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## **Dark Academia: How Old Inequalities Are Being Retold in a Global Youtube Learning Phenomenon**

### **Abstract**

This study examines the emerging trend in online learning related to the phenomenon of YouTube and lo-fi music channels regarded as an aid in the process. The main object of study are the so-called Dark Academia streaming forms. This phenomenon is being examined through the perspective of critical cultural studies and qualitative research. The research sample is constituted here by the selected channels providing specific content to online learners. The significance of the study is however not just related to the Dark Academia as an internet phenomenon, but also as a contemporary cultural reflection of learning strategies.

**Keywords:** dark academia, internet, YouTube, learning styles, digital learning

### **Introduction**

One of the recent examples of digital culture is the emergence of specific streaming internet music channels using specific aesthetics. The vast majority of those channels are Youtube-based and oriented to deliver particular set lists of music pieces together with the quasi-Victorian narrative. The common denominator of those music channels is not just related to the specific iconography, but particular academic touch of nostalgia. The new internet phenomenon of the so-called “Dark Academia” is attracting in recent years much attention and not only thanks to its large number of subscribers and clicks. It embraces a much broader issue of the internet presence of the self, new learning strategies and educational aids, motivation, imagination, concepts of work and leisure,

and identity politics. It also encapsulates everything that is placed beyond the actual Internet realm, but is still linked with the Dark Academia trend. This includes clothing and hairstyles, paraphernalia, mannerism, speech patterns, etc.

If we want to understand the fascination behind this cultural revival of classic (and primarily British in their origins) patterns of modern Dark Academia fashion, iconography, music, or behavior and how it is all related to learning, we would have to shed light on the specific articulations of this phenomenon occurring in the dimension which in many ways is the most crucial channel of self-expression to young people today, i.e., the vast virtual universe of streamed content. The diverse channels, particularly popular streamers, famous influencers, and other internet personas, might be considered in that regard as a new forefront of creators who, in contrast to a traditional artist, produce digital content and do not create actual works of art themselves directly. This distinction can be drawn across the borderline of digital creators' and digital artists' domains. The most common definition of content creators is being defined as individuals who create digital media serving the purpose of: 1) entertainment, 2) creative endeavors, and 3) production of knowledge (Lenhart, Fallows, Horrigan 2004). On the other hand, digital artists and digital creators have certain things in common. Both share a similar approach towards their essential activity in the virtual environment – producing a number of works with the use of available digital tools and circulating them, and reproducing them mainly in a digital setting (Grau et al, 2019).

## **Research Methodology**

The immense impact these approaches have on the trajectories of the development of various educational practices is yet to be established and evaluated. However, it remains the fact that the “analog divide” becomes a problem in the implementation of new and complex information technologies in many schooling systems and universities alike. Torin Monahan points out that the analog divide influences participatory design, flexible design, and organizational communication (Monahan 2001, pp. 24). The latter plays a crucial role in reshaping the modularities of the mentioned divide in schools and other educational institutions. As communication is being reduced due to technological advancement, it becomes subsequently more violent, disrupted, or even non-existent, as in the case of the Los Angeles Unified School District analyzed by Monahan over twenty years ago.

The key difference between analog and digital education lies within the two main dimensions within which the learning process takes place and from

which it takes its major motoric force. The first dimension is being made by the patterns of social practice given to the analog human agency in the digital settings and interaction with the digitalized aspect of contemporary human existence. The analog praxis takes in that context often a culturally defined shape, i.e., it recalls culturally defined tropes and motives, usually linked to the knowledge we already have or information we were transmitted to, shaping the broader picture of the actions undertaken concerning the internet universum, artificial intelligence, algorithmic management, and other forms of digital input and conditioning. The second dimension is based on relations with the world of meanings given to the material aspect of human interaction with the digital. In other words, it tackles the broad space between the human and artificial components, filled usually with various signs of human/machine communication and non-verbal interaction. It becomes obvious that this dimension is the most dynamic of the two, and the speed of transformation, its trajectories, and the structure of modern symbolism, metaphors and language are to be acknowledged as an important impulse in the global change caused by the immense proliferation of IT solutions within sensemaking practices.

