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Digital Music as Artistic Research: Practice, Platforms, and Post-Digital Aesthetics

Triyono Bramantyo 

Fakultas Seni Pertunjukan, Institut Seni Indonesia Yogyakarta, Yogyakarta 55187, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

This article approaches digital music as a form of artistic research, examining the ways aesthetic value is produced through creative practice, platform-based infrastructures, and post-digital sonic conditions. From a practice-informed standpoint, it understands composition, curation, and technologically mediated listening as primary modes of artistic inquiry, rather than as derivative outcomes of theoretical frameworks or market imperatives. Drawing on post-digital sound studies and creative arts research, the article reconceptualizes digital music as a processual sonic event that takes shape through the interaction of code, infrastructure, artistic intention, and perceptual experience. Methodologically, the study investigates a range of contemporary practices—including streaming-native composition, playlist curation, and algorithmic or AI-supported music-making—as forms of research-through-practice. Through interpretive analysis and close listening, the article demonstrates how artists and curators negotiate platform logics, algorithmic mediation, and conditions of digital circulation. In doing so, the article advances a relational, post-digital understanding of sound that moves beyond object-centered conceptions of music and offers a practice-based framework for interpreting aesthetic value in platformed music cultures. This perspective situates digital music not as a bounded object of analysis, but as an evolving field of artistic practice embedded within contemporary technocultural systems.

Keywords: Digital Music; Artistic Research; Creative Practice; Post-Digital Sound; Research-Through-Practice; Platform Aesthetics; Algorithmic Mediation; Listening Practices

*CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Triyono Bramantyo, Fakultas Seni Pertunjukan, Institut Seni Indonesia Yogyakarta, Yogyakarta 55187, Indonesia; Email: bramantyo.triyono@gmail.com

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1. Introduction

Digital music has emerged as one of the most significant arenas of artistic experimentation within contemporary technocultural contexts. Rather than serving solely as a means of distributing already existing musical works, digital infrastructures now play an active role in shaping how music is composed, produced, curated, and encountered ^[1,2]. Streaming platforms, algorithmic recommendation systems, software-based production environments, and data-driven economic models have become embedded within musical creation itself. For creative arts research, this shift calls for a reorientation of focus: moving away from treating digital music primarily as a finished cultural product and toward understanding it as a domain of artistic practice in which aesthetic value arises through situated acts of making, listening, and technological mediation ^[3].

A considerable body of scholarship has examined digital music through classificatory and evaluative lenses, often structured around oppositions such as art versus artifact, autonomy versus commodification, or creativity versus technology ^[4]. Although these frameworks have been influential, they increasingly fail to capture the realities of post-digital sound cultures, where music operates less as a discrete object and more as a processual sonic event unfolding across computational, perceptual, and infrastructural dimensions ^[5–7]. Within creative arts research, such oppositional thinking risks obscuring the ways in which artistic knowledge is produced through practice itself—particularly in platformized environments where algorithmic mediation blurs the boundaries between creation, circulation, and reception ^[8].

This article proceeds from the assumption that digital music is best approached as a research-through-practice phenomenon. Instead of asking whether digital music should be classified as art or artifact, the study examines how aesthetic value is actively negotiated within contemporary digital music practices. Composition, sound design, curation, and technologically mediated listening are treated not as secondary consequences of theory or market dynamics, but as central sites of artistic inquiry ^[9,10]. From this perspective, digital music operates as a form of creative research in which aesthetic questions are explored through experimentation, reflexivity, and sustained engagement

with technological conditions ^[11].

At the core of this approach lies a post-digital, processual ontology of sound. Digital sound does not exist simply as encoded data or as a stable musical work awaiting interpretation. Instead, it emerges as a sonic event—vibrational, temporal, and relational—co-constituted by code, infrastructure, human perception, and cultural context. Approaches in contemporary artistic research similarly describe digital sound as a dynamic vibrational object whose meaning unfolds through perceptual and technological mediation, building on earlier work in sound studies ^[6,12–14]. A sonic event gains aesthetic significance not simply through recognition or circulation, but through its ability to maintain perceptual tension, differentiation, and engagement across these interacting layers ^[15]. This understanding challenges accounts that prioritize platform visibility, playlist placement, or engagement metrics as primary measures of value, instead emphasizing the intrinsic yet relational qualities of sonic practice ^[16].

