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ABSTRACT

This article explores internet aesthetics (visual and narrative systems like cottagecore or dark academia) as dynamic sites of participatory fan culture and affective identity work in the postdigital condition. Originating in platform cultures, internet aesthetics function as symbolic infrastructures through which users imagine, perform, and negotiate alternative selves and possible worlds. Drawing from affect theory, fan, and media aesthetics, the article develops a conceptual framework that repositions internet aesthetics as a form of productive fandom: one that centers on mood, atmosphere, and shared sensibility rather than linear narrative or character-based identification. The article examines how meaning is generated through curatorial, contemplative, and performative engagement and argues that internet aesthetics facilitate collaborative world-building practices in which users co-create aesthetic environments that traverse platform boundaries and blur the lines between digital, analog, and imaginary spaces. Central to this analysis is the notion that fandom operates not only through textual consumption but through embodied affect and cultural participation. The article's main goal is to establish internet aesthetics as a significant object of inquiry within fan and media studies. Far from being superficial or transient trends, they are affective, social, and symbolic practices that enable users to articulate belonging, envision alternative futures, and navigate contemporary formations of subjectivity. In doing so, they reveal the cultural labor fandom performs in a digitally saturated, algorithmically shaped, and increasingly post-individual world.

KEYWORDS

internet aesthetics, postdigital images, post-individualism, productive fandom, networked images, witchcore

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Internet Aesthetics as Postdigital Fan Practice

Introduction

The advent of the internet has profoundly reshaped our understanding of the self. Online environments open up spaces in which individuals can imagine and perform identities detached from their geographical, familial, and, above all, bodily anchors. The internet does not merely function as a medium of communication but as a social space of possibility, in which alternative conceptions of self and world, both real and imagined, can be constructed and enacted in context-specific ways. These digital identities do not simply overlay physical existence; rather, they constitute an additional social self that is deeply entangled with everyday structures and increasingly shapes lived realities beyond the screen.

Consequently, we are witnessing a fundamental reorganization of subjectivity: the individual becomes fragmented into platform-specific micro-personas that often differ algorithmically, aesthetically, and socially from their offline or IRL counterparts (see e.g., Strickler 2024; Ceccarelli 2025; in the context of subjectivity and [post]digital intimacy Shields Dobson/Robards/Carah 2018). This fragmentation of the self finds a particularly vivid expression in what are commonly referred to as internet aesthetics: visually coded systems of order, such as cottagecore or dark academia, that give form to these micro-segmented identity practices. Within these aesthetics, cultural imaginaries, visual style, algorithmic logic, and social interaction converge, resulting in a dynamic process of collective sense-making.

Internet aesthetics can thus be understood as platform-specific condensations of post-individual identity work (cf. Strickler 2024). They serve as performative frameworks in which users negotiate belonging, emotion, and cultural meaning. Viewed in this way, internet aesthetics are not merely stylistic phenomena but dynamic affective and narrative structures—what Lamerichs (2018) terms *productive fandoms*—in which communities co-create, remix, and circulate shared symbolic worlds. Fans do not engage with these aesthetics solely for the sake of visual or stylistic expression, but as tools for social positioning, community building, and participatory identity formation within the postdigital condition. This raises an important question for fan studies: if internet aesthetics function as fandoms, what exactly is the fan object? Unlike traditional fandoms, which coalesce around specific media texts, aesthetic fandom does not require a singular, bounded source text. Instead, as this article will argue, the aesthetic itself becomes the object of fannish investment: its moods, symbols, visual grammar, and affective textures constitute a metatextual universe that users curate, remix, and emotionally inhabit. This represents a significant shift in how we conceptualize fandom and its objects.

This article sets out to establish internet aesthetics as a productive object of inquiry within media and fan studies. To do so, it develops a conceptual framework that treats aesthetics not as fixed sty-

listic codes, but as dynamic cultural practices embedded in affective and social systems. While this article does not present a formal case study or ethnographic fieldwork, it builds on a theoretically grounded and culturally informed approach that draws inspiration from digital ethnography. Methodologically, its aim is to theorize internet aesthetics as a cultural formation within the postdigital condition and to develop a vocabulary for understanding them in relation to affect, subjectivity, and fandom. Rather than analyzing a defined corpus or community in depth, it engages with vernacular practices, media artifacts, and affective styles that circulate across social media platforms. This article adopts a theoretically-informed, interpretive approach and aims to conceptualize internet aesthetics as dynamic, affect-laden cultural formations and to trace their significance within broader reorganizations of subjectivity and fandom in the postdigital condition. The goal is to theorize the dynamic cultural logics and affective economies underpinning internet aesthetics and their broader significance within contemporary fan and media cultures.

The article begins by introducing the concept of internet aesthetics, tracing their emergence and cultural logic. It then explores how these aesthetics are constructed through database narratives and curated lists, how they function as fragmentary, yet networked meaning structures and how they are shaped by affective sensibilities and post-individual subjectivities. Finally, it examines the role of engagement and participation: how users interact with, perform within, and inhabit these aesthetics across platforms and media formats. The aim is to demonstrate that internet aesthetics not only reflect but actively shape contemporary modes of cultural belonging and self-understanding in the digital age.

