

The Rise of the Dark Academia Movement: An exploration of the role of digital platforms in the creation of popular culture

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The field of digital humanities has witnessed a massive change due to an unprecedented global digital presence which was a result of the 2020 pandemic. The mandatory physical isolation was the central reason for the increase in the time spent online at a global level. Thus, digital spaces became community spaces which effectively made them sites of culture studies. Digital platforms like Instagram, TikTok and Tumblr are virtual spaces of cultural expression at an individual and collective level. This makes them significant to the field of popular culture and digital humanities; an aspect which is relevant to this paper in its study of the intersection between the creation of popular culture online and the role played by digital platforms in creating it. More specifically, it is the ways in which digital platforms encourage cultural trends that increases the popularity of certain practices, ideas or rituals that makes it popular culture. Certain cultural trends go ‘viral’ online that makes them dominant socio-cultural practices which slowly turn into movements when they remain popular over a longer time span. Various features of different digital platforms encourage different types of trends- for example, TikTok includes reels that end up with a particular gesture or a background song/ dialogue going viral which then gets interpreted and remade by millions of users in their own different ways. However, a common theme or a common umbrella idea can sometimes connect different cultural trends across different digital platforms. The sustained popularity of such a common idea results in it becoming a cultural movement.

The adaptation to an increased digitized life in 2020 led to many socio-cultural changes in significant aspects of people’s lives. Work from home, studying from home and even having familial gathering on digital platforms were among prominent shifts that occurred during the pandemic that were unprecedented at a larger scale. In order to cope with the various lockdowns academic institutions had to come up with strategies to not just survive but also educate the students. A momentous shift that took place globally was the shift from in person learning to online learning. Before this shift, the classroom, library and the campus were vital cultural spaces that contributed to the creation of a learning environment that stimulated and enhanced the engagement of the students. Post the shift, this loss of campus life and the entire physical environment of learning led to a yearning that needed to be filled. This paper proposes that this gap was filled by the online cultural aesthetic movement known as the Dark Academia movement and thus look at online learning as a cultural phenomenon. This paper intends to study the aforementioned intersection between the creation of popular culture online and the role played by digital platforms in creating sites of cultural expressions through an exploration of the Dark Academia movement as an aesthetic and literary movement. The Dark Academia movement is primarily an online movement that has a spectrum of interpretations that are so broad that it becomes challenging to define it. It is difficult to pinpoint what dark academia precisely stands for as an internet phenomenon, since it is the combination of a fashion choice, a style of interior design, a music taste, a general lifestyle and, to some extent, a philosophical outlook on the purpose of life and knowledge (Cheng). Arguably it is this very characteristic that increases its popularity as it appeals to the diverse interests of different people which makes it possible to encompass more people into

the movement. Despite this diversity, a characterization of what can be called Dark Academia is vital in not just understanding the movement but also shaping the future trajectory of it as a literary movement. Examples of Dark Academia may range from handwritten notes contrasted against a background of pages torn out from a book to an individual sitting with a pile of books in an old library; from pictures of an old Gothic structure with someone walking by dressed in a tweed jacket and some old doc martin shoes to a desk set up with an old typewriter and ink stained letters lying around. The word academia in the name of the movement indicates an emphasis on areas connected to knowledge seeking, that is, reading, writing, studying, researching, etc. Thus the pursuit of knowledge for the sake of knowledge is a central idea in the aesthetic and the written works of the movement. It is of the essence to note that Dark Academia does not just refer to an aesthetic movement but also to an upcoming literary genre as well. This is simultaneously a division but also an interconnected loop in the movement that keeps feeding itself through these two aspects of the movement which will be explored later in the paper.

The Secret History (1992) by Donna Tartt is widely understood as the inception point of Dark Academia, setting the stage for dark academia's narrative tropes, aesthetic reference points, and cultural intertexts (Stowell). *The Secret History* (1992) in itself could not have been a Dark Academia novel because the genre did not exist back then. It was a campus novel that subverted its genre by incorporating literary techniques from murder mysteries and psychological thrillers.

