

# The Influence of Post-Internet on the Aesthetics of Vaporwave

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While the cultural phenomenon known as vaporwave is commonly traced back to 2009, its defining characteristics remain a subject of ongoing debate within both popular culture and academic circles. Various perspectives categorize it as a microgenre of electronic music, a meme, an art movement, a critique of capitalism, or even a manifestation of pure aesthetics. As such, vaporwave remains a complex and multifaceted topic for research.

In this paper, I explore the influence of post-internet culture on the formation of vaporwave and its aesthetics by analyzing the methods and strategies used to create what is recognized as vaporwave, rather than attempting to label or define it precisely. As a further step in this inquiry, I document an attempt to apply these methods and strategies, resulting in the publication of four music albums. This practice-based approach to analyzing vaporwave through creation and publication helps to better understand some core qualities and aesthetics of this art movement.

*Reikšminiai žodžiai:* vaporwave, post-internet, aesthetics, plunderphonics, practice-based research.

## Introduction

In the current globally connected and turbulent times, which acknowledge the scepticism and relativism of postmodern thought, creators not only often engage in the reevaluation and “incredulity towards meta-narratives”<sup>1</sup> but also seek to move beyond it by embracing sincerity and hope. Metamodernism, therefore, encompasses both irony and a longing for authenticity, oscillating between sincerity and irony, naivety and know-ingness. Despite these times being “[...] characterized by the oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment,”<sup>2</sup> we can observe a substantial decline in the number of art movements compared to the 20th century. However, vaporwave continues to unify a massive group of artists worldwide. I aim to understand what makes it stand out and what qualities encourage artists to collaborate or choose similar aesthetics in their practice.

To understand how the aesthetics of vaporwave formed, we must explore not only the boundaries of vaporwave but also the delimitations of post-internet. I argue that the post-internet era played a crucial role in shaping what is known as vaporwave. To better understand this influence, we can analyze a similar approach to the methods of vaporwave used before the internet permeated culture, exemplified by the creative practice of composer John Oswald. Lastly, we can examine the methods of creating vaporwave using a practice-based approach by exploring the project *One Person And*, which emerged from a series of international workshops aimed at working as a group to create and publish a vaporwave album in under a week. This exploration should provide insights into the aesthetics of vaporwave and the influence of post-internet on its formation and dissemination.

## Finding the common denominators of *vaporwave*

To define the context for this inquiry into vaporwave aesthetics and its relation to post-internet, we must lay the foundation by discussing the terms themselves. Therefore, let us start with vaporwave.

- 1 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 17.
- 2 Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, “Notes on Metamodernism,” *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 2:1 (2010): 5677.

Metaphorically speaking, vaporwave can be described as “the muzak that plays in an elevator in a mall in a futuristic Japanese cyberpunk dystopia”<sup>3</sup> or perceived as an “internet-based subculture whose members consider themselves the digital-age version of punk rockers.”<sup>4</sup> Despite these evocative descriptions, what precise definitions and distinct qualities could describe it? Often, vaporwave is characterized as a microgenre of electronic music, a meme, an art movement, a critique of capitalism, or a form of aesthetics. In this paper, I focus on the art movement aspect of vaporwave and seek to identify the common denominators that unify its various sub-genres.

Despite solidifying around 2011, with roots tracing back to 2009, vaporwave remains a diverse cultural phenomenon in 2024. It has branched into sub-genres like *future funk*, *eccejams*, *mallsoft*, *vaportrap*, *vapornoise*, and *hardvapour*,<sup>5</sup> each varying based on the samples used and the methods to rework them. However, certain shared qualities unite these sub-genres under the umbrella of vaporwave. To distil these features, let us examine some early examples of vaporwave.

In terms of chronology, a significant starting point for this investigation is the album often regarded as one of the initial instances of vaporwave: “Eccojams vol. 1” by Chuck Person (2010). This album employed audio editing techniques such as resampling, stretching, cutting, looping, and adding sound effects to songs from the 1980s and 1990s. The resulting 15 compositions underwent such intense transformations that the sources became challenging to identify, offering a novel aesthetic experience.

For instance, the 1987 hit “Lady in Red” by Chris de Burgh became an atmospheric, seemingly endless loop repeating the phrase “There’s nobody here” with added reverb and delay, untitled and known as the fourth song on side B.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Janet Jackson’s song “Lonely” (1989) became track A6. Notably, the album does not credit the original artists, leaving listeners with a choice to approach it as a puzzle or simply enjoy it without

3 Jordan Minor, “Drown yourself beneath the vaporwave,” *geek.com*, 2016, <https://www.geek.com/tech/drown-yourself-beneath-the-vaporwave-1657121/>.

