

Affective Politics of Aesthetics: Visual Trends and Sensory Worlds on Social Media

Shuchita Joshi¹, Dr. Atanu Bhattacharya²

¹Doctoral Scholar, Department of English Studies, School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies, Central University of Gujarat, Kundhela, Vadodara, Gujarat

²Professor, Department of English Studies, School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies, Central University of Gujarat, Kundhela, Vadodara, Gujarat

Abstract

This paper examines how social media aesthetics function as affective infrastructures that shape user participation and identity formation on digital platforms, specifically Instagram. Moving beyond conventional notions of aesthetics as visual trends, it analyses how aesthetic styles such as Minimalism, Dark Academia, Cottagecore, and Vanilla Girl operate as affective modalities producing distinct emotional atmospheres and sensory experiences. Drawing on Brian Massumi's (2002) theorization of affect as pre-individual intensity, Sara Ahmed's (2004) concept of affective economies, and Teresa Brennan's (2004) model of transmission of affect, the paper demonstrates how these aesthetics circulate moods and feelings that exceed individual expression to create collective affective environments. It also proposes the concept of 'atmospheric technologies' to capture how social media aesthetics, through curated visuals and platform affordances, generate ambient moods that users inhabit and circulate. The analysis reveals that platforms serve as affective infrastructures, designed to amplify content based on its capacity for emotional resonance rather than its textual meaning. Users perform affective labour through curated visuals and stylistic choices to sustain coherent identities, operating within platform logics of visibility and shareability that inherently reinforce social hierarchies of race, class, and cultural privilege. The paper argues that even aesthetics appearing to resist neoliberal values, such as Cottagecore's pastoral retreat or Dark Academia's intellectual melancholy, are absorbed into platform economies that transform affect into marketable, shareable content, illustrating how contemporary digital culture packages emotions into standardized aesthetic modes.

Keywords: Affect Theory, Social Media Aesthetics, Digital Platforms, Instagram, Aesthetic Curation

Introduction

On social media, aesthetics have moved beyond isolated posts to encompass broader curatorial practices and lifestyle trends that shape how individuals present themselves. This is not limited to setting a mood, atmosphere, or 'vibe' – a term widely used in social media discourse. According to Aesthetics Wiki (an online encyclopaedia of social media aesthetics), "Aesthetics have now come to mean a collection of images, colours, objects, music, and writings that create a specific emotion, purpose, and community." As aesthetic trends circulate across platforms, they do more than influence taste; they create affective worlds that invite users to inhabit particular moods, desires, and modes of being. This paper examines how social media aesthetics function as affective forces that shape user participation by analysing three prevalent

aesthetics on Instagram (an image and video sharing platform): Minimalism, Dark Academia, and Cottagecore. Additionally, the analysis extends to trends like Vanilla Girl to demonstrate the breadth and variety of affective operations across different visual-emotional registers on social media platforms. Each of these aesthetics operates distinctly as an affective mode – Dark Academia’s melancholic intellectualism cultivates nostalgia for scholarly tradition, Cottagecore’s pastoral romanticism generates desires for rural simplicity and handicraft, while Minimalism’s stripped-back visual language produces feelings of clarity and control. The Vanilla Girl aesthetic, with its emphasis on understated elegance and ‘clean’ femininity, mobilizes different affective investments around aspirational simplicity and palatability. While each aesthetic presents its own distinctive visual vocabulary and emotional tenor, this paper does not treat these cases exhaustively as isolated phenomena. Rather, they serve as strategically selected entry points into broader mechanisms that highlight how aesthetic styles operate as affective modes producing shared sensory experiences, and how users interact with them through forms of affective labour. Though on the surface their visual coherence seems to be the compelling force, they draw users in through the way they feel and the atmosphere that they create via their materiality, cultural framing, and tone. Examining these diverse and prominent Instagram aesthetics demonstrates that their affective dimension is not incidental to their circulation but central to how they function as organizing structures for identity, belonging, and participation on social media platforms. Despite the growing ubiquity of these affective-aesthetic formations in digital culture, there is a paucity of literature analysing social media aesthetics within the framework of affect theory, and this paper aims to fill that gap by contributing to the scholarship in the field.

Theoretical Framework

This paper’s analytical approach draws on three complementary strands of affect theory to understand how social media aesthetics function as affective infrastructures. Building on Brian Massumi’s seminal work *Parables for the Virtual* (2002), affect here is understood not as a personal emotion, but as a “pre-individual”, “transpersonal” force (p. 121) circulating through digital networks, creating energetic charges that exceed individual subjective experiences. Massumi’s formulation is particularly valuable for analysing social media because it accounts for how bodily responses occur before conscious interpretation. This pre-cognitive dimension is precisely what platform architectures exploit by designing interfaces that prioritize rapid, affective engagement over reflective deliberation. Social media capitalizes on the body’s capacity to be moved before the mind can evaluate or resist. By examining how aesthetic forms generate, circulate, and modulate emotional experiences, the paper aims to explore intricate mechanisms through which digital visual cultures create immersive sensory environments and negotiate the boundaries between individual and collective experience.

