

The aesthetics of the self: The meaning-making of Internet aesthetics

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Abstract

In this study we explore the so-called Internet aesthetics, labels applied on heterogenous collections of materials and activities, which are discussed and constructed primarily on the Internet (mainly on Instagram, Tumblr and Pinterest). In contrast to established notions, such as genre, style or subculture, Internet aesthetics are characterized by few conventions, but seem fundamentally open for individual interpretations. We conducted inductive qualitative content analyses on text and images of 24 entries of AestheticsWiki, finding that Internet aesthetics display little consistency in their composition and avoid drawing clear-cut defining lines. Rather, they are characterized by presenting an experience of sorts, a subjectively defined atmosphere. We then conducted phenomenological interviews with 11 Internet aesthetics enthusiasts. We observe that Internet aesthetics primarily serve as toolkits, through which individuals give sense and coherence to personal experience, in line with a situation-specific self-image. In doing so, they contribute to a reflexive myth of the self.

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Introduction

When browsing posts on social media, one is likely to encounter hashtag labels, such as ‘cottagecore’ or ‘dark academia’. These labels accompany cultural objects — whether clothing, music, artworks or images — qualifying them as belonging to so-called Internet aesthetics and thereby categorizing them. Originating on social media platforms, such as Tumblr and Instagram, Internet aesthetics has been gaining increasing attention globally (Bateman, 2020; Bohn, 2020; Gowans-Eglinton, 2020; Slone, 2020). Alongside extensive media attention, the Internet abounds with advice to tailor one’s activities and consumption according to particular Internet aesthetics — movies and series (Jayanthi, 2020; Pierce-Bohen, 2021), shopping lists for furniture or fashion items (J.B., 2020; Waddell, 2020; West, 2021), and even which career paths to pursue (Ash, 2020). Internet aesthetics are thus fast becoming relevant cultural categories in communication on the Internet.

‘Cottagecore’, for example, has become the topic of bestselling books (Jones, 2021; Kent, 2021), the inspiration of thriving online shops and has been termed the biggest trend for interior design for 2021 (Shaw, 2020). ‘Dark academia’, in turn, became an important “TikTok sensation” with masses of young Internet users “donning wooly sweaters over collared shirts and pulling up knee-high socks for looks that resembled uniforms they might have seen in *Dead Poets Society* or *Derry Girls*” (Andrew, 2022). It also reignited the popularity of learning Latin and Greek and the interest for literature classics, such as Keats (Lanigan, 2022). Although some of the materials that are labelled as belonging to an Internet aesthetic are characteristic to the Internet (most notably memes), many are not exclusively digital and bear relevance to an engagement with the physical world as well (as is clearly the case for interior decoration). Still, what warrants the term *Internet* aesthetic is the fact that the categorizing activities, bringing these materials together, happen initially (and often exclusively) online. Therefore, the Internet is integral to their construction and availability.

What stands out is the sheer variety of products, activities, interests and even attitudes to which these labels are applied. In the example of ‘dark academia,’ these include movies such as *Dead Poets Society* (1989) or the *Harry Potter* saga (2001–2011), classical readings of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the music of Debussy or pop singer Lorde, as well as activities such as museum visits, reading in libraries, and studying. Music styles, literary works from multiple (and often contrasting) genres, television shows, and hobbies are grouped together without accounts as to why they belong to such categories, what roles they play within these constructions, their uses, or their resonance with each other.

Systems of aesthetic categorization are amongst the most fundamental features of culture. The construction of and engagement with cultural labels like art and music genres, fashion styles, or urban subcultures has long been the focus of sociological efforts to understand transformations in living circumstances, class conflicts, and other sociocultural dimensions surrounding certain groups in time (Alexander, 2003; Hebdige, 1988; Willis, 1978).

Yet, this theoretical repertoire fails to provide adequate explanations to understand the categorization and labelling dynamics of Internet aesthetics. While established terminology on aesthetic categorization has focused on — and thereby emphasized — coherence, Internet aesthetics present a striking lack of coherence. Within each Internet aesthetic, expanding collections of cultural objects (like lists of references or visual boards) are built upon an apparently tacit or subjective form of meaning-making, categorizing elements in a seemingly implicit or “felt” way. Thus, Internet aesthetics appear to lack the thread of justification, a central feature around which aesthetic categories are constructed and maintained (Bourdieu, 1984; DiMaggio, 1987; Fligstein and McAdam, 2012).

Observing the uniqueness of Internet aesthetics and the potential that this phenomenon has of constituting a new form of aesthetic categorization, we explore which dynamics characterize the meaning-making of Internet aesthetics. We first compare Internet aesthetics to the theoretical vocabulary of cultural sociology. We then use content analysis to produce a qualitative understanding of 24 Internet aesthetics as they are presented in the open collaboration Web site Aesthetics Wiki (https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Aesthetics_Wiki), a self-proclaimed encyclopedia of Internet aesthetics. Subsequently, we explore how consumers of Internet aesthetics perceive the relationship between Internet aesthetics and the cultural materials they represent, and the meanings and uses that they give to these entities throughout 11 phenomenological interviews.

The relevance of this investigation is two-fold. First, Internet aesthetics are gathering broad media attention due to their popularity online, and the Internet abounds with materials for daily applications and uses of certain Internet aesthetics. Thus, this study contributes to an understanding of emerging forms of meaning-making in Internet environments, which often serve users as ways to organize their lives and understand their own reality outside the Internet (e.g., advice ranging from clothes and furniture to career choices).

Second, our content analysis of Web pages cataloguing and describing Internet aesthetics suggests that Internet aesthetics can be connected to postmodernity’s most broadly explored features: its rejection or

recycling of labels by smaller social groups, who subvert categories to serve their own cultural agenda. However, such an account fails to explain how Internet aesthetics manage to exist as collectively shared and recognizable entities to the degree in which they can inspire design trends, books, personal journeys of self-discovery and transformation. In this regard, Internet aesthetics appear similar to famous art styles or music genres, yet without presenting fundamental characteristics which are understood to be essential for aesthetic categorization. Internet aesthetics reproduce and yet contradict important tenets of postmodernity. Our phenomenological interviews suggest that Internet aesthetics serve individuals as toolkits to create subjectively recognizable identities in highly fluid and miscible realities. Thus, we believe the paradox of Internet aesthetics to be indicative of a broader situation: in times of rapid cultural developments and the loss of traditional societal structures, digital technologies are used by individuals in a quest to (re)create subjective structure. Individuals choose to organize their daily life experiences and their perceptions of reality within thematically coherent mental frames, so that, in turn, they might create a more coherent self-image.



1. Conceptualizing Internet aesthetics

We first explore how Internet aesthetics relate to established ways of understanding aesthetic categorization in cultural sociology. Although concepts such as online art criticism, genre, style, and subculture resonate with certain aspects of Internet aesthetics, we argue that they do not capture this particular type of categorization convincingly. We then turn to outlining some of the most salient formal properties of these categories, to arrive at a working definition that can inform our empirical work.

1.1. Practices: The sociology of (online) cultural categorization

Given the fact that Internet aesthetics can be characterized as a classificatory activity taking place through online communication in places like Tumblr or Aesthetics Wiki, it might be reasoned that they are a manifestation of digital forms of criticism and other related forms of digital hermeneutics. Online art criticism, collective readings of art, and social hermeneutics online are understood as requiring individuals to collectively (or singularly in social settings) engage critically with artifacts, justifying their categorizations of them (Fish, 1980; Hanquinet, *et al.*, 2014; Jauss, 1982; Kristensen, *et al.*, 2021; Verboord, 2014). However, Internet aesthetics present in their construction little discursive activity: they group songs, visual references, movies, books, but it is rarely explained which properties of these objects justify their aesthetic belonging and there is no debate. Therefore, Internet aesthetics seem to be characterized by a rather uncritical type of engagement with cultural objects that they aggregate.

Such an uncritical engagement implies that Internet aesthetics either lack converging meaning, or this understanding and meaning-making is rather subjectively understood by those involved, dispensing with a need for justification. The latter possibility might result from individuals massively sharing reproduced popular cultural repertoires, leading to an apparent “obviousness” of the relationship between certain objects and an Internet aesthetic, or amongst objects.

