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"I hope people stop dressing like they're in *The Matrix*": exploring the aesthetic, its place in social media and consequent perceptions of genre – specifically techno - within contemporary club culture

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the role of the aesthetic in social media and perceptions of genre within contemporary club culture using 10 in-depth interviews with DJs and producers. Using techno as a case study, three key discourses emerge: the notion of the aesthetic and its significance in musical careers, how techno artists find themselves to be online (invoking concepts of authenticity, self-identity and representation), and how aesthetics both a) manifest themselves and b) translate between online and offline settings. Using qualitative research and in-depth thematic analysis, this dissertation demonstrates that social media plays a vital role in influencing perceptions of techno, although both the reality of the genre, and artist self-presentation, is nuanced. A so-called 'techno aesthetic' exists, heightened by social media, towards which participants hold ambivalent feelings. This so-called aesthetic shifts between online and offline spaces variably, both visually and sonically.

Contents

<u>1.0 - Introduction</u>

This dissertation explores the role of the aesthetic in social media and consequent perceptions of genre – specifically techno - within contemporary club culture. Through in-depth interviews with DJs and producers, it addresses discourses including the role of the aesthetic in musical careers, how techno artists find themselves to be on social media – revealing a tension between articulating the so-called 'authentic self' and satisfying expectations of music industry stakeholders – and how aesthetics both emerge and translate between online and offline spaces.

This work is crucially underpinned by theories of (self) representation and identity; namely works by Goffman on performativity (1956), Turkle on the emphasised self (1994; 1999; 2011) and Hall on identity (1972; 1979). Marwick's more recent ideas (2013) on the relationship between social media and identity construction also prove useful, contributing to this dissertation's interrogation of the relationship between digital technology and club culture.

The notion of the aesthetic arises continually throughout this research. It should be noted that by 'aesthetic', I refer to a meaning-making concept. As Mitchell writes, an aesthetic signals "specific features" (2005, p.17) of a phenomenon, and participants of my research understand aesthetics to exist visually (how something looks) and sonically (how something sounds).

It has become apparent that social media is "integral to the work of sustaining music careers" in contemporary culture (Prior, 2010, p.341) due to music industry stakeholders - i.e. record labels, booking agents and managers - becoming "dependent" on the online infrastructures, using metrics such as follower count to determine an artist's success (Baym et al., 2021, p.3420). Often these stakeholders (and artists' audiences) coin terms to define music in accordance with what is seen online - for example, "hardcore techno" (Morris, 2020, p.1) - and

an associated aesthetic arises in turn. This phenomenon has even been recognised by publications such as The Guardian – who suggest those involved with techno always dress "black-clad" (Fullerton, 2024, n.p.) - however there remains very few studies interrogating the role of the aesthetic in both music and digital culture. This dissertation fills that research gap.

Whilst findings and arguments within this dissertation are interesting for those invested in this case of techno identities, it also proves compelling for those with an interest in digital media and music culture broadly. This is because it contributes to an increasing body of work interrogating the intersection between music culture and digital culture studies, specifically digital music (creator) culture, with Hesmondhalgh et al. most notably recognising the emergence of this crossover in their recent UK Government-commissioned article (2023).

I actively work in the club music industry as a music journalist and DJ with global publications and record labels; this dissertation is the product of years of personal curiosity having experienced firsthand the proliferation of social media amongst artists. Utilising my extensive networks, I offer a unique perspective with this dissertation interviewing some of the leading figures currently at the forefront of the techno subculture.

My primary research question is therefore: *What is the role of the aesthetic in social media and how does it influence perceptions of genre within contemporary club culture?*

This RQ was addressed using semi-structured in-depth interviews with 10 participants, all of whom are presently techno DJs and/or producers. Purposive sampling was employed, using a callout on social media platform Instagram. Following transcription, thematic analysis (TA) was undertaken, modelled on key TA scholars Braun and Clark (2017; 2024).

I acknowledge my use of the term 'social media' within this dissertation, as opposed to focusing on a particular platform. This is inspired by a similar decision undertaken by Haynes and Marshall in their 2017 article exploring the impact of social media platforms upon independent musicians. It was justified to be "led by the musicians' understanding of what 'social media' meant" (p.1980) because of "how the use and interpretation of social media is shaped…within preexisting industries" (p.1975). This decision resonated because I, too, commenced this dissertation intending to be inductive and participant-led. Ultimately, all of my participants naturally discussed image-based platform Instagram and, although three acknowledge other social media (text-based platform Threads and short-form video platform TikTok) in addition to Instagram, a key finding in relation to the emphasised self (see section 4.2) emerged as a result. Had I not taken an inductive approach, this finding would not have occurred.

This dissertation concludes by arguing that social media plays a significant role in influencing perceptions of techno although both the reality of the genre, and artist self-presentation, is nuanced. A so-called 'techno aesthetic' exists (and is heightened) because of social media, which participants hold ambivalent feelings towards. This stereotypical aesthetic shifts between online and offline spaces in various ways, both visually and sonically.

2.0 - Literature Review

With this dissertation's aim to interrogate the role of the aesthetic in social media and perceptions of genre within club culture, this literature review begins by contextualising my research, addressing the roots of club culture (Jones, 2021; Prior, 2010; Toynbee, 2000), importance of genre (Shuker (2008) and Marwick (2013) are particularly useful here) and role of the aesthetic for musicians (Mitchell, 2005; Swidler, 2010). I then explore digital technology and the music industry, within this discussing platforms, datafication and perceived resulting opportunity for career development drawing upon names including Gillespie (2010; 2014), van Dijck (2013a; 2013b; 2014), Kaye at al. (2022), Prior (2010) and Baym (2010; 2018). This speaks to the increasing use, and importance, of social media. Finally, I move onto literature concerning representation and identity both offline and online. These concepts are key theoretical notions providing the skeleton for this research, with ideas in this literature review drawn from Goffman (1956), Turkle (1994; 1999; 2011), Marwick (2013), Papacharissi (2002), Castells (2010; 2013) and Hall (1972; 1979) amongst others. Using this combination of literature, the research sits at the intersection of study on music culture and digital culture, filling a gap by synthesising the two and holistically exploring digital music (creator) culture.

2.1 - Club culture and genre

Club culture - 'club' referring to dance or electronic music - is considered DIY and attributed to values including "autonomy, community and participation" (Jones, 2021, p.26). This musical style is reflective of the "'do-it-yourself' ideologies of punk and hip-hop, reinstating practices of homemade art" - which existed prior to the "rise" of media conglomerates (Prior, 2010, p.345) - concerned with being "alternative or resistant" (Jones, 2021, p.26). Consequently, a space is offered to "identities that are not reflected in mainstream popular

music" (Jones, 2021, p.54). This is reflected in techno, the club music genre this dissertation focuses on, often characterised by a 4/4 beat and groove (Jerrentrup, 2000), perceived as a "self-consciously experimental music culture" originating in Detroit (Toynbee, 2000, p.133).

Toynbee argues that a genre's validity is "measured by the extent to which it is an expression of grass-roots values and identity" (2000, p.110) which consequently invokes the notion of authenticity. The term is slippery and contested because, as Marwick argues, "the expectation of authenticity can be quite difficult to manage… [it] is never absolute" (2013, p.361). In terms of music, however, authenticity is broadly ascribed to artists who "undertook the 'creative' work themselves; that there is an element of originality or creativity present" and that they are "musically pure, genuine and organically connected to the community" (Keightley, 2001, p.121; Shuker, 2008, p.98).

Given the proliferation of technology – the increased use of media technology in everyday life (Ytre-Arne, 2023) - since these works by Toynbee (2000), Shuker (2008) and Marwick (2013), I suspect that defining a musician's authenticity is further complicated by the nuanced offerings of identity formation provided by online spaces, as explored in section 2.3 (Turkle, 1994; 1999; 2011).

Genre as a concept is crucial to this dissertation because it is key to music culture and prominent in a variety of domains, from artist and repertoire (A&R) to record labels, to categorising in radio stations and music press (Shuker, 2008).

Perceived as a "category or type", genres are "constantly debated and contested" (Shuker, 2008, p.95). Like identity, although assuming genres as static "makes it possible to group

people" (Marwick, 2013, p.356), the reality is more nuanced. I therefore write fully conscious of the fluidity and subjectiveness of genre.

