

Dark Academia as a Cultural and Literary Phenomenon

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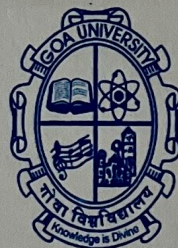
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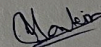
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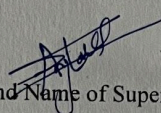
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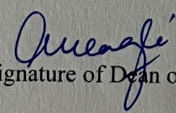
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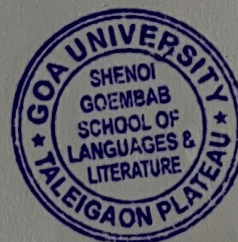
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Abstract

This dissertation explores Dark Academia as a cultural and literary phenomenon, tracing its emergence and evolution while examining the role of social media in its dissemination.

Focusing on two primary texts, *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt and *The Maidens* by Alex Michaelides, the study identifies commonalities within these works through the use of a few insights from Genre studies and investigates whether Dark Academia constitutes a distinct genre. Additionally, through the conduction of a survey, it examines the impact of Dark Academia on those who engage with it, shedding light on its cultural significance and literary implications. Through a comprehensive analysis, this research therefore contributes to a deeper understanding of Dark Academia as both a literary and a cultural force.

Keywords: Dark Academia, Genre studies, Cultural Phenomenon, Literary phenomenon, Evolution, Impact, Social Media

CHAPTER ONE: UNVEILING THE SHADOWS: A PRELUDE TO THE ENIGMATIC REALM OF DARK ACADEMIA

1.1 Background:

“A cool, quiet, misty autumn night. On a mountaintop, alone and overlooking a scenic little village, sits a haunting, isolated castle. A filthy study filled to the brim with outdated books, the floor covered in carelessly discarded crumpled paper balls, and the room's supplies woefully insufficient. A lone, dedicated, and endearingly messy writer and researcher who is dying away in the pursuit of knowledge and artistic expression is illuminated by soft candlelight in the study's castle.”

The lines above provide a generic scenario that is evoked by the emerging cultural phenomena known as Dark Academia. In recent years, this captivating subculture and aesthetic has emerged within the realms of literature, art, and social media, captivating the imagination of a diverse and growing community.

Dark Academia, as a burgeoning literary and cultural phenomenon, traces its roots to the digital realm, notably originating within the confines of an online book club on the social media platform Tumblr. The catalyst for its emergence was the communal exploration of Donna Tartt's seminal work, *The Secret History*, which ignited discussions and content sharing among users, encapsulating recurring themes and aesthetics believed to stem from the novel. This term, "dark academia," encapsulates a spectrum of aesthetics inspired by the pursuit of knowledge through scholarly endeavours. At its essence, Dark Academia embodies a brooding ambiance, an affinity for the arts, a fascination with

academia, secret societies, and a profound acknowledgment of the inherent darkness within human nature and society.

According to Dr. R.J Adriaansen Dark Academia is grounded upon an ‘imagined notion of late 19th- early 20th century college life.’ (Adriaansen). Going by this statement it can be assumed that central to Dark Academia is its thematic focus on the life within educational institutions, particularly boarding schools, prep schools, and colleges spanning the late nineteenth century to the 1940s. Its objectives are manifold, serving as both a refuge from contemporary superficiality and a vehicle for self-expression and self-discovery, fostering a fervent exploration of literature, history, art, and academia. The adoption of Dark Academia principles also extends to the creation of personalised study spaces, emulating the ambiance of a library or classroom desk within the confines of one's own room. This entails meticulous control over lighting, the use of candles for atmosphere, and the presence of stacks of vintage books and notebooks.

Furthermore, Dark Academia fosters a sense of community among like-minded individuals, facilitated by social media platforms, enabling enthusiasts to connect, share creative works, and engage in intellectual discourse. Its influence extends beyond online forums, permeating contemporary literature and art, where its themes and aesthetics resonate deeply, infusing narratives with a timeless quality.

The allure of Dark Academia has not been immune to evolution, giving rise to sub-genres such as "magical academia" and "occult academia," enriching the literary landscape with supernatural elements. Its impact on contemporary culture, particularly amidst the pandemic, has been notable, with a surge in online searches reflecting a heightened interest in December 2020.

Richard Papen, the narrator-protagonist of *The Secret History*, reflects on the existence of a concept akin to "the fatal flaw," a dramatic imperfection commonly found in literature, within real life. Initially skeptical of its existence beyond the realm of fiction, Richard now believes it to be real, identifying his own flaw as a morbid longing for picturesque beauty at any cost. It appears that Richard's pursuit of an aesthetic ideal is shared by others, as evidenced by the rise of this online subculture during the Covid-19 pandemic. This subculture or internet-aesthetic has gained significant popularity, with hashtags such as #darkacademia accumulating over 100,000 posts on Instagram and 18 million views on TikTok. (Zaveri, 3)

Acknowledging the appeal of Dark Academia amidst times of isolation, Amanda Taylor identifies five key factors that resonated with individuals during the pandemic: a sense of detachment from the outside world, relatable narrators embodying outsider perspectives, nostalgia for vintage fashion reminiscent of collegiate aesthetics, a portrayal of campus life reflecting current trends, and a curated aesthetic revolving around coffee, tea, and books. (Taylor, 35).

This dissertation seeks to delve deeper into the conceptual understanding of Dark Academia and its cultural and literary significance, unraveling the mysteries and allure that have propelled it into a cherished and enduring cultural movement. It also seeks to shed light upon the perception of the movement on the Indian populace, and subsequently discuss its influence and impact. Keeping in mind that Dark Academia embodies a multifaceted nature as a genre, movement and an internet aesthetic, the dissertation seeks to discuss each of these aspects through the various chapters.

Relevance:

The relevance of this study lies in its exploration of how contemporary cultural movements, exemplified by phenomena like Dark Academia, exert a significant influence across various facets of society, including fashion, literature, and art. Adherents of these movements often embrace their ethos for its aesthetic allure, thereby serving as catalysts for authors, brands, and creators to produce content imbued with the distinctive characteristics and visual motifs synonymous with these internet-driven aesthetics.

Delving into the study of such movements and aesthetics provides a valuable opportunity to comprehend their profound impact on shaping our cultural landscape, as well as their far-reaching implications for media and the publishing industry. Moreover, such investigations afford us the chance to introspect on how these cultural phenomena influence our own perceptions and behaviours.

1.2: Aims and Objectives

- Tracing the origins and roots of Dark Academia.
- Examining the factors that draw individuals to Dark Academia, such as its themes, aesthetics, and intellectualism.
- Investigating the role of social media and digital communities in the dissemination and evolution of Dark Academia.
- Assessing the impact of Dark Academia on the fashion, literature, art and educational choices of its adherents.

- Exploring potential positive and negative effects of the movement on those who engage with it.

- To explore Dark Academia as a literary and cultural phenomenon.

By addressing these objectives, the dissertation aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the cultural dynamics surrounding Dark Academia, shedding light on its influence on individuals and society.

1.3: Literature Review

There is no official definition of Dark Academia in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) or any other prominent dictionaries yet. However, there are a number of informal definitions of dark academia circulating online. One common definition is that dark academia is the subculture that combines a love of learning with a fascination for the dark and unusual. It is often associated with the study of literature, history and philosophy, as well as with Gothic and horror fiction.

Another common definition is that dark academia is an aesthetic that is inspired by the pursuit of knowledge and learning, often through reading and research. It is also characterised by an interest in the unusual and the grim, such as mystery, crime, and death. There is little source material available for Dark Academia as a cultural phenomenon. However, on exploring the literature available in this field, critics have commented on the nature of Dark Academia and how it appeals to various individuals and groups. In a pertinent article Megha Bhatia discusses the Dark Academia subculture and how it is multifaceted having both appeal as well as criticism. (Bhatia, 5)

In terms of appeal there is nostalgia, intellectual satisfaction and artistic aesthetic. However, she also points to a lack of diversity, romanticisation and glorification of

suffering as being the limitations of the genre. The idealisation can lead to people having unrealistic expectations of what it is like to pursue a life of academia. This can be especially harmful to young people who may be drawn to Dark Academia because they may be seeking a sense of belonging or may be attracted to its aesthetic appeal.

In an essay, Robbert-Jan Adriannsen (114), states how Dark Academia has however led to the celebration of liberal arts and humanities, emphasising learning for its own sake in a world dominated by STEM. Isabella Dudley-Flores in her article discusses another concern about Dark Academia regarding its Eurocentric, exclusionary and elitist appeal. This genre often focuses on traditional notions of academic excellence and achievement as well, which can leave out people who do not fit into these norms, while simultaneously emphasising perfectionism. Additionally, Dark Academia is said to be often associated with a certain social class and socioeconomic status. (Dudley-Flores)

Finally, some critics have expressed concern about the potential negative psychological effects of Dark Academia. For example, the focus on death and the dark can be triggering for people who have experienced trauma or mental health challenges.

Caron Gentry in her article “How Reading 'Dark Academia' Novels Can Help New Students Feel More at Home at University” discusses how the prevalent feeling of ‘not belonging’, among the main characters of works which constitute this genre, whether due to socioeconomic backgrounds or minority status, resonates with many real-world experiences that students have in academic settings. The portrayal of these struggles, often accompanied by the characters' quests for acceptance and belonging, sheds light on the existence of "hidden curricula" that can marginalise students from diverse backgrounds. By delving into these issues, Gentry states that Dark Academia literature

serves as a means to confront and understand the structures and biases that hinder inclusivity in educational institutions. (Gentry)

In fact, most of the articles concerning Dark Academia often state, though not explicitly, that this genre to a certain extent provides solace and a sense of belonging to those who feel left out of the mainstream society. This in particular is surprising as the genre deals with somber and dark themes. Thus, this dissertation aims to enhance our understanding of this unexplored genre of literature and its cultural and genre-related significance.

1.4: Research problem/questions and Hypothesis

- How does the reception of Dark Academia influence individuals and society?
- What are the features/characteristics of the movement?
- How has the movement evolved?

- Problem:

There is a need for research in Dark Academia.

- Hypothesis:

If the reception of the Dark Academia movement is explored (predominantly within the Indian context), it will reveal that this aesthetic and lifestyle trend has provided individuals, particularly in regions where access to traditional academic environments is limited, with a sense of connection, community, and intellectual engagement, and belonging.

1.5: Research Methodology

Since the focus of the dissertation is to study Dark Academia as a cultural phenomenon the response of the reader is crucial to understand how this genre shapes the cultural consciousness of the receiver. Furthermore, since the dissertation intends to study Dark Academia as a literary phenomenon as well, insights from the field of Genre Studies are used to examine the concept of Dark Academia.

i. Research tools:

Apart from conducting a thorough content analysis, a survey was conducted in order to collect quantitative data through the use of an online questionnaire. The sample group for the questionnaire primarily comprised of people aged 16 and above. The questions asked were in accordance with the objectives of the research, mainly regarding the participants' reception of the movement.

1.6: Scope

This research aimed to investigate the reception of Dark Academia and its impact on individuals and society, particularly focusing on the Indian audience. The study encompassed an exploration of the origins and defining characteristics of the Dark Academia subculture, an examination of the two primary texts – *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt and *The Maidens* by Alex Michaelides. The dissertation also aimed to explore Dark Academia's emergence in popular culture, and its overall appeal.

1.7. Outline of the study/ Conspectus:

i. Chapterisation:

● **Chapter 1. Unveiling the Shadows: A Prelude to the Enigmatic Realm of Dark Academia (Introduction and Literature Review)**

This chapter introduces us to the Dark Academia movement, wherein its roots and its popularity is briefly explored. This chapter also includes a literature review which provides an in-depth analysis of the existing literature related to the Dark Academia movement and its influence, offering insights and perspectives from previous research and academic work.

● **Chapter 2: Ink Stained Roots: Tracing the Emergence, History, and Concepts of Dark Academia**

I. Emergence:

This section delves into the origins and emergence of the dark academia subculture, tracing its historical roots and contextualizing its evolution within broader cultural and literary movements. By examining the precursors and influences that contributed to the development of dark academia as a distinct subculture, the chapter sheds light on the socio-cultural factors that shaped its emergence and subsequent evolution.

II. What is a Subculture?

Building upon the foundational understanding of subcultural theory, this section explores the concept of subcultures and their significance within contemporary society. Through theoretical frameworks drawn from sociology and cultural studies, the chapter elucidates the defining characteristics and functions of subcultures, highlighting their role as sites of cultural resistance, identity formation, and collective expression.

