated, this is not an identity position commonly used for self-identification in this community. In contrast, the normalisation of this behaviour is such that they are rarely even acknowledged as niche or obsessive by their participants, despite the often highly specific and 'difficult' nature of the music being discussed. As I will demonstrate in this and the following chapter, this set of online musicking practices nonetheless play a vital role in the articulation of musical identity for those who engage in them. The lack of an identifying name for this mode of music fandom (such as those adopted by the fans of certain musical artists) is, if anything, a testament to its ability to construct individual musical identities for its practitioners. On the other hand, as a community, /mu/ frequently engaged in the expression of collective musical identity, most visible in the construction of its community canon, /mu/core.

This set of albums from various genres became synonymous with the community due to the frequency of their discussion and recommendation by its members. Among those released during /mu/'s existence, some (like Kanye West's *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*) are already becoming canonised in the mainstream, while others (like Death Grips' *The Money Store*) have resulted in large surges in an underground artist's popularity on the internet and beyond. Among older /mu/core records, many traditionally occupy places in the pop pantheon

in the mainstream (Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours*) or avant garde (*Trout Mask Replica* by Captain Beefheart and his Magic Band), but /mu/'s championing of previously overlooked releases has occasionally resulted in a more general critical reappraisal (Neutral Milk Hotel's *In the Aeroplane Over The Sea*). In addition to providing the community with a sense of collective identity, /mu/core was also used for community gatekeeping and potential expansion, demonstrated in Figure 3.1.

New to /mu/?
 Don't know what to listen to?
 This chart will help you become an entry level /mu/ant, and more easily get involved in conversation on the board.

/mu/core

1. James Blake - James Blake
2. Modest Mouse - The Moon & Antarctica
3. Ride - Nowhere
4. Daft Punk - Discovery
5. Brian Wilson - SMiLE
6. The Deception Plan - Emergency & I
7. Massive Attack - Mezzanine
8. Ghostland Point Name - Replica
9. Kyuss - Welcome to Sky Valley
10. Godspeed You! Black Emperor - F#A# (infinity)

Sub-"/mu/core

1. Spirit - Fuck Your Emotional Bullshit
2. Panda Bear - Person Pitch
3. Sigur Rós - Ágætis Byrjun
4. DJ Shadow - Entropia
5. The Strokes - Is This It
6. Devo - Love - Lovemonger
7. Joanna Newsom - Ys
8. Animal Collective - Spirit They're Gone, Spirit They've Vanished
9. Fleet Foxes - Fleet Foxes
10. Death From Above 1979 - You're A Woman, I'm A Machine

The Classics

1. Led Zepplin - Led Zepplin IV
2. The Velvet Underground - Loaded
3. Pink Floyd - Dark Side of the Moon
4. The Doors - The Doors
5. Devo - Q: Are We Not Men? A: We Are Devo!
6. The Velvet Underground - Velvet Underground
7. Big Black - Songs About Fucking
8. The Beatles - Rubber Soul
9. The Cure - Disintegration
10. Creedence Clearwater Revival - Cosmo's Factory

Rock

1. Sonic Youth - Daydream Nation
2. Pixies - Doolittle
3. The Jesus Lizard - Goat
4. Joy Division - Unknown Pleasures
5. Miss Davis - Bitches Brew
6. Nick Drake - Pink Moon
7. Michael Jackson - Thriller
8. Love - Forever Changes
9. The Replacements - Let It Be
10. Menemmen - Double Nickels on the Dime

Pop

1. The Velvet Underground - White Light/White Heat
2. Captain Beefheart & His Magic Band - Safe As Milk
3. Miles Davis - Kind of Blue
4. Lou Reed - Transformer
5. The Doors - The Doors
6. Black Sabbath - Paranoid
7. Phil Spector - Back to Mono
8. John Coltrane - A Love Supreme
9. Johnny Cash - At Folsom Prison
10. The Human League - Dare

Contemporary Rock

1. Frank Sinatra - In The Wee Small Hours
2. Chris & The Cosemos - Lips and Other Associated Love Songs
3. Frank Zappa - Hot Rats
4. Stevie Wonder - Inner Visions
5. James Brown - Live at the Apollo
6. T. Rex - Electric Warrior
7. New York Dolls - New York Dolls
8. Keith Richards - 12th Avenue Skat
9. Kate Bush - Hounds of Love
10. Foghat - Repeat

Hipster-Hop

1. Beastie Boys - Paul's Boutique
2. De La Soul - 3 Feet High and Rising
3. Black Star - Black Star
4. Nas - Illmatic
5. Outkast - Aquemini
6. Jay-Z - The Black Album
7. Ghostface Killah - Supreme Clientele
8. Big L - Lifestylez Ov Da Poor And Dangerous
9. M.O.D. - Back on Both Sides
10. N.W.A. - Straight Outta Compton

Electronic

1. Kraftwerk - The Man-Machine
2. Air - Moon Safari
3. Venetian Snares - Rosaz, Cellad Alatt Szulett
4. The Orb - The Orb's Adventures Beyond the Ultraworld
5. The Future Sound of London - Lifeforms
6. Tangerine Dream - Phaedra
7. Vangelis - Blade Runner
8. Underworld - Dubnobasswithmyheadman
9. Tricky - MaxiQuake
10. UNKLE - Psyence Fiction

Metal

1. Autschre - Tri Repetee
2. The Chemical Brothers - Dig Your Own Hole
3. Fennesz - Endless Summer
4. Oval - 94 Diskont
5. The KLF - The White Room
6. Sasha & John Digweed - Northern Exposure: Expeditions
7. Flying Lotus - Cosmogramma
8. RJD2 - Deadmats
9. The Kite - Silent Shout
10. Roxykopp - Melody A.M.

Other

1. LFO - Frequencies
2. Daft Punk - Alive 2007
3. Alec Empire - The Destroyer
4. Riech - Homo
5. Squarespusher - Hard Normal Daddy
6. Massive Attack - Bliss Lungs
7. Brian Eno - Ambient 1: Music for Airports
8. The Prodigy Music for the Jilted Generation
9. Goldie - Timeless
10. Global Communication - 76/14

Classical

1. Metallica - Ride the Lightning
2. Megadeth - Rust in Peace
3. Slayer - Reign in Blood
4. Burzum - Filosofem
5. Morbid Angel - Leviathan
6. Iron Maiden - Powerslave
7. Black Sabbath - Master of Reality
8. Metallica - Master of Puppets
9. Morbid Angel - Altars of Madness
10. Bathory - Hammerhead

Genre-specific

1. Daft Punk - Transmuting Manger
2. Emperor - In The Nightshade Eclipse
3. Boris - Feedbacker
4. Mania - The Wet & Bath
5. Pentagram - Reintense
6. Earth - Earth
7. Agalloch - The Mantle
8. Morbid Angel - When the Kite String Pops
9. Sleep - Holy Mountain
10. Between the Buried and Me - Colors

Figure 3.1: A visual guide designed to introduce new users to /mu/core.

This visual list of three hundred LPs is ostensibly intended to introduce newcomers to the community's tastes. To members, this canon and others like it act first and foremost as statements about their collective identity – one defined by taste, eclecticism, internet use and the ambivalent feelings surrounding the identity of the obsessive, reclusive geek. /mu/'s subcultural norms, though a palpable influence on >implying, have certainly been watered down in their journey from the depths of 4chan onto the internet's largest social platform. But the ties between >implying and /mu/ remain an important—if contentious—aspect of the community's identity. The nickname 'not/mu/' is sometimes used for >implying in order to emphasise the differences between the two communities, and as an ambivalent reference to the fact that the name '>implying we can discuss music' actually refers to a meme first popularised on /mu/. The meme in question is a 4chan posting practice known as 'greentext' (see Figure 3.2), in which an anecdote or pithy, dismissive statement is broken into sentence fragments, each preceded by a greater-than symbol (on 4chan this causes the text to appear green).



>be 3 years old
>standing in the living room next to leather sofa
>for no apparent reason think to myself "i will remember this moment"
>still do

Figure 3.2: A 'greentext' post from one of 4chan's imageboards.

In this context, the word 'implying' usually signals a sarcastic interpretation of a previous post, so '>implying we can discuss music' acts to rebut a hypothetical attempt to talk about music in good faith – an idea implied to be absurd. The very act of a productive musical discussion

is already dismissed in the community's name. Within this ambivalent attitude we can also identify an implied value system from this tacit acknowledgment of the nature of musical discourse: if musical quality is supposedly subjective, then what is the point of discussion?

Along with the use of Facebook's platform features described in the previous section, a number of idiosyncratic digital practices found in the Group help to reinforce and maintain subcultural consensus while also providing space for individual users to express their musical identities in a variety of innovative ways that can tell us much about the position and use of music in the context of contemporary digital cultures. Before introducing these practices, this case study will now briefly turn to the community members, and their self-reported musical practices and behaviour in the community.

Members

As explained in Chapter Two, the data gathered directly from members during the research into >implying has not been sufficient to make broad statements about community demographics or gain statistical data about collective activity on any representative scale. Despite this issue, the depth of data provided by members has been instrumental in nuancing and supporting insights gained through participant observation. I only received twenty responses to the circulated survey but was thankfully able to perform three expert interviews, two with long-term community members and another with a prominent member of the >implying admin team. A summary of key findings from these individuals follows, preceded by some of the insights offered by survey responses.

The sample of twenty respondents was quite gender diverse (ten female, seven male and three non-binary) and located in nine different countries; though as might be expected a majority

(sixty per cent) were from the anglosphere. The survey asked about their activity in the community, their music choices and listening practices. A wide variety of music formats were mentioned, but all twenty reported regular use of streaming services. Among these by far the most popular platform was Spotify, used by all but one respondent. YouTube was also a popular streaming method, used by seventy-five per cent. >implying's still rapid growth is demonstrated by a relatively high number of respondents new to the community, thirty per cent having joined less than a month before taking the survey.

However, a quarter had been members for more than two years. When asked about their primary reason for being in the community, respondents were evenly split between discovery and discussion, with a fifty per cent split between the answers 'finding new music & getting recommendations' and 'sharing and discussing music opinions'. Though these survey responses cannot be used to extrapolate any hard conclusions, the findings are in line with observed behaviour, especially regarding forms of engagement. For example, ethnographic observation suggested that rather than making their own posts, most members engage with the community primarily through the react function and occasional comments, rather than making their own posts – an observation fully supported by survey responses, as less than half the respondents reported ever making original posts, with just one respondent doing so on a weekly basis. In general, longer-term members appeared to be more likely to make posts and comments, though some of the newer members still reported posting regularly.

On top of this, given that responding to the survey is itself a form of engagement, it is highly likely that actual rates of member engagement are considerably lower than those implied by the survey responses. This conclusion regarding engagement is vital to an understanding of the way >implying is actually used by most members – rather than offering their own detailed

opinions or recommendations, most instead seem to use the community to passively develop their knowledge and taste by observing others' discussions and only interacting through reactions. However, as explained above, this behaviour is still affectively powerful, and vital to the community's culture, contributing to or disrupting the formation of consensus, and potentially 'signal boosting' minority opinions that would be overlooked without reactions to bring attention to them.

This is also supported by the first interview respondent Brian, who reported that while he did not always understand what was being said in public discussions, they helped to guide his perceptions of popular consensus, especially on the topic of artists with whom he was less familiar:

Truthfully, there is a lot of discourse that I think I get, but I still feel like there's stuff I haven't really dug into or listened to. You know, there's a lot of stuff that I am not as literate in as a lot of the other people are, and for me it's interesting to try to get into it and adopt. Like, 'these are the opinions that people have about Frank Ocean or Tyler the Creator'. That's just two names off the top of my head that I only have some tangential awareness of.

– Brian

Here Brian is using >implying as an extension of his own musical knowledge, something previously observed in musical artists associated with digital culture (Waugh 2017). Aware of his inability to keep up with every musical development, he relies on fellow members to learn, even adopting their perspective on unknown or barely known music; and relying on discussion and recommendations to curate a set of new artists for him to try when he can. Later in the interview he likened >implying to a 'clique' whose collective opinion on various artists and

albums are broadcast by their public discourse – a telling comparison that belies the relationship between social capital and the expression of musical tastes in the Group’s semi-public arena. Active, knowledgeable members exert influence in the community as opinion leaders through their public discussions, and various posting practices that demonstrate their consumption, as has been previously theorised in research concerning the spread of cultural tastes (Bennett 1999, Cheng et al. 2021, Lievens 2008, Lizardo 2015, Rossman 2015, Savage 2011, Vlegels 2017, Ruvio 2007).

The second interviewee, Michael, also understood the community to be socially linked through their music taste. He independently aligned >implying’s culture to that of /mu/, its values and alternative canon but struggled to identify any musical or genre-based continuity to tie this canon together, suggesting instead that such canons are defined by the consumption practice of the canonisers, rather than specific properties of the music. This idea is demonstrated by Michael’s comparison of online music fandom to that surrounding stereotypically nerdy media (that is, media associated with the technologically savvy, often masculine and socially awkward identity discussed in Chapter One), and the role that conspicuous consumption is used to express identity:

Whether you’re into shit like comic books or video games, people wear t shirts of their favourite comic book characters and stuff like that, and so it’s the same thing with band merch or people who post charts. I mean it sounds cliché, but it’s having an interest that you’re passionate about. That’s just innately human, I think.

– Michael

The posting of ‘charts’ referred to here is a practice will be discussed in detail below, but the significance of Michael’s choice of comparison between this behaviour and media associated

with nerdy consumption demonstrates the important role played by the idea of the nerd in the identities of participants in certain online music cultures, even as the internet's popularity has far outstripped its long-held associations with geek culture. This dynamic, and the semi-aspirational identity of the music nerd is explored further in Chapter Four. The final member interviewed was Luis, an influential and popular member of the administrator team. Like Michael, Luis recognises the community's cultural links to /mu/, but was quick to distance >implying from its notoriously didactic canonising practices:

We've tried as much as possible over the years to disconnect ourselves from /mu/, but we are still plagued with it. We are sometimes referred to as 'not/mu/', and this shows what we try to do. We try not to be as much of a cult as /mu/ is.

– Luis

Luis' comparison of /mu/ to a cult suggests a lack of the individuality he prizes in his own community. At the very start of our conversation, Luis was quick to ensure that nothing he said about >implying be taken as indicative of the Group's opinion at large, and throughout the interview he continually referenced his intention to foster friendly division, disagreement and mutual growth among members through the discussion and comparison of musical opinions. He felt that >implying's size exposed its members to 'every aspect of musical taste that there is. You get in touch with music that you never dreamed about, from everywhere in the world.' Tensions between Luis' ideal of totally individual taste and the canonical values identified by Michael are further discussed in the following sections, as the community's dual purposes of discovery and discourse are viewed in the context of first communal and then individual musical identity.

Collective identity: emergent curation

While a broad range of music discussion topics are seen in >implying, a high proportion of posts concern members' tastes and consumption habits, such as users asking for listening recommendations to fit certain criteria or sharing an opinion about a particular genre or artist. While the sentiments that taste and musical value are somewhat subjective are commonly repeated during discussion, musical value judgments are ubiquitous, and users are often praised or ridiculed for their stated opinions and personal preferences. Alongside personal taste, >implying also has a collective identity based on shared values, practices and the aggregation of its users' opinions, all rendered highly visible thanks to the platform tools discussed earlier in this chapter. In this context, discussing musical opinions serves to build and reinforce community identity, while also encouraging the development of users' individual musical identities via the public displays of their specialist knowledge, tastes and consumption that make up a significant portion of Group discourse. Just as has been observed in offline music communities, taste is a key element 'delineating subcultural identities' both against the mainstream and within the subcultural participants (Kruse 1993).

Another function that emerges from these activities is curation, reflected in the >implying's secondary purpose as a discovery tool. Pre-digital communities and subcultures that prioritise or value the consumption of music often enact the mutual, social shaping of musical practices within the community and its members through the sharing of cultural resources both tangible (e.g. lending records, providing access to live music) and intangible (e.g. recommendations, access to subcultural knowledge and capital). Curation is generally understood to occur in one direction, from an authority towards a larger audience, and thus is not normally discussed in the context of music communities, or discussion with peers.

But on a large enough scale, the collective opinions emergent from repeated discussions (visually enhanced by Facebook's reaction tool) can begin to combine to form a kind of taste-making, curatorial process that extends in multiple directions through the community. Members' immediate access to vast libraries of recorded music allows for the co-operative large-scale pooling of members' intangible cultural resources through recommendations and public discussion, generating an emergent form of co-curation. The consensus-building nature of the platform combines with users' collective knowledge and tastes to offer recommendations, suggestions for fans of particular genres and gateway artists to get into new sounds, just as individual or institutional pop curators do.

Curation is also often understood as either having a specific source like a critic or DJ, or a specific target like the algorithmic playlists on Spotify. At first, it might seem that the process emergent from >implying's collective activity fits neither of these categories and so cannot be true curation, but in practice it actually blends elements of both together. Just as users find recommendations from community consensus, many members choose to offer each other more targeted, personal recommendations based on known information. This second factor could be one reason motivating users to share such detailed accounts of their personal tastes, in the hopes of eliciting more appropriate recommendations from their fellow members. This kind of individual curation will be explored in more detail in the following section, but on a collective level >implying's curatorial influence results in something very much like a reflexive

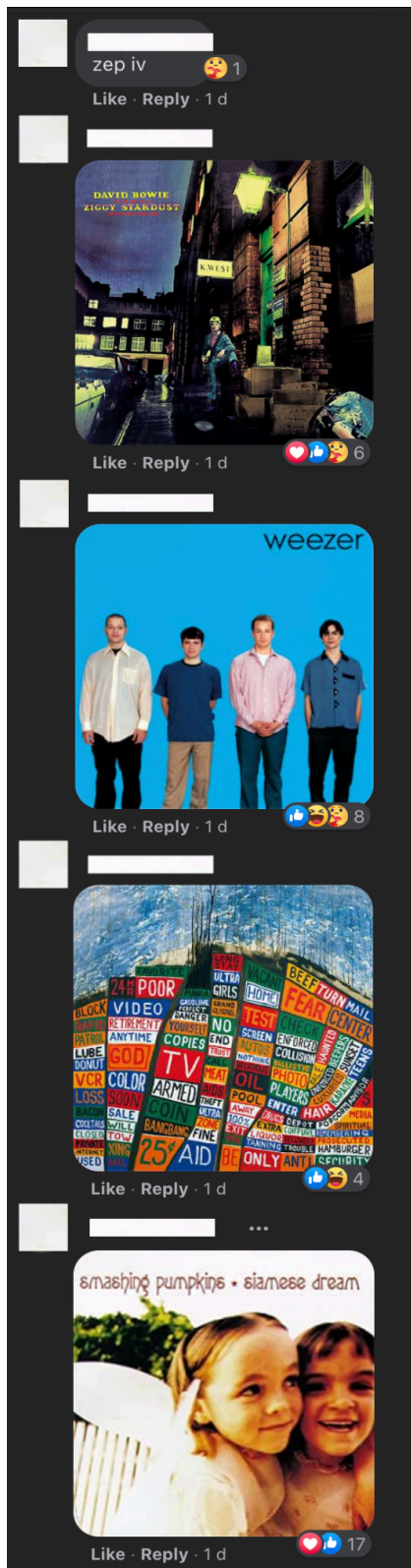


Figure 3.3: An excerpt from a thread in which >implying users were encouraged to post ‘classic’ albums. Note the use of Facebook’s react function in the replies.

community canon, in which seasoned community members become aware of >implying’s favourite albums and oft-recommended artists.

This is reminiscent of Henry Jenkins’ observation that fan communities collectively encourage particular readings of a text, teaching newcomers to read ‘the right way’ (Jenkins 1992). Here, the new user is guided towards certain artists or records based on what is being discussed and praised, resulting in certain texts becoming ‘over-hyped’ or so associated with online discussions that they actually *lose* favour or simply become the butt of jokes. For example, posts asking for all-time ‘best’ albums, essentials and ‘five indisputable 10/10 albums’ are a common way for the community to generate informal lists of albums considered indispensable by members – a process significantly helped along by reactions and sub-comments providing consensus or challenges to any more dubious offerings.

This dynamic is clearly visible in Figure 3.3, where popular albums are posted to the varied approval of the membership but the user at the top who decided to nominate the popular if slightly uncool *Led Zeppelin IV* but chose not to post the album artwork has received comparatively little engagement for their contribution. Pushback against the other albums’

inclusion by some users is also on display here in the laughter reactions to albums by Weezer and Radiohead. This negative response by a minority of users could be motivated by a variety of reasons, the former perhaps a controversial suggestion due to its perennial popularity in internet memes, and the latter potentially resented for Radiohead's over-representation in posts of this kind.

The strict canonicity of /mu/core demonstrates this kind of process at perhaps its most self-aware, requiring prospective community members to familiarise themselves with a long list of albums before even attempting to bring their own perspective to the community. In its role as a community of lively discussion, >implying stops short of this level of prescriptivism, but the Group's canonical values remain a popular subject for discussion, as does the identification of music that is over or underrated by the community. Antti-Ville Kärjä sheds some light on this process, describing the formation of canons connected to particular communities and geographies: 'canons represent a way for members of a community to express their shared values' (Kärjä 2006). Motti Regev also identifies links between canon and community identity, pointing to their influence on collective memory and heritage (Regev 2006).

Of course, there is a difference between a canon and a list of all-time best albums made in an online community or a conversation in a record store. In her study of canonical processes in rock music, Carys Wyn Jones relegates such activities to the position of 'secondary material', pointing out that in general, lists are considered lowbrow and canons highbrow (Wyn Jones 2008:93). However, the traditional divide between high and low has been greatly complicated by the ambivalence of online culture, the phenomenon of cultural omnivorousness (discussed in Chapter Four), along with the unrivalled dominance of so-called 'popular' forms in both the

musical spheres of mass-market appeal, and the more niche, ‘difficult’ releases celebrated in various strands of the subcultural underground.

Certainly, no single thread listing >implying’s most recommended albums could form a canon by itself but once again, in a Group of its size, cultural processes are emergent. Writing about the formation of new canons in popular music Wyn Jones states that ‘the internet is not a universally respected source of information due to the uncontrolled (or uninstitutionalised) nature of its contents’ (Wyn Jones 2008:99). In 2008 this was perhaps still the case, but whether or not the internet has become more reliable in the time since, it has certainly undergone a form of institutionalisation thanks to platform capitalism, with communities like >implying (and certain prominent online individuals) providing a platform-structured alternative to the canonisers described by Wyn Jones – identifying, protecting and venerating a relatively stable list of ‘classic’ releases, while also partly setting the agenda for the reception of new developments like emerging genres and the careers of major artists. The issue of high and low remains, but as this project’s final chapters will demonstrate, the distinctions between high and low have always been heavily disrupted in the context of online music culture, especially as they relate to cultural value and legacy, two of the core traditional canonical values.

Collective musical identity is a common point of interest for many >implying members, exemplified by the use of games and polls to determine the Group’s aggregate opinion, with one popular example even using the reaction function to hold a month-long single elimination tournament, pitting albums against one another to determine an ultimate victor in the eyes of the community. This section has discussed how the vast social scale and platform tools available to >implying can produce a curatorial effect from the collective opinions and tastes of the community, guiding the tastes of new users and resulting in a collective musical identity.

As >implying grows over time with the addition of new members, so the nature of this collective musical identity evolves, but stays relatively stable. It has therefore become important for many users to publicly distinguish their own consumption from that of the community, in order to retain some sense of individual musical identity.



Figure 3.4: Three charts made as canonical guides to certain genres of music.

Individual identity: chartposting

This section will expand on the role of album artwork in the culture and discourse of >implying. As seen in Figure 3.1, images made up of numerous album covers are sometimes used to guide the consumption of individuals hoping to familiarise themselves with new communities, as well as genres and artists (Figure 3.4). Acting as a form of gatekeeping even as they encourage community growth, these practices are a useful means of expressing and spreading a collective identity defined by the consumption of specific works. But similar images are also produced to represent the taste and consumption of individual users, often updated over time. Just as in the case of ‘image macro’ internet memes, the concept of an image or visual format that can be reposted in many iterations, following a single structure but tailored to individual users and contexts is a powerful tool for the generation of identity on both an individual and collective level (Gal et al. 2016).

This visual practice, known as ‘chartposting’ is a central activity in >implying and similar communities, representing among the purest forms of music-consumption-as-identity communication that is commonly engaged in online. Chartposting is even popular enough to be supported by various small and medium scale digital services helping users to track their listening and generate charts for music consumption over varying periods of time, while harnessing the data-harvesting power of streaming platforms allowing users to view and share sophisticated statistics about their musical habits. These consumption habits generally align with the loose set of norms and ideals I discuss above in the context of /mu/’s cultural influence on >implying.

Digital culture scholars observe the importance of visual self-representation in online communication, with ‘selfie’ culture being a particularly well-documented phenomenon

(Thumin 2012, Steinbock 2017). Selfies continue to play an important role in the Facebook subcultures under scrutiny in this project, but traditional selfies are not the main way that >implying users share images that relate to themselves. Instead, the members' visual self-representation practices in the >implying community are often closer to what Tiidenberg & Whelan call 'not-selfies' (2017): self-representational 'images that do not show the bodies and faces of the people who share them, instead showing objects, animals, fictional characters, or other things' (Tiidenberg & Whelan 2017:141). Among several examples, Tiidenberg & Whelan demonstrate this concept by pointing to online 'everyday carry' communities, in which members share curated representations of themselves via images of the objects carried in their pockets such as tools, pens, wallets and batteries.

Identity profiles generated in this way can be playful or highly personal and are unfixed over time, but always remain tightly tied to the individual selfhood of those participating in the practice, as well as playing on the 'shared contextual literacies' of these unusual forms of self-representation required in order to decode any meanings in the identity being expressed (for instance, familiarity with high-end pocketknives). The fluid understanding of identity represented by these communities is reminiscent of the models of musical identity discussed earlier in this project. Frith's idea of musical experience as a form of 'self in process' and DeNora's labelling of music as a 'technology of the self' both understand music as a method for self-becoming (Frith 1996, DeNora 1999:32). Here, music doesn't just define us 'in the moment' but offers a window into the changing nature of self by connecting us to our past practice, something illustrated in chartposting by users' frequently updated 'all time' charts, and those that represent consumption over a particular period of time.

An >implying user might begin a chartposting thread by offering a chart derived from the music they have consumed over a period of time, typically the last week or month. This is often accompanied by a plea for reciprocation ('Week. Post em.') or recommendation ('Here's my month can I get recs?') in response. A commonly seen phrase is 'h8r8rec' ('hate, rate, recommend'), requesting critical engagement in addition to suggestions for further listening. Despite survey results suggesting only a small minority of >implying members engage in or approve of applying numbered scores to music, chartposting is one of the more common sites of this practice in the Group. Many charts are adorned with ratings out of ten that may also be colour coded to indicate whether or not they are new to the poster (Figure 3.5). As suggested by requests for recommendations, the function of these posts is not purely one of identity expression, but practitioners' invitations to potentially antagonistic disagreement ('hate') suggest that the functional and discursive aspects of the practice may themselves be an important part of the identity ritual of performed consumption in which they are engaged.

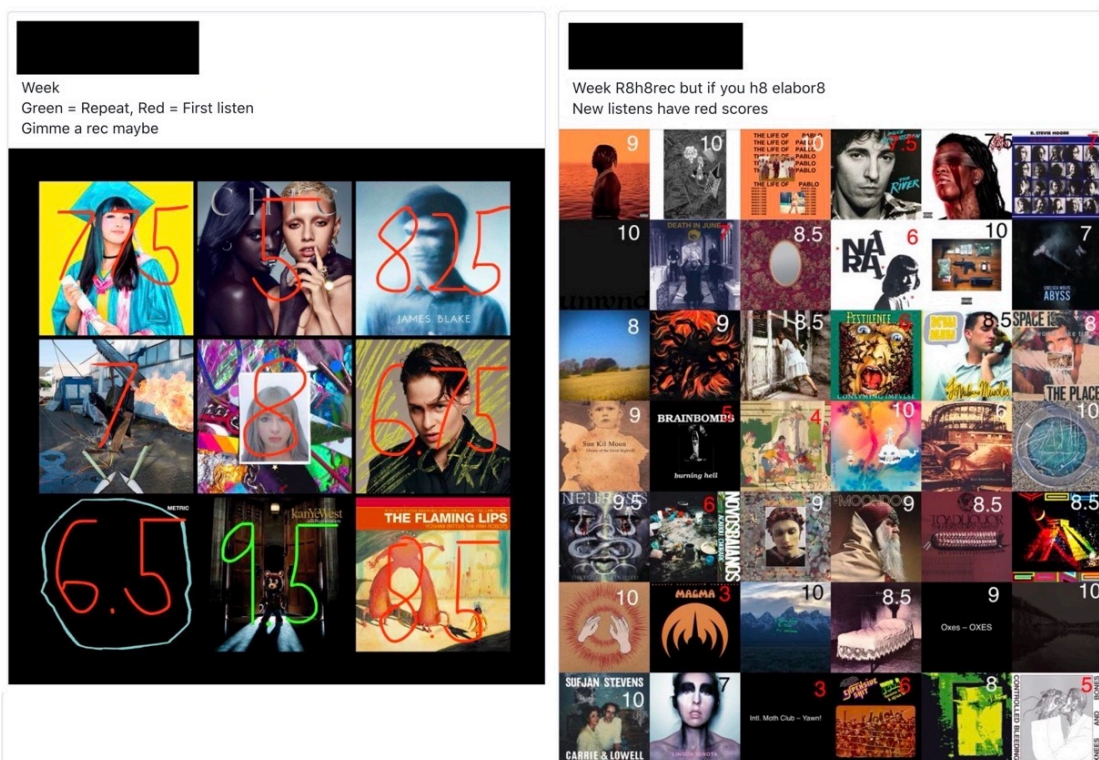


Figure 3.5: Two examples of 'week' charts posted in >implying, featuring colour-coded ratings for each album.

This also underlines that chartposting is not intended to identify oneself in a rigid and unreactive way and is instead part of a process of becoming that offers both an opportunity to defend one's profile and a chance to have it developed further by the Group. Even in the case of the 'all time' charts discussed below, charts are never considered final, as taste (like the self *and* like the online cultural discourse of which charts play a key part) is always changing. As observed in the previous section, empowered by their use of platform affordances, the collective curatorial power of the community encourages users to share as much information about their consumption as possible with their fellow members in the hopes of receiving more useful recommendations. This human-to-human version of the data-driven recommendation processes at work in streaming platforms even potentially reflects a level of social influence being exerted by the now normalised workings of platform capitalism.



Figure 3.6: A different type of chart posted to >implying, which represents the posters' changing tastes over time.

The notion of music taste as a constantly updating self-portrait certainly predates the internet as evidenced by programmes like the BBC's *Desert Island Discs*, in which 'castaway' participants often choose pieces of music that define their lifetime temporally, based on specific memories or changing circumstances. Related to chartposting, >implying's closest match to this notion of the musical autobiography or 'discographic self' is a game in which users map the development of their musical tastes by listing their favourite artists at a number of stages during their adolescence, accompanied by crude self-portraits for each stage (Figure 3.6). Unlike traditional chartposting this game is rather controversial among members and often receives a significant amount of negative feedback expressing second-hand embarrassment ('cringe' in online terminology) at such an openly reflexive approach to presenting one's musical identity. This response can tell us a lot about the users' anxiety around the mediation of such identities in public, where the act of admitting to a certain level of unmediated introspection remains a faux pas.

As Andrew Blake points out in his historical account of *Desert Island Discs*, since the 1940s, the BBC program's central activity has become common practice in our music culture (Blake 2017:113). For Blake, this is represented best by playlist culture (in which >implying also indulges via the collaborative creation of Spotify playlists), but in chartposting practices the autobiographical function of music consumption becomes even more apparent. For the embarrassed users in the above example, to map one's life on the basis of the bands they liked at various ages is just *too* personal (and perhaps too close to home for users who might be embarrassed by their younger self's comparative lack of subcultural capital). In contrast, various forms of identity mediation offered by digital platforms often automatically, such as Facebook's Memories function or Spotify Wrapped (discussed below) are seen as more socially acceptable, rearticulating and corporatising the process of presenting oneself, and

therefore demonstrating a lack of investment in or preoccupation with the appearance of one's online musical profile.

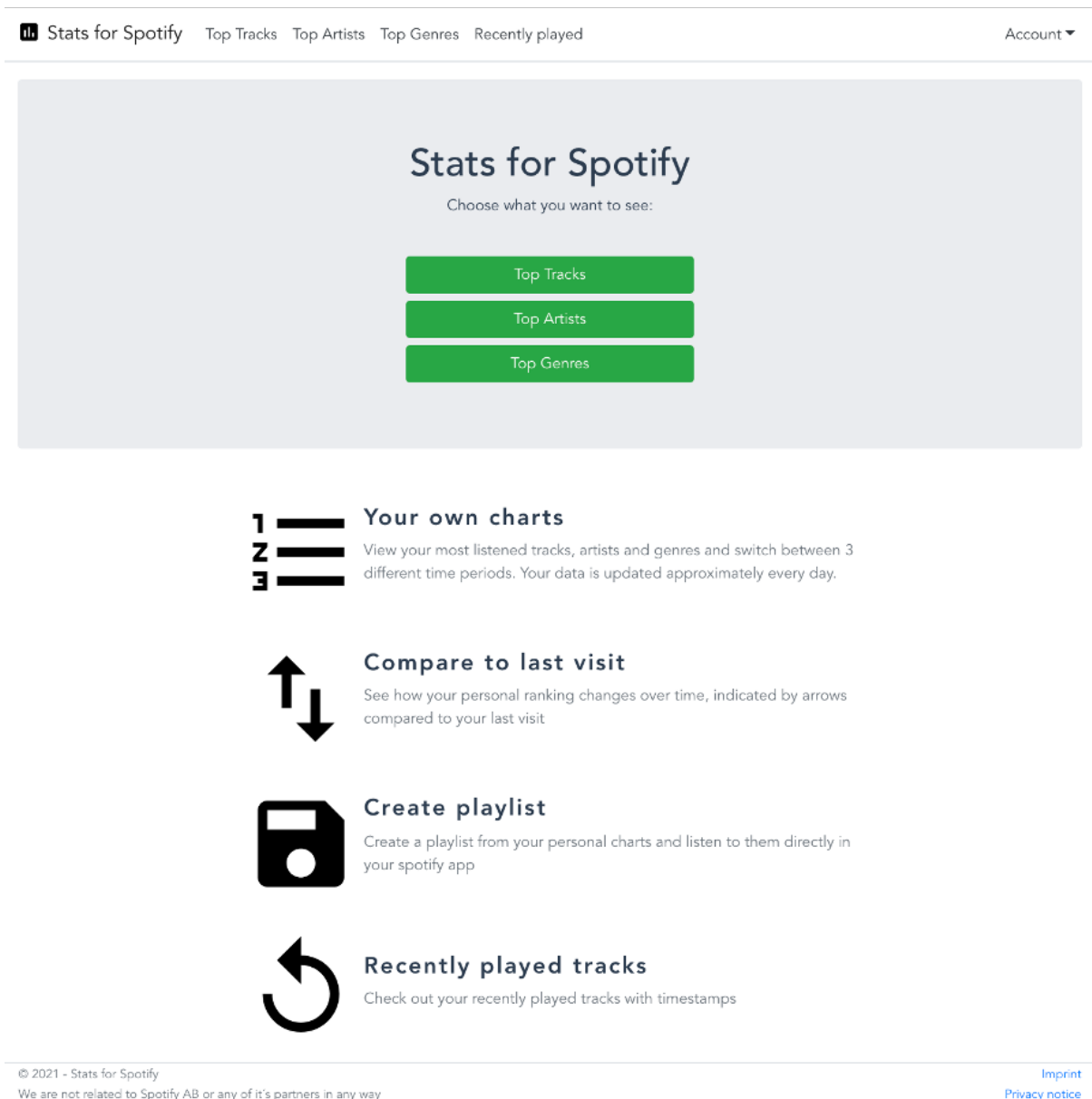


Figure 3.7: statsforspotify.com.

Alongside increasing their social acceptability, the platformisation of these kinds of autobiographical practices has also led to their adoption outside these subcultures, as seen in the recent viral popularity of sites like statsforspotify.com that aggregate and display data about users' top tracks, artists and genres (see Figure 3.7). Spotify themselves also provide a very similar service in the form of the year-end event Spotify Wrapped, which since 2015 has

developed from an automated playlist of users' most listened songs into a sophisticated slideshow narrativising users' musical consumption in what amounts to a heavily-branded appropriation of chartposting culture, complete with attractive arrangements of album artwork and listening statistics displayed (just like the scores on a weekly chart) in Spotify's signature bold sans-serif fonts. In addition to its remarkable similarities with the much older chartposting phenomenon, Wrapped also exemplifies the often-predatory working conditions that have accompanied platformisation. In late 2020 during the week-long event, Jewel Ham, a former intern at the company alleged on Twitter that she had been a major contributor to the reinvention of Wrapped, supporting her story with design documents.

Ham also claimed that due to her work as an intern being owned by Spotify, she never received credit despite her ideas' implementation and wild success (Kim 2020). This story highlights the injustices that arise as a result of platform capitalist models reliant on the work of others, whether in the form of music, user generated content, or intellectual property automatically ceded to companies by their own workers due to the insufficient regulation of labour practices in Silicon Valley and beyond. As Ham is a Black woman, her mistreatment must also be understood in the broader context of the disproportionate pressure and abuse suffered by workers of marginalised identities in the technology sector.

Despite this, many >implying users are happy to incorporate Wrapped's convenient consumption summary into their regular community engagement, and during December the Group is flooded with posts relating to Wrapped including screenshots of top songs and favourite genres as well as complaints of the automated system's shortcomings. For example, one post from late 2020 complained that their listening statistics has been skewed due to 'one instance of marathon repeat listening' of a single song, suggesting instead that the 'real'

Wrapped statistic should be which album was listened to the most, a stance resistant to Spotify's economically driven preference for singles and playlists.

Bill Clinton Swag

"I did not have sexual relations, for the record"



Figure 3.8: *billclintonswag.com*.

In the same manner as those that allow for the quick creation of personalised internet memes, a host of small webpages streamline the process of generating charts and other novelty images to be personalised with music choices (Figure 3.8). This example in particular is noteworthy due to its obvious foregrounding of the tactile relationship with one's records, now all but lost in the face of digital dematerialisation. Here, digitally represented album artwork takes on the physical qualities of a vinyl record's cardboard sleeve. In contrast with weekly or monthly

forms of chartposting, the Bill Clinton image follows a genre of identity practice based around users' all-time favourites.

This is the form of post that perhaps acts the most like a self-portrait, as the subject has an opportunity to carefully choose how to present themselves with a manually curated list of objects rather than an honest account of actual listening or even an automatic snapshot drawn from services like last.fm. To perhaps overextend the metaphor, an automated weekly chart bears some similarity to a 'no-makeup selfie', presenting an image of the subject that is ostensibly devoid of as much of the internet's inauthentic identity mediation as possible.

When asked during an interview to talk me through one of his charts, Luis first offered to send me one he had made of his all-time favourites. He spent some time to find an appropriate image on his computer, intent on finding the most up-to-date chart he could so as not to misrepresent himself. Eventually settling on a chart he had completed a year or two ago: 'Yes, this one is acceptable, I think. It's almost up to date.' For users like Luis, self-representation is an important aspect of chartposting, but it is always also a process of becoming, for both his own musical practice and that of his peers, which he hopes will be influenced by his charts:

I don't try to change someone's mind, but I try to give them my perspective, start a discussion, and maybe get them to listen to music in a different way, maybe they will like it, maybe they won't. It's OK, at least they tried to listen to it in a different perspective. This is my goal when I post charts – to invite people into discussion.

