Conformity to Social Media Aesthetics: Capitalism, Induvidualty and Contemporary Literary Perspectives

K. Deepika
I MA English Literature
Department of English and Foreign Languages
Bharathiar University, Coimbatore

Abstract

The paper deals with how the ideas of what "aesthetics" originally were and how it differs massively with present day notions of "aesthetic" which is predominantly connected with social media. Initially aesthetics was a rebellious charge against rigid and conventional norms of the society but what is available today is a set of pre-regulated rules on how to attain a particular aesthetic. Which was initially a means of self-expression, has become a subculture that has been commodified. Capitalism has been a driving force to these commodified online personas. However, this aesthetics promote a lack of individuality and art in the form of these social media posts is heavily mediated. What started in Tumblr as a means to express unique selves has turned to into cottagecore, Y2k aesthetics, etc which is limiting. Theories and concepts that were used to compare and contrast are Jean Baudrillard's Simulacra and Simulation, Rosseau's Amore-Propre, Kant's Judgement of Taste from Critique of Judgement and Cultural Materialism by Raymond Williams. These philosophical ideas give a further understanding of the major impacts of something so superficial like social media posts on Instagram, TikTok, etc. The paper also deals with how the contemporary subcultures are manifested in the form aesthetics on social media. Literary works that reflect this- No one is Talking About This by Patricia Lockwood, Poet Dane's Social Media Madness; Mirror, Mirror on the Screen by Camille Fairbanks have also been discussed with excerpts. It is concluded on how users online should embrace authenticity than fitting into something that was not made for them.

Keywords: Social Media, Aesthetics, Capitalism, Conformity, Individuality

Introduction

The term "aesthetics" has generally been about philosophical study of beauty and nature. It is a topic of subjective nature and depends on how art is interpreted and evaluated. However, the ideology of the term has evolved in the past decade. It did not mean just the beautiful but rather a wide range of attributes- the beautiful, the ugly, the sublime, the elegant, the mediocre, etc. At the present day and age, to define the term has become more ambiguous.

With the rise in new forms of art, such as photographs, music videos, social media posts, etc., there is a shift from the traditional views about "aesthetic". In history, the aesthetic movement has questioned

rigid prototypes, was rebellious in its way and the artist would establish his signature style through aesthetics that was unique and challenged social norms. In his Critique of Judgement, Kant discusses that one's aesthetic experiences should arise from the interaction between imagination and understanding. The imagination should be unrestricted, allowing it to generate ideas and concepts beyond the constraints of logic or practical concerns. Meanwhile, the understanding offers the framework that enables the imagination to create a unified experience of beauty. But this idea has taken a drastic turn in today's digital world. The word "aesthetic" has been exploited in the past decade which in turn has led to curated user accounts online. These start from simple elements such as captions under a post to even curated online personas like the VSCO girl aesthetics, dark academia core, cottage core, etc. This in turn leads to lack of individualism which strikingly contradicts with the original idea of the "aesthetic". These "aesthetics" are driven by capitalist structures and are promoted online where the user keeps shifting from one trend to the other in order to create the perfect online personality. The irony lies in that exact idea because personas are created and offline self and the online self are two different individuals. There is contemporary literature produced encompassing this background of the world in its realities and characters that become victims to the pressure of having an extremely perfect online profile.

Evolution of Social Media Aesthetics

"What are aesthetics? The definition of aesthetics is a set of principles underlying and guiding the work of a particular artist or artistic movement, a particular taste for or approach to what is pleasing to the senses and especially sight."