Toynbee argues that "genre must be recognized by the audience" (2000, p.11) who are drawn to particular ones because of the ideologies they "carry" (Shuker, 2008, p.163). Therefore, for audiences to gravitate towards techno, there are meanings decoded and attributed to the genre and creative output to attract them. This is achieved through particular signifiers, which signal a meaning, thereafter denoted by its receiver (Barthes, 1967). Hall's concept of encoding and decoding is useful to build on this (1974; 1980), acknowledging the role played by both the sender and receiver of the message. He argues that whilst there are "intended messages" by the encoder (i.e. the musician), audiences (decoders) "interpret those messages in multiple ways, often based upon their identities" (Woodstock, 2016, p.399).

Simultaneously, as audiences decode meaning, social bonds emerge. Often formed by those who share a common interest in a genre (Shuker, 2008), they naturally involve "a strong affiliation" and "intense" investment in the genre (Toynbee, 2000, p.103). Identified as "distinctive subcultures" (Wynn and Katz, 1997, p.298), often those affiliated with a genre "distinguish themselves against others" to reinforce their normalcy (Harrison, 2006, p.290; Shuker, 2008, p.176), operating as a "fraction of the larger social group" (Shuker, 2008, p.176). In the context of this dissertation, this is applicable to those associated with techno: a "fraction" of the larger "social group" of electronic music. The question of the existence of mutual meaning construction beyond sonic techniques in subcultures such as techno, then, will be taken up in my research.

A method of meaning construction considered throughout this dissertation is the aesthetic. Mitchell and Swidler define aesthetics as key, related to "the sensory, perceptual reception of art" (2005, p.17; 2010, p.235). The aesthetic can help differentiate "between good and bad art", signal experiences connected to the art in question and the "specific features of these experiences" (Mitchell, 2005, p.17). This raises the question of whether the aesthetic assists in meaning-making, signalling (and indicating to audiences) a musician's association with a particular genre. I shall revisit this in my research design.

Through the strength of social bonds within audience subcultures such as that of techno, "people influence each others' thoughts", often "mapped in changes in social behaviour patterns in social media" (Chen et al., 2019, p.2668) – such as the perceived aesthetic attached to a genre and how artists consequently represent themselves. With the introduction of technology dubbed "extremely important for dance music" (Toynbee, 2000, p.132), the significance of visual representation in club music culture today feels further heightened. Terms such as "hardcore techno" are actively "written into existence" by music stakeholders and audiences alike, who are actively "trying to grapple" with digital technology and new musical trends (Morris, 2020, p.1). Mainstream journalism has described those involved in techno as "black-clad" in their dress with "shaved heads and mirrored sunglasses" (Fullerton, 2024, n.p) and the genre is associated with "muted tones" by another journalist (Cagney, 2021, n.p) So, how do these aesthetics come to be?

To conclude, whilst DIY music such as techno arose in opposition to conventional values, it is becoming more mainstream and prominent through digital technology; Whiteley observes how nightclubs in particular have become "sites for social tourism" (2000, p.161) whilst Halnon argued that the notion of rebellion has been "commodified" and "reduced to stylish

brand content" online (2005, pp.449-450). This therefore raises the question of how oppositional DIY values are embraced today, contextualised by social media. I will return to this in my empirical work to overall aid the aim of this study: to explore the role of the aesthetic in social media and consequent perceptions of genre within contemporary club culture.

2.2 - Digital technology and the music industry

Today, digital technology plays a key role in changing how "culture is produced, disseminated and consumed" (Prior, 2010, p.341). A "proliferation" of platforms has arisen resulting in a saturation of possible outlets for users (Gillespie, 2010, p.351) and, potentially, a saturation of content to consume as a result.

Platforms exist as structures whereby an "infrastructure" supports "online environments" facilitating certain activities to occur (Gillespie, 2010, p.349). Social media platforms embrace the socially-oriented nature of society, focusing on "ordinary users" (Gillespie, 2010, p.352) by (at surface level) promoting "interpersonal contact" (van Dijck, 2013a, p.8; Gillespie, 2010, p.351). As Gillespie argues, such interactions are "managed" by algorithms, which "transform input data into a desired output, based on specified calculations" (2014, p.167). Interactions therefore become what van Dijck refers to as "datafied" – this datafication "the transformation of social action into online quantified data, thus allowing real-time tracking and predictive analysis" (2014, p.198).

Datafication is often considered in relation to Big Data. boyd and Crawford define Big Data as "massive quantities of information produced by and about people, things, and their interactions" (2012, p.662) however note that assumptions of Big Data as simply "massive

flows of data" (Kennedy et al., 2015, p.1) should be read with caution, for "some of the data encompassed by Big Data (e.g. all Twitter messages about a particular topic) are not nearly as large as earlier data sets" such as census data (2012, p.663). van Dijck and Powell and Brubacher agree with this, noting social media's expansive nature as a prime source for Big Data (2013; 2020). The datafication of said data on platforms, then, occurs because "digital infrastructures are technological structures with multiple owners, actors and stakeholders" (Ferrer-Conill et al., 2023, p.292) with data collected from users, such as demographic information and on-platform activity. Whilst Ferrer-Conill et al. continue by criticising the "power asymmetries" associated with this and "ethical concerns over citizens' privacy and surveillance" (2023, pp.291-292), Kennedy et al. make an interesting point that datafication "should not only be understood as the process of collecting and analysing data…but also as feeding such data back to users, enabling them to orient themselves in the world" (2015, p.1). TikTok evidences this: its 'For You' page – where users are shown content deemed of interest to them in accordance with their viewing history and in-app activity - is determined by an algorithm which assesses datafied time spent consuming content on the application. As "more data are generated… the more accurate do profiling and prediction become", therefore personalising user experience (Kaye et al., 2022, p.60).

Klug et al. previously claimed that users are often unaware of algorithmic working (2014), however a larger body of research suggests that as social media platforms become increasingly engrained with daily life (boyd, 2008; van Dijck, 2013a) users are building an "understanding" of how to "game" the platform and its algorithm, occasionally even using "platform-specific tactics" (van Dijck, 2013b, p. 202; van Dijck, 2014, p.200; Morris, 2020, p.7). The intention of this is to obtain more reach and consequently bring about "advantage" for whatever that means might be (van Dijck, 2013b, p. 202).

The lack of geographical boundary online (Baym, 2010) permits connection with anybody regarding "virtually any subject" on social media (Marwick, 2013, p.362). In an environment where user activity results in algorithmic decisions displaying content similar to what they're engaging with, social media has thus become "integral to the work of sustaining musical careers" due to artists being able to reach "swathes" of potential new audiences whose algorithms align (Prior, 2010, pp.341-342). Morris refers to algorithms on social media as "discovery mechanisms" (2020, p.2); this feels underappreciative of the power held by algorithms to define user experience. Regardless, Prior continues, dubbing algorithmic work the construction of "micro-organizational worlds with systematic, meteorological effects" (2010, p.342).

Although previously discussed in terms of algorithms, data is also relevant in terms of metrics - such as likes and followers - which have not only "fundamentally altered how media industries gather data" but also act as values which the music industry specifically "relies" upon, as a "new form of dependence" (Baym et al., 2021, pp.3419-3420). Baym et al. continue by addressing artist "reactivity", whereby musicians "orient themselves toward being measured" (2021, p.3421) in response to the widespread knowledge (or, assumption) that industry professionals including record labels, managers and booking agents rely upon metric figures to define success (Baym et al., 2021; Haynes and Marshall, 2017; Maasø and Hagen, 2020). This demonstrates an online phenomenon shifting offline, with a resulting "pressure" to update social media profiles and "learn" a toolkit of strategies for "standing out" and maintaining "visibility" (Morris, 2020, pp.2-3). I shall revisit this consequence shortly.

If there is a reliance on metrics from industry figures, a consequent understanding is that social media is a means whereby artists can "build and maintain audiences which can then be 'monetised'" (Haynes and Marshall, 2017, p.1974) and consequently progress their musical career, "idealizing" the potential of social media for artists (Duffy and Wissinger, 2017, p.4653). However, with the previously addressed oversaturation of platforms - and lack of geographical ties online – Haynes and Marshall note that more musicians "feel that they are 'in the game' than ever before" (2017, p.1984), all "clamouring for attention alongside millions of others" (2017, p.1989). There is therefore greater pressure to be perceived as connected to a specific genre in order to resonate with - and build - an aligning audience. Musicians are no longer solely making music; they're entrepreneurial, responding to an expectation to "take on multiple responsibilities" in order to construct a "digital reputation [which] becomes a form of currency" (Duffy and Wissinger, 2017, p.4654; Thomson, 2013; Walzer, 2023, p.43).