The platformization of music further intensifies these conditions by situating artistic practice within systems that actively shape aesthetic form. Streaming environments influence decisions about duration, dynamic range, timbral density, and sequencing, while recommendation algorithms affect how music is framed, accessed, and contextualized ^[17,18]. Artists working within such systems do not simply accommodate technological constraints; they engage with them creatively, developing platform-aware practices that incorporate infrastructural conditions into aesthetic decision-making ^[19]. From the standpoint of creative arts research, these practices are better understood as forms of situated experimentation that generate new artistic knowledge rather than as compromises imposed by technology ^[20].

Listening, within this framework, also requires reconceptualization. Digital listening is neither neutral nor purely behavioral; it is a technologically constituted and reflexive practice shaped by interfaces, personalization mechanisms, and algorithmic sequencing ^[21]. These systems structure attention, memory, and affect, contributing directly to the emergence of the sonic event itself ^[22]. A practice-informed understanding of digital music therefore treats listening as an active component of artistic research, operating across physical, computational, cognitive, and cultural dimensions ^[23].

Authenticity—often invoked as a criterion of aesthetic legitimacy—likewise demands reconsideration under post-digital conditions. In digitally mediated contexts, authenticity can no longer be grounded solely in material originality or opposition to technology. Instead, it takes shape through reflexive engagement with mediation, as artists and listeners critically navigate algorithmic systems, remix practices, and platform economies^[24,25]. Authenticity thus becomes an ongoing process rather than a fixed attribute, closely aligned with the reflexive orientation of artistic research^[26].

Digital music practices are also inseparable from broader political, economic, and ecological contexts. Platform capitalism, data extraction, and the rise of generative artificial intelligence shape not only creative autonomy but also the material infrastructures of sound production^[27,28]. Servers, energy consumption, mineral extraction, and electronic waste constitute the often-invisible conditions of digital music culture, highlighting the environmental footprint of digital media infrastructures^[29–31]. For creative arts research, attending to these material ecologies is essential, as aesthetic experience unfolds within technological systems that carry tangible environmental and geopolitical implications.

Within this context, the present study positions digital music in relation to a practice-informed, post-digital framework that brings together creative arts research, sound studies, and platform-aware aesthetics. Rather than proposing a comprehensive theory of digital music, the article examines how aesthetic value is produced through specific artistic practices, including streaming-native composition, playlist curation as a curatorial strategy, and algorithmic or AI-assisted music-making^[32–34]. These practices are approached as modes of artistic inquiry through which knowledge is generated via process, experimentation, and reflexive engagement with mediation.

By foregrounding creative practice and sonic process, the article advances three contributions to contemporary creative arts research. First, it articulates a processual ontology of digital sound that moves beyond outdated classificatory binaries^[35]. Second, it demonstrates how artistic practices critically engage with platform infrastructures and algorithmic systems^[36]. Third, it reframes digital music as a site of research-through-practice in which aesthetic

value emerges through relational, material, and perceptual negotiation^[37].

In doing so, the study presents digital music not as an abstract theoretical category, but as a dynamic field of artistic experimentation within post-digital culture. To situate this practice-informed approach within existing scholarship, the following section reviews key debates in digital music studies, sound studies, and creative arts research. It traces how theoretical understandings of digital sound, mediation, listening, and value have evolved and identifies the limitations of object-centered and classificatory models that the present study seeks to address.

2. Literature Review

Scholarship on digital music has grown substantially over the past two decades, reflecting wide-ranging transformations in how sound is produced, circulated, and experienced under conditions of technological mediation. Early studies typically approached digitization as a change in format and distribution, emphasizing processes such as dematerialization, reproducibility, and expanded access^[1,2]. While these contributions established important foundations, they often carried forward object-centered assumptions inherited from analog frameworks, treating digital music as a stable entity whose meaning is largely established through circulation. As digital sound cultures have evolved, such assumptions have increasingly been challenged.