Arguably, Internet aesthetics might come about in an effort to delineate symbolic boundaries through categorization. This process would correspond to symbolic power exerted through art genres. However, Internet aesthetics present very low access barriers. That is, a couple of hashtags usually are enough to express the belonging of a cultural reference or Spotify playlist to a certain Internet aesthetic.

Internet aesthetics seem also to sprout easily. For instance, corresponding to specific taste preferences of different users, an abundance of sub-forms or variations of particular (often popular) Internet aesthetics develop. ‘Darkest academia’, for example, is a variation of the popular ‘dark academia’ with more “darkness” in the aesthetic. This evinces that Internet aesthetics can be rather easily created and developed by Internet users. Still, some Internet aesthetics capture more interest than others, indicating a process of

collective convergence as more Internet users are likely to gather around some Internet aesthetics rather than others.

Moving from the scholarship on digital engagement with the arts towards the broader scholarship regarding aesthetic categorization, the theoretical repertoire of sociology of arts and culture offers three key concepts to understand systems of aesthetic categorization.

First, Internet aesthetics might be approached as genres. Sociologically speaking, genres are organizing categories within art forms [1]. They are constituted by rather specific conventions which they impose on art objects, artists, or contexts. Genres are typically confined to particular artistic forms (e.g., music genres or literary genres). By contrast, Internet aesthetics comprise multiple art forms almost as a matter of rule: musical genres, literary genres, and so on. Moreover, genres are usually characterized by somewhat clearly delineated boundaries, which are often reinforced as exercises of symbolic and epistemological power by groups with privileged positions in certain fields (Bourdieu, 1984; DiMaggio, 1987; Fligstein and McAdam, 2012; Peterson and Kern, 1996). Again, this seems hard to reconcile with the informalized and loose nature of the classification process that takes place within Internet aesthetics.

Second, Internet aesthetics also resemble conceptualizations of style. Different from genres, styles are rather detailed ways of doing, recognizable toolkits for creative expression, which artists instrumentalize to differentiate themselves within genres in all forms of creative expression (Godart, 2018). Styles are sociologically conceived as normative aesthetic criteria which, being “durable and recognizable” [2], allow objects to be recognized as expressions of an aesthetic system. Similarly, Internet aesthetics too are aggregating entities, yet they fall short of the creative output of styles: they only bring together cultural materials, but do not prescribe the form or content for subsequent production — much like an exhibition may group renaissance, neoclassic, and impressionist paintings to illustrate the evolution of a certain theme in art, aggregating stylistic developments across art forms under an overarching premise.

Closely related to styles and genres, the third possible conceptual lens for Internet aesthetics is that of subculture. Whereas styles and genres operate as qualifications attributed to objects, subcultures are social categorizations, serving to group people. Subcultures employ cultural elements like clothing, pop culture objects, and even slang as socially distinguishing characteristics of a specific social group (Hebdige, 1979). Subcultural repertoires are interconnected by styles (Godart, 2018). Internet aesthetics present a similar variety of cultural objects in their compositions as subcultures. They also have a social nature: hashtags or visual references publicly associate individuals with an Internet aesthetic. Yet, Internet aesthetics do not constitute a collective identity in the way subcultures do. As of yet, there is no account of “cottagecorers”, “dark academics”, or other group identities that use their (sub)culture in socially distinguishable ways, unlike punks, bikers, or hippies.

We now move towards the characteristics that Internet aesthetics seemingly have in common to provide a minimal definition of what they are. Based on this, we develop a hypothetical understanding of how they function as systems of signs, which will then inform our empirical exploration.

1.2. Objective properties: The semiotics of Internet aesthetics

A first central feature of Internet aesthetics is their aggregating nature. Under the label of an Internet aesthetic, movies, books, clothes, and leisure activities come together under an all-encompassing, interrelating premise. This leads to a second central characteristic, that Internet aesthetics serve as labels. They group objects together and serve as categories in communication. For instance, the Internet aesthetic ‘bloomcore’ presents specific objects (such as flower crowns, and denim pants) as ‘bloomcore’ objects (<https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Bloomcore>). The attribution of objects or activities to an overarching category produces a label that can subsequently be used in communication. An Instagram user might decide to adopt the label ‘bloomcore’ as a hashtag to accompany a post on the platform, thus communicating the content of the post as somewhat related to the Internet aesthetic in question. Third, and by consequence, it is fair to assume that Internet aesthetics have an intrinsically social nature: the very visibility on the Internet of

famous instances like ‘cottagecore’ or more obscure Internet aesthetics like ‘animecore’ seems to indicate an effort to share these categories with other Internet users, and make them publicly available beyond individual use. These features do not exhaustively describe Internet aesthetics, yet they are descriptive and fundamental enough to move forward to hypothesize about their meaning in broader terms.

The aggregating and labeling aspects of Internet aesthetics indicate that these entities are large re-assigners of meaning. The cultural objects within these constructions might inform a larger meaning of a category that they are in, helping to construct what a certain Internet aesthetic is, or acquire a completely different meaning once brought within an Internet aesthetic. This makes Internet aesthetics amenable to the perspective of social semiotics. Social semiotics conceive of cultural or artistic objects (like songs, movies, novels) as signs: forms representing something through a process of signification in which a meaning is associated with a (material or immaterial) object. This process creates a symbol. The origins of symbolic meaning and value are debated in semiotic scholarship, sometimes associated with the aesthetic properties of signs, sometimes thought of as (often guarded) social constructions (Saussure, 1983; Turino, 1999).

Barthes’ (1957) semiotic theory of culture sees the social meanings of pop culture objects as taking the form of myths: multi-layered combinations of symbols that transmit a meaning only loosely connected to that of the single composing parts. Within the myth, a pre-existing symbol (*e.g.*, a historic figure) becomes a mere signifier, conveying part of its meaning to the larger meaning of the myth. A sign’s existence within a myth is contained by its contribution to the myth. Much like Barthes’ conception of myths, Internet aesthetics seem to be elaborated through combinations of pop culture objects; they communicate a meaning only partly reliant on that of the movies, books, or songs, agglomerated within the Internet aesthetic. Hence, the meaning of cultural objects within Internet aesthetics relies on the myth that they are brought together to construct.

Aggregating tools such as curation boards (*e.g.*, Pinterest) or hashtags, social platforms (*e.g.*, Tumblr), and self-broadcasting tools (*e.g.*, YouTube) provide a crucial form of creative agency for Internet aesthetics. Through aggregation, categories are created where the prevailing logic to include or exclude cultural objects is the extent to which they resonate with the myth at the core of the category. The Internet aesthetic, therefore, might be seen as an abstraction constructed transversally across many objects, each contributing its share of visual, audio, or narrative material to the Internet aesthetic. The question, then, is why certain elements (and not others) are brought together under an Internet aesthetic, and what nexus connects them.

Interpreting Internet aesthetics as semiotic myths requires understanding the processes of bringing cultural objects into these categories. As previously argued, these processes are intrinsically tied to digital practices, yet they are essentially different from how scientific scholarship conceives of such processes (*e.g.*, online forms of criticism or taste distinction in the digital sphere). Thus, while the concept of semiotic myths might provide a good explanation of what Internet aesthetics are, it still does not tell how and why they might be constructed and maintained in the social world — and the online world in particular.

Observing the uniqueness of Internet aesthetics within the socio-scientific lexicon on cultural categorization, how they differ from broadly understood forms of digital hermeneutics, and what these singular characteristics might indicate about new meaning making dynamics, leads us to propose the following exploratory research question: What dynamics characterize the meaning-making of Internet aesthetics? To answer this question, our first research step is a content analysis to produce a qualitative understanding of the object properties of Internet aesthetics. On the basis of this analysis, we then proceed to investigating the subjective meaning-making around Internet aesthetics through interviews with their consumers.

2. Exploring the properties of Internet aesthetics

2.1. Methods and data

To understand the structure and properties of Internet aesthetics as classificatory systems, we conducted content analysis of Internet pages describing Internet aesthetics. We tried to obtain a broad overview of the composition of a varied selection of Internet aesthetics. We also looked for content overlaps within different pages, and other ways in which common ground could be identified across them.

