

Immaterial Voices: Transgender Expression within Hyperpop's Shifting Identity

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Abstract

Algorithmic streaming platforms and social media have, in recent years, shifted the dynamics between artists and their audiences. The commercialization centered around these platforms has had a profound effect on the ways in which certain musicians create music with online virality in mind. The nature of algorithmic streaming is inherently geared towards listening to a broad range of artists instead of building a connection or understanding with specific artists. The subject of transgender rights has also become increasingly contentious over the last decade. As conditions become more hostile, safe spaces for transgender expression become even more important. This thesis deals with the ways in which viral trends have affected the identity of the genre hyperpop, which is known for its high number of transgender and LGBTQ artists. I argue that while commercializing algorithmic trends on platforms like Spotify or TikTok may isolate and displace the transgender communities of hyperpop by diluting their voices, an increase in the visibility of transgender expression inherently leads to a future with more free and expansive transgender representation in music.

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Throughout this project, I have realized just how brilliant a musician, artist, and person SOPHIE was. Her ways of thinking—the agency she took over her body and identity—inspire me to push my own boundaries in both music-making and within myself. Though she passed in 2021 while reaching up towards the moon, I believe her spirit still lives out there in the cosmos.

Thanks to my friends for listening to me blab and encouraging me to get this done. You guys rock.

“Transness is taking control to bring your body more in line with your soul and spirit so the two aren't fighting against each other and struggling to survive.”—SOPHIE 2018

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Introduction

If you were around Generation Z in the summer of 2024, you might have noticed an influx of bright green imagery, a reckless wave of party culture, and a rise in unapologetic brashness. This cultural phenomenon, dubbed “Brat Summer,” was a result of Generation Z’s excessive obsession with British pop star Charli XCX, and her album, *Brat*. The album’s snot green aesthetic, along with its playful unruliness, had an influence that extended through youth meme cultures to online marketing trends that were so ubiquitous that even the United States Democratic Party used it as a campaign strategy during the 2024 presidential election. Though it is often interpreted as the hit pop album of the summer, *Brat*’s influences came from an unusual genre that sits just on the outskirts of mainstream pop. This genre, dubbed “hyperpop” by Spotify in 2019, is known for its loudness, obnoxious internet inside jokes, and boundary-pushing production styles. Before it became a genre, the music that is now considered hyperpop belonged to a vast internet community of musicians who were passionate about experimental forms of musical expression. A large portion of this community identified as transgender and saw this digital musical milieu as a safe space to freely express themselves outside of physical constraints or gender dysphoria—a term used by transgender individuals to describe a dissonance between one’s gender assigned at birth and one’s true gender identity. These individuals were drawn to the scene’s experimental forms of expression, like voice changers that allow transgender people to alter their voices that might otherwise trigger discomfort or dysphoria. Beginning at the advent of the genre’s sounds being heard in mainstream contexts due to viral trends like *Brat*, the original identity attached to its sounds is being lost and diluted as these sounds permeate into the

soundscape of mainstream pop music. Throughout this thesis, I will explore the transgender influences and sentiments that remain foundational to hyperpop's sound, and consider whether the processes of commercialization, displacement, and isolation that have worked to dilute the genre's transgender identities over time have resulted in the loss of a vital sanctuary—or if the broader acceptance of these sonorities has created new opportunities for gender non-conforming artists to reach mainstream audiences.

Methodology

Due to the relatively novel subject of hyperpop, this research paper draws on a spectrum of perspective and tone, from formal, peer-reviewed scholarship to journalistic articles offering cultural commentary, to blogs and social media posts that capture lived experience, vernacular expression, and community sentiment in order to illustrate and discuss a comprehensive zeitgeist of the burgeoning genre. I use a wide array of journalistic articles about relevant events, artist biographies, interviews, and album reviews to supplement the scarce academic writing about hyperpop and to form an understanding of the points of discussion around the genre.

Additionally, I use the computational tools of natural language processing, specifically topic modeling and sentiment analysis, on the rich corpus offered by Reddit comment data in order to support the trends outlined by journalistic articles. I also look at social media posts on Twitter and Instagram as primary sources to analyze artists' opinions and behaviors in relation to topics. Finally, I use music theory analysis, lyrical analysis, and analysis of music videos to provide an interpretation of artists' intentions.

The theoretical frameworks are built upon musicological journal articles, gender theory, as well as sociological theory in relation to digital gentrification. The musicological frameworks

are used to discuss identity within the context of music genres. It includes Keith Negusa and Patria Román Velázquez's problematization of identity as a sole descriptor of genres and arguments for the additional consideration of disbelonging or the distance of artists and listeners from a genre's cultural or geographical identity. Gender theory frameworks touch on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity which argues that gender is based on outside interpretations of the repeated actions and stylizations of one's body, Anne Fausto-Sterling's critiques on the dominant but narrow view on biological sex and gender, Martine Rothblatt's argument for transhumanism or the use of technological augmentation in modern day gender expressions, as well as Susan Stryker's explanation of the intersectional and interconnected nature of transgender, feminist, racial, and anti-colonial/imperial struggles.

SOPHIE

SOPHIE (stylized in all capital letters) is the moniker of Sophie Xeon, a British music producer known for her style of unconventional, but addictive ear candy that would later develop into the genre of Hyperpop. SOPHIE's production style was fascinating because, though she eschewed sampling, her sonic palette mimics sounds from the real world—the light crinkle of a plastic potato chip bag, the popping crunch of bubble rap, the jarring industrial clangs of metal, glass shattering, etc. Her sonorities distanced her from mainstream pop, “inviting listeners to peer in and question the ultimate criterion of pop” (Hicks 2024) until she passed away in January 2021, leaving behind a legacy as both a visionary producer and a pioneering transgender artist whose work continues to reverberate through pop music.

For the first several years of her career, SOPHIE operated in a kind of cultivated anonymity, keeping her public image deliberately fragmented and elusive. She barely maintained

a social media presence (Lhooq 2017); the biography on her website simply stated “HI MY NAME IS SOPHIE” in an exaggerated curly typeface. In place of typical promotional photos or interviews, the only images available of her were grainy, fan-snapped photos from a handful of live sets (Geffen 2017). When asked to perform a Boiler Room set, she infamously sent drag queen Jesse Hoffman to pretend to DJ in her place while she stood off to the side disguised as a bodyguard (Lhooq 2017). For a long stretch, as Sasha Geffen from *Vulture* describes, SOPHIE’s presence felt “conditional, based only on her presence in the same room as you” (Geffen 2017). While SOPHIE’s anonymity was initially meant to let the music stand on its own, she later reflected that her intentions might have been misunderstood. In retrospect, SOPHIE told *Teen Vogue* that her decision to remain anonymous had always been intentional, though it may not have been understood in the way she hoped (Lhooq 2017). However, this ambiguity, particularly the absence of third-person pronouns in press materials, contributed to widespread assumptions that she was a man (Geffen 2017). Thus, with the release of “It’s Okay to Cry,” widely regarded as her way of coming out as a transgender woman, SOPHIE explained that she wanted to be more active in the conversation (Lhooq 2017).

****Oil Of Every Pearl’s Un-Insides****

SOPHIE released her first album, *OIL OF EVERY PEARL’S UN-INSIDES (OOEPU)* on June 15, 2018. The album's title may be a play on the phrase “I love every person’s insides,” which reflects the album's theme of optimism and self-acceptance (Williams 2021, 12). It stands as a landmark album at the intersection of trans identity and digital culture. Widely acclaimed by critics, the album was celebrated not only for its innovative production but also for the way it radically reimagined identity, embodiment, and sound in the digital age. Across its surreal tracks,

SOPHIE crafts a sonic world that dissolves the boundaries between human and machine. The artist has said that a running theme in her music is “questioning preconceptions about what’s real and authentic… in terms of music, in terms of gender, in terms of reality” (quoted in Geffen 2017).

SOPHIE took inspiration from the idea of transhumanism, citing transhumanist Martine Rothblatt as one of her influences (Geffen 2017). Transhumanism is a branch of philosophy that supports the betterment of human life through technological augmentations. Rothblatt argues for the acceptance of the use of technology as a tool for transgender expression and identity:

Just as each person has a unique sexual identity, without regard to their genitals, hormones or chromosomes, each person has a unique conscious identity, without regard to their degree of flesh, machinery or software. It is no more the genitals that make the gender than it is the substrate that makes the person. (Rothblatt 2011, 136)

The album, *OOEPU*, can be thought of as a discussion of the boundaries between her physical self, Sophie Xeon, and her transhuman self, SOPHIE. The album’s emotional range, from the tender vulnerability of “It’s Okay to Cry” to the harsh, metallic abrasiveness of tracks like “Faceshopping,” reflects a deeply personal perspective on gender, technology, and self-definition.

