University of Exeter

Ro-minimal identity and community: Fandom, gender, healing, and the impact of COVID-19 on a Romanian-born electronic music subculture

Submitted by Alexandra Onofrei to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology, December 2023

Abstract

My research considers articulations of identity and community in ro-minimal, a Romanian-born underground electronic music genre and subculture. Utilising digital ethnography, autoethnography and interviews, I examine fandom and distinction, gender inequality and discrimination, healing, performance, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on ro-minimal in eight chapters. The research is bound up with the embodiment of the ethnographer though gender, national and professional identity, pandemic conditions, and health, and is based on a flexible methodology that varies with the health of the ethnographer. The thesis provides important methodological insights into the application of autoethnography combined with digital ethnography, helpful for disabled/chronically ill researchers. The thesis contributes to understanding ro-minimal as a music subculture, articulating Romanian national identity, and an exclusive folklore-informed community while also part of a global minimal techno network. Within ro-minimal, gender relations are reproduced similarly to other techno subcultures, however they are reinterpreted in the Romanian patriarchal context. The thesis highlights how this is counteracted though the production of a femme sound (Lilleslåtten, 2016; Gadir, 2016). An important sociological contribution is tracing coping mechanisms within the shared experience of isolation amongst music fans during the pandemic (Pryor & Outley, 2021), and the role of analogue and digital network technologies for communal experiences of healing. The thesis contributes new insights into literature on music and healing, showing the therapeutic capacities of raves. Lastly, the thesis also considers the potential of NFTs within music-based communities and their role in community-making processes.

Keywords: *ro-minimal, DJing, identity, community, fandom, gender, healing, performance, COVID-19*

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Between 2018 and 2019, I lived in București, the capital of Romania, for five months and experienced the city's abundant nightlife at length. I attended numerous parties at nightclubs such as *Control* for dance music, *Apollo 111* for 90s pop and disco, and *Macaz* for manele and experimental electronic music. Trained as a classical musician, I have been interested in melodic, harmonious sounds that I found in folk, jazz, various kinds of rock music and more recently in manele, a pop folk genre usually created and performed by Roma artists. However, for my birthday during my time in București, a friend suggested going to a rave at *Guesthouse*. This nightclub has been the epicentre of Romanian electronic music since 2010, when it opened. In early 2019, when I first attended, it was in a former industrial building converted into a club that promoted techno, house and ro-minimal, genres with which I was not familiar and against which I was slightly prejudiced. I found house and techno percussion cringeworthy and tedious and their musical narratives dull. Also, I had associated this music with disorderly lifestyles and habits that I perceived as characterised by drug taking and addiction, but I gave my friend's proposal a chance. We arrived at *Guesthouse* at midnight, and after queuing for half an hour, we got in and started dancing in the crowd. We moved in sync with the lo-fi bassline and playful kicks of ro-minimal songs; tracks lasted over ten minutes; minutes felt like hours; this was a genre where seamless transitions between tracks were tracks in their own right. Dancers wearing black clothes and black sunglasses, dancing slightly from one side to another, gurned tenderly and sipped from their perfectly designed water bottles; the hours seamlessly merged into the afterhours; a few people hugging and telling each other they're *soooooo happyyyyy*, holding onto a fleeting sense of unity and shared affection until the break of dawn, and beyond; my first ro-minimal rave.

Context

After this event, I started seeing targeted Facebook ads promoting rave recovery packs[1] or rave outfits. Names of DJs and producers of minimal house and techno appeared as suggestions on my social media accounts, as well as

[1] Usually this refers to sachets containing a powder formed of various vitamins and plants, to restore vitality and energy after attending a rave, where it is assumed that one consumes drugs and gets very tired.

clubs, memes,[2] festivals, pass codes for private events, ro-minimal Facebook groups, and online communities where members only ever seem to ask for 'track id'.[3] As I later discovered, Shazam, a music identification application, does not work particularly well for ro-minimal: many tracks played in this scene are obscure and often unreleased to the public. Musical novelty in this community is self-sustained through playing unreleased tracks that keep fans and producers intrigued and creative. I became enthralled in a musical flurry: I familiarised myself with the ro-minimal artist names, record labels, various kinds of mixing techniques, and soon I had a sizable amount of knowledge which allowed me to get involved in the scene and start mixing professionally. I started attending, in person or online, events where I experienced ro-minimal as a genre in its own right, with a steady, committed fanbase and distinctive sound (Ralston, 2017; Guțu, 2019). I experienced ro-minimal as an affective community, so one with "widely-held and collectively understood forms of feeling" (Hutchinson, 2018, para. 4). This term is normally associated with negative experiences and collective trauma (e.g., victims or witnesses of terrorism or totalitarian political regimes). However, I use the term in the context of the ro-minimal community to explore other emotions and particularly those that are articulated in identity and community-making in the ro-minimal subculture.

My thesis mainly focuses on how aficionados articulate their identities as enthusiasts, experts, escapists, dancers, men, women, fans with good taste. Ro-minimal is informally considered a type of minimal house and techno music that originated in Romania. As I show in Chapter 3, there is no consensus about ro-minimal as a separate genre. However, there is a subculture around what is believed to be ro-minimal, including events and festivals, and also a large online community with social media groups and forums, with tens of thousands of passionate fans. Therefore, I use the term 'ro-minimal' to refer to, depending on the context, the genre and the community that has formed around this genre. Ro-minimal has developed into a well-respected genre on the underground music scene in Romania and abroad since the 2000s (Ralston, 2017; Guțu,

[2] Usually a picture, video or text with generally humorous nature that is spread rapidly between people over the internet. The video or picture usually stays the same while the text accompanying it changes to illustrate different situations.
[3] i.e., the name of track and artist.

2019; Trandafoiu, 2021). It combines minimal techno, deep and tech house and emphasises fullness and warmth through vertical ornamentation rather than horizontal narrative development. As Ralston (2017, p. 45) explains, “there’s been a lot of discussion around this style, so much so that there are various loosely-adopted subgenres associated with it. Some simply label it the <Romanian sound> which is slightly misleading given that it originated in Bucharest before spreading. Nonetheless, at its core is a foundation based on loops and novel sequences of rhythms. The music is subtle and ethereal, laced with delicate intricacies over a minimalist baseline [sic]. The tracks are long and hypnotic with no explosive breaks and little melody. There also tends to be only a few elements, hence the term <Ro-minimal>.”

Ro-minimal started as afterhours music in Romanian clubs, but soon moved to the centre of raves (Ralston, 2017) in Romania and elsewhere. The ro-minimal pioneers are Rhadoo,[4] Petre Inspirescu,[5] and Raresh[6] who created the [a:rpia:r] record label, which has been defining the sound of Romanian minimal house and techno ever since. The artists’ stage names are traditional ones, with romantic references to folk and mythological stories and characters, positioning ro-minimal as a neo-romantic electronic music genre. While Garcia (2016) and Nye (2013) discuss neo-romanticism in relation to electronic music and minimal techno, I place neo-romanticism in the context of ro-minimal, showing how this genre links to Romanian history and geography. For example, one producer/DJ is called *Herodot*, which is the name of an ancient Greek historian; another is called *Praslea*, also the name of a character in Romanian folktale *Prâslea the Brave and the Golden Apples*. Alongside the [a:rpia:r] label, there are other movements and directions within this genre and contemporary Romanian DJs who mix minimal with deep house, acid techno, garage, breakbeat, lo-fi house and funk, ambient and experimental music, giving ro-minimal complexity, creative resourcefulness and a large assorted fanbase (Ralston, 2017). Ro-minimal is influential in Romania, where most parties featuring this genre take place, but has had cultural and musical purchase in many other geographical regions. Initially, ro-minimal was popularised abroad through clubs in Ibiza

[4] Rhadoo is considered the first ro-minimal producer and DJ (Ralston, 2017). https://www.residentadvisor.net/dj/rhadoo
[5] https://www.residentadvisor.net/dj/petreinspirescu
[6] https://www.residentadvisor.net/dj/raresh

(Ralston, 2017) and it subsequently started being recognised and reproduced in European and non-European countries. Also, the number of ro-minimal parties abroad has increased since this initial promotion of ro-minimal in Ibiza. There are now (ro)-minimal raves in the UK (Manchester, London, Brighton, Glasgow), Germany (mostly in Berlin), France and Belgium to name a few, and these function as fully fledged parties/raves instead of afterparties.

However, it is important to recognise that ro-minimal did begin as afterparty music and that it is an underground music genre. Similar to minimal techno (Nye, 2013), I argue that ro-minimal has an increasingly large fanbase, as well as a very specific sound and atmosphere. It is based on repetition, submerged overlapping textures and layers, and funky, sometimes dark, and distorted vocals, and steady, punchy percussion. So, like in minimal techno (Nye, 2013), ro-minimal's musical impact comes from its sustained length and depth rather than big and loud musical peaks or drops. Ro-minimal is often seen as distinctively Romanian on the global electronic music scene (Ralston, 2017) specifically because it managed to transform something potentially dull (afterparty music) into something exciting and create a brand-new genre or, perhaps, a new way of perceiving minimal through its atmosphere. Ro-minimal is secretive but popular; widespread but insular; up to date, but nostalgic for analogue technology. This "technostalgia" or nostalgia for past technology (Pinch & Reinecke, 2009, p. 103) could be more meaningfully articulated as a mediator between past and present (van der Heijden, 2015) instead of a mere longing for past technology. While I investigate these aspects in detail in the following chapters, here I provided a brief context for my research on ro-minimal. Next, I present the research focus of this thesis, and the relevance of my research.

Research focus and relevance

Since my first contact with ro-minimal, I have become interested in researching this music's role in articulating social bonds and neoliberal forms of identities. The main focus of this thesis is identity-making and articulations of community and solidarity in and through this subculture. I examine these processes by looking specifically at fandom, gender, healing, enskilment and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Before I settled on the topic of ro-minimal for my PhD research, I had proposed a different project, which looked at Roma mushroom picking communities in Eastern Europe, where I planned to examine forms of human and non-human collaborations and economies and their relationship to capitalism. However, after taking a break from my studies and immersing myself in the București rave scene, I decided to change the topic of my research and explore the ro-minimal community instead. While this could seem like a big leap in my research, I see it as continuing on from my previous academic interests in human-animal, or human and non-human relations and the anthropology of community. This time I focus on human-technology relations and music, while also highlighting music as one of my passions and an area in which I am trained and skilled. I have received the full support of my supervisors and my funding body for this change. And despite having been teased by some peers about doing this research as a way to party, I hope to illuminate the multiple complexities of the Romanian minimal techno and house subculture, and show its importance to the anthropology and sociology of identity, community, music, healing, and technology.

My research is first and foremost a substantive academic piece on a minimally researched community. Thus, it sheds light on and open up various venues of research on this scene, hopefully bringing significant contributions to academia and beyond. While my thesis deals with ro-minimal, a genre and community born in Romania, it not only has implications for research on Romanian society and rave culture, but I hope it will contribute to literature and society in several other ways. First, my thesis makes contributions to literature on community and identity-making through ro-minimal, and elucidating on the value of rave subcultures for these processes. I also illuminate the various forms of raving encouraged by ro-minimal, and the forms of sociality and partying that developed since the COVID-19 pandemic. My work sheds light on the ways in which human-technology relations have changed in light of this global event, and its implications for electronic music subcultures such as ro-minimal, where vinyl and analogue technology are highly praised. Additionally, my thesis provides insights into the relationship between music and healing, and propose alternative uses of ro-minimal, and potentially other genres, for mindful physical exercise. Also, I explain how gender figures in ro-minimal, and in the global dance music industry, proposing ways of celebrating women's music and their

proper inclusion in music scenes. Finally, the thesis develops contributions to methodology, especially for researchers with health issues, disability or neurodivergence. On these grounds, I propose that this thesis is relevant to academia and to society, as it also points out the significance of subcultures like ro-minimal to everyday life, and contribute to challenging the stigma around electronic dance music raves as dangerous or disorderly.

Challenges faced

As I explain later in this thesis, particularly in the autoethnographic chapters, I faced numerous challenges during the PhD, and without wanting to make excuses for myself, I enumerate the challenges, and reflect on my PhD process, as I believe it is important to be upfront about one's research. The factors I look at next shaped how I carried out my research and wrote the thesis, and I believe they speak to the research community, recognising that besides being academics, we have other things going on in life which frame the way we research. First, there was the COVID-19 pandemic which had several effects on health, sociality, work, and relationships on a large scale. When the first lockdowns were imposed in the UK, I was about to have my PhD upgrade, and while I proposed a one-year in-person fieldwork to study ro-minimal, it was not possible anymore. So, my methodology had to be altered, aspect on which I elaborate in the methodology chapter. I also struggled with overcoming personal trauma and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which has been a lengthy process, as I explain in Chapters 5 and 6. During my struggle with mental health issues, I was unable to work for prolonged periods of time and I took medical leave twice. I have also been struggling with chronic pain that intensified during the pandemic, making it difficult for me to engage with my PhD at times.

Other global events such as the ongoing invasion of Ukraine by Russia, and the Israeli violence on the people of Gaza, have disrupted the normal course of life, including research. While these did not directly impact on my work, they have caused me to feel more anxious than normal, distressed, helpless in the face of humanitarian problems, and unable to focus on my work. Despite trying to get away from the news outlets and social media, it was not always possible, particularly as social media use has grown since the pandemic. Lastly, women face gender-based discrimination in many areas of life, which has also been a

challenge for me, as a DJ, but also as a researcher. The following example comes to mind: a male academic peer asked me, on my arrival to my newly-appointed office space at the university: “Why are you here – did the University put you in here because of gender quotas?” just as I was starting my PhD.

Additionally, although I present the structure of the thesis at the end of this chapter, it might be helpful to discuss the order of the empirical chapters, and explain the reasoning behind writing the thesis this particular way. The first empirical chapter looks at ro-minimal fandom generally, setting the scene for the rest of the thesis. Carrying on from the theme of fandom, Chapter 4 examines gender representation in this subculture, particularly looking at how gender inequalities impact on the organisation of this community, but also on ideas of taste, expertise, and innovation. Chapter 5 and 6 show my personal relationship with ro-minimal by highlighting different parts of my healing process and the music’s role in it, through processes of anticipation in music, enskilment, and performance. Simultaneously, these two chapters place ro-minimal in a variety of contexts, emphasising its constant dialogue with other music scenes, particularly in the UK where I live and perform music. Lastly, Chapter 7 examines the ro-minimal subculture during the COVID-19 pandemic, and although this was considered in some parts of previous chapters, here the pandemic angle connects all the other themes, and retrospectively presents an analysis of the changes this community underwent since 2020.

Before moving on, I want to state that although the thesis offers a wide-angle view of ro-minimal, it is by no means comprehensive. I explore a variety of themes, however they are presented from the standpoint of my participants’ experiences, and my own, as I emerge in this thesis not only as its writer, but as a research participant. Finally, I am aware that there are other ways in which the thesis could have been composed – I touch on these in the Chapter 8 (the conclusion).

Literature review

In this section, I briefly present some influential theoretical literature which, while it does not match the exact themes of each chapter, it greatly influenced my work. I engage in depth with more theoretical literature over the course of the empirical chapters. While I divide the literature under a sequence of

headings, I am aware that this is heuristic – matters of taste, pleasure, gender, expertise, and community all interdigitate.

Taste and pleasure

To determine how identity and community are articulated through fans' engagement with ro-minimal, experiences of taste are considered; they are an important level on which music and identity interlink. Music appeals to people because of what it sounds like, what emotional responses it awakens in them (DeNora, 2000), but also because of secondary associations with class or other social categories (Hennion, 2001) that music enables. In *Music Lovers* (2001), Hennion places fans at the heart of co-producing music, by modelling and paying attention to their experiences of taste and pleasure and how they connect to other practices (e.g., fashion, dance) that, in turn, influence the music they listen to and how they listen to it. *Music Lovers* is helpful for contextualising the history of pleasure in music and in framing music as a "theory of passion" (2001, p.13). In this conception, music is an ideology and practice through which social emotions, relations and identities are enabled to take different shapes and meanings and through which intense liking in the form of fandom or amateur and expert enthusiasm are encouraged. Similar to Ueno (2017) and Rietveld (2003), Hennion joins the dots between affect and technology in music, making a compelling argument that music is a lot more than mere sound – it is everything that makes it come into being: the equipment and instruments used to create and disseminate sound, the place and the atmosphere in which it is heard and felt, the act of listening, and so on. Drawing on this, I propose an analysis of ro-minimal as a community of enthusiasts, but also as one where new and extended practices of taste and enjoyment are harboured. I consider the technologies and techniques people use such as analogue or digital musical equipment, dancing, and visuals in rave settings which encourage certain kinds of sensibility, physical resistance, and patterns of social relations. I also argue that ro-minimal music serves to enable multiple communities, but also factions.

DeNora's *Music in Everyday Life* (1999) takes a phenomenological approach to music and sets the scene for analysing music within society and the everyday. DeNora suggests that music reflects certain aspects of society, but this does not imply that music should explain them. Music is a site where agency and

identity are formed and reproduced; it interacts with our feelings, perceptions of time and space and our sense of belonging (Krueger, 2019) and 'ontological security' (Giddens, 1991; DeNora, 2000, Mitzen, 2006) in which taste and enjoyment can be pursued. The notion of 'ontological security' was first used by psychology scholar Laing (1960) to refer to mental stability, and to distinguish between mentally healthy people and those on the schizophrenia spectrum. However, I employ the concept drawing on Giddens' conception of the term, as a tool for understanding the self (1991), or "the need to experience oneself as a whole, continuous person in time —as being rather than constantly changing — in order to realize a sense of agency" (Mitzen, 2006, p.342). Furthermore, I also draw on DeNora's view of ontological security through using music as a form of "entraining and modulating mood and levels of distress" (DeNora, 2000, p. 16), thus emphasising the relational aspect, but also the aesthetic pleasure and enjoyment associated with this concept.

I elaborate on the relationship between music and society in my work and following DeNora's advice to avoid determinism and causality, I engage with notions and practices of pleasure and taste phenomenologically (Bramble, 2013). I also draw upon DeNora's notion of music as a "technology of self" (1999, p. 32) which links music, aesthetic reflexivity, and individual self-perception. Romanian modernity does not (have to) always match up with other modernities (Latour, 2003) that are globally dominant (i.e., the UK or US) and thus, the processes of self-reflexivity inspired by art and music in this context are worthy of anthropological investigation. They reveal the kind of modernity that works in Romania and what its impact is on underground music.

In the forty-five years of communism in Romania, taste and enjoyment were not a priority and access to Western art and culture was curbed, if not entirely forbidden (Ralston, 2017; Preda, 2013). Also, only thirty-four years ago, Romania overthrew this regime, and it has since been grappling with a long politico-economic transition (Recorder, 2019) that has affected all sectors of social life, including the arts. The connection between art and identity, specifically the freedom that people now have to articulate taste and artistic preferences, is even more worthy of investigation not least because it articulates a more self-aware process of identity-making amongst music enthusiasts. This is because alternative musical communities are now allowed

to fully unfold and are attaining exposure in Romania. Ro-minimal particularly can show how identity and community are articulated – as personal, emotive acts but also as political attitudes and responses to everyday routine and current affairs, in a comparable way to Nye's (2013) analysis of German minimal techno. Ro-minimal is briefly mentioned in Trandafoiu (2021) in her study of electronic dance music in Cluj-Napoca city, and Guțu (2019) discusses some aspects of the ro-minimal subculture, particularly its exclusiveness, in a short academic text, as part of the book *Hipsteri, bobos și clase creative*[7] (State & Guțu, 2019). Ralston's work (2017), although not formally academic, is the only monograph-length piece on ro-minimal and its cultural and historical specificities. It delves into Romania's political and musical history to determine the origin and current form of ro-minimal as such a peculiar underground genre, but which seems freely accessible.

Most official art had to fit into Ceaușescu's personality cult, so there was little opportunity to be creative, but equally, a strong underground community throve: mostly folk rock, but also electronic music. Since the instatement of the new democratic regime, Romanians, although freer, now have to consciously and actively choose what they like and attend. This change has been important for the development of distinct kinds of taste and forms of cultural appreciation. Bourdieu's work, especially *Distinction* (2010[1984]) is of direct relevance and utility here. It led me to ask questions such as who can afford what and when, making taste a matter of power and capital (economic and cultural). Although Bourdieu's work has been criticised for its "ahistorical structuralism" and failure to account for the complex changes that capitalism has brought about (Gartman, 1991, p. 421), the questions his work proposes about taste are essential to Romania, a society that generally sees itself as new, with a fresh politico-economic structure (Recorder, 2019). Throughout the thesis, I draw on Bourdieu's notion of class, defined by the amount of capital that one has, and also through habitus, "a set of preconscious dispositions, including tastes, a sense of the self, bodily stances, and, crucially, skills or "practical mastery" (Riley, 2017, p. 111). As Gere (2021, pp. 16-17) mentions, "Sarah Thornton (1995) alters the term <cultural capital> and uses it to describe the practices subculture […] members have to demarcate themselves within the bigger

[7] *Hipsters, bobos and creative classes* (Translated from English by the author)

context of culture." This process of differentiation of ro-minimal from other communities, particularly in relation to the wider umbrella term EDM (electronic dance music) which is often associated with mainstream culture, is important in my thesis. "Subcultural capital", in Thornton's perception is "a form of being 'in the know', using (but not over-using) current slang and looking as if you were born to perform the latest dance styles" (Thornton, 1995, p. 27), or being acquainted with the latest ro-minimal music, in this case. Like Gere (2021), I also find that the term 'subcultural capital' suitable for my analysis of ro-minimal.

Considering the differences between the previous communist system where commonality and sharing were (forcefully) ordained and the current regime where individualism and individualities are encouraged, experiences of taste and pleasure are analysed both individually and collectively. This analysis sheds light on how individualism and collectivism impact on ro-minimal enthusiasts' understandings of taste, artistic choices, and how this, in turn, informs processes of identity and community-making. How does this newly achieved and assumed relevance of taste interact with the structure of Romanian society, specifically its social hierarchies?

Fandom, Expertise and Gender

Discussions of distinction and taste lead on to the next influential theme in my research: fandom and expertise and how they mutually articulate each other. These concepts are closely linked to how musical technology, electronic music and social media have changed people's roles as enthusiasts that not only consume and use music but produce it – so they become "prosumers" (Ritzer, 2015, p. 1) and "produsers" (Bruns, 2008, p. 21). Under the former regime, some Romanians were selected by Partidul Comunist Român (The Romanian Communist Party), designated as experts, and placed into key state functions while the rest were ignored, but also exploited. Citizens were forcefully mobilized to cheer for official government events, so whilst they had their individual motivations and preferences, public expertise and fandom were reduced to controlled and limited forms of expression. It also seems that expertise was assigned arbitrarily (or often through nepotism) rather than demonstrated status. It is no surprise then, since the 1990s and with the advent of the internet and social media, people found themselves surrounded by new information, art forms, channels of communication and new ways of social

bonding (live streamings, forums, Facebook groups, Soundcloud, Mixcloud, YouTube) and then later on, by more affordable forms of music production and mixing. The implication is that digital access and participation have been socially and culturally transformative: people widened their engagement with music and with influencing electronic music trends.

I draw on Davies' *Hackerspaces* (2017) to investigate how, despite the increase in people's critique of and engagement with the cultural products they consume, inequalities and exclusionary practices persist. In ro-minimal, this is an evident fact. Women involved in producing and mixing, although have started taking up more space in the industry, are still widely considered unskilled in technology, music manipulation and even sourcing good music (Straw, 1997; Nikolayi, 2019; Farrugia, 2012). I pursue the divisions and hierarchies that are articulated in the new hacker/maker spirit (Davies, 2017). Miller's work on digital anthropology (2012) proved useful not only as a key text on anthropological research in the era of fast internet, but also as a tool for understanding how the internet has changed social interrelations, and notions of status and identity: more people have access to internet and can have multiple virtual identities in forums and discussion groups where they show and share skills and knowledge, which often happens in the ro-minimal community.

Furthermore, *Textual Poachers* by Jenkins (1992) challenges the idea that fans are passive receptors of the art they consume. Jenkins, like de Certeau (1988), suggests that fans regularly operate from the margins of society to either assert their mastery over artforms or to address the trends and potential problems in them. This is important for ro-minimal because its fans engage in production and sharing of their own music, so it is crucial to see them as active producers who shape this community. However, although Jenkins' notion that fans come from the margins may be accurate for the case studies discussed in his book, it does not fully apply to ro-minimal. Members of this community often come from wealthy, bourgeois backgrounds (Anderson, 2009a) with access to all kinds of capital, placing them in a central position to begin with: this is analysed in what is to follow.

Arguably, DJs have been rendered as "organic intellectuals", in the Gramscian sense, so that what they do is for the community and not for themselves, as Ueno (2017, p. 176) maintains. I argue that doing something for the community

and for oneself are not mutually exclusive, as shown by Pryor and Outley (2021) in their account of online parties during the pandemic, as well as by Orenstein (1985) in her work on self-healing performances of female artists. In ro-minimal, DJs are purveyors of new music, they provide a framework for social relations in parties and non-party situations. However, raves are centred around DJs visually and sonically, highlighting their skills as beat matchers, music connoisseurs, technical experts and even sex symbols (Rietveld, 2003). So, ro-minimal DJs have strong individualities that are widely liked to the point of fetishism (as I explain in Chapter 4). Whereas for partygoers, listening to music is an act of experiencing pleasure, for DJs and sound technicians, listening is often a form of labour (Nye, 2013) that often comes with issues: hearing problems, back/posture problems, dealing with technical malfunctions and irritating fans or people who request songs, etc. Mixing and using the turntables or CDJs (a form of digital turntables) as musical instruments points to a form of virtuosity akin to shamanistic practices (Bloustien, 2016). However, I am interested in the material relations between DJs and their equipment. I look at DJs' engagements with the musical gear and tools that make music possible, to understand who and what maintains and defines the scene. Fears of complex digital technology replacing human DJs are rising (Tokui, 2018), and so is nostalgia for analogue machinery in the ro-minimal scene and in the music industry more widely. In this context, I found a productive framework that considers musical agency as distributed between human and non-human actors (Latour, 2005). Music, besides the final product that can be heard, is a variety of practices and performances (Pickering,1995) of sound through technology (DeNora 2000), dance (Sklar, 1991), people's interactions with the rave environments (Ueno, 2017), and self-care/self-enhancing technology like earplugs which contribute to the articulation of ro-minimal music and atmosphere. I examine music as a multitude of factors which support and articulate each other. I do this from a variety of standpoints (Haraway, 1988) which reveal that human and non-human forms of agency are vital to maintaining the ro-minimal subculture.

The new wave of digital technology has allowed people to extensively engage with their artistic and musical choices, to produce, mix and critique music, and create new hierarchies (Rietveld, 2003) and forms of relating based on knowledge and skill (Hennion, 2001). Ro-minimal fans see themselves as

belonging to an elite group which understands the complex and subtle music (Ralston, 2017; Atton, 2012) that comprises ro-minimal. This is a starting point in my investigation of the skillsets one needs to appreciate and enjoy this music. I draw on Ingold's theory of skills as making sense of an environment (2000) and specifically the point that skill is continually changing and adapting (Ingold, 2017). This is the case with ro-minimal, especially since the advent of digital practices and online forms of social connections and sharing. This leaves enthusiasts, and particularly women who receive more negative criticism, vulnerable. Whereas recent technology allows them to get involved in the music they like, it also means they are open to more criticism and conflict online. With ro-minimal tracks being released often, produsers are embroiled in a constant flow of information, online arguments, and searches for musical tracks.

Identity and community do not simply reside in us, as bounded, defined individuals, or groups. Music and social relations go hand in hand. The way that experiences of music contribute to feelings of togetherness and unity is a pivotal point of focus in this thesis. Raves are known as events where people listen to music, dance, drink, and sometimes take party drugs, but most importantly, they connect with each other. Feelings of unity, friendliness and social warmth have often been reported by ravers (Rietveld, 2003; Shenton, 2015; Ueno, 2017). Ro-minimal is an attractive case study because it started as the soundtrack of afterparties. It is repetitive, calm, deep with a BPM[8] between roughly 115 and 130. Generally, it has the ability to fill a room, tent or open space with the content and feelings that inspire unity and inter-identification, through very minimal, almost introspective choreography as opposed to energetic dance that people think of when they imagine a rave. At ro-minimal events, people share the dancefloor, but also the dance itself, the music, water, lighters, tents, and cigarettes (Ueno, 2017), so identity and community-making are deeply material practices. I take inspiration from Ueno's interpretation and application of Guattari's theory of affect onto rave culture which emphasises the intersubjectivity of affective processes at techno party events: learning and unlearning from each other, developing ways of listening and being together for a specific occasion.

[8] A measurement of the number of beats per minute

Community

Unlike the raves of the 1980s and 1990s, “post-rave dance culture is seemingly calming and maturing in the UK” (Rietveld, 2003, p.150), and since the early 2000s, the rave scene is seen as more “fragmented and diminished” (Anderson, 2009, p. 307) than it was thirty-forty years ago. In ro-minimal, people party for longer, and rather than being energetically ecstatic for a short time, they conserve and harness their energy and excitement for long hours. Building on Rietveld’s claim (2003) about the post-rave dance culture, I consider how privatisation and postmodern art have impacted on the ways in which people party, the party industry itself and how it engages with society and politics at large. The containment enabled by this new form of rave, makes these events more commercial and more easily controlled, following a pre-established script. Rather than expressions of engaged resistance to social and political structures of power, they often emphasise sustainability and strength in the community and solidarity around the minimal techno subculture in Romania.

One of the most obvious features of raves is the unity or community which partygoers invoke and this has been largely discussed in the literature (Ueno, 2017; Hennion, 2001; Shenton, 2015). But the uses of ‘community’ as a perfectly cohesive group have been criticised in literature on fandom (Jenkins, 1992). Like Johnson (2017), I further emphasise that, in lived experience, groups are often less united than in theory. A community implies that those in it have the same purpose or motivation for being there or are working together to achieve a common goal, however disagreements and differences also need to be acknowledged. The advent of fast internet and social media, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, has created opportunities to study forms of online community (Osler, 2019; Krueger, 2011), and the relationship between music and healing, mediated by the internet (Pryor & Outley, 2021; Wolfenden et al., 2022). Here again, however, the unity and shared affectivity of online groups has perhaps been overemphasised and not problematised enough, so I provide a nuanced analysis of the ro-minimal community, without simplifying it, and instead, explain what keeps it together, and what its internal factions and conflicts are. Also related to ideas and practices of community is the concept of ‘scene’. This idea was advanced by Straw (1991, p.373), who argues that “a musical scene […] is that cultural space in which a range of musical practices

coexist, interacting with each other within a variety of processes of differentiation, and according to widely varying trajectories of change and cross-fertilization." I use this concept in my thesis to highlight both consensus and dissent in ro-minimal, as well as this scene's exclusivity and openness towards other musical communities.

The meaning of community is further complicated in the context of a party, which, beyond the purpose of partying itself, does not seem to have another direct purpose, in a neoliberal, capitalist sense. From a neoliberal work ethic standpoint, partying is ephemeral, not materially productive and does not have a goal that can be quantified socially. The display of economic and "subcultural capital" (Thornton, 1995, p. 27), the economic productivity of selling tickets and drinks, and the facilitation of an informal economy of drug use (Hart, 2006) in this community is an important analytical venue as it shows its connections to capitalism. Furthermore, ideas and patterns of leisure are examined to determine whether people can obtain these feelings of unity or togetherness in places or contexts other than in-person parties. The purpose and social or political meaning of partying and dance events have long been the subject of debates in academia (Lison, 2011), especially in discussions of "ontological security" (DeNora, 2000, p. 16) and in the political resistance literature (Bey, 2000; Rietveld, 2003), but also with regard to the advent of neoliberal, capitalist work ethic. The latter has instilled an urgency to work – to make money, to provide, to make ends meet, to succeed, even when there is no clear purpose or need for certain jobs (Graeber, 2018). Neoliberalism has, in many ways, curtailed the time that people allocate for leisure and has diminished our entitlement to experience leisure at our own pace, without the pressure of thinking about our work in terms of productivity and profit. Also, societies with such socio-economic structures have developed conditions and opportunities for people to explore ideas and practices of leisure and fun.

Ro-minimal enables a specific kind of music, style of clothing, dancing and being in the world. So, while there are some behaviours and images associated with it, this does not necessarily imply all participants feel or think the same thing about the music, the party, their being there and neither are their motivations for being part of this group necessarily similar. So, I investigate what ro-minimal brings out in people and what it means to them. I utilise the

concept of community to understand the commonality of the ro-minimal raving experiences. I also use it to see what ro-minimal aficionados can achieve when enjoying music together, and in what ways communal experiences are important to them as members of this scene. Also, it is important to mention that throughout the thesis, the terms ‘community’ and ‘scene’ are used interchangeably to highlight the importance of terminology to ro-minimal fans that participated in this research. The term ‘community’ has, of course, imperfections and limitations. However, it is often used by research participants. So, through the blurring of terminology in this thesis is to purposely stay close to the discursive field of research, while also acknowledging the commonalities of ‘community’ and ‘scene’ regarding ro-minimal.

(Self)-care

Another theme discussed throughout the thesis is ro-minimal’s relationship to ideas and practices of care. Specifically, practices of care are important to the relationship between ro-minimal aficionados and their records (Plotnick, 2022). As Hodder (2011, p. 154) claims, “1) Humans depend on things. In much of the new work in the social and human sciences in which humans and things co-constitute each other, there is, oddly, little account of the things themselves. (2) Things depend on other things. All things depend on other things along chains of interdependence. (3) Things depend on humans. Things are not inert. They are always falling apart, transforming, growing, changing, dying, running out.” Hodder’s view of human-things entanglement shapes my exploration of the relationships between ro-minimal enthusiasts, their records, music equipment, etc. as bonds based on care and intimacy. Furthermore, a lack of care and interest in gender representation in the ro-minimal scene promotes unequal gender relationships and opportunities for artists (Gavanas and Reitsamer, 2016). Then, in the context of ro-minimal and healing practices, care and self-care appear particularly important. Music, as DeNora (2000, p. 16) maintains, engenders a sense of “ontological security”, which is helpful for recovery from trauma and mental health conditions. Music can, it has been argued, promote wellbeing (DeNora, 2000; Wang & Agius, 2018) and self-healing (Seligman, 2010), approaches which majorly influence this thesis. I also use Ingold’s notion of “enskilment, […] which proposes that learning is inseparable from doing and place. From this worldview, what is learned is not an established body of

knowledge, transmitted into the mind of a passive recipient from an authorised being, but is a progressively deepening embodied-embedded attentiveness, where an individual learns to self-regulate by becoming more responsive to people and environmental features by 'looking, listening and feeling'" (Woods et al., 2021, p. 1). Through enskilment (Ingold, 2000), charitable livestream events during the pandemic, DJ performance (Pryor & Outley, 2021) and using ro-minimal to do academic work and daily chores, I show that self-care as well as care for the community are articulated in the ro-minimal scene in a variety of ways. Particularly in light of the pandemic, greater care is shown for the subculture itself, mutual care between ravers rose and music has had a large contribution to these changes.

Research structure

Chapter 2 examines the research methodology employed in this project, and the various changes I implemented due to the pandemic, as well as personal health issues. The chapter discusses in detail each method used, as well as challenges encountered in the process. It also includes a summary of my data analysis process and how the themes and material of this thesis were brought together in the current shape.

Next, there are five empirical chapters. Chapter 3 investigates what it is like to be a fan of ro-minimal, and how this is important to articulating ro-minimal identities. First, I consider the centrality of vinyl culture, which indicates the distinctions and hierarchies of taste and skill present in ro-minimal. Then, I show the intimacy of the human-vinyl material and emotional connections, illustrating the care of ro-minimal fans for analogue technology, and highlighting the collector identity in this community. Digital technologies are increasingly popular in ro-minimal, and while they co-exist with analogue technology, the latter remains central, illuminating this scene's practices of distinction and exclusiveness. I also show how, depending on the location of ro-minimal events, ro-minimal fashion can enact various aspects of this subculture, specifically colourful and dark versions of ro-minimal fashion. At outdoor festivals, colourful and highly ornate clothes convey playfulness and escapism. The motifs and materials of the clothes often promote eco-friendliness and respect for local knowledge, not without sometimes culturally appropriating elements of other cultures. Conversely, nightclub ravers wear dark and black

clothes, performing their intimate familiarity with a particular ‘classical’ version of ro-minimal. These clothes are more practical and match the post-industrial environments of nightclubs, but also promote belonging and togetherness, within the limits of the exclusive character of the ro-minimal subculture. I also examine the national identity element of ro-minimal, showing the neo-romantic fascination of this community with Romanian mythology, history, and geography, which is observed in artist names, song names and in the content of the musical tracks themselves. This also shows the varying levels of access in the ro-minimal scene, contributing to its hierarchical organisation. Equally, I explain that ro-minimal is cosmopolitan and well connected to other music communities in Europe and beyond. Lastly, this chapter examines a ro-minimal festival's relationship with digital environments, activity which has strengthened ideas of national identity and also proposed forms of digital kinship in this scene. While attempting to attenuate inequalities in ro-minimal, this festival’s foray into digital worlds replicates everyday social norms and hierarchies. This chapter highlights the complexities of being a ro-minimal fan, and the constant tension between openness and welcomeness, on one side, and exclusivism and hierarchy, on the other.

Chapter 4 examines the question of gender in ro-minimal, in particular gender representation and inequalities. I provide an overview of gender representation in the music industry, showing that despite actions taken to reduce women’s discrimination, this remains a substantial problem. I explain my experience of learning to mix in the welcoming, supportive environment of a Bristol-based mixing collective, which influenced my journey as a Romanian female DJ who often plays ro-minimal. I specifically look at how gender figures in ro-minimal, explaining the centrality of male artists in this scene. The few women who are popular are frequently harshly criticised, expected to know nothing about DJing, and are often hypersexualised, which cements the view of ro-minimal as exclusivist. Next, I analyse the femme sound aesthetic in ro-minimal which is a response to the dominant male sound. I consider the music of artists such as Margaret Dygas and Alexandra to show that women in ro-minimal push the boundaries of genres, and influence notions of taste and enjoyment. I then investigate the general perception of ro-minimal male musicians as hyper talented gods, while often women are regarded as unexperienced fan girls. I further analyse the consequences of women’s sexualisation, and present the

importance of dancing as a DJ, as a way of reclaiming centre spots in this scene. This chapter also deals with the notion and practice of safety in ro-minimal, acknowledging the general friendliness of ravers, and the significance of minimal dancing for spatial delimitation on dancefloors. However, I also stress the undercurrent sexism behind these practices which influence ravers' behaviours. Finally, the chapter examines alternative electronic dance music subcultures in Romanian music, and their dialogue with ro-minimal. These often promote eclecticism, the queering of electronic music and fairer skill and knowledge-sharing practices. The constant communication of ro-minimal with these scenes leads to positive change in the Romanian dance music industry.

Chapter 5 inspects ro-minimal in the context of my healing process at home, during the pandemic, and while recovering from PTSD. As an old trauma resurfaced for me, I show how I used music to structure my daily activities, illustrating its role in creating "ontological security" (DeNora, 2000, p. 16). I explain how ro-minimal, in the context of a variety of musical genres, boosted my mood and helped me regain self-confidence, through contributing to mindful embodiment practices such as yoga and meditation, but also through revitalising my connection with my Romanian origins. Then, I illustrate how dancing to ro-minimal, among other genres, can be empowering, and can alleviate PTSD symptoms. Additionally, dancing while doing chores can be relaxing, and reconfigures the home as a space of fun and excitement. Next, I investigate my participation in an online music festival, where I played a DJ set, including several ro-minimal tracks. I show the festival's contribution to communal healing, but also to my personal healing, through sharing and learning skills and through the many elements of my DJ performance. Lastly, I investigate the relationship between ro-minimal music and academic work. Ro-minimal has helped me return to academic work after a period of illness and absence, and I describe how I used this genre to become more curious and excited about my work. Ro-minimal's stimulating and relaxing character is also ideal for playing in the background while writing, thus providing an auditory framework for work, and highlighting its multimodality.

Chapter 6 further delves into my healing process in the context of an in-person festival where I played a DJ set, containing ro-minimal music. I look at my preparation stage, where the anticipation for the event, together with learning

and developing technical skills aided my healing and re-entry into the local music community. By watching DJ set videos and sourcing new music, I enacted playfulness and a sense of adventure which illustrate an improved mental health. I demonstrate how ro-minimal is an ideal warmup genre in the context of a UK multi-genre music festival, as it is gentle yet stimulating, however, due to its esoterism, it was difficult to find the music for my set. Furthermore, I discuss the problems that artificial intelligence (AI) could pose to DJing, but also the benefits technology can have, especially for chronically ill, disabled, or neurodivergent DJs. Lastly, in my preparation stage, I also examine the cyborgian relationship between DJs and their equipment, showing the process of enskilment, as seen by Ingold (2000), and its connection to my healing. The second part of this chapter examine my DJ set at the festival, and the performance of multiple parts of my identity: Romanian, immigrant, woman, DJ, and trauma survivor. I show the plurality of non-human agency in the organisation of the festival and in the performance of my set, in how the event was influenced by livestreaming aesthetics during the pandemic, and by post-pandemic collective anxieties regarding contagion. I also discuss the collaboration of DJs and particularly of sisterhood enacted during my performance. I explain how, by playing ro-minimal at this event, I articulated my increasing self-confidence and playfulness, pointing to my improved health. By playing this obscure genre at the festival, I took care in self-representation and performing my multifaceted identity and my artistic versatility.

Finally, Chapter 7 investigates the ro-minimal subculture during the pandemic, emphasising the specific ways through which this community faced the challenges posed by this collectively traumatic event. First, I look at ro-minimal's relationship to online spaces, establishing how although online and offline activities co-exist in this scene, during the pandemic the former gained popularity. Music was shared on platforms such as YouTube and Soundcloud and digital forms of sociality flourished through livestreamed events. There was an initial disengagement with ro-minimal among fans due to general fear and anxiety caused by the COVID-19 virus. Some fans feared that online activities and parties would become the norm, and pointed out their flaws, despite their many positive effects on the community. Next, I discuss ro-minimal DJ set livestreams which were one of the driving forces of this scene during the pandemic. I look at the livestreams hosted by *Sunrise Hub*, the organiser of

Sunwaves Festival, in collaboration with Kaufland, a major supermarket in Romania. Despite the promotion of ro-minimal as a unique underground genre and despite widespread belief in ro-minimal's active separation from and antithesis toward capitalism, the collaboration with the supermarket shows this scene's close relationship with capitalism. The livestreams strengthened ro-minimal social bonds and provided a more democratic front-row view of the DJ sets. Also, DJ performance aesthetics reproduced playfulness and experimentation, making full use of the digitally mediated forms of disseminating ro-minimal. Next, I consider other forms of ro-minimal sociality and enjoyment during the pandemic, such as solo raves and illegal parties. As many ro-minimal events are already secret and private, the pandemic intensified this aspect, emphasising its exclusivist character. Private homes hosted unauthorized raves with a reduced number of participants, which, some participants argue, increased the quality of the events and their atmosphere. Ro-minimal music was also extensively used at home, in the background of daily activities, leading to a domestication of the genre, but also to a rave-ification of homes. Mini-raves with friends and solo raves exhibited the multisensorial excitement of out-of-club ro-minimal experiences, and highlighted how joy, introspection, pleasure, and playfulness were experienced by this community. Then, I examine a limited edition of the *Sunwaves* Festival, held in Zanzibar, as a response to Romania's COVID-19 restrictions. I show how the reduced line-up and high cost of attending this festival were associated with an exclusive luxury experience, further consolidating the view of ro-minimal as secretive. The organisers' care for the environment and for the local economy highlights a more-than-human harmony, as well as an "ecology of repair" (Blanco-Wells, 2021, para. 1), and I argue that communal healing is promoted by this ro-minimal festival. Next, I examine the ways in which ro-minimal aficionados intensified their "prosumer" practices (Ritzer, 2015, p. 1), by creating and sharing music. Many saw the pandemic as an opportunity to deepen their ro-minimal knowledge, which displays the importance of lengthy appreciation of music among fans. I explain how the COVID-19 restrictions levelled this community, as clubs closed, and most artists operated from home. Aficionados shared skills, knowledge, asked for advice and better quality of music was reported by some research participants. Lastly, I discuss gender representation in ro-minimal during the pandemic which is characterised by an increased sentiment of sisterhood as a

response to women's discrimination. The edgy femme sound in this scene became further celebrated, although it only happened on specific occasions. Also, the gender discrimination in this scene and the overwhelming volume of online music during the pandemic caused some women to stay offline. Ultimately, the pandemic significantly affected the ro-minimal community, and this chapter shows how the patterns of openness, secrecy, and elitism of this scene were altered by this global event.

Lastly, Chapter 8 presents the conclusion of the thesis, and contains a summary of the chapters and a discussion of main themes across the thesis. Here, I also discuss the contributions that this thesis aims to make to the academic literature, to broader ways of thinking about society, as well as contributions to methodology and future research. And, in the spirit of transparency and self-reflexivity, this chapter also looks at anything that I could have done differently, if I was to start the PhD again.

The following chapter discusses the methodology used in this research project.

Chapter 2: Methodology

This chapter discusses the research methodology of this thesis. I briefly discuss the original methodology that I had planned and the changes I applied leading to the adoption of a new suite of methods, once the COVID-19 pandemic started. I discuss each method and provide an overarching rationale for choosing each in light of the pandemic, explaining how I linked my methods to my research questions as they developed in a time where traditional ethnography was difficult to practice, if not impossible. Inspired by Góralska's work (2020, p. 46) on "anthropology at home," I present the ways in which I carried out the PhD research from home during the pandemic, while struggling with illness and trauma.

The main research method as I originally envisaged it was traditional ethnographic fieldwork. This method, or rather an umbrella term for various data-gathering practices such as participant observation coupled with interviews (Reeves et al., 2013) has been a defining characteristic of anthropology since the dawn of this discipline. From Malinowski's immersive fieldwork into Trobriand culture in New Guinea (1922), to Geertz's work in Indonesia and Morocco (Slymovics, 2013) and more recently, Tsing's multi-sited ethnography *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015), ethnographic fieldwork has been ever present in anthropology. As Góralska (2020) notes, ethnographic fieldwork is an unspoken rule for anthropologists and there is a stigma in the discipline against those who do not use this method, and instead opt for digital ethnography (Hine, 2000; Pink, 2006). Even in my academic network, I heard a fellow anthropologist being told by a more senior colleague that they have to conduct in person fieldwork to be considered a 'real' anthropologist by the academic community.

A brief natural history

Through the strict restrictions on travel and social life, the COVID-19 pandemic left no choice for anthropologists but to rethink their approach to their work, and soon, digital ethnography became the new standard model of fieldwork (Góralska, 2020; Podjed, 2021). Only weeks before the first lockdown, I had submitted my ethics proposal with a one-year fieldwork period planned in Romania, the UK and Germany. As soon as the first lockdown started, I was told by the ethics department that all in-person fieldwork was suspended until

further notice. This was the case in many universities and research centres worldwide and even in the rare cases where fieldwork was allowed, researchers were too scared of the virus and of the consequences of meeting people in person to go into the field (Góralska, 2020). I was faced with the prospect of reconsidering my methodological approach and moving towards digital ethnography (including online interviews, surveys, and online participant observation, as well as media analysis). Also, given that I was going to spend a lot of time on my own in my house during the pandemic, I decided to utilise autoethnography more so than originally anticipated.

Due to the isolation and fear at the beginning of the lockdowns, I lacked the motivation and energy to change my methodology. As Góralska (2020) suggests, there was plenty of time to pursue research activities such as reading, writing and data gathering, however, many of us had our phones glued to our hand for hours on end. The 'doomscrolling' – reading or watching news, in this case about COVID-19 – proven to negatively affect mental health (Price et al., 2022), made it difficult for creativity or analysis to ensue. This left many, including me, at a loss. Also, besides the global traumatic event that is the pandemic with all its implications, I have been battling health issues and trauma. This massively complicated my research process as for months I was in survival mode, trying to care for my health which meant engaging with my research very minimally. During this time, I would sometimes see an interesting post online about ro-minimal and I would take screenshots, or I would record a voice message of myself talking about ro-minimal and my ideas for the project. Therefore, my methodology was severely affected by the pandemic, as well as by my personal health difficulties; overall there is a strong resemblance to the "anthropology at home" which Góralska (2020, p. 46) discusses in her paper. As such, I conducted a digital ethnography more because of necessity than by choice. Also, my struggle with recovering from trauma and mental health conditions highlighted the relationship between research and illness, disability, trauma and neurodivergence. This led me to propose alternative ways of approaching research and work for disabled/differently abled and chronically ill academics.

Not only did my methodology change, but so did elements of my research question. This sort of change is not untypical, as the methodology, the data and

the research question can co-emerge iteratively. I was originally interested in the way identities and community emerge in the ro-minimal scene: how and why is ro-minimal important to articulating identity and community among aficionados? While the question remained largely the same, the pandemic with all the restrictions, lockdowns, and a general move towards online activities affected the way I practically explored the research question. As my fieldwork consisted mostly of digital ethnography and autoethnography, the role of online community and identities, as well as my experience as a ro-minimal fan and DJ grew more important. An entire chapter is now dedicated to analysing the ro-minimal community through the lens of the pandemic; and another two chapters examine the relationship between health and healing in ro-minimal, during the pandemic. Both these chapters would not have existed in the absence of the COVID-19 virus and the pandemic, or if they had, they would have looked different. Because the pandemic had such a colossal influence on all areas of academic life, and affected me personally but also impacted the ro-minimal community, I considered it appropriate to discuss this at length in my thesis.

The process of analysing digital ethnographic data was rigorous and comprised of two main analytical approaches. First of all, my analysis has been based on grounded theory, so “successive iterations of data collection, analysis, and verification in order to reveal categories and their properties as well as evidence to be collected and analyzed in the next round of research.” (Knigge, 2017, p. 1). I placed my participants’ views at the centre of my study, and in the first instance, I allowed the data to come to me, so to say, without looking for anything specific. When I had observed and gathered a certain amount of material, I started coding it, and searched for particular kinds of data, based on the content and themes of Facebook posts, for instance. As Braun and Clarke (2006) claim, thematic analysis is the most widely used approach in social sciences and qualitative research, and is one which “researchers should learn as it provides a set of foundational, core techniques and skills that are used in many other forms of qualitative analysis” (Swain, 2018, para. 1). As mentioned in the introduction, the research process has been one where co-emergences of data, methodology and research themes occurred, shaping the thesis in its current form.

In 2020, after my PhD upgrade, I gained the approval of the ethics committee for this research project based largely on online methodology. Below, I examine each method individually and present the grounds for using it. I also discuss advantages and disadvantages of these methods, highlighting the way in which they were helpful, or, if they posed any challenges, how I managed to overcome them.

Online observation

The main method used in my digital ethnography was online participant observation with emphasis on observation. This would have been a key method in the original project where I planned to conduct in-person fieldwork, but it gained importance in the pandemic when a lot of social activity moved online. I mainly looked at a Facebook group called *ro-minimal* which, at the time of submission, had around 68700 members, making it the largest online social media group dedicated to ro-minimal. I have been a member of this group since 2019, after attending my first ro-minimal rave in *Guesthouse* in București. I have found the group exceptionally helpful for my sense of belonging to this community, not least as there were no ro-minimal parties where I live, and especially during the pandemic when there were no authorised parties at all. This Facebook group is highly active, with around twenty posts daily. The content of the posts varies, but mostly contains the following: links to YouTube ro-minimal music tracks, DJ mixes that group members put together, videos containing fragments of music productions in music-making software such as Ableton, memes or video snippets from raves with the intention of identifying the track played. Also, many ro-minimal parties are shared in this group, and anything related to ro-minimal such as the creation of new collectives and labels.

With such a wide array of posts, this group was a remarkable data resource for all my chapters. Sometimes, given the high volume of posts, it was difficult to filter through them, although the search function of Facebook as well as coding my data helped to organise my material. Also, as Góralska (2020) warns, the excitement of having so much data available can be overwhelming, specifically during the pandemic when people were exposed to an overload of internet information. So, I limited my interaction with and involvement in the group to avoid overburdening myself. While in an in-person fieldwork this limitation would

be easier and marked by leaving the field at night or for a period of time, maintaining boundaries online was more difficult (Marshall, 2010).

Another challenge I encountered while doing observation in this Facebook group is one of ethics and representation of online voices. Góralska (2020) and Kaur-Gill and Dutta (2017) or (Bell, 2001) have pointed out that a form of 'lurking' can occur when conducting online observation. Given that online observation is a relatively recent endeavour in the history of ethnography, it has not been regulated and views on how to do it ethically differ. The *ro-minimal* Facebook group is public, so all the information posted there is openly available to anyone interested – with or without a Facebook account. The way I conducted my online observation was therefore unobtrusive, and the fact that I am a member of this group helped by establishing rapport with the other members. I regularly ensured the group remained public so as to not infringe on anyone's privacy. Also, I made a public post on the group introducing my research and asking for participants in my survey for this project: this elicited a large number of positive reactions from participants. Therefore, due to the reduced amount of regulation in online ethnography, boundaries are constantly negotiated when conducting online fieldwork. And even though 'lurking' has been argued to provide a degree a detachment of the participant from research participants (Kozinets, 2002), it did feel slightly strange to collect information for my research without making the process explicit. Thus, I ensured I was only using public information and I preserved the anonymity of those in the group.