Further, Sara Ahmed’s (2004) theorisations of “affective economies” and the “stickiness” (p. 120) of affects are extrapolated to explain how certain styles become emotionally charged through repetition and shared engagement on social media. Ahmed’s (2004) framework extends this analysis to the cultural and ideological dimensions of aesthetic circulation. Her concepts of “circulation” and “attachment” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 119) help illuminate how social media aesthetics are not merely individual expressions of taste but participate in larger affective structures that assign cultural meaning to visual styles through iterative encounter and engagement. This is crucial for understanding why certain aesthetics gain traction while others fail to resonate; they become sticky repositories of collectively generated feeling that users recognize, reproduce, and reinforce through their curatorial practices. As affects stick to particular visual

arrangements of an aesthetic, they simultaneously shape how users understand and perform their identities. Choosing an aesthetic becomes a way of aligning oneself with a recognizable affective register that, to others, conveys the moods and values one embodies or aspires to embody.

Teresa Brennan's (2004) theory of the 'transmission of affect' provides the third strand of this framework, emphasising how affect moves between people, influencing moods and states of being. Brennan argues that affect is not contained within individuals but is "socially contagious," as emotional states are shaped by our surroundings and interactions (p. 6). On social media platforms, this transmission is both enabled and amplified by the infrastructural design of feeds, algorithms, and engagement metrics. Users become affectively entangled with visual-emotional worlds not in isolation but through networked encounters that spread moods virally across communities. The analysis of Minimalism, Dark Academia, Cottagecore, and Vanilla Girl aesthetics demonstrates this transmission in action, revealing how users become affectively entangled with these visual-emotional worlds through scrolling, saving, recreating, and sharing content. Grounded in these theoretical approaches, this paper understands social media aesthetics as operating like what might be called 'atmospheric technologies' – visual, stylistic, and algorithmic arrangements that generate and modulate ambient moods, shaping the collective affective potentials available to users. The term 'atmospheric' is employed to explain that these aesthetics work environmentally rather than representationally, as they create conditions of feeling that users enter into and inhabit, much as one enters a room and feels its mood before analysing its contents. The 'technology' aspect emphasizes that these atmospheres are not naturally occurring but engineered through deliberate curatorial choices, platform affordances, and algorithmic amplification. While 'affective infrastructures' refers to the broader platform conditions that organise circulation, and 'affective modes' highlight the stylistic and sensory orientations of particular aesthetics, the notion of 'atmospheric technologies' captures the concrete mechanisms through which curated visuals, stylistic conventions, and platform affordances engineer and circulate affect. These are dynamic systems of affective production and circulation, where form, infrastructure, and user practices interact to create immersive sensory worlds. Together, Massumi (2002), Ahmed (2004), and Brennan (2004) provide a layered framework for analysing how social media aesthetics operate as active sites of affective circulation on digital platforms, mobilizing collective sensory experiences while simultaneously shaping individual modes of feeling, belonging, and self-presentation.

Understanding Affect

Figure 1: Representative of the Minimalism Aesthetic (Source: Creative Commons)



Figure 2: Representative of the Cottagecore Aesthetic (Source: Creative Commons)



Figure 3: Representative of the Dark Academia Aesthetic (Source: Creative Commons)



What do these images (see figures 1-3) represent? What sense do you get from them? What feelings do they evoke, if any? Before one thinks, articulates, or acts, one feels. Affect theory seeks to understand this pre-verbal, sensory register of experience, and how emotions circulate, move, and attach themselves to environments, images, and people. Affect shapes how we engage with the world around us, as it is not housed in the individual but emerges in encounters of a body with another owing to the body's "power (or potential) to affect or be affected" (Massumi, 2002, p. 15). This formulation repositions affect as fundamentally relational rather than possessive. It is not something one has, but something that happens

between us and the surrounding world. When Massumi invokes the body's capacity to affect and be affected, he is drawing on a Spinozist understanding that challenges the bounded, autonomous subject of liberal humanism. Here, the 'body' is not just an individual or biological entity or a fixed object, but a relational and dynamic one. It is defined by its openness to encounters. A body, in this expanded sense, might be a human organism, but it could equally be an image, a sound, a space, or even a digital interface; it entails anything capable of entering into relations that produce change. It is understood in terms of its capacity to enter into "relations of movement and rest" (Spinoza, 1985 as cited in Massumi, 2002, p. 15), i.e., how it responds and how it enters into relations with other bodies, environments, and objects. This does not refer to literal physical motion but to states of intensity, receptivity, and transformation, and the ways bodies (again, broadly conceived) compose and decompose, enhance or diminish each other's capacities.