“Immaterial”

“Immaterial,” the second-to-last track on *OOEPU*, is SOPHIE’s most popular track with nearly 40 million streams on Spotify (SOPHIE 2018a). The upbeat track is driven by a syncopated staccato ostinato played on bumping 808 hits and “xylophone-like resonant hits” outlining a iv-V-I-VI progression (Williams 2021, 26). The quantized clap hits, the driving instrumentals, and vocals that repeat “Immaterial girls, immaterial boys” create an upbeat,

optimistic, and highly danceable feeling (SOPHIE 2018a). The lyrics of ‘Immaterial’ are a heartfelt ode to the immateriality of digital embodiment:

You could be me and I could be you
Always the same and never the same
Day by day, life after life
Without my legs or my hair
Without my genes or my blood
With no name and with no type of story
Where do I live?
Tell me, where do I exist?
(SOPHIE 2018a)

These lyrics reflect SOPHIE’s appreciation of the digital world as a sandbox where identity can be endlessly shaped. As an “immaterial” entity, SOPHIE exists beyond the physical boundaries of Sophie Xeon’s physical body. She can be perceived without legs, hair, genes, or blood—detached from the constraints of her physical self. “Genes” here could be a reference to sex chromosomes, which are often a point of discourse in anti-trans discussions. Transphobic rhetoric often assumes that humans come in only two shapes and sizes: XX and XY (Fausto-Sterling 2000). This argument is weak due to its narrow view of human biology. Humans come in all shapes and sizes, and this argument ignores the existence of people with intersex conditions. The first instance in which a person is gendered is either before birth through the use of ultrasound technology or after birth from observation of the genitals—rarely ever through chromosomal tests (Fausto-Sterling 2000). American sexologist Anne Fausto-Sterling complicates this process: “If a child is born with two X chromosomes, oviducts, ovaries, and a uterus on the inside, but a penis and scrotum on the outside, for instance, is the child a boy or a girl?” (Fausto-Sterling 2000, 5). Human beings do not fit nicely into two boxes; the characteristics that we use to apply gender to people are based on a conglomeration of voice,

body shape, hair, genitalia, behavior, and a multitude of traits that vary from person to person. As Judith Butler puts it, “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Butler 1999, 43-44). While they were describing gender based on physical stylizations of the body, Butler’s argument can be applied in the context of our modern digital world, in which we are perceived according to the parts of ourselves that are shared online. It is through the persona of SOPHIE that Xeon can take agency over the specificities of her identity to be perceived and escape the tired discourse surrounding transgender people and their bodies.

“Immaterial” is one of the many instances in which cisgender woman singer, Cecile Believe’s, voice is used in SOPHIE’s music (SOPHIE 2018a). Each time, it is portrayed as though Believe’s voice is SOPHIE’s own. Xeon’s real, unprocessed voice is rarely featured in her music. Believe is one of the many perceivably feminine vocalists with whom SOPHIE collaborated without being listed in the credits. The absence of formal accreditation could be understood as a deliberate choice, emphasizing how different versions of the self are absorbed into one digital persona (Williams 2021, 21). By repeatedly presenting various female vocalists as her own, Xeon constructs SOPHIE in a way that transcends the limitations of physicality. The immaterial world, as she alludes to in the bridge of the song, allows SOPHIE to be anything she wants:

I was just a lonely girl
 In the eyes of my inner child
 But I could be anything I want
 And no matter where I go
 You'll always be here in my heart
 Here in my heart, here in my heart
 I don't even have to explain
 Just leave me alone now
 I can't be held down
 I can't be held down
 (SOPHIE 2018a)

This perception of SOPHIE as an “immortal” persona is made more believable by the separation between SOPHIE’s personal life and Xeon’s. Xeon chose anonymity in order to obscure Sophie Xeon, the Scottish transgender woman producer, from SOPHIE, the digitally embodied persona created by Xeon, and represented in various forms, voices, and sounds across her music videos and songs. The sonic universe SOPHIE constructs in ‘Immortal’ acts as a sanctuary for digital embodiment (Williams 2021, 24). This argument can, however, be extended into SOPHIE’s entire discography and persona. In the earlier years of her career, SOPHIE chose to never show her face (Fitzmaurice 2013), instead opting to remain unknown while letting her music speak for her. In a Pitchfork interview, SOPHIE argued that “music is not about where someone grew up, or what they look like against a wall” (quoted in Fitzmaurice 2013). The ambiguity around who sings what in her songs was intentional, as SOPHIE avoided centering herself in the music. By constantly detaching the sounds of voices from the people responsible for singing them, Xeon builds an association between the different vocals and herself. In other words, the repeated act of feminine vocals congeals over time to create the appearance of substance over the blank canvas of SOPHIE’s anonymity.

“Immaterial,” with its upbeat and danceable sound, can be thought of as a celebration of the liberation offered by the digital world. The track is Xeon’s cherishing of SOPHIE’s ability to embody a self that is removed from the troubles of the physical world. In the immaterial world, Cecile Believe’s voice becomes SOPHIE’s. The anonymity of the vocalist through the choice to omit Believe in the credits serves not as an erasure, but as a reclamation of self on Xeon’s own terms. By detaching the voice from a fixed, gendered, physical body, SOPHIE blurs the lines between who is speaking, singing, or being represented. This practice challenges the rigid structures of identity that are so often weaponized against transgender people, offering instead a vision of identity as fluid, immaterial, and collectively constructed. SOPHIE becomes an intangible entity built from sound. In doing so, Xeon constructs a digital haven where the limitations of her physical body dissolve, and her identity can be meticulously molded.

“It’s Okay to Cry”

Released on October 19, 2017, as the first single on the *OOPUI*, “It’s Okay to Cry” is the introduction to the person behind SOPHIE. It holds great cultural significance as the first time her unaltered voice is featured in one of her songs, and the first time her face appears in a music video. It is thought of as Xeon’s way of introducing herself “as a person rather than a producer,” and as her way of coming out as a transgender woman. Instead of the typical, loud, distorted, or mechanical sounds and heavily processed vocals of her previous songs, “It’s Okay to Cry” features her completely unaltered voice tenderly singing to what is presumed to be her past self (Weaver, 2017).

The lyrics, written in the second person, can be interpreted as an internal dialogue in which SOPHIE consoles a version of Xeon in an earlier stage of transition. The first verse illustrates SOPHIE carefully and empathetically approaching this past self that regrets the

milestones of girlhood (Williams 2021, 17): “All of the big occasions you might have missed” (SOPHIE 2018b). SOPHIE assures her past self that, despite lacking these personal experiences, she is still entirely worthy of acceptance. In the second verse, SOPHIE addresses her past self directly: “One time you were lost.” The older, wiser, and emotionally mature version of SOPHIE reminds her past self that “it’s okay to cry” (SOPHIE 2018b). By writing in the second person, SOPHIE illustrates her current perspective in her transition journey by accepting the internal turmoil that constructs her and coming to a realization of self-acceptance: “I think your insides are the best side” (SOPHIE 2018b)

The music video, featuring SOPHIE in the nude caressing her face and body, visually reflects the sentiment of self-acceptance. Throughout the video, SOPHIE directly faces the camera in front of an ethereal background that changes between clouds, sunsets, outer space, and a thunderstorm (SOPHIE 2017). This portrayal represents the boundlessness of digital embodiment as she takes advantage of digital processes to remove her natural, organic body from earthly limits (Williams 2021, 16). The utilization of especially spacy reverb in the instrumentals creates a floating feeling that further emphasizes this ethereal sensibility.

“Faceshopping”

“Faceshopping” is the third and final single of *OOEPU*. The track constructs a sonic landscape of industrial textures, fragmented vocals, and metallic synths, evoking a kind of violent beauty. Lyrically, it discusses the commodification and mutability of the self, particularly through the metaphor of the face as a purchasable, customizable surface; It reframes the face not as a marker of fixed identity but as a mutable interface, something that can be modified, sold, and reimagined within the digital world.

The verse consists of a low pitch and highly distorted growling voice chanting terms in a mechanical rhythm of paired organic and synthetic concepts (Jones 2024, 67). The voice is so heavily manipulated that it is almost unintelligible; it almost acts like heavily pounding percussion. The things the voice is saying, “Artificial bloom,” “hydroponic skin,” or “plastic surgery,” are written out in the music video, which pairs the terms with imagery. These images contain both organic and artificial concepts, like a flower, skin, raw meat, squid, social media logos, and CAPTCHA tests (SOPHIE 2018c). The juxtaposition between organic and artificial concepts can be thought of as a representation of the relationship between natural human life and technology. The way that the machine-like voice is unable to be understood without the aid of the lyrics written in the music video plays with this relationship even more. The listener’s ears naturally perceive the voice alone as an object or machine, while the added information from the video assists the viewer by allowing the listener’s eyes to read the text to better understand the voice. This interaction can be thought of as an augmentation of the listener’s senses as they rely on technology to further their understanding. The verse, thus, is SOPHIE’s way of portraying modern humanity’s reliance on technology as an extension of oneself.