III. Key Concepts in Dark Academia:

This subsection delves into the core concepts and aesthetic elements that define the dark academia subculture. By examining key themes such as aesthetics and cultural motifs, the chapter unpacks the nuanced layers of meaning and symbolism embedded within dark academia literature, art, and fashion. Through critical analysis and interpretation of these aesthetic elements, the chapter elucidates the cultural significance and ideological underpinnings of dark academia as a distinct cultural phenomenon.

- **Chapter 3. Genre Trouble: Navigating Genre Fluidity and Textual Analysis in Dark Academia**

This chapter delves into an in-depth analysis of two primary texts, *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt and *The Maidens* by Alex Michaelides, through the lens of genre studies. Drawing on theories of literary analysis, the chapter examines how both novels fit within the genre of Dark Academia. Through close examination of certain key thematic motifs, the chapter seeks to uncover the underlying cultural and literary tropes that define the Dark Academia genre. By comparing and contrasting the portrayal of academia, intellectualism, and violence in both texts, the analysis aims to shed light on the themes that define Dark Academia.

Ultimately, this chapter offers a comprehensive exploration of how *The Secret History* and *The Maidens* contribute to the evolving landscape of dark academia literature, while also providing valuable insights into the genre's cultural and thematic complexities.

- **Chapter 4: Social Media's Influence on Dark Academia: Unveiling a Symbiotic Relationship**

This chapter seeks to explore the dynamic interplay between social media and the dark academia subculture, aiming to elucidate whether their relationship is symbiotic or not. By examining the role of social media platforms in shaping perceptions, disseminating content, and fostering community engagement within the dark academia community, the chapter aims to uncover the extent to which social media influences the evolution and dissemination of dark academia culture. The chapter employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative analysis of questionnaire findings with qualitative exploration of user-generated content on social media platforms. Through the administration of a structured questionnaire to individuals aged 16 and above, the chapter gathers empirical data on participants' usage patterns, preferences, and perceptions regarding social media's impact based on their engagement with dark academia content.

Analysis of the Questionnaire Findings:

Drawing upon the questionnaire findings, the chapter analyses key themes and trends related to participants' attitudes towards social media's influence on dark academia. By examining participants' responses motivations for engaging with dark academia content on social media, and perceptions of its impact on their sense of community and aesthetic preferences, the chapter provides a nuanced understanding of the symbiotic relationship between social media and dark academia culture. Through analysis and interpretation of the empirical data, the chapter evaluates the extent to which social media platforms serve as catalysts for the dissemination, perpetuation, and evolution of dark academia ideals and aesthetics.

- **Chapter 5: Penning the Finale: The Culmination of Dark Academia's Odyssey (Conclusion):**

This final chapter contains concluding statements that summarise the key findings and insights from the study, highlighting the project outcomes and implications.

CHAPTER TWO: INK-STAINED ROOTS: EMERGENCE, HISTORY AND CONCEPTS ASSOCIATED WITH DARK ACADEMIA

2.1 Emergence:

Dark Academia is a multifaceted phenomenon encompassing a genre, cultural movement, and internet aesthetic. As a genre, it refers to a literary and artistic category characterised by its thematic focus on intellectualism, academia, and a brooding atmosphere often set in the past, particularly the late 19th century to the 1940s. As a cultural movement, Dark Academia involves a community of enthusiasts who share a passion for knowledge, literature, art, and a collective longing for intellectualism and a sense of belonging, so much so that it is now being categorised as a subculture. Additionally, as an internet aesthetic, Dark Academia originated online, particularly on platforms like Tumblr and TikTok, where users curate and share content embodying recurring themes, aesthetics, and motifs associated with the subculture. The movement's influence extends beyond the digital realm, impacting contemporary literature, art, and fashion.

However, one source stated that the trend apparently started out as a mere hashtag on the social media platform – Tumblr as early as 2014 (Rasa, K.J), wherein a user attached the tag with an image of dusty novels stacked above each other. Another source stated that it started out as a name for a book club on Tumblr for the purpose of discussing Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*. As the years progressed though this term has been associated with multiple entities and it has significantly influenced these entities and people's way of life. Although, the exact inception of the term remains elusive, online-sources suggest that the idea of "dark academia" started circulating online around 2017 but boomed during the pandemic, alongside other niche aesthetics and 80s

throwbacks. This trend revolves around the romanticised image of attending a classic, elite university – think old gothic buildings, not modern campuses. It's all about intellectual pursuits: deep discussions with quirky professors, getting lost in old poems, fuelled by endless coffee (and maybe some cigarettes). But what does it mean to actually embody "dark academia"? This aesthetic can be tricky. Like many internet trends, it can be just a stylish online presence or a whole way of life. Dark academia could be a fancy term for a traditionalist fashion trend, or it could represent a deeper lifestyle or even a community. We'll explore what it truly means and how this unique trend came about.

The term "dark academia" may be unfamiliar to many, but its usage primarily comes from individuals already familiar with its themes who actively seek out this genre in literature, film, and other media forms. Fortunately, the name itself provides insight into the genre's definition and standards. To be classified as "dark academia," a work must meet two criteria. Firstly, academia must play a significant role in the narrative, reflecting a scholarly environment of study, scholarship, and education. If, for instance, a story's setting can easily be shifted from a university to a private law firm without significant alteration, it may not qualify as dark academia. Student-centered stories should include elements such as classwork, homework, or independent study that are inherent to academic life, while narratives featuring professors should explore how their career impacts both character development and storyline progression.

Dark Academia embraces the notion of "academia" as an idealistic haven for intellectual pursuit and knowledge, often romanticising the ambiance of ancient libraries, ivy-covered campuses, and the pursuit of esoteric wisdom. It resonates with a sense of longing for the past, a yearning to steep oneself in the classics, and a desire to cultivate a

refined and intellectual persona. Within this subculture, knowledge is venerated as a source of power and emancipation, wherein individuals often seek to embody the archetypal "tragic scholar" – a figure grappling with both brilliance and inner turmoil.

A crucial aspect of Dark Academia lies in its interplay with darker elements. The presence of "darkness" within an academic context is essential, whether stemming from ethical conflicts, situational dilemmas, or character flaws.

However, the prefix "dark" within the term does not solely signify melancholia or gloom but rather alludes to the exploration of profound and often unsettling themes. These may include the examination of human nature's complexity, the pursuit of forbidden knowledge, the impact of mortality, and the exploration of the human psyche. The merging of intellectual pursuits with dark themes gives rise to a rich and layered artistic expression that captivates the imaginations of its adherents. The "dark" in dark academia may also be a reference to the members' interest in the unusual and the macabre. Mystery, crime, death, and other dark and eerie subjects are what give dark academia its distinct "darkness."

Dark academia provides fertile ground for various genres, including bildungsroman, romance, and science fiction. Even children's literature finds its place within this genre, showcasing works like Frances Hodgson Burnett's *"A Little Princess"* and Lemony Snicket's *"The Austere Academy."* However, dark academia, like the academe itself, tends to adhere to traditional norms, often focusing narratives on white cisgender heterosexual males from upper-class backgrounds or those surrounded by such individuals.

Despite its diverse content and platforms, dark academia suffers from disunity and lack of proper categorisation. The absence of a distinct label for this genre contributes to its disorganisation, leading to works being classified under more established categories like romance or thriller. Without a recognized genre label, dark academia works are often misplaced, hindering their visibility and accessibility to audiences seeking this specific aesthetic and thematic content.

On discussing the association of dark academia with a particular literary period R.J Adrianssen states that there is certain ‘layeredness’ to it. According to him ‘it tries to emulate fin de siècle humanist college education and taps into the literature of the era (eg. Wilde), while it does so through an engagement with contemporary literature (eg. M.L. Rio), but in its attempt to reimagine learning in a humanist tradition it also resurfaces classical and Romantic literature.’ Moreover, he states that beyond it being a Western tradition, its presence in India ‘taps into its own literary canon.’

2.2 What is a subculture?

Before further exploring Dark Academia, it is important to understand what a subculture is.

According to SociologyDictionary.com a subculture is defined as “a distinct social group within a larger culture that shares specific patterns of behaviour, values, beliefs, and practices that differentiate them from the dominant culture” (Bell). Subcultures frequently develop among individuals who share common interests, experiences, or identities and who seek to establish a sense of belonging and identity within a larger society. Small societies tend to exhibit cultural homogeneity, whereas large industrial societies are characterised by cultural diversity and the presence of numerous subcultures.

Dark Academia as a subculture is said to have gained prominence during the pandemic. Several articles online quote that the popularity of dark academia may have been part of a larger trend of seeking comfort, connection, and meaning during challenging times like the pandemic with loss of social connections and interactions along with social distancing measures. Dark academia has had a strong presence on social media platforms, with communities forming around shared interests in literature, art, and academia. The online nature of these communities probably allowed individuals to connect, share experiences, and find like-minded individuals even when physical interactions were limited. The visually appealing aesthetic perhaps provided university students with a sense of belonging in a world of solitude wherein students couldn't visit actual university campuses. Dark Academia's rise to prominence can be attributed, in part, to its evolution into a subculture.

Merriam Webster defines a phenomenon as "an observable fact or event," but a more nuanced understanding emerges when considering the cultural context. Columbus State Community College describes a cultural phenomenon as embodying the bandwagon effect, wherein individuals adopt a particular behaviour due to its widespread popularity. Dark Academia aligns with this definition, gaining traction as a cultural phenomenon marked by its widespread appeal, spanning from literature and art to fashion. The subculture's allure, rooted in a nostalgic and aesthetic appreciation for intellectual pursuits, has spurred a collective embrace that transcends individual preferences, contributing to its cultural significance.

Dark Academia can be seen as a literary phenomenon because it places a strong emphasis on classic literature, often from the Gothic and Victorian eras, and celebrates the value of knowledge, learning, and intellectual pursuits. It draws inspiration from

works by authors like Edgar Allan Poe and Mary Shelley creating a rich interplay between literature, aesthetics, and culture. The movement's focus on themes of introspection, existentialism, and the exploration of human nature also aligns with the depth often found in literary works, further contributing to its literary significance. The objectives of Dark Academia are multifaceted, reflecting a range of individual motivations among its followers. For some, it serves as a refuge, offering an escape from the superficiality of contemporary culture and a 'sense of belonging' to a perceived golden age of intellectualism. It provides an avenue for self-expression and self-discovery, allowing individuals to explore their interests in literature, history, art and academia with a certain fervor and authenticity.

2.3 Key Concepts:

I. Aesthetics:

Aesthetic by its basic definition, according to Oxford Learner's Dictionary is "the understanding of beautiful things and an aesthetic appreciation thereof" or "the formal study of the principles of art and beauty".

In a Latin treatise titled *Aesthetic* (1750) by Alexander Baumgarten, a German philosopher, the term 'aesthetics' is used to refer to the arts, "of which the aesthetic end is the perfection of sensuous cognition, as such; this is beauty." (Abrams, 5)

Aesthetic theories conceptualize artworks as deliberate creations aimed at evoking aesthetic responses from audiences, theorists like Theodore Adorno in his work "Aesthetic Theory" explores not just traditional aesthetic themes like the role of beauty and sublimity in art, but also delves into the connections between art and society.

Dark Academia exemplifies one aspect of what users on social media platforms term "aesthetics." They use the term in a manner distinct from academic practitioners of aesthetic theory, yet equally coherent. Dark academia encompasses various tropes, clothing styles, media representations, and visual motifs established through mass consensus and ongoing revision. It intersects with other popular aesthetics like "light academia," characterised by fewer dark elements and more cozy, academic-inspired attire, and "cottagecore," appealing to those interested in rustic, quaint settings. In online contexts, "aesthetic" also serves as an adjective. Describing a blog, person, or image as "aesthetic" implies a focus on the sublime in everyday moments. Essentially, dark academia imbues the mundane aspects of school life with an aesthetic allure. Its online community imbues homework sessions or a worn armchair with historical allure and emotional depth. For many users, especially those growing up in less picturesque environments, aesthetics offer a means of transforming the ordinary into a comforting fantasy.

Media coverage of dark academia has generated various theories regarding its appeal among young individuals. In light of the pandemic, some commentators suggest that our heightened awareness of the privilege associated with attending physical schools, coupled with the inundation of imagery depicting mortality, contribute to its allure. However, it is believed that these explanations fail to fully explain the enduring popularity of the trend, as well as its close counterparts like 'cottagecore', which similarly lean towards Anglophilia and historical themes. Instead, what's more appealing about Dark Academia is its blend of lofty aspirations and attainability. Through online

communities, individuals are provided with the means and guidance to engage in an aesthetic and intellectual realm that might otherwise be inaccessible.