Content analyzed was retrieved from Aesthetics Wiki

(https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Aesthetics_Wiki), a Fandom-type Web site. It defines itself as “the comprehensive encyclopedia of online and offline aesthetics”, counting over 500 entries. Entries in Aesthetics Wiki present a description of an Internet aesthetic, a systematic overview of cultural objects (grouped under different types), and exemplary pictures and hyperlinks to relevant resources. Aesthetics Wiki was selected as a sampling frame because of its cataloguing nature, popularity, and user-generated character.

AestheticsWiki catalogues entries according to the suffix of their name: “core” (e.g., cottagecore), “goth” (e.g., cybergoth), “kei” (e.g., cult party kei), “punk” (e.g., sea punk), “wave” (e.g., sovietwave), and “academia” (e.g., dark academia). For each suffix, an index page lists Internet aesthetics carrying it. On index pages, a grid displays the “trending” pages within that suffix. Not all Internet aesthetics listed on Aesthetics Wiki carry a suffix (e.g., “bubblegum witch” or “ethereal”). We selected the three most popular (“trending”) aesthetics within each suffix category, resulting in a sample of 12 entries. This number of highly popular entries was complemented using the “Random Page” function of Aesthetics Wiki, which uses a random selection algorithm to present an arbitrary entry. In this way 12 more pages of varying popularity were selected. The final sample thus consisted of 24 entries (see [Appendix A](#)).

Data was analyzed through an open-coding process, with analytical categories and themes being formed inductively to reflect the exploratory character of this research step (Kyngäs, 2020). Below, we list and explain our analytical steps.

a. *Unstructured inspection of the sample:*

Our first step was to inspect the 24 sampled units in an unstructured inductive manner to obtain an overview of their composition. We observed that sampled units presented a rather diverse structure: they varied greatly, amongst other differences, in length, structural elements (e.g., sections), and presence of visual materials (or not).

b. *Inspection of visual and other multimedia references:*

Before systematically looking into the descriptive contents of units, we examined closely examining that visual and multimedia references used within each entry, looking at how they stood in relation to the contexts that they were brought into. We also conducted parallel Internet searches to observe the same aesthetic in other online locations. Throughout the following analytical steps, we often returned to visual and multimedia material presented within entries to contextualize and better understand our observations.

c. *Reading and cataloguing of textual elements within entries:*

According to our observations of the structural and content diversity within the sample, we catalogued the number of sections, references (songs, photos, artists and playlists, etc.), and descriptions contained within each entry. This was done to obtain a broad understanding of the dimensions of the units within the sample, so structural differences could be observed. This step made clear that most of the objects listed on a page were presented textually: paragraphs, lists, and hyperlinks make up the largest portion of Aesthetics Wiki’s pages.

d. *Inductive text analysis:*

Bearing in mind the predominantly textual nature observed in sampled units, we decided to adopt a number of text analysis procedures to make sense of these materials. This process evinced that three categories of text featured repeatedly across the sample, with three different functions, which we denoted *description texts*, *linkage texts*, and *materials*.

e. *Focused text analysis:*

Building on the findings of the previous steps, we iterated our analysis procedure, this time giving more centrality to understanding the three categories of text and their distinctive traits.

- *Description texts*, observed at the beginning of each page, explain and characterize the Internet aesthetic in question, giving a broad indication of what an Internet aesthetic is about (without being prescriptive). These descriptive texts take different forms depending on the core artistic expressions included in the Internet aesthetics, such as music or visual arts.
- *Linkage texts* are paragraphs used to introduce lists of references, linking these references to the Internet aesthetic.
- *Materials* are the varying number of lists of references (e.g., books, movies, songs, fashion objects), contained by entries, of which linkage texts claimed they indicated or exemplified the Internet aesthetic.

[Figure 1](#) illustrates these text types within a unit of the sample.

Ethereal

Ethereal is an aesthetic is based around the feeling of being extremely delicate and light in a way that seems not to be of this world.

1

Contents [hide]

- 1 Visual
 - 1.1 Locations
- 2 Fashion
- 3 Music
- 4 Movies
- 5 Gallery

Visual

This aesthetic can be described as very heavenly and light. Certain things it includes is angels, angel wings, lace, floral patterns, chandeliers, cathedrals, cathedral ceilings, etc.

2

Locations

- Nature
 - Cliffsides
 - Streams
 - Brooks
 - Creeks
 - Forests
 - Lagoons
 - Ponds

3

Figure 1: An example: Ethereal; 1 — Description text; 2 — Linkage text; 3 — Materials.

2.2. Content analysis results

a. Multiple memberships, exemplification, and openness

Our content analysis revealed, first, multiple instances of overlaps amongst Internet aesthetics, as objects were regularly listed on different entries of Aesthetics Wiki. For example, British pop-rock band *Arctic Monkeys* figured both in the entry of the Internet aesthetic ‘anglo core’, and in the entry of ‘dark academia’. Further searches revealed that the band was featured in another four entries, never with any justification as to why it was included in a certain Internet aesthetic. The cross-referencing of cultural objects or activities in multiple Internet aesthetics was a recurring discovery. Let us examine this further by comparing two prominent aesthetics.

The Internet aesthetic ‘traumacore’ centers around pairing stereotypically feminine motifs such as dolls,

pink dresses, and childish stickers, with references to traumatic events and emotional distress. By contrast, the Internet aesthetic 'lolita' revolves around depictions of women in flamboyant, Western attire from baroque and rococo periods. According to Aesthetics Wiki, the fashion dimension of 'lolita' relies heavily on (very full) skirts and dresses (<https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Lolita>). However, we observed striking similarities with the exemplifying and descriptive resources of 'traumacore'. For instance, much like 'traumacore', 'lolita' listed anime and other Japanese media as exemplifying material (within the "Media" category of the 'lolita' entry and within the "Activities" of the 'traumacore' entry). Further, both entries emphasized bubblegum pink and pastel colors, stereotypically "girlish" themes and an appeal to childish innocence.

This was further supported by the visual inspection. Dolls and the Japanese pop culture figure Hello Kitty were quite prominent in the image galleries of both Internet aesthetics, although in the case of 'traumacore' these were often combined with visuals of derelict homes and urban spaces, and emotionally charged texts, such as "everybody always leaves me" or "what did I do wrong". By way of illustration, [Figure 2](#) is a photograph posted on Instagram by Nicolle Dollanganger, a singer who features prominently in both the descriptive texts (as an inspirational figure) and lists of the 'traumacore' entry (<https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Traumacore>). Although 'traumacore' undeniably engages in a different semiotic construction than 'lolita', it is quite clear that many of the cultural materials present a noticeable similarity.



Figure 2: Artist Nicolle Dollanganger, Instagram: @nicolledollanganger.

Analyzing linkage texts introducing the lists of Aesthetics Wiki, cultural objects are predominantly introduced by sentences like “examples of this aesthetic include” or “some of the music that exemplifies this aesthetic”. Occasionally, grouped objects are referred to as inspiration, (*e.g.*, “Visuals that inspire this aesthetic”). Thus, the most common type of association made between lists and Internet aesthetics is one of exemplification.

According to Goodman (1976), art objects communicate meaning through referencing: types of “stand for” relationships in which art objects act as symbols. Exemplification, then, is a mode of referencing: an object, due to some of its characteristics [3], acts as a symbol for those characteristics. Exemplification requires that symbol-specific properties be shown forth through an interpretive frame that discerns what an object exemplifies [4]. Such an interpretive frame is largely absent in Aesthetics Wiki. This absence suggests that meaning-making in Internet aesthetics is rather subjectively understood. Arguably, this is due to the relationship between objects and Internet aesthetics appearing rather obvious to those involved. Thus, explanations of fitness are dispensed with. This finding begs the question of what interpretive frames are

used to group these objects together, which are not explicitly mentioned within Aesthetics Wiki entries.

Linkage texts also appear to actively avoid drawing categorical judgements of what does and does not belong to a certain aesthetic. Formulations involving “usually”, “might”, or “can be” feature frequently within linkage texts, seemingly indicating that lists should not be taken as canonical. There appears to be an implicit effort to highlight that other objects or activities, although not listed, may be part of an Internet aesthetic. Lists of examples, therefore, resemble “routes” or general recipes, giving Internet aesthetics an essentially open-ended nature.