– Luis

Luis explained how he constructs his charts with an audience in mind, mixing popular albums with lesser-known personal favourites in the specific hope that this might guide members of the audience to give them a shot. It is also noteworthy that in the above statement he framed this passive approach to recommendation with his motivation to influence others' approach to listening, as well as the actual music they consume. As a community admin, Luis feels responsible for maintaining healthy and productive discussion, but he also encourages a form of musical engagement and consumption in fellow users that he personally finds rewarding. For instance, he refuses to give albums numbered ratings, considering the practice 'stupid, useless and lazy', an opinion demonstrated to the community at large by his regular posting of charts without ratings, encouraging other users to do the same.

As outlined in the introduction, charts (particularly those representing all-time favourites) can act as a means of distinction from the communal identity discussed in the previous section. In addition to cross-referencing one's own chart with >implying's collaboratively constructed canonical lists of classics and essentials, users can compare their all-time charts with one another, spotting similarities and identifying users based on how much taste they share. This is perhaps displayed most clearly in a briefly popular game in which posters would construct bingo cards featuring the names of their favourite artists and ask other users to cross off every artist they also regularly listened to. This notion of 'having artists in common' speaks to an additional layer of meaning at play in this kind of exercise, an expression of psychological ownership that would seem to confirm previous academic speculation that music collectors' methods of 'enhancing self-identity through psychological ownership' could extend into the digital realm in the post-ownership sharing economy typified by >implying (Belk 2013, Sinclair & Tinson 2017:2).

Unlike the case of ‘real’ selfies or examples like Everyday Carry, >implying members need not necessarily recognise the significance of their behaviour as an abstract expression of identity. Chartposting’s flexibility and temporal elements are mirrored in symbolic interactionist frameworks that describe reciprocal, ongoing nature of identity (Robinson 2007). As a snapshot of musical consumption and cultural engagement, each chart is a portrait of a music fan and whether or not they consider it as such, the act of sharing it projects an image of that person out into the world in such a way that can offer insight into their state of mind, values, day-to-day activities, and even their national or sexual identity. In order for an image to qualify as a selfie, it must be intended to represent ‘who’ an individual is:

The uploader has to understand and/or intend it to be understood that the shared image is representative of “who they are,” and others can in some sense “correctly” recognise it as a representation relevant to forming an understanding of that person’s self-conception at that moment. (Tiidenberg & Whelan 2017:151)

By this definition, charts might not necessarily be selfies, but whether or not Chartposting users recognise the significance of their behaviour as an abstract expression of identity, even in their purely visual forms, these images nevertheless do an excellent job of conveying music’s role as a technology of the self, and as a sophisticated tool for identity communication. In many ways an emblematic (if unorthodox) form of contemporary social media communication, each chart is a candid snapshot, a portrait of musical practice that projects an image of that person out into the world in such a way that—to the right audience—can offer a powerful insight into their state of mind, values, day-to-day activities and shared contextual literacies to engage in a very human-centric type of musical practice on an internet where the act of recommendation is increasingly the responsibility of non-human actors.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the way that the members of an internet-based music community use taste and musical consumption as means of articulating a shared sense of belonging and fan identity, as well as a nuanced and changing personal selfhood through the expression of personal tastes and patterns of listening. It has explored the role of digital platforms in supporting and shaping this activity in the specific context of Facebook Group culture and the affordances of music streaming, along with many smaller online services, including those developed by participants themselves to facilitate their identity practices. As users negotiate musical identity via internet-mediated expressions of their consumption, the members of >implying we can discuss music enjoy the mutual benefits of an emergent form of curation made possible through the strategic use of platform affordances. These affordances range from those that streamline the transmission of affect in musical discussion or assist in the creation of visual charts to the provision of access to a vast array of musical texts. This access—the central affordance of streaming culture—is what allows identities of all kinds to be expressed based on the conceptual, social and cultural associations carried by the texts within the community and wider popular music discourse.

These affordances are used to augment the power of human-based music recommendation in the face of an online environment increasingly dominated by non-human actors. Communities like >implying emerge to meet the challenge of navigating and curating an online environment in which music is essentially free, but subcultural capital remains hotly contested and closely guarded. The practices described in this chapter have been analysed both in their relatively isolated social context and in terms of their historical and contemporary entanglements with corporate actors, digital platforms and broader strands of internet culture.

Chapter Four will continue to examine the contemporary online music culture introduced in this chapter, in which conspicuous consumption and recommendation are used as the building blocks of musical identity, capable of conveying a multitude of identity categories based on their associations with the genres, artists and texts of popular music. However, rather than examining another online community, it will look to an individual figure with considerable influence and notoriety within this culture, the YouTube-based music Anthony Fantano. As a highly visible proponent of the same value system represented by the members of >implying, Fantano acts both as a means of digging deeper into the relationship between music consumption and identity, and as an example of the role played by prominent individuals in the popularisation of this relationship in online music culture. Chapter Four's case study will build on this chapter by identifying how Fantano mobilises certain musical values and consumption practices to project and promote a particular musical identity to his audience.

Chapter Four – ‘The Internet’s busiest music nerd’: authentic consumption & *The Needle Drop*

Despite the existence of communities like >implying, automated systems of music recommendation are rapidly becoming the norm, especially for younger audiences. In this context, one critic has managed to mobilise digital culture’s machinery of social influence, interactivity and economy of attention to become arguably the most prominent music journalist on the internet. Continuing the exploration of music consumption as a form of online identity practice, this chapter focuses on YouTube-based music reviewer Anthony Fantano. I explore the processes by which Fantano constructs his identity as a music consumer and ‘music nerd’, which is derived not only from his particular tastes but also through a combination of pre- and post-digital logics of ‘authentic’ consumption, blending the historical image of the rock critic with that of the social media influencer. Over the last twelve years Fantano has built a large and loyal audience for his YouTube channel *The Needle Drop* (hereafter ‘*TND*’) to become by far the most prominent music critic on the internet’s largest video platform and has more recently followed audiences onto streaming platform Twitch and short-form video app TikTok.

I argue Fantano’s unique level of success as an online music reviewer is based upon a carefully performed online musical identity generated not just from his on-camera personality, but from a set of consumption practices that combine a mastery of digital platforms and a high level of literacy in both musical and internet subcultures with nominal engagement with pre-digital popular music practices like collecting. Fantano’s deft use of platforms and internet culture literacy are important aspects of his projected identity, positioning him simultaneously as a peer and a role-model for his young online audience. Like all internet users, Fantano’s online identity is generated from a multiplicity of nodes and connections in the form of cultural,

critical and social traces on the internet. But in Fantano's case these traces include thousands of hours of video content and social media interactions detailing his consumption practices and relationship with music more generally, a web of easily accessible data from which his presented musical identity emerges. These factors all make Fantano a useful candidate for study in order to further this project's understanding of the role of music consumption in the formation and expression of online identity.

While plenty of traditional journalistic coverage of Anthony Fantano's work and impact exists, he remains a relatively unknown figure offline, and has not been the subject of any scholarly enquiry beyond passing reference (Bates 2020). However, among online audiences Fantano has become renowned for the prominent and influential position he occupies in internet mediated music discourse. Just as it provides a useful case study for this project, Fantano's highly visible, consumption based musical identity acts as a shared context for many online music fans, a reference point used to negotiate their own identities. Many of the consumption practices on display in *TND* are reflective of the online music culture examined throughout this project, but it is also extremely common to see internet users define their musical identities in part through opposition to Fantano. Anti-Fandom of media texts, artists and other individuals has long been mobilised as a means of individual and subcultural distinction (Thornton 1995, Click 2019), and in this way Fantano's high profile image offers a model of a certain type of music listener against or with which individual listeners or communities can align their own online musical practice.

The concept of authentic consumption is used in this chapter to describe the way Fantano's content presents his relationship with music. Past academic studies of rock and pop journalism have examined how critics convey the impression of musical authenticity, despite the concept's

famed slipperiness and subjectivity (Lindberg et al. 2005, Lindberg 2010). Authenticity plays a central role in Fantano's work too, but on *TND* it is not the authenticity of musical production that takes priority, but that of its consumption. The notion of authenticity is fundamentally resistant to rigorous academic definition in the abstract, so in order for an idea of authentic consumption is to be successfully integrated into any analysis, it must be defined in the specific cultural context of online music consumption, and in relation to the specific discourses that come to bear on that context. Many scholars have considered the paradox of authenticity's intangibility and simultaneous centrality to popular music discourses (Frith 1996, Leach 2001), attempting to unravel the issue of subjectivity by defining different forms of authenticity. For example, via taxonomies of 'personal' and 'Other' authenticities (Hamm 1997), first and second person authenticities (Moore 2002, Coulter 2017), or based on political or aesthetic associations (Borschke 2014). Authenticity is generally considered to be something experienced by the audience and made possible by an expression of genuine experience or earned identity.

If we take this idea and apply it to the specific cultural context of conspicuous, internet mediated music consumption then what becomes important is that the listener's professed relationship with music is a genuine one. We are not interested in the authenticity of the music itself, but that of the listener and the legitimacy of their projected consumption habits. As I will demonstrate, in the case of Fantano, his image as an omnivorous amateur expert relies on his ability to consistently comment honestly and knowledgeably on the music he consumes. Simon Frith has called expertise 'the relationship of knowledge and pleasure' (Frith 1996:253), so in the context of *TND*, Fantano's expert status is contingent on the answer to two questions: 'Does he know what he is talking about?' and 'is he being honest about his preferences?'

Fantano therefore bears the responsibility of producing an ‘authentic’ relationship with music, by developing and sustaining the correct forms of listening and engagement in a way that draws from pre-digital notions of bourgeois amateur expertise while simultaneously being entirely embedded in the cultural and material conditions of the internet. As a result, one of the most important elements setting *TND* apart from its competitors in print media, online publication and on YouTube is the clarity with which it paints the image of an authentic music listener making full use of the internet in the appreciation of music, a constructed ideal to which the channel’s viewership is intended to relate and aspire.

Online content creators vary in how much they adopt the tactics and aesthetic markers of the professional ‘influencer’ in the construction and performance of their personae. Fantano nominally chooses to distance himself from this role, but still makes use of influencer strategies in his use of multiple platforms and encouragement of parasocial audience engagement. The critic’s role as an internet personality, a creator and more specifically a YouTuber is a potential reason he appears to have been largely disregarded as a significant competitor by more entrenched music journalists. But for his audience, it is this very status as a figure known for social media content rather than written reviews that reinforces his credibility and perceived authenticity. The way Fantano talks about music is always grounded in pop history, but is largely descriptive, factual and surface level, allowing him to sell music and guide consumption at a rate that is extremely hard to match in written criticism. His light, informative style, eclectic taste and omnivorous consumption of both mainstream and highly experimental music results in the image of a listener worth listening to for advice, entertainment and to expand one’s taste.

In this chapter I will first provide the historical context of music criticism on the internet. I then introduce *The Needle Drop* and its construction of Fantano’s online musical identity, summed

up by his self-given title, ‘the internet’s busiest music nerd’, which in many ways resembles the broad set of values and consumption practices just analysed in Chapter Three. This is by far the most prominent use of the term ‘music nerd’ in all popular music discourse, and openly showcases the merging of popular music culture’s economy of subcultural capital with the obsessive, systematic consumption practices associated with nerd identity, a process which I have argued originated in during the P2P era. Supporting this idea, I will explain how Fantano’s identity as a music nerd is defined by his specific consumption practices, tastes and mobilisation of contextual literacies around both music and internet cultures. I then further locate this identity by examining one of the more unusual aspects of this case study: the constructed inauthentic Other represented by the Fantano’s comedy alter-ego, against which his ‘true’ identity and relationship with music is contrasted. Finally, Fantano’s adaptive, multi-platform strategy is discussed, including his strategy for audience interaction, which sees him engage in the types of vernacular online discourse discussed earlier in the project.

Reviewing music on YouTube

As a YouTube-based music critic, Fantano simultaneously occupies two discursive traditions. While *TND* reviews exist within the realm of music journalism, their content bears more similarity to other media found on YouTube than to that found in the pages of a music periodical, or even an irreverent zine. Despite inheriting a certain amount of influence and responsibility from these forms, Fantano does not consider pre-internet rock criticism a core element of his own history of music consumption and taste development: ‘I’ve never been a big music magazine guy: A lot of my musical education and experience comes from reading stuff online’ (Balaclava Records 2020). Rather than growing up buying the *NME* each week, Fantano was in his teens during the turn of the Millennium, as blogging began to take music discussion and criticism online, along with the Web 2.0 era’s fansites, wikis and audience

communities dedicated to mapping music history and discovering new releases beyond the guiding hand of the press.

Fantano still stresses the importance of offline social interaction in developing his personal taste, crediting his time working in college radio with influencing his approach to music criticism. But rather than being rooted in the one-to-many hierarchy of traditional rock journalism, this foundation was interpersonal; based around discussing music with passionate, knowledgeable people: ‘That kind of dictated my desire down the road to create a platform where I am reviewing albums and talking about music in a conversational kind of way, because a lot of my education and learning on the matter came through conversation and recommendation’ (Balaclava Records 2020). Rather than a desire to be the Lester Bangs of YouTube, or even to take the youthful, internet-savvy approach of music blog journalism onto video, Fantano sees himself as a content creator who only happens to focus on music: ‘My early inspirations were other early YouTubers I saw turning their passions into video essays or reviews’ (Balaclava Records 2020).

Written music journalism as it exists online today evolved from three major stylistic and formal strands: blogging culture; online fan communities; and pre-internet publications from major newspapers to weekly music magazines and fanzines. There is plenty of overlap between these categories, and it would surely be difficult to find a young professional music writer working for a major publication today who has never maintained a blog or made an impassioned defence of a beloved record in an online forum. Internet communities have also birthed paper publications, a frequently cited example being respected quarterly journal *No Depression*, originating as an AOL discussion board (Shuker 2016:168). Of the major platforms for music journalism that began life as blogs, *Pitchfork* was surely the most successful. A powerful and

divisive voice in music criticism for the best part of a decade, *Pitchfork* represented the first generation of young, extremely online music writers, democratising the field and disrupting the long-stagnating world of rock criticism with distinctive, unabashed writing and splashes of attention-grabbing editorial cruelty.

Just as *Pitchfork* was finding its feet at the turn of the millennium, a common sentiment among journalists was that the rock critic was all but dead. Genres were both too plentiful and too homogenous, killing the countercultural spirit on which good music criticism was built. The internet was also apparently to blame due to the pressure put on the industry by P2P services and the young, short-sighted online audiences gaining access to music of all genres, weakening the subcultural barriers on which many magazines had come to depend since the 1990s. In a 2002 Guardian article arguing along these lines, a quotation from Barney Hoskyns (formerly of the *NME*) sums up this idea:

Music in all popular culture has become diffuse. It doesn't have the same kind of tribal power. You can read about pop in any kind of magazine. Wherever you find it, there's a uniformity of approach and style. You get everything served up in easily digestible pieces. (Sturges 2002)

While this diagnosis certainly has some merit, it is noteworthy that three hallmarks of digital culture— access, fragmentation and ease of digestion—are here held up as representative of a decline in the quality and efficacy of pop journalism. It is also therefore interesting to note the role of the web in preserving access to golden-age pop criticism on sites like robertchristgau.com and *Rock's Backpages*, the online archive of music journalism now run by Hoskyns himself.

Even into the 1990s, ‘serious’ music criticism had maintained its strong association with rock, but as the discipline moved online this relationship became increasingly blurred. *Pitchfork* broadened its scope from a focus on indie rock in the 2000s to increasingly champion alternative R&B and hip-hop in the 2010s, following a pop zeitgeist retreating from rock after a decade marred by a saturation of industry-backed boys-with-guitars. This move was certainly shrewd in terms of expanding the site’s brand and retaining an audience of music lovers whose own tastes were developing over time, but it also conveyed a message about the nature of music taste in the internet age.

On one hand, the vast expansion in the availability of texts made for a culture of increasingly diverse (and perhaps fleeting) tastes and habits associated with the trendy music consumer. On the other, a different battle was underway between the critical ideologies of ‘poptimism’ and ‘rockism’, as supporters of the former attempted to redefine music criticism’s own logics of authenticity that had been orientated around the individual creative (guitar wielding) ‘genius’ since the 1960s (Austerlitz 2014, Gormely 2014, Hann 2017, Horning 2006, Lobenfeld 2016, Loss 2015, Richards 2015, Rosen 2006, Sanneh 2004, Wolk 2005). Both waves of the poptimism debate (the first in the mid 2000s and the second a decade later) can be understood as responses to the two major shakeups in musical access models discussed in Chapter One: peer-to-peer filesharing and music streaming platforms. Elements of this lively and recurring discourse seem to have influenced the genre-agnosticism normalised by online critics in both the 2000s and the 2010s, helped along by the genre-bending and aesthetic homogenisation seen in the music mainstream since the rise of streaming, a phenomenon perhaps best exemplified by the adoption of emo and punk aesthetics by trendy strains of youth-orientated hip-hop.

Today, *Pitchfork* still hold onto a significant amount of influence and canonising power, especially within online circles. The furore around the perfect score awarded to Fiona Apple's *Fetch The Bolt Cutters* in early 2020 (the first in over a decade) has demonstrated that it is still able to ignite the conversation, if not dominate it. Roy Shuker suggests that *Pitchfork* and other online music criticism continued the process of democratisation that had begun with print zines (Shuker 2016:170), but as with all such narratives the true process is much more complex. As welcome as *Pitchfork*'s shake-up of the music criticism status quo may have been at first, it was not long before they began to dominate the conversation themselves, drowning out their online peers or chasing them into genre niches while carving out an alternative canon in defiance of the critics that came before. Meanwhile, online music communities were organising themselves, creating their own canons like /mu/core to resist *Pitchfork*'s mainstream alternative. It's alternative canons all the way down.

This was the context into which *The Needle Drop* was born, offering a form of music journalism that appeared to take itself less seriously, marked by a digestible form of review focussed on conveying an album's basic features in an entertaining way, and which could not be further from the famously self-involved writing on *Pitchfork*. Fantano's criticism is pithy and overtly lacks pretence. He appears uninterested in presenting in-depth analysis, preferring to vividly describe the music and its impact on him rather than dismantling its themes or structure. While clearly intended to inform, entertain and recommend, there is seldom any indication that Fantano intends his reviews to have any lasting artistic merit of their own. The bulk of a typical *TND* review is comprised of broad, easy to parse descriptions and arguments as Fantano unfolds his opinion into the camera, nearly always beginning with an overview of the artist in terms of their genre and significant cultural associations.

It is hard to call into question the knowledge and authority with which Fantano tackles much of the music he scrutinises, but his commitment to omnivorousness means that the depth of his critiques can vary quite wildly. This is not to suggest that *The Needle Drop* represents a ‘dumbing down’ of music journalism, but true to his original intent outlined above, the result is closer in style to other media on YouTube than something one might read in a music magazine, newspaper or blog. This enables Fantano to quickly adapt to match trends and cultural shifts in an online landscape increasingly dominated by video content, and one in which long-form text sometimes feels less than future-proof. Fantano’s content projects forms of engagement with music and with online culture that are reflective of the practices and values found in the online communities towards which criticism is orientated. He and his audience influence one another’s consumption practice and in turn their musical identities, continually evolving to reflect the online environment in which they operate. This is particularly visible in his content that interacts more directly with his audience, discussed towards the end of the chapter.

In 2022, Fantano’s conversational, humorous, talking head style is hardly the only form of media criticism on YouTube. No longer the bastion of domestic, amateur content once described by Michael Strangelove (2011), YouTube is now home to media produced at every level of professionalism and budget. More tightly composed and edited content (in terms of both filmmaking and writing) has grown significantly in popularity and relevance on YouTube over the past decade. For instance, a new generation of cultural critics have made names for themselves with well-researched video essays often with considerable artistic merit of their own. Despite this, the most popular YouTube creators still adhere to a style more closely related to that of the platform’s early years—direct, personal, charismatic—the words partially or completely improvised.

To build and maintain an audience on the platform it is not only important that users consume newly released content, but also that they have something older to watch when they have seen the latest offering. *TND* reviews perform both of these functions simultaneously, coming out roughly concurrently with the YouTube release of the music in question (easily linked in the video's description box), but still retaining relevance to anyone who comes to a release months or even years down the line and wants to look up what *TND* had to say about it. Since his channel is significantly more popular than many of the lesser-known artists reviewed there, looking for a release from an obscure musician on YouTube will often turn up Fantano's review of it in the search results, frequently given priority over the music itself.

Further situating *TND*'s style within that of YouTube rather than rock criticism is Fantano's deliberate use of repetition. Producing such a high number of video reviews requires a certain amount of structure and formal consistency to reduce labour and play to audience expectation. *TND* reviews are held together by self-conscious reliance on stock phrases and editing quirks that provide the video's framework and instruct the audience to learn the rules of the channel. Some of these rituals are subtle flourishes that become familiar to frequent viewers, but others are more overt, like the opening spiel in which Fantano introduces himself with a brand new, topical pseudonym to accompany his self-proclaimed title. The closing ritual of each video is particularly idiosyncratic, and jarringly memorable to a first-time viewer. A cut positioned across the first and second syllables of the word 'transition' leads to a closing title card, as Fantano rattles off a rhythmic, faintly musical phrase:

Have you given this album a listen? Did you love it? Did you hate it? What would
you rate it? You're the best, you're the best, what should I review next? Hit the
like if you like, please subscribe and please don't cry. Hit the bell as well. Over

here next to my head is another video that you can check out, hit that up or the link to subscribe to the channel. Anthony Fantano, [name of artist being reviewed], forever.

This monologue is worth quoting in its entirety here as it demonstrates Fantano's understanding of the attention economy and the calculated combination of sincerity, irony, repetition, and quirkiness (complete with intentionally overstated algorithm-friendly calls to action) mobilised in this content to drive audience familiarity, engagement and good will. For many YouTube creators, calls to action ('don't forget to subscribe') can be a site of instability for their brand with the power to undermine the tone of a video or otherwise damage the perceived authenticity of the creator's constructed identity. By observing Fantano's negotiation of this potential hazard we can begin to understand the broader approach to self-presentation and musical identity that has helped to bring his musical opinions to such a wide audience – an approach to which I will turn shortly.

The Needle Drop

In September 2020, *The New York Times* published a profile of Fantano entitled 'The Only Music Critic Who Matters (if You're Under 25)'. To offline audiences who have likely never heard of him, claims of Fantano's enormous reach may well sound like hyperbole. But there is no denying that the size of *TND*'s audience is now larger than that of any print publication devoted to music. As of April 2021 *TND* has 2.63 million subscribers and a weekly viewership of around 2-3 million, making it by far the biggest platform for music reviews on YouTube. *TND*'s sibling channel *fantano* began uploads in 2017 and already has 1.53 million subscribers drawing in 1-2 million views a week, making it a strong contender for the second-largest YouTube channel devoted to music discussion. A third channel, *TNDstreams* was opened in

late 2020 to upload material from Fantano's livestreams on Twitch – a growing practice among YouTube creators who have recently broken into streaming.

Fantano's five-to-fifteen-minute album reviews form the core content of his channel and make up about 75% of uploads, the rest being videos summarising a month's best releases or providing quick opinions on new albums that did not receive full reviews. This is significant as it reinforces Fantano's 'busy' identity: even if he doesn't review something, he *did* listen to it. Fantano is also known for his omnivorousness, consuming a large range of genres, summarised on *TND*'s YouTube homepage as 'rock, pop, electronic, metal, hip hop and experimental music'. Already briefly mentioned in Chapter Three, the cultural omnivore is a category introduced by Richard Peterson in the early 1990s to describe the emerging trend of individuals whose music consumption straddles multiple brows and discourses like highbrow, popular and folk (Peterson 1992). Several other scholars have gone on to build on this concept as it relates to the insatiable nature of contemporary consumption (Sullivan & Katz-Gerro 2007) and new forms of cultural expertise remaking the cultural canon (Savage & Gayo 2011).

While much of this research has strong sociological underpinnings, its repeated methodological failure to account for nuances in the nature of genre result in conclusions that are less than convincing in the context of musicological study. More recently, Mark Rimmer has acknowledged the flaws inherent in defining mass identities like the cultural omnivore with broad genre categories. Rimmer attempts to solve this problem with a return to Bourdieu and the introduction of a concept of 'musical habitus' intended to theorise 'actors' modes of engagement with music and the implications of these for the deployment and accumulation of cultural capital' (Rimmer 2012:300). This idea clearly offers a useful means of framing major parts of Fantano's project of identity construction, but it cannot quite account for the role in

this process played by the internet and its broader culture. Due to this, identifying Fantano's musical habitus will not offer a full picture of the means through which he constructs selfhood through his work. Despite its problematic features, I have chosen to use the term 'omnivorous' in this study as it remains a useful way of describing Fantano's consumption of music of multiple brows, genres and levels of obscurity.

Matching his voracious, omnivorous consumption, Fantano is extremely prolific in his output, uploading a new *TND* video slightly less than once a day, a pace more or less matched on *fantano*. This second channel acts to expand the critic's role from professional album reviewer to something more akin to a music-loving friend through loose, entertainment-forward content based around music that can respond better to trends and formal shifts in the culture of YouTube than the rigid review format of *TND*, resulting in videos discussing industry issues, music gossip and advice. A strong example of Fantano's effective use of the YouTube platform, this multi-channel strategy is increasingly common among YouTubers looking to maximise the saturation of their content in viewers' video feeds, potentially doubling the number of recommendations the YouTube algorithm will make of a single creator.

Combining coverage of the global mainstream with that of underground or up-and-coming musicians means that the viewership for each video can vary significantly for each review. But Fantano still manages to maintain a core audience presumably comprised of eclectic music lovers with an interest in music from both sides of the perceived mainstream/underground dichotomy. Fantano's acknowledgment of his subjects' differences in accessibility and popularity form an integral part of his self-portrayal as the authentic ideal listener, one to whom 'all' forms of music are valid, but who is capable of making and defending value judgements via the articulation of personal taste. Like all rock critics, Fantano's taste is a vital part of his

identity, presented by his rhetoric as experiential and intangible, but always supported by the contextual knowledge outlined at the start of each review. Via the omnivorous combination of genres and brows with lists of favourite records containing chart topping trap and pop alongside extreme metal and noise music, Fantano lays claim to subcultural capital derived from discourses of underground music and art music while also avoiding the label of snob.

These various forms of cultural and subcultural capital are not fixed and thus neither is his projected musical identity, but one of Fantano's most visible claims to authenticity can be seen in his self-professed status: 'the internet's busiest music nerd'. Here, the work of listening to the most music (being the busiest) qualifies his opinions and perspectives as worthy of an audience. At the same time the identity of 'music nerd' places him along with sci-fi enthusiast Paul Williams in a lineage of rock critics unafraid to identify as nerds, further cementing Fantano as an amateur expert. This also provides a strong link to the modes of consumption discussed in Chapter Three, as evidenced by >implying member Michael's comparison between his community's culture of dedicated, conspicuous consumption and the culture of comic books. In Fantano's case, the distinguishing title of 'busiest' also suggests that his viewers might identify with the music nerd label; knowledgeable audiences using the internet to seek out music reviews and recommendations in a range of genres that both reinforce and hone their own amateur expertise, taste and subcultural capital. In this way, Fantano's image and social role map neatly onto that of other 'influencers', social media micro-celebrities selling an aspirational lifestyle and ethos to their audience (Leaver et al. 2019), that incorporates neoliberal aesthetics of productivity and success born of personal enterprise.

Strengthening his claim to this identity is the fact that Fantano really is very busy, and makes the best use of his light, optimised approach to criticism to produce many more album reviews

in a single week than most traditional journalists are able to write in month. *TND* is able to release enough content to compete with publications produced by a small team of dedicated columnists, editors and freelancers while maintaining a singular critical voice. Each week, *TND* publishes reviews of most major releases and selected artists from the underground, as well as taking audience requests. As the channel has grown, Fantano has begun to employ a small team of professional staff. He makes no secret of this and occasionally even addresses his video editor directly during videos, but the actual ‘content’ of his reviews is always presented entirely as coming from him alone. As a result, for the most part his output still feels very much like a one-man YouTube show, lending all the more credibility to his identity as a regular music listener.

However, Fantano’s simultaneous claims to contrasting discourses of authenticity are not always successful, especially when they reach out for forms of subcultural capital developed in the underbelly of online culture. A lingering crossover between Fantano’s core audience and certain online music subcultures widely associated with racism and misogyny has been the source of significant tension as his career has progressed. It has been observed by others in the industry that genres with which Fantano is clearly less familiar, and releases best understood through a sense of identity or cultural experience not matched with his own do not always receive the most nuanced attention (Keller 2018). Even so, his eclecticism and ability to speak engagingly about emerging forms of music while maintaining abreast of internet culture have allowed Fantano to continue to access sufficient levels of perceived authenticity to grow his audience.

The internet's busiest music nerd

Anthony Fantano does not fit the description of a presiding, learned dean like Robert Christgau and Jon Landau before him; nor that of Lester Bangs' mad gonzo prophet with boots planted in the muck of rock culture. Instead, Fantano plays the role of Antoine Hennion's 'amateur' expert music lover, whose value is derived from taste and knowledge. In his studies of self-professed music lovers, Hennion identifies taste as an important means of building and articulating one's personal identity (Hennion 2001, Hennion 2005). Rejecting Bourdieu's conception of taste as a merely 'passive social game' intended to hoard cultural capital, Hennion instead focuses on its internal reflexivity and external negotiation, its role in the network of subjects and objects that comprise the musical experience – texts, listeners, spaces, records etc. For Hennion taste is still a source of distinction and group-forming as Bourdieu suggested, but what was missing in this view was an understanding of the processes of taste acquisition and expression. Hennion points out that neither of these can take place in the absence of another listener for 'taste starts with the comparison with others' tastes' (Hennion 2005:5). In contrast to Bourdieu's class-centred analysis, Hennion places much significance on the figure of the amateur – that listener who, led by the example of other known amateurs, develops musical taste and identity simultaneously. Having done this, the now expert amateur is able to express their identity through their taste, and vice versa, must act as a known amateur for others to reinforce this earned status. Through this process, groups are gradually formed and stabilised, and with them new forms of cultural and subcultural capital.

In this role, Fantano excitedly shares his thoughts, insights and recommendations as a peer, fellow music nerd or perhaps an older brother, striving to position himself on a level with his audience, together members of an in-group formed through a mutual love and respect for music of all genres. He is of the audience and not the industry. It seems that Fantano seeks to define

his identity primarily through the *way* in which he listens to and talks about music, but this alone cannot account for the importance placed on his personal tastes, canons and ratings by his online audience, discussed later in this chapter. Overall, Fantano has been successful in projecting a relationship with music marked by an integration of the internet and digital platforms as mediators and extensions of his identity. The internet provides him the ubiquitous access to musical texts, historical context and peers (his audience) necessary in order to perform his role as the internet's busiest music nerd. This technologically augmented relationship to music is closely related to that described by Michael Waugh in his study of post-internet musicians in which the affordances of digital culture allow for the extension of their identity and musical capability (Waugh 2017). Waugh finds that for many online musicians, the internet acts as an extension of memory and selfhood through its storage of texts and representations of past selves – a posthuman phenomenon that easily extends to the realm of musical consumption.



Figure 4.1: A frame from Fantano's review of I've Seen All I Need To See by The Body, with the cover of Danny Brown's XXX in the background.

In the highly mediated context of the video review, physical recording formats play an important role in this system of identity and authenticity. But the way they do this incorporates elements of digital culture, hybridising the culturally significant materiality of vinyl records with the use of album artwork in online culture as discussed in Chapters One and Three. During most of his videos, whenever Fantano discusses an album its artwork appears behind him, keyed onto a square of ‘green screen’ fabric hanging from the wall. On his other side sit shelves of vinyl records, a library not only directly representative of Fantano’s taste and a ‘technique of the presentation of the self’ (Hennion 2005:6), but of his legitimate identity as a collector. In many reviews, a particular sleeve from Fantano’s collection will be on display, facing outwards on the shelf behind him. These are often popular classics, or recent records Fantano particularly loves, acting as passive recommendations to the audience of a particular video, as well as drawing connections between the newly released work being reviewed and the content of his collection. Fantano is positioned between these artefacts, a mediating force where new and old music—as well as digital and non-digital consumption—meet.

With remarkable prescience given the more recent explosion of video-mediated dancing on TikTok, in 2014 Ann Werner used Deleuze’s ‘body machine’ to conceptualise amateur YouTube dance videos in which the body is just one part of an assemblage or ‘network of alignments with other things’: physical movements, figures of femininity, media technologies etc (Werner 2014:187). Hennion’s work describes the body in similar terms as it relates to the material result of musical taste. A ‘body that tastes’ – the corporated (not embodied) product of training one’s faculties to become sensitive in its interactions with the musical object. From this arises the figure of the ideal listener, emerging alongside taste through the activities of the body machine. If applied to the mise-en-scène of a *TND* review we can see Fantano’s body positioned at the nexus of this machine-network: between the camera (through which a path

leads to YouTube and the audience); the music being reviewed (represented in the green screen album cover) and a material assemblage of the critic's taste, preferences and musical knowledge (the carefully arranged collection of vinyl records). In this way Fantano literally and figuratively positions himself as a music listener worthy of an audience and of emulation – one whose existence would be impossible in the absence of the internet.

Fantano's unmatched cross-pollination of the parasocial mechanisms of influencer culture with the respected status and tools of the rock critic has also resulted in another aspect of his musical identity, that of the curator. This curation is quite unlike the emergent, collective process of recommendation discussed in Chapter Three, but is still made possible through the use of digital tools and platforms just as it is in >implying. Thanks to the channel's unique level of success, *TND* is regarded as an influential force in online music culture, with many assuming Fantano's recommendations significantly shape the consumption of his audience. This supposed influence is hard to substantiate but is visible at least in its role in online discussion, where one user might dismiss another's taste or argument on the basis that they must be parroting or reacting against something Fantano might have said. Conversely, it is also common to see users complain that a negative Fantano review ruined a previously enjoyed release for them by pointing out its flaws, a phenomenon common enough that at least one professional article has been published advising on how to avoid letting his reviews impact your opinion (Canny 2020).

An important tool Fantano uses to define his taste is one inherited from offline music journalism: *TND*'s system of album rating. Scoring records on a zero-to-ten scale, with the number given finer precision with the addition of an adjective (e.g. a 'strong' seven outranks a 'decent' seven). Scores play a complicated role in Fantano's identity, as his ideal listener status

precludes most declarations of a work’s inherent value (describing them as ‘just reflections of my enjoyment’ (Fantano 2020)), but these scores also provide a historical summary of his tastes and opinions from which aspects of his musical identity can be easily derived. As a result these scores are a frequent site of focus for his audience, with some dedicated fans posting YouTube comments that track the relative frequency of each number, and even in one case using score data to perform statistical analysis of his taste (Figure 4.2). In a typically platform-savvy move, Fantano also employs a more informal rating system, a tradition of wearing colour-coded flannel shirts for certain reviews: yellow for very positive and red for very negative. This practice is perfectly suited to Fantano’s format, as it is visible from a YouTube thumbnail image alone, sending a message to the prospective viewer that a review is significant, or just that it will be particularly entertaining.

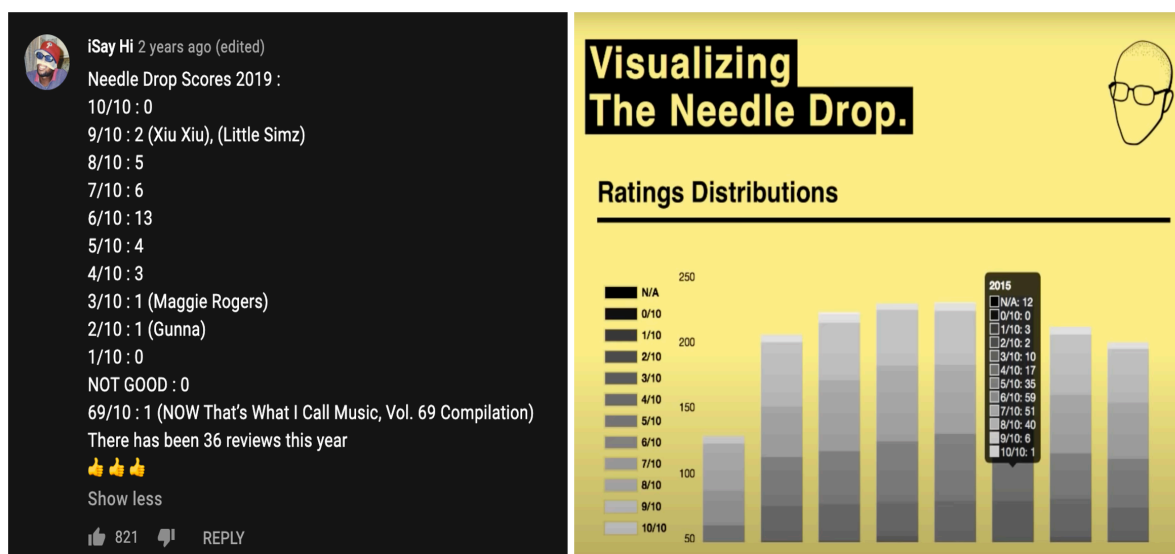


Figure 4.2: Left, a fan keeping track of Fantano’s review scores in March 2019. Right, part of a 2017 fan-made statistical breakdown of every score given to date.

Extreme scores have also played a key role in scaffolding Fantano’s musical identity and taste profile, the first ten out of ten *TND* review being perhaps the most significant of Fantano’s career. His glowing review of Death Grips’ album *The Money Store* in 2012 became a definitive moment for Fantano’s taste and personal brand, tying the band tightly to *TND*

throughout the mutual development of their careers. Parallels can be drawn between this and another famous ten out of ten, that of Brent DiCrescenzo's review of Radiohead's *Kid A* for *Pitchfork* in 2000 – a landmark of ecstatic, youthful journalism that catapulted the site to new heights of exposure leading into their decade at the head of the online music discourse. A decade later Fantano's *The Money Store* review was seen by many as the crowning of a new critical representative of a online music culture. Just as DiCrescenzo's experience of slowly pirating *Kid A* with a DSL connection contributed to his review's capture of the newly internet-mediated experience of music in the 2000s (Enis 2020); Fantano's style and identity as a platform-based 'content creator' combined with Death Grips' own associations with underground online culture to present the critic not just as a cheerleader for an experimental hip hop trio from Sacramento, but the embodiment of a set of consumption practices defined by the internet culture of the early 2010s: the ideal listener.

Like many critics, at times Fantano's musical identity is also influenced by negative reviews, particularly of albums considered by many to be contemporary classics. The most prominent example is Kanye West's *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*, which while widely regarded as among the very best records released in the last twenty years, was famously given only a 'Strong Six' in its review on *TND*. In the eleven years since this review it has become a prominent meme among Fantano's audience, often used to tease him or question his critical authority. Whether positive or negative, Fantano's catalogue of past reviews have become core to his musical identity, easily accessed from his YouTube channel to provide viewers with additional insight into whether or not they themselves will enjoy a new project on the basis of past correlations between the critic's taste and their own. But his specific tastes are important. The existence of this archive is also valuable in the way it supports Fantano's self-presented status as a virtuously knowledgeable, authentic, amateur enthusiast engaging (in good faith)

with any and all music he can. In this way, Fantano embodies the identity of an ideal, technologically augmented music consumer.