Internet Aesthetics & Post-Individual Worldbuilding

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, internet aesthetics, such as their most prominent representatives cottagecore[1] or dark academia,[2] have become increasingly popular as a playground of pop-cultural expression. Broadly defined, the term 'internet aesthetics' refers to online-circulating systems of order that organize heterogeneous collections of (audio-)visual materials, pop-cultural references, and performative acts within the digital sphere. These assemblages are designed to evoke specific moods and/or imaginary worlds (cf. Vollmert/Heuser 2025, 291).[3] Developed collectively by and within online communities, they function less through narrative coherence than through affective condensation. As the Aesthetics Wiki—the largest community-driven online repository of information and materials on the topic—puts it, internet aesthetics are "a collection of visual schema that creates a 'mood'" (Aesthetics Wiki: FAQ).

At the heart of internet aesthetics are the affective atmospheres and moods they convey, which offer alternative identity constructions and imaginary worlds; spaces where one's sense of self can be experimented with, far from the constraints of reality (cf. Vollmert/Heuser 2025, 290). The heterogeneous elements that constitute internet aesthetics come together to form affective-aesthetic worlds. These do not

1 Cottagecore romanticizes rural life, emphasizing simplicity, nature, and self-sufficiency through activities like baking, gardening, and crafting. It centers on an idealized pastoral lifestyle, nostalgic for a slower, pre-industrial past. For further information see e.g., Büsken 2024.

2 Dark academia revolves around a love for classical literature, art, and the act of learning, often set against moody, gothic aesthetics. It celebrates scholarly pursuits, melancholia, and an appreciation for historic academic environments. There is already a wealth of research literature on this aesthetic, see e.g., Nguyen 2022.

3 For a discussion of the term's semantic complexity and its distinction from related categorization systems such as consumer aesthetics or aspirational aesthetics, see Vollmert/Heuser 2025, 289f.

function as clearly bounded scenes in the subcultural sense, but rather as multimodal assemblages in which visual, affective, technical, and cultural elements interrelate in dynamic ways: a loosely connected cultural meaning-structure that generates significance situationally. They create temporary aesthetic worlds, continuously reshaped through processes of circulation and recontextualization.

Given the scale of participation, internet aesthetics can no longer be dismissed as marginal or niche online phenomena. Instead, following art historian Valentina Tanni (2024), they can be understood as "the most reliable expression of the zeitgeist because they are spawned by collective processes that involve millions of people. They influence, and also reveal, our view of the present" (10f.). Accordingly, internet aesthetics may be seen as key agents in digital processes of negotiation and as a narrative mode of the postdigital condition.[4] Beyond enabling creative self-presentation, internet aesthetics also offer tools for reflecting on the complexity of our present.

Understood as interconnected imaginary worlds, internet aesthetics function as speculative "realms of possibility, a mix of familiar and unfamiliar, permutations of wish, dread, and dream, and other kinds of existence that can make us more aware of the circumstances and conditions of the actual world we inhabit" (Wolf 2012, 17). In this sense, internet aesthetics may also be interpreted as expressions of what Yancey Strickler (2024) describes as *post-individualism*. Strickler argues that in the era of post-individualism, we develop a multitude of parallel self-versions. The self, he claims, is no longer a consistent, autonomous voice, but an ensemble of digital micro-identities performatively activated in specific social media environments (cf. ibid., 167). Aesthetics, then, function as visual, narrative, and performative forms of expressing such digital micro-identities. They allow users to temporarily inhabit alternative value systems and simultaneously experience a sense of belonging. At the same time, they can be understood as spaces of imaginative dreamscapes or speculative play in which users explore alternative modes of being, feeling, and relating.[5]

Strickler also emphasizes that post-individualism is increasingly oriented toward group-based meaning, security, and identity: "This is the post-individual experience. It happens when someone accepts their individuality, but feels called for a variety of reasons (social, creative, metaphysical, financial) to seek greater meaning and context with others. Post-individualism isn't a rejection of individualism. It's a graduation from it" (ibid., 177). In this context, internet aesthetics are not merely stylistic taxonomies, but what Strickler calls "post-individual proto-institutions that speak to the desire for safety, meaning, and social, creative, and financial prosperity we as online and offline individuals share" (ibid., 177f.). Within these aesthetic structures, it is shared values, narratives, and visual codes that foster collective identification. The *I* is thus supplemented by the *we* of the aesthetic. The aesthetic becomes a kind of social infrastructure, rendering post-individual belonging tangible through moods and vibes.

4 Basar (2022) identifies lorecore as a key symptom of the postdigital condition: a narrative mode in which fragmented, visually condensed stories emerge not in spite of, but because of the overwhelming abundance of digital content, a means of extracting meaning from 'too much content.'

5 There is a certain affinity between internet aesthetics and performative practices such as cosplay or LARP, suggesting a shared performative dimension. However, aesthetics differ fundamentally in terms of media logic, aesthetic function, and cultural intent. While cosplay and LARP typically aim at the detailed representation of specific characters or scenarios, internet aesthetics focus primarily on the staging of moods, vibes, and atmospheres. Symbolically charged narratives, often referencing pop-cultural systems, are individually inflected and usually realized without a fixed template. These aesthetics deliberately operate through ambiguity, functioning as affective backdrops for postdigital self-experimentation and generating speculative realities.

