



# Charting Youth Subcultures, Identity Formation, and Niche Aesthetics in the Age of Social Media

 Ajmal, Sharmien<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Aligarh Muslim University,  
Aligarh (202002), UP, India

**Corresponding Author:** Ajmal,  
Sharmien

**Phone:** 8859355982

**e-mail:** sharmienajmal7@gmail.com

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## ABSTRACT

By the end of the 20th century, postmodernism had already started shaping culture and popular tastes in unprecedented ways. With the turn of the century came the widespread use of the internet and the rise of social media which in turn further affected the way popular culture manifested itself within the youth. This paper aims to explore the effects of social media on youth subcultures and niche aesthetics, especially those that rose to prominence alongside Web 2.0. Examples include the 'dark academia', 'cottagecore', and 'coquette' aesthetics, or trends like 'clean girl', 'VSCO girl', etc. The focus shall be on the death of monoculture and the rise of diverse taste communities on the internet, arguing that the decentralisation of culture, facilitated by the fragmentation of the digital landscape, has fostered a pluralistic environment where these niche subcultures and micro aesthetics flourish. These aesthetics and subcultures existing within a capitalist framework lead to a characteristic sense of hyperindividualism and hyper-compartmentalization of identity, which shall be explored in the context of theories of identity formation.

By exploring the concepts of the digital space, identity formation, and the commodification thereof in light of the work of theorists like Zygmunt Bauman and Jean Baudrillard, this paper aims to reach a multifocal understanding of the complex interplay between cultural democratisation and economic exploitation of self-expression in the digital era. This shall be done via analysis of pre-, transitory, and post-digital age youth subcultures to foreground the influence of social media.

**Keywords:** youth subcultures; social media; aesthetics; digital communities; commercialization.

## Introduction

The digital culture prevalent today has come a very long way from where it had started, morphing and evolving in such vastly unprecedented and unexpected ways so as to be almost completely unrecognisable. From the early days of the read-only Web 1.0 to the next generation of early social media like MySpace and 4Chan to more and more complex networking platforms like the ones we see today, internet communities, language, culture, and conventions have all gone through drastic changes. Moreover, with time, the turnover rate for the creation, popularisation and disposition of the 'next cool thing' on the internet, so to speak, has increased drastically, leading to cultural chasms being formed in between age groups that are far lesser apart than one would expect them to be — evidenced by the discrete online

communities of millennials, Gen Z, and more recently, Gen Alpha, complete with their own cultural semiotics. A lot of this, predictably, has to do with how the internet and the digital space itself have organically evolved over the past few decades.

Subcultures, or more specifically, youth subcultures, ever since they started emerging in the mid-20th century have held a peculiar place within sociology and cultural studies, standing simultaneously for threateningly subversive attitudes within the status quo as well as genuine tendencies of self-expression of the younger generation in the face of a rapidly changing social and cultural landscape. This paper is going to explore the possible ways in which the evolution of the digital space has affected and influenced niche and not-so-niche youth subcultures and how the process of identity formation via these niche subcultures has been altered by their migration into the digital space.

In order to proceed with the discussion in any meaningful way, it is first necessary to build a bit of conceptual and theoretical background on the topics the paper shall engage with. That understanding shall then in turn be applied to the question at hand.

### **Youth Subcultures — A Brief Timeline**

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word ‘subculture’ as “an identifiable subgroup within a society or group of people, especially one characterised by beliefs or interests at variance with those of the larger group; the distinctive ideas, practices, or way of life of such a subgroup.” In more colloquial terms, a subculture is a group that differentiates itself from the existing standard and/or conservative values of the sociocultural milieu to which it belongs, mostly via developing and maintaining its own norms and values regarding cultural, political, and sexual matters. Although academic interest in subcultures only began to take shape somewhere in the 1920s, subcultures are believed to have existed before that as well. That said, youth subcultures in particular are a specifically interesting and distinctly modern phenomenon, with the first recorded instances emerging in the mid-20th century.