SOPHIE acknowledges her identity as a relationship between her organic self and the technologies that she interacts with. The refrain repeats permutations of the line “my face is the front of shop:”

My face is the front of shop
My face is the real shop front
My shop is the face I front
I'm real when I shop my face
(SOPHIE 2018d)

These lines allude to our world centered on social media and influencer marketing. The word “shop” when used as a noun in the first and third lines, or as an attributive noun in the second

line, refers to the digital market in which one sells a product or service—in this case, SOPHIE and her face are the products being sold. In the last line, “shop” is a reference to “Photoshopping” or digitally editing one’s appearance for social media, and it is used in this context as a verb to mean “modify.” SOPHIE lists other modifications in the verse, such as “plastic surgery” and “chemical release” (SOPHIE 2018d), which may respectively allude to facial feminization surgery and hormone replacement therapy. By saying “I’m real when I shop my face,” SOPHIE expresses that her identity is only fully represented when represented as a combination of her organic body, mind, and voice, and her technologically altered face and hormones. Understandably, as a transgender woman, these modifications, whether digital or physical, are what make SOPHIE feel more “real.”

SOPHIE also layers meaning into the word “real.” In the music video, the word is stylized in a similar way to the Coca-Cola logo (SOPHIE 2018c). This stylization creates a connection to the ideas of the digital marketplace, where branding is a form of manufactured authenticity, and the boundary between what is real and what is constructed is deliberately blurred. By linking “real” to a hyper-commercial visual language, SOPHIE points to a world in which identity is endlessly marketable, customizable, and performative—a phenomenon especially present in digital spaces where appearance can be edited, sold, and consumed. This interpretation aligns with SOPHIE’s own reflections on authenticity in relation to artificiality, particularly in the context of body and sound:

[With] things like body augmentation, you can find something that’s actually more real, which was my experience with electronic music and synthetic materials... That’s something I always want to try and communicate, deconstructing this idea of authenticity which you see so much in the music industry especially. An acoustic or electric guitar is

meant to signify authenticity, but it's like, what's the real relationship? It's a symbol more than anything (quoted in Jones 2024, 75)

This reflection is crucial to understanding how SOPHIE uses the language of “Faceshopping” to interrogate both identity and marketability. The recurring word “shop” signifies both the digital market where faces and bodies are sold as curated images and the act of editing or modifying one’s appearance to meet or resist those market demands. In this way, the face becomes both a product and a surface for experimentation.



Figure 1. “Real” stylized similarly to the Coca-Cola logo is paired with human skin (SOPHIE 2018c)

The word “real,” stylized in the music video like a corporate logo, further complicates this relationship by tying authenticity to commercial imagery. In “Faceshopping,” to “shop” the face is to claim ownership over it, and in doing so, to reshape what is “real.” Rather than rejecting synthetic or augmented forms, SOPHIE suggests that these alterations, whether through Photoshop, surgery, or hormone therapy, are not distortions of identity but are actually augmentations of one’s authentic self.

While the verse and refrain are rigid and mechanical, built from static rhythms and repetitive, chant-like vocals, the bridge offers a striking contrast. It feels softer and more organic,

with rhythmically loose, melismatic vocal lines, shimmering chords, and spacious reverb that evoke a more ethereal, fluid atmosphere (SOPHIE 2018c). In the context of transgender identity, the voices in the verse and refrain act as SOPHIE, her idealized self, while the voice in the bridge can be interpreted as her unchanged self, Xeon—It can be seen as Xeon wanting to be “fully realized as this version of herself” (Jones 2024, 83-84). The music video visually represents this change from rigidity to softness. In contrast with the smooth edges and sharp flashy visuals of the former sections, the bridge represents the voice with glittering, fluid shapes of text that drift and shimmer against the backdrop of an empty black void, which contrasts with the smooth edges and sharp flashy visuals of the previous sections (SOPHIE 2018c). The lyrics are in the second person and are presumed to be addressing the version of themselves presented in the verse and refrain. The voice in the bridge is envious of this modified version of themselves, and it yearns to be set free by it and to be reduced to “nothingness.” In the context of transgender identity, the voice representing a dysphoric pre-transition self envies a euphoric self that has gone through gender transition procedures (i.e., plastic surgery, voice manipulation, hormone replacement therapy, etc.).

So you must be the one
That I've seen in my dreams
Come on, touch me
Set my spirit free
Ooh, test me
Do you feel what I feel?
Do you see what I see?
Ooh, reduce me to nothingness
(SOPHIE 2018d)

SOPHIE uses music production and video editing to show the ways that technology is important in authentically representing her identity. Xeon and SOPHIE are inseparable. SOPHIE acknowledges that the entire mosaic of her personhood—her physical self along with her digital

self—must be represented in order to paint a full portrait of herself. By presenting her idealized self as a voice that is so digitally modified and distorted to the point of being almost completely mechanical, she represents the change that her self has gone through in relation to technology. In the bridge, a free and more natural voice soars enviously speaking to this transhuman self depicted in the verse and refrain in hope that it will make her feel “real,” by erasing the unmodified self and reducing it into “nothingness.” In doing so, SOPHIE both challenges conventional ideas of authenticity while also illustrating how technology can be a vital tool for transgender individuals to construct, inhabit, and claim the versions of themselves that feel most real.

True to her spirituality, Xeon died trying to reach the ethereal cosmos as she fell while climbing up on a roof to get a closer look at the full moon (Milton 2021). In SOPHIE’s passing, her physical death becomes less an end than a transformation, allowing her to ascend beyond the material world that so often proved hostile to her identity. SOPHIE’s legacy endures as one of the most innovative and influential musicians of the decade, her work having reshaped not only the sound of hyperpop but the broader contours of experimental pop music. Her longtime collaborator, Charli xcx, has risen into global stardom by 2024 with her album *Brat*, carrying with her the sonic textures and structural innovations first pioneered by SOPHIE, whose touch remains throughout the album’s glitching beats and alien vocal modulations. In a way, Xeon’s death liberates SOPHIE to live on in digital perpetuity, unbound by the oppressive restraints of her physical body and our tumultuous world. Within online archives, fan communities, and countless samples and remixes, SOPHIE exists as a dispersed, posthuman presence—a testament to how trans artists have continually reimagined both sound and self through technology, transcending not just genre but corporeal limitation.

Laura Les

The often squeaky, high-pitched vocals characteristic of Les's music reflect the transgender artist's use of technology to shape her gender expression and navigate gender dysphoria. In an interview with *Them*, Laura Les, known for her chipmunk-like vocals on her duo-project with Dylan Brady, 100 gecs, speaks about how the vocals in nightcore, another genre of music that utilizes high-pitch-changed vocals, influenced her musical career: "It is the only way that I can record, I can't listen to my regular voice, usually," she explains. "I knew that I liked nightcore vocals. From the first time I tried it, it sounded amazing to me. I was like, I'm never doing anything else" (quoted in Kim 2020). Laura Les's experience with vocal dysphoria has profoundly influenced her music, with 100 gecs rising to prominence during her genre's viral breakthrough and official naming as hyperpop in 2019.

Laura Les's Musical Journey Through Depression and Gender Dysphoria

While 100 gecs, one of the most recognizable artists in their scene, formed in 2015, they would not find success until 2019 after the release of their debut album, *1000 gecs*. Until then, Laura Les had been releasing music on SoundCloud and Bandcamp under the moniker osno1, where she would discuss themes of depression and gender dysphoria. We can see Les navigating these difficulties through the evolution of her music. One of her early tracks, "better get sharper; better change yr name", released in 2015, is a noisy, lo-fi, 25-minute ambient project that features unintelligible, pitched-up, slowed vocal loops and layers of samples that fade in and out to form a lush, melancholic soundscape (Les 2015). The project exists in stark contrast to the

whimsical and upbeat feels of later works in her discography, however, it can be viewed as a raw and emotional look into Les's psyche.

