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Abstract

Starting in 2020, the rise of the "aesthetic," music playlist (playlists that appealed to a particular aesthetic or theme) had skyrocketed on Youtube. From referencing studies about the effects of isolation and creativity to directly analyzing the musical playlists themselves, this paper examines the growing trend of aesthetic playlists on social media by identifying how particular combinations of songs evoke certain creative or emotional expressions as well as what those expressions mean to the listeners in an online community. While lacking a definite or singular reason as to why it had sprung into popularity, multiple studies lend evidence to the theory that the COVID-19 lockdowns had stripped away socializing opportunities with peers and friends during key stages of development, leaving ample room and need to develop other means of sharing sentiments via online internet; aesthetic playlists thus have become a new medium of universalizing a creative effort to engage in a vague, self-written and often self-serving story with others in order to cope with the loneliness that followed months of solitude. Additionally, this paper provides an inspection of how the youth adjusts to mass trauma in the modern day.

Keywords: musical aesthetic, isolation, romanticization of solitude, social media, music therapy

The Isolated Youth's Modern Musical Aesthetic

As a platform, Youtube has a wide range of content for browsing, from educational lectures to mind-numbing, saturated entertainment videos for kids and even more. In recent years, YouTube has become a host for a new type of video, if it may be called such, which is the *aesthetic playlist*. Where YouTube has the ability to create playlists by grouping videos that will then play in succession of either added or arranged order, aesthetic playlists do not utilize this system. Instead, aesthetic playlists are a single YouTube video made by a user who compiles a list of songs under a particular context and allows them to play in order, often leading to these videos ranging from fifteen minutes to even two hours long. These aesthetic playlists evoke the creative imagination of the listener, and because the listener dictates which narrative to engage in, they also act as a source of escapism from reality and into an alternate universe of which they control.

Context

The term *aesthetic* is one often juggled loosely in the modern day, but it originates from philosophy. Shelley (2020) clarifies that since its coming to the English lexicon in the 18th century, *aesthetic* divulges "a kind of object, a kind of judgment, a kind of attitude, a kind of experience, and a kind of value" towards something (para. 1). The aesthetic exists through an object—often some form of art—as the basis for projected sentiments. The connection is formed based on the viewer's ability to connect their self to the idea presented by the art or the idea they conclude from the art. Goldman (1990) claims that aesthetic qualities "are first of all phenomenal experiences, and relations among phenomenal properties," evaluating the aesthetic through the non-physical and intangible connections that the viewer may draw from it (p. 26).

Analysis

One aesthetic playlist video's name is "you're studying in a haunted library with ghosts (dark academia playlist)" by user oliviaalee. The title entails a narrative point, which is the studying in the haunted library with ghosts, as well as the genre being clearly defined as dark academia. The dark academia genre emphasizes romanticizing and even mystifying education. The word *dark* can imply secrets and mystery, as things often obscured in darkness are difficult to clearly perceive. The title itself additionally sets the tone for the video; before even being able to listen to the contents of the playlist, a YouTube user first reads the video title for context. In this case, oliviaalee sets up an image; they use the second person point of view to directly involve the imagination of the listener and essentially invite the listener to partake in the beginnings of a guided, but self-made narrative story. With the difficulty of obtaining and retaining consistent views on such a diverse platform, many aesthetic playlists utilize this method of titling in an attempt to draw in the attention of YouTube users for popularity or revenue.

Throughout each of these playlists, regardless of genre, there is rarely ever any vocalized speech from the user that posted it. They do not tell the listener how to listen to the songs, why they chose certain songs, or their feelings about their own playlist in the video, description, or even comments. Many aesthetic playlists lack commentary from the user, leaving the listener only with the music, title, and image. By withdrawing input from the creator of the playlist, more emphasis is placed on the listener cultivating their personalized experience with the playlist and therefore, the narrative drawn from it. The aesthetic playlist gives context to a particular set of songs, potentially giving new meaning to the music by conforming to the aesthetic via the listener's conscious or even subconscious will because, as Robinson (1997) explains, instrumental music "consists simply of structures of tones with no meaning or reference outside

of themselves" (p. 1). Many classic philosophers, such as Nieztsche and Hegel, have debated whether music carries any relevance to the human soul and how meaning is drawn from a string of sounds, but modern musicologists conclude that music can "express feelings and thoughts that may be of profound human significance" through the "historical context in which a piece if composed and listened to" (Robinson, 1997, p. 3).