Database Narratives & List-Making

The moods and atmospheres evoked by internet aesthetics are constructed as a collective dreamworld from a vast and eclectic archive of materials drawn from pop-cultural echo chambers.[6] This results in intensive world-building processes (cf. Vollmert/Heuser 2025, 288). These aesthetic configurations often take the form of database narratives (cf. Manovich 2001, 225f.): narrative structures that, as Manovich argues, are organized in an almost encyclopedic fashion. Platforms like the aforementioned Aesthetics Wiki function as a "database of multimedia material" (ibid., 227), where the world of an aesthetic is assembled through curated lists of characteristic elements and tropes: "This formulation places the opposition between the database and the narrative in a new light, thus redefining our concept of narrative. The 'user' of a narrative is traversing a database, following links between its records as established by the database's creator" (ibid.). Paul Booth (2015) points out that this list-making is a central activity within fan culture (see also the chapter "List-Making as Fan Practice" in Linden 2027, 26ff.). Navigation through these lists and databases relies primarily on a dense web of pop-cultural references: a meta-referentiality that is inherent to aesthetics themselves.[7] Participating in the aesthetic discourse thus also entails recognizing and interpreting the underlying codes, quotations, and iconic references. In this sense, internet aesthetics can be understood as a form of creative, knowledge-based fandom—as a practice of "world building as a form of passionate fandom" (Collins 2017, 366); or as productive fandom as defined by Lamerichs (2018): "Specific modes of fan productivity that are creative, and engage in storytelling and play. […] Thus, fans produce different types of narratives and objects and express themselves through play and performances. […] These fan creations are heavily inspired by the existing text or 'source text,' but they also create new textual relationships" (13f.). In the spirit of transmedia storytelling (cf. Jenkins 2006), these narratives spread across and through various platforms (Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Pinterest, Reddit), formats (short videos, photo posts, ASMR and ambience videos, beauty, fashion and interior guides, playlists, watchlists, DIY tutorials), and even media that exist independently of the internet (literature, music, fashion, film/television, visual art). Popular internet aesthetics, in particular, have generated an entire consumer-oriented ecosystem around themselves: fashion, music, books, and themed gadgets constitute a vast market that is continually promoted and shared online.

Yet internet aesthetics are fundamentally digital in origin: they are imagined, negotiated, communicated, and performed within online spaces. As Giolo and Berghman (2023) emphasize, "what warrants the term *Internet* aesthetic is the fact that the categorizing activities, bringing these materials together, happen initially (and often exclusively) online. Therefore, the Internet is integral to their construction and availability." Still, internet aesthetics are not solely online phenomena; they represent a postdigital, co-creative practice of world-appropriation, in which images, sounds, and embodied practices interact and

6 Tiidenberg, Abidin, and Hendry (2021) develop the concept of *silosociality*, which refers to the structuring of digital communities not by networked personal profiles but through shared contextual practices, vernacular, and sensibilities; these "silos" are imagined and enacted by users as distinct, affective subcultural spaces sustained by communal routines. This concept is useful for understanding how internet aesthetics circulate within such semi-enclosed environments, where users collectively contribute to meaning-making through a dense, recursive exchange of content and references.

7 Drawing on (predominantly female-centered) digital everyday culture, Akane Kanai demonstrates in her work "Gender and Relatability in Digital Culture" (2019) how participation in these online spaces requires not only a flexible aesthetic repertoire but also extensive insider knowledge of digital styles, pop-cultural references, and specific (genre) codings. The ability to integrate oneself into a dense network of meta-referentiality (e.g., in the production and interpretation of memes) is considered a prerequisite for recognition and belonging within such publics.

are transferred into IRL (in-real-life) contexts.[8] The practice involves not only reception but also active contribution: a collaborative and creative form of world-building, where codified visual worlds serve as templates for contemporary longings and identity constructions.

Fragments & Contexts

The database logic inherent to internet aesthetics also gives rise to their networked structure: they form dynamic networks that are interconnected through shared semantic units, narrative structures, and visual elements. As networked images (cf. Rubinstein/Sluis 2008), the individual components of internet aesthetics are necessarily interlinked and cannot be understood in isolation. Their fragmented elements drawn from diverse texts, media, and practices are embedded within a broader network of transmedial and intertextual connections, hyperlinks, platforms, and users, all of which mutually influence each other's meaning, affects and effects (cf. ibid.; see also Brantner/Lobinger/Götzenbrucker/Schreiber 2020; Niederer 2018). The classification criteria by which individual internet aesthetics are defined by fan communities do not follow consistent or codified rules: "These elements are constantly debated, as the opinion on whether or not some aesthetics exist or are valid is constantly debated" (Aesthetics Wiki: FAQ). Instead, the taxonomies are open-ended, (inter)subjectively interpreted by all actors involved, and vary in specificity and structure across different aesthetics. As such, aesthetics cannot be understood as rigid genres or enclosed subcultures, but rather as open, fluid fields of meaning whose formal and semantic compositions are contextually and individually shaped by users.

Cultural theorist Lawrence Grossberg (1992) emphasizes that the relationship between audiences and cultural texts can neither be reduced to passive reception nor to the appropriation of pre-constituted social positions: "The relations between culture and audiences cannot be understood simply as the process by which people appropriate already existing texts into the already constituted context of their social position, their experience or their needs. Nor can it be described in terms which suggest that the audience is simply passively acceding to the predetermined nature of the text" (54).

This can be exemplified by the popular aesthetic *witchcore*. Characterized by a mystical, nature-bound, and often darkly romantic visual style, witchcore blends witch imagery with vintage fashion, forest landscapes, and occult symbolism.[9] Alongside its visual components, it also involves performative practices such as casting spells, brewing herbal infusions, or engaging in ritualistic self-care routines.