Les's debut solo EP, *hello kitty skates to the fuckin CEMETARY*, released in 2016, is a fifteen minute and thirty second project described by Les on SoundCloud as “a bunch of songs about dead bodies” and tags it as “emo,” “trans,” and “garbage,” which is an excellent descriptor for what sounds like taking a reflective walk on a dreary day. Backdropped by the somber sound of heavy winds, the EP includes tracks such as “ditch a body in the laundry,” featuring Dylan Brady, her collaborator on 100 gecs. The four-minute track starts with an electric guitar arpeggiating F# Maj7 (omit3), with a bass synth walking from the 8th scale degree to the 3rd and repeating, creating a contemplative mood. The first verse, performed by Brady, is about his appreciation of Les as a friend and how he will always be there to support her (Les 2016a):

You've been all on my side since forever...
 In the dark, in the cold, in the storm, in the snow
 You've been here
 I'll give you a cigarette
 We can talk about anything
 (Les 2016a)

The second verse, performed by Les with her chipmunk vocals, contains lyrics of feeling discomfort in her own body:

smell it on my clothes 'cause flesh lingers
 you know I'll ditch a body in the laundry
 hiding in my covers 'cause it haunts me
 i just held a candle to my fingers
 smell it on my clothes 'cause flesh lingers
 you know I'll ditch a body in the laundry
 hiding in my covers 'cause it haunts me
 (Les 2016a)

These insecure feelings are a common sentiment shared among transgender people who must deal with the slow process of becoming the person they truly are while navigating the dissonance between their mind, identity, and body. The second track on the EP, “gone with a knife; given all wrong,” features a soft synth piano ostinato arpeggiating a Bmaj7 - C#6 - D#m - C#6 (IV7- V6-vi-V6) chord progression that never resolves to the tonic chord of F#. That unresolving progression with a moving harmonic rhythm of two quarter notes, stepwise cyclical bass motion anchored on an A# (3rd scale degree) pedal point, a gliding guitar riff reminiscent of midwest emo music, and a howling windy ambiance create a somber and reflective backdrop for Les’s digitally manipulated vocal performance which is processed differently with each repetition of the lyrics about feeling trapped in her own skin (Les 2016b):

holding me tight, rolled around my bones
 you were holding me tight, feeling like a lie
 you were gone with a knife; given all wrong
 you said baby don't you know that i need u
 (Les 2016b)

Les’s emotional performance, coupled with dark, repeating lyrics that allude to body dysmorphia and self-harm, is an illustration of the emotional toll of being a transgender woman. The EP ends with three instrumental tracks that continue to paint the picture of Les’s overwhelming depression. Despite the bleak soundscapes and troubling lyrics throughout the album, Les ends the EP on a more positive note, titling the last track “there are a lot of things wrong but that doesn’t mean i hate the world just me maybe” (Les 2016c) which shows that she is reflecting on her emotions with an attempt to mold them towards a more positive outlook on the world.

Laura Les's 2017 EP, *i just dont wanna name it anything with “beach” in the title* (2017), differs from her previously mentioned works with its driving, trap-influenced percussion, ironic, blown-out meme samples, and deep, rumbling 808 bass. The EP's whimsical feel foreshadows the sonorities of her eventual breakthrough 2019 album, *1000 gecs*. The music again features her chipmunk vocals as she expresses her frustrations with transitioning over to more upbeat instrumentals. With tracks like “dumb pics” dealing with insecurity over seeing herself in pictures or the mirror, it can be assumed that Les is still writing about her depression, however, we can see how her perspective has developed into a more nuanced and positive direction since her aforementioned 2016 EP. On the track, “in the darkest part of day,” about feeling numb from depression, Les weaves in optimism, singing, “but at least we can still tear up at our pain” (Les 2017a). This bittersweet line shows how she is aware of her dull periods while appreciating her ability to still feel her emotions. Les shows more nuance with “how to dress as human,” where she talks about the difficulties of attaining an affirming gender presentation:

how to dress as human
 what like a skirt and.. like some heels?
 now i look stupid...
 is this how every human feels?
 better go with vans
 im never gonna pass
 i should stay home
 why did i make plans?
 drunk in the bathroom
 messing with my skirt
 ive got hair in my tights and
 nothing in my shirt
 if i paint on some lips
 will they come off with a kiss
 and tell?
 (Les 2017b)

As Queer Musicologist, Lisa Karoyln Holte, puts it, the song is “a portrait of an artist early in her transition, resourcefully utilizing digital tools to not only bridge, but also to highlight the identificatory distance between herself and her gender” (Holte 2023, 44). The lyrics, depicting anxiety around passing as a woman, coupled with chipmunk vocals that are simultaneously digital and genuinely human, “both feminize the voice and call attention to the artificiality of this process” (Holte 2023, 44). Everyone struggles when they begin to be more intentional with their image. Cisgender women may experience the awkward phase during their adolescence when they start wearing makeup, however, trans women who transition later in life have to deal with the compounding anxiety of wearing makeup for the first time and the external pressures of gender conformity. Thus, the song beautifully illustrates the transgender experience by expressing gender performativity as a process that, at times, may feel surface-level but is ultimately an affirming way of presenting oneself. *i just dont wanna name it anything with “beach” in the title* is Laura Les’s way of using irony and humor, through the uncanniness of chipmunk vocals and the memetic absurdity of exaggerated sonic references, to bring light on depression and negotiate her gender dysphoria in a way that is affirming for her.

100 gecs and Virality

Laura Les met her 100 gecs collaborator and friend, Dylan Brady, at a rodeo during high school, but the two did not begin collaborating until 2015 (Watson 2020) when they released their eponymous first EP, *100 gecs*. The pair, however, would not gain their present-day notoriety until their debut album, *1000 gecs*, was released on May 31st, 2019. The album took off in 2019, becoming The New York Times’ best album of the year (Caramanica 2019a) and eventually charting on the Billboard 200 in late August of 2020 (“100 gecs”). It initially started with the

motive of filling out a setlist for their performance at a 2019 music festival called Fire Festival, which takes place on the online video game, Minecraft.

Online music venues, which have been around for over a decade, are typically underground events that allow performers to play their music in front of a webcam on live streams, as digital characters, on platforms such as turntable.fm, or on video games like Minecraft or Roblox. Audience members are also able to participate by posting to the live chat or by “dancing” by moving around their character. Engagement from behind a screen allows participants to avoid discomfort in in-person club environments. According to one of the founders of SPF420, a live streamed online music venue started in 2012, club culture was a “big cock-fest. I’d go see bands and end up hating it; people just yelling, harassing, being super drunk. You’re always being looked at” (Martin 2014). Thus, online music venues provide spaces for those outside of extroverted, straight, cisgender, and hypermasculine identities to feel safe and comfortable while enjoying music with others.

For queer people—especially those living in places with harsh anti-LGBTQ regulations—online music venues bring the communal experience of queer expression and music events to the comfort of their own homes. Events like the Minecraft Fire Fest were unabashedly queer with the entire in-game world colorfully “emblazoned with the LGBTQ+ rainbow alongside the blues, pink and white of the transgender flag” (L. Gordon 2019). For artists across the globe, online concerts let them reach a wider audience free from the physical constraints of travel or social discomfort. Nadezhda Tolokonnikova of the Russian feminist protest band, Pussy Riot, appreciated playing at Elsewither, a 2020 music festival on the video game, Minecraft due to it providing representation for those that lack it where they call home. Tolokonnikova praised the grassroots, underground event’s “emphasis on anticapitalist, pro-LGBTQ agenda” (Prince

2020). She commended how it provided visibility and Russian representation to young queer Russians who may not live in an environment that is safe for queer expression: “I think if I was able to log onto Minecraft and see a concert with this lineup, it would probably have changed my life in a lot of ways” (quoted in Prince 2020).

Events like Elsewither were especially important during the 2020 global lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These events, though underground, were not small. Events like Minecraft Square Garden, hosted by 100 geeks, hosted lineups with names big artists, including A.G. Cook, Danny L. Harle, Dorian Electra, and the now globally famous pop-star, Charli XCX (Horn 2020). For these artists now associated with hyperpop, “the pandemic was a crucial catalyst of the scene” since “all they had to pass the time was music-making and watching Charli XCX and 100 geeks’ Minecraft Square Garden set with friends online” (Press-Reynolds 2021a). With experience cultivating community, collaborating, and performing online, 100 geeks were naturally unhindered during the isolating time of the pandemic, where other artists had to turn to “streaming as a tool to cope with loss of income and satisfy a desire for connection in a time of isolation” (Horn 2020). With so much time on their hands, most of the essential canon of the scene—and its eventual genre label, hyperpop—came from the online collaboration in the early months of the pandemic (Press-Reynolds 2021a).