More recent work in sound studies and musicology argues that digital sound cannot be meaningfully separated from the infrastructures that bring it into being. Research on audio compression, encoding, and playback technologies demonstrates that technical processes actively shape how sound is perceived, rather than simply transmitting pre-existing musical content^[3,6]. From this standpoint, mediation is not external to aesthetic experience but fundamental to it. Post-digital and sonic materialist approaches extend this position by conceptualizing sound as vibrational, temporal, and emergent—an event that unfolds across computational, perceptual, and environmental domains^[7,8]. These perspectives displace the notion of music as a discrete object awaiting interpretation, instead emphasizing the conditions through which sonic events become percep-

tible and acquire meaning.

Despite these advances, much of the literature continues to rely on classificatory binaries, most prominently the distinction between art and artifact. Digital music is frequently framed either as an aesthetically diminished form compromised by commodification and technological mediation, or as an emancipated artistic domain freed from material constraints^[9]. Efforts to reconcile this opposition through concepts such as hybridity have offered partial resolutions, yet critics suggest that such approaches remain limited insofar as they reproduce the very binary they seek to overcome^[10]. In response, post-digital theorists propose ontological frameworks grounded in process, becoming, and relationality, which dispense with categorical distinctions altogether^[11].

Creative arts research has played a key role in advancing this ontological reorientation. Within practice-led and practice-informed paradigms, artistic processes are understood not merely as objects of study but as epistemic practices that generate knowledge through making, experimentation, and reflection^[12]. From this perspective, digital music is examined not simply about practice, but through practice. Software-based composition, algorithmic systems, platform-oriented production, and curatorial strategies become sites where aesthetic questions are explored materially and procedurally. This orientation resonates with broader developments in artistic research that foreground situated knowledge, reflexivity, and process as central methodological commitments^[13].

The concept of platformization has become especially influential in analyses of contemporary digital music practices. Streaming platforms and recommendation systems do more than facilitate access to music; they actively shape aesthetic form, listening habits, and creative decision-making^[14,15]. Studies have shown that platform logics influence compositional strategies by encouraging particular durations, dynamics, and affective profiles aligned with playlist cultures and algorithmic optimization^[16]. At the same time, platforms reshape notions of authorship and curatorship by introducing hybrid configurations of human and algorithmic agency, complicating established understandings of artistic control^[17]. Within creative arts research, these dynamics are increasingly recognized as integral elements of the material conditions of artistic prac-

tice rather than as external constraints.

Listening must also be reconceptualized as an active and technologically mediated practice rather than a passive mode of reception. Philosophical accounts of sound have likewise emphasized that auditory events are constituted through perceptual engagement rather than existing as independent objects^[19,20]. Earlier sociological accounts emphasized listening as a social practice shaped by identity, taste, and cultural capital^[18]. Although valuable, such approaches often understate the technological constitution of auditory experience. More recent contributions in the philosophy of sound and media theory conceptualize listening as an embodied, cognitive, and technologically distributed process^[19,20]. Algorithmic sequencing, personalization mechanisms, and interface design structure attention, memory, and affect, giving rise to reflexive or meta-listening practices characterized by awareness of mediation itself^[21]. These insights are particularly important for creative arts research, as they position listening as an active contributor to the emergence of sonic meaning rather than a passive form of reception.

Questions of authenticity continue to generate debate within digital music scholarship. Traditional accounts often link authenticity to material presence, originality, or resistance to technological mediation. Under post-digital conditions, however, such criteria have become increasingly difficult to sustain^[22]. Contemporary theorists propose understanding authenticity as a reflexive practice that emerges through critical engagement with remix cultures, algorithmic systems, and platform economies^[23,24]. Within artistic research, authenticity is thus less concerned with claims to originality than with awareness of conditions, intentionality, and the critical negotiation of mediation.