Gandini amalgamates the above points succinctly, stating that "social media is approached, managed and utilized as a shop window" and "activity within the online sphere is performative since it is not just an act that communicates…it is one that defines a social identity that links into value" (2016, pp.129-130). Self-branding is crucial in the career of a musician online, and to investigate this deeper, literature concerning representation and identity should be considered to inform this dissertation.

2.3 – Representation and identity

Erving Goffman introduced the concept of performativity in 1956, whereby the idea of a front and backstage in a theatre setting replicates self-representation in daily life. Whilst the backstage is perceived as withheld components of the self, the front is "expressed" during

said representative performance (p.13). This front comprises of a "collective representation" of influential factors such as setting, appearance or manner, often to fulfil an "established social role" for which "a particular front has already been established" (p.17). Performance is context dependant, "moulded and modified" (p.23) to fit the expectation of those experiencing it. Through what Papacharissi refers to as "information management" (2002, p.644), there is an idealised performance for particular groups or subcultures. I am therefore curious how these ideas apply in contemporary club culture given the emergence of the notion of the aesthetic. How much is concealed, and how much of an "act" (Goffman, 1956, p.10) is portrayed to conform to supposed genre stereotypes?

Intertwined with performativity is the concept of identity, which incorporates self-perception, self-representation, and/or collective perception/representation (Marwick, 2013; Robins, 2005). Hall defines identity as a continual construction (1996), ongoing as the self (or group) are exposed to influencing factors. Academics build on this by widely assuming it as "flexible", "changeable", "socially constructed" and emerging from "one's associations and connections" (Marwick, 2013, p.356; Turkle, 1999, p.647; Turkle, 2011, pp.300-303). Online spaces heighten this nuance further, with Turkle leading writing on identity online by describing it as offering a "parallel life" where one can "play an "aspect of yourself"" (1994, p.161). This was in the context of gaming in multi-user spaces on the Internet (MUDs), although the idea of emphasising a specific personality trait can be applied to other communities such as those involved with techno. It might be said that online offers a space to tap into the music-focused "aspect" of the self, for example.

Early work, such as Turkle's seminal writing (1991; 2011) and Papacharissi (2002), heavily focuses upon the concept of identity "reconstruction" (Turkle, 2011, p.202), even the

"invent[ion] [of] virtual life personae different from their real life personalities" (Papacharissi, 2002, p.645). Whilst the self is reflected online in some capacity, there is an implication of a "distinction between how people present themselves online and how they do offline" in these discussions – although works over the previous decade acknowledge a "narrowing" split (Marwick, 2013, p.358). Marwick continues in this earlier writing, suggesting that this is because "people today use social media primarily to communicate with people they know in ''real life'' contexts" (2013, p.358). More recently, and as outlined in section 2.2, Morris coins social media "discovery platforms" (2020, p.2) with lack of geographical boundary. This permits "mass self-communication" and "global audience" reach (Castells, 2013, p.55). Rather than constructing an entirely new identity online, there are increasing incidences of spaces - social media - being used to enhance an aforementioned "aspect" (Turkle, 1994, p.161) of oneself that exists in offline spaces instead.

Social media "require users" to construct identity (Marwick, 2013, p.355) through its affordances of profile curation (creating a username, profile picture and what content is chosen to share). This way, identity is "expressed through customization…that serve a function similar to clothing or bumper stickers" (Marwick, 2013, p.358). As a result, "shared identities" form online, which "contribute to a feeling of community" and "a shared sense of who "we" are that may be pre-existing or develop within a group" (Baym, 2010, p.86). Identity thus becomes "entwined with the identities of others" (Baym, 2010, p.111) as communities build, establishing "shared norms" (Baym, 2010, p.75). Therefore, ideas in section 2.1 concerning association with genre-based subcultures - specifically formation of social bonds by those who share a common interest - become relevant.

To explore the role of the aesthetic, we can consider online identity from the perspective of a DJ or producer, building towards the key research aim of this dissertation: to interrogate the role of the aesthetic in social media and perceptions of genre within club culture. To reach industry stakeholders, artists are increasingly understanding the "importance" of constructing the self as a brand online (van Dijck, 2013b, p.200), even as a "microcelebrity" where the self is curated as "a branded good" (Senft, 2013, p.346). Promotion and self-branding is a "normalized, accepted phenomenon" (van Dijck, 2013b, p.203) which, it is argued, causes an "erosion between private and public" in online spaces, which are likened to a stage, or "concert hall" (Baym, 2018, p.155; Senft, 2013, pp.347-351). Goffman's 1956 idea concerning performativity and front and backstage once again arise, inferring the importance of his ideas for social and digital media scholars studying the self online.

Once the branded self is established, Jones acknowledges a "pressure to adhere to a relatively constrained online persona" (2021, p.57) where one part of the self is explored "more extensively" (Papacharissi, 2002, p.645), therefore portrayed as one's "only routine" or way of being (Senft, 2013, p.31). This recalls Goffman's notion of "dramaturgical discipline" where users feel as if they have to maintain a particular performance (1956, p.137). Interestingly, a 2017 study by Duffy and Wissinger found that creators "outwardly reject any calculated attempts to build their social media personae" (p.4659) and a year prior, Gandini noted a "reluctance to fully acknowledge the extent to which self-branding relates to social relationships in the production of social value" (2016, p.124). My more recent research found different, however, whereby participants openly discussed attempts to "game the algorithm" (Ingram, 2023, p.33).

With this literature review in mind, resulting questions arise concerning the process of meaning making in techno, reinforcing potential "norms" (Baym, 2010, p.75) and stereotypes, and the consequent relationship between representation on social media (and how this translates offline) and perception of genre arise. This therefore points to my research design which shall consist of interviews with techno artists in club culture, gathering their perspectives and experiences navigating social media. Ultimately, this will help to answer my primary research question: *what is the role of the aesthetic in social media and how does it influence perceptions of genre within contemporary club culture?*

3.0 - Methodology

I firstly reiterate the key research question and subquestions, which are as follows:

>*PRQ: What is the role of the aesthetic in social media and how does it influence perceptions of genre within contemporary club culture?*
>
>*1.1: How do techno DJ and producers understand the aesthetic in the context of their career?*
>
>*1.2: Who do techno DJ and producers find themselves to be on social media?*
>
>*1.3: In what ways does the aesthetic move between online and offline spaces?*

These were explored through 60-90 minute in depth, semi-structured interviews. Morris writes that "any research question that can be answered by people talking about their experiences lends itself to in-depth interviewing" (2015, p.8). Interviews "encourage elaboration", allowing participants to "construct their experiences in their own words" (Linabary and Hamel, 2017, p.99; Powell and Brubacher, 2020, p.646). Further, when conducting interviews, "there will be a good deal of social reality which is not part of the researcher's immediate experience" (Morris, 2015, p.5) and therefore by giving interviewees space to expand upon their answers, valuable insight emerges. I also acknowledge that participant elaboration may result in slight contextual shifts as the interview progresses, an expectation upon dealing with another person (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). However, such shifts (permitting they align with relevant topics to the research) could again offer further depth and build understanding of the phenomena.

Methodological models also informed the decision to undertake interviews. Everts et al., for example, studied the work activities of musicians in the Netherlands using in depth, semi-

structured interviews (2022). The method enabled participants to be reflexive in a one-to-one situation with greater scope for reflexivity as opposed to a focus group-style setup. Allocating such space enables the interviewer to establish a "relaxed, open and honest" environment (Morris, 2015, p.3). Everts et al.'s open questioning style also encouraged reflexivity, ensuring the process navigated through relevant topics to their research objectives (p.103). This consequently produced answers that could contribute understanding to build a resultant narrative about their phenomenon at hand. Other research employing the in depth, semi-structured interview method that I shall model include that of Alacovska and Kärreman (2023), Duffy and Wissinger (2017), Hair et al. (2022) and Haynes and Marshall (2018).