Youth subcultures are differentiated from just subcultures in that they are comprised primarily of young people and focus on the experiences, values, and issues specific to this demographic, including but not limited to identity formation, desire for autonomy, subversive attitudes, and the formation of a distinct collective identity. Youth subcultures tend to be highly self-expressive and visible through things like fashion, music, slang, and other forms of cultural production and are more often than not characterised by rapid changes and trends. Michael Brake conceptualises youth subcultures as lifestyles, systems, or modes of expression developed by subordinate groups in response to their positions relative to the dominant groups, thus attempting to resolve structural contradictions arising from the wider societal context (Brake 8). Early examples of youth subcultures can include subgroups like the Beatniks, hippies, greasers, and the like, while later turn-of-the-century examples include emo, punk, grunge, scene, etc.

While the early pioneer groups of youth subcultures had already had their heyday and mostly fizzled out by the advent of the internet, later examples persisted and even made the leap from the real to cyberspace. These newer youth communities tended to be organised more around cultural production in a way that their previous counterparts were not, and were also comparatively more given to appropriation by consumer culture, as evidenced by the popularity of the goth, emo, and scene ‘aesthetics’ characterised by black eyeliner, nail paint, wide ear piercings, bracelets, long fringes, black/multicoloured hair as well as aspects of Japanese anime culture — all of which one could easily shop at their local Hot Topic. Over the late 2000s and early 2010s, these niche communities, though having left an indelible mark upon the online social consciousness, slowly lost steam and faded out of popularity, making way for even newer trends like the VSCO Girl, E-boy/E-girl, cottagecore, dark academia, etc, native to more modern social media platforms like TikTok, Instagram and Tumblr.

### **Identity Formation and Digital Youth Subcultures**

Identity formation in the postmodern world is a complex phenomenon, affected by an ever-

increasing variety of factors owing to the march of modernisation. Zygmunt Bauman, in his work *Liquid Modernity*, works out quite an extensive conceptualisation of identity formation, among other things, in the context of the modern world, one that is of particular interest to us here in relation to modern internet culture and social media.

In a liquid modern life, there are no permanent bonds, and any that we take up for a time must be tied loosely so that they can be untied again, as quickly and as effortlessly as possible, when circumstances change - as they surely will in our liquid modern society, over and over again. (Bauman 76)

Bauman essentially talks about the increasingly unstable and transient nature of the modern world, calling it 'liquid' in contrast to the 'solid modernity' of the early 20th century where social systems and institutions were structured, stable, and predictable. Because of this destabilisation, individuals living in liquid modernity experience more freedom than ever but because traditional sources of identity and support, such as family, community, and long-term employment, have weakened under said liquid modernity, they must also consequently bear more burden of identity construction and uncertainty.

This can be seen very clearly in the context of youth subcultures, both before as well as after the advent of the internet and social media. Youth subcultures and aesthetics are arguably the most clear manifestation of ephemeral identity formation, offering a fertile ground for Bauman's concept of unstable identity to manifest. They do so by providing the necessary resources and niche social structures for this ongoing identity work, offering narratives, styles, and practices that young people can adopt and adapt. The digital space makes this particularly easy, mainly because not only do online environments support and encourage fluid and experimentative identities, but they also allow one to explore and present multiple identities at once while simultaneously remaining completely anonymous. This unique feature is something that was not available to earlier youth communities.

Identity formation in relation to youth subcultures, specifically digital youth subcultures is thus a highly fluid affair, and as we move further into the 21st century, the idea only becomes more complex. The constant consumption and reinvention of identity that characterises the liquid modernity discussed earlier finds concreteness in the form of consumer goods. Youth subcultures and niche communities tend to be characterised more often than not by a specific visual style that distinguishes them from others, and even before the advent of the internet, commercialisation of a subcultural identity never took too long once a commodifiable 'aesthetic' had emerged from it. In the digital landscape, this is only amplified.

In his seminal work, *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard has talked about hyperreality, a concept closely linked to semiotics, post-structuralism, as well as postmodernism. Baudrillard defines hyperreality as a representation that does not have an original referent, or in other words, perceptions of a 'real' without a reality behind it. This is different from imagination, as he says, "the unreal is no longer that of dream or of fantasy, of a beyond or a within, it is that of a hallucinatory resemblance of the real with itself" (Baudrillard 142). Hyperreality as a concept follows from Baudrillard's formulations on simulations, and it is not hard to follow that line of thought to see how it applies to the present-day digital landscape and social media ecosystem.