This finding indicates that Internet aesthetics are deliberately articulated to allow for subjective interpretation. By avoiding clear and strong claims of belonging, Aesthetics Wiki users further emphasize the subjective nature of Internet aesthetics. It is plausible that exemplifying lists are made in such an open-ended manner in order to accommodate further additions, where subjective interpretations of an Internet aesthetic may become objectified. Any additions and changes, in turn, do not require justification since they come from, and aim at, subjective perceptions.

b. Reconstructing world experiences

Analyzing descriptions of the Internet aesthetics, we observed a pattern of relating a particular Internet aesthetic to being in a certain place, time, or mental state. This element proved to be an explanatory tool to make sense of cultural material grouped within entries.

For instance, let us look at how the descriptions of ‘cottagecore’ and ‘traumacore’ help us make sense of their shared mentioning of “flower growing”. On the one hand, arguably, flower growing might take part in the bucolic and turn-of-the-century scenarios of ‘cottagecore’, as this Internet aesthetic is described. Yet, sad environments, such as funeral homes or hospitals, also often feature flowers. Hence, the traumatic and depressing atmosphere of ‘traumacore’ has contextual space for flower growing as well. Flowers, being a widespread symbol for purity, delicateness, and femininity, have in their semiotic repertoire enough range to contribute to the scenarios of both ‘cottagecore’ and ‘traumacore’.

Yet, what is it that seems to implicitly indicate the difference in meaning that must be made out of this signifier (flower growing) in each Internet aesthetic? Flower growing derives its meaning in relation to what can be called an *experience*. With experience we recognize the sensorial presentation of the world at an individual level (Silins, 2021), and ways of being in this world subjectively. For instance, an individual experience of the world at age 20 is different from age 80, as they are each characterized by different material circumstances (clothes, fashion styles) and habits. Likewise, an individual experiencing a restaurant in 2022 New York encounters different fashion, ambient music, service, and menus from what characterized experiencing the same restaurant in the 1930s (if the restaurant existed for almost a century). Experiences might also be imagined, for example, that of being a citizen of an ultra-modern city in a dystopian future, with its architecture and post-human atmosphere.

Experiences (and, likely, their importance for Internet aesthetics) seem to be even more evident in the titles of playlists associated with different aesthetics: “You are studying in a haunted library with ghosts” (dark academia playlist), “You found the entrance to a secret garden”, “You are falling for the protagonist in a fantasy novel” (light royaltycore), or “A playlist for old money living in the French countryside” (light academia). Even clearer here, multiple objects (songs) are grouped and given symbolic meaning under a new interpretive key. This key is experience-centered. Thus, it seems acceptable to assume that experience is also the goal of an Internet aesthetic: to become someone different, to feel as if living in a different time.

We also find that entries vary greatly in terms of artistic and cultural categories used in their compositions. For instance, ‘kidcore’ (an Internet aesthetic based around nostalgia for the colors, places, and themes of childhood) contains an “Architecture” category, absent from the other entries sampled, which compiles examples that “come from theme parks and stores which sell goods to children such as Toys ‘R’ Us and Gymboree” (<https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Kidcore>). According to this entry’s description, certain places define a childhood experience, apparently necessitating this category.

Such specificity and variety of categories adds to the hypothesis that subjective experience is central to Internet aesthetics. In an effort to achieve an encompassing experience, visual, musical, and other objects cater to diverse senses, accounting for sensorial and cultural dimensions specific of certain experiences. While object-specific characteristics can be objectified and debated when judging the fitness of an object within an aesthetic system, subjective experiences cannot. Even more so, if the experience is one of imagined scenarios or historical times.

Internet aesthetics, thus, do not seem to be about grouping objects according to their sensorial characteristics, their *aesthetic* properties, as the term is philosophically understood (Nanay, 2016). Such sensorial characteristics (*e.g.*, their visual or musical characteristics) create coherence to categories like genres or styles. Internet aesthetics, by contrast, seem to revolve around rather subjective criteria. Hence, the greater openness of Internet aesthetics (compared to genres or styles) might be explained by the impossibility of objectively denying that certain objects exemplify someone's experience of an Internet aesthetic.

We propose that the overlaps, the exemplification relationship towards grouped objects, and the nature of openness of Internet aesthetics might be convincingly understood through the idea of (reconstructing) experience. The way that Internet aesthetics are described and their varied use of artistic modes of expression seem to support this possibility.

The construction of Internet aesthetics is manifestly in line with Barthes' [5] idea of cultural myths: signifiers (forms of speech, visual or musical objects) with pre-existing social meanings are incorporated in a symbolic system to which they contribute, while receiving a novel layer of meaning.

The goal of this content analysis was to explore the material properties of Internet aesthetics, seeking to identify what aesthetic principles could be at the basis of the construction of these systems. Since the findings suggest that intrinsically subjective dynamics are at the core of the construction of Internet aesthetics, in the next step we expand our research to incorporate subjective experiences and uses of Internet aesthetics by their consumers, attempting to see how these materials are used in meaning-making practices.

3. Exploring the meaning of Internet aesthetics to users

3.1. Methods and data

We explored experiences and meanings attributed to Internet aesthetics through semi-structured phenomenological interviews. We chose this method considering the lack of previous scholarship regarding Internet aesthetics, which led us to choose a data collection and analysis method where experiences of the studied object are central, so that more specific hypotheses and generalizations can then be derived (Groenewald, 2004; Knaack, 1984).

We interviewed 11 people. We applied a combination of convenience and snowball sampling, using engagement with Internet aesthetics as the main sampling criterion (Moser and Korstjens, 2018). We sought individuals actively interested in Internet aesthetics (*e.g.*, who liked watching videos or reading about them) and who considered Internet aesthetics important for them. For most interviewees engagement with Internet aesthetics consisted of browsing the Internet and social media for inspiration, but during the interviews it became clear that one also occasionally engaged in blogging about her favorite Internet aesthetic. Preference for specific Internet aesthetics was not a requirement, so the interviews covered a diverse range of Internet aesthetics.

We sampled through personal networks in the Netherlands, seeking initial entry points in multiple social spheres like friends, work, or family circles. From these, we expanded our sample through referrals from interviewees. Although the majority of the sample was Dutch or located in the Netherlands, this snowballing process resulted in two interviewees being based in Italy as well. We paid attention to any differences in the data that could be attributed to the nation where respondents were based, but we found no indication whatsoever of differences in how people based in Italy related to Internet aesthetics compared to those situated in the Netherlands.

Although gender was not a sampling criterion, we were only able to find respondents who identified as female. They were 21 to 26 years old, and most lived in the Netherlands, but coming from different European locations. We believe that the limited age range and the over-representation of women in our sample might indicate important characteristics of the predominant audience for Internet aesthetics, to which we will return in the [conclusion](#). As is common in phenomenological research (Hennink and Kaiser, 2022; Saunders, *et al.*, 2018), we stopped adding interviewees to the sample when most themes started to recur, suggesting theoretical saturation. Interviews were conducted through Zoom or Skype, complying with measures to counter COVID-19 at the time of the study. Interviewees are identified by pseudonyms in quotes presented below.

Interviews started with interviewees providing general demographic and occupational information about themselves. Subsequently, we inquired about their preferred Internet aesthetic, gradually moving towards more specific questions regarding how they would characterize a particular Internet aesthetic, explain it, and relate cultural objects to it. In some cases, we went with interviewees to Aesthetics Wiki through screen sharing options, prompting them for their opinions on how their preferred Internet aesthetics were catalogued. Finally, we asked interviewees questions about the uses and daily meaning they attribute to Internet aesthetics. [Appendix B](#) presents an overview of interview topics.

Once interviews were completed, we proceeded to analyzing raw interview data first by closely re-reading the transcripts of each interview. Our concern during this stage was to look for similarities and differences in the ways that interviewees described their experiences of Internet aesthetics. For instance, we observed how, in a few instances, interviewees would openly relate Internet aesthetics to their “previous” selves during their childhood and teenage years. Another common theme across interviews was a sense of “as if you were there”, as interviewees almost unanimously associated consuming a certain Internet aesthetic with a cognitive experience of feeling transported to other times and places. This analysis resulted in seven phenomenological themes.