Affect emerges in this encounter in the space between bodies, in moments of intensity that precede conscious thought or understanding. It is sensorial; the body reacts to and transforms through these interactions, often preceding language and cognition. To say that affect precedes cognition is not to suggest it is primitive or meaningless, but rather that it operates on a register where meaning has not yet solidified into recognizable forms. It is the moment of potentiality before interpretation crystallizes – a visceral pull, a subtle shift in breathing, a quickening or slowing of attention. This pre-cognitive dimension is precisely what makes affect so powerful in digital environments designed for rapid scrolling and instant reactions. On social media, where aesthetics are curated with the aim to trigger immediate, visceral responses, this capacity of the body "to affect and be affected" (Massumi, 2002, p. 15) becomes important to understand why and how viewers engage with such content. Social media platforms function as vast assemblages of affecting and affected bodies as images encounter eyes, colour palettes meet nervous systems, and curated grids interface with algorithmic logics. Each aesthetic, whether the muted tones of Vanilla Girl, the amber-lit nostalgia of Dark Academia, or the sun-drenched pastoralism of Cottagecore, operates as an affective proposition that invites the viewer into a particular mode of feeling before any cognitive assessment occurs. It is saturated with images and videos to create a mood, atmosphere, or a relatable 'vibe' that makes it a prime site for the circulation and movement of affect.

The affective charge of social media leaves out language and articulation to an extent as we double-tap, react using emoticons, scroll past, or share something not because we have processed it consciously and rationally, but because it moves or affects us in a certain way, creating a shift in our sensory state that demands onward transmission. These micro-gestures (the double-tap, the save, the doomscrolling) are themselves affective registers, bodily responses that occur in the gap between stimulus and reflection. They are not private but part of a broader affective economy where moods and intensities are produced, circulated, and shared. An affective economy, as Sara Ahmed (2004) theorizes it, describes how emotions circulate between bodies and signs, accruing value and power through repetition and exchange, and do not simply reside in individuals. On social media, this economy becomes hyper-visible where certain aesthetics gain affective momentum as they are repeatedly encountered, saved, recreated, and shared, while others fail to generate the same charge and fade from feeds. The platform architecture itself, through algorithms that reward engagement, interfaces that facilitate rapid circulation, and metrics that quantify resonance, structures and amplifies these affective economies. This is especially highlighted in curatorial aesthetic practices where form and senses are tightly intertwined. When users curate their feeds according to a particular aesthetic by maintaining colour consistency, selecting images that align visually and atmospherically, and editing out elements that disrupt the mood, they are also engineering affective

environments along with the visual arrangements. Especially in the case of professional content creators, each aesthetic choice is a decision about what feelings will be amplified, what sensory experiences will be invited, and what affective rhythms will structure the viewer's encounter with the profile. The coherence of an aesthetic feed is thus both visual and affective, holding together through images that share a common look while simultaneously generating a consistent emotional frequency through a recognizable atmospheric quality that viewers can return to, inhabit, and become part of through their own engagement.

Emotions, Feelings, and Affect

The conceptual boundaries between affect, emotion, and feeling remain a site of productive tension within affect theory, with some scholars drawing clear distinctions among these concepts and others emphasising their fluidity and overlap. Considering the theoretical frameworks central to this paper, it is important to note that while Sara Ahmed (2004) does not explicitly distinguish between affect and emotion, both Teresa Brennan (2004) and Brian Massumi (2002) differentiate affect from emotion. Brennan's (2004) framework emphasises affective transmission over qualification, theorising affect as fundamentally intersubjective, whereas Massumi focuses on the individual's phenomenological experience. This proves crucial for analysing social media aesthetics, as these three theoretical lenses allow us to track affect at multiple scales. Massumi attends to the micro-level of bodily encounter and helps in understanding how platforms exploit individual bodily responses before conscious recognition (the individual scrolling, pausing, feeling pulled toward an image). Brennan traces the meso-level of interpersonal and networked transmission, illuminating how moods and atmospheres circulate virally through digital networks and spread contagiously through communities of users. Ahmed maps the macro-level of cultural sedimentation, explaining how aesthetics accumulate ideological meaning through repetition and become sticky repositories of collective meaning. Each theorist addresses a different temporal and spatial dimension of how affect operates, making their combined framework particularly generative for understanding the multi-layered affective dynamics of social media.