The use of the term “sensemaking” is usually linked with organizational and management studies. It had been developed in the late 1970s by the organizational psychologist Karl Weick, who introduced the term in his book *The Social Psychology of Organizing* (Weick, 1979) and *Sensemaking in Organizations* (Weick 1995), and then developed it further along with Kathleen Sutcliffe and David Obstfeld (Weick, Sutcliffe, Obstfeld 2005). Sensemaking is being conceptualized by Weick as an activity which is “about the interplay of action and interpretation rather than influence of evaluation of choice” (Weick et al., 2005, pp. 409). In this perspective, human agency is becoming a question of the organization of experience with all of its features which may influence decision making on an individual plan. In effect, experiencing and interacting with reality turns into a search for answers to problems occurring on the way and which an individual is being faced on an everyday basis. The solutions found and decisions made by a person forced to act in response to those problems are, in effect, often named and reflected upon. It’s how a specific sensemaking narrative emerges, which can be analyzed with various methodologies of different social sciences.

## Research Background

As Andrew Brown, Ian Colville and Annie Pye suggest in that regard, sensemaking is “associated strongly with research that is interpretive, social con-

structionist, processual and phenomenological” (Brown, Colville, Pye 2015, pp. 266). It situates the research in a wide field of earlier approaches represented by scholars such as James W.B. Douglas, Harold Garfinkel, and Karl Polanyi. Sensemaking studies tackle not just the issue of organization in the context of institutions or work but also bring up the problem of learning, as it had been investigated by Maurizio Catino and Gerardo Patriotta (Catino, Patriotta 2013) or the processes of identity formation as to be found in the research of Michael Humphreys and Andrew Brown (Humphreys, Brown 2002). It also opens many other areas of analysis such as creativity and innovation, management strategies, crisis response, creation of organizational cultures or even cognitive and linguistic (discursive) aspects of functioning in an organization. Creating grander organizational narratives, which may be crucial in combining particular meanings in a comprehensive story, raises further questions on the textual interpretations of social roles, as well the purpose and aim of institutionalized interactions in schools, workplaces, public spaces, etc. Nevertheless, the core idea behind this approach is bound by the role of practice in all of the mentioned areas. The application of these types of practices in the modern learning strategies may be associated with both – optimization of performance and setting the conditions to learn new competencies from the meanings unfolding in a variable of educational situations. Thus we may say that sensemaking is at the same time an effect achieved through careful reading of signs and symbols present in a conversation, textbook, social interaction or the shape of school space and a process of producing meaningful relations between social actors, their surroundings, statuses or different sources of pedagogical inspirations and students learning from them. The seemingly natural incorporation of ontology and epistemology in sensemaking drives the identification not with the institution itself but with the philosophy of functioning and the policy behind it. The operational patterns which come from the tightening of bonds between the individual and the organisation could be interested through the methodology of ethnography of organizations. The “bottom up” approach typical for contemporary ethnography allows us not just to see to a certain point the reality with the eyes of the actors involved, but also to reconstruct the structure and the dynamics of meanings applied by them when confronted with ambiguity or equivocality in many different contexts. The ability to explain complex realities in a comprehensive fashion makes sensemaking processes an “ongoing creation of coherence by connecting salient observations, beliefs, and actions as reasons for one another” (Schildt, Mantere, Cornelissen 2020, pp. 246).

## Sample

In the light of the above a key question emerges – what and how do people actually learn from the digital environment and how do they incorporate particular analog elements in the organization of the digital learning space? Furthermore, another issue is to be resolved – does learning in a digital environment boosts the level of cognitive human abilities or do we need some sort of sensemaking strategy in order to effectively use the digital tools at hand? The answer lies within the transformation the digital factor imposes on two major aspects of any organization of learning, ie. time and space in which the educational process takes place today. When it comes to the issue of time it is striking that the notion of the analog in the digital age encompasses a nostalgic turn to the past. This is followed by further emerging problems and significant oppositions related to the notion of time like: fast/slow, past/future, or tradition/modernism. It would be a tautology at this point to say that today's reality became accelerated by technology and the IT development made space smaller and physical borders invalid. The sensemaking practice of digital learning with the use of analog tools and strategies takes it to the point in which the problem of speed becomes central in discussing possible consequences to the transformation of future schooling and the whole educational sphere. It requires however a fundamental change in the prevailing model on how learning is being acted upon and practically conducted by the individual in relation to the temporal aspect. Daniel Kahneman points out that thinking either “fast” or “slow” affects the human learning in the sense of different heuristic models, which build specific narratives (thus they are discursive in that sense), and “good stories provide a simple and coherent account” (Kahneman 2011, pp. 195). The division between the two modes of thought is based on the different approach towards making choices and decisions by an individual confronting a situation which requires taking action or providing an immediate solution to an unfolding problem.