Having observed this initial set of commonalities, we then proceeded to interpret them more closely. Here, our concern was no longer only looking for commonalities across interviews, but also to see how each experiential theme could be made sense of in relation to other phenomenological elements of interviews. For instance, we observed that, across interviews, the theme “As if you were there” was closely connected with the theme “Capturing the essence”. Both themes were underlined by a sense of capturing something (through the Internet aesthetic) which must be experienced in order to be understood. Thus, both themes could be merged together into an overarching theme. At the end of this part of the analysis, we were able to compress our initial seven themes into three broad phenomenological categories, which we believe covers the wealth of accounts that our interviewees described of Internet aesthetics.

3.2. Phenomenological interview results

a. Toolkits for experience and multiple preferences

We started the interviews by asking about interviewees’ broad understanding of what Internet aesthetics are in their mind. The following are a few of the answers given:

“It’s hard to say, really ... it’s a style that entails all types of things. The books I like to read, the movies I watch, but also

the kind of atmosphere I want. It's like a style and a combination of interests, all in one. It's just a vibe." Martina (Dutch, prefers 'dark academia').

"An Internet aesthetic for me is a sensory package of things I enjoy or find pleasing, like visuals, music." Jane (Dutch, prefers 'cottagecore').

"I think it's just a group of everything ... the fashion, people, furniture, it's just a way to express your taste." Rebecca (Welsh, prefers 'victorian').

These statements show Internet aesthetics being considered by interviewees as compendiums. Moreover, they unanimously expressed a level of enthusiasm as they described how Internet aesthetics encapsulate the things that they enjoy in life, associating these categories with different practical applications in their routines.

This compendium dimension seems inherent in the very construction of Internet aesthetics. Illustrating this, [Figure 3](#) reproduces a social media post which one of our interviewees regarded as illustrative of what 'dark academia' means. Here we observe how cultural references, leisure activities, and visual styles are brought together in a complex composition, associating them through a singular interpretive key.



Figure 3: ‘Dark academia’, according to one interviewee, Instagram: @Quirinebrouwer.

For Rebecca, ‘victorian’ could be used either for interiors or for dressing. Her preferred use of the Internet aesthetic, however, is in decoration ideas, trying to recreate a Victorian-inspired atmosphere with the aid of candles and furniture. Similarly, Jane talked about ‘cottagecore’ being “like Christmas decoration”:

“you can celebrate Christmas by having a simple Christmas tree or you can go all out and do all the decorations ... With

cottagecore [it] is the same, you can be into cottagecore and have small elements embedded in it, or you can go all out and have all the extra elements. The whole sensory experience. I would put myself in the middle, it really depends on my mood. It reflects on my room, but not on other parts of my life.” Jane (Dutch, prefers ‘cottagecore’).

Maaïke (Dutch) considers ‘art hoe’ her favorite Internet aesthetic. ‘Art hoe’ (or ‘art mom’) is described on Aesthetics Wiki as centered around a love for art in combination with attention to nature and sustainability. Flower paintings, bucolic activities such as flower-picking, and the color yellow are prominent in this Internet aesthetic. For Maaïke, ‘art hoe’ manifests itself mostly in her music preferences, and in finding inspiration to live her passion for sustainability and art.

Exploring further how interviewees associated Internet aesthetics with practical applications in their routines, they often mentioned that they preferred different Internet aesthetics at different times. For example:

“I change all the time, depending on my mood. In the winter I am more into dark artsy stuff, in the summer I’m more into light, fun stuff, it really depends ... When it’s spring, I’m more into light stuff and more colorful stuff and 70s aesthetics is all that.” Martina (Dutch, prefers ‘dark academia’).

“The aesthetics that I like really depend on my mood of the day. On Sundays, when it’s sunny, I really enjoy aesthetic images that give me this summer feeling.” Jane (Dutch, prefers ‘cottagecore’).

Jane, who strongly connects ‘cottagecore’ to morning walks, went on to explain that in those moments the scenarios and imaginaries of this Internet aesthetic “flow” into her activity, representing “the things I would like at that moment. They give me a warming feeling”. Asked to elaborate on how the Internet aesthetic comes to play into that moment, Jane said:

“It’s the dreaminess ... Recently, I really enjoy looking at pictures of large houses in Italy and having that sensory experience of imagining myself not being rich, but being in Italy and enjoying a piece of bread and being in the garden. So, it’s something that’s always in the back of my head, pops up here and there, it just flows into multiple things.” Jane (Dutch, prefers ‘cottagecore’).

Later in the interview, Jane stated to prefer ‘dark academia’ for movie choices and moments of study.

In a similar vein, Martina explained that:

“When I read something that belongs to dark academia, or watch a movie, I suddenly feel like writing poetry, because I get inspired by it, then suddenly I feel like doing it ... If I watch a lot of dark academia movies, I might be more inspired to light the candles and read something really interesting.” Martina (Dutch, prefers ‘dark academia’).

Similar to Jane, Martina’s interest in ‘dark academia’ seemed to be rather seasonal. Thus, adherence to or preference for specific Internet aesthetics is subject to changes in the interviewees’ subjective mood, their

circumstances, or simply what they are doing at a certain moment.

Internet aesthetics, thus, clearly operate as resources for practical use. The cultural repertoires of Internet aesthetics (for instance, music or decorative objects) are selectively employed by individuals to give meaning to their own experiences by mentally aligning lived realities with those of Internet aesthetics.

This dynamic resembles Swidler's (1986) conceptualization of culture as a toolkit for action. According to Swidler, a social group's culture is comprised of symbols, such as ways of speaking, art, or beliefs, employed by agents to reach personal goals when following strategies of action. Swidler's toolkit metaphor considers the meaning of symbols to emanate from widely held conventions within cultural communities (e.g., subcultures). In this sense, DeNora's (1999) study on music consumption presents a complementary interpretation to the toolkit approach by zooming in on the practical, daily strategic uses of cultural symbols. Through in-depth interviews, DeNora uncovered how music consumption provides means for self-interpretation, for the articulation of a self-image, and for harmonizing different emotional states associated with the self. In this process, the widely held meanings of songs were often subverted through alternative personal, biographical interpretations, with the sole purpose of aiding in the articulation of a coherent self-image.

In sum, Internet aesthetics are mobilized selectively, depending on the situation, as heterogeneously composed practical toolkits. Yet, neither Swidler nor DeNora considered cultural toolkits as identifiable systems of classification, bringing together tools under an aggregating label. Their "toolkits" did not have a name, like 'cottagecore' or 'art hoe'. This begs the question why individuals choose to categorize these toolkits, to give a name to the Internet aesthetics that they use.

b. Subjective coherence

To understand the existence of Internet aesthetics as socially shared categories, we will now consider two points where interviews converged: a rather open attitude towards the inclusion of certain objects within an Internet aesthetic and, related, the lack of agreement regarding what objects should be included in an Internet aesthetic. At the root of these dynamics seem to be largely subjective connections between objects and how each interviewee imagined certain experiences.

Sophia is a Dutch student in her mid-twenties interested in 'cottagecore' and 'anemoiacore', an Internet aesthetic centered around visuals and sounds that relate to a longing for a past that never existed (<https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Anemoiacore>). Visiting the Aesthetics Wiki entry of 'cottagecore' with Sophia and asking her opinion on the composition of the entry, she explained that she disagreed that the movie *Call me by your name* (2017) should be listed:

“I would call it more anemoiacore. It takes place in the Mediterranean, where it's not really about cozy houses, it's about summer and big houses, and when I look at the visuals of the movie it is a lot simpler, there is not even a cottage there, the clothes they wear have nothing to do with farming.” Sophia (Dutch, prefers 'cottagecore' and 'anemoiacore').

Similarly, she disagreed with listing the movie *Barbie & the diamond castle* (2008), explaining that: “when I think about Barbie, it's more about Beverly Hills, fashion, it has nothing to do with farming.”