Besides the Facebook group, I also observed ten ro-minimal DJ livestreams on YouTube or Facebook, if they were re-shared there. There are two main components of observing livestreams. First, I observed the sets themselves, considering the music played, the visuals, the dancing, and gestures of the DJs; these elements were contained in the actual video of the stream. Then, I looked at the live chat and comments posted on the video. The first part, which has the DJ at its centre, was a multifaceted process due to the number of elements observed. Also, since the DJs whose sets I observed are in the public eye, the lurking issue mentioned previously was not so problematic in this case: the livestreams were created with the purpose of being shared and seen by as many people as possible. For the live chat and the comments section, I also worked with the knowledge that these were public, but I maintained the privacy

of the people behind the comments. Digital identities often articulate the users' alter egos with exaggerated desired qualities, as ways of escaping from their real-life selves or coming home to their true selves (Russell, 2020; Floridi, 2011). Through usernames and avatars which often mask the real identities of users, commenters get to self-define their version of a cyborg as Russell (2020, p. 51) suggests in *Glitch Feminism.* Even so, with avatars and usernames that mask their offline identities, I took every precaution to ensure the anonymity of the users was secure.

If it weren't for the pandemic, I would have conducted fieldwork which included participant observation at in-person raves where most likely I would have danced, spoken to ravers, and taken voice notes. But during the pandemic, I watched the livestreams, which entailed a completely different dynamic from being in a club. I joined the livestreams as they happened, but it was strenuous work to sit through a three-hour livestream in my room. I mostly observed the livestreams and the adjacent comments sections after the stream had ended. This enabled me to pause and reflect on the elements that particularly interested me. The internet-mediated experience of observing these livestreams provided me with comfort and a level of detachment from the DJ set.

Over the course of three years, I gathered data from various types of content on the group, thus ensuring the participant variety and a good inclusion of material that otherwise would not have been available to me, if I had only done in-person fieldwork. Also, as Hart (2017, p. 6) claims, "a major incentive for doing ethnography is the opportunity to capture authentic data, that is, real rather than reported or hypothetical interactions between community members." Therefore, online participant observation has been crucial to my data gathering process as to some extent, and particularly at the start of my research, it partly replaced my original methodology. However, it soon became clear that this was a method in its own right, and not just a substitute for in-person fieldwork.

Autoethnography

Another method that I planned on using to a limited extent, but which eventually gained importance, is autoethnography. This key method looks at my multi-layered experience as a Romanian female DJ who sometimes plays ro-minimal music, so I was able to approach issues of gender, national identity, DJ expertise and fandom from a unique standpoint.

Michael (2022) discusses autoethnography in his book on sociological methods, showing that this method has notably been critiqued by Delamont (2007). She believes that no new data can be gathered through autoethnography, and it is ethically dubious as it draws in others in the narrative without consent. Also, Delamont (2007) claims that autoethnography is not analytical enough, researchers are privileged actors, and not interesting enough to be the subject of research. However, like Ellis et al. (2011), I believe that it is precisely through its experiential qualities that autoethnography can articulate novel material, or novel interpretations of the material, highlighting the power relations and dynamics of researching the self and others. Also, any ethical problems that this method might pose can be resolved. Any reference to others, particularly in my case, is minimal. Their anonymity is protected, and if anyone was mentioned often, I asked for their consent for being included in the account. Also, it may be true that researchers are privileged, although that is an overgeneralisation. As academic communities are attempting to become more open, through decolonising practices (Begum & Saini, 2019), promoting gender equality (Clavero & Galligan, 2021), and developing a better understanding of the relationship between neurodivergence and academic research (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al., 2023), it has become clear that researchers can come from a variety of backgrounds of more or less privilege. Furthermore, to exclude researchers from the very position of being researched would only widen the gap between them and their research, accentuating any privilege they have. Therefore, I rely on autoethnography in this project, as it shows the various parts of my identity and the ways in which they shape my work and my understanding of ro-minimal.

Whilst I have used autoethnography in previous research projects, it was never on such a large scale, nor during a pandemic. Autoethnography is still a new qualitative research method. It is not even considered fully a method, but more of a philosophy (Wall, 2006; 2008), so the way it is used in research depends on each researcher's view. Wall (2008, p. 39), citing Reed-Danahay (1997), also talks about the emphasis various researchers put on the "*auto-* (self), *ethno-* (sociocultural connection)" or *-graphy* (the application of the research process)." While not always particularly easy to differentiate between these elements, the classification is important to structure this method. I argue that my

autoethnography is mainly concerned with the self and the sociocultural connection, but more than anything, it is, as Pitard (2019) argues, a phenomenological tool of research. Rather than following a strict agenda for my autoethnographic process, I allowed my own experiences and memories to guide it. While the human memory is generally seen as unreliable, Diamond et al. (2020) suggest that our memories are more accurate than previously thought. This has important implications for the confident use of memory-based journalling in autoethnography. Furthermore, as Hayler (2010, p. 5) suggests, "the power of narrative memory comes not from precision or accuracy but from how we relate to our constructions and re-constructions of the past."

As McMillan and Ramirez (2016, pp. 433-434) argue, autoethnography can have therapeutic effects for those recovering from traumatic experiences, emphasising that "recovery must be a collaborative performance, extending the therapeutic relationship beyond constructed boundaries that artificially divide therapy and research." Similarly, writing about my experiences and analysing them through autoethnography has been freeing and healing, as I explain in Chapters 5 and 6. My mental health struggles also contributed to the loosely regulated approach to gathering autoethnographic data. I kept an autoethnographic journal for the entire duration of my research period, in which I attempted to write regularly. However, given the nature of my illness, consistency was not always possible. Instead, I allowed myself to write notes whenever I felt capable of doing so, and relied on my memory to bring up anything interesting that happened while I was not able to write. This, again, stresses the importance of relying on memory when engaging in autoethnographic work. Also, the relationship between a flexibly implemented autoethnography and illness and trauma, emphasises, again, the importance of recognising that not all researchers are equally abled. Neurodivergent, chronically ill, and disabled researchers need to do more emotional work and labour (Hochschild, 1983) in order to achieve their goals, and my work recognises the need for alternative methodologies that take these differences into account, facilitating all academic research.

I also recorded voice notes on my phone when I was unable to write, which allowed me to regard and present my data in a different, more interactive way. Mazanderani (2017) advocates for the use of voice recordings as a part of

feminist self-reflexive ethnographies, and I argue that it is particularly important to self-reflectively look at the process of research, not just at the results – something with which voice notes have helped. Also, artifacts or online media such as pictures or videos related to ro-minimal prompted me to write in my journal as this reminded me of different aspects of my own practice as a DJ. For example, if I saw a video of a DJ mixing, that would bring up certain aspects that I found interesting or problematic in my own practice and I found it easier to write about that instead of doing it regularly. This way, my autoethnography is loosely structured and treats time in a non-linear way to allow memories and important data to come to the surface when I was prepared to write them down. In addition, I used some of my notes from a preliminary research experience at a ro-minimal festival as well as notes from a ro-minimal party I attended on New Year Eve 2023. Again, rather than working with a tightly structured timeline, I went back and forth in time, to find valuable material.

Autoethnography, therefore, has been an essential methodological tool as it assisted me in collecting key data about my own intersectional experience as a female ro-minimal DJ and the ways in which I participate in the ro-minimal community. It did that in the harsh environment of the pandemic, when a lot of my experience as a ro-minimal fan and practitioner was online and, in several ways, isolated. Also, given my struggles with mental illness, this method was particularly important as it enabled me to gather data in a professional way while still recognising and allowing for a needed dose of irregularity when doing so. I argue that autoethnography is a valuable qualitative method and way of writing up research results which is phenomenological and creative, allowing for variance in the data collection process such as periods of absence or low activity, and mental illness. In light of my own experience, I would advocate for research on the benefits of using autoethnography especially in researchers with chronic illness, trauma, disabilities, neurodivergence or anything that might impede their research process.

Online surveys

Surveys constitute another method that I had not used before the pandemic because as an anthropologist, and especially as an ethnographer, it is assumed that data would be gathered through in-person fieldwork. Like Long (2020), I found myself resorting to online surveys due to COVID-19 regulations. Initially, I

was reticent about surveys as they are rarely used in anthropological research due to the assumed incompatibility between the in-depth nature of this kind of research and surveys. As Long (2020, p. 294) states, “anthropologists, after all, pride themselves on using long-term ethnographic fieldwork to develop depths of insight survey research is thought to lack. […] when anthropologists do use surveys, these generally stay subordinate to ethnography in the analytical process.” However, as Hamann et al. (2017) argue, mixed methods in anthropology ought to be embraced and I began seeing their benefits. I easily set up the online surveys on Outlook Forms, the software provided by the University of Exeter.[9] I shared the form on the previously mentioned Facebook group *ro-minimal* and it received considerable attention, with over one hundred reactions and several comments, making it one of the most popular posts that I have noticed there since I joined the group.

A total of ninety-five people filled in my survey, with eighty-five responses in English, and ten in Romanian. The survey consisted of twenty questions, giving people the option for further participation in the study. Therefore, surveys were an important element of my methodology and research design as they helped me find participants in an easy and speedy manner. In addition, the survey helped gather key data for my project, as most of the questions were about the participants’ involvement in the ro-minimal scene. I found out a lot about fandom and expertise, gender and ro-minimal during the pandemic as well as key aspects about demographic dimensions such as the age, gender, and location of my participants. Other questions were open-ended, allowing participants to share their own narratives in their chosen words, so the clear benefit of this method is “giving respondents a voice” (Neuert et al., 2021, p. 3). While I designed the questions carefully to guide the participants to talk about the topics I am interested in, I aimed to empower them throughout the research process and ensure that they could articulate their ideas liberally. LaDonna et al. (2018) suggest that open-ended survey questions are not conducive to accurate qualitative research. However, the open-endedness of survey questions has indeed been very helpful in turning out valuable insights in my project. Also, as Miller and Lambert (2014) claim, particular groups are more responsive to open-ended questions than others. Throughout the pandemic,

[9] See the survey questions in Appendix 1

many people were at home with little to do, so the opportunity to talk about their ro-minimal experiences in an open-ended manner seemed very appealing to them– at least that is the impression drawn from the quality of their responses. In any case, this method resulted in rich and substantial qualitative data which I was able to use in the research.

Online interviews

I have conducted many interviews – in person and online – in previous research projects, and I have always found them helpful, as they enable participants to talk about their experiences in detail. As Seidman (1998, p. 2) claims, "interviewing…is a basic mode of inquiry. Recounting narratives of experience has been the major way throughout recorded history that humans have made sense of their experiences." The richness of the interview data makes this method ideal for qualitative research and I opted for it again in this project. Digital anthropology as a whole is still relatively new in the realm of methodology (Miller, 2012), and online interviews – which can be seen as part of digital ethnographies or separate from them – are becoming more established in the qualitative research community, especially since the development of communications technologies over the past few decades (Janghorban et al., 2014). If before 2020, online interviews were used occasionally, the pandemic and succeeding social restrictions rendered online interviews a necessity for researchers (Góralska, 2020). Except for taking place online, and being mediated by the internet and communication software, online interviews follow somewhat the same rules as face-to-face interviews and have their own pros and cons, discussed below.

For this project, I interviewed four people.[10] Two of them were recruited from the online survey that I put out, and I already knew the other two from various social circles, and sharing a passion for ro-minimal. The interviews were in depth and semi-structured. Again, as in the case of the online survey, I prepared a set of guiding questions, but depending on the specific circumstances of the interview and the way in which the conversation unfolded, I allowed research participants to delve into topics they were interested in, as long as this stayed within the main themes of my research. As Kallio et al. (2016, p. 2955) suggest, "the semi-structured format is the most frequently used interview technique in qualitative

[10] See the main interview questions in Appendix 2

research” due to its versatility (Adams, 2015) and ability to bring out rich, “thick data” (Bornakke & Due, 2018, p. 2). Thus, I valued the organic quality of the semi-structured interview technique and aimed to preserve and promote the voices of my participants. This format also allowed the participants to talk freely about themselves. As Wolgemuth et al. (2015, p. 353) suggest, “[participants] characterize their interview experiences as cathartic, empowering, and therapeutic. They appreciate the opportunity to tell their stories to empathetic listeners and convey hope that talking about their experiences may be of benefit to others." My research participants also expressed joy and comfort over talking about their passion for ro-minimal, particularly in the distressing times of the pandemic.

Each interview lasted between an hour and an hour and a half, offering ample time for discussion and development of key points. The length of the interviews show the constraints of conducting this method online. Unlike face-to-face interviews where organicity and continuity can be achieved relatively easily due to the interviewer and interviewee sharing the same room, online interviews differ. With screen time levels skyrocketing during the pandemic, people grew tired of being in front of screens eventually (Góralska, 2020). The implication for my study is that the interviews lasted less time than they might have if they were face-to-face. Also, another disadvantage was the quality of the internet connection during the interviews. Sometimes, due to unsteady Wi-Fi connection, some words in our conversations were cut out, the video would sometimes freeze, so there were a few minor interruptions, but with negligible effect on the actual transcriptions or on the quality of the data. Besides connectivity disruptions, I personally was afraid of a phenomenon that rose steeply during the pandemic – Zoom Bombing, the act of a Zoom meeting being hacked, which normally implied that an intruder entered the meeting and disrupted it by showing disturbing content like hate speech or videos of violence and abuse (Elmer et al., 2021). Although this normally happened on Zoom, and all of my online interviews were carried out on Skype and were private, the threat felt real, especially since I was healing from trauma, and therefore, in a vulnerable position. Luckily, my interviews were safe from this.

There are many advantages to online interviews, and one is that both my participants and I were speaking to each other from the comfort of our own

houses. This made the process of interviewing more intimate and relaxed. It has been suggested that being at home during the interview can pose several distractions which “can interfere with the flow of an interview and may affect interviewee concentration, and subsequently, the data gathered may be affected” (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014, p. 609). While that may be true, not many distractions came up in my interviews, and if they did, I did not consider them more disruptive than those that might have occurred in face-to-face contexts (i.e., noise in a café or a waiter taking an order). Also, as I conducted audio-visual interviews, the research participants and I were able to see fragments of our personal spaces which enabled us to learn about each other, besides what was being said. Of course, telecommunications apps such as Skype or Zoom offer the option to blur out or put a filter on the background, but I opted for showing it and so did most of my participants. This further articulated the sense of comfort and friendliness, and the overall organic, intimate atmosphere of the online interviews (Jenner & Myers, 2019).

I promote the multivocality of my interview data, beyond the view that the voice of my participants is “a stable thing that resides or happens in individual bodies or is waiting submerged for a moment of emancipation/expression” (Chadwick, 2021, p. 79), and moving toward a more relational concept of voices. I conducted two interviews in Romanian as two participants were Romanian and felt most comfortable speaking in Romanian. The other two participants were from other European countries and preferred talking in English. Thus, I highlighted the relationship between different voices and languages, which was also present in how I translated the interview data. I sometimes provided alternative translations in the footnotes, to show how the material can be seen in the cultural context of both the Romanian and English languages. Also, to preserve the accuracy of the interview data, I directly quoted my participants and used fragments of their interviews verbatim, including swear words or abbreviations, which I explain in the footnotes. In the same vein, I recorded all of my interviews audio-visually on Skype and shared the recordings with my participants, thus providing them with access to the data they provided, so that they can be in control of what they share.

After conducting these interviews, I judged that I had reached data saturation through this method. I already had sufficient data from my other methods. Also,

the information I was receiving from my interviewees was beginning to repeat itself and I decided to stop interviews. Having said this, the online interviews were absolutely essential for the development of my research, and they provided me with copious amounts of information. More importantly, they supplied invaluable detail about the data I already gathered through other methods on themes such as the secrecy of the ro-minimal scene, or the level of involvement of fans. This way, interviews helped to connect, flesh out and cohesively organise my data.

Media analysis

This method is part of my overarching digital ethnographic methodology, emphasising the multi-sensorial aspect of the data. I used this method throughout the whole research period. Firstly, I focussed on ro-minimal Instagram pages where I looked at photos, videos, and memes. As opposed to Facebook which has a primary focus on text, Instagram is more visually oriented (Lee et al., 2015), so I paid particular attention to the visual posts and included several examples in the body of the thesis. Instagram pages that I analysed in this project are *raw.minimal*, *rominimal_*, *rominimal culture*, *minimalshelter*, *romanianbits*. These are all accounts that gather pictures and videos from ro-minimal fans from around the globe, and post them in an attempt of “trying to bring people together through music”, as the Instagram description of the account *romanianbits* states.

The focus on visual content was significant here because I was unable to carry out my original fieldwork plans which included attending ro-minimal events and being involved in the ro-minimal community physically. This would have provided material for “thick description” (Geertz, 1973, p. 26), which is an “ethnographic method in which researchers write as they immerse themselves within the context of a certain culture, noting specific, detailed references about social actions and behaviors of participants” (Clark & Chevrette, 2017, para. 1). However, in the absence of in-person fieldwork, I engaged with a range of audio-visual media. Being in the midst of Instagram posts about ro-minimal enabled me to immerse myself in this scene in a similar way that in-person fieldwork would have placed me in the ro-minimal community. As Utekhin (2017) argues, using Instagram content as an ethnographic source is a valuable tool of digital anthropology, providing not only visual data, but music, speech,

captions, poetry, etc. I analysed data from Soundcloud (music tracks, mixes, artwork) in a similar way. I relied on media analysis and on the digital aspect of my research in order to emphasise the anthropology of the senses (Pink, 2006). As Waltorp (2021) notes, data from social media sources highlights the multimodality of digital fieldwork. Digital methods are particularly important as many people frequently use electronic devices such as smartphones and laptops, so their engagement with ro-minimal is constructed in several ways online. Also, through my media analysis, I show that, despite the challenges of the pandemic, researchers can carry out thorough qualitative studies with their own advantages.

The second part of the media analysis focussed on magazine and newspaper articles about the ro-minimal scene, but also press interviews with ro-minimal artists on various platforms or magazines, of which I found an abundance online. I analysed articles from platforms such as *Trommel* (this is also a minimal music label) which has a *News* section on their website, presenting events and interviews with artists. I also looked at *Electronic Beats*, *Resident Advisor*, both internationally renowned music platforms, and the *r/minimal* community on Reddit.[11] These platforms provided me with material about the history of ro-minimal, but also show how ro-minimal artists view themselves and what their music means to them, in the context of wider musical communities. An article that I found especially important was *Sunrise in București* by William Ralston (2017) in *Berlin Quarterly*. It thoroughly presents the history of ro-minimal and I return to it several times throughout this thesis. The focus on magazines and newspapers is especially significant project due to time constraints. But also, due to aforesaid personal problems, reaching out to famous ro-minimal artists was not always straightforward. Nevertheless, with such a wide variety of ro-minimal media available, including interviews with prominent ro-minimal artists and news articles on ro-minimal, there was no need for me to contact them.

Media analysis was a particularly useful tool in my digital ethnography, which complemented the other methods used in this project. It also highlighted the

[11] As the website itself states, Reddit is “a network of communities where people can dive into their interests, hobbies and passions.”

multimodal, sensory elements of ro-minimal and provided me with an immersive ro-minimal experience, resulting in my being able to engage in thick description.

Conclusion

I faced several challenges in this research, the main ones being the pandemic, as well as personal struggles with trauma and mental illness. Although I had to significantly alter my methodology, I found digital ethnography to be well suited to the project. With most ro-minimal activity moving online during the COVID-19 lockdowns, much of the data available was also online, so I embraced the digital aspect of my research. Even if I initially feared that doing research digitally rather than face-to-face ethnographic fieldwork would make me less of an anthropologist, I allowed myself to utilise digital anthropology in numerous ways such as carrying out online participant observation, online surveys and interviews, or media analysis. These methods yielded a rich and complex array of data. Also, autoethnography became a major methodological research strategy which brought the main themes of my research together. It enabled me to highlight my own experience as a Romanian female ro-minimal DJ not least enabling me to articulate my involvement in the ro-minimal community, in a time when the possibilities to socialise, gather or even participate fully (physically) in the community were drastically reduced.

All in all, I overcame these challenges, and I embraced the general move to digital anthropology to carry out the research presented in this thesis. I suggest that the combination of methods that I used for this project, engaging as they did with numerous adjustments and embracing a range of obstacles, produced a rich variety of data, while also enabling me to develop as an empirical anthropologist. Lastly, by showing the dynamics between my research methodology and my health struggles, I also highlight the ableist tendencies of academia (Lindsay & Fuentes, 2022), and I am proposing alternative methodologies for those less or differently abled.

Chapter 3: Being part of ro-minimal: fandom, taste, and expertise

Context

Since I started to follow and integrate myself into the ro-minimal community in 2018, I have noticed an increase in the genre's popularity, particularly online. For example, the largest ro-minimal Facebook group *ro-minimal* had around 20000 people in 2021. In 2022, the number has more than tripled, and the group now has more than 68000 members. The number of ro-minimal artists, events, and subgenres, as well as online groups dedicated to it has greatly increased, considering that ro-minimal was initially warmup and afterparty music. However, as noted by Ralston (2017) in *Berlin Quarterly*, this growth is not necessarily welcome by ro-minimal aficionados. Ro-minimal has originally been and still is seen as an esoteric genre by its followers and non-followers alike, as I show in this chapter. Ro-minimal events are often public, although some are private. The preferred equipment for producing and mixing music is analogue rather than digital. Ro-minimal's most prominent artists seldom engage in social media trends, and some find becoming popular beside the point of their music. To add to the exclusivity of ro-minimal, most DJs and producers in the genre are cisgendered[12] men, an aspect I touch on briefly here, but discuss in detail in Chapter 4.

In this chapter I examine, from an anthropological and sociological standpoint, the meaning of being a ro-minimal fan. I look at the esotericism of this community by considering concepts and practices of taste, expertise, clothing, and technology. These feed into the overarching theme of the thesis – identity, and the way ro-minimal fans articulate their identities thorough this music and being part of the scene. I examine these issues from an autoethnographic perspective too, as I am a Romanian DJ who often mixes with Romanian minimal techno and house, and also draw on data from my interviews, surveys, as well as social media analysis. This chapter asks: what is it like to be a fan of ro-minimal and in what ways is that important to articulating ro-minimal identities?

[12] A person whose gender identity matches their sex assigned at birth; someone who is not transgender or nonbinary. Often shortened as 'cis'.

The participants I surveyed and interviewed offered vague definitions and

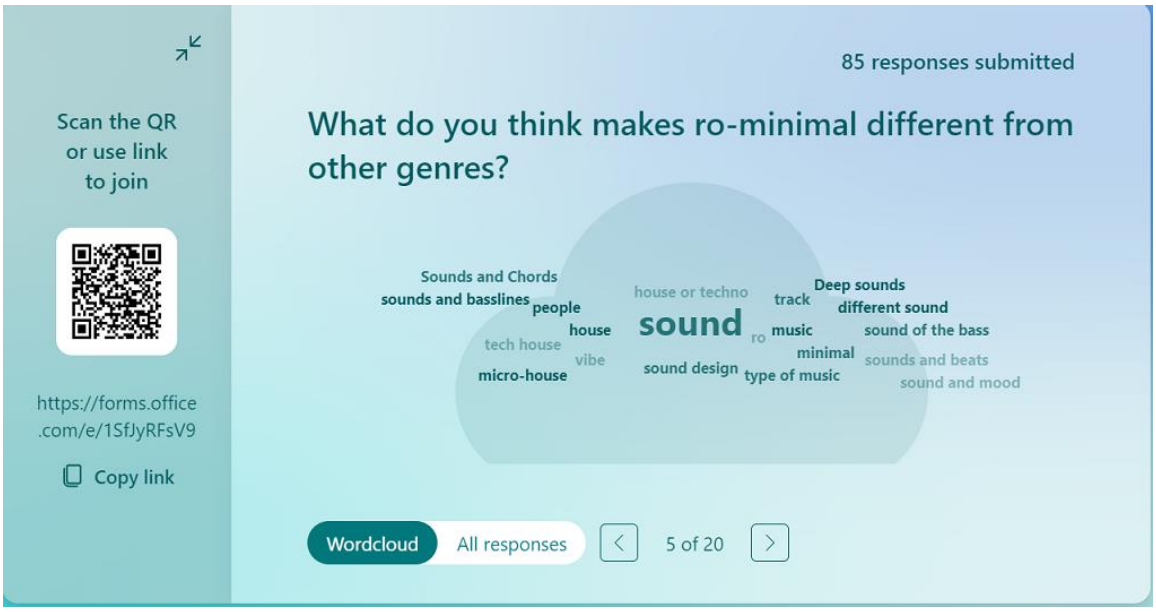

Figure 1 Word cloud of my survey participants' descriptions of the ro-minimal genre. Screenshot by the author

features of ro-minimal as a genre. Figure 1 shows some characteristics of ro-minimal such as “ambient”, “different sound”, “sounds and bassline”, “deep sounds” that were given by research respondents. This suggests some difficulty in articulating ro-minimal in worded ways. Ro-minimal is characterised by a felt quality of the sound and atmosphere that eludes simple comparisons or definitions. Thus, ro-minimal is similar to other kinds of rave genres, which, as Takahashi and Olaveson (2003) argue, are best described through experiential techniques. They are detached from the rigidity of text and speech, and focus instead on the lived experience (Hastrup, 1995) of music in an all-encompassing way. I engage with the felt, *unwordable* qualities of ro-minimal later, however now I focus on what ro-minimal aficionados *can* describe about their passion for this genre.

There is one characteristic of ro-minimal which stands out, both to my participants and myself: a lot of ro-minimal music is mixed using analogue technology: vinyl records and turntables. Initially, when electronic music emerged under the communist regime in Romania, and having a momentum in the 1990s, vinyl was the preferred medium for recording music, as it was cheaper than cassettes (Ralston, 2017). Furthermore, vinyl and cassettes had slightly different functions. Cassettes were a portable medium for playback,

while vinyl was the standard form for recording and selling albums, and playback in clubs and on the radio. However, when the CD format came to prominence, vinyl production went up in price as many vinyl pressing plants closed down. Since then, in Romania and elsewhere, digital formats such as MPEG-1 Audio Layer 3 (MP3) and Waveform Audio File Format (WAV) have been dominating the DJ scene, as well as digital equipment such as CDJs and mixing controllers (Tschmuck, 2006). However, in the 1990s in Romania, especially in București, where electronic music was played, “only vinyl was allowed” (Ralston, 2017, p.35) in some nightclubs. Therefore, playing on vinyl has been the norm since the beginnings of Romanian electronic music, which positions analogue mixing as a widespread technique. However, in the context of digital advancements in the music industry, the ro-minimal community appears esoteric. With rapid technology advancements in the 2000s and 2010s, “information overload” (Ralston, 2017, p. 52) became a standard occurrence in the music industry, and electronic tracks were produced much more easily and faster than before (Tschmuck, 2006). Ro-minimal, on the other hand, kept its allegiance to vinyl and analogue technology; ro-minimal music came out on vinyl records and ro-minimal mixing was also mainly carried out on vinyl and turntables, too. I argue that this is partly related to the historical and political context of post-communist Romania. During communism, taste, pleasure, and enjoyment were not particularly important (Preda, 2013), so once this regime was overthrown, people actively started to choose their preferences. Perhaps the dedication to vinyl is so strong in this group precisely due to this transition in ideas and practices of taste. Showing commitment to analogue technology, in a world where digital technology is the norm, feels more of an active option than conforming with mainstream music practices.

Since electronic music has been played on vinyl from the beginning, it makes historical sense for ro-minimal to still be closely attached to vinyl and analogue technologies. Although this nostalgia for analogue technology, or “technostalgia”, as Pinch and Reinecke (2009, p. 103) name it, is a significant part in ro-minimal’s dedication to vinyl, it would be an oversimplification to claim that it is the sole defining element (Bartmanski & Woodward, 2015) of this community’s relation with the analogue medium. As van der Heijden (2015) suggests, this interest in analogue technology could be meaningfully seen as a mediator between past and present in music. In the case of ro-minimal, it is a

matter of continuity. Furthermore, I argue that a type of nostalgia for something that one has never had or experienced is present in ro-minimal's fascination with vinyl. The term for this kind of nostalgia, *anemoia*, was coined in an online mock dictionary by John Koenig in 2020 to refer to experiencing memes by the older generation (Ward, 2021). I find that it can be applied to music making and broadcasting in two different eras in Romania – communism and the current period of transition to neoliberalism. The founding artists of ro-minimal often mix on vinyl out of tradition and perhaps a form of habitus in the sense of having "trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinant ways, which then guide them" (Wacquant, 2005, p. 316). Although Bourdieu has been criticised for overemphasising the unconscious dimension of habitus, as shown by Edgerton and Roberts (2014), Atkinson (2010, p. 4) contends that "habitus is not a mechanistic translation of objective structures into action, but a generative and creative capacity for thought and action within limits." Therefore, the preference of vinyl over digital culture is very much celebrated and promoted within ro-minimal which indicates the habitus but also the subcultural capital (Thornton, 1995; Moore, 2005) associated with this practice. For instance, pioneers of underground Romanian electronic music such as Rhadoo or Petre Inspirescu, but also Dragoș Ilici or Miss I are often seen mixing on vinyl, which reinforces the centrality of vinyl in this community, inspiring ro-minimal aficionados to invest in it and further promote it. Younger ro-minimal artists, however, have less experience of music presented on vinyl records, as they have been more exposed to digital tracks and digital ways of mixing. It is precisely due to this lack of exposure to vinyl and the desire to experience something simultaneously old and novel that drew many of them to mix on turntables.

Another key factor which directly impacts on ro-minimal fans' relation to analogue technology is the price of being part of a vinyl-based community. While at first vinyl was cheaper than producing music on cassettes in Romania, with the rise of digital music and mixing, it has become very expensive. Especially since the beginning of the 2020s and in the context the cost-of-living crisis, having a record collection requires a large financial investment and effort. Discogs, the largest online music database and marketplace worldwide, has an entire section on ro-minimal and Romanian minimal techno and house, with most titles released on vinyl. The record prices vary from £3 to £20 or even £30,

and can go up to several hundred pounds for a record that is considered very rare, but the majority are between £10 and £20. It would cost between £30 and £60 to buy three vinyl records per month. However, to build a large collection, especially as a DJ who regularly plays on vinyl, would cost a lot more, as Brimfield (2021) also notes in his autoethnographic work on being a DJ. Also expensive is the musical equipment needed to listen to records – turntables and a proficient sound system for vinyl require a financial premium, with a new pair of turntables costing around £1000.

The high cost of vinyl records and analogue technology is due to the perceived higher quality of the sounds they produce. Music on vinyl records allegedly has a more distinctive sound, although not all are convinced by this (Headphonesty, 2021). As Burns (2020, para. 6) puts it, “vinyl has its own, distinctive sound, filled with surface crackle, pops and distortion that people love. Calling it ‘better’ probably isn’t accurate, but there’s certainly nothing else like it.” Wilson (2020) shows that vinyl is better and fuller sounding than digital files due to the data compression that takes place in the latter. However, while there is no scientific evidence that vinyl sounds clearer than CDs or digital music tracks, there is a perceived different feel of listening to music on vinyl - the small imperfections and crackles that occur in the production - that is often perceived to bring one closer to the music itself, including the process of creating the music. While digital music production is relatively fast and simple compared to analogue, it does not always equate superior quality. While digital music production is arguably cheaper and more democratic than music on vinyl (Leyshon, 2009), the fact that is takes less time to do means the original process of crafting music and paying attention to its intricacies could potentially be diminished or lost. Without claiming that analogue music sounds better or is better produced than digital, I argue that it is important to look at why ro-minimal prizes the analogue medium. Alongside sociality, vinyl culture also stimulates an appreciation of music-making as a tactile craft involving complex human-analogue technology relations. Drawing on Sarpong et al.’s work (2015) on the readoption of vinyl music listening and music dissemination practices, I argue that vinyl records satisfy a desire to connect with material objects and feel at one with the technology used in these practices in the ro-minimal community. As Wilson (2020) mentions, compressed music files lessen the emotional connection of the listener to the music consumed, thus making vinyl the lossless medium that

promotes this affective relationship between music and its listeners. Although the term ‘lossless’ usually describes digital formats that retain the original audio of music files (Anderton, 2006) such as WAV or Free Lossless Audio Codec (FLAC), I contend that vinyl records are lossless by default, as they capture all of the sounds of a music track, without the type of compression that ensues in the making of a digital file. Playing a vinyl record on a turntable also adds to and evokes the age of vinyl and the many journeys it has been on while played in clubs, or at home for casual listening. The grooves of a vinyl record and its marks or scratches document this. Also, being closer to the production process and enjoying this analogue expression of music is something that Hayes (2007) sees as a frequent practice of postmodernity. Hayes argues that as technology is becoming increasingly digital and impersonal, young people are turning to analogue technology in attempt to make the process of consumption and listening to music more meaningful by gearing products to individual sub-group tastes through small batch production. This largely applies to ro-minimal, where mixing on vinyl shows a form of anemoia, the nostalgia for things or experiences that were never had.

Further to the point of music on vinyl being distinctive, I claim that there is a certain fragility involved in owning and playing records. For instance, they cannot always be played outdoors at festivals as the wind or rain could negatively interact with them. Weights are needed to keep records in place both at indoor and outdoor venues, as records can move slightly due to the vibration of the sound, or due to windy conditions. This sensitivity of records, as Godfrey et al. (2017) argue, creates a mutual relationship of ambivalence, uncertainty and ambiguity between the DJ/owner and their vinyl. Records are physical objects that require attention and care so that they can have a long life. As Plotnick (2022, p. 260) states in her work on media cleanliness, records require thorough hygiene to achieve a “clean sound,” thus acknowledging the constant interaction between records and their owners or players. In the same work, Plotnick discusses the impossibility of completely removing oil remains from human fingers that touch records, which attracts dust particles in the record grooves, thus making their cleaning a Sisyphean task. At the same time, it strengthens the bond between records and humans, making not only the playing, but the cleaning an intimate and tender act of care. Here, I draw on the entanglements theory by Hodder (2011; 2012) who asserts that humans and

objects are always in co-constitutive, interdependent relationships which can be limiting, but also creative. For example, I present an excerpt from my autoethnographic journal about one of the first vinyl records I bought by Pox & Poll (aliases for Argenis Brito & Ricardo Villalobos):

I got this one for a tenner and was really happy to have it because Villalobos is the guy who made ro-minimal popular outside Romania. I love seeing it in my collection, it reminds me of how I first started my DJing. There's 2 songs on it and I like them, but the highs are so hard to hear. I want to put these tracks in my mixes but it's not easy because of its sound. Also, I keep dusting the record to see if that would make a difference to the sound quality but it's not really working. I think it's just the songs are unusual to be honest. I'll keep trying different variations of mixes with these 2 tracks, I'm sure something will work in the end! (Autoethnographic journal, 25 March 2021)

The excerpt illustrates a strong affective connection between the record and I, as the record reminds me of the start of my journey as a DJ, by materially feeling it and seeing it in my record collection.[13] It also reveals the co-constitutive element of my relationship with the record through my perception of its sounds, the cleaning and dusting of the record and the creative impulse this inspired for my mixing practice.

Mixing on vinyl is complicated for several reasons. As mentioned above, buying, collecting, and mixing with vinyl records is costly. So, building a record collection for listening and for DJing requires a substantial investment which suggests that ro-minimal is not very accessible financially, and this contributes to the genre's esoterism, mysteriousness, elitism as well as class positioning. As Guo (2023) argues, the middle class is generally more inclined to buy vinyl records. They have the capital for it, and this practice contributes to their aesthetic self-perception as versed in the arts, while cementing their view of vinyl as a superior form of listening to music, over digital forms. On the other hand, the fact that ro-minimal records are so expensive and rare enables this community to be passionate about collectibles. So, besides the music element, collecting rare items in ro-minimal serves as an important social practice as Roy (2015) argues in her book on materiality in cultural practices. Collecting involves going to record shops, browsing, listening to the records in store, deciding what to purchase, conversing with the seller and sometimes the other people in the shop. First of

[13] The vinyl record information, including the artwork for this release can be viewed on Discogs: https://www.discogs.com/release/12064472-Pox-Pol-El-Malekon-Rikileaks

all, this portrays record collectors as creative, thrifty individuals, as many record stores keep second hand records, or discounted items that might contain music produced by less known artists, but which is as good or interesting as the more expensive music. For instance, another excerpt from my autoethnographic journal, describes an experience I had at Idle Hands record store in Bristol:

[My partner and I] went to Idle Hands in Bristol and I was already so tired from walking all day and didn't want to spend lots of money. But I saw the discounted box of records and I went to see if there's anything good in it. After browsing a little, I found stuff by Joe Ellis for less than £5 and it's really good! I like to listen to these, but I can also use them in my ro-minimal mixes which is helpful. (Autoethnographic journal, 13 May 2021)

This shows that there can be plenty to be found at record shops that is cheap, which expands, to a certain extent, the accessibility of genres such as ro-minimal. Another significant point is that I had the necessary knowledge to recognise this record as being good value, and desirable both despite and because of its good price, which illustrates the complexities of taste practices (Hennion, 2001; Lamerichs, 2014). Moreover, by looking at discounted records, collectors (who are often DJs in electronic music fandom) enlarge the definition of ro-minimal, by playing tracks that are less known and underappreciated. Many minimal house tracks can be characterised by a left field sound, with isolated strong frequencies where hi-hats and kick drums lie, thus creating a punchy effect of the music, especially on a powerful sound system. Often these sounds appear to be clipping or glitchy which contributes to the reduced popularity of these songs. However, based on Prior's work (2008) on glitch in contemporary music, I argue that the glitchy characteristic of minimal house and techno is a productive and creative process rather than a problem: both when it comes to the perception of this music as interesting and engaging, but also as thrifting for rare or obscure records that turn out to be real 'treasures' for listening and mixing. I had never heard of Joe Ellis before finding one of their records in the store, but since then, I have played the record and included it in my minimal house and techno mixes. This influences not only what I think a minimal set should be, but also what I play for my friends and larger audiences and their perception of minimal and ro-minimal too. Similar to what Shuker (2010) maintains in *Wax Trash and Vinyl Treasures*, discounted, virtually unknown records are highly significant as they have an impact on a DJ's

practice, the boundaries of genres and also on raving, by integrating less-known artists in rave experiences.

To exemplify the practice of vinyl browsing and buying, I look at a key record shop in Romania – *Misbits*. This is located in București, and sells underground electronic dance music vinyl records, including an ample ro-minimal collection. The store has a stall at each *Sunwaves* Festival, and the 2022 edition was no exception. The *Misbits* tent was at *Sunwaves* 2022, where festival attendees are shown engaging in a variety of activities and displaying various moods.[14] There are people inside and around the tent, and the wide-angle perspective gives the viewer an idea of its general mood of informality and friendliness, characteristic of electronic music events (Lynch & Badger, 2006). The people are shown engaging in either record browsing, resting, or conversations. The colour beige, the sand and the light blue sky convey a sense of serenity and calm and the tent has a board reading 'chill pe vinyl' ("chilling on vinyl" in English), emphasising the tranquil dimension of the image, but also of the tent itself – an oasis of calm in the midst of the wide expanse of the ro-minimal festival. One person is smiling, while others are looking through records or enjoying a beverage. So, besides being a hotspot for ro-minimal and electronic music in everyday life in București and on the internet through its online presence, *Misbits* fosters ro-minimal sociality at a major ro-minimal festival, enabling ravers to connect over their shared taste in music. It also gives them the opportunity to relax and unwind, alone or with other festivalgoers. I argue that ro-minimal vinyl culture fosters important social practices as well as a relaxed framework for socialisation, whether that is in a record store or during ro-minimal festivals. Although electronic music festivals often have food and drink stalls, and potentially relaxing activities such as massages or yoga (depending on the type of festival), it is not particularly common to have vinyl records for sale at these. The presence of *Misbits* at *Sunwaves* shows a strong connection between the production of ro-minimal, the process of advertising and merchandising ro-minimal (with particular emphasis on the centrality of vinyl) and the playing, experiencing, and enjoying ro-minimal music.

[14] The image of the tent can be accessed in the following Facebook post by Mibits: https://www.facebook.com/Misbits/posts/pfbid0VTVRHMCbproX4uaW1tq7bPHixQPZcCwYgay1BKKYh7x3ngL7f7C3Pp68r2Jv1Txwl

Ro-minimal remains a highly specialised community of makers, listeners and afficionados. Despite DJ mixes made available online, turntables and vinyl records remain the preferred mediums for becoming a respected DJ. Many ro-minimal fans are DJs themselves. Over half of 81 survey responses in my survey in English answered ‘yes’ when asked if they were producers or DJs, which suggests that among my participants there is a strong interest in becoming involved with ro-minimal beyond listening to music and raving. Additionally, this trend is suggested by my online observation data. Many members of the Facebook group *ro-minimal* regularly post videos of themselves mixing as well as links to their mixes on Soundcloud or Mixcloud accounts, both mainstream platforms used to upload and share DJ mixes. These practices constitute the ro-minimal subculture as a “community of practice” so a group of people “who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger-Trayner, 2006, p. 1), which contributes to the cohesion of this group. But the commitment of the ro-minimal community to vinyl is not exclusive as music on vinyl records can be listened to online as well. Festivals such as *Sunwaves* record and post DJ sets on their Soundcloud account, so they can be accessed by followers around the globe. Also, artists themselves record their vinyl mixes and post them online for various podcasts and mix series which host ro-minimal artists. Therefore, even if most music is produced and mixed for turntables, the listening experience is often mediated by digital technology and thus is available to a wide variety of people. As such, I argue that analogue and digital technologies coexist and are interdependent (Bartmanski & Woodward, 2015) in electronic music, and specifically in the ro-minimal community. They complement each other and bring out different parts of the music played, or various elements of performance practices, as shown later in this chapter, and in Chapter 7.

Whilst vinyl is central in ro-minimal, more automated forms of mixing and music production have been gaining significance in this scene. In recent years, digital technology has taken over in ro-minimal too, with new DJs, as well as established ones such as Priku, SIT, Sepp, Zau and Alexandra using CDJs in their DJ sets. The pioneers of ro-minimal Rhadoo, Raresh and Petre Inspirescu strive to use vinyl records and turntables in their DJ sets. And because they are seen as the “gods of ro-minimal” (Interview with Leona, 12 February 2021), a large part of the ro-minimal community looks up to them, which strongly

suggests that vinyl remains highly popular. It is not always possible to use vinyl, however. For instance, the “gods of ro-minimal” mixed on CDJs, a type of digital music-playing technology for DJing, at Club *Guesthouse*’s New Year Party in 2023 which I attended. Sometimes it can be challenging to instal both CDJs and turntables at certain venues due to spatial or technological constraints, so CDJs are often used, at the expense of turntables. Also, as Lhook (2017) argues in her article on the advent of CDJs, this new form of mixing equipment is more democratic, as it is generally seen as easier to use than turntables. CDJs are also considered more affordable in the long term: while they are not cheap, digital music files cost a lot less than vinyl records. Most importantly, Lhook (2017) talks about the excitement of using CDJs in mixing, by massively increasing the range of effects and functions a DJ can use to curate their sounds and sets in inventive ways. Nonetheless, I argue that some of the fascination with vinyl comes from the limited functions a DJ has at their disposal when mixing on vinyl. Thus, by virtue of the challenges posed by vinyl, an increased level of creativity and inventiveness for curating an exciting set arises, making mixing a deeply engaging practice.

As shown by Montano (2010) in *Popular Music,* the definition of ‘DJ’ changed with the advent of digital technology, both for production and mixing. The skills that a digital DJ needs to play a set are different from a vinyl DJ’s. Although both digital and analogue mixing are multimodal practices by involving various senses (Leeuwen, 2001), CDJ mixing is more visual based than vinyl, the latter relying on listening carefully to the record and touching its surface directly. CDJs offer visual cues that simplify transitions between songs, increasing the potentiality for improvisation, as not much can go wrong that cannot be controlled or fixed.[15] At the top of the CDJ, a display with waveforms can be seen, also showing the time left to the end of the song which simplifies navigating the dynamics of playing in a club such as nervousness before a DJ set or faulty headphones or sound monitors. Mixing on vinyl, on the other hand, requires the DJ to intimately know the track in order to curate a coherent mix. The grooves of a vinyl records indicate where one track ends and another begins, as well as when there is a breakdown in the track, however these are minimal visual cues compared to those on CDJs. Mixing on vinyl thus, besides

[15] For reference, pictures of CDJ-3000 can be accessed here: https://dyproaudio.co.uk/products/pioneer-dj-cdj-3000-professional-dj-media-player

allowing the DJ to be directly involved with the origins of mixing on turntables and with 12-inch discs (Gavanas, 2008), enables them to be closer corporeally co-ordinated with the technology they use. This, then, is conducive to a deeper and more active listening, which articulates DJing with turntables as an intimate experience fostered by a return to analogue technology (Mall, 2021). Utilising Pickering's notion of "dance of agency" (2012, p. 191) as an interplay of agency between humans and non-humans, I argue that the collaboration between humans and analogue musical technology is highly intimate, as turntables and vinyl records constrain and enable certain musical actions and affects. In this way, mixing on vinyl harbours a merging of DJs, turntables, mixers, and vinyl records in a cyborgian fashion (Haraway, 1991), and promotes their unification through performing a mix. Cyborg theory is particularly important when humans use not-up-to-date technology such as vinyl in the ro-minimal scene, blurring the lines between organism and machine, and potentially nature and culture, too. The human-vinyl cyborg interferes with the 'natural' expected course of technological advancements, stubbornly capitalising on the potential creativity found in this collaboration.

Interviewees in this study emphasised their preference for mixing on vinyl, viewing this practice as a central value of ro-minimal culture. For instance, Leona, a ro-minimal fan, and DJ, said:

> *The reason why I started mixing vinyl … was because there were so many tracks that I couldn't get that I wanted to play so I said, "what are you gonna do?" so I switched digital and went vinyl. It's hard, it's a lot harder and more expensive as well … but you're getting a lot from them, unique sounds, and unique tracks that you're not gonna get on digital, you know what I mean? (Interview with Leona, 12 February 2021)*

Leona acknowledges that mixing on vinyl requires more skill and effort as well as financial investment, but is willing to pay extra and learn extensive mixing techniques to access rare songs only available on vinyl, as well as to be 'fully' part of the ro-minimal community. She also mentions the 'unique sounds' available on records which suggests that some ro-minimal producers reserve their most interesting music for vinyl releases. This contributes to prizing vinyl in the ro-minimal scene to the point of fetishism (Bartmanski & Woodward, 2015), deeming it a medium with special qualities such as carrying and providing music not found elsewhere. New music is often released online on websites such as *bandcamp* or Soundcloud, and this was the case during the COVID-19

pandemic when clubs were closed, and most artists were unable to share their music at in-person events. Playing unreleased tracks at in-person events generates anticipation and excitement, which then subsequently increases the recognition and familiarity of a track. I have often seen people at ro-minimal events unsuccessfully using Shazam to identify the track being played by a DJ: this demonstrates the sense of curiosity and excitement present at these events. Often, ro-minimal ravers rely on each other or wait until the tracks are released to identify music. Anticipation, word of mouth, and collaboration between ro-minimal members in person and online contribute to the popularisation of tracks on vinyl. Anthropological literature regularly deals with word-of-mouth as a practice of resistance in authoritarian regimes (Perice, 1997), or as something that aids tourism and marketing (Cetin & Dincer, 2014). However, I propose that in the ro-minimal scene, word-of-mouth practices are essential to the cohesion of this community, cementing knowledge about events, artists, and their music, thus contributing to the demystification of vinyl and making ro-minimal more accessible. Nevertheless, this has to be taken with a grain of salt, as the information is generally passed only via the mouths of ro-minimal fans, which shows once again that this community remains exclusive.

Playing on vinyl at raves has been the norm in electronic music since its beginnings and it coexists with the development of digital culture and technology. For instance, techno and electro artists such as Helena Hauff or Hector Oaks endeavour to play music on vinyl to show and celebrate this skill. Mixing and releasing music on vinyl has other consequences on the community around ro-minimal. Since most electronic music is played digitally, it makes the ro-minimal community obscure and gated. As Ralston (2017) mentions in *Berlin Quarterly*, for many years before digital mixing and production became widespread in ro-minimal, *Sunwaves* Festival was the only connection fans had with this genre. *Sunwaves* is the main festival showcasing ro-minimal, normally taking place on the Romanian seaside. It is a key trendsetting place in ro-minimal, but also more widely in electronic dance music, where the fashions in good taste and good music are popularised. A ro-minimal fan I interviewed described the atmosphere at the festival:

Yeah, no idiots, no people jumping around. Do you know? If you go to most festivals, people are there for the session. They don't even care who is playing, you can ask them, and they'd be like "I don't know", you know what I mean? So,

with Sunwaves, everyone is there for the music they want to be there for. Tent number 4 is where the ro-minimal is, and then you have the more commercial guys in the other tents. Don't get me wrong, there's some good DJs, I might be popping in for an hour or half hour to see a mate, but then I'd be gone back to tent number 4. That's the only tent left at the end as well, they close all the other ones … and depending who's playing, it goes on for hours and hours and hours (afterparty). (Interview with Leona, 12 February 2021)

Leona mentions how *Sunwaves* is a multi-genre electronic music festival, but only one stage caters specifically to the taste of the ro-minimal community. Initially, *Sunwaves* comprised only of tent 4, as described in the interview above, but after gaining popularity, it expanded physically and musically. Leona describes tent 4 as a group of very knowledgeable fans, committed to this music. They are "there for the music they want to be there for", there's "no idiots, no people jumping around" (Leona, 12 February 2021). Ro-minimal seems to be a very specialised community with aficionados who respect the music, the other ravers, and the space they share at events. When interviewed, Rhadoo, one of the founders of [a:rpia:r] label, explained in Ralston's reportage (2017, p.53) that [ro-minimal] "is made for professionals; it does not work when played in the wrong context. It requires small rooms, a DJ who knows how to use it, and a crystal-clear sound system. Having an unlimited number of digital files floating around would risk the integrity that forms the basis of such an intentional community." This statement suggests that the insistence of playing music on vinyl is deliberate, putting this elementary practice at the base of the ro-minimal community. Rhadoo, as well as other ro-minimal producers and DJs, are well aware of the small-scale size of their community and they argue it is what makes it distinct, and in many ways, so attractive.

This section shows that vinyl culture is a large part of being a ro-minimal aficionado, influencing fan behaviours, knowledges, and forms of expertise. Through an analysis of vinyl culture in relation to digital technologies, I demonstrate that these two coexist in the ro-minimal subculture, despite the prevalence of music releases and mixing on vinyl. Also, while there are various ways though which ro-minimal is regularly demystified and made more casual and friendlier, the core of Romanian techno and house and the community around it remain highly specialised and highly skilled in practices of listening, raving and appreciating obscure, wonky sounds found in this genre. The

following section examines taste and fandom through the lens of ro-minimal fashion.

Ro-minimal fashion: between eco-friendliness and urban looks

In this section, I look at the choices ro-minimal aficionados make to articulate their connection to this genre through extended raves and afterhours, in the context of *Waha* Festival, and also at indoor venues such as Guesthouse. Based on autoethnographic notes from preliminary research as well as digital ethnography, I show that a variety of styles coexist in this community, which articulate people's worldviews and socioeconomic statuses. The fashions also adapt to various environments such as forests and post-industrial landscapes, showing the multifaceted, complex constitution of ro-minimal as fitting into various spaces but also promoting distinct ideologies.

New age, environmentally inspired fashion

Although my first contact with ro-minimal was in Club *Guesthouse*, I later encountered this genre in festival contexts. I attended *Waha* Festival in 2019 and I noticed the prevalence of vibrant colours in the attendees' clothes:

> *If you look at some images of a generic [ro-minimal] festival what you can see is people dressed in... colourful shirts and floral dresses and they have like 'tribal' elements in their accessories like sort of headdresses and you know feathery things lots of jewellery and yeah it just looks very generic like it's just … it doesn't look very well thought out. (Ethnographic notes, 15 January 2020)*

Dressing colourfully is a conventional way of clothing at music festivals in Western societies, so this is not particular to ro-minimal. Especially during the warm seasons, ro-minimal ravers opt for colourful clothes that in the Euroamerican tradition are seen as harmonising with the natural environment: nuances of green, yellow, red, blue, as well as shades of white and earthy beige tones. On one hand, this has to do with the warm temperatures of spring, summer, and early autumn, when festivals are held, and lighter colours are used in clothing to avoid absorbing excessive heat. Colourful clothing is also used in festivals as these events are commonly viewed as places of escaping the routine of everyday life (Falassi, 1987). Most of my interviewees agreed that festivals are places of freedom and exploration, so dressing colourfully is an act of playfulness and fun. St John (2004, p. 32) argues that "parties are carnivalesque stages for the performance of individual freedoms, for self-experimentation with the most intense sensations and most outrageous expressions of difference, from which a host of outcomes ensue." Similarly, *Waha* Festival enables alternative ways of socialising, self-expression, and playfulness in fashion. Although the ethnographic notes above show my prejudice against this form of clothing, I also adopt it, to some extent. Figure 2[16] shows a picture of me attending *Waha* Festival, dressed in multicoloured clothes with zoomorphic and geometric motifs. I am dancing and wearing a combination of vibrant green, white, and orange, as well as accessories such as glasses, earrings and a

Figure 2 A screenshot of a video showing the researcher at Waha Festival in 2019, wearing colourful clothes. Copyright © 2022 Waha Festival, Waha Festival Instagram page

[16] The video from which the screenshot was taken is available on Waha Festival's Instagram page at: https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cl6MnCODfgh/?igsh=MTBsa2czYWM4azBmMg==. Permission to publish the screenshot granted by Waha Festival on 15/05/2024.

multicoloured waist bag. Also, my facial and bodily expressions suggest a lightness of mood and movement. My attire at the festival, then, further confirms that at festivals such as *Waha*, participants are enabled to explore and be playful with their identities. Similar to how shoppers are guided by shop music and directed to certain products or actions (Sterne, 1997), also at this festival, the clothes and the music are engaged in a feedback loop, each guiding the festival goers on their engagement with the others, and reinforcing a particular set of affects and outlooks. This becomes even clearer in the next section, where I consider clothing at indoors ro-minimal events.