Political economy has provided a crucial framework for interrogating digital music cultures, particularly in relation to platform capitalism and data extraction. Research has documented how streaming infrastructures prioritize engagement metrics, reinforce dominant aesthetic norms, and marginalize experimental or non-normative sonic practices^[25]. At the same time, critics observe that political-economic analyses often remain abstract, insufficiently connected to the material infrastructures that sustain digital sound^[26]. More recent scholarship addresses this gap by foregrounding the ecological and geopolitical dimensions

of digital media, including energy consumption, mineral extraction, and electronic waste^[27]. For creative arts research, these material conditions are central rather than peripheral to understanding the ethical and aesthetic implications of digital practice.

The rapid incorporation of generative artificial intelligence into music production further intensifies these debates. Initial discussions have often framed AI in terms of authorship, copyright, or efficiency^[28]. Emerging research, however, increasingly positions AI as an aesthetic and political rupture capable of producing large-scale homogenization by flattening stylistic difference and recombining existing patterns at unprecedented scale^[29]. From a practice-informed perspective, AI systems function neither as neutral tools nor as autonomous creators, but as participants within creative assemblages that require ongoing critical negotiation by artists. AI-assisted music-making thus constitutes a significant domain of contemporary artistic research.

Alongside these developments, scholars have drawn attention to counter-aesthetic and resistant practices that challenge platform-driven optimization. Post-digital, glitch, noise, and parasound practices intentionally foreground error, instability, and inefficiency as aesthetic strategies^[30–32]. Frequently marginalized within streaming ecosystems, these practices resist personalization and predictability, asserting alternative forms of sonic value that operate outside dominant metrics of visibility. For creative arts research, such practices illustrate how aesthetic resistance can function simultaneously as artistic expression and as a mode of critical inquiry.

Taken together, this literature underscores the need for a practice-informed, post-digital approach to digital music. Rather than conceptualizing digital music as a cultural object whose value is assigned through classification or circulation, contemporary research increasingly understands it as a processual, relational, and materially situated sonic practice. Despite these advances, there remains a need for studies that integrate post-digital ontology, platform-aware analysis, and concrete artistic practices within a unified creative arts research framework. Addressing this gap, the present study situates digital music within a research-through-practice framework that examines how aesthetic value emerges through composition, curation, lis-

tening, and technological mediation in contemporary sonic environments. The following section therefore outlines the methodological framework through which this practice-informed analysis is conducted.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a practice-informed creative arts research methodology situated within post-digital sound studies and relational approaches to artistic inquiry. Rather than approaching methodology as a neutral or purely instrumental set of procedures, the framework employed here treats method as epistemologically significant, shaped by underlying assumptions about how knowledge, artistic practice, and aesthetic value are produced. In line with contemporary artistic research paradigms, the study proceeds from the position that artistic practices themselves operate as modes of knowledge generation, producing insight through process, experimentation, and reflexive engagement rather than through external measurement alone^[1,2].

Methodological approaches grounded in empirical positivism—frequently used in social-scientific research on media and culture—are not well suited to the questions explored in this article. Such approaches tend to prioritize quantification, behavioral generalization, or representational transparency, often at the expense of the experiential, emergent, and processual dimensions that characterize sonic practice under post-digital conditions^[3]. By contrast, creative arts research conceptualizes knowledge as situated, embodied, and relational, arising through acts of making, listening, and curating within specific technological and cultural contexts^[4]. This orientation does not abandon rigor; rather, it reframes rigor in terms of conceptual consistency, reflexivity, and analytical depth.

On this basis, the study employs a qualitative, practice-informed methodology that combines interpretive analysis of artistic practices with post-digital theoretical reflection. The objective is not to generate generalizable claims about patterns of digital music consumption or platform behavior, but to examine how aesthetic value is produced and negotiated through creative practice within contemporary digital infrastructures. Artistic outputs, curatorial strategies, and listening configurations are treated as research material—sites where aesthetic, technological,

and sociocultural forces intersect and become perceptible through sound.