Dark Academia as a term was introduced in 2015 on Tumblr as the name of a book club to talk about *The Secret History* (1992). According to Mukadam, in its earliest iterations on Tumblr, Dark Academia focused on *The Secret History* (1992) and much of it was concentrated on the fans imaginations of characters, creating moodboards "fan casting" & celebrities as *The Secret History's* central characters, and recommending books and movies that match the "vibe" of Donna Tartt's world. Both the words 'dark' and 'academia' can be traced to *The Secret History* itself, whereby secrets, murder, gothic architecture, substance abuse, the chase of the supernatural etc from the book represent the 'dark' aspect. The 'academic' portion can be seen in the way the group in the book is obsessed with the study of the classics and learning the western classical language like Greek and Roman, the amount of time spent in the library and the romanticization of knowledge for the sake of knowledge. Even the fashion aesthetic of Dark Academia comes from ways that the characters dress in blazers, tweed jackets, suits and pleated skirts. All of these characteristics more or less have come to define the parameters of the Dark Academia aesthetic as it has developed over time. Dark Academia is sometimes called an online subculture and other times it is also known as a popular cultural movement. According to Stowell and Therieau, it is an online subculture, a constellation of spaces on Tumblr, TikTok, and Instagram dedicated to a certain idea of the fashion and material culture of elite universities and their wealthy students. This paper argues that amongst the different digital cultural movements online, Dark Academia started as a subculture but evolved into becoming popular culture, which will be elaborated on in further detail at a later point in the paper. The rise of the Dark Academia movement is in itself a study of how a subculture becomes a popular culture and the contextual role that digital platforms play in this upward mobility. The Dark Academia moniker has now racked up over 18 million views on TikTok; there are over 100,000 posts on Instagram (Bateman).

This paper divides the Dark Academia movement into three broad categories in order to study them

individually while exploring the ways in which they all contribute to the creation of online learning as a cultural phenomenon. The proposed categories are- Dark Academia as an aesthetic, Dark Academia and learning, and Dark Academia as a literary genre. Dark Academia as an aesthetic combines the Oxbridge fashion from the 1920's with warm colour palettes and trending moodboards that include spaces that have become associated with the term Dark Academia itself. Classics of the college look such as Oxford shirts, blazers, tweed trousers, trench coats, duffels and knitted waistcoats are staples of the Dark Academia aesthetic (Zirngast). Brogues, loafers, Chelsea boots and Dr. Martens are the shoes of choice and accessories include brooches, glasses, ties, watches, knee high socks and umbrellas (Zirngast). The clothes that define the culture are unisex which allows an expression of gender fluidity that as a characteristic feature of the Dark Academia movement also has its roots in *The Secret History*. The characters in the text explore their own sexualities and have open conversations about sexual experimentation, and the representation of characters that belong to the LGBTQIA+ community makes these aspects prominent features of the movement itself. In 2021 Instagram released its first trend report: an extensive study of previous user behaviour in order to determine the upcoming trends and one of the most unexpected yet prominent trend, especially in the realm of fashion posts was Dark Academia (Brinkhof). The fashion aesthetic has become so popular that Amazon and other online shopping apps direct the user to the clothes that belong to the aesthetic when one searches the term 'Dark Academia' on it. In fact, it is not uncommon to come across guides on how to dress and live the dark academia lifestyle. They include charts, links and tutorials with proper examples of the colour schemes, textures and accessories that help in achieving the style (Reyes).

The colour palette includes grey, black, dark green, burgundy, navy blue and brown; as well as neutral colours like tan, beige, white, and cream. This is directly reflected in the colour scheme of the moodboards that are trending on digital platforms like Instagram, TikTok, Tumblr and even Pinterest. A moodboard is a curated collection of images, often arranged in a three-by- three grid, intended to produce an overall impression, an energy or vibe (Therieu,). Writing in leather-bound journals with fountain pens or quills, lighting candles, making tea, and putting together old-timey outfits and accessories are common sights in these curated moodboards (Reyes). Another repetitive feature in these images is that of spaces that have come to represent the aesthetic of Dark Academia. These spaces include libraries, Greek and Gothic architecture, museums, art galleries, coffee shops, classrooms, campuses, cemeteries and even forests in the fall season. All these spaces are either connected to studying or the 'dark' aspect of the overall aesthetic making them a crucial part of the very aesthetic itself. Another prominent image is that of books, especially books that also belong to the genre of Dark Academia itself, including images of different editions of *The Secret History*. These also include books that may not necessarily belong to the genre or are limited to fiction; it can include textbooks, journals, newspapers, etc. All of these different facets of the overall aesthetic of the Dark Academia movement are an important part of the socio-cultural context that makes online learning into a cultural phenomenon. Students who are trying to study in isolation and attend lectures online adhere to these aesthetics in order to feel like they are a part of a larger cultural framework.