8 Even though this paper assumes a postdigital condition of the present, in which the distinction between digital and analog has become obsolete, I nevertheless undertake an analytical differentiation here, in order to more clearly delineate the state of the postdigital. See in this context also Legacy Russell's (2020) discussions of AFK (Away From Keyboard): For Russell, the idea of AFK plays a central role, particularly regarding the connection and tension between the physical and digital worlds. AFK, according to Russell, functions as a space for reflection, a moment of interruption, and is an essential component of understanding how digital and analog worlds interact with and mutually shape each other within her framework of *Glitch Feminism*. What happens in digital space produces real effects in the physical world and vice versa. Thus, AFK becomes a site of reflection, in which the fluid and performative nature of digital identities is translated into, and carried forward within, the analog world.

9 Witchcore draws on a long cultural lineage of witch-iconography, particularly shaped by Gothic (Revival) and Romantic traditions that emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries. These tropes have continually resurfaced across literature, film, and fashion, and are reassembled in the digital sphere through platforms like Tumblr, TikTok, and Pinterest. In this context, witchcore functions as a postdigital remix of historically gendered, mystical, and anti-normative motifs, now reimagined through user-driven aesthetics and platform-specific visual grammars (on the Gothic roots of witch imaginaries see Spooner 2006).

Fans of this aesthetic are not simply interested in esotericism; rather, witchcore operates as a symbolic-visual field that can be filled and interpreted through diverse approaches: candles, tarot cards, crystal balls, occult symbols, as well as pop-cultural references such as *The Craft* (1996), *Practical Magic* (1998), *Charmed* (1998-2006), or *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (1996-2003). The meaning attributed to witchcore varies widely: for some, it represents queer emancipation; for others, feminized spirituality or a nostalgic escape into premodern imaginaries.[10]

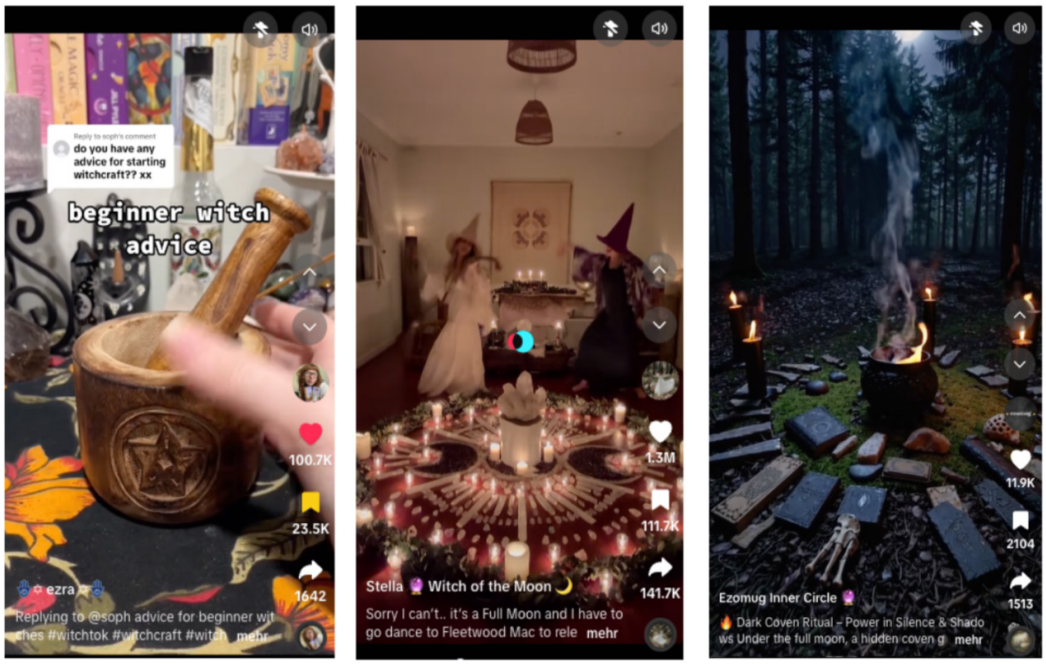

Fig. 1: Collage of witchcore examples on TikTok
@astralwitch (Oct. 3, 2023), https://www.tiktok.com/@astralwitch/video/7285537809274866986
@spiritspacecollective (Sep. 18, 2024), https://www.tiktok.com/@spiritspacecollective/video/7416003924492127506
@ezomug (Apr. 21, 2025), https://www.tiktok.com/@ezomug/video/7495762607815642390

These aesthetics are also shaped by platform design, algorithms, and circulating affects such as longing, rebellion, or empowerment. Video-based platforms such as TikTok or Instagram employ algorithms that do more than merely distribute content; they actively privilege specific aesthetic forms and emotional atmospheres. These platform's algorithms tend to amplify performative content that combines aesthetic appeal with affective intensity, privileging imagery that is both visually rich and emotionally resonant. On TikTok and Instagram reels, witchcore manifests through videos in which creators perform rituals such as lighting candles at dusk, whispering incantations, or preparing herbal teas in dimly lit kitchens (Fig. 1). These videos often employ POV-formats and atmospheric soundscapes. Crucially, on video-based platforms, affect is generated through embodied enactment: The creator's embodied presence produces affective intensity through temporal unfolding and corporeal intimacy. This creates a feedback loop in which certain affective registers, such as empowerment or melancholic longing, become dominant within the aesthetic: not merely as visual atmospheres, but as performed and enacted states.

10 See further, especially in the broader context of cultural studies, the edited volume *The Witch Studies Reader* (2025) by Jane Ward and Soma Chaudhuri, which among others analyzes witchcore as a form of (queer-)feminist and decolonial resistance practice.