100 geeks enjoyed preparing for the 2019 Minecraft festival so much that it led them to continue working until they had a whimsical 23-minute album of ten songs filled with internet references such as “message alert noises, clever puns about the music software Ableton Live, [and] nods to half-a-dozen subgenres from the last 10 years” (Enis 2019). Its obnoxiously clashing sounds of exaggerated distortion, meme sound clips, and intensely processed vocals complement the lyrics about the overstimulating experiences of living in the digital era. The

track “gec 2 Ü” contains Brady venting about the anxiety of modern-day relationships centered around our smartphones: “I don’t know how to be alone / I’m always looking at the phone / waiting for your call” (Enis 2019). The album is an illustration of Gen Z’s meme-filled internet-centered life.

The most successful track on the album, ‘money machine,’ was released as a single two days before the album’s official release. The song, “a direct result of being on the internet and the democratization that home recording and self-releasing provides” (Enis 2019) is a satirical depiction of internet rap culture with its music video starring the duo acting “as badass



Figure 2. Laura Les (left) and Dylan Brady (Right) dancing in front of trucks in their music video for “money machine” (100 geeks 2019)

rapper-types mugging for the camera as they stomp around a parking lot with some rather large trucks” (Moen 2019), gaining 20 million views on YouTube as of March 2025 (100 geeks 2019), it is the track that helped the duo gain a burst of attention in 2019 (Caramanica 2019b). The song opens with a warbly midi-guitar line playing an almost gratingly amelodic riff over a corny-sounding, syncopated midi-guitar chord stabs on one and the of two “before descending into scraping power chords that are kind of like a cross between Skrillex and SOPHIE” (Moen

2019). Throughout the song, Les and Brady rap pompously about “coming with the big trucks” and “feeling so clean like a money machine,” and mocking an unnamed “piss baby’s” arms because “they look like lil’ cigarettes” (100 gecs 2019). The music video shows the digital artists in the real world, which serves “to underline their rejection of traditional macho masculinity by deliberately displaying the out-of-place-ness of their own attempt at claiming an ultra-masculine posture” (Holte 2023, 48). The tough, overly confident, money-obsessed lyrics and music video of the track come off as ironic through Les’s chipmunk vocals and images of two bedroom producers who created the song to fill out their setlist for a music festival hosted on the online video game, Minecraft.

The success of ‘money machine’ and *1000 gecs* would lead to a cultural phenomenon that would cement the sound of its previously undefined genre of hyperpop that it occupies today. In August 2019, editors at Spotify noticed the growing popularity of *1000 gecs*, inspiring them to “look deeper and see if there were other artists making music” like it. This culminated in an algorithmically curated playlist called “HYPERPOP,” which would be the moment the music of 100 gecs and associated acts would be categorized in a genre (Dandridge-Lemco 2020). Placed into the center of the playlist’s curation, *1000 gecs*’s most popular track, ‘money machine,’ became the quintessential example of hyperpop. This also represented an important moment in Laura Les’s music career, where her vocal style would inspire many aspiring hyperpop musicians to mimic her signature vocals. Les’s “vocal production and performance was so defining for the genre... that many amateur artists have come to equate the vocals of Laura Les, and 100 Gecs more broadly, as ‘hyperpop vocals’” (Holte 2023, 47). Previously a ‘scene’ of artists playing with experimental music production styles, the Spotify playlist consolidated the uncategorized music into a ‘genre.’

What was once a boundless space of creative experimentation and boundary pushing became a “sonic palette” of set tone colors and production styles. The music included within the boundaries of the “HYPERPOP” playlist “[became] a kind of musical font that anyone [could] deploy without adding much originality” (Press-Reynolds 2021a). Glaive, one artist whose music was algorithmically put into the “HYPERPOP” playlist, explained in a *WIRED* interview that “the packaging of his organic online community felt suffocating: ‘I was making music just because that’s what I was doing… I grew up in an age where music was never presented to me as a genre’” (Barshad 2023). The algorithmic playlist also welcomed new listeners and artists to the scene who would have previously been distanced from it. As a result, those listeners were more likely to see exemplary hyperpop songs such as ‘money machine’ for its novel vocal and production style instead of understanding Les’s development as a musician, “how she struggled with voice dysphoria and subsequently recording her own voice, [and] how she found solace in the art of nightcore vocals,” an understanding that “deepens the layers of interpretation” that the artist and duo have to offer (Holte 54, 2020).

Commodification and Charli xcx

There is a trend within ethnomusicology to assume that social identities associated with genres are all-encompassing, defining characteristics of a genre. However, the experience of music is much more nuanced than that of the groups of people that a genre is meant to reflect. For example, tango and salsa are two genres that reflect the experiences of marginalized communities navigating cultural hybridity and social struggle through a shared language. It thus could be easy to describe these genres as Spanish or Latin music, but this type of description omits the more complex and nuanced histories of the two genres. Marié Abe describes how

“tango and salsa highlight how sound can encode cultural difference not as reified or monolithic, but rather as a product of ongoing, dynamic, and ceaselessly turbulent historical entanglements” (quoted in Rommen, 45). Timothy Rommen continues this by describing how “out of this constantly hybridizing context” of salsa’s formation, with sounds from multiple localities of origin, “it is no longer possible to hear salsa as Cuban or Puerto Rican. Instead, it is a musical style that emerged in and through the processes of diaspora” (Rommen, 58). These descriptions of tango and salsa, both genres born of diasporic communities, are effective in conveying how the genres reflect their origins; however, they do not take into consideration the common feelings of detachment when listening to music outside of one’s social group.

Though much focus is placed on the shared social identities in musical genres that bring people together, it is also important to consider how listeners or performers may not identify with or feel distanced from a genre’s sentiment or original identity. As Veronika Muchitsch and Ann Werner put it, the ways people or communities connect with music can take different forms, ranging from a sense of direct reflection, where listeners see aspects of themselves in the music, to more performative or “fantasized—including exoticist—relationships that involve desires for ‘others’ through music perceived as fundamentally different” (Muchitsch and Werner 2024, 3). While a genre’s sonorities may come from sensibilities associated with a certain social or cultural identity, “there is, in short, no such essential connection between a musical sound and a social identity” (Negus and Velázquez, 136). For example, many non-Spanish-speaking people enjoy salsa or tango music simply for their sonorities, thus they are distanced from the reflective identity of the genre:

The feeling of distance may well be experienced as anomie; estrangement from the tastes, norms, and values of others, a feeling of not being part of a group, of not identifying with

those who are ‘into’ the music or not sharing anything other than a love of the music with the producers of that music (Negus and Velázquez, 144).

If music is viewed as a conversation between artists and listeners, it’s essential to consider the role of artists and listeners who engage with music without being tied to specific identification labels. These individuals, however distanced, may also contribute to the musical conversation by offering unique perspectives and interpretations that broaden the conversation beyond its predefined categories; Their interactions with the music shape and influence the meaning and cultural significance of the genre in alternative ways. Though genres may be formed through sonorities that reflect certain identities, the listeners and creators of these genres may not always be attached to these sensibilities, thus, music may construct social identity in different ways based on the personal identities of those interacting with it.

In the context of hyperpop, listeners often engage with the genre without the context of its cultural meanings. Those who discovered hyperpop algorithmically, whether it be through the 2019 Spotify playlist or TikTok, do not necessarily recognize the sounds as trans-coded, instead, they are allowed to interpret the sonic palette in their own way. SOPHIE was well aware of this phenomenon, choosing to use her anonymity to encourage listeners to relate to the music in their own ways. Many (including the intended academic audience of this thesis) who are unfamiliar with hyperpop may simply view it for its gratingness, loudness, and obnoxiousness. Others may enjoy the whimsical nature of its satirical internet references, or perhaps they may simply like to dance to it. Though understanding the trans-coded origins of the sounds and aesthetics of hyperpop may help to appreciate the genre, it is not necessary to know the story behind the music to enjoy it or be inspired by it.

Thus, the bedroom producers, who raced to ride the viral wave of hyperpop during the pandemic, are still considered to be contributors to the genre. However, instead of relating to the use of voice changers to circumvent voice dysphoria, producers may use vocal processing simply because they enjoy hearing it from Laura Les. Those unaware of SOPHIE's relationship with digital embodiment may perceive the harsh, machine-like sounds used by SOPHIE for their interesting textures. Though some may say that these artists are inauthentic since they do not relate to the genre as deeply, SOPHIE problematized "authenticity" by accepting that we live in a commercialized world—one where it is difficult to separate people from the products they consume. A piece of music written by a cisgender person who is inspired by the sonic palette of hyperpop can still be as deeply part of the genre as one written by a trans person.