Founded in 2012, *Waha* Festival takes place yearly in Romania, in a green lavish forest in Covasna County and is known for its celebration and attachment to the natural world and the idea of a universal spirit, as the website of the festival confirms:

> *Wahaland creates the community of people who have been there to experience IT, new friendships occur when all you see is friends, individuals who deeply share the same Love and Openness consciously co-creating a sunny wonderland where everything is possible. It is the sense of community that gives you the extra push of confidence in realizing you can individually and collectively have an impact on the environment. The global family is actually big, and now you experience it.*[17]

Clothing appears to be an aesthetic manifestation of a larger idea that governs *Waha*, specifically that all beings are connected to each other and to a collective consciousness, idea that Mair and Duffy maintain (2017) is a key component of many music festivals. *Waha* is viewed by its organisers as well as participants as a site of shared affective experiences, connected by music, dancing, listening, and participating in workshops in a forest environment. Crespi-Vallbona and Richards (2007) contend that the ephemeral nature of festivals causes them to be unreliable as all-year sites of such spirituality. However, I argue that the *Waha* is not just an in-person event, as it expands beyond its actual temporal and geographic location, and relies on continuity and unity both online and offline. Numerous posts, pictures, and videos by the festival organisers and attendees contribute to the anticipation of the in-person event.

[17] Available here: https://wahafestival.ro/vision/

Ravers at *Waha* usually wear colourful, dark, and black layered clothes, dancing to the music.[18] The mix of dark and colourful clothes shows the mix of typical colourful festival attire, and also black/dark clothes, which, as I show in the following section, signals a state of being in the know. The 2019 edition of the festival was rainy, so ravers are wearing layers and jackets around their waists or carrying them in their bags, in case of rain. Their clothes are in earthy tones of brown, red, and green and ostensibly blend with the nature-forest continuum in the background, thus achieving one of the goals of the festival – a sense of harmony between humans and the natural environment. The human-environment communion takes different shapes. There are examples of this across a wide historical timeframe and more currently with the ontological turn that acknowledged the assumption of human superiority in relation to the environment and non-humans (e.g., Bray, 2012; Lemmens, 2020) with the intention to dethrone it. Romania has a rich and diverse folklore, and has a deep connection to the natural environment, being the country with the richest biodiversity and largest forest lands (Aseniero, 2021) in Europe. While this is not to imply that environmental values are always prioritised here, local knowledge and expertise are often valued, which translates into wearing local motifs in clothing, or engaging in eco-tourism in Romania. Simultaneously, Romanian society is increasingly urbanised and cosmopolite, and open to external influences in fashion. Thus, the colours used in the ro-minimal festival scene such as *Waha* often resemble those of the hippie countercultural movement in 1960s, and later incorporating New Age beliefs and practices.

There is a large body of literature that documents alternative forms of spirituality and shows their importance in Euroamerican societies (Aupers & Houtman, 2006; Iwersen, 1999; Mears & Ellison, 2000). For example, New Age practitioners have introduced and advanced meditation and yoga to the Western world, with numerous adjustments to fit with the audiences' worldviews. These practices have had a substantial influence on Euroamerican perspectives and everyday habits such as beliefs in astrology or in the spiritual energy of objects, and manifestation (Gecewicz, 2018). However, New Age spirituality and practices have been critiqued as resting on cultural appropriation from non-Anglo cultures (Awad, 2021; Hutnyk, 2000). While they try to promote

[18] An example of this can be observed on Waha's Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=2782130908483404&set=a.2782129458483549

and celebrate non-Western traditions and worldviews, this effort results in their further othering and exoticisation (Divita, 2016). It was precisely this unfavourable view of the New Age movement, and especially its enactment at music festivals, that came to mind when I heard ro-minimal being referred to as 'hippie' in an informal conversation I had with a raver. The notion of 'tribe' is often used in the context of certain music festivals, while festival goers wear headdresses or various ethnic symbols on their clothes and accessories.

Nevertheless, by participating in *Waha*, I realised that festivalgoers' choices of clothing were not merely a prescribed way of dressing in this community and that people's fashion choices were the result of more complex practices than a case of blatant cultural appropriation. As Divita (2016, p. 1) shows in her work on music festivals, attendees who wear clothing of different cultural-ethnic groups, think that "it looked cool", so the cultural appropriation often arises from a type of admiration, but also unawareness of various cultures. At *Waha*, attendees seemed to put effort into creating their looks. It was colours, patterns, and symbols that I started to notice in their attire, which show an intentional celebration of different cultures and forms of spirituality. Festivalgoers at *Waha* often wear loose fitting clothes with breathable materials.[19] The clothes often feature zoomorphic symbols, which is a common appearance in eco-oriented festivals such as *Waha*. Similarly, materials such as linen or hemp are popular at this kind of event, suggesting the importance of sustainable fabrics among *Waha* festival goers. Also, hemp and flax have been used predominantly in handloom weaving on Romania's territory for centuries (Pop, 2022), so using it regularly shows respect for local, culturally sustainable fabric-making methods, and the local environment. Clothing that is connected to the natural world through symbols from the animal and plant world is an extension of the philosophy of *Waha* festival which promotes unity and connection among all regna.

Although *Waha* is not solely a ro-minimal festival, the ro-minimal stage was central in 2019 when I attended. Therefore, the ethos of *Waha* indicates that ro-minimal fans enjoy good quality fabrics that are healthy for their skin and bodies and for the environment, and they can afford them. At the same time, the

[19] An example of this can be observed on Waha's Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=2964370910259402&set=a.2964363476926812

centrality of sustainability and interest for New Age practices is regularly associated with the middle and mid-upper classes (Redmond, 2021), as sustainable clothes and other commodities are more expensive, and not everyone can afford these. Therefore, although *Waha* is open to all participants, it especially attracts those from certain socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, who have an interest in environmental and cultural sustainability practices and who are affluent enough to afford living by these principles of sustainability.

Nightclubs and black clothes

If in the case of ro-minimal outdoor festivals ravers opt for multicoloured clothes and earthy tones, nightclub ravers usually wear dark and black clothes. While people wear dark or black clothes at outdoor festivals, too, I argued that this is to quote club culture and the state of being an insider of the ro-minimal subculture, or it could also be done out of the ravers' personal preferences for this aesthetic. However, black is predominant at club nights.

I reminisced about going to *Guesthouse* in București in my autoethnographic journal, and the dominant fashion element there was the colour black or dark tones of blue, brown, and grey. First, it has to do with the location of *Guesthouse*, in București – the capital of Romania - but also the capital of Romanian house and techno music. București is an Eastern European metropolis situated at the intersection of post-socialism and neoliberal, late capitalism. Late capitalism could also partly influence the eco-awareness and prizing of New Age beliefs in ro-minimal, as in this stage of capitalism not only material objects, but concepts and lifestyles become commodified (Jameson, 1984). It is the same hyper-commodification of services including music which drives a lot of the ro-minimal scene to be separated from this phenomenon, and establish a private community. The relatively recent gentrification and the leisure-ification of industrial spaces and abandoned factories (Becuț, 2018) have impacted on the way music is enjoyed, including the attire of ravers. Post-industrial spaces such as *Guesthouse*[20] call for comfortable, utility clothes as well as stripped-down aesthetics, which is what I found in ro-minimal ravers' fashion. Urbanites who enjoy ro-minimal raves opt for minimalist and practical

[20] An image of the interior of Club Guesthouse can be found on the Club's website: https://www.clubguesthouse.ro/our-story#gallery-4

designs, colours which simultaneously denote casualness and elegance, as well as a sense of being apprised of ro-minimal rave practices and protocols.

Black has been the colour of being familiar with a particular subculture, especially in techno music (Jones, 2022). As a raver in Guesthouse, I was surrounded by people dressed in simple, expensive-looking black clothes, and wearing sunglasses, but minimal accessories otherwise. The accessories included rings, fine necklaces, and sunglasses, all in a utilitarian fashion to promote ease of movement and flexibility while dancing. The interior of Club *Guesthouse* is very dark itself, and only lit by hypnotic visuals in deep colours such as red or blue. In such a dark place, colourful clothes would not be seen and appreciated as much as in daylight, so black is a more practical option. Therefore, wearing black could be helpful for focussing on those visuals without distraction. Literature on the cyborg (Haraway, 1991) is also important here, emphasising the agency of clothes. As Miller's chapter "Why Clothing is Not superficial" from his book *Stuff* (2013) indicates, clothes possess complex agency, and can potentially reveal substantial elements about one's identity. Thus, I argue that ro-minimal ravers team up with non-human agents (clothes) to facilitate and promote particular affective-aesthetic states, which indicate their dedication to the music.

Black is often worn by DJs, especially techno DJs. Other than being a marker of belonging to techno culture (Anderson, 2009b), this colour is said to be worn for practical reasons; ease of style and wear, or covering sweat stains (especially helpful when DJs or dancers overheat at a gig – as I often do) have been mentioned by Jones (2022). But black has historically been a sign of distinctiveness for different reasons. In New York, black is worn to signify casualness, but also "black connotes power, elegance and eroticism, characteristics that many people — New Yorkers included — wish to identify with" (Wolfe, 2018). Furthermore, in Berlin, wearing black at raves has become a standard practice, especially if one wants to attend *Berghain*, a notorious nightclub in techno culture that is particularly difficult to access. Black in Berlin has been historically associated with queer and fetish culture (Brill, 2007), especially when worn with leather, mesh and fetish or kink wear such as

harnesses or chokers. In the Berlin version, black is a symbol of liberation and freedom, as well as rebellion against the establishment.

Techno culture is often associated with openness to and support of queer culture, in all of its meanings including sexuality, gender identities, but also through alternative, disruptive ways of being in the world (Ahmed, 2006). Raving in a club is different to raving at an outdoor festival, and the former, especially through the black, unisex clothing, is a manifestation of reimagining social landscapes and rules (Rietveld, 2018). In Rietveld's view, underground music is a site of resistance and reworking of social norms, traditions, and identities. Techno is deeply connected to science fiction through the futuristic sounds used in this genre but also through dancing and socialising to music that emphasises our relations to machines, offering "an opportunity to engage sonically with the experience of electronic technologies and of acceleration that characterise the post-human world of what may well be termed the technoculture" (Rietveld, 2018, p. 24). These promote the reimagination of the social world and order, where people, machines and the music are intermingled in a cyborgian fashion, and here the colour black is a unifier and equaliser of the raving crowd. Ro-minimal's link to the future is interesting here, especially given the 'tribal' relationships to the past that present in the festival scene. This tension between past, present and future suggests a determination to link to and explore alternative temporalities, and stresses the complexity of this music and scene. Similarly, the connection to nature in the festival scene displays an element of hybridity, and perhaps a yearning to connect to other entities and organisms, which in turn, shows that the ro-minimal community is not merely exclusivist, but one where interrelations are prized. Moreover, although wearing black would indicate the ro-minimal community's interest to promote equality and fairness in its practices, as discussed in detail in Chapter 4, the gender disparity in artist and raver representation in this subculture suggests otherwise. So, the desired unifying effect of black clothing should not be taken for granted as resolving gender discrimination or other issues in this group.

Wearing black in New York and Berlin (techno hotspots) has had an impact on techno fashion worldwide, including the ro-minimal scene. Although ro-minimal does not promote hardcore techno music, wearing black emanates a sense of being intimately familiar with a subculture such as techno, which again, shows

fans of ro-minimal to hold specialised knowledge and expertise. I argue then, that clothing contributes to the overarching view and self-perception of ro-minimal aficionados as a highly specialised, esoteric community. Because ro-minimal fans are aware of their fashion choices which represent certain aspects of themselves in particular ways, these are important to the articulation of their identities (Anderson, 2009b). At the same time as signifying a state of 'being in the know', black is a unifying, non-descript colour which allows ravers to lose themselves in the crowd. They can then easily mingle and blend into the environment of the nightclub, while immersing themselves in the musical experience. Ravers become dancing, moving bodies in an engrossing musical journey, in an attempt to achieve unity. This unity through black and dark colours is visible in many photos from ro-minimal raves online.[21] Ravers' heads and hands are visible, as well as club lighting and smoke from the smoke machines, but not much else can be seen. Perhaps the photography style contribute to the perceived enmeshment of ravers into one mass. But it is also the fact that raves and DJs are wearing black, and a sense of unity is achieved not only on a spiritual and energetic level (St John, 2004), but also visually and physically. Although the ro-minimal community is very specialised and has different levels of membership and access, once one is in, there is a strong sense of belonging and togetherness that is prevalent here.

The fashion and clothing choices of this community show the identities of individual members as fashionable, elegant, eco-conscious and perhaps New Age-minded, which was seen at outdoor festivals. Concomitantly, members of the ro-minimal community opt for minimal, avantgarde and functional clothes raving at indoor events. Therefore, distinct parts of ro-minimal ravers' identities are performed depending on the location and type of raves. The ro-minimal community appears to be tightly knit, with a well-defined group identity, but also showing individual identities of ravers pertaining to musical expertise or environmental and cultural consciousness and commitment to sustainability. And not only clothes, but natural landscapes and built environments are active agents, stimulating certain kinds of affects that articulate the ro-minimal scene

[21] An example of the kind of images described can be found on Club Guesthouse's Facebook profile: https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=690408773269992&set=pb.100069026253078.-2207520000&type=3

in multiple ways. As Navaro-Yashin (2012, p. 168) talks about in her work on spatial and affective materialities in post-war Cyprus, affect “is referring to sensual intensities that may move through human bodies but that do not necessarily emerge from them.” Similarly, the ways in which people relate to the ro-minimal subculture are influenced by different types of environments which frame particular sensibilities, indicating a constant tension between exclusivism and openness in the scene. The next section investigates the relationship between national identity and ro-minimal, by looking at the Romanianness of this genre, and the ways in which it is connected to other genres and subcultures.

The ‘ro’ in ro-minimal: nationality and ethnic identity

In this section, I examine the relationship between national identity, ethnicity and ro-minimal fandom and identity. I look at the general population that accesses the ro-minimal scene, paying particular attention to how ro-minimal, or minimal techno and house with a Romanian origin and influence, is done and played in contexts other than Romania. I also look at various influences on ro-minimal, as well as at elements of ro-minimal such as folklore, history, geography, and myth, which I argue, accentuate the national identity element of this genre.

Immediately when seeing the term ‘ro-minimal’, which is a combination of ‘Romanian’ and ‘minimal’, it becomes clear that this genre is first and foremost Romanian with a Romanian fanbase. As shown, ro-minimal was born in București as a continuation of pre-2000 electronic music, but with its own individual sound (Ralston, 2017). However, there is no agreement about the actual existence of a particular genre called ‘ro-minimal’. Even Raresh, a pioneer of Romanian techno and house and co-founder of label [a:rpia:r] says in an interview that there is no such thing as a ‘ro-minimal’ genre:

> *I don't think there's such a thing. Of course, there has been a lot more outside interest in Romanian house and techno over the last few years, but that's because more people here began to produce music. (Raresh in Interview by Unicomb for Resident Advisor, 2015)*

Even so, there are several large social media groups dedicated to ro-minimal as well as responses from my research participants about ro-minimal being a very particular kind of minimal house and techno. Therefore, it appears that fans of

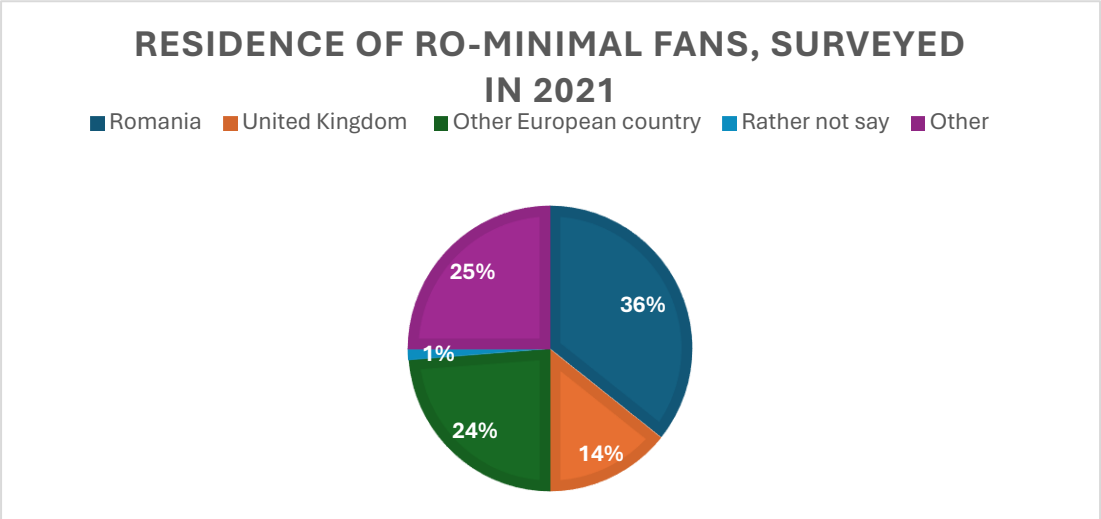

Figure 3 Pie chart showing the places of residence of survey participants

Romanian house and techno consider ro-minimal to be a genre offering a special sound, atmosphere, and raving experience. So, while there is not necessarily a consensus about a ro-minimal genre, there is certainly evidence about a ro-minimal community, who enjoys Romanian minimal house and techno.

Being a Romanian musical genre, ro-minimal has been played in Romania in various locations such as București, Cluj-Napoca, Timișoara or Brașov, which means a large section of ro-minimal fanbase is made up of people who live in Romania. This includes Romanian nationals but also immigrants and ex-pats as well as Hungarian, Roma, Turkish and other ethnic minorities of Romania. In my online survey, almost a third of respondents said they were from Romania, but they are closely followed by people from European and international locations (Figure 3). Thus, although ten years ago the proportion of Romanians would have been higher, currently ro-minimal is a fast-growing genre with Romanian minimal techno and house artists being added on line-ups worldwide. Moreover, large Romanian cities and especially București are cosmopolitan and multicultural places due to the university courses offered in English at the Polytechnic University for example (Timotin & Radeș,1995), which have attracted students from Europe, Africa, and Asia since before 1989. Also, București has been a centre for international companies and businesses, attracting foreign staff and investors in the country (Marica, 2015). This contributes to the cosmopolitanism of the urban population in Romania and of the ro-minimal fanbase.

The ro-minimal community and Romanian minimal house/techno were originally crafted by the trio [a:rpi:ar] (Rhadoo, Petre Inspirescu and Raresh), and popularised with the help of Argentinian-born German techno DJ and producer Ricardo Villalobos, who is often considered the 'father' of minimal techno. While the trio were setting the foundation for ro-minimal at home, Villalobos helped to diversify the fanbase and ro-minimal sound beyond the bounds of Romania, by introducing the creators of [a:rpi:ar] in clubs in Ibiza and other European locations (Ralston, 2017; Trandafoiu, 2021). Therefore, ro-minimal has rapidly become a global phenomenon expanding far beyond Romania, and it has had cultural influences from German techno and especially Berlin minimal techno, genre which (Nye, 2011) documents in detail.

When I posted the announcement looking for survey participants on the Facebook group *ro-minimal*, most people who responded were encouraging and excited about my project. However, one member of the group commented on my post that "there is no such thing as ro-minimal, just minimal" (Anonymous user, ro-minimal Facebook group, November 2020). This shows that some fans do not necessarily believe in a clear delimitation of ro-minimal from other genres. However, I argue that what makes ro-minimal ro-minimal is the fact that it was born in Romania under very specific circumstances. As shown in the ro-minimal fashion section, these socio-economic and political conditions play a key role, enabling the scene to incorporate foreign elements from and be part of a complex global electronic music network.

Besides the confluence of post-communism and late capitalism, a central role in the crafting of ro-minimal music are Romanian folklore, history, and geographical place names of Romania. These have a large influence, particularly on the names of ro-minimal artists, their track titles, locations for parties as well as on the titles for various mixes they curate. The historical, geographical, and mythological references articulate ro-minimal as a late neo-romantic genre and, to borrow a term from Rietveld's discussion of DIY electronic dance music culture in the UK (1998, p. 261), as a type of "electronic folk music." Neo-romanticism has been used in relation to techno communities in their critique of mass tourism and promoting alternative forms of techno tourism such as flying for a weekend to Berlin to attend a rave (Garcia, 2016) and slowing down rather than rushing to take in *all* the local culture. Ro-minimal

is certainly oriented towards maintaining a small scene and encourages slowing down and appreciating the music and rave. However, I believe it is neo-romantic through its interest in nature, history and mythology-inspired nomenclature for artist or track names, as well as through a form of escapism from everyday norms and paying homage to pastoral nature. As discussed, several ro-minimal festivals take place outdoors in forests, at the seaside or on islands, thus facilitating this connection to bucolic nature. However, many ro-minimal events take place indoors in post-industrial spaces that have been repurposed for rave experiences. This makes the neo-romanticism of ro-minimal connected to urban landscapes and lifestyles and promotes the reimagination of these spaces as appropriate and compatible with these slow and long-lasting raves. While the sense of slowness and length is a feature of other kinds of electronic dance music raves, in ro-minimal this feature is in-built. The licensing laws are different in Romania and say, the UK, and in the former, events are, formally or informally, licensed to last for several days at a time. Even when licenses are not granted, organisers often find loopholes in the legislation to be able to host long-lasting ro-minimal events, and this sense of improvisation is prevalent in Romanian culture (Kideckel, 2008), as I further demonstrate in this thesis.

Firstly, although varied, the names of ro-minimal DJs often have a Romanian folk or mythological origin. Numerous ro-minimal music playlists on Spotify support my argument that this genre is remarkable within electronic music and has a neo-romantic orientation. For example, the playlist entitled “RO-MINIMAL” is 21h 17m long and on the 28th of October 2022, when accessed, it had 2337 likes. Although a few tracks belong to foreign artists such as Robert James (UK), Traumer (France) or Lola Palmer (Ukraine), the majority of the artists are Romanian, including Mihai Pol, Ada Kaleh, Nu Zău and Barac. A few artist names stand out as having old Romanian and even Dacian antique folklore origin, as well as Romanian place names. Producer and DJ Ada Kaleh takes his name from the island ‘Ada Kaleh’ on the Danube River in Romania. Producer and DJ Herodot takes his name after classical Greek historian and geographer Herodotus who wrote about the Dacians (generally considered the ancestors of Romanians); Producer and DJ Colentina takes his name after sector 2 București neighbourhood ‘Colentina’; Producer and DJ Dragutesku has a compound name, “drăguț” meaning “cute” or “nice” in Romanian plus the typical

Romanian surname suffix *-escu*. The wide usage of Romanian grammar forms shows appreciation of Romanian heritage. It also demonstrates the meaningfulness of choosing a Romanian name on the global music scene that is dominated by the English language, thus cementing the Romanian-ness of ro-minimal and a strong sense of national identity of this community.

Praslea is a producer and DJ, but also a character in the Romanian folktake "Prâslea the Brave and the Golden Apples" (Prâslea cel voinic și merele de aur) written by Petre Ispirescu, who inspired the name of another ro-minimal artist – Petre Inspirescu; the name was created by the fusion of words *Ispirescu* and "*a inspira"* which means "to inspire" and the suffix *-escu*, thus suggesting creativity and playfulness. These artist names are not only very obviously Romanian, but they create a sort of landscape and soundscape reminiscent of Romanian mythology, fairy tales and old geography. Having this additional level of depth to ro-minimal cements ro-minimal as a Romanian genre and in order for its fans to access and enjoy it, they require in-depth knowledge of Romanian history, geography, and literature. This potentially adds an extra layer to the expert listening already needed in ro-minimal, as non-Romanian speaking fans would not intuitively make the connections between the names and their origins, nor would they immediately understand the wittiness that has gone into articulating these names. Furthermore, as I note in my autoethnographic journal, the fairy tale-like, homely atmosphere of ro-minimal is, for me, ultimately comforting:

I like seeing names like Primarie (Town Hall) or Barac or Bucurie (Joy) when I scroll down on Spotify looking for music. It feels like I'm going home and, on my way home, I'm finding these characters and places which remind me of my hometown. Also, I feel like I'm not just on Spotify, this big corporation that wants my money, but a more intimate space where I create my own journey and meaning. (Autoethnographic journal, 5 May 2022)

The autoethnographic paragraph shows a landscape and soundscape populated by words and references that comfort me as a Romanian immigrant in the UK who enjoys and mixes with ro-minimal. These references model my listening journey not only spatially through the imagination of a Primarie (Town Hall), but also emotionally through seeing the artist Bucurie (Joy). Also, the artist Barac holds a special significance for me as he is from Miercurea Ciuc, a city close my hometown, Sfântu Gheorghe, in Romania.

So, a strong sense of familiarity with Romania, especially Transylvania, as well as a longing for it are established while listening to and flicking through this ro-minimal playlist. Drawing on Solomon's work (2005, p. 9) on ideas and practices of "underground-ness" in hip-hop communities in Istanbul, I suggest that through the Romanian references, ro-minimal is articulated as a specific kind of underground music, connected to Romanian national identity, landscapes and culture. I also draw on Baffoe's work (2009) which suggests that music has, in immigrant African communities living in Canada, the role of reimagining 'home' for members of this community and providing comfort for them while navigating everyday life in a new country. I argue that ro-minimal, too, has a function of connecting listeners to certain concepts and emotions, such as the homeland, family and feelings of longing and nostalgia around them. Despite ro-minimal being a global genre with a diverse fanbase, the mythological and place-name references make it appeal on a different level to Romanian and Romanian-speaking fans. I argue that these references are partly what makes ro-minimal distinctive from other kinds of minimal techno and house in Europe and beyond. Equally, the Romanian heritage references contribute to the stratification of the fanbase on distinct levels of access, based on knowledge and familiarity with Romanian culture, history, and geography.

Nonetheless, ro-minimal is played all around the world for audiences of various backgrounds. Many events happen in the UK, mostly in large cities such as London, Birmingham, and Manchester, which shows the genre's versatility, but also its large global appeal. For instance, I found a ro-minimal event that happened in renowned nightclub Fabric on 27th November 2022[22] featuring the original ro-minimal producers Raresh, Petre Inspirescu and Rhadoo. At the time of accessing this event, on its Facebook page, there were ninety people who responded to the event, out of which sixty were 'interested' and thirty responded with 'going', whilst on Resident Advisor – the largest platform for discovering electronic music artists and events, one hundred and thirty-one users were registered as attending. Although this seems like a small number given the 1600 people capacity of the club, many ro-minimal events are regularly in an intimate setting and the crowd is formed of aficionados who have specialised knowledge of the genre. Furthermore, ro-minimal events are not advertised too

[22] Event information available here: https://ra.co/events/1600932

much, specifically to filter out those who might attend without too much prior knowledge of ro-minimal. The brief description of the Facebook event confirms the inside knowledge one needs to have as an established fan and the avid curiosity required for newbies: *"RPR Soundsystem play a staple extended set in a room Raresh, Petre Inspirescu and Rhadoo know all too well. Need we say much more."* Also, oftentimes, the numbers of participants at events shown on Facebook or other platforms are surpassed by the actual number of people attending an event. Either way, the ro-minimal fan is articulated as a specialist consumer of music who needs to lookout for ro-minimal events, thus, to actively seek them out and be invested in furthering their knowledge and connections. Jenkins (1992) argues that fans are generally creative actors, engaged socially and critically with the media they consume. For the ro-minimal community, a group where specialised, expert knowledge is particularly appreciated, this creativity and curiosity is highly emphasised.

I was unable to see the details of those registered as "going" or "interested" on Facebook due to the new GDPR regulations, but given that the event was in London, it can be assumed that not only Romanians attended this event, but also people of other ethnicities and nationalities. If this event is anything like ro-minimal parties I attended, especially *Waha* where I met people from many European countries as well as the US and East Asia, there were undoubtedly participants from various backgrounds. My survey data also supports this assertion, as many respondents from outside of Romania said they regularly attend ro-minimal events such as *Sunwaves*, *3 Smoked Olives* Festival in Călărași, *Waha* Festival in Covasna County and *Miortimic* Festival in Cluj-Napoca, showing them as highly mobile and in possession of time and financial capital to participate in the ro-minimal scene.

To elaborate further on the connection between the Romanianness of ro-minimal and the fanbase of this genre, I would argue that ro-minimal has influenced and has grown together with minimal house and techno from other parts of Europe such as Ukraine, France, and the UK amongst others. This intermingled growth of minimal house and techno contours another aspect of being a ro-minimal fan which is breadth and flexibility of taste. Evidence of this are not only the hybrid line-ups of minimal techno music events in Romania and abroad, but also the several playlists entitled 'Ro-minimal' on Spotify, YouTube,

and other music platforms. For example, considering the name of the playlist “ro-minimal|microhouse|techno” on Spotify, the multitude of minimal house and techno varieties are assumed to go hand in hand. The playlist contains songs from renowned ro-minimal artists such as Rhadoo, Arapu, Petre Inspirescu, but also Croatian producer Mariano Mateljan, Spanish producer Claudia Amprimo or Yaroslav Lenzyak from Ukraine. These are a few examples from a wealth of similar cases which suggest that ro-minimal has been evolving alongside other comparable genres, thus articulating a culture of minimal house and techno beyond Romania. Therefore, the fans who listen to ro-minimal are constantly introduced to new music from artists in various countries that collaborate with Romanian artists. Braun (2018, p. 147) argues in his work that “underground culture has formed a common identity in these cities, how an enduring community has transcended national boundaries, geographic distance and historical divergences” in Berlin and Melbourne. Similarly, underground music subcultures from Romania and geographically or culturally close places to it often combine. Although ro-minimal is a genre through which national identity is articulated by some fans, their cosmopolitanism and openness to other music and influences in their taste is equally important. Romanianness, then, articulated through the ro-minimal community, is not just a matter relating to Romanian nationality, but it is strongly connected to other cultures, worldviews, and musical genres.

On a similar note, many record shops from Romania and other countries in Europe or the US host vinyl nights especially for minimal house and techno with very similar music and audiences. For example, French minimal house, often referred to as microhouse is a very popular genre of its own. *Yoyaku* is a French music label with an affiliated record shop that held music nights called “yoyaku instore sessions.” Various electronic dance music artists are invited to play vinyl sets to the audience in store and, since the set is streamed on YouTube, worldwide. Artists include DJ Boring, Delano Smith, Zendid, Andrey Pushkarev, who play various kinds of house and whose tracks I used in my ro-minimal leaning DJ sets. Another artist that is featured in the instore series is Cristi Cons, a well-known Romanian ro-minimal artist. This illustrates the deep-rooted connection between different microhouse communities and subcultures, including ro-minimal. Once again, this cross-cultural connection indicates that ro-minimal fans are certainly not only from Romania, and they can search

various platforms outside of Romania if they wish to keep up to date with their favourite artists, as well as discover new ones and diversify their musical taste. Although foreign or non-Romanian speaking fans might not grasp certain linguistic nuances around DJ and track names, the music is not rendered as inaccessible. Language is important to a certain extent, although the non-verbality of music such as various beats, rhythms and melodies act as unifying elements in the ro-minimal scene. Furthermore, not only are the Romanian language references not impediments to foreigners' enjoyment of this music, but Romanian names have been adopted by non-Romanian DJs. For example, a Danish-born and Melbourne based DJ is called Blană, which means 'fur' in Romanian, but also 'cool' or 'excellent' in Romanian slang. This suggests that despite the absence of a Romanian origin of the artist, she uses this name to indicate her allegiance and connection to ro-minimal as a musical style and to recognise its influence on her own work.

Ultimately, this shows ro-minimal's openness and connectedness to artists and music scenes globally, which establishes a sense of cosmopolitanism in this community. I demonstrate that there is a certain Romanianness of both ro-minimal music and the community around it, which is especially brought out by referencing of Romanian heritage such as mythology, folklore and geographical or historical references to places and Romanian figures. This referencing is important for Romanian-speaking fans of ro-minimal, as it contributes to their feeling comforted, soothed, and connected to *home*, both as a place and as an emotion when listening to this music, especially to Romanians from the diaspora. The neo-romantic interest in mythology and folklore of ro-minimal can also be understood as a form of escapism from everyday worries, norms, and rules, which attracts many people to this genre. However, ro-minimal remains a slightly gated community, as fans of this music must be actively interested in accessing information about ro-minimal events and artists. Lastly, I show how ro-minimal is connected to similar communities and genres in Europe and beyond, and also that ro-minimal events cater for fans of various backgrounds. This makes ro-minimal a cosmopolitan and open community, in constant dialogue with the musical network around it, even if, on a certain level, it is difficult to access. The next section looks at ro-minimal's relationship with digital

environments, exploring the case of one Romanian electronic music festival's foray into the virtual world, and its consequences on ro-minimal fandom.

NFT *SUNWAVES*: Ro-minimal in the metaverse?

In this section, I analyse ro-minimal fandom and the levels of access within this community, by examining one ro-minimal festival's relationship with NFTs (non-fungible tokens). This aspect reveals valuable details about the ro-minimal community's relationship to the digital world, in particular to virtual reality. It also illustrates significant details about ro-minimal aficionados' digital savviness and their interest in the potential benefits they can get from entering virtual spaces. This exploration of NFTs in relation to ro-minimal is done bearing in mind that the general interest for the metaverse, in its current form, has died down recently, and investing in NFTs is often seen as a pyramid scheme or even as a 'scam' (Hakim, 2022).

First, definitions of NFTs and the metaverse are needed. An NFT is "a digital representation of an asset that is written in a <smart contract (i.e., a string of codes recorded in a decentralized ledger in the blockchain) and tradeable using digital cryptocurrencies (e.g., Ether, Solana, and Tezos)>", according to Chandra (2022, p. 1). Therefore, NFTs can be any form of digital object, but most of the market for NFTs is in digital arts. Another facet of NFTs is related to ownership of a certain digital object or artwork which has ramifications for digital artists and art collectors, respectively for how they produce, own and trade art. Furthermore, NFTs are strongly interlinked with blockchains (decentralised databases and transaction networks), which means they are also connected to cryptocurrency. This eliminates the need for banks and other financial companies that normally oversee transactions and handle money, which means that transactions between individuals can be done completely separately from centralised bank systems. Also, while the metaverse has many definitions, it essentially is a virtual space where life can be experienced differently than in the physical world (Tucci & Needle, 2023). As Serra Navarro (2023, p. 120) suggests, the metaverse is a "(non)-place" full of "meanings, symbolisms, self-referentialities, ephemeral landscapes, mimesis of realities, dystopias or info-communicational disfigurements." I am interested in exploring the potentialities offered by the metaverse in the context of *Sunwaves* Festival and see what that means for fandom and access around the ro-minimal subculture.

In 2021, *Afterparty* festival was launched, showcasing NFT art along musical performances. In 2022, the renowned music festival *Coachella* stepped into the virtual realm through the medium of NFTs, offering festivalgoers benefits such as backstage passes or lifetime festival passes (Sato, 2022). Similarly, *Sunwaves* Festival launched a collection of NFTs in the autumn of 2022, called *Sunwerse* NFT. A portmanteau of "*Sunwaves*" and "metaverse", *Sunwerse* shows the festival's ownership of a part of the metaverse. This is done similarly to how the festival physically occupies a beach on Romanian seaside, at resorts Mamaia or Olimp. NFTs in music festivals can come in different forms such as various entrance passes, artworks, and any form of digital collectibles (Agarwal et al., 2022). The concept of NFTs is strongly connected to online material culture. Lehdonvirta (2010, p. 886) suggests that virtual worlds are "penetrated by that specific type of material culture, consumer culture" and that through acquiring virtual goods, people seek to "establish social status and live up to the expectations of their peer groups, to build and express identity, and to seek solutions to problems, real or imagined." Therefore, examining NFTs and the metaverse in ro-minimal can show how aficionados relate to each other, and more generally, to other music scenes.

Sunwaves Festival has put out 5000 unique artworks online, and it operates with the native Romanian cryptocurrency Elrond. So, in this regard, *Sunwaves* encourages Romanian goods and the Romanian cryptocurrency market, emphasising the national identity and the origin of the festival. However, Elrond, as well as any other cryptocurrencies, can be accessed and used by people of any nationality. Here, I suggest that the promotion of ro-minimal and Elrond together as authentically Romanian products was done to increase their appeal, in a similar way that Swiss chocolate and watches are sold together in packages or French wine is paired with cheese. As Rangel and Hirai (2021) argue in their work on soundscapes and the lives of Mexican migrants in Houston, music is often presented as part of Mexican terroir: various sounds, tastes, affects. Similarly, the positioning of Romanian products also emphasises their terroir, perhaps a form of digital/sonic terroir – the particular conditions under which they were created, and which contribute to their uniqueness, reinforcing the national identity element in ro-minimal. Although based on Romanian cryptocurrency, the *Sunwerse* and its benefits are available to all interested. This contributes to the globality of ro-minimal, which then is

articulated as a group where an interest in digital worlds and digital knowledge becomes important.

Furthermore, on the main page of the *Sunwerse* – the *Sunwaves* NFT project, a myriad of advantages that come with purchasing the NFTs are listed. These are various passes for the VIP table, backstage, discounts, or early bird tickets among others, all lasting for a lifetime.[23] At the bottom of the *Sunwerse* benefits page, there is the ultimate festival pass called "The Sunwaver" which offers all the other passes for a lifetime. Therefore, by investing into *Sunwaves* NFTs, one gets access to a wide range of benefits and becomes part of the "ro-minimal family" as the website states. While this is advertised as a form of digital kinship, it can only be accessed through paying a considerable sum of money, which makes it more of a contract. Digital kinship has been defined by Wade (2019, p. 80) as "a relational practice through which familial ties—with both origin family and chosen family— are established and/or maintained through digital technologies." Whilst this concept applies to *Sunwaves* Festival NFTs, the cost of being part of the *Sunwaves* family complicates the relationship. It highlights inequalities between fans who can and who cannot afford to access the 'family', while simultaneously cementing the seller-buying dynamic involved in the transaction. The socio-economic background and varying financial possibilities of fans are enacted in their ability or inability to buy NFTs and passes. Arguably, the VIP table pass is better than the early bird pass if considering access to the scene, therefore not all NFT buyers can be considered equal members of the family. While this NFT project provides options for different NFTs with different prices to account for the financial capabilities of its fans, it fails to be the equaliser that it claims to be. Nevertheless, it is important at this point to note the difference between artists, music labels, event promoters and organisers, and the more general community of fans and ravers in ro-minimal. So, this inaccessibility to benefits, or access based on financial exclusivity occurring in *Sunwaves* NFTs is only a part of the wider ro-minimal community. While being one of the most notable festivals of ro-minimal in Romania, *Sunwaves* is not identical with the entirety of the ro-minimal scene.

[23] The Sunwerse website and its artwork can be accessed here: https://www.sunwavesnft.com/

Music studies and anthropology literature have long argued that festivals are liminal spaces with their own temporal and spatial structures that differ from regular everyday life (Bey, 2000; Shenton, 2015) or even places of escape where partygoers can detach themselves from quotidian rules and expectations (Lison, 2011) and access an almost-religious experience through raving (St John, 2004; Gauthier, 2004). However, some have argued that this suspension from everyday life promised by raves is not fully achievable (Richard & Kruger, 1998). Similarly, I claim that this separation is unlikely to be a perfectly defined line between 'regular' everyday life and raves. While a degree of separation occurs at festivals, the social order is rearticulated, and various socio-economic structures and tendencies are replicated at events such as *Sunwaves*. The metaverse adds an additional layer of inequality to society, despite its purpose of affording more fairness for those who access it, as Koohsari et al. (2023) argue, and instead serving to introduce alternative hierarchies. From the beginning, virtual reality has been a place of inequality and rigid socio-economic hierarchies (Evans et al., 2022), and only available to those who could afford technologies to access it. Furthermore, ro-minimal fans are not only expected to afford expensive passes, but also to be knowledgeable about the latest technological advancements such as NFTs, and to be willing to participate in it the metaverse. This aspect of the ro-minimal community further indicates that its exclusivist character deems it potentially ageist and not as accessible to those less familiar with the latest technological trends and developments.

This facet of ro-minimal groups and the issue of access to benefits is a key point, especially in the context of recent social events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the murder of George Floyd by an American police officer, which have both brought to the surface the deep inequalities that still prevail in contemporary societies. I draw on the Technomaterialism Manifesto, put together by "an Afro-diasporic and Black materialist multidisciplinary platform formed by Black writers, musicians and club workers, and focussed on providing alternatives to McCarthyism & neoliberal representation optics in dance music" (Anonymous, n.d.). It focuses on the relation between technology and the material world, and the ways in which electronic dance music can diminish social inequalities instead of amplifying them. *Sunwaves* is a significant ro-minimal festival, and although it is famous for its egalitarian, free-spirited worldview, it remains somewhat unreachable and closed off to new members

and even to existing ones if they do not possess the means or knowledge to access technology such as blockchain and the metaverse. *Sunwaves* festival's involvement with digital culture through NFTs falls short of its goal, stated on the *Sunwerse* NFT website, of being more inclusive for existing members and newcomers. The festival could make a stronger effort to bridge gaps in society and encourage equal opportunities among its members. However, the NFTs and the metaverse are in an incipient stage and therefore still underdeveloped concepts. This suggests that in time, *Sunwaves* Festival's involvement with them could change as they continue to evolve, but further research is needed to understand the relationship between ro-minimal and the metaverse.

The relationship between ro-minimal and virtual realities, specifically *Sunwaves* Festival's promotion of NFTs in the shape of digital artworks and entry passes for events further confirm the tensions between openness and exclusivity in this subculture. The discussion of themes of kinship, expertise and hierarchies show how the ro-minimal community, or part of it, is open to new technological concepts and practices. However, while doing so, it reiterates hierarchical dynamics within the community, particularly along the lines of access to financial and technological resources.

Conclusion

This chapter analyses experiences of fandom, taste, and expertise as they are conveyed in ro-minimal. By examining the centrality of vinyl culture, I show the presence of technostalgia (nostalgia for analogue forms of technology) in this community, which also contributes to ro-minimal's esoterism and to its underground appeal. The importance of vinyl records and mixing on turntables in this community also portrays ro-minimal fans as highly skilled listeners and practitioners. My examination of digital music culture shows that it recently gained importance and has made mixing and producing easier and more affordable for novices in ro-minimal. As a consequence, I analyse the notion of producer and consumer in relation to ro-minimal, where many fans and ravers are also music producers or DJs themselves, blurring the line between artists and audiences. Ro-minimal fashion in the context of outdoor festivals and club events further reproduces the hierarchies within this community. In the former, fashion is colourful and eco-oriented, whilst in the latter, clothing is normally black or in dark colours, illustrating the changeability of this subculture and the

agency of physical space and architecture in shaping engagement with the music. Another aspect I analyse is national identity in ro-minimal, showing the subtleties of track titles and artist names as well as samples used in the making of ro-minimal music which are inspired by Romanian history and geography, thus emphasising its Romanian origin. The increasing popularity of ro-minimal music outside of Romania, and the genre's strong links with other kinds of minimal house and techno music globally shows its global appeal and its openness. Lastly, the recent phenomenon of NFT *Sunwaves* being launched as a digital version of the festival includes various VIP packs and entry passes fans can buy. While the initiative attempts to provide more choices for fans to become part of the 'ro-minimal family', I suggest it increases imbalances in the community and emphasises its hierarchies.

Ro-minimal is a multi-layered and multi-faceted community where fans are not mere listeners or ravers, but active agents in the making of ro-minimal by producing and mixing music, through personal style and fashion, the performance of their national identities, and a potential interest in the metaverse. Whilst the term 'community' has been used regularly throughout this chapter, I acknowledge its limitations such as implying perfect unity or cohesion in a group. Instead, I use it to specify the points of cohesion but also dissent in the ro-minimal scene, showing that the boundaries of ro-minimal are simultaneously contested and celebrated. In the next chapter, I inquire into the relationship between gender and the ro-minimal genre and community, focussing on gender representation and inequality, the particulars of the femme sound aesthetic, and concepts and practices of safety in ro-minimal environments.

Chapter 4: The Gender Affair in ro-minimal

The first time I attended a ro-minimal party at *Guesthouse* in 2019 is when I knew I wanted to become a DJ. The DJs playing on the night looked effortlessly cool, and ravers appeared to want to be around them as they oversaw the dance floor and were in charge of the general mood. I was amazed by the idea of playing techno music to people and see them enjoy it, the idea of reading a room and designing a flow of music that articulates a playful rhythmic narrative - I loved it. However, a feeling of frustration flooded me almost instantly because most of the time, I had only seen men DJ in București at that point, especially in the context of ro-minimal parties, which signalled that perhaps it would not be so easy for me – a woman – to become a DJ. Months later I returned to the UK and started my PhD, but I also invested time and money in becoming a DJ and perfecting my skill, as well as getting involved in local events in South West England. I looked for opportunities to start DJing and I found *Mix Nights*, a mixing course for women and nonbinary people in Bristol. I enrolled in it in the summer of 2019, and since then, I have been DJing at electronic music club nights and festivals in England. I was also the co-manager of two local DJ collectives, thus becoming a practising DJ, but not without obstacles: both as a DJ who sometimes mixes with ro-minimal, and as a member of the wider ro-minimal community, I have noticed gender imbalances that are detrimental to women and queer people, and to the music industry as a whole.

In this chapter I outline the specific ways in which ro-minimal can be understood to be gendered. I suggest that just as many varieties of musical performance have historically been male dominated, DJing in ro-minimal tends to be perceived as a male preserve, or at least, most ro-minimal DJs and producers are cisgender men. I link this observation to the fact that ro-minimal developed within the patriarchal society of Romania (Pop, 2016), where despite some movements towards gender equality under communism, male dominated social institutions and the male wielding of power continue to be supported, for instance, by the Romanian Orthodox Church, itself a heavily patriarchal institution (Bucur, 2011). I go on to illustrate how DJ line-ups at ro-minimal events are dominated by cis male DJs, as well as there being a notable visual absence of queer people and culture from ro-minimal dancefloors. Dancing and taking space at ro-minimal events can also sometimes, though not inevitably,

reproduce specific gendered and sexualised roles. So, even though raving is assumed to provide an escape from society's traditional norms around gender roles and expectations (Pini, 2001), these are often amplified in clubs, both on dance floors and in DJ booths (Farrugia, 2012; Gadir, 2016). There are, however, numerous movements to create more opportunities for women and non-binary participants to produce and perform ro-minimal (I myself have been closely involved in some of these since 2019). Women DJs are, however, often on the receiving end of sexualised comments and remain subject to an often-hostile male gaze, as well as receiving occasionally belittling comments on their style, aesthetic, and mixing techniques (Nikolayi, 2019), which is worthy of anthropological investigation.

Primarily, I investigate gender representation in ro-minimal through autoethnography. The reason I engaged in autoethnography is because I am a Romanian woman DJ who sometimes mixes with ro-minimal music. Dissecting my experiences of related social dynamics is relevant not only as a researcher, but also as someone who is engaged with the ro-minimal community in several ways, through mixing for platforms that promote minimal music, attending ro-minimal events and being active in online groups dedicated to this genre. Another key reason I rely on autoethnography (more than initially anticipated) is because the COVID-19 pandemic started around the time that I was supposed to commence my fieldwork. Pubs and clubs were closed, and events were cancelled due to safety restrictions and lockdowns put in place to stop the spreading of the virus. So, while I conducted interviews, surveys, and online observation, I also leant into my own practice as a DJ and analysed my personal experience in this community during the pandemic. I also drew on and examined memories of my being at ro-minimal festivals prior to the pandemic. First, however, I provide an overview of how gender figures in electronic dance music.

Context

Gender comprises a fundamental issue when discussing the modern music industry, as for the largest part of its existence, it has been dominated by cisgender men. I only refer to music of the Euroamerican world however, because that is where the genre I examine, ro-minimal, was born and where it is currently most popular. The advent of electronic music saw cis men gain easier

access to music training and secure more opportunities for performing music and expanding their musical knowledge. As Scott and Harrassowitz (2004) argue, the gender disparities in music are not due to an absence of female musicians. These imbalances have historically persisted as women have often been socially and politically excluded from public life, but also due to music performance being associated with female sex work and prostitution, which were considered morally condemnable activities. Therefore, as Scott and Harrassowitz (2004) contend, women who engaged in music performance were usually seen in a negative light, and even as depraved individuals. Whilst many Western societies are beginning to enable more egalitarian practices and attitudes, sexism and gender discrimination in the music industry remain prevalent.

Particularly in electronic music genres such as techno and house, gatekeepers have been male and subgenres of this music often have ‘founding fathers’ and ‘godfathers’ (Juan Atkins and Jeff Mills – fathers of techno, Ricardo Villalobos – father of minimal techno/house, Frankie Knuckles – father of house), but never mothers – or if there were mothers, they came later. Also, the idea of a mother in dance music can be problematic, as mothers are often seen as older women. And older women in Western cultures are regularly criticized for the mere act of being old and having aging bodies (Rochon et al., 2021). As Rietveld (2013) argues in *DJ Culture in the Mix*, the DJ is seen as a *he/him*, similarly to how most professions are regarded as male endeavours until the adjective ‘female’ is placed in front of them (Gadir, 2016). Having the descriptor ‘female’ or ‘nonbinary’ before ‘DJ’ is generally done to show the progress made towards gender equality in the music industry, but it also has a negative connotation: it can further accentuate the exclusion and othering of women and transgender and nonbinary people, as Duignan-Pearson (2017) shows in her work on DJing in Johannesburg. For many years, electronic music festivals have had all-male line-ups without the organisers or partygoers realizing how this gender gap might be an issue (Balanescu, 2021; Rietveld, 2013). These line-ups display and replicate the patriarchal social order that keeps women in an inferior position to men, denying them access to the same opportunities, recognition, and popularity that cis men enjoy. This discrimination is further articulated in manifold ways such as women or queer people not having models in the music industry that could inspire them to become involved. Although in the recent

past, festivals and music events have consciously tried to include more women on their line-ups so that the ratio of men to women is closer to 50:50, equality still seems out of reach as Balanescu (2021, para. 3) notices in their work:

> *The Isle of Wight Festival totalled a 73% male line-up; Victorious, Slam Dunk and Bloodstock over 80%; TRNSMT 61%; Creamfields 91%; and Kendal Calling's partial line-up 79% – despite that the festival had signed up to an initiative tackling gender inequality, Keychange, in 2018. Meanwhile, Reading and Leeds have announced 6 male headliners.*

These are large, established music festivals that strongly influence electronic music and clubbing culture worldwide. Failing to achieve gender parity in their line-ups suggests that many smaller and local club nights and festivals follow in their steps. However, there are some grassroots events and collectives which deviate from the norm and propose a more equal and fairer playground for electronic music DJs and producers, especially women, Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) and transgender or nonbinary people. One notable example is *Discwoman*, a platform and collective from New York which showcases women and nonbinary artists. They have hosted several events in person, livestreams, and training programmes, and have participated in events organised by a popular online dance music broadcaster called *Boiler Room*. In the UK, there are several such cooperatives such as *Pxssy Palace*, *6 Figure Gang*, *femme culture*, *VAJ.Power*, *Concrete Jungyals* (Roberts, 2020) and *Sister Sounds* which I co-managed in Exeter. These collectives function similarly to *Discwoman*, platforming women and other marginalized gender artists in the industry, aiming to make the club environment a more welcoming and safer space for them.

Mix Nights: first time mixing (with ro-minimal)

Mix Nights, a part of the larger music collective *Saffron*, is another significant all-women and nonbinary DJ collective in Bristol which has been a platform for several DJs that have subsequently created their own collectives or music events. *Mix Nights* is where I learnt how to mix, and when I first bought an electronic music record. It was also my first contact with mixing ro-minimal music. I discovered this course through a friend who knew someone enrolled in it and who is now a practising DJ. I was thrilled about the opportunity, and I googled 'mix nights'. The search turned out a few results, but there was nothing inspiring much confidence. There was however a page to sign up for a

newsletter from *Mix Nights* which said they would notify me if the course would be available again. I signed up, half hopeful, half deflated as I was unsure whether I would hear back from them. I mention my search results and my response to them because they show how scarce the opportunities for women and non-binary people to learn to mix actually were in 2019, and how there were certain obstacles to participation.

I was pleased to receive an email from *Mix Nights* a month later informing me of their new mixing course and I had a few days to sign up for it through filling in a questionnaire, as there were limited spaces to join this session. I was selected to participate and started the first class within a matter of weeks. I am not completely sure how the selection process happened, however, besides a few basic questions about my identity and previous skills in music, there was a more complex question in the sign-up form about the motivation to join this course and what one hopes to achieve by doing so – I assume this formed the main criterium for acceptance. Since then, *Saffron*, the organisation which enables *Mix Nights*, have held many other DJ workshops, online courses and have especially promoted black women and trans people in this industry as they have been particularly marginalised (Gavanas & Reitsamer, 2013). *Saffron* therefore shows not only a high demand for this sort of initiative, but also its intersectional approach to skill teaching and sharing in the dance music scene.