Moreover, Brian Massumi's (2002) influential formulation establishes a clear distinction between affect, emotion, and feeling as they "follow different logics and pertain to different orders" (p. 27). While affect is immediate, physiological, and a raw, pre-conscious intensity, emotion is a culturally-shaped conscious labelling of affect, and feeling is a private and personal expression of emotions that can persist or evolve over time. Dewsbury (2009) notes that "the distinction can be grasped as a spectrum from the autonomy of affect in its open, impersonal, and unqualified form, to its capture and expression in the qualified forms pertaining to emotion ... Emotions are usefully understood as tangible manifestations of affect" (p. 23). Similarly, Massumi, while theorizing the difference between affect and emotion, states that "An emotion is a subjective content, the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience ... Emotion is a qualified intensity ... It is intensity owned and recognized" (p. 28). He further remarks that an emotion or feeling is "a recognized affect, an identified intensity as reinjected into stimulus-response paths ... into subject-object relations" (p. 61). This paper employs these terms based on these distinctions – Affect as a raw, pre-subjective and pre-linguistic intensity; it is a bodily response that exists before it is consciously recognised or categorised. Emotion, on the other hand, is the socially and linguistically mediated version of that raw intensity. It is the retroactive labelling of affect into recognisable categories. Feeling is the private experience of an individual; it is personal and internal, shaped by individual context, memory, and cognition. For instance, though at the expense of oversimplification, the Dark Academia aesthetic uses moody lighting, vintage books, and tweed textures (Murray, 2023, p. 350) to trigger a bodily sense of

intrigue (affect), which users collectively frame as “intellectual romance” (emotion), before individuals attach personal memories or critiques to it (feeling). Returning to Figure 3, this progression can be tracked more granularly through the example of a user scrolling through Instagram, drawn to scholarly pursuits, intellectual aesthetics, or romanticized visions of academic life. When they encounter an image of a dimly lit study, their body responds before thought (pupils dilate, scrolling slows, attention catches). This is affect: pure intensity, not yet qualified. Next, cultural frameworks come into play. The warm amber lighting, leather-bound books, and wood panelling are recognized as cues of ‘Dark Academia,’ and the sensation is named as intellectual, romantic, or nostalgic. This is emotion: affect captured within available discourse. Finally, the user’s relationship deepens as they might recall studying late in their university library, or feel critical of the aesthetic’s Eurocentric elitism, or experience longing for an intellectual life from which they feel excluded. This is feeling: the personal, reflective layer where emotion becomes entangled with biography and critique.

Here, the materials help curate an affect that draws on Victorian-era objects for intellectual work – a historical appropriation of objects from a bygone era that conjures the aura of burning the midnight oil and cultivates a brooding atmosphere. In this sense, the medium is indeed the message (McLuhan, 1967) as the objects once central to 18th – 19th century intellectual life are repurposed to stage a retro or vintage media aesthetic, where media stretches beyond audio-visual culture to encompass material props and environments. McLuhan’s formulation takes on new resonance here, for what matters is not the objects’ original functions (quill pens for writing, oil lamps for illumination) but what they mean as media that transmit and generate affect. Circulating on Instagram, these objects become an affective technology that communicates scholarly seriousness, temporal depth, and aesthetic refinement. In this process, the material object itself becomes a medium for circulating mood, demonstrating how social media aesthetics extend media theory’s purview from mass communications to the curated circulation of objects-as-atmosphere.

Social Media as Affective Infrastructure

The question, ‘What’s your aesthetic?’ emerges even before one creates a public Instagram profile, as the platform is designed to prioritise feeds and content that appear visually cohesive and thematically consistent. In practice, asking someone about their aesthetic is akin to asking, ‘How do you put yourself together?’ – a phrase that resonates with the fashion-inflected idea of ‘putting together a look.’ It is framed as a unifying quality or style that enables disparate elements to cohere into a recognizable and sustainable visual identity. The very capacity to hold together disparate elements is not just an aesthetic accomplishment but an affective one, shaped and sustained by the platform’s architecture. While the term ‘infrastructure’ typically refers to the underlying systems that support operations, the term ‘affective infrastructure’ is deployed here to refer to how social media platforms create and sustain affect through their very design; they do not function as neutral infrastructures, rather they are built to organize, amplify, and circulate affective intensities.