However, it remains valid to consider that a genre can be appropriated. Steven Feld, in his essay "A Sweet Lullaby for World Music," describes that as a consequence of globalization, world music has been commercialized for the financial gain of Western musicians who are commended for their adventurous sampling of exotic "raw material" (Feld 2000, 166). Feld presents a woman from the Solomon Islands named Afunakwa, who sang a lullaby called "Rorogwela" that was recorded by ethnomusicologist Hugo Zemp. "Rorogwela" would go on to be sampled by a French music project called Deep Forest without credit (Feld 2000, 154-155). Feld argues that "from the initial standpoint of the sampler, Afunakwa is not a person but a sound" (Feld 2000, 165). The use of the word "sound" instead of "music" is notable here because in the liner notes to *Boheme*, Deep Forest's Grammy award-winning CD, they would describe their "sampling of 'native melodies' as the use of 'raw material'" (Feld 2000, 155). Referring to a group of people's music as "raw material" both dehumanizes the groups of people involved and also evokes the notion that the music is unrefined unless improved by a Western musician.

Whereas Laura Les refuses to record herself in a song without nightcore vocals in order to avoid gender dysphoria, cisgender artists may simply be exoticizing the sounds that transgender artists use to represent their digital embodiments. By disengaging with the identities at the origin of the genre, ‘copycat’ artists may contribute to a dilution of the music’s original transhuman sentiments into mere sounds.

Spotify and Hyperpop’s Aesthetic Lock-in

The influx of distanced creators who obscure transgender and queer voices in the genre of hyperpop can be compared to the process of gentrification. In her book, *The Gentrification of the Internet*, digital cultures researcher Jessa Lingel details how concepts of gentrification can be applied to internet cultures. She describes gentrification on the internet as a process that involves displacement, isolation, and commercialization (Lingel 2021, 15). Within Lingel’s framework, Displacement refers to how original users or communities are pushed out of online spaces as those spaces become more popular or controlled by larger, often corporate, interests, with the people who helped build and shape the space finding themselves excluded. Isolation happens when these once vibrant, connected communities lose their sense of closeness. As more outsiders arrive or the platform’s priorities shift, users feel increasingly cut off from each other and from the culture they helped create. Commercialization is the process of turning these online spaces into profit-driven environments. Platforms start prioritizing advertisers, influencers, and brand partnerships over the needs of everyday users, shifting the focus from community to consumption.

In terms of processes of digital gentrification, the commercialization of hyperpop is clear: A former strategy manager at SoundCloud said that “the platform saw a quantifiable spike

in March and April 2020 from new creators,” many of whom were making hyperpop music (Barshad 2023). The rush to claim the shiny new Spotify-created label of hyperpop led to a genre oversaturated with creators only interested in it for capital gain. On a Zoom interview with *WIRED*, Hyperpop artist Glaive expressed his belief that the packaging of the genre into a playlist inherently led to “bad music” catered to the TikTok and Spotify algorithm with the intent of monetary success—A motivation for music making that he considers a “cardinal sin” (Barshad 2023). Once a scene that “resisted” classification, the genre label ‘hyperpop’ has locked down the explorative music scene of Laura Les’s who believes that once something has been placed in a definitive box, “it’s time to move on and do something else” (quoted in Dandridge-Lemco 2020). Quinn, another transgender hyperpop artist, describes in an interview with *Business Insider* that “hyperpop was once defined by its community spirit and collaborative ethos,” but the commercialization effect of the 2019 Spotify playlist caused “in-fighting and the biggest artists signing to major labels while leaving others behind.” These events, Quinn said, are what led the scene to “crumble” (quoted in Press-Reynolds 2021b). Transgender hyperpop artist, Underscores, further expands on this negative sentiment towards commercialization, expressing in a 2023 *NME* interview that she believed hyperpop is “officially dead” with a lot of members in the community “trying to figure out where [to] go next.” She said that what she liked most about hyperpop was “how important it was for a lot of queer music,” but that it always sounded like 2020 (quoted in Shutler 2023). In terms of the digital gentrification of the hyperpop milieu, the commercialization of the genre, due to the 2019 Spotify playlist, and the rush of SoundCloud producers seeking TikTok fame and monetary gain, has started the process of displacement and eventual isolation of the genre’s original artists. Underscore’s reflection concisely details how algorithmic commercialization has frozen the sonic palette of hyperpop within the sounds of the

2020 era as well as Lindel's other two frameworks; the influx of new creators in the queer and transgender space of hyperpop has isolated the original creators subsequently displacing these artists by leading them to search for new creative spaces.

Lingel acknowledges big tech's tendencies to alienate minority communities, which include "people of color, as well as women, people with disabilities, and LGBTQ people" (Lingel 2021, 3). The huge number of bedroom producers that came to the genre, who mostly reproduce the 2020 sounds centered around 100 gecs, have contributed to a dilution of the meaning of the experimental sonic landscape. What was once an underground scene that was an affirming space and place of expression for queer and transgender artists is now a space where transgender voices are in the minority. Though Laura Les's voice through 100 gecs is loudly centered within the hyperpop canon, transness may no longer be the main focus of the genre. The identity of the genre has shifted due to the influx of new artists who are distanced from the original sentiments behind its sonorities and aesthetics.

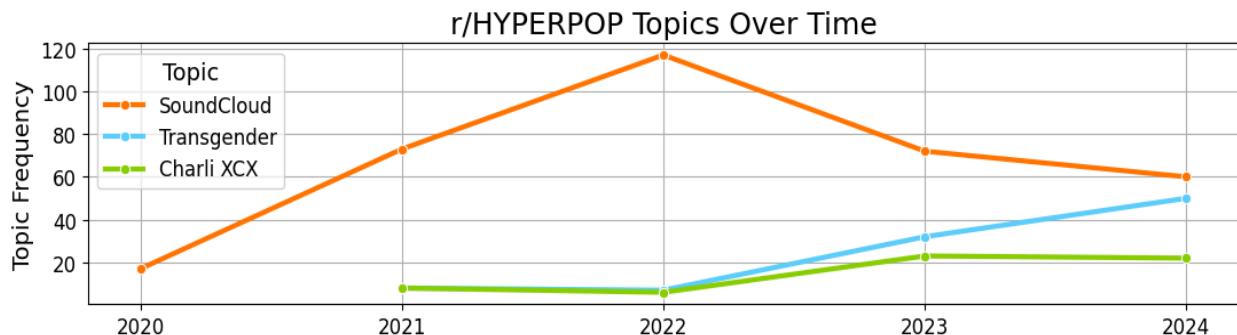


Figure 3. The topic frequency over time of various topics on the hyperpop subreddit shows that posts on the topic of SoundCloud grew in frequency at the beginning of the pandemic until 2022, at which point the topic's popularity began to decrease over time (Pushshift.io).

Charli xcx

Charli xcx is a cisgender singer who has held roles of both the face of the genre and as a paradigm-shifting pop star. The British artist initially found international mainstream success in the early 2010s, most notably through features on two songs written by other artists. The first, “I Love It,” written by Swedish duo Icona Pop in 2013, with its one billion streams on Spotify, is one of the dance-pop anthems of the early 2010s with its four-to-the-floor kicks, hi-hats on the upbeats, and snare hits on two and four. Sweeping synths, and a breakdown lead to a drop to the chorus containing highly repetitive lyrics about being absolutely and cathartically over a past romantic partner: “I got this feeling on the summer day when you were gone / I crashed my car into the bridge, I watched, I let it burn / I threw your shit into a bag and pushed it down the stairs” (Icona Pop and Charli xcx 2013). The second song that helped skyrocket Charli’s success is Iggy Azalea’s 2014 rap song, “Fancy.” Its production is simplistic, but effective, with percussive snaps, “hey” samples, and a kick drum driven by a pluck bass synth ostinato that outlines a C minor chord over which Charli xcx sings about being on the verge of fame and fortune, and traveling the world extravagantly (Azalea and Charli xcx 2014).

Charli’s first solo hit, “Boom Clap,” off of her second studio album, *Sucker*, followed shortly after the success of the two aforementioned features. Released initially in June 2014, as part of the soundtrack for the film, *The Fault in Our Stars*, the “radio-ready synth-pop song” (Murphy 2021) features a tasteful layering of synth bass, soft pads, and swelling saw chords that outline a four-chord progression of IV-V-I-vi in E major. As with other pop songs, the most prominently featured part of the track is Charli’s voice singing about falling in love: “Boom clap, the sound of my heart / The beat goes on and on and on and on and...” The percussion matches

the lyrics appropriately with the kick drum and snare following the lyrics “boom” and “clap” respectively (Charli xcx 2014).