For Sophia, the Studio Ghibli movie *My neighbor Totoro* (1988) exemplified well what 'cottagecore' was about. Later, she also identified the movie *The secret world of Arrietty* (2010) as “probably the best example” of 'cottagecore' listed by the Aesthetics Wiki entry, because “there you have this very cottagecore vibe, at least the way I imagined cottagecore.” When asked why this was the case specifically, she explained:

“It has these summer vibes, a dream-like state these lens flares where the world becomes kind of ‘glowy’, dream-like. The placement already, very much in nature, with hills around it, lots of plants and big, chunky trees. I imagine that to be part of cottagecore. This fantasy environment, houses, wells, little ponds.” Sophia (Dutch, prefers ‘cottagecore’ and ‘anemoiacore’).

It is noteworthy how Sophia’s best examples of ‘cottagecore’ were both Japanese animations. This seemed to be a common thread in the materials of a number of the Internet aesthetics studied (as previously observed in the case of ‘traumacore’ and ‘lolita’ as well). This might stem from their rather distilled and stereotypical representations of Western realities, originally aimed at Asian consumers. Needing to speak clearly to how these audiences popularly conceive bucolic, Western realities, this animation is packed with visual stereotypes and exaggerations. The resonance between stereotypical representations of the West and ‘cottagecore’ suggests a need for clarity and simplicity in the construction of Internet aesthetics.

Interestingly, the same “summer vibe” that made Sophia discard *Call me by your name* (2017) from ‘cottagecore’, was one of the fundamental reasons why she saw *My neighbor Totoro* (1988) as a great example of this Internet aesthetic. Apparently, to her both objects presented a different portrayal of summer, which aligned with different experiences: experiencing summer at the Mediterranean coast during the 1980s (*Call me by your name*), as opposed to experiencing summer in a cottage, somewhere similar to 1900s England or North America.

Jane was prompted to explain how she thought the different artforms and activities listed within Aesthetic Wiki’s ‘cottagecore’ entry were related. She responded:

“They give me the idea of scaping my current reality. Obviously, other people live the cottagecore reality in one way or another.” Jane (Dutch, prefers ‘cottagecore’)

Jane’s awareness that ‘cottagecore’ might mean different things for different people was indeed confirmed by other interviewees’ statements. For example, Sophia ruled out one image of Aesthetics Wiki’s ‘cottagecore’ entry on the basis that it resembled too much an Italian villa, and yet the feeling of being in an Italian villa was part of what ‘cottagecore’ was for Jane.

When asked what made objects fit within ‘dark academia’, Lia (Italian) explained that objects or activities must be connected to or reflect a rather specific study experience: “I think it could be described as antique objects, antique places. And a deep sense of depression.” Elaborating on this answer, Lia explained:

“Dark academia sets an idea those old poets that would die for their beloved, or the old Greek killing themselves for an ideal, so it’s all very ... it’s also very well-educated, very high class, with this idea that knowledge and growth, and depth, come with pain. So, this idea that poetry will only come if you suffer, knowledge will only come if you write until your finger bleeds, so it’s ... I think that’s it, depression, sadness, emotion, it’s always there.” Lia (Italian, prefers ‘dark academia’)

During her inspection of the ‘art hoe’ entry on Aesthetics Wiki (https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Art_Hoe), Maaïke pointed out the listing of “micro-bangs” on the fashion section of the page. She said that “you see them a lot in art school. So, I think that definitely fits.” Likewise, she considered indie music part of this Internet aesthetic due to that style’s capacity of suiting “the mentality and life attitude of an artist.”

Taken together, interviewees' descriptions of Internet aesthetics as well as their reasons for including/excluding and justifying examples within Internet aesthetics lead to two conclusions. On the one hand, their conceptualizations of the same Internet aesthetic often varied greatly, even to the extent to be at odds. On the other hand, interviewees shared a subjective sense of structure, of organization. This personally attributed meaning appeared to reflect a sense of experience which seemed central to understanding objective properties that surfaced from content analysis.

In the case of Lia's passion for dark academia, the imagined life of a "genuine" early 1900s, Anglo-American intellectual or university student provided the experiential frame from which she abstracted 'dark academia' material. Although there were clear resemblances with Martina's and Jane's views on 'dark academia', Lia emphasized study and poetry, whereas the other two interviewees thought of "dark plots" and somewhat "posh" demeanors. When discerning which cultural objects belonged within 'art hoe', Maaïke related to how she imagined the experience of being an (ecologically minded) art student. Thus, songs must resemble art students' assumed mentalities, dressing styles need to reflect those found, according to Maaïke, in the halls of art schools.

These differences were understandable when we take into account the centrality of subjectivity in the meaning-making around Internet aesthetics, and interviewees seemed to be very much aware and accepting of it. This excerpt from Maaïke's interview exemplified that:

"Everyone is different, I don't think there should be rules, like 'this doesn't fit into this aesthetic'. If you feel you are part of this community, it's always up to you to decide for yourself what that would look like for you. But look at the themes that are really at the essence of this aesthetic." Maaïke (Dutch, prefers 'art hoe')

he openness to diverging views and lack of agreement of interviewees on what constitutes an Internet aesthetic both echoed the linkage texts explored in content analysis, with their emphasis on exemplification and an open-ended nature. On the basis of our content analysis, we had proposed that Internet aesthetics grouped objects not according to their sensorial characteristics — their inherent aesthetic properties, as the term is philosophically understood (De Clercq, 2002). Interview data seemed to back our conclusions by demonstrating that subjective and largely associative connections between cultural materials and imagined experiences served as the main classificatory criteria for interviewees.

Combined with the toolkit function that Internet aesthetics were found to provide, this finding supports the interpretation that Internet aesthetics have been used by individuals to give meaning to their own personal life experiences by fitting them into a larger class of experiences.

Individuals made sense of situations by considering them as an instance of an Internet aesthetic, turning Internet aesthetics into lenses through which they saw the world. For instance, when they are studying, writing, or reading in winter, 'dark academia' gave Martina and Jane the "vibe" of being 1900s Oxford or Yale students involved in some "dark plot". They mentally framed their actions as if they took place in another context. When, instead, Jane was going for a morning walk on a sunny day, or listening to music at home, 'cottagecore' took her to Mediterranean villas or English cottages in simpler times. 'Art hoe' transported Maaïke to agricultural communities, art schools, or forests during relaxing activities such as drawing or learning about sustainability.

Thus, different Internet aesthetics were for interviewees formulae through which to reach certain psychological states by the meaningful consumption of cultural objects. These objects were largely borrowed from existing cultural categories (for instance "indie music" or "classical literature"), assembled together as a toolkit.

In this regard, Internet aesthetics introduce a paradox: individuals seek to give meaning and structure to

their subjective experiences through recontextualization, yet they resort to widely available pre-constructed labels. In other words, Internet users perform this most subjective and individual mental operation of transmuting their perceptions of reality, only to reclassify their inner experiences as that of a widely shared myth borrowed from the Internet. While these categories might be re-defined and reformulated on a subjective level, individuals paradoxically stick to labels like ‘cottagecore’ or ‘dark academia’. This begs the question of what kind of subjective purpose this sought-after structure responds to.

c. Aesthetic aid in the quest for a coherent self

Internet aesthetics provide individuals a structured and coherent view of their reality, as they align lived experiences to the experiences of Internet aesthetics with the aid of specific cultural repertoires. Our interviews suggested that such a quest for coherence ultimately contributed to shaping and performing certain identities. As individuals brought coherence to different life events through aesthetic lenses, this process, in turn, afforded them a coherent self-image. The following statements illustrate how interviewees acknowledged an affinity between Internet aesthetics that they consumed and their sense of self:

“I think I’m very much a dreamer, I daydream a lot, and this kind of images, this aesthetic, makes me want to imagine that I am in this place. So, if I see a painting of people sitting and painting in nature, or a beautiful painting of someone in nature it looks so peaceful and so nice, and I think ‘oh I want this life in the future’, it makes me feel so relaxed.” Maaïke (Dutch, prefers ‘art hoe’)

“When I was younger, I was the only one who read books in my school, and people thought it was lame, but in this aesthetic it’s cool to be like that ... I think I somehow really like that pretentious aspect, I really like reading, I like classics, I like mythology, so the things that belong to dark academia are also interesting to me.” Martina (Dutch, prefers ‘dark academia’)

“I used it a lot during harder study periods ... because it filled an emptiness, it gave sense to my feelings of loneliness, isolation ... they found place in that atmosphere. My work writing school texts, creating new things ... I found that I could see the same things by going through pictures, songs, movies ... and it gave new value to what I was going through.” Lia (Italian, prefers ‘dark academia’)

Maaïke exemplified how she admired a painting that she came across on the Internet, characterizing it as her ideal visualization of ‘art hoe’. She described spending a good amount of time looking at it (Figure 4) and being fascinated by the lifestyle and ambience described in it, aspects that she aspired for her own life.