This study employed purposive sampling, targeting DJs and producers who operate within the techno genre and use social media. I consciously use the term 'social media' throughout this research as opposed to a specific platform name - similar to Haynes and Marshall (2017) - intending to be led by the participants' own interpretation of what 'social media' is to them. A method which "relies on researchers' situated knowledge of the field and rapport with members of targeted networks" in order to gather a specific population, purposive sampling enables access to participants who might be "otherwise difficult to access" (Barratt et al., 2015, p.5). Due to my work within club culture, as explained in section 1.0, I had access to a range of potential participants and initially reached these individuals through a callout post on Instagram. Not only would this be a direct address to my desired participants, but respondents indicating their interest negated risk of non-response. Although I then utilised word-of-mouth and snowball sampling through those who saw the post recommending other potential participants, social media was the most appropriate place to initially recruit participants because of my connections in these spaces.

Using such a niche demographic directly compliments my research objective by focusing upon a genre strongly associated with club culture. In doing so, I draw methodological inspiration from Klawitter and Harittai (2018) who acknowledge that whilst using such a "distinct group" might be perceived as restrictive (p.3505), research findings can add knowledge towards an emerging body of work. In the case of this paper, this is work exploring the intersection between music culture studies and digital culture studies – rather, digital music (creator) culture. Hesmondhalgh, Campos, Kaye and Li's recent article (2023) recognise the emergence of this intersection, whilst Hesmondhalgh and Kaye have worked both individually (Hesmondhalgh, 2019) and with other academics (Kaye and Myint, 2021; Kaye et al., 2021; Kaye et al., 2022) to examine the field. As outlined in section 2.1, there is also ongoing journalistic discourse about techno and its stereotypes. Therefore, speaking directly to participants immersed in a discourse that moves beyond academia will contribute further understanding to the intersection of music culture and digital culture studies.

Having reached out to this population, the post reached over 1000 unique viewers with 50 positive responses. At this stage, participants were purposively selected, ensuring that each fit the criterion of being a techno DJ and/or producer actively using social media. A total of 10 interviews were undertaken, with participants based across the UK and Europe. This number was settled upon having undertaken interviews and reaching data saturation, which occurs when "no new information or themes" are uncovered through the empirical work (Guest et al., 2006, p.59). A concentration on saturation as opposed to intending to interview a set number of participants results in the emergence of key themes, allowing in-depth analysis and discussion knowing that within the purposive, targeted sample, as much information as possible was extracted. Of the 10 interviews, the first two were treated as pilot, with the mindset that any unexpected concepts which arose (within the scope of my research aims)

could be incorporated into the forthcoming interviews. This did indeed happen; namely the phrase '*there is no right or wrong here*' was added to questions because within the pilots, participants sometimes asked if I had a 'correct' answer in mind.

Once refined, the interview guide and process itself was informed by the Standard Interview Method. A useful framework to implement with in-depth interviews to ensure that they stay concerned with the research objective at hand – which, as a reminder, is to explore the role of the aesthetic in social media and perceptions of genre within contemporary club culture – its guideline suggests the following, best outlined by Powell and Brubacher (2020). After an "introductory greeting", "conversational rules" were established which are "designed to help interviewees understand the interview process and nature of the conversation" (therefore staying on topic) (pp.649-650). "Narrative practice" then occurred; a test run to ensure the participant understands their agency to construct a narrative (p.651). Powell and Brubacher ask interviewees – children – "*tell me something fun you've done recently*" (p.651). Similarly, yet more appropriate to the participants in my study, I modelled this by asking: *How did you get into DJing?* This not only offered such a test, but also provided me with useful context to understand the participant better. Following this, the "topic of concern" was introduced, and a consequent "eliciting [of] a narrative" (pp.652-653) as the semi-structured interview unfolded accordingly.

Working on this dissertation, I read Bagnoli's article, which advocates for methods aside from the usual interview (2009-11). Creative ways of interviewing, she argues, can be "responsive to participants' own meanings and associations" (p.547). A method of particular resonance to key concepts of this dissertation – self-representation and identity - is the idea proposed by Bagnoli of asking participants to draw a self-portrait, which encourages

"reflexivity and getting them [participants] to think holistically about their identity" (pp.549-550). However, to avoid reticent feelings from participants about engaging in drawing and potentially be unable to fulfil as vivid detail as they would prefer, I adapted the concept verbally. With this in mind, in the final stages of the interview – having gained trust from participants and established a sense of comfort – I encouraged each interviewee to picture themselves DJing and describe what they saw. Depending on their response, I followed up with various prompts, including: *What do you look like? What about the crowd? How does this compare to what you see if you think about your online self?* This therefore constructed an image inspired by, albeit in a different manner to, Bagnoli's research (2009-11).

Finally, with the international spread of participants in mind, it was most natural to carry out interviews online – James and Bushner credit online methods to "communicate with geographically dispersed individuals" (2009, p.3) - specifically using video conferencing software Microsoft Teams. Similarly, Beach and O'Brien justified their telephone interviews by crediting them as allowing access to a "wide range" of interviewees (2017, p.102). Whilst online research has been questioned due to its ability to replicate in-person circumstances (Fielding, 2017), Salmons affirms that using such methods "in a milieu commonly used to connect with family and friends may help some participants be more forthcoming" (2014, p.40). The "ability to actually see the person on the other end" (James and Busher, 2009, p.3) not only allows a more comfortable setting to be established through reading and reacting to body language, but also assists with visual cues involved in this empirical work. The video affordance of Microsoft Teams, for example, aided my verbal adjustment to Bagnoli's ideas (2009-11). It provided participants with the opportunity to show examples to reinforce points they might have made. For example, if they were describing their appearance, the video nature of Microsoft Teams would allow interviewees to show me an object to assert their

example, such as a piece of clothing (and one interviewee indeed did this). This visual aid therefore proves the usefulness of video, and is reinforced by Williams in her forthcoming work having also interviewed participants via video call (2024).

3.1 - Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were followed throughout the research design and empirical process. Firstly, within the design, I created an in-depth information sheet for participants to read before returning a consent form (appendix a). The information sheet (appendix b) clearly outlined the process in an accessible manner to each potential interviewee. This included further information about the empirical work, what would be expected of them, what they should expect of myself, and further information concerning the use, dissemination and storage of their personal information and research data, including how they would be anonymised. Providing such an extensive briefing – and including my contact details should any query arise – established a comfortable, open domain with participants from the outset. Further, having each person sign a consent form ensured their understanding of the scope of the project and what their involvement would entail, whilst also confirming that they were over 18 years of age. It ultimately ensured full informed consent from each interviewee.

The empirical process also followed suit in ensuring participant comfort, meeting all appropriate ethical requirements. As shown in the interview guide (appendix c), participants were reminded that whilst direct quotes from the interview would be included in this paper, they would remain anonymous. Whilst the topics at hand were not highly sensitive, maintaining participant anonymity prevented any potential backlash from third parties who read the research and disagreed, due to the large following many interviewees had. As recommended by Allen and Wiles (2016), participants were involved in the anonymity

process by choosing the pseudonym they would be referred to throughout this dissertation. A pseudonym approach was chosen as opposed to a prescriptive approach of labelling participants *P1, P2* and so on because whilst they "maintain anonymity and confidentiality" (Allen and Wiles, 2016, p.151), giving the participant agency and crediting them with an (alternative) name acknowledges their significant role in the research. After all, qualitative research – including in-depth interviews - "look to include participants" wherever possible due to interviewees wilfully sharing valuable "lived experience" (Allen and Wiles, 2016, p.162; Linabary and Hamel, 2017, p.99).

Further, all data management of the interview recording was carried out according to data protection laws and informed by the University of Leeds' ethical guidelines for information protection (2021) and the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) guidelines (2019). The latter reinforces participants' "rights to autonomy, informed consent and privacy" when engaging in internet-based research methods, such as video call (James and Busher, 2009, p.14), and was therefore relevant to this empirical work. Both interview recordings and transcriptions - which were carried out using Microsoft Teams' transcription tool and manually checked to smooth out any inaccuracies - were stored in a password protected folder in my University of Leeds OneDrive, with a folder for each participant, ready for analysis.

3.2 - *Analysis*

Analysis is crucial to get to know one's data better, and due to each interview transcript's extensive length, it was natural to undertake thematic analysis (TA). Several of my methodological models which undertook in-depth interviews addressing identity also used

TA, including Alacovska and Kärreman (2023), Everts et al. (2021) and Haynes and Marshall (2018).