## Instruments and Procedures

The shared task set both by the prospect theory and sensemaking approach, ie. to challenge the existing system of mental mapping of problem solving, to open up and present holistic and innovative solutions, and last but not least, to form a new way of making heuristic links and relations in a largely complex

and technicalized world, might be understood as a long term goal for many contemporary pedagogical strategies. In order to bring out the significance those new strategies are being assigned to by social actors in the emerging educational structures we must look at the implementation of the two aforementioned dimensions (time and space) within a more nuanced sphere of digital and analog culture. One way to do so is to highlight the specific practices which serve the purpose of not just learning but also to construct a larger community of learning subjects. Digital or analog communitarianism would be in this context a form of relation building process oriented on three basic aspects: the self functions in the vast ocean of information and immense data sources available today. The first aspect is being defined through the illusive, non-materialistic and fluid nature of social relations we may observe in many examples of online communities. The online society would be in that regard a group of loosely interconnected users, each gaining personalized educational content from the dynamically changing sources located in the global data highway. Second aspect is related to digital group identity, which in return delivers new possibilities to root its core values, norms and key meanings not in traditional group identity structures, but in the non-material world affected among others strongly by the pop-cultural streams of hyper-detailed offers. The particularization of identities is seemingly a base feature of many digital communities not just in the educational sense. The emergence of such groups is to be observed also in the area of politics, religiosity and spirituality or environmental issues. Third and last aspect of digital communities which may have a significant effect on the dynamics of learning strategies today can be associated with the level of technological advancement we experience nowadays when coping with diverse everyday tasks. The shift towards mobile solutions and the extensive use of mobile applications challenges the educational institutions and traditional schooling in particular to the point where it becomes necessary to raise a debate on the future of institutionalized education and its pedagogical effectiveness. One of such surprising directions reflecting the described dynamics of change in contemporary learning practices is being delivered by the Dark Academia phenomenon. The core idea behind this ongoing internet hype around the mentioned videos is however related to a much wider style associated with the lo-fi music genre.

### **Data Analysis**

As the term lo-fi stands for “low fidelity” it is quite obvious that it is mostly put in a stark contradiction with the “high fidelity” it opposes. In a more broader

meaning it contradicts under many conditions as well the notion of “high tech” by being constituted by technological means of the past – not just with simplicity and low quality in mind, but with analog technology as the lo-fi major means of creation and reproduction. This dichotomic stance can be found in a 1958 article published in *The Observer* by Kingsley Amis, a British jazz critic and poet who strongly opposed the high fidelity notion represented in the album *Bob Crosby's Bob Cats in Hi-Fi*. That very meaning contributed to the Oxford Dictionary entry where lo-fi had been put as “sound production less good in quality than hi-fi” (Burchfield 1976). The semantic field of the term comes from its use in the music industry and its musical associations and applications can be regarded as a major factor to the development of specific cultural phenomena discussed in this chapter. The term entailed poor quality and rough sound of old music cassettes and vinyl records, especially in the 1990’s when the CD technology became more popular and pushed out the magnetic tape due to its obvious lo-fi shortcomings. Lo-fi aesthetics had been linked with more general notions of archaism, primitivism, and unprofessional music made by amateurs who only slowly progressed into hi-fi as they matured and their own sound and musical taste became more sophisticated. This underdog position of the lo-fi music genre and the related culture can be certainly treated historically in the context of the origins of what had turned out in the recent twenty years to be a true stream of bands and subgenres in both instrumental and electronic music. Starting off their career in garages many of those bands remained faithful to the lo-fi features in their later works, recalling with auto reflexive manner the modern precursors of the aesthetics.

