Critical Appraisal:

Paper Title:

'Youth Culture and the Making of the Post-Fordist Economy: Dance Music in Contemporary Britain' – Smith & Maughan (1998), Journal of Youth Studies.

Following a period of rapid expansion in the 1990s (Murphy & Loben, 2021; Hesmondhalgh, 1998), dance music [1] was the "dominant form" of periodical UK youth culture (Smith & Maughan, 1998: 211); attracting sociological/geographical research on the interplay between youth consumption of dance music, oppressive social structures *[capitalism, state policing inter alia]* and the 'rave' as a symbolic space of postmodern escapism (Negus, 2011 *[1992]*; Goodwin, 1991; Redhead, 1993). Despite recognising the importance of prior research, Smith & Maughan's (1998) paper abductively questions the homogenous methodological paradigms which overlook the post-Fordist socio-cultural economies of individual actors within the dance scene. Characteristic of a wider movement from Marxist/collectivist structuralism to interpretivist ontologies (Jessop, 1996; Weber, 1981), the paper highlights the relationally independent experiences and economic engagements of young people; recognising their position as individual creators of cultural socio-economic phenomena. This critical appraisal explores the paper chronologically, beginning with analysis of the research questions and methods. Subsequently, the sections of analysis are explored, relating all sections to the internal validity, dependability, and transparency of the methodology.

Discussion of research questions is highly implicit, vastly different from the research-orientated papers in the same Youth Studies volume [2]. The research 'question' is argumentative, stating that "young people *are* playing key roles in the formation of an emerging post-Fordist economy" (211). Stylistically, prioritising *thesis statements* over *research questions* represents the radical nature of the paper, extending methodologies beyond largely structuralist understandings. Subsequent citing papers recognise this, with Bennett (2018: 143) stating that "Smith and Maughan's argument *[still]* rings true for a wide range of musical genres", highlighting how such radical research caused a wider paradigm shift. Therefore, the implied research question is not a negative feature of the research design. Instead, the thesis statement still highlights the objects/logics of investigation (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013), supported by insight into the abductive "feelings" (Reichertz, 2017) which inspired the research project *in prima instantia* (Holmes, 2020). Holistically, the presence of thesis statements synoptically links the paper together by providing a homogenous and understandable argument throughout, evidenced by data extracted from interviews.

Interviews were conducted with over 50 'young' people from the same suburb, south-west of London. Despite minor clarification over the term 'young' [3], no further explanation of method or sample is present. Critically, lack of information over *[interview]* methods raises questions over potential researcher reactivity and dependability. Without clarification, I assume the

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[1] Periodically dominated by House, Jungle, Drum & Bass, Techno & Happy Hardcore *[sub-]*genres.
[2] See: Flum (1998) & Shek (1998).
[3] Qualified as "late teens or early twenties *[with]* some in their early thirties" (226) in the footnotes.

interviews to be semi-structured, evidenced by the statement "Interviewer: *[t]*hat's a negative thing then?" (218). Omitting an in-depth methodology paper may be representative of the quasi-standardised interview practices in the 1990s [4](Peneff, 1988; Suchman & Jordan, 1990), however, excluding all information not only raises questions of transparency and reliability, but also fails to recognise the "social contexts of the interview process*[es]*" (Warren, 2002: 10). Observing the wider contexts of interviews can positively evidence researcher reactivity, additionally producing richer data sets for later analysis. Constructively, outlining interview methods and potential sources of bias can improve the paper's dependability and construct validity, especially if, periodically experimental, intensive or *in situ* methods are used (Sayer & Morgan, 1985; Dubé et al., 2014).

Following the thesis statement, the paper states that "*[y]*oung people…should not just be seen as a group…but as individuals and members of collectives" (212). Consequently, the co-action of qualitative methods and a comparatively small sample size *[Flum, 1998; Shek, 1998]* reassert the paper's argument by synthesising rich data sets which prioritise casual inferences and high internal validity (Elman et al., 2016). This does not mean that external validity was ignored (Williams, 2000), with Smith & Maughan's conclusions retroactively transposed to elucidate the economies of other *[sub-]*cultural groups (Bennett, 2018; Wilson & Atkinson, 2005). However, more information on, presumably snowball, sampling techniques would reinforce their post-Fordist argument of interconnected individuals. Whilst recognising confidentiality ethics, emphasising the social links between interviewees would meta-evidence the underlying social structures they are arguing for, additionally supplementing their sub-argument of local spatialities of music (Taylor, 2023) [5]. Consequently, the lack of information on method and sample is not wholly negative, especially given more practical concerns of journal word limits and audience comprehension. Nevertheless, the inclusion of interview techniques and sampling methods would enhance their argument, increasing the transparency and dependability of subsequent conclusions.