Charli first stepped into the world of hyperpop when she collaborated with SOPHIE on her 2016 project, *Vroom Vroom EP*. SOPHIE’s presence on the record is immediately noticeable from the first second of the title track, ‘Vroom Vroom.’ The track starts with Charli repeating “let’s ride” overtop an intense, dark-sounding pluck synth bassline, which is then joined by gridlocked quarter note clap samples that all ramp up into three loud kick drum hits and a shocked gasp (Charli xcx 2016). The first verse gives context to the new Charli xcx with her fervidly rapping about her lavish popstar lifestyle:

Lavender Lamborghini, roll up in a blue bikini
 Bitches on the beaches, lookin' super cute and freaky
 All my friends are princesses, we keep it whipped and creamy
 Ice cubes on our tongues because we like to keep it freezy
 (Charli xcx 2016).

This brash tone marks a stark departure from Charli xcx’s earlier, polished pop persona, established through mainstream hits such as “I Love It,” “Fancy,” and “Boom Clap.”

Her introduction to the hyperpop milieu begins with a striking imperative: “let’s ride.” The question naturally follows—where is she going? As Sam Murphy of *Junkee* succinctly puts it: “It was difficult for many to see where Charli and SOPHIE were going … Here was a popstar coming off the back of her most commercially successful album *Sucker*, deliberately delivering a project that radio would never have touched” (Murphy 2021). While the reception of the album received mixed reception in 2016, Charli never strayed from this new trajectory which she had been anticipating throughout her career—“All my life, I’ve been waitin’ for a good time, a good time / Let me ride” she sings in the pre-chorus (Charli xcx 2016).

As Josh Hicks puts it in Pulp, this partnership marked a significant shift in Charli's artistic identity, as she moved away from her earlier pop-rock background and embraced the hyper-stylized, synthetic aesthetics of hyperpop. SOPHIE's influence extended beyond Charli's work, leaving a mark on the wider alternative pop landscape and shaping the sound of artists experimenting with digital textures and genre-bending production. Hicks highlights examples such as Charli's 2020 album, *how i'm feeling now*, which stands as one of her most adventurous projects in which she blends warped, auto-tuned vocals with glitchy synth lines and deconstructed trap beats. The track 'pink diamond' most exemplifies this new sound, layering harsh, metallic crashes with fragmented percussion to mirror lyrics about digital nightlife and video-chat parties. Its artificial, mechanical production recalls SOPHIE's "HARD," a track built around elastic, rubbery synths, pounding bass, and shimmering xylophone tones—a testament, Hicks argues, to the producer's lasting influence on both Charli and the hyperpop genre as a whole (Hicks 2024).

Charli continued collaborating with SOPHIE and PC Music, becoming a prominent figure of the burgeoning genre of hyperpop. She immediately doubled down on her new sound with her first 2017 album, *Number 1 Angel* (Charli xcx 2017a), and she articulated her ambition to redefine pop music through her second 2017 album, aptly titled *Pop 2* (Charli xcx 2017b). While SOPHIE and PC Music had been gathering an audience before her *Vroom Vroom EP*, the boundary-pushing, experimental pop music they were creating was too bizarre and foreign for mainstream audiences. Therefore, Charli's attachment to the genre was significant because "it gave the music a [recognizable] face. It was a sign that this new sound was leaning outside of its cult internet status and striving for a wider reach" (Murphy 2021). Charli's face would eventually

become incredibly recognizable during the summer of 2024 with the immense success of her album, *Brat*.

Problematizing Brat Girl Summer



Figure 4. Album cover of *Brat* (Charli XCX 2024a)

As activist Jim Poe puts it, when people mention *Brat*, it usually means one of two things: First, the album itself—a career-defining, culture-shifting record. Second, Brat Summer, characterized by the album's ironically minimalistic snot green album cover with the word 'brat' written in a blurry low-resolution font, which led to the wave of lime-green memes, hyper-online references, and anthems for party girls of all genders. For Generation Z, the summer of 2024 was about reckless nights, rough mornings, drugs, breakdowns, and the weird, aching confusion of trying to be a girl in a world that feels like it's falling apart (Poe 2024). Despite the word 'brat' usually evoking feelings of adolescent angst, "brat summer [was] all about accepting your imperfections while embracing chaos" (Caldwell 2024). Brat Summer was the most successful point of Charli XCX's entire career. Six of her songs ("360," "Apple," "Guess featuring billie eilish," "Sympathy is a knife," "Girl, so confusing featuring lorde," and "Talk talk featuring troye sivan") reached the Billboard top 100 in 2024, with "360" and "Apple" both charting for

20 weeks. The number of users in her Reddit community exploded, jumping from around 5,000 in 2023 to nearly 60,000 in 2024 (“Charli xcx”). The viral popularity of the album propelled Charli into becoming one of the most widely known pop stars in the world, coinciding with the first time a hyperpop artist reached massive mainstream success.

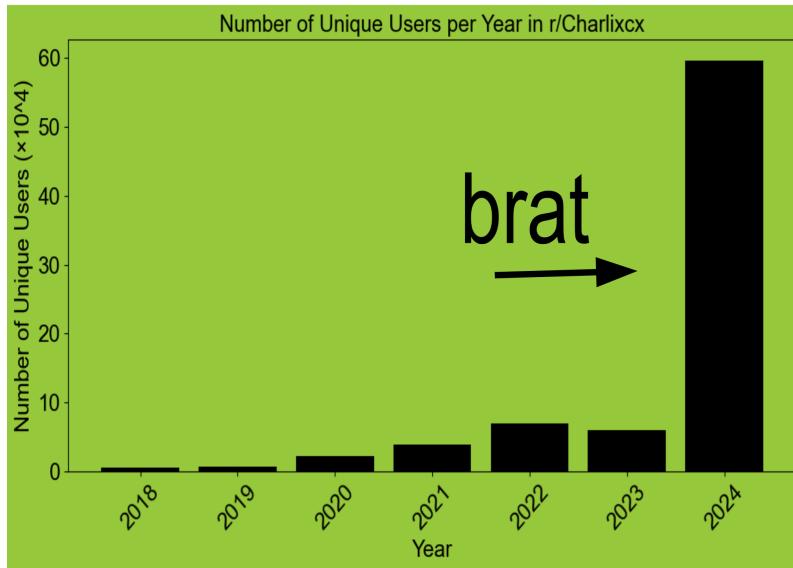


Figure 5. Number of unique commenters on Charli’s Subreddit per year (Pushshift.io)

However, the relentlessly fun, lime-green veneer of Brat Summer could not last forever. What was initially a viral, chaotic celebration of self-indulgence and imperfection began to feel co-opted by political posturing. The carefree tone of Brat Summer came on July 22, 2024, when Charli infamously tweeted “kamala IS brat” in response to President Joe Biden stepping down as the democratic nominee in favor of Vice President Kamala Harris in the 2024 presidential election(Clarke-Billings 2024). Hours after the tweet, Kamala Harris’s campaign team raced to capitalize on Brat Summer’s virality by changing its Twitter banner to the lime green aesthetic of *Brat*’s album cover as a way to cater towards Generation Z. The campaign also began reposting memes and TikToks with references to the album (Clarke-Billings 2024). When official entities

such as corporate brands or politicians begin co-opting viral internet memes for marketing purposes, the memes lose their grassroots authenticity. Brat Summer's political co-opting mirrors the corporatization and subsequent ending of its 2019 predecessor, 'Hot Girl Summer' (Orlofsky 2019). A *Pitchfork* article titled, "Brat Summer is Dead, Long Live Brat Summer," said, "people who were absolutely not having a Brat Summer—CNN reporter Jake Tapper, Minnesota governor Tim Walz—began to pile atop an already fragile meme" (A. Gordon 2024). Besides the formalization and politicization of a trend rooted in unabashedly messy party culture, others, such as activist Jim Poe, criticized the tweet in a social justice context: "No, Kamala is not Brat—she's a 59-year-old career politician who's helping run an empire." Poe cites Harris's "history as a district attorney, marked by the criminalization of parents of truant children and the denial of gender-affirming care to a trans inmate," as standing in "direct contradiction to the ethos of Charli's fanbase," who are a community known to be largely occupied by queer and transgender people (Poe 2024).