A processual and relational ontology of digital sound underpins this methodological approach. Digital music is not treated as a fixed object, symbolic representation, or cultural commodity, but as a sonic event that emerges through interactions among code, infrastructure, artistic intention, perceptual engagement, and environmental conditions ^[5–7]. This ontology rejects object-centered and classificatory models that seek to stabilize music within predefined categories. Instead, it emphasizes becoming, emergence, and temporality as defining characteristics of post-digital sonic practice. Methodologically, this entails attending to how sound unfolds across computational, sensory, cultural, and ecological dimensions, rather than isolating any single layer as analytically dominant.

Within this framework, case-based artistic analysis constitutes a central methodological strategy. Selected digital music practices are examined as instances of research-through-practice rather than as illustrative examples appended to theoretical discussion. The cases—streaming-native composition, playlist curation as a curatorial practice, and algorithmic or AI-assisted music-making—were chosen for their capacity to illuminate how artists and curators engage creatively with platform infrastructures, algorithmic systems, and post-digital listening contexts ^[8]. Emphasis is placed on analytic depth rather than representational breadth, privileging interpretive richness and conceptual insight over comprehensive coverage.

Engagement with these practices integrates close listening, contextual analysis, and reflective interpretation. Close listening is understood as a methodologically grounded practice that attends to sonic texture, temporal organization, spatial characteristics, and perceptual tension as they unfold within technologically mediated environments ^[9,10]. Contextual analysis situates these sonic features within the infrastructural, economic, and cultural systems that condition their emergence, including platform logics, algorithmic visibility, and data-driven circulation. Reflective interpretation brings these observations into dialogue with post-digital theory, allowing artistic practice to actively inform conceptual development rather than merely exemplify pre-existing frameworks.

Listening itself is treated as a methodological site

rather than as a passive object of description. Digital listening practices—shaped by interfaces, personalization mechanisms, and algorithmic sequencing—are understood as active components of the sonic event ^[11]. This perspective aligns with phenomenological and post-cybernetic accounts that conceptualize listening as reflexive, technologically distributed, and cognitively mediated ^[12]. Methodologically, this involves recognizing the researcher's own situated listening as part of the analytical process, while maintaining critical awareness of mediation and technological framing.

The methodology also incorporates a critical political-material dimension, acknowledging that digital music practices unfold within concrete technological ecologies. Platform capitalism, data extraction, generative artificial intelligence, and energy-intensive infrastructures constitute the conditions under which post-digital sound is produced and sustained ^[13–15]. Rather than treating political economy as an abstract backdrop, the analysis situates aesthetic practice within these material systems, recognizing their influence on creative autonomy, sonic diversity, and ecological impact. This approach aligns with emerging strands of creative arts research that integrate ethical, ecological, and geopolitical considerations into artistic inquiry.

Finally, reflexivity is explicitly embraced as a methodological principle. Interpretation is understood as situated and shaped by theoretical commitments, listening practices, and cultural positioning ^[16]. Far from undermining rigor, this reflexive stance enhances methodological transparency by clarifying the conditions under which knowledge is produced. For clarity, this study is based exclusively on publicly available artistic works and scholarly sources and did not involve human participants or require ethical approval. The following case studies operationalize this methodological framework by examining contemporary digital music practices as sites of research-through-practice.

In summary, the methodological framework developed in this study positions digital music as a domain of artistic research in which aesthetic value emerges through practice, process, and mediation. By integrating post-digital ontology, practice-informed analysis, and critical engagement with platformed sound environments, the methodology moves beyond evaluative or classificatory

models toward an understanding of digital music as research-through-practice. This framework underpins the subsequent analysis of artistic cases, through which the study demonstrates how aesthetic value is dynamically produced within contemporary post-digital sound cultures.

4. The Case-Study Synthesis

Understanding digital music as creative arts research requires close and sustained attention to artistic practices as sites where aesthetic, technological, and cultural questions are actively explored. Rather than functioning as empirical demonstrations of pre-existing theory, the practices examined in this section are approached as forms of research-through-practice, through which aesthetic value emerges through creative negotiation with post-digital conditions.