The significant change that occurred in recent years in the whole music industry shifted the listener’s experience from the use and purchase of a physical record to various internet streaming services. Youtube, Spotify, Bandcamp, and many other smaller services and websites offer today either a single song or the whole album for streaming or downloading high-quality sound without the need to visit the record store. Internet streaming became a crucial part of the music industry and most artists are by now present in one form or another in the ever-growing digital catalogue of bands, singers, DJ’s and music projects to choose from. Among many it is obvious that Youtube is an unquestionable market leader in that regard. It allows anyone to upload any content online as long as it follows the service’s rules in relation to the depiction of violence and sexually explicit material, for example. It didn’t take long before Youtube became a gateway for many music enthusiasts to upload and share their setlists combining songs and pieces in accordance with their own tastes and preference and creating long track lists and mixtapes for others to listen to for free



(although their work can be monetized other way through specific Youtube policy based on the number of clicks and subscribers).

One of the most popular of such Youtube channels in 2015 was launched by a French user known under the moniker “Chilled Cow.” What was unique and surely contributed to the initial success of the channel was the presented combination of lo-fi music, mostly located within the framework of hip hop and downtempo genres, and the topic “beats to relax/study to” accompanied by a manga style animated graphic depicting a girl in the process of learning surrounded with notebooks, a cat relaxing nearby and a window through which the viewer could see changing day times, landscapes and weather conditions. The calming atmosphere, slow and chilled music, and long duration stream attracted subscribers and occasional viewers alike. The channel’s content was quickly associated simply as “Lo-fi Girl,” and the name stuck permanently. The usual short form of allowed Youtube uploading material by regular users of 10 minutes had been stretched up in this case to a few hours of constant live streaming.

The character of Lo-fi Girl (taken from the 1995 animated movie “Whisper of the Heart”) was being recognized by many as an universal personification of a Millennials and generation Z working and studying habits and evolved into an internet meme in short time notice. The cultural impact of the Lofi Girl phenomenon on emerging internet trends was and still is hard to estimate precisely; however, its overall presence and a number of copycat channels that sprung out shortly afterward with a similar offer and a desperate hope to cut a piece of the Lofi Girl’s popularity is obvious and easy to spot today. Predominantly the lo-fi aesthetic caught the attention of the general public, inspiring not just new streamer competition but also a whole new type of digital content creators. Those creators form an interesting trend in the way content is being presented and distributed on the internet today. Starting from basic Youtube channels providing selected tracklists with a key topic combined with lo-fi, ambient, or relaxation music, though live streams with a similar philosophy behind them, ending with new online radio stations streaming 24/7 – all these sources of musical content follow the same principle. Their main objective seems to be focused on building a quasi-community of followers (fandom) or, on a much larger scale, to inspire and animate a broader generational movement and its selected digital manifestations. Its basis is being constituted by the specific group identity patterns typical to generation Z.

The outcome of 2017 IPSOS research shows how the digital immersion of generation Z is being executed mostly with the use of social media (IPSOS 2017). Conclusions from the survey highlight the role social media play in



the lives and life expectations of generation Z and show that the “battle for attention” becomes evident in five core areas of their digital activity, which are: 1) concerns with “viewability”, 2) desire for a wide reach instead of targeting core audiences, 3) proliferation of behavioral measures used to optimize and judge the digital value, 4) declining creative effectiveness, 5) lower return of investment observed in digital advertising (IPSOS 2017: 68). The combination of these factors may not only affect future digital trends but reveals in the first place the complex character of the use of digital tools even by younger social cohorts which usually were perceived as clearly defined in their high ability to operate swiftly within the digital realm. The aforementioned analog/digital dichotomy becomes thus a significant part of the unfolding digital agency pattern, particular representation strategies of digital creators, learning new skills through digital means, and changing the perception of educational activities in the near future.