I travelled to Bristol and back to Exeter every Wednesday for two months to attend this course. The first class was an introduction, where students, tutors, and organisers – all women and nonbinary people, met for the first time, accentuating the sisterhood that is often present at this sort of collective (Farrugia, 2012). I felt welcomed and comfortable at the workshop, which did not have a hierarchical structure, and was instead more akin to a friendship group, where skills and knowledge were shared enthusiastically (Abtan, 2016). This was dissimilar to my first contact with the ro-minimal culture in Romania, which seemed male-centred and somewhat intimidating. As Richards (2016) argues, with the rise of DIY and grassroots maker communities in electronic music, gender imbalances are beginning to be addressed, and numerous platforms such as *Mix Nights* are part of a mass intervention in the DJing culture, opening spaces for women, transgender, and other queer people in this industry. Women DJs and producers have taken proactive roles in learning from

each other and teaching other women or nonbinary people skills and techniques that were not widely accessible to them previously. This is the case with *Mix Nights* too, which promotes women's learning and involvement in the UK and international DJ community within an accepting and friendly environment. This contrasts with the varying levels of hostility and aggressive competitiveness often observed in male-centric DJ cultures (Gadir, 2016) and which can even lead to lead to unsafe circumstances and even violent acts in nightclubs. Instead, mutual help, collaborations and professional openness are encouraged to achieve fairness for DJs and musicians of all backgrounds; similar dynamics can be found in *Female Pressure*, an online network promoting underrepresented DJs (Reitsamer, 2012). Not only does *Female Pressure* promote female, transgender, and queer artists by curating a mix series displaying music by its members, but it also provides a global database of these artists, where information about them is publicly available. Also, several women or nonbinary DJs I met at *Mix Nights* or other DJ collectives are also members of *Female Pressure*, which reinforces the bonds and sisterhood in these groups. Thus, these interconnected organisations have established a nascent scene that promotes marginalised artists, with a particular focus on women, queer, trans and BIPOC (black, indigenous, and other people of colour) artists. Women are frequently dismissed for having too many emotions or for not handling emotions well (Burrow, 2005) and despite women's exclusion from positions of authority becoming rarer (Paxton et al., 2020), women must work harder to achieve these positions of power. Therefore, being in charge as a DJ, combined with overseeing the mood of a certain nightclub, room and crowd, is a powerful position to be in for women or people of marginalised genders, and the collectives mentioned above are attempting to empower them.

At the *Mix Nights* workshop, we split into two groups: students learning mixing on CDJs/controllers (digital) or vinyl (analogue), and I opted for the latter. I remember having an informal conversation with a friend at the time about the kind of mixing I should choose, and they told me: "Go for vinyl, girl, that's the original way to do it, and that's how they do it in ro-minimal too. It's highly respected. And you can learn to mix on digital later." So, it appears that, as demonstrated in Chapter 3, mixing on vinyl is seen as the more skilful (and hence) status-conferring practice, not only in ro-minimal but in electronic music generally, a dynamic which inspired me to learn mixing on this medium. In that

way, I was brought closer to ro-minimal, both as a fan of this music and as a DJ, by accessing the dance music industry and by playing on a medium that was highly praised in the ro-minimal subculture. The *Mix Nights* tutors showed us how to mix two tracks on vinyl. Soon enough, I was mixing myself, and the process of DJing became demystified for me as initially, I thought DJs were creating a song in the moment, during their performance. To some extent, of course, that is true as DJs do use mixers, turntables, and other mixing equipment as a set of musical instruments (Rietveld, 2013; 2016), blending musical tracks to create new sounds and rhythms that were potentially not intended by the original producer of the track. However, mixing is fundamentally a curatorial process, thus articulating certain moods of the music, and shaping the surrounding space and rhythm (Barna, 2017), which I only fully realised as I was stepping into the DJ booth for the first time.

Mix Nights has been a helpful platform for launching my DJ career and enabling me to immerse myself in the electronic music networks around South West England, but also internationally, in Romania and other European countries, and I examine the specific skills and connections in Chapters 5, 6 and 7. Also, the first time I played a ro-minimal track was at my debut gig in Bristol, and although I am not mainly a ro-minimal DJ, I am one of the few ones who play it regularly and promote it alongside other genres in my local area. Furthermore, participating in this all-women/nonbinary workshop and having powerful female figures to provide DJ tuition inspired me to become a DJ despite the hardships I knew I would face as a woman in this industry. So, with global dance music and DJ culture beginning to move towards gender equality, but still prioritising cis men, how does this dynamic translate in the club culture of Romania, specifically in the ro-minimal community? In the next section, I analyse economic, religious, and social factors in Romania which show how ro-minimal is articulated as a genre and community, demonstrating the patriarchal status quo of society and Romanian music industry.

It is important to acknowledge that while I use my experience as a DJ to shed light on these issues, I recognise that there is a certain element of bias involved, not necessarily in my analysis, but in choosing the topic of gender. Bias has been proven to exist, overtly or covertly, in social sciences research (Hammersley & Gomm, 1997). I prefer to think of my gendered experience as

"situated knowledge" (Haraway, 1998, p. 575), though it might conceivably be described as 'counter-bias' given that anthropology has been dominated by male bias for so long (Sharma, 1981). My experience as a female ro-minimal DJ places the analysis in a lived-in context, while emphasising the imbalances I consider within the genre. As my study is a large piece of research on an understudied genre and community, I use my specific experiences to reveal the gender inequality in the genre, and more widely, in the dance music industry and to contribute to its attenuation.

Ro-minimal gender imbalances

Ro-minimal has been the main underground genre of electronic music in Romania for approximately the past fifteen years. Since its beginnings, it has expanded well beyond the borders of Romania and has influenced other subgenres of minimal house and techno in the Euroamerican world, and beyond (Ralston, 2017). Producers all over the world are replicating and expanding on ro-minimal, adding their own idiosyncrasies to their productions and mixing styles. With now tens and hundreds of thousands of fans, listeners, and ro-minimal enthusiasts, doing a simple Google search of ro-minimal artists or ro-minimal event line-ups, reveals that most members of this community are men, both producers and consumers of this music. That begs some questions: how important is gender representation in this genre? What percentage of the fanbase and ro-minimal line-ups is constituted by artists that are not cis men? Why do women and non-binary people not figure as much in the numbers of this musical community? How does ro-minimal that is made by women sound, and why is it important to hear that in clubs or on the radio?

64% of the online survey respondents selected 'male' to describe their gender which indicates that there *are* many men in the community, especially online. A participant from my research survey said that there are 'only two genders' when asked to describe their own. These are only a few examples that support the view that ro-minimal is male-centred, and tends to invisibilize queerness and fluid gender identification. Ro-minimal has been flagged several times for having such an overwhelmingly male majority of DJs, producers and afficionados, most recently and notably in an article in the magazine CUTRA (Nikolayi, 2019). While no academic sources on the ro-minimal scene's views on gender exist currently, the anthropological and sociological data on club

cultures overwhelmingly points to women's and queer people's discrimination in the industry (Gavanas & Reitsamer, 2013; Rietveld, 2018; Farrugia & Swiss, 2005; Farrugia, 2012; Straw, 1997). Nikolayi's article (2019) as well as my own data strongly suggest this to be the case in the ro-minimal community, too. Nikolayi's article analyses videos of ro-minimal women DJs, arguing that the Romanian club industry is men-centric and the gatekeepers of different musical scenes within the country are also cis men, as it also happens in the global music industry (Hooper, 2019; Reddington, 2016). This makes it difficult for women and queer people to access them and to receive the recognition their cis male counterparts enjoy. Perhaps one could argue that globally, the music industry is still mostly made by and for cis men. Music is an extension of societal ideas and practices; however, club industries are not uniform all over the world. Romanian, and British societies, for instance, are quite different. Romania is a place where women and queers are not as safe as they would be in the UK, with laws on sexual harassment and assault not being implemented consistently (Tepșanu, 2020). Romania is a patriarchal society where women's and queers' contributions to culture are undervalued and underappreciated, and sometimes mocked. Gender inequality is strongly promoted and perpetuated by Biserica Ortodoxă Română – The Orthodox Church of Romania, whose official view is that women should not be in positions of power as they are born to be subordinate to men (Fati, 2021). Romania is officially a laic state, but The Orthodox Church is heavily involved in the way social affairs are conducted such as being strongly opposed to sex education in schools or promoting 'traditional' family values (anti-LGBT marriage and sex). These official and unofficial opinions that The Orthodox Church holds have slowly become incorporated into social discourse, the fabric of other social institutions and industries such as those involved in music. However, it must be noted that the Orthodox Church's views are not as widely held as they once were in Romania, as the younger generations are becoming more open-minded and liberal in their worldviews (Șancu, 2021).

Presently, women and queer artists remain largely underrepresented and discriminated against in the Romanian club industry. As Nikolayi (2019) argues, it is not that there is a lack of female and queer talent, but the women or queer people that get to play in coveted spots such as *Boiler Room*, often get more harshly criticized than male DJs, which is discouraging of further or increased

involvement. Also, as I later show, when they do get to play, femme-presenting[24] women and queers often receive comments on their looks, their bodies, and their sex appeal, which stands against the goal of expanding the music scene meaningfully and equally among people of all genders and sexual identities. As Gavanas and Reitsamer (2013) argue, the hypersexualisation of femme DJs is widespread in the music industry, and additionally, their DJing skills are exposed to painstaking scrutiny by audiences.

One notable example of this type of attitude towards women DJs in ro-minimal is the case of Miss I (Boiler Room, 2016), a woman DJ and producer of Romanian electronic music and founder of *Misbits*, the most established record store in București and in Romania. While ro-minimal does not have founding 'mothers' and is dominated by male figures, Miss I is certainly a prominent ro-minimal actor by owning and managing *Misbits*, a store that provides ro-minimal music among other genres to DJs and fans in Romania and abroad. Other than being in the record selling business, Miss I often DJs at events in Romania and internationally and made her *Boiler Room* debut in 2016 in București. Her performance received plenty of attention in the ro-minimal community, and like those of other female DJs, it was closely dissected.

Miss I played an entire set on vinyl, which, as shown in Chapter 3, is an esteemed skill in the ro-minimal scene. Mixing on vinyl is notoriously complex: the sound the DJ works with is finite and not as malleable as in digital mixing; tracks cannot be looped or restarted, there is no emergency loop button as there is on CDJs or digital controllers; the DJ must have an intimate knowledge of their records, as they have limited visual information about the soundwave and structure of the tracks. Furthermore, carrying records to a gig and having to physically reach for them and put them on the turntable requires considerable effort too (Farrugia & Swiss, 2005). The comment section on Miss I's *Boiler Room* video on YouTube is generally positive leaning towards neutral, however, despite a general appreciation for vinyl in ro-minimal, there is a lack of acknowledgement for Miss I's skills in this medium. Her transitions are not entirely seamless as is expected in ro-minimal. Given that it is an all-vinyl mix, minor errors are normal and even welcome. For instance, one of the founding

[24] 'Femme-presenting' refers to physical appearances that lean towards conventional ideas of femininity (e.g., long hair, use of makeup, dresses)

fathers of Detroit techno, Jeff Mills, discusses the beauty of curating beats that are not perfectly matched in a DJ set:

When you hear the tracks merge together, conceptually it pulls you into the whole process. If you never let the audience hear that, then they might believe that you're perfect, and that you mix like a computer, like software. So that's not always really the point. Sometimes I purposely lag the beats slightly, and then bring them together again, and that's because I want you to hear that mix perfectly, and then we can move on. (Jeff Mills in Will Lynch, 2019)

According to Jeff Mills, mixing on vinyl goes beyond beatmatching. It is a journey that shows the creativity and humanity of the DJ, a process that sometimes involves mistakes and irregularities. Miss I's *Boiler Room* performance was criticized for the DJ's imperfect transitions, but also for the low energy of her mix, as exemplified in Figure 4.

Figure 4 Screenshots of anonymised comments to the YouTube video of Miss I's Boiler Room performance. Source: Boiler Room YouTube channel

Perhaps these responses come because ro-minimal is a niche genre and YouTube viewers expect more energy and more dramatic drops from a *Boiler Room* set. But according to Duignan-Pearson (2017), women and queer DJs have a higher rate of being subjected to tough reviews than male DJs, and the YouTube comments support this view. In particular, the comment about Miss I being a "pass the discs DJ" shows that she is potentially seen as a sous-DJ rather than one that has full control and power over the set she produces. As Bloustien (2016) and Farrugia (2004) suggest, female DJs are often assumed to know very little, even nothing, about how musical equipment works at an electronic music event by organisers, technicians, and partygoers, which contributes to their marginalisation in the industry. However, several encouraging comments such as "good selection" and "fenomenal al maximo" praise the DJ for a good set and especially for selecting the tracks carefully.

This suggests that ro-minimal fans are becoming more open to women DJing and to various ways of transitioning between songs that are not necessarily seamless. However, they remain reticent to welcoming women fully into the community as DJs and producers, as they do not always sound, and act as expected.

I have noticed that people have certain judgements about women who DJ and their appearances in Romania, which also apply to the ro-minimal community. When asked about her views on women's representation in ro-minimal, Sonia, an interviewee in my research, said:

Yeah, I guess I don't know a lot of female ro-minimal DJs … because there aren't many. But you know what the thing is? Even if there's more women DJing in other genres, like mainstream techno … they're more sexualised. If you look at Deborah De Luca or Nina Kravitz, they really are sexy bombs and people often comment on their looks, and don't maybe even care about their mixing that much.

Me: And what about ro-minimal? How would you say the women who mix in this genre are?

Sonia: Normal, like nothing too strident or too much in terms of makeup or clothing, or how much skin they show. Like if you've seen Miss I, she just looks normal, she doesn't concern herself with her looks too much. (Interview with Sonia, 8 April 2022. Translated from Romanian by the author)

Although steps are being made towards the inclusion and recognition of women as musicians and DJs, the women who are famous in the club culture are often under scrutiny for their looks and have to conform to norms of female beauty. In turn, the norms of beauty are considered to distract, in a way, from their music (Gavanas & Reitsamer, 2013). Whilst it is true that women in music, and in society generally, are subjected to more rigorous beauty standards than men (Goldman & Waymer, 2014), makeup or clothing is not always a way of conforming to standards, but a articulation of personal style. It is interesting how Sonia assumes the problematic nature of looking good as a woman when DJing, as in her opinion, the audience start paying attention to their looks and not to their mixing. This is an opinion born out of disbelief at women's success and a generalised sexism, especially in the case of established female artists such as Nina Kraviz or Peggy Gou, notion supported by Gadir (2016) and Farrugia (2012). Women DJs are therefore often judged for their looks regardless of their different preferences for makeup, clothing, and general

appearance. The interview with Sonia supports this interpretation, as she suggests that it is preferrable for women who DJ to have a neutral look and blend in with the mass of cis male DJs, in order not to detract attention from the practice of DJing. As emphasised by McCabe et al. (2020) in their research on

Figure 5 Screenshot of a post asking about alternative collectives in ro-minimal. Source: ro-minimal Facebook group

wearing makeup at work, the wearing makeup or trying to look 'pretty' is seen as a way of asking for attention or being superficial and materialistic. They argue that makeup "is a reflexive agent that paradoxically provides women both a source of identity formation and self-confidence and a means of feeling ready to engage in the world, and yet fosters judgment of beauty against them" (McCabe et al., 2020, p. 657). In ro-minimal, too, makeup or 'girly' looks are often seen as a distraction from the 'serious' practice of DJing. Additionally, Miss I, who Sonia discusses in the interview, does not use a lot of makeup during her performance, but she has not been spared of judgement and prejudice, as shown in the YouTube comment section for her *Boiler Room* performance (Figure 4).

More examples of this marginalization of women and queer people in ro-minimal were found through my digital ethnography, particularly through online observation. I spent several months observing ro-minimal public groups on Facebook and Instagram. I primarily looked at posts made in ro-minimal

Facebook groups, but equally interesting, if not more so, were the comments to these posts. Comments are often less scrutinized by admins than the posts per se. Even so, there is no convincing evidence to show that online users show

their ‘true’ selves online (Marriott & Buchanan, 2014), so while these online comments reveal some views in the ro-minimal community, they are not generalisable.

As seen in Figure 5, a user posted in the Facebook group *ro-minimal*, asking for recommendations of labels and collectives owned by women and LGBTQIA+ people. The author of the posts says “please no jokes, hate speech is [not] tolerated under this post” (Anonymous user, 2020) which signals the lack of alternative voices in the ro-minimal subculture and the negative response this type of initiative usually receives from some fans. It also illustrates that women and queer people have been seen as the subject of jokes and hate speech, pointing not only to their discrimination but also to their lack of safety in the community. The vulnerability of women and queers in public spaces is a widespread phenomenon (Mellgren et al., 2018) and sexual harassment and assault are normalised in many societies around the world, with clubs being spaces where this often happens. However, Figure 5 indicates a clear interest for promoting alternative artists and practices within the ro-minimal community. Women (as well as queer, black, or disabled) artists are therefore not only seen as DJs, but also carry the responsibility of safeguarding ravers from dangers such as harassment and assault. This makes them even more valuable to the music industry, but it also means they must work harder to feel safe, both as ravers and as DJs. The ro-minimal post above, at the time when I noticed it, had gathered around twenty reactions, out of which most were ‘like’ and ‘love’ which show some interest and appreciation for initiatives promoting underrepresented groups in ro-minimal. There were also a few ‘haha’ reactions which suggest that this kind of initiative can be laughed at and not taken seriously. There is one comment in particular, shown in Figure 5, where someone discusses the state of music and ro-minimal these days, saying that “there’s no discrimination in music based on such things [gender, race, etc], I’m pretty sure labels won’t turn down good music because x is a girl or transgender.” This view is common in the ro-minimal community as another comment in the thread shows: “there is a lot of toxic masculinity in this group and I’m certain someone will go off or laugh as soon as I post this.” This comment thread exposes two positions in the ro-minimal community, one recognising the marginalisation of women and queer people and inspires change and encourages the recognition of artists from all backgrounds. The other side sees no problem with the status quo and “doesn’t

think” labels would turn down music based on gender or other “bullshit criteria” as the user in this post claims.

The debate about whether music and politics *should* mix at all happens on a global level with people believing that politics has no place in music, and that ‘society’ would be wrong to mix them by focussing on such criteria as gender or race (Garratt, 2019). Conversely, there is a plethora of women, non-binary and alternative gender and sexuality people that are not getting as many sets as their cis male counterparts (Farrugia, 2012; Gavanas & Reitsamer, 2013). Being denied opportunities or marginalised in a club culture where cis men DJ hold the reins, results in posts such as the one above, asking for alternative DJs, events, and music. This situation not only identifies the inevitable intersection of music and politics especially in terms of representation and professional recognition, but also suggests that structural changes are needed to achieve fairness in ro-minimal.

This section shows my investigation of the general perception of women and queer DJs and music producers in ro-minimal, placing my analysis in the context of Romania’s patriarchal society. Examples from my own experience as a DJ and the data from my online ethnography demonstrate how female artists are marginalised, assumed to have insufficient knowledge about DJing, they are often hypersexualised, and harshly criticised. All these actions are conducive to ro-minimal’s exclusive character. The following section considers how women in ro-minimal have responded to marginalisation, by articulating specific, avant-garde mixing and producing styles.

Femme sound and aesthetic

Another reason for women’s discrimination in ro-minimal that I focus on is the idea of a “feminine sound” (Lilleslåtten, 2016; Gadir, 2016) which is generally perceived as different and less attractive than established dominant sounds. In this case, the dominant sounds represent ‘masculine’ sounds, as they have been promoted and celebrated in the music industry, monopolising club cultures, and practices of music production and DJing (Gadir, 2016). As we have seen in the case of Miss I’s *Boiler Room* performance that received several negative and disparaging comments, there also exists an interest and curiosity about new sounds and styles of mixing in the ro-minimal community. However, while there is a tension between the criticism and acceptance of the

music that women produce and mix, this chapter indicates that the established ro-minimal sound that is produced by men is regularly preferred by fans.

When asked to describe their gender, several survey participants answered with 'minimal' or 'dark minimal'. This might be due to a possible gendering of the ro-minimal genre, but it could also be a result of translation and misunderstanding issues that can occur in multilingual research, both linguistically and culturally (Bachmann-Medick, 1996). In this case, many Romanian participants completed the survey in English, potentially mistaking 'genre' for 'gender.' In the Romanian language, the words for gender and genre are both *gen* which illustrates how closely these concepts are linked, leading to their overlapping when used in the English language. Yet based on the survey responses, it is difficult to say whether there is a specific feminine sound and aesthetic in ro-minimal. This is because there are few women who produce and DJ in mainstream ro-minimal online channels and on event line-ups, so there is not enough material around which respondents could form an opinion.

My interview participants struggled to name Romanian female musicians in the ro-minimal scene. I also I found it difficult to name women DJs of ro-minimal beyond Alexandra, Miss I, and IONA, who are the most well-known in Romania. However, it must be noted that there *are* in fact several women in minimal house/techno that perform at ro-minimal events, alas not from Romania. Margaret Dygas (Polish-born and Berlin-based) is a regular presence at ro-minimal festivals and club events in Romania, but there are others, for instance Oshana (from the USA), Olga Korol (from Ukraine), tINI (from Germany), or Sonja Moonear (from Switzerland). Romanian artists that receive similar levels of recognition as male counterparts such as Raresh or BRYZ are difficult to find in ro-minimal. As Sulcas (2012) mentions: "the achievements of female DJ's [sic] are not acknowledged to the same extent to which the achievements of male DJs are acknowledged, which could explain the underrepresentation of women in the DJ industry." Emerging artists such as Sophilia,[25] Cristina,[26] or I (as Lexia Majora)[27] are increasingly gaining recognition for their skills. Despite this positive change, barriers to women's appreciation in ro-minimal persists. For example, self-promotion on social media is expected in many lines of work

[25] https://soundcloud.com/sophiliaa
[26] https://soundcloud.com/crisiix
[27] https://soundcloud.com/lexiamajora

(Gunn, 2016) especially for self-employed artists and small business owners, including DJs. Due to the Instagram algorithms constantly changing (Duffy et al., 2021), however, it has become more difficult for all musical artists regardless of their gender or background to self-promote while trying to navigate content ranking algorithms on social media. I have shown that women work harder for professional recognition in ro-minimal, so self-promotion on social media increases the amount of work they must undertake, and therefore, could potentially minimise their exposure in this community. Equally, it could be argued that the social media algorithms, if understood and used efficiently, could provide opportunities for marginalised artists, thus working around the traditional DJ promotion apparatus.

Additionally, that most women at ro-minimal events come from outside of Romania potentially shows not so much a lack of female talent in Romania, as much as a general misogynistic attitude of Romanian society and the difficulty of breaking through the glass ceiling in the Romanian electronic music industry, as suggested by Nikolayi (2019). Female artists that come from other countries where it may have been easier to gain recognition are therefore more popular in Romania as they are already established artists before coming to play in the country. Also, in terms of queerness, there are no openly ro-minimal queer DJs that are well-known except for Romanian-born sEmoa, who lives in London where they are involved also in DJing, music production and videography. While I did not speak directly to the artist, I have observed their presence on their public Instagram account, which shows the artist playing at various events, mostly in the United Kingdom. This could be related to the artist residing in the UK, but also it can potentially mean they prefer playing in the UK, as opposed to Romania, to avoid homophobic attitudes. The absence of queerness in Romanian minimal music is not owing to an absence of queer artists necessarily, but I see it as a result of the general discrimination of queer people in Romanian society. If attitudes towards women in Romania are discriminatory, public opinions of LGBTQIA+ lifestyles are even more intolerant (Woodcock, 2019).

The data I analysed points to women in ro-minimal having distinct styles of producing and mixing compared to the norm in this genre. Leona, one of the interview respondents, talks about Margaret Dygas as having a particular sound

in her music productions and mixes. The Polish-born artist currently lives in Germany, but is present at many minimal house and techno events in Romania. She produces music that is deep, dubby and experimental, and suitable for various kinds of dancefloors. For instance, Dygas's track "Saasafras" released on record label *Perlon* has both the typical percussion of minimal house and dub techno, but is influenced by contemporary jazz and classical music. Another of her tracks called "Quintet (Fünf)" leans into slower groovy sounds, while simultaneously drawing from noise music, a genre that expressively uses noises, therefore expanding the definition of music itself (Cascone, 2000). Dygas is highly respected in the dance music industry, particularly in the (ro)-minimal community, as her boundary breaking music is daring and easily recognisable. In an interview for Resident Advisor (2007), Dygas jokingly mentions that she is:

> *A secret tribal girl, you know? Don't tell anyone. It's from when I used to go out in New York. That was the time the tribal house thing was going on, I was a big Danny Tenaglia fan. But don't write that down.*

Dygas is reticent to reveal her liking of tribal house, potentially due to fear of being criticised by the musical community. Women have rarely been seen as geniuses or even great artists in music (Reitsamer, 2018), and, as it takes a good enjoyer of music to produce good music, it can be inferred that women are also subjected to harsher criticism for their taste in music compared to men. Also, tribal house is frequently assumed to culturally appropriate African music (Maloney, 2023), so Dygas finds it difficult to publicly admit that she used to enjoy it and risk being associated with it. As Thornton (1995, p. 29) argues in her work on women's place in subcultures, " if [they] opt out of the game of 'hipness', they will often defend their tastes (particularly their taste for pop music) with expressions like 'It's crap but I like it'. In so doing, they acknowledge the subcultural hierarchy and accept their lowly position within it." Roberts (2023, para. 4), in her piece on enjoying pop music, also suggests that categorising some music that women like as "guilty pleasures" is minimising and shaming women's musical taste, thus further excluding them from participating in the musical communities they wish to access. This perception of women's music tastes as trivial is in line with the general view of female musicians as untalented and unknowledgeable (Bloustien, 2016). Multiple house and techno subgenres borrow from other genres, including tribal or Afro house, but in the

case of women DJs and producers, the negative aspects of these influences are emphasised. Therefore, if Dygas's enjoyment of tribal house demonstrates anything, it is having an eclectic taste in music, which she uses in production and mixing, and crafting her signature style.

Furthermore, Alexandra, one of the best-known DJs and producers on the underground music scene in Romania, and co-owner of music label *Melliflow*, talks about her style in an interview: "it's an intense eclectic journey through old and new, through decades in electronic music, through a vast pool of genres" (Nicholls, 2019). Alexandra's mixing exemplifies her broad approach to music. For example, in a "deep techno & breaks set at shesaid.so" available on YouTube (Mixmag, 2019), Alexandra plays a variety of genres, such as breakbeat, minimal, deep, and groovy house, and even UKG.[28] Her sets, particularly the one recorded for *She Said*, sound playful and cheerful, as her musical narrative has a fluid, unrestrained flow, as the DJ welcomes mood and tempo changes. Taylor (2008, p. 655) discusses eclecticism in relation to queerness and sexual freedom in the local dance music scene of Brisbane: "the aesthetic and performative qualities of music coupled with its fluidity, temporality and looseness of meaning make it perfectly suited to expressions of queerness." I apply this correlation to mixing styles such as Alexandra's. Also, I use the term "queer" not necessarily as related to sexual or gender identities, but as a political form of queerness and existing in the world without readily accepting social norms. While Russell (2020) uses the concept of queerness similarly to refer to digital identities in cyberspaces, I use it here to describe the eclectic mixing style and music taste of Alexandra, who seems to DJ unrestrained by the expectations of what ro-minimal should be or sound like. Even though planned as a continuous whole, her sets are sites of experimentation and freedom, challenging the limits and definitions of Romanian minimal techno and house.

Alexandra herself, in the same interview with Nicholls (2019), mentions the satisfaction she receives from mixing, as opposed to music production: "I'm a digger and a raver, I like to dance, I like the energy of a party. I like to be on the move all the time, I love to scout for music. I am a DJ to the bone. I plan to swim

[28] UK garage is a genre of music born in the UK in the 1990s and influenced by garage house, jungle, and R&B.

deeper into the process of making music, but it's not in my priorities now." Unlike the majority of well-known ro-minimal DJs, and of any genre for that matter, Alexandra is mostly only a DJ. In the current music industry climate, one of the prerequisites for becoming well-known and being booked for gigs is music production. Artists are expected to be multitalented: DJ, music producer, event promoter, social media expert and tour manager, as Trevino (2015) and Ahmed et al. (2012) argue in their papers on the complexities and hardships of modern DJing. Being a multitasking DJ is exhausting and does not fully allow them to focus on the craft of DJing, a skilled practice that should allow energy for a level of fun and pleasure. Few DJs such as Dr. Rubinstein or DJ CHIDA are well-known strictly DJs globally, which indicates the rarity of this practice. Thus, Alexandra can be considered a pioneer in the Romanian music industry through the distinctive sound of her mixes and productions, but also through specifically focussing on the craft of DJing. While she has been involved in a music production project under the name *The Apricots* with fellow DJ and life partner, DJ Slim Fit,[29] Alexandra remains centred on DJing, refining this skill both by using CDJs, and turntables in her practice.

This section illustrates that despite the lack of women DJs on ro-minimal line-ups, there are several established artists at ro-minimal events, although many of them are not Romanian. This shows an openness to gender equality in the community in general, but not so much on a national level. Also, the prominent female artists in the ro-minimal community often have a particular sound to their production or DJ sets, or they dedicate time to mixing rather than producing music. Women DJ are shown as creatively resourceful actors in an industry that is not geared towards their success and professional appreciation. The next section further delves into women's marginalisation in ro-minimal, by looking at how talent is perceived as a gendered category in this community.

Ro-minimal DJ gods and fangirls

This section looks at how people in the ro-minimal scene are perceived based on their gender. Existing gender studies and anthropological literature indicate that, indeed, cis men receive more professional recognition, admiration and are booked more often for gigs that are better paid than women in the electronic dance music industry (Gadir, 2016; Gavanas & Reitsamer, 2016). In ro-minimal,

[29] Previously known as 'Pîrvu'

a similar phenomenon occurs, as the data in my interviews suggests. Two female participants who are both involved in the ro-minimal community have referred to male ro-minimal DJs and producers as “gods”, “titans” and “wizards.” There are other examples in ro-minimal with Priku, a prominent ro-minimal producer and DJ, informally called ‘the president’ or Ricardo Villalobos, the so-called ‘father’ of minimal house and techno, also being referred to as ‘legend’ or ‘genius’ in the comments to a YouTube video showing a DJ set the artist did in Rome (Amore Music Experience, 2022). This terminology illustrates how creativity and musical prowess are regarded as male traits, idea that has been widely observed (Battersby, 1990) in the arts and indeed many areas of life. Specifically in ro-minimal, the view that men are extremely talented (often directly or indirectly implying that they are more talented than women) is linked to their access to music, music technology, teaching, and mentorship in music. Initially, during communism, women had good access to jobs and there was a level of gender equality that was promoted by the establishment (Oprica, 2008). However, as Oprica (2008, p. 30) shows, the “real power was held by an exclusive, male-dominated clique (with the exception of Elena Ceauşescu).”[30] So, men were more present in public spaces and had wider access to art and music, as Romanian society had strong patriarchal gender roles in place during the communist regime. Some of the DJs who founded ro-minimal are men born before 1989, therefore, although probably not on purpose, ro-minimal started and has continued to exist as a boys’ club (Ralston, 2017; Nikolayi, 2019). Also, it was influenced to some extent by the Romanian society’s perceptions of gender roles which theoretically endorse gender equality, but in practice fail to achieve that goal (Oprica, 2008). Only recently has ro-minimal opened the gate to women and non-cis male people to join the group and expand its limits, and as this thesis demonstrates, it is a rather lengthy and intricate process.

Leona, an interview participant who often attends ro-minimal festivals in Romania, enthusiastically describes the moment she accidentally met one of her idols, Margaret Dygas, at the Otopeni airport in București:

I actually met Margaret Dygas at the airport going to Sunwaves. It was so funny, I was getting off the plane in Romania and there was a mirror, I was fixing my

[30] The wife of Nicoale Ceaușescu, the leader of the Socialist Republic of Romania. She was also the deputy prime minister of Romania, and was known for her research in chemistry, although it is widely known now that she was awarded a PhD in chemistry solely based on her political position in the Communist Party.

hair in it and there was a girl next to me, had pinkish hair and she was doing the same. And I was looking at her wondering where do I know her from? And she's my idol, I love Margaret Dygas, and I asked her "are you Margaret Dygas" and she goes like "shhhh." But yeah, when it comes to female ro-minimal DJs that are Romanian there isn't a lot that I've heard of. Maybe it's more male-oriented in Romania? (Interview with Leona, 12 February 2021)

Leona ends her story by saying "maybe it's more male-oriented in Romania?" illustrating her awareness of how ro-minimal is dominated by men. Although in the same interview, Leona shows tremendous reverence for male artists such as Priku, her admiration for Dygas in fact equals, if not, overshadows that for the former artist. In this case, then, if Raresh and Priku are gods of ro-minimal, as male DJs are often seen in techno music cultures (Rietveld, 2013), Dygas could be regarded as a goddess in this community, by experimenting with unconventional sounds in ro-minimal. Leona met Dygas in an airport bathroom and spoke to her privately. Women's bathrooms in clubs or restaurants have often been referred to in popular culture as safe spaces where women momentarily share their hardships (often caused by the men in their lives) and are comforted and encouraged by other women (Koku, 2020) who have gone through similar situations and can spare advice and encouragement. Therefore, Leona and Dygas's meeting in the bathroom is articulated as a moment of intimacy and sisterhood, in the face of gender marginalisation.

Sorority in ro-minimal extends online, too. Leona describes in detail an experience where a beginner woman DJ was featured with a prominent ro-minimal promoter in London and received hatred online. My participant said, with a visibly disappointed appearance:

But something that did piss me off was this group called Unusual in London […] She was playing out in the open, Unusual must have spotted her and asked her to do a mix, but when they posted the mix in the ro-minimal community, the girl got so slathered. The community were like "2 years and she thinks she's a DJ" and I just felt so sorry for the girl. I've never seen it, I've never seen that kind of judgement before like that and I was just … the poor girl, how bad that must have been for her […] She must have been so delighted that they asked her to mix, and they were promoting her by posting this mix to all these pages and then, the horrible things that were said … nooooo. I wouldn't like to post my own mixes on there if that's what was happening to her. (Interview with Leona, 12 February 2021)

As in the case of Miss I, disproportionately negative comments about this female DJ were posted in an online ro-minimal group, and focussed heavily on the DJ's appearance. I was excited to hear about a new female DJ promoted by

the music promoter *Unusual*, but the overall experience of this promotion, or rather its reception by some fans, seemed misogynistic towards this DJ, exhibiting the wider discrimination against women in the ro-minimal community. Some comments described in the interview were not detrimental only to the DJ herself, but to aspiring female DJs, who could potentially be intimidated by these reactions so much that they never get the chance to DJ publicly. In Leona's words, the DJ got "slathered", and although I was not a first-hand witness of this livestream, I could sense the agony in my participant's voice when she was describing the incident. The sentence "the horrible things that were said … nooooo" illustrates that the language used by commenters on that livestream was extremely offensive. As Farrugia (2012) and Bloustien (2016) suggest, this type of sexist behaviour is commonplace in musical subcultures, and this applies in ro-minimal, too. This is a culturally ingrained phenomenon that happens in clubs, but also carries over into online forums and social media groups, as above.

Leona has been a passionate ro-minimal fan and DJ for many years. She owns a large vinyl collection that she cherishes. As a DJ, she carefully and meticulously constructs her sets, crafting complex musical narratives, as she says in our interview. She has received some attention and recognition in the ro-minimal community and one of her mixes was listened to over seven thousand times on Souncloud, which is considered a good reach on this alternative music platform (Hesmondhalgh et al., 2019). Despite her knowledge and confidence in her craft as a ro-minimal DJ, even Leona was discouraged by the comments made on the promotion video she described in the interview: "I wouldn't like to post my own mixes on there if that's what was happening to her." This paints ro-minimal as a community where women are poorly represented, but also where they have access and participation difficulties. As Pini (2001) contends, the misogyny and harsh criticism towards women's attempts to access the music industry are formulated in response to wider societal changes. These changes are mostly around how women act in the public sphere, particularly in nightclubs or at raves, partying as hard as men and refusing to stay confined to the private sphere of the home as they have for centuries in Western societies. In Romania, these collective shifts in women's behaviours and liberal attitudes to partying and DJing have been met with

resistance, as gender equality remains a theoretical aspiration without much basis in lived experience (Oprica, 2008).

To further examine the extent of, and variation in, the marginalisation of female and queer DJs in the ro-minimal community, I analysed a video posted in the main ro-minimal group on Facebook. While not necessarily representative of all videos in this group as a whole, it is reminiscent of many similar snippets showing women sharing their performances, as I explain in this paragraph.[31] It is a 30-second video of a female DJ playing a set; she appears to be having fun, she is smoking, dancing, and interacting with the camera by looking straight into it and sometimes smiling. There is small replica of the David sculpture in the background and a warm, dim pink light surrounding the DJ and the decks. The viewer can see the upper body of the DJ, the mixing decks, and a green houseplant as well, thus the space seems cozy and intimate. The fragment of the set is well-executed with smooth transitions between tracks, and with a clear and crisp sound. However, the comment section of the video presented the same issue of negativity, judgement and hate that is seen in many responses to women DJing. Facebook users responded to the video by saying things such as 'ewwww wtf is this? Why is that model pretending to be a DJ?', 'she is sexy', 'cringe' and 'Onlyfans link anyone?'. These comments strongly suggest, once again, an instance of hypersexualisation of the DJ (Gavanas & Reitsamer, 2016). The DJ's femme-presenting body and appearance are objectified as most comments on the video are about the DJ's body and looks rather than her DJ skills. Drawing on Puwar's (2004) work on women's representation in the media, Gavanas and Reitsamer (2013) argue that female DJs often have to manage their image, as any element of their appearance could be criticised and interpreted in a myriad of – mostly negative – ways, leading to their depreciation and further marginalisation.

Furthermore, the comments on the video asking for the DJ's OnlyFans[32] account, promote some problematic views that stem from the same misogyny

[31] Video link: https://www.facebook.com/groups/2116665131899501/permalink/2931190830446923/ [Accessed in 2021]

[32] Content subscription service, known for and mainly used by sex workers to produce pornographic content. The service is also used by fitness instructors, artists and various kinds of content creators who want to share their work.

that I have illustrated so far. The first idea is that female DJs are in the public eye to be objectified by audiences (Reitsamer, 2012). Particularly when the DJ is seen as traditionally attractive, they are associated with modelling and even sex work. Bell (2009) suggests that sex work has been considered immoral and socially unacceptable historically, but it is slowly being destigmatised and legalized, specifically in Euroamerican cultures. In Romania, sex work has also been decriminalised since 2014, however public attitudes to it remain suspicious and judgemental (Alexandru, n.d.). The beliefs articulated in the comments to the video show that women's work is not particularly appreciated in ro-minimal, thus further minimising their activities and contributions to the community.

The DJ's interaction with the camera in the same video illustrates a point of contention in the music industry especially since DJ booths and the position of the DJ at parties have changed over the years. Traditionally, DJs used to play in a booth, out of the ravers' sight, and physically separated from the dancefloor. As Frankie Knuckles suggests based on his practice as a DJ, ravers are connected by music rather than by the DJ (Ross et al.,1995). In Knuckles' view, the DJ should not necessarily be at the centre of the rave. He also argues that many ravers have mixing skills similar to the DJ, so in that way, the music and the rave act as equalisers among participants, whether they are dancers or DJs. I agree with this view as it could minimise the potential arrogance or conceit of DJs that find themselves suddenly famous. Yet there is criticism over how some DJs conduct their sets, especially in the American tradition of EDM (Electronic Dance Music). Here, the DJ is at the forefront of parties, facing the crowd and dancing, thus potentially giving the impression that they do not pay attention to their set, or even lack mixing skills (Attias, 2011). Ross et al. (1995) also discuss the centrality and glorification of the DJ, which can often lead to DJs becoming arrogant. While these concerns are important, I argue that dancing, taking pleasure in moving one's body, or showing it off are key components of feminist, body-positive and queer practices (Nikolayi, 2019; Marsh, 2006) that should be present in DJ booths and clubs. When DJs such as the one in the short video on the ro-minimal Facebook group choose to dance or smile, they are often put down by audiences and criticised over their playful behaviour, which is seen as a distraction from the 'seriousness' of the music played. I suggest, instead, that taking up space through dancing and playfulness while

DJing are necessary practices that can redress gender imbalances in the club industry, while expanding the practice of DJing. Also, as DeChaine (1997, p. 33) argues, when DJs engage in ludic actions, they oppose “forces of oppression which circulate in [club] culture” and raves become more subversive and anti-establishment, resisting the seriousness of some music scenes and that of everyday, regimented life. It is especially important for female or queer DJs to engage in such playful behaviour and to take up space and reclaim the centre spot at raves after historically being marginalised. They also encourage ravers to do the same, and I would suggest that such playfulness could potentially result in clubs becoming safer, friendlier environments for all, but particularly for marginalised people.

The label of ‘playfulness’, however, is sometimes used pejoratively to belittle those practice it, as I found in another ro-minimal group I follow on Facebook, called *La Romanasi*. A 28-second video stood out,[33] with over three hundred reactions and several comments at the time, and one of the many instances in which women are ruthlessly criticised. The video depicts a group of three femme-presenting partygoers, filming themselves as they dance at a ro-minimal event. In the background, Petre Inspirescu, one of the founders of music label [a:rpia:r], can be seen playing a DJ set. The three partygoers are at the centre of the video, dancing and playfully looking at the camera, action which I believe started a wave of negative comments. I see the video as a form of reclaiming and reconceptualising the space of the party (DeChaine, 1997) by the three ravers, playfully including the DJ in the video, although keeping the focus on themselves. Some of the reactions to this video exemplify how difficult it can be for women to enjoy ro-minimal music in their own ways. As Cline (1992) argues in her work on rock music fandom, women are often challenged on their musical knowledge and taste and they are seen as posers rather than fans with ‘real’ knowledge and passion, and this can be observed in ro-minimal, too. Whilst posers are common in all musical genres and areas of life, women are often assumed to be in this position, with the stereotype of groupie or fangirl still being predominant (Gerrard, 2022). Moreover, as women have had consistently less access to the music world as practitioners, they have often accessed it as fans. So, to downplay their contributions to the ro-minimal community, and

[33] The video can be accessed here, on La Romanasi Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/laromanasi/videos/1749447971889255

infantilise their tastes only proves the high level of gender-based marginalisation. The comments to the video are misogynistic and prove that gender inequality is rampant in this community, among DJs and fans. One comment to the video reads “embarrassing lol (laugh out loud)”, which emphasises an element of shame for the ravers’ behaviour perhaps because it is seen as disingenuous and disrespectful towards members of this community with ‘real’ knowledge and expertise. Another comment says “mamasitas” meaning something along the lines of “little mamas” in a sexual way, which is another example of women’s objectification and the hypersexualisation on the dancefloor (Fileborn, 2016). Lastly, the most misogynistic comment reads “pussy ID?” which reduces the women in question to their genitalia and sexual functions. This goes beyond hypersexualisation, conveying the dancefloor as an unsafe space where women exist solely for the sexual pleasure of men (Sheard, 2011).

This section presents an analysis of interview data and material from online observation to depict the distinct perceptions of men and women in ro-minimal with the former being seen as experts and geniuses and the latter as uninitiated, unknowledgeable fans or musicians. This gendered view of fandom and musical skills has implications for the safety of ravers, especially that of women and queer people. It has to be noted, nonetheless, that the reactions to videos exist in the cyberspace rather than in a face-to-face context. This is not to say that online comments are any less real than face-to-face ones, but simply that they might be articulated differently – this aspect is examined in the next section.

The ro-minimal dancefloor: safety concerns

I have shown how women are perceived and treated in ro-minimal online forums and social media groups: they are challenged, judged, sexualised, and under-appreciated for their contributions to the scene. To further investigate the issue of gender representation and imbalances in ro-minimal, I look at the general atmosphere in this subculture and at how safe people, especially women, feel at parties.

The three women that I interviewed for my research said they feel safer in the ro-minimal community as opposed to parties in other musical genres. Leona acknowledged how generally at parties, men can invade women’s personal

space and harass them (Fileborn, 2016), but explains that ro-minimal is superior in this respect:

That's what I love about the ro-minimal scene. People know what they're going there for, know what to expect … they're a lot more mature in the way they act restrained… I'm 37 now, I like to go somewhere without idiots annoying me, you don't get that with ro-minimal. Everyone is cool. (Interview with Leona, 12 February 2021)

In Leona's opinion, the demographic attracted to this style of music and raving is mature both in terms of the age of participants, and in how they take up space on the dancefloor. Ro-minimal is a relatively obscure, multifaceted musical genre that attracts people who are interested in the music itself rather than attending parties to get drunk, high or find sexual partners, as it often happens in clubbing to mainstream genres such as pop or American EDM (Fileborn, 2016). Bøhling (2014) suggests that drinking and taking drugs are common in dance music subcultures, and they are often stigmatised. However, while regular in the ro-minimal scene, alcohol and other drugs contribute to the general atmosphere of friendliness and solidarity at events (Kavanaugh & Anderson, 2008), and one which is inclusive and considerate of all ravers. Another research participant, Sonia, mirrors this opinion in her interview:

I think people are welcoming in the ro-minimal community, they want to show you how things are done, so they take on this role of an expert – "oh so you haven't taken this drug before? Let mem know you, I'll give you some. There's a few things like in any cult. […] People are friendly, and drugs help with this, and people help each other. […]

Yeah, I feel pretty safe and comfortable at parties. No one is being creepy or anything annoying like that. You just dance and feel good. And you are just free to be yourself in whatever way you want. (Interview with Sonia, 8 April 2022. Translated from Romanian by the author)

In Sonia's understanding, the sense of safety on ro-minimal dancefloors is sustained by the liberalism of this community, enabling people to be their authentic selves. This is a common attribute of the raving scene which has often been characterised as an escape from daily norms and anxieties (St John, 2004; 2006). This argument is supported by data from my online surveys. When asked what attracts them to the music, around 70% of the people surveyed, answered using words such as "atmosphere of freedom", "nice, strong community", "beautiful people" - here referring to personality characteristics instead of physical appearance. This points indeed to a perceived sense of unity and general inclusivity. While unity is a common trait of events within

electronic music cultures (Rietveld, 2018; Anderson, 2009), feeling safe does not always accompany this experienced unity. Thus, despite a general sense of safety and comfort reported by the women I interviewed, there is also an acknowledgement of how men's perceived superiority has ramifications for the ro-minimal community. We saw that above, when Leona said she did not want to post her mixes online out of fear of being subjected to misogynistic comments. Also, Sonia said in our interview:

I feel good as a woman, the community is educated. The woman is not seen as an object, like when you enter the club everyone looks at you. This attitude irritates me massively! As a fan, I'm ok, but when you look at the ration men/women, it's surely not good. But let's not expect men to do anything about this, the status quo works for them. (Interview with Sonia, 8 April 2022. Translated from Romanian by the author)

Although Sonia feels safe as a raver and fan of ro-minimal and believes the ravers are generally not sexist, she is dissatisfied with how the community is built: by men and for men. Furthermore, even if the community is perceived as safer than mainstream club culture, there is room for improvement so that women can have a more prominent role in how this community progresses. This discrepancy between DJ booths and dancefloors indicates that gender inequality and sexism, although decreasing, are commonplace in ro-minimal (Nikolayi, 2019). Rather than being articulated in the form of incidents such as sexual harassment and other forms of sexual violence, sexism has become common knowledge that many have accepted, and some have become tired of fighting against.

Dance music subcultures have long been seen as spaces for people to perform their identities freely, however this has not been a democratic and fair process for all ravers. Women and queers are among those who have arguably had most to suffer from this as they are the demographic that endures the most sexual harassment and assault in clubs (Fileborn, 2016; Ross, 2021). The fact that people generally feel safe at ro-minimal events is positive, but intriguing, given that Romanian society and the Romanian music industry are still strongly patriarchal (Oprica, 2008). One other reason for ravers reporting a sense of safety could be related to ro-minimal dancing. Like the music, it is also minimal and introspective, as Leona describes:

You only need about a square on the floor. You don't need any more space than that. You literally have your feet moving to the way the music is, and the

deeper it gets, the lower you get. You know? You'd be getting into it; you don't need to move around the floor. So, if you're in the club, you have your spot. You know when you get into a bit of banter with people, I tell them "See this square? That's mine so stay there!" You don't need to be jumping around the place. (Interview with Leona, 12 February 2021)

Sonia echoes this opinion in our interview, saying "you just need your own little square and you're good for the whole event." Delimitating personal space in a rave is an important characteristic of the ro-minimal atmosphere, enabling ravers to 'own' a portion of the dancefloor, which is a relatively democratic practice that could reduce unpleasant interactions between ravers. It also allows ravers, especially women, to feel safer and more in control of their bodies and of the space around them. Naturally, overlaps and misunderstandings occur, but solving these issues between ravers allows them to strengthen their bonds and is part of the standard dialogue and negotiation of space at raves (Farrugia, 2012).

Socialisation at raves further sheds light on the issue of gender imbalances with regard to the dancefloor. Due to lockdowns and restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic, there were no legal parties organised from 2020 until 2022, with some exceptions. However, I did attend a few ro-minimal events before the pandemic where generally I felt safe as a female raver. After 2020, I have attended virtual parties, livestreams and watched online sets where people socialised in various ways, but mostly by commenting on videos of DJs mixing, aspect which I investigate in the next three chapters. To an extent, the pandemic transformed the definition of safety on dancefloors into to cyber-safety, something that women have had to be particularly aware of (Frazier, 2023).

In my experience of ro-minimal, ravers socialise in quite traditionally heteronormative ways. That is, sometimes ravers sometimes flirt through dance. At the ro-minimal events that I attended, both indoors and outdoors, I felt safe and there was no harassment or aggressive behaviour from other ravers, so, I concur with Leona's and Sonia's views of ro-minimal as a generally safe community to be and dance in. A few times I have been approached by men and had dialogues with them on the dancefloor, but whenever I was not in the mood for conversation, I communicated that, and it was understood. Also, at an event in *Guesthouse* before the pandemic, while I was dancing with my friend, I

heard two men in the background saying something along the lines of “check out that cool girl, in front of you!” I would not, however, class this as problematic behaviour, because flirting and forming consensual bonds with people are part of club culture (DeChaine, 1997) and it is one of the reasons why raving is so attractive. If people are respectful of each other and their boundaries, they can enact elements of themselves unrestrainedly, through dancing, flirting and general socialising, as Rietveld (2013) mentions in her work on techno raves.

This section assesses the perception of safety in the ro-minimal community, with a focus on women’s perceptions of ro-minimal dancefloors. I show that there is sexism and misogyny online in the ro-minimal community, but at in-person events, fewer such attitudes are reported, which does not necessarily mean that it happens less, as I explain in the following section. However, as Sonia suggested in her interview, the way that ro-minimal events are centred around men exposes the gender imbalances that marginalise women in this community. With women rarely gracing ro-minimal DJ booths, there is scope for sexism and misogyny to resurface and negatively impact on the ro-minimal community. The next section considers ro-minimal’s relation to other underground genres and looks at how these collaborate to provide diverse rave experiences.

Alternative underground scenes in Romania

Finally, I discuss how alternative music scenes co-exist and collaborate with ro-minimal, and how notions of gender equality are articulated through cooperation. Ro-minimal is the foremost underground music subculture in Romania, especially in București and other large cities in the country, but it is not the sole one, so I look at how gender disparities and dancefloor safety are perceived and felt in night venues around București, where music of various other genres is played.

Nightclubs rotate music genres depending on the night and on the occasion (e.g., they often play ro-minimal, but on Valentine’s Day they might host disco events, or for queer nights harder techno is generally played). There are nightclubs in București such as *Control*, *Krystal* or *Grădina Monteoru* where genres such as tech-house, ballroom techno[34] or disco are commonly heard.

[34] A genre of music with Latino and African American origin, born in the underground queer culture of New York.

These genres each bring a variety of partygoers with mixed tastes and backgrounds, as well as ideas about gender equality and notions of consent. Tepșanu (2020) reports that *Control*, which is maybe the most popular club in the capital for alternative dance music, is perceived as a safer space than other more mainstream clubs in the city, although sexual harassment incidents often ensue here too:

> *Before the pandemic, I used to go only to Control and Macaz, because I thought they were safer spaces for women than all other clubs in București. I used to meet only with people I knew, so the risk of being harassed was minimized, because those who know you, they know you as "that damned feminist" … that's my reputation, so people do not dare to disturb you unless they lose control somehow. Which can happen often, including from men who say they are allies, feminists, or leftists. (Mihaela Drăgan in Tepșanu, 2020)*

As playwright and actor Mihaela Drăgan says above, harassment and abuse are normalised in all clubs in the Romanian capital, and indeed in nightspots around the world (Fileborn, 2016; Grazian, 2009). Although places such as *Control* are generally seen as less unsafe spaces than most clubs in București, women must remain careful and anticipate any dangers that they might encounter. This is an issue in clubs, but extends to most public places (Kearl, 2014). A study done for the feminist charity Centrul Filia by Băluță and Tufiș (2022), shows that public perceptions of sexual violence in Romania often fail to acknowledge the fault of the abuser, and instead the blame is attached to survivors of abuse. Most pertinently for this research, the study also explains how laws against sexual harassment and assault are not dependably implemented, which deepens the issue of safety in nightclubs.

To redress the gender inequalities in the Romanian underground music industry, a DJing platform for women and nonbinary artists was born in București – CORP. This platform, whose name translates as 'body' in English, has become culturally significant in Romania and in some parts of Europe, promoting women and nonbinary artists, and the transformation of nightclubs into safer spaces, which is a common aim of queer collectives and platforms (DeChaine, 1997). Whilst at first CORP organised small-scale DIY projects, they now perform shows in major nightclubs in București such as *Control* and *Guesthouse* (where they host queer nights in collaboration with other electronic music artists), as well as abroad in Berlin or on renowned international radio stations. For instance, Admina, one of the founders of CORP, is often seen

DJing hard techno in *Control*, while under the name Lili Putana, they play Latino electronic music at other venues in București. CORP also have various shows on the radio and online platforms, highlighting femme, nonbinary, and queer talent.

For example, Chlorys, a DJ, producer and co-founder of CORP has had residencies on NOODS radio station, an international broadcaster from Bristol. They also played numerous guest mixes for shows on LYL Radio, a French broadcasting service, and on Black Rhino Radio from București. Chlorys's experimental style focusses on the sounds and utterings of the flora and fauna, as seen in the artwork for one of their shows on LYL Radio. The artwork is an image of a creature, perhaps a crustacean or even a fossil on a beach, and the title "Primordial Soup" is evocative of the origins of the natural world and music.[35] Chlorys's interest in the relationship between electronic music and the natural environment is a common endeavour of artists, especially those who consider themselves experimental, by borrowing a variety of elements from spaces and forms of life and non-life from the environment (Cage, 1961). Therefore, through eclecticism and anti-establishment experimentation practices (Taylor, 2008), CORP encourages and supports the diversification of the Romanian music industry, and subsequently, of the ro-minimal scene, too.