Cal Chuchesta: the inauthentic other



Figure 4.3: Fantano in character as Cal Chuchesta.

The image of the ideal listener represented by Fantano's persona is defined loosely in Fantano's words and the various consumption rituals made apparent in his content, but is never discussed directly, outside of rare occasions in which Fantano explains his approach to music consumption directly to the audience. Despite the success of his identity presentation, a disadvantage of *TND*'s one-man show is Fantano's difficulty in defining his consumption practice against another tasting entity. This section details his solution to this problem. Roy Shuker has claimed that critical voices in pop discourse 'construct their own version of the traditional high-low culture split, usually around notions of artistic integrity, authenticity and the nature of commercialism' (Shuker 2016:96). To some extent Fantano does the same, but in his case these notions extend to Fantano himself – he constructs himself as a trustworthy, authentic and independent voice in a crowded, increasingly cynical and automated musical landscape. Another element of the channel that reinforces this idea in an extremely straightforward way is the character of Cal Chuchesta, Anthony Fantano's fictional, musically clueless roommate and alter ego.

In Fantano's early videos Cal operated as a minor comedic foil, growing in prominence after becoming a fan favourite. This popularity culminated in 2015 with the free online release of *The New Calassic*, a full-length mixtape of parody hip-hop performed by Fantano in the

persona and later given a tongue-in-cheek review on *TND*. Since then, Cal has gradually appeared less frequently due to the development of Fantano's creative approach, 'normal' persona, and the channel's logics of authenticity. When portraying the character, Fantano sports an ugly checked jumper over a black turtleneck; a false moustache; a vacant, cross-eyed expression and a comedy Canadian accent. Chuchesta is most often seen standing in the corner of the room in which Fantano records his reviews, interjecting to offer his own perspective.

In stark contrast with Fantano's self-presentation as a close-listening, intelligent and diligent consumer of an eclectic array of musical artists and genres, Cal is portrayed as slow, musically illiterate and easily swayed. Where Fantano is passionately motivated in his quest for cultural understanding, historical insight and the development of authentic, evolving opinions on the music he consumes, Chuchesta's relationship with music is deeply uncritical, passive and as unchanging as his clothing. Cal is unwilling to admit to his lack of knowledge or taste, claiming to hold authentic opinions that are easily exposed in conversations with his roommate. For example, during a Bon Iver review Fantano tricks Cal into revealing his ignorance by asking about the singer-songwriter's (then) non-existent fourth album, humiliating him when he replies that he enjoyed it. Chuchesta also mispronounces Iver's surname, a mistake made commonly and in good faith by new or casual Bon Iver fans, here revealingly presented as yet another sign of inauthentic, uninformed music consumption.

In addition to acting as a send-up of the uncritical general public, Chuchesta is associated more generally with marks of inauthenticity in the music industry. In a very early example from 2010, popping up to sing along with Fantano's rendition of Ceelo Green's 'Fuck You', Chuchesta instead sings the radio edit of Ceelo Green's 'Fuck You' (censored to 'Forget You'). Cal's mistake highlights the lack of authenticity associated with censored lyrics, and also plays

the role of the ignorant radio-listening masses unfamiliar with the original line. Furthermore, the character displays notably less internet literacy than Fantano, whose mastery of digital platforms and online humour are important aspects of his projected identity.

In this way, Cal allows Fantano to highlight and celebrate a mixture of cultural literacies shared between his projected authentic identity and his audience: platform mastery, meme culture and musical knowledge. Interestingly, Chuchesta is often treated with an uncharacteristic level of cruelty by Fantano despite not being portrayed as actively malicious beyond his stupidity, obliviousness and lack of taste. While it is possible that this is intended as a self-effacing admittance of the critic's elitism, it sends the message that mainstream, music-ignorant audiences not only exist in contrast with Fantano's own identity and values, but that they are actively incompatible with them.

When rhetorically advantageous to Fantano, Cal is also used as a stand-in for parts of *TND*'s audience, repeating requests and YouTube comments Fantano finds obnoxious. In one such video, Cal scolds his roommate for covering obscure bands that surely can't be any good since they are so unknown, allowing Fantano to respond to this common criticism directly. Cal is also sometimes shown taking up audience causes, demanding reviews for specific records or redactions of certain controversial opinions. Portraying these perspectives as ones that would be held by the character of Cal is a rhetorical strategy in its own right, associating these demands with the character's ignorance, inauthentic consumption and lack of subcultural capital. Cal was very popular with *TND*'s audience during Fantano's rise to prominence, starring in fan-made compilation videos and frequently being requested after a few videos' absence. However, as the channel grew rapidly during the second half of the 2010s, the

character's presence in *TND* videos had increasingly begun to clash with the channel's maturing image.

In 2022 Chuchesta still appears occasionally, but feels increasingly like a relic of a crass, less professionalised Old YouTube populated by low-budget sketch comedy. Meanwhile, Fantano's open scorn for Cal has softened, his ignorance more tolerated, if still played for laughs. During this transition Fantano has folded aspects of the character into his own persona, in part perhaps to consolidate and nuance his position on the dichotomy of musical in and out-groups. Cal also served as a creative outlet for Fantano, but in recent years the channel has seen a more serious replacement for this in Fantano's own musicianship, represented in his practice as a bass guitarist and on-screen progression to a respectable level of amateur skill. The explosion of collaborative, semi-synchronous amateur music making on TikTok since the end of 2019 has greatly informed new discourses of musical identity among the youth audiences from whom Fantano is still gathering new subscribers. To online youth audiences in the 2020s, it is therefore likely that good faith attempts at musicianship, however amateurish, read as more appealing than the construction and ridicule of an imaginary, ignorant other. This can be partly corroborated by Fantano's recent forays into taking part in TikTok jams on his bass, playing with online bands made up of amateur Generation Z musicians at several points during the COVID-19 lockdowns.

While this gradual transformation of some the more problematic elements of the channel's content has been largely successful, as *TND* grew rapidly in the mid 2010s another strand of Fantano's online persona presented significant problems to his personal image and an opportunity for members of the traditional music press to take their video-based competition to task. Fantano's original second channel, *thatistheplan* was home to frenetic and 'irreverent'

videos that saw the critic perform in an abrasive, aggressive persona to satirically discuss political issues and review internet memes (Gordon 2016). These videos, which included rants lampooning ‘social justice warriors’ and the idea of wanting to resist capitalism while also owning an iPhone (imagine!) have since been deleted by Fantano along with the rest of the channel’s content after music magazine *The Fader* published an article in 2017 accusing Fantano of having alt-right sympathies. Despite the poor taste of the videos in question, this accusation has been widely dismissed as a poorly calculated attack that failed to recognise the nuances of the era’s irony-laden meme culture – in many ways proving Fantano’s implicit claim to a rightful place in that culture successful. A video response by Fantano challenging many of the article’s claims was released to *TND* shortly after the publication of the article, which was removed from *The Fader*’s website a few months later.

Fantano’s personal political views are not necessarily a matter of particular significance for this thesis, but their role in his content and resulting impact on his musical identity are still important to consider in order to understand his relationship with other strands of internet music culture. For some time before the *thatistheplan* controversy, issues of feminism and critical authority had been at the centre of an online subcultural clash often referred to as GamerGate (Chess & Shaw 2015). This was a prominent and highly gendered conflict, so Fantano’s online audience are very likely to have been aware of it, regardless of whether they were stakeholders in the culture war themselves. *TND*’s relationship with so-called ‘edgy’ online humour during the 2010s also stems from a broad association with the tastes and consumption practices of the influential /mu/ community, causing very similar tensions to those discussed in Chapter Three. As they relate to this chapter’s investigation, the *thatistheplan* videos can be best understood as another part of Fantano’s identity project attempting to demonstrate authentic engagement with a certain brand of underground internet culture.

Given the reactionary elements of his content in the mid 2010s, it is perhaps surprising that in the years since Fantano has become much more likely to openly discuss political issues in his reviews, now displaying a significantly more left-leaning perspective that, however authentic, appears to match up quite smoothly with his intended audience. This development is also visible in the antics of Cal Chuchesta, who in 2015-17 was being used to mock the concept of ‘safe spaces’ and acting as a straw man arguing that Fantano lacked the authority to review certain albums due to his race. By 2019 however Cal was more likely to embody reactionary positions, for example complaining about one album’s overt environmentalism. Together these strategies demonstrate one aspect of Fantano’s construction of a personal identity as both an expert music consumer and a highly literate internet user.

‘LET’S ARGUE’: audience & interaction

So far, this chapter has examined how Anthony Fantano constructs his musical identity by drawing from discourses of authentic consumption within digital and material music cultures in order to present an image of the ideal online listener. It has also touched upon the impact of his work in terms of curation and personal canon, and on his strategic use of the YouTube platform. Before concluding this case study, I will now turn to Fantano’s use of other platforms to promote his criticism, develop his relationship with his audience, and to conspicuously engage with forms of online music discourse closer to those discussed in Chapter Three. As mentioned above, Fantano puts energy into fostering a parasocial relationship with his audience, treating them as peers. This strategy’s success is illustrated by the familiar way Fantano’s audience treat him, teasing him with long-running in-jokes in YouTube comments, and his now long-term nickname ‘Melon’. This nickname—originally derived from an

argument between the critic and British producer Zomby—gently ridicules his shaved head while obliquely referring to his perceived encyclopaedic musical knowledge.

Though he is still largely based on YouTube, Fantano's online presence is visible on several other platforms. Along with his use of Twitch for streaming interviews and more casual content like discussing music news and reviewing music produced by his audience, Fantano has also had significant success with his TikTok account @TheNeedleTok. In late 2022 the account has almost one million followers and has even produced several very popular viral 'sounds' used by other TikTok users in comedic videos. The first time this happened, an audio clip from one of Fantano's reviews was uploaded to the TikTok and popularised without Fantano's direct involvement, but more recently he has created videos specifically for the platform, many of which have nothing to do with music, but are simply intended to be humorous or relatable. Fantano's success in this area is testament to his continued ability to engage effectively with internet humour, which is quite an impressive feat considering the differences between the humour found in his early content and the specific brand of absurdity favoured by TikTok's notoriously youthful userbase.

But beyond the direct promotion of his online brand or utilisation of growing markets like live-streaming, Fantano has also made very successful use of more traditional social platforms to bring himself closer to his audience as well as to reinforce his identity as a member of the broader online musical discourse, both on those platforms and in his YouTube content. This is exemplified by 'LET'S ARGUE', a popular audience-orientated video series uploaded to the *fantano* channel. As mentioned above, Fantano's second YouTube channel features a lighter and more casual style of content than *TND*, where the critic experiments with video formats

and more directly engages his fans. Among these experiments, LET'S ARGUE has proved by far the most successful, with over 120 episodes released since its first instalment in late 2017.

In a typical LET'S ARGUE video, Fantano reads from a curated list of responses to a thread posted to his Twitter account days before the video's release, requesting 'hot takes, tough questions and unpopular opinions' from his audience. This social crowdsourcing provides Fantano with a set of discussion prompts and opportunities to dress down individual fans for their absurd opinions, as the phrasing of the original request ensures that easily rebuttable points are in plentiful supply. Secondly, it offers Fantano's audience a chance to go toe to toe with him and gain some subcultural capital by being insightful or funny, or simply by having Fantano agree with them. Some comments have clearly been composed in good faith and contain more reasonable or sincere opinions (frequently offered in a rhetorical register similar to Fantano's own) that earn a rare stamp of approval. Thirdly, for Fantano this is an opportunity to respond to criticism, always present in his Twitter mentions and replies regardless of whether thread in question was specifically soliciting it.

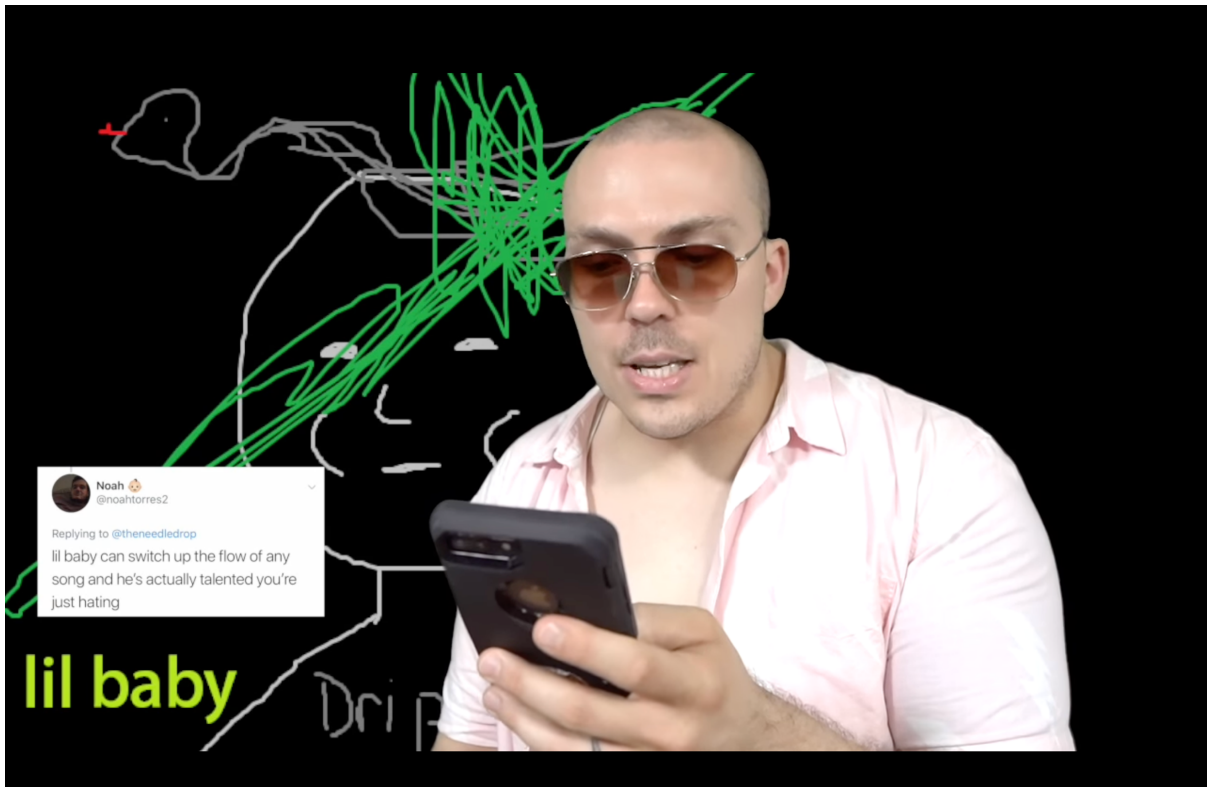


Figure 4.4: A screenshot from a 2019 episode of LET'S ARGUE. Here Fantano is engaging with a fan's tweet, displayed in the background.

Reading audience responses directly from his phone (Figure 4.4), Fantano is able to cultivate an atmosphere of friendly music discussion, with off the cuff responses and reactions further underlining his persona, and the authenticity of his opinions and perspectives given in the series. Since 2019 Fantano has begun to develop the format, presenting his Twitter followers with more specific prompts: underrated or overrated albums, worst and best lyrics and singers, or inviting the audience to name Fantano's worst review or most egregious scoring errors. Another important aspect of the series is the introduction, which often features Fantano playfully jamming on the bass guitar. The regular release of these videos demonstrates Fantano's authentic, visible improvement on the instrument while further cementing the series' aesthetic, which evokes the feeling of sitting around as a teenager in a friend's bedroom, playing around with instruments and arguing about bands.

As Simon Frith has pointed out, music taste is not so much a manifestation of the self as its actual progenitor (Frith 1996:109), and as such LET'S ARGUE encourages his audience to join him in the mode of listening that will allow his audience to share in the music nerd identity and grow with him: 'The question we should be asking is not what does popular music reveal about the people who play and use it but how does it create them as a people, as a web of identities?' (Frith 1996:121). The combination of Fantano's criticism with his audience interaction constructs a 'knowing community' of listeners who can demonstrate their own authentic consumption not necessarily by having the right opinions but being able to demonstrate the development of honest ones, to be litigated in the arena of social media. While Fantano is generally presented as a peer to his audience, he is still the 'busiest music nerd', deserving of his audience and positioned as an important node in the network of the taste community to which he and his audience belong.

Conclusion

In its analysis of the expressions of musical identity in the work of Anthony Fantano, this chapter has continued to investigate the use of musical consumption practice to represent selfhood on digital platforms. In particular, this case study has focussed on the way a prominent internet personality constructs and projects a musical identity of expert amateur consumption through the combined use of musical knowledge and appropriate listening practice with displays of platform mastery and related cultural literacies. Fantano's marriage of the rhetoric of rock criticism with memetic online discourse and the parasocial tactics of social media influencers demonstrates the ways that internet culture (and the forces of platformisation more specifically) have transformed music consumption and recommendation. In this new context, the critic's role is to advise not only what to consume but *how* to consume, and to demonstrate appropriate forms of engagement with a rapidly changing online musical culture. The fact that,

after more than a decade, Fantano's audience is still growing and spreading onto newer platforms suggests that *The Needle Drop's* success as a curator and canoniser of particular musical texts is at least matched by its success as a guide to authentic consumption and an introduction to participation in online musical discourse.

Beyond his status as a role model however, Fantano's successful construction of musical identity online is dependent equally on expertise in both musical practice and online practice, reflected in his mastery of both music discourse and digital platforms, with the proven ability to navigate their developing landscape. Fantano's online musical identity is shaped by the practices of internet users who make up the online music culture to which his content is tailored, reflecting changes in political values, humour, and preferred tools, just as it reacts to broad developments in musical taste, fashion and forms of consumption. The members of >implying harness the affective power of platform affordances at a granular level, but Fantano exercises digital cultural literacies on a much broader scale. In this way, this chapter's case study has provided a demonstration of how it is the shared flexibility and ever-changing nature of musical practice and online practice that makes them both such appropriate and powerful tools for the negotiation and expression of identity.

Chapters Three and Four have both examined the role of music consumption in the online expression of identity. In these two case studies, individual taste acts as an articulation of selfhood via musical association, while collective identity and belonging within internet music culture are articulated via certain forms of consumption practice and discourse. The pair of case studies that follow in the next two chapters return to the context of online community found in Chapter Three, looking to the way in which acts of musical interpretation operate as a means of identity construction, both for the interpreter and the identity of the artist whose

music is interpreted. After the broader discussion of consumption found in the first two case studies, a focus on this more specific aspect of music consumption allows for a more detailed examination of the relationship between audiences and music, in terms of both texts and artists. Though both Chapter Five and Chapter Six are based around online communities with a shared sense of collective identity, some of the elements of individual identity and self-presentation explored in this chapter will remain relevant, including the role of expertise, political affiliation and the cunning use of platforms to maximise the meaningful presentation of the online self.

Chapter Five – Platformisation, power & lyric interpretation on genius.com

The next pair of case studies both explore interpretation and contested musical meaning as they relate to the negotiation of identity in online music communities. They retain the project's focus on audience activity while also representing a move towards the specific impact of musical artists, at least compared to earlier chapters. These two case studies offer further insight into the ways that music is used as a technology of the self in conjunction with the structures and affordances represented by digital platforms. While they do share some thematic elements, the contrasting levels of community organisation and spontaneity between the chapters' subjects demonstrates the various ways that identity expression is enacted, controlled and collectivised in different corners of online music culture.

Chapters Five and Six each feature a group of music fans grappling with the relationship between artists and the meaning found in their music, and the nature of this meaning is understood in a number of different ways by the members of these groups. For some it is entirely defined by authorial intent, while others feel it is largely open to creative interpretation, with a few users viewing the idea of musical meaning as totally free and subjective, acting as a means through which they are able to access and express their own identities. Within this diversity of perspectives, I show how collective behaviour works to establish and reinforce consensus regarding the meaning of the music consumed by groups of fans. In Chapter Five this takes the form of strict hierarchies of power and agency within the community, while in Chapter Six this collective behaviour is instead guided by dominant or normative political and aesthetic values (Bennett 2011a), enacted via participation in community specific memes.

In the next chapter I will explore a rather abstract conception of musical meaning by examining the way online fans collectively interpret and construct the musical identity of artists. In contrast, the community at the centre of Chapter Five explores a more straightforward understanding of musical meaning based primarily on song lyrics and that essentially amounts to a process of discovering the author's intent. But in the social context of this chapter's case study, the analysis of lyrics still contains a certain amount of room for creativity and subjectivity and is therefore capable of providing a rich basis for the expression of online musical identity. In a similar way to the identity practices based on taste and consumption discussed in Chapters Three and Four, online acts of musical interpretation are a showcase of an interpreter's expertise, creativity and status within the community to express their distinct musical identity.

genius.com

The website genius.com (originally Rap Genius) allows its users to annotate song lyrics with interpretations and context. This chapter looks at the way the site's strict internal hierarchies and social economy control the production and validation of lyrical meaning by its users, and how Genius users use the site to negotiate their online identities. Users can assert their taste, expertise and belonging to online hip-hop fandom, which has its own (often racially coded and gendered) subcultural identity and history around forums like thecoli.com, as well as jockeying for position in genius' highly hierarchical and regimented social structure. It also observes genius.com's relationship to platformisation during the 2010s. Like many popular websites ascendant in the early 2010s, Genius began with extremely lofty goals. Speaking at an event for venture capital firm First Round Capital in late 2013, Genius co-founder and Chief Technology Officer Tom Lehman even drew joking comparison between his site and the Talmud: 'The Talmud explains the Torah, and that's what Rap Genius does for the whole of the

internet' (Constine 2012). Through it was presented in the context of typical Silicon Valley irreverence, this comparison nonetheless demonstrates the lofty goals of a website that began as a way to explain the lyrics of hip-hop songs and would soon promise to 'annotate the world'. But while this promise was ultimately not fulfilled, in the decade since Lehman's speech his website has grown into an institution of online music culture as the go-to service for decoding lyrical meaning.

Though it was supported for many years by a tight-knit community of users providing and organising its lyric annotations, in recent years there has been an increase in the site's reliance on mainstream media platforms. This is accompanied by a gradual turn away from its users and towards musical artists themselves as a source for interpretation, cutting audiences off from their role in determining musical meaning. My investigation of genius.com required that I first familiarise myself with the site, submitting my own annotations and comments. I then reached out to other users using the in-built chat functionality. I conducted semi-structured interviews with four different community members with varying amounts of experience, and who occupied different places in Genius' strict hierarchy.

I will start by outlining the function and cultural context of the website, followed by a discussion of some key regulatory and motivational techniques increasingly employed by the company to guide its community of contributors. I then provide a brief profile of an influential, high-level Genius user, demonstrating the heightened levels of interpretive agency afforded at the top of the site's hierarchy and the additional freedom of identity expression this affords such users. The final section then shifts slightly in focus, outlining recent changes in the nature of video content published by Genius – developments that suggest a gradual disempowerment of Genius users lower in the site hierarchy as well as a larger shift away from crowd-sourced

interpretation and toward a privileging of authorial intent. Overall, I argue that these changing dynamics and developments of interpretive authority on Genius signify declining support for the audience subjectivity that was previously an important part of the site's theory of lyrical meaning, resulting in a recentralisation of epistemic authority and accompanying shift in Genius' mediation of its users' musical identity.

Arriving at the front page of the site today, an uninitiated user could be forgiven for mistaking Genius for any other mid-scale music site publishing lyrics, articles, release information, charts and video content. But beneath the surface is an engine powered by fan labour – a massive user-generated database of metadata and lyrical analysis. Genius relies on users not only to transcribe the pop lyrics that generate much of its traffic, but to create extensive annotations on those lyrics, ranging from amusing behind-the-scenes facts to insightful conceptual and textual analysis. Some Genius users also include comments and metadata about musical elements and techniques like sampling, instrumentation and form in annotations; but since the majority of user annotations focus on lyrical meaning and context, this is the type of annotation discussed here. As described in Chapter Two, this case study was supported by interviews with three community members, who all exhibited a high level of investment in their contributions to the site as annotators.

Online lyrics & interpretation

As a company founded at the tail-end of the Web 2.0 revolution, Genius embodies several core principles associated with this moment in internet history, chiefly those of participatory practice, online community and digital democratisation. In support of these principles the site extensively utilises the iconic Web 2.0 technology of 'wiki' style webpages open to direct editing by users (O'Reilly 2005). In essence, Genius represents a combination of Web 2.0

ideals and tech innovation with the online fan culture logics of collective intelligence and expert knowledge in order to enhance another internet phenomenon – music lyric websites. Music lyrics have been made available online since at least the 1990s but came to prominence in the mid-2000s during a number of high-profile court cases from copyright holders (Youngs 2005).

Dai Griffiths has referred to the advent of online lyric archives as a ‘point of no return’ after which 'words in songs left their relatively stable publishing contexts and entered the unpredictable context of internet access and visibility' (Griffiths 2001:237). Online lyric transcriptions are audience-derived, often differing subtly in content and presentation to officially published versions, reflecting the various ways in which a song can be heard. On Genius this process is taken to another level through its community-based project of annotation, discussion and explanation, allowing its participants a closer relationship to the music they consume. This represents an audience-orientated process of collective meaning-making which is not beholden to forces of authorial intent, in which annotators are influential on the way in which users understand the music they listen to. Just as an important function of online lyric transcriptions is to clarify a hard-to-hear line in a favourite song, Genius’ user annotations play a role in guiding or clarifying audience interpretation. Rather than a personal process between listener and music, on Genius interpretation is collaborative and hierarchical, resulting in popular readings that can become canonised and accepted by the community. Additionally, this offers Genius users a means of articulating their identity as music consumers as interpreters with the power to confirm or even determine the meaning of lyrics through their expertise, experience or research.

Folksonomy is a Web 2.0 term describing ‘vast archives that people classify by tagging them with descriptive metadata’ (Santini 2011:211). These bottom-up systems of collaborative classification have historically played an important part in online music communities and can operate as a influential cultural force, a famous example being the power of Last.fm tags in shaping the identity of music genres and even christening new ones (Trainer 2016:411). Genius’ paratextual archive of annotations certainly qualifies as a folksonomy, but its interpretive dimension in particular raises questions regarding the stability and origins of musical meaning. This project of crowdsourced annotation might appear to follow a postmodern perspective, that questions the author’s position as sole originator of textual meaning by offering audiences the opportunity to suggest their own understandings of lyrics.

But in practice, Genius users’ acts of interpretation are required to fit into a model process that somewhat privileges authorial intent. This policy is made possible by the access to vast amounts of secondary media and other evidence afforded to Genius users by the internet. Rather than asking the audience to suggest what they feel a song means to them, the site could more accurately be characterised as asking users to go and find out what the artist was trying to say, using Google and online music media as well as scouring social media for clues and evidence. Nonetheless, the audience-mediated nature of this process still provides scope for a certain amount of interpretive agency and creativity on the part of Genius users, while the standardisation of the procedure enhances the sense of collective identity among the users who follow it.

Artists themselves also occasionally make appearances on the site as users, and since at least 2011 Genius has incorporated lyricists’ own explanations of their music. Musicians approached by the company or those who provide proof of their identity are given accounts as ‘Verified

Artists' and are encouraged to proofread lyric transcriptions, provide information about the history of songs or explain the intended meaning behind their work. The potential presence of authors in the midst of fans discussing their work is a major selling point of the site to many users. Having an annotation met with a Verified Artist's approval (referred to as a 'cosign') is one of the higher honours a regular Genius user can experience, with one user I spoke to excitedly listing the annotations he had made that were later cosigned by the artist. This form of 'official' top-down approval is one of a number of internal mechanisms at work on the site that incentivise users to put effort into their online labour.

Community, hierarchy & identity

IQ

Like many smaller, specialised online communities, platformisation is a threat to Genius' independence and viability as an online service. Along with the tensions created between audiences and artists in the annotation process, automation is also something of a threat to the annotation culture on Genius, and as the power and utility of categorisation and recommendation algorithms increases, folksonomic methods are not as popular as they once were. A site like Genius is rather more resistant to algorithmic obsolescence than other folksonomies since human minds still appear to be the best at interpreting artistic meaning in a satisfying fashion (George & Shamir 2014). But online nothing is futureproof, and the company has had to continually evolve in order to keep up with newer digital platforms and forms of participatory media that have appeared in the decade since its birth. So far, Genius has remained true to the mission of explaining song lyrics, but over time the company has developed strategies to maximise user productivity and consistency. However, when these strategies are designed to target broadly defined markers of bad practice (frequently associated with the contributions of less experienced users) they frequently limit the capacity of certain

users to make their interpretations heard. This particular problem is explored in more detail later in this section.

As I have already mentioned, the Genius community's collective identity is defined in this co-construction of metatextual knowledge, offering users the chance to prove themselves as interpreters, or to bring knowledge of their own to the table. But during my research this rosy image was repeatedly problematised by users who expressed dissatisfaction with the site's changing culture. These users reported a gradual lessening of community support, stricter editorial standards and the increasingly privileged position occupied by the site's most prominent users to the detriment of those lower in the hierarchy. These last two complaints were generally heard in the context of the company's methods of regulating site content. In order to maximise user traffic and revenue Genius needs to keep the quality of the average Genius annotation as high as possible, while simultaneously ensuring that users do not become disillusioned with their role as contributors.

Genius Annotation 9 contributors

Kendrick plays on “BM” to mean “baby mother” and German car manufacturer BMW. “Mercedes” refers to Mercedes-Benz, another German luxury car manufacturer, and a popular female name derived from the Spanish, “Merced.” He used a similar BMW/BM line on 2010’s “Look Out For Detox”:

“ I’m being myself, my BFF is a BM-dub
With your BM in it and your stash box
glove

This line also draws similarities to Pimp C’s line on “Big Pimpin’”:

“ If I wasn’t rappin’, baby, I would still be
ridin’ Mercedes

Edit

👍 +270 🔒

⚡️ 📄 Share

Suggest an improvement to earn IQ

Figure 5.1: A typical Genius annotation, this one for the line ‘If I quit your BM, I still ride Mercedes, funk’ from Kendrick Lamar’s 2017 song ‘Humble’. Note the positive score of two hundred and seventy IQ earned by the nine community members who contributed to this annotation.

This balance between fun and professionalism is maintained through a combination of incentivised community initiatives and a strong user hierarchy that focuses on mentoring and strict oversight from experienced users. Editorial standards mandated by the company are enacted by high-level users who work to train new contributors up and foster a sense of friendly competition. For the most part this arrangement functions well, with several users interviewed for this project supporting the idea that the editorial quality and consistency of user submissions has improved over time.

But such a system inherently runs the risk of reducing diversity in annotation practices and closing down potential meanings, in the ideological pursuit of song interpretations that meet specific editorial standards and remain strictly true to the intent of the author. In many cases, interpretations are rejected on the basis that they do not meet on-site standards of plausibility or evidence of author intent, with annotations rejected on this basis marked with the words ‘It’s a Stretch’.

Genius' site guidelines refers to its contributors as 'scholars', an identity that emphasises their role of providing evidenced insight, with the authority to make judgements within their 'scholarly' community. This label demonstrates how aware Genius is of the intersection between online music culture and nerd subculture discussed in previous chapters, playing into contributors' presumably somewhat obsessive fan activity. But the 'scholar' label should also be understood in the context of hip-hop fandom more specifically, as it acknowledges both the high level of expertise attained by many rap fans and offers a rarely seen level of prestige to the art of hip-hop itself, given that the genre has not yet experienced the hegemonic canonisation and legitimisation that rock music has enjoyed for several decades. Just like those working in academia the scholars of the Genius community are encouraged to review the work of their peers. This can be done very simply via an 'upvote' or 'downvote' but is part of more structured activities like the weekly annotation competitions offering users in search of community recognition the opportunity to show off their interpretive skill. However, higher levels of review and quality control are the responsibility of a subset of users who are awarded roles with extra permissions, the most populous of whom are called Editors. These users have the ability to edit or delete contributions by any other user, or to tag them with the distinction of 'Official Genius Annotation', in what amounts to a 'cosign' from the site itself.

Editors are expected to set an example in their own contributions, while also reviewing regular users' annotations and keeping an eye out for promising new users to bring into their ranks. Mentor culture in the Genius community is exemplified by 'Top to Bottom', a weekly video seminar in which an experienced host leads a surgery focussed on a specific song, discussing each lyric and reviewing all existing user annotations to bring them in line with the site's standards. However, there is evidence that this aspect of the community is less important to the site's owners than it perhaps once was. For example, Community Manager is a now-defunct

staff position held by a paid employee of the Genius site, playing a key role in recruiting new Editors, as well as hosting ‘Top to Bottom’ seminars. According to one interviewed user, the removal of this role has resulted in ‘a massive decrease in the number of Editors being made.’

At the centre of Genius’ community economy is a pseudo-currency called ‘IQ’. Mainly obtained through contributing content, IQ is also awarded when a user’s work is upvoted by other users, and when the corresponding page attracts a high number of views. This currency plays a vital role as an incentive for all contributors, especially as a user’s current IQ score is displayed prominently next to their username, building up over time. While far from the only status symbol on Genius, IQ remains a key signifier of user experience, investment and credibility in the community. Bonus IQ is offered for participation in a number of ongoing community projects, which are together referred to as the ‘Glorious IQ Bonus.’

This program offers additional IQ rewards to Editors on the completion of specific tasks deemed to raise the overall quality of the site. These include simple jobs like annotating newly released music, ensuring that metadata is added to album pages and completing summaries of songs, artists and albums. One job that stands out among these is so-called ‘Red Removal’, involving the systematic rejection and removal of unreviewed user annotations. Bonus IQ can also be attained by accepting and providing edits on unreviewed annotations, but the mass removal of annotations by regular contributors is still an attractive way for users in higher roles to quickly boost their account’s standing, and potentially earn more substantive rewards, including gift cards for online shops. A large proportion of the site’s annotations remain unreviewed, so while competitive Red Removal is framed as necessary maintenance, one could argue that such incentivised purging of user annotations (frequently on the basis of formatting

errors or rule technicalities) constitutes a systematic destruction of knowledge created by users lower in the hierarchy.

In the site's early years Genius annotations were much less strictly moderated. As a result, many older annotations (or those from users returning to the site after spending time away) often get away with breaking the very rules that have become central to Genius' policy of striving for consistency and (ostensibly) objectivity. First-hand accounts from interviewed users frame the website's past as its Wild West era, a time during which annotations could be significantly more broad, profane and subjective in their content without risking removal. Such contributions often engage in open subjectivity in their annotations and utilise a broad range of media-forms. Once, it was permitted to write annotations including profanity or consisting solely of animated 'reaction' GIFs or even pornography, but in recent years these practices have become much less tolerated. While newer annotations have retained and even expanded upon elements of this multimedia approach in some respects, an annotation consisting simply of an embedded GIF without explanation certainly would not make the cut today.

Contemporary annotations vary a great deal in length and depth. Some consist of simple observations about specific references, obscure slang or wordplay while others can contain several paragraphs of information contextualising a line with support from embedded media or quotations from primary sources. Annotations frequently feature hyperlinks to other pages on Genius, and such self-referentiality is encouraged in order to generate an interconnected and self-stabilising web of knowledge that encourages users to remain on-site. Most in-depth annotations are worked on by multiple users and built up in iteration over time. This practice of collaborative, iterative interpretation commonly breaks out on high-profile new releases, as the community races to provide the most insightful contributions. Here, new song lyrics are

used as a means of both individual and collective musical identity work, with users working together to display and develop their personal identities along with that of the community, or of subsets within it, such as the fans of a particular genre or artist.

As Alice Marwick has argued, for all the non-hierarchical and communitarian ideals associated with Web 2.0, the market-orientated strategies that accompanied the era's technological innovations resulted in the emergence of highly competitive, status-orientated environments (Marwick 2013). Systems of 'self-quantification' are a recurring feature in such environments, providing individuals with social power in the form of many simple but quickly aggregated numerical markers and codes: likes, shares, followers, subscribers etc. Despite the importance of the IQ system to everyday site use, several interviewed community members were quick to point out it does not define their activity on the site. But the competitive nature of collective annotation and practices like the IQ bonus (coupled with the social capital that comes with a high-IQ account) still suggest that there is a link between IQ and user status and identity. Whether or not is it a deliberate strategy by the site's owners, Genius' systems of contribution and interaction encourage and reward a race to the top of the hierarchy and compliance with moderation practices, as well as the site's author-first ideology of musical interpretation.

High-level users

Many users who have attained a high level in the Genius community strata take annotation very seriously, taking time and great care to research and compose their interpretations, and frequently specialising in particular genres, artists or music labels. One advantage afforded to these diligent users is a certain level of additional freedom in more subjective or esoteric analysis, which might be less tolerated were it present in the work of a less experienced user or if it were accompanied by markers of editorial bad practice that high level users have learned

to avoid. This disproportionate balance of power in terms of validating musical interpretations encourages new users to work their way up through community mentoring rather than striking out on their own, not only to access higher status in the community, but also to allow them more freedom in their expression of musical identity.

Marcus, who was interviewed for this project, is a high-level contributor holding the Editor and Moderator roles with a particular interest in creating high-quality annotations as an expression of his musical expertise and fandom. Marcus' user homepage on Genius acts partly as a showcase of his achievements on the site: the page's left side displays more than ten colourful badges, trophies awarded to his annotations in various community competitions. A caption above one badge reads 'This annotation was featured in the Best Annotations of 2018, the Top Five Annotations of February 2018 and won "Tate of the Week" during *Black Panther*'s opening weekend.' Many of these annotations are on the work of Compton rapper Kendrick Lamar, of whom he is a big fan. Pinned at the top of the page is one of Marcus' favourite annotations, an analysis of two lines from Lamar's 2017 song 'GOD.': 'Slide on you like fallen drapes, God toss full of carnivals.' In his interpretation of these lines Marcus first explains the nuances of their slang and wordplay, before suggesting that the famously religious Lamar is also making a veiled reference to the biblical 'Tearing of the Temple Curtain', citing both *The Book of Exodus* and the *Gospel of Matthew* to draw links between Lamar's words and Christian scripture. The annotation then analyses the lyric in its wider musical context, reminding the reader that *DAMN.* (the album on which the lyric appears) was released on Good Friday, the same day the curtain was supposedly torn.

Rather than preferring blind speculation, Marcus is often creative in his use of primary sources. Another annotation citing a quote printed on t-shirt worn by Lamar in an attached photograph

printed with a bible verse to support his claim that he referred to the verse in a song. However, when asked about the ‘GOD.’ annotation, he admitted to me he has no ‘hard evidence’ to support his reading:

I’ve kind of been looking at this like my doctoral thesis in a way. It’s an intense annotation and if I’m being honest. It’s an interpretation of a line that is kind of vague, and it’s entirely possible that my theory on what that lyric means is wrong. I’ll be the first to admit that, but I would say I am about 98% certain that that is what Kendrick is talking about.

Interestingly, Marcus clearly still considers his role as interpreter to be based on finding the sole meaning intended by the artist, rather than on co-creation or subjective meaning-making. This is perhaps influenced by his identity as a practicing Christian, and the obvious parallels between his relationship with hip-hop and the act of decoding scripture, the original context in which hermeneutics developed as a formalised system of interpretation. In any case, as it lacks a source this interpretation technically fails to stand up to Genius preference for evidencing author intent. But despite this the annotation has been approved, perhaps spared in part due to Marcus’ reputation on the site and particular renown as an expert on Kendrick Lamar. One can only assume that if a newer user were to make such a contribution it would be at considerably greater risk of removal or at least being flagged with ‘It’s a stretch’, the Genius catch-all tag for unsubstantiated annotations.