Primary data is first presented when arguing for 'A State of Independents' by utilising long participant excerpts. The translation from a largely quantitative literature review-cum-critical analysis to qualitative data presentation reflects the thesis statement, as prioritising individuality allows for relational knowledges that are more reflective of the true nature of youth cultural economies. This is demonstrated through data from only 5/50 *[10%]* of participants, with in-depth case studies demonstrating the independent nature of the scene and methodological focus on praxis. However, there may be practical concerns of participant articulation and eloquence meaning that only the most understandable participants were included (Wilce, 2003; Lunn, 2014 [6]). Recognising the interplay between rich qualitative excerpts and their thesis statement would strengthen their argument, as issues of eloquence can explain away deliberate choices with facile reasoning. Moreover, participant discussion of black economies and unregulated income streams highlights the futility of prior positivist cultural research, as accurate quantitative data would be near-impossible to synthesise. Thus,

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[4] Marked by semi-structured interviews, audio *[tape]* recording and formalised topographical locations (*ibid.*)
[5] Including greater participant information would also highlight the inherent hierarchy which exists in UK dance music (Fraser, 2012; Fraser & Ettinger, 2008), allowing for more detailed exploration of various aberrant cases and intersectionalities; explored in studies by Lena, (2012) and Pini (2001).
[6] Despite these references exploring studies in the 'global south', their discussion of participant eloquence and competency is highly relevant to all qualitative studies; especially those based on interviews/focus groups.

developing qualitative methodological conclusions on the independent nature of UK dance music increases dependability and internal validity, as quantitative studies are unable to obtain accurate economic data.

The subsequent sections on 'DJ Culture' and 'Technology' are weaker than the notion of independent economies given disparities in supporting data. Vastly more data is present for the musical technology section compared to the DJ section, indicating that more producers were interviewed than DJs. This is surprising as, within UK dance music, most music producers also DJ to diversify their income streams (Murphy & Loben, 2022; Hesmondhalgh, 1998). To bolster their argument, unreferenced and uncontextualized quasi-autoethnographic data is used, such as the discussion of the "Fatcat Records" clientele in London (223) [7], thus questioning the data's dependability and transparency. To improve this, positionally reflexive recognition of the sample representativity and lack of academic literature on the topic would help justify their inclusion of quasi-autoethnographic data. Conversely, the technology section is thoroughly supported by participant data, convincingly elucidating "the complex relationship between the technology and *[musical]* aesthetic" (224). However, the section fails to examine the social relationships between producer and technology, with studies citing how record shops and magazines periodically facilitated the dissemination of information between *[sub-]*cultural actors (Bennett & Peterson, 2004; Murphy & Loben, 2021). Therefore, the latter sections still evidence the thesis statement, yet they are weaker than the former given a lack of participant evidence and unexplored dialectics.

In conclusion, Smith & Maughan's paper successfully argues for their thesis statement despite stylistic omissions from their methodology. Their focus on relational and representative data disputes the periodically standardised cultural research methodology, thus providing context as to why research questions and methods were omitted in favour of argumentative structures [8]. However, questions remain over the research's dependability, internal validity and transparency with constructive suggestions centring around linking methodological explanations to the argument at the paper's nexus. After a strong critical literature review, the data presentation-cum-analysis sections argue for their thesis statement to varying degrees. Recognition of their methodological choices would further strengthen their 'State of Independents' section, whilst the following analysis of 'DJ Culture' and 'Technology' ideally require further reflexive methodological justification given the presence of quasi-autoethnographic data and unexplored phenomena respectively. Nevertheless, the paper argues for and utilises a qualitative methodology which has diversified cultural analysis across numerous disciplines and populations.

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[7] Also seen in the "problem of knowledge" (223) between consumers and DJs.

[8] Especially when considering more facile restrictions such as word count. Words are used to construct their argument, rather than outline their method to provide a more homogenous paper.

Appendix:

Litmaps Citing/Cited By Visualisation:
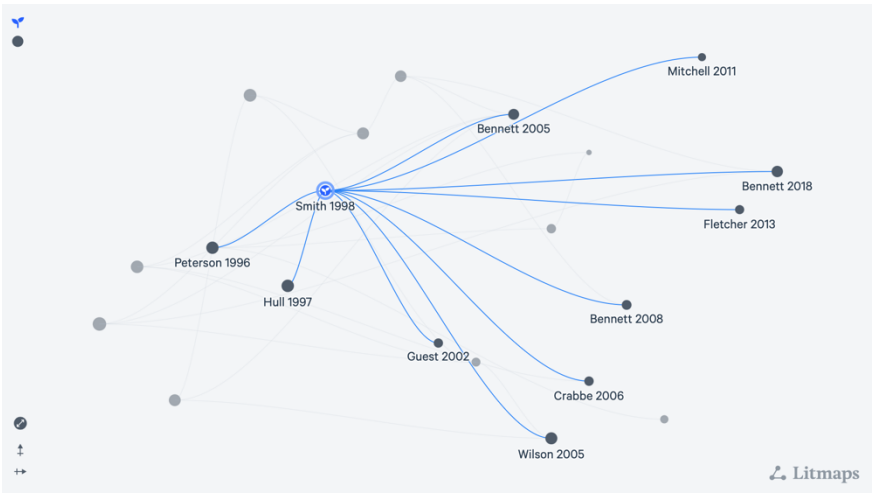
Participant Data Table:

Participant Name:	Times Evidenced:	Percentage (3 s.f.):
Black	1	8.33
Brian	2	16.7
Jim	4	33.3
Martin	1	8.33
Max	4	33.3
5	*12*	*100%*

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