Key scholars within TA, Braun and Clark describe it as a useful method for "identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning ('themes') within qualitative data" (2017, p.297) through a process of familiarising oneself with each interview transcription before coding the data to "evoke important features" which could be of use (Braun and Clark, 2024, n.p.). A crucial step, coding establishes "building blocks for themes" and "patterns of meaning" (Braun and Clark, 2017, p.297). In my case, codes were digitally labelled terms including 'aesthetic', 'the self', 'part of the self', 'need for social media', 'perception of techno' and 'potential cause'. Following Braun and Clark's updated six phases of TA (2024), after such coding, initial themes were established before they were developed and reviewed against my full dataset of 10 transcriptions to ensure that they told "a convincing story of the data" addressing the research question (Braun and Clark, 2024, n.p.; Naeem et al., 2023, p.13). This was important, because a narrative-based approach to TA must recognise the "complexity of personal experience" and "individual perspective" of each participant (Naeem et al., 2023, p.14). This review stage of each theme was therefore essential to ensure that all 10 perspectives were addressed. Each theme was then named and their individual narratives (which contributed to answering the dissertation's research question) were established before the write-up of the discussion began. This is the point whereby the overall "analytic narrative" and "data extracts" are ultimately interlaced, all contextualised by existing academic literature and theory (Braun and Clark, 2024, n.p.; Naeem et al., 2023, p.13), in order to explore the role of the aesthetic in social media and perceptions of genre, specifically techno, within club culture today.

4.0 – Discussion

To reiterate, my primary research question was: *What is the role of the aesthetic in social media and perceptions of genre within contemporary club culture?*. Using techno as a case study, subquestions interrogated issues concerning the aesthetic and its significance in their career, how techno DJ and producers find themselves to be on social media and in what ways the aesthetic translates online to offline as a result. With these questions in mind, I ultimately argue that social media plays a key role in influencing perceptions of techno although both the reality of the genre, and artist self-presentation, is complex. A so-called 'techno aesthetic' exists as a direct result of social media, too, towards which interviewees feel ambivalent – and this stereotypical aesthetic shifts between online and offline settings in various ways.

This section begins by outlining how participants understood the aesthetic, its relationship to social media, and its role in their career. A tension between conforming to an aesthetic and embracing the so-called 'authentic self' emerges here. This is analysed in further depth thereafter, interrogating concepts including self-identity and representation. My use of the phrase 'so-called' in relation to authenticity should be noted; authenticity is a tricky notion to quantify due to its subjectivity, and whilst literature defines it as an understanding that artists are original, creative and "genuine and organically connected to the community" (Keightley, 2001, p.121; Shuker, 2008, p.98), it is ultimately interpretative and imagined by each individual differently.

To close, I relate the above ideas to techno by interrogating the genre itself. I analyse the resultant so-called 'techno aesthetic' and recognise that beneath this – social media perpetuated - stereotype - the 'techno aesthetic' is more complex. Now recognised, the translation of the aesthetic from online to offline spaces is explored.

4.1 – The aesthetic

All participants, when asked how they understood the aesthetic, defined the concept as a consistent look or appearance of something or someone. 'Robin' instantly connected the aesthetic to self-representation, describing it as "how you want to put yourself out there and look to other people". 'Barry' thought similar, although instantly understood the aesthetic as how his social media profile is curated and consequently how he appears as an artist.

This immediate association of the aesthetic with social media was confirmed by all ten participants stating that social media directly influences someone's aesthetic. It should be noted that this isn't a new phenomenon, as 'Beth' said:

> When I was a teenager Instagram wasn't a thing and I based a lot of my
>
> looks off of YouTube or TV shows. A lot of the time we're taking
>
> inspiration from things that we consume, and social media is the main
>
> thing that people consume.

'Robin' suggested that "people learn how to use social media from other people and seeing how they've become successful" (and 'Tom' echoed similar), feeding into the overall consensus from participants that an aesthetic results directly from what is 'trendy' on social media at a particular time. 'Robin''s quote suggests an element of imitation at play here and that as more people replicate how someone uses social media - inclusive of the way one represents themselves - a common aesthetic amongst a group of people emerges as a result. This idea of imitation resonates with Chen et al.'s discussion of social media habits, as they state that "people influence each others' thoughts" which can be "mapped in changes in social behaviour patterns in social media" (2019, p.2668). Imitation connotes a lack of

originality or creativity, however, therefore implying that adhering to an aesthetic is potentially overemphasised in the absence of creativity. This shall be analysed shortly.

Having affirmed their understanding of the key role played by social media in influencing someone's aesthetic, participants naturally discussed their perception of the aesthetic in the context of their career. Most blatantly, 'Tom' declared the aesthetic as "everything" and that "people are more attracted to the looks than the actual music" of an artist. 'Robin' reinforced this, commenting that "as an artist you have to choose your way…to show who you associate with, or what you're into". This strongly aligns with Mitchell's work recognising the usefulness of the aesthetic through its ability to provide an indication of the "features" or "experiences" to expect from, in this case, the artist (2005, p.17). 'Beth' offered a particularly relevant anecdote relating her duo's relationship with the aesthetic, evidencing 'Tom''s claim regarding heightened valuation of appearance over music:

> When I totally restored our Instagram and purged it and started again all
> black and white, I feel like we definitely got more bookings off the back of
> that. People knew what we were. It's about looking a certain way, so
> people know what they're getting. The better you look, the more chance
> you're getting booked.

Furthermore, this anecdote embodies the comment made by 'Robin' about an artist "choosing their way". By removing all previous content and restarting on Instagram - "choosing" a carefully curated "way" - 'Beth' reinforces literature which acknowledges a "pressure to adhere to a relatively constrained online persona" (Jones, 2021, p.57) in which her duo's online presence is portrayed as their "only" way of being (Senft, 2013, p.31).

Participants' discussion of a desire to be perceived in a particular way - and by establishing and withholding a strict aesthetic, there is a greater likelihood of being booked - brings about a tension between a feeling of need to adopt and carefully adhere to an aesthetic, and the very premise of techno as an authentic genre and culture where uniqueness and, as Toynbee writes, "experimentation" (2000, p.193) prevails. All 10 participants recognised this sentiment, with 'Lana' acknowledging that aesthetics are "important and so much fun" but adopting and creating one's aesthetic as an artist "shouldn't be staged, it should come naturally".

Considering this, we must raise the question of just how much originality and creativity – two elements which, according to Shuker, are understood as vital in rendering a musical artist authentic (2008, p.98) – are involved in the creation of an aesthetic. Techno artists clearly recognise the importance of the aesthetic in their career, particularly online. Therefore, the forthcoming subsection analyses how the tension between adopting an ideal aesthetic whilst maintaining authenticity is addressed.

4.2 – The so-called 'authentic self' versus the social media 'game'

It is firstly apparent that using social media feels instrumental, with all participants identifying Instagram as their main platform. 'Tom' stated he would rather use no social media, describing Instagram as "the slow big animal that we keep on feeding" because of a "need to fill the stream of content", whilst 'Barry' added that "having to be your own publicist nowadays is a very strange thing". Not only do lexes such as "need" and "having to" affirm a feeling of obligation towards the use of social media – reinforcing Prior's description of social media as "integral" for musicians' careers (2010, p.341) – but 'Tom' describing

Instagram as animalistic suggests that what happens on the platform and how it is used has taken on a life of its own, as if artists feel a lack of agency over what they can post. This idea is heightened by 'Peggy', who stated that she "need[s] to get better at the social media game". The use of "game" suggests that participants see themselves as having to 'play up to' set norms, or ways of being, online. Often, as discussed in section 4.1, this is by establishing and maintaining an aesthetic. Knowing this, because artists feel a need to a) use social media and b) conform to ways of being on social media, the aforementioned metaphor by 'Tom' comes to fruition. The "animal" – social media – is "fed" by artists who recognise needs a) and b) over time, creating a sense of lack of agency as artists feel they must play what 'Peggy' (and other interviewees) coined a "game".

This need to use - and be perceived in specific ways on - social media exists because of how other stakeholders in club culture perceive it. Literature suggests that social media is a "discovery mechanism" for record labels and managers, who rely on metrics such as follower count to define an artist's success (Baym et al., 2021; Haynes and Marshall, 2017; Maasø and Hagen, 2020; Morris, 2020, p.2). Whilst participants agree with this premise, they were more specific in the stakeholders who valued social media highest: those running events (promoters).