One of the most evident manifestations of this affective design is the platform-driven emphasis on aesthetics as a means to define oneself, which encourages individuals to articulate their identity in terms of a particular ‘look’ or ‘vibe.’ An illustrative case is the cottagecore aesthetic, characterized by pastoral imagery, vintage dresses, handmade crafts, and a nostalgic, romanticized vision of rural life (see figure 2). It does more than signal a personal style as it invites users to present themselves within a specific emotional and visual framework. It structures the ways in which users engage emotionally with content: soft lighting,

cozy interiors, and idyllic garden scenes evoke feelings of calm, nostalgia, and comfort. By performing this aesthetic visually and affectively, users position themselves within a recognizable mood that can be easily consumed, shared, and amplified by the platform. While it gestures toward a critique of modern life and creates a fantasy of retreat that is idealised and affectively charged, it is not politically confrontational. It remains soft and non-disruptive, which aligns closely with platform dynamics that favour emotionally evocative content that is shareable and commercially viable. Identity, in this context, becomes something to be curated aesthetically and affectively for public consumption and emotional resonance. Social media's affective infrastructure operates through likes, shares, algorithmic suggestions, and feedback loops that privilege content capable of quickly generating emotional responses (Goldenberg & Willer, 2023, p. 845). It is not just the quality of content that drives its performance, but the specific 'feel' it conveys – calming, exciting, nostalgic, luxurious, or relatable. Platforms reward this capacity of content for affective resonance. The affective charge of content propels its shareability, which in turn reinforces the visibility and circulation of posts across social media platforms, creating feedback loops where certain moods and aesthetics accumulate algorithmic momentum. Algorithms further amplify such content for its ability to elicit a response from the audience, enabling certain moods and identities to circulate widely and gain traction. Textual information, arguments, or meanings circulate less effectively and gain lower engagement than the transmission of affects that is embodied in sensations, atmospheres, and moods created through visuals, as also highlighted in the business research findings that “most B2C social media literature highlights the benefits of emotional cues” (Gu et al., 2023, p. 110). Users participate in this infrastructure not just by consuming and reacting to content but by reproducing and adapting aesthetic templates and how-to guides (Davis 2025; Kenan 2025; Demeku 2025) that carry distinct emotional cues. Popular Instagram aesthetics offer a useful lens to examine the operation of affective infrastructures. As discussed above, the Cottagecore aesthetic evokes a sense of calm, slowness, and pastoral simplicity. In contrast, Minimalism as an aesthetic trend operates within the affective logic of control, tidiness, and emotional restraint. Its visual language is characterised by clean lines, neutral palettes, and uncluttered spaces that convey a sense of aspirational calm, stability, and a promise of order in the chaos of digital life (see figure 1). Its popularity not only reflects an appeal to its neat visuals but also the affective charge it carries. Based on its proponents' emphasis on productivity, it can be argued that the minimalist aesthetic resonates with neoliberal ideals of efficiency, self-discipline, and optimisation of activity on social media platforms, moulding affective intensities into predictable, monetizable patterns.

Recognising social media as an affective infrastructure requires an understanding of platforms as more than content distribution systems, as they distribute ways of feeling. Within this structure, aesthetics become a means to generate affect, providing users with recognisable templates through which they can craft, perform, and share affectively resonant identities. Such participation in this system is not limited to producing visually appealing content but also entails engaging with affective cues that secure visibility, foster a sense of belonging, and enable forms of social recognition within the social media platforms.

Aesthetics as Affective Modes

Social media aesthetics are generally understood as visual curatorial styles with specific colours, compositions, and filters. However, as argued earlier, aesthetics are more than just visual trends; they operate as affective ecosystems that curate moods, ambient narratives, and embodied feelings (affect) that circulate across platforms and gain affective force. These aesthetics function as sensory regimes that shape user engagement and participation through pre-conscious triggers, ideological storytelling, and repetitive

rituals. While participation in an aesthetic is a performative act, it is worth noting that it does not only involve adopting a particular dressing style, interior design, and other activities and elements associated with it, but participating in an aesthetic also encompasses embodying a specific affective state and signalling the same to viewers through visual narratives, atmosphere, and captions. Such participation and engagement is not a passive act; rather, it entails “affective labour” (Hardt & Negri, 2001, p. 293), which involves both emotional and creative effort of creating content that aligns with a particular aesthetic framework, along with the intentional construction and modulation of emotional responses in viewers. On Instagram, this labour is embedded in the curation of mood and feeling through aesthetic performance as “what is really essential to it are the creation and manipulation of affect” (Hardt & Negri, 2001, p. 293). It surpasses self-regulation to actively shape collective affective experiences by moving beyond image-making to mood-making.

Sara Ahmed’s (2004) theory of affective economies is crucial to understanding how social media aesthetics become charged with affects. She argues that affects “stick” to particular objects, people, and bodies (Ahmed, 2004, p. 120), enabling emotions to circulate and organize collective attachments. This process is intensified and made intentional on social media platforms, where it is produced through deliberate acts of affective curation as part of an aesthetic narrative. It involves a careful attention to detail while selecting objects, scenes, and scenarios, editing, lighting, and filtering that give aesthetics their immersive and lived-in ‘feel.’ Visual elements of an aesthetic set the mood through their recognisable look or ‘vibe.’ These styles gain affective potency through repeated circulation and user interaction; however, the very mechanisms that amplify them can also render them jarring or oversaturated, as constant repetition across feeds transforms once-novel cues into predictable or even dissonant markers of style. The labour of aligning with an aesthetic through social media posts, mood boards, or daily rituals imbues it with an affective weight, and through reiteration, these aesthetics materialise emotions that create shared sensibilities and relational intensities that “stick to” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 120) objects, atmospheres, and their visual elements. Brennan’s (2004) framework is also important to examine the affective potential of aesthetics and the circulation of affect that structures how we relate to the world and each other. On social media platforms, aesthetics are deeply entangled with affect, where a single image, sound, or colour palette can trigger a mood or a memory, pull users into a certain emotional rhythm, and encourage participation not through argument or persuasion, but through atmosphere.