For example, an anonymous college student describes their experience with practicing Chopin's Nocturne Op.9 No.1 in B-flat Minor—one of the classical piano pieces used in oliviaalee's playlist—as a frustrating task when the quality of the piece felt "clumsy and rigid" compared to their expectations (p. 1). To relieve themself of this growing conflict, the student explains how they "play with [their] imagination and the music" simultaneously, such as how they perceive the tempo as "the journey of a snowflake" (p. 3); each pianist plays the piece differently based on the way they feel the music, insinuating a level of control when defining the imagery presented by the piece or the general aesthetic of the piece. In a similar fashion, listeners of oliviaalee pull their own derivative meaning from the compiled music, regardless of what meaning might have been gathered at the original compositions' release dates. The only difference between the modern listener and the previous student is that the student has no context outside of the music's sound whereas the listener is given the context of dark academia, reformulating the meaning of the songs to fit the genre.

Returning to olivaalee's playlist, there are a few qualities of the title itself that represent the very genre it belongs to. The playlist title lacks any uppercase lettering, and although it may be attributed to the fact that the internet itself does not demand strict, grammatical literacy, it also encases the aesthetic in a type of softness. Where a sentence written in full uppercase might resemble rigidity or loudness, a sentence written in full lowercase could then resemble quiet,

which matches the tone set by the contents of "studying," "haunted library," and "ghosts" that define qualities of dark academia. The title of oliviaalee's playlist concerns studying and ghosts, two wholly different categories. It crosses the line between the real (studying, academics, education) and the fictions (ghosts, supernatural), which furthers the setup of creating a new reality.

The music compiled for dark academia playlists consists mainly of European, classical pieces by famous composers such as Chopin and Tchaikovsky. Classical music was once formally reserved solely for the upper and middle class, and so, even as it is accessible and enjoyed by people of all kinds to date, it carries an air of elegance and refinement. In fact, classical music was a form of "cultural distinction [...] in which the middle classes built and maintained symbolic, cultural, and economic boundaries around their privileged spaces," and because a majority of classical music had been composed in the eighteenth to nineteenth century, much of that culture still pervades into modern day (Bull, 2019, p. 6). When merged with academia, the resulting effect is a fantasy reimagining, an alternative universe, or a romanticized version of what truly is.

One of the many factors that contribute to the imagined reality is the varying, expressive intonations of the music's sound. It is important to note the lack of vocals in any of the songs in oliviaalee's playlist; there is no human singer, only instruments in play. This works to create a sense of solitude, as direct human involvement is missing from the equation. The instrumental music also carries a slight echo, both due to the piano's use of the sustainer pedal, which draws out notes longer than they are held, as well as the added echo effect itself. The playlist carries a vastness that resembles the very library that oliveaalee invokes in the video's title, playing on both sound and imagination to bend the immediate barrier of reality akin to how a movie utilizes

sound effects to sell its level of realism. More than half of the songs are played in a minor scale—a musical pattern commonly used to express sadness or negative emotions; the quality of the song takes on a grimmer tone compared to its antithesis: the major scale. To accentuate the generalized, sad feeling, most of these pieces are played with a slower rhythm, emulating a nostalgia for a past that may or may not exist depending on how radically the listener chooses to blur the line separating fiction and reality. Coupled with the title, an image may begin to form in the listener's head, like studying alone in a library with ghosts, accompanied by nothing but cold breaths, invisible gazes, and the echo of pattering rain against the windows throughout the halls. However, solitude is not demonized or pitied in the case of dark academia. Rather, solitude is romanticized and fancied in the dark academia community, despite its overwhelming external stigma.

Solitude and Community

Isolation of the self has historically been perceived as having two sides: on one hand, isolation can lead to depression or a lack of self esteem whereas on the other, isolation can foster creativity or self reflection. Soysal and Bakalım (2021) examine the general life satisfaction of undergraduate students who willingly participate in solitude. They concluded that "there is a positive relationship between preferring to be alone and general mental health and well-being in the research they conducted with university students in emerging adulthood," mainly in terms of processing reality's struggles such as work, school, or their social life (p. 10). Similarly, listeners of dark academia may search for an idealized solitude through their cultivated experience.

The images used throughout the videos also aid the weaving of a narrative. Although the playlist is meant to be listened to, many users still implement thematic pictures for the added aesthetic. Oliviaalee's playlist alters between various images for each song. For example, during

Chopin's Nocturne op.9 no.2, a cropped, low quality picture of an open piano is laid behind the music. The content of the picture and quality are the two most important factors. The piano connects to the classical piano song itself, but also implies an artistry from the letters and scenic picture sitting above the lid. Akin to the instrumental music, the scenic picture is void of any people, emphasizing emptiness. The low resolution of the image also insinuates a history, imitating the rugged and unclear photo quality of older cameras belonging to a time long past. The visual elements of the playlist align with the audible components, but also continue the ongoing concepts of nostalgia, emptiness, and mystery with regards to academia.