> Promoters use a lot of tactical words without being so blunt as to say: 'we need to have this amount of followers'. They use terms like: 'You've not got the right profile,' or 'your profile isn't big enough'. They don't use the specific metric reference, but you know when you pick it apart, they mean the amount of followers you've got. - *'Barry'*

I think raw musical talent is not always favourite over raw social media

talent. I see way too many line-ups where big numbers are dominating the

line ups and then when you listen to the music it's not that good. - *'Tom'*

Playing the "game" of social media appears to be a direct result of feeling obligated to satisfy

other stakeholders, predominantly promoters, to secure DJ bookings. 'Robin' echoed such

sentiment, although acknowledged that social media is not always considered essential:

You just speak to some newer promoters and they'll mention that it is

important that people have a following or are active on social media. And

then certain other promoters won't really bat an eyelid at that.

Anomaly cases as discussed by 'Robin' draw a strong parallel with the nuanced attitudes

within the techno genre, analysed in section 4.3. It is also important to acknowledge that in

the small sample of this study, whilst there is evidence that many care about social media,

others still do not. If this qualitative study was scaled upwards, more of these anomaly cases

might emerge, which could prove interesting for further interrogation.

The literature on musicians and social media discussed in section 2.2 broadly agrees that

social media is increasingly necessary in musicians' careers which, besides the anomaly

outlined by 'Robin', aligned with my interviewees. There was, however, an absence of the

focus on musicians' associated feelings, which my research sheds light on. These feelings are

overarchingly reluctance and frustration towards the need for social media, but also at having

to grapple with it alone. 'Barry' described it as "strange", 'Venus' "exhausting". There is

clearly scope for further research concerning the feelings of creative workers in relation to social media. This dissertation therefore provides a springboard for further investigation.

A key aspect of social media is how artists present themselves. 'Christine' immediately stated that "you spend more time thinking about how the post is presented and the way you come across in it", feeling obliged to show "strictly techno DJ material". All interviews echoed this, focusing on how artists typically only share a particular part of themselves online. This once more reinforces the restrictions discussed in literature that artists can feel, for better or worse, when establishing the self as a brand (Jones, 2021; Senft, 2013).

Often, articulating part of the self is achieved through copying what 'Tom' refers to as "tactics that work well". This speaks to my discussion in section 4.1 regarding imitation whereby I explored the question of authenticity. In my interviews, a number of participants acknowledged that their self-presentation can be "calculated" ('Marcus'), with 'Barry' and 'Christine' reflexively questioning how authentic sharing a polished version of an aspect of their so-called true, or most authentic, self really is. This reinforces my previous research highlighted in section 2.3 that users are increasingly open to discuss their attempts to "game the algorithm" (Ingram, 2023, p.33). We are witnessing a shift since research by Duffy and Wissinger (2017) and Gandini (2016) suggested that users are hesitant to acknowledge, and reject suggestion of, premeditated efforts when portraying oneself online.

Discussing his recent shift to treating Instagram like a "business", 'Barry' very clearly articulated his resentment towards playing the "game" ('Peggy'):

I have this conversation with my agent every day about how you - and this

is what I hate doing – cater content to maximise its impact. He was like:

'You make tunes all the time. Record yourself making a tune, put it on

Instagram and see what happens.' The bad thing is, it gets so many views

and interactions. You're like: 'this is actually what you're meant to do

then'.

What 'Barry' describes above, specifically the effort to "maximise impact", is commonplace

amongst artists. It speaks to literature discussing how artists are increasingly having to

implement strategies to construct an effective "shop window" (Gandini, 2016, p.129) for

themselves to get work. It builds, as Duffy and Wissinger state, a "digital reputation" (2017,

p.4564). It also demonstrates the aforementioned increased awareness amongst users about

the workings of platforms (at least half of my participants mentioned "pleasing the

algorithm"), as musicians are one of several groups of creative workers online "clamouring

for attention alongside millions of others" (Haynes and Marshall, 2017, p.1989).

I return to my previous discussion concerning authenticity and the industry here, however.

Participants depart from literature – which positions artists online as robotic – by insisting that

whilst an effort to utilise tactics and/or display a more polished, specific aspect of the self

might be made, authenticity still exists at the crux of their digital presence. All 10 participants

wanted to claim that they were their most authentic self, affirming that no persona exists when

presenting themselves online; what is "put out there" ('Molly') is representative of who they

are. 'Venus' was keen to reinforce that she is "not an actress", whilst 'Lana' was also vocal on

her effort to be authentic, voicing her struggle upon attempting to show one aspect of herself:

I tried to do the whole 'delete all your photos and only post content based
on your music' which does work, but I need some soul. I don't feel like I
need to put on a persona, I don't need to character build, I just want to be
myself.

'Beth' discussed the aspect of the heightened self to bridge this tension once more appearing
between constructing an online brand – an aesthetic – and authenticity. Her sentiment of
bridging between the two echoed throughout the majority of interviews:

There's a part of me that likes to wear the black and likes to be grungy and
techno and moody. I don't feel like it's a persona. I feel like it's just me when
I'm in the mood to play techno. It's pretty real in that, so that's good.

The notion of being "grungy and techno and moody" will be unpacked in section 4.3.
However, this quote effectively demonstrates how such a tension between the aesthetic and
authenticity is dealt with, with other participants expressing a similar way of grappling with
this tension. The use of "good" is interesting here in its association with authenticity,
positioning the quality as a credible asset to be associated with. Throughout each interview,
participants inferred the positive connotations of authenticity, although the above quote states
this most explicitly reinforcing that 'Beth' – alongside the other 9 interviewees – all
recognised the roots of techno which embody experimentation and the expression of one's
true identity. They are conscious of honouring this as they express their craft.

Thus far, this subsection has dealt with the idea of articulating a part of the self, speaking
directly to Turkle's 30-year old seminal writing on how in online spaces, the opportunity for

an individual to "play" or enhance an "aspect" of themselves is granted (1994, p.161).
Throughout, participants have demonstrated this through discussions of not creating a
persona, but instead only sharing content about music, their career, and at times more
specifically, techno. An interesting new finding arose throughout this research, however,
building upon Turkle's observations. Whilst all participants mostly (and in the case of over
half, only) used Instagram, platform differences briefly emerged. Two participants actively
used Threads and one TikTok in addition to Instagram. 'Venus' articulated her frustration at
sharing only one aspect of herself online, and therefore embraces Threads to share a further
fragment of herself:

> What I was missing with Instagram for a long time [was] this curiosity of
> people to look at the artist as a human being. It's become like a business
> platform. Where is the human interaction? I want to know who's behind
> the music, so I use Threads to share opinions that on Instagram I wasn't
> sure people would be interested in.

Similarly, 'Tom' described himself as "more of a producer nerd" on Threads in comparison to
Instagram operating as more focused on "gigging" videos, and 'Molly' explained that she is
"a lot more reserved" on Instagram with "a nice aesthetic" unlike TikTok where she "show[s]
a lot more of my personality" through videos. This therefore speaks to a new key finding:
artists are not only embodying Turkle's suggestion that people can emphasise an aspect of
themselves online, but they are now taking this a step further by portraying different parts of
this emphasised self on different platforms. Whilst my study is by no means representative,
this finding offers a springboard for further research into the fragmented self of musicians
today.

Ultimately, this subsection has uncovered an extreme, at times contradictory, tension between wanting to – and trying to – embody one's so-called authentic self online and playing the "game" of social media to meet demands and/or expectations of the music industry. I use the term 'contradictory' because whilst participants see themselves to be honouring their authentic self, they also recognise an element of calculation when representing themselves online; 'Marcus' recognised that "there's got to be some kind of human touch" when representing himself online, but added that "because I've established that on my story, it hides the fact that my feed is quite calculated", for example. It is important to recognise that outliers and anomalies to this tension do exist, however - namely 'Lana' and 'Venus' outright rejecting any form of calculation and 'Robin' reporting some promoters' lack of care for social media – although this should be considered within the context of interviews as a method. Authenticity is clearly a desirable value within music and whilst interviews are useful to gain rich, in-depth data, they are a performance in themselves, and data collected should be considered with this in mind.

Therefore, with techno DJ and producers finding themselves to be – for the most part – grappling with a tension between embracing authenticity and feeling obligated to fulfil the needs of industry stakeholders, it feels necessary to ask why such a need exists. The forthcoming subsection will therefore interrogate the reasons for such a tension, exploring specifically the techno genre and associated stereotypes.