Affective dynamics of different aesthetics become perceptible in distinct ways since each channels particular moods and orientations. Moreover, as affect sticks to visual elements through constant circulation, certain aesthetics emerge as especially potent sites of affective investment on social media platforms. While certain popular aesthetics like ‘Minimalism’, ‘Clean Girl’ and ‘Vanilla Girl’ convey a sense of relaxation and slow living, and a polished calm rooted in subtle forms of control; others evoke different affective registers, like melancholy, nostalgia, comfort, productivity, or retreat (Steinert & Dennis, 2022; Lay, 2021; Beaton, 2025), yet they are similarly structured by affective labour and aesthetic regulation. Irrespective of whether the mood evoked is light or dark, productive or passive, each aesthetic becomes a mode of affective orientation toward the self, toward time, and toward the imagined viewer. It is important to note that it also includes what remains unseen – the discarded images, the edited-out ‘mess’, and the moments of burnout that don’t align with the affective tone of the aesthetic because this very act of omission is essential to how the aesthetic works and what it communicates. For instance, the calm, curated order associated with Minimalism and other related aesthetics like Clean Girl or Vanilla Girl does not simply reflect a personal yearning for simplicity; it performs an affective promise of composure, ease,

“luxury cosy, minimalism [and] ... an air of opulence” (Parsons, 2023). Through neutral colour palettes “such as white, cream, and beige” (Leconte, 2023), soft lighting, and spatial sparseness with “clean spaces, few distractions, little to no clutter, and a calm vibe” (Weingus, 2022), these aesthetics construct an affective environment in which self-control and serenity become aspirational values.

The illusion of ease is often sustained through considerable emotional and creative labour. Even the “simplistic look” of Vanilla Girl “... requires far more than minimal planning; girls are putting a lot of effort into looking effortlessly cute and cosy, so the whole trend is quite the oxymoron” (Leconte, 2023). It requires consistent effort to build and sustain an identity based on an aesthetic; in the case of minimalism and related aesthetics, tidiness must be preserved, make-up and lighting calibrated to appear natural yet flattering, complete with “an effortless, natural look” (Coates, 2024). What appears to be ‘effortlessly’ simple, neat, and calm is, in fact, the result of careful management, seeking inspiration from Pinterest mood boards, lookbooks, ‘how to’ articles and YouTube videos. Any element that might disrupt the aesthetic mood, such as disorder, meltdowns, or contradiction, is carefully excluded, as are people of colour, with the aesthetic space within trends like Clean Girl and Vanilla Girl remaining saturated by idealised, predominantly white (often blonde) feminine figures. This highlights how socio-cultural hierarchies play out on digital platforms, reinforcing not only racial exclusion but also gendered and classed ideals of beauty, leisure, and consumption. It can be argued that this constitutes a form of aesthetic governance in which emotional and social complexity is streamlined into a controlled atmosphere designed for smooth circulation and visual appeal. This is also sustained through the algorithmic logic of replicability. The labour involved extends beyond producing a singular image; it lies in maintaining a coherent emotional tone over time, one that feels genuine to viewers even as it requires ongoing negotiation over what aspects of life are permissible and acceptable, and what must be concealed.

A different affective register emerges with aesthetics such as Dark Academia and Cottagecore that is oriented around nostalgia, romanticism, and retreat with an emphasis on slow living, solitude, and emotional deceleration. Dark Academia evokes a melancholic intellectualism through visual cues like candlelit study spaces, vintage clothing, classical languages, and well-worn texts (Murray, 2023, p. 350; Adriaansen, 2022, p. 108) – “objects, sounds, movements, and quotations that ensemble establish the ‘look and feel’ of this aesthetic, and generate a specific mood or atmosphere of melancholia, nostalgia, spleen, and solitude” (Adriaansen, 2022, p. 106). It conjures a mood of reverence as it “embraces the key concepts of liberal arts education, including a passion for knowledge” (Ranasinghe, 2022, p. 82), and “idealising the past becomes a way to escape the problems of everyday life” (Wojcik, 2022, p. 7), especially where learning is romanticised. Similarly, Cottagecore constructs a pastoral fantasy that “stems from a deeper desire to escape capitalism and the digital age through the veneration of a pre-industrial way of life” (Brand, 2021, p. 2) through scenes of bread-making, gardening, embroidered linens, and golden-hour landscapes. It draws affective power from tactile comforts and a sensory reconnection to nature and natural materials.