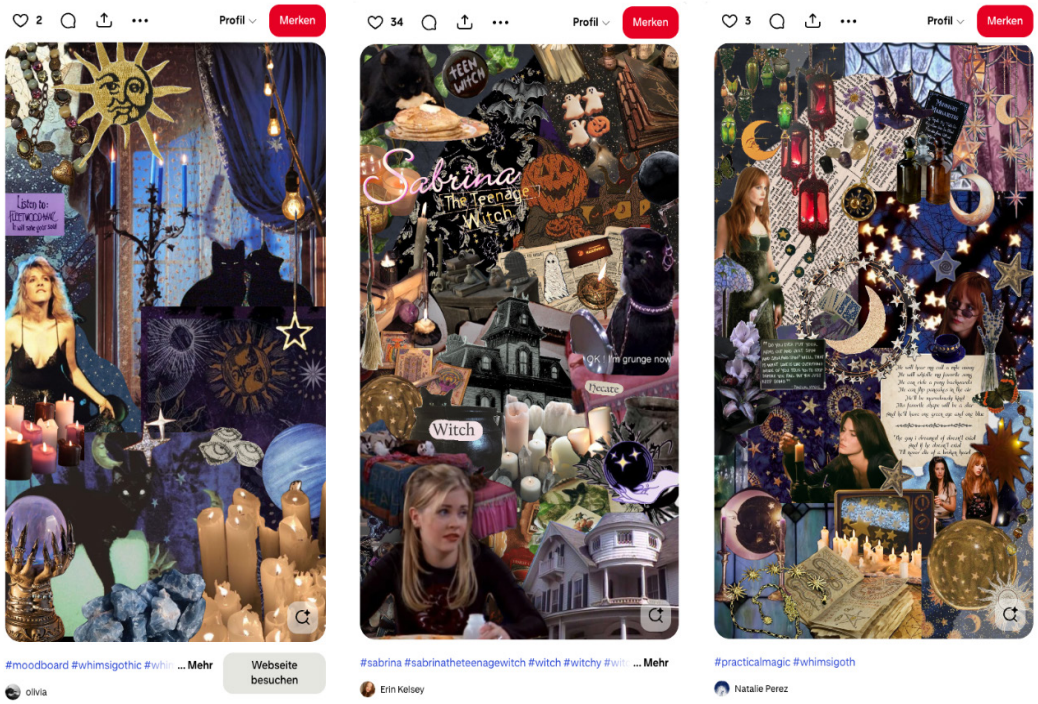

Fig. 2: Collage of witchcore examples on Pinterest
@twoheadedcain, https://de.pinterest.com/pin/563018696306618/
@erinkelsey00, https://de.pinterest.com/pin/3870349675059970/
@rosesophiablanchedorothy, https://de.pinterest.com/pin/25895766604399211/

In contrast, on Pinterest, witchcore circulates through a different logic: it is static, curatorial, imaginative and contemplative rather than performative. Here, the aesthetic appears in curated boards that emphasize symbolic motifs like herbs, candles, or crystals, inviting users to collect, arrange, and gaze upon images rather than to embody or enact them (Fig. 2). Pinterest foregrounds the aesthetic's atmospheric and nostalgic dimensions through accumulation and juxtaposition: affect emerges from the act of browsing and projecting oneself into imagined spaces, not from witnessing or participating in embodied performance. These platform-specific modes of circulation shape not only how the aesthetic is perceived but also which affective and ideological framings come to the fore.

As a result, witchcore aesthetics are shaped not only by individual creativity, but also fundamentally by algorithmic curation and the collective emotional dynamics of users. This interplay between platform technologies and affective circulation explains how witchcore emerges aesthetically and culturally, and how it spreads across digital spaces. It reveals the extent to which technical infrastructures and emotional forces are intertwined in shaping and intensifying the aesthetic meaning of witchcore. Grossberg describes this constant re-contextualization as a mutual transformation of text and audience: "Both audiences and texts are continuously remade [...] by relocating their place within different contexts" (ibid.). The same media fragment can take on entirely different meanings depending on its platform and format (e.g., Instagram moodboard vs. TikTok reel). Only through the specific combination of narrative elements, visual codes, platform formats, and affective tones does the distinctive vibe or mood of an aesthetic emerge. Aesthetics like witchcore do not stem from a single origin, but from a cultural network of texts, practices, and visual, narrative, and affective fragments. Meaning arises through their assemblage within cultural contexts: "The audience is always caught up in the continuous reconstruction of cultural

contexts which enable them to consume, interpret and use texts in specific ways" (ibid.). What matters, therefore, is not only *what* is represented, but *how* and *for what purpose*—through which means, on which platforms, and in which affective registers users construct their own version of an aesthetic.

Nonetheless, centralizing tools such as lists and databases remain essential for communication and participation within internet aesthetics. It is through these structures—and through the (individual as well as collective) acts of collecting and recombining elements—that the various objects and pop-cultural references attain contextual meaning. They become legible, and in turn capable of creating new imaginary worlds or expanding existing ones.

It is important to note that many fans engage with witchcore across multiple platforms, carrying shared sensibilities and affective expectations with them. However, this does not neutralize platform-specific dynamics; rather, different platforms modulate and foreground distinct dimensions of the same aesthetic formation. A fan who performs witchcore rituals on TikTok and curates witchcore moodboards on Pinterest does not simply replicate the same affective experience: instead, they access complementary modes of aesthetic engagement: embodied enactment on one platform, contemplative projection on another. The affective 'core' of the aesthetic may remain recognizable, but its texture, temporality, and mode of address shift according to platform affordances.