4.3 – The 'techno aesthetic'

Having established that social media both influences the construction of aesthetics and plays a vital role in the career of techno DJs and producers (whilst conscious that anomalies can exist), it is unsurprising that all participants argued that social media influences how techno as a genre is perceived.

All participants were keen to ensure that there are different types of techno. The genre is complex - 'Beth', 'Marcus' and 'Barry' recognise its housing of many subgenres with their own nuanced sonic elements - although all interviews ultimately differentiated techno into two broad categories. Firstly, a more classic, puristic form, identified as a derivative of Detroit and European techno with more traditional percussive and at times groove-laden characteristics (Jerrentrup, 2000), and conversely a harder, faster style in comparison. All participants immediately identified the latter as part of a stereotypical 'techno aesthetic' perpetuated by social media, on which each participant spoke critically.

There was a consensus (and annoyance towards) that, as most explicitly stated by 'Tom' and 'Robin', "people call everything techno"; 'Venus' suggested that this is because of social media pages with the word 'techno' in their username, who often share content including music that suggest otherwise, resulting in people "getting infected with an idea that this is what techno is". 'Peggy' built upon this:

> Some music that has went viral on TikTok and a lot of people assume 'oh,
> that's techno' and it's not even techno. I feel like a lot of people have an
> idea in their head of what techno is or what a techno event is, and they've
> never been to a proper rave in their life. I feel like there should be a deeper

understanding of where it comes from and what the underlying subculture

and roots are for the people who are just getting into it.

Ultimately, the division in how techno is perceived is a result of how the genre is portrayed on social media – rather, what associated aesthetic has been constructed. 'Peggy', 'Robin' and 'Tom' named brands who claim to throw techno parties, with those mentioned having between 100,000 and 1 million followers. As they book a variety of artists who, as mentioned by 'Peggy', do not play "traditional techno", extensive numbers of people are – according to all participants, and as 'Venus' earlier described, "infected" – with the idea that techno is a genre that is traditionally characterised entirely differently.

This negative perception from participants towards the harder style of techno embodies Shuker's claim that genres are "constantly debated and contested" (1998, p.95). My research suggests that social media is only making this contestation more nuanced as audiences are now able to understand genre by its representation online. Interviewees' responses alluding to the assumptions made about techno, and as 'Peggy' mentioned, the lack of depth of understanding about the genre, are puristic. As discussed in section 2.1, techno originated as a form of DIY music, expressive of "grass-roots values and identity", priding itself on being "resistant" to outside forces whilst providing space "not reflected in mainstream" (Jones, 2021, p.54; Prior, 2010, p.345; Toynbee, 2000, p.110). As events who label themselves as techno parties garner immense numbers of followers online whilst booking acts who my participants described as not playing "real techno" ('Marcus'), it is difficult to argue that brands such as this are a) not "mainstream" (Jones, 2021, p.54) and b) embodying the sentiment of techno as characterised above. There is a sense that although techno has been perceived as an oppositional, "distinctive subculture" in its own right, rebellious against the

"mainstream" (Harrison, 2006, p.290; Jones, 2021, p.54; Wynn and Katz, 1997, p.298), a new subculture is emerging to distinguish itself from the contemporary perception of techno – herein referred to as the puristic subculture.

'Molly' offered a unique perspective, acknowledging the "bad perception" of this harder style of techno and its lack of "musical merit", whilst also recognising the potential benefit of the harder sound being popularised by parties on social media. She argued that "they make techno very accessible to the public, whereas before techno has been very closed off", whilst 'Marcus' also reflexively felt that puristic techno is "too serious at times". He took a more positive stance towards the role of social media by likening it to a "stepping stone for people [to explore techno beyond the harder sound]".

Although the views of 'Molly' and 'Marcus' are outliers to the puristic stance taken by most participants, these more forgiving perspectives felt necessary to acknowledge. The richness of qualitative work allows such a variation of opinions to arise, and, in this dissertation, they deserve to be recognised because the nuanced nature of perceptions of genre is reinforced. Whilst the sample in this research is not representative of the wider population, variation in opinion among my interviewees indicates that the role of social media in the career of techno artists - and how their craft is perceived - is both highly contested and complex.

For the most part, then, there is a division between puristic and harder techno. A stereotypical aesthetic exists sonically, as briefly discussed above, but it does so visually too, which shall be explored shortly. Before moving onto exploring the nuances of the sonic and visual aesthetics stereotypically associated with techno – of which participants distanced themselves from, associating it with hard techno – there was occasional reluctant recognition of a 'drip

feed' of elements of the 'techno aesthetic' into puristic techno. Further, it was made clear that whilst the so-called 'techno aesthetic' appears to manifest itself on social media, it can translate between online and offline spaces.

I therefore return to the aforementioned broad sonic aesthetic associated with techno reported by participants, all of whom argued was a direct result of social media. 'Tom' and 'Marcus' characterised it as "fast and hard", whilst 'Christine' - who alongside her DJing also works as a promoter – agreed, simultaneously demonstrating the translation of the aesthetic from online to offline spaces:

> People aren't interested in attending nights to explore new music and
> follow the DJ along on a journey; they want music that's been made
> popular by TikTok, they want bouncy tracks with words. There is a
> noticeable shift in the room when playing an underground techno track
> compared to a TikTok techno track.

'Robin' recalled a situation embodying the above idea that highly followed parties claiming to play techno – what all participants, at least once throughout interviews, referred to as 'TikTok techno' (this in itself implying the correlation felt between social media and the contemporary perception of techno) - perpetuate a stereotypical 'techno aesthetic':

> I'd just played in Berlin and one of the other rooms was really hard techno.
> After my set I went to my friends, and we were in the hard techno room
> for a second to check it out. One of them was like: 'this is proper techno,
> isn't it?'. I was like: 'oh… I don't feel like it is though'. They're not really

into techno as such, but that was what they classed as techno. I think that's

based off social media.

He continued, describing crowds in these 'TikTok techno' spaces as "people doing chicken dances with harnesses on", whilst 'Tom' recalled audiences looking "uniform". In almost every interview, participants described crowds as wearing "bondage" ('Lana'), BDSM-influenced outfits in the club (chains and harnesses were reported) and all-black clothing. 'Barry' exhaled, sighing: "I hope people stop dressing like they're in *The Matrix*", whilst 'Marcus' stated he'd never be caught "cutting around in a leather harness".

It was clear throughout interviews, particularly in the above comments, that participants were eager to distance themselves from the stereotypical visual 'techno aesthetic'. Such satirical comparisons and the very reference of 'TikTok techno' suggest a lack of seriousness associated with the specific subculture, consequently positioning it as inferior. Whilst aligning with literature previously discussed concerning music cultures such as techno being rooted in individuality (Keightley, 2001), participants' judgement is interesting because each acknowledged a similar common all-black-clothing aesthetic existing in the puristic subculture (albeit without the BDSM influence, and instead black t-shirts and trousers). This way of dressing is not new. 'Barry' reported people dressing in all-black when he first went to techno club Berghain several years ago, speaking to literature suggesting that clothing is utilised as "bumper stickers" to signify one's association with a subculture, whereby "shared identities" form and "shared norms", such as the way of dressing, manifest (Baym, 2010, p.75; p.86; Marwick, 2013, p.355). Whilst 'Venus' and 'Lana' outright rejected conforming to any aesthetic – unsurprisingly, given their rejection of playing the social media 'game' in

section 4.2 - 'Beth' alluded to this all-black visual aesthetic when discussing her approach to techno gigs:

> I do try and wear darker clothes, which is hilarious. If I turned up to a gig
> wearing a big pink puffy dress, you wouldn't expect to hear slamming
> techno from me. You want people to know what you do.

This relates to my finding discussed in subsection 4.1 and 4.2 of this dissertation, where I argued that there is a tension faced by techno artists, who are actively grappling with expectations of other stakeholders in the industry – in the instance of clothing, this is reinforced by 'Peggy', who reported that she had encountered promoters implementing an "all-black dress code" – and embracing the true self. 'Beth' noting the situation as "hilarious" is reflexive, as she acknowledges her conscious attempt to confirm to an aesthetic. It is clear that this tension translates from online social media representation to offline self-presentation, as 'Marcus' argued:

> The mainstreaming of content that parties push on social media and the
> way they almost document the people and the outfits and the merch they
> sell all feeds into the aesthetic.