Because digital youth subcultures and communities are heavily influenced by popular media and culture, they are steeped in a plethora of simulacra, or referents without an original. These referents influence identity formation in youth communities, inevitably leading to constructions that are inextricably intertwined with media imagery and narratives. Furthermore, in a state of digital hyperreality, identity becomes not only a commodity but also, in Susan Sontag's words, a performance (Sontag 44). This commodified performance of identity leads to a culture of branding and artificial self-presentation, as social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok relentlessly incentivise personal identity construction with the express aim of maximising visibility and monetisation. This leads to identities constructed for public consumption rather than personal authenticity. Additionally, the concept of hyperreality in the digital space also explains the fragmented nature of not only digital identities but of the digital landscape itself. On the one hand,

identities are fragmented in the sense that it is increasingly easy for people to assume and shed new identities based on current interests, trends, and the specific social media platforms they are using. For instance, a person might present as 'artsy' or sophisticated on Instagram, playful and in touch with the latest trends on TikTok, and completely serious on LinkedIn — none of these constructions are more real than others and they all exist simultaneously. By virtue of existing within a digital hyperreality, individuals no longer have to 'commit' to a singular identity, so to speak. On the other hand, fragmentation with respect to the digital landscape and the internet itself has led to what many theorists have dubbed the death of monoculture and the rise of specific 'taste communities'.

Monoculture, in a sociological sense, refers to a more or less homogeneous popular culture that lacks diversity and is characterised by a uniform set of cultural norms, beliefs, and practices, especially in the sense of media and cultural production. Vox Magazine's Kyle Chayka says about monoculture —

Today, the word monoculture is used to describe a monolithic culture: the range of artifacts, characters, voices, and stories that a specific demographic find recognizable and relatable. But the word also evokes a homogenized space, a Monocultural Cinematic Universe in which everything is bright, vapid, and family-friendly, and any whimpering of dissent is smoothed over into sameness: monotonous culture. (Chayka)

Popular monoculture essentially means the kind of media that everyone consumes at a particular point in time and references to which can be made on reasonable assumptions of prior knowledge about them. For instance, the Star Wars franchise was a big part of the millennial monoculture in the 1980s to the early 2000s, after which it assimilated into generalised pop culture. The Marvel Cinematic Universe is another textbook example of a monolithic pop culture phenomenon that characterised the popular culture of the 2010s.

However, as mentioned earlier, with the internet and the digital landscape morphing further and further into hyperreal territory, monoculture seems to be on a decline, with more niche 'taste communities' taking its place. Popular monoculture existed in the early and middle days of mass media because the forms of entertainment available to the masses were limited — cinema and television ran entertainment based on what the largest number of people were interested in, so for instance, if the Marvel Cinematic Universe is blowing up at a particular point in time, that is what one would see everywhere. The fragmentation of the internet, however, brought around the existence of taste communities (which were later compounded by the development of OTT platforms that cemented the death of monoculture, but that is beyond the scope of our present discussion). Taste communities on the internet developed primarily with the advent of various social media, such as Tumblr, Pinterest, Reddit, and Instagram because of the highly specialised and targeted algorithms that these platforms utilise. A paper by Dong, et al. has developed the concept of 'sentiment communities' to explain the specific ways in which machine learning is utilised in order to scope out discrete communities on social media sites for targeted content and marketing. This is mentioned in the context of behavioural data collection in a study titled Machine Learning Algorithms for Social Media Analysis —

A community in the real world has a specific job to do. For instance, the biker community is a community that plans voyages, or senior citizens club has senior people to share their feelings in the community. Like this every online Networked group has specific intentions, identifying such groups requires community detection techniques. The concept of "sentiment communities" is for improving the online marketing and business strategies. Sentiment communities are user groups who have an exclusive mindset on particular products or services on social networks. (Balaji, et al. 9)

The information yielded by data mining and behavioural analysis via machine learning is utilised in a variety of ways, from maximising engagement and time spent on the social media platform to marketing specific products. The result of this kind of targeted algorithm is that instead of existing

organically within the entirety of the digital ecosystem, individuals are increasingly getting boxed into niche bubbles tailored to their specific opinions, alignments, and interests, conscious or unconscious. When we look at this in the context of digital youth subcultures, it is not a huge leap to make to infer that social media changes them structurally in the ways outlined above and creates niche online spaces that are an evolved form of earlier youth subcultures. Examples of such modern digital youth communities include the punk, emo, grunge and goth scenes that made the migration from analogue to digital medium, as well as the more modern VSCO Girl, E-boy/E-girl, dark academia, cottagecore, etc that are entirely native to the digital ecosystem. Of course, even within these taste communities, some are more 'mainstream', so to speak, than others.