Again, though the playlist's function is more to be listened to rather than watching a still image, the mixing of these senses play on the listener's emotions. Baumgartner et al. (2016) concluded that "strongest emotional reactions (experience) cannot be evoked by presenting emotional pictures alone (at least in most cases), but only by simultaneous presentation of congruent emotional musical excerpts" (p. 42). Therefore, by presenting a holistic aesthetic in more ways than just the collection of songs, the aesthetic playlist is able to garner an even stronger emotional connection to the listener and better fulfill its purpose as a gateway to escape. The appeal to multiple stimuli "can make an important contribution to an improved under-standing of the neural structures involved in emotional feelings and psychiatric disorders as depression and anxiety," implying that the connection between classical music and particular imagery may relate to mental illness as well (Baumgartner et al., 2006, p. 42). Summer (2010) expands on the potential benefits of classical music. She introduces the Guided Imagery and Music (GIM) method which is the process of introducing a set of specific classical songs to a therapist's client in order to draw out the subconscious that was previously inaccessible by other means. By utilizing classical music through the GIM method, classical music has the potential to

become an "evocative musical space for accessing unconscious thoughts, repressed memories, solutions to problems, buried positive aspects of the self, and experiences of a transpersonal or spiritual nature" (Summer, 2010, p. 20). In the specific case of dark academia (and other aesthetic playlist genres), classical music may function similarly if not the same, where the playlist maker may parallel the therapist and the listener, the client. There is also the potential that the "listener is not aware of the technical devices" that synthesize into the final, emotional product, but experiences it nonetheless (Summer, 2010, para. 27). While oliviaalee's listeners may not be able to identify how each aesthetic element works together to form dark academia, they still have a fundamental understanding of what the genre *is* at its core.

Schäfer et al. (2013) identifies the four main purposes that music serves in a person's daily life:

> "*social functions* (such as the expression of one's identity or personality), *emotional functions* (such as the induction of positive feelings), *cognitive or self-related functions* (such as escapism), and *arousal-related functions* (such as calming down or passing time)" (p. 5)

The main aspect of dark academia that separates it from standalone music is the effort to engage in escapism. While able to understand this notion through analyzing the very form and content of the playlists themselves as previously done, YouTube is equipped with a comment system, allowing room for user discussion. A majority of comments joke about their academic stresses and struggles, such as user Sky Precipitator's comment with 5.6 thousand likes:

> "**Ghosts about to haunt me**
>
> **see I'm studying quantum mechanics**
>
> Ghost: 'he's suffered enough'"

Humor acts as the force in which tension is alleviated, and further serves to create community. Bergson (1900) claims that "laughter appears in need of an echo" (p. 6); even if not the creator of the playlists, commenters participate in the community by writing and sharing their own narratives for the enjoyment of others, demonstrating both their universalized understanding of the aspects that formulate dark academia as well as their desire for control and comfort.

Control and comfort may go hand in hand. The more control a person has over a situation, the more autonomous they feel and therefore more comfortable as opposed to someone leaping into the unknown. In the case of dark academia, they may also be separate. The community aspect provides comfort on its own—the ability to relate and share ideas with a like-minded group. Given, the engagement in a community may appear strange in lieu of the solitude that is fantasized, but it is of great importance to emphasize the fact that solitude is *fantasized* and *romanticized*. While highly possible and likely that many listeners of dark academia may enjoy their time alone more than not, it is the aesthetic of being alone that they daydream of. That comfort sought through aesthetic playlists, thus, turns into a form of escapism rather than pure enjoyment.

Conclusion

Although listening to dark academia and other varying aesthetic playlist genres can be done for a multitude of innocent reasons, it is important to understand that it also serves as a means of temporarily escaping the harshness of reality. In regards to the type of people that indulge in escapism, Hirschman (2010) elaborates:

> "They were above average in seeking sensory arousal and in imaginal capacity. Further, they felt socially estranged in terms of their personal values. The construct of escapism implies that the individual uses activities as a way of

avoiding current unhappy events or getting away from anxieties" (p. 75)

The need for escapism in a person's life rises due to trauma and extreme unhappiness and paints the escapee as someone imaginative or creative, but also lonely. If escapism is closely tied to dark academia as well as other aesthetic playlists due to their function and engagement in fictional scenarios, then there, too, is a reason for why dark academia had suddenly come into being.