Dark Academia has an inherently intertwined relationship with learning since the name of the movement itself emphasizes the academic aspect. It is vital to note that the movement is not just limited to students belonging to an academic institution. There is an assumption that the movement is limited to humanities or the arts because of the parent novel *The Secret History*, where the emphasis is on the pursuit of the

classical languages and texts. It ended up romanticizing the study of literature, philosophy and psychology etc. However the movement is not limited to humanities only. Dark Academia advocates a cry of 'knowledge for the sake of learning' because the emphasis within the movement is placed upon a yearning to learn anything that one is passionate about. In fact several Dark Academia accounts and posts on digital platforms focus exclusively on STEM students while others focus on a specific degree like PhD posts in all fields. This view also counters the criticism against Dark Academia as elitist or classist because in lieu of the philosophy of knowledge for the sake of knowledge, the idea is that anyone can study. One no longer needs to belong to an elite Ivy League college to pursue an academic interest. The set up and aesthetic is also cost efficient and accessible because it involves candles, notebooks and ink pens; all of which can arguably be commonly accessible. The clothes that may or may not be an addition to the studying aesthetic of Dark Academia can also be resourced via thrift shops or second hand vintage shops. Most importantly, the access to education in itself is no longer limited to universities and the ivory tower of academia. Furthermore, one is also not limited by the stream that they may have a degree in- A person who is an automobile engineer can listen to the podcasts of Dr, Jordan Peterson and therefore be studying philosophy. Podcasts, YouTube videos, TED talks, electronic free online libraries and even accounts on Instagram and TikTok that post reels of information or short explanations on any topic have all made knowledge not just freely available but also accessible with an internet connection. In the lockdown when people were isolated physically but connected digitally, these platforms were explored more and more academically. Therefore, as a movement it is not just limited to aesthetics or a trend but is a part of a larger philosophy or an outlook that advocates for the pursuit of knowledge. In the context of online learning, this becomes especially vital because it opens up the socio-cultural context to a population that is not necessarily belonging to the category of educational institutions and also removes age as a barrier to becoming a student. Dark Academia has thus contributed to the creation of an online learning culture that facilitates and encourages the pursuit of knowledge. This aspect was especially crucial in the context of the pandemic. With the shift to online learning students had to cope with the loss of spaces that enhanced their focus while studying and that also aided learning. While it is not impossible to study in one's own home or bedroom, spaces play an important role in the learning process. Research on how classroom space and physical environment might impact teaching and learning is still relatively new and developing (Santana). In the context of online learning, the vitality of the loss of the cultural and educational impact on students is also being studied increasingly. Amanda Taylor narrows it down to five reasons why Dark Academia resonated with students during the pandemic; the isolation from the world, identifying with a narrator who is also an outsider looking inside, the vintage fashion which is reminiscent of the college look of the past, the campus life which is reflected in the trend and the aesthetic set up which includes coffee, tea and books. The setting up of a study space according to the Dark Academia movement mimics the 'mood' or 'vibe' of a library or a classroom desk in their own room. It includes controlling the lighting and even using candles, keeping piles of vintage books and notebooks, using multicolour pens and adding an element of aesthetic beauty to the notes made. It creates an environment that helps them study better in online lectures where blank screens and audio discussions are the only aspects that belong to the actual university. The movement called Studyblr on Tumblr which is an abbreviation for Study Tumblr, existed before it got amalgamated into Dark Academia whereby students would help each study with notes, references, talking and planning timetables together. The escapism that Studyblr offered had more to do with the actual act of learning, not the environments in which it took place, whereas Dark academia focuses on the idea of learning — shifting from aestheticized practices to aestheticized environments (Mukadam). Thus, the environment became a factor

that added to the aesthetic and they both increased the importance of the impact that the movement had in becoming culturally popular and relevant on digital platforms.

Dark Academia is growing into a literary genre in a time where the very process of genrefication in literature is developing. The context of it being a literary movement plays an important role in cementing its evolution into a genre. As a literary movement, Dark Academia has bloomed on digital platforms right from its birth online as a book club. The book club expanded its boundaries with the inclusion of texts that included similar ideas, thematic elements or characteristics. These included texts like *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), *Wuthering Heights* (1847), *Frankenstein* (1818), *Dracula* (1897), *Northanger Abbey* (1817) and even the *Harry Potter* (1997-2007) series. It is essential to note here that although these texts were included in the category of Dark Academia and are still mentioned in popular collections or recommendations of Dark Academia texts, they are loosely inclusive of ideas from the movement. The genre of Dark Academia has only started developing recently and it is still a work in progress. Digital marketing within the publishing industry that takes place on digital platforms like Instagram, Tumblr, TikTok, etc plays a central role in the upcoming genrefication processes.