According to Ana Quiring it can be argued that Dark Academia both demystifies elite academic settings and romanticises them. Aesthetic blogs combine self-directed learning with a diverse and thoughtfully curated online community. One doesn't necessarily need to attend an Ivy League institution to delve into Ovid's works; in fact, discussing "The Metamorphoses" with online peers might prove to be a more enriching experience than studying it at a prestigious school. Essentially, the trend serves as a shortcut to the trappings of a prestigious education, devoid of the financial burden, exclusivity, or parental pressure. A critical perspective might view this community as promoting the aesthetics of scholarship over genuine academic engagement, reducing education to a superficial trend lacking in context. However, participants of Dark Academia deserve more recognition. They are, in essence, revitalising the treatment of humanities in academia, reclaiming a romanticised appreciation for art's intrinsic value. This resistance to instrumentalisation aligns with broader movements within literary studies, challenging the productivity-driven ethos of late capitalism. While Dark Academia may be accused of trivialising education by turning it into a commodity, this tendency is learned from the corporate university itself. Ultimately, its commodification serves less nefarious purposes than the university's focus on measurable outcomes and efficiency.

II. Aesthetic Elements:

A. Fashion

The widespread appeal of micro-aesthetics is particularly evident when they find expression in the realm of fashion. It's not unexpected; whether we agree with it or not, clothing serves as the most conspicuous means of conveying one's status, lifestyle, or convictions. Even choosing not to engage in this form of self-expression, perhaps in the vein of the once-prominent normcore, conveys a distinct message. Consequently, the rise of dark academia as a fashion trend on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Pinterest underscores its popularity.

Dark Academia has significantly influenced fashion, emerging as a trend that intertwines the two seamlessly. Recognized for its “prep school fashion with a gothic twist” as coined by InStyle Magazine, this aesthetic often draws inspiration from Ivy League vintage styles.

The aesthetic embraces muted earthy colours and dark palettes, creating an ambiance that mirrors the intellectual and mysterious themes associated with Dark Academia. This distinctive style often involves classic pieces, layering, and a preference for timeless accessories.

Moreover, Dark Academia’s impact extends beyond individual preferences. Numerous online guides curate dressing styles aligned with this aesthetic, recommending specific brands that resonate with the theme. The fusion of fashion and literature creates a unique cultural phenomenon, reflecting a romanticised intellectualism.

In exploring the cultural impact, one might find resonance with the ideas of Horkheimer and Adorno, who introduced the concept of the “culture industry” Dark Academia, in its curated fashion and literature, challenges the mainstream by offering a counter-cultural expression, embodying a sense of intellectual rebellion against mass-produced trends.

Simultaneously, this movement facilitates capitalism and dominant trends as by subtly creating a trend which then fuels several industries like the fashion industry, marketing and the publishing industry. With book boxes being created with the specifics of this movement in mind and styling guides being created with the genre in mind, one can argue that the movement does become a facilitator of the culture industry.

Overall, it can be posited that Dark Academia's influence on fashion and literature goes beyond mere aesthetics, tapping into a cultural shift that seeks to reclaim a sense of intellectual authenticity in a world saturated by the culture industry.

B. Symbols:

Dark Academia is rich in symbolism, using various elements to convey its intellectual, mysterious, and nostalgic essence. Some prominent symbols associated with Dark Academia include:

1. **Books and Literature:** Central to Dark Academia is a deep appreciation for books and literature. Old, weathered books, leather-bound journals, and vintage manuscripts often symbolise a connection to intellectual pursuits and a longing for a bygone era of erudition.

2. **Candles and Candlelight:** Candles are frequently used in Dark Academia aesthetics to create a moody, atmospheric setting. They symbolise introspection, focus, and a reverence for the written word. The warm glow of candlelight contributes to the mysterious and reflective ambiance.

3. **Keys and Locks:** Keys and locks are symbolic of hidden knowledge, secrets, and the unlocking of mysteries, all of which tend to be at the core of the movement and

the novels within the genre. These symbols add an element of intrigue and can be found in accessories or as decorative elements in Dark Academia-inspired spaces.

4. Feathers and Quills: Feathers, especially quill feathers, connect Dark Academia to the art of writing. They symbolise creativity, the written word, and the literary arts. Moreover, quill pens are often associated with traditional academic settings.

5. Classical Art and Statues: Dark Academia draws inspiration from classical art and often features references to ancient sculptures and paintings particularly those from the Renaissance. These symbols evoke a sense of timeless beauty, history, and an appreciation for the classical arts and enriches the knowledge base of the reader, because it incorporates factual information which can trigger readers to seek out information about these artworks.

6. Nature Imagery: Dark Academia frequently incorporates natural elements, such as dried flowers, botanical prints, and references to the changing seasons. These symbols convey a connection to the passage of time and the cycle of life, adding depth to the aesthetic. Apart from these, the nature imagery in Dark Academia novels feature moors, expansive fields, bare leafless trees, all of which are veiled beneath a curtain of perpetual mist.

7. Crows and Ravens: Dark Academia embraces a slightly gothic twist, and birds like crows and ravens are commonly associated with this aesthetic. According to a popular blog named Thorn and Claw ravens are said to “represent ancient wisdom, intelligence and transformation. They are spectral messengers, bearing the weight of untold visions and prophetic whispers.” These birds add a touch of the macabre to the work or art form which then enhances the overall enigmatic atmosphere.

8. **Timepieces:** Antique clocks, hourglasses, and sundials are often used in Dark Academia settings to symbolise the passage of time, highlighting the transient nature of knowledge and the academic pursuit. These symbols collectively contribute to the intricate tapestry of Dark Academia, creating a visual language that resonates with those drawn to the aesthetic's intellectual and romantic ideals.

C. Settings and Atmosphere:

Enigmatic ambiance: Dark Academia evokes a sense of secrecy, concealed knowledge, and fascination. It frequently integrates features of Gothic and Neo-Gothic architecture, dimly illuminated libraries, study rooms bathed in candlelight, and deserted or deteriorating structures. In terms of gothic and neo-gothic architectural styles, the structures are characterised by pointed arches, intricate embellishments, and dramatic forms. Additionally, the architectural landscape associated with Dark Academia is often associated with expansive libraries, ancient ruins, and other edifices that evoke a feeling of history and wisdom.

CHAPTER THREE: GENRE TROUBLE: NAVIGATING GENRE

FLUIDITY AND TEXTUAL ANALYSIS IN DARK ACADEMIA

The term "genre" itself, derived from the French and Latin for "kind" or "class," has been utilised across rhetoric, literary theory, media studies, and linguistics to denote distinct types of texts. It signifies a particular category or style of literature, encompasses a wide array of genres, which have been classified based on various criteria throughout history. Since the era of Plato and Aristotle, there has persisted a fundamental classification of literary works into three main categories, delineated by the perspective from which the narrative is presented: lyric (expressed entirely in the first person), epic or narrative (wherein the narrator initially assumes the first-person role before allowing characters to express themselves), and drama (where characters solely drive the dialogue). Within this overarching classification, classical scholars, including Aristotle, delineated numerous specific genres. While several ancient designations such as epic, tragedy, comedy, and satire endure, newer classifications such as biography, essay, and novel have emerged over the past three centuries.

Nonetheless, Genre theory is plagued by persistent uncertainties. Questions arise regarding the ontological status of genres: do they truly exist in objective reality or are they constructs devised by analysts? Is there a finite classification of genres or are they essentially boundless? Are genres eternal, transcending time like Platonic forms, or are they transient and tied to specific historical periods? Additionally, there is debate over whether genres are culturally contingent or universally applicable. Further complicating matters is also the debate over the purpose of genre analysis: should it be purely prescriptive or descriptive in nature.

Historically, genre study has focused on categorization and classification, akin to the botanical classification of plant varieties. Literature, for instance, has been broadly categorized into poetry, prose, and drama, with further subdivisions such as tragedy and comedy. However, contemporary media genres are more specific, often revolving around particular forms rather than overarching themes like tragedy and comedy (Allen, 44).

Modern media, including films and television, are routinely classified into genres like thrillers, westerns, game shows, and sitcoms. Yet, the process of genre classification is far from objective. There is no universally agreed-upon taxonomy, and disagreements abound regarding the definition of specific genres. As Jane Feuer aptly observes, genres are abstract concepts rather than empirical entities, subject to interpretation and differing perspectives among theorists. What one scholar may consider a genre, another might regard as a sub-genre, highlighting the inherently subjective nature of genre theory (Feuer, 144).

Keeping this in mind let's embark upon a discussion as to what Dark Academia constitutes as a genre.

The emergence of Dark Academia as a burgeoning literary genre coincides with the evolving landscape of genrefication in literature. Embedded within a cultural context, the movement's transformation into a genre is notably influenced by its digital genesis as a book club discussing Tartt's *The Secret History*, on Tumblr, expanding its literary boundaries to encompass works resonating with its thematic elements. Texts such as *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, *Northanger Abbey*

and the *Harry Potter* series, while loosely affiliated with Dark Academia, epitomize the genre's early stages of development.

Central to this evolution is the pivotal role of digital marketing within the publishing industry, catalyzed by platforms like Instagram, Tumblr, TikTok, and YouTube's BookTube community. The advent of BookTubers facilitated book reviews, interactive readings, and merchandise showcases, fostering an influencer culture that transformed online platforms into dynamic spaces for literary discourse and promotion.

As the genre gained traction, it became a conduit for knowledge dissemination, championing intellectual curiosity through characters immersed in academic pursuits. Dark Academia's appeal, particularly amidst the pandemic, offered readers a vicarious glimpse into academic life while fostering a community-driven ethos on platforms like Bookstagram and BookTok.

In this digital age, consumers metamorphose into producers, actively shaping and perpetuating cultural narratives on digital platforms. Here, consumption and creation intertwine, fostering a dynamic exchange that perpetuates the genre's evolution and dissemination among avid participants.

3.1 Novels:

The novels chosen for analysis, *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt and *The Maidens* by Alex Michaelides - have been selected because they to a certain extent effectively exemplify fundamental themes inherent to the Dark Academia genre. The objective of this analysis is to illuminate key themes and motifs of dark academia, thereby reinforcing and enriching our comprehension of the genre. Emphasis will be placed predominantly on thematic exploration of both the novels concurrently, to elucidate the intricacies of Dark Academia.

A. *The Secret History* (1992) by Donna Tartt:

The Secret History is a novel written by Donna Tartt, published in 1992. Set in a fictional Vermont college, Hampden College, the novel follows a group of highly intelligent and eccentric Classics students who form an exclusive and secretive clique under the tutelage of their enigmatic and charismatic professor, Julian Morrow.

The plot revolves around Richard Papen, a transfer student from California who hails from a working-class family and becomes fascinated by the group of affluent students comprising of the twins – Charles and Camilla, Edward ‘Bunny’ Corcoran, Francis Abernathy, led by the magnetic and mysterious Henry Winter, the typical problematic, brooding, arrogant yet intelligent characters found in Dark Academia novels. As Richard becomes increasingly drawn into their world, he discovers that they are not only deeply immersed in the study of Classics but also engaged in illicit activities and moral transgressions.

The central event of the novel is the murder of one of their own, Bunny Corcoran, and the murder of a local farmer, committed by the group in a drunken and drug-induced

frenzy. The group's efforts to cover up the crime and evade detection by the authorities drive much of the narrative tension.

As Richard becomes more entangled in the group's dark secrets, he grapples with his own moral conscience and the consequences of his involvement. The novel delves into themes of morality, guilt, death, loyalty, and the pursuit of knowledge at any cost.

Tartt's skillful storytelling and vivid characterisations immerse the reader in a richly esoteric world of academia, intellectualism, and moral ambiguity.

The novel serves as a quintessential example of Dark Academia, encapsulating many of the themes and tropes associated with the genre (secret societies, morally ambiguous characters). Notably, it is often considered a foundational work within the dark academia literary movement, setting the stage for subsequent explorations of intellectualism, moral ambiguity, and the allure of academia.

The novel's narrative structure adds to its intrigue, as it unfolds as a "why-dun-it" mystery rather than a traditional "who-dunnit." Through the perspective of protagonist Richard Papen, the story is presented in reverse, with Papen recounting the events that led to the chilling tragedy and the irreversible consequences that befall the group of students.