Figure 4: Maaike’s ideal visualization of ‘art hoe’, art by Phoebe Wahl, Instagram: @Phoebewahl.

Interviewees made more or less explicit connections between Internet aesthetics and their life trajectories. This is exemplified in the following passages, when interviewees answered how Internet aesthetics first appealed to them:

“My interest [in ‘cottagecore’] was always there, it just didn’t

have a label.” Jane (Dutch, prefers ‘cottagecore’).

“For princesscore, I really liked princess stuff and Barbie movies, it’s a huge part of my youth, so my dream was always to have like a big photo shoot with a princess dress and that kind of stuff ... For cottagecore ... I feel a little suffocated in times like these, because I’m always at home, the cottagecore aesthetic is about being outside, being with flowers ... Vaporwave has these neon colours, a little bit more futuristic, city pop type of look. When I was much younger, I was really into the alien type of stuff, so I wore like space buns, the alien t-shirt, I had the holographic backpack.” Stephanie (Dutch, prefers ‘princesscore’)

Internet aesthetics accommodated self-actualization for interviewees, allowing them to live out parts of their “true selves.” Earlier, we observed how interviewees often associated Internet aesthetics with specific moments and daily activities. Through Internet aesthetics interviewees were trying to be who they “really are” in those moments, by re-imagining their actual experiences as if they occurred in another realm. They added a layer of meaning to reality around them, which took the format of an imagined experience proposed by an Internet aesthetic.

As noted earlier, Lia saw ‘dark academia’ mostly through the heartfelt poetic struggle of writers and thinkers of the nineteenth century. These were also the ways in which she brought that Internet aesthetic into her life:

“You feel much more important if you’re writing something that is lit by a candle, it sets the mood of the old, it brings back an idea of, like, Jane Austin writing on her bed, coughing, with a candle by her side” Lia (Italian, prefers ‘dark academia’)

Interviewees, therefore, borrowed ‘cottagecore’, ‘art hoe’, or other Internet aesthetics that they identified as “my aesthetic” creating a recognizable picture of their selves, by allowing identity traits to exist and be performed while being justified within an overarching template for experiences.

In this sense, exploring a certain Internet aesthetic and selecting materials (for instance, by spending time looking at hashtags on Instagram or Pinterest boards) could be seen as expanding a toolkit to bring a larger range of experiences in line with a self-image. When users pursue their interest in an Internet aesthetic that they see as compatible with their selves, they also gain inspiration for interior decoration, books, and other forms of consumption.

Content analysis pointed out that Internet aesthetics strongly resembled myths, as proposed by Barthes (1957), in that they too agglomerated various signifiers under the premise of communicating an all-encompassing myth which was only somewhat related to the meanings of different references that constituted it. Looking at the interviews, we observed that these myths seem anchored in subjectivity and self-narratives. Ideas about self, interests, and desires to reach certain subjective states of perception seemed to prevail in meanings and uses associated with these myths. Internet aesthetics, thus, appeared to reflect and construct myths of the self: symbolic systems that afforded coherent self-images for individuals that used cultural objects, styles, and activities assembled within the label of a certain “aesthetic” to build their own self-image and signify parts of their subjectivities. In turn, individuals formed a mythological self, a self which was articulated and expressed through an array of cultural materials.

To sum up, phenomenological interviews seemed to afford an interpretation of Internet aesthetics as compendiums of cultural materials and ideas which acted as resources for practical use. Individuals applied Internet aesthetics in their daily lives by interpreting their lived realities as belonging to an imagined

experience. This experience could take many forms and meanings, with the same Internet aesthetic often having another meaning for different individuals: ‘cottagecore’ could be a farmhouse in rural England or a rustic villa in Italy. However, across instances, we observed a quest for a coherent self as the thread that seemed to connect subjective presentations and uses of Internet aesthetics. By perceiving reality through the lens of ‘dark academia’ or ‘cottagecore’, individuals in turn saw themselves as part of that world, thus bringing coherence to their (often varied) interests, hobbies, or professional obligations. Internet aesthetics were mobilized as an experiential framework (sounds, visuals, habits) of a mythical self in a self-selected time and place. Individuals mentally aligned their lived realities with the (imagined) ones of Internet aesthetics.

Discussion and conclusion: New forms of aesthetic categorization

Our findings on meaning-making surrounding Internet aesthetics point towards a dynamic of categorization where various cultural objects and activities are grouped to exemplify subjective aspects of certain experiences. These categories cluster materials which Internet users employ to interpret their own life experiences as belonging to alternative realities. In this sense, it is less surprising that certain cultural objects often belong to multiple (sometimes contrasting) Internet aesthetics. This is possible because, as the interviews made clear, they are inscribed in different imagined experiences of the world.

Similarly, Internet aesthetics occasionally feature very specific categories of objects, which grow virtually unlimitedly, according to how different individuals perceive various objects as exemplifiers of certain experiences. Again, this was corroborated by the interviews, when respondents explained how they need to envision cultural objects as part of a certain experience to discern their belonging within an Internet aesthetic. Yet, echoing linkage texts analyzed from Aesthetics Wiki, interviewees repeatedly stressed how their opinions should not be taken categorically, remaining open to the possibility that others might see different objects as part of a particular Internet aesthetic.

The apparently “felt” relationship between particular materials and the overarching Internet aesthetic seems to stem from the centrality of subjective experience within Internet aesthetics. Holding subjective experience as the main inclusion criterion and goal of an Internet aesthetic, users actively refrain from appropriating these entities and from drawing clear boundaries around them.

Interestingly, the centrality of subjectivity, which shapes Internet aesthetics, does not prevent large numbers of people from subscribing to the same categories. As exemplified by “flower growing”, cultural signs often contain properties that help their intended meaning within a symbolic system to be readily available even to those strange to the subjective vision responsible for including said object in that category. On the other hand, knowing that a certain activity (or cultural material, more broadly) might be associated with an aesthetic might be enough for users to know how to interpret that activity or object as part of an imagined experience.

Internet aesthetics blur affiliations between cultural objects and historical times, art styles, and other traditional categorizing systems. This agglomeration seems to occur with utilitarian goals: genre or style-specific categorizations, historical accuracy, geographical provenance, and other dimensions of the object can be overlooked if a certain object is found useful to indicate a certain experience.

Individuals seem to resort to Internet aesthetics as interpretive toolkits. Superimposing cultural objects and imagined sceneries over their personal experiences of reality, they frame aspects of reality as part of a deliberately self-chosen experience. Whereas traditional aesthetic categories like genres or styles group and define cultural objects intersubjectively [6], the examples contained within Internet aesthetics are consumption pathways to re-define users self-image and attain certain subjective states. Internet aesthetics users reimagine their selves as situated in different times, places or moods through cultural objects.

Interestingly, although these entities are collectively available, there appears to be little intent to bond with like-minded people, or to build a community, over the consumption of Internet aesthetics. These collectively defined categories appear to serve merely as socially provided toolkits appropriated by individuals to make sense of their own experiences.

It is worth noting that our sample of interviewees had limited diversity, both in terms of age and gender. This may be considered a serious limitation, affecting our findings. However, given the exploratory and inductive nature of our research, we did not pose any prior restrictions on the sample, but relied on referral sampling starting from various entry points, with the manifest intention to allow for a diversity of perspectives. Observing the final composition once saturation was reached, we took into account the possibility that this limited diversity may not be merely a limitation, but also a finding in its own right.