4 David Jimison, “The Dilution of Avant-Garde Subcultural Boundaries in Network Society” (PhD diss., Georgia Institute of Technology, 2015), 13.

5 Simon Chandler, “Genre as Method: The Vaporwave Family Tree, From Eccojams to Hardvapour,” *daily.bandcamp.com*, 2016, <https://daily.bandcamp.com/lists/vaporwave-genres-list>.

6 Chuck Person, “Eccojams Vol. 1,” *The Curatorial Club*, 2010, B4.

preconceptions. While legal concerns about copyrights may arise, the emphasis lies on the album being a new piece of music rather than a remix compilation based on the works of other artists.

Fragments of the album were first uploaded to YouTube as early as 2009, and in 2010, it was released on cassette and digitally by the label The Curatorial Club. The album's graphic design and associated videos appropriated images from the same period as the sound samples. The cover featured a shark alongside the words "Ecco" and "Mega," using fonts from the video game Ecco the Dolphin and the gaming computer Sega Mega CD (Picture 1). Thus, the entire album, including audio and visuals, is crafted by rearranging existing material from different authors.



1. Chuck Person, *Eccojams vol. 1*, 2010, cover

Chuck Person, *Eccojams vol. 1*, 2010 m., viršelis

A similar strategy can be observed in the song often associated with vaporwave memes, "Lisa Frank 420 / Modern Computing" (リサフランク 420 / 現代のコンピュー) by Macintosh Plus, released in 2011.<sup>7</sup> This song and the entire album *Floral Shoppe* (2011) involve sonic editing of songs by other artists. For instance, "Lisa Frank 420 / Modern Computing" (リサフランク 420 / 現代のコンピュー) is a slowed-down and chopped-up version of *It's Your Move* by Diana Ross (1984), which itself is a cover of a song by Doug Parkinson from 1983.

These iconic vaporwave albums reveal a strategy of recycling sounds and imagery. While this may initially resemble sustainable design, the need for new raw materials is reduced in actual sustainable design. In digital recycling, both the source material and the results persist, leading to an increase

7 Macintosh Plus, "Floral Shoppe," *Beer On The Rug*, 2011.

in the number of products and frequent associations with accelerationism. Furthermore, the authors of the sampled songs are not credited, and music recognition software like Shazam often fails to detect the samples. So, how does this work?

To figure this out, back in 2018, I reached out to a creator of *vaporwave* known as 美学(b i g a k u) AESTHETICS~ (with whom I also became affiliated for live performances in 2020) and received this explanation:

The loophole for stealing sounds was created when the music industry grew so large that it became nearly impossible to filter out releases without the use of automation through algorithms. The algorithms that are currently in use do detect rhythmic and timbral patterns based on databases of copyrighted material. However, once you stretch a sound, both its pitch and tempo change, and luckily enough, the algorithms are not sophisticated enough to detect every possible transformation just yet.<sup>8</sup>

Based on this method, the essence of vaporwave could be considered twofold: the method of avoiding copyright strikes even while sampling music and visuals, and an effort to transform existing media into something that evokes an entirely different emotional response compared to the source material.

#### Features of the *post-internet* in relation to *vaporwave*

The best starting point for a deeper understanding of post-internet is to explore the origins of this term. Artist, writer and curator Marisa Olson is widely credited with coining the term. She argues:

The World Wide Web is, now more than ever, mirroring globalization as reflected in the tone of online collaboration. No longer is the content of this activity strapped with the heavy burden of representing the medium itself (the self-imposed burden of all nascent media struggling to move beyond ‘mere representations;’ in this case, representations about working at a distance). We’ve entered the more mature ‘something more’ phase in which it may be a given that

8 美学(b i g a k u) AESTHETICS~, email to author, April 17, 2018.

two artists are working simultaneously in different spaces; we're ready to move on and say something more with the internet, not just talk about it.<sup>9</sup>

If we base our definitions on Marisa Olson's ideas about post-internet, we could argue that post-internet art is not necessarily about the medium itself but unfolds through new possibilities provided by the internet.