## The Digitisation of Youth Communities and Subcultures

For the purpose of this discussion, we shall divide youth subcultures into three broad categories — i) pre-social media, ii) transitory, and iii) post-social media. There has been a lot of scholarship on pre-social media era youth subcultures, with sociologists and cultural theorists like Dick Hebdige and Stan Cohen formulating theories about the mechanisms of their emergence and popularisation. Hebdige, for instance, explains the emergence of popular youth cultures in the mid-20th century such as the mods, the hippies, the rockers, and the Beatniks, as the result of a social polarisation in the turbulent mid-century period.

The ways in which class was lived, however, the forms in which the experience of class found expression in culture – did change dramatically. The advent of the mass media, changes in the constitution of the family, in the organization of school and work, shifts in the relative status of work and leisure, all served to fragment and polarize the working-class community, producing a series of marginal discourses within the broad confines of class experience. (Hebdige 74)

These 'marginal discourse', according to Hebdige, were what gave rise to the early youth subcultures. To supplement this with Cohen's definition of a subculture, "compromise solution between two contradictory needs: the need to create and express autonomy and difference from parents . . . and the need to maintain the parental identifications" (Cohen 59). The latent function of subcultures, according to him, was to express and attempt to resolve these contradictions. The visually specific style that such youth subcultures exhibited was understood as the idea of style as a coded response to the changes affecting the entire community.

But, as is the nature of the modern and postmodern world, nothing remains untouched by commercialisation, no matter its roots. Admittedly, the youth subcultures of the mid to late 20th century were seen by mainstream sensibility as 'deviant', profane, and threatening to an extent, still there was a sense of fascination mixed with dread, amusement mixed with outrage. The stylistic and visual innovations, such as dress, music, etc, of a youth community are inevitably incorporated by capitalist forces via their conversion into mass-produced objects, leading to a dilution of their subversive power.

[...] as soon as the original innovations which signify 'subculture' are translated into commodities and made generally available, they become 'frozen'. Once removed from their private contexts by the small entrepreneurs and big fashion interests who produce them on a mass scale, they become codified, made comprehensible, rendered at once public property and profitable merchandise. (Hebdige 96)

This was the case with many, if not all, popular youth subcultures of the time, including the hippie culture, punk, rock, glam rock, grunge, etc. Once this commodification of a youth community's subcultural signs is done, its lifespan is essentially over and it gets seamlessly assimilated into mainstream culture as a set of 'themed' commodities, so to speak, an aesthetic one can buy with money without any of the associated social, political, or subversive connotations.

The process remained much the same with the transitory period of youth subcultures as well. The development of the internet, and particularly the early days of social media, provided youth cultures with the perfect foothold to catapult them into relatively wider demographics while still maintaining the common ground on which they were built. A good example is that of emo and

its angry counterpart, nu-metal. The emo subculture technically emerged in the early 1990s from its earlier counterpart, hardcore punk, and was mostly structured around a specific music genre. Visually characterised by things like tight black clothing, black eyeliner, fringes of dyed black hair, studded belts and chokers, etc, emo, both as a subculture and a subgenre of music, distinguished itself by engaging with themes of existential angst, vulnerability, alienation, anxiety, and poetic lyricism. Its first wave in the 1990s was headed by bands and artists like Sunny Day Real Estate, Piebald, and Joan of Arc, becoming a proper underground scene that was characterised by a kind of heightened parasocial intimacy between the artists and their fans. The second wave of emo in the 2000s is where it gets interesting as it coincided with the advent of early social media, specifically, MySpace. Michael Tedder, in his book *Top Eight: How MySpace Changed Music*, says —