Streaming-native composition, playlist curation, algorithmic and AI-assisted music-making, and counter-aesthetic sonic practices are therefore treated as analytically productive domains. Each case illuminates how digital sound operates not as a fixed musical object but as a processual and relational sonic event, shaped through interactions among artistic decision-making, technological infrastructures, and listening environments.

One of the most consequential developments in contemporary music production is the rise of streaming-native composition, in which aesthetic form is shaped in anticipation of platform-based circulation. Composers increasingly work with an awareness of compression algorithms, loudness normalization, playlist sequencing, and mobile listening contexts. These infrastructural factors shape decisions regarding duration, dynamic range, timbral density, and spatialization, embedding platform awareness directly into creative practice^[1,2].

Albums, such as Billie Eilish's *When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?*, exemplify this orientation through restrained dynamics, intimate vocal production, and carefully calibrated sound design optimized for close, headphone-based listening. Such aesthetic choices are not incidental stylistic decisions but responses to the perceptual regimes of streaming environments, where music is often encountered in individualized, distracted, and algorithmically ordered contexts. From a practice-informed

perspective, these compositional strategies function as artistic inquiry into how sound operates within digitally mediated listening conditions, rather than as a retreat from artistic autonomy.

Streaming-native composition also foregrounds the processual ontology of digital sound. The sonic identity of a track is not fully contained within its encoded file but emerges through playback systems, interfaces, and listening situations that repeatedly reinstate the work as a sonic event^[3]. Artistic practice in this context involves designing sounds capable of sustaining perceptual distinction and aesthetic tension across varying technological conditions. In doing so, such practices challenge evaluative models that equate aesthetic value primarily with visibility, popularity, or circulation metrics^[4].

Beyond composition, playlist curation has become a significant creative practice within post-digital music cultures. Although often understood as functional or promotional, playlists increasingly operate as aesthetic forms that organize listening through selection, sequencing, and contextual framing. From the perspective of creative arts research, playlist curation constitutes a form of curatorial authorship in which aesthetic meaning emerges relationally across multiple works and listening situations^[5].

Editorial playlists, such as *Peaceful Piano*, *Deep Focus*, or *Lorem*, exemplify this mode of practice. Rather than foregrounding individual authorship or narrative closure, these playlists cultivate affective continuity, temporal flow, and alignment with particular modes of everyday listening. Their aesthetic value lies not in individual tracks but in the emergent experience of sustained listening shaped by curatorial decisions and algorithmic modulation^[6]. Sequencing, repetition, and tonal coherence function as compositional techniques, producing a sonic environment rather than a discrete collection of works.

Playlist curation further illustrates the dynamics of distributed creativity, involving ongoing interaction among human editors, algorithmic systems, and listener behavior. Recommendation algorithms reorder and personalize playlists based on engagement data, introducing a form of evolving authorship that complicates conventional notions of artistic control^[7]. Rather than diminishing creative agency, this hybridity creates new opportunities for artistic inquiry into temporality, affective modulation, and relational modes

of listening. Within creative arts research, playlist curation thus operates as a research practice that investigates how sound unfolds across time, context, and use.

Algorithmic and AI-assisted music practices further unsettle object-centered aesthetic frameworks by integrating computation directly into creative processes. In these contexts, artistic agency is not displaced but reconfigured, shifting emphasis from composing fixed works to designing systems, setting parameters, and curating generative outputs. From a creative arts research perspective, such practices constitute process-based inquiry, in which aesthetic questions are explored through engagement with generative mechanisms rather than being resolved in advance^[8,9].

Generative music practices associated with artists such as Brian Eno exemplify this orientation by prioritizing emergence, variation, and non-closure as aesthetic values. In these cases, the artwork exists not as a singular, finalized object but as an unfolding process whose identity remains contingent and open-ended^[10]. Artistic practice involves attentive listening, selection, and refinement within computational constraints, exercising judgment over systems rather than over individual notes.