The first key feature of the internet that could be relevant to the formation of vaporwave is the access to immense resources like scientific papers, audio files, images, videos, and free software. This access allows anyone with an internet connection to quote, plunder, and further develop ideas, turning their phones, tablets, and laptops into music production studios and sampling machines. This liberating process eliminates the need for access to a professional recording studio or expensive gear to create artistic output.

Secondly, the internet allows everyone to share their creative output online while potentially remaining anonymous and avoiding copyright strikes, even when sampling the works of other creators. The anonymity that arises from the cycle of uploading and downloading sounds and images, followed by subsequent uploads by different individuals, not only accelerates the process but also obscures the original creator, paving the way for collaborative efforts without clear authorship.

An example of such anonymous collaboration is evident in the work of a YouTube content creator known by the pseudonym Sun Levi. Since 2013, Sun Levi has been crafting (or possibly just uploading) videos featuring vaporwave music. These videos employ a similar approach of modifying pre-existing material, but they stand out by using sounds created by other anonymous vaporwave producers. In a sense, Sun Levi is making music videos for people they might not have met or interacted with, yet the results often become more popular than just the songs alone, starting to feel like "official" videos for the music.

Marisa Olson also mentions another feature of the post-internet by arguing that "the sense-experience of art that is postinternet, that is made and distributed within the postinternet, or that we might say is of the postinternet era, is an art of conspicuous consumption."<sup>10</sup> This idea of

9 Marisa Olson, "Postinternet: Art After the Internet," *Foam Magazine* 29 (Winter 2011): 59–63; repr. in *Art and the Internet*, London: Black Dog, 2013.

10 Ibid.

consumption aligns with some *vaporwave* artists, who aim to create as many products as possible with the simplest means available. On the one hand, the circumvention of copyrights goes against major labels and the music industry, but on the other hand, it negates “all meaning in an attempt to draw attention to the destructive forces that have necessitated the form of its creation,”<sup>11</sup> becoming a form of accelerationism.

We could make a partial conclusion that perhaps a mix of features has turned the creators of vaporwave into an art movement. One of these features could be the methods of stretching, flipping, and altering source material to create a new experience. Additionally, the ideas of opposing the music industry or accelerating production output might be new narratives that unify groups of people working in similar ways or even collaborating without directly knowing each other. This action might be seen as a “metaphoric comment on the immanent breakdown of capitalist order that accelerationism points towards.”<sup>12</sup>

To expand on what unifies vaporwave creators into an art movement, we can explore the application of similar methods before the internet became ingrained into the culture.

#### The same methods applied before the internet: John Oswald's Plunderphonic

Establishing that vaporwave is not merely a remix but a new phenomenological experience derived from existing material, a connection emerges with the ideas of Canadian composer John Oswald. In his essay “Plunderphonics, or Audio Piracy as a Compositional Prerogative” (1985), Oswald explored questions of piracy and creativity.<sup>13</sup> He further investigated the possibilities of recontextualizing sounds and the issue of their recognition.

11 Gareth Leaman, “Spectatorship, Accelerationism and Art’s Critical Potential,” *Disposable Everything*, 2013, <https://disposableeverything.com/2013/11/01/spectatorship-accelerationism-and-arts-critical-potential/>.

12 Ken McLeod, “Vaporwave. Politics, Protest and Identity,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, Volume 30, Number 4 (2018), 123–142.

13 John Oswald, “Plunderphonics, or Audio Piracy as a Compositional Prerogative,” presented at Wired Society Electro-Acoustic Conference, Toronto, 1985, <http://www.plunderphonics.com>.

A fragment is contextually inextricable from the whole. There is meaning and value in very short durations—even a few milliseconds of well known recordings. A single sound can act as a trigger for recollecting entire pieces of music... Therefore, in some way, good or bad, sampling from a commercial release affects both your music and the source. Some see it as theft; I don't. Music is information, and, as such, it's a renewable resource: Intellectual real estate is infinitely divisible.<sup>14</sup>

However, when applying these ideas in his creative practice by re-using and reworking sounds created by artists in his album *Plunderphonic* (1989), Oswald faced a legal dispute. After sampling Michael Jackson's *Bad* and turning it into an entirely new piece called *Dab*, "Jackson's management and the CRIA forced the confiscation and destruction of the master tapes and all copies of the CD still in Oswald's possession."<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, the traces of this album were never entirely erased (Picture 2), and this example, along with the essay by John Oswald, became a cornerstone for other composers and creators of vaporwave. In a sense, it could be considered another unifying element, turning the essay into something akin to a manifesto for vaporwave creators. Furthermore, this case illustrates how the same methods did not work out two decades earlier when records were distributed through physical means.