Here, Marcus’ status in the community plays a role in his ability to get away with bending the rules in his ‘doctoral thesis’ interpretation, but he has only achieved this status by generally adhering to the site’s standards and generally living up to Genius’ values of competition and overall deference to authorial intent. This indicates that despite the site’s strict community

standards, some users are able to harness Genius' Web 2.0 affordances as a 'technology of the self' more effectively than others (DeNora 1999), expressing their identity through meticulous curation of personal musical observations and well-researched insight.

Dedicated annotators like Marcus are a valuable source of content for Genius, as the site's reputation for insightful interpretations draws in new users. The aforementioned editorial side of the site frequently features articles breaking down a new song based on community research and insight, spotlighting and praising user interpretations. While having one's content featured in a Genius Staff article is framed as a privileged reward, it remains a direct and uncompensated monetisation of fan practices by the website. Content hosted on Genius song pages has even made its way into other journalistic platforms in the past, showing that the value and influence of user annotations extends beyond Genius itself. The site has accepted user pitches for more directly authored editorial content in the past, but this practice is dwindling. Despite this, most users welcome any form of additional exposure for their work, especially given that several users I spoke to have serious journalistic aspirations of their own.

Platformisation, video content & *Verified*

So far, I have demonstrated the impact of inter-user hierarchy and regulatory practices on the freedom of interpretation, meaning making and associated identity expression by members of the Genius community. In contrast, this final section of the chapter looks to the relationship between Genius and the forces of platformisation that began to put increasing pressure on the site in the second half of the 2010s. I will show how recent changes in Genius' online content strategy suggest a significant shift away from community-based interpretation and towards a top-down model that gleans insight straight from the artists themselves. Despite this shift, as a company Genius continues to define itself with language derived from that community,

presenting itself as a site for fans even while tightly controlling and lessening their overall interpretative agency. This shift in focus is therefore illustrated not by the site's branding or use of language, but by the aforementioned decline in support for the users reflected in the dismissal of several community-facing staff members and subsequent disenfranchisement of several long-time users interviewed for this chapter. Interestingly, rather than a sense of lost interpretive agency, it was the loss of community identity and support that appeared to drive the feeling of decline shared by the community members I spoke to.

These shifts in Genius' company priorities must be understood in the context of more general trends in online content production, which are in this case defined by the rise of major social media, music streaming and video-hosting platforms. The so-called 'pivot to video' made by digital media outlets of all sizes in the mid-2010s saw a distinct move away from written content in order to retain audiences who were flocking to YouTube, visible in the creation of competing video platforms like Facebook Video, but also in the capitulation of many smaller sites to the Google-owned video giant. This capitulation generally saw these formally text-focussed sites starting to create content for YouTube to then be embedded on their sites, and in many cases building enclaves for their brand on YouTube in the form of channels operating separately from the original site but under the same brand. But how might such a pivot be achieved when the content of the website in question is powered by written content generated by users? When met with this challenge, rather than attempting to somehow transplant their community culture into short-form video, Genius instead opted to invest in heavily branded YouTube-ready content that shifted to focus on the voices of artists themselves, rather than those of their audience.

Several years prior to this in 2012, a short series called *Behind the Lines* ran on the Genius YouTube channel. It featured musicians discussing their lyrics on camera. Despite having legendary New York rapper (and Genius Verified Artist) Nas among those featured, the series saw little viewership. In 2017—comparatively late in the industry-wide pivot to video—the concept was rebranded and relaunched under the name *Verified* to much greater popularity. Though it cannot compete with community annotation in terms of quantity, the series is extremely prolific, with well over one thousand videos produced so far. Like the work of Anthony Fantano, this showcases the efficacy of frequent uploads on the YouTube platform. Regardless of its success, I contend that *Verified* represents a major change in Genius’ method of attaining its most valuable resource: information about lyrics.

A key element to the new format is that artists are asked to perform a cappella vocals for the song in question, breaking to discuss the lyrics in between each stanza. While safe territory for rappers, this aspect has proven to be rather more divisive among singing guests, as maintaining one’s composure and affability while singing one line of your song at a time with any consistency, and while taking breaks in between to explain the context of your lyrics, is no mean feat for many pop singers. For the show’s creators, this is ostensibly a good thing, adding an element of potential virality when certain artists inevitably embarrass themselves or, less frequently, surprise and delight the audience by courageously emerging from the ordeal with their reputation unscathed. To this end (and with an *almost* admirable level of transparency) the series has increasingly called upon what might charitably be called gimmicky booking choices, hosting a number of viral stars from social media, and hopefully boosting the series’ popularity among a younger audience that is presumably disinterested in Genius.com itself.

As its name suggests, *Verified* is conceptually tied to the longstanding role of ‘Verified Artist’ on the site. The lyric breakdowns by artists featured on episodes of *Verified* are also incorporated into the existing Genius annotation system. These direct explanations are transcribed by Genius staff and added to the relevant song page on the site, complete with the green highlighting that singles out annotations bearing the verification of the author. As one might imagine, since the resulting annotations are transcribed from each artist’s verbal stream-of-consciousness, they often do not meet the strict standards required of regular users, and frequently break one of Genius’ cardinal rules: to never simply ‘restate the line’ in an annotation.

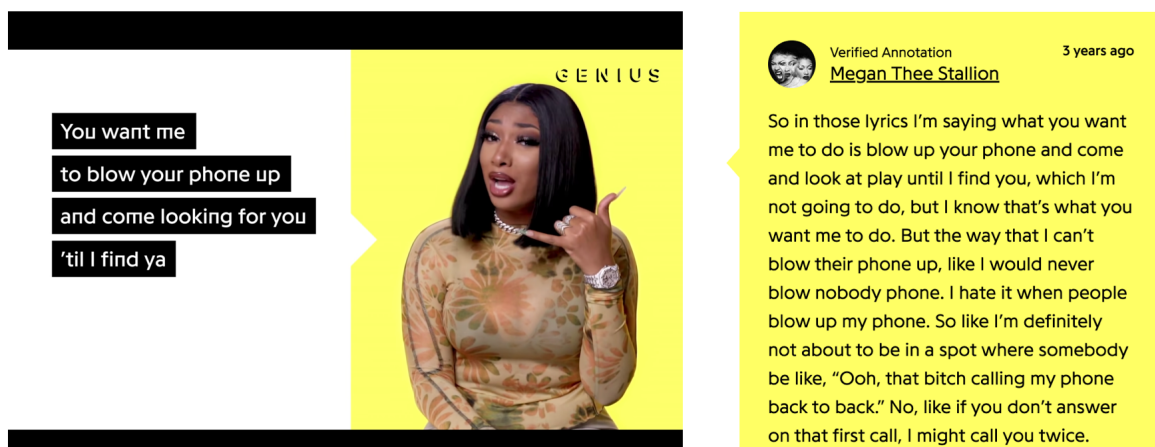


Figure 5.2: Left, a still from an episode of *Verified* for Megan Thee Stallion’s ‘B.I.T.C.H.’ Right, the corresponding ‘verified annotation’ as it appears on *Genius.com*.

Behind the scenes, the Genius community continues to work to build and perfect its vast library of musical metadata, analysis and interpretation, but as *Verified* continues to see success with a high proportion of new hits getting their own video, the community’s role as real-time interpreters is less important. Before the series began, users would race to research and interpret new songs by their favourite artists as a community, showcasing the collaborative but

competitive culture previously encouraged by the site. Now, a significant proportion of popular new tracks are featured on *Verified*, the lyrics supposedly demystified, and the artist's comments automatically transcribed as the official Genius annotation.

Despite the recent decentring of community voices, Genius' is still careful to maintain the image of a media company defined by the musical expertise it brings to its audience. In addition to featuring the authoritative tagline 'bringing you the meaning and the knowledge behind the music', Genius videos incorporate terminology from the site's community culture into their musical news segments. In a recent video uploaded to the Genius YouTube channel featuring the teenage creator of a viral dance challenge on TikTok set to 'Savage' by rapper Megan Thee Stallion, the host makes specific use of the term 'cosign' to describe the artist's own participation in the challenge set to her music (Hill & Abad 2020). By utilising the term in this context Genius signals its cultural links to the broader history of hip-hop vernacular from which it is derived, but more importantly is working to reframe the meaning of a cosign within the audience-artist relationship, a relationship that is here facilitated by TikTok, rather than Genius itself.

This video explicitly connects Megan Thee Stallion's personal participation in a fan-made dance challenge set to her song with the lyric cosign of a Verified Artist. Both these forms of author validation in the form of cultural capital, earned through fan labour and creative musical practice, a practice which to some extent benefits both the artist and the recipient of the cosign, but more importantly benefit each of the three platforms mediating this cultural exchange. Finally, by covering contemporary audience-generated cultural practice on the enfant terrible video app TikTok in this way, Genius already appears to be scoping out new sources of fan labour removed from its now rather dated Web 2.0 contributor culture.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the ways that Genius.com operates as a means of identity expression for its community of volunteer annotators. The interpretative frameworks enforced on the site limit the ability of Genius annotators to co-create meaning in a public setting, but the very organised and hierarchical structure of the site's community also provide a means through which its members can improve their skills (and therefore their identities) as fans, interpreters and researchers. Along with participation in a set of niche digital practices, these individual and collective identities are formulated and expressed primarily via musical expertise rather than the consumption that defined the previous case studies. However, the idea of the nerd or expert music fan are still visible, along with various identity categories associated with specific popular music texts. Religious identity is a notable addition to these categories explored in this chapter, not to be encountered anywhere else in my research into online music culture. Additionally, as is demonstrated by users like Marcus, the users reaching the upper levels of the Genius hierarchy are rewarded with additional freedom in their interpretive practices, and with them, the articulation of their identity as experts and consumers of music.

However, the internet in which this system first operated no longer exists, and as the dominance of Web 2.0 practices has faded in the face of a changing internet landscape, new forms of participatory culture have emerged. Apps like TikTok that thrive on the more visually orientated mobile internet culture have shown that audiences are as productive as ever, but the close-knit communities and co-construction of knowledge on platforms like Genius are no longer at the cutting edge. As a brand Genius has enjoyed great success in its recent strategy; deftly evolving to reflect and harness new developments in online music culture as a whole without losing its identity as a major online source of knowledge and meaning 'behind the

music'. But since that very identity was originally derived from the labour of the site's increasingly disenfranchised membership, can it be maintained in the era of *Verified*? Through its waning support for the Genius community, the company sends the message that it needs its users less and less as its business model divests ever further from the insight that results from that community's labour. Without dedicated contributors generating a large proportion of its content via the construction and expression of musical identity, it is questionable whether Genius will be able to retain its audience and its credibility.

Genius initially found success through the organisation and facilitation of meaning-making musical practice, taking advantage of the identity-building activity of its users to propel its own brand identity as an extensive and trustworthy source of musical insight that represented the potential of audience-driven online music cultures. In outlining the shifting forms of musical knowledge production surrounding Genius.com, this chapter has demonstrated the impact of platformisation on a site that, for many, is a pillar of online music culture. Genius' responses to changes in the nature of online audience production are visible in both the role of hierarchies and regulatory practices on the site, and in the company's increased foregrounding of artist intent in recent years after its pivot towards video content. As evidenced by the emergence of mobile platforms hosting new forms of audience participation and innovation (Coscarelli 2020), the disempowerment of collective interpretation and meaning making on Genius does not signal an end to creative, influential audiences, but it would seem to confirm Web 2.0 ideologies of free market inclusivity inexorably lead to the recentralisation of power to favour 'official' interpretations of popular music.

Chapter Six – ‘Is This DG?’: politics & identity among online

fans of Death Grips

Returning to the context of Facebook Group culture, this chapter examines the largest online community for fans of the industrial hip-hop trio Death Grips from Sacramento, California. In contrast with genius.com’s users, these fans are highly sceptical of appeals to authority. This reflects the anarchic, disruptive spirit found in Death Grips’ music, providing this audience with the ability to interpret and partially determine the band’s political and aesthetic identity for themselves. This is demonstrated by community members’ contribution of new texts (and the rejection of others) to what many members see as the open-ended, internet-embedded multimedia art project of Death Grips, a practice that shapes the band’s meaning in the eyes of the community as a whole. I argue that in this process, the emergent political and aesthetic identity of Death Grips acts as a means through which the community and its members can assert their own self-image, both collectively and on a completely personal level.

In the Genius community examined in the previous chapter, musical meaning is generally thought to exist primarily within the text, even if certain contributors maintain some awareness of their role in the meaning-making process. In contrast, the audience featured in this chapter engage directly in the collective negotiation of musical meaning. This community views meaning as a significantly more abstract concept, and one which provides multiple avenues to its members in the negotiation of their own musical identity. To clarify this process I draw on Daniel Cavicchi’s influential study of Bruce Springsteen fans (1998), and his application of Steven Feld’s concept of ‘interpretive moves’ (1984). This model views musical meaning as something that is constructed by the listener via a set of specific actions that bring their own perceptions, preferences and methods of understanding to each encounter with music. Cavicchi

identifies six different forms of interpretive moves made by his subjects, variations of which can also be mapped onto the activity of Death Grips fans observed in this chapter: ‘summarising the music’, ‘making aesthetic associations’, ‘making political associations’, ‘making biographical associations’ and ‘making personal associations’ (Cavicchi 1998:113-120). The only one of Cavicchi’s interpretive moves not visible in my analysis ‘situating the listening experience’ can be accounted for in the location of the community on social media.

Raquel Campos has observed that in online spaces, music ‘falls within the paradox of being so abundant in online interaction that most of its circulation is silent’ (Campos 2019:6). Perhaps as a result of this paradox, most of the interpretive moves observed in this case study are done in the absence of the music of Death Grips itself. Rather than being tied to specific musical encounters, these interpretive moves are instead orientated around an imagined, abstracted idea of the band’s artistic identity, referred to in the community as ‘DG’. Negotiating the precise nature and meaning of the DG concept has become a core activity for this group of fans, and it is within these negotiations that the other five forms of interpretive move can be found, as detailed later in this chapter. As in previous case studies, my analysis here is supported by survey responses from the community, along with interviews conducted with members, all of whom have been anonymised with pseudonyms.

In addition to its links with earlier case studies through its consideration of audience identity, musical meaning and its setting on Facebook, this chapter introduces some topics that will become increasingly central in the final two case studies. Firstly, it is more focussed on musical aesthetics and genre conventions than previous chapters, as the nature of Death Grips plays an important role in how the band’s identity is understood by its audience. The chapter also continues to look at how online the use of certain media and user practices can, through the

correct context, become associated with particular musical modes and aesthetics enough to directly link online activity with musical practice. Some examples of this online musicking through the posting and discussing of media texts have already been discussed in Chapters Three and Four, with a good example being the affectively charged use of digital album artwork. This principle will be developed further in the project's final case studies focussed on forms of musical production intended to directly represent aspects of online culture. Chapter Six serves to 'bridge the gap' between the case studies that come before it and those that will follow.

This is the second of this project's accounts of subcultural activity within a large, Facebook-based music Group, and just as in Chapter Three, the analysis is based on a mixture of digital ethnography and qualitative data gained from surveys and interviews with community members. In contrast to >implying we can discuss music however, the Group at the centre of this chapter, 'DEATH GRIPS SNITCHPOSTING' (hereafter 'DGSP') is Public (entry is not controlled by administrators) and rather than general music discussion, is devoted to a single artist. Beyond these differences the Groups share some key similarities, being of comparable size (at time of writing >implying has around eighty-one thousand members compared to DGSP's seventy-three thousand) and both operating within the 'Musicbook' subcultural context. Many practices and processes introduced in Chapter Three are therefore also found in DGSP, including a culture of 'shitposting' in the exchange of subcultural capital (largely absent on Genius), and discursive behaviour derived from Facebook's specific platform affordances such as the 'react' function.

As discussed in Chapter Two, the vast difference between the two Groups in terms of user engagement with data gathering methods has resulted in a slightly different structure between

this chapter and Chapter Three. In particular, the high number of survey responses (n=348) offers a broad set of data on which to build a slightly more systematic understanding of the community's demographics, and of the musical and political meaning-making activity at the heart of the case study. The greater number of in-depth interviews with members (n=8) has also provided additional insight into members' personal histories and relationships with the Group, as well as the music on which it is focussed. The increased response rate from members has been important to the success of the analysis, as unlike the public, visual displays of musical identity represented in chartposting practices in the >implying community, the community practice at the core of this chapter is considerably more abstract.

This practice, referred to as 'Is this DG?' is an internet meme originating in and largely confined to DGSP that has become a means by which members negotiate the meaning of the DG concept mentioned above, via processes of aesthetic and political interpretation. The meme works to position and define the political and aesthetic meaning of Death Grips' music, which in several ways presents itself as *of* the internet and *for* online audiences, while at the same time being produced by a band who offer little in the way of concrete identity markers or coherent online presence of their own that could otherwise afford audiences a solid basis for identity work. Despite this, Death Grips offer a fairly substantial aesthetic framework both in the form of their music and their limited but distinctive public use of social media, and through which their audience can construct meaning,. What results is an identity assemblage for the band that is inextricably entangled with the culture of the internet and highly reliant on fan intervention and creative engagement in order to be understood.

The following section will introduce Death Grips and their relationship with internet culture and their use of social media, as well as a brief description of their music. After this, the

background and culture of the DGSP Group will be outlined before beginning the analysis of the ‘Is this DG?’ meme and its central concept ‘DG’. In this community’s subcultural discourse, the DG concept acts as a memetic shorthand for members’ collective understanding of Death Grips’ musical identity, which itself is derived through community practices that collectively negotiate the philosophical, aesthetic, social and political meanings expressed in the band’s work. In a manner derived from Death Grips’ engagement with social media, secondary media objects are added to the DG assemblage by fans in an ongoing attempt to refine the audience’s understanding of the band’s musical meaning. Throughout, the argument is supported by the perspectives and insights offered by community members during interview and in a survey circulated in the Group.

The internet’s own band

Death Grips have been cited as being among the most important and influential musical artists to emerge during the 2010s (Britton 2015, Mills 2018, Indiana 2018). After first finding praise in the online music press for their 2011 mixtape *Exmilitary* (Ben 2011, Calvert 2011), between 2012 and 2019 the band released six full-length albums and three EPs, garnering ecstatic admiration for their music but inspiring frustration with their erratic behaviour which included hastily cancelled tours as well as turbulent relationships with their audience and record labels. Despite not breaking out to a wider audience from their sizeable and enduring presence in online music culture, the band’s influence on subsequent releases by mainstream artists is well-documented (Kot 2014, Geslani 2015). Death Grips’ music mixes elements from hip-hop, industrial music and punk with an image defined by reclusivity and nihilism, along with an esoteric use of the internet in the promotion and dissemination of their work. The group’s frontman Stefan Burnett (MC Ride) draws on strands of underground hip-hop, punk and the avant garde in his highly aggressive vocals and cryptic lyrics. Burnett is accompanied by

abrasive and disorienting instrumentals from drummer/producer Zach Hill and occasionally sound engineer Andy Morin.

Death Grips' sound ranges from sparse, minimal hip-hop built with distorted synths, guitars and Hill's frenetic drumming, to maximalist abstract electronica with aesthetic links to noise music and electroacoustic composition. Audio manipulation of Burnett's voice is common, as is the use of prominent samples from highly varied sources. For instance, the song 'Spread Eagle Cross the Block' from *Exmilitary* extensively uses Link Wray's iconic 1958 instrumental 'Rumble'; while the first disc of 2015's *The Powers That B* features eight different songs containing vocal samples from Björk, allegedly recorded by the Icelandic artist specifically for this purpose. These two different approaches to sampling serve to demonstrate how Death Grips' music positions the band both in continuity with a history of innovation in mainstream popular music ('Rumble' being frequently noted as playing a major part in popularising the use of power chords and electric guitar distortion (O'Dell 2008)), and also at the cutting-edge of the pop avant garde, as demonstrated in their major collaboration with one of its most influential and respected figures.

Successfully synthesising a variety of extreme aesthetics with elements from relatively approachable genres like hip-hop, rock and IDM, the initially challenging but ultimately rewarding nature of Death Grips' music and the surprising and potentially thrilling experience of finding oneself able to enjoy it were key to driving the initial growth of their audience. Death Grips are frequently evoked as an example of 'extreme' music in online cultural discourse both by fans and non-fans, a reputation that forms a basis of their musical identity, an identity that acts both as a source of subcultural capital for their audience and a means of gatekeeping in a manner typical of more abrasive forms of popular art. Unlike the music of typically 'difficult'

genres such as noise, contemporary art music and various genres of extreme metal, Death Grips' incorporation of abrasive and disorientating musical features is supported by an unmistakable and highly effective implementation of elements from the catchy, hook-orientated songwriting that has maintained a presence in mainstream hip-hop since the mid-2000s. This blended strategy combining easily digested hooks with abrasive sonic and thematic material has become something of hallmark of experimental music popular in and associated with certain online subcultural circles, and so will continue to be found in the music discussed in Chapters Seven and Eight.

Since first being met with praise from primarily online sources in the early 2010s, Death Grips' music has developed a strong identification with online culture. Along with the glitchy, digital quality of the timbres, sampling and vocal effects used throughout their music, both the band's song concepts and lyrics frequently relate to various aspects of digital media and technology. Key examples include computer hacking ('Hacker'), disposable online media ('Trash'), surveillance and connectivity ('I've Seen Footage', 'Deep Web') and the remaking of digital identities ('Death Grips 2.0'). Rather than being a shallow tactic designed only to appeal to online audiences, the band's music often suggests a well-developed understanding of these concepts and the artistic discourse around them in their music, providing insightful commentary and engaging intellectually with works of contemporary art dealing with similar themes.

Death Grips make extensive use of the internet in disseminating and popularising their music in ways that work to demonstrate a high level of proficiency and familiarity with internet culture, as well as an apparently genuine dedication to principles of anarchic techno-libertarianism. This is discussed further below, but one such example was the construction of

a sophisticated digital scavenger hunt utilising encrypted sites on the Tor Network to promote their album *No Love Deep Web* (2013) that culminated in the band leaking their record for free online, accompanied by a highly explicit photograph of Hill's penis in place of album artwork. This led to the band being dropped by their label Epic Records, with whom they had recently signed.

In interviews conducted for this chapter, fans of the band explained that Death Grips' music and ethos represented something that felt authentically orientated around and influenced by vernacular online cultures, evoking the cultural experience of being on the internet. As will be explored, this forms one element of the band's musical identity as defined by DGSP. Death Grips combine markers of internet-based communication like reflexivity, ambivalence and detachment with the high level of affective power exerted by the music's sonic maximalism and MC Ride's embodiment of uncontrolled yet somehow still cerebral antagonism. This combination of ambiguity of message with extreme affect forms an important part of the basis for the contested nature of the music's meaning – it evokes something profound about the online experience, but by its very nature that something is intangible and indeterminate and could simply be a joke.

Upload trash

Death Grips' secondary online presence as an object of fandom is contrasted with their direct digital footprint which—unusually for a band so aligned with internet culture—is sparse and cryptic. In interviews, the band's members are noted for their introverted social demeanour; particularly Burnett, who in contrast with his MC Ride persona appears very shy, rarely answering questions or speaking. Death Grips occasionally post on social media platforms, but do not interact with their audience, often deleting or changing accounts. As of 2022, the most

active social media account associated with the band is Zach Hill's Instagram page (@gottagoogole), posting every two to three weeks. However, rather than images relating to Death Grips or content promoting tours or merch, it mainly contains vague and often grotesque photographs that seem to be taken casually by Hill himself, and which only very occasionally provide insight to his work as a musician.

When Death Grips have made posts as a band it has often been to share particularly impactful messages, such as in 2013 when they used Facebook to share acrimonious emails from their label as proof that a last-minute tour cancellation (previously decided on a whim and announced in a single tweet) was not a publicity stunt. Such a relationship with social media performs several functions, the most obvious of which defines Death Grips' internet presence against that of musicians who regularly interact with their fans and maintain a reliable, coherent online identity around which fandom can be built (Beer 2008). This approach builds mystique and reinforces their identity as being *of* the internet without risking dilution through overexposure or visible curation. This strategy could also be understood as a means of maintaining the impression that the band's members do continue to use the internet as 'lurkers', but not to promote themselves or their music.

After the band's departure from Epic in 2013, they continued to utilise the internet to promote and support their work without a significant promotional budget or support from the industry. For decades, advertisers and political actors have harnessed the power of viral media to reach as broad an audience as possible. But what sets Death Grips' online activity apart from the kind of viral marketing that, for instance, disguises advertising content as amateur video footage, is that it conveys a specific message about the cultural and political identity of its perpetrators. Instead of aiming to go viral in order to reach the broadest audience possible, Death Grips

operated on a significantly smaller scale, using the mechanics of online virality to grow their fanbase among a particular online audience.

In this way their strategy might be likened to online content that targets a particular demographic ahead of an election. It is intended to reinforce aspects of the band's artistic identity and integrity and to help their work reach a more specific audience of online fans and potential fans (i.e. young fans of experimental music who are literate in internet culture). Crucial to this is the fact that the band's approach to social media has a significant philosophical and stylistic overlap with their music. Death Grips' online behaviour comments on and deconstructs the same aspects of online culture that are explored in their music, and the aesthetics of their social media posting often directly reflects their distinctive compositional and performance practices.

This is clearly exemplified by the Instagram account mentioned above. Rather than appearing accidental or entirely devoid of meaning, the account's inscrutable posts suggest both a deep and intentional disregard for platform conventions, to the right audience reinforcing aesthetic and formal elements of Hill's musical identity as a technically gifted but nonconformist drummer. When referring to the spirit underlying this type of social media use during interviews, several DGSP community members used the phrase 'upload trash'; a reference to the lyrics of Death Grips song 'Trash' and to a brief online campaign used to promote the 2016 album *Bottomless Pit* on which the song appears. On the day of the album's release, a toll-free phone number was posted by the band in various places online, including their Instagram page (@bbpoltergeist) along with the message 'press 1 for trash' (Figure 6.1). Calling the number and doing so resulted in 'Trash' playing in full over the line. The line also allowed fans to leave

voice messages, some of which were then sampled in an Instagram video by artist Galen Pehrson, who had previously produced media for the campaign.



Figure 6.1: A post on Death Grips' Instagram page on the day of release for Year of the Snitch.

A few months later the same Instagram page individually posted two images of a wine bottle filled with cigarette butts a total of forty-five times in a row over the course of several minutes, flooding followers' feeds with literal 'trash' with no warning or recognisable intent. Here we see a direct attack on the Instagram platform and its users through the harnessing of its central algorithm's limitations. Since the account's posts are infrequent but usually receive a lot of interaction from followers, this unexpectedly high volume of posts had the potential to 'trick' the app into displaying the meaningless and ugly content on the timelines of a higher number of users than it might for an account that posts several times a day. By drawing attention to the invisible layer of automated curation on user's feeds, these posts disturbed the tightly curated

Instagram experience, revealing its inner workings. While some fans were appropriately irritated by this (the top comment on one of the images complains of the post disrupting their browsing), many Death Grips fans enjoy and even personally identify with such activity:

Another huge part of the Death Grips culture is the online presence – ‘upload trash’. That’s what got me into it, I love that idea of useless information. Maybe it’s my ADHD talking, but having that culture of anything goes is pretty liberating, you know? [...] They upload trash, and we eat it up, and I think that that’s a pretty good parallel to how everything else is, it’s just that this is a little bit more raw, and a lot less coated in corporate sugar and a bunch of bullshit that’s kind of fake.

- Joe

For Joe, this form of social media use reflects an authentic ‘raw’ engagement between Death Grips and their fans that is contrasted with the ‘fake’ approach of other artists, as well as speaking to and even representing his neurodivergent identity and experience of the world. Joe’s feelings are reminiscent of Dick Hebdige’s famous observation about 1970s Punk style, and the use of bricolage to resist and disrupt hegemonic culture by signalling a refusal of the mainstream through the coding of certain specific practices as subcultural (Hebdige 1978). Death Grips’ use of mainstream social media platforms is coded as countercultural in a way that refers to the wider history of ‘flame wars’, ‘raids’ and other disruption of online spaces (Dery 1994). Max, another DGSP member, considers this behaviour and the accompanying call to ‘upload trash’ as nothing less than a continuation of Death Grips’ musical output, another form of internet musicking:

It’s a broad art project that goes beyond just the sounds that come out of the albums, and the interesting aspects of it make us want to rally around all of it, not just the music but also the esoteric tweets, the leaks on 4chan, the ironic callouts to

random media figures, the random photos in unknown pizza shops. It's all part of it.

- Max

Similar perspectives were offered by the other interviewees, who all linked the band's online activity directly to their music in terms of its expression of aesthetic and political ideas. In this way, by uploading 'trash' to the internet (both through their abrasive music and more literally in the form of photographs), Death Grips represent a form of punk simultaneously tied to the past and digitally rearticulated for a post hip-hop social media dominated context in which samples, aggressive rapping and grinding electronic music have supplanted punk's original sonic toolkit, which was itself a reaction to the mainstreaming of rock and economic and social condition of the era.

'Upload trash' also invites established audience members to participate, contributing to the practice as a demonstration of their own identities' alignment with the cultural origin and values of the music they consume. DGSP's original name 'DEATH GRIPS TRASHPOSTING' reflects this, and many members of the Death Grips fandom follow the band's lead, working to further the digital art project by creating and sharing meaningless or disposable content. This practice has therefore become fundamental to the building and negotiation of the band's identity on the part of Death Grips' online audience. Through it they are able to take part in – and take some amount of ownership of – the subcultural practices engaged in by the band, and which meaningfully contribute to both the abstract and textual elements of the band's broader artistic project.

This collaboration via refusal and disruption can be simply viewed as an internet-mediated form of the social disobedience once associated with punk and other subcultures and similarly,

the way these practices help to construct identity among audience members (while also contributing to the identity of the band themselves) has a complex relationship with social and political meaning. So is there anything specific Death Grips are trying to say? The band's aesthetic sensibilities are relatively clear, but any political intention in their work is very underdetermined. In interview, the band members have said they do not vote, and many aspects of their work point more towards a nihilistic apathy than activism serving any cause (Pelly 2012). This political ambiguity has led to the emergence of certain tensions and contradictions in their audience, as different interpretations for the band's music and identity clash politically and socially.

Death Grips' identity is constructed through a combination of audience interpretations of the band's music, and through the ethos of 'upload trash' as enacted in online space and involving both interpretation and collaboration by that audience. This is further complicated by yet another similarity to the British Punk movement, as Death Grips' provocative online behaviour has resulted in the emergence of a significant following for the band among the members of reactionary online subcultures. As was pointed out by several DGSP members during my interviews, this is inevitable in any online fandom of a certain size, but it is clear that Death Grips' attitude and aesthetic also appeal to communities that trade in fringe ideas and belief systems including those that tolerate bigotry and hate speech. As is explained in the following section, the DGSP community exists in large part as a response to this problem, being created as a place where Death Grips fans can enjoy art and online content of an extreme or disturbing nature without intrusion from the politics of hate. As a result of this however, DGSP is a battleground in which defining the political or philosophical meaning of Death Grips' work remains a central aspect of Group discourse and subcultural posting activity.

DEATH GRIPS SNITCHPOSTING: demographics, leadership & politics

As discussed in Chapter Three, compared to the members of >implying we can discuss music, the DGSP community engaged extremely well with the data gathering efforts of this project. Several hundred users completed the survey (n=353), providing details about their type and level of engagement with the community; the other Facebook Groups they took part in; their reason for joining the DGSP community and their personal perspective on the meaning of ‘is this DG?’. This question is of the most relevance to the case study and will be discussed below in more detail, but the survey data can also provide key information regarding the Group’s demographic makeup and most common forms of engagement.

As explained in Chapter Two, while the set of members who chose to engage with the survey is unlikely to be representative of the community as a whole, the participants’ contributions match up well with my personal observations. This is helped somewhat by this project’s interest in participatory cultures, as it might be assumed that lurking members who rarely engage directly in community activities would also be less inclined than others to participate in a survey circulated in the Group. But considering the group’s anti-authority culture, and its participants’ potential resentment of a researcher in their midst, it is not unlikely that some otherwise active members will have abstained from participation, and this notion is supported by the fact that several respondents engaged with the survey in a deliberately disruptive manner (n=5). However, despite the complexities of obtaining voluntary research participation in such an anarchic but highly active, reflexive and collaborative community, the results of the survey and interviews appear to be reliable for the purposes of this chapter’s analysis.

Even disregarding the eleven underage survey respondents whose answers were immediately discarded, the DGSP community is quite young, with a mean age of twenty-three among the

respondents, only five percent of whom are over thirty (n=16). The Group's gender makeup skews quite heavily male at seventy-two percent of survey participants (n=251) compared to just eleven percent for women (n=38). However, DGSP also seems to be popular with non-binary users at ten percent (n=36); around thirty times the current estimated rate among the general US population (Wilson & Meyer 2021). The number of members who reported being transgender was lower at just over one percent (n=4), but as respondents were asked to state their gender identity rather than choose from a list, it cannot account for trans members who simply answered 'male' or 'female'.

The spread of gender identities among respondents is supported by ethnographic observations; for example, the underrepresentation of women is evident in certain misogynistic aspects of community discourse, while widespread acceptance for queer and LGBT members is visible in DGSP's shared values, supported by the testimony of the two interviewed members who identify as non-binary. Respondents were not asked to state their race or ethnicity in the survey. This was certainly an oversight on my part, given the relevance of ethnicity to some aspects of this case study. However, respondents were asked to state what country they currently lived in. Among the usable respondents (n=348), seventy-four percent were based in English-speaking countries (n=259) with members in the USA making up just under half of that group (n=118). Fifteen percent of respondents were based in mainland Europe (n=51) and eight percent from Latin America (n=30), with small numbers in Africa (n=2) and Asia (n=6).

Around half had been members for more than two years (n=182), with just four percent joining less than a month before taking the survey (n=15). Respondents' reported posting practices confirm Chapter Three's speculation about patterns of engagement in terms of posts, comments and reactions: sixty-nine percent of users reported never making their own posts in the Group

(n=243), while commenting on others' posts was more common, with a combined sixty-five percent commenting either weekly (n=108) or monthly (n=115). As expected, the most common form of engagement was via reactions, with sixty percent of users reporting daily use of this feature to respond to posts or comments (n=210) and ninety-six percent of users reacting at least once a month (n=337). While not verifiable due to the relative lack of data for >implying, these numbers are consistent with ethnographic observation of both communities. The similarity in forms of engagement between two Facebook Groups containing quite different practices could suggest that the adapted use of specific platform affordances for the exchange of subcultural capital is common across music communities on Facebook, and potentially beyond, with the popularity of the reaction feature allowing for low-effort engagement with high potential affective impact (as identified in Chapter Three).

Among the reasons chosen for membership in DGSP, the most popular answer selected was 'shitposting & memes', in line with the ethos of 'upload trash'. Variations of 'making friends' and 'meeting people' were popular custom answers to this question. The community would therefore seem to act as a means of connecting geographically dispersed fans, who potentially do not have a way to engage in Death Grips fandom in an offline setting. This corroborates past academic observations discussed in the introduction to this project, and which theorised that in the absence of geographically rooted scenes and subcultures in the twenty-first century, young people are increasingly likely engage in subcultural activity online (Peterson & Bennett 2004).

The social functions of the Group might seem somewhat surprising due to its size, but one aspect of the community that appears to encourage a relaxed social environment is its administrator and founding member Paulo. Quite unlike the strictly organised hierarchy of

genius.com users or the admin team of >implying, who enforce Group rules from atop an authoritarian but relatively flat hierarchy of moderation, Paulo is a highly visible and regular contributor to DGSP, frequently posting memes and his own Death Grips inspired artwork, as well as engaging with the posts of other users.

In interview, Paulo explained how he began the Group specifically as a space to which he could escape from the more anti-social and reactionary members of the fandom after being ‘harassed, antagonised and ultimately ostracised’ from another Death Grips Facebook Group by its ‘extremely racist’ members. After this incident, in May 2016 he set up his own community and utilising his skills with the Facebook platform and a deep understanding of online culture, began to promote it in other fan and audience spaces on Facebook, posting internet memes mashing up references to Death Grips with the topic of each community: ‘If I wanted to get some guys from the SpongeBob Group to join mine, I’d share SpongeBob crossover content from the Death Grips Group in the SpongeBob Group and so on and so on.’ This strategy resulted in his new community quickly outstripping any other Facebook Group devoted to the band, ultimately growing to be ten times the size of the community from which Paulo had been expelled.

This rapid growth demonstrates the power and utility of the ‘upload trash’ ethos, not only reflected in the Group’s original name but also in the way the community was born, demonstrating that Death Grips’ online identity and association with meme culture can also be wielded by members of their audience to powerful effect. This technique reaches users through precise engagement with specific audiences through the creative application of meme culture rather than impersonal, large-scale viral marketing. Paulo was mentioned and praised by several of the other interviewees for his approach to running the Group, which he describes as

a ‘commitment to lax moderation and allowing people to post virtually anything they wanted’ while remaining vigilant and strict on users who break harassment rules specifically:

I learned that Facebook Groups are much like economies. Liberalisation is a potent tool when applied wherever appropriate because it’s necessary for growth, but to prevent its consequences from running amok a strong guiding hand is needed, even if using that hand makes you sick to your stomach.

- Paulo

As suggested by this statement, Paulo is also acutely aware of and invested in online political discourse. Active in many of Facebook’s leftist communities, he describes himself as a ‘vehement Marxist’. While he accepts that many DGSP members may not share this position, he still views the Group through a politicised lens: ‘There’s a lot of love for social democrats, anti-fascism and anarchism and a lot of hostility towards fascism, conservatism, traditionalism and capitalism; but at the same time Marxism-Leninism, China, and anything deemed to be authoritarianism is similarly unpopular.’

Along with some light moderation from a small team, the community’s confrontational culture and broadly left-wing political consensus acts to socially pressure those whose views are not welcome. The Group’s Public status allows entry to anyone with a Facebook account, resulting in the frequent appearance of members who publicly dismiss or ridicule others’ readings of Death Grips as left leaning, either for contrarian or political reasons. Sexist and racist humour are also quite often found in the Group, but—in contrast to many other shitposting communities—this behaviour is generally met with extremely negative responses by other users. Mark, one member described how Paulo’s hands-off approach results in the freedom for members to publicly shame those whose politics appear to run contrary to those of the

community and by extension, the band: ‘You get this self-regulation where it’s like ‘so you’re a libertarian capitalist and you’re in a fucking Death Grips Group? What the fuck is wrong with you? Are you a fucking idiot? Have you just never listened to the music?’’

To some, this social alternative to increased oversight by moderators is a key core of the Group’s culture. One survey respondent listed this among the most important functions of the Group and described their irritation with ‘right-wingers masquerading as centrists’ who ‘ignore the political views of the band’. These assertions of Death Grips’ political identity reflect frustrations within the community at what certain members see as a ridiculous misconception by any fans who do not share that reading of the band and their music. As will be explained in the following section, the ‘Is this DG?’ therefore acts as a defence mechanism against perceived misreadings of Death Grips’ (and the community’s) political identity, but also as a collective meditation on the nature of politicised music and the artistic value of floating signifiers.