Affects & Sensibility

The individual meaning and, above all, the effect of internet aesthetics unfolds not solely through their visual or auditory composition but through their affective density. From the perspective of affect theory, such as in the work of Brian Massumi (2002; 2015), it is not clearly nameable emotions but rather bodily-felt intensities that constitute the aesthetic appeal of such content. Affect does not function here as personal emotion but rather as shared atmospheric bodies that circulate between images, music, and viewers—and that make the cultural longing for another kind of order perceptible through this collective affective resonance.

In the context of fan culture, Lawrence Grossberg's concept of *affective sensibility* proves particularly productive for understanding internet aesthetics. Grossberg does not define sensibility as an individual emotional state, but as a shared affective-aesthetic logic that shapes how cultural forms are experienced, interpreted, and imbued with meaning. According to him, sensibility determines what is felt to be relevant, beautiful, moving, or fitting within a given cultural milieu. It is thus a mode of relating to the world, one that links affective perception, aesthetic judgment, and cultural framing. This understanding of sensibility aligns with key arguments in fan studies, where scholars such as Louisa Stein (2015) or Briony Hannell (2023) have highlighted the centrality of affective intensities in fandom, framing it not merely as interpretive practice but as emotionally charged engagement.

This kind of sensibility is clearly observable, for instance, in the previously discussed aesthetic witchcore. It brings together aesthetic elements such as candlelit dark rooms with affective modes like melancholy, longing for nature, or empowerment, and fuses them with narrative fragments (witch figures, occult symbols, and more) into a coherent experiential framework. Witchcore seeks to make certain ways of feeling possible, for example, the sensation of existing outside normative social structures, somewhere between nature, magic, and otherness.

Such sensibilities are always shaped by media and platform dynamics. TikTok, Instagram, or Pinterest each foster distinct modes of aestheticization and affective positioning. As Grossberg emphasi-

zes, sensibility not only structures visual codes but also determines which pop-cultural references are perceived as relevant or compatible. Within the context of witchcore, for instance, *Practical Magic* or *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* are often embraced affirmatively, while *Hocus Pocus* (1993) tends to be used more ironically, and *Harry Potter* (2001-2011) is framed differently depending on one's political stance toward J.K. Rowling. Sensibilities thus also define ethical and political boundaries (and vice versa: they are co-constitutive).

Against this background, it becomes clear that internet aesthetics are not simply collections of visual elements but, in Grossberg's terms, cultural sensibilities that open up affective spaces of experience and participatory meaning-making. Witchcore, for example, is not merely a stylistic category but a form of aesthetic-affective worldmaking in which images, narratives, and symbols are combined in ways that allow for specific experiences of identity, belonging, and subjectivity. These experiences are not arbitrary but structured by sensibility: what is perceived as empowerment, otherness, spirituality, or subversion depends on the affective framing in which the aesthetic is encountered.

Grossberg (1992) further argues that fans are not merely 'more intense' consumers, but participants in a different cultural sensibility: "The category of the fan […] can only be understood in relation to a different sensibility" (56). The fan's relationship to cultural texts, he argues, is primarily affective rather than cognitive. Fandom is thus not just about interest, but about emotional entanglement. Fans of internet aesthetics do not just interpret texts: they relate to them through mood, atmosphere, and affective resonance. Grossberg describes these structures as kind of affective alliances: connections that are formed not through argumentation, but through shared moods and experiential logics.

Especially within queer or other marginalized communities, aesthetics such as witchcore operate as affective environments in which empowerment, care, and identity negotiation take place collectively. According to Grossberg, fandom primarily functions on this affective level: it's not simply about 'liking' something, but about how it feels to be connected to it—physically, immersively, even existentially. This also explains why the meaning of a text can shift when one's affective relationship to it changes. Witchcore, as noted earlier, can be experienced as emancipatory empowerment or as escapist fantasy, depending on platform, discourse, or individual mood.

Affect lends experience a particular atmosphere: it colors and textures meaning, rendering it sensual and significant. Without affect, reception would be mere consumption. With affect, it becomes part of lived experience. In this context, Grossberg's concept of *mattering maps* is also relevant: it describes how individuals organize cultural spaces in which they invest affectively, not just in content or symbols, but in possibilities for locating themselves within the world. Internet aesthetics constitute such spaces. They offer opportunities to create meaning, stabilize identity, feel belonging, and imagine alternative world-models. These affective investments may be escapist, subversive, ironic, or identity-driven. What matters is that the specific sensibility shapes what kinds of meaning are possible and what affective and political consequences follow from them.

From all the above aspects, three key conclusions can be drawn: First, internet aesthetics function as multimodal remixes of pop-cultural fragments that are contextually recombined. Second, their reception is multilayered: a single aesthetic can be read as feminist, romanticizing, consumer-critical, or affirming all at once.[11] Third, through these aesthetic forms, users negotiate identity, belonging, and affect; often beyond established texts or official canons.

11 This multilayered reception highlights the inherent ambiguity of internet aesthetics, which often resist fixed interpretations and instead invite simultaneous, even contradictory, readings depending on context, platform, and user perspective.

Engagement & Participation

What characterizes internet aesthetics most fundamentally is their capacity to generate *possible worlds* and to facilitate movement between them. These worlds are not confined to digital spaces but extend into physical environments and loop back through the realms of imagination and performance into the postdigital present. The question of how meaning is generated within these aesthetic systems is therefore inextricably linked to the degree of engagement users have with them: how fans interact with these possible worlds, how they interpret and extend them, and how communities collectively participate in their production, circulation, and transformation.