2. Information on John Oswald's *Plunderphonic*, 1989, Discogs.com

Informacija apie Johna Oswaldo *Plunderphonic*, 1989, Discogs.com

<sup>14</sup> John Oswald, "Neither a Borrower or a Sample Prosecute," *Keyboard* 14, No. 3, (1988), 12.

<sup>15</sup> Kevin Holm-Hudson, "Quotation and Context: Sampling and John Oswald's *Plunderphonics*," *Leonardo Music Journal*, nr. 7 (1997): 17–25.

### A shift from methods to *aesthetics*

Jumping back to vaporwave, the most exciting twist within the community to me is the case of 2814. As one of the two creators behind 2814, David Russo states, “Vaporwave was mostly about the aesthetic container of the music itself and how that recontextualization of past music could elicit new feelings from sounds that were unexpected.”<sup>16</sup> This critical feature of recontextualization can be seen both in Oswald’s creative output and in many earlier vaporwave records, where old songs are transformed into new, often eerie or uncanny soundscapes. However, the album *Birth of a New Day* (新しい日の誕生, 2015) no longer contains sampling or stretching, yet it is still considered vaporwave.

This album marks the shift from defining vaporwave based on the methods used to create it to the qualities of the sound and a specific aesthetic. Interestingly, the word “aesthetics” itself (stylized as AESTHETICS) is a meme within the vaporwave community. This popularization is due to the common use of Japanese characters and the Japanese keyboard’s full-width alphanumeric input option, which changes the Latin characters in a unique way even without altering the font. Certain visual elements do not necessarily create a coherent story or connections but have been used by the community so often that their spread continues to live on as a meme,<sup>17</sup> where the origin or reasoning is no longer questioned.

To visualize this aesthetics, we can look at the frequently asked questions section of Reddit’s online community for vaporwave aesthetics. It lists:

Global brands which were huge in the 80s/90s such as Honda, Canon, Sharp, etc.; 2D and 3D computer graphics; Hand-drawn and computer animation such as anime; Personal nostalgia inducing media such as video games; Classical art originating from ancient Greece or Rome, including sculptures; User interfaces of computer operating systems, games, and other electronics; Effects such as warping, distortion, desaturation/hyper saturation to replicate the

16 David Russo, “An Interview with David Russo AKA HKE,” interview by Andrew Daly, VWMUSIC, 2021, <https://vwmusicrocks.com/2021/04/11/an-interview-with-david-russo-aka-hke/>.

17 Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene, 30th Anniversary Edition* (Oxford University Press, 2006, first published 1976), 192.

characteristics of analog television footage, to simulate hardware failure and data loss, or misalignment or misregistration which may be found on an old or damaged VCR tape.<sup>18</sup>

This list might not form a coherent narrative, but it establishes a certain recognizable visual expectation. Sonically, vaporwave aesthetics might be more challenging to define but easier to feel. Most of the early vaporwave examples not only chopped up but also slowed down the source material, lowering its pitch and creating artefacts that impart an uncanny quality. Despite it being a methodical process, when combined with heavy reverb, the distinctive vaporwave sound becomes relatively easy to recognize.

Moreover, after solidifying, this aesthetics has transcended music and the internet, influencing other facets of culture and daily life. Firstly, music has moved beyond the internet into live concerts and DJ sets, and physical formats like vinyl records, cassettes, and CDs have become collectible items. An exciting and unexpected development is the emergence of independent vaporwave labels.<sup>19</sup> Secondly, there are apps such as *Vaporgram* that facilitate creating visuals based on vaporwave aesthetics or applying ready-made filters to photos or videos. Lastly, this aesthetics has influenced fashion, giving rise to new clothing stores<sup>20</sup> and established brands incorporating it into their collections.

#### The methods in a *practice-based* approach

After learning about some of the methods and strategies used by vaporwave creators, I became curious to test them through a practice-based approach. I wanted to see if these methods were effective and if it was possible to create new content solely through collaging and reworking existing images and sounds, and then publishing it online without encountering copyright issues. This curiosity led to the development of an international group project called One Person And.