Within the broader literary landscape, *The Secret History* can be categorised as both a campus novel and a mystery novel. Its setting within the hallowed halls of Hampden College provides a rich backdrop for exploring the complexities of academic life, while its central mystery captivates readers with its moral dilemmas and psychological depth.

As the novel delves into themes of morality, guilt, friendship and the pursuit of knowledge, it paints a vivid portrait of dark academia, captivating readers with its atmospheric prose and compelling characters. Through its exploration of the darker aspects of human nature and the consequences of intellectual obsession, *The Secret History* remains a timeless and influential work in the realm of dark academia literature.

B. *The Maidens* (2021) by Alex Michaelides:

The Maidens is a psychological thriller novel written by Alex Michaelides, published in 2021. Set in Cambridge, England, the novel follows Mariana Andros, a group therapist grappling with grief over the loss of her husband - Sebastian. When her niece, Zoe, informs her of a murder at Cambridge University, Mariana becomes embroiled in the investigation, out of curiosity and concern for her niece Zoe, who turns out to be the murderer.

The victim is a young woman named Tara, a member of a secretive group known as 'The Maidens,' led by the 'dazzling', mysterious and magnetic professor, Edward Fosca. The group consists of privileged female students who are drawn to Fosca's teachings on Greek mythology and psychology. Mariana becomes convinced that Fosca is involved in Tara's murder, particularly when she learns of his past association with another young woman who died under mysterious circumstances years ago.

As Mariana delves deeper into the investigation, she finds herself drawn into the world of The Maidens, uncovering dark secrets and hidden agendas. She struggles to balance her grief with her determination to uncover the truth, even as she faces resistance from the university and skepticism from the police.

The novel explores themes of obsession, manipulation, and the blurred lines between reality and illusion. Michaelides skillfully weaves together elements of Greek mythology, psychology, and suspense, creating a gripping narrative that keeps readers guessing until the final twist.

The Maidens received praise for its atmospheric setting, complex characters, and intricately plotted storyline. It offers a chilling exploration of the human psyche and the lengths to which people will go in the pursuit of power and control, catalysed by obsession.

a. Setting:

Academic institutions serve as a pivotal backdrop in Dark Academia novels, imbuing the narrative with an air of intellectualism and intrigue. Hampden College in *The Secret History*, akin to St. Christopher's in *The Maidens*, emerges as a picturesque enclave nestled amidst wooded landscapes and snow-capped mountains. The quaint town of Hampden, with its rustic charm and modest cultural offerings epitomised by the Orpheum Theater, complements the serene yet enigmatic ambiance of the college setting.

Within these hallowed halls, a diverse tapestry of individuals converges, each contributing to the rich tapestry of the academic milieu. It is amidst this eclectic mix that the intricate plotlines of Dark Academia novels unfurl, weaving together themes of ambition, obsession, and morality.

The temporal backdrop of autumn transitioning into winter adds another layer of symbolism to the setting. Autumn, with its connotations of growth and shedding, serves as a metaphorical prelude to the cold, foreboding months of winter. The mist-shrouded

landscapes and dwindling daylight evoke a sense of melancholy and introspection, mirroring the brooding atmosphere commonly associated with Dark Academia narratives.

Ultimately, the setting in Dark Academia novels serves as more than mere backdrop; it becomes a character in its own right, shaping the actions and motivations of the protagonists while enveloping the reader in its atmospheric embrace. Whether viewed as a harbinger of intellectual enlightenment or a harbinger of ominous events, the academic setting imbues the narrative with a sense of timelessness and intrigue.

3.2 Themes:

a. Rituals and Greek Myths:

During ancient Greek times, the Dionysian mysteries comprised clandestine religious ceremonies aimed at venerating the deity Dionysus. Participants engaged in rituals involving the consumption of alcohol, intoxicants, and indulging in choreographed dances and orgies, all in pursuit of altering their consciousness. Within the confines of these rites, individuals sought liberation from societal norms, aspiring to transcend mundane existence and commune directly with the divine. In *The Secret History*, professor Julian, inadvertently, introduced the notion of a Dionysian bacchanal to his students, fixating on its transcendent and aesthetic dimensions while neglecting to emphasize the imperative of moral accountability.

Inspired by Professor Julian's lectures, Henry, Charles, Camilla, and Francis then endeavoured to replicate this ancient Dionysian ritual, endeavouring to attain transcendence through intoxication, communal revelry, and the abandonment of societal constraints. After several unsuccessful attempts, the group eventually achieve a trance-like state, traversing the woods amidst hallucinatory visions and perceived spiritual

epiphanies. Yet, upon regaining sobriety, they discover the unforeseen consequence of their actions: the death of a farmer, the circumstances of which remained inexplicable. Henry, recounting the events, predominantly focuses on the ephemeral spiritual enlightenment attained, trivializing the farmer's death as a mere inconvenience encountered along their journey. Apart from echoing a hint of elitism and the abandonment of rationalism, this showcases how ancient Grecian rituals or the mention thereof are prominent in Dark Academia novels, which brings us to the secret cult of Eleusis, that Professor Edward Fosca speaks about in Chapter 10 of Part 2 of *The Maidens*.

The Eleusinian cult as Professor Fosca describes it gives one a 'liminal experience of being between life and death' (Michaelides, 135). The Eleusinian Mysteries, also known as the Cult of Eleusis, were ancient Greek religious rites celebrated in honor of the goddesses Demeter and Persephone. These mysteries were held annually in the town of Eleusis, near Athens, and were considered the most important religious rituals in ancient Greece.

The exact details of the Eleusinian Mysteries were shrouded in secrecy, as participants were sworn to secrecy under penalty of death. However, it is known that the mysteries consisted of two main parts: the Lesser Mysteries and the Greater Mysteries.

The Lesser Mysteries were held in the spring and served as a preliminary initiation for prospective participants. Those who wished to partake in the Greater Mysteries had to first undergo initiation into the Lesser Mysteries. The rituals of the Eleusinian Mysteries were highly symbolic and immersive, involving processions, sacrifices, prayers, and dramatic reenactments of the myth of Demeter and Persephone.

This very ritual was said to have been enacted by professor Fosca and the Maidens, as described by Zoe in Chapter 2 of Part 5 of the novel.

In an interview with Celadon Books, Michaelides (author of *The Maidens*), states that ‘myths — they are timeless and violent, magical and powerful; stories about passion and heartbreak and love and loss’ (Michaelides). Myths in particular those of Grecian origin, are indeed timeless with multiple novels like the *Percy Jackson* series by Rick Riordan and *The Song of Achilles* by Madeline Miller, based on them. *The Maidens* is no different, with the stories and plays of Euripides, Greek inscriptions and the story of Iphigenia, spersed throughout the narrative. The name of the novel itself alludes to the Greek goddess Persephone who was known as ‘*Kore*’ in Greek which translates to ‘maiden’ or ‘young girl’ (Turner). These allusions add a profound depth to the novel while providing an additional context to the entire plotline.

The mention of these rituals and Grecian myths as well as scripts enhances the intertextuality of the novel, giving it an informative depth that expands the knowledge base of the reader.

b. Elitism and Classism:

Drawing on sociologist Nirmal Puwar’s concept of *Space Invaders*, sociologist Sarah Burton delves into Dark Academia, where certain bodies are perceived as natural occupants while others are deemed alien or out of place. This idealised version of an academic aligns with traits typically associated with white, upper-middle-class, male, cisgender, and heterosexual individuals. These attributes, manifested through language, attire, representation, and interactions within academic settings, reinforce the notion of the existence of a dominant group and its exclusionary practices. (Maia)

Defining this archetype inherently excludes those who do not fit the mold, compelling individuals from marginalized groups to conform to the dominant group's standards for access to academic spaces. This process often entails shedding authentic markers of identity in favour of adopting the cultural norms of the dominant group, sacrificing individuality for assimilation. Entry into academic spaces becomes contingent upon one's ability to assimilate and conform to the norms of the dominant group.

Burton's depiction of the model academic echoes the narrative in Tarrt's Novel, where Richard undergoes a transformation to align with the Julian's Greek class's expectations, after his academic advisor- Laforge, states "one must have read the right things, hold similar views" (Tarrt, p. 14), in reference to gaining a place within the circle of the students studying Greek. Richard's transformation involves adopting the attire and demeanor of the preppy, conservative East-Coast Academic, shedding his former identity in pursuit of acceptance, Richard even makes sure he purchases clothes from a thrift shop so that they give off the idea that he owned those items for quite a while and that they weren't bought right then, just so that he could 'fit the part' of a typical Classics student at Hampden College.

Furthermore, Burton highlights the exclusionary nature of Dark Academia, which marginalizes women, working-class individuals, people of colour, those with low economic or cultural capital, individuals with disabilities, caregivers, and those engaged in domestic activities. The aesthetic and lifestyle of Dark Academia predominantly favour whiteness, masculinity, and Eurocentric cosmopolitanism, perpetuating exclusionary practices within academic circles.

Classicist ideals and class markers are clear from the very fact that the students belonging to the inner circles (Julian's and Fosca's) all hail from wealthy hyperprivileged families, they either are of noble lineage like Tara and Diya in *The Maidens* or are children of powerful parents like Veronica and Francis. These class differences between these groups and the rest of the student populace gives the former an air of superiority. A classic example of this very classism and elitism is seen Tarrt's novel when the group of students comprising Carla, Charles, Henry and Francis murder a local farmer in a state of drunken frenzy. Instead of being seemingly disturbed by the deed they tend to treat it as a mere hindrance to the trance that they were in, this is perhaps because they deemed the farmer to be a mere local who lacked any intellectual prowess and hence wouldn't contribute to (elitist) society in any form, according to the superficial elitist ideals that they upheld.

These class differences are evident in Michaelides' *The Maidens* as well, in the treatment meted out by the protagonist Mariana's father towards her boyfriend Sebastian. Sebastian hailed from a working-class family from the United States of America while Mariana belonged to one of the wealthy, elite families in Athens, Greece. It should however be noted that Mariana's father's hatred towards Sebastian mainly stemmed from the fact that Sebastian had an almost incestuous relationship with Mariana's niece Zoe, as he had caught them red-handed.

c. Intellectualism and the Pursuit of knowledge:

"I hope we're ready to leave the phenomenological world and enter into the sublime."

-Julian Morrow, *The Secret History*

Knowledge and its pursuit thereof are one of the significant features of Dark Academia and avidly illustrated in the two novels.

The Secret History explores the notion that deep philosophical pursuits, while seemingly significant, can sometimes lead individuals astray, disconnecting them from the realities of rational life. Henry epitomises this concept, possessing linguistic prowess and poetic recitations but lacking awareness of the world around him. Despite being regarded as the most intelligent among the Greek students, he is astounded to discover the moon landings ever occurred and he relies on ancient texts for medical knowledge instead of referring to contemporary sources, revealing a certain impracticality tied to his intellect. Nonetheless, Henry flourishes in Greek discussions, earning Julian's admiration.

Contrastingly, Bunny represents the antithesis of scholarly aptitude. Despite studying Greek, his proficiency in English is lacking, evident in his incomprehensible paper on fictional concepts like 'metahemipherals'. Unlike his peers, Bunny remains connected to contemporary society, maintaining relationships outside academia and extending kindness to Richard. Surprisingly, the least intellectual character (Bunny) emerges as the most rational, highlighting how an excessive focus on erudition can narrow one's worldview.

The wealthy students in Julian's group, while privileged, pursue knowledge for its intrinsic value rather than necessity. This ethos resonates with the principles of Dark Academia, emphasising learning for the sake of knowledge. It also contrasts, Richard's parents view, who consider college to be a means of career success, prioritising financial gain over intellectual enrichment. The Lyceum, where Julian's lectures on Greek classics

takes place can be considered as a space that is representative of this very knowledge that is being pursued and it can perhaps be symbolic of this very theme.

In *The Maidens*'s Fosca with a cult-like following, embodies intellectualism through his lectures on Greek mythology which attended by students from various streams and his influence over his students. Knowledge plays a central role in this novel on the basis that the entire plot of framing professor Fosca by Zoe and Sebastian, was constructed by a whole web of Greek stories and myths.

d. Female perception and Gender Dynamics:

In *The Secret History*, a limited number of female characters are prominently featured. Among them, Judy Poovey stands out as Richard's neighbor, embodying what is perceived as the epitome of the "normal" Hampden students, those outside of the elite Greek Class. Judy's demeanor is characterized by a lack of scholarly inclination, involvement in drug use, and a sociable nature more akin to the atmosphere depicted in *The Rules of Attraction* (a rom-com/ campus novel by Bret Ellis), rather than the cerebral world of *The Secret History*. Despite Judy's consistent kindness towards Richard, he regards her with a dismissive superiority, reducing her in his perception to a stereotype, incapable of matching the intellectual prowess of those within the Greek class.