‘Is this DG?’: origin

It began as a racist joke. In many cases the specific origin of a meme has essentially no bearing on the use, form or meaning it conveys beyond initial recognisability (as is the case with visual memes featuring celebrities, popular media or current events). But ‘Is this DG?’ is atypical in this regard as understanding how it began provides essential insight into the role it has come to play in the DGSP community and the way that its original meaning has been stripped away and replaced by something much more malleable. For several years preceding the formation of the Group in 2016, due to the extremely online nature of the Death Grips fandom, many of its members (and those of other online music communities) developed a self-effacing image of themselves as socially awkward, white, suburban American teenagers.

One in-joke that arose out of this reflexive idea among Death Grips fans was that some of their members were so sheltered, ignorant and unfamiliar with hip-hop culture that they would even fail to be able to distinguish Death Grips' front man Stefan Burnett from any other Black person. This idea was also related to the band's lack of social media presence, meaning that new photographs of the members (a vital currency in any digital fandom) were in short supply and shared with excitement whenever posted or discovered online. From this context, a meme emerged whereby an image of any two white men and a black man would be posted accompanied by the question 'Is this DG?', meaning 'is this a new picture of the band?'

Humour rooted in this kind of self-deprecation is common in meme cultures either as a means of 'getting by' as a minority within a hostile community (Dobson 2015, Fathallah 2021), or as a way for a community of self-identified outcasts to work through feelings of self-loathing while also policing the boundaries of their collective identity (Trammell 2014, Cottee 2020). Here it performs the latter function, but also works to assert the Death Grips fandom's identity as politically incorrect and 'unafraid' of offending the sensibilities of those to whom racist jokes are unpalatable. But however brave and fearless the originators of this meme might have felt they were, for many in the self-consciously antiracist DGSP Group this kind of joke is regressive and dull, racial humour being the very antithesis of the perceived political leanings of the band among the community's members. But rather than banning its use, the community began to broaden the meme's usage, mutating it into an unrecognisable form using abstraction and subversion to strip away meaning in a way that itself feels aligned with the Death Grips ethos.

Eventually, where once the meme consisted of two white bodies and one black body representing the band's personnel, 'Is this DG?' now asked members whether any object,

action or abstract concept ‘felt’ like Death Grips to them, with the community’s collective reaction to each post determining the answer. Soon the question ‘Is this DG?’ accompanied grainy videos of disturbing, bizarre or foolhardy behaviour; violent reactions against bigotry and antifascist political action. ‘DG’ status had come to denote affinity with the band’s aesthetic sensibilities, artistic approach, and politics – summary of Death Grips’ music, curated by community members via the uploading and discursive analysis of trash. Here we find the first of Cavicchi’s interpretive moves as applied to fans’ interpretation of musical meaning, ‘summarising the music’ (Cavicchi 1998:116), which broadly describes the idea of the DG concept itself, an attempt to locate the meaning of Death Grips based on an abstract representation of the nature of their artistic project as a whole.

Typically, a post asking, ‘is this DG?’ is accompanied by a concept, idea or media text of some kind. This could be an image, a video, a recent or ongoing event, a piece of music or artist, but is occasionally more abstract, such as a political ideology. The community then responds to the post’s question in the form of ‘reacts’ and comments which, as they accumulate, gradually produce a consensus. Some posts are quickly confirmed by the community as being DG, with a majority of love or like reactions and affirming comments with their own positive reactions; but others are more controversial and can result in significant debate or conflict between users, accompanied a different spread of reactions to the post and comments making the case for either side.

During this ritual, several processes are at work in the negotiation of musical meaning. Firstly, the post author has selected and decided to offer something to the Group for consideration. In doing so, they presumably have already formed a personal reading of that media text – one that they are hoping to compare to that of the rest of the community. This forms an aesthetic

reflexive expression of musical identity similar to that described by Tia DeNora (1999), or in Frith's 'badge' of recognition (1981), with the offered media essentially being proposed as aesthetically, politically or otherwise strongly aligned with Death Grips' musical identity. The poster's determination that their post does or does not align in this way acts as a form of proof that they are capable of discerning what is and is not DG, reinforcing not only the poster's sense of belonging in the community, but also their levels of subcultural capital and individual status as someone who understands Death Grips.

Secondly, the posted media object is interpreted by the community, their collective reading of it lined up with that of the DG concept for comparison. This results in an aggregate opinion shaped by the users who are able to respond, and exerting collective power over the meaning of DG, as well as the relationship between that meaning and the proposed object. However, they do this without running the risk of rejection that faces the post's author, and therefore do not have access to the same potential benefits as they would if the post is successfully determined to be DG. Finally, whether it is accepted or rejected by the community, the posted object itself has been added to the assemblage of objects used to define the nature and meaning of DG in the community's collective imagination.

As outlined in Chapter One, assemblages can be broadly defined by the level of coding and territorialisation among their component parts or segments (DeLanda 2016). In this context, the assemblage's level of coding can be described based on the internal organisation of DG objects, which I have mapped onto three more kinds of interpretive moves: aesthetic, political and biographical associations from which meaning is derived (Cavicchi 1998:116-119). Meanwhile, in this case the assemblage's level of territorialisation describes how contested the

meaning of DG is, and how heterogenous its segments are – i.e. how strong the consensus is as to what DG means, and whether certain things are and are not DG.

The addition of a new segment to the DG assemblage via an ‘is this DG?’ post always has an impact on its nature and emergent properties, but how readily it is absorbed into the assemblage is always determined by a process of collective interpretation. For example, if a post asks whether a politically charged event or action is DG, the community’s response is shaped by a collective interpretation of the political meaning of Death Grips, a meaning which goes on to be shaped by the inclusion or exclusion of the proposed segment. Similarly, if a film is considered for DG status, so is any artistic meaning the film might be understood to contain. In this way the DG concept gradually accrues meaning over time as new additions are made to the assemblage of things previously judged to be DG. The next section looks at the way that the DG concept and the meanings emergent from it are understood by the Group’s members, with strata of its multimedia assemblage defined by three broad categories.

Defining ‘DG’: aesthetics, politics & experience

The previous section outlined the origins and basic identity forming processes at work in the ‘Is this DG?’ meme I was able to discern during participant observation. However, to develop a detailed understanding of these processes it is also vital to gain insight into the way the members themselves view their participation, particularly when it comes to the nature of DG itself. Over the meme’s years of popularity as a community practice, the Group has not developed a stable definition of the DG concept, or even a rough framework for defining its boundaries. As a result, while members appear confident in assessing whether or not a given thing is DG, explaining the exact meaning of DG can be difficult even for frequent participants in the interpretive ritual.

Anticipating this problem, my survey also asked respondents to provide two examples of a ‘thing’: one they felt was DG and one that was not. For some this was still not enough, as one respondent complained that they were not permitted to upload images as answers, suggesting that an example of the concept is not even possible to express through language. Despite this user’s concerns however, many of the examples provided through the medium of text have offered insight that is useful to this chapter’s analysis, generally falling into three categories or strata within the assemblage of media used to articulate the DG concept: aesthetic, political, and those based in identity.

Of the survey respondents’ examples of objects that do and do not fit the description of DG, among the most straightforward were aesthetic associations – works or artists deemed to share elements of Death Grips’ artistic identity. Many were musical, such as Jimi Hendrix, Nick Blinko of Rudimentary Peni, art-rapper MF DOOM and ‘hyperpop’ experimentalists SOPHIE and 100 geecs. These last two examples were likely chosen due to the association with online music culture they share with Death Grips, along with their similarly disruptive musical aesthetics. For these reasons, both SOPHIE and 100 geecs are among the internet-based artists whose work I analyse in Chapter Seven. Examples of other DG media included comedian Eric Andre, David Cronenberg and several Japanese films including seminal anime *Akira* (1988) and cyberpunk horror *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* (1989).

The second category of response to this question (and which represents another type of interpretive move) were political associations. These featured political figures and movements such as Bernie Sanders, Black Lives Matter and Antifa, as well as politically charged actions: ‘punching Nazis’ (perhaps the most popular answer overall), ‘destroying capitalism’, ‘rioting

against police brutality’, ‘stealing/pirating a record’ and violence against child abusers. In this category, several answers referred to popular ‘Is this DG?’ posts made on the Group; notably an interview with activist Austin Clay who used a pickaxe to destroy Donald Trump’s star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame and later revealed he had been listening to Death Grips on his headphones during the act (Figure 6.2). For the respondents who answered in this way, the interpretive moves undertaken by the community around each of these memorable posts contributed quite directly to the creation of musical meaning around the DG concept.

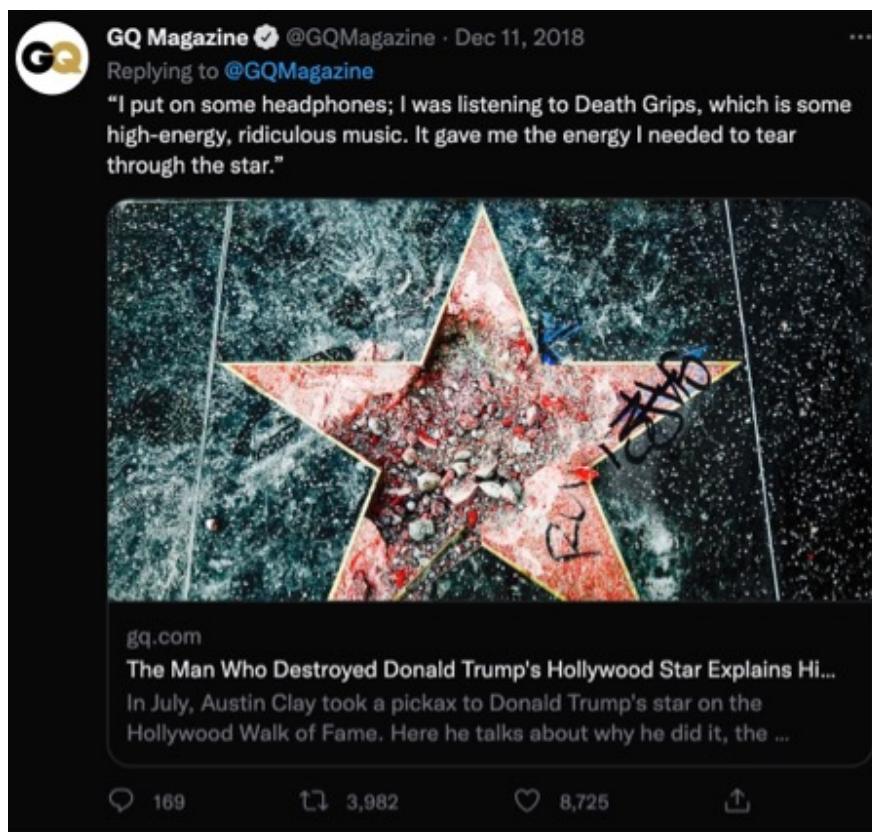


Figure 6.2: A tweet from GQ Magazine quoting the Hollywood Star vandal, whose actions were widely praised in the DGSP Group.

Many examples of DG situations and actions were also offered by Group members, some being based upon lived experience. One such example was offered in interview by Chilean

community member Alessa, who described living through the protests that swept her country in 2019:

I'm in Chile, and two years ago we had this crazy revolution of the people. I started to see a lot of police brutality every day, it was super stressful. Then I remembered 'I've Seen Footage' and it kind of clicked, you know? [...] I remember in the revolution times here in Chile I used to post – not fully police brutality – but some posts saying, 'OK this is happening in Chile' and people generally received it well.

- Alessa

Here, Alessa is comparing the experience of witnessing state violence near her home to 'I've Seen Footage' (2012), a Death Grips song in which Burnett recounts internet-mediated experiences of violence witnessed in viral videos and on social media. Alessa was among the Chilean community members who posted in the Group during the protests to explain the political situation and provide updates, to which she felt the membership were receptive. While not originally presented in the 'Is this DG?' format, these posts appear to have left a lasting impression on some members, as more than a year later in January 2021, four different survey respondents living outside Latin America (in New Zealand, Australia, The Netherlands and the UK) used the Chilean protests as examples of something that was DG. This and other experiential examples form the interpretive move of making both personal and biographical associations, as the meaning of DG is formed from association with the experience of political violence by one—and then many—members of the community.

Along with these artistic and political categories, many survey answers linked the DG idea with absurdism, attempting to emulate its spirit with an abusive, non-sequitur or otherwise

trollish response. This refusal to complete the survey as intended ironically—though perhaps intentionally—provided an insightful expressive demonstration of their understanding of the DG concept and relationship with it. On the other hand, some members were irritated by the survey’s questions on this subject, tersely answering that only Death Grips themselves and their music should be considered DG. It is unclear whether this opposition was to the survey’s obvious interest in codifying a community-specific subcultural practice, or to the existence of the meme itself, but distaste for the popularity of ‘is this DG’ posts is not an uncommon sentiment in the Group.

Finally, some respondents chose to illustrate the concept via comparison with individuals belonging to oppressed or minority identities, particularly those deemed as brave or disruptive of patriarchy, with answers including ‘queerness’, ‘being trans’ and ‘furries’ (an often-maligned online subculture whose members inhabit alternate anthropomorphic identities called ‘fursonas’). The answer ‘kissing the homies goodnight’ was given by three separate users, referencing an internet meme popularly used to make fun of homophobia and hegemonic masculinity. Appearing in this context, the meme acts both as an example of uninhibited, fearless disregard for social norms, while also asserting the community’s embrace of alternative masculinities and homosexuality. In terms of Cavicchi’s set of interpretive moves (1998), these answers derive meaning from several different types of association: aesthetic, political, biographical (as many members of the Group are visibly gender non-conforming) and (for those community members who themselves identify as LGBT) personal.

Despite a certain amount of consensus within the community that aligns DG’s meaning with these kinds of values, Paulo’s light administrative touch cannot insulate the Group from all homophobic or transphobic content any more than the community’s broad political consensus

can keep out right-wingers. What it can do, however is very visibly demonstrate support for LGBT issues from the majority of members that might be or might just appear to be absent in other online spaces, leading users with these identities to feel isolated, especially in the face of any negative experiences with a minority of bigoted individuals in the community. Posts defending trans rights (particularly those celebrating acts of protest and vandalism targeting transphobic groups and individuals) are very popular. But certainly the most visible example of DGSP's support for its trans members is 'Transposting', a very popular series of threads in which queer, trans and non-binary members of DGSP gather and encourage one another to post selfies introducing themselves. One interview subject, Max, discussed their experiences in the Group as a non-binary person, comparing DGSP favourably with other Musicbook Groups in which they spend time, despite its more abrasive aspects. 'It's just a good space for people who want edgy humour but also want to be respected for not being a white cis male.'

The issue of patriarchy is an aspect of identity that the DGSP community means to reclaim and subvert in response to accusations of toxicity aimed both at the band's online following and at Death Grips' music. Declaring 'kissing the homies goodnight' as DG constitutes an audience elaboration on interview statements by band members Hill and Burnett responding to accusations that their music celebrates aggressive, masculine sexuality. In a rare on-the-record response to a question about the penis adorning *No Love Deep Web*'s album artwork, Burnett suggested the intended message was more nuanced than many assumed: 'If you look at that and all you see is a dick, I don't really have anything to say, pretty much.' Later in the same interview, Hill defended the album cover as a legitimate artistic response to what he called the band being cast in an 'aggressive, male-based, [and] by some, misogynistic-seeming' light. This was followed by a question from the famously shy Burnett: 'I mean, do we seem like macho people?' (Weingarten 2012). Here we can see the way that in the DGSP community,


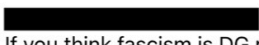
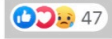
the DG concept works to contribute to and support the projected identity of the band, both in terms of their music and the members' sense of self. The distinction drawn by the band between the sound of their music and their values as people is reflected by the examples of 'DG' concepts from the survey responses that were intended to clarify what has been interpreted as Death Grips' authentic musical and political identity, while also contributing to that identity by drawing on their own feelings and experiences.


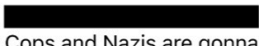

When asked for things that were not DG, users provided inverse equivalents for each category discussed above; artistic (mainstream pop stars) and political (Trump, Nazism) as well as large corporations, respect for authority, record labels and transphobia. A particularly popular example, 'storming the Capitol' reflected a then-recent dispute on the Group after one member asked whether the events of 21 January 2021 in Washington D.C. were DG (Figure 6.3).




 Aldo Rainne
6 January at 21:02 ·

Say what you will about their political affiliation but I feel like this is



 
If you think fascism is DG please find a cliff and run
Like · Reply · 5 d  47

 
Cops and Nazis are gonna eat each other in front of the main symbol of modern capitalist oppression...so yeh, this is pretty DG
Like · Reply · 5 d  7

 
The cops are handling the fascists with kids gloves.
They're literally begging them to go home while they storm congressional offices. Kissing their boobos n shit
Like · Reply · 5 d  16


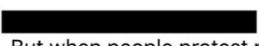

 
But when people protest police violence they get hit with the tear gas. This country is a fuckin joke
Like · Reply · 5 d  2

Figure 6.3: Top: a post on DEATH GRIPS SNITCHPOSTING proposing that an event qualifies as 'DG'. Bottom: selected comments from the resulting discussion.

These users pointed out that while attacking the US Capitol Building was in line with the DG spirit, the event's motivation disqualified it: 'They've somehow done the most DG thing possible for the most anti-DG reason'. Debates like this one are not uncommon in the community and in this instance many users have ultimately interpreted the event as not being DG – inspiring several survey respondents to cite it as such. Unlike the system at work on

genius.com there is no codified way for the community's collaborative acts of interpretation to reach a consensus, but the proportion of 'reacts' to a given topic, argument or comment offering the best insight into the final conclusion. In the context of this research however, some definitive consensus is visible through a total lack of opposition. For example, among three hundred and fifty-one responses to the survey, no one suggested that anything on the political right could be DG, suggesting that the Group had either successfully removed all members with these views through its social tactics described above, or perhaps that these users simply preferred not to consider the DG concept in directly political terms.

Meme, meaning & personal identity

Despite the fairly high level of stratification outlined in the previous section, responses to the question 'what makes something DG' would suggest that in DeLanda's terms, the DG assemblage is significantly deterritorialised, with no clear consensus or, in some cases, the will to produce an answer. While a broad consensus on the aesthetic, political and social meaning of the DG identity was discernible from respondents' examples and metaphors, this was not the case when they were simply asked 'What makes something DG?'. As well as ranging wildly in their explanations, the responses also varied in their level of certainty, ranging from hesitance ('idk', 'not sure, it's just a vibe') and reductive brevity ('edgy shit', 'it's audacity', 'not giving a fuck') to longer, more descriptive responses trying to pick the concept apart:

A mix of something being unexpected, dissonant, creative, violent and progressive.

- Liz

Something that is primordially aggro but also very anti-establishment and daring and often "experimental". It's a pretty loose concept but those are some common elements, not necessarily all together.

- Lucia

If it matches the overall sonic, political, social and aesthetic ideas and beliefs put forward by the Group.

- anonymous

Other answers made appeals to authentic expressions of identity: 'visceral authenticity', 'expressing yourself and being your true self disregarding the hierarchies and norms that govern mainstream society'. As an aside, these answers provide further support for Chapter Four's argument that however unwieldy it may be as an objective mode, the concept of authenticity will remain relevant to academic musicology for as long as it plays such a central role in the way audiences think and talk about music. Moving beyond the notion of authentic expression, some community members instead focused on the flexible, subjective nature of the DG concept; pointing out how it has changed over time and even claiming that it has no intrinsic meaning of its own, suggesting some awareness of DG's function as a means of projecting and solidifying the community's shared sense of self. This perspective was expressed in detail by several of the interviewed users, demonstrating the self-reflexive impulse commonly found in internet culture, and that contributes to the identity of both Death Grips and these members of their audience.

For example, Graham explained that beyond the inspiration provided by Death Grip's music, the band's affinity for and participation in shitposting culture also shaped way he understands the meaning of DG:

Shitposting is very much in the Death Grips philosophy of being like ‘fuck it, I don’t care what someone else said the rules are, I don’t care what the expectation is for me, I don’t care what potential effect this is going to have on someone, I just really want to make this post about mantis shrimp right now.’ I find this to be wonderful, and I find this it to be artistic, liberating and very human.

- Graham

Graham appears to view the DG meme as a celebration of meaningless expression made possible by the internet and social media. This suggests that the DG concept can also be understood as a particular approach to being online: a way of acting, rather than a way of thinking, just like the modes of consumption promoted by the ‘music nerd’ identity explored in Chapters Three and Four. A similar view of DG is held by Max, who points to the indeterminacy that arises from the reflexivity inherent in online existence: ‘through subversion it’s become meaningless to us. It doesn’t even mean what it means anymore.’ On the other hand, some respondents see the DG concept in a more constructive light. For example, Mark, who in the survey summed DG up in the pithy phrase ‘visceral authenticity’, described what he understood as the Group ‘building lore for Death Grips’ as a response to the lack of information available about the band. In this sense, this lore is not unlike the internet’s many vast, fan-operated digital repositories of information on fictional characters, video game worlds and other metadata surrounding established intellectual properties. Online audiences commonly create fan media to explore, nuance or provide alternative versions of the media they consume, expressing themselves through the frameworks provided in a way that produces new textual meanings just as it reinforces and expresses personal and collective identity.

To this set of respondents, the DG concept is a free-floating, malleable identity defined by the assemblage of media that the DGSP community judges to align with Death Grips' musical project. Rather than attributing any specific identity to the band, Graham instead relates to Death Grips precisely because he feels no need to do so:

Look at something like punk music for example. It is quite often characterised by what it is in opposition to, or is a response to, whereas I get this emotion or idea when engaging with Death Grips' music—and to an extent with the fanbase in shitposting Groups like this—where my identity or how I perceive my identity doesn't have to be a response to something. It doesn't have to be in contrast to something else, it can just be what it is.

- Graham

It is interesting that Graham would distinguish this concept from his conception of punk while describing something quite similar to Hebdige's original 1979 reading of the subculture referenced in the opening to this chapter. For Graham, Death Grips provide a form of punk that (unlike the long-obliterated 1970s movement), resists identification, and is therefore resistant to reincorporation into its commodity form. Meanwhile, the malleable, evolving nature of the DG concept also provides some sense of musical or political meaning to the band's fans online. Through the ever-shifting DG meme, the band's identity is actively resistant to attacks from capital – it can only be framed or defined from within its own subculture through ritual participation.

As of 2022, the DEATH GRIPS SNITCHPOSTING community is still growing (if not at quite the same rate as >implying) and the 'Is this DG?' meme is still a core part of the Group's culture, with daily posts asking the question, many of which become extremely popular. Death

Grips are no longer regularly releasing music, but the collective online project at work within their largest fan community is still developing and offering new audience members an internet-mediated means of articulating their own identities while also contributing to the collective understanding of Death Grips' music.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the ways that a fan community for the band Death Grips utilises online media and a variety of discourses (aesthetic, artistic, political and social) to craft and curate a musical identity for the band. In turn, this identity is used by members of the community to identify themselves as a group within the band's audience in ways that reflect forms of political consensus in that group and presents the space they occupy as simultaneously valuing free expression, transgressive art and fringe politics, while also not tolerating identity-based hatred. Death Grips' music and 'upload trash' slogan are affectively charged expressions of the ambivalent internet cultural register and related shitposting practices, inspiring the band's audience to use these practices to define the band themselves via the DG concept, the meaning of which expresses both Death Grips and their audience's collective musical identity. The open-ended nature of DG allows for its use as, on the one hand, a means of working through material struggles and real encounters with political violence and oppression (as seen in the Chilean example); and on the other, a way for all community members to celebrate any aspects of their own identity assemblage that feel as free from possessing fixed meaning as the band's music.

As an artistic entity, Death Grips exists in the form of the band's music but also as an assemblage of online media and discourse. I will further develop the notion of music operating as part of an internet-embedded media assemblage in Chapter Eight, where the forms of online

music fandom explored in earlier chapters are reframed and incorporated into a composer's process of musical production. Before this however, Chapter Seven will explore the broader history of music with aesthetic and cultural ties to online culture. Together these final two case studies will complete the project with an exploration of the ways that online cultural practices and aesthetics are incorporated into music itself.

Chapter Seven – Hyperpop: internet music, platform capitalism & gender

So far, this project has primarily explored how *musical identity* can be expressed through online activity. Now, Chapters Seven and Eight will demonstrate a partial inversion of this phenomenon: the ways that *online identity* is expressed via musical practice. The shift in focus from one to the other has already begun. Chapter Five introduced the role of authorial intent to interpretive fan communities, and Chapter Six analysed the music of a band outwardly engaged with online culture in the themes and presentation of their work. The final pair of case studies now completes this process, further exploring how the online experience can be translated into forms of musical expression. The common threads of platform mastery, conspicuous consumption and ambivalent, vernacular discourse observed in earlier case studies are still present. But rather than mediating musical identity, in Chapters Seven and Eight they can instead be seen among the features of the online experience that musicians use to express their belonging to online music culture, and to express the complexities of contemporary digital identity.

Chapter Seven examines hyperpop, an emerging subgenre of popular music for which the internet—and its power to mediate and reconstruct identity—forms a central part of its appeal and aesthetic palette. Hyperpop mediates the experience of internet culture and platform literacy both sonically and in its lyrical themes but is not the first genre of music to do this, descending from earlier forms of music to emerge online such as mashup, vaporwave and nightcore. The aesthetic qualities and themes of these genres all influenced hyperpop in their own way, but also each continue to demonstrate the way that in online culture, musical production nearly always incorporates elements of consumption into its processes. This

principle is expanded upon significantly in Chapter Eight, the final case study and more in-depth piece of textual musical analysis found in the project. Chapter Eight continues to investigate the musical expression of online identity by returning to the work of Daniel Lopatin, and how his 2015 album *Garden of Delete* made use of online platforms to weave an abstract, nonlinear narrative that reflexively explores the composer's adolescent memories of the internet before the advent of music streaming and domination of platform capitalism. This narrative therefore brings together strands from all previous case studies and provides a focal point for the findings of the project as a whole. As mentioned at the start of the project, Lopatin's influence on internet music culture exists far beyond the record examined in Chapter Eight. This wider impact forms an important part of the following chapter.

Music for the perpetually online

What makes hyperpop particularly relevant to this project is the way it is integrated with digital platforms, as the creation, dissemination, consumption, discussion and even definition of this music are all primarily mediated through platforms. For example, an online community for hyperpop fans on Reddit describes the genre by quoting the hyperpop Wikipedia page, itself paraphrasing an online article from *The Independent*:

Hyperpop is a genre of music that reflects an exaggerated, eclectic, and self-referential approach to pop music and typically employs elements such as brash synth melodies, Auto-Tuned 'earworm' vocals and excessive compression and distortion. (Pritchard 2020)

When engaging with hyperpop, one is always part of a long chain of online mediation. As a genre born of internet culture hyperpop therefore shares many of the features of online discourse that have recurred throughout the other case studies – reflexivity, ambivalence,

juxtaposition, bricolage and a seemingly intrinsic understanding of the fluid and unfixed nature of personal and group identity. Thanks to this, hyperpop is broadly interpreted by its audience as a musical mediation of the online experience, designed by *and* for people for whom the internet is an important and even primary tool for social interaction and self-expression. This is also illustrated well by a post in the above-mentioned Reddit community, where one of the all-time most popular posts is a screenshot of a YouTube comment claiming that fans of popular hyperpop duo 100 geecs are ‘just people who had unsupervised internet access since childhood’ (Figure 7.1). The image indicates that the original post was liked around thirty thousand times by YouTube users. Aside even from the indicatively cross-platform nature of this screenshot, the popularity of such a post among fans of the genre demonstrates its success as a representation of online identity.

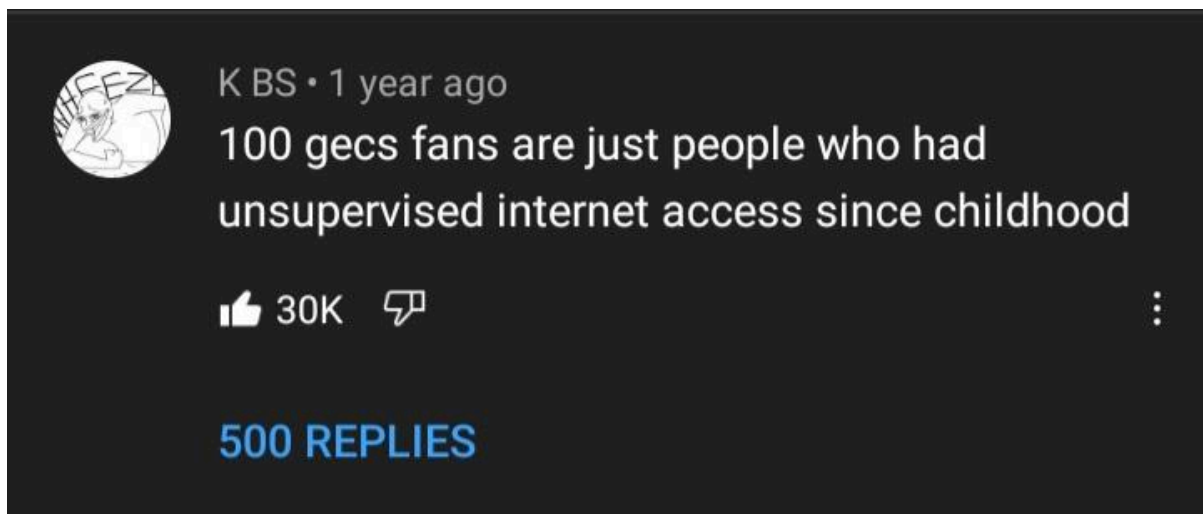


Figure 7.1: A screenshot from YouTube, posted to the r/hyperpop community on Reddit.

But this chapter is not about hyperpop’s audience or reception. Instead, it will demonstrate how hyperpop acts in its role as a form of internet-mediated identity expression for the genre’s artists, and a reflexive exploration of the relationship between identity and the digital, especially around the issue of gender. Among the many aesthetic and thematic juxtapositions

that define the genre, perhaps the most important is hyperpop's ability to reassert and celebrate many of the same ideas and promises of the earliest incarnations of digital identity discussed in Chapter One, while also unmistakably being both a product and beneficiary of the platform-dominated environment of the contemporary internet. In this project, hyperpop therefore works as a useful example of the way that entanglements between musical and digital identity practice are expressed, sold and understood by internet-based musicians and audiences. As the first of two chapters focussed on the identity expression of internet-based musicians, this also sets the stage for the next case study, in which a more in-depth analysis of a specific musical work develops many of the ideas presented in this chapter, as well as the project's earlier case studies.

The following analysis describes how hyperpop carries with it many of the cultural and political attitudes associated with online culture – particularly those relating to identity – and how these ideas are conveyed musically. The genre's aesthetic strategies of juxtaposing extremely different timbres and genres illustrate the instability, polarisation and playfulness of online discourse, while also representing an ambivalent synthesis or coexistence of opposing ideas and meanings. Queer aesthetics combine with a posthuman attitude to identity in many of hyperpop's lyrics and accompanying media, in what has been called 'digital queering' (Waugh 2017). This effect echoes early accounts of online identity discussed in Chapter One, in which the internet freed users from the constraints of their physical bodies as digital communication and intimacy offered them a means of self-expression that was unfixed and ongoing, and which could account for a broad range of identities and experiences in terms of gender and sexuality.

For hyperpop's musicians and audience, many of whom identify as queer, the genre's themes and aesthetic language reaffirm this idea. Hyperpop expresses a postmodern, even posthuman attitude to identity in which the material and political conditions that often mark the queer

experience can be transcended with the use of technology. As a result, the genre has come to act as a musical nexus for online queer culture, as well as the expression of internet-mediated identity more broadly. Meanwhile, hyperpop's necessary embrace of platform capitalism strengthens the genre's ability to articulate the online queer experience, by reflecting the often ambivalent relationship between marginalised communities and the digital platforms on which they depend for meaningful self-expression.

In order to properly map out the relationship between the hyperpop genre and online culture, it is first necessary to introduce the lineage of musical innovation and experimentation loosely defined by the term 'internet music', of which I will argue hyperpop is one of the most successful recent examples. Three earlier forms of internet music are discussed in the context of their stylistic and subcultural links to the development of hyperpop. This is followed by an introduction to hyperpop's core features and early history and its relationship with major digital platforms, a factor that has been instrumental in driving its success and appeal. Finally, selected works by two hyperpop artists will be analysed, with particular focus on the strategies they employ in the expression and exploration of internet-mediated identity.

The first of these artists is Scottish producer and songwriter SOPHIE, who in 2018 drew mainstream critical attention to hyperpop with her Grammy-nominated debut LP *The Oil of Every Pearls Un-Insides*. The other artist I will discuss is American duo 100 geecs, whose music and influence as curators of Spotify's 'hyperpop' playlist has been a major factor in the genre's surge in popularity since 2019. As well as being major contributors to the proliferation of hyperpop among online audiences and its legitimisation by the musical establishment, the music of both these artists acts as a key site for the expression and celebration of transgender identity in a way that draws explicit links between online musical practice and the internet's

ability to challenge and disrupt hegemonic notions around gender, even in the age of platform capitalism.

Internet music

Since the earliest incarnations of networked computer culture, various strands of internet-mediated music-making have developed in relative isolation from each other, with some beginning in the pre-internet computer networks of the 1970s and others arising from online communities or in the wake of new technology. In cases of the latter category online music-making is often tied to digital platforms, as the affordances and scale of file sharing, social media and other platform-based technologies open up possibilities for entirely new ways of creating music. But unlike the platform-dependent communities studied in Chapters Three, Five and Six, music-making practices born of specific platform technologies often outlive those platforms and continue to thrive in new contexts.

For the purposes of research and discussion, grouping such a multitude of practices into a single musical category is difficult, but among the attempts to do so perhaps the most enduring is the idea of internet music. In his introduction to a special issue of *Contemporary Music Review* entitled ‘Internet Music’, Andrew Hugill attempts to draw a line between true internet music – that is, music composed or performed through the direct use of networked digital technology – and that which is merely influenced by what he calls an ‘internet aesthetic’, a set of musical features, formal components and signs that evoke an *idea* of the internet (Hugill 2005). While this was an important distinction for experimental academic composers in 2005, the mainstreaming of internet culture in the decades since has resulted in a significant broadening of the ways in which online media and sociality can relate to and influence the music-making process. The idea of internet music has therefore since broadened to include music that would

never or could never have existed without online culture, including music created specifically for online audiences, by internet-based artists or that is very engaged with online culture (Harper 2016). Alternative terms such as ‘internet mediated music’ also sometimes appear in journalism and scholarship (Born & Haworth 2017), with the older, more specific concept described by Hugill now generally called ‘computer network music’.

Hyperpop’s status as internet music arises from a combination of factors. Internet-mediated collaboration across various platforms and active communities is common among hyperpop musicians at every level of prominence, but this is also true of many genres less closely associated with online culture, and alone it is not necessarily enough to make hyperpop internet music. Beyond this though, the genre’s frequent utilisation of glitch and digital noise as musical features certainly evoke Hugill’s internet aesthetic. But beyond this, its thematic engagement with online life and internet-mediated sociality combines with its spread and popularisation via digital platforms to strengthen hyperpop’s identity as being ‘of’ the internet.

As this chapter demonstrates, it is also possible to identify historical, aesthetic and subcultural links between hyperpop and forms of internet music that predate it – links that can help to more clearly show how the genre works to express internet mediated identity. Its stylistic roots are tied to long established audience-led compositional practices that developed in online communities first discussed in Chapter One, offering insight into how hyperpop operates aesthetically and politically. Just as musical traditions and genres operating within different communities in the same city can have an impact on one another’s development, so too do different forms of internet music influence one another, along with sharing some aesthetic and political features derived from the nature of online culture more broadly.

The following section will now therefore introduce and outline three older forms of internet music that can help to demonstrate these relationships, their aesthetic and political elements laying the groundwork for the development of a nuanced understanding of contemporary hyperpop. The first of these is the musical practice known as mashup, which conceptually predates the internet but enjoyed particular popularity in tight-knit online communities in the mid-2000s, occasionally achieving more mainstream recognition. In contrast with mashup (which can be best understood as a compositional technique), the other forms of internet music discussed more closely fit the label of ‘genre’. These related genres, vaporwave and nightcore, were among the first internet music phenomena to gain widespread recognition for their relationship to—and effective musical evocation of—online culture. In this account mashup, vaporwave and nightcore have been chosen for particular attention, but other online genres and online forms are also mentioned, as each has had their own influence on the central issue of hyperpop’s relationship with digital identity.

Mashup

In their utilisation of various internet affordances and virtual contexts to experiment with identities, texts and narrative, online fan communities and related music cultures are often marked by a destabilisation of various hierarchies and traditional dialectics (e.g. the real/virtual, the intertextual/intratextual, audience/creator). A typical feature of online culture, this destabilisation and rejection of hierarchies is therefore also often present in internet music, mirroring not only the structural nature of the internet, but also the identities and political views of its creators. As will be exemplified later in this chapter, hyperpop conveys many of these features itself, but to understand the way it does this we must first look to the roots of the genre’s musical language.

As explained in Chapter One, in the early years of widespread online file sharing (around the early to mid-2000s), communities that developed around peer-to-peer platforms rejected traditional models of consumption and community, forming their own social hierarchies based in the unbalanced but mutually beneficial power dynamics of file sharing (Adar & Huberman 2000, Cooper & Harrison 2001). Ideas inherited from offline Punk and DIY music cultures were combined with the aesthetics of piracy and cyber-utopianism in the collective identity and musicking practices of these communities. Sean Ebare characterised these networks as new sites of subcultural resistance in which the sharing of files acted as a ‘locus for negotiations of meaning and identity among music fans’, accompanied by social activities including ‘online chatting, personal image sharing and blogging’ (Ebare 2004), as well as the creation and sharing of original music.

Technological competence and perceived familiarity with internet culture became markers of authenticity and legitimacy along with more typical subcultural values valorising musical taste, expertise and production skill (Whelan 2006). The access to raw material afforded by new technology combined with this mixture of subcultural values to drive the development of internet-specific composition practices in these communities. Mashup was one of these practices, a form of textual poaching that splices samples of recognisable songs together (Jenkins 1992, Lessig 2008), often in unlikely, incongruous or humorous combinations, to then be distributed on P2P networks and in communities. In mashup, juxtaposition of musical material from different genres, perceived levels of cultural legitimacy or distance from the mainstream was used as an expression of the internet’s ability to collapse hierarchies and structures born from the industry. This was internet music, forged from online media by and for the members of online communities, its mere existence a defiant celebration of decentralised file sharing technology.

The superabundance of media offered by P2P and the associated perceived freedom from the limitations of copyright law resulted in a dissociation between the aesthetic and economic worth of musical objects, leaving them free to be reappraised or rehabilitated into new musical contexts (Whelan 2009). Mashup creators were therefore able to combine and juxtapose media in a variety of novel and transgressive ways, as a means of expressing not only their own musical identities but those of their communities. A similar but less actively resistant principle can be observed in the curation practices of certain audiences like those discussed in Chapter Three. If music is free, accessible and abundant, then what matters is one's taste in music (consumption) and the way it can be used to express meaning and identity (whether in the form of mashup compositions or weekly charts).