At the same time, AI-assisted music-making raises significant concerns regarding aesthetic homogenization and equivalence. Large-scale generative models trained on existing musical datasets risk reinforcing dominant stylistic norms while marginalizing experimental or culturally specific practices^[11,12]. From a practice-informed standpoint, artistic engagement with artificial intelligence (AI) therefore becomes a site of critical negotiation, requiring reflexive awareness of the political, economic, and epistemic assumptions embedded within algorithmic systems. In this context, AI operates not merely as a tool but as a collaborator whose influence must be actively examined within creative practice.

While many digital music practices operate within platform infrastructures, a range of counter-aesthetic practices explicitly resist algorithmic optimization and commercial legibility. In this article, *parasound* refers to sonic practices that operate alongside or against dominant musical structures, foregrounding interference, excess, and perceptual ambiguity rather than harmonic coherence. Such practices explore the margins of audibility and tech-

nological mediation, revealing how sonic meaning can emerge from noise, disruption, and infrastructural friction rather than from stable musical form^[13–15]. These practices frequently remain marginal within streaming ecosystems precisely because they resist personalization, categorization, and seamless consumption.

From a creative arts research perspective, such practices exemplify aesthetic resistance as a mode of inquiry. By disrupting algorithmic expectations, they expose the normative assumptions embedded within platform infrastructures and open alternative perceptual possibilities. These works demonstrate that aesthetic value cannot be reduced to metrics of engagement or visibility, reaffirming the importance of practices that demand sustained attention, critical listening, and perceptual effort^[16].

Taken together, these cases show that digital music does not operate as a classifiable object but as a field of creative practice in which aesthetic value is continually negotiated through process, mediation, and listening. Streaming-native composition, playlist curation, algorithmic music-making, and counter-aesthetic practices each illuminate distinct aspects of how sound functions under post-digital conditions. What connects them is not stylistic similarity but a shared engagement with mediation as a constitutive dimension of artistic practice.

For creative arts research, these practices demonstrate that aesthetic value is neither intrinsic nor granted solely through circulation. Instead, it emerges through sustained engagement with sonic material, technological systems, and perceptual conditions. By grounding post-digital theory in concrete artistic practices, this section enacts the practice-informed methodology outlined earlier and affirms digital music as a vital and legitimate domain of research-through-practice.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The analysis developed in this study demonstrates that digital music cannot be adequately accounted for through object-centered or classificatory approaches that seek to determine whether it should be understood as art, artifact, or commodity. Instead, the artistic practices examined here reveal digital music as a post-digital sonic event—one that emerges through relational, processual,

and materially grounded interactions among sound, technology, and perception. For creative arts research, this shift is not merely theoretical; it reconfigures how aesthetic knowledge is produced, moving from retrospective evaluation toward research-through-practice as a primary mode of inquiry.

Across the case studies, aesthetic value consistently emerges through creative engagement with mediation rather than through visibility, circulation, or platform metrics alone. Streaming-native composition demonstrates how artists actively incorporate infrastructural conditions—such as compression standards, loudness normalization, and playlist logics—into compositional decision-making, transforming technological constraints into generative parameters for sonic experimentation^[1,2]. Rather than undermining artistic autonomy, these practices illustrate how autonomy is reconfigured under post-digital conditions, exercised through attentiveness to perceptual environments and infrastructural variability. In this context, aesthetic value resides in the ability of sonic practices to sustain perceptual differentiation and experiential depth across technologically mediated instantiations^[3].

Playlist curation further unsettles inherited assumptions about authorship and artistic form. When understood as a curatorial and aesthetic practice, playlists demonstrate how sound operates relationally across time, context, and use, generating meaning through sequencing, repetition, and affective continuity rather than through discrete works^[4]. The hybrid authorship characteristic of playlist cultures—distributed among human curators, algorithmic systems, and listeners—illustrates post-digital creativity as a collective and dynamic process. From a creative arts research perspective, playlist curation functions as an inquiry into listening itself, examining how sonic experience is shaped by context, temporality, and algorithmic modulation^[5].