The emo scene and MySpace formed a connected loop. As one grew, so did the other. The more people who joined the site, the more they saw emo bands everywhere they looked, the more emo fans who joined because they'd heard the homeland had been discovered, and the bigger the site got. After years as a punch line and untouchable underground scene, emo was crossing over by the fall of 2003. The scene ran the Internet and quickly made MySpace its home base. (Tedder 76)

MySpace, with its endless customisation options that encouraged users to learn basic HTML, became a fertile ecosystem for young people with similar interests to not only connect with each other on a much wider scale but also to express themselves in a way that was much more fluid, vivid, and dynamic than before. In a feature on the website of the Museum of Youth Culture, a former member of the emo subculture who was a teenager during the days of MySpace reflects upon the experience —

Emo, alongside other 00s music subcultures, was the first to make use of the internet. Internet forums, personal blogs and early social media profiles enabled us to connect and share music with people across the world. At the same time, we left the internet behind whenever we went out, our Sony Walkmans and Nokia 3310s not yet allowing us to carry it around with us. We were the transition to a digital world that is now so ubiquitous. (der Weduwe)

This transition to the digital world that der Weduwe talks about is what gives these mid-era subcultures their differentiating characteristics. Emo's popularity was stoked by MySpace in particular as bands amassed huge worldwide followings on social media rather than through traditional channels (Hawkes).

The bands and artists that rose to prominence during this time include emo behemoths like My Chemical Romance, Fall Out Boy, Pierce the Veil, and Bring Me The Horizon, and were all characterised by an increasingly personal fan culture that encouraged fan-created cultural production. This era of relative mainstream boom in the popularity of the emo culture consequently led, as such developments have always had throughout history, to the commodification of the culture in the form of 'aesthetics' sold as consumer goods. Artefacts of visual characterisation such as dark clothes, band T-shirts, army boots, and fishnet stockings that members of the community use to forage for became widely available at retail stores like Claire's and Hot Topic. With this commercialisation, this second wave of emo fizzled out of relevance by the early 2010s, with the digital landscape morphing further and social media sites changing in structure. This is in line with historical observations, wherein youth subcultures and communities either evolve or die out once they become commodified in mainstream culture.

Aside from emo, other youth communities that crested and waned during this early period of digitisation include hipster, goth, nerd, scene, etc. A key difference that can be seen here between the non-digital youth subcultures of the mid to late 20th century and these newly digital ones is the media reception to them. Because the form of media changed on a structural level, the way it interacted with youth subcultures also changed. Earlier mass media, or 'monocultural' media, tended to see youth subcultures as 'deviant' or as a threat to the normal functioning of society (as evidenced by frequent popular scares pedalled by newspapers and magazines in the 80s and 90s about the rising rates of street gangs and crimes in relation to alternative youth subcultures).

Digital media and social media in the early 2000s, conversely, led to a fragmentation of the digital space where these alternative youth cultures could exist within their own 'taste bubbles' permeable to whoever might be interested. While this fragmentation obviously does not completely do away with the villainisation of such communities, it does reduce it to a great extent by providing a fertile ground for these youth subcultures to expand, both socioculturally as well as in number.

The latest phase of youth subcultures, which I had earlier categorised as post-social media subcultures, are those that came into existence once social media had properly fleshed itself out in the popular consciousness. These communities are entirely native to the digital landscape, meaning that individuals associated with them have never engaged with them in the absence of a digital platform. A rough timeline for these can be drawn as starting from the mid-2010s to the present day. These particular youth communities are vastly different from their predecessors and only continue to cement those differences further by constantly evolving in the dynamic social media landscape. The principle social media platforms associated with these communities are TikTok, Instagram, and Tumblr. Examples of such modern amongst modern youth subcultures include the VSCO Girl, E-boy/E-girl, Dark Academia, Cottagecore, Clean Girl, etc.