Along with taste, the nature of listening itself is very important in the context of mashup, both for producers and audiences. In his analysis of mashup culture, John Shiga underlines the importance of virtuosic listening or 'audile technique', a set of skills previously used as a form of bourgeois distinction now transplanted into a postmodern, digitally mediated context that is highly reflexive and referential (Shiga 2007). So for mashup producers and their audiences, to decode and enjoy the ironic juxtaposition of musical samples from vastly different genres, aesthetics and levels of cultural capital is prized as a skill that determines identity and belonging within a community. A good mashup might even bring out the hidden value in a piece of music that is otherwise poorly regarded by its producer and intended audience, 'improving' it through recontextualisation and exposing its strengths and nuances when juxtaposed with something quite unlike it.

But the reverse can also be true, and tasteless and ridiculous mashups that intentionally ‘ruin’ the sampled songs remain a popular aspect of mashup’s iconoclastic and highly ironic culture. As is typically seen in the context of kitsch and related aesthetic modes, the distinction between these two opposing effects can be subtle and disputed within an audience, and for some listeners can exist simultaneously, as one is forced to admit that a combination of sounds ‘works’ in spite of its awfulness. It is here that we can locate the beginnings of the hyperpop approach, in which a knowing resistance to the boundaries of good taste forms a core aspect of compositional practice, enhanced by certain shared contextual literacies found in online culture and specific communities of musical practice.

An emblematic example of these processes in mashup is the work of Neil Cicierega, whose 2014-2020 *Mouth* series of mash-up albums heavily incorporate ‘cool’ and ‘uncool’ music in equal measure, including many songs associated with internet culture and memes. Here, the mashup artist’s audile technique works together with several forms of technocultural mastery: of digitally mediated popular culture; of the technology on which it runs; and of the internet’s own vernacular humour. The sample choice and skill in each song’s composition construct an image of Cicierega as an expert listener with a mastery of pop music repertoire and internet culture, an image helped significantly by his reputation in online culture for composing several influential and highly viral works of audiovisual media in the 2000s. At the same time, the audience’s ability to not only identify unfamiliar combinations of familiar music, but also to aurally parse the cultural statements that result is a form of expert listening that particularly rewards users who possess subcultural knowledge. Like mashup, hyperpop is frequently described as humourous and ridiculous, yet capable of producing powerful affective responses that override and challenge the listeners’ assumptions about their own taste while also rewarding the listening technique required to decode the music.

Despite its playfulness and humour, mashup also has the ability to convey politically charged artistic statements, especially regarding issues that are considered particularly important by its online audience, yet another aspect of mashup echoed by contemporary hyperpop. Among the most politically noteworthy online mashup releases of the P2P era is 2004's *The Grey Album* by Brian Joseph Burton (AKA Danger Mouse), which combines samples from The Beatles' eponymous 1968 'White Album' with samples from the vocal tracks of Jay-Z's *The Black Album*, released in 2003. This choice of material both deftly foregrounding the ties between mashup music and The Beatles' avant-garde pop and showcases mashup's links to hip-hop in terms of technique, as well as the many aesthetic, legal and social disruptions associated with its culture.

Occurring at the height of the P2P war between the music industry and online audiences, Danger Mouse's album became representative of the broader issue of copyright and music ownership in the digital age. Its success and subsequent legal response by EMI launched the then-unknown Danger Mouse into a mainstream career and led to a 'day of civil disobedience' organised by online activists encouraging the mass sharing and download of the album in February 2004 (Spink 2005, Bowrey & Rimmer 2005). Along with its social and political importance, *The Grey Album* displays mashup as an ontologically disruptive form that encourages its audience to change the way they are listening to the sounds they hear, while also showcasing the DJ's mastery of audile technique (Fairchild 2014).

Mashup demonstrates something about the changing nature of music itself during the P2P era, as music itself and the means of its production were simultaneously set free by technology, their use limited only by the imagination of the internet's population. Just as Walter Benjamin

predicted in 1935, works of art, freed from the restraints of context, can be remediated and reconfigured in accordance with any purpose. Not only does mashup rely on this principle, but it also openly celebrates and exemplifies it with its extremes and provocations. This musical language of disrupted ontology is core to several forms of internet music, and is seen in hyperpop, through both its juxtaposition of genre and timbre and its thematic resistance to hegemonic identities, disregarding the rules of taste and style.

Despite the waning of P2P culture, the mashup remains a relevant form to this day, with several popular TikTok accounts dedicated to producing deliberately tasteless but nonetheless catchy mashups of bygone pop songs. One such producer known as @Snowdream includes on-screen captions decrying his own mashups as deplorable, but his content almost always garners sincere (if incredulous or embarrassed) comments requesting that he upload his work to Spotify. In his videos @Snowdream plays the part of a 'local DJ' with a garish shirt, decks and lights reminiscent of a 1990s school disco, this roleplay gimmick working to enhance the music's combination of low cultural capital with genuine nostalgia. Such a clear evocation of shared cultural memory is not typical of the presentation of older mashup music, partly due to its reliance on audiovisual media not available in the P2P era. In this contemporary context, it therefore points towards an influence from another form of internet music, one that, like mashup can help us understand hyperpop's lineage and relationship with online cultural identity.

Vaporwave

Vaporwave is an online genre of electronic music that first appeared in the early 2010s, placing it after the peak of P2P-based mashup communities, but before the emergence of hyperpop. Much of the genre's initial popularity grew from the extreme virality of the 2011 album *Floral Shoppe* by MACINTOSH PLUS, and its subsequent use in many internet memes. Typical of the ambient, often heavily sample-based Vaporwave genre, the MACINTOSH PLUS track 'Lisa Frank 420 / Modern Computing' (‘リサフランク420 / 現代のコンピュー Risa Furanku 420 /



Figure 7.2: The album artwork for *Floral Shoppe* by MACINTOSH PLUS.

Gendai no Konpyū') consists almost entirely of an extended sample from the opening Diana Ross' 1984 song 'It's Your Move', slowed down and pitch-shifted but otherwise barely edited save for a reverb effect. James Ferraro's album *Far Side Virtual* (2011) and Chuck Person's *Eccojams Vol. 1* by Daniel Lopatin (2010) also contributed to the genre's success due to their positive critical reception and online popularity, as the former was voted

record of the year by *Wire*, and material from the latter enjoyed viral success on YouTube. Vaporwave is also notable for its instantly recognisable visual style, which borrows extensively from television, design and advertising from the late 1980s and early 1990s, specifically the era's technology, consumer and leisure cultures. Glitch aesthetics and the associated visual language of technological degradation also play a central role and are as common in vaporwave artwork as their audio equivalents are in vaporwave music.

Lopatin's role in innovating and popularising vaporwave aesthetics is perhaps his most significant and far-reaching contribution to internet music culture, influencing both aesthetics and processes of musical production. Lopatin calls the compositions on his Chuck Person album 'eccoams', describing a production technique of identifying and exploring very small sections of iconic pop songs using loops and effects to sonically unpack their affective impact. This hybridisation of listening and composition attempts drill down into the most sticky or ecstatic moment of a song, the way it actually sounds when it is stuck in your head, eternally repeating (Carswell 2016). According to Lopatin, this release was intended as something akin to a demonstration of an easy-to-replicate musical practice, something he half-assumed everyone was already doing (Lopatin 2017). As was seen in P2P mashup culture, the normalisation of simple, casual bedroom production of music that is nonetheless experimental and challenging is a recurring feature of recent internet music, represented in the context of hyperpop by the very young age of many of its most popular artists (Canjemanden 2021). Vaporwave's novelty surrealism and absurdity are also appealing to young, online audiences making it easily shareable and memetic. For this reason, along with its highly specific and perhaps slightly thin visual style, even among its fans vaporwave is seen more as a meme than a legitimate music genre.

An important point of similarity between vaporwave and mashup music is the leveraging of listener memory, using music that is supposed to be recognised (or in the former case, *almost* recognised) by the audience. In vaporwave this creates a similar intertextual web to mashup, albeit a shakier and even more subjective one, as the memory is not merely triggered but toyed with and tricked, twisting the concept of audile technique by simulating the experience of remembering. Vaporwave has been the subject of enquiry by a number of scholars, investigating its affinity for anticapitalist politics; its play with memory, irony and

ambivalence; and its links to internet culture and other, less influential online musical phenomena (Harper 2012, Trainer 2016, Glitsos 2017, Born & Haworth 2018). What vaporwave offers this analysis in particular however is its highly effective use of affective triggers in seizing and maintaining audience attention. Vaporwave combines the application of an instantly recognisable set of audiovisual aesthetic markers with the intentional stirring of memories held on both a personal and a shared cultural level to generate a sticky, instantly gratifying and memorable experience for the listener who encounters it.

The concept of stickiness was first described by Sara Ahmed to explain the way that emotions shape our experience and our bodies, linking us, leaving traces and resulting in cycles of thought and behaviour (Ahmed 2004). Vaporwave is perfectly calibrated to take advantage of this phenomenon, spreading virally through the networks it occupies and comments upon, both social and technological. Thanks to this combination of factors, vaporwave is both an extremely successful meme and a long-lasting subculture, birthing many communities dedicated to its production and consumption, and whose members understood the importance of the genre's memetic quality and the ease with which it can occupy online spaces and the minds of those who use them. Studies of the nature and role of internet memes have foregrounded their semiotic qualities just as much as their replicability (Cannizzaro 2016), pointing out that memes are potent carriers of specific cultural information and subcultural capital (Nissenbaum & Shifman 2015).

To 'get' a meme by decoding it to access the humour or meaning within it is therefore a powerful means of generating collective identity (Gal et al. 2016), as has been demonstrated in previous chapters through practices like chartposting and the DG concept, as well as the cryptic, idiomatic language found in genius.com's subcultural discourse. As a musical meme,

vaporwave spreads through the internet conveying subcultural messages that invite the construction of collective identity among its fans and creators. Perhaps above all others, it is this highly memetic quality that makes vaporwave relevant to this chapter, and the quality that had the most influence on the internet music phenomenon that followed it, surpassed it, and has now in 2022 become a mainstay of both the popular music underground and the mainstream.

Nightcore

Nightcore is an internet-based music genre that might be considered an aesthetic counterpart or ‘sister’ genre to vaporwave, but has generated less academic attention, perhaps due to its relative lack of political or aesthetic depth. Despite this, nightcore is significant to the development of hyperpop, providing the root of one of its most audibly distinctive features. Where vaporwave and eccojam compositions (as well as those in the southern hip-hop subgenre known as ‘chopped & screwed’) typically slow down a sample to give the vocals a dreamlike, disaffected quality, nightcore is instead a microgenre referring to any edit of a song that has been sped up to around 160-180 beats-per-minute (Harshman 2015). This offers a completely reversed effect, instead reading as excited, youthful and for many, deeply irritating, adding to its virality and memetic potential if not to its long-term popularity. Unlike the famous ‘chipmunked’ vocals of Alvin and company in the 1960s, which were typically sung and recorded at a proportionally slower tempo to match the beats-per-minute of the sped-up versions to the intended final recording, nightcore is both higher *and* faster, providing a frenetic quality that not coincidentally matches the tempo of the hardcore dance musics that were popular in European clubs at the end of the 1990s.

The concept of catchiness in pop music is not one that has been extensively unpacked by music scholars, but some empirical study of the phenomenon suggests that the catchiest songs are often higher than average in tempo (Cox 2016). Though the genre had its roots in early P2P culture, during the 2010s YouTube was instrumental in popularising nightcore edits, as users who found and enjoyed the concept could very easily make and upload their own examples. Aided by platforms like YouTube and SoundCloud, memetic genres like vaporwave and nightcore were able to spread through the internet in the same way as visual internet memes, where an original viral image quickly becomes a template to be iterated upon by users, expanding, subverting or reinventing the original concept. As the next section will explain, this platform entanglement in both the production and consumption is another element of these earlier forms of internet music to be inherited and further optimised by hyperpop. Though there is less to explore regarding the theoretical elements of nightcore's relationship with hyperpop than with vaporwave or mashup, the distinctive qualities shared by these genres make it an essential part of the online musical context from which hyperpop emerged.

Hyperpop & platform capitalism

While Vaporwave's rise in popularity can be traced to certain instances of viral media and the success of several seminal albums released at the turn of the 2000s and 2010s, hyperpop did not emerge into online popular culture all at once and then die off in the manner typical of the memetic genres discussed in the previous section. Instead, despite its obviously high level of entanglement with online culture, it has now become accepted as a legitimate genre of music. This could be linked to the increased acceptance the concept of internet music began to enjoy among audiences during the 2010s, as internet users became more accustomed to the idea that certain media forms and discourses were intrinsically linked to online culture or could only take place in a digital setting.

This shift is in part due to the solidification of a shared understanding of the online cultural register among wider audiences as a result of platform capitalism's consolidation and repackaging of the internet experience to align with the affordances and limitations of each platform. Hyperpop is therefore perhaps the first internet music phenomenon to occur almost entirely in the context of mainstream digital platforms – not emerging from insular online subcultures, separated from other areas of the web like mashup, but coming to prominence via Spotify playlists, TikTok trends and 'stan culture' fan communities on Twitter and Instagram.

This section of the chapter outlines hyperpop's position as a key contemporary face of internet music, situating its aesthetic strategies within the broader context of online music culture and specifically musical identity practice. It accounts for this in part by describing the highly synergistic relationship between the genre and the forces of platformisation. As discussed in the previous section, in their nascent stages older forms of internet music have often relied on specific technologies like P2P and online video sharing for their survival, but until hyperpop, none were fully woven into the platform model, consisting of independent communities and forums, and often eschewing the mainstream. In contrast, hyperpop music can be read as something of a celebration and exploration of the mainstreaming of online life, as well as the domination of that life by platform capitalism. To make a generational analogy, if vaporwave expressed the anxieties and confusions around the death of analogue media and the birth of online culture as experienced by the Millennial cohort, then hyperpop should be understood in the context of Generation Z, whose lives and identities have always been mediated by digital platforms, and who have no memory of a time before the internet.

Since the end of the 2010s, hyperpop has become an increasingly powerful and influential force in popular music, its influence heard in mainstream pop, and its aesthetic now as recognisable as popular youth subcultural styles found in visual online culture such as the ‘e-girl’ and ‘gamer’ archetypes. Together with hyperpop, such emerging subcultural styles are themselves a result of platformisation, as creators increasingly play to algorithm optimisation and become more proficient at tailoring their content to the medium of mobile-first online audiovisual media along with the platform-guided tastes of its users. Digital platforms have emerged as a driving force in the generation and curation of online musical life. But as previous case studies have suggested, this does not necessarily prevent that life from performing vital and resistant purposes in the formation and exploration of user identity and innovative artistic expression.

As is the case with mashup music, the disruption and juxtaposition of genre is at the core of hyperpop’s aesthetic strategy. It is often described as a form of electronic pop music but acts more as a parody or deconstruction of the genre, heightening its features to create an exaggerated, artificial sound world with a reflexive disregard for aesthetic boundaries found in most popular music. In doing this, hyperpop often makes heavy use of camp and futurist aesthetics and the musical language of femininity, but also incorporates sonic elements from hip-hop, pop punk, extreme metal, and noise music, challenging established hierarchies of power, genre and gender. Hyperpop is very preoccupied with the role of digital technology in daily life, exploring experiences of mediated intimacy and digital identity in its lyrics and themes.

The use of kitsch aesthetics and juxtaposition of incongruous musical material often has a political bent that follows the legacy of the genres already discussed. As well as its aesthetic and formal links to these genres, elements of hyperpop’s ‘digital maximalist’ aesthetic can also

be found in glitch music (Harper 2016), as well as other hyperreal, internet-embedded genres like hypnagogic pop, distroid and breakcore (Whelan 2008, 2010). While the exact birth of hyperpop is not easy to locate, a small group of British artists broadly associated with the label PC Music are often cited as important to its earliest incarnations, along with the popularity of these artists in queer communities on platforms like Twitter and SoundCloud.

In the mid 2010s, PC Music producer A.G. Cook released a number of singles featuring female vocalists performing an intentionally naive or hyperfeminine affect and accompanied by glossy, electronic instrumentals that featured heightened versions of various dance-pop techniques, instrumentals and timbres. Producer SOPHIE and singer Charli XCX (both of whom had already released music in a similar vein) briefly became associated with the label before continuing to work independently. The PC Music style was noteworthy for its obsession with brand and lifestyle orientated consumerism and a disregard for the cycles of cultural capital and ‘cool’ associated with popular music aesthetics from the recent past. These elements appear highly ambivalent and ‘post-ironic’ in their presentation (Trainer 2016), simultaneously condemning and revelling in the music’s disposability.

Supporting this approach, explorations of saccharine pop excess were often also juxtaposed with equally maximalist sounds drawn from European trance, and (in the case of SOPHIE) industrial and noise music. Just as mashup and vaporwave music leverage listeners’ complex affective reaction to familiar music presented in unfamiliar ways, hyperpop presents a combination of extreme, volatile or otherwise ‘difficult’ timbres and musical features like noise, distortion and ‘screamed’ vocals within the traditionally ‘easy’ and predictable framework of the pop genre, sharing some of the same strategies as the music of Death Grips. This results in a similarly nuanced affective response to that of the other forms of internet music

discussed in this chapter, but as will be explained below, for many of hyperpop's most successful and influential artists this juxtaposition also has thematic significance, and directly expresses aspects of the online experience.

The bizarre and intentionally obnoxious nature of the characters portrayed by PC Music's singers worked alongside the instrumentals' timbral contradictions to generate an uncanny listening experience that combines pop's immediacy with signifiers of experimental music high in subcultural capital. However, rather than merely juxtaposing high/low or easy/difficult aesthetics, even in this early stage, hyperpop manages to synthesise these elements, allowing them to exist simultaneously. As a result, the style drew fans from various internet-based consumption communities and subcultures, from music nerds and extreme music enthusiasts to more traditional pop audiences, while also generating significant attention from the online queer community thanks to the genre's heavy use of camp and its reflexive celebration of the pop diva figure. PC Music's divas of this period already demonstrated elements of the stylised gender representation that would become a core part of hyperpop's appeal. Notably many PC Music vocalists sang in a heightened accent of British Received Pronunciation, further heightening their performance of femininity by evoking an extremely White, bourgeois hegemonic femininity that is recognised as easily by non-British audiences as by those from the UK. This delivery works alongside the musical features of bubble-gum and synth pop to construct a hyperreal version of popular music's long-standing semiotics of gender.

Though among the earliest, this strand of development was not the only source of music that would later be grouped under the hyperpop label, as various web-based music subcultures had begun to cross-pollinate thanks to an increasingly centralised, platform-dependent internet. In this context, hyperpop began to see more recognition as genre of internet music by both

journalists and scholars (Harper 2016), accelerating in significance thanks to the mainstream critical acclaim of SOPHIE’s Grammy-nominated album *The Oil of Every Pearl’s Un-Insides* (2018), and the streaming success of hyperpop duo 100 gecs’ album *1000 gecs* (2019) respectively. These two records represent a significant departure from the approach represented by PC Music several years earlier, developing hyperpop into an even more sonically abrasive form while maintaining its unique aesthetic strategy. Both albums also brought new depth to hyperpop’s fixation on the digital experience, which was previously typified by PC Music songs such as Hannah Diamond’s ‘Hi’, which explores the mindset of a teenage girl waiting in her bedroom to talk to a crush via instant messaging. While certainly evocative of what has become a resonant adolescent experience for several generations, it does little to explore the interactions between this form of intimacy and the nature of self.



Figure 7.3: Left, the album artwork for The Oil of Every Pearl’s Un-Insides by SOPHIE. Right, the album artwork for 1000 gecs by 100 gecs.

In contrast, 100 gecs and SOPHIE both explore the concept of digital identity with considerably more nuance, particularly as it relates gender, engaging in what Michael Waugh has described

as ‘digital queering’, a trend found among numerous online artists that fuses ‘the posthumanism of Post-Internet identity with the fluid gender deconstructions of queer theory’ (Waugh 2017:234). For these artists, digital technology offers a freedom of self-expression and identification just as described by the earliest scholarly accounts of online identity (Turkle 1995), but hyperpop is also able to move beyond this. These artists’ participation in online musical production acts as a direct outlet for gender expression, one that can provide all the raw materials (samples, DAWs, plug-ins etc) to create gendered musical personae along with the means to present the resulting identities to a large audience and (from a symbolic interactionist perspective) have those identities validated through the process of the looking-glass self.

For example, in ‘Faceshopping’ SOPHIE explores her experience with gender presentation in a culture where the posting of digitally edited ‘selfie’ images is commonplace:

My face is the front of shop
My face is the real shop front
My shop is the face I front
I'm real when I shop my face

SOPHIE describes the way she figuratively sells her feminine identity based on ‘shopped’ [abbr. ‘Photoshopped’] images of her face, expressing that she feels this is a dramaturgical ‘front’ of some kind, but ultimately that is what makes her feel the most real. This account is grounded in SOPHIE’s experience as a trans woman, an aspect of her identity explored throughout *The Oil of Every Pearl’s Un-Insides* and also expressed in ‘Faceshopping’ via numerous references to cosmetic surgery. These themes are underlined by the song’s powerfully abrasive industrial soundscape, which combines heavily distorted sub-bass stabs

and jagged synthesizer leads with various metallic striking and clanging sounds of both acoustic and synthetic origin. This is accompanied intermittently by a string sample, pitch-shifted up to sound like a whirring surgical saw, and the appearance of numerous chopped & screwed female vocal samples, contrasted throughout this traumatic surgical interlude by the lead vocal's naive, almost absent-minded 'na na na na' vocalisations.

Here, a heightened semiotics of gender convey a femininity similar to that found in PC Music, but rather than reinforcing this paradigm as in the case of 'Hi', it challenges and disrupts assumptions regarding gendered musical features. As Susan McClary famously argued, gender has long been used in the language of European art music to describe the relative strength of harmonies and cadences, where 'strong' harmonic relationships are coded masculine and 'weak' described as feminine, and where the latter is always destined to eventually submit to the former (McClary 1991). But in 'Faceshopping' the (primarily timbral) semiotics of femininity exist alongside those of masculinity, still contrasted but neither dominated nor destroyed. This 'harmonic' juxtaposition of genres, timbres and themes therefore acts as a fundamental expression of the validity and legitimacy of queer identity, as well as the violence (whether medical, digital or abusive) that trans people face throughout their lives.

Elsewhere on the album, SOPHIE more directly celebrates the internet's ability to transcend and transform gender with the anthemic 'Immaterial', in which a chorus of voices chants 'immaterial girls, immaterial boys', while the lead vocal occasionally interjects with 'I could be anything I want'. In the same way that Death Grips' use of samples from early rock music positions them within the broader history of popular music innovation, this song foregrounds the complex relationship between SOPHIE's musical identity and the feminine ideal of the diva. This is most obviously visible in 'Immaterial's subversion of the 'material girl', phrase

closely associated with Madonna, who herself drew with ambivalence on the iconography of Marilyn Monroe in the video for the song of that name. The climax of 'Immaterial' is the bridge section, which features an isolated vocal breaking away as the song's chant and accompanying instrumental fade away:

I was just a lonely girl in the eyes of my inner child
But I could be anything I want and no matter where I go
You'll always be here in my heart
Here in my heart, here in my heart
I don't even have to explain
Just leave me alone now
I can't be held down
I can't be held down

Throughout this section, digital effects allow SOPHIE's voice to perform daring, impossible feats of coloratura, demonstrating the power of technology to reach beyond the ability of the human body, and the truth of the final lines' message. As well as recalling the feminine semiotics of the operatic soprano (the queer history of which has been explored by Wayne Koestenbaum (1993)), this kind of digital vocal manipulation has been linked to the concept of the cyborg by several scholars, describing technology's augmentation of the body to create a musical human-machine hybrid (Aunur 2001, Thompson 2011, Waugh 2017). But in SOPHIE's work, the cyborg exists not just musically but socially as well, with posthuman musical techniques acting as a metaphor for the ability to live in digital space, self-identifying and being perceived however one wishes.

Interestingly however, beyond making such statements on identity either explicitly or implicitly in their use of vocal manipulation, both SOPHIE and 100 geecs also demonstrate a

commitment to the embodied identities beneath the cyborg layer. This is shown by SOPHIE's appearance in the first music video to be released ahead of *The Oil of Every Pearl's Un-Insides*, 'It's OK to Cry', the video for which featured SOPHIE herself, appearing to her audience for the first time since her gender transition. A parallel of this can be seen in the 2021 100 geecs song 'Mememe', which is the first song to feature band member Laura Les' voice unaltered by autotune. Before this, Les (also a trans woman) had generally used various effects to feminise her voice (Burgoon 2021), so its raw appearance in the lead single for the group's second album was taken as a signal by fans that the singer's confidence in her unaltered voice had grown. Due in part perhaps to the viral success of her music and the increased presence of her online identity and support from fans that accompanied it, Les' security in her identity seems to have developed past the need for technological augmentation.

As mentioned above, along with their musical success, 100 geecs' experience using digital platforms arguably resulted in the solidification of Hyperpop as a phenomenon. Shortly after the release of the *1000 geecs* album in 2019, the band were invited to temporarily take over the curator role for Spotify's new Editorial playlist 'hyperpop', with Les adding music she had encountered in the growing community of young musicians based across the platforms of Discord and SoundCloud (Dandridge-Lemco 2020, Canjemanden 2021). Having truly grown up on the internet, these teenage members of Generation Z have quickly identified with and elaborated on Hyperpop's illustrations of digitally mediated teenage angst, striking a further chord with the large audiences Spotify exposed them to, and becoming the driving force behind the genre's development in the years since.

In contrast to Hannah Diamond's sugar-coated account of digital intimacy in 'Hi', 100 geecs tend to present intimate online communication in a way that is closer to the casual, improvised

and crass norms with which most internet users are familiar. In the introduction to the song ‘Money Machine’ the heavily distorted voice of Laura Les casually berates the listener (or a third party), commenting on their weak appearance and misplaced confidence before finally suggesting that they are enjoying being insulted, but that if they admitted this then she would ‘ghost’ them. This is the language of trolling (or ‘flaming’ as it was once known), which while tongue-in-cheek nonetheless contains more verisimilitude than most attempts to represent internet discourse.

Contrasted with PC Music’s relatively traditional label structure, the default practice among many hyperpop artists is to collaborate with each other using platforms like Discord and then disseminate their music via SoundCloud, skilfully utilising multiple platforms at once to create their own movement, just as a new generation of rappers did to disrupt and restructure the hip-hop industry in the mid-2010s. For these young musicians and audiences, concepts of scene and subculture are intrinsic to the platforms on which they occur. In the 1990s, Sarah Thornton observed the way subcultural capital was generated and exchanged via actors’ engagements with both specific locations (night clubs) and particular media objects (vinyl records) (Thornton 1995). But in the context of contemporary online culture, platforms have collapsed these elements together – by becoming both the place in which and the object with which subcultural capital is exchanged and musical production enacted. For many young audiences and musicians, these have become the processes through which musical identities are constructed.

Conclusion

In addition to introducing and illustrating the concept of internet music, this chapter’s account of the Hyperpop genre demonstrates the role of digital platforms in the development of new

musical techniques and subcultures, and the continued relevance of influential voices such as music critics in the legitimisation process for emerging forms of experimental music. It also offers an example of how quick online audiences can be to innovate and generate large quantities of music to develop a new genre, using platforms in their own ways to form their musical practice, creating and releasing music independently of traditional industry structures. The musical identities at the centre of this chapter are defined by a subversive articulation of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ taste in a celebration of the ambivalence, discontinuity and irony that pervade both digital culture and queer aesthetics. In particular, I explored how hyperpop musicians have used the genre’s queer and posthuman entanglements to mediate the transgender experience – a vital form of musical self-expression at a time when transgender people are increasingly finding their identities under attack.

Hyperpop’s relationship with platformisation is important for understanding the entanglement of digital platforms with contemporary online subcultural production, but the genre’s content also illustrates how uniquely online experiences of identity (including elements of those found in early internet culture) remain an important aspect of internet mediated musical expression. As internet music has developed over the last two decades, the intensity of its deconstruction of traditional musical aesthetics and genre conventions has only increased, and its exploration of the online experience remains vital and complex. The following chapter will now continue to explore the themes addressed with this case study, while developing and concluding other concepts from the first four case studies, relating to authorship, the fluidity of identity, online aesthetics, and the affectively charged ephemerality of digital experience.

Chapter Eight – Fragments of identity & the online experience in

Daniel Lopatin's *Garden of Delete*

This final chapter takes the form of an extended analysis of the internet-mediated dissemination and promotion of *Garden of Delete*, a 2015 album by composer Daniel Lopatin. In the process, several of the core issues and concepts around online musical identity that appear in the previous case study chapters are revisited and further developed. As mentioned in the opening of this project, Daniel Lopatin is an artist whose identity has been heavily influenced by his use of internet technology. His work is informed by a deep fascination with the online experience, and shares similarities with this project in its conceptualisation of the role played by digital platforms in the negotiation of internet-mediated identity, even openly engaging with some of the same theoretical concepts that support my own analysis in this project. As the

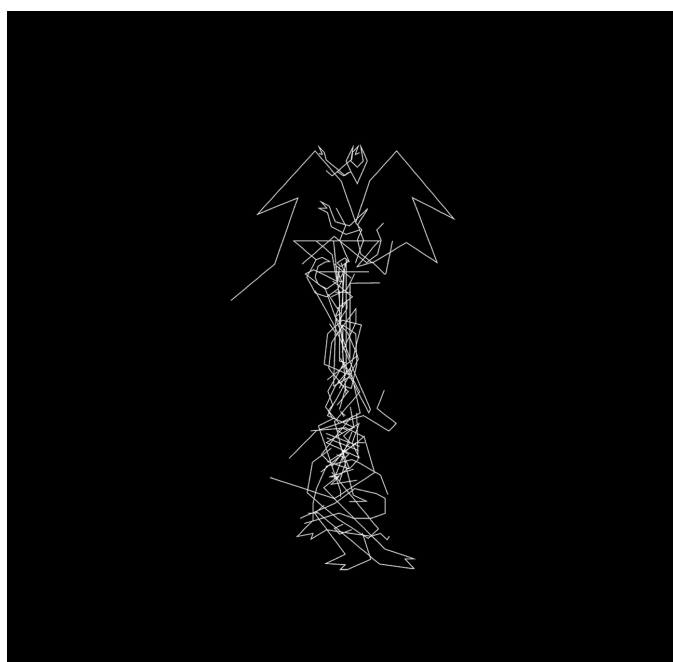


Figure 8.1: The album artwork for *Garden of Delete* by Oneohtrix Point Never.

culmination of Lopatin's engagement with these recurring themes, *Garden of Delete* therefore offers significant insight into my own research questions, while the album's self-reflexive and exploratory nature presents an opportunity for reflexivity on the part of this project as a whole. This case study will demonstrate how the practices and media forms scrutinised elsewhere in the project can coalesce to bring forth

the emergent experience and subsequent expression of online musical identity. *Garden of Delete*'s aesthetic, characters and themes resonate greatly with identity categories found in

precious case studies: primarily those orientated around the obsessive consumption of niche and ‘nerdy’ media and the ways both the body and mind can be warped and transformed by exposure to the internet.

Rather than simply being a piece of electronic music, *Garden of Delete* by Oneohtrix Point Never (Lopatin’s main pseudonym) takes the form of an internet-embedded multimedia assemblage, of which the album release is both a constituent part and a synecdoche, representing and being represented by the assemblage as a whole. I argue that this complex, fluid relationship between the music and the online media associated with it is central to *Garden of Delete*’s artistic statement, and specifically to its commentary on the nature of digital identity and the ever-changing online experience.

In the months before the record’s release, Lopatin crafted a makeshift Alternate Reality Game (ARG) to accompany the album, a networked narrative device intended to expand upon and contextualise the music to Lopatin’s audience, but also to challenge and destabilise conceptions of Lopatin’s authorship and artistic identity as a media consumer. This ARG was made up of a number of online spaces and discrete online media objects including music, video, images, academic publications and other text documents, from which the narrative and characters of the ARG were emergent. This chapter will demonstrate how this network of online media can be understood as both a deconstruction of the twelve-song album at its centre and a phenomenological account of the composer’s relationship with the internet, its form and content together representing the ontology of Lopatin’s music, his identity and the internet.

Throughout the chapter, the phrase ‘the album’ will be used to refer to the release by Warp Records (both in terms of the music recordings themselves and the physical releases on CD

and vinyl) and ‘the ARG’ will be used for the network of internet embedded media surrounding it, while ‘*Garden of Delete*’ includes both. Similarly as when discussing music, I will also be using the present tense when describing aspects of the ARG, except when talking about things that happened at particular times. In the following section, I will introduce some elements of Lopatin’s past work that are either present or further developed by *Garden of Delete*. The chapter then describes the album’s musical content and concept. The ARG is introduced, along with a discussion of Alternative Reality Games more generally, before the chapter’s explanation and analysis of the characters, virtual spaces and media created by Lopatin. Some themes relating to online musical identity from earlier parts of this project that are revisited or developed in this chapter include music consumption and fandom, digital platforms past and present, gender and embodiment online and the fluid nature of identity, among others. Also present are the recurring set of aesthetic markers and strategies associated with internet music and online culture more generally, and the importance of emergence and the assemblage framework in terms of the materialisation and experience of identity on the internet.

Oneohtrix Point Never

Daniel Lopatin is an electronic composer and multimedia artist based in the United States, whose work first emerged from Brooklyn’s underground noise music scene in the early 2000s. Lopatin uses several pseudonyms, but unless otherwise stated, this chapter discusses the music and art he has released under the name Oneohtrix Point Never. While they fall within an eclectic body of work, there is a broad continuity of musical style across Lopatin’s different artistic identities. For instance, some of the aesthetic sensibilities and compositional techniques he developed as Chuck Person can be found in his Oneohtrix Point Never releases. But Lopatin’s use of various pseudonyms still serves an important artistic purpose, delineating his musical identity in a way that is especially clear in *Garden of Delete*, as the project contains

characters and musical entities that each play different roles in the ARG and relate to Lopatin's 'real' identity in a variety of ways.

As Oneohtrix Point Never is Lopatin's primary and most prolific pseudonym, the music released under this name is stylistically diverse, representing the overarching development of the composer's artistic voice throughout his career. This can be broadly summarised as a gradual shift from the synthesizer-based ambient drone, noise and psychedelic soundscapes of early releases to more recent music that utilises comparatively conventional pop structures and songwriting. Nearly always present are a preference for distinctive, synthetic timbres that challenge preconceptions of taste, and a thematic fascination with memory and simulation. Lopatin is also notable for his use of plunderphonics, making extensive and prominent use of samples, often looped and sonically degraded to conjure affective experiences that transport the listener to decaying, dreamlike worlds. This reflects another persistent theme: digital technology's capacity for creating experiences and new meanings through the mediation of media texts.

As outlined in the introduction to this project, the name Oneohtrix Point Never itself provides a succinct microcosm of Lopatin's artistic sensibilities, being derived from the broadcasting frequency of *WMJX* ('Magic 106.7'), a Boston-based easy listening radio station sporting the slogan 'Today's Hits, Yesterday's Favourites'. The choice of such a middlebrow source for Lopatin's pseudonym is mirrored by his work, which is often constructed from material with low amounts of cultural capital, such as samples from popular media and cheap electronic instruments. These building blocks are then warped almost (but rarely entirely) beyond recognition to reach a stage in which their affective qualities are recontextualised, but that does not completely free them from their original, culturally impoverished source.

The same can be said of Oneohtrix Point Never itself, a name that twists the number 106.7 ('one-oh-six point seven') into a state of bizarre but still recognisable contortion, containing the uncomfortable letter order of an 'h' followed by a 't' and even evoking Lopatin's favourite themes of longing and lost futures in the word 'never'. Its stylised abbreviation (OPN) includes a similar effect, as the O of Oneohtrix is substituted by a numeral found in the name's original source, which has now been replicated by the sighing 'oh' in the word's centre. Reinserting a piece of the source object in a warped simulacrum of that object in this manner is an effective demonstration of Lopatin's reflexive compositional practice, as well as his approach to the concept of identity, both of which are central to *Garden of Delete*. As mentioned above, this structure of the synecdoche is also key to the relationship between the album's music and associated ARG. I will now provide a brief overview of Lopatin's work prior to *Garden of Delete*, highlighting the themes, techniques and approaches that offer context and depth to the analysis later in the chapter.

Introduced in the previous chapter, *Chuck Person's Eccojams Vol. 1* is a 2010 album of short plunderphonics pieces in which Lopatin explores the relationship between music and memory. The influential 'eccojam' approach he utilises in these compositions was already outlined in Chapter Seven but is once again relevant here due to the inclusion of one such composition on the *Garden of Delete* album (track four: 'ECCOJAMC1'). It is also noteworthy that this compositional strategy can be found on Lopatin projects released under multiple pseudonyms, suggesting that the composer does not consider these artistic identities to be delineated by specific techniques or approaches. The following year, the album *Replica* was released under the Oneohtrix Point Never name, developing Lopatin's approach to plunderphonics. This project is significantly more sonically diverse and formally complex than *Eccojams* but retains

a prominent use of sampled singing and human speech to generate combined with saturated, obscured sonic textures. In the composition of *Replica*, Lopatin searched through hours of VHS quality audio for ‘harmonically intense’ moments in 1980s and 1990s TV commercials (Bevan 2011), a practice he would later apply to obscure online media for *Garden of Delete* as he searched for samples and various other online ephemera.

After the success of *Replica*, Lopatin was signed to influential Sheffield electronic music label Warp Records. His first release on Warp was 2013’s *R Plus Seven* – the name of which is a reference to the French constrained writing technique OuLiPo. *R Plus Seven* saw Lopatin entirely abandon Juno-60 synthesizer that defined his early compositions, instead relying entirely on synthetic MIDI instruments, basic synth presets and patches. It was these specific, unbending timbral constraints that lead to his association between the record and the OuLiPo, which requires writers to employ strict (often mathematical) rules and procedures that confine writing decisions. Lopatin also derived MIDI material from the sound of text-to-speech software reading from various documents (including material by Bruno Latour) – this principle of drawing from philosophical and academic writing both conceptually and in the form of textual poaching has continued in Lopatin’s work since and is especially present in *Garden of Delete* (Jenkins 1992).

R Plus Seven also apparently saw the crystallisation of Lopatin’s interest in electronic instruments that imperfectly replicate the sound of acoustic instruments. While still often accompanied by hazy drones and background noise, in contrast with Lopatin’s earlier work, much of *R Plus Seven*’s instrumentation has crisp, defined timbral edges. Crackling chimes, synthetic brass, reeds and bright plucked strings sit among sterile digital choir ‘oohs’. The songs on this record also feel methodically composed, very unlike the loose, even

improvisational mood favoured by the composer before this point. Despite the aesthetic and conceptual differences between *R Plus Seven* and his previous music, one part of Lopatin's artistic approach remains: seeking out and grappling with crass, lurid or banal sonic material and exploring relationships between juxtaposed sounds, fusing supposedly incompatible sounds together to create a kind of timbral dissonance. All of these elements remain present in *Garden of Delete*, as well as linking to broader trends in internet music such as the mashup, vaporwave, nightcore and hyperpop genres discussed in Chapter Seven.

Before moving on to discuss this chapter's main case study, the multimedia aspects of Lopatin's work should also be addressed, as they form an integral part of the *Garden of Delete* ARG. The composer had previously worked with visual media on *Memory Vague*, syncing his ecco-jams with lo-fi visual loops from VHS and early internet video sources, but Lopatin also frequently collaborates with experimental digital artists in the presentation of his work. For example, the visuals accompanying *R Plus Seven* featured stark, physically impossible lines and forms of 3D rendered digital environments provided by sculptor Nate Boyce, who has also collaborated with Lopatin on several live performances in galleries including at the Guggenheim in New York. Lopatin's work with Boyce recontextualises the composer's music to a more sterile type of hyperreal, digital virtuality quite unlike the grainy warmth of analogue technology that had characterised his work in the past. Boyce's visual accompaniment for Lopatin's compositions features virtual 3D spaces and objects rotating through and clipping into one another. These entities are scored with Lopatin's suitably inhuman sonorities, one minute soft and silky, the next brittle and impossibly sharp. Alongside the morphing sounds and shapes flash various second-hand media: tacky logos and website banner advertisements.