Other female characters in the novel primarily fulfill traditional domestic roles, such as wives, mothers, or girlfriends. For instance, Bunny's girlfriend Marion is referred to as a concubine, while Bunny's mother, sisters-in-law, and Richard's post-graduation love interest, Sophie, are depicted as embodiments of mundane suburban life, contrasting sharply with the elevated intellectual pursuits of the Greek Class. Richard's narrative

subtly conveys a sense of social and intellectual superiority towards these characters, indicating his belief that they do not measure up to his standards.

Within the Greek Class itself, Camilla is the sole female member, positioned as "the only female in what was basically a boys club." (Tartt, 264). Despite being intellectually on par, if not superior, to her male counterparts, Camilla's complexity is overlooked in Richard's narration. Instead, she is portrayed as conforming to the expectations of her male classmates and teacher, her presence in the academic sphere conditional upon her adherence to their limited perceptions of femininity. To different members of the group, Camilla assumes various roles – from a romantic interest to Henry and Charles, to a muse for Julian, and even an object of unrequited affection for Richard himself. Yet, she is also subject to mockery from Bunny for her perceived failure to conform to traditional gender norms, underscoring the complexities of gender dynamics within the Greek Class.

In *The Maidens*, the narrative revolves prominently around female characters, particularly Mariana, who serves as the driving force behind the plot. Professor Fosca's exclusive group, The Maidens, comprises solely of women, with Zoe being implicated in the murders, thereby centralizing the story around female protagonists. The female characters are portrayed as possessing a formidable intellect, exemplified by Professor Clarisse, whose profound knowledge of Greek and English literature allows her to effortlessly quote from classic works. Additionally, powerful figures such as Demeter and Persephone are interwoven into the narrative, further emphasizing the female-centric nature of the story.

Notably, many of the male characters in the novel are depicted in antagonistic roles. Figures like Fosca and Morris are portrayed as morally dubious individuals who engage in inappropriate relationships with their students, while characters such as Sebastian and Mariana's fathers are depicted as domineering and authoritarian figures. Even Henry, despite his complexities, is depicted as possessing an unhealthy obsession with Mariana, stemming perhaps from his own traumatic experiences.

By and large, *The Maidens* presents a female-centric narrative that delves into themes of power, knowledge, and gender dynamics, while also offering a nuanced portrayal of male characters who often occupy morally ambiguous roles within the story.

e. Death:

“Death and what happens next has always been an interest of mine”

- Sebastian, *The Maidens* (Michaelides, 231)

The theme of death and violence permeates *The Secret History*, despite the characters being youthful college students. Initially, death captivates Richard and his peers precisely because it seems distant and unreal to healthy, young individuals in their twenties. Their academic pursuits frequently lead them to contemplate death through the prism of Classical history, literature, and philosophy, often viewing it through the lens of beauty and immortality. However, the fatal incident involving the farmer doesn't serve as a harsh wake-up call, forcing them to confront the harsh realities and consequences of death. They instead contemplate murdering their peer Bunny who was threatening to expose them, and when Charles questions as to how ‘how can you possibly justify

cold-blooded murder?’ Henry states: ‘I prefer to think of it as redistribution of matter.’

(Tartt,377) Which basically demonstrates the lack of value they hold for a human.

Nevertheless, when they are implicated in the murder of Bunny, the gravity of death truly hits home, shattering their innocence.

Bunny's demise, a bright young soul with a promising future, underscores the profound impact death can have on individuals and communities alike.

As the narrative unfolds, the group finds itself ensnared in a downward spiral of violence and despair. The repercussions of their reckless actions manifest in increasingly violent deaths, including Charles's attempted murder of Henry, Henry's subsequent suicide, and Francis's desperate suicide attempt. Their initial fascination with death morphs into a consuming darkness, enveloping them in a macabre web of despair and guilt.

In *The Maidens*, the theme of death is introduced early on, with Mariana receiving a chilling call informing her of her roommate Tara's murder, followed by the gruesome deaths of two other students, Serena and Veronica. The character of Sebastian, through his letters to Zoe, unveils a disturbing portrait of violence and death rooted in his traumatic childhood experiences. He recounts a harrowing upbringing marked by abuse and brutality at the hands of his father, whose violent tendencies extended to the family's farm animals. Sebastian's upbringing, marred by childhood abuse, not only shaped his fascination with death but also led to the development of disturbing and predatory tendencies, evident in his grooming of Zoe for a heinous murder plot. His traumatic past serves as a haunting reminder of the enduring effects of childhood trauma and the complex interplay between abuse, trauma, and violent behaviour.

3.3 Is Dark Academia a Genre or Not?

In the domain of genre theory, it is widely acknowledged that genres often possess a subjective nature, with boundaries between them frequently blurred. Works may encompass multiple genres simultaneously and may even incorporate various subgenres within their narrative frameworks. In the case of Dark Academia, as a genre, it epitomises this fluidity and ambiguity.

Dark Academia defies easy categorisation, existing as a nebulous entity with indistinct boundaries. Its classification within the realm of genre theory is a matter of contention, given its lack of a fixed structure or definitive set of tropes. However, despite its elusive nature, works associated with Dark Academia share certain commonalities that offer insights into its thematic and stylistic components.

Themes such as eccentric professors, tightly-knit cliques, themes of mortality, violence, intellectualism, and settings characterised by an atmosphere of brooding unease are recurrent motifs within the Dark Academia genre. It is through these loose thematic structures that one may begin to delineate the contours of Dark Academia and discern its defining characteristics.

Yet, it is important to recognise that Dark Academia remains a dynamic and evolving genre, continually shaped by the works that contribute to its corpus. As such, while its precise categorisation may remain elusive, its allure lies in its ability to captivate audiences with its enigmatic blend of intellect, darkness, and sinister, esoteric atmospheres.

CHAPTER FOUR: SOCIAL MEDIA'S INFLUENCE ON DARK

ACADEMIA: A SYMBIOTIC RELATIONSHIP

In the realm of social media and digitised spaces, a symbiotic relationship frequently emerges between online platforms and their users. This symbiosis revolves around several key factors: the cultivation of a strong online presence, the allure of visual pleasure and aesthetics, and the provision of temporal satisfaction through entertainment offerings. Social media platforms function as potent amplifiers, extending the reach of websites and bolstering the influence of various movements (Holly).

Through an examination of the responses collected via the Google form, the dissertation aimed to ascertain whether the connection between social media and the Dark Academia movement embodies such symbiosis. Additionally, the analysis endeavours to uncover any other pertinent findings that may arise, shedding light on the dynamics at play within this digital ecosystem.

4.1 Purpose:

To find out the reception of Dark Academia (as a genre, internet aesthetic and movement) in India and to draw upon insights of the various individuals who have engaged with Dark Academia and to ascertain if there's a symbiotic relationship between social media and Dark Academia.

4.2 Methodology:

This survey aimed to explore the reception of Dark Academia among university and college students aged 18-25 in India. The methodology employed a questionnaire

consisting of 10 questions designed to elicit insights into respondents' familiarity with Dark Academia, their perceptions of its cultural impact, and their motivations for engaging with the aesthetic.

A total of 12 respondents participated in the survey, comprising individuals from diverse educational backgrounds within the specified demographic group. The selection criteria targeted university and college students aged 18-25 to ensure relevance and representation among individuals likely to be familiar with contemporary cultural trends and aesthetics.

The Google Forms questionnaire was distributed electronically to potential respondents, leveraging online platforms and communication channels frequented by university and college students in India. Respondents were invited to participate voluntarily, with assurances of anonymity and confidentiality to encourage candid and honest responses.

Upon completion of data collection, the responses were compiled and analysed to identify patterns, trends, and insights relevant to the research objectives. Descriptive statistics were utilised to summarise the findings and draw conclusions regarding the reception of Dark Academia among the target demographic group in India.

It is important to acknowledge potential limitations of the methodology, including the small sample size and the specificity of the demographic group, which may restrict the generalisability of the findings to broader populations. However, despite these limitations, the survey offers valuable insights into the perceptions and experiences of university and college students in India regarding Dark Academia, contributing to a deeper understanding of its cultural significance and impact within this demographic cohort.

4.3 Analysis:

The survey delved into the cultural reception of Dark Academia in India, seeking to understand the influences, perceptions, and impact of this movement within the Indian context. Around 75% of respondents encountered Dark Academia through social media platforms (Fig. 1), which made it evident that digital spaces play a pivotal role in disseminating and popularising this aesthetic. Notably, while 50% of respondents asserted that Dark Academia's popularity predates the COVID-19 pandemic, 33.3% identified the pandemic era as its peak, shedding light on the dynamic relationship between cultural trends and global events (Fig.2). Furthermore, the survey revealed that classic literature and intellectualism are the most common characteristics associated with Dark Academia, resonating with 58.3% of respondents. Additionally, the Gothic and Victorian periods emerged as prominent touchstones for the aesthetic, with 50% and 25% of respondents, respectively, drawing connections to these historical eras.

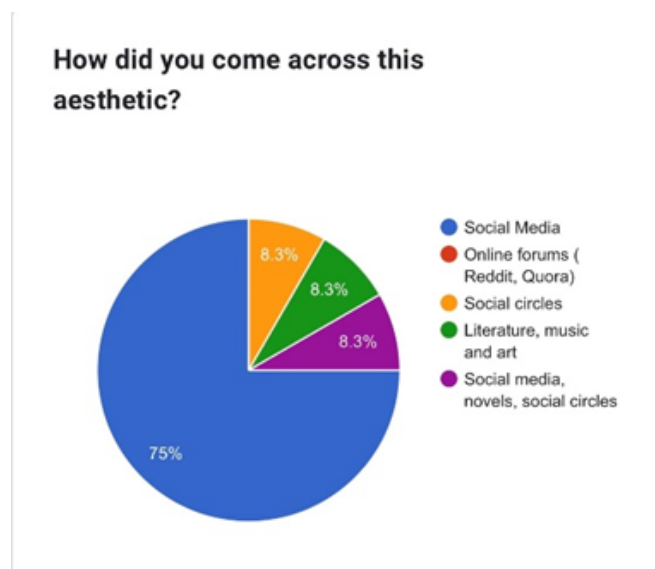


Fig. 1

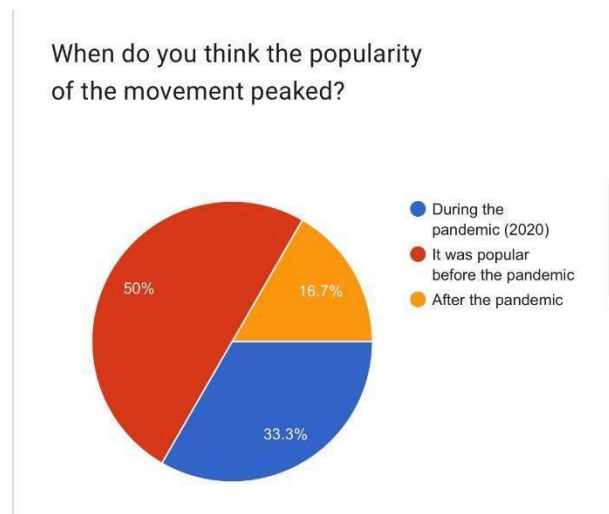


Fig. 2

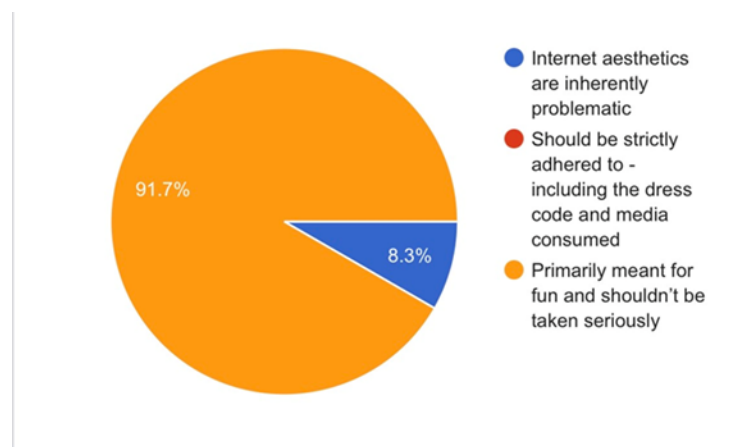


Fig. 3

According to the survey results, a significant majority of respondents, accounting for 91.7 percent, expressed the opinion that internet aesthetics are primarily meant for enjoyment and should not be taken too seriously (Fig. 3). This viewpoint reflects a prevailing sentiment that online aesthetics serve as a form of creative expression and entertainment rather than embodying rigid rules or standards. It suggests that for the vast majority of individuals, engaging with internet aesthetics is akin to participating in a

playful and imaginative space where individuals can experiment with different styles and themes without the burden of strict adherence.