Another example of this diversification and of cooperation and skill-sharing is from 2020, when CORP together with NGO Rezidența 21, a cultural foundation in Romania, developed open calls and projects for artists in the country. I responded to an open call and was selected for an experimental DJing programme for artists from underrepresented categories, but due to pandemic restrictions, I was unable to attend it. I have followed the development of the programme closely and I am in touch with a few artists who participated in the project, learning music production, improvisation, and performance skills. The programme illustrates a powerful sense of cooperation and experimentation, characteristic of queer platforms (Taylor, 2008). It also displays, as Abtan (2016) argues in her work on electronic music female collectives, the benefits of skill-sharing for diversifying electronic music culture, and in this case – underground electronic music in Romania and globally. Two of the CORP

[35] The artwork of the mix on Soundcloud can be accessed here: https://soundcloud.com/chlorys/lyl-radio-primordial-soup-w-chlorys-03112022

founders, who tutored the artists in residence, when discussing the creative process in music in *Electronic Beats* (2018), mention how technological limitations or machines malfunctioning contribute to the originality of their music. While this example shows the resourcefulness of these underrepresented artists, it also illustrates how they deal with funding shortages and lack of technical support or equipment, as also shown by Rowley (2009) in her work on Chicago House music groups.

The existence of collectives such as CORP also benefits the Romanian electronic music scene by diversifying the aesthetics of performance and that of the DJs. For example, I analyse the artwork for one of the podcasts called "Corpcast" that CORP do for Black Rhino Radio, a music broadcaster from the Romanian capital. The image shows a closeup of the artists who are, in addition to DJs, drag queens.[36] As McGlotten (2018) claims, drag art and performance are strongly political acts, as this form of entertainment can foster societal change subtly and in a fun way. First, the names of the artists are intriguing: Aphrodite Heaven references the Antique Greek goddess of beauty and sexual love, which could be connected to sexual liberation and taking pleasure in self-care and appearance, both ideas promoted by queer culture (DeChaine, 1997). Also, the name of the second artist, Rayne O'Plasty, is a play on the word 'rhinoplasty' – the surgery that reshapes the nose. This sort of word play is common in drag art (Kornstein, 2019), and in this case, it features a surgery that has long been deemed as superficial and vain (Chinski et al., 2013), but showing it in a ludic, humorous manner. The artists shown in the event's artwork are wearing colourful, expressive makeup and big wigs that complement their femme aesthetics. The DJs are also shown posing in vogue dance moves. Vogueing is a highly stylised house dancing that came from the 1960s Harlem ballroom scene, but which was popularised in Madonna's famous video for Madonna's song *Vogue* and shown in the documentary *Paris is Burning* (Halberstam, 2003). By promoting drag, ballroom and vogueing, as well as alternative aesthetics of performance styles, CORP show a part of electronic music that is often hidden in Romania due to prejudice against women and queer people. It showcases female and nonbinary talent, as well as genres of

[36] The artwork for the event can be accessed on Corp Platform's Instagram account: https://www.instagram.com/p/Cf-868gDmg_/

music or dancing styles that otherwise would be missing from the dancefloors of Romanian nightclubs.

Institutions such as CORP, that have artists play in clubs *Control* and *Guesthouse* where ro-minimal is routinely played, carry out a significant amount of work for increasing women's and queer people's representation in Romanian underground and mainstream music. Simultaneously, they also encourage the implementation of safety policies in nightclubs. DJ booths and dancefloors become more inclusive and safer for people of all genders, sexual orientations, or ethnic background as a result of the interaction between ro-minimal and other alternative music scenes in Romania. These collaborations could encourage positive change and updated practices of inclusivity. However, I argue that women and marginalised gender people feeling unsafe in nightclubs remains a major issue that needs constant attention and reform from formal state institutions in Romania, to be properly implemented and maintained.

Conclusion

This chapter analyses the ways in which gender and queer identities are articulated in the ro-minimal community. I gathered data from online interviews, surveys, online observation, media analysis and autoethnography to throw light on how women and nonbinary DJs and producers of ro-minimal are still widely marginalised. I demonstrate that the ro-minimal community is largely centred around cis men in terms of how event organisation, line-ups and the kind of music played in the community, but also in terms of the makeup of the community itself and gender representation among fans. Also, by focussing on alternative underground music in Romania, I contextualise my analysis. I explain how, as they occur in the electronic music scene more widely, various forms of sexism and gender prejudice co-exist in the ro-minimal subculture. Although my analysis points to positive change being promoted in ro-minimal, there is a striking lack of representation for women and non-conforming gendered people, all while cis men DJs and producers of ro-minimal are glorified. I therefore argue that the difference in how men, women and nonbinary people are represented and treated in ro-minimal leads to the latter two having to accomplish more in their careers than cis men to receive professional acknowledgement. Also, I focus on the articulation of a distinct femme sound aesthetic within ro-minimal which I observed. This shows that

marginalised artists are, by choice or by force, in positions where they create unconventional, original music.

Lastly, I contend that although the electronic music scene fosters numerous initiatives to popularise women and nonbinary DJs and their specific sounds in Romania, ro-minimal is, still profoundly discriminatory towards any producer, DJ or fan that is not a cis man. A plethora of changes could be implemented societally and at a policy level such as promoting safeguarding schemes that would require nightclub staff being trained to respond to ravers asking for help regarding sexual harassment and violence in nightclubs. These measures would promote gender equality in the ro-minimal community, while also enabling this community to be inclusive and safe for all artists, ravers, and fans. The next chapter examines the relationship between ro-minimal, healing and performance with a primary focus on my experiences of “musicking” (Small, 1999, p. 9) during the pandemic while struggling with and healing from trauma.

Chapter 5: Healing with ro-minimal at home

This chapter examines the role of music, particularly ro-minimal, in my recovery from mental health conditions and trauma. It is primarily an autoethnographic chapter, analysing my healing process in everyday life as I navigate the lockdown period, while being isolated and experiencing mental health struggles. I consider the relationship between ro-minimal and embodiment practices, performing at an online music festival, housework, and academic work. I illustrate the therapeutic qualities of music, and how music illuminates the multiple processes by which people are constituted through their experiencing it, but also through community, skill, practice, national and gender identity.

Music has been shown to influence human behaviours and moods (DeNora, 2014), with theorists such as Wang and Agius (2018) demonstrating the positive effects of music on people who suffer from mental health conditions. DeNora (1999) argues that music helps to articulate and structure the self, so depending on the music consumed, one articulates distinct parts of oneself. For instance, I used ambient music to enable a state of serenity and introspection, as opposed to hard techno or pop music which were used to articulate and release pent-up energy, or ro-minimal for a boost of vigour while maintaining a sense of calm. I primarily draw inspiration from literature on music and healing in this chapter, however I use various other works from the anthropology and sociology of self-healing (Seligman, 2010), as well as psychology and medicine to show the relation between music therapy and wellbeing (Wang & Agius, 2018). I also draw on literature on online communities (Osler, 2019; Zahavi & Salice, 2016; Miller, 2012) and the anthropology of dance, bodies, and movement (Sklar, 1991; Wulff, 2001) to support my arguments about the specific ways in which ro-minimal in its various forms has contributed to my healing. The link between ro-minimal and mental health is key to understanding this genre, especially as the community around it found new ways of dealing with isolation and mental illness during the pandemic, and, as I show in this and the next two chapters, they have utilised ro-minimal to assuage the negative effects of the pandemic. Understanding the relationship between ro-minimal and healing is also useful to future research into this music and its application in contexts other than nightclubs and festivals, and promotes its potential use in mindfulness or healing practices. Lastly, if other chapters deal with ro-minimal alone, this

chapter and the next show ro-minimal as a part of wider everyday practices which communicates with other genres, revealing its porous nature. To relegate the non-ro-minimal elements of my healing process would be an inaccuracy and it would fail to show ro-minimal's adaptability not only as a genre, but as part of daily activities: for instance, I describe leisurely listening to ro-minimal, dancing to it, and also practising yoga with it in the background, writing or doing housework. These practices illustrate ro-minimal's position in the dance music industry, but also its key role in everyday life.

Context

It is March 2020 and the situation in the country and around the world is looking dire. COVID-19 is spreading rapidly, and many people are very ill and dying in overworked hospitals. The UK government has just announced the first lockdown which means that we have to spend most of our time indoors, with very restricted time outdoors, to limit the spread of the virus. Everyone I know thinks or hopes this will last a couple of weeks and the internet is full of memes about getting bored at home or wearing protective hazmat suits when going grocery shopping.

We know now that the pandemic as well as the lockdowns and restrictions have, in fact, lasted almost two years, on and off. Besides the physical health and livelihoods of millions of people around the world being affected by COVID-19, our mental health collectively and individually was critically affected and has putatively resulted in a pandemic of mental illness (Choi et al., 2020). Self-isolation, the inability to meet friends and family or go to work in person, the implied and felt danger of the COVID-19 virus and the threat it poses to health and human connections all contributed to increasing rates of mental illness globally (Smith et al., 2020). Furthermore, for some, being indoors for extended periods of time with their own thoughts has brought up painful or traumatic memories that were otherwise supressed. Steir-Livny (2022) points out how the lockdown caused the reemergence of traumatic memories for Holocaust survivors in Israel.

My own situation of trauma resurfacing is comparable to the example above. Initially, I felt I was handling the lockdown well. One of my flatmates at the time was my best friend, which made the social remoteness easier. Our house had a

back garden and I felt relatively comfortable and sheltered from the virus and its consequences. However, when an old trauma returned after a video call with a friend, I became overwhelmed with emotions and intrusive thoughts and began experiencing severe anxiety and depression. There were also some specific issues about my circumstances which complicated my situation: I was away from my family in Romania and although they supported me, it was difficult not to have them close by in that critical time. Also, my then partner lived away from Exeter, so I was separated from key people in my life. In addition, I felt severely alienated from my research colleagues and friends. Due to the complex nature of my trauma, I found it challenging to discuss it with many people. As Plante et al. (2022) argue, traumatised people often experience fear, but more importantly shame, which obstructs their social relations, something with which I struggled. Furthermore, at the start of 2021, when the final restrictions were eased in the UK, my ex-partner and I ended our relationship, which drastically worsened my mental state, causing me to experience large periods of time where I was unable to work, or even engage in daily activities.

Before I delve into the subject of mental health and music, I want to briefly discuss an issue that is generally taken for granted in society. Mental health and illness are getting increasing amounts of attention, but currently they are still not taken very seriously in medicine and generally in societies, often being regarded as weaknesses (Ferguson et al., 2019), and they are attributed to individual difficulties and circumstances. However, mental health and illness are only a small part of larger narratives about the causes of individual struggles. Structural problems such as governments' failure to meaningfully deal with social issues forces individuals to act through setting up charities and raising money for various social and political causes (Silvasti & Riches, 2014). Similarly, as Davies (2021a) argues, mental health issues are often seen as individual ones in Euroamerican societies. She claims that capitalism is at the root of the current global mental health crisis. Other structural conditions such as racism, or patriarchy also negatively impact on certain populations and their circumstances. Olfman (1994, pp. 259-260) for instance, mentions that "[women] continue to face challenges to [their] mental health. […], we are still criticized should we choose to focus some of our energy and talent outside of the domestic sphere; we have few social supports to facilitate combining

Motherhood with career ambitions; we continue to fight for the right to own our bodies; we live in fear of random violent acts of hatred, such as rape and physical abuse." In this example, all these institutional pressures, then, have a large role in the deterioration of people's mental health, especially for women. While I acknowledge these structural issues' effect on individuals, and more precisely on myself, I nevertheless do not expound on the specific issues I have faced in my autoethnographic account. Therefore, I mention my trauma inasmuch as I analyse its relationship to anthropological notions of illness as a social experience of health and disease (Young, 1982). Confidentiality is important, especially when exposure can have unforeseen consequences.

Daily structure and ro-minimal

Music has always been a significant part of my life. I have been singing since I was a toddler, and I went to music school for eight years. I learnt to play classical music, performance, and theory, and I was part of an orchestra and several choirs. Numerous studies demonstrate the link between playing a musical instrument and increased brain plasticity, cognitive development (Thompson & Schlaug, 2015) and protection against cognitive impairment and dementia in later life (Balbag et al., 2014). During my undergraduate degree, I was in a folk band, and more recently, I discovered electronic dance music and have subsequently become a DJ. Initially, my PhD topic was related to mushroom picking and capitalist economies in Eastern Europe, but discovering electronic music reconnected me with my lasting passion for music. When I started the new PhD and DJing, I felt revitalised and powerful. That being said, I did not think music would play such an important part in my healing a year and a half into the PhD, when I had started to experience depression and anxiety, as part of a Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) diagnosis and the resurfacing of complex trauma. Additionally, I have been struggling with chronic pain for several years, and during the pandemic, its impact on my overall health deepened. It was the first time in my life that I was paying full attention to my mental and emotional health and experiencing such trauma caused me to socially withdraw. All I was able to focus on was the experience of pain and suffering, which is a common response in people with depression and anxiety (Girard et al., 2014). I withdrew from social life, work, leisure activities, friends, and initially even music, the thing I felt I enjoyed the most. My daily schedule

was as follows, with slight variations: wake up, shower, eat, watch TV, and scroll through social media content; then eat and maybe go for a walk, more TV and sleeping. Music would sometimes be in the background, but I did not particularly care about the genre, as long as it was easy to listen to or it did not remind me of the newly resurfaced trauma.

The way I revived my close relationship with music was through yoga and meditation. Besides these practices being beneficial to my mental health through focussing on being in the present (Behan, 2020) and sitting with my thoughts instead of attempting to make them disappear, the ambient music which accompanied the practices played a major role in my healing. Ambient music used in meditations is gentle, repetitive, normally played on piano or harp, and is sometimes mixed with sounds from the natural environment such as rustling leaves, or a flowing river. Although ambient music can sometimes encourage the expression of heavy emotions, which is arguably not such a relaxing experience (Viega, 2014), this musical genre has been suggested to soothe the nervous system and is known to create a sense of safety and calm (Becker-Blease, 2004) for the listener. The sounds and soundscapes of ambient music often appear in ro-minimal tracks, too. I elaborate on it in this chapter chapter, but for instance the track “Glossary” by ro-minimal artist Barac contains sounds similar to frogs’ croaking. This sound is repeated throughout the track, thus contributing to the track’s closeness to soundscapes of the natural environment, and to a mysterious, but peaceful mood. This quality of ro-minimal music makes this genre ideal not only for raving and casual listening, but also for healing and embodiment practices that I discuss in this chapter – yoga and meditation. Here, I also draw on the Motherbeat philosophy which house DJ and producer Eris Drew has popularised (Minister, 2022). In Drew’s viewpoint, “this divine healing energy [is] the foundation of all music, [and] somehow feels like a precious gift and the most common-sense thing at the same time” (Ryabova, n.d.). I also argue that ro-minimal holds healing capacities, being particularly suited to healing practices centred around mindfulness and embodiment.

Music therapy is regarded as one of the main practices through which PTSD symptoms can be alleviated, as Landis-Shack et al. (2017) argue in their theoretical review of this form of therapy. They present vast empirical evidence

about the link between music therapy and the relief of anxiety and depression symptoms, improved emotional regulation, and increased experiences of pleasure in PTSD patients. Although this research refers to clinically traditional ways in which music therapy can help with PTSD, I argue that the mere act of listening to calming music is restorative. Menziletoglu et al. (2021) write that the frequency of 432 Hz is the closest to the human heart or the heart 'chakra'. Chakras are energetic points in the human body, which correspond with the location of endocrine glands in the body, that are used in meditation practices inspired by the teachings of ancient Buddhism and Hinduism. There are seven of them and the heart chakra or 'anahata' in Sanskrit, is situated in the chest and in front of the heart. This chakra is associated with love, balance, and clarity, but as Beshara (2013) argues, it is also seen as a centre of consciousness by practitioners of meditation. Therefore, music that is considered to have the same frequency as the heart is often used in healing anxiety, depression, and PTSD. The same study by Menziletoglu et al. (2021) looks at binaural beats for their role in healing. As McConnell et al. (2014, para. 1) argue, binaural beats "are an auditory illusion perceived when two or more pure tones of similar frequencies are presented dichotically through stereo headphones." Listening to binaural beats regularly has been found to help with reducing anxiety (Kelton et al., 2021), improved cognitive processes such as memory and concentration (Jurnet, 2021) and increased creativity (Reedjik et al., 2015). I listened to gentle ambient music by following meditation podcasts on Spotify and on YouTube, as well as listening to binaural beats to induce peace and focus, process that lasted several months. As I started to feel more relaxed, I allowed other genres, including ro-minimal, back into my life.

I began listening to music in the morning when my mood was generally at its lowest. Oftentimes, I preferred pop music. I find this genre easy to listen to, and it is often written in a major key, which, especially in the Western tradition, is commonly associated with positivity and happiness (Webster & Weir, 2005). Pop music has been demonstrated to be a mood booster (Huang & Duell, 2020) and I found it to relieve my anxiety and depression symptoms, especially when the listening was accompanied by dancing. The following excerpt from my autoethnographic journal shows this:

I woke up feeling empty again, I'm not sure what time it is or what day it is. It's hard to get out of bed. I just want to scroll through Instagram reels all day. I must make a to-do list and shower. Make my bed. I will put on some music first, maybe that will help. Dua Lipa or perhaps Dolly Parton. I just need to hear something nice and cheerful. (Autoethnographic journal, 15 June 2021)

I describe pop music as "nice and cheerful" and conducive to an elevated mood. Despite the journal excerpt showing an instance of personal struggle, it also illustrates my perception of music as a tool for relieving heavy feelings. Therefore, I utilised music to create a sense of "ontological security" (DeNora, 2000, p. 16) around me and within me, when my inner world was in a state of torment.

During my depressive episodes, I struggled to manage my time and lacked motivation, so I used music as an anchor and a way to structure my days. DeNora (2014), Krueger (2011) and Roberts and Krueger (2022) discuss this aspect of music as helping with time management and articulating order in one's everyday life. In the autoethnographic journal section below, I show how different times of the day were associated with different genres of music:

In the morning, I'm quite grumpy and unmotivated. I need something strong like the equivalent of a shot of vodka in music. So energetic pop like early 2000s Britney [Spears] or Taylor Swift to properly wake me up. Or techno, but really fast one like 150 bpm with powerful vocals – that really motivates me if I have it in the right dose. It normally makes me get out of bed real quick and I enjoy dancing to it, so I have a little dance before anything else in the morning.

In the afternoon, I normally have a nap, so I listen to a bit of minimal house, ro-minimal, or acoustic music, which calms me down, but also is not too slow and keeps me engaged while I make lunch or do my skin care routine. Then later in the afternoon, I need something with a kick, so I listen to pop again. In the evening, I want to unwind and relax because I find it hard to stop worrying. So, I either just watch TV which distracts me from everything, or, if I want to be present with my feelings, I put on a guided meditation podcast and listen to that – normally it has ambient music on which is super relaxing. (Autoethnographic journal, 30 July 2020)

This fragment displays my association of distinct genres of music with different times of the day. I perceived strong sounds such as drums and fast rhythms as motivational and energising. This sort of intense, energising music, as Facci and Boschi (2013) show, are often played in gyms to provide motivation for gym goers and make them focussed on their goals, which shows that culturally and socially, this kind of music is uplifting. Another point that Facci and Boschi (2013, p. 144) make, by reiterating the words of Merriam (1960), is that this kind

of music, pop, or fast dance music “adds the dimension of <aesthetic pleasure> to physical activities through musicalisation.” This assertion reinforces the idea that pop music, or other genres, also provide beauty in our daily lives and frame our activities as more pleasurable and fun. In the morning, I preferred listening to this energising music in my headphones, as it was clearer to hear, and I found it a more personal experience than listening on a stereo system or from my laptop speakers. Zelechowska et al. (2020) argue in their paper on the effect of headphones and speakers on our body’s rhythm, that headphones offer a more private experience, as opposed to listening on speakers. They also claim that as listening on speakers is done through the ear canal and the whole body feels the vibration of the music, it can deeply energise the body. Nevertheless, I preferred listening on my headphones when I was depressed as I was in an introverted mood, and desired a more private experience.

The soundtrack of my afternoons was more varied and depended on my mood and on the activities that I performed in and around the house. For this part of the day, I listened to house, ro-minimal, and airy, melodic techno, or synth-pop and hyper-pop which I experienced both as energetic and soothing. Some examples are ‘Diminuendo’ released by Daniel Avery in 2018, which is a techno track with soft, ominous-sounding synth pads, and with an energising but subtle mood. Another example is the hyper/synth-pop track ‘Pretty bones’ by yeule (Yeule, 2019). I found the dreamy, surreal, and ethereal sounds of this track deeply soothing. The music video of ‘Pretty bones’ shows pastel colours and traditionally aesthetically pleasing elements such as fruit and flowers, as in a still life painting, which is gentle and engaging. The image also contains candy, make-up, cigarettes and alcohol, presenting an aesthetic duality, and the juxtaposition of still life and perhaps ‘impure’ content in the same video frame. Furthermore, as Parrella (2022) argues, hyper-pop has popularised discourses on self-care, mental health and depression, showing through the music as well as through the visual aesthetics of music videos, the effects of mental health conditions on people, but also illustrating how healing takes place in the presence of music.

In terms of minimal and ro-minimal, I usually listened to the kind that was closer to deep house, and which incorporated folk instruments or nature sounds. I also enjoyed the glitchy and darker sounding side of ro-minimal, which I found

engaging and invigorating. One example is the track ‘Morning Light’ by BRYZ. Released in 2018, the track contains looped digeridoo sounds, as well as a guitar riff and brief vocals, which I found soothing. Another example is *Palatul de Cleștar* (‘The Crystal Palace’, in English) by Ada Kaleh, which includes mesmerising flute melodies, cowbells, but also sci-fi outer space sounds of perhaps spaceship battles. This soundscape, besides being healing through its rhythms and melodies, also reminded me of Romanian folk tales, thus evoking my home country and family, an aspect of ro-minimal that I discussed in Chapter 3. Also, whilst *cleștar* means ‘crystal’ in Romanian, this is an older, poetic version of the Romanian word ‘cristal’, thus accentuating the mythological time of this musical track’s soundscape. At the time, I was unable to visit my family due to the pandemic restrictions, so these sort of ro-minimal tracks enabled me to feel close to them. As Baffoe (2009) asserts, social makings, and re-makings of the notion of home in immigrant African communities in Canada are substantially influenced by music from one’s heritage and homeland. Similarly, ro-minimal music such as *Palatul de Cleștar* by Ada Kaleh articulated an audio-imaginary of Romanian references and trends in Romanian music which allowed me to feel connected to my country and culture of origin, as well as to the particular subculture of ro-minimal.

In the evenings and at night, my anxiety generally intensified. So, as I explained in my autoethnographic journal, I opted for relaxing and distracting music. I listened to ambient music. Also, when I felt extremely anxious, this genre facilitated my feeling more grounded in my surroundings, a characteristic of ambient music that Viega (2014) also observes in his article on this genre: “In the ambient mode of being, a listener becomes immersed in the raw materials of sonic environments (soundscapes) and nomadically shifts awareness across the terrains of these environments – simultaneously experiencing being in a liminal space and grounded in the here-and-now.” When it felt too difficult to practice meditation and be still, I preferred just scrolling through social media posts, especially Instagram reels, which are short videos, usually with inspirational or humorous content. Social media is largely considered detrimental to mental health (Lup & Rosenthal, 2015), due to the unrealistic expectations about body image or popularity promoted on it, but also due to its potential to spread misinformation. However, during the pandemic, social media was one of the ways through which many maintained connections and a sense

of light-heartedness, by sharing short videos and memes, so it was used extensively for that purpose (Aggarwal et al., 2022).

In this section, I analyse ro-minimal music as part of a variety of practices and genres which alleviated my anxiety and depression. I explain how this music helped to structure my days, and contributed to the articulation of various feelings and emotional states, which was beneficial to my healing process. Also healing was ro-minimal's function of evoking Romanian culture, as this genre facilitated a closeness between me and my Romanian origins. Next, I discuss dancing and moving to ro-minimal and other musical genres in more detail, as movement, in particular dancing, has been a key part of my recovery.

Healing through movement and dance

In the same way that I listened to music at different times of the day, I also danced to various genres depending on time. I have an eclectic music taste, so I dance to anything that appeals to me in the moment, but if I like a particular genre or tune, I save it in a playlist and use that for a dancing session. I made a playlist on Spotify called 'Room Dancing' that I used for regular dancing in the room, but especially when my mood was low. Tracks in the playlists included classics like 'Lambada' by Kaoma, 'We are Family' by Sister Sledge, or 'Give Me One Reason' by Tracy Chapman and 'I like it like that' by Cardi B. Although these songs belong to different genres such as pop, disco, and hip hop, they are known for their powerful sense of vitality and empowering rhythms and words (Trowell, 2017). Lyrics such as "we are family, I got all my sisters with me" by Sister Ledge or "I like dollars, I like diamonds, I like stunning, I like shining" by Cardi B speak of sorority and community support on one hand, and on the other, self-empowerment and success are suggested, which are practices supported by intersectional feminism, increasingly visible in the Euroamerican world (Banet-Weiser, 2018). This movement is primarily focussed on the multiplicity of experiences of oppression. Simultaneously, it includes women and queer people reclaiming the terms such as 'bitch' which have been used as a derogatory names for them and instead, infusing them with their own meanings of power and success. As noted by Koponen (2021, p. 16), the term 'bitch' still has strong sexual connotations, but in Cardi B's song, for instance, it is "used in reference to <excellent> or <admirable> women." This empowering music, coupled with freestyle dancing in my room, has had a strong positive

effect on my mental and physical health. My autoethnographic journal shows the healing power of dancing:

> *This Cardi B song really hits the spot. It made me move in the waist area a lot, and feels like good cardio! My heart is beating fast, my feet are warm from the dancing and I'm even crying with happiness because I feel so connected to this song! (Autoethnographic journal, 25 January 2021)*

Not only was I emotionally engaged and stimulated by the music, but I also released tension and trauma through physical movement. This process has been demonstrated to alleviate mental and physical health conditions and PTSD in both the medical sciences (Norouzi et al., 2020) and social sciences (Davidson & Emberly, 2012; Wulff, 2001).

As with dancing, shaking, or tremoring, which is a technique from somatic experiencing, has tremendously helped in my healing, especially in the early stages. Somatic experiencing is a philosophy and form of therapy which recognises that trauma results from not allowing the body to fully experience and process pain (Brom et al., 2017). Healing practitioners have adapted the practice of shaking or tremoring from the animal world. Animals are able to 'shake off' stress and then return to their normal activities, which allows them to live more fully in the moment. As Brom et al. (2017) claim, humans have lost the mechanism of releasing stress in this way, and instead, they store it in different parts of their body and in their minds, which intensifies stress and causes numerous physical and emotional blockages and diseases (PACES Connections, 2018). Therapeutic tremoring works by involving the core muscles in the body and shaking them through different techniques, which, it has been suggested, alleviates symptoms of PTSD and depression (Brom et al., 2017). Whilst I was not always listening to music when performing this technique, shaking has a certain rhythmicity to it that can be translated into casual dancing. The body is placed in various poses which make it contract and expand naturally and create and sustain its own natural rhythm until the muscles tire and a sense of physical and emotional relief is felt throughout one's body. I incorporated elements of this practice in my casual dancing at home, and it worked particularly well with punchy genres such as power pop, disco, or techno, but also with minimal house, and particularly ro-minimal.

As I began to feel better, I started listening to electronic music, including ro-minimal, throughout the day and to practice dancing with it, too. Like music,

dancing can be often used as a therapeutic device to relieve symptoms of mental health conditions such as depression or anxiety in medicine, as shown by Millman et al. (2021). Dance and movement have been suggested to effectively boost dopamine levels, increase heart rate, and enhance creativity (Karkou et al., 2019). There is also evidence from alternative, non-Western medical therapies that movement and specifically movement in relation to music, is beneficial to releasing trauma and easing PTSD. For example, yoga is sometimes practiced with a musical backdrop, and the music is thought to emphasise the effects of the yoga on the mind-body continuum, as Vajpeyee et al. (2022) argue in their study of yoga and music therapies used for stress relief during the COVID-19 pandemic. In an informal conversation, one of my friends talked about the healing power of one of my ro-minimal mixes, when combined with yoga: “Oooooh, I love it! Honestly, it got me moving so mindfully, it was great!” (Anonymous, informal text conversation, 30 March 2023). My friend’s account shows a connection between ro-minimal, mindfulness and movement, suggesting that this genre can have positive impacts on embodiment practices such as yoga. Thus, I contend that ro-minimal, especially in the form of a mix rather than single tracks, complements bodily practices that promote healing through movement.

Minimal house and techno and specifically ro-minimal are quite intricate genres containing a variety of sounds, instruments, and sound effects. This form of composition is conducive to a deep, expert form of listening, by going beyond the surface level of the music and paying attention to minute details (Nye, 2011). Equally, ro-minimal is a genre with subtle sounds, so even when dissonant, it is interesting to listen to. This makes ro-minimal suitable not only for raving, but also for playing in the background while doing housework, for instance. Many of my survey and interview participants also said they listen to ro-minimal while doing chores and housework, to promote a sense of calm and focus on their tasks, aspect which I further examine in Chapter 7. All survey participants said that ro-minimal helped them stay sane and retain a good level of calm during the pandemic and lockdowns when they were unable to meet friends or do their normal activities. DeNora (1999) documents the connection between music and household chores, contending that listening to music during housework is reported by her participants to increase their motivation and

energy for work. Another participant in my study mentioned that listening to ro-minimal had gotten her through a rough period in her life. While she did not say what it was specifically that had happened to her, I could notice in our online interview that she was upset and overwhelmed, and emphasised how music helped her feel her emotions and be kind to herself:

> The pandemic taught us to simply be with ourselves. It taught us about ourselves and showed us we can be open and honest with ourselves, and we can offer ourselves a dance or a moment of relaxation without anyone else present. (Interview with Mirela, 6 February 2021. Translated from Romanian by the author)

Dancing and singing while performing chores and housework have been commonplace for a long time (DeNora, 1999), but the pandemic appears to have brought out these activities even more. Listening to ro-minimal was healing for Mirela as it brought her closer to herself in a time when being close to others was difficult if not impossible and she found comfort and pleasure in relaxing and dancing on her own, with the knowledge that others were probably doing the same. This idea supports a view of ro-minimal raves as similar to other kinds of raves, as events that enable participants to feel alone together (Yankovska, 2019). This is because each raver has a particular style of dancing, style of listening and enjoying the music, but they are all united by their passion for music. Particularly in the pandemic, the alone togetherness could have been easily felt as together aloneness, as fans of ro-minimal were not able to connect physically. However, as my research participant Sonia claims, at ro-minimal events “people usually come alone. Even if they come in a group, they behave as if they would be alone. I dance how I want, and people don’t usually look for conversation” (Interview, 8 April 2021. Translated from Romanian by the author). This shows that ro-minimal does not necessarily require physical togetherness to meaningfully experience a rave, but that it is a comforting feeling to be surrounded by others with the same passion. The data obtained from my interviewees and from online observation of ro-minimal groups points to the prevalence of feeling a deep sense of togetherness. Gere (2021) shows a similar feeling of unity that fans of electronic music experienced in Prague during the COVID-19 pandemic. And in a similar vein, Cannon and Greasley (2021) demonstrate the positive effects of participating in online electronic music festivals on emotional wellbeing, which I also observed.

While I elaborate on this in Chapter 7, I briefly look at the importance of dancing and reconfiguring the space of the home during the pandemic here, with a focus on its benefits for my healing. I listened to music in the kitchen with one of my friends and housemate while we were cooking. We often danced and reminisced about going to raves. I sometimes recorded a mix and we listened to it in the kitchen. This gave me a purpose during the pandemic and made me feel excited about playing my music, even if it was only to one person. We sometimes dressed up and danced, and hearing my own mixing felt comforting and gentle, as it was the result of hours of hard work that included sourcing and matching tracks, mixing, and recording (Nye, 2011). This is because I see my mixes as a proof of my skills, determination, and creativity, and in times of struggle or illness, these motivated me to re-enter the world of dance music and to care for myself. The house, especially the kitchen space, was filled with soft electronic music, and became a sort of club. Listening to music at home and dancing to it, then, re-articulated the meaning and performance of raving. Dancing was a fluid and gentle experience with the lights on and not-too-loud music, so as to facilitate conversations, laughter and, ultimately healing (Pryor & Outley, 2021) in the collectively traumatic times of the pandemic. We also shared these moments of dancing and music enjoyment with friends over Skype or Zoom during the lockdowns. We danced, spoke at length about music and checked on each other to see if we were doing well. This form of being together online, or “we-experiences” as Osler (2019, p. 569) calls them, was common during the pandemic, and enabled people to feel connected, facilitating a shared experience of music, dancing, and self-care. Also, I argue that listening to ro-minimal and engaging with music in a way that is conducive to community bonds and socialisation is in itself healing.

This section considers the relationship between forms of dancing, ro-minimal music among other genres, and both personal and communal healing. Despite the complex nature of ro-minimal music, its sounds are generally easy to listen to and this genre can accompany and enhance daily activities such as yoga and other mindful exercise, as well as housework, or cooking. The following section examines my participation in an online music festival, where I played ro-minimal, and through which I reached a new phase in my healing process.

Zoomtown: communal healing and showcasing ro-minimal

As the music and club industry was badly affected by the pandemic, many artists were left feeling idle and frustrated, as they lost large amounts of income and were unable to play music in venues (Howard et al., 2021). However, arts communities around the world have proven to be resourceful, and with the help of the internet, the "sphere of sociability" (Parry et al., 2013, p. 26) was expanded and artists and their audiences managed to connect and share art and moments of pleasure, hope, and happiness digitally. While I discuss the importance of digital cultures for music and ro-minimal in Chapter 7, here I pay attention to the specific ways in which participating in an online music festival where I played ro-minimal was a healing experience for me.

The online festival I participated in is called *Zoomtown*, which is a play on the words 'Boomtown' (a highly popular annual dance music festival in the UK) and 'Zoom' – the name of one of the most popular apps of video communication used during the pandemic (De & Pal, 2020). The naming of the festival points to a reconfiguration of the space and experience of raving, made to resemble both a physical music festival, and a virtual communication app. The festival lasted four days and involved tens of DJs from Exeter. A variety of electronic genres was played, such as downtempo, house, hard techno and drum and bass. Minimal house was also present as I played ro-minimal, and another DJ played minimal house. The event was free to watch, but a donation was encouraged in support of Trussell Trust, a charity that fights poverty and hunger in the UK. Drawing on Osler's (2019) work on feeling togetherness online and DeNora's (1999) research on music as an effective form of therapy, I argue that online electronic music festivals enable forms of collective healing. First, the healing comes in the form of music's ability to bring people together, and move them physically, emotionally, and spiritually. As St John (2004) outlines, DJs are guides for their listeners, taking them on a transformative journey of hope and connection, which I claim, also applies to online festivals. Also, organising and participating in a music festival has been shown to be cathartic (Ballantyne et al., 2013), which applies in the case of *Zoomtown*, too. What is more, I suggest that the transformative journey does not apply only to listeners, but also to the artist themselves in the act of performing.

Music is also healing through its powerful impact on society, which at *Zoomtown* was done through raising awareness of Trussell Trust, and raising money for the causes it supports. Although a small virtual festival, *Zoomtown* raised over £3000, which is not insignificant given that it was run and played by students, and the organisers had little time to promote the event. Festivals such as *Zoomtown* have also served to emphasise those areas of life where the government is not doing enough (Parsell et al., 2021), as well as support positive change in those areas. Healing by doing good through music has multiple structural implications such as the socio-economic status of the donors, who are in positions of power that allow them to be charitable, and the act of giving or donating potentially makes them feel good about themselves (Anik et al., 2009). This mainly autoethnographic section investigates my experience of healing from trauma through playing ro-minimal at *Zoomtown*. Nonetheless, I suggest that the practice of charitable donation mediated through involvement in online dance music festivals contributes to the enabling communal experiences. The political experiences associated with charitable events in the dance music industry is an interesting area that requires further research.

Initially, when I was asked to play, I was unsure whether to do it or not, since I was unwell. I accepted, because although I knew I would struggle with some aspects of participating, I was hopeful to reconnect with friends and meet new people. Also, as Pryor and Outley (2021) assert, the experience of DJing is deeply healing and energising for the DJ themselves, a feeling which I experience during my sets and which I craved in those times of personal and collective struggle. At first, I was overwhelmed by the technical work that went into streaming from my laptop for the festival, because it was something I had never done before. I thought I would need help and by needing help I would be perceived as unskilled or 'not good enough'. Bloustien (2016) and Farrugia (2004, pp. 70-71) argue that female DJs are perceived to have minimal technical skills by men in the scene who "make assumptions about their lack of knowledge or skill, or they are more concerned with showing women that they know what they're doing." Therefore, while these fears might have been caused by depression and anxiety symptoms in my case, they are connected to women being socialised to believe that they are not technically skilled, despite observations that technical abilities are similar in both men and women (Hargittai & Shafer, 2006).

In fact, getting involved in this festival was beneficial in several ways, both for my career as a DJ and for my recovery. I learnt that other DJs involved in *Zoomtown* had a similar level of technical expertise as I did, which enabled me to relax. We were all experts or learners at different points in the process and drawing on Gunn's (2007) work on skill learning and sharing, I argue that a variety of skills were shared among the DJs. For example, I acquired skills such as installing and using OBS Studio – a software for video recording and live streaming. Not only was I able to successfully stream my set (Figure 6), but also assist other streamers with their own set-ups.

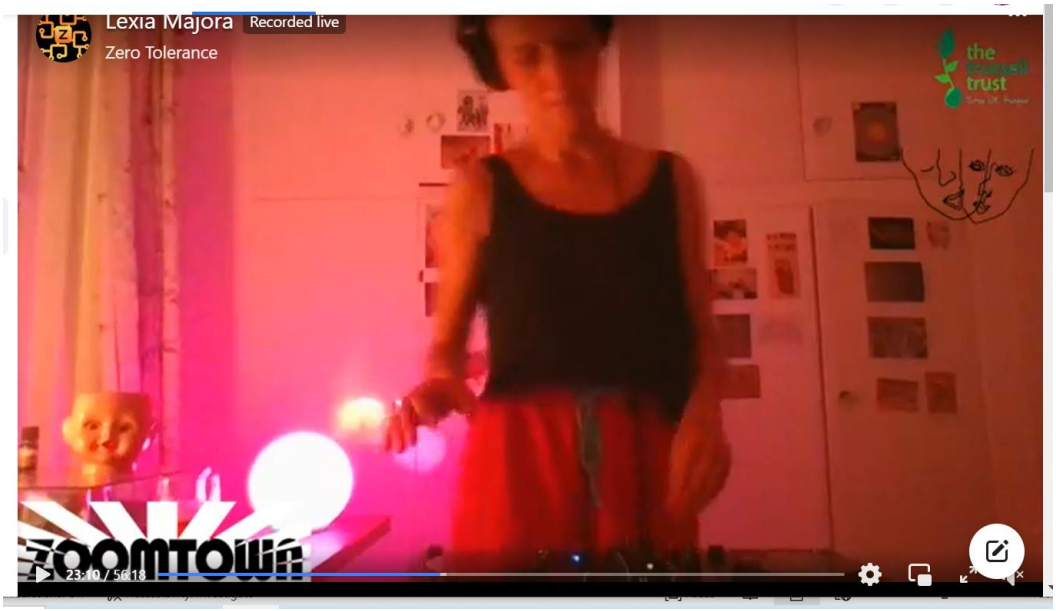

Figure 6 A screenshot of the author's Zoomtown DJ set. Source: Zoomtown Facebook page

The process of skill-sharing not only diversified our skillsets, but also tightened the social bonds between the DJs. There was plenty of communication between DJs in preparation, during and after the festival. While communication is not always conducive to strengthened social bonds, here it facilitated friendships, as we encouraged each other before our DJ sets, and we reminisced about the pre-pandemic period when we played gigs in clubs. Also, as I discussed with some of my DJ friends, our desire to go out and party lessened during the pandemic. As O'Brien et al. (2021) suggest, many people became drawn to sedentary lifestyles during the pandemic, and their sensitivity to noise and social situations increased. Therefore, it was refreshing to participate in *Zoomtown*, which enabled me to feel less socially withdrawn and retrieve my passion for mixing, which had an overall positive effect on my health. I started

waking up feeling more energetic and more engaged with the world around me. I searched for music tracks online and my friends and I sent each other songs that we wanted to play for our sets, so I felt more involved in the DJ community than ever before. Wolfenden et al. (2022) demonstrate in their paper on *Basement Traxx*, a series of DJ sets livestreamed from a Glasgow basement during the pandemic, that a strong sense of community was created around these events, as they enabled regular virtual gatherings. The same happened at *Zoomtown*. Preparing for this event distracted me from my pain, but it also allowed me to focus on experiences of community, pleasure, and joy. My involvement in this, then, helped me reconceptualise the way I saw and performed daily activities.

Once I found tracks that I liked, I started practising my mix. My playlist consisted of various genres such as ro-minimal, hypnotic and Detroit techno, electro, and deconstructed club music. Whilst I typically allow room for improvisation in a club set, I pre-planned my *Zoomtown* set as it was my first time livestreaming, and I wanted an issue-free experience. I mostly played on turntables in clubs before the pandemic, but in 2021, I had bought the Pioneer DDJ 400, the newest model of controller from Pioneer. I find it easy to use and it is rated as one of the best controllers for home digital mixing and recording by DJs worldwide (Dracott, 2023). Also, using the controller instead of turntables meant I could livestream more easily, as it involved less technical setting up. By choosing the digital option, I also reinforced my personal and work boundaries in the process, as I was careful not to give myself too much to do and eventually exhaust myself. These boundaries are, again, a sign of improved mental health and increased self-esteem and confidence.

I played my DJ set on the first day at *Zoomtown*, between ten and eleven p.m., and invited friends and family to watch the livestream. I was nervous as it was the first time performing live in a long time. It was also the first time that I was engaging in a large social event which was as exciting as it was daunting. I began my set with ro-minimal music because this reminds me of home and Romania. Once more, drawing on Baffoe (2009), I argue that particularly during the pandemic when I was unable to visit my family in Romania and access their support, ro-minimal connected me to my home. Choosing to play ro-minimal at the beginning of my set had the function of relaxing and grounding me. Also, for

instance, the minimal track ‘Leu’ (‘Lion’ in English) by Varhat is glitchy, subtle and playful, so it provided an easy introduction to the rest of my mix, where I played faster, harder, and more experimental music. Also, I found playing online helpful for presenting ro-minimal to some of my audience which was UK-based and unfamiliar with it. When I played ro-minimal, some DJs messaged in the *Zoomtown* group chat about how the tracks sounded peculiar, and were unsure whether the sound from my stream was glitching itself or there were problems in the tracks. This signalled a relative unfamiliarity with ro-minimal and the way in which this genre can incorporate sounds of technology malfunctioning (Prior, 2008), a large part of the ro-minimal aesthetic. Therefore, together with another minimal house DJ in the group, I had the opportunity to explain to the DJ group this aspect of the genre. That was a bonding experience with the group which felt empowering for me, as a female DJ with specific knowledge and skills that relate in many ways to my home country. As Clayton (2015) claims, musical performance articulates a strong sense of self and other, as well as individual and communal identities. In my case, playing ro-minimal and discussing it with an audience unaccustomed to this sound, while in the process of healing, articulated my identity as a female Romanian DJ, living in the UK and healing from trauma.

Another way through which participating in *Zoomtown* was therapeutic was the performance component of this experience. During the first few minutes of my livestream, I felt anxious and vulnerable seeing myself on the screen. I initially experienced an awkwardness and uncanniness akin to that of hearing one’s own voice on a recording (Kimura & Yotsumoto, 2018). Nevertheless, once I got into the groove of mixing, I completely disregarded the video and focussed instead on the atmosphere in my room and on playing music. The music was on louder than it had ever been during the pandemic in my house, so I could not only hear it very clearly, but feel its vibrations and warmth through the ground (Zelechowska et al., 2020) and on the furniture around me, which was soothing. It was a comfortable experience to welcome the soundscape of this festival into my bedroom, from where I was streaming. I had a friend with me in my room, dancing and bringing me refreshments as needed. I had a changing colour lamp on in the corner of my room which projected a gentle, playful light into the space and created a comfortable atmosphere (Figure 6). So, whilst at the beginning I

was anxious and reminded of my illness, during most of my set, I felt powerful and passionate, exemplifying the transformative power of performance, as noted by Pryor and Outley (2021).

After finishing the set, I felt ecstatic, as this note from my journal confirms: “OMG that was amazing! I can’t believe I actually did this, and it went so well! I want to do it again ASAP, it was too exciting!!” Orenstein (1985) describes the powerful act of performance in her paper on self-healing female artists. Similar to the experiences she documents, I felt energised and revitalised through my DJing, and although I normally went to sleep before midnight, I stayed up after my set and watched fragments from other streams in the festival, but mostly I rewatched my own performance. After DJing in a club, I usually get sent a few video recordings of my set by friends, but at *Zoomtown*, I had the full audio-visual recording of my set. Seeing myself play the set was akin to watching a film or a theatre play. It was an experience where not only was I the creator of the music and atmosphere, but a consumer as well, both auditorily and visually.

Tan (2013) discusses the role of YouTube tutorials in learning and teaching literacy informally, and drawing on her argument, I assert that informal learning takes place while emphasising the relationship between the artist or performer and their art, in my case livestreamed on Facebook and YouTube. Looking back on the recording of my set enabled me to enjoy the music as a consumer, but also to analyse my set and learn from any potential shortcomings. I could access a heightened emotional state, experiencing passion, excitement, and vitality. This was similar to what Smith (2003) describes with regard to hip hop performance as a ritual with a large emotional impact on the audience as well as on the performing artist. During my set, I was dancing energetically, I was focussed, I also talked with my flatmate, but also communicated with people watching the stream from the UK and Romania. I was thus connected to my own passion and my own identity and to the wider community in a time when social connections were difficult to maintain, as Langlois (1992) and Pryor and Outley (2021) claim. Feeling connected to my circle of friends and family was favourable to my health and for the first time in a while during the pandemic, I felt relief and even joy. So, although DJs have been seen as performing a service for others (Ueno, 2017), the performance is often emotionally moving and healing for the DJ themselves. Music can be, then, a collective form of

healing: not only did it positively influence my healing process, but also brought together generations of people from different places (Smith, 2003), united by a common language – electronic dance music.

This section considers my involvement in an online festival where I played a DJ set, and which I argue, positively influenced my healing. Through skill and knowledge sharing, performing, and streaming my set, as well as rewatching it, I reclaimed my passion for electronic music and DJing, and re-connected to the community around me. Ro-minimal had an important role in this process, as it placed me closer to my Romanian roots. Equally, my position as a DJ and mediator contributed to the makings and re-makings of ro-minimal and electronic music communities during the pandemic. This was a powerful position enabling me to articulate my passion, expertise, and identity, thus ultimately being highly therapeutic for me. I also demonstrate how ro-minimal was perceived at this festival, and through my expertise in this genre, I was able to meaningfully connect with members of the local DJ society, which aided my recovery. Next, I assess how ro-minimal helped me in another stage of my healing – performing academic work.

Getting back into academic work with ro-minimal

In *Healing from Depression*, Bloch (2009) emphasises the highs and lows of depressive disorder, but also of recovering from this condition. In my case, there have been ups and downs, and the downs rendered me unable to work for extended periods of time. However, I also had more energetic periods, and engaging with ro-minimal music contributed to my increased ability to concentrate and produce academic work. Music is known to have a positive effect on the human brain, emotions, and moods. It can help achieve a state of relaxation and peace, but it is also conducive to increased concentration and focus (DeNora, 1999; Jurnet, 2021; Kelton et al., 2021). The relationship between music and work was key in my healing process, as it was not only through listening to music that I felt better, but also through curating mixes for radio shows and talking to my research participants about their interest in ro-minimal: these had an especially strong influence on my wellbeing and ability to work.

Before I was able to begin my academic work such as reading, synthesising information, or writing about ro-minimal, listening to ro-minimal in the background of my daily activities helped with my mood, as I mentioned previously. However, I sometimes put on a ro-minimal mix on YouTube and danced along to it in my room. I would dress up and watch myself dance in the mirror, taking written or vocal notes on my phone, and enjoying the atmosphere in my room. Below is a fragment from a vocal note about a livestream I watched in April 2021:

I started watching this livestream sponsored by Kaufland, by Alexandra. And the beginning is really beautiful, almost heavenly, and super super chill. And then she changed the mood super quickly … I don't know, I like it though, so let's see. I think her style is a bit eclectic so, you can hear her (music playing in the background). And really nice visuals, she's like in a field of seaweed with very shiny tips, and a bumble bee flying around so it's really cool. (Vocal note recorded by the researcher on her phone, 14 April 2021)

By connecting to "the broader category of musical experience, in this way allowing for questions of the corporeal, the affective, the collective and the located nature of musical experience (aka listening) to arise in a stronger way than heretofore", Born (2010, p. 80) claims that there are various modes of listening in her work. The listening mode described in the fragment above seems to be deep and engaging for all of my senses – corporeally and affectively. Engaging in deep listening and watching the livestream was an engrossing experience, which made me excited and curious about the music in itself, but also about the music in the context of my PhD research. As Pryor and Outley (2021, p. 332) assert in their work on DJing during the pandemic, the internet became a digital mediator of "grief and healing" that brought on feelings of hope and positivity for both audiences and DJs. This point is illustrated by the section where I engage with the visuals of the livestream DJ set I watched – "it's like a field of seaweed with very shiny tips and a bumble bee flying around" and also earlier in the paragraph where I compare the sounds and visuals of the mix to being in heaven.

Technology such as visual projection and audio-visual streaming shows how the internet can be a space for healing and hope. Particularly for me, YouTube, where many ro-minimal mixes were streamed, was a space that emotionally and intellectually stimulated me to engage with the world around me and with

my academic work, during a challenging time in my healing. Moreover, by dancing along to these mixes, my self-confidence significantly grew. Whilst, for instance, ballet dancers are often reported to have predominantly negative self-perceptions, low self-esteem, and high levels of anxiety (Kosmidou et al., 2017), other forms of dancing and rhythmic movement such as aerobic dance (Hős, 2005; Norouzi et al., 2020) have been suggested to alleviate symptoms of depression and anxiety as well as increasing self-confidence. In my case, freestyle dancing to ro-minimal music was fun and increased my energy levels, alleviated my low moods, and boosted my creativity and focus, all necessary for my re-entry into academic work. Listening to ro-minimal mixes empowered me to feel motivated to read and write for my PhD. I often listened to ro-minimal in the background to help with writing. Although listening to music can be perceived as distracting when performing other tasks, there is plenty of data demonstrating the positive effects of listening to music while working when used appropriately, depending on personal needs (e.g., Lesiuk, 2005; Goltz & Sadakata, 2021).

I continued to listen to ro-minimal livestreams on YouTube and I found them engaging and inspiring. For instance, one ro-minimal mix that I particularly remember as helpful for increased focus while working is by Andrei Ciubuc. The mix was in the same series as the one by Alexandra which I discussed above and lasted for two hours. The mixed tracks were stimulating, but not distracting. While various musical genres can increase listeners' focus, and ambient as well as trance music have an interesting relationship with relaxation and dissociation (Becker-Blease, 2004; Batt-Rawden & DeNora, 2005), I argue that ro-minimal is especially useful for working, as it is simultaneously relaxing and engaging. Both tracks and mixes in ro-minimal are generally lengthy, thus offering a continuous musical backdrop for working. Similar to ambient music, which consists of repetitive, soothing sounds (Viega, 2014), the rhythm and speed articulated in ro-minimal mixes such as the one by Andrei Ciubuc (Sunrise Hub, 2020) are rather comforting. They provided me with an auditory framework for my academic tasks, thus showing the multimodality of the idea and practice of work. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001, p. 20) argue that multimodality is "the interplay between different representational modes, for instance, between images and written/spoken word." In this case, working is multimodal through

incorporating audio-visual elements such as music and video recordings of the livestreamed DJ set, as well as through their therapeutic benefits for my health. Furthermore, when I took breaks from writing or reading, I would look at the video of the mix too, which felt somewhat similar to being at a party, and thus entertaining. The mix then served both as a tool for increased concentration, but also for relaxation and enjoyment, which I argue, made ro-minimal particularly beneficial, as I was working, but also in need of several breaks from work.

Another way through which my passion for music strengthened my capacity and motivation to produce academic work is my involvement in radio shows, but particularly through the possibility of producing a radio show. In the summer of 2020, I was offered the chance to host my own radio show on a Devon broadcasting station. I was thrilled to share my music, especially ro-minimal, with people from around the world and possibly help them feel more relaxed during the pandemic (Pryor & Outley, 2021). I had written a proposal for the radio show which I was eager to begin as soon as possible. Here is a fragment from my show proposal called 'Basic Bitch':

Basic Bitch explores the possibilities of minimal across different genres. It takes simple musical structures and puts together narratives that are familiar and comfortable, but which can be unconventional and startling at times. The show will be a mixture of solo mixes, guest mixes, b2bs as well as occasional conversations and lyrical explorations of minimal and what it means in today's music and society. Basic Bitch playfully curates minimal soundscapes, testing the limits of bare, stripped-down compositions, but also interrogates existing social structures and stereotypes. It explores the ways in which we've been socialised to appreciate, doubt, or discard various forms of art, music and mixing styles and hones refreshing prospects in this sense.

The proposal shows a theoretical engagement with music, which had brought me closer to my PhD work after a period of academic hibernation. To re-illustrate the point about the ups and downs of healing from depression (Bloch, 2009), my trauma issues resurfaced as I was about to embark on the radio show journey. Therefore, I had declined the project as I considered it would have eventually led me to burnout.