### Contemporary Digital Youth Subcultures and Their Mechanics

The main observable difference between these newer youth subcultures and their older counterparts seems to be that as times go on, there seems to be lesser and lesser substance behind them in terms of a social ideology. Earlier youth subcultures, be it grunge or emo or punk rock, developed first as worldviews, interests, and ideologies before they grew as visual aesthetics to set these worldviews apart from mainstream culture. The modern youth communities tend to lack this aspect to a large degree. This is not to say that all of them are completely visual. The VSCO Girl, for instance, is characterised by environmental activism and conscious consumption while the cottagecore aesthetic promotes a 'return to nature' approach to escape the hustle and bustle of an increasingly connected and digital life. Both of these, however, and indeed other examples such as these, come nowhere close to the complex fabrics that earlier youth subcultures formed, with or without social media.

The process of assimilation or incorporation by the forces of production gets shorter and shorter as time goes on. VSCO Girl aesthetic, even if there was indeed a shred of ideology behind it, was fundamentally structured in such a way that it could not have functioned without the forces of commercialisation supporting it from behind — the Stanley Cups, Birkenstocks, and other brand name clothing and accessories are a prerequisite for one to qualify as a VSCO Girl and be part of the community in the first place. This was not the case with earlier youth communities, which were largely organised around similar interests and worldviews and then later commercialised by mainstream brands.

One can look at the life cycle of a youth subculture in four distinct stages —

**i) Inception:** The subculture/community is born out of a shared set of beliefs, worldviews and interests, with individuals looking for a sense of belonging and identity creation against the grain of mainstream culture.

**ii) Popularisation:** After it has been created, the youth subculture brings together like-minded people as it expands into a community in the true sense of the word.

**iii) Appropriation:** Once a subculture is sufficiently popular and stylistically established, it starts to get commodified by market forces. The visual specificities that characterise a subculture and its specific set of subcultural values can now be bought with money. In this stage, the subculture loses whatever subversive power it might have held as it can now be adopted by anyone and everyone without the need to take an ideological stance.

**iv) Decline/Evolution:** Lastly, once all its signs and cultural symbols have been appropriated and commodified, the youth subculture starts to decline. This happens in one of two ways — either it fizzles out altogether, or it morphs into a newer, different but still related form.

When we look at youth subcultures in the context of these four stages, we can observe that all of these four stages clearly manifested in pre-social media and transitory youth subcultures

such as hippies, punk, grunge, emo, goth, scene, etc, as has been discussed at quite some length in the preceding section. However, the further we move into the digital era of youth subcultures, the more complicated things get. The mid-late and latest digital subcultures can actually be observed to condense some of these stages into one or skip them altogether. The cottagecore and dark academia 'aesthetics', for example, promote a visual aesthetic more than they promote any comprehensible worldviews, the values associated with them perfunctory at best. When we move even further into the timeline and get to digital trends and cultures born on Instagram and TikTok, such as Clean Girl, Old Money, Tomato Girl Summer, Coquette, etc, we see an even more pronounced lack of substance.

The Clean Girl trend, with millions of views of the hashtag on TikTok, is characterised by glowy skin, a pinch of blush, glossy lips, slicked-back hair, gold hoops, tote bags, sunglasses, etc. Cottagecore, on the other hand, promotes simple living in the present in nature, complete with gardening, growing flowers, and sewing one's own clothes. The New York Times' Isabel Slone explains that "in the cottagecore universe, there are no phones pinging constantly with updates, no urgent work emails, no evenings spent responding to the onerous demands of a tyrannical boss." Trends and aesthetics such as these are more often than not driven by some form of celebrity influence, such as Hailey Bieber being the textbook Clean Girl, or Taylor Swift's cottagecore album 'folklore' dominating music charts at the same time 'cottagecore' as an aesthetic was gaining momentum on TikTok.

One could go on and on about these latest digital subcultures — Tomato Girl Summer basically promotes an identity itself, someone who eats sundried tomatoes and olive oil and dresses in chic red headscarves, white linen, bold prints and the like, coquette is essentially hyperfemininity repackaged as an aesthetic for the umpteenth time in the past two decades — but one trend becomes clear from these observations. Digital youth subcultures today no longer emerge and proliferate organically, neither do they have the kind of ideological and non-visual substance that their predecessors did. Instead, they skip the first two stages of the youth subculture life cycle mentioned above and jump straight to the third, arising out of commercialisation itself rather than getting commercialised and are specifically designed and marketed to appeal to the largest number of people online. In this way, modern digital youth subcultures are more microaesthetics than they are subcultures. They sell a visual aesthetic that promises individuals a sense of fulfillment in the way that they live as well — "Buy this ensemble of clothing and accessories to qualify as a real clean girl and your life can be effortless, chic, and easy as well!"