While difficult to pinpoint the exact date, dark academia had surged into popularity on YouTube around 2019 and 2020—the years in which COVID-19 had broken out into widespread news. With the pandemic becoming a universal cataclysm, those who felt overwhelmed by the stress of change and loss looked not to face reality, but instead to escape it by any means possible; dark academia is one of the infinite facets of escapism for said people, and more specifically, the younger generations. COVID-19 had switched many schools to online teaching for over a year, where online teaching was both difficult to adjust to for both faculty and students, causing mass distress. Young students were also deprived of their primary source of social engagement and interaction when their face-to-face schooling had been changed, even more so with the additional lockdown orders that limited hours outside for the sake of the people's safety. Socialization is incredibly important for people to form a community for ease and care, but it is even more important for younger children, teens, and even young adults to develop proper social and communication skills. Blakemore claims that "adolescents usually place elevated value on peer interactions" which leads to their constant need for social interaction and thus, they fall to the online world (as cited in Fernandez et al., 2008, p. 62). The need for socialization supplemented by social media unfortunately correlates a "strong relationship between compulsive online behaviors, symptoms of depression and loneliness"

(Fernandez et al., 2008, p. 62). Yet, the sentiment of being alone is something that dark academia revolves around so in theory, the anti-social measures taken by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention would be celebrated by dark academia enjoyers.

There is no denying that a plethora of introverts lived relatively unphased by the pandemic and had reveled in the ability to stay well within their spaces at home. However, disregarding other external factors of COVID-19 and unlike solitude, or the willingness to be alone, COVID-19 measures had *forced* isolation, therefore differentiating the effect on the youth. Rather than providing comfort and a space of ease, COVID-19 had forced the youth to find ways in which they could connect to people since it was no longer an option in real life. To cope with the sudden, traumatic change, people began to cultivate aesthetic playlists to share with others where they could find people who possessed similar interests as well as relaxation through the music itself. Dark academia was birthed primarily by and for the pains of reality.

The reason why dark academia playlists flourished on YouTube is because YouTube offers "a participatory culture in which youth can develop, interact, and learn" (Chau, 2010, p. 65). YouTube's ability to like, comment, and subscribe enables the potential to craft one's own experience and communicate with others about videos that people enjoy. Even without actively participating in writing a comment, liking a video and having the ability to see the most popular comments creates the sense of belonging and community that people may lack in reality. It is for the very same reason that dark academia was able to grow most popular on YouTube in comparison to other musical apps like Spotify, where there is little to no ability to communicate with others. While certainly the result of grief and anxiety in real life, dark academia is also formed by and requires community; it may function for the individual on a smaller scale, but at its core, relies on the creation of a community to thrive.

Of course, not all people who listen to aesthetic playlists are mentally ill or need it for therapeutic purposes. Some people like the neatly-organized collection of music rather for simpler purposes. Many comments under dark academia playlists say that the playlist music is useful in that it helps them study. Instead of utilizing the playlist to escape reality, these viewers use it to *assist* them with reality, which is not to say that they are inappropriately engaging with the genre. The effect, like aesthetic itself, changes depending on the perceiver—those with woes and deep pains will provide a different perspective on the media they engage with compared to someone with a healthier life. Yet, even still, the timing of dark academia's relevance (as well as a majority of aesthetic playlists' relevance) aligns with the start of the COVID-19 outbreak, and hundreds of comments discuss their struggles with connecting to others, losses in their life, and adjustments to the current state of reality while others ignore it wholly in favor of temporarily living in a fictional world of their creation. Regardless of the reasoning behind why one listens to aesthetic playlists, what all groups of the audience do share in common is the sharing of the community and the comfort that results from this union.

Though not harmful in plain, isolated existence, the implication that aesthetic playlists can immerse young, impressionable listeners in escapism because they do not know of any other way to cope with reality can be detrimental to their development both socially and mentally. Additionally, the aesthetic community may encourage improper coping habits like a potential echo chamber. The fact that young people seek escapism in physical solitude by engaging in mental relief or repression via aesthetic playlists may inhibit their conscious state into adulthood. By this logic, the aesthetic also diverges from its archaic meaning of art providing feeling for feelings' sake. Ngai (2012) believes that the "aesthetic experience has been transformed by the hypercommodified, information-saturated, performance-driven conditions of late capitalism,"

which goes to show that the aesthetic, and what is gained from it, has changed in accordance

with the times (p. 1). With the rise in modern historical events, old words adopt new meanings,

and *aesthetic* has become one of them. However much the aesthetic community may indulge in

escapism, be it to a healthy degree or otherwise, aesthetic playlists are not all bad in their entirety

and should not be demonized for the flaws of reality. Instead, for now, they act as a small solace

for those who must escape to a happier, calmer place and an interesting reflection of how the

youth continue to handle major changes and challenges during their essential developmental

years.

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