In contrast, a smaller proportion of respondents, comprising 8.3 percent, held the belief that internet aesthetics are inherently problematic. This perspective likely stems from concerns regarding the potential negative impacts of online aesthetics, such as perpetuating unrealistic beauty standards, promoting consumerism, or reinforcing harmful stereotypes. These respondents may perceive internet aesthetics as contributing to a culture of superficiality or superficial values, prompting skepticism or criticism toward their pervasive influence in digital spaces.

The absence of respondents advocating for strict adherence to internet aesthetics, including dress codes and media consumption, suggests a general reluctance among the surveyed population to endorse rigid guidelines dictating online behaviour. Instead, the overwhelming majority prioritise the enjoyment and creative expression afforded by internet aesthetics, favouring a more flexible and individualistic approach to engaging with online culture.

These findings shed light on the diverse attitudes toward internet aesthetics within the surveyed population, highlighting a spectrum of perspectives ranging from embracing them as a source of fun and creativity to questioning their inherent implications.

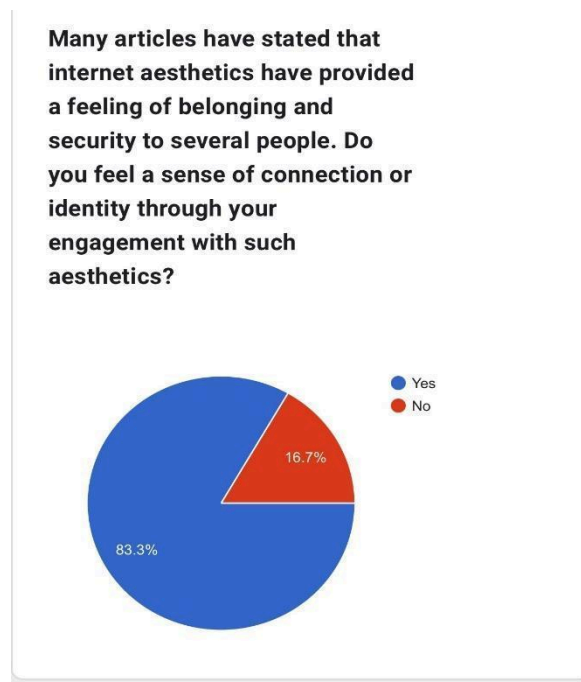


Fig. 4

Furthermore, the survey revealed that a substantial majority of respondents, totaling 83.3 percent, reported experiencing a sense of connection or identity through their engagement with internet aesthetics (Fig.4). This finding underscores the significant role that online aesthetics play in fostering a feeling of belonging and security for numerous individuals within digital communities. By participating in and aligning with specific internet aesthetics, respondents likely find opportunities for self-expression, communal belonging, and the validation of their identities and interests.

Conversely, a minority of respondents, comprising 16.7 percent, indicated that they do not feel a sense of connection or identity through their engagement with internet aesthetics. This perspective suggests that while internet aesthetics may hold appeal for many, they may not resonate with everyone in the same way. Factors such as personal preferences, cultural backgrounds, or individual experiences may contribute to variations

in the extent to which individuals feel connected to or identified with online aesthetic movements.

On being questioned on whether internet aesthetics have had a significant impact on individuals, specifically on a psychological level the respondents held the following opinions:

Response 1: *“The aesthetics sure do have an impact on me, there is a strong connection between who I am and how I perceive the world due to the influence of these aesthetics”*

Response 2: *“In my experience, internet aesthetics have played a significant role in shaping my perceptions and influencing me on a psychological level, which sometimes is good, but sometimes can become a problem, like watching a rich person post a picture of a Luxury product online, and feeling the urge to have one yourself, even though that might financially burn a hole in your savings.”*

Response 3: *“I feel some Internet aesthetics have made me relate to and quite empowered me to introspect and embrace my individual identity.”*

Response 4: *“Feeling of not being good enough. Self emptiness: That it takes a lot of money to be happy whereas it doesn't really, but it has a good side to it as well. It doesn't make you feel alone, it makes your time go quicker and keeps you occupied and busy. It can help with anxiety and depression but it can be mentally exhausting cause it's not as easy as it portrayed”*

Response 5: *“It's a way I express my thoughts and feelings through humorous pictures, so it's more wholesome to me”*

Response 6: *“Yes. I usually check such reels to coordinate my social outfits. They can be really informative in coordinating ones fashion sense”*

Response 7: *“Yeah, I agree that it impacts psychologically as it boosts your confidence at some point of time giving you a platform and support to be yourself and express yourself in a way you never did before.”*

Response 8: *“Primarily a positive influence for I find myself browsing through visually aesthetic pages as they happen to be a source of relaxing pleasure”*

Response 9: *“Yes. As an artist, I have always been drawn to vintage fashion, era-based movies, classical music, literature, and art movements, such as Baroque and Romanticism, even before discovering the term dark academia. It provides a sense of belonging and inspires me to create my version of it.”*

Response 10: *“Yes I love the vibe. It is inspiring at the same time, comforting and relaxing. Dark academia aesthetics create an emotional connection which can inspire and foster connections.”*

The aforementioned responses provide a diverse range of perspectives on the impact of internet aesthetics on individuals, particularly on a psychological level. Here's an analysis of the responses:

1. Response 1 and Response 3: These respondents express a positive connection between their identity and their perception of the world influenced by internet aesthetics. They highlight a sense of empowerment and self-awareness derived from embracing individual identity through online aesthetic movements.

2. Response 2: This response acknowledges the dual nature of internet aesthetics, acknowledging their influence in shaping perceptions positively but also highlighting potential negative effects such as feelings of inadequacy or materialistic desires.
3. Response 4: This respondent reflects on the mixed impact of internet aesthetics, noting both positive aspects such as alleviating loneliness and providing distraction, as well as negative aspects such as perpetuating unrealistic standards and contributing to mental exhaustion.
4. Response 5: This respondent views internet aesthetics as a means of expressing thoughts and feelings through humor, emphasising the wholesome nature of their engagement with online aesthetics.
5. Response 6: This response focuses on the practical aspect of internet aesthetics, noting their informative value in coordinating fashion sense and social outfits, highlighting the utilitarian aspect of engagement with online aesthetics.
6. Response 7 and Response 8: These respondents emphasise the positive psychological impact of internet aesthetics, including boosted confidence, self-expression, and relaxation, suggesting that online aesthetics serve as a source of comfort and pleasure.
7. Response 9 and Response 10: These responses highlight the inspirational and emotionally resonant qualities of internet aesthetics, particularly within specific aesthetic movements such as dark academia. They emphasise the sense of belonging and inspiration derived from engaging with online aesthetic communities.

Overall, the responses demonstrate a complex interplay between the effects of internet aesthetics, encompassing both positive and negative aspects. While some respondents find empowerment, inspiration, and comfort through their engagement with online aesthetics, others acknowledge challenges such as feelings of inadequacy or the pressure to conform to unrealistic standards.

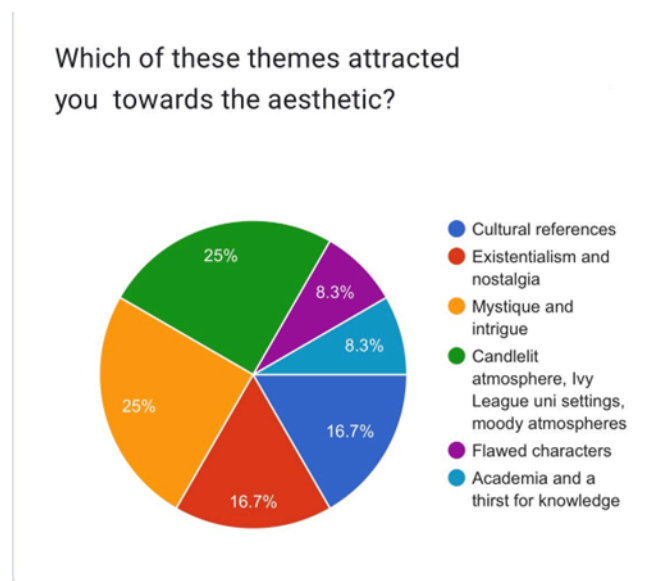


Fig. 5

When queried about the themes that drew them to the Dark Academia aesthetic, respondents provided the following insights:

1. Cultural References (Option 1) and Existentialism and Nostalgia (Option 2): Both options received equal proportions of respondents, with 16.7 percent each. This suggests that a subset of respondents was drawn to Dark Academia for its cultural references and themes of existentialism and nostalgia. These individuals likely

resonate with the intellectual and philosophical aspects of the aesthetic, finding meaning and connection in its exploration of identity and the human experience.

2. *Mystique and Intrigue* (Option 3) and *Candle Lit Atmosphere, Ivy League Uni Settings, Moody Atmospheres* (Option 4): These options emerged as the most popular themes, each chosen by 25 percent of respondents. This indicates a strong attraction to the mysterious and atmospheric elements of Dark Academia, characterised by its evocative settings and moody ambiance. Respondents may be drawn to the sense of escapism and romanticism offered by these themes, finding fascination in the allure of academia and intellectual pursuits.
3. *Flawed Characters* (Option 5) and *Academia and a Thirst for Knowledge* (Option 6): Both options received the least number of responses, each chosen by 8.3 percent of respondents. This suggests that while some individuals may appreciate the portrayal of flawed characters and the emphasis on academic pursuits within the Dark Academia aesthetic, these themes may not be as influential in attracting individuals to the aesthetic compared to other aspects such as atmosphere and mystique.

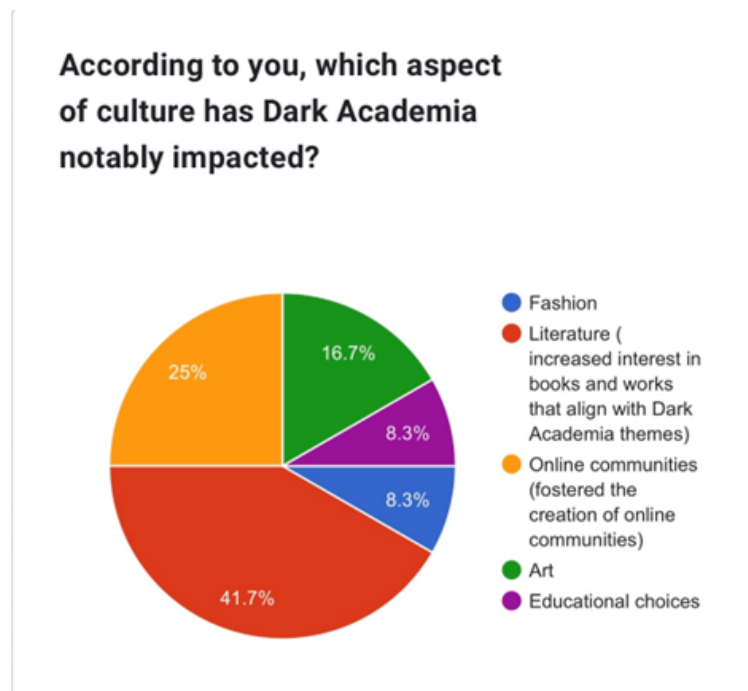


Fig.6

Additionally, based on the survey findings (Fig. 6), respondents perceived Dark Academia as having notable impacts on various aspects of culture. Here's an analysis of the responses:

1. Fashion (Option 1): This option received the lowest proportion of responses, with 8.3 percent of respondents attributing notable impact to Dark Academia in the realm of fashion. While some individuals may see influences of Dark Academia in fashion trends, it appears to be a less dominant aspect compared to other cultural domains. This result however contrasts the overall opinion of articles online which suggest that fashion was avidly influenced by this Dark Academia and it perhaps suggests that the aesthetic doesn't align with the Indian context of fashion. If one

ponders over the idea of wearing trench coats and sweaters in India especially southern India with the excruciatingly hot weather, one can understand why perhaps the impact upon fashion in this country isn't as significant.