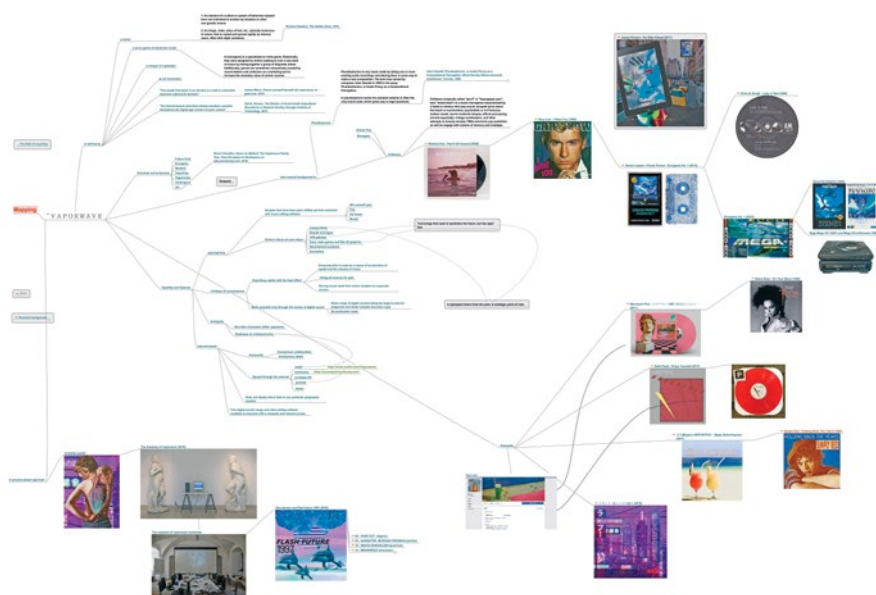
18 “What does ‘Vaporwave Aesthetics’ mean?,” *reddit*, accessed on January 5, 2024, <https://www.reddit.com/r/VaporwaveAesthetics/wiki/faq>.

19 *Dream Catalogue*, an example of a vaporwave label, *Dream*, accessed on March 17, 2024, <https://dreamcatalogue.store>.

20 *Kaunas Vaporwave* is both a social media account creating images based on vaporwave aesthetics and recognizable elements of the city of Kaunas, and a fashion and interior design store operated by an anonymous artist, accessed on March 18, 2024, <https://vaporwave.lt>.

The first iteration was a workshop organized through the Nordplus networks KUNO and CIRRUUS. Thanks to the Vilnius Academy of Arts' membership in both networks, I was able to invite art and design students from Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Sweden, and the United Kingdom to join and collaborate for a week-long exploration of vaporwave, culminating in the creation of their own album.

Given the typical timeframe of such intensive courses being just one week, time was limited. Therefore, I planned a relatively straightforward agenda in advance while fostering an environment where everyone could contribute and share ideas. To kickstart discussions, I created a mind map (Picture 3) to quickly introduce participants to the theoretical context, core concepts, albums, and aesthetics of vaporwave. The first day of the workshop was dedicated to getting to know each other and engaging in discussions. I organized three crash courses on editing audio, video, and images using free software to equip participants with the basic skills and tools needed for creating vaporwave. The second day was devoted to these



3. Mind-map on *vaporwave* used in one of the workshops

Minčių žemėlapis apie *vaporwave*, naudotas viename iš seminarų

workshops, where we used *Audacity* for audio editing, *AVID media composer first* for video editing, and *Gimp* for image editing.

The remaining three days were dedicated to collaborative work. Using shared cloud storage, participants sourced images, sounds, and videos, editing them to create new compositions. An intriguing aspect that emerged in the process was the fluidity of authorship: one person could initiate a piece, and another could build upon it, resulting in different versions of the same audio, image, or video. This process also sparked unexpected emotional responses when we experimented with merging sounds and videos. Some created videos inspired by sounds created by others, while others just fused separately created elements into new compositions.

The result of this workshop was a collection of songs sequenced to mimic a movie script, complete with titles suggesting scenes. After deliberation, the project was called *One Person And* through a voting process. The resulting album, titled *Flash Future 1997* (2018), was successfully distributed via online music platforms and stores, demonstrating our ability to evade copyright detection.

Since then, the project has expanded to include three more international workshops, one of which was conducted entirely online in 2020 due to the pandemic. In total, the project has produced four albums. Each workshop and release have involved artists primarily from art academies, many of whom had no prior experience in music production. Despite this, the collaborative efforts produced cohesive works that look and sound like a vaporwave. This coherence underscores the importance of the tools and methods employed and the idea of working together within a limited time frame. Sound plundering and stretching, applying reverb, and pitch shifting not only help avoid copyright detection but also contribute to the distinctive spacious and digitally artefact-rich sound of vaporwave.