The word 'microaesthetic' is fitting to describe these digital trends rather than subcultures both because they lack the substance that their earlier counterparts were steeped with and because the average lifespan of a social media trend such as these is extremely short. The reason for this can be found, once again, in Bauman's concept of liquid modernity. As mentioned earlier, digital youth subcultures and aesthetics are arguably the most fertile ground available for ephemeral identity formation. Adopting and shedding identities is particularly easy in the digital space because not only do online environments support and encourage fluid and experimentative identities, they also allow one to explore and present multiple identities at once while simultaneously remaining completely anonymous. Because these identities are not as concrete as they used to be, and because they exist in the attention deficit hypertextual consciousness (Amerika 168) of present-day social media, commitment to them has also gone down, leading to shorter and shorter lifespans of digital subcultures.

In *Simulacra and Similation*, Baudrillard outlines four orders of the simulacra —

Such would be the successive phases of the image: it is the reflection of a profound reality; it masks and denatures a profound reality; it masks the absence of a profound reality; it has no relation to any reality whatsoever [and] is its own pure simulacrum.

In the first case, the image is a good appearance - representation is of the sacramental order. In the second, it is an evil appearance - it is of the order of maleficence. In the third, it plays at being an appearance - it is of the order of sorcery. In the fourth, it is no longer of the order of appearances, but of simulation. (Baudrillard 6)

These newer digital youth subcultures, having skipped the steps of inception and popularisation straight to commercialisation, are still presented as something that have some sort of values backing them, even though none exist, because a narrative is necessary in order to make sales, as is the case with VSCO and cottagecore. In other cases, these trends do not even try to mask the absence of substance behind them but simply market themselves as a way of living, a path towards fulfilment not backed by anything concrete — why is the Tomato Girl happier than anybody else? Does donning the clean girl makeup really make life any more manageable? These trends and microaesthetics can thus be said to exist in a Baudrillardian hyperreality, exhibiting themselves as third and fourth-order simulacra.

This entire process is, of course, backed by social media algorithms, machine learning and analysis of 'sentiment communities', and the capitalisation of youth psychology.

## Conclusion

Over the course of this paper, I have explored the concept of youth subcultures, their timeline, and their exodus into the cyberspace with the advent of the internet. Several of them developed, spread, and waned in popularity well before the internet became a household thing. Some were born during the transitory period of the development of the cyberspace and early social media and made the great migration from the analog to the digital, morphing and evolving in unprecedented ways. Still others were born purely in a digital world, on social media that was designed to sustain and proliferate them.

All three of these stages of youth subcultures have been analysed with examples in the context of their inception, popularisation, appropriation by commercial forces, and eventual decline. The earliest youth subcultures went through all four of these stages over the span of years, sometimes even decades, as was the case with hippie culture, punk and even grunge. Transitory youth subcultures of the early age of the internet and social media displayed a marked increase in the speed with which they went from inception and popularisation to commercialisation, with cultures such as emo, goth, and scene getting commercialised as mainstream fashion and aesthetics a mere two or three years within their outbreak of popularity, owing to early social media. Lastly, the latest form of digital youth subcultures has condensed down the process so much that they end up skipping the initial stages altogether — youth subcultures on modern social media are no longer born out of a common set of values, beliefs, or interests, but are rather packaged 'aesthetics' that seem to promise that achieving a certain visual aesthetic will lead to self-fulfilment on the same level that reconciliation of personal beliefs and values with lifestyle would have. Because there is no actual ideology, values, substance, or context behind these trends and aesthetics, they are essentially effects without cause — micro aesthetics rather than subcultures in the true sense of the word.

Because these latest digital youth subcultures are not born organically but are rather created with an implicit agenda, they exist as simulacra of the third and fourth orders, either pretending to be something they are not by masking the absence of substance and reality behind them or existing as pure simulation of something that neither exists nor has ever been promised to.

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