2. Literature - Increased interest in books and works that align with Dark Academia themes (Option 2): The majority of respondents, comprising 41.7 percent, identify literature as the primary aspect of culture notably impacted by Dark Academia. This suggests that Dark Academia has sparked increased interest and engagement in literary works that embody its themes of academia, intellectualism, and nostalgia.
3. Fostered the creation of online communities (Option 3): A significant portion of respondents, totaling 25 percent, acknowledge Dark Academia's role in fostering the creation of online communities. This indicates that Dark Academia has contributed to the formation of digital spaces where individuals can connect, share interests, and engage in discussions related to the aesthetic.
4. Art (Option 4): A notable proportion of respondents, accounting for 16.7 percent, perceive Dark Academia as impacting the realm of art. This suggests that Dark Academia has influenced artistic expression and creative endeavours, potentially inspiring visual artists to explore themes and motifs aligned with the aesthetic.
5. Educational choices (Option 5): The option of educational choices received the lowest proportion of responses, with 8.3 percent of respondents attributing notable impact to Dark Academia in this domain. While some individuals may be influenced by Dark Academia in their academic pursuits, it appears to be a less prevalent aspect compared to literature, online communities, and art.

The findings underscore the diverse ways in which Dark Academia has permeated various facets of culture, with literature emerging as the most prominently impacted domain.

On pondering about the engagement of people with aesthetics specifically internet aesthetics, the following insights were received:

Response 1: *“Because it's a form of identification like an identitarian space”*

Response 2: *“It provides people a safe place to express themselves, a state of belonging in a world where you could be anything.”*

Response 3: *“In my opinion, it sort of becomes like the missing part of a puzzle for some people, fills a void.”*

Response 4: *“I think it provides them an escape from reality or everyday life. It reflects and expands their boundaries for imagination.”*

Response 5: *“To feel belonged. Be a character in their own life.”*

Response 6: *“Mostly because of how put together the aesthetic looks when it comes together, everything fits like pieces of a puzzle”*

Response 7: *“It's something unique and people are always intrigued with something unique and different”*

Response 8: *“Maybe to feel good about themselves as they experience another version of themselves which they had pushed under the carpet so they don't get judged by society. Some also do it for showoff to show other people how out of the blue and beautiful they*

are and how much they enjoy being in it. It's just dopamine/serotonin boosted state of mind"

Response 9: *"It maybe a source of identity for some while a way of expressing oneself for others"*

Response 10: *"Dark academia" is a popular theme that people enjoy exploring. It encompasses movies, fashion, literature, and music that evoke a sense of nostalgia or belonging to a specific era and the thirst to be part of it. It is deemed unique and allows people to stand out from mainstream culture."*

Response 11: *"It nurtures creativity and innovation, inspires and enables people to think outside the box. Also when one is around aesthetically pleasing spaces it sort of boasts productivity."*

Response 12: *"Maybe because they feel like they belong there, perhaps like a sense of belonging and it feels normal."*

These responses offer a diverse range of insights into individuals' motivations and experiences. Common themes among the responses include:

1. Identification and Belonging: Several respondents highlight the significance of Dark Academia as a form of identification or a space where individuals feel a sense of belonging (Responses 1, 2, 5, 9, 12). This suggests that for many, engaging with Dark Academia serves as a means of connecting with like-minded individuals and finding a community where they can express themselves authentically.

2. **Escapism and Imagination:** Others view Dark Academia as a means of escapism from reality or everyday life, allowing individuals to expand their boundaries of imagination (Responses 3, 4, 11). This implies that Dark Academia offers a retreat from the mundane aspects of life, providing a space for creativity, introspection, and exploration.
3. **Aesthetic Appeal:** Some respondents are drawn to Dark Academia for its aesthetic appeal and the sense of cohesion it provides when elements come together (Responses 6, 7, 10). This suggests that the visual allure of Dark Academia, characterised by its vintage-inspired aesthetics and atmospheric settings, plays a significant role in attracting individuals to engage with the aesthetic.
4. **Self-Expression and Identity:** For others, Dark Academia serves as a source of self-expression and identity formation, allowing individuals to explore different facets of themselves and nurture creativity (Responses 8, 9, 10, 11). This highlights the role of Dark Academia in facilitating personal growth and enabling individuals to express their unique perspectives and interests.

The diverse motivations behind individuals' engagement with Dark Academia reflect encompassing themes of identification, belonging, escapism, aesthetic appeal, self-expression, and creativity. The concept of Dark Academia serving as a safety net, providing individuals with a sense of security and comfort in expressing themselves, aligns with the Uses and Gratifications Theory, in particular 'affective needs' which includes the situation wherein people use media to satisfy their emotional needs or to seek satisfaction and pleasure. According to this theory, individuals actively seek out media content and experiences to fulfill specific needs or gratifications, such as entertainment,

information, social interaction, or personal identity. In the context of Dark Academia, individuals may engage with the aesthetic to satisfy needs related to self-expression, social connection, and psychological fulfillment, thus reinforcing the idea of Dark Academia as a safety net or refuge for individuals seeking solace and fulfillment in a digital landscape.

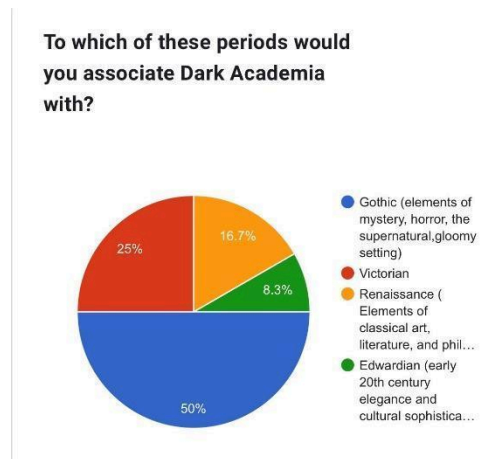


Fig. 7

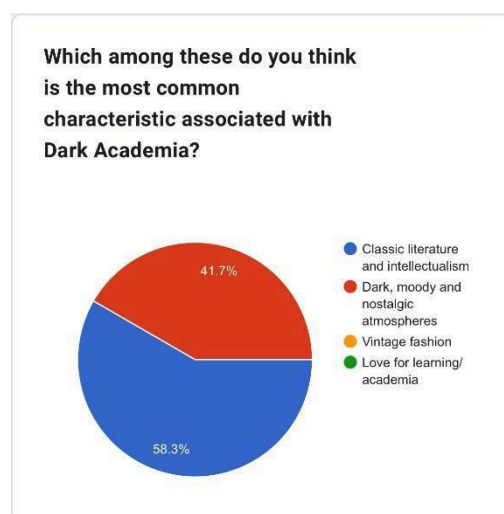


Fig. 8

4.4 Concluding statements:

In conclusion, the survey findings provide valuable insights into the cultural reception of Dark Academia in India and shed light on the nuanced motivations, perceptions, and impacts associated with this enigmatic aesthetic. From the prevalence of social media as a primary introduction to Dark Academia to the varied interpretations of its popularity timeline, the survey underscores the dynamic nature of cultural trends and their intersection with global events. Furthermore, the identification of classic literature and intellectualism as central themes, alongside associations with historical periods such as the Gothic and Victorian eras, highlights the rich tapestry of influences that shape the Dark Academia aesthetic.

The diverse responses regarding why individuals engage with Dark Academia reveal a complex interplay of factors, including the search for belonging, the allure of aesthetic appeal, the pursuit of escapism and self-expression, and the cultivation of creativity and innovation. These motivations align with the Uses and Gratifications Theory as mentioned before. Moreover, the survey underscores the role of Dark Academia as a cultural phenomenon that transcends geographical boundaries, resonating with individuals worldwide and fostering online communities centered around shared interests and identities.

Overall, the survey findings illuminate the cultural significance and impact of Dark Academia, offering valuable insights into its reception and relevance within the Indian context. As individuals continue to navigate the complexities of digital culture and seek meaningful connections in an increasingly interconnected world, Dark Academia serves as a source of inspiration, exploration, and self-discovery, enriching the cultural landscape and fostering a sense of community among enthusiasts worldwide.

4.5 Symbiotic Relationship or Not?

Based on the responses indicating where participants came across Dark Academia and what aspects appealed to them the most, it's evident that social media plays a significant role in the dissemination and cultivation of the Dark Academia aesthetic and ideology in India. Social media platforms such as Instagram, Tumblr, and Pinterest often serve as hubs where individuals discover and engage with Dark Academia content, including literature, art, fashion, and lifestyle.

In return, the Dark Academia movement benefits from social media's ability to facilitate community building, content sharing, and cultural exchange among enthusiasts. Social media platforms provide a space for individuals to express their appreciation for Dark Academia, connect with like-minded individuals, and participate in discussions about related topics. Additionally, social media allows for the amplification of Dark Academia content through hashtags, trends, and influencers, further expanding its reach and influence.

Conversely, the Dark Academia aesthetic and philosophy contribute to the allure of social media platforms by offering a distinct and captivating cultural niche. The romanticisation of academia, intellectual pursuits, vintage aesthetics, and literary references inherent in Dark Academia content resonate with individuals seeking a sense of belonging, inspiration, and cultural identity online. As a result, social media platforms benefit from the engagement and participation of Dark Academia enthusiasts who contribute to the diversity and vibrancy of their communities.

Brands and businesses that primarily function through social media platforms can leverage the Dark Academia trend to tailor their marketing efforts towards a specific audience segment that resonates with the aesthetic and values of the movement.

Products like book boxes for example those by The Big Book Box (TBB) an online store that curated book boxes, are created as well with the aesthetic in mind so that audiences or enthusiasts may purchase it which then leads to the formation of an economic aspect to the movement. It showcases how subcultures can further drive these industries, though not majorly.

Overall, the relationship between social media and Dark Academia can be described as symbiotic, as both entities mutually reinforce and benefit from each other's presence and participation. Social media serves as a catalyst for the dissemination and popularity of Dark Academia, while Dark Academia enriches social media platforms with its distinctive cultural contributions and engaged community.

CHAPTER FIVE: PENNING THE FINALE: THE CULMINATION OF DARK ACADEMIA'S ODYSSEY

As we delve into the final chapter of this dissertation, the findings discern the profound influence of Dark Academia on literature, fashion, and cultural discourse, and its impact as cultural and literary phenomenon underscoring its enduring appeal and significance in contemporary society.

5.1 Findings:

Emergence and Evolution:

Chapter Two of the dissertation delineated the emergence, evolution and the cultural significance of Dark Academia, highlighting its role as an aesthetic and the symbols as well as the various facets that function within this aesthetic.

Dark Academia has burgeoned as a multifaceted phenomenon encompassing a genre, cultural movement, and internet aesthetic. Rooted in intellectualism and a brooding atmosphere reminiscent of bygone eras, particularly the late 19th century to the 1940s, its emergence is intricately linked to the digital landscape. Initially incubated on platforms like Tumblr and TikTok, Dark Academia swiftly coalesced into a vibrant community, where enthusiasts converge to share a fervent passion for literature, art, and a collective yearning for erudition.

The genesis of the term "dark academia" can be traced back to the early 2010s, where it either emerged as a hashtag on Tumblr or found resonance as a moniker for a book club discussing Donna Tartt's seminal work, *The Secret History*. However, it wasn't until around 2017 that the term gained traction, burgeoning alongside other niche aesthetics and a resurgence of 80s motifs, further catalysed by the global Covid-19

pandemic. Central to its allure is the romanticised portrayal of classic, elite academia, where intellectual pursuit reigns supreme, whether as a stylistic online persona or a deeper communal ethos.

At its core, Dark Academia embodies a realm of scholarly exploration, delineated by a distinct set of characteristics and standards. A work falling under its purview must exude an aura of intellectual rigour and educational ardour, with student-centric narratives often featuring academic endeavours such as classwork, homework, or independent study. It represents an idealistic sanctuary for the pursuit of knowledge, where the interplay of light and shadow serves to illuminate profound and often unsettling themes, resonating deeply within the annals of academia.

Dark Academia encompasses various literary genres, ranging from bildungsroman to romance and even science fiction. Within its expansive embrace, it encompasses children's literature as well, and draws inspiration from the Gothic and Victorian literary canons. Beyond its Western origins, Dark Academia finds resonance in diverse cultural landscapes, echoing the timeless allure of humanist education and tapping into literary traditions spanning continents.