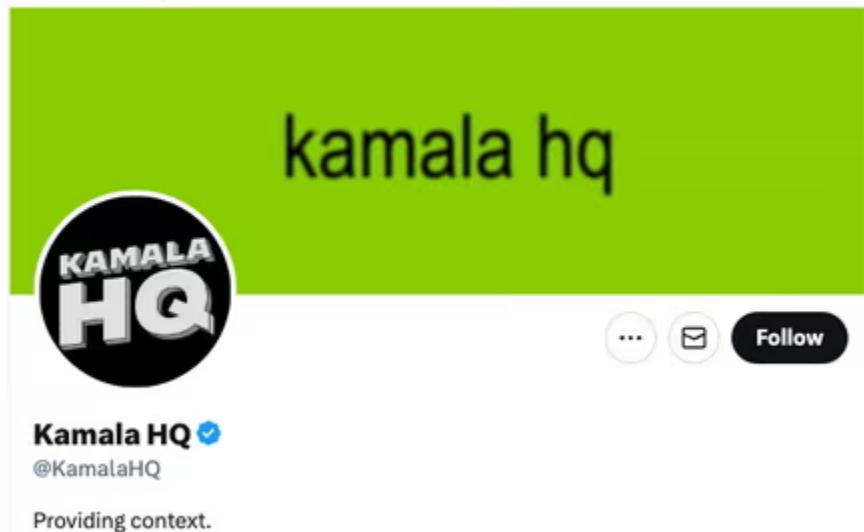


Figure 6. Kamala Harris's presidential campaign Twitter profile during the 2024 election draws on the aesthetics of Brat Summer (Demopoulos 2024).

Susan Stryker, a transgender American Historian, illustrates the intersectional nature of transgender activism. In her book, *Transgender History*, dedicated to the “to the trans people, and our friends and allies living today, who continue to make history by advancing the cause of social justice” (Stryker 2017, 6), Stryker writes about the layers of oppression that create the need for trans liberation movements to this day:

Discriminatory policing practices that target members of minority communities, urban land-use policies that benefit cultural elites and displace poor people, the unsettling domestic consequences of US foreign wars, access to health care, civil rights activism aiming to expand individual liberties and social tolerance on matters of sexuality and gender, and political coalition building around the structural injustices that affect many different communities. (Stryker 2017, 109)

The interconnectedness of systems of oppression against different minority groups thus links the struggle for trans liberation with feminist liberation, black liberation, and anti-colonial liberation.

Queer Lebanese writer and activist, Christina Hajjar, observes that both the trans youth movements and Palestinian movements are about the right to live either in their own bodies or in their own homes: “Both of these movements advocate for agency, liberation, and basic human rights that should not be contested” (Hajjar 2024). Thus, when Charli xcx, a cisgender representative of the transgender creative sanctuary of hyperpop, endorses Kamala Harris—a career politician and former prosecutor who spent her Vice Presidency and presidential campaign ignoring pro-palestine protesters’ requests for divestment and ceasefire in Gaza (Shalal and Singh 2024; Diaz 2024)—she betrays the community whose shoulders she stands on by endorsing an imperialist selectivity of who deserves the right for agency and life.

Charli xcx is a cisgender party girl, an identity that, in nature, exists in contrast with the many transgender artists in the community who prefer online music venues. Considered a new one of “pop’s it-girls” (Spanos 2024), her status as the face of hyperpop fades as the prefix ‘hyper–’ is omitted from discussions of her pop success. Charli began distancing herself from the genre label as early as August 2021 when she posted “rip hyperpop? Discuss:” on Twitter (Charli xcx 2022). and opened up a discussion on a now-deleted Instagram post in which she questions the term for its broad coverage of vastly different types of experimental music while also questioning if the genre really ever existed (u/N00B5L4YER, 2021). Thus, when she released *Brat* in 2024, it makes sense that it would be branded under the broader category of pop instead of the hyperpop label that she had contentions with.



Figure 7. Charli’s prompts in her August 8, 2021, Instagram posts questioning the term ‘hyperpop’ (u/N00B5L4YER, 2021)

As Charli re-enters the mainstream—a space where she has not held as much cultural prominence since her 2014 “Boom Clap” era—she carries with her the sounds and aesthetics shaped by transgender hyperpop artists like SOPHIE and Laura Les. While some of her peers

have remained in more underground circles, this shift seems less like a deliberate sidelining but more like a reflection of the industry's selective embrace of certain figures. Charli herself has consistently acknowledged those who have shaped her work, most poignantly on the ninth track of *Brat*, "So I," where she reflects on her relationship with the late SOPHIE:

Wish I'd tried to pull you closer
 You pushed me hard, made me focus
 Your words, brutal, loving, truthful
 (Charli xcx 2024b).

While she pays respects where they are due, her gratitude falls on deaf ears as the 'pop it-girl' inherently caters more to the audience of mainstream pop who are unaware of SOPHIE's influence throughout Charli's sonorities.

Charli xcx deeply cares for SOPHIE, and is deeply saddened by the artist's tragic death in early 2021. At a concert in Cologne in 2022, Charli broke down in tears while explaining to her audience that it makes her very emotional at concerts when they heckle her to play "Taxi," an unreleased track that she worked on with SOPHIE before her passing: "That was a song that we loved together, and it was a song that never got to have the life that it was supposed to have." (quoted in Wongo 2022). Three years later at a Chicago concert in April 29, 2025, a TikTok video from a fan caught a moment where Charli spotted a fan allegedly holding a disrespectful sign requesting her to play "Taxi" during the opening of "So I" and, without stopping the song or speaking into the microphone, leaned in to scold them asking, "Isn't this song enough?" (leslie.xoxu 2025). Moments like these reveal not a callousness on Charli's part, but the complex and often uncomfortable dynamics between artists and fandom in a digital age where audiences have less of an understanding of the personal artistic expressions they consume.

Brat's overwhelming mainstream success has reignited the same digital gentrification patterns of commodification, displacement, and isolation as the genre's initial popularization caused by algorithmic trends in 2019 and during the pandemic. As Charli xcx's music finds a new level of visibility, the aesthetics and sonic palette originally cultivated by queer, trans, and experimental artists risk becoming flattened into a marketable trend, stripped of the context and communities that gave them meaning. While Charli herself has paid tribute to figures like SOPHIE and continues to grieve their loss, the structures of the market-centered mainstream music industry remain indifferent to these histories.

However, SOPHIE viewed mainstream commodification in a more positive light: When a McDonald's web commercial used a clip of SOPHIE's "Lemonade" to sell lemonade, it sparked immediate backlash from fans who saw the commodification as a betrayal of the track's experimental roots. Yet SOPHIE herself rejected this framing, viewing the crossover as an opportunity rather than a compromise. "People were furious," she recalled, "but I don't think that compromises anything in the music. If it's used in that context, it doesn't change my intention of making it" (quoted in Geffen 2017). For SOPHIE, the friction between avant-garde expression and mass-market circulation was not necessarily destructive, but potentially constructive. She argued that if a piece of music could function simultaneously as personal, experimental art and as a vehicle within mainstream consumer culture, it could expose new audiences to radical aesthetics in otherwise inaccessible spaces. "An experimental idea doesn't have to be separated from a mainstream context," she insisted. "The really exciting thing is where those two things are together. That's where you can get real change" (quoted in Geffen 2017). This ethos underscores SOPHIE's larger philosophy: that subversion and visibility need not be mutually

exclusive, and that navigating the mainstream might itself be a kind of boundary-pushing gesture.

SOPHIE's acceptance of the authenticity of commodification offers an optimistic light to the dilution of the transgender influences on hyperpop music. Though its history and identity may be lost, the permeation of hyperpop's sounds into the mainstream pop soundscape is an opportunity for transgender voices and sentiments to be heard by a wider audience. Though artists like Charli XCX may thanklessly try to maintain the values of the genre, mainstream audiences are not obligated to understand rich meanings embedded in the sonorities. However, the simple fact that transgender voices are being heard—even if not understood or acknowledged—is a step towards a future where the sounds that resonate with transgender artists may be palatable in mainstream pop contexts and hopefully a step towards a future of acceptance of transgender artists outside of underground spaces.

Conclusion

The journey of hyperpop's sounds from online transgender artistic expression to overwhelming mainstream success reveals how virality or popularization may affect musical genres by disconnecting listeners from the identities of the originators of the genre's sounds. As the genre's experimental textures and digital aesthetics moved from insular online communities into viral playlists and mainstream pop, the connection to its transgender roots has often been diluted or erased. Rather than viewing this solely as a loss, the philosophies from figures like the late SOPHIE offer a more complex perspective, accepting commodification as an inevitable byproduct of visibility and a potential avenue for broader cultural presence. While the rich histories and personal narratives, like that of Laura Les's, embedded in hyperpop's sonorities

may be overlooked by casual listeners, their diffusion into mainstream contexts allows transgender voices to subtly permeate cultural soundscapes. Artists like Charli XCX, though not always explicitly framed within hyperpop, carry forward some of the genre's values, blurring the boundaries between underground authenticity and commercial pop. Even if audiences do not fully recognize or engage with the histories behind these sounds, their very presence signals a shift in what is considered palatable and possible within mainstream pop. In this way, hyperpop's trajectory highlights both the costs and potentials of cultural visibility, suggesting a future where transgender artists might no longer need to exist solely in underground spaces to be heard.

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