The constantly evolving lo-fi phenomenon is an exemplification of the above tendencies. The Dark Academia trend is, in particular, a representation of certain digital trends related to the Lofi Girl effect. The effect consists of high demand among social media users for content based on nostalgic and aestheticized visions of elitism, shallow romanticism, and reactionism towards the challenges caused by high tech society, i.e., technocracy, the unbearable pace of life, global uniformism or constant change with uncertain future and lack of immersion in the traditionally defined locality. It maintains, however, its own modality and raises different questions about the attitude new kinds of learners and young people in general show towards education and the institution of school. It is worth noting that the Dark Academia trend encompasses not only social media and Youtube or TikTok videos but has a much wider cultural influence. It also includes literature (initially inspired by the 1992 novel “The Secret History” by Donna Tartt) and fashion (animated mostly by social media influencers and bloggers on Tumblr, Instagram, and TikTok), making it easy to define the phenomenon as one of many modern subcultures. It is nonetheless the digital sphere where Dark Academia looms and blooms, creating an atmospheric and gothic ambiance filled with the imponderabilia associated with classic universities, schools, and educational effort at well-established elite institutions like Oxford or Yale. The trend aesthetics that come forward recall selected elements of 1930s, 1940s and 1950s looks like clothing, hairstyles, text fonts, advertisement, pictorialism etc. Those elements are being combined into one thanks to the dominant narrative present in all Dark Academia manifestations in a very much literally placed description of the place and atmosphere the viewers should experience in their imagination. The deprivation of ambi-

guity and unequivocality of meanings forced upon the viewer stands in harsh contradiction to classic romantic literature and the gothic novels *Dark Academia* aspires to mimic. The paradox that emerges in digital neoromanticism diminishes its more profound cultural impact and focuses purely on aesthetics.

## **Results**

Aestheticization of the notion of education and reducing the schooling experience to a nostalgic feeling that comes along with *Dark Academia* trend's rising popularity provides at the same time a possibility for highlighting selected symbolic elements which play an important part in reproduction of social inequalities through the proliferation of *Dark Academia* related trends. The issue becomes more evident if we include the fact that *Dark Academia* had been evaluated recently as one of the most dynamic internet search phrases with the 4,750 increase in the number of online keyword searches by Google in 2021. The main field of criticism of the discussed phenomenon is linked with the idealization of particular academic and educational traditions, especially the British and American university systems based on the leading role of elite institutions like the Ivy League universities and the Oxbridge conglomerate. British sociologist Sarah Burton brings out the argument in that context that *Dark Academia*'s idealization of elite education contributed to the construction of a scholar, academic or an intellectual as a cultural figure (Burton 2021). By bringing the cultural aspect into the debate we may point out further symbolic elements open for interpretation and critique. A special attention may be noted to the historical and political associations elite schooling brings with, i.e. economic privilege, whiteness and exclusion of working-class students, women, or ethnic minorities. Burton makes the argument that *Dark Academia* rose in popularity during the Covid 19 pandemic with its isolation policy and online learning offering the students deprived of the physical education experience a digital substitute in the form of a TikTok aesthetic and Instagram feeds full of autumn colors, opened and half-read books, horn-rimmed glasses, and wool pullovers taken almost directly from the set of the movie "*Dead Poets Society*." As appealing and pleasing to many as these artifacts may seem, Burton makes a conclusive statement in that regard that "outside of thin, white, Europeanness, there is little scope to legitimately imagine yourself into this aesthetic".

Furthermore, according to Burton the unrealistic perception of learning and academic work not only squeezes the educational experience into a narrow visual framework but also provides an opportunity for the already existing educational inequalities to be widely accepted and reframed in a new digital

environment for the future generations to come. In that sense, Dark Academia provides a specific kind of online storytelling delivering a promise that cannot be fulfilled to many individuals representing its alleged target audience. It retells the romantic narrative, which stands in a harsh contradiction to the existing social issues. Even in the Anglo-Saxon educational systems that Dark Academia takes for granted as a global paradigm and a “one size fits all” approach, these inequalities seem to gain further reach. Adam Gamoran states that the recent and future trends in American schooling show a clear discrepancy based mainly on socio-economic and racial divisions between social groups benefiting from education on a high-school and university level (Gamoran, 2021).