As a subculture, Dark Academia epitomises a distinct social group unified by shared values, beliefs, and practices, particularly centered around a reverence for literature, art, and intellectual pursuits. Its meteoric rise during the Covid-19 pandemic underscores its resonance as a cultural phenomenon, fueled by a collective yearning for nostalgic aesthetics and an appreciation for erudition. Through its literary manifestations and aesthetic expressions, Dark Academia embodies a multifaceted cultural phenomenon, challenging mainstream norms and fostering a renaissance of intellectual authenticity amidst a sea of commodified trends. In simpler terms it presents an accessible emulation

of elite culture and education, catering to individuals from diverse backgrounds and social classes.

Symbolism and Atmosphere:

The aesthetic tapestry of Dark Academia is intricately woven with symbols and atmospheres that evoke a sense of enigma, nostalgia, and intellectual reverence. From weathered tomes and flickering candles to ancient keys and classical art, each element serves as a testament to the movement's ethos, encapsulating the pursuit of hidden knowledge, the passage of time, and the timeless allure of intellectual exploration. Against the backdrop of gothic architecture and dimly lit libraries, Dark Academia emerges as not merely an aesthetic trend but a profound cultural renaissance.

Chapter Three portrays a detailed explanation of Dark Academia's amorphous nature as a genre, through the analysis of two primary novels – *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt and *The Maidens* by Alex Michaelides. These were the following findings:

In the realm of genre theory, the delineation of genres is often acknowledged as subjective, with boundaries between them frequently blurred. Works frequently intertwine multiple genres, incorporating various subgenres within their narrative frameworks. Within this context, Dark Academia, purported as a genre, epitomises this fluidity and ambiguity.

The classification of Dark Academia within genre theory is a subject of debate, owing to its nebulous nature and lack of fixed structure or definitive set of tropes. However, despite its elusive characterisation, works associated with Dark Academia share common themes that offer insights into its thematic and stylistic elements.

Recurrence of motifs such as eccentric professors, tightly-knit cliques, explorations of mortality and violence, and settings steeped in brooding unease are indicative of Dark Academia's thematic underpinnings. These recurring themes serve as loose frameworks through which one can discern the defining characteristics of Dark Academia.

It's imperative to acknowledge that Dark Academia is a dynamic and evolving genre, continually shaped by the contributions of new works. Consequently, while its precise classification may remain elusive, its allure lies in its ability to captivate audiences through an enigmatic blend of intellect, darkness, and atmosphere.

In Chapter Four the survey findings and analysis provide valuable insights into the cultural reception of Dark Academia in India, shedding light on nuanced motivations, perceptions, and impacts associated with this enigmatic aesthetic. From the prevalence of social media as a primary introduction to Dark Academia to the varied interpretations of its popularity timeline, the survey underscores the dynamic nature of cultural trends and their intersection with global events, like the Covid-19 Pandemic. Furthermore, the identification of classic literature and intellectualism as central themes, alongside associations with historical periods such as the Gothic and Victorian eras, highlights the rich tapestry of influences that shape the Dark Academia aesthetic.

The diverse responses regarding why individuals engage with Dark Academia reveal a complex interplay of factors, including the search for belonging, the allure of aesthetic appeal, the pursuit of escapism and self-expression, and the cultivation of creativity and innovation. It highlights the fact that individuals did feel a sense of belonging and connection when it came to Dark Academia as an aesthetic. Which in turn

validates the hypothesis of the research. Moreover, the survey underscores the role of Dark Academia as a cultural phenomenon that transcends geographical boundaries, resonating with individuals worldwide and fostering online communities centered around shared interests and identities.

As stated by Dr. Adriaansen aesthetics like Dark Academia gives its followers a space for imagination and creativity, which is ‘strongly entangled with social media platforms and practices of self-presentation and performativity.’ (Adriaansen, 1)

Overall, the survey findings illuminate the cultural significance and impact of Dark Academia, offering valuable insights into its reception and relevance within the Indian context. As individuals continue to navigate the complexities of digital culture and seek meaningful connections in an increasingly interconnected world, Dark Academia serves as a source of inspiration, exploration, and self-discovery, enriching the cultural landscape and fostering a sense of community among enthusiasts worldwide.

In conclusion, this study has successfully achieved its research objectives, providing valuable insights into the phenomenon of Dark Academia, in its cultural and literary contexts.

Firstly, the origins and roots of Dark Academia have been thoroughly traced, shedding light on its historical influences and cultural underpinnings.

Secondly, the factors that draw individuals to Dark Academia, including its themes, aesthetics, and intellectualism, have been examined comprehensively.

Thirdly, the role of social media and digital communities in the dissemination and evolution of Dark Academia has been investigated, highlighting their pivotal role in shaping and popularising this aesthetic movement.

Furthermore, the impact of Dark Academia on fashion, literature and art has been assessed, revealing the multifaceted ways in which this movement intersects with various aspects of contemporary culture.

The dissertation comprehensively explored Dark Academia as Literary and Cultural phenomenon.

Lastly, the study has explored both the potential positive and negative effects of Dark Academia on its adherents, providing a nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding this cultural phenomenon.

Overall, this research has addressed the research problems and questions posed at the outset, contributing to a deeper conceptual understanding of Dark Academia. While further research may be required to delve into specific aspects of the movement and its implications, this study lays a solid foundation for future inquiries into this intriguing literary and cultural phenomenon.

5.2 Limitations:

The following are a few of the shortcomings of the research:

As this research explored the reception of Dark Academia, it's important to note that it was conducted in India. Given that Gothic architecture and certain elements of the Dark Academia subculture are not as prevalent in India, this geographical limitation affected the ability to closely study architectural nuances and fully explore the subtleties within the culture. It should also be acknowledged that physical access to visit renowned Ivy League colleges and campuses like Oxford, Yale or Cambridge, which are often associated with Dark Academia, was not feasible, considering the geographical distance.

This limitation restricted a first-hand experience of the settings and the insights that Dark Academia provides among the movement's enthusiasts.

Additionally, the questionnaire used for data collection primarily targeted an Indian audience. Therefore, the findings may not be applicable or relevant to a wider, international audience. It's therefore important to acknowledge that the responses obtained may reflect the perspectives of an Indian audience rather than a global one. Moreover, a lack of resource materials associated with Dark Academia at the University library, posed as a hindrance to the research.

5.3 Areas for Further Study:

In terms of future research directions, a more comprehensive examination could be undertaken to elucidate Dark Academia's position as a distinct literary or artistic genre. Additionally, there is potential for exploring the psychological ramifications of engaging with such movements and aesthetics, shedding light on the emotional and cognitive effects experienced by participants.

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Appendix I

The following are the transcripts of the interview with Dr. Robbert-Jan Adriaansen, conducted on 3 January 2024 via mail.

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Exploring Dark Academia: A Research Inquiry

Questions:

1. Would you associate Dark Academia with certain historical or literary periods?
There is a layeredness here: it tries to emulate fin de siècle humanist college education and taps into the literature of the era (eg. Wilde), while it does so through an engagement with contemporary literature (eg. M.L. Rio), but in its attempt to reimagine learning in a humanist tradition it also resurfaces classical and Romantic literature. Moreover, beyond this Western humanist tradition, dark academia in India taps into its own literary canon. Yet in general I would say that dark academia centers around an imagined notion of late 19th-early 20th century college life.
2. How can we understand Dark Academia as a literary and cultural phenomenon, considering its influence on literature, arts, and its broader cultural implications?
I think the best way to approach this would be to look into how dark academia understands itself, namely as an “internet aesthetic”. This is not the same as a literary generation, or a subculture as it is perceived in social theory, but is strongly entangled with social media platforms and practices of self-presentation and performativity.
3. Would you consider such movements contributors to the cultural fabric of society?
Absolutely! This is cultural creativity at work. But at the same time, it works differently from how we are accustomed that culture works, so this is why it will probably receive broader recognition in hindsight.
4. Do you think movements like Dark Academia and internet aesthetics contribute to or challenge existing cultural norms and perceptions?
This is what dark academia is about. Dark academia renegotiates gender roles, literary canons and reinvigorates learning and reading ironically in a very digitized environment. The way in which dark academia does renegotiate values is fascinating because it does not “oppose” some form of established culture in favour of some new culture that negates or transcends it (i.e. some form of dialectics), rather it adapts and negotiates our cultural and literary canons and is

able to address contemporary issues through challenging our interpretive traditions, rather than disposing of the present in favour of some different future.

5. Would you consider this movement problematic?

Of course there are problems, some argue for example that dark academia reproduces literary canons and stereotypes without necessarily being aware of the historical context and power dimensions that led to the formation of these canons. But such problems also pose educational opportunities! Overall I would say the focus on learning, and the digital environment it facilitates is also a democratizing factor: dark academia emulates elite culture and learning, but in a very accessible way for people of all backgrounds and classes.

6. What are your opinions on internet aesthetics and subcultures?

As mentioned, I think internet aesthetics and subcultures are not entirely identical, although they overlap. Content-wise I hold no specific opinions; some aesthetics/internet cultures are personally more interesting or appealing to me than others, but I usually tend to see them as phenomena of scholarly interest rather than anything else.

7. Do you believe such movements impact the psyche of readers?

Not sure what you mean with psyche, but it is clear that movements like dark academia have big impact. Particularly during the coronavirus pandemic dark academia provided a form of solace to many.

8. Would you say that online communities contribute to the popularity of such movements?

The question here is what constitutes an online community. The platforms that facilitate dark academia (tumblr, instagram, tiktok) are not community-oriented in the traditional sense, but they facilitate a kind of belonging to the internet aesthetic through performative participation. The affordances (e.g. algorithms) of these platforms facilitate the popularisation of the aesthetic.

9. In your opinion, what leads to the formation of such movements?

A concept that allows imagination. Both “dark academia” and the idea of “internet aesthetic” allow people to imagine what it might be and bring creativity in. The networked culture of social media platforms was also key in its spread. And the societal circumstances of the coronavirus lockdowns were also instrumental.

10. Can one identify both positive and negative effects of Dark Academia on mental health, personal identity, and how individuals are perceived in society?

I think that dark academia can be very beneficial to individuals because it promotes the idea of self-development through education. This is a very important concept that encourages creativity and personal growth. This is much needed in contemporary society where the identity of individuals is often imagined in fixed terms and ideas of growth and self-development have been discouraged in favour of concepts like equity (you are entitled to your fair share regardless of your efforts).

Appendix II

Questionnaire used to collect data from respondents.

1. What are your opinions on Internet Aesthetics?

Internet aesthetics refer to the visual and stylistic choices people make online to express their identity, preferences, and creativity. It encompasses the design elements, color schemes, overall look and feel of online content, including websites, social media profiles etc. Examples: Cottage core, light academia, grunge etc.

- Internet aesthetics are inherently problematic
- Should be strictly adhered to - including the dress code and media consumed
- Primarily meant for fun and shouldn't be taken seriously

2. Many articles have stated that internet aesthetics have provided a feeling of belonging and security to several people. Do you feel a sense of connection or identity through your engagement with such aesthetics?

-
- Yes
- No

3. In various instances, internet aesthetics have notably influenced individuals, even on a psychological level. Can you reflect on whether these aesthetics have had an impact on you as well? Please share your perspective.

4. How did you come across this aesthetic?

- Social Media
- Online forums (Reddit, Quora)
- Social circles
- Literature, music and art
- Social media, novels, social circles

5. When do you think the popularity of the movement peaked?

- During the pandemic (2020)
- It was popular before the pandemic
- After the pandemic

6. Which of these themes attracted you towards the aesthetic?

- Cultural references
- Existentialism and nostalgia
- Mystique and intrigue
- Candlelit atmosphere, Ivy League uni settings, moody atmospheres
- Flawed characters
- Academia and a thirst for knowledge

7. According to you, which aspect of culture has Dark Academia notably impacted?

- Fashion
- Literature (increased interest in books and works that align with Dark Academia themes)
- Online communities (fostered the creation of online communities)
- Art
- Educational choices

8. Which among these do you think is the most common characteristic associated with Dark Academia?

- Classic literature and intellectualism
- Dark, moody and nostalgic atmospheres
- Vintage fashion
- Love for learning/ academia

9. Why do you think people engage with such aesthetics?

10. To which of these periods would you associate Dark Academia with?

- Gothic (elements of mystery, horror, the supernatural, gloomy setting)
- Victorian Renaissance (Elements of classical art, literature, and phil...)
- Edwardian (early 20th century elegance and cultural sophistication)