A lot of the language around trauma and healing from trauma is related to work. People that are healing from emotional suffering are often referred to as 'working through trauma', as the book *Narrating Our Healing: Perspectives on Working Through Trauma* (van der Merwe & Gobodo-Madikizela, 2007) shows. Healing is not a one-way journey to recovery. It requires the traumatised individual to actively work towards this goal, despite the numerous setbacks that

occur in the process. The work of recording music for radio shows, therefore, allowed me to feel part of the music community when I was isolated and socially withdrawn. Sharing my favourite music with people around me is one of the reasons I DJ, so being able to do that sped up my healing process. I shared my mixes for the radio with friends and family and within the music groups on social media. I received numerous reactions and encouragements from them, and again, this solidified social connections with people in my life and created new bonds with new people, which has likewise contributed to my social healing. Furthermore, these forms of online "we-experiences" (Osler, 2019, p. 569) articulated through sharing music, particularly ro-minimal, impacted on my overall boosted mood, creativity, and concentration which, in turn, enabled me to perform academic work. I also suggest that the reason DJing inspired me to do more academic work and vice versa is related to the skills required in both of these practices. As Farrugia (2004, p. 66) claims, "access to technology and technical skill is only one-third of what makes a good DJ. Track selection and sensibility are equally important to success. Because E/DM relies only minimally on advertising and print reviews, and new records are released frequently, it is necessary not only to physically flip through, but also to listen to numerous records." Similarly, in academic work, it is not enough to write, but also to read and engage critically with a certain subject, in order to be able to link and organise various pieces of information.

This section considers the relationship between ro-minimal and academic work, showing how this musical genre was employed to alleviate PTSD symptoms, as well as boost creative and cognitive functions. This ultimately increased my ability to engage with my academic work after a long period of inactivity, and supported my understanding of work as a multimodal practice.

Conclusion

This chapter examines the healing capacities of music, in particular of ro-minimal, by closely examining my experience of the genre among others during a personal struggle with trauma and mental illness, at home. I discuss several musical genres which I preferred at different times of the day and times during my recovery, indicating that music can articulate different parts of one's identity. I show that ro-minimal is a versatile genre that can enhance the healing effects of yoga, meditation, dancing, and other kinds of mindful embodiment practices,

but can also complement daily chores such as housework and cooking. I present the healing power of social bonds and community brought on by livestreaming and playing radio shows during the pandemic. I exemplify this through my involvement in the virtual festival *Zoomtown*, engaging with ro-minimal livestreams and contributing to radio shows which helped me regain my passion for electronic music and share it with others. Livestreaming was particularly healing for the wider community through artists taking charitable action, but also for myself as a performer due to engaging with my music peers and family, learning new skills, and through showcasing ro-minimal, amongst other genres. Ro-minimal has played a key role in the various therapeutic processes discussed as it structured my daily routine and my academic work, whilst inspiring me to get involved in radio work. Thus, I harnessed musical agency in order to instil calm and craft periods of relaxation, as well as restoring energy, thus articulating my identity as a ro-minimal DJ recovering from trauma.

The next chapter continues the exploration of my reaffirmation as a DJ into the local dance music scene. It examines my preparation for and performance of a DJ set at an in-person music festival, to shed light on the relationship between performance, enskilment and healing. My re-entry into the music scene by playing at this festival illustrates the idea of healing through practices of enskilment, playful performance and national identity.

Chapter 6: Healing through performance and enskilment at *Hijacked* Festival

Context

In this chapter, I examine the relationship between partying, DJ performance and ro-minimal in the post-covid era, by looking at my experience of playing a DJ set at *Hijacked* Festival in September 2021. This moment represents my return to the music scene and to raving, being my first live in-person performance since March 2020. My participation at *Hijacked* Festival is also a key milestone in my healing, as I started to feel healthier and more prepared to participate in social life. I focus on healing and enskilment, as viewed by Ingold (2000): “a newcomer [being] supported in appreciating and using the affordances of their environment” (Flood et al., 2018, p. 1405), so in my case, my re-entry into the local music scene, by preparing for and playing at the festival. *Hijacked* was also significant as I further introduced ro-minimal to the local electronic music scene, while popularising it among the other DJs and festivalgoers. This chapter is mostly autoethnographic and based on observation notes I gathered while preparing for the festival and participating in it, as well as from informal conversations I had at the event.

I look at my experience of post-pandemic raving and mixing at *Hijacked*, although the COVID-19 pandemic is not a definite timeline. Various places across the globe have had distinct trajectories for pandemic rules and their enactment, due to the local structures of society, healthcare, and law enforcement. Despite societal expectations about music and performance during the pandemic, research shows that not all were met, and rules were interpreted in various ways so that in-person parties could go ahead (Riyan, 2021).

Preparing for the festival: playfulness and joy

Hijacked is a biannual electronic music festival, with its May edition at Double Locks and the second one in September at Powderham Castle, both locations in and around Exeter. It is a dance music event with an official average number of participants of 5000, many of whom are University of Exeter students in their early twenties. Other than music, there are various food and drink stalls and other kinds of entertainment such as face painting and bumper cars at this event. The festival, lasting from midday to midnight, hosts multiple stages with various styles of dance music such as techno, house, drum and bass and disco.

This is common in the music industry, as Gibson (2007) suggests, because being a multi-genre event attracts wider audiences and subsequently larger profits for the festival organisers. The multi-genre quality of events such as *Hijacked* can also sometimes create tension between participants with differing tastes and differing ways of raving, as Codina and Colombo (2022) indicate in their work on festivals in the Basque Country. However, I argue that multi-genreness can enable attendees to closely experience music they are not used to hearing, while allowing them to also access moods and forms of dancing with which they might be unfamiliar. So, whilst there was not normally a lot of minimal house or ro-minimal at *Hijacked*, by playing at the festival, I introduced a new genre to the audience, which, as I discuss in this section, has multiple consequences both for the audience, and for myself as a performer.

Due to the restrictions imposed on large gatherings during the pandemic, *Hijacked* did not take place in May 2020. Therefore, for the September 2021 edition, the preparations were intense. Besides the regular booking of DJs, equipment, and other logistical preparations, the organisers had the added task of ensuring that the festival was a COVID-safe space. Festivals, parties, and rave spaces have had to change to accommodate crowds of attendees on the dancefloor, as ideas and practices of risk and safety were altered by the pandemic (Morton & Power, 2022). Festivalgoers were asked to present either a vaccination certificate or a negative COVID test result to access the venue. Notions of health and contagion had become key to public health discourse, but also in the context of raving (Ali-Knight et al., 2023). Never before in contemporary times were health passes or vaccination proofs required to enter a music venue, but for a short while in 2021, they were the norm. These changes in the security and structure of the festival, as well as its date change suggest the wider pandemic-related adjustments in the music industry (Davies, 2021b). Underground music events have often been deemed as spaces and communities of care and mutual help among partygoers (Gauthier, 2004). This is due to the unifying effect that music is perceived to have on ravers (Gere, 2021), but also due to the consumption of drugs and alcohol at events, so participants have learnt to take care of each other and practice harm reduction (Davies, 2021b). Therefore, the mutual care component of festivals such as *Hijacked* intensified, and impacted on the attendants' healing from the collective

trauma of the pandemic, but also on my personal process healing through performing and socialising with other DJs and friends.

During my periods of illness, I had not mixed often as I found the process exhausting. As Nye (2011) shows in his paper on DJs' work, mixing tracks and records is an act of intensive labour that requires expert listening. Given my mental health conditions, this work seemed even more intense and initially alienated me from DJing. Furthermore, I had not attended any in-person parties since early 2020, so the thought of playing at a large music festival was equally thrilling and scary. Literature from anthropology (Bryant, 2020) and psychology (Vuust & Firth, 2008) demonstrates that anticipation primarily influences the experience of listening to music and responding emotionally to it. Anticipating *Hijacked* aided my healing process by giving me something to look forward to, transposing me into the time of the festival that I imagined to be filled with joy and fun. The anticipation also encouraged me to work on my DJ skills, thus providing an activity that promoted my betterment as a DJ, but also as a trauma survivor. Whilst music is generally regarded as helpful for trauma recovery, its healing effects are accentuated in the context of music-making and performance within a community (Garrido et al., 2015). Also, as I was planning to play ro-minimal, a genre through which I enact my Romanian heritage, performing at the festival was therapeutic through connecting me to my native land and Romanian roots.

I started daydreaming about the festival and about how I would sound, how I would dance, how I would look. The anticipation and imagination of performance is a regular occurrence before any public show (Vuust and Firth, 2008). However, with the rise of online DJ set livestreams during the pandemic, the visual element of DJing became more prominent. As spectators of online video sets, we were not just interested in the music, but also in what the DJ set and the experience of being a DJ looked like. *Boiler Room* and *HÖR BERLIN*, two internationally renowned streaming platforms, showcased DJs weekly or biweekly. Thus, during the sets, DJs had control of that online space and time, and performed their identities through fashion, makeup, and dancing, as much as they did through their music. The aesthetics of techno DJing showed bodies of different genders, sizes, and shapes, and although femme bodies remain highly scrutinised and sexualised in electronic music subcultures (Rietveld,

2003), video streaming gave artists an opportunity to take back control and own their choices while delivering electronic music. A notable example is Ellen Allien, a German DJ who often livestreamed her DJ techno sets during the pandemic. As one of the DJ's livestream sets shows (Ellen Allien UFO, 2020), both her and the dancer in the background wear transparent, breathable outfits, easy to move in, and in animal prints or in nude, earthy hues. My anticipation of the festival was influenced by this dynamic of femme bodies, but also femme sounds and ways of taking up space in the world and specifically on the stage, spaces that are conventionally governed by cis men (Farrugia, 2012). While not a ro-minimal or minimal techno DJ, Ellen Allien is an inspiring figure in my practice of mixing and performing, so I listened to her music in preparation for my festival performance. Listening to this livestream also indicates the lack of women DJs and artists in ro-minimal, as I explained in Chapter 4.

In mid-July 2021, I started practising mixing. Although I had not properly mixed for months, I had a mental and corporeal memory of the skill of mixing. As Koch et al. (2013, p. 82) claim, body memory is "all the implicit knowledge, capacities and dispositions that structure and guide our everyday being-in-the-world without the need to deliberately think of how we do something, to explicitly remembering what we did, or to anticipate what we want to do." I looked through my playlists and listened to musical tracks to understand the type of feelings and moods they evoked. I began by mixing twenty minutes at a time, then half an hour and sometimes a full hour. DJing has been a source of energy, pleasure, and fulfilment for me, as many DJs have been reported similar feelings derived from their practice (Munro et al., 2022). Therefore, mixing was not only in preparation for the festival, but also an act of rediscovering my enthusiasm, of healing mental and physical ills, which enabled my inspiration to create, both in music and in my life. Once I was able to mix again, I felt a deep sense of strength, confidence, and peace, which are signs of improved mental health. I describe this in my autoethnographic notes:

I love mixing. I love that I can mix again. There's few things, if any at all, which make me feel so strong like when I mix. I play in my room alone, and sometimes with friends, but even if I was just playing for myself, I love how it makes me feel – strong and confident, and that's so nice. (Autoethnographic journal, 13 July 2021)

Before knowing the time of my festival DJ set, I selected some hard techno tracks with a high BPM value (between 135 and 145). In the summer of 2021, I was heavily influenced by dark, energetic techno typical of some Berlin techno subcultures which Nye (2011) analyses in his paper. My relationship with music and mixing was also influenced by the news that I was to manage a local techno event, which represented my deeper involvement with the techno scene. Also, I drew inspiration from *Harder & Softer*, a queer event series in București, and from the alternative techno subculture in Romania. These promoted the harder, darker side of techno music as Lee (2021) also documents in their auto-ethnographic study of queer nightlife culture. Other than hard techno, I spent a lot of time on YouTube, Spotify, Soundcloud and online record shops to discover new tracks, which included plenty of ro-minimal music. Thus, the articulation and enactment of my personal taste also contributed to my healing. Sourcing music, be it in record crates or online, is an essential component of a DJ's work and their identity (Ahmed et al., 2012), which helped to constitute me as a healthy(ish) person and skilled DJ with myriad connections to the music world.

There are several stages at *Hijacked*, including Drum and Bass (DnB), Disco, House & Techno and Electro. As I play a variety of genres including techno, house, ro-minimal and electro, I could have been assigned to most of the stages depending on the programming. Practising my festival set before knowing my exact stage and slot was key to my healing and to my re-entry in the scene. It allowed me to be playful with my playlists, with my mixing style and transition techniques which are useful skills to have as a DJ generally. According to Bartel (2004, p. 240), "playfulness is a fundamental quality of enthusiastic life." My eclectic DJ practice in which I allowed myself to go beyond the rigid limits of genres, then, indicates a return to more enthusiastic and joyful feelings and moods than those I experienced while struggling with my recovery from trauma. Therefore, by playing tracks from genres such as ro-minimal, hard techno, hyper-pop, deconstructed club music or synth wave, I articulated my identity not necessarily as a fan or these genres or a Romanian DJ, but as a person who is able to feel joy and fun and who can allow themselves to play.

I learnt about my set time approximately three weeks before the festival, which was on the *Hijacked* Stage (the original stage showcasing house and techno

music), right before the first headliner of the event, producer and DJ Peach. As a woman and immigrant DJ, getting to play at a key time along with Peach, felt like a personal triumph but also a communal victory for underrepresented artists in the industry (Gadir, 2016). During the pandemic, I curated mixes for online platforms and livestreamed a DJ set for *Zoomtown* festival, as described in Chapter 5. While DJs are perceived as cultural and musical mediators (Campbell & Barut, 2021), sharing music online further expanded the mediation process, an aspect I further examine in Chapter 7. This meant that the closeness to my audience, as well as the experience of playing and being perceived online differed from playing at an in-person event. This was a distinct element of my anticipation for the festival, equally influenced by fear and the desire to be seen and heard.

I started piecing together my mix. I alternated between sourcing music, listening to newly found tracks, mixing, and listening to mixes by other DJs online, all practices that are part of a DJ's work (Nye, 2011; Ahmed et al., 2012). "Digging" for tracks is necessary for DJs who wish to enrich their music collection and knowledge, by developing their taste and mixing style (Ahmed et al., 2012, p. 1805). I discovered a lot of energetic house music, light and playful techno, and a lot of ro-minimal, too. I came across music I already knew such as tracks by Romanian ro-minimal artists BRYZ, but I also found tracks by artists that I was not familiar with previously. An example would be the track '1001' by Romanian artist iAR, uploaded on YouTube in 2017, but not publicly released for download or purchase. This partly reveals the obscurity of the ro-minimal community, especially when it comes to music producers who intentionally maintain the overwhelming sense of secrecy in this scene. The track contains ominous pads, striking kick drums as well as samples from Romanian folk acoustic music, thus articulating a mythical time-space continuum, often promoted by neo-romantic art (Garcia, 2016). Sampled on the track is also a reading from a Romanian folk tale:

The happenings that are taking place in this story, occurred a long time ago. Hundreds and hundreds of years ago, when the earth was young and the truth mingled with legends, somewhere in a remote country that didn't know snow; a country in which the sun caressed forests of roses, and where the pale moon walked pensively through the blue nights, in a lost glade in the darkness of the forest, an old man was about to die. (Sample of a Romanian folk tale reading, used in the track '1001' by iAR. Translated from Romanian by the author)

The sampled folk story accentuated a sense of homeliness and comfort of the track for me due to folk tales being an essential part of my childhood in Romania. Simultaneously, a sinister atmosphere is emphasised in the sample, as the story appears to be set in a primordial time-space and its main subject is death. The track would have been ideal for playing in my *Hijacked* set, as it clearly exemplifies characteristics of ro-minimal which I was keen to showcase for an audience that had not heard this genre before. As Boer et al. (2013) elaborate in their work on the national music of six cultures from across the globe, music can be a key source of one's own national identity. Especially when the individual resides in the diaspora, the appreciation of their national music and desire to share often intensifies (Baffoe, 2009). Despite my intention to share this track, it was unreleased. I could have downloaded the track from YouTube, but it would have been in a low-quality format, thus unsuitable for a festival sound system. Instead, I opted for other ro-minimal tracks which were easier to access. This raises the issue of access to this genre, discussed in Chapter 3, and which perhaps suggests that some tracks are only meant to be heard by small, specialised audiences as opposed to large crowds of people uninitiated in the genre. As a result, I started looking for other genres and tracks, turning to the depth of my taste in music. This eclecticism suggests ro-minimal's dialogue with other genres: although sometimes I would contact artists and ask for their unreleased ro-minimal tracks, it was not always feasible. Instead, I opted for tracks that were more easily available, and genres that are adjacent (or not) to ro-minimal.

Listening to new tracks, besides being a habitual part of a DJ's work, also involves playfulness and fun. As already demonstrated, there is a strong element of playfulness in many activities related to musical performance and music-making, or "musicking" (Small, 1999, p. 9), which results in improved emotional and mental wellbeing (Austin, 2020; Weinberg & Joseph, 2016), and in my case, the playfulness signalled enhanced overall health. I listened to distinct parts of the songs and determined if their rhythm and atmosphere were suitable with my vision for the mix. If available, I looked at the soundwave of the track; normally this can be seen online through websites such as *Beatport*, or if not, the soundwave of a track can be seen on *Rekordbox*, once the track has been uploaded onto, and verified by, this DJing software. In this process, I looked for quality of sound, musical narrative, and energy levels. Particularly

through visualising the ups and downs, and breaks and peaks in a song, I was reminded of the highs and lows of my depression and recovery from trauma (Bloch, 2009). Furthermore, discussing both music listening and music performance, Vuust and Kringelbach (2010) assert that music is a stimulating hedonistic endeavour. As a DJ preparing for my set, I felt a sense of purpose, adventure, and enthusiasm from listening to new songs. These practices of seeking pleasure and excitement are essential to mental wellbeing and healing from illnesses, thus illustrating the progress of my healing.

I got carried away by the abundance of new music, especially if I was on YouTube, which generates playlists based on what I had played so far. Despite technological advancements in music that could arguably jeopardise the role of DJs (Spagnolli et al., 2020; Tokui, 2018), I argue that technology can be helpful to a DJ's work. Search engines and recommended playlists can narrow down song choices for DJ sets. This is particularly important for people who struggle with mental illness and chronic conditions and who might be more prone to exhaustion. Thus, online recommendations can be useful tools for those recovering from mental illness such as myself. Music apps such as YouTube or Spotify articulate and intensify inequalities in the global music scene (Tofalvy & Koltai, 2023). However, I argue that recommendations on these apps, or alternative apps such as Tidal that provide better and clearer sound and pay musicians more fairly, sometimes show unexpectedly good results, thus challenging the notion of artificial intelligence (AI) being unimaginative. More widely, recent developments in AI technologies such as Chat GPT, an AI generator of various types of human-like texts or more visually orientated apps such as AI Picasso and Lensa, illustrate the extensive and growing resourcefulness of these technologies. Fear of novel technologies has been around for centuries. Kim (2019, p. 9) indicates that "to some, an idea of AI advancing to be on par with a human is enough to arouse fear; nonetheless, many are now convinced that AI will exceed human capacity sooner or later. Haslam (2006) argued that emotion, spontaneity, spirit, and intuition are unique attributes of humans that set apart from machines. But in reality, AI is also projected to replace actual human companions in this aging society." Also, with the accelerated technological advancements of the 21st century (Kurzweil, 2014), technophobia - or the fear of technology, has deepened. Instead, I propose that technology's creative capabilities can be utilised to aid and

complement human activity, rather than making it obsolete (Anantrasirichai & Bull, 2022; Tokui, 2018). I suggest that the use of new technologies could improve the job of human DJs, especially those who are chronically ill, disabled, or neurodivergent – I expand on this in the conclusion of the thesis, where I suggest this would be a fruitful research avenue. Nonetheless, in the case of ro-minimal, the recommended playlists and tracks were not so helpful, especially on Spotify, where the algorithm turned out very few results that I liked or that I could use in my sets. This illustrates, once more, the esotericism of the ro-minimal scene, thus staying true to its neo-romantic persuasion, and suggesting perhaps the presence of a widespread technophobia or a rejection of new technologies.

During my preparations for *Hijacked* Festival, I became engrossed in music searching. I created a playlist of forty tracks,[37] but eventually, I reduced its size by approximately four times. I grouped two or three tracks and started envisaging snippets of my forthcoming mix, familiarising myself with the mood and energy of the music. For instance, if a track was in a minor key and had a BPM of around 122, it probably had to go in a different section than a track in a major key and a BPM of 130, although I allowed myself to improvise and do last minute changes in my set. Since music generally influences and articulates one's moods and affective states (Born, 2010; DeNora, 2000), it was important for me, in this playful selection process, to become habituated with the way songs made me feel and if they were suitable with my idea of a warmup set. Furthermore, as DeNora (2000) argues, music enables the listener to disperse or intensify certain feelings. Because this preparation period was concomitant with a healing milestone, I searched for moderate to high energy music such as acid house, as well as gentle but stimulating sounds such as ro-minimal.

My DJing practice is not only about selecting music and playing it, but it also incorporates movement and dance, so I normally listened to tracks in my DJ headphones[38] and danced in my room, in preparation for my set. As already mentioned, dancing has been a key aspect of my healing process. It is an everyday practice has been shown to maintain wellbeing emotionally and physically (Hős, 2005; Norouzi et al., 2020). In my case, dancing also

[37] This would be enough for a two-hour set, and my allocated set was forty-five minutes.
[38] These are designed to be worn on one or two ears, and also have the function to play one track in one ear, and another track in the other ear.

contributed to the articulation of my identity as a DJ. As shown in Chapter 4, DJs who dance are sometimes frowned upon in the music industry because they are perceived as unskilled or as attention-seekers (Attias, 2011). On the contrary, I argue not only that dancing can have a positive emotional effect on a raving crowd, by putting them at ease, but is also healing and reassuring for the performing DJ. In the ro-minimal community, cis men DJs are prevalent and many refrain from dancing, and as I demonstrate, women who dance can sometimes be ridiculed. Therefore, it was even more important for me to incorporate dancing in my DJ set, to shift the narrative in ro-minimal DJ performances which rarely involve dancing. As seen in Ellen Allien's (Ellen Allien UFO, 2020) DJ set livestream, she is showcasing fashion and choreography as part of her performance. The viewer simultaneously experiences closeness due to perhaps seeing the DJ mixing in their own home, but also a sense of distance due to not physically sharing the same space. Therefore, the aesthetics of livestreaming DJ sets have specific characteristics which often differ from in-person events. This is an aspect which I briefly analysed in Chapter 4, and which I consider in depth in Chapter 7. Therefore, returning to on-stage performances would be influenced by livestreaming aesthetics, so understanding the energy and corporeal feel of a song before adding it to my setlist was essential as I wanted to feel prepared for this experience.

Next in my festival preparation, I watched DJ sets from various broadcasting platforms, in particular *Boiler Room*, as it provided a wide variety of music. I watched a set that Peach, one of the headliners at *Hijacked*, performed in Manchester at a queer party (Boiler Room, 2018). Watching this video familiarised me with the affective environment that Peach and her DJ set articulates: an atmosphere of openness, warmth, freedom, and respect. The video shows an amalgam of elements: a plush dog toy placed on a spinning turntable, ravers dancing close to the DJ and colourful flowers placed on the mixing decks. Furthermore, one comment to the video reads:

> Such an amazing crowd for this set. People actually using the space they've been given for dancing instead of standing around and awkwardly sipping their drinks, amazing! Big ups to Peach for laying down this set like a[sic] absolute meteor. *(Anonymous user, 2021)*

Both the image and the comment to the video present the warm, open atmosphere at the party, which is characteristic of queer nightlife culture (Taylor, 2008). The same values were promoted recently in a manifesto by British DJ Rebekah (Ross, 2021), pointing out the problems in the current club music industry, and deeming it an unsafe space especially for women and queer people. The manifesto calls for systemic changes in the club industry, promoting a culture of safety and respect, which, after watching Peach's set, I felt was possible to achieve.

The video reminded me of the sense of community and sisterhood which exists despite the music industry being dominated by cis men (Gadir, 2016). As observed in my online surveys and interviews on ro-minimal, and in ro-minimal groups on social media, few women publicly DJ in this scene, and those who do are frequently marginalised. Furthermore, I demonstrate that being a fan of ro-minimal as a woman is sometimes difficult due to sexualisation and belittling of women, and their being constantly criticised for 'not knowing enough' about ro-minimal (Nikolayi, 2019). Understanding how poorly women can be treated in ro-minimal influenced my expectations before playing my first DJ set after the pandemic and made me apprehensive. And despite my desire to play more ro-minimal or watch more ro-minimal videos in preparation for the festival, I was unable to find many sets played by ro-minimal women DJs and producers. Nevertheless, my identity as well as my taste in music are not purely determined by my country and culture of origin, so I delved into my taste in high energy house and techno, and watched a set by Shanti Celeste b2b Saoirse (fabriclondon, 2021), two DJs connected to *Mix Nights*, the collective where I learnt how to mix. The filming was close up, showing the mixing techniques of the DJs. I felt a deep sense of sisterhood (Farrugia, 2012) watching this video as it reminded me of learning to DJ at *Mix Nights*, where a similar atmosphere of openness, collaboration and fun was present. Therefore, my initial anxieties began to dissipate. I felt empowered and excited for my set, which contributed to my overall increase in self-esteem and confidence, fundamental for my recovery.

I was allocated the warmup set at *Hijacked*, so I was aware I was not supposed to play too hard, both in terms of the speed and the energy of my music. If a warmup DJ plays really popular and very high energy tracks, or "bangers", that

would leave little room for the headline DJ to “peak” on the night (Montano, 2009, p. 84). So, the warmup set, while exciting, can be challenging to navigate, as it needs to slowly build up the energy towards the main act. I had played warmup sets in before in nightclubs, but this was at festival whose crowd size could vary from one hundred to a few thousand people. I found a helpful article, with contributions from DJs that I follow and admire, including Peach (Murphy, 2018), advising on how to play a warmup set. Peach’s recommendation was to embrace one’s personal style, but focussing on left-field, lesser-known tracks. Being a warmup DJ incorporates a key skill – playing subtle music, but lively enough to energise the crowd and create collective anticipation for the main act. So, drawing on Peach’s advice as well as from Montano’s work on DJ culture in Sydney (2009), I claim that a warmup set enables the DJ to display and curate their more unconventional music, thus accessing separate parts of their personality and performing skills. I also contend that this is an act of self-exploration and self-discovery, which are both essential activities in working through trauma and healing from mental health conditions (Bloch, 2009; Chan et al., 2021).

Ro-minimal consists of myriad subgenres, and whilst the tracks vary in energy and speed, they are often regarded as subtle and intriguing, so fit for setting the mood as well as for creating anticipation for the headliners’ sets. This is confirmed in Chapter 3 by my interview and the survey participants. Ro-minimal is a versatile genre, but not popular in cities such as Exeter where *Hijacked* Festival was held. Exeter nightclubs normally close at three or four in the morning. With the little time they have available, people go out in Exeter to dance around eleven or midnight and spend the three hours in the club drinking and dancing, generally preferring mainstream music that is loud and energetic. Ro-minimal is the opposite of that. Firstly, some club nights in Romania, specifically București, start at ten p.m. and can last for many hours and even up to two or three days (Ralston, 2017). As shown in Chapter 3, ro-minimal is an obscure genre, created to be savoured in detail, and on a regular club night, there is not enough time for a DJ to fully develop a musical narrative. However, *Hijacked* Festival was a longer event, enabling musical build up and fuelling crowd anticipation, so I decided to use ro-minimal in my set. Self-determination and increased self-confidence are signs of improved overall health, when recovering from mental health conditions, as Piltch (2016) claims. My choice of

including ro-minimal in my set illustrates a willingness to challenge myself given the reduced popularity of this genre locally; it shows a readiness to perform music that might not be immediately liked by audiences, thus performing my professional, national and gender identity in the context of a British music festival.

I mixed at home on my DDJ-400 Pioneer controller, a device that is connected to a laptop and uses the software *Rekordbox* to access tracks and to mix, thus similar to CDJs, the standard digital mixing equipment used in clubs and at music festivals. Turntables are making a comeback in the music industry (Bartmanski & Woodward, 2015; Mall, 2021), and they have been used almost exclusively in ro-minimal (see Chapter 3). However, CDJs and controllers are easier to set up, so digital DJs, as opposed to vinyl DJs, need to bring only a USB stick with music (Rietveld, 2016). The DDJ-400 Pioneer controller is ideal for playing and recording DJ sets at home. And as I explain in Chapter 7, playing online DJ sets from home during the pandemic has enabled DJs, including myself, to articulate aesthetically and technically significant elements of the mixing experience. For instance, I did not have a sound technician available to help when I played sets online or when I was practising. This put me in charge of the technical process of installing and maintain good sound throughout my practice, and as Elliott (2022) shows, this is a common practice for DIY, self-taught DJs. Mixing on the DDJ-400 was straightforward, but occasionally I had to reconnect the wires for the speakers to the amplifier, as I had an old and unreliable sound system at the time. Also, during my practice sessions, I had to be mindful of my housemates and neighbours and had the music on low volume, but definitely louder than during the pandemic. I wanted to clearly hear the sound levels of my music, and I knew I had to play on a higher volume at the festival, so I wanted to familiarise myself with that sound level. This is an example of enskilment which, as Woods et al. (2021, p. 1) argue, means that “what is learned is not an established body of knowledge, transmitted into the mind of a passive recipient from an authorised being, but is a progressively deepening embodied-embedded attentiveness, where an individual learns to self-regulate by becoming more responsive to people and environmental features by ‘looking, listening and feeling.” My desire to play louder music suggests my eagerness to perform, and my gradual re-entry into

the music scene in Exeter, after a period of absence, whilst getting used to the festival environment, so that I was able to perform my set.

Besides practising at home, I practiced on my friends' CDJs, which illustrated the complexities of a DJ set, especially one that contains ro-minimal music. Some tracks were not heard as loud or clear as they did on my controller. As mentioned in Chapter 5, the glitchy aesthetic of ro-minimal can be perceived as erratic or problematic by those unfamiliar with the genre. So, by hearing ro-minimal tracks played on CDJs and through powerful speakers enhanced my DJ practice, as I identified any sounds that might be considered challenging during my set, and I tried to obtain the tracks in higher quality formats. This way, I hoped the tracks would be heard clearly and any glitchy-sounding fragments would be then perceived as normal, intentional parts of the track rather than anomalies, as both Prior (2008) and Panzieri (2013) assert in their work on glitch. Also, my friend's CDJs had an issue with the cue button, a problem which I incorporated into my practice, thus learning how to work with equipment that is faulty or noncompliant. Technology can be an extension of self (Haraway,1991; Nye, 2011), and here, a process of hybridisation or a cyborgian connection is created between the DJ and the mixing technology they use, in the articulation of sound, music, atmosphere and eventually, the DJ set. Furthermore, through this hybridisation and negotiation of sound and technique between myself and my equipment, I was able to control the narrative of my set, which helped my healing progress. During depressive episodes, it was difficult to create or entertain a sense of personal narrative. However, by curating music for *Hijacked*, I was able to re-distribute myself across a corporeal and technological assemblage. Therefore, I projected my cyborgian DJ identity, a concept also Sellin (2005) utilises in her work, thus affirming my skills and my improved mental health.

Another significant moment in my festival preparation was the night before the event. I learnt from other DJs on the line-up that the sound system at the festival would be Funktion One (generally considered the best quality in the music industry), so music files of lower quality than 320 kbps would sound muffled when played on it. Fortunately, all my tracks are 320 kbps or WAV (a lossless audio file format, as explained in Chapter 3), so I was not worried initially. However, I learnt that the sharing platform from where I sometimes

obtain my tracks has lower quality music files disguised as 320kbps, so I checked all my tracks for the real bitrate. I also re-downloaded some tracks in WAV format where available, to ensure clarity of sound throughout my set. Again, this was particularly important for my ro-minimal tracks, as many are vinyl-only releases, so if they were digitalised and distributed online, their quality would be usually diminished. Besides experiencing healing through preparing for the DJ set, I was also in the process of enskilment (Ingold, 2000; Woods et al., 2021). This was done by collaboratively, working with other DJs to discover new information about mixing, thus enabling me to feel ready for returning to face-to-face performances after the pandemic hiatus. Moreover, the practices of checking technical information and the attentiveness involved in preparing the mix are illustrative of a high level of care, particularly self-care, but also care for my projection into a public space.

This section analyses my preparation for *Hijacked* Festival, exploring anticipation, playfulness, enskilment and national and gender identity. I look at a variety of practices such as sourcing music, practising and skill-sharing, illuminating key aspects of ro-minimal, among other genres used in the preparation stage. Next, I consider the day of the festival, illustrating my re-entry into the local music scene, where I played ro-minimal and performed various parts of my identity and of my healing process.

Performing ro-minimal identity at *Hijacked*

This section discusses the act of performing my DJ set at *Hijacked* Festival in September 2021, which I treat as a decisive milestone in my healing and in my DJ career. With such a high intensity attached to it, my performance can be seen as the point I had been working towards for several months in my healing. Also, since it was my first time playing at a festival and playing to a live crowd after the pandemic, it takes on the extra meaning of enskilment (Ingold, 2000), particularly through publicly showcasing my DJ skills, which I discuss here in detail. Furthermore, playing ro-minimal at this festival is an act of performing my identity as a Romanian immigrant, woman, DJ, and trauma survivor.

As opposed to feeling extreme anxiety on the morning of the festival day, I was pleasantly surprised to experience joy, lightness and even relief:

I got to the festival site on the staff bus with other DJs, photographers, sound crew and bar staff. The atmosphere was light and cheerful, with people laughing

and singing loudly in the back of the bus, so it felt a bit like being a school trip. (Autoethnographic journal, 30 September 2021)

This festival was held after the lockdowns, so attendees generally approached it with caution, as ideas of health and contagion were transformed after the pandemic (Morton & Power, 2022). However, described above in my journal is an atmosphere of playfulness and friendliness. The festival preparation process continued as I arrived on site with the other DJs. We explored the festival grounds and inquired about the DJ set-ups. Liaising with the stage manager and getting acquainted with the equipment gave me a sense of security and control over our sets, whilst pointing to the totality of actors being involved in the production of sound and atmosphere of the festival (Latour, 1996). As Farrugia (2004) and Rowley (2009) indicate, and as demonstrated in Chapter 4, women DJs are presumed to have limited knowledge about the technical side of DJing by most parties involved in a music festival. Thus, in addition to feeling in control of my set by discussing the sound system with the technician, I was also asserting my skills and my interest in the technical side of DJing. Besides, as social distancing was emplaced and people were unable to physically meet and produce events together during the pandemic, collaboration became imperative. On return to in-person events, artists, including myself, carried forward the practices of collaboration that were developed during the pandemic.

Despite the meaning I attached to the festival, I felt relatively calm on the day. Closer to my set, I was excited and nervous, but I see this as a regular part of the anticipation process (Vuust & Firth, 2008), and not necessarily related to my mental health struggles. I reproduce a part of my autoethnographic notes, documenting my excitement/nervousness:

Half an hour before my set we went back to the Volcano Stage [where I was about to play]] and a trio of DJs were playing. They were playing very rhythmic, high-energy garage music which made me think that my set would bring down the energy of the crowd. I got up on the stage in the corner and asked one of the DJs playing what BPM is their current song? He told me it's 136 bpm! That was 10 bpm over what I was planning to begin my set on. I knew I had to fade out their last track. When I did that, I knew the atmosphere changed but I was in control and excited to play my ro-minimal tunes out to the people. (Autoethnographic journal, 30 September 2021)

The fragment explains the complex decision making involved in planning a set. Despite having the possibility to fade out the previous set and start mine afresh with the desired BPM, any transition had to be done very carefully. This level of

care and attention to detail was important in playing in online festivals such as *Zoomtown*, analysed in Chapter 5, but even more so at *Hijacked*. In the former, articulating a cohesive atmosphere, even if desirable, was not exactly doable due to the technical component of livestreaming sets: each artist streamed from a different physical location, and each had their own livestream link to enter the performance online, so there was always a small gap between sets. However, at an in-person festival such as *Hijacked*, the sense of continuity mattered more as artists shared the DJ decks and the physical space of a stage, which in turn, created an atmosphere of cohesion, as Sylvan (2006) also shows in their work on global rave cultures. Furthermore, the autoethnographic paragraph shows my nervousness regarding playing ro-minimal after the previous set. This was a risk in terms of mood, as inevitably the genre change from garage to ro-minimal would be felt by attendees. The necessity of taking risks and making split-second decisions before and during my set indicates, again, the performance of skills through being attentive to my environment and the technical as well as the mood conditions of the previous set (Woods et al., 2021). It also indicates an improvement of my mental health, as I displayed increased self-confidence by making decisions and taking charge (Bishop & Gagne, 2018).

Most of my playlist was planned, but I left space for improvisation. As a DJ, I play music that I enjoy and craft the atmosphere of the event together with the crowd, incorporating their live feedback into my set. As Butler (2014) suggests, the co-crafting of the atmosphere is done by choosing tracks that modulate the mood of the DJ set, and that of the event attendees. I played a variety of genres, as I was guided by the energy, danceability and mood of musical tracks rather than by their genre. To define a genre can be beneficial to creating and maintaining a music subculture, however, it also limits musical expression (McKay & Fujinaga, 2006). I played ro-minimal, acid house, deep house, and techno. Also, as it was a warmup set, I ensured the momentum incrementally increased, although in a subtle and smooth way, as to not ‘peak’ before the headliner’s set (Montano, 2009). Ro-minimal can be low/soft energy, almost lazy, glitchy, deep, acid or ‘trippy’ as described by one of my survey participants. In most accounts related by interview participants, ro-minimal was described as a genre that they associate with the word ‘journey’. This suggests ro-minimal’s suitability in various contexts, conveying a sense of movement, narrative, and adventure.

Drawing inspiration from Ingold's (2007) theory of lines as the elementary components of our lived experiences, I argue that in the same way, ro-minimal, as a "journey genre", described so by my research participant Leona (Interview, 12 February 2021), shows a linear progression thorough moods and feelings, by setting and then intensifying the tone of a set. Although one might expect that lines are always straight and uninterrupted, Ingold (2007) looks at a variety of lines in human experiences, and especially in musical notation and performance, which show the irregularity and spontaneity of this linear view of the world: our environments have straight lines, curved lines, squiggles, and scribbles, among other kinds of lines which illustrate journeying and movement. And, as Born (2010) suggests, listening is not a simple and uniform process of taking in the sounds of something or someone, but depending on multiple factors such as technology, volume or place, the experience varies greatly. In my DJ set, ro-minimal indicated a sense of direction and wandering, while also highlighting the breaks and not-so-clear or not-so-obvious sounds that encourage introspection and close listening.

Although by the time I was playing the organisers were expecting around one thousand people, the number was closer to two hundred. The atmosphere was intimate, and despite being on a lifted stage, thus physically distanced from the audience, there was a closeness between us. To reduce the potential stress of performing at a festival for the first time, I had another DJ friend on the stage with me. We agreed we would be on the stage for each other's sets, dancing on the side in case either of us needed backing. Having another woman DJ by my side was an enactment of sisterhood and availability of help and support in the industry (Farrugia, 2012). It also reminded me of my first contact with DJing, at the *Mix Nights* course, specifically my first gig, where my tutors were by my side as I played my first ever gig. Thus, playing at *Hijacked* was a reinforcement of sorority bonds in the music industry, which are healing and helpful not only on a personal level, but also collectively, by shaping a welcoming and friendly environment for those regularly sidelined.

When I began mixing, I entered auto-pilot mode and immediately felt comfortable and poised. The crowd's response was overwhelmingly positive, as more people arrived at the stage during my set. Ravers were dancing and imitating my body movements and even cheered me on as I transitioned

between tracks. Reading a room is considered an essential skill for a DJ (Rietveld, 2003): to see how the audience responds to the music played, and craft the set with the intention to modulate it accordingly. The first few tracks of my set were ro-minimal, so I paid close attention to the crowd, scanning their reactions to my music. I was unsure of how the crowd would respond to this genre, given its relative local unpopularity. Instead of excitement, I sensed mild anxiety regarding the response of the crowd. Performance anxiety is a regular occurrence in a DJ's work, or for that matter, of any artists who shares their work publicly, especially when they do something unconventional (Steptoe, 2001). Additionally, when the unconventional nature of the performed art is tied with ideas of identity and self-representation, the anxiety grows even stronger. As my set continued, I eased into the rhythmicity of the music, the atmosphere I was co-creating with the equipment, the physical place of the festival, and crowd (Latour, 1996; 2005), so I trusted that attendees were enjoying themselves. This Latourian view of my DJ set within the music festival comforted me as although I was in control of my set, other elements were equally impactful on the atmosphere and the environment of the event, thus enabling me to relax and focus on my performance, without experiencing excessive anxiety. Therefore, I see my healing directly related to my becoming integrated in the world in a different way and by altering my assemblage. The organisation and dynamic of my set put me at ease, and I suggest that this is a form of STS-inspired therapeutic exercise, which I took comfort in.

I enjoy ro-minimal's complexities and intricate rhythms, and the way it manages to concomitantly be in the background and in the centre of attention is fascinating, making it one of my favourite genres to mix with. Often, ro-minimal tracks contain various drum patters and absorbing vocals, and producers utilise samples of old Romanian folk music in their music, as shown earlier in this thesis. They rework the tracks to increase their appeal for contemporary audiences, but retain the mysteriousness, fantasy, and evocativeness of old songs, thus staying true to the general neo-romantic direction in this genre (Garcia, 2016). And, as previously mentioned through using Romanian folk song samples, a certain element of national identity (Baffoe, 2009) and even pride are articulated for me when listening and playing ro-minimal. The autoethnographic passage below explains how I connected with one particular ro-minimal track that I played at the festival:

The track "Suflet" ('soul' in English) by Nedeea (a duo of Italian producers) was love at first hearing for me. It has this beautiful old traditional song from Romania about shepherding sung by a haunting soft voice with a bit of reverb added on. The track is a whole mood. I can't describe in any other way. Once I heard it, I knew I had to play it out. Even if people don't understand what it's about, they don't understand the words, it makes them curious and I am certain the haunting, mystical quality of the song translates to any language.[39] As a Romanian immigrant living in the UK, sharing songs like this, makes me happy and makes me proud. (Autoethnographic journal, 29 September 2021)

Songs such as 'Suflet' offer me the opportunity to perform my identity. Similar to Eurovision performers who incorporate folk music elements in their performances (Baker, 2008), my playing of Romanian folk-inspired ro-minimal articulated a connection with my audiences through revealing something fundamental about my identity. Although to be seen as the ultimate bearer of knowledge about Romania and Romanian music can be a tokenistic position (Madrid, 2017), it is also a privileged spot which I somewhat enjoyed. The kind of ro-minimal I chose for the rest of my set was complex and highly rhythmic, such as "back to back" by sEmoa containing vocal samples from pop song "Hollaback Girl" by Gwen Stefani, or "Yes, I love It" by Alineat.[40] Both tracks are dynamic and engaging, and particularly the one sampling pop music eases the audience into this unfamiliar genre through the use of a familiar one. In addition to ro-minimal, I included acid house and techno to complement the quirky sound of my set, and to convey my taste and expertise in music. Although I knew what tracks followed in the set, I was curious to see how they sounded on a big sound system. I ended my set with a jazzy minimal house track with moderate energy and mellow rhythm, giving the headliner Peach the opportunity to increase the energy of her set. Once I played my last track, I asked Peach to come on the stage, and we swapped places. We talked for a few minutes as I was playing my last track, and she was sorting out the beginning of her set. As Peach has multiple connections to the *Mix Nights* collective in Bristol, being on stage with her revived a strong sense of sisterhood and community (Farrugia, 2012) which I was happy to return to after my period of illness and inactivity. Also, besides performing my national identity, I also articulated my playfulness and artistic versatility through my set, displaying my improved mental health and wellbeing.

[39] The track can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-8WikFIZbU
[40] Previously known as 'Stroe'

My set lasted forty-five minutes, and while in my home during practice sessions, this felt like a long time, on stage it passed quicker, or even felt virtually absent:

During that set, I didn't really think about time, or time in a casual everyday sense. Although I am very aware of how long songs are and how long I need to do the transitions and play with the levels between the tracks, I don't really measure that in minutes or regular time units. As soon as I finished my set, I wanted to do it all again, I enjoyed it so much! (Autoethnographic journal, 30 September 2021)

This autoethnographic fragment is evocative of the rave as a temporary autonomous zone (Shenton, 2015), so a space where societal rules do not apply in the same way as in everyday life, and festivalgoers experience various degrees of freedom for a limited amount of time. In the same way, and drawing on DeNora's work (1999, p. 8) which suggests that music has the ability to "reconceptualise time" by slowing it down or speeding it up, I suggest that my DJ set at *Hijacked* Festival almost erased the notion of measured time. I experienced time as a deeply corporeal and intuitive element rather than an external, quantifiable notion, thus exhibiting a lack of anxiety, and instead enjoyment and pleasure, so ultimately performing my healing self.

This section examines my DJ set at *Hijacked* as a significant breakthrough in my healing from PTSD. By exploring ideas of performance, sisterhood, and identity, as well as enskilment and the agency of assemblages, I show how ro-minimal aided, among other genres, my healing, illustrating my full re-entry into the local music scene.

Conclusion

This chapter looks at my participation at *Hijacked* Festival as a milestone in my healing process and in my DJ career. It is an autoethnographic, phenomenological exploration of the various stages of my preparation for playing at the festival, my interaction with various actors at the event, while featuring ro-minimal and techno music. I present the concepts of healing and enskilment, as I re-embedded myself in the electronic music scene after a period of illness and inactivity. Technology and equipment, collaborations between DJs, stage managers and the festival crowds all contributed to the articulation of a very specific kind of post-COVID atmosphere and festival organisation. The technological, affective assemblages that were at play during my DJ set worked as an STS-inspired form of therapy. Ultimately, I illustrate how ro-minimal is intimately linked with my national, immigrant, gender, and

mental health identity. I carefully examined my process of creating the mix for the festival, selecting songs, and interacting with the crowd. The preparation for *Hijacked* positioned me as a Romanian, female, immigrant, partly healed and sociable DJ on the local and wider underground electronic dance music scene. By playing a set predominantly consisting of ro-minimal, I reached a breakthrough in my recovery: not only did I perform multiple aspects of my identity and grounded myself by showcasing an important aspect of Romanian culture, but I also displayed signs of relaxation, joy, playfulness, and adventure, all vital components in the recovery from mental health conditions and traumatic experiences.

The next chapter investigates the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the ro-minimal community. It looks at questions of expertise and skill, gender, DJ set livestreams and their aesthetics, practices of gathering online and offline, as well as skill-sharing and skill development in the ro-minimal scene.

Chapter 7: Ro-minimal during the COVID-19 pandemic

A large part of this thesis presents and analyses the practices of the ro-minimal community, which were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The ro-minimal subculture has been transformed by this major global event and the previous chapters display this change. However, in this chapter I focus specifically on the implications of the COVID-19 rules and regulations for ro-minimal, as primarily a Romanian venture in music, but also an internationally recognised underground music genre. By analysing data obtained from digital ethnography, media analysis, online interviews and autoethnography, I consider how the pandemic and its related measures such as lockdowns, safety regulations and music venue closures transformed ideas and practices of identity, fandom, gender (in)equality, and the way in which this genre is produced, performed, and enjoyed by aficionados. I focus on ro-minimal in Romania and the UK, countries where ro-minimal is flourishing, and which is where most of my participants are based, including myself. Additionally, I closely look at online and offline practices of partying and gathering and how they have facilitated socialising and enjoyment in the ro-minimal community in a time of collective trauma. I also examine the ways in which the ro-minimal community has shown creativity and adaptability by hosting a *Sunwaves* Festival in Zanzibar. Lastly, I look at practices of sharing mixes and musical productions on online groups during the pandemic, and examine how perceptions of gender equality changed during this time. This chapter highlights the ways in which the ro-minimal scene has been affected by the pandemic, with a focus on the changes to how its members interact with each other and with the wider dance music scene. Thus, it emphasises the particular processes by which the tensions between openness and exclusivity have evolved since the beginning of the pandemic in the ro-minimal community.

Context

Before I delve into the main themes of this chapter, I present a brief timeline of lockdown measures instated by Romania and the UK. Looking at the response of the Romanian and British governments to the pandemic is essential for understanding how the general public, the music industry and the ro-minimal scene have been affected by and responded to these measures.

Romania entered state of emergency for thirty days on the 16th of March 2020, which included measures such as reduced freedom to roam, reduced teaching and learning, a ban on gatherings, but also a ban on strikes and protests (Monitorul Oficial, 2020). The UK began its first national lockdown on March 26, 2020, and although it was strict, it mainly placed restrictions on gatherings and instigated social distancing. Romania had instated rules that were generally less permissive, so things like going out were only possible in exceptional circumstances such as work or emergencies, and by filling out a self-responsibility document (Kiss, 2020). Early in 2020, when European countries started introducing restrictions, the COVID-19 virus was not seen as especially dangerous by the younger demographics, as it was believed they were least affected by the virus (Aydın et al., 2021). The internet also became saturated with memes about the pandemic, suggesting a humorous view of the pandemic. Simultaneously, it can be argued that these reactions are a manifestation of gallows humour, a way of coping with the horrors of a collectively traumatic event (Phillips-Kumaga et al., 2022).

After the introduction of the first lockdowns, there were various relaxation of the rules and lockdown breaks, modified and area-specific lockdowns, but COVID-19 related restrictions lasted until early 2022 in both countries. This means that for over two years, social life was dramatically altered: for instance, people had to wear face masks, practice social distancing as well as rethink and reorganize their daily routines and relationships, be they romantic or otherwise (Mezzadri, 2022). In the following sections, I discuss how the measures taken to prevent the spread of the virus by the UK and the Romanian governments altered the electronic music industry and particularly the ro-minimal scene: as I show, they were deeply transformed.

Ro-minimal online: a community in crisis?

For most of 2020 until 2022, Romania was under various COVID-19 restrictions. These caused places such as bars and nightclubs that hosted parties and raves to temporarily, or permanently, close down, having a major negative impact on these businesses (Ducman et al., 2021). Closures also meant that music fans, especially those interested in raving, were left without the means and physical places to do that, which generated collective loneliness and social insularity (Killgore et al., 2020). As noted repeatedly in social science literature (Gere,

2021; Ducman et al., 2021; Jeannotte, 2021), the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on music communities was felt deeply worldwide. A large part of the music industry and the communities surrounding it rely on in-person interaction and participation. So, as soon as the venues were forced to close down, fan groups and entire music-based communities had to reconsider their organisational principles, and rely on improvisational practices. Ro-minimal was no exception, and the impossibility of officially and legally meeting and raving generated varied responses from its fans. Therefore, this chapter examines ro-minimal as a community that in many ways responded to the pandemic like other electronic dance music communities globally, but which at times enacted its Romanian origins.

First, I discuss the role of online practices in the ro-minimal community since the beginning of the pandemic. Drawing on Gere's work (2021) on the electronic music scene in Prague during the pandemic, I argue that online and offline practices and environments coexist and complement each other instead of being opposed. Online practices have gained prominence in ro-minimal throughout the pandemic, and this had an impact on the exclusiveness of the scene. As demonstrated in Chapter 3, and as Ralston (2017) shows in his study of ro-minimal, although it is an increasingly international genre and community, it remains highly enigmatic and exclusivist. Ro-minimal is particularly hospitable towards people who are 'there for the music', a phrase often quoted by my interview participants, which enacts ro-minimal as a community of fans with specialist knowledge and interest for the music instead of merely using the music to escape the rigours and conventions of everyday life, which is often represented as the most common function of partying and raving (St John; 2004). Most research participants confirmed that despite the perceived exclusivism of the scene, fans are welcoming and open to new members, regardless of their knowledge of ro-minimal. Sonia, whom I interviewed, endorses this statement:

[Ro-minimal] encourages freedom, there aren't any strict rules … and if you're different, it's not an issue – you're not excluded. The level of acceptance is pretty high. (Interview with Sonia, 8 April 2021. Translated from Romanian by the author)

The friendliness and welcoming attitude of the ro-minimal community described by my research participants seems to apply for in-person parties. Once music

venues closed down due to COVID-19 restrictions, the forms of socialisation in this group changed: there was an increase in the use of online spaces (Gere, 2021), social media groups dedicated to various music genres, and a surge in music livestreams and YouTube or Soundcloud tracks and mixes uploads (Hansen et al., 2021). The pandemic also enabled forms of offline partying and raving, but very private and in isolation from the regular club infrastructure, mostly in people's homes, with ravers partying alone or with small groups of friends (Wolfenden et al., 2022). Whilst in-person parties took place in one way or another, the online alternatives intensified with the instatement of lockdowns and impacted on the social fabric of the ro-minimal community. Friendliness and accessibility in the ro-minimal subculture were altered, and I suggest that the pandemic increased and articulated new forms of sociality.

The consequence most commonly observed and mentioned by my research participants is the rise in the number of online electronic music parties and livestreams which they saw as a direct substitution for in-person parties. When asked 'How have you engaged with the ro-minimal community since the start of the pandemic?' in the online survey I circulated, sixty-nine out of eighty-one people said they engaged in some form of listening to or watching online mixes, podcasts, and livestreams. Likewise, when I expanded on this question in interviews, all participants said that music from online sources was their preferred and most reliable source of entertainment (Hansen et al., 2021), even though they also relied on secret parties among other activities. Online parties and livestreams were so popular as they mimicked to an extent, in-person raves, but without breaking any pandemic rules, i.e., attending illegal parties. For example, Mirela, a master's student from Romania, recounts how during the pandemic, livestreams were a crucial social practice:

Me: So, did you normally go alone to the livestreams or with friends?