Engagement with internet aesthetics occurs along a spectrum. On one end lies contemplative reception, individual acts of collection and curation; on the other, deeply immersive practices that blur the lines between fiction, identity, and embodied experience. These variations in intensity also correlate with the extent to which users transfer elements of an aesthetic into their own realities or immerse themselves within the structures and logics of an imagined world. This spectrum of involvement comprises a complex matrix of interaction between analog, digital, and imaginary domains (cf. Vollmert/Heuser 2025). This dynamic becomes particularly evident when considering the variety of media formats through which internet aesthetics are practiced and experienced.

Moodboards are a central tool for curating and consolidating aesthetic sensibilities. Users collect, expand, organize, and share existing content in the form of visual collages, guides, playlists, or themed watchlists. These acts of collective curation serve two functions: first, they reinforce and expand the shared reference frame that supports collaborative world-building; second, they stimulate individual imagination and contemplative engagement. Formats such as ambience videos or playlists (often consumed as background media during daily activities; see further Berndt 2014) do not narrate linear stories but instead create open-ended experiential assemblages. In these contemplative modes, internet aesthetics operate as diffuse, speculative environments rather than fixed narrative frameworks.

In contrast, point-of-view (POV) formats reflect a higher degree of performative engagement. Rooted in embodied perspective-taking, POV videos adopt the vantage point of a character or figure and invite followers to imaginatively enter their world. Though interaction may appear passive, viewers actively participate by mentally inhabiting specific roles, moods, and scenarios. These formats are deeply embedded within aesthetic conventions, using stylistic and narrative motifs to evoke immersion. The dialectical tension between proximity and distance –between being 'in' the scene and remaining an observer—produces layered forms of individual meaning and identification. The constraints of the POV format also challenge traditional narrative logic, foregrounding temporality and spatiality in new, embodied ways. These videos are not merely representational; they become invitations to reenact or remix an aesthetic logic, inspiring users to perform their own versions of identity within the affective frame of a possible world.

A particularly immersive expression of this performative engagement can be seen in aesthetic ASMR roleplays. These formats combine the sensory stimuli of Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (e.g., whispering, tapping, soft sounds; see further Kirschall 2014) with narrative role-playing and aesthetic conventions. ASMR roleplays often depict intimate or fantastical scenarios from daily-life interactions to fully imagined narratives. Many creators take on fictional roles aligned with specific internet aesthetics, allowing users to imaginatively enter these environments through a form of "embodied copresence" (Zappavigna 2023). Here, the sensory and the symbolic converge: affective response is not only emotional but also tactile and immersive.

At the far end of the engagement spectrum lies the phenomenon of 'reality shifting,' which emerged as a viral trend around 2020, especially on TikTok and Reddit. Shifting refers to practices through which users claim to transfer their consciousness from their current reality (CR) to a desired reality (DR), often one grounded in fictional worlds (with the *Harry Potter* universe being a particularly prominent example). Through techniques like scripting, meditation, and lucid dreaming, users attempt to construct detailed imagined realities and access them cognitively, emotionally, or even spiritually. Internet aesthetics play a central role in this process, supplying visual cues, soundscapes, and narrative frameworks that aid the imagined transition. The act of scripting—like writing detailed narratives that describe the desired world, its relationships, objects, and norms—resembles aesthetic curation. Digital fragments (ambience videos, images, aesthetic playlists) are used not just to visualize but to *actualize* an imagined experience. The Reality Shifting Wiki, the largest community-curated repository of information on the concept, defines it as follows: "Reality shifting is a phenomenon that allows people to shift their consciousness to alternate realities as they desire. It is possible because of the infinite number of universes to exist within the Multiverse [...]. The shifter can interact with people and places once they have shifted, which are actually real, only in an alternate reality from our current reality" (RealityShiftingWiki 2021).

While the act of shifting is intensely focused on mental and affective immersion, it still relies heavily on digital infrastructures: platforms like TikTok and Reddit offer tutorials, support networks, and community validation. The shared aesthetic vocabulary that supports shifting is co-curated and continually expanded. This mode of engagement blurs the lines between imagination and embodiment, between internal experience and external practice. The 'offline' world is never fully left behind; it becomes the staging ground for postdigital ritual where curated digital content enables what is perceived as transcendental experience.

This practice is deeply embedded in fan culture, particularly in fandoms centered on expansive fictional universes (such as *Harry Potter*). Shifting communities often emerge within existing fandom spaces and draw on shared canon knowledge, fanon interpretations, character relationships, and tropes well established in fan fiction. The act of scripting, in particular, closely mirrors fan fiction practices: users craft elaborate narratives that detail interpersonal dynamics, emotional arcs, and world-specific norms, effectively writing themselves into fan-created or alternative versions of familiar worlds.[12] In this way, reality shifting becomes a form of immersive, affective fan engagement that extends the logic of fan fiction beyond storytelling into lived, speculative self-experience.

Across these formats one thing remains clear: meaning in internet aesthetics is not passively received but actively made through engagement. Whether contemplative or immersive, individual or communal, aesthetic participation enables fans to inhabit speculative modes of being. These engagements shape not only how an aesthetic is interpreted but also how fans experience identity, belonging, and emotional resonance. Internet aesthetics thus serve not merely as stylistic expressions but as participatory infrastructures for world-building, identity exploration, and shared cultural imagination.