Yet both aesthetics, while invoking a longing for simple living, timelessness, and arguably challenging neoliberal ideals (Ranasinghe, 2022), are embedded in the infrastructures of digital production. Their affective appeal also moves beyond mere visuals; it is deeply temporal with a desire for slower rhythms (Nicole, 2022), for seasons and natural cycles rather than relentless timelines and deadlines. However, it is important to note that producing this affect within the accelerated pace of social media demands its own intensity, one that belies the ease such aesthetics are meant to convey. The impression of slowness or detachment is meticulously staged and mediated through the visual logic and tools of contemporary digital

and consumer culture; they distil moods into styles, giving affect a shape that can be inhabited, shared, and recirculated. Their allure lies in a curated retreat that appears immersive, aesthetically coherent, and aspirational to viewers who are navigating an endless scroll. Both Dark Academia and Cottagecore depend on affective world-building through emotional atmospheres that signal toward a different, slower pace of life and a reflective way of being. However, these curated escapes often rely on selective visibility, race and class privilege, Eurocentric gaze, elitism, and mask the harsh realities of hard physical labour that is repetitive rather than romantic, the colonial nostalgia embedded in rural imagery (Ollivain, 2020; Nicole, 2022; Klotz, 2021; Martinez 2021) and a romantic idea of academia rooted in exclusionary practices (Monier, 2022). The retreat they perform is both symbolic and strategic; it preserves the desired affect by holding complexity and contradiction just outside the frame.

Conclusion

Within an affective framework, social media aesthetics reveal that affect circulates not only through content but also through mood, atmosphere, and temporality. Personal expression, in this sense, is less an individual act than a response to platform demands that prioritize visibility, circulation, and engagement. Whether through the polished self-regulation of Minimalism and the Vanilla Girl, or the brooding nostalgia of Dark Academia and the romanticised withdrawal of Cottagecore, affect is mobilised as a structuring force that is sustained through repetition, performance, selection, and constant omission. Building on Massumi (2002), Ahmed (2004), and Brennan's (2004) conceptualisations, it becomes apparent how affect sticks to objects, atmospheres, styles, and rhythms associated with an aesthetic; these curated worlds become emotionally legible to audiences who are primed to feel with and through them. By conceptualising aesthetics as 'atmospheric technologies,' this paper examines how affect circulates through curated images, platform affordances, and repeatable practices to produce recognisable modes of belonging and exclusion. Furthermore, studying social media as affective infrastructures explains how platforms mobilize aesthetics as affective modes that invite users to look, feel, identify, aspire, and participate in/with carefully constructed affective registers. This process is sustained through the material, temporal, and affective labour demanded by these aesthetics. For instance, the Clean Girl's 'effortless' gloss covers the expensive and expansive beauty rituals; Cottagecore's pastoral idealism erases agricultural labour; Dark Academia's Eurocentrism excludes global knowledge systems. Most importantly, even resistance is co-opted, like the Goblincore and Cluttercore rebellion against perfection and homogenised whiteness, which become shoppable 'ugly-cute' merch, and cottagecore's anti-capitalist and anti-modern yearnings are transformed into opportunities for brands to sell linen dresses, dried flowers, and curated accessories.

The ways in which these aesthetics manifest, circulate, and become mainstream reveal how they often script a mode of being quietly overwhelmed, but only within frames that remain visually appealing, restrained, and frequently Eurocentric. This controlled aesthetic framing sets limits on how users experience and express emotional intensity, shaping both what is seen and what is felt. They privilege certain lifestyles and emotions, welcoming curated expressions of solitude or melancholy that appear poetic, while sidelining forms of sadness or struggle that do not fit the aesthetic narrative. Although these aesthetics appear open to all, participation and visibility are uneven, shaped by material resources, platform algorithms, and cultural capital. Gestures of resistance, too, are frequently absorbed into platform economies, where even dissent risks becoming another curated form of content. These dynamics illustrate

how social media platforms host, circulate, and package affect and emotions into aesthetic modes that are easily marketable, shareable, and aligned with standardised ideals of beauty, aspiration, and belonging.