The fact that our interviewees were young adults may be attributed to this cohort being more likely to deploy engagement on the Internet. However, given our observations, it is plausible that younger individuals are more prone to resort to cultural toolkits of the kind provided by Internet aesthetics in shaping their identity. As formative stages in life, teenage years and early adulthood are periods in which people develop a sense of self and they may more avidly avail themselves of cultural materials in the process. For instance, teenagers often display posters, stickers, CD collections, furniture, and other carefully selected objects around their rooms to help gain a sense of their evolving selves and express outwardly their personalities and beliefs (Lincoln, 2014). Similarly, in previous decades, subcultures primarily attracted young people (Hebdige, 1979). Internet aesthetics seem to afford a way of perceiving the world and oneself as part of a coherent narrative, which may cater to the needs of this cohort to a larger extent than it does for older (and younger) people.

Regarding the gender profile of our sample, we considered the possibility that different genders have varying degrees of openness and willingness to talk about their attachment to certain styles or aesthetic preferences in their daily lives. In that sense, our sample of interviewees might have been limited. We cannot rule out that we might also encounter other than female voices when extending the sample further, representing different orientations towards Internet aesthetics. Still, the underrepresentation of non-female respondents in an unstructured sampling process — whether it was due to them being more difficult to access or to their relative absence — might also be considered a sign that different gender identities relate differently to the use of cultural toolkits when making sense of their life experiences. Although this was beyond the scope of an inductive exploration of meaning-making around and uses of Internet aesthetics, the role of gender in Internet aesthetics warrants further investigation. We invite research that takes gender as a sampling criterion from the outset, whether to overcome a methodological limitation, or to document any gendered characteristics of Internet aesthetics systematically.

From a broader perspective, we may speculate that Internet aesthetics are telling about societal and cultural changes. Concepts such as styles, genres, and subcultures (with the processes occurring within them) have served scholars across the social sciences and humanities as lenses through which to understand epochal changes (Alexander, 2003; Hebdige, 1988; Willis, 1978). Likewise, the findings of this research seem to position Internet aesthetics as a reaction to societal developments — more specifically, as a contradictory symptom of the postmodern condition.


In this new form of aesthetic categorization, many of the most striking traits of postmodernity can be recognized. For instance, the reinterpretation of collectively shared categories, such as different music genres and art styles. We might also see the epistemological subjection of objective reality to subjective experience, as individuals take distance from structured ways of perceiving and move towards new understandings of their experiences, of cultural objects and even of reality in the broad sense, based on their subjective needs. Another postmodern trait is border-spanning cultural consumption, which births fluid identities and heterogeneous cultural diets (Shusterman, 2009; Wilke, 1991). Postmodern creative practices such as pastiche or intertextuality are also present in Internet aesthetics, although apparently occurring without direct creative engagement with the objects they merge and reinterpret, and without giving rise to new forms of artistic expression, as opposed to, for instance, cultural bricolage (Hebdige, 1979).

Yet, the very existence of Internet aesthetics (and the uses that individuals seem to attribute to these categories) introduces a paradox in our understanding of postmodern society. If postmodernity subverts and rejects labels, elevating individual experience and sensibility above collectively shared symbols, then why do these categories arise and become such broadly shared and culturally relevant entities? If postmodernity affords and encourages heterogeneous patterns of cultural consumption and an individualized sense of identity, then why do so many Internet users gather around lists of references which aggregate extremely diverse cultural objects to (re)create a single category which is shared amongst all users? This intrinsically postmodern phenomenon seems to do exactly what postmodernity dispenses with: it creates structures for living.

In this sense, our phenomenological interviews strongly suggested that the use of these experiential toolkits answered a need to bring coherence to the self. Interviewees frequently associated their consumption of Internet aesthetics with living out (often in private settings) characteristics that they considered self-defining. Labels like ‘cottagecore’ or ‘dark academia’ lended coherence to these subjective dimensions, by serving as a label for their selves, for what they stood for, a means to provide significance to psychological moods. These individuals actively sought structures for perceiving reality, seeing themselves and their activities as part of an “aesthetic”.

Thus, the rise and popularity of Internet aesthetics seem to indicate that when the importance of social structures decreases (Shusterman, 2009; Smith-Lovin, 2007), individuals still seek structured frameworks for interpreting their reality and making sense of who they are, creating structures of their own. Internet aesthetics seem to cater to a need for subjective certainty by helping purposeful acts of perception of their own reality, whereby perception aims at “conceiving the reality to which the perceiver and actor has to respond unambiguously and clearly” [7]. For instance, willfully perceiving a walk around the block on a sunny day as part of the experience of living in the English countryside or on the Italian coast through the aid of a ‘cottagecore’ playlist; willfully perceiving one’s own reading afternoon as part of a ‘dark academia’ life through the aid of “aesthetic” images.

This research examined a considerable number of Internet aesthetics, each having different material traits, representing different ways of looking at reality. They each are a modern myth (Barthes, 1957): a system of symbols giving meaning to a larger, socially shared, narrative. The subjective application of these symbolic systems to construct coherent self-images means that Internet aesthetics can be considered as *myths of the self*. They enable the establishment of a mythological self: a self-image built through assemblages of cultural signs, which indicate parts of the subjectivities of their creators and consumers. This mythological self might be seen as a dialectical synthesis between postmodernity’s fluidity and abundance of cultural materials, and subjective needs for structure. While Internet aesthetics provide structure and recognizability to experiences of reality, they do so through rather unorthodox combinations of cultural materials and themes, through collages and pastiches. In this reality, we pin, collage, and rearrange culture to (re)create parts of ourselves through references and bits of popular culture like a Pinterest board. A label like ‘cottagecore’ brings coherence to the whole.

As Internet aesthetics grow in popularity, further research is needed to explore the cultural meanings that these myths propose. For instance, why has the bucolic, Anglo-American ‘cottagecore’ become such an appealing category across countries? What might this specific interpretive lens indicate about the anxieties, desires, or struggles of a growing number of users adopting it? Future contributions are invited into these and other questions that engage critically with the contents of Internet aesthetics. 

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Notes

1. Frow, 2015, p. 1; Tanner, 2003, p. 112.
2. Godart, 2018, p. 121.
3. “Predicates” — Goodman, 1976, p. 53
4. Goodman, 1976, pp. 53–86.
5. Barthes, 1957, p. 114.
6. Alexander, 2003, pp. 73–74; Godart, 2018.
7. Simon, 1965, p. 174.

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Appendix A: Internet aesthetics sampled from Aesthetics Wiki

Anglo Goth (https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Anglo_Gothic)

Angura Kei (https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Angura_Kei)

Atompunk (<https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Atompunk>)

Bloomcore (<https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Bloomcore>)

Bubblegum Witch (https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Bubblegum_Witch)

Cottagecore (<https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Cottagecore>)

Cyberpunk (<https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Cyberpunk>)

Dark Academia (https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Dark_Academia)

Ehtereal (<https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Ethereal>)
Fairy Kei (https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Fairy_Kei)
Fashwave (<https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Fashwave>)
Frogcore (<https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Frogcore>)
Goblincore (<https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Goblincore>)
Grandparentcore (<https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Grandparentcore>)
Hellenic (<https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Hellenic>)
Kidcore (<https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Kidcore>)
Light Academia (https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Light_Academia)
Monkeycore (<https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Monkeycore>)
Pastel Goth (https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Pastel_Goth)
Princesscore (<https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Princesscore>)
Traumacore (<https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Traumacore>)
Vaporwave (<https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Vaporwave>)
Vibrant Academia (https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Vibrant_Academia)
Virgo's Tears (https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Virgo%27s_Tears)

Appendix B: Topics for semi-structured interviews

1. Can you tell me a bit about who you are, what you do, etc?
2. What is an Internet aesthetic for you?
3. To what Internet aesthetic(s) do you consider yourself as subscribing to?
4. Could you describe this Internet aesthetic(s) a little bit, and how you came across it?
5. What goes into this aesthetic?
 - 5.1. Why does X [cultural reference made by interviewee] belong in this aesthetic?
 - 5.2. If I were trying to add something to [Internet aesthetic], for example if I had a Web page talking about this aesthetic, what should I look for in movies, activities, etc, in order to be able to see if it belongs to the aesthetic or not?
6. How is this aesthetic important in your daily life? For example, in your daily routine, your hobbies.

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