Elements of this aesthetic palette carried over to *Garden of Delete*, but with a level of corruption and human grime suitable for an album based on online culture. This interest in the dirty side of the internet actually slightly predates *Garden of Delete*, as the central concept of a video produced for the *R Plus Seven* song ‘Still Life’ by the artist Jon Rafman. Rafman is known for work that directly incorporates the internet in its conception or execution, a notable example being the blog 9-eyes.com, a photography project using Google Street View. Rafman’s ‘Still Life’ video uses media associated with the internet’s underbelly, such as images of the squalid homes of reclusive internet addicts, fetish porn and videos from ‘furry’ culture (Figure 8.2). Given the video’s content Lopatin’s choice of venue for its digital premiere was quite appropriate, if comically far-flung from the Guggenheim: 4chan’s infamous and aforementioned music imageboard /mu/, where after initial doubts as to its authenticity, the video was met with a characteristic blend of praise, profane antagonism and outright disgust.

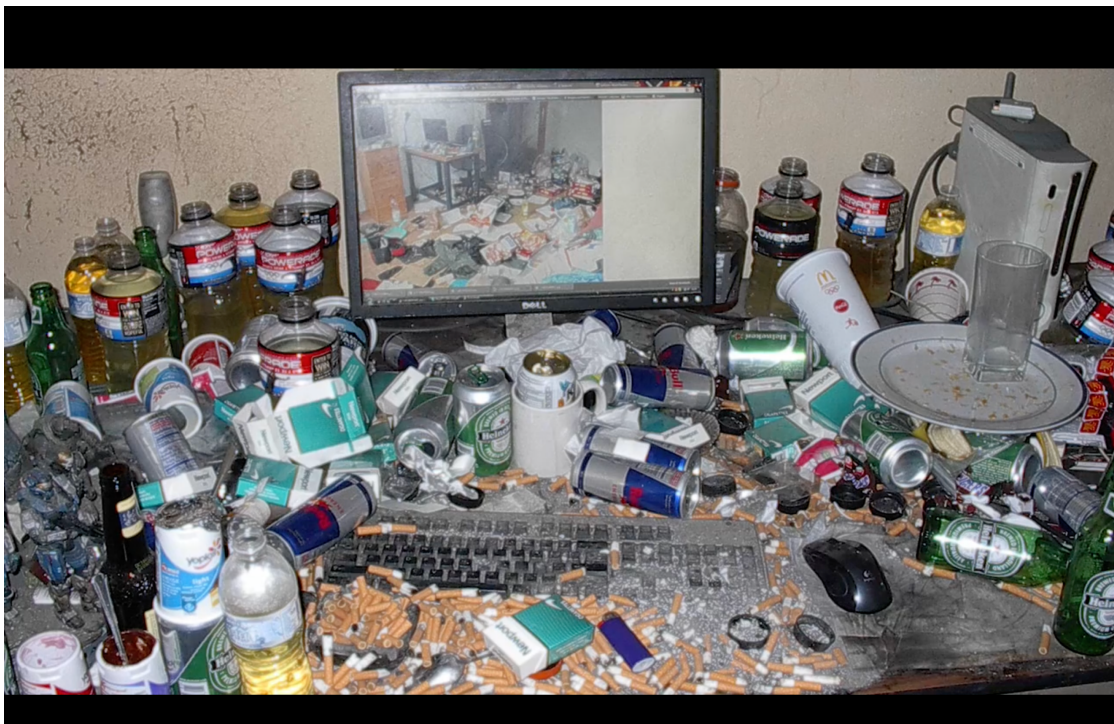


Figure 8.2: An image from Jon Rafman’s video for ‘Still Life’ by Oneohtrix Point Never.

As of 2022, Lopatin has gone on to release two more full-length records on Warp: 2018's *Age Of* and 2020's *Magic Oneohtrix Point Never*, as well as producing soundtracks for a number of successful films and working closely with Canadian singer The Weeknd. These activities all represent stylistic and conceptual developments that are beyond the scope of this chapter, but continue to engage with many of the concepts, aesthetics and techniques discussed in this section.

Garden of Delete: the album

After the glossy sounds of virtual instruments and MIDI presets on *R Plus Seven*, Lopatin's next record made a flying leap towards distortion and grotesquery. *Garden of Delete* is something like a Oneohtrix Point Never rock album, drawing on the guitar music Lopatin consumed in his teenage years (McDermot 2015). Influence from horror and science fiction media is central to the album's aesthetic, with the genres' speculative nature leading Lopatin to explore 'imaginary modes of music that to me don't exist yet' (Welsh 2015), evidenced by his frequent reference to the fictional genre of 'hypergrunge'. In typical fashion, distorted or otherwise edited samples of the human voice are central to the sound world of many tracks, accompanied by synthesisers that range from glistening solo leads to thick walls of heavy, highly compressed synthesiser triads. Absolute silence is also sometimes utilised, with a starkly digital 'on-off' effect found on several songs.

The album is twelve tracks long, including a brief introduction ('Intro') and a thirty second eccojam interlude ('ECCOJAMC1'). In form, it more closely resembles a pop or rock album than Lopatin's releases had prior to joining Warp Records, combining tracks that loosely adhere to traditional popular song structure ('Sticky Drama', 'Ezra') with pieces that more fit the formal conventions of underground dance music ('Mutant Standard', 'Freaky Eyes') or the

work of fellow Warp artists Aphex Twin and Boards of Canada ('SDFK', 'I Bite Through It'). But even the more song-like entries more give the impression of parody than anything else, evoking the aesthetics and conventions of verse, hook, chorus and bridge rather than actually abiding by them. In accordance with the album's themes (as well as those favoured by Lopatin throughout his work) *Garden of Delete* really only resembles a rock album if you squint.

The record is constructed from a wide variety of electronic sounds from synthesisers to MIDI instruments and 'vocaloid' speech-synths, combined with an equally broad range of samples, many of them vocal. This gives the impression of a sonic collage both in the context of a hook orientated song-form track or a more abstract work of dance or ambient music. Lopatin builds on his previous plunderphonics work by foregrounding the manipulation and processing of these sonic materials, rarely presenting a sample or instrument in its unadulterated form. On many occasions, a noise, note or percussive sound will gradually unravel over the course of a held note or phrase, revealing its original nature as a familiar instrumental timbre or an ordinary voice saying something mundane. The sleeve notes contain lyrics for six tracks: 'Ezra', 'Sticky Drama', 'Animals', 'Freaky Eyes', 'Lift' and 'No Good'. Throughout these lyrics themes of uncontrolled adolescent affect and sexuality as mediated via technology are easily visible, making them among the most coherent and consistent elements of the album as a whole. A more detailed analysis of the lyrics to one of these songs appears later in this section.

In terms of samples, beyond the extensive use of uncredited 'found' sounds from online media (discussed below), credited musical sources range from those within popular music to experimental and contemporary art music. Selected examples include industrial rock band Grotus (on 'SDFK'), folk singer Roger Rodier (on 'Freaky Eyes') and German inventor Hans Reichel (on 'No Good') as well as composers John Luther Adams (on 'SDFK') and Michael

Finnissy (on 'Child of Rage'), whose work is associated with the minimalist and new complexity movements respectively. Non-musical samples are also abundant, but none are credited beyond for the prominent use of an interview scene from the 1992 CBS film *Child of Rage* (on 'Child of Rage'). While certainly eclectic, this set of examples still hardly does justice to the diversity of sources and aesthetic registers featured on the record.

Along with Lopatin's tried-and-tested approach of disorientating plunderphonic juxtaposition, the album also marks several significant developments in his style, including many moments during which the music contains vivid echoes the soundscapes of well-established pop genres. These include 1990s grunge, minimal techno, trance and several subgenres of extreme metal, but appearances by these fragments are typically surrounded by or layered on top of more typical features of a Oneohtrix Point Never composition, in a manner that album treats these genre elements as instruments in their own right: stylistic pastiche as a form of purpose-built sampling. Another element that sets the album apart from earlier Lopatin releases is the use of percussion, a notable absence in much of his previous work. As with all elements of the album, it appears in a variety of shifting forms throughout, sometimes as uncanny, meticulously sequenced acoustic drum samples ('SDFK'), at other times as a pummelling synth kit ('Mutant Standard') or in the form of a warped electronic string instrument or synth lead with the attack turned up a little too high ('Sticky Drama' 'I Bite Through It', 'Lift'). In keeping with the rock aesthetics on display, distorted (though no more than is typical for heavy rock and metal) electric guitars also make regular appearances, either providing decorative and overblown lead lines that sit apart from the main sonic texture ('Lift') or as part of a synth-metal breakdown accompanied by driving double-kick pedal 'blast beats' in the drums ('Sticky Drama').

The album's second track 'Ezra' is an early showcase of the album's style. It is named for *Garden of Delete*'s central character, a perpetually online teenage fan. As will be explained below, Ezra is a partial representation of Lopatin's young self, used to explore links between puberty and posthuman aesthetics. 'Ezra' begins with the intermittent chords of a crackling, lo-fi synthesizer, separated by more than a second of total silence. These are answered by the jingle of bells and the sighing of what appears to be either a highly processed vocal sample or a synthetic choir 'ooh'. This call-response figure repeats before giving way to a dark, chorus-laden guitar riff that evokes Seattle grunge. The first idea then returns, now joined by two different vocal samples, both trapped in a glitchy loop that contorts them into repeating the words 'there's Ezra'. The name—formed artificially from fragments of the sampled speakers' original words—is then sung to the melody of the accompanying synths from the opening.

This opening then gives way to a B section formed from the contortions of a new voice, high pitched and frantic, repeating the words 'in' and 'out' as if responding to a series of rhythmic commands or robotic programming. This line then gets its own more frenetic, arpeggiated synthesiser accompaniment, before leading into a driving, rhythmic section that develops instruments and samples heard earlier. The opening section eventually returns in a new form, including percussive acoustic guitar and high, melodic lead synths that build into a cacophony before the grungy guitar riff from the opening is heard once more. The guitar then also degrades into a wall of noise, leaving only a melodic lead synth that ends the track, merging smoothly into the next track, 'ECCOJAMC1'. This is a simple eccojam featuring a looped vocal sample from John Martyn's 1973 song 'Solid Air', weighed down with delay and reverb. Martyn is heard repeating the words 'I don't know what's going on inside'.

A breakdown of the components and development of these two tracks is included here to provide a clear example of Lopatin's compositional approach on *Garden of Delete*. While fairly coherent in terms of timbre and aesthetics, the album is diverse in its instrumentation, with this song making particularly heavy use of vocal samples. Other tracks are composed almost entirely from synthesizers, such as 'Mutant Standard', a pummelling hybrid of trance and metal. Some songs are more in line with traditional songwriting, like the single 'Sticky Drama' which contains a lead lyric exploring internet-mediated, pubescent sexuality.

According to Lopatin, 'Sticky Drama' (the title of which refers to a now-defunct gossip website) is about the 'shock of ejaculating for the first time' (Welsh 2015). The song opens with a complex arrangement of tuned percussion including hammered dulcimer and piano, before the first verse sees the return of the thick, rubbery synths found earlier on the album. The wailing lead vocal—which distorts into static when it pauses to breathe—sings a disjointed and tongue-in-cheek lyric interspersed with ideas drawn from shallow celebrity gossip media:

Sticky drama is the girl for me
She's so sticky from the memories
Is he famous? Are you white?
How I lust her in your eyes
Sticky Drop
Know it's some special fade in
They're here to see you: V-I-Penis
Sophisticated, she did it
Ooh get high

617244

6509617846

1341617

5391514 and they can barely stand up

Sticky drama is

The girl for me

Sticky drama's the girl

The lyrics to the first half of the song are replicated here to demonstrate the mixture of coherence and repetition with nonsense and digital obfuscation. The song is clearly written from Ezra's perspective and was presumably sung by Lopatin himself, though this is impossible to verify due to vocal processing. This vocal stands apart from the vocals found elsewhere on the album, which more commonly appear as samples. Links can be drawn here to hyperpop artists like SOPHIE via the lyrics' sexual nature, and the mix of English with numerical sequences points to the line between embodied and digital experience. Another notable aspect of the song is its prominent use of percussion—quite unusual for Lopatin—with high velocity 'blast beats' at the song's climax. 'Sticky Drama's exploration of visceral experience with a range of synthetic but tactile timbres can also be found elsewhere on the album, such as in the song 'I Bite Through It', while the song's themes of mediated adolescent angst recur on other tracks like 'Child of Rage'. While surely meticulously composed, the album's music gives the overall impression of being compiled from a deep and diverse assemblage of media, themes and affect, just barely held together in a musical form. In order to better understand this emergent relationship between *Garden of Delete* and its component

parts, the following section will now introduce the theoretical lens through which I have chosen to view the album.

Alternate reality games

An Alternate reality game (ARG) is a nonlinear, transmedia narrative experience that requires players to use a variety of methods to search for or move between game elements in the form of discrete texts or objects. What separates an ARG from more typical narrative artwork is that rather than a single media object such as a book, film or performance in which the narrative is embedded, an ARG is made up of multiple fragmentary media objects that exist within the 'real' world, together forming an emergent narrative for the game's players (Niemeyer & Garcia 2017). These media texts work together to form a network of information that can be discovered and explored by the players in a nonlinear fashion, encountering these texts as they map a path through the network. ARGs frequently require that players solve clues, travel to real world locations at specific times and participate in the fiction of the story to continue their journey deeper into the narrative web. When first encountering an ARG, many players will not be aware of what they have found and begin to engage with the game's textual web as a genuine process of discovery. In long-running ARGs, players often seek one another out to swap information, theories, and to experience the game together.

The use of locations across real and digital space can offer the players a sense of immersion by positioning them as similarly inside the story, with no 'fourth wall' to separate the audience from the game world. Participant contribution can be very important to some ARGs, including interaction with other players or actors performing as part of the game's world. Players are also sometimes encouraged (or required) to contribute media texts of their own creation to the game world, expanding the narrative web from the other side. In this way, an ARG can be understood

as a deterritorialised assemblage with a high level of fluidity and flexibility, and its various narrative elements as emergent properties of the assemblage derived from the relationships between its constituent parts. The coding of an ARG assemblage is also highly complex due to the number of categories into which its segments can be organised – texts, characters, locations etc. The contributions and actions of an ARG’s players ‘plug in’ new segments to the ARG network, subtly changing these emergent properties in a way that can be experienced by all participants, such as by influencing narrative outcomes. ARGs also frequently incorporate digital technology into their text networks, using the internet as a host for component texts or to instruct player behaviour. Some ARGs are created by specialist production companies as immersive marketing campaigns for consumable products or media like films and video games (Janes 2015), while others are created for their own sake as standalone narrative experiences (De Beer & Bothma 2016).

One ARG of particular relevance to this chapter is *Year Zero*, produced in 2007 to accompany the release of the Nine Inch Nails album of that same name. *Year Zero*’s narrative was one of dystopian science fiction, requiring players to take up the role of activists and dissidents fighting a corrupt authoritarian government in the midst of impending supernatural disaster. The game began when some Nine Inch Nails fans noticed mysteriously highlighted letters on a t-shirt for an apparently unrelated concert tour. This code led them to a secret webpage that initiated a narrative event warning of nefarious actions by the government, resulting in these fans then receiving official-looking emails warning against their continued access of ‘dissident material’. Each of these events were orchestrated by the band and their collaborators to provide fans with the immersive narrative experience of living withing the album’s world. Another node of the *Year Zero* assemblage took the form of USB pens containing story information and teasers for tracks from the upcoming album, planted in the bathrooms of several Nine Inch

Nails concerts around the world. Once discovered, fans shared this information on Nine Inch Nails messageboards and worked together to uncover more of the story. The *Year Zero* narrative also incorporated the band's members as characters. Some players received invitations to a secret protest concert, the hidden location of which was then raided by actors playing the role of police, interrupting the performance.

Nine Inch Nails frontman Trent Reznor and art director Robert Sheridan worked together with the specialist company 42 Entertainment to construct the game. 42 Entertainment had previously been responsible for creating a number of other ARGs promoting video games and Hollywood films. However, according to Reznor, the band's intention was to make *Year Zero* more than an innovative marketing campaign, drawing comparisons with the liner notes of 1970s concept albums. 'We want to make the world's most elaborate album cover, you know, using the media of today instead of making people buy a vinyl record, which they're not going to do, or a CD or an MP3, which has no artwork' (Rose 2007). Aware of straightforward purpose of the previous 42 Entertainment ARGs, Reznor states that he was keen to avoid *Year Zero* feeling like a promotional gimmick, or a lightweight addition to the album, with the album's music instead acting as just one node in the larger narrative network of the *Year Zero* ARG.

Despite Reznor's insistence that the ARG was something more meaningful than the marketing vehicles that inspired it, *Year Zero*'s structure, deliberate message, narrative cohesion and conclusion all mark it as a fairly typical example of the form. While *Year Zero* had significantly more polish and narrative clarity than Lopatin's rough-hewn *Garden of Delete* ARG, it can be considered a direct precursor to it. Not only was it designed to provide paratext to an upcoming rock album and made innovative use of the internet to stage aspects of its narrative, but there

is also evidence to suggest that Lopatin was directly inspired to create his own ARG after touring with Nine Inch Nails the year before *Garden of Delete* was released. But as is typical of Lopatin as an artist, the existence of an obvious point of inspiration for his work enhances its power rather than diluting it. Just like one of his samples, Lopatin's ARG twisted and repurposed the form into a new context, transforming its expressive potential. As the following sections will explain, Lopatin not only used his ARG to build a narrative world that enriched the content of his music, but to unpack his own processes of production and identity as a practitioner of both the internet and of music.

However, even this idea did not originate with this chapter's case study. As mentioned in Chapter One, Paul Booth uses the ARG as a metaphor for the activities of online audiences, describing the relationship between fans and the texts they consume, as well as between groups of fans, who position themselves as interconnected nodes in the assemblage of media that makes up their online environment (Booth 2010). This suggests that the internet itself is like a kind of perpetual ARG, a network of textual objects embedded in digital space that can only be experienced in a subjective, participatory way. To Booth, this idea is especially applicable to fans as they are known for their complex and innovative use and reuse of texts taken from the objects of their fandom, as famously described by Henry Jenkins. But in the time since it was made, Booth's comparison has only become more broadly applicable, as platformisation has encouraged internet users of all kinds to engage in such activity. It seems highly improbable that this similarity between the actions of ARG players and online fan practices was lost on Lopatin when conceiving and constructing *Garden of Delete*, especially considering the content of the narrative he constructed, firmly centred on the relationship between the internet and media consumption. As a result, *Garden of Delete* can perhaps be best understood as an

ARG about the ARG-ness of the online experience: a hypertextual narrative simulating the hypertextual experience of life online.

Having established this, it is now possible to begin breaking down the *Garden of Delete* ARG into its component pieces, discussing their significance and role not only in the game's narrative assemblage, but also in terms of the way they relate to the research questions first introduced at the start of this project. In particular, different aspects of Lopatin's ARG offer insight into the way that the online experience relates to internet users' sense of musical identity, and how media consumption, genre and taste can work to simultaneously generate and express a sense of selfhood for those engaged in online communication. For both myself and Lopatin, the changing nature of the online experience under platform capitalism offers a means of addressing these questions. But in contrast to my previous case studies, Lopatin takes a typically nostalgic approach in his engagement with this idea, evoking the internet of the late 1990s and 2000s, a time before platformisation had truly taken hold of online culture.

Identifying and categorising the constituent parts of an ARG is a challenge, since the nature of the form means there can be almost as many types of nodes in the network as there are nodes themselves, not to mention the fact that the pieces of a broad, nonlinear narrative web can be difficult to present in an order that doesn't misrepresent relationships and hierarchies in the network. This is especially true in the context of *Garden of Delete* since the experience of playing the ARG is so key to its expression. However, as a relatively compact example of the form, it is possible to categorise and list the major elements of this ARG (meaning both emergent elements like its characters and the actual media content that makes up the network), while still conveying some of the intended player experience. First, I will introduce the basic concept of the *Garden of Delete* ARG via the first node in the assemblage that doubled as

Lopatin's album announcement. I will then move on to describe the ARG's characters, and their relationship with Lopatin's own identity, before moving on to map out the ARG's media network: its virtual spaces and the textual nodes within them.

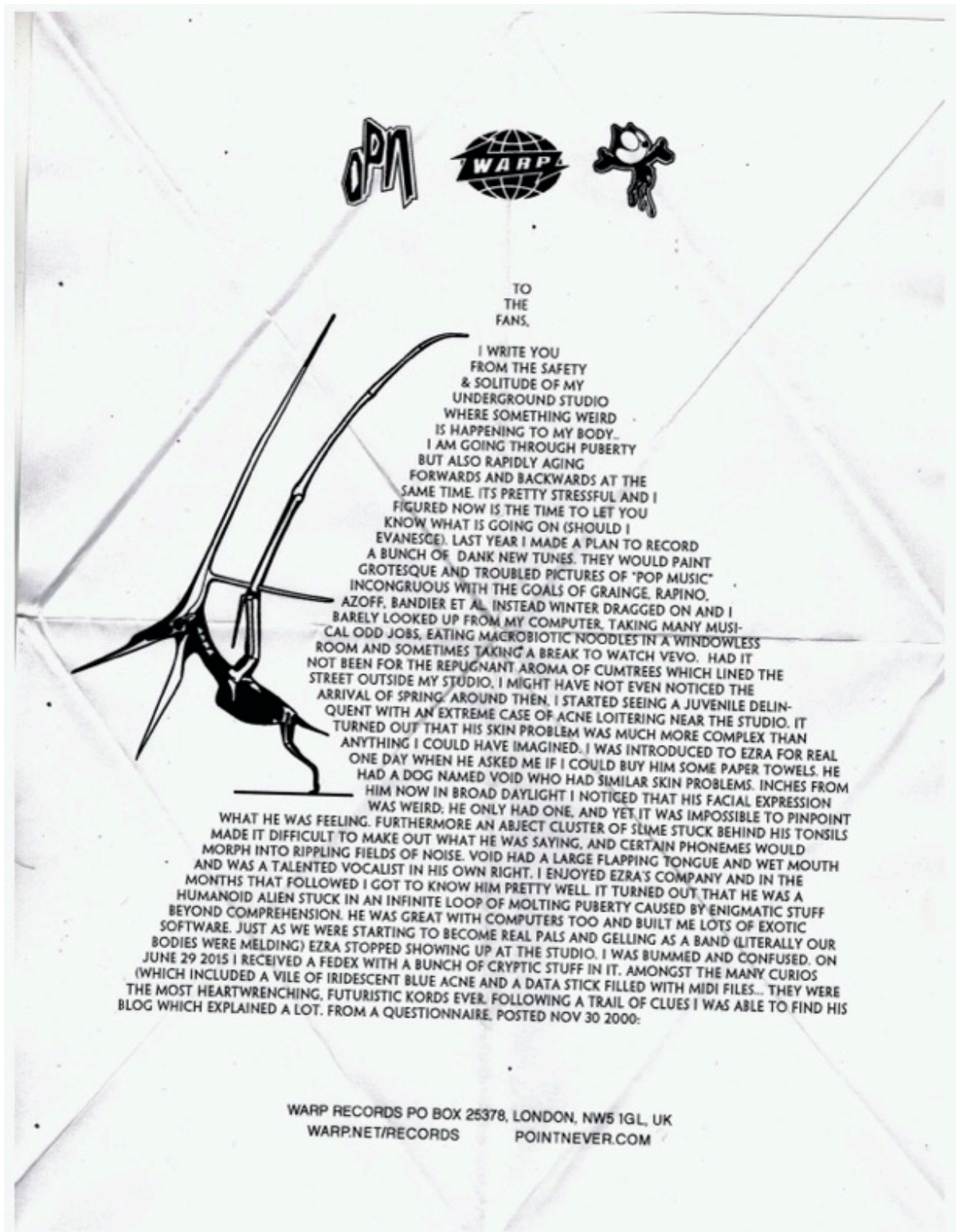


Figure 8.3: The first page of the 'TO THE FANS' document that began the Garden of Delete ARG.

Garden of Delete: the ARG

In August 2015, a PDF document was uploaded to the Oneohtrix Point Never website. It served to announce an upcoming album entitled *Garden of Delete* but was not a straightforward press release. The four-page document was made to look like it had been printed, crumpled and re-scanned into a computer, the second page even sporting the warped image of a hand at the right-side border, holding the paper in place. The first page was a letter from Lopatin beginning ‘TO THE FANS’ (Figure 8.3), in which the composer explained that his recent reclusivity was due to him having caught some kind of supernatural ageing disease. This tale was told in a dreamlike fashion that blended bizarre, grotesque language with dated slang. In it Lopatin described meeting a mysterious and similarly afflicted teenager named Ezra, who offered him companionship before eventually disappearing before sending him a bag of junk in the post, including a memory stick full of MIDI files. Ezra features prominently in the ARG, as much of the network of online media is designed to represent his internet-mediated practices and experiences, in a similar manner to that already exemplified in ‘Sticky Drama’.

The second, third and fourth pages of this mysterious PDF contain a questionnaire similar to those once popular on blogs and in music magazines, the questions a mixture of banal (‘Last phone call?’) and personal (‘Are you a virgin?’). Answers to these questions were printed below (and signed ‘<e>’ for Ezra) painting the character as a melodramatic but down-to-earth music obsessive, and continue the morbid, esoteric style of Lopatin’s letter on the first page. Ezra’s questionnaire also contained clues and instructions for Lopatin’s audience, pointing to other nodes in the ARG network, including the URL of blog and numerous references to a band called ‘Kaoss Edge’. The questionnaire was dated 30 November 2000, matching the visual design of the whole document, which was in line with a particular strain of late 1990s to early

2000s alternative music culture that was to become the aesthetic basis of the rest of the ARG, as well as the album's music.

This visual style follows the sonic palette of the album, drawing on science fiction and body horror traditions of cyborgs and posthumanism, mixed with material evoking awkward adolescence. While these aesthetics build on the setting and themes of *Garden of Delete* effectively, they also form a continuation of Lopatin's longstanding preference for working with cultural material that is highly unfashionable, staying intentionally out of sync with generational and often contrived cycles of nostalgia in mainstream culture. For instance, by the release of *Garden of Delete* in the mid 2010s, the media from the early 1990s Lopatin had recycled and explored in his earlier work had very much come back into vogue. Similarly, as I write in the early 2020s, so-called 'Y2K' style inspired by the fashion of the late 1990s is very visible among young people, with Lopatin having now once again moved on.

However, Lopatin's interest in this era is not merely aesthetic, but phenomenological. 2015 was a period of rapid platformisation, as the pivot to video saw a large-scale transformation of what the internet *felt* like in years before. Lopatin did make use of some mainstream platforms while building his ARG's media assemblage, but the way in which he implemented and arranged his network was unmistakably intended to simulate a much older incarnation of the internet. This was a time in which users could easily become lost, shocked or delighted with a discovery, and in which each webpage, blogs and online communities seemingly existed in a world of its own, despite their networked nature. This pre-platform internet has been mentioned many times in this project so far, but never has it been evoked in such a vital and experiential way as it is in *Garden of Delete*.

Characters

The character of Ezra is the ARG's central figure, an autobiographical expression of Lopatin's adolescent identity – grotesque, self-loathing, and almost entirely defined by his use of the internet. An avid consumer of music and online media, Ezra was the author of a music blog and appeared to run a fansite for his favourite band, Kaoss Edge. Though his appearance varied between depictions, Ezra most often appeared as a teenage boy suffering from a mysterious chronic skin condition. First referred to as 'a severe case of acne', the disease is gradually revealed to have more a severe, horrific nature, sometimes portrayed as a series of grotesque boils and cysts, while at other times as the boy's skin melting away like putty. This ailment appears to be a rather on-the-nose metaphor for both the embodied and psychological experience of adolescence, as puberty does violence both to the body and the self-image. In line with these supernatural elements, in the 'TO THE FANS' document Lopatin refers to Ezra as an alien: 'it turned out that he was a humanoid alien stuck in an infinite loop of molting puberty caused by enigmatic stuff beyond comprehension' [sic]. The absurd science fiction horror tone of this revelation (and of the metaphor itself) is indicative of the ARG's tone more broadly. Throughout the network of media there is a constant presence of recycled media and tropes from horror, b-movies and sci-fi cinema, all regurgitated by Lopatin in a style similar to his plunderphonics musical compositions.

Ezra is a subject within the *Garden of Delete*'s simulation of the pre-platformisation internet, his character accessible to the ARG's players only via the digital traces of his tastes, opinions and experiences scattered throughout the network. By demanding in this way that we learn about Ezra through the lens of his online consumption and discussion of music, Lopatin makes a powerful statement about the aspect of his identity that Ezra represents. For his part, Ezra appears to also derive some amount of selfhood through his online consumption, choosing to

name his blog (kaossed.blogspot.com) and twitter handle (@EzraKaossed) after his favourite band, once again signalling the importance of online self-naming practices in the expression of musical identity. As well as being a fan, Ezra is also a musician, implied to have been the catalyst that inspired the *Garden of Delete* album's music and collaborating with Lopatin in its composition. Specifically, the questionnaire mentions that he plays the drums, perhaps a reference to the increased presence of rock percussion on the album in comparison to Lopatin's earlier music. This idea is supported by the fact that in the ARG's narrative, Ezra is the source of the MIDI files Lopatin then used as a starting point when writing *Garden of Delete*. This role as the composer's muse combines with Ezra's conception as a distorted representation of the young Lopatin to demonstrate something profound about the composer's artistic process; drawing from his past selves, his work always derived from memory.

A fictionalised version of Daniel Lopatin himself also appears in the *Garden of Delete* ARG. This Lopatin is quite different from the 'real-life' persona found in press interviews, using bizarre, poetic language that wildly swings between candid reality, irony and supernatural storytelling. Lopatin appears only twice as a character in the media network but plays an important role on both occasions, first introducing the ARG itself in 'TO THE FANS', and then when he reappears on Ezra's blog, taking on the role of interviewee. Lopatin's choice to include a fictionalised version of himself in the narrative raises further questions about the nature of his identity. The collaboration described between Ezra and this version of Lopatin (apparently accompanied by a Cronenbergian literal merging of their bodies) suggests that *Garden of Delete*'s music is the result of a fusion of these two personas.

The final set of characters featured in *Garden of Delete* are the delinquent members of virtual band Kaoss Edge: 'Frank (Krank) Iodine', 'Malkon Flex' and 'Flow Kranium'. The band's

style appears to be a crossbreed between nu-metal and cybergoth, two musical subcultures prominent in period between the mid '90s and early '00s. During the promotional cycle for *Garden of Delete*, Lopatin referred to the band as a central influence on the album's direction. Continuing to play on the boundaries of bad taste like much of Lopatin's work, Kaoss Edge are a gleeful celebration of the ugliness of late '90s genre-mashing music and 'alternative' consumer aesthetics, blended with the same fantastical elements as the rest of Lopatin's worldbuilding. As both a fictional inspiration for present-day Lopatin and Ezra's favourite band, Kaoss Edge act as a second order simulation, providing yet another means through which the ARG explores notions of influence, taste and authorship.

Kaoss Edge's genre is referred to as 'hypergrunge', or sometimes 'cybernetic rock', both of which are also how Lopatin describes his own musical direction on the album. Several songs credited to the band were uploaded to a SoundCloud account owned by their label 'Konfrontation Records'. In another echo of outdated web design, one song, 'Looking Glass' auto-plays on the homepage of kaossedgeofficial.blogspot. The music is a predictably aggressive, synthetic attack on the senses, featuring shouting vocal samples, whirring industrial synths and pummelling drum machines that appear to ricochet around virtual spaces. One might reasonably expect (as many fans did) that these tracks were composed by Lopatin—the virtual band functioning as a new pseudonym—or possibly as way of teasing clips from the *Garden of Delete* album but according to Lopatin the Kaoss Edge songs were in fact written by the aforementioned visual artist and frequent Lopatin collaborator Nate Boyce. Boyce had apparently been unhappy with the songs with no plans to release them, so Lopatin asked if he could use them to portray his virtual band.

Between the start of the ARG in August and the album's November release, each of the above characters maintained active accounts on Twitter. The use of social media accounts to roleplay fictional characters in this way has a long history (Booth 2010), as well as being used in other ARGs. Lopatin's fictional self-operated from the composer's long-established account @0PN, mostly retweeting the accounts of other characters and playing along with the game's fiction. Ezra's account @EzraKaossed behaved in line with his character, posting often about writing code and music fandom, as well as his interactions with Lopatin. Perhaps the use of a major social media platform like Twitter certainly does some damage to the intended setting of the ARG in a pre-platformisation internet, but it also provided Lopatin a means of networking the followers of these accounts together, drawing them into the assemblage as participants in the fiction and narrative of the ARG. For Lopatin, it appears that the utility of Twitter's social affordances is enough to outweigh the clearly anachronistic presence of this contemporary platform in the narrative context of his ARG even despite its ongoing theme of out-of-place temporality. This dynamic can be seen in Lopatin's use of the Google-owned WordPress service to host Ezra's blog, where even in the construction of intentionally dated online spaces, characters and media, it is now essentially impossible to operate online without the use of major digital platforms.

The two final Twitter accounts linked to the ARG were both associated with Kaoss Edge: the first an 'official' band account supposedly controlled by the band's label Konfrontation Records and linked to the aforementioned SoundCloud account. This official account was parody of corporate music accounts, retweeting the promotional material of real artists and posting in accordance with the Kaoss Edge aesthetic, but with an air of maintaining a profitable image for the band. The third account, while also linked to Kaoss Edge, was an 'unofficial' tribute account to the Flow Kranium, the band's front man who was apparently in 'kryo' sleep

during the Twitter account's active months. The choice to make an unofficial fan account for Kranium, rather than giving the actual character a voice continues the ongoing theme of fandom and secondary, fluid identities found throughout *Garden of Delete*. Furthermore, it is implied that this account is in fact run by Ezra, roleplaying as his idol Flow Kranium, furthering Ezra's internet mediated musical identity.

Perhaps the simplest way to understand the characters of Ezra and Daniel Lopatin is as the two sides of the 'real' Lopatin's musical identity: Ezra, the consumer and Daniel Lopatin, the producer. But in this framing what do Kaoss Edge represent? Their role as an imaginary inspiration for the album reflects Lopatin's intense desire to rework and remediate musical ideas, openly and proudly poaching all kinds of material from his surroundings, whether musical, textual, aesthetic, conceptual or philosophical. Kaoss Edge therefore can be understood as the result of Lopatin abstracting his own process of artistic influence and regurgitation. They are an invented simulacrum of a musical influence, one that is just as synthetic as the timbres and instruments often heard in his music, but that is no less capable of producing affective, challenging musical material in his hands.

Virtual spaces

Of the two main websites that were part of the ARG, the first I will discuss is Ezra's blog, kaossed.blogspot.com. The blog's backdated archive stretches back into the past: one post from 1994; seven in 1997; nine in 1998; one in 2000; one in 2003 and two in 2015, reinforcing the temporal instability of the character. Within this spotty timeline the vague story of Ezra's origin is told, depicting an alien mind that develops human language and goes on to absorb and regurgitate various media objects, before finally emerging as a perpetually pubescent super-fan. Here, characterised only through what he writes in his blog, Ezra can be witnessed reading

or *consuming* himself into being. Throughout the ARG Lopatin makes references to numerous articles, books and academic texts that relate to *Garden of Delete*'s themes, or that inform his artistic identity, positioning these elements as constituent parts of the emergent identity represented by both the ARG and the music of the album.

The 1994 post 'No G.O.D.' is a long series of non-alphabetical Unicode characters: mathematical symbols, Greek letters, punctuation marks etc. The second post, entitled 'Birth' is written in English, but is still largely incoherent: it begins with a definition for the word 'birth' taken from the satirical 1911 book *The Devil's Dictionary* by Ambrose Bierce. Beneath is what appears to be the from the instruction manual of the Digitech Metal Master distortion pedal, complete with diagrams and some more abstract art. The third entry is shorter, beginning with another quotation: this time from the 1962 essay 'White Elephant Art and Termite Art' by film critic Manny Farber, a treatise in praise of small-scale, auteur driven 'termite art' (so named because the creator can 'burrow into' their subject) over the bloated, self-aggrandising 'white elephant art' often found in the mainstream. Below this quotation Ezra continues the discussion:

The common quality or defect which unites all good bands is fear, a fear of the potential life, rudeness, and outrageousness of an album. Coupled with their storage vault of self-awareness and knowledge of music history, this fear produces the chaos edge.

From here, kaossed.blogspot.org becomes more recognisable as a teenage music blog, containing stream-of-consciousness posts by Ezra about his life and friends, reviews of concerts and festivals, and numerous images from horror films and text-based roleplaying games. Other notable parts of the blog include the comment sections which, like the Twitter

accounts, offer a means by which the ARG's players can engage with Lopatin's world. The blog's comments are populated with a mixture of real-life fans playing along with the game's fiction: 'you couldn't explain these things any better. thank you ez', and those addressing Lopatin directly: 'You're a weird guy, Daniel'.

One of the more recent posts on the blog is dated a few weeks before the start of the ARG, and is an interview with Lopatin, taken by Ezra. This post acts as a counterpart to 'TO THE FANS' as Ezra takes on the narrative voice, describing his descent into the composer's underground studio, led by Lopatin's corporate label representatives. The interview itself meanders between absurdity and what seems like sincere discussion of the upcoming album. The Lopatin/Ezra interview is a focal point for the entire ARG, as it is here that the identities of the consumer and producer come together fully, producer interviewed by consumer.

Once again, the idea of a deconstructed self-interview is not an original one, having been previously used by David Byrne to promote Talking Heads' legendary concert film *Stop Making Sense*. In this earlier example Byrne mocks the perceived authenticity of the pop interview format, playing a similarly detached parody of himself, interviewed by various characters also played by Byrne. In response to these interviewers' questions, Byrne offers a mix of seemingly meaningful information and inane non-sequiturs. In response to several weightier questions, Byrne answers to himself with a conspiratorial reply of 'I'll tell you later', highlighting his total control of information, and the absurdity of presenting promotional interviews as authentic representations. Perhaps the most interesting similarity between these two interview parodies is their role as parts of a larger project that expanded the work of their subject into a new medium. Where *Stop Making Sense* moved Talking Heads to the audio-visual realm, thus requiring a TV Pop interview, *Garden of Delete* saw Oneohtrix Point Never

step into cyberspace, and therefore included an interview conducted by a teenage music blogger.