A movement evolves into a genre when there is a cultural context that creates a demand for texts that include characteristics or ideas embedded in the movement. The first shift to digital marketing in the book publishing industry took place when avid book readers started their own vlogs on YouTube. It was popularly known as BookTube and the vloggers were called BookTubers. They started posting videos where they would review books, host interactive reading sessions, unpack book hauls and sometimes cosplay as their favourite book characters. Eventually publishing agencies and authors started sending advance copies and merchandise for free to accounts that had larger followings in exchange for a publicity review which would not only create a hype around the book but also increase the sales on pre-orders. The pre sale marketing strategies shifted to online interviews with the popular BookTubers which allowed for an interactive global audience. When Instagram as a social media platform started gaining popularity, the content creators shifted to this newer platform. Eventually this gave rise to what is known as the 'influencer culture' where content creators known as influencers worked as brand ambassadors. The major difference was that any product could become a brand or at least be marketed as one. Digital popularity was increasingly becoming a means to making a career when influencers started getting paid for promotions. After Instagram, TikTok became the next big app where people would post reels, which are really short, videos and the influencer culture also migrated there. The book community on Instagram is called Bookstagram and on TikTok it is called BookTok. On both these platforms, Bookstagramers and BookTokers were similar to BookTubers, and posted content that was similar in essence but different in terms of adapting to the features of the platform. As a literary genre whose characteristics highlighted the ideas of the movement itself, the genre started encouraging readers to study. Through characters that display a passion for learning, it reignites the desire to study along with being informative itself. Almost all texts belonging to the genre of Dark Academia impart knowledge via the characters own academic journey. So, for students of language and English Literature, *Babel*, or *The Necessity of Violence* (2022) by R. F. Kuang has the potential to be more than just a fictional novel. It includes literary references, translation theories and asks important questions that are reminiscent of a good post-colonial lecture. Thus, as a literary genre it imparts and encourages knowledge consumption. The genre of Dark Academia, especially during the pandemic also allowed the readers to get a glimpse of a student's life in an academic

institution which increased its popularity as well.

In the world of the internet aesthetic, the passive reader-consumer becomes the producer of the genre themselves as they enact it for the consumption of others (Taylor, G). Digital platforms have thus become spaces where culture gets created and is distributed for consumption among the people who want to participate in this loop whereby the very act of consuming the culture is simultaneously an act of producing it. The 'reposting' feature of social media apps is a vital aspect through which this occurrence takes place. The hashtag is another feature that increases the popularity of any phenomenon that takes place either as a thing in itself or a collective movement. Both these features have played a huge role in popularizing Dark Academia as both a literary movement and an aesthetic. Digital platforms also lead to intertwining the two sides of the movement fusing it together to make it an online cultural literary movement. The initial dilemma of a spectrum of phenomenon that can be classified as Dark Academia can then be explored as not so much a line but a loop that self fulfils. The aesthetic aspect of the cultural movement creates digital popularity that highlights the subculture of the literary genre. Since the movement initially began as a literary one, its journey started from being an online subculture which eventually developed into popular culture. The posts on various digital platforms that adhere to the Dark Academia aesthetic create a demand for the texts and the texts increase the number of posts that are labelled as Dark Academia. It creates a feedback loop with books inspiring scores of blog posts and podcasts, which in turn spawn more books, and as a phenomenon this makes it highly relevant for scholars of contemporary culture. Dark Academia has its own historical significance in terms of its role in the pandemic in context to online learning, it has socio cultural vitality in the form of the aesthetics and the focus on pursuit of knowledge, while also emerging as a newer literary genre thus making it a popular online literary cultural movement. Thus, through the exploration of the Dark Academia movement this paper studied the role played by digital platforms in creating popular culture and how it leads to the development of a literary genre due to ongoing shifts in the genrefication process in literature. This can encourage further research in the exploration of the relationship between popular culture and digital platforms that is evolving and growing constantly with digital progress and technological development.

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