12 In this context, it is important to note that while shifting practices are predominantly anchored in a single, pre-existing fictional universe, shifters do not engage with the canon universe simply as it exists. Instead, through scripting and worldbuilding, they create individualized, alternative versions of these universes. These personal iterations blend canon knowledge with creative reinterpretation, original characters, and affective sensibilities, resulting in what might be understood as aesthetic variations or inflections of the source material rather than crossovers between discrete fandoms. In this sense, shifters engage in both consumption of and creative deviation from established narrative worlds.

Conclusion: Code(d) Culture

Internet aesthetics can ultimately be understood as expressions of a broader shift in digital visual cultures, where audiovisual atmospheres become vessels for collective longing, affective orientation, and speculative forms of alternative world-making. They operate as digital resonance chambers in which fragmented relationships to self and world are not primarily articulated through rational discourse, but through affect and aesthetic intensity. As co-creative practices, aesthetics circulate not only within popcultural echo chambers but also generate shared imaginaries: possible worlds in which new modes of meaning, identity, and belonging can be tested and performed. These worlds do not necessarily articulate explicit utopias but they raise urgent questions about possible futures.

Despite being marginal in scholarly discourse thus far, internet aesthetics warrant interdisciplinary attention—particularly within fan and media studies as they reflect a culture in which visual and affective codes have become central to social self-positioning and the negotiation of belonging. As art historian Valentina Tanni (2024) has observed, aesthetics are symptomatic of our time: not least because millions of users participate in their production, circulation, and transformation. Their ubiquity on platforms like TikTok, Pinterest, or Tumblr points to a collective desire for expression, orientation, and affective meaning. Precisely because they matter deeply to people, aesthetics become powerful: emotionally, culturally, and, at times, politically. For many fans, internet aesthetics offer stability, expression, community, and even comfort. The corresponding fan practices are not eccentric hobbies but ritualized, embodied engagements embedded in language, dress, self-presentation, and everyday interaction. Understood as part of *productive fandom*, internet aesthetics are not simply driven by an exaggerated search for identification. Rather, they reflect a cultural need to navigate the uncertainties of the present (and future), to find tools for self-understanding, world-interpretation, and the imagination of alternatives. In doing so, they hold political potential: not because they are inherently subversive, but because they open affective spaces where dominant ideologies can be reframed, questioned, or circumvented.

At the same time, the rise of generative AI is significantly altering the conditions under which aesthetics function as co-creative fan practices. Internet aesthetics are increasingly becoming both algorithmic resources and affective repertoires: standardized, labeled, and rendered machine-readable through detailed guides, databases, and visual taxonomies on platforms like Aesthetics Wiki. As a result, popular aesthetics such as cottagecore or dark academia have become so symbolically and visually codified that they now constitute a kind of aesthetic corpus: easily replicated, recombined, and remixed by machine-learning models.

The longstanding recognition within fan culture that fans are also producers now converges with a new paradigm: AI-powered creativity. Generative models make it possible to synthesize complex visual compositions in the style of particular aesthetics, to create hybrid forms, or to subvert and reimagine existing aesthetic conventions. In this process, GenAI becomes a co-producer of affective images, but it is never neutral. Trained on normatively curated datasets, it often reproduces ideological defaults, reinforcing stereotypes and aesthetic clichés.

Moreover, as AI-generated images in low quality—repetitive and contextless—increasingly flood digital platforms (a phenomenon sometimes referred to as AI slop) the aesthetic clarity and affective resonance of internet aesthetics may begin to erode. The overwhelming volume of mediocre, decontextualized, or formulaic content threatens to dilute the specificity that once made aesthetics powerful modes

of identification, expression, and imaginative play. The affective investment that fuels *aesthetic fandom* may be undermined by a visual landscape in which excess replaces intimacy and automation outpaces interpretation. Notably, platforms themselves have begun to respond to this challenge: in 2025, Pinterest introduced AI-labeling and filtering tools that allow users to reduce GenAI content in their feed (cf. Pinterest 2025) —an implicit acknowledgment that the uncontrolled circulation of AI slop threatens the platform's core function as a space for curated aesthetic inspiration.

What remains, however, is the cultural logic behind internet aesthetics: their function as shared symbolic infrastructures that allow individuals to locate themselves emotionally, imaginatively, and socially within a fragmented world. As this essay has shown, aesthetics are not just visual trends: they are affective practices, participatory spaces, and speculative templates for dealing with reality. In this light, the concept of *aesthetic fandom* as productive fandom may offer a productive framework for understanding these practices more precisely. As suggested earlier, aesthetic fandom represents a departure from the object-centrism that has long characterized fan studies. Unlike the broader notion of participatory culture, aesthetic fandom describes a mode of engagement in which the aesthetic itself (its moods, symbols, and stylistic grammar) becomes the object of fannish investment. Users do not only engage with media texts through aesthetic expression; they engage with the aesthetic as a metatextual universe in its own right, curating, remixing, and emotionally inhabiting its codes.

For fan studies, this opens new questions: How do algorithmic co-productions change fan labor? How are aesthetic communities reorganized around platform architectures and machine learning tools? And what does it mean to feel with, through, or against a style in a time of automated affect? And how does generative AI reshape the emotional, aesthetic, and participatory dynamics of fandom itself?

In the end, internet aesthetics remind us that meaning is never simply given: it is constructed through shared mood, mediated experience, and the desire for resonance in uncertain times. Studying them, above all, means studying of how we live: together, online, and in the margins of possible worlds.

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