Mirela: I used to share livestreams and say 'there's Priku playing live in two hours, or Sepp, if you want to watch, I will watch as well. But yeah, sometimes you 'bumped into' a person or two that you knew at the lives[treams] and we would say 'ah this song is so cool' … but that's about it. (Interview with Mirela, 6 February 2021. Translated from Romanian by author)

Initially, Mirela is moderately enthusiastic about the livestreams. She portrays them as important musical and social events, where potentially the latest music is released, with some opportunities to connect with others, friends, or strangers

(Wolfenden et al., 2022), although her statement suggests that it is more difficult to meet people at online events. Gere (2021, p. 12) quoting Olaveson (2004) mentions the five criteria that need to be achieved in order for "collective effervescence" to be felt at a gathering such as a rave. The event needs to elicit the following emotions and concepts: "(1) electricity, exaltation, enthusiasm, (2) embodied, non-rational, emotional, (3) communal and collective, (4) transgressive, levelling and humanising and (5) temporary, creative, and utopian." Like the electronic music scene in Prague during the pandemic examined by Gere (2021), the ro-minimal community also sought alternatives to attain these goals. The livestreams seem to cover most points, but particularly those regarding enthusiasm and collectivism. However, the rest of Mirela's answer shows that livestreams cannot accomplish all functions, and that online music events have limitations. Mirela was fearful that online events would become normalised, irrevocably changing the nature of the ro-minimal community:

> *Now everything happens online – work, school, music. Music was the only one that helped us escape from the virtual … It was ok at first [the livestreams] it helped to stop that party fever, but I'm scared it will be a routine from now on. It destroys its charm [if it keeps happening online]. (Interview with Mirela, 6 February 2021. Translated from Romanian by the author)*

In Mirela's opinion, music has a distinctive relationship with the offline world, being positively disconnected from virtual spaces and formats – to her, the latter can often seem restrictive and soulless. Despite the numerous benefits of online music events and DJ livestreams to community and personal wellbeing (Pryor & Outley, 2021), their constraints have also been documented, especially by Green et al. (2022) who show collective perceptions of online events as lacking spontaneity and failing to create a deep bond between audiences and artists. My participant articulates a type of nostalgia and a strong sense of missing out or being denied experiences, which became widespread during the pandemic (Lee & Kao, 2021), especially in raving communities where, as Olaveson (2004) argues, togetherness is key to achieving catharsis and escapism. Nostalgia has been noticed in all kinds of demographics affected by pandemic restrictions of socialisation, from elderly people in homes whose families were not allowed to visit, to couples who lived separately and were not allowed to visit each other (Taheri Kia, 2020), tourists who could not travel, and raving communities for whom physical gatherings were out of the question.

For some research participants, the longing for their pre-pandemic lives, dancing all night in a club while listening to ro-minimal DJs play their favourite music, was overshadowed by the immensity of the pandemic. This posed a massive health threat to them and their families, as well as to the collective health of communities (Ornell et al., 2020). For instance, Sonia explains her view:

Me: How did you feel when you saw that clubs closed down?

Sonia: I couldn't believe it. Everyone closed at the same time. My anxieties and fears were bigger than how I was going to party. I had bigger fish to fry. For instance, like how are we going to survive, are we going to be OK? Yeah … it was shocking … after I got used to the idea [of lockdowns] and I found it even harder to imagine if things were going to be like before. I didn't know if I was going to be the same, and same for the [ro-minimal] scene. (Interview with Sonia, 8 April 2021, Translated from Romanian by the author)

Sonia describes a feeling stronger and more complex than a mere nostalgia for a time undamaged by the COVID-19 pandemic: intensified concern and care for families and communities, combined with dread and helplessness in front of a deadly virus, a feeling often reported, as evidenced in research on the pandemic's effects on wellbeing (Rossell et al., 2021). Sonia's interest in ro-minimal, then, became secondary and initially was deemed insignificant.

In a similar vein, Fred, a 20-something year old participant from Exeter, confirmed having developed of lack of interest in music, raving and mixing. He often found no pleasure in DJing or listening to his favourite music during the pandemic:

Me: How do you feel about raving currently?

Fred: Meh … honestly, I don't even feel like doing it anymore. Even if clubs open, I don't think I would have the same passion for it as before. All this staying at home, playing video games and such I guess made me quite reluctant to go out and party until 5 AM or so … it's not the same. (Interview with Fred, 24 November 2020)

Fred exemplifies the disconnection from the physical culture and scene of raving, which Green et al. (2022) argue, was felt globally in electronic music. Furthermore, Fred shows that other activities such as watching TV or playing video games became more common, thus suggesting an extensive reorganisation of his daily life.

Like Sonia and Fred above, I felt detached from electronic music especially at the beginning of the pandemic, when the COVID infection rates were high. As shown in Chapters 5 and 6, my passion for music and DJing was, for a while, replaced by intense fear and worry. I wrote in my autoethnographic journal about this separation from music and a turn towards personal and community health:

I don't really feel like mixing tbh [to be honest]. And I wouldn't go to the club now even if I had the chance. I think about the covid cases a lot and it's quite scary to go outside. I'm scared people will cough on me, and I don't want to get covid. (Autoethnographic journal, 6 May 2020)

My journal entry points out how my capacity for thinking about music was limited at the time. Most of my energy was spent on worries, fears, and self-preservation, as was the case for a large part of the globe's population. This is shown by Gamonal-Limcaoco et al. (2022) in a study of perceived stress during the pandemic of more than fifteen hundred people worldwide.

This section presents my analysis of the initial responses of the ro-minimal aficionados in the face of the pandemic, rules and regulations, and a temporary disengagement with the community and the music they normally enjoy. Nonetheless, as the pandemic lasted for approximately two years and the COVID-19 infection cases fluctuated and eventually decreased, worries and fears were also inconstant, and generally diminished towards the end of the pandemic. Furthermore, people learnt to manage their stress levels and accept the reality of the restrictions and lockdowns. This enabled them to relax and enjoy the things they like, mostly in online formats, which brings us to the next section of this chapter. Next, I focus on how the ro-minimal community found ways of being together online, as the pandemic continued.

DJ set livestreams: coming together online

As the pandemic progressed and the acceptance of the lockdowns and restrictions on social life settled in, a large part of the ro-minimal scene relocated online, in keeping with the rest of the music industry (Green et al., 2022). In this section, I look at some of the ro-minimal collectives who streamed music regularly during the pandemic, with a focus on *Sunrise Hub*, which is the organiser of renowned festival *Sunwaves*. I also analyse online partying, which

refers to collectively attending an online event and perhaps communicating with others in the chatroom, to achieve an experience similar to ‘going out’.

Sunrise Hub was at the centre of the ro-minimal community with regard to online and livestreaming activity. *Sunrise* is the organiser of *Sunwaves*, the largest ro-minimal festival usually taking place at the Romanian Black Sea coast. Given the restrictions on large gatherings, *Sunrise* moved its activity to digital environments and platforms. It started ‘Live Sessions’ – a series of livestreams initially sponsored by Kaufland, a major supermarket in Romania. The sponsorship was later stopped, but the livestreaming sessions continued after the pandemic.[41] The series consisted of Romanian ro-minimal DJs playing a set for two to three hours, while visuals were also provided during their sets for audiences. Several artists such as Dragoș Ilici, Mihigh, Andrei Ciubuc or Prichindel participated in the series, offering entertainment for the ro-minimal community. Before analysing the livestream series in depth, I want to point out the implications of the collaboration between *Sunrise* and Kaufland, in light of the renowned underground, private character of the ro-minimal community. Although ro-minimal is seen as an alternative underground subculture (Ralston, 2017), this partnership indicates a potential expansion of this genre into mainstream culture, and an openness to new members and aficionados. The fact that Kaufland is a major supermarket[42] also speaks to the national character of the genre, in a similar way to how *Sunwaves* collaborates with the cryptocurrency Elrond, as evidenced in Chapter 3. Furthermore, the supermarket sponsorship deal potentially represents a form of cultural appropriation, or the appropriation of subcultures by the capitalist mainstream as often happens in advertising. As Clark (2003, p. 231) argues, “subcultures may even serve a useful function for capitalism, by making stylistic innovations that can then become vehicles for new sales.” This explains to a certain extent the dualistic character of the ro-minimal scene as open and exclusive, in the context of a capitalist society from which it cannot completely separate, and whose assistance it needed, particularly during the pandemic.

[41] I have looked thoroughly for information on why the sponsorship ended, but I was unable to find anything helpful in this sense. I would assume it is because the Kaufland funding for this particular project ended and it was not renewed.
[42] Kaufland is a German supermarket, however, alongside Lidl, it is the most popular supermarket in Romania.

Many research participants mentioned the importance of *Sunrise Hub* for their partying and listening experiences. Leona, who frequently attended these online events, said:

Leona: Me and my boyfriend would religiously listen to every Wednesday. If I'm not with him, we would both be listening at home. So, there's about 3 of our friends who are really into it. They'll be watching at the same time as us, coz we can see they are there (in the live chat). A lot of people that we know from England that are DJs and into this stuff, they'll all be there as well. (Interview with Leona, 12 February 2021)

Leona describes her attendance as a religious practice which is almost addictive, and which supports the idea of the ritualistic nature of music and musical events (St John, 2006). The livestreams – a form of online music festivals or events, occurred regularly and had the function of strengthening the community (Berkers & Michael, 2017) by providing new music and openings for fans to come together. Watching the livestreams enabled Leona to closely follow her favourite artists and listen to new music, but also connect with her social group, and potentially expand it. While she mentions an intimate circle of friends who are "really into it", she also talks of a larger community of DJs from England. Thus, while the pandemic hindered some aspects of the ro-minimal scene such as the ability to physically rave together, it also facilitated an expanded feeling of community. As (Osler, 2019) and Svenaeus (2021) claim, virtual bonds are as strong as physical ones and are vital for understanding how a group works and tracing how its members are brought together. In particular, Osler (2019) argues that the boundary between offline and online spaces is arbitrary, and the latter manage to articulate and strengthen social relationships as much as the former do. In the pandemic, platforms such as *Sunrise Hub* have worked as pillars of the ro-minimal community, enabling members of the community to form social relations beyond physical limitations. Leona, explains in detail in the same section of the interview about the existence of a local music group where ro-minimal is often discussed:

We'll chat with each other about it like "omg, this is sick." And we have a site called 'all things music' that one of the Cork boys made up. That's where people post music, that's where we push the ro-minimal stuff. There's 300 people there that are into music, and they might see this and say "ooh, who is this?" and stuff, you know? "I didn't know this music was this way, I had it all wrong." (Interview with Leona, 12 February 2021)

In this online group, a variety of musical genres are promoted, including ro-minimal. Leona and her friends encourage ro-minimal as they want to hear it played more often in their local area. Although she said that initially it was viewed with suspicion, the other members eventually accepted and started to like it, even admitting to judging it too harshly at the outset.

The importance of *Sunrise Hub* livestreaming is crucial to the further dissemination of ro-minimal music and creating new interest for the genre, while enlarging its musical community. Similar to promoting sacred Safi music in New York (Shannon, 2003, pp. 270-271) which is done as "constructing a domain for consumption apart from other (dominant) <styles> of world music," I suggest that the promotion of ro-minimal opened up an alternative space that contrasted with the more mainstream genres. In other words, ro-minimal was advanced as a unique, underground genre, different from mainstream music and styles of consumption, thus furthering the idea that this community is a highly dedicated, specialised group of aficionados. As demonstrated in previous chapters, this perception and promotion of ro-minimal as a community of good taste can be seen as an enactment of subcultural capital (Thornton, 1995; Moore, 2005). Members of this community prescribe to a large extent ideas and practices of good taste in the electronic music industry in Romania, and beyond.

The *Sunrise Hub* livestreams provided a front-row experience for viewers with many close-up shots of the DJs and their mixing performance, that is, a combination of their hands and the mixing equipment used. Typically, in a club, only a few have access to the front row and even fewer to the backstage, and the spatial organisation of the club normally revolves around the DJ (Pfadenhauer, 2009). The concept of backstage has been theorised by Goffman (1959), and particularly in electronic music scenes by Spring (2004) as a space where individuals are free of regular expectations and can relax. In electronic music dance events, the backstage is a place of privilege and rest, providing a different kind of entertainment from the one present on stage. However, while livestreams have drawbacks insofar as ravers are not physically together, they provide a somewhat egalitarian form of raving, viewing, and listening experience. They eliminate to a large extent the backstage and front-row spaces, so that what in a night venue would have been mid- and back-row ravers, now are online ravers with front-row access to the DJ set with the help

of full-frontal camera shots (von Rosen, 2020). Of course, factors such as access to internet and internet speed introduce a level of inequality in the audience, however more people now could be privy to the front-row experience if they had the means to, or wanted to, as most livestream events were free to access.

The livestreams seemed to remain true to the atmosphere of a regular in-person ro-minimal rave experience, which means that extensive use has been made of visual effects. Visual jockey-ing (VJing) is using visual effects to complement and enhance the music and the overall performance of a DJ, the atmosphere and dynamism of a raving crowd (Jung & Kim, 2016), broadly used in electronic dance music events. The visual element in DJ sets is significant in ro-minimal, with visual artists being listed on line-ups together with the musical artists. Especially in a club environment, visual effects often aid the raving experience, by emphasising certain atmospheres, instruments, or fragments in the music. Finnäs's research (2001, p. 57) on various ways of presenting music indicates that "some visual features accompanying music may not only leave the listener's experience undisturbed, but may even influence it positively." This is despite the drawbacks of music and visuals being presented together such as the visual element distracting from the music. Especially in ro-minimal raves where music tracks and sets are lengthy, visuals have an increased importance as they 'fill up' the space and the time, providing a constant sensory companion for ravers.

Ro-minimal visuals often consist of dark colours as well as dimmed hues of yellow, orange, and red for contrast, as seen in Clovis's livestreamed DJ set at Sunrise Hub (2021). During the pandemic, the DJ set livestreams utilised playfulness, experimentation, and an exploration of affordances of various streaming platforms (Campbell & Barut, 2021) going beyond two-dimensional imagery. These practices involved playing with space, size, and ratios to convey movement and dynamism and to give a surreal, all-encompassing feeling of the livestreamed set. This was done in an attempt to re-create the in-person rave atmosphere, or potentially, to articulate new ways experiencing togetherness (Svenaeus, 2021), as well as novel performance aesthetics. Although some livestreams focus on the DJs playing their set and only a few visual effects can be seen in the background, many take full advantage of the separation between

the DJ booth and the public and explore the opportunities of livestreaming technology. Thus, Vincentiulian's set for *Sunrise Hub* (2021) has elaborate visuals, with DJ booth drawing on the aesthetic of video game consoles in the 1990s, or even 2000s Windows screen savers: an all-black background, framed by colourful tube-like lines that move with the rhythm of the music. As the DJ is playing music, he deconstructs into small squares, slowly blending into the space of the booth, continuously shapeshifting. And, while in the middle of the set he is shown deconstructing into the background, in the end he is fully back to his human shape, but layers of the background overlap onto him, giving the impression that he has somehow broken the background and is moving amongst strips of it. This is just one example of many ro-minimal livestreams provided by *Sunrise Hub* with similarly powerful and complex visual effects, presenting a vision of enmeshment: the DJ, their equipment, and their surroundings all melding together. This reinforces the view of ro-minimal DJing as a multi-layered artform (Campbell & Barut, 2021), that expands beyond music and listening, and incorporates visual effects, making use of digital technologies to aid performance. It also further articulates the view of the relationship between humans and technology in techno events as densely and intricately cyborgian (Rietveld, 2003).

Another way in which the social function of ro-minimal livestreams was evident was the live chat function of the YouTube videos for the livestreamed DJ sets. The *Sunrise Hub* livestreams were posted on YouTube and offered viewers the opportunity to communicate in real time with each other as the DJ sets unfolded. Communicating with others in nightclubs is slightly difficult due to the loudness of the music and the nature of the events which has been described as introspection-based by Sonia in our interview. However, in the context of livestreams, viewers were somewhat removed from the environment of the DJ set, socialisation seemed easier, and was perhaps more acceptable. This was evident in the live chats that I have observed over several months (Figure 7). For instance, the users who joined the livestream featuring Arapu, a well-known ro-minimal DJ, were highly active in the chat. I analyse the live chat as a space where people communicate impressions of the set they are watching. I also see it as a site where participants articulate affective connections (Osler, 2019) and enact certain moods such as humour or friendliness, which contribute to the wellbeing of the ro-minimal community. I have examined live chats previously in

this thesis, but here, I pay particular attention to the playfulness of their comments, and the ways in which their dialogue mimics that which would be used in a club situation. Arguably these exchanges, and the forms they take, can be understood as attempts to articulate, and maintain a sense of normality during the collective trauma of the pandemic (Wolfenden et al., 2022). The comment ‘massive track’ or ‘baga bine Ionut in seara asta, e fiert’ (translated from Romanian as: ‘Ionut [Arapu] is playing well tonight, he is boiled’) show appreciation for the music and for the artist. The phrase ‘he is boiled’ – jargon for being under the influence of drugs, denotes playfulness and familiarity with the ro-minimal scene, where drugs are often used to enhance the raving experience (Bøhling, 2014). Further down in the chat someone else is saying ‘I’ve forgotten how it is to enter a club honestly’[43] echoing the nostalgia for the pre-Covid times that many in the ro-minimal community have described (Gere, 2021). In another live chat from Priku’s livestream from *Sunrise Hub* (Figure 7), the atmosphere is similar: people are joking and making light-hearted comments amongst themselves. One thing that stands out is the manner in which some comments are written as if people were in a physical venue. For instance, comments such as ‘heeeeey, turn it down, the police are coming’ allude to the underground, illegal roots of techno subcultures, which is also related to a sense of connectedness and unity in the face of the authorities (Reynolds, 1998; Gere, 2021). The comment reading ‘morning’ suggests that the rave has lasted all night, thus conveying the stamina that is often required at ro-minimal parties that last for days. Techno raves are regularly associated with long hours, and qualities such as stamina and endurance (Hitzler, 2002) are valued in dance music subcultures. Ro-minimal raves are known for lasting many hours, and even days in a row. Although the DJ set livestreams normally lasted two or three hours, and satisfied to some extent the need for a lengthy event, the nostalgia for in-person raves was strong in this scene during the pandemic.

[43] Translated from Romanian by the author

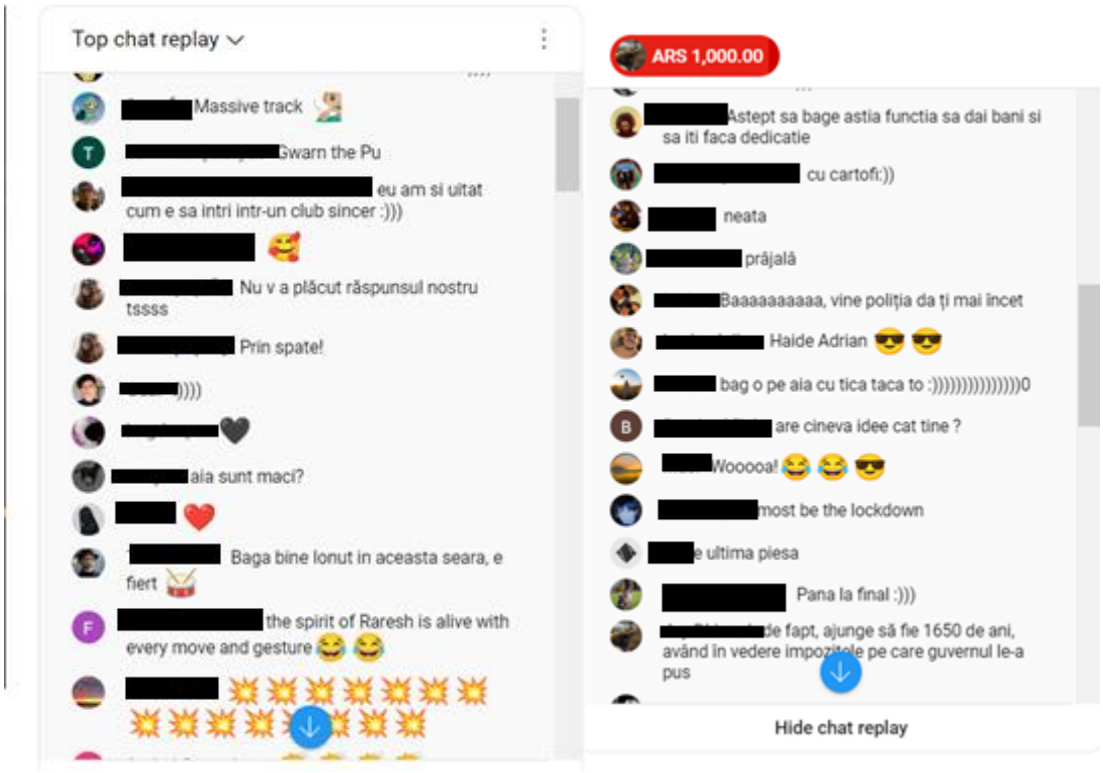

Figure 7 Screenshots of live chats from Sunrise Hub DJ sets by Arapu (left) and Priku (right). Source: Sunrise YouTube channel

Besides the regular livestreams which were essential to the cohesion of the ro-minimal community, *Sunrise Hub* also held a nearly-ten hour-long New Year Eve livestream as well as a 24-hour virtual version of the *Sunwaves* Festival on YouTube. These events are significant in terms of bringing together many fans during the pandemic, while emphasising, again, the stamina required for ro-minimal, as they lasted considerably longer than the regular two-hour DJ sets. Particularly because of its length, the virtual edition of the *Sunwaves* Festival seemed to enable a "space of hope, liberation and virtual healing" (Pryor & Outley, 2021, p. 340) amid the unknowns of the COVID-19 pandemic. In our interview, Leona mentions the significance of the online *Sunwaves*:

Yeah. And then there was, when Sunwaves didn't happen last year, they did like a 24-hour livestream and me and my friends had a 24-hour party at my house, and we watched the whole thing on telly and had the tunes blasting. It was brilliant, it was very good. (Interview with Leona, 12 February 2021)

For Leona, this was an opportunity to participate in a celebration of ro-minimal and join in with the community online, while also physically gathering with a few friends and transforming her home into a space suitable for raves. The home, then, is reconfigured as a space of protection from the outside world and the pandemic, but also of fun, entertainment, and relaxation (Mallett, 2004;

Andersson, 2006). Previously, Leona had also mentioned how she was "going crazy" from boredom at home during a lockdown, but claims that the online *Sunwaves* festival articulated a vastly different, more desirable version of her home. In a similar way to how practising fitness exercises at home during the pandemic "contributed to daily routines, transformed the atmospheres of the home and yielded affective experiences of escape" (Clark & Lupton, 2021, p. 1222), the virtual edition of *Sunwaves* highlighted experiences of fun and pleasure. The concept of home and its perception especially during the pandemic varied greatly, as for many the home was a place of monotony, stagnation, or even aggression and unsafety, as incidents of domestic violence soared during this time (Kay, 2020). So, while I acknowledge the deeply negative impact of the pandemic on domestic violence and on the protective character of the privacy of home, here I focus on a positive reconceptualization of the home (Bozdağ, 2021), based on the data collected. Also, drawing inspiration from DeNora's work on music asylums (2014, p. 1), I suggest that the home's reconceptualization during the pandemic accommodates various "forms of self, identifications, fantasies and plans."

Similarly, for another participant, Mirela, the online *Sunwaves* Festival felt like a unique experience, perhaps because it fell on her birthday:

Me: So, when you went to livestreams, how was it? Did you dance in your room or how did it go?

Mirela: Yes, on the 1st of May when it was supposed to be …. I've never been to Sunwaves, and it fell exactly on my birthday. They normally hold [the festival] from the 30th of April to the 7th of May. I was at home, during the pandemic, doing my masters. And I turned on the TV [with the livestream] and started to dance. And I talked to a lot of people, they tried to revive the atmosphere. […] We can offer ourselves a dance and a moment of relaxation even if we are not physically with someone. (Interview with Mirela, 6 February 2021. Translated from Romanian by the author)

For Mirela, the fact that the *Sunwaves* livestream coincided with her birthday felt like a special event, which she considered a good omen. She had the opportunity to celebrate her birthday as well as get more involved with the ro-minimal community in a time of distress and widespread illness, which positively influenced her wellbeing. As in the case of Leona, for whom the home became a place of enjoyment and protection, for Mirela, the livestream transformed her home into a space of freed self-expression through movement and dancing. Dance has been repeatedly shown to be connected to general wellbeing (Sklar,

1991; Karkou et al., 2019) by releasing endorphins, thus lowering levels of stress, and contributing to a healthy immune system, elements which were particularly important in the pandemic. However, as opposed to Leona, Mirela embraced the solitude that comes with a lockdown, showing a high level of comfort with being on her own and discovering previously unnoticed facets of herself. After all, ro-minimal has often been described by research participants as a reflective genre where introspection and contemplation are encouraged through the structure and rhythm of the music (Ralston, 2017), as well as through the dancing style promoted at raves. Also, whilst a certain tension between the self-expression of dance in general and the self-reflective nature of ro-minimal dancing could be drawn, I argue that introspection and self-expression are two sides of the same coin, particularly in the case presented above. Mirela's dancing at home, while not necessarily too energetic, is a way of articulating her feelings, her mood, and her passion for ro-minimal at a time where large gatherings and raves were banned.

Livestreams had a key function of providing hope and stability, as well as enabling novel ways of experiencing togetherness in this scene. Some preferred online events as they allowed them to hear and see their favourite artists play, or because they were evocative of nightclub raves. And despite some limitations of the digital medium, livestreaming technology had a positive impact on artistic performance as digital art and 3D effects expanded the way ro-minimal can be enjoyed visually; also, livestreaming technology democratised to some extent the viewing experience, which I suggest, increased the openness of this scene. Some appreciated the livestreams' ability to distract them from the pandemic or from boredom, while others viewed these as an opportunity to discover themselves. These transformations in the ro-minimal scene articulate its changing relationship to openness and secrecy, which I investigate further in this chapter. In the next section, I further investigate the ways in which aficionados managed to stay in touch with the ro-minimal community, while exploring options such as illegal raves and solo raves.

Ro-minimal parties: between solo raves and illegal events

55% of survey respondents in this study believed that the ro-minimal community was negatively impacted by the pandemic. The reason behind their answer was

often the “lack of parties”, “no parties going on”, “you can’t go to parties anymore” (Anonymous survey participants, 2020). This group of respondents acknowledged the general negative impact of the pandemic on the music industry, and not necessarily seeing it as something specific to this community. However, when asked the question ‘did the pandemic influence the ro-minimal community?’, one person said:

> Oh, fuck yes. This is the kind of music that have [sic] to be experienced with a crowd and a quality sound system. it's the same with theatre. You can watch it online, but it’s not the same experience. From the crowd, the booming speakers, to the smell of the dancefloor after a long set, everything comes together as a unifying experience” (Anonymous participant, survey, 2020)

This statement illustrates a strong belief that ro-minimal needs to be experienced in person. It is also a prime example of the “crisis of spatial materiality” (Taylor et al., 2020, p. 221) which affected the entire music industry: a displacement of music-related practices from venues (music studios, nightclubs, auditoriums). Spatial materiality can be understood as more than ‘stuff in a space’ so to speak. As Dale (2005, p. 652) claims, it is “imbued with culture, language, imagination, memory; it cannot be reduced to mere object or objectivity.” During the COVID-19 pandemic, the spaces where the ro-minimal subculture regularly unfolded abruptly closed. The inability to experience the ro-minimal sound through highly advanced sound systems such as Funktion One, through the vibration felt in the floor of the nightclub, or through the “crowd, the smell of the dancefloor”, significantly changed this community. This is not to say that ro-minimal *must* be experienced in person, but that there are certain qualities of the ro-minimal materiality which appeal to its fans. The lack thereof encouraged aficionados to creatively find solutions and maintain a level of normality in their community.

20% of the respondents said they were ‘not sure’ or ‘unsure’ of the effect the pandemic had on the ro-minimal scene. The reason for answering this way in one case was “where I live, I'm the only one into the ro-minimal scene” (Anonymous survey participant, 2020). This type of answer suggests the varying levels of engagement and local enactments of the ro-minimal culture in various places. In particular, a survey respondent said “[I] was already listening to a lot of online content, so I kept on doing it, especially during lockdown. I also bought records and digital releases to support artists, but I was also doing it before the pandemic since I'm not a party guy” (Anonymous survey participant,

2020), showing that perhaps some fans already engaged with ro-minimal online. For them, nightclub closures and cancelled events during the pandemic did not majorly impact on how they engaged with this scene, suggesting a heterogeneity of listening styles, and that while part of a community, fans are individual people with specific tastes and worldviews. The rest of the survey participants declared that the ro-minimal scene was not affected at all, or it was only affected minimally because parties kept occurring even when restrictions on gatherings and lockdowns were in place. For instance, one participant said: “It's been quietly happening with closed doors. Mountain houses/cabins, countryside, apartments, everywhere. It's just more troublesome to make them, and to find them” (Anonymous survey participant, 2020). As shown in previous chapters, ro-minimal has always been an underground genre as the music is associated with expert listening and knowledge and an introspective dancefloor and raving experience, and the pandemic contributed to the secrecy and exclusivity of this community.

Between 2020 and 2022, the “underground-ness” (Solomon, 2005, p. 9) of ro-minimal became particularly significant to the maintenance of this scene’s cohesion. Wolfenden et al. (2022) and Abidi (2022) also confirm the importance of underground practices and concepts in their research on resistance and community through illegal raves during the pandemic. Ro-minimal raves took place semi-regularly, as the survey answers suggest, and the short videos posted on social media, especially on the *ro-minimal* Facebook group, show.[44] These videos of parties during the pandemic were posted without much context and depicted groups of people and a DJ partying together to ro-minimal music, in people’s homes. Once again, the home is shown as a reconceptualised space of fun, pleasure, and excitement instead of boredom and isolation (Bozdağ, 2021). This reiteration of the home has consequences for the very nature of this space, and for how notions of public and private are performed in this context (Clark & Lupton, 2021; Watson et al., 2021). McMullin (2021) showed the intermingling of the private and public spheres in digital social services provided from home during the pandemic. In the same way, a hybridisation of the public and private spaces and practices occurred in the

[44] I am unsure whether these events were legal or not, and since I am required to protect the anonymity of any people that might appear in this research, I did not screenshot any parts of the videos showing the parties. Instead, I briefly described the scenes presented in some videos.

electronic music industry, including ro-minimal. DJ sets were livestreamed from home, or from empty nightclubs to aficionados who gathered online, but who were physically distanced from each other, and often danced alone in their private homes. Also, this illustrates DeNora's concept of "furnishings and refurnishings" (2014, p. 79) of a home, based on what one wants to achieve or articulate. In this case, homes were transformed into music studios, dancefloors, and clubs.

Usually, ro-minimal events are scarcely advertised, with invites sent individually to potential attendees, rather than en masse, indicating the secrecy and exclusivity of this community. Throughout the pandemic, ro-minimal relied even more on secret events whose organisers carefully selected the guests to ensure that the events would be successful in terms of the atmosphere desired, but also to minimise the chances of being halted by law enforcement officers (Dowson et al., 2014). One survey participant said that "parties are more selective" (Anonymous survey participant, 2021) during the pandemic, which indicates that fewer raves with fewer participants were not necessarily seen as a negative consequence of the pandemic. On the contrary, ro-minimal events and fans have been promoting exclusiveness and rewarded the dedicated fans of this genre, as it happens in many underground subcultures (Lingel et al., 2012) and the pandemic further consolidated this exclusiveness. Some participants saw this as a positive consequence of the pandemic, as parties were more intimate and there were no 'outsiders' nor ravers with no intention to return to and support the scene. As with the case of advancing ro-minimal as a unique underground music genre, the promotion of ro-minimal in this certain way is an enactment of elitism and subcultural capital, reproducing the levels of hierarchy and familiarity with the subculture. This elitism was born out of lockdowns and pandemic restrictions, and contributed to the rigidification of the boundaries between ro-minimal and other genres and music-based communities.

One of my research participants describes attending a boat party in London, not during a strict lockdown, but under tiered restrictions on travel and gatherings:

I was at a ro-minimal gig on a canal boat in September, I think. BRYZ was playing and there were only about 90 people. 2 Irish people and 88 Romanians [both of us laugh]. It was one of the best nights in my whole life. Everyone that was there was there for exactly the same thing ... compared to everyone going out to get

pissed, then go home. Everyone was there just for the music and … that's what I love about the ro-minimal scene. (Interview with Leona, 12 February 2021)

Leona suggests that in some ways, the pandemic positively changed the ro-minimal community. That is, because these parties were hidden from the public eye to avoid being shut down due to their illegality, fewer people were allowed in. Those who were allowed to attend were there 'for the music', so not for purposes such as getting drunk or finding sexual partners (Fileborn, 2016), all while indifferent to the music played in the background. For the ninety people present at the boat party, ro-minimal was not in the background, but at the forefront of their rave experience, enabling a sense of normality and community during the collectively traumatic pandemic (Pryor & Outley, 2021).

The morality of attending these illegal parties during the pandemic is not majorly interesting to me here because underground cultures have existed and relied, to varying extents, on illegal events to continue (Reynolds, 1998). We have seen the closure of many big nightclubs among which are *Griessmuehle* in Berlin and *Fabric* in London, before the pandemic, due to real estate development or misuse of drugs on the premises. Throughout and after the pandemic, even more clubs were shut down due to scarce funds allocated to the music industry (Mazierska & Rigg, 2021), suggesting that its contribution to culture was less important than other industries. In ro-minimal's case, illegal parties were the driving force of the ro-minimal culture during the pandemic, along with livestreams and any other audio-visual material about ro-minimal online. Furthermore, attending the parties during the pandemic is not specific to the ro-minimal crowd, as that happened across genres, so it would be unfair to judge the ro-minimal partygoers as a singular instance of this phenomenon. Also, many parties held under lockdown or gathering restrictions required attendants to provide a negative PCR test, to prove they are free of COVID-19. So, although not in accordance with COVID-19 guidelines, the events were not completely irresponsible, trying to provide safe rave spaces (Morton and Power, 2022). Finding loopholes in the system and improvising is very common in the ro-minimal culture, as legality and laws are not clearly implemented by authorities, leaving room for interpretation and manoeuvre. As argued in the introduction of this chapter, the majority of electronic music communities were forced to reorganise their modus operandi, and relied, to a great extent, on improvisation. Kideckel (2008) argues that various forms of coping or

descurcare (‘managing’, ‘disentangling oneself’ in English) are common and particularly important in Romania. As citizens in a post-communist country, Romanians often seek DIY solutions to problems when met with excessive and counterproductive bureaucracy. These coping practices are found in the ro-minimal community too, thus accentuating the improvisational part of ro-minimal aficionados’ identities. So, while improvisation is not particular to ro-minimal, it partly responds to a specific set of circumstances in Romania.

To further analyse the alternatives to in-person raving that ro-minimal fans practiced, I now delve into at-home raves and solo raves by analysing my own experience of listening to ro-minimal at home during the pandemic. Since the beginning of the UK lockdown in March 2020 and until January 2022 when Plan B restrictions ended,[45] I listened to a lot of music at home, as presented in Chapter 5. Livestreams replaced club nights, becoming the main source of entertainment for ravers not willing to attend or not knowing about illegal parties (Wolfenden et al., 2022; Pryor & Outley, 2021). I listened to many genres at home, but most often to ro-minimal and classic Berlin techno. I watched Berlin techno livestreams, but sometimes the music would not fit with my idea of home and with the space of my room. I considered my home and my room to be a safe, gentle, and loving space (Mallett, 2004), and although I have shown how hard techno can be therapeutic, after one hour or so of listening, it felt too intense. Ro-minimal, on the other hand, was ideal for prolonged listening.

One aspect of ro-minimal which makes it easy to engage with and listen to is the restraint in the melody and rhythm. This quality articulates ro-minimal as a very adaptable genre, and in the context of the pandemic, suitable for extended home listening, as I show in Chapter 5, and consider further in this section. Thus, I often had ro-minimal playing in the background at home while I engaged in cleaning the house, cooking, or applying skin care products, which contributed to a state of relaxation (DeNora, 1999) during the pandemic. Ro-minimal became a genre that I closely associated with comfort and contentment. Also, to a certain extent, ro-minimal became domesticated as it was just as much a part of my routine as applying facial moisturiser or

[45] Plan B was a set of regulations imposed in the UK as a response to the risks of the Omicron variant of the COVID-19 virus. These measures included wearing face masks in public venues indoors and on public transport, working from home where possible and showing an NHS COVID pass for entry in nightclubs. Plan B ended on the 27 January 2022.

hoovering the house. The domestication was not done through the commercialisation of the genre, thus a simplification of the genre to suit mainstream audiences, as St John (2006) uses this concept in his research. Instead, while ro-minimal had an impact on my everyday tasks and on my mood, the space and atmosphere of the home also articulated a domestic side of this genre that is not only associated with raves and resistance, but with routine and comfort. Simultaneously, a more intentional, rave-like engagement with ro-minimal occurred during the pandemic where I attempted to recreate a rave atmosphere at home. This often happened in the kitchen, where I and a very good friend, gathered and cooked dinner, while listening to ro-minimal livestreams, as a fragment from my journal illustrates:

I came downstairs cause I heard B was cooking. I could hear the fan being on as well as sizzling. I ran downstairs I wanted to hang out with someone, and I hadn't properly hung out with anyone like that in ages. I brought my laptop as I heard that Mihigh was just about to do a livestream that night and it would be nice to listen to it. […] B made tikka masala, the whole kitchen smelled amazing: sweet, spicy, and creamy. I put on the mix and started chatting to B about how our day had been. I dimmed the lights a little and turned up the volume just a bit so that we could feel the music filling up the room. We poured red wine in two glasses. B continued cooking and started dancing, mostly moving her knees. I sat on one of the bar stools and watched the livestream with its superb visuals while moving my waist to the rhythm of the mix. Felt pretty nice to be honest. (Autoethnographic journal, 15 July 2021)

This shows the impossibility or certainly, the difficulty of meeting with people throughout the lockdowns. It also describes how a routine part of the day – the dinner – can be a carefully produced and curated event. My flatmate and I paid attention to the atmosphere of the evening, which, like a rave, engaged more than the sense of hearing. The smell of the food, the lighting of the room, the volume of the music, the chatter as well as the visuals including the food being cooked but also the actual video of the ro-minimal livestream engaged all of our

senses. The mood of the kitchen listening-rave experience was controlled and curated by my flatmate and I, as opposed to club owners or party promoters as it happens in a regular club night. Therefore, in the context of the pandemic, the ro-minimal rave was in some ways similar to a regular club rave, but also completely different: the regular raver became the producer and curator of their own party at home. So, while initially there was a crisis of "spatial materiality" (Taylor et al., 2020, p. 221) in the music industry, it was replaced by the ravers reorganising their homes and kitchens to suit raves and entertainment. Thus, spaces of routine and perhaps boredom such as the kitchen, became sites of celebration, multi-sensorial excitement and enjoyment (Ruiz, 2013). And, whilst not specific to this community, this emphasises the adaptability of ro-minimal fans, and their creativity in the face of collective trauma with the subsequent challenges it posed to this community.

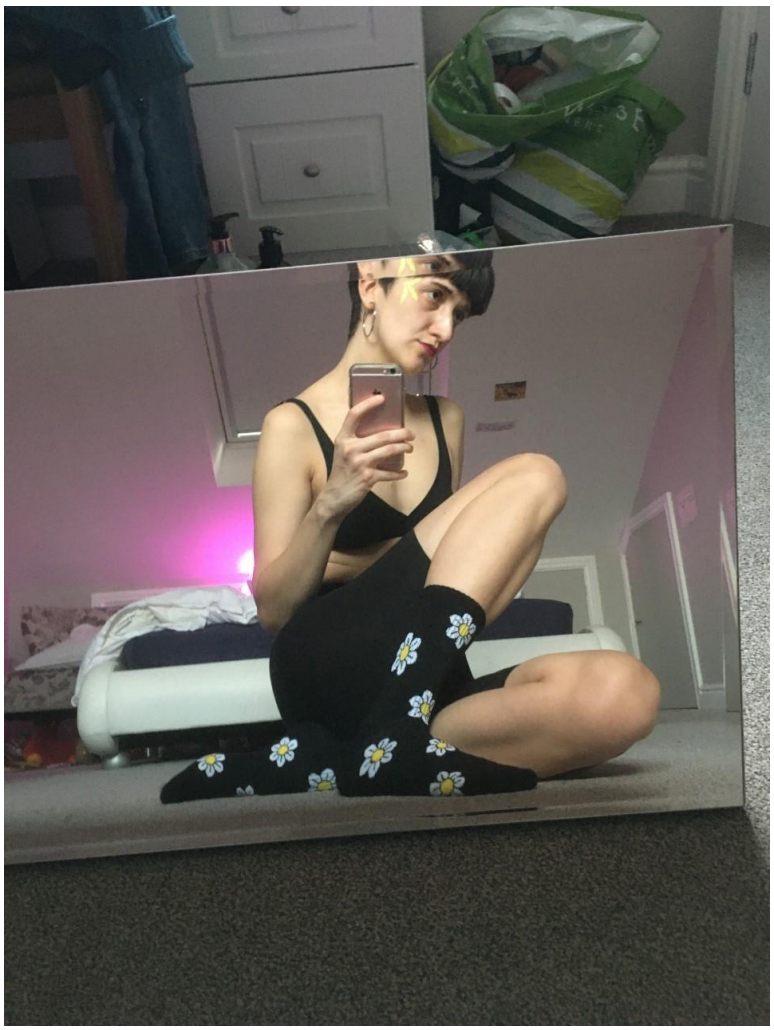

Figure 8 The author during a ro-minimal solo rave session in her bedroom during the pandemic. July 2020. Author's personal collection

Similar to the kitchen experience, I also watched and listened to many ro-minimal livestreams in my bedroom during the various lockdowns, as shown in Chapter 5, where I focussed on the relationship between music and healing. This kind of listening was more deliberate, and I had an enhanced curatorial role. For instance, I watched a set by G76, an experimental ro-minimal DJ and

producer, that was livestreamed on YouTube in July 2020. Although the lockdown was somewhat downgraded in the UK at the time, there was little to do outside of the house as most restrictions on meetings and gatherings were active, and music venues were still closed. Hence, as many of my participants, including Leona and Mirela, who often danced and organised small gatherings at home while watching the ro-minimal livestreams, I decided to have a solo rave in my bedroom. Whilst the idea of a 'solo rave' regularly refers to attending an in-person rave alone (Bell, 2018; Pini, 2017), I use it slightly differently here. The concept of solitude remains central; however, the raving is done in a mostly private space such as the bedroom, and the raver is physically separated from other ravers. The space of the bedroom was more private, and I had more control over it than I did in the kitchen, where my flatmate and I met and danced to ro-minimal music. Non-kin households are common nowadays particularly in Euroamerican societies, and, as Clark et al. (2018) argue, the rules for living together and sharing communal spaces are different from those in kin-based households. Especially through the pandemic, where people spent most of their times indoors, the dynamics of living together became more complex. My bedroom at the time, on the other hand, was my own to be in and play with. So other than being careful with any loud noise coming from that space, I took supreme curatorial role, designing a ro-minimal experience for myself. G76's DJ set lasted for two hours and twenty-one minutes, so it was slightly shorter than a regular livestream set of three hours. However, I did not mind because three hours can feel like a long time when raving alone in my bedroom. While the set was starting, I made some adjustments to craft a suitable ambience for my experience. The following autoethnographic passage explains the process in detail:

It's a sunny day so I pulled the blind down a little – I want the sun coming in slightly, but also, I need some shade and darkness. I put the wide mirror on the desk so that the place looks even bigger and so I can see myself dancing. Actually, it feels like more than one person in the room that way. I put some makeup on and the black top and cycling shorts. I turn off all lights except the disco ball type thing – I like that, it changes colours and makes this experience feel special. Also, I turned up the volume a little, especially the bass to feel the music under my feet too. (Autoethnographic journal, 20 July 2020)

Although in principle solo raving involved only one person, a variety of assemblages made up of me, the space of my room, all the things in my room, and audio-visual technology contributed to this experience (Latour, 2005). I also

had a heightened role in curating this rave session: the precise lighting, my attire and makeup, the volume of the music, the feeling of plurality obtained through seeing my reflection in the mirror, all contributed to my solo rave. Figure 8 is a selfie I took during this time. I wore a top and shorts in various shades of black, as well as vivid, colourful makeup, thus illustrating the connection to the tradition of wearing black at raves (Anderson, 2009b). My appearance also suggested a playfulness which is often noticed at raves, as Karkabi (2020) argues in their work on self-liberation and pleasure, at raves in Palestine. Furthermore, a variety of elements show a complex relationship between the idea and practice of rave, and the space of a home: the lamp radiating a deep pink light, the furry beige carpet, my unmade bed, a few clothes hanging on the side of the chair, empty bottles of soap and shampoo, bags of laundry and a couple of postcards on the wall. The juxtaposition of these elements in my room further supports the idea that the private and the public spheres intermingled during the pandemic.

Although initially this was an attempt to recreate the atmosphere of a traditional in-person rave, it soon became apparent that solo raving, as well as raving in the kitchen, were in fact self-standing types of raves. Also, I argue that they were as legitimate as in-person raves in terms of the function it has for the raver. While “collective effervescence” (Olaveson, 2004 in Gere, 2021, p. 12) is perhaps not fully attainable in this format, many criteria mentioned by Olaveson for achieving this state were found in my solo raving experience: exaltation, enthusiasm, the presence of an emotional experience, transgression, creativity, utopianism and the temporary character of it. And, while I was dancing alone in my room, I had the knowledge that others were acting similarly in various places of the globe, which to some extent, emphasised the collective and communal nature of this experience. As Tacchi (2003, p. 293) claims, nostalgia, or, in this case, yearning for closely experienced forms of community, “supplement[s] social life, and qualitatively alter it.” The kitchen and solo experiences of ro-minimal show the domestication of raves and techno events, whereas homes were *rave-ified*, too. While not necessarily sustainable or preferrable in the long term due to the insular nature of this practice, I argue that solo raves, as exemplified in my case, enabled creativity, playfulness, and mindful moving (Karkou et al., 2019) at a time where regular entertainment and social relationships were severely altered.

Ro-minimal is a versatile genre that has facilitated the articulation of various forms of raving during the pandemic. Whether through kitchen raves, a solo bedroom rave or watching livestreams on YouTube, ro-minimal is suited to and complements activities in and around the house, making it easy to listen to and interact with. Simultaneously, these at-home forms of raving also contributed to a slight domestication of the practice of rave. In terms of changes to community, identity, and status, the practices I analysed illustrate resourcefulness and creativity, but also a strengthening of the already present hierarchies in this group, thus further reinforcing the element of distinction and elitism in this community. Whether it was through watching livestreams of ro-minimal DJ sets and raving at home, or through attending secret parties in person, commitment has been rewarded in ro-minimal, generally demonstrating that this community is eager to continue and share their passion, even in times of profound crisis. The following section analyses a special edition of *Sunwaves* held in Zanzibar in 2021, exploring its impact on the ro-minimal community.

Zanzibar edition

During the lockdowns, ro-minimal fans also had the opportunity to participate in a special edition of the *Sunwaves* Festival that ran from 17th of June to the 21st of June 2021 on the Dongwe Beach in Zanzibar. In June 2021, Romania was under strict regulations on large gatherings, so it would have been impossible to host the festival in Mamaia, Romania, where it normally took place. However, the creativity and entrepreneurial spirit of Romanians that Kideckel (2008) discusses in *Getting by In Postsocialist Romania,* can be observed yet again in the organisation of this festival abroad, where COVID-19 regulations were less strict. The organisers also provided a novel experience for guests: being in a new place with different weather and food, and generally different cultural customs, therefore further reinforcing ro-minimal fans' identities as well-travelled, cosmopolitan, and privileged individuals, as demonstrated in Chapter 3. Moreover, by placing the festival in a different location, people closer to Zanzibar could now afford to attend this edition.

The festival's artwork presents the line-up on a turquoise background with orange dots and beside brightly coloured and dotted fish, and green leaves.[46] The poster's aesthetic takes the viewer of this artwork on a daydreaming

[46] The festival artwork can be accessed here: https://sunwaves-fest.ro/edition/sw-zz/

exercise, imagining dancing on Dongwe Beach to the music of ro-minimal artists, among brightly coloured water, sand, and plants. As Vuust and Firth (2008) and Vander Elst et al. (2021) maintain, anticipation in musical phrasing and composition is correlated with positive emotions and relaxation. I apply the notion of anticipation to the poster of the event which enables an early, pre-gig strong visual eagerness among prospective festivalgoers, and articulates a music-visual continuum which is key in the ro-minimal scene, as demonstrated earlier in this chapter and in Chapter 3.

The line-up seemed reduced in size compared to previous editions of the festival. This format arguably makes the raving experience more intimate, as a longer set time allows ravers to deeply enjoy more of the music of one DJ, instead of shorter sets from multiple DJs. It also gives the DJ plenty of time to develop a fully-fledged set that takes the participants on a multi-layered musical journey, especially in a genre like ro-minimal which is renowned for long-lasting tracks and DJ sets (Ralston, 2017). Also, by moving the festival so far away from its original location in Romania it was necessary to adapt to the local conditions of Zanzibar, so the amount of work put into this festival denotes a high level of perseverance. This is not unique to ro-minimal, but as I explain, it is predominant in this community. Initially, when I heard about the Zanzibar edition of *Sunwaves*, I imagined that the local economy and environment would be exploited for the profit of the event organisers. I was pleasantly surprised to learn that the organizer of *Sunwaves*, Ion Borzea, was highly interested in giving back to the local community of Dongwe (Ndilwa, 2021). He said:

> *We will make sure to have locals in the spotlight of the festival as well as business-wise, whereas all the money circulation viewed as an income budget that will be generated by participants of the festival will be for the local community and it will remain in Zanzibar*

Here, Borzea clearly indicates his intention to support local businesses through the organisation of the festival in Zanzibar. He further states:

> *We will work before, during, and after the festival with local entrepreneurs, companies, day workers and others to provide jobs, invest in local businesses, keeping our investment in the island and its actual community.*

By proactively employing local people and by using local resources, the organizer of the festival shows environmental care and care for the local community. As Hazel and Mason (2020) argue in their paper on music festivals

in British Columbia, people are more likely to buy tickets to a festival that is actively involved in environmentalism and the protection of local ecosystems, so it makes sense from a variety of standpoints to support local communities and the environment. Furthermore, the Fest Ticket website asserts that “the two stages [of *Sunwaves* Festival in Zanzibar] as well as the rest of the festival will preserve the island spirit by using local wooden materials and eco-friendly supplies.” This statement portrays the event producers as respectful of local nature and ways of life. I show this to be the case also in Chapter 3 for the *Waha* festival, an environmentally friendly festival with high regard for the participants, but also for the more-than-human elements that contribute to the success of a festival. Originally theorized by the Brazilian anthropologist Viveiros de Castro (1998, p. 470), the Amerindian concept of “spiritual unity and corporeal diversity”, is illustrated in the organisation of the *Sunwaves* Zanzibar edition. This more-than-human harmony endorsed by the festival is a key practice in the ro-minimal community, especially at outdoor festivals where forests and fields are used to create the mood of the events. Again, this interest in environmentalism and human-nature harmony is not specific to ro-minimal, but also in genres such as folk music, as documented by Dibben (2009) in her paper on Icelandic popular folk music.

The COVID-19 pandemic overwhelmed health systems globally as Newman et al. (2021) demonstrated in their study on the emotional strain on NHS workers during this time. It also deeply affected mental health (Choi et al., 2020) and enabled social mistrust (Jennings et al., 2021) among communities around the globe. These developments make the idea of human-nature harmony as an “ecology of repair” (Blanco-Wells, 2021, para. 1) all the more important, as it encourages collaboration, trust, and communal healing. Thus, the ro-minimal community appears as resilient and creative, whilst promoting collective restoration through music and environmental values. Nevertheless, there exist various tensions and power relations in terms of what healing means and how it is put into practice, with healing taking the role of an ideological construct which structures relations in particular ways. In this context, ro-minimal encourages a form of communal healing in a somewhat similar way that is observed by Geffen (2020) in raves where attendants vocalise chakra toning sounds at raves. And while ro-minimal is not by any means predominantly concerned with spirituality, through festivals such as *Sunwaves* Zanzibar, I suggest that more-than-human

connections as a form of remedy to global ills such as the pandemic are promoted.

The fact that *Sunwaves* was moved over eight thousand kilometres away from its original location increased the risk of low attendance for this event. Nevertheless, approximately three thousand people attended the Zanzibar edition which is a very high number considering the circumstances. Also, it becomes clear that ro-minimal fans can generally afford to spend large amounts of money on travelling, festival passes, accommodation, and food in a faraway place such as Zanzibar. I only analysed this festival as it was enacted through social media data, so I do not have information about the earnings of the ro-minimal fans who attended the event. However, affording the cost of plane tickets, accommodation, food, and the festival ticket signifies, if not outright wealth, then potentially a high level of dedication in (part of) this community, particularly for those based in Romania. As Edlom and Karlsson (2021) suggest in their work on online fandom, certain hierarchies and positions of privilege exist in fan-based communities. In ro-minimal, this hierarchical structure further emphasises the secrecy and exclusivity of this group, and simultaneously enables a more personal and relaxed raving experience for those privileged. This relationship between exclusivity and recreation further illustrates the levels of distinction in this community which I already documented in this and previous chapters. Yeoman and McMahon-Beatie (2014, p. 20) examine the relationship between personal space and luxury in their paper on luxury brands, claiming that “increasingly, every shopper is being treated as a VIP and every person is entitled to a sense of exclusivity, which is often provided at no extra cost and as a default part of the retail offer.” This means that luxury has become widely available in everyday items and experiences, and brands continually need to work to provide ‘real’ luxury instead of ‘mass’ luxury (Yeoman & McMahon-Beatie, 2014, p. 13). Similarly, the relationship between luxury and exclusivity is continually revisited, as more people become interested in the ro-minimal scene, as if to uphold its hierarchical organisation. Furthermore, people from places closer to Zanzibar were now able to afford going to the Zanzibar edition of *Sunwaves*. This positioning of the festival in a new place advances ro-minimal even more into the international scene, making it a global genre with an increasingly wide appeal, despite its established elitism.