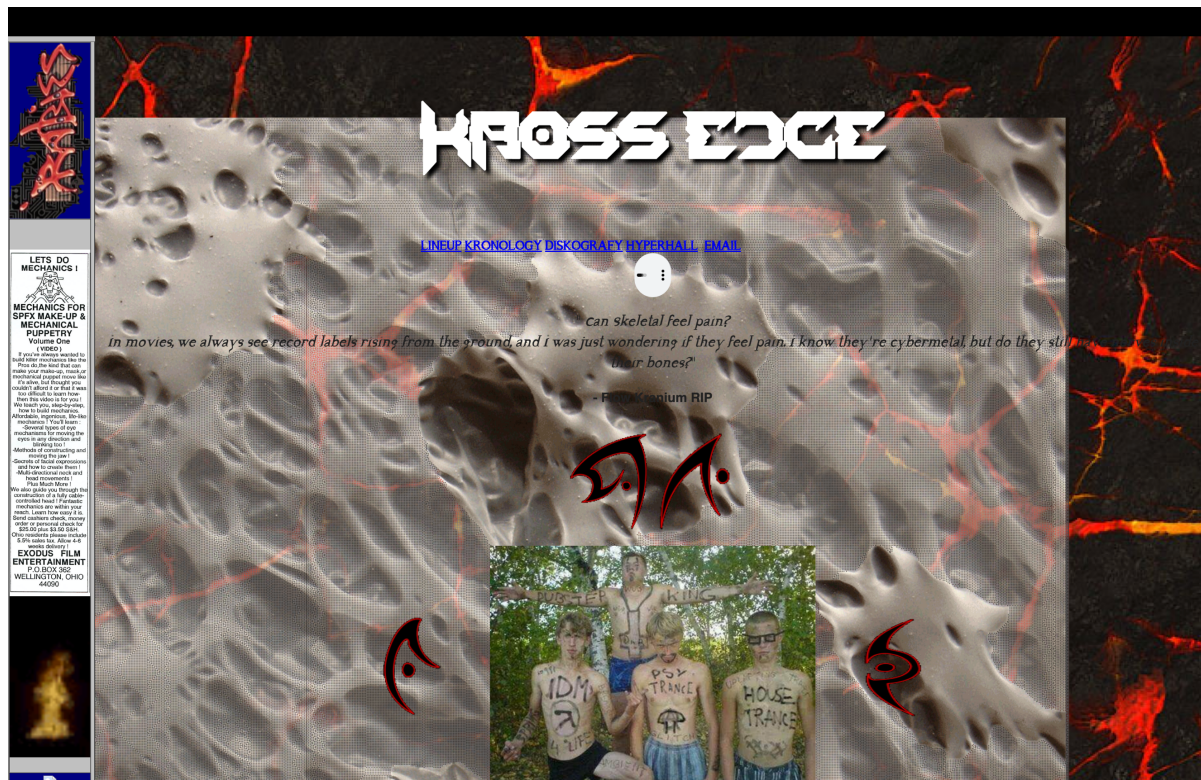


Figure 8.4: The homepage of kaossedgeofficial.com.

Another significant virtual space in the structure of the ARG is the Kaoss Edge website kaossedgeofficial.com, which was initially password protected, but broken into by players based on clues found in the ARG's original PDF. The most striking element of the site is its visual design – a nightmarish combination of the worst design sins of long defunct webhosting service GeoCities, the website is a mess of clashing, textured backgrounds and nearly unreadable fonts. The homepage sports low-quality GIFs and crudely cut-out alien lettering hyperlinked to vaguely threatening images of the kind one might inexplicably encounter on the third page of a Google Image search, such as a bowl full of chains covered with pasta sauce. Featured throughout the site are old internet banner advertisements, further evoking the experience of finding yourself on a strange website in around 2002.

Despite the URL's claim that it is 'official', the site strongly evokes early 2000s fan-made websites. Notably the text on many of the pages reads similarly to that of Ezra's blog, implying that he is its creator. The site's six pages include limited information about the origins and history of Kaoss Edge, but if one attempts to use the website in the normal manner, following the site's navigation buttons and in-text hyperlinks, they will quickly find themselves transported across the web seemingly at random to unrelated blogs, articles, images and videos. Beneath the surface of this fansite for a virtual band made by a virtual fan, Lopatin constructed a complex intertextual labyrinth of secondary media.

ARG ephemera

The virtual locations described in the previous section acted as nodes of the ARG assemblage but were also nexus points for other nodes positioned further out in the network. Many of these nodes were the strange and vague collection of files, videos, images and forgotten websites described above, many disguised behind hyperlinks claiming to lead to other areas of the site, generating a disorientating experience for anyone trying to navigate through the ARG's online spaces. This served to heighten the already uncanny, 'haunted house' feel of *Garden of Delete's* virtual spaces, keeping the user unsure of what will be behind each door. On encountering this aspect of the ARG, a group of Oneohtrix Point Never fans started working together to map out this content and the connections between it. Despite these efforts however, this media didn't seem to be building to anything, it was just a confusing pile of nonsensical media and hypertextual noise. For example, many of the website's hidden links led simply to strange and unpleasant JPEG images, or old websites with only tangential thematic relationships with the project – Lopatin's own version of the 'upload trash' mantra of Death Grips.

As mentioned above, Lopatin's music often includes references to or even material directly taken from the philosophical and academic texts that inspire and interest him, and this practice is also present in the *Garden of Delete* ARG. On one of the back pages of kaossedofficial.com, hyperlinked from the text 'TAKE THE FUCKING BATE EAT WHAT YOUR GIVEN FROZEN IS MY STATE PREVENTS ME FROM LIVING!!!' is a full PDF copy of Julia Kristeva's influential 1980 essay *The Powers of Horror*, a discussion of the affective concept of abjection via Lacanian psychoanalysis, and which explores our morbid fascination with objects that disgust or disturb us. Lopatin mentioned his interest in Kristeva in several interviews promoting *Garden of Delete* (Friedlander 2015, Smith 2015, Yoshida 2015), her work clearly informing the album's conception and aesthetic content. Other examples of academic work hidden in *Garden of Delete*'s transmedia labyrinth include the 1962 'White Elephant and Termite Art' essay mentioned in Ezra's blog, and a 2010 paper entitled 'Amoeba-Inspired Network Design' dealing with advances in self-improving technological networks influenced by the natural behaviour of biological entities, yet another vague allusion to the project's themes of posthumanism and emergence.

Several other nodes are musical in some way, as the site is linked to similar fan sites dedicated to progressive rock musicians such as Rush (one link is to a full interview with Geddy Lee), a blog post about Lollapalooza festival, and numerous YouTube videos, such as a Russian acoustic guitarist covering Metallica songs, and the entirety of dark ambient/drum and bass producer Christoph de Babalon's 1997 album *If You're Into It, I'm Out of It*. As confusing as this textual web may appear, I believe that these seemingly fragments serve a greater purpose beyond the desire to waste the time of his fans. In fact, the key to understanding what Lopatin had attempted to do had been present in the ARG all along, contained within the flash drive of MIDI files mentioned in 'TO THE FANS', the first network node introduced to fans.

The MIDI Files

On a back page of the Kaoss Edge website, players found a list of nine MIDI files, ranging from single melodies to more densely textured chords and are each several minutes long. While no official announcement was made regarding these files, in the context of online music culture, the page's very existence should be understood as a suggestion that fans download and experiment with them musically. Though it was not known at the time, this MIDI data contained the tonal backbone material for nearly every song on the upcoming album, the fundamental melodic and harmonic lines at the centre of Oneohtrix Point Never's *Garden of Delete*. In terms of their role in the ARG, it seems that these files are intended to represent those that Ezra sent to Lopatin in the post, described as 'the most heartwrenching, futuristic kords ever'.

Initially this appears to echo *Year Zero*, and the USB sticks of teaser tracks for Nine Inch Nails' upcoming album planted in concert bathrooms, but in the context of *Garden of Delete* this is an act with much more significance to the ARG's narrative and themes. Rather than providing a preview of his finished compositions Lopatin handed his fans the raw materials he had used to create them – the assemblage of media from which his music was emergent. For many composers, melodies and other harmonic material form the focal point of their work, but in Lopatin's case this is much less true. From his ambient and noise music to the more organised, patchwork compositions of his early Warp releases, Lopatin's music prioritises timbre, spatiality and aesthetic juxtaposition over melody or harmony, with the affective manipulation of listeners' taste and memory replacing the tension of harmonic resolution. When Oneohtrix Point Never tracks do contain coherent melodic lines they generally play the role of supporting whatever complex collection of samples or instrumentation the piece explores. In sharing the

Garden of Delete MIDI files Lopatin therefore gave much less away than many other artists would have in doing the same. Rather than leaking his work, Lopatin was demonstrating the comparatively insignificant role played by this material in his musical expression, suggesting that the source of his unique musical identity is instead located the ARG's assemblage of media, character and digital space.

In a similar fashion to many other aspects of Lopatin's ARG, this idea echoes the actions of previous artists, but is subtly twisted in a way that provides new dimensions of meaning and complexity. Samantha Bennett has discussed the various pop artists who have previously chosen to release the mix 'stems' of their music to encourage audience experimentation (Bennett 2016). But in every one of Bennett's examples, the work in question had already been released in an 'official' form by the time its stems were released. Had Lopatin released his new album's MIDI files *after* the record's release then they would carry a teleological imprint of their eventual forms with them. When asked about the 'leak' of these files, Lopatin appeared to be interested in what his audience would do with them, comparing the situation to the visual personalisation of era-appropriate open-source music software. 'Yeah, it was the first time anybody had heard any of the riffs or the progressions from the record, and they got to hear them the way they wanted to dress them. It's like a Winamp skin' (Wilson 2015).

In response, during the months leading up the album's release, many of Lopatin's fans uploaded music based on the MIDI files to YouTube, SoundCloud and other platforms. As Lopatin predicted, in many versions the base material is simply 'reskinned': 'I downloaded them from the Internet and put them with some nice synths' (Solomatin 2015). Other examples are more extensively edited and posted along with links to the creators' ongoing musical projects for people who enjoyed listening to their work. Interestingly, some of music created

from Lopatin's MIDI files sounds a lot more like *R Plus Seven* than it does like *Garden of Delete* – its creators unable to predict how much of a departure from his previous record was to be found on the upcoming album. These re-uploads often included links to the original files, hoping to keep the practice going. Each new upload added more and more nodes to the assemblage of the ARG, the comment threads below them providing new locations in which fans could speculate and discuss Lopatin's work:

Is the Kaoss Edge material supposed to be some continued philosophy from the Eccojams stuff? Something representing music as a medium dissolving into technology with time? Who knows (maketimmycry 2015).

On top of this, during this period entirely fan made material attributed to either Oneohtrix Point Never or Kaoss Edge also began to appear online, as users composed entirely new music inspired by the ARG, continuing the expansion of the assemblage beyond the grasp of its creator.

Sampled media

The MIDI files are not the only media Lopatin hid in his ARG that features on the album. After the album's eventual release, fans began to realise that a lot of the collected media that they had been trying to make sense of made up more than an aesthetic backdrop to the ARG, appearing in album's music in the form of samples. This includes several YouTube videos with only a few hundred views, a typical example starring a pair of bored kids filming themselves as they run around their suburban neighbourhood causing trouble and awkwardly showing off to the camera. Audio clipped from this video is featured prominently in the song 'Mutant Standard', as the sound of the boys' game plays out over a pulsing trance rhythm, competing for space among a wash of synth pads before being suddenly obscured by a new sample, of

someone chewing loudly. The YouTube comment section below the video (which was taken down at some point during the completion of this project) was filled with Lopatin's fans, visiting both before and after the album's release:

- RIP Flow Kranium
- THUMBS UP IF EZRALIEN BROUGHT YOU HERE
- I have too many tabs open
- kid look up Mutant Standards by Oneohtrix Point Never he sampled you

By this stage in the breakdown of *Garden of Delete*, the relationship between the project's ARG and the album should be discernible. The assemblage of media, virtual spaces and characters that makes up the ARG can be understood as a kind of decomposed form of the album – an explosion of the assembled components that went into Lopatin's musical process. However, there are additional layers to the way this assemblage represents Lopatin's artistic identity. Throughout the chapter I have demonstrated that Lopatin's ARG is a kind of simulation of the experience of the pre-platformisation internet. The characters and media inhabiting this simulation form a fractured image of his subjectivity within that experience, expressing the way his artistic process is entangled with the internet. The intersecting practices of consumption and production each contributing to his musical identity in different ways, here brought to life (in the forms of Ezra and the fictionalised Lopatin) through the powers of emergence.

Conclusion

Lopatin has always maintained that the ideas, themes and narrative of *Garden of Delete* were designed to be vague and ambiguous, but one small node in the ARG's network of ephemeral media greatly supports my reading of the project's intentions. Behind one of the small menu buttons on kaossedgeofficial.com can be found a grainy JPEG image of poststructuralist philosopher Manuel DeLanda, the scholar whose work first streamlined and strengthened the notion of assemblage. With this self-referential inclusion of DeLanda in his ARG, Lopatin is stating that rather than simply 'putting together vague ideas' he understands the way that emergent properties can arise from a specific collection of objects. Lopatin's decision to utilise this phenomenon in his project exploring the relationship between musical identity and the online experience demonstrates a significant amount of resonance between *Garden of Delete* and the aims of this project as a whole.



Figure 8.5: The image of Manuel DeLanda hidden within the ARG.

In this chapter, I have shown how the *Garden of Delete* ARG, rather than a simple promotional exercise, or a pathway strewn with clues for fans to follow, should be viewed as a deconstructed, deterritorialised reflection of the album. In one way or another the media strewn around Lopatin's websites was all contained in the *Garden of Delete* album, and Lopatin meticulously reconstructed the intertextual network of his compositions in virtual space like a web of uncited references. The ARG simultaneously acted as an image of the album's contents and a simulation of the experience of discovering those contents online. In fragmenting his musical selfhood into several virtual forms in the non-linear narrative of the ARG, and even blending his compositional approach with the creative endeavours of his audience in the process, Lopatin decoupled himself from the privileged central position of composer in his own artwork. However, experience of this ARG still presents one with a virtual representation of Lopatin's own distinctive artistic approach, with its many heterogenous constituent parts: mismatched and often interchangeable aesthetic, sonic, narrative and theoretical elements interact together to generate the emergent properties unique to his style. In an emblematic display of the ambivalence and fluidity that pervade online identity, Lopatin uses his work to simultaneously occupy multiple selves and identity positions. Many of these can be matched up with other examples of online identity described in this thesis – notably those mediated via nerdy, conspicuous consumption; posthuman embodiment; and the evolution of the online experience.

I understand the websites accompanying *Garden of Delete* as a kind of assemblage-as-album in a stage of semi decomposition (itself a theme running through the work) – a deconstruction of the constituent parts of Lopatin's musical creation, from the MIDI backbone of the tracks to the aesthetics, characters and cultural theory which inspired him. Far from merely being list of

textual fragments, the ARG embedded this media in a virtual space, allowing its users to walk through the internet's hypertextual web as he had: encountering music, home videos, philosophy, images and bizarre blogs, all that truly led back to his music. The resultant experience is something like virtual tour of the album embedded in cyberspace, acting simultaneously as two kinds of conceptual object: first as an ontological map of the composer's creative process, and second as a hyperreal simulation of the music itself – an album made out of internet. The *Garden of Delete* ARG is itself an example of the very thing it is about – the nonlinear, sometimes disturbing experience of fragmented identity that emerges from our increasingly immersive and personal digitally mediated cultural experience.

Conclusions

In the opening of this project, I offered the example of composer Daniel Lopatin to introduce the ways that identities oriented around the experience and skilful use of the internet are reflected in musical practice. But the diversity of contexts in which these identities are mediated by both music and online communication meant that no single representative example, however fitting, could succinctly summarise the project's findings and research focus. As I have shown, this system of mediation is further complicated by its entanglement with large-scale technological and cultural processes that dramatically impacted the digital world throughout the 2010s. Despite this complexity, each of my six case studies have provided insight into the nature and functions of music in negotiating internet users' sense of selfhood, subcultural belonging, expertise, political allegiance, gender, embodiment and everyday experience. In this way, the project has advanced our understanding of how musical practice is used in various different but inter-related contexts to guide, negotiate and express these aspects of identity for internet users. It has also demonstrated the role played by the newly dominant system of platform capitalism in shaping and being shaped by online music culture, providing a basis on which future music-based research into platformisation might build.

This concluding chapter will first provide an overview of the project's findings and theoretical contributions. This is achieved by revisiting the research questions laid out in the Introduction, drawing out the common threads that have emerged across the different case studies, demonstrating the relationships and commonalities between the various phenomena I have encountered and analysed. This is then followed by a discussion of ideas and questions raised during the course of this project that could be fruitful areas for future research. In particular, the short-form video app TikTok is singled out as a notable absence from this project, and

several possible areas for future enquiry on the platform are presented, based on the findings in my case studies. Finally, I will conclude with some brief points of reflection.

Project findings & common threads

Early in the project I explained how my working concept of musical identity was derived from a combination of scholarship in fields including musicology, popular music studies, music education, fan studies and developmental psychology. Popular music in particular acts as a powerful and direct mediator of identity thanks to the manifold social, political, spatial and experiential associations it carries with it in its texts, traditions, genres and scenes. This model is predicated on a holistic view of musical practice in line with Small's idea of musicking, one that understands the way such practice both builds and reflects the identity of the practitioner to themselves and to others. In essence, musical identity is an image of the individual or collective selfhood that is mediated by acts of musicking. These acts—musical identity practices—range from those commonly understood by most people to those that require relatively high levels of contextual literacy, skill and experience to decode. This variance in understanding then works to segment audiences, building and reflecting a sense of collective identity for each group of practitioners. In light of this, one of the central claims of this project is that this system of identity-orientated musical practice bears significant similarity to the way that the use of online communication constructs and conveys identity. Just like music, the internet can be viewed as a technology of the self, meaning that musical practice and online practice share a structural relationship with one another in terms of identity and therefore also easily synergise with one another. This has resulted in the hybrid online musical identity practices presented and analysed across the six case studies.

Research questions

My first research question was directly concerned with this hybridisation, looking at the existence of pre-digital musical identity practice in online culture:

- 1) Among online audiences and musicians, to what extent have identity practices associated with pre-digital popular music culture hybridised with those relating to the culture of the internet?

The parallel histories presented in Chapter One first showed how the social and legal repercussions of the internet-driven revolution in musical access resulted in the fusion of ideas, social norms and identities from cyberculture, ‘nerd’ and hacker communities with those associated with musicians and music fans. The evidence from my case studies certainly confirms my speculation that the increasingly visual online culture of the 2010s would see some of the more visual markers and behaviours found in pre-digital popular music culture enter online music culture. While the visual styles I mentioned are perhaps best exemplified by TikTok, this visual shift can also be seen in the recurring importance of album artwork discussed in Chapters Three and Four. In the latter case studies too, the importance of digital artwork and specific visual palettes to several forms of internet also support the idea. This is especially evident in the recent resurgence of aesthetics from the late 1990s and 2000s, which are not only seen in hyperpop and the work of Daniel Lopatin but have also filtered into more mainstream music released by artists like Doja Cat and Dua Lipa.

Another aspect of the fusion between online culture and pre-digital popular music subcultures that emerged across multiple case studies is found in the way music is discussed. It appears that online, music fans’ preoccupation with performances of taste and authenticity synergise

with the affect-laden, highly mediated style of internet communication to create the distinctively online music discourse observed throughout the first four case studies. Something similar to this fusion is also reflected in the music examined in Chapters Seven and Eight. The 'h8r8rec' culture of >implying; Anthony Fantano's 'LET'S ARGUE' videos; the competitive nature of Genius annotations and the system of social control exercised by DGSP members each in their own way represent a specific blend of antagonism and ambivalence, as well as a tension between the reliance on and resistance to social and platform structures. Together, these examples show how along with consumption itself, participation in these practices and engagement with their internal tensions is a core way that music fans express and negotiate their sense of personal and collective identity in online culture.

But this cultural hybridity must also be understood in the context of the digital platforms on which it occurred and continues to develop, so this was the purpose of my second research question:

- 2) How has the negotiation of musical identity in online music culture been influenced by the growing power of large digital platforms, particularly in the context of social media communities and music streaming?

Evidence of the symbiosis between the two platform types mentioned here recurred at points in the project, as well as the way they relate to smaller, platform-adjacent online communities, services and tools like genius.com and the various sites designed to enable chartposting that featured in Chapter Three. My findings have largely confirmed the hypothesis that as the key intermediaries of online communication, commerce, consumption and sociality, large digital platforms have had a profound impact on the negotiation of musical identity, playing a central

role in every musicking practice discussed in this project. As I had suspected, throughout my research the forces of platform capitalism broadly represented a reterritorialisation of internet culture, stratifying and consolidating practices around specific online locations and services.

However, my findings also suggest that the users of these platforms exercise a significant amount of control over the form of their negotiation of musical identity. Though they might attempt to define or dictate how their users engage in musical practice, platforms ultimately still only act as stages and intermediaries through which musical identities are negotiated and expressed. The balance of power in these platform-user relationships varies from case to case, often depending on users' ability to make innovative and tactical use of platform affordances to develop the clarity, complexity and efficiency of their identity practice. In certain cases, the stratification and reterritorialisation of online music culture has resulted directly from the creative actions of users, rather than being imposed directly by platforms. This can be seen as a response to the daunting nature of the celestial jukebox, as audiences search for new forms of curation exemplified by the popularity of user-created recommendation charts and visual guides. In some ways chartposting represents a later stage of the process that began with P2P communities and MP3 blogs, as trust relations offer a hierarchy through which certain users are able to provide a curatorial service to others in exchange for respect and the reinforcement of their musical identities.

Rather than dictating the behaviour of their users, platforms provide the tools and conditions required for these users to develop musical practice. These innovative and often unorthodox forms of engagement hybridise pre- and post-digital musical discourses and values with those of internet culture more broadly, linking my first and second research questions together. This is reflected in the adoption of ambivalent vernacular humour by the subjects of Chapters Three

and Four, as the once resistant ‘shitposting’ practices of internet subculture have become a common feature of mainstream digital platforms. On the one hand, this has resulted in the rejection of some of the most toxic aspects of the online cultures that influenced both Fantano and >implying, as seen by the Facebook community’s rejection of associations with 4chan, and the demise of Fantano’s controversial alternate YouTube channel. But on the other hand the popularity and social relevance enjoyed by the hosts of such thriving communities and influential online figures inevitably provide legitimacy and stability to platforms that are also associated with numerous social, political and economic harms.

Early in the project I had anticipated that increasing platform influence might reduce users’ access to certain identity practices, but this has not appeared to be a widespread problem in the context of my chosen case studies. I observed some limited forms of resistant platform engagement by the subjects of my research, with key examples being Facebook users’ refusal to allow the platform to police their communities for them and the ‘upload trash’ mantra of Death Grips fans. However, there was certainly less of this resistant activity than I expected to find, and little or no voiced concern from users about the potentially homogenising and corporatising results of widespread platformisation. Rather than shying away from platforms, users were more likely to find ways to enhance or go beyond intended uses of various platform affordances in their musicking activities.

While it was rare to encounter outright active resistance against platformisation during my case studies, there is certainly evidence to show that when the platform-based automation of certain practices occurs, it is unlikely to replace practices that currently rely on human interaction. For instance, Spotify Wrapped has not replaced chartposting practice, and has instead been incorporated into the musicking practice of the >implying community. Similarly, the success

of *The Needle Drop* demonstrates that internet users continue to value human-based systems of recommendation alongside those powered by algorithms. Like any other platform affordance, these automated systems are absorbed into the assemblage of tools and practices that make up users' online musical practice, adding to the scope, flexibility and precision of the identities that practice can negotiate.

It is clear though that the platform capitalist model has resulted in structural changes that risk the loss of entire communities and their means of online musicking. This is best exemplified by the changes to Genius' model of lyric interpretation described in the second half of Chapter Five. These moves by the company appear to have precipitated the decline of a relatively niche but sophisticated and highly valued form of online identity negotiation, one that also produces a clear benefit for non-participating internet users in the form of detailed and well-evidenced lyric analysis for popular songs. On a larger scale still, one of the many themes explored in *Garden of Delete* is the changing nature of online media consumption and the creative processes born from the experience of an internet less dominated by large platforms – one in which it was still possible to get truly lost, and whose users had a greater level of agency.

In the absence of this sense of independent discovery and exploration, platform competence has become a very important skill both in terms of making it possible for users to participate in online culture, as well as within that culture as a signifier of status and belonging. Once again, Anthony Fantano demonstrates this well, but the members of the >implying group also engage in expert use of a variety of platforms including Facebook, last.fm, Spotify, YouTube and others in their musical consumption and subsequent visual expression of musical identity via chartposting. Still, the changing nature of the online landscape means that these literacies (and the forms of musicking associated with them) can be quickly lost when a particular

platform becomes obsolete. Interestingly, given the typically limited lifespan and trendy nature of social media platforms, the removal of access to subcultural capital that results from a platform's demise is similar to that befalling subcultural participants who find themselves no longer at the forefront of a musical movement, when their contextual literacies and subcultural knowledge falls out of step with contemporary popular culture. This parallel is clearly demonstrated in Chapters Seven and Eight by the celebration of bygone technologies along with the musical aesthetics that existed alongside them. The shared techno-musical nostalgia displayed in genres like vaporwave and hyperpop offers a clear image of the relationship between digital and musical culture. In this way the lifecycle of digital technology mirrors that of genres, trends and aesthetics in music, as older forms are revived and recycled.

My first two research questions were each broad in scope, the others focussed on three specific categories of musicking that relate to identity, spread across the six case studies. The first looked to consumption practice in particular, split between two types of consumers:

- 3) How is the conspicuous consumption of music used online as a way of expressing identity? What does this look like among
 - a) communities and their members?
 - b) prominent social media personalities?

Chapters Three and Four examined how in the post-ownership economy of online music culture, conspicuous consumption has developed into a formalised visual language of psychological ownership and individual taste, but also accelerates the development of alternative canons that provide affective ties between users in a given community or audience. Building on existing scholarship around discourses of authenticity in popular music culture,

the concept of authentic consumption was proposed in Chapter Four to describe Anthony Fantano's utilisation of various discourses of authenticity to produce his image, and is clearly also an important aspect of chartposting, in which participation in established forms of mediated consumption and the ability to defend one's choices and tastes are requirements for social belonging.

Elements of the consumption practices examined in Chapters Three and Four can be found elsewhere in the project. For instance, Genius mobilises discourses of cultural legitimacy and authenticity in its use of the language of scholarly expertise alongside that of hip-hop culture and fandom to motivate its users and foster a sense of competitive but shared identity. Meanwhile, similarities can be seen between the omnivorous tastes on display in >implying and *The Needle Drop* and the music at the centre of the last three case studies, where eclecticism and aesthetic juxtaposition operate as a key part of the 'internet aesthetic' found in the genre-mashing music of Death Grips, hyperpop and Oneohtrix Point Never.

The concept of musical meaning, and more specifically the act of interpretation is at the centre of the next research question:

- 4) What is the role of musical meaning in the negotiation of identity among online music audiences, and what is the role of social platforms in these processes?

My findings relating to this issue demonstrate how broadly the notion of musical meaning can be applied and understood in different contexts, and the variety of ways that internet users make use of it in the negotiation of their identities. On Genius, the philosophical consensus that musical meaning is fundamentally tied to author intent could be understood as a point of tension

with the Web 2.0 model and ideals of the site. If this is the case, then the site's pivot to video content featuring the artists represents an improvement in the accuracy of the lyrical meanings listed on the site. But for the community of interpreters this move decreases the legitimacy and power of their meaning making activity, and with it, their negotiation of identity. The diffusion of Genius branded content into larger platforms like YouTube and Apple Music grants access to Genius' brand identity and cultural capital as an expert source of lyric interpretations. But the value of this large-scale platform homogenisation is limited, as in the process, the source of that reputation is diluted by the abandonment of amateur expertise and creative, competitive musical interpretation in favour of a more restrictive and top-down approach to determining musical meaning.

Though it was the second chapter to consider the idea of musical meaning, Chapter Six was the first case study in the project to consider the interplay between audiences' musical identities and those of the artists whose music is used in the expression of audience selfhood. Among members of DEATH GRIPS SNITCHPOSTING, musical meaning operates on a largely subjective basis, but is anchored by a common understanding of Death Grips' own musical identity and the goals of their artistic project. Quite a departure from the authoritarian social environment of Genius, DGSP's self-governed community may encourage shitposting, but was also reliant on the fierce defence of the group's shared social and political values. This ambivalent mixture of playful and frivolous communication with more grounded, politically charged rhetoric is also seen in the expressive style of hyperpop in which profound statements occupy the same space as bizarre or disposable ideas and media objects.

Appropriately for a group initially created as an escape from racial discrimination, the roots of the DG meme as a subversion of a self-loathing and offensive joke exemplify the power of

ambivalent discourse. The participation in certain forms of humour by potential victims of that humour as a means of ‘getting by’ here develops into a system of individual and collective identification, offering participants the opportunity to assert their own collective and shared meanings. This dynamic of self-criticism as a form of collective identity negotiation is also present in the concept of the music nerd and the self-effacing humour found in the hyperpop community.

The interpretive moves that make up the DGSP community’s regular interventions on the meaning of the DG concept closely reflect observations made regarding largely pre-digital fan cultures and can be organised into a range of associations including the aesthetic, the political, the biographical and the personal. This similarity with offline practices even in the highly internet-mediated context of this case study is yet another example of hybridised musical identity practice that combines the affordances and logics of online culture with older ways of thinking about music, meaning and the self. Death Grips’ ability to connect effective critiques and challenging engagement with contemporary digital culture to the disruptive musical language of the past through sampling, punk and the mythology of reclusive genius demonstrated that the internet was indeed a new social and cultural medium, but that it cannot transcend history. Death Grips and their online audience represent the musical zeitgeist of the decade by both taking the internet seriously and recognising that it is far from a magical, universal solution, being highly susceptible to the same messy social and political ills as offline society.

- 5) How do contemporary musicians engage with the platformisation of online culture in their music, and how does this engagement relate to the musical expression of internet-mediated identity?

The final research question posed the Introduction focussed on the way musicians associated with online culture have engaged with platformisation in their work and its dissemination, as well as more broadly with the idea of internet-mediated identity. The developing tradition of internet music introduced in Chapter Seven continues to demonstrate the relationship between internet music culture and digital platforms. Online communities of musicians in the 2000s and early 2010s derived their compositional and expressive practices from the affordances of P2P technology, offering free access to musical texts and the software with which to produce their own works. But like the subjects of Chapters Three and Four, while internet music is often shaped by digital platforms, it is not restrained by them, as demonstrated by the fact that each genre described in Chapter Seven eventually transcended and even outlived the original platform context in which it was developed.

Like the online music culture that produced it, hyperpop borrows themes and strategies from various genres of internet and non-internet music, its mixture of time-tested pop songwriting with digital maximalism, extreme aesthetics and an ambivalent relationship with taste evoking a similarly omnivorous mode of ‘authentic consumption’ to that advocated by *The Needle Drop*. Though its roots extend back to sample music from before the birth of the internet, within internet music I traced this encoding of consumption practice into musical expression to mashup, where it both signalled the expertise and taste of the music’s producer and encouraged similar forms of engagement in the consumer. Maintaining the ambivalence typical of internet-mediated expression, hyperpop also draws from vaporwave’s post-ironic expression of the postmodern, media saturated experience of contemporary life. Together, the stickiness, humour and replicable nature of these elements makes internet music not music made meme, but meme made music.

In the context of online culture in the mid-to-late 2010s, the strategies of hyperpop musicians function to convey their online identity to audiences for whom such an identity is relatable and authentic, while the deft use of streaming and social media platforms by these artists makes hyperpop highly visible and accessible to these audiences. Once again similarities with Chapter Four can be seen here, as Anthony Fantano's successful use of multiple platforms and online cultural codes also provides him with both direct access to his audience and the social capital afforded to skilled navigators of online culture. But hyperpop's expression of internet mediated identity also incorporates ideas about digital identity that predate platformisation entirely, embracing a post-digital, disembodied gender politics while also engaging with the contemporary social realities of online communication and the lived experience of queerness.

The anachronistic, reflexive exploration of digital cultures past is also at the centre of the final case study. This continued Chapter Seven's analysis of internet music as a form of musical identity practice even as it brought together many of the other processes discussed in the project. In 2010, Paul Booth compared the online activity of media fans to participation in a loose, improvised and all-encompassing ARG. Through this lens the widespread platformisation of the internet in the following decade should be seen as formalisation of this process, as platform algorithms delivered content to users who were both enabled and compelled by platform affordances to adapt and develop their game-like online practices in the pursuit of musical identity. The *Garden of Delete* ARG represents the experience of online media before widespread platformisation by presenting an assemblage of media texts, online locations and identities from which the album's narrative, characters and music are supposedly emergent. As this project has shown, however, these processes have not been lost, but have become integrated with the digital platforms that now dominate online culture.

In Chapter One I summarised the project as an exploration of two overlapping phenomena: online expressions of musical identity, and musical expressions of online identity. Like this project, *Garden of Delete* should be viewed as an exploration of the idea of online musical identity in two different ontological forms: the album as a musical expression of Lopatin's online identity, and the ARG an online expression of his musical identity. In both of the album's formulations, identity is emergent from the experience and use of media in online spaces. This experience is articulated around the complex interplay of consumption and production, and the impact on that interplay made by ongoing changes in the nature of the internet.

Similarly, the concept of musical identity laid out in the Introduction suggests that selfhood is emergent from social engagement with musical practices. In online culture, many of these practices involve the construction of media assemblages of various kinds, the emergent properties of which dictate or contribute to musical identity for the participants. The role of platforms in this varies from example to example but has undoubtedly increased over the last decade. The emergent understanding of online musical identity practice produced by this research suggests that platformisation will continue to shape online music culture, just as audiences and musicians continue to adapt to the changing environments, opportunities it presents and limitations it imposes. The following section will now outline some areas of interest for potential future research outside the scope of this project, or that could develop areas already touched upon in the case studies.

Areas for further enquiry

One of the research areas that would most benefit from future academic enquiry relating to online musical identity expression and internet music culture more broadly is the short-form video app TikTok. As I briefly mentioned in Chapter Two, the timing of this project's completion did not align well with TikTok's meteoric rise to prominence during the second half of 2019 and the height of the COVID-19 pandemic that began the following year. As a result, the platform is mentioned only sparingly in my analysis, being discussed in the most detail in Chapter Four in relation to the expansion and adaptation of *The Needle Drop* brand to viral short-form videos and sounds, and in Chapter Seven, which included brief mention of a TikToker specialising in garish mashups. Among many others, both of these examples exemplify the need for research focussed on the platform's music culture, which has already developed into something quite distinct from that of other social media and video platforms.

This culture stems from TikTok's initially unique (and now widely emulated) content model which favours immediacy and speed above all else, resulting in the development of 'distilled' versions of many older forms of musical video content on the app. These include live and studio performances, lessons and tutorials, music recommendations, reviews, ratings and adverts for upcoming events both physical and virtual, and even micro-essays offering concentrated doses of historical or technical analysis. User interaction and collaboration is also core to TikTok's culture, creating highly immersive new forms of social musicking and across space and time (Kaye 2022). Recently published research has focused on the relationship between its users and the recommendation algorithm that seamlessly and automatically delivers content, appearing to 'listen' in real time as it noticeably and almost immediately responding to user behaviour. In addition to reflecting the self through content in an automated platformisation of musical practices similar to those analysed in this project, this immediacy and flexibility also

allows users access to kind of direct (if never complete) manipulation of ‘their’ algorithm (Simpson et al. 2022, Şot 2022).

TikTok is also increasingly powerful as a medium for music promotion and dissemination, with music and dance trends on the platform driving record breaking chart success for music both new and old. A notable instance of the former category is rapper Lil Nas X whose famous skill at online self-promotion has significant potential for a case study expanding on the ideas explored in Chapter Seven of this project. To perhaps an even greater extent than the hyperpop musicians I have discussed, Lil Nas X harnesses his talent for online humour and social media promotion in a way that directly shapes his musical decisions, purportedly choosing song topics specifically based on their potential use in viral trends and internet memes. Importantly, he is also able to navigate controversy in such a way that reinforces his online musical identity as a trickster and provocateur, avoiding any of the long-term negative social repercussions suffered by many of his peers.

Many practices and platform phenomena featured in this project could be further explored in future research. For instance, Spotify Wrapped has significant potential as a site for a large-scale inquiry building on the findings of Chapter Three and complementing the interesting scholarship that is already emerging regarding audience reception and remediation of the event on social media (Bimm 2022). On a related topic, the changing role of music journalism in an increasingly algorithmically defined environment was touched upon in Chapter Four but was less than central to my analysis and could therefore benefit from more focussed study in future research, perhaps investigating platform users’ habits relating to human and non-human music curators in detail.

Another recurring yet under-explored idea that emerged in several places during my research is regarding the status of the album format, and the related idea of musical materiality. Though the latter has been explored in some detail in previous research (Magaudda 2011), the use of digital album artwork in particular could form the basis of future study, especially in the context of the ongoing resurgence of vinyl. Similarly, the role of services like Genius could be analysed in terms of its relationship with the liner notes that once accompanied LP and CD album releases. While it was a central theme of Chapter Eight, the idea of new, digital configurations of the pop album could certainly be explored much further, with *Garden of Delete* constituting just one example. Existing research on transformation of the album format focusses on topics as broad as changing release cycles and direct forms of platformisation via integration with mobile apps (Wade Morris 2016), offering a basis for further exploration.

Other than TikTok there are several other apps and platforms I decided not to include in this project, including Instagram, which was mentioned briefly in Chapter Six but is certainly deserving of additional scrutiny, for example as a significant site of gender expression and the development of more visual forms of musical identity expression outside the scope of this project. I feel that the ‘not-selfie’ framework employed in Chapter Three has additional potential in this regard and would be interested in exploring this in future research of my own, perhaps in combination with the concept of ‘digital queering’ mentioned in Chapter Seven, which closely matches the context of existing research into online visual self-representation.

These areas for future scholarship are largely based on the findings in my case study chapters, but along with these contributions, the concept of musical identity explored throughout the project also has significant potential as a way to further the development of music’s role as a mediator of selfhood in contemporary social life, on and off the internet. Finally, research

participants' repeated displays of reflexive engagement with their own musical identity practices found across each case study suggests that public understanding of the issues surrounding identity in digital spaces are only growing more sophisticated, a phenomenon that is certainly worthy of further academic investigation. The thesis now concludes with some closing remarks and reflections.

Final remarks

Platform capitalism is now the status quo, and as such will continue to define online music culture, integrating into existing musical practices and impacting the development of those that emerge in the future. In approaching this rather fluid topic, the use of a flexible, immersive methodology allowed me to significantly adapt my approach from chapter to chapter, allowing the project to focus on a diverse set of research subjects in terms of context and scale. The often overlapping and blurred boundaries between the case studies act to display how different elements of online culture including practices, platforms, users and locations relate to one another. The network of examples and analyses presented here have evidenced how online music culture has been impacted by the widespread adoption of platform capitalist models, but user innovation is still clearly the central, driving force behind developments in the negotiation of musical identity in digital culture. Meanwhile, online musicians produce their own insights into these processes via their reflexive examination of internet culture and its history, and the subsequent musical expression of online identity.

The idea of the digital self was once seen as revolutionary in its own right. Not much more than a decade ago, spending a lot of time online was still widely considered a sign of social isolation and disconnection from mainstream culture. Now, to be disconnected from the internet not only means losing contact with one's primary source of information and

entertainment, but also many core elements that define our sense of self: our memories, communities and the means by which we both express and experience others' identities as well as our own. The power and social role of digital technology will surely continue to develop, and with it, so will the way that music is consumed, understood and produced. While the future of online music culture is impossible to predict, it is clear that the development of platform technology and online culture will always be accompanied by the emergence of new, musical forms of self-representation, opportunities for social influence, resistance, artistry and introspection.

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