Algorithmic and AI-assisted music-making intensifies these dynamics by embedding computation directly within creative practice. The cases discussed here indicate that generative systems do not eliminate artistic agency but redistribute it across human and non-human actors^[6]. Artistic research in this domain involves designing systems, establishing constraints, and critically curating outcomes, foregrounding emergence, variation, and reflexivity as aesthetic concerns. At the same time, the analysis highlights

the political stakes of AI-driven creativity, particularly the risk of aesthetic homogenization and the reinforcement of dominant stylistic norms through large-scale data training^[7]. Engagement with AI thus emerges as both a creative and a critical practice, requiring ongoing awareness of the cultural, economic, and epistemic assumptions embedded in algorithmic systems.

Counter-aesthetic practices—such as glitch, noise, and parasound—further illuminate the limits of platform-based regimes of value. By emphasizing error, instability, and inefficiency, these practices resist algorithmic legibility and challenge the assumption that optimization and personalization are inherently desirable^[8]. Their marginal position within streaming ecosystems exposes how platform infrastructures privilege clarity, predictability, and affective smoothness, while excluding practices that demand sustained attention or critical modes of listening^[9]. For creative arts research, such practices are particularly significant, as they demonstrate how aesthetic inquiry can operate as political critique enacted through sound.

Listening emerges throughout the study as a central methodological and ontological concern. Digital listening is neither neutral nor purely behavioral; it is technologically constituted and reflexive, shaped by interfaces, personalization systems, and algorithmic sequencing^[10]. Understanding listening as an active component of the sonic event aligns creative arts research with phenomenological and post-cybernetic accounts of perception, in which meaning arises through embodied and mediated engagement^[11]. This expanded view of listening challenges sociological reductions that frame listening primarily in terms of preference or consumption, emphasizing its role in aesthetic emergence and critical awareness.

When reconsidered within a post-digital framework, authenticity no longer functions as a marker of material originality or resistance to mediation. Instead, it emerges as critical awareness of mediation itself—a reflexive engagement with the technological, cultural, and economic conditions under which sound is produced and experienced^[12]. Artistic practices that foreground their own mediation, whether through platform-aware composition or algorithmic experimentation, exemplify this understanding of authenticity. Such practices align closely with the ethos of artistic research, where reflexivity and situational awareness

are central to the production of knowledge.

The political, economic, and ecological dimensions of digital music further situate aesthetic practice within broader technocultural systems. Platform capitalism, data extraction, and generative artificial intelligence influence not only creative autonomy but also the material infrastructures that support sound production, including energy consumption, mineral extraction, and electronic waste^[13,14]. By situating aesthetic practice within these material ecologies, the study challenges dematerialized accounts of digital culture and foregrounds the ethical implications of post-digital sound practices. For creative arts research, attending to these concerns is essential, as artistic inquiry increasingly unfolds within technologically saturated environments that carry tangible global consequences.

Taken together, the findings advance a practice-informed, post-digital framework for understanding digital music within creative arts research. By moving beyond obsolete binaries and object-centered models, the article demonstrates how aesthetic value emerges dynamically through creative practice, technological mediation, and listening. The originality of the contribution lies not in proposing a new classificatory theory of digital music, but in articulating a methodological and ontological reorientation: from evaluating digital music as a cultural product to understanding it as a processual field of artistic research.

This reframing has implications that extend beyond music studies. As artistic practices across media increasingly engage algorithmic systems, platform infrastructures, and AI-driven tools, creative arts research requires methodologies capable of addressing emergence, mediation, and relationality. Digital music offers a particularly revealing context for this inquiry, as sound operates at the intersection of perception, computation, and material infrastructure. By treating digital music as research-through-practice, the present study offers a model for engaging post-digital creativity that is analytically rigorous, artistically grounded, and critically reflexive.

In conclusion, digital music should be approached neither as an art form compromised by technology nor as an artifact defined by circulation alone, but as a post-digital sonic practice in which aesthetic value is continually produced through interaction, experimentation, and mediation. Recognizing this shifts the task of creative arts

research from classification to engagement, and from judgment to inquiry. It is through such practice-informed approaches that digital music can be meaningfully understood as both a site of artistic experimentation and a mode of contemporary cultural knowledge.

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