So what does the Dark Academia phenomenon endorse if not the realistic educational process? In order to answer this question we may take a closer look at its key components. The described aesthetic showcases several features which form a consistent picture of how education and learning are being perceived by the social media content creators and how it is interpreted by their audience and followers. The key features of Dark Academia can be thus ordered as follows:

- 1) Its peak of popularity is to be linked with the Covid-19 pandemic, self-isolation, and remote schooling. The prevailing narrative constructs the viewer’s online persona as a loner and an individual lost in the immense libraries of a traditional elite-style school or university, art gallery, or a gothic hall. The feeling of alienation combined with the pursuit of knowledge at any cost is a returning motive on most Dark Academia Youtube music streams.
- 2) It represents an idealistic perception of schooling institutions and recalls particular academic traditions. The vision of an elite school as a place of knowledge-boosting environment for human intellect neglects the socio-economic reality that makes the basis of such institutions and conditions the organization of elite schooling systems, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world. Dark Academia not only rejects this integral part of every elite school or university’s structure but also takes on elitism as a virtue in a reality where uniformity of lifestyles is omnipresent and self-evident.
- 3) Dark Academia advocates the humanistic approach to education in a highly technicalized world. The studying of literature, arts, philosophy, or ancient languages suggested in many streams, blogs, and other online representations of the phenomenon put the traditional humanistic and Socratic style of education above more modern types of learning.
- 4) The choice of music genres with the dominant classical and various types of relaxation music have a calming effect which serves the purpose of

deep focusing during the long studying hours and fosters the mental learning process of an individual. Listening to the streams can be regarded as a sensemaking practice and an analog educational strategy in a digital reality.

- 5) Dark Academia style can be regarded under many conditions as a sub-culture. In that context, it constructs its own microcosm of cultural references, symbolic language, and metaphors that are easy to interpret by the representatives of specific demographics. This aspect limits its inclusive character to mostly white middle-class young people with unlimited access to the internet and resources needed to be an active (online content creating) part of the movement.

## **Discussion**

Certainly, all of the above features can be critically deconstructed and placed within different discourses than education alone. Nonetheless, Dark Academia remains a phenomenon that baffles us with its paradoxes and contradictions raising further pedagogical questions on not just how new learning strategies are being executed in practice but also it is raising issues like the ability of young generations to learn from the existing sources of knowledge without reducing them to a single selected dimension, like aesthetic for example. On the other hand, the complexity of the observed knowledge acquisition processes and ways of learning new skills in the IT-sphere should be followed up today also in a socio-cultural plain. This step opens up fresh methodological possibilities and brings into the debate the qualitative approach in the analysis of Dark Academia and many other similar phenomena already present and yet unfolding in the digisphere. Surely, the conclusion we are able to grasp by looking at Dark Academia's trending on the internet in recent years is based on the dynamics affecting every internet fashion; however, its particular nature goes far beyond that notion. The new digital communitarianism seems to be an example of a much more profound process that takes place today. The rupture of traditional social and cultural forms of community relations, nationhood, or ethnicity does initiate other forms of relation-building, and within those new digital communities, we may find interesting evidence for the human competence to learn in interaction with its direct but constantly changing surroundings.

## **Conclusions**

The materialistic turn (also called new materialism by some authors) “signals a growing cross-disciplinary effort to challenge long-standing assumptions about humans and non- or other- than-human material world” (Gamble, Hanan, Nail 2019, pp. 111). The perspective differs largely from the Marxist approach towards the material tissue of society due to the prevailing Epicurean idea that matter is creative and, in a sense, “alive.” The performative relation binding the human with material objects allows thus to investigate the dynamics of the interaction in the context of social praxis and the socio-cultural effects which reveal themselves in a meaningful human-object relation. Christopher Gamble, Joshua Hanan, and Thomas Nail share the view that “new materialism embraces a non-anthropocentric realism grounded in a shift from epistemology to ontology and the recognition of matter’s intrinsic activity” (Gamble, Hanan, Nail 2019, pp. 118). It is worth noting that the authors distinguish three basic types of new materialism, and each of them has its own leading subject of analysis or idea, i.e., 1) vital new materialism (forces of ontological vitalism), 2) negative new materialism (matter is non-relationally external to thought), and 3) performative new materialism (refusal of any totality of what is possible).

Looking at the Dark Academia phenomenon with a similar sensibility towards object-based technology, and the IT sector certainly is such a thing nowadays with the smartphone, contributes to the shift in the academic perspective. The global reach of mobile applications and social media covering the spectrum of possible new identities of younger generations does influence the birth and fuels the existence of many other forms of digital communitarianism. However, the people following the Dark Academia trend represent a specific attitude found only in similar nostalgic, but yet still very desperate cries for bringing back the good old times when the value of education was bound with social prestige and high status due to the effort demanded in the prestigious schools and universities so cherished by the Dark Academia fans.

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