This section considers the particular case of a ro-minimal festival that was organised in Zanzibar, and through which ideas and practices of environmentalism, respect for the host community of the festival, but also renewed hierarchies and forms of exclusivity were performed. These strengthened the view of ro-minimal as a resilient, but also elitist and hierarchical community. The following section examines other creative practices which ro-minimal aficionados took up during the pandemic to stay engaged with the community such as DIY music production.

Bedroom DJs and produsers/prosumers

The ro-minimal community underwent multiple changes as a result of pandemic restrictions on social life and music venues. For many, dancing at home and watching livestreams of their favourite DJs' sets was the main practice through which they maintained connections with the community (Pryor & Outley, 2021; Wolfenden et al., 2022). In this section, I evaluate activities that ro-minimal aficionados carried out to increase feelings of belongingness to the ro-minimal community such as looking for music online, buying music, starting to DJ or produce music, and collaborating with others in various musical projects.

A large part of the ro-minimal community spent more time further exploring the genre, by searching music online. With few opportunities to party in person, many had a desire to deepen their knowledge of the genre through any means. One example is Mirela, a research participant who spoke of expanding her love and knowledge of ro-minimal during the lockdowns:

Since February [2020] when the lockdown started, I continued to search for new music and new artists. It was amazing for me to go deep into their music and to interact with a community so open and without prejudices […] I started a large playlist with carefully selected tracks, I watched a lot of livestreams on Facebook or YouTube, and I even started to be interested in music production, to understand what a producer or DJ goes through when they focus on a result … I'm sure my hobby will continue, with a burning desire to join the community as soon as possible and with every opportunity. (Interview with Mirela, 6 February 2021. Translated from Romanian by the author)

Mirela, a relatively new fan who became interested in ro-minimal in February 2020, shows a deep-rooted passion for ro-minimal which did not diminish with the start of the pandemic. On the contrary, this was an opportunity for it to expand, as Mirela talks of exploring not only DJing, but ro-minimal production too, allowing her to become ro-minimal savvy in an abbreviated time. Mirela's

exploration of new ro-minimal music is similar to that of a DJ's who searches for music for hours, thus deepening their skills and knowledge (Ahmed et al., 2012). This type of engagement with the music is opposed to the general direction of fan engagement with art during the pandemic (Rendell, 2021) which was oriented more towards short videos and short musical tracks on social media. This example further articulates ro-minimal as a community of enthusiastic fans, who are actively involved in production and creative activities, as opposed to merely consuming art.

My situation as a ro-minimal DJ and fan is similar to that of Mirela's. I became interested in ro-minimal only a year before the pandemic, when I attended a ro-minimal rave at *Guesthouse* in București and shortly after, I moved back to Exeter. This considerably reduced my chances of being involved with ro-minimal at in-person events, due to Exeter not being particularly interested in this genre. Most of my engagement with ro-minimal has always been online, and during the pandemic it stayed that way, the only difference being that the majority of ro-minimal fans also were mostly online. The restrictions imposed during the pandemic, although isolating in many ways, also had a levelling function (von Rosen, 2020) for the ro-minimal community. As demonstrated, ro-minimal parties continued to happen, but many fans were morally disinclined to attend, had health anxieties, or simply did not have any parties happening near them. I draw inspiration from Lindsay's work (2023), which shows that prisoners spent a lot of time practising and writing songs while being incarcerated, something they were unable to do outside of prison when they had to earn a living, feed, and look after themselves. In the same way, COVID-19 should have ruined the ro-minimal scene, and while it did stop many club nights, people found other ways of being with the music. Hence, the pandemic restrictions, and the related rise of online forms of interaction, consumption, and performance, enabled a larger number of people to become interested in ro-minimal and provided avenues for them to feel more included in this community.

'Digging' for ro-minimal tracks and collecting records or buying music online became a popular activity for the ro-minimal fans during the pandemic. Another research participant, Fred, mentioned that during the pandemic he spent a considerable amount of time looking for music on YouTube and Soundcloud, but also on music labels that specialise in techno like *Hardwax* or others that

focus on the minimal side of the genre like *Trommel*. Similarly, another participant, Leona, mentioned her experience of collecting records during the pandemic:

> *So, she [record shop owner] put together a selection of 22 records and said pick out the ones you want. I listened to them, and I wanted all of them. So, she was like 215(?) Euros, so then it was 30 or 40 Euros to post, and it was just as the pandemic was going on … she went to the post office, and they weren't accepting any post from this country, so we did not know what was gonna happen. All in all, it took me 6 weeks to eventually get them. (Interview with Leona, 12 February 2021)*

Leona is one of the ro-minimal fans for whom the collector identity flourished under the pandemic, as she had plenty of free time, at home, where listening to new music, selecting, and ordering records was just as satisfying as dancing and raving. As Bartmanski and Woodward (2015) argue, the collectability of a vinyl record is one of the reasons this medium is so popular. Hence, while collecting and carefully listening to records have long been popular in the ro-minimal community, these practices became particularly prominent during the pandemic, due to bans on gatherings and venue closures. The interview with Leona also shows the logistical difficulties of transporting vinyl during postal restrictions in different countries, as the postal market was negatively affected by the pandemic (Chołodecki, 2023). Likewise, it illustrates the determination of fans such as Leona, who despite these logistical issues, attempt and manage to obtain records, and thus preserve their passion for this genre.

It is common for fans of various kinds of arts to become, in several ways, producers themselves, and that is also the case for ro-minimal aficionados. The term 'prosumer', coined by futurologist Alvin Toffler in 1980 (Ahluwalia & Miller, 2014) has often been used in social sciences literature, with a notable example from Jenkins (1992), to describe participatory culture and fan practices that moved towards the realm of production. A similar term, "produser", coined by Bruns (2008, p. 21) refers to a form of user-lead content creation, and applies more to digital environments. I believe that both 'produser' and 'prosumer' are suitable when discussing the ro-minimal fan community generally, and particularly during the pandemic, as their practices occurred both on- and offline.

Produsage became widespread, as social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook and especially Tik Tok, were accessible sources of entertainment that inspired people to dance, sing, cook and ultimately to create their own digital content (Masciantonio et al., 2021; Guerrero-Pico et al., 2019). However, because ro-minimal promotes a lengthy appreciation of music (Ralston, 2017), TikTok was largely unsuitable for this genre. Rather, social media platforms such as Facebook or YouTube, but also Instagram, were the virtual spaces where most ro-minimal content was posted. For example, the account *ro-minimal _culture* has 1459 followers on TikTok, compared to 16400 followers on Instagram, showing the prevalence of Instagram over TikTok for this collective. Nevertheless, Facebook has remained key due to allowing the creation of 'groups', function which does not exist on the other social media platforms mentioned. As previously discussed, the Facebook group *ro-minimal* has increased in size during the COVID-19 pandemic, and now has a total of more than 68000 users, being the largest ro-minimal online group on that social media application to date. This is the primary way that I engage with the ro-minimal community, where dozens of events, tracks, mixes, and memes about ro-minimal are posted daily. And that is where I found the majority of my research participants, so my work reinforces the reputation of this group as a popular one. The *ro-minimal* Facebook group was the place where collaborations in music, as well as practices of advice giving and offering feedback on music increased during the lockdowns. This strengthens the idea of ro-minimal as a "community of practice" (Wenger-Trayner, 2006, p. 1), in the sense of sharing a passion, while relying on each other for support and advice. With music gigs being an impossibility for many ro-minimal fans, they began sharing their own DJ sets or musical tracks, which indicates the intensification of the inter-community bonds and a move towards creating, as opposed to merely consuming.

Facebook posts asking for feedback from the ro-minimal community have always been common in this group, but during the pandemic they increased. The posts have a friendly and casual tone, and received high levels of engagement from group members, with a number of likes from 150 to 300 and also, tens to hundreds of comments. The ro-minimal community, then, appears as one where experimentation and collaborations are encouraged, and artistic production is generally a democratic practice, especially in the case of

cisgender men; it is slightly different for women, a situation I examine shortly in the gender section of this chapter.

Besides social media ro-minimal groups booming during the pandemic, the number of guest mixes on Soundcloud and other platforms increased as well. While big names in the dance music industry such as Peggy Gou or Robert Hood shared DJ mixes from their homes on the 'Streaming From Isolation' series by the *Boiler Room* platform, unknown or less known DJs also took advantage of social media platforms and released their mixes. Howard et al. (2021) argue that the pandemic forced professional DJs to become 'bedroom DJs', so in a way, all DJs were 'demoted' to playing in and from their rooms rather than in public venues. The renowned artists still had larger audiences, whereas less known DJs slightly struggled with this aspect, however they persevered and managed to get large audiences involved as well. For example, a DJ called Tommy Lamb was promoted by Project London Radio in October 2020 when one of their vinyl mixes was livestreamed on Facebook and shared onto the *ro-minimal* Facebook group (Project London Radio, 2020).

This is a minimal house and techno set with clean transitions between tracks and stimulating melodies, which was received generally positively as the post had a high engagement level in terms of likes and comments. And whilst the comments on the post are generally encouraging, one comment read "liven it up ffs. Im going to sleep. Drull." This shows that naturally there is disagreement in the ro-minimal community, and that ro-minimal, among the wider genre of minimal house, remains an underground genre with a sound that is not suitable for and liked by all. Especially as many people developed "cabin fever" during the pandemic (Grenier, 2021, p. 4), their taste in music also changed. Hennessy et al. (2021) argue that those affected by the pandemic preferred softer, slower music or had lost their interest in going out. This idea is supported by one of my research participants, too, who said that:

> If the music is good [at an event], I feel good. But I can't stay as many hours as I used to. I get sleepy, I can't even drink as much, I think I got old.[47] I'm not sure how it would have been if it weren't for the pandemic. I think it would have been

[47] The verb Sonia used was 'a se băbi', which is derived from the noun 'babă' meaning 'hag'. So I used 'got old' in this context, but a more exact translation would be 'to act like a hag' however I believe it doesn't have the same punchy effect as in Romanian.

a bit different (Interview with Sonia, 8 April 2022. Translated from Romanian by the author)

Equally, others began preferring harder, faster genres to help them cope with the isolation of social distancing and quarantining, especially when the pandemic was nearing its end, and the possibility of going out was in reach.

Regarding well-known ro-minimal producers, the pandemic offered them a time of introspection. They spent more time putting ideas in practice and writing and producing songs. And although the pandemic was profoundly traumatic, some musicians found inspiration in the stillness and quietness of society in a state of isolation. As Caust (2021) argues, many artists already struggle to make a living from their art, an aspect which was highlighted during the pandemic when opportunities to earn money were fewer. Therefore, for a lot of ro-minimal artists, production was a way of sharing their passion with the community. Furthermore, as DJ gigs were not an option at the time, producing and potentially selling music tracks was a way of generating an income. For instance, artist Mischa Blanos, who is part of the ro-minimal trio Amorf, together with fellow musicians Cristi Cons and Vlad Caia, also produces music on his own. In 2022, he released an album he worked on during the pandemic called *City Jungle*. A segment of the album's description on *Forced Exposure* (2023) reads:

In 2020, the global pandemic meant that Mischa Blanos found himself stuck in Bucharest, no longer able to travel. With a curfew in place between 9pm and 9am, he would spend long, solemn nights in his studio making music, letting the memories, the different rhythms and pressures of the cities and spaces that he used to explore, flow through him.

Like many during the pandemic, Blanos felt stuck due to travel and social restrictions which had certain implications for his music. By being in his studio for large amounts of time, he managed to translate the claustrophobia (Grenier, 2021) of urban spaces of București with its imposing brutalist, socialist architectural structures into a musical album. Furthermore, *bandcamp* releases from ro-minimal artists I follow such as Semoa or Andrei Ciubuc were announced regularly in my inbox, which illustrates the increased ro-minimal music production between 2020 and 2022. This statement is supported by many of my survey participants who said: "artists had more time for producing new stuff so not only bad things [happened during the pandemic]" or "yes as

many producers have turned to making music in their time off so lots of good tunes are about" (Anonymous survey participants, 2020). This suggests not only a preference for producing ro-minimal during the pandemic, but a perceived increase in the quality of the music released, too. So, despite the negative consequences of the pandemic for the ro-minimal community, additional music production and better quality of music production were seen as positive outcomes of the COVID-19 restrictions.

This section presents an examination of the ways in which ro-minimal aficionados strengthened their produser/prosumer identities by experimenting with mixing and producing music. This strengthened the bonds between ro-minimal fans, as they often asked for help and advice, thus emphasising the friendly, welcoming side of this scene. I also underline the equalising effect of the pandemic on the ro-minimal community, and show the dissent and inequalities that were still present despite this standardisation that occurred in the community. Lastly, while increased music production was key in ro-minimal, it is not solely specific to this genre, which illustrates that ro-minimal is part of a large industry that was deeply affected by the pandemic. The last section of this chapter investigates how ideas and practices of gender (in)equality were affected by the pandemic in ro-minimal, with a focus on the specific ways of celebrating femme artists and femme sounds in this scene.

A celebration of gender?

As shown in this chapter, the ro-minimal community saw a sharp increase in online events and livestreams of DJ sets which made the practice of sharing music and collaborations between musicians more equal. However, for women, sharing mixes or productions online was more problematic than it was for cis men. Although this is starting to change, only a few Romanian women are known for playing and mixing ro-minimal, which is discouraging for beginner women DJs as they prepare to enter the industry. Also, the Facebook group *ro-minimal* shows negative responses from the community to women posting their work, as explained in Chapter 4. Throughout the pandemic, the gender inequality persisted in terms of women's music-sharing and engaging with the community, although the collective culture of sisterhood strengthened during this period.

New collectives and initiatives featuring ro-minimal women DJs and producers were created and advertised online on the Facebook group *ro-minimal* between 2020 and 2022. For instance, I found a post in the group from the 1st of December 2021 that was looking for suggestions of women ro-minimal artists to support.[48]

As the group gets tens of posts daily, these generally receive low engagement from users. However, posts like this one which ask a question, generate high engagement (Quesenberry & Coolsen, 2019). The post received considerable attention, with fifty-three likes and eighty-nine comments. It also created an interesting conversation around the style of women ro-minimal artists compared to that of male ones. One comment in particular read:

I think you'll come to find female producers making more sophisticated music in my opinion and i can see why. With a male dominated production scene all making relatively similar music, I've found that female producers tend to take it up a notch with the mood and depth of a track and that's why you rarely find female producers making the 'stock standard' ro-minimal sound we so often hear. (ro-minimal Facebook group user, 1 December 2021)

Besides acknowledging the gender inequality and in representation in the ro-minimal community, this user comments on the uniqueness of women's music in this genre. I have already documented in Chapter 4 the ways in which femme producers and DJs stand out in the scene. Due to their needing to work harder to be noticed and be rewarded artistically, they articulate a specific kind of sound: deeper, darker, and generally very attractive to fans. This edgy femme sound (Lilleslåtten, 2016; Gadir, 2016) has gained much more attention during the pandemic. Normally, many ro-minimal club nights predominantly feature cis men. However, through the lockdowns, the ro-minimal community engaged in online practices including listening to more podcasts, mixes, and livestreams. This enabled them to discover more of the music they like, and find previously unknown artists, including many women who produce and mix in this genre. For instance, I learnt about the minimal house artist Red Pig Flower through a post on the 8th of March 2021 that celebrated International Women's Day on the Facebook group *ro-minimal*. Another post from the Romanian music platform FEEDER.RO shared an article in the *ro-minimal* group, naming and honouring a

[48] The post can be seen here, on the Facebook group ro-minimal: https://www.facebook.com/groups/2116665131899501/permalink/3222937877938882/

large group of women who curated mixes for this platform. Most artists listed were unknown to me and judging by the answers from my surveys and interviews, they were also unknown to most of my participants (Feeder.ro, 2021). As Butete (2022) mentions in her analysis of three Zimbabwean female musicians during the pandemic, social movements promoting gender equality in music gained momentum at the time. While this interest in women's music in the ro-minimal community is an important step towards gender equality, the fact that women are recognised only on special occasions such as Women's Day, raises questions about the status of women musicians in ro-minimal, and the music industry more generally, displaying its still ubiquitous gender inequality (Fileborn, 2016).

Ro-minimal women DJs and producers became more visible through livestreaming and through the promotion of their music, but some chose not to be involved online (Warren, 2020) due to the oversaturation of the internet with music content. Instead, they decided to expand their passion for ro-minimal by appreciating and creating this music offline. The first example is Leona, who was overwhelmed by the number of livestreams online and did not feel the need to share her work online:

Me: also have you been doing livestreams yourself and put mixes online in the pandemic?

Leona: No, I haven't. Because I'm doing the vinyl now as well, it's so easy to make mistakes like that. And I don't feel confident enough or I don't need to do livestreams right now and play to anybody. I'm quite happy just me at home, playing away at my friends, showcase my records or show them the new records I got. I think the internet is overshadowed with livestreams at the moment as well […] there's so much. And everyone does that. I prefer to go see someone do a livestream that … Sunrise Hub or something like that. Or if one of the big boys are doing something, livestream … I think on Saturday there's a few things happening in the ro-minimal community. So, I'll probably watch the soccer and put the speakers on (laughs). (Interview with Leona, 12 February 2021)

Leona's response presents the importance of confidence in the context of women posting their music online. Although the ro-minimal community has been described as welcoming and its members see themselves as generally open-minded, my analysis of the Facebook *ro-minimal* group's activity suggests otherwise. The comments on women's DJ sets or musical productions are often harsher than those on men's music (Nikolayi, 2019; Reitsamer, 2018), although it is somewhat acknowledged that women usually articulate, produce and curate

more interesting soundscapes than men precisely because of this marginalisation. For Leona, it is not just about the fear of making mistakes while playing vinyl. The sheer volume of DJ sets posted online was overwhelming and she preferred listening to music, while exploring her vinyl collection at home, alone or with friends. This makes her experience of playing ro-minimal a very homely and comfortable one without putting extra pressure on herself to share online. This example exhibits women's attitudes in ro-minimal that are somewhat influenced by fear of extremely negative comments from the ro-minimal community. It also shows Leona's acceptance of this situation, and her determination to pursue her passion despite it, in the comfort of her home rather than in a hostile digital environment. This is partly an example of discriminating women in ro-minimal and further confining them to the private space of the home, by discouraging them to fully participate in the scene. Simultaneously, I suggested that ideas and practices of 'private' and 'public' intermingled during the pandemic (Clark & Lupton, 2021). Therefore, I argue that the home, in this context, can be seen a productive, creative space which enables women to develop their skills and interests, without subjecting themselves to online prejudiced critiques and even verbal abuse.

In a comparable manner, Mirela talked about her plans to potentially establish a ro-minimal label:

I was thinking to create a music label here in my own home, to renovate it and bring all the necessary equipment …. To do a label for artists. I would like it to be an escape from Bucharest for them because I live in Pitești, in a village with a forest in the back. You can come here relaxed in a weekend and record your music, with the mixing and production and event organisation …. There has been a lot of ideas. (Interview with Mirela, 6 February 2021. Translated from Romanian by the author)

The pandemic provided Mirela with an opportunity to slow down and think about what she can offer to the ro-minimal community. She positions herself as an organizer and producer who could potentially create and spread ro-minimal music, thus emphasising the prosumer identity (Jenkins, 1992) often noticed in this scene. Mirela's vision is also in line with ro-minimal's general perspective on the symbiotic relationship between humans and the environment (Viveiros de Castro, 1998) that we saw in the organisation of *Sunwaves* Festival in Zanzibar, or at *Waha* Festival. Mirela proposes the creation of a specific kind of music studio: a peaceful environment where artists can record music, allowing

themselves to be inspired by the local nature and feel its relaxing, healing effects, as Marcus (2015) also argues in her work on the health benefits of being outdoors, in the natural environment. Therefore, besides Mirela's identity as a ro-minimal prosumer, another dimension of herself as a healer is illustrated through this example, a position often taken by women throughout history (Brooke, 2020). And while ro-minimal DJs and producers of all genders can be argued to provide various kinds of healing to listeners through their music, this example illustrates a strong association of women with healing, especially during the pandemic through all its negative consequences on humanity.

By analysing the practices of sharing women's mixing and productions and the feedback they received online, I show that the pandemic emphasised the gender inequality in ro-minimal. At the same time, women did share more ro-minimal mixes and productions, as there was a general increase in online activity in all social media groups dedicated to ro-minimal. Also, similar to other social movements that combat gender discrimination and promote women's safety in the music industry, there were several programmes promoting women among which Feeder.ro's list of Romanian electronic music artist mixes was key. However, not all women in the community felt the need to go online, due to fear of being judged or feeling that the internet was oversaturated with content. Instead, some women focussed on exploring ro-minimal in the comfort of their own homes, honing their skills, and engaging in healing practices through promoting the benefits of music and being in the natural environment.

Conclusion

This chapter investigates the ro-minimal community and genre during the COVID-19 pandemic, paying attention to elements such as fandom, community, gathering online and offline, music production and distribution as well as the perception and representation of gender in this community. I show that the boundaries between online and offline practices are not as firm as previously thought of and that ro-minimal livestreams and online activity increased during the pandemic, as the members of this community relied on the internet for connecting and for following ro-minimal artists. Besides watching DJ set livestreams and listening to music online, I examined other ways in which people gathered and raved during the pandemic including attending unauthorized parties, raving at home with flatmates or alone in their bedroom,

or attending a *Sunwaves* Festival edition in Zanzibar. All these practices contributed to the upkeep of the ro-minimal community during the distressing time of the pandemic. I also illustrate that ro-minimal music production and experimentation by renowned artists but also by beginners or 'bedroom' DJs and producers increased, as the pandemic was a time of introspection on the artists' creative practices. In terms of gender, the general ro-minimal discrimination of women persisted, although more women shared their music online and social movements and initiatives to combat gender inequality in ro-minimal were relatively successful. Equally, some women in the community opted for cultivating their interest in ro-minimal offline and focussing on deepening their skills or starting nature-oriented music practices.

Ultimately, the ro-minimal community was acutely affected by the pandemic. Initially, ro-minimal aficionados had little energy to care about the future of ro-minimal, and for some, the hope of returning to pre-COVID lifestyles was lost. However, as most restrictions lasted, on and off, for approximately two years, ro-minimal aficionados slowly restarted to become interested in the genre and found ways to connect with each other and to keep the community alive, while their hopes for the future improved. At the same time, fans became more resilient and creative as a result of the social restrictions. If in 2020, ro-minimal fans were pessimistic about the future of the ro-minimal scene, by 2022, more of them ventured into music production, mixing, new forms of partying and gathering and engaging with an increasingly strong ro-minimal community. This chapter highlights ro-minimal aficionados' attempts to articulate and maintain experiences of community, as well as uphold the scene. Their practices show the variable relationship between secrecy and openness, which are characteristic of this subculture.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

This thesis investigates the ro-minimal subculture, illuminating identity-making and community-making processes within this group: I examine how and why ro-minimal is important to articulating identity and community among aficionados. I discuss the history of ro-minimal, and its various definitions and incarnations in places such as Romania, the UK, France, and in online environments. Community and identity-making are investigated through their links to fandom, technology, gender, healing, and performance, and through ro-minimal subculture's responses to the COVID pandemic. Below I present the findings of my research, drawing out the common themes across the thesis. I explain my thesis' contribution to literature and methodology, and reflect on what I could have done differently if I had the chance to start again. Finally, I show my research's contribution to ways of thinking about society, and discuss its contributions to future research.

What I would do differently

Several events affected my research such as the pandemic in all of its manifestations, as well as health issues including chronic pain and mental health conditions. Without intending to be self-indulgent, I acknowledge these personal and collective challenges, and the additional challenge of women's discrimination in music, and generally in society, which shaped my work in specific ways.

I would have expanded on the research sample, to broaden the scope of my study. I would have increased the number and range of interview participants, to gather additional in-depth data. I would have interviewed more established ro-minimal artists, particularly on issues such as gender representation or exclusivism in ro-minimal. Also, I would have added and changed some questions of my online surveys, to gain a deeper understanding of the issues examined. In terms of theory, I would have elaborated on human-technology relations, drawing more on actor-network theory, and emphasising the emergent agency of the various actors in the ro-minimal scene. Lastly, I would have considered methodological innovation on researching music and art, and addressed how one can include and present music and art in a non-textual way in a sociology/anthropology PhD thesis.

Summary of chapters

Chapter 1 explains the origins of the ro-minimal scene, and the context of my research. I present the research focus, and discuss the relevance of my research. I discuss the challenges faced throughout the PhD, show the processes by which the thesis has come to exist in its current form, and include a literature review. Chapter 2 considers the methodology of my research, discussing the circumstances of my PhD which contributed to implementing digital ethnography. Chapter 3 examines ro-minimal fandom and expertise. I look at the centrality of analogue technology which positions ro-minimal aficionados as knowledgeable actors in this community and outside of it, with plenty of subcultural capital. Although more digital mixing and production occur in ro-minimal, this community prizes the intimacy of human-vinyl relations. I examine ro-minimal fashion, indicating two main directions in it, based on the location and type of ro-minimal parties: eco-friendly fashion and respectively, black, and minimalistic attire. Both imply subcultural capital, and the hierarchical structures that keep it in place. I examine ro-minimal's connection to Romanian culture, emphasising national identity through neo-romantic practices such as sampling folk stories in musical tracks. I also show the cosmopolitanism of ro-minimal and its international connections to music collectives. Lastly, I examine ro-minimal's relationship with digital spaces designed to expand the ro-minimal cyber-kinship/community, but which instead highlights this subculture's inequalities.

Chapter 4 examines the reproduction of hierarchical structures in ro-minimal through gender inequalities. I analyse my experience of learning how to mix in Bristol, where I found support for women, queer and trans people. I discuss ro-minimal gender disparities, where femme producers and DJs are often assumed to have a scarce understanding of their practice, and are hypersexualised. Despite an interest in making ro-minimal more inclusive, the general disregard for women's musical skills cements the view of this community as exclusivist. Women's tastes are diminished, leading to the articulation of a specific femme sound aesthetic within ro-minimal. Lastly, I discuss dancefloor safety in ro-minimal, and my research participants agree that this community is generally safe. Ro-minimal dancing is minimal, and ravers usually form consensual bonds, although some fear the presence of a dormant

misogyny. Alternative club scenes in Romania bring queerness, safety, and mutual care practices on ro-minimal dancefloors.

Chapter 5 examines ro-minimal within a multitude of practices and musical genres, and investigating the facilitation of my healing from trauma by using music. Ro-minimal can be used to aid embodiment practices such as yoga. I evidence ro-minimal's capacity to connect me to my Romanian origins. I examine my healing in relation to performing a DJ set at an online festival which was collectively and personally therapeutic. I examine the transformative power of my performance, learning technical skills and tightening social bonds with other DJs, which enabled me to feel pleasure and joy. Ro-minimal has been helpful with my academic work, increasing my focus for writing and reading, and showing the multimodality of work.

Chapter 6 investigates healing and enskilment at an in-person dance music festival where I performed a DJ set. I consider the preparation stages for this festival, showing playfulness and anticipation which provided me with a sense of adventure and purpose, contributing to my healing. Mutual help in the DJ community, solidarity and skill-sharing were examined to demonstrate music's remedial capacities. Ro-minimal was difficult to access, emphasising the secrecy of the community. I point out ro-minimal music's versatility which makes it an ideal warmup genre: I deepened my knowledge, self-exploration, and self-discovery, which facilitated my recovery. My DJ performance could be grasped through a Latourian view of the DJ set, with the technology, crowd, environment, and technicians contributing to the atmosphere, allowing me to relax. I performed my identity as a Romanian female DJ, and displayed both the inaccessible and cosmopolitan parts of ro-minimal on stage. Although ro-minimal is generally a genre with limited distribution, its relation to healing can potentially enable it to become useful in contexts other than raving.

Chapter 7 presents how the ro-minimal community changed in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. A rise in music livestreams and other online events occurred. Ro-minimal was promoted as a unique underground genre, revealing its association with ideas and practices of 'good taste.' Online events and live chats encouraged affective ties between watchers, providing front-row experiences. Through experimentation and playfulness, livestreaming technology articulated ro-minimal DJing as a multi-layered performance artform.

Homes were reconfigured as spaces of fun, where people danced or watched livestreams. I explain ro-minimal's suitability for extended listening, being a genre of comfort, and not only one of subversion. Through my exploration of solo raves, I show that a domestication of ro-minimal as well as a rave-ification of homes ensued, where public and private spaces intermingled. Illegal raves accentuated the undergroundness of this community. The pandemic restrictions made parties more selective, thus increasing the quality of events so some fans regarded this as a positive change. Despite COVID regulations, event organisers found loopholes in their fabric, illustrating the improvisational element in the ro-minimal subculture. An edition of *Sunwaves* was held in Zanzibar during the pandemic, emphasising the cosmopolitan aspect of this music scene. The festival promoted communal healing through music, but also emphasised exclusivity. Fans deepened their knowledge and passion for ro-minimal, and the collector identity intensified. Social media networks were useful in connecting fans, which articulated ro-minimal as community of practice. Gender inequality persisted, although numerous initiatives promoting women were founded, and fans celebrated women artists' edgy aesthetic. However, due to harsh criticism of women's music, some women chose to cultivate their passion and skills offline. The pandemic had a major negative effect on ro-minimal, as both exclusivism and openness intensified. Ro-minimal aficionados found ways of gathering and investing in their passion, including livestreams, underground raves, or solo raves, which strengthened and transformed this community.

Research findings

As my thesis analyses ro-minimal from a variety of standpoints, it also makes several contributions to academic literature, as evidenced below.

Methodological insights

The thesis provides important methodological insights into the applications of a carefully conducted autoethnography in conjunction with digital ethnography, enabling a rich set of data and insights. I draw on Góralska's (2020, p. 46) "anthropology at home" as a method, which in my case, meant carrying out research in my country and culture of origin – Romania, but also from the inside of my home, as I was stuck indoors due to pandemic regulations. While anthropology at home can be negatively evocative of armchair anthropology

(Sera-Shriar, 2014) and it could be argued that it was suitable for research only during the pandemic, I expand this notion and show how it could be helpful to (chronically) ill and disabled researchers. Digital anthropology has become notably popular during the pandemic, but it has been around for a significant amount of time (Hine, 2000; Pink, 2006) and it will only continue to grow, as human-technology relations presumably intensify (Spath et al., 2021). Therefore, anthropology at home and digital anthropology go hand in hand and could significantly simplify the research process for disabled, chronically ill scholars. Whilst I do not argue for a replacement of in-person ethnography with digital methods, the latter could be used more often by ill and disabled ethnographers when they are unable or less able to go into the field for research. Online interviews, online surveys, or online focus groups, among numerous digital methods could be popularised or encouraged for those who, for instance, cannot stand or walk for too long, and those who are prone to exhaustion. Digital methods were helpful for me as I was struggling with mental health conditions and chronic pain. Additionally, I adapted some of my original methods and even my work schedule to fit my needs, without (I hope) compromising on the research quality. Therefore, instead of writing in my autoethnographic journal regularly, I adopted a semi-regimented writing schedule, and wrote when I felt able to do so. Also, I recorded some of my thoughts as voice notes when I was unable to write due to my chronic pain. These methods helped me collect rich data, and supported my gentle approach to recovery. This indicates the benefits of bespoke research methodology both for future research and for researchers who struggle with the aforementioned issues. While I received various resources to help with my health conditions, I was treated mostly as an abstracted person, detached from my research. Instead, and drawing on the work of disability studies scholars Berger and Lorenz (2016), I propose that researchers need to be regarded as such by their academic institutions.

Another methodological contribution of this thesis is related to using digital materials. Digital anthropology has gained prominence during the pandemic, but the relationship between handling the multiplicity of digital materials and accessing off- and online places has been less researched, as Lee et al. (2020) also claim. So, I propose that valuable lessons lie at the intersection of digital anthropology and multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995) as methods, and I

contend that these can sometimes be two facets of the same coin. Hence, I propose that digital spaces and places are just as ‘full of stuff’ and affectively charged as physical places, and multi-sitedness expands beyond in-person research experiences. This view of research fields could make a difference in how researchers treat their data and rely on digital material culture as much as they do on the physical one, especially in the arts and other multimodal subjects.

Ro-minimal subculture

My thesis also makes contributions to understanding ro-minimal not only as a music genre but also as a subculture, that articulates national identity particular to Romania, thereby creating a sense of a closed folklore-informed community that is nevertheless part of a global network of minimal techno fans. In doing so, it may be possible to highlight differences between ro-minimal and other (minimal) techno, in terms of its technostalgia and a tendency to engage with a slower-pace techno compared to techno heard at peak dance events. Through discussions on fandom and expertise (Hennion, 2001; Bourdieu, 2010[1984]), I show the tensions in ro-minimal subculture’s constitution, which can be applied to other music subcultures. The ambiguities of ro-minimal fandom articulate this community both as exclusionary and inclusive, where hierarchies and friendly bonds of skill-sharing are encouraged. As Edlom and Karlsson (2021) maintain, hierarchies are a normal component of any fan-based community. Also, drawing on Hennion (2001) and Lamerichs’s work (2014), I demonstrate that the ro-minimal community enables deeply affective relations between ro-minimal aficionados, causing friction, dissent but also cooperation and friendship. While this is true for ro-minimal, it could be applied to other fan communities in the artworld and beyond.

My thesis provides contributions to literature on national identity and its relation to articulations of community (Baffoe, 2009). By showing that ro-minimal is a Romanian genre, but simultaneously internationally renowned, I emphasise the centre-periphery relations between national and international elements of this music and community. While “the centre/periphery relations have been strongly penetrated and transformed by the reflexivity of late modernity, […] they have not vanished” (Guomundsson, 2000, p. 52). Multiple centres and peripheries co-exist and interchange positions, as they are mediated by various forces, the

internet and global travelling being the main ones. For instance, electronic dance music in America would be one centre, and ro-minimal would be at the periphery in this system. However, ro-minimal is also a centre of underground electronic dance music in Romania, but also in Europe, and is on equal footing with other underground music scenes. Jet-setting and international travel have become more accessible (Nye, 2011), and the pandemic accentuated internet-mediated communities and relations. These contributed to the evolving perceptions of 'mainstream' and 'underground.' Ro-minimal has become internationally popular while still celebrating the Romanian origin of this genre.

Gender relations

Another finding of my work is showing that, within the localised bounds of the ro-minimal subculture, gender relations are reproduced similarly to other techno scenes, particularly evidenced in Chapter 4, Chapter 6 and in the final section of Chapter 7. Yet, the gendered identity is reinterpreted in the Romanian patriarchal context. The specific conditions of gendered ideas and practices in ro-minimal counteracted through the engagement with a femme sound. I show the effects of gender-based discrimination and marginalisation on the very fabric of music (Farrugia, 2012; Fileborn, 2016; Gavanas & Reitsamer, 2016; Pini, 2001). To highlight the link between gender-based discrimination in ro-minimal and the patriarchal Romanian society, I develop Lilleslåtten's idea of feminine sound (2016) fostering a complex and slightly different aesthetic from men's music. In ro-minimal, a femme sound was articulated as a reaction to patriarchal concepts of women's subordination to men. I explain how ideas of gender are intricately connected to concepts of genius, talent, and skill in ro-minimal. Women DJ and producers' sound aesthetic is known to be different, darker, and edgier than that of men's in ro-minimal. There is a lot of experimentation in women's music, making use of abstract sound and noise and pushing the boundaries of the genre. Therefore, the marginalisation implies that ro-minimal as a genre is shaped through gender relations, but equally, gender is enacted through the music. These findings have implications for how gendered ideas are theorised in relation to music, but also how they practically shape the music industry and the livelihoods of musicians.

My exploration of gender representation in ro-minimal and dance music more broadly shows the many instances of gender-based discrimination in the

industry. While I explain that several initiatives in music promote the recognition of women and queer people, the question of why women and queer people are still discriminated in the industry remains. Many studies (Fileborn, 2016; Farrugia, 2012; Gavanas & Reitsamer, 2013), including the present one repeatedly document the proficiency of women and queer DJs and music producers, so it is important to keep discussing these issues of representation and equal opportunities, potentially in a forum format, where academics, practitioners and music fans can be invited to share their expertise and experiences.

Coping mechanisms and COVID-19

An important contribution of knowledge to sociology is tracing the coping mechanisms within the shared experiences of isolation amongst music fans during the COVID-19 pandemic and the role of digital network technologies, from streaming events and social media connections to home raves and solo raves during this time. The thesis thereby contributes new insights into literature on music and healing.

My thesis contributes to the newly created body of literature on COVID-inflicted changes to various parts of society. By exploring the impact of the pandemic on the ro-minimal community, I show the adaptability of this scene, which responded to the “crisis of spatial materiality” (Taylor et al., 2021, p. 221), by continuing some forms of togetherness offline, and finding new ones online. Building on material culture literature (Lehdonvirta, 2010), I also expanded on the idea of material culture’s relationship to digital spaces and music consumption. My research participants reported very palpable experiences of music and community online, especially when they exchanged and worked on music together digitally. Finally, the parts of the thesis that deal with healing contribute to the anthropology of health and illness. By examining my own experiences of healing through DJing, I show how enskilment and music performance help alleviate various ailments, particularly mental health conditions (Garrido et al., 2015).

Contributions to the anthropology and sociology of music (Born, 2010; DeNora, 2000) and raves (Rietveld, 2003; 2018; Wolfenden et al., 2022) are made by proposing a novel kind of raving in ro-minimal in which the music’s relationship to healing is emphasised, and where stamina, but also restraint, are prized. I

show examples of this particularly during the pandemic, stressing the significance of home-made raves, online raves (Wolfenden et al., 2022; Gere, 2021; Pryor and Outley, 2021), and solo raves. These emerged as alternatives for in-person events, and while I do not advocate for their replacement, these function as alternatives that promote boosted health, community relations and feeling of belongingness (Osler, 2019) in times of crisis, or in long-distance situations such as friendships. More research is needed to understand the full effects of home raves or solo raves, as while they help with feeling part of a community, their long-term use could potentially have negative effects on the same aspects it helped with during the pandemic.

Technologies and NFTs

My thesis makes contributions to academic literature on digital technologies, the metaverse and the potential of NFTs in the context of a dance festival economy and music-based communities, bearing in mind advantages and disadvantages of NFTs.

A lot of the ro-minimal community has a strong allegiance to analogue music technology, revealing the collector identity, expertise and subcultural capital attached to vinyl and turntable practices. The advent of digital music technology in ro-minimal articulates the co-existence of analogue and digital mediums, increasing the openness of ro-minimal, while maintaining its hierarchies. The tension between openness and hierarchical structures was visible in a ro-minimal festival's entry into digital environments and offering VIP or lifelong event passes to fans in the form of NFTs. Ro-minimal technology is important as many aficionados are producers, music technicians and DJs themselves, blurring the boundaries between fan and producer/artist. Even so, not all have equal chances and roles in this community, as many non-cis male people are marginalised, and harshly critiqued. Women use social media and online streaming in various ways to promote their unique music, in both analogue and digital forms. Technology was key in my healing process, by mediating my performance at an online festival, my connection to my home and community, and my preparation for and performance at an in-person electronic music festival. Equally, during the pandemic, technology such as livestreaming and 3D visual effects used in ro-minimal online DJ sets contributed to the democratisation of rave experiences online and expanding the perception and

practice of DJing, as a multimodal artform. Human-technology interconnections highlight some inequalities and hierarchies already mentioned, but also the point out the multiple ways in which ro-minimal is enacted as a friendly(ish) community of practice.

My exploration of NFTs and cyberspaces in relation to a ro-minimal festival demonstrated that the boundary between online and offline worlds is not so rigid. This has implications for how we consume music, ownership of music as well as music-making processes. The intermingling of the ro-minimal subculture with NFTs also has implications for the sense of exclusivity promoted, advertently or not, by group. While the intentions behind the launching of the Sunwerse NFTs were to widen the community, my research shows that the presence of the opposite effect of increasing exclusivity and rigidifying barriers between aficionados.

Common themes across the thesis

As the chapter summaries indicate, several common themes run across the thesis, forming the basis of my argument about ro-minimal identity and community being at the intersection of exclusivity and openness.

A main theme is identity, which is intersectionally analysed throughout the thesis, to reveal the manifold ways it manifests in the ro-minimal subculture. Identity in ro-minimal is the result of multiple elements, a major one being national identity. Although ro-minimal is a widely spread genre with international appeal, this music contains Romanian references which differentiates between Romanian or Romanian-speaking fans and those who are not or do not speak Romanian. There is not necessarily a consensus about ro-minimal as a specific genre, and instead, it is more of a community that has developed around the Romanian minimal techno and house music. However, national identity is important in understanding the subtleties of this music and community, and accessing the distinct levels of membership in ro-minimal. Another element of identity I analyse is gender. While women and queer people are increasingly more recognised for their contributions to ro-minimal, gender representation indicates the prevalent gender discrimination present here, and more commonly, in the dance music industry. And whilst women have crafted their own specific musical styles in response to the marginalisation, inequalities persist. Another point that I analyse is the identity of the ro-minimal genre itself,

as underground, analogue-oriented and glitchy rave music. These further illustrate the exclusivism of this scene, and point to its hierarchical organisation based on taste and expertise. Simultaneously, the similarity between ro-minimal and other genres, as well as its connections with myriad music collectives and clubs worldwide suggests the openness of the ro-minimal subculture, thus accentuating tension between secrecy and friendliness. I also look at identity through the concepts of health and illness, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, but also relating to personal health struggles. I illustrate how ro-minimal can be particularly helpful for mental health conditions, as well as for increasing focus and the ability to work or for connecting with community, especially in times of crisis. Ro-minimal's therapeutic potential then, suggests, to an extent, the openness and friendliness of this scene. While these aspects of identity are analysed separately, I bring them together in the autoethnographic parts of this thesis. My identity as a Romanian immigrant woman, ill and healing, DJ, and performer, presents the very tensions between the friendliness and exclusivity of ro-minimal. However, my experiences often articulated comfort and familiarity in ro-minimal, and when I encountered obstacles, I leaned into its connections with other genres and collectives.

Experiences of community and aloneness have also been focal points of this thesis. I demonstrate that ro-minimal is a community of practice where skills are developed and shared among members, although belongingness is not experienced by all in the same way: women or queer artists are more prone to severe criticism in the subculture, and they are often excluded – be it intentionally or inadvertently. And although this scene is seen as friendly by its members, those on the outside frequently see it as private and exclusive. In Chapters 5 and 6, I further establish how the tension between community and isolation/exclusion is manifested through healing. Numerous ro-minimal online events and livestreams during and post-pandemic promote communal healing and affective connections. The mixing of private and public and online and offline practices during the lockdowns, such as home raves while watching livestreams, solo raves or illegal parties highlighted the tensions between community and solitude. I also argue that these experiences articulated novel understandings and practices of community, mediated by several forms of digital technology.

A more specific point that runs through the thesis is the diffusion and development of Romanian minimal techno and ro-minimal fandom. Ro-minimal is formed and presented as a community of expert music lovers who engage in music production and mixing, and prize analogue technology. Ro-minimal as an umbrella term for various kinds of Romanian minimal techno and house, although soft and gentle, is esoteric, glitchy, sometimes dissonant, requiring expert listening and patience, which accentuates its exclusiveness and distinctiveness. Also, when played it in a multi-genre music festivals, ro-minimal is often portrayed as an eccentric genre, although people seem to enjoy it greatly, despite the comments or questions they have about it. Moreover, the idiosyncrasies of ro-minimal are what makes this genre so appealing to wide and varied audiences, which illustrates, once more, the tensions between the "underground-ness" (Solomon, 2005, p. 9) and approachability of this scene.

Contributions to thinking about society

My work engages with multiple ways of thinking about the society. For instance, digital mediation of communities intensified during the pandemic. Many believed that after the pandemic, societies would return to 'normality', however with the rise of online practices, remote work, and the redesigning of workspaces (Kane et al., 2021), it has started to become clear that 'normality' would perhaps be changed, too. Musical artists continued engaging in digital practices such as livestreaming their music as they did during the pandemic, which suggests that these practices are here to stay. Additionally, the increased multi-locality of living and working, especially among millennials, show the importance of digitally mediated communities. My work shows the lessons in resilience to be learnt from the dance music industry, which during the pandemic was disparaged and suffered severe funding cuts. Livestreaming DJ sets, organising online parties, small parties at home or even solo raves show an immense level of creativity in music-based communities such as ro-minimal. Also, the musical collaborations between members of the ro-minimal community, and the organisation of charity music events online demonstrate the importance and strength of digital bonds.

An additional contribution is in wellbeing and mental health. Music has been used in formal therapeutic practices for decades (DeNora, 1999), however, I claim that particularly ro-minimal could be used informally as a therapeutic tool.

The therapeutic effects of raves are explained in this thesis, but a wider use of ro-minimal could be promoted in other-than-rave contexts. Rave forms could be diversified to be more inclusive and accessible (e.g., daytime, alcohol-free raves), leading to more people accessing the healing effects of electronic dance music.

Lastly, the way we think about society and technology is informed by a general rise in technostalgia (nostalgia for past and analogue technology) in music, or other forms of art such as photography where film cameras have been gaining popularity in the past decade (Caoduro, 2014). Arguably more complex skills are needed for both analogue mixing and photography, supporting a deeper understanding of how these technologies work. The interest in analogue technology and a return to vinyl and turntables are important to discuss when designing sustainable music technologies and skill-sharing practices in societies.

Contributions to future research

As an extensive academic study aiming to illuminate multiple aspects of the ro-minimal community and genre, this thesis opens up a variety of venues for future research. It suggests that the anthropology of music and electronic dance music particularly, could be advanced through further exploration of the humans-technology relations in an increasingly digitalised world. My work contributes to the literature on articulations of community and subcultures. Tracing the tensions and connections between exclusivism and openness, and underground and mainstream, I suggest that these concepts could be developed in ro-minimal or in relation to other musical genres. Additionally, while I investigate agency, this area could be further researched to understand the complex assemblage of human and non-human actors at play in the ro-minimal community, and in the dance music industry. Lastly, the methodological findings around anthropology at home, digital methods or autoethnography, open up research to a broader diversity of people. My work begins to address various research conditions and regimens, promoting a move away from ableist perceptions of research and researchers' needs. In line with disability studies (Berger and Lorenz, 2016), I suggest that more could be done to facilitate researchers that have particular ranges of abilities and capacities to ultimately

improve and democratise research culture, and indeed enhance the research itself.

Appendix 1: Online survey

1. Age

18-25

26-35

36-45

46-60

Over 60

Prefer not to say

2. How would you describe your gender?

3. Where do you live?

Romania

UK

Other European country

Rather not say

Other

4. When did you first hear of ro-minimal?

5. What do you think makes ro-minimal different from other genres?

6. Do you attend electronic music festivals? If yes, which one(s)?

7. Do you have a favourite music festival and why?

8. What do you think makes a good ro-minimal producer?

9. What do you think makes a good ro-minimal DJ?

10. Are you a producer/DJ yourself? If yes, when and how did you start this?

11. Name a few of your favourite DJs and producers and please explain why you chose them.

12. Do you listen to music on online platforms? If so, which platforms do you use? If not, where do you listen to music?

13. Do you feel the ro-minimal scene and community was influenced by the pandemic? If yes, in what way?

14. How have you engaged with the ro-minimal community since the start of the pandemic (e.g. listening to online mixes, events and livestreams, etc.)?

Is virtual partying something that could work in the long term for you? Why/why not?

15. How do you see the future of underground electronic music given the pandemic and the restrictions imposed on mass gatherings?

16. Would you like to participate further in my study? If yes, which methods would you be happy to take part in? Select all that apply.

Online interviews (on Skype, Whatsapp, phone)

Auto-ethnography (I'm going to ask you to document your engagement with music through writing about it weekly on various prompts, sending photos related to this, or voice messages)

Journal writing (fortnightly/monthly to have an online meeting to talk about these journal entries)

Commenting on other people's mixes and sending your responses to me

Sending some of your mixes for others to comment on

Online focus groups (on the topics of DJ-ing, producing, partying)

17. Please enter you email address, phone number or social media contact, if you would like to be contacted for further participation in my study.

18. I understand how my data will be used in this project.

How I'm going to use the data provided

The information you provide will be used for research purposes and your personal data will be processed in accordance with current data protection legislation. All data will always be stored securely. Audio and visual files will be stored as password protected files stored on the University of Exeter U-Drive. Your personal data will be treated in the strictest confidence and will not be disclosed to any unauthorised third parties. My thesis and any subsequent publications will not identify any individuals unless I have been given informed consent. *

19. I have read and understood the consent form and I agree with its terms and conditions.

Appendix 2: Interview questions[49]

1. When did you first become interested in ro-minimal?

2. What drew you to it?

3. What does ro-minimal mean to you?

4. How does it make you feel?

5. Describe ro-minimal as a genre … is there anything that makes it special/different from other kinds of minimal? What is that?

6. How about ro-minimal as a community? Talk about that for a bit … is there a strong sense of community?

7. How often do you go partying?

8. How important is partying in ro-minimal?

9. Why is music important to you?

10. Describe to me a party that you attended, and it stayed with you … why was it special?

11. Do you dance?

12. How do you feel when you dance?

13. How would you describe dancing to ro-minimal?

14. Is dancing in ro-minimal important to you?

15. How is the atmosphere at ro-minimal parties?

16. What about festivals? What festivals have you attended?

17. Do you have a favourite and why?

18. Are parties different from festivals and how/why?

19. Do you normally have pre-parties and after-parties?

20. What happens in them?

21. Do you normally go partying in groups or alone?

22. How easy/difficult is it to meet new people and form connections at ro-minimal parties? Why do you think that is?

23. Who is your favourite producer and DJ and why?

24. Do you produce or DJ yourself?

25. Would you be willing to show me some music samples?

26. How did you get into DJing/producing and why?

[49] This is a set of initial, guiding questions for the interviews. As the interviews I conducted were semi-structured, I added questions, or modified the ones presented above depending on the circumstances and atmosphere of each interview.

27. Is it profitable? Do you want to make money out of this – or is this important?

28. What other kinds of dance music do you like?

29. What values do you feel are important to you in general and in the ro-minimal community or other musical communities? Are these values consistent or similar?

30. Politics of representation: do you care about any political message that lies behind the music you listen to?

31. Do you feel that the ro-minimal community has changed in any way since the beginning of the pandemic?

32. How have you kept close to the rest of the community?

33. How are the livestreams? Do you attend any and how often, if so?

34. Do you ‘go partying’ with friends at these livestreams?

35. How would you describe the atmosphere?

36. Is online partying something that could work in the long term? Why/why not?

37. What do you think the future of underground music looks like now that so many events have been cancelled?

38. Have you noticed any changes in what you listen to since the beginning of lockdown?

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Additional ro-minimal discography[50]

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[50] This is a list of playlists and recordings meant to introduce ro-minimal to those interested. The list is not by any means exhaustive, but it provides a few examples of ro-minimal music which the author considers important.
[51] This is the original Romanian minimal house and techno label, founded by Rhadoo, Petre Inspirescu and Raresh. This list on RA contains all their music releases to date.
[52] This nightclub promotes various music styles, although ro-minimal is prominent. It acts as a ro-minimal nightlife hub in Bucharest and internationally. Details about the club and their past and upcoming events can be seen on their website.
[53] This platform promotes minimal house and techno from around the world, thus showing ro-minimal's influence on and connection with other minimal house and techno music.
[54] A major vinyl record shop in Romania, with a well-curated ro-minimal section.
[55] Sunrise Hub is the organiser of Sunwaves Festival, and has also livestreamed many ro-minimal DJ sets during the pandemic.
[56] This playlist contains the type of music that is played at Sunwaves Festival, showcasing Romanian and international artists.

Epilogue

This thesis makes a series of contributions to theory, methodology, and empirical knowledge of Romanian electronic music. In this epilogue, I discuss the aspects of this research that might be developed for future publishing, in order to enhance the impact of my work on academia and beyond. These are only a few examples of the papers that I plan to publish, highlighting the key findings of my thesis, however the following list is by no means exhaustive.

First, I plan to elaborate on and publish a paper on the innovative methodology that I developed throughout this thesis, based on digital ethnography, autoethnography, a flexible approach to research and drawing lessons from working with music. The benefits of this methodology are ample, but would especially benefit disabled or chronically ill researchers who struggle with following a strict programme of research. I am currently preparing a co-authored piece on this methodology with my supervisor, Prof. Mike Michael, planning to submit this to journals such as *Qualitative Research* in the following months.

I also plan to publish a paper on the tensions between exclusivism and inclusivity within the ro-minimal subculture, particularly emphasising the national identity element in this dynamic. By writing about the Romanianness of ro-minimal in conjunction with the role of different technologies in this subculture underline the type of undergroundness promoted here, and they emphasise the place of Romanian electronic music within the global music scene. I plan to submit a paper on this topic to *Dancecult* and *JRAI*.

I aim to submit papers on the relationship between the ro-minimal subculture and the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly on the role of digital technologies in mediating fandom relations in this community, but also on the therapeutic effect of various kinds of raves, aiding recovery from mental and physical health conditions. Aspects such as self-care and community care were altered in the ro-minimal subculture due to the pandemic, and it is important to present these lessons in resilience not only to audiences interested in music, but also more widely in society. Also, ro-minimal music's connection to slower-paced dancing and raves as well as embodiment practices open up its therapeutic potential which I also aim to publish about. Papers on the relationship between ro-minimal, health, wellbeing and care will be submitted to journals such as *Social Anthropology*, *Sociological Review*, *Anthropology Today*.