References

1. Adriaansen, R. J. (2022). Dark academia: Curating affective history in a COVID-era internet aesthetic. *International Public History*, 5(2), 105–114. doi:10.1515/iph-2022-2047
2. Aesthetics Wiki: FAQ. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Aesthetics_Wiki
3. Ahmed, S. (2004). Affective Economies. *Social Text* 22(2), 117-139. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/55780>
4. Beaton, H. (2025). The Aesthetic Dualities and Cultural Undercurrents Defining 2025's Trend Cycle. Retrieved from <https://ceconline.co.za/the-aesthetic-dualities-and-cultural-undercurrents-defining-2025s-trend-cycle/>
5. Brand, L. (2021). Crafting Cottagecore: Digital Pastoralism and the Production of an Escapist Fantasy. Retrieved from <https://cmsmc.org/publications/crafting-cottagecore>
6. Brennan, T. (2004). *The Transmission of Affect*. Ithaca & London.: Cornell University Press.
7. Coates, H. (2025). Clean girl nails are trending: Here are 13 minimalist manicures to try now. Retrieved from <https://www.vogue.com/article/clean-girl-nails-to-try>
8. Davis, A. (2025). New! 12 current trends on social media in 2025. Retrieved from <https://www.scottsocialmarketing.com/blog/most-current-trends-on-social-media-in-2025>
9. Demeku, A. (2025). How to create a strong Instagram aesthetic in 2025 (7 tips). Retrieved from <https://later.com/blog/instagram-aesthetic/>
10. Dewsbury, J. D. (2009). Affect. In Rob Kitchin and N. J. Thrift (Eds.), *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography* (pp. 20–24). Elsevier Science.
11. Goldenberg, A., & Willer, R. (2023). Amplification of emotion on social media. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 7(6), 845–846. doi:10.1038/s41562-023-01604-x
12. Gu, W., Chan, K. W., Kwon, J., Dhaoui, C., & Septianto, F. (2023). Informational vs. emotional B2B firm-generated-content on social media engagement: Computerized visual and textual content analysis. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 112, 98–112. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2023.04.012>
13. Hardt, M., & Negri, A. (2001). *Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
14. Kenan, J. (2025). 10 social media trends you need to know in 2025. Retrieved from <https://sproutsocial.com/insights/social-media-trends/>
15. Klotz, H. (2021). Cottagecore, a beautiful aesthetic with issues to address. Retrieved from <http://www.michigandaily.com/arts/cottagecore-beautiful-aesthetic-issues-address/>
16. Lay, G. (2021). The Rise of Escapist Aesthetics. Retrieved from <http://www.lippymag.com/post/the-rise-of-escapist-aesthetics>
17. Leconte, R. (2023). Viral trends: What exactly is the 'vanilla girl aesthetic'? Retrieved from <http://www.thecourieronline.co.uk/viral-trends-what-exactly-is-the-vanilla-girl-aesthetic/>
18. Martinez, A. J. (2021). The Problems & Potential of Loving Cottagecore as a Woman of Color. Retrieved from <https://dismantlemag.com/2021/09/20/cottagecore-woman-of-color-problems-potential/>
19. Massumi, B. (2021). *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. London: Duke University Press.

20. McLuhan, M., & Fiore, Q. (1967). *The Medium is the Massage*. Toronto: Random House.
21. Monier, M. (2022). Too dark for dark academia? Retrieved from <https://post45.org/2022/03/too-dark-for-dark-academia/>
22. Murray, S. (2023). Dark academia: Bookishness, Readerly Self-fashioning and the Digital Afterlife of Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*. *English Studies*, 104(2), 347–364. doi:10.1080/0013838x.2023.2170596
23. Nicole (writer), A. L. (graphics). (2022). The comforts and criticisms of Cottagecore. Retrieved from <https://umsu.unimelb.edu.au/news/article/7797/The-Comforts-and-Criticisms-of-Cottagecore/>
24. Ollivain, C. (2020). Cottagecore, colonialism and the far-right. Retrieved from <https://honisoit.com/2020/09/cottagecore-colonialism-and-the-far-right/>
25. Ranasinghe, P. J. (2022). An Exploration of the Dissemination of Knowledge through the “Dark Academia” Aesthetic. *University of Colombo Review*, 3(2), 79–98. doi:10.4038/ucr.v3i2.74
26. Parsons, S. (2023). ‘Vanilla girl’ beauty is TikTok’s most talked about aesthetic. Here’s how brands can tap into the trend. Retrieved from <https://cosmeticsbusiness.com/-vanilla-girl-beauty-is-tiktok-s-most-talked-about-aesthetic-here-s-how-brands-can-tap-into-the-trend-206527>
27. Steinert, S., & Dennis, M. J. (2022). Emotions and digital well-being: On social media’s emotional affordances. *Philosophy & Technology*, 35(2). doi:10.1007/s13347-022-00530-6
28. Weingus, L. (2022). What does it mean to have a minimalist aesthetic? Retrieved from <http://www.silkandsonder.com/blogs/news/what-does-it-mean-to-have-a-minimalist-aesthetic>