Interviewees noted instances where this translation was not always the case, however. This was both from observations of other DJs (Lana' praised Nina Kraviz for playing "hard ass techno in a floral summer dress"), and personal experience. 'Molly' discussed crowds being occasionally more "chilled out" with their dress sense, 'Robin' recalled an instance at a festival where the crowd wore "completely different things, not all black" and 'Tom' said

that whilst "some people will dress all black, there are also girls in dresses and guys with colourful t-shirts'. Interestingly, 'Molly', 'Robin' and 'Tom' were unsure as to why crowds have not always conformed to this so-called 'techno aesthetic', as the trio - alongside all other participants - affirmed how online, techno, regardless of whether the puristic or harder form, is associated with wearing all black.

I therefore argue that social media – particularly parties, or aligning DJs with larger following counts online – are highly influential in contributing to the so-called 'techno aesthetic'. Whilst a particular aesthetic, typically all-black dress, already existed in accordance with theory on subculture and shared identities (Marwick, 2013, p.355; Wynn and Katz, 1997, p.298), certain elements such as BDSM-inspired outfits have been exaggerated online and assumed to be the norm by those consuming associated content. It is ultimately because of stakeholders who have mainstream audiences branding themselves as 'techno' whilst perpetuating a particular way of being that this so-called stereotypical 'techno aesthetic' is constructed. Accordingly, and as explored in this discussion section, both artists and audiences follow suit in embodying this aesthetic resulting in a shared norm and identity.

4.4 – Summary and conclusion

Techno DJ and producers acknowledge the significant role of the aesthetic in their career, and how social media influences both people's aesthetic and the perception of techno. In turn, whilst findings spoke to literature asserting the importance of constructing a brand identity for musicians (Gandini, 2016; Haynes and Marshall, 2017; Morris, 2020; Walzer, 2023), I uncovered a tension felt by participants. Specifically, between the feeling of need to adopt and adhere to an aesthetic (according to expectations of industry stakeholders) and embracing

their so-called true self, thus honouring the very premise of techno as an authentic, experimental genre.

In attempt to navigate this, participants found themselves online to, predominantly, embody Turkle's concept of the emphasised self (1994) by focusing their social media on their music and career. Of these, however, some discussed using different social media platforms to share different aspects of the emphasised musical self (for example the use of Instagram to share gig videos, and Threads to talk about production, or more general matters). This is where a new finding emerged, offering a fascinating progression from Turkle's theory: the emphasised self is being fragmented and emphasised a step further.

The navigation of this tension and representation, however, is further complicated by techno itself being contested. There are distinctions between different types of techno and what, as a genre, it really 'is', however a stereotypical so-called 'techno aesthetic' is perpetuated by social media. Oftentimes this is by those with large, mainstream audiences online labelling themselves as 'techno'. This results in those consuming the content to assume that this perpetuation – predominantly hard, fast music and all black, BDSM-like dress - is the only way in which techno should exist. Such a portrayal (and resultant assumptions) is met with frustration and judgement by those who situate themselves as a 'proper' techno artist. Participants do recognise that the puristic techno - which they align with - has elements within its aesthetic that overlap with the stereotypical aesthetic, however, and there was a consensus that regardless of what aspects of the so-called 'techno aesthetic' an individual draws upon, it very often translates from online to offline spaces.

5.0 - Conclusion

This dissertation analysed the role of the aesthetic in social media and the perception of genre – specifically techno – within club culture. It uncovered that social media platforms, predominantly Instagram, play a crucial role in influencing how techno is perceived, although it should be noted that both the reality of the genre and self-presentation of techno artists is nuanced. A so-called 'techno aesthetic' exists - heightened by social media – which participants hold ambivalent feelings towards. What is clear, though, is that the so-called aesthetic shifts between online and offline spaces sonically and visually.

This was achieved by firstly laying out the most relevant literature, addressing club culture, genre and aesthetics, digital technology and the music industry – specifically datafication, platforms and opportunities they provide – and representation and identity. This contextualised the research that was to follow before the methodology laid out the framework through which this work was undertaken. 10 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted; interviews provide rich quantities of data and conform to my inductive research approach. Thereafter, rigorous thematic analysis occurred.

Whilst findings of this dissertation are interesting for those who are invested in the particular case of club culture and social media, the qualitative nature of this dissertation means that they are also relevant to those interested in digital media more broadly. Upon critical reflection, it could be argued that my findings are not generalisable because of a relatively small number of interviews; I justify using 10 participants because the rich discussion provoked within each 60-90 minute interview resulted in a suitable level of data saturation allowing for plentiful analysis. Additionally, the varied opinion amongst interviewees

indicates the complexity and contestation of the research topic at hand, thus providing a springboard for expectation should the research be scaled upwards.

The significance of this dissertation for broader understanding of digital culture – and, more specifically, its impacts upon society - should not be underestimated. This project fills a research gap not only by exploring the role of the aesthetic across the disciplines of music and digital, but also whereby I acknowledged an absence of focus on musicians' emotions toward the feeling of need to use social media (section 4.2). Whilst my research sheds light on the relationship between musicians and social media, there is clearly scope for further research surrounding how an increased importance on digital presence is affecting creative workers.

Presently, however, this dissertation argues that the concept of the aesthetic is increasingly crucial in contemporary club culture, with the so-called 'techno aesthetic' – a result of social media, which shifts between online and offline spaces - influencing perceptions of a traditionally experimental, individualistic genre. Such a stereotypical aesthetic was met with ambivalent responses from participants, who were eager to affirm the complexity of the techno genre. Regardless, for the most part there is a tension between feeling obliged to adopt and adhere to a consistent way of being online (due to industry stakeholders) and maintaining authenticity. It is at this crossroads of conflicting feelings experienced by participants which demonstrate that the intersections of the aesthetic, social media and club culture are complex and nuanced. By intertwining contrasting fields of study – digital culture and music culture – this dissertation contributes understanding to a growing field of digital music (creator) culture led by Hesmondhalgh et al. (2023) and Kaye et al. (2021; 2022), further cementing the discipline as both legitimate and culturally relevant.

6.0 – Bibliography

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7.3 – appendix c – interview guide template

Guide to inform semi-structured interview. Interviews will not strictly proceed in the order questions are written; others may be omitted.

The guide
Opening information / introductory greeting –
Thank you for taking part in this interview for my dissertation in MA Digital Media. I am investigating the role of the aesthetic in social media, and perceptions of genre within contemporary club culture, specifically techno. As previously explained, this will take between 60 and 90 minutes.

Conversational rules –
Throughout this discussion we will only address key topic of the above subject, and anything related in this discussion. We will not diverge elsewhere.

As you know, whilst direct quotes from this interview might be included in the paper, you will be anonymised throughout this process. I'll be addressing you in the writing through a pseudonym. You can pick this, so if one comes to mind now feel free to share, or we can return to this at the end.

Brief narrative practice -
- How did you get into DJing?
- Tell me something enjoyable you've done lately with your career.
- Are you a full time DJ or producer?

Reiterate topic of concern –
I'm now going to ask you a series of questions, which are all related to the purpose of this interview: to explore the role of the aesthetic in social media and perceptions of genre within contemporary club culture, specifically techno.

Social media use –
- What are the social media platforms you use the most?
  - ○ Why X or Y?
  - ○ Why X over Y?
- How do you represent yourself on X platform versus Y platform?
  - ○ Why like X on Y platform?
- How natural to you does it feel when representing yourself as an artist on social media?
  - ○ Does it feel like a persona?

The aesthetic –
- There's no right or wrong here: How do you understand the notion of the 'aesthetic'?
- As an artist, what is your 'aesthetic', then?
- Do you believe that someone's aesthetic can be influenced by social media?
  - ○ Why?

Techno's intersection with the two
- There's no right or wrong here: how do you understand the 'techno aesthetic'?
- Do you think social media influences how techno is perceived?
  - ○ Why?
- Do you think the 'techno aesthetic' is influencing how DJs feel they should present themselves visually?

- When I say the words 'TikTok techno', what comes to mind?

An exercise –
- Okay finally, I've got a short exercise for you. Picture yourself DJing for me – feel free to close your eyes. What do you see?
  - What do you look like?
  - What about the crowd?
- How does this compare to what you see if you think about your online self-presentation?
  - And the crowd / following you have online?

Concluding –
- Is there anything else you'd like to add?
- If they haven't already given a pseudonym, ask for it now
- Thank you for taking the time to speak to me