To explore and evaluate these concepts further through a listening experience, I am including a link to selected songs from these four workshops (Picture 4<sup>21</sup>) and the project files of the first workshop (Picture 5<sup>22</sup>) with some files redacted to protect the participants' anonymity. The first

21 Full link:  
<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/3fCE4d3uBhuRlvDYCoAaWQ?si=2e0de15257114a54>.

22 Full link:  
<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1KdUsIILQc-TnV6xasXlamLOidcwOCOAY?usp=sharing>.



4. QR code link to a playlist of selected songs from the workshops

QR kodo nuoroda į grojaraštį su atrinktais kūriniais iš dirbtuvių



5. QR code link to the shared folder from the first workshop

QR kodo nuoroda į bendrą aplanką iš pirmojo seminaro

link directs to a Spotify playlist, currently a controversial yet widely popular music streaming platform. It imposes stringent regulations on copyrighted material. Therefore, successfully uploading classic-style vaporwave to Spotify attests to the efficacy of plunderphonics in evading the algorithms designed for copyright detection.

### Conclusions

In conclusion, the evolution of the communities and aesthetics of vaporwave into an international art movement is deeply intertwined with elements directly linked to the internet. First, vaporwave's identity is shaped not only by the creative methodologies and the ideas of John Oswald and plunderphonics but also by the broader context of the post-internet era. Secondly, there might be more unifying factors that turn vaporwave into an art movement. However, there exist multiple unifying factors that bring together creators in this movement, including the essay on plunderphonics which functions as a manifesto, the methods of quoting, appropriation, and recontextualization via a specific toolset including stretching, flipping, chopping, and screwing, as well as certain thematic narratives such as criticism of the music industry or accelerationism. Thirdly, vaporwave's visual

and sonic *aesthetics* have consolidated through repetition and the dissemination of its elements as memes across online communities. Lastly, John Oswald's creative practices in the 1980s demonstrate that vaporwave as we know it today could not have emerged prior to the *post-internet* era, which enables online collaboration and circumvention of traditional copyright barriers through algorithmic protections.

Furthermore, it is evident that the post-internet era, more so than specific geographic locations, significantly contributes to the widespread and anonymous dissemination of vaporwave. This dynamic interaction is uniquely facilitated by the capabilities of this medium.

Submitted — 2024 01 15

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Santrauka

## Postinterneto įtaka *vaporwave* estetikai

Vyginas Orlovas

*Reikšminiai žodžiai:* *vaporwave*, postinternetas, estetika, plėšikofonija, praktika grįsti tyrimai.

Teksto autorius gvildena postinterneto įtaką *vaporwave* estetikai. Autorius siekia išsiaiškinti, kaip *vaporwave* kūrybos metodus ir strategijas formavo postinterneto aplinka, ir daro prielaidą, kad unikali postinterneto kultūros teikiamos galimybės atliko lemiamą vaidmenį formuojant ir skleidžiant *vaporwave* estetiką ir metodus.

Tyrimo sritis apima ir teorinius tyrimus, ir praktika grįstus eksperimentus.

*Vaporwave* savybes ir susiformavimo istoriją autorius nagrinėja per kertinius albumus bei palyginimą su kompozitoriaus Johno Oswaldo kūryba. Praktika grįstą tyrimą autorius atlieka dalyvaudamas projekte *One Person And*. Šiame projekte dalyvavo įvairių sričių kūrėjai, kurie bendradarbiaudami savaitę kūrė *vaporwave* albumus, ir tai leido išsiaiškinti *vaporwave* kūrybos metodų efektyvumą ir jų suderinamumą su muzikos klausymosi platformomis. Sintezuodamas teorinę analizę ir praktinį pritaikymą, autorius aiškina daugialypę *vaporwave* estetikos prigimtį ir jos, kaip pasaulinio meno judėjimo, statusą.

Apibendrindamas autorius teigia, kad *vaporwave* estetika peržengia geografines ribas. Ją suformavo keletas veiksnių, įskaitant postinternetinę aplinką, autorių teisių apribojimų vengimas, ideologiniai naratyvai, tokie kaip akcelerationizmas, ir bendri visuomenės vizualiniai bei garsiniai potyriai, kartojami kaip memai.