With the rise in popularity of Tumblr, in the 2010s, there was also a rise in the "aesthetic culture". But initially it was about connections, lifestyle and cultural beliefs. However, in Tumblr people did not follow any strict aesthetic standards but stood individualistically. One of the first trends or aesthetic was the Vapourwave which was a means of self-expression and was characterised by the use of bold colours. Then come, TikTok and Instagram where aesthetics were visual treats which were possible with an access to material goods and services. Aesthetics, these days mean that something has to look "aesthetic" than being "aesthetic" which ultimately lacks depth and the substance. For example, the dark academia core, means that the user is focused on looking like an academician rather than actually being academic. The pandemic saw a trend of Cottage Core, Y2k Aesthetics, and Dark Academia. The Cottage Core aesthetic represents a love for subtle and warm colours, a pastoral and rustic life, sustainable lifestyle with vintage, etc. The full form of Y2k is Year 2000 and the Y2k aesthetics are the elements that represent the elements of the year 2000, the age of early internet- neon and iridescent colours, glitch effect, 3D graphics, etc. Then there was dark academia whose aesthetics include a stack of hardbound leather books, darkly lit rooms, classic literature, gothic mystery etc. These are a few trends that were initially sweeping the feeds. Recent days, there is an increase in the reach of Clean Girl aesthetic, Old Money Aesthetic, and so on. However, the problem arises, when these aesthetics become trends and go viral and popular, there is a pressure to be like others and once the person gives into the conformity, the individual has to find themselves fit as the trend changes from one to other.

Conformity, Capitalism and Loss of Induvidualty

As the trend and popularity shifts from one aesthetic to another, users go on to curate their profile for the next trending aesthetic and here is where it turns to capitalised consumption from a form of self-expression. When it comes to social media there is the platform vernacular which involves the use of captions and hashtags and the straightedge's subcultural vernacular where regulated practices through which users identify themselves individualistically or collectively (Williams).

This corresponds to what is called "aesthetic" in present day. An aesthetic, brings with it strict guidelines and rules to which users adhere and this adherence begins with buying goods and services to become a part of that aesthetic community. This does not only involve goods and services but also adopting a whole new lifestyle. According to the idea of Cultural Materialism by Raymond Williams, social media aesthetics can be seen as a product of economic, social and technological forces. In that case, social media aesthetics are not necessarily just a means of self-expression but also a way in which capitalist frameworks commodifies this expression. In even more simpler terms, for one to adopt the clean girl aesthetic, one should purchase all the things that would make one look the part and when the old money aesthetic is thriving one will be inclined to buy stuff that resembles old money like old elitist brands like Ralph Lauren. So, the person to engineer the perfect grid is not driven without a capitalist motive. Like conformity of a person to a particular culture which is dominant, the social media user conforms to a particular aesthetic. Aesthetics are commodified by big brands and are monetized through influencer marketing, advertisements, brand collaborations, etc. This is on par with influencers with reach who make big money out of their social media. But micro-influencers would have created the perfect aesthetic for their Instagram without an assurance in income because of the interventions of algorithms. Their ideas and visuals are aired on the grid without a guaranteed result for all the exploitation of their labour. On user's side of things, their endless scrolling has been monetized through the influencer's reach. The user might be a passive social media user but nevertheless the attention is monetized.

According to Baudrillard, Simulacrum is the thing which has been imitated. An aesthetic rises into prominence when a user expresses oneself in an appealing way and it becomes popular and the masses try to adopt to it even though it is not their way of expression. This audience gives up on what is expression to themselves and tries to copy or imitate someone else's way of expression and even personalities and identities. So, the profiles that have supposedly taken "inspiration" from the original is the simulacrum and the way in which it is curated is the simulation. Hyperreality here is when the state of reality and the user's online presence is collapsed because aesthetics are not just about products but also a whole lifestyle. It is as if one is living in a simulated world until the next one becomes a trend. "And the narcoticized and mesmerised (some of Baudrillard's metaphors) media-saturated consciousness is in such a state of image and fascination with image and spectacle that the concept of meaning itself (which depends on stable boundaries, fixed structures and shared consensus) dissolves." (Kellner). There comes a question which is what is wrong in adhering to a particular aesthetic? Personal style is lost and people fail to understand what are the things that truly represent them. The lines between reality and online presence are greatly blurred. Rosseau's Amore-Propre is self-love of sorts where the validation is taken from external factors such as other people's judgements. Conformity to social media aesthetics is built upon that factor where users are driven by the numbers on their blog, like likes, follows and comments, etc.

The urge to fit in and identify oneself with a community could also be one of the factors to this conformity.

Related Literary Works

There are many contemporary literary works that deal with this conformity to unrealistic standards set by social media. The vulnerability of the users to imitate and accept accurate profiles created by others and ignore the harsh reality of the world or even just pretending to do so is brought about by Poet Dane in his Social Media Madness.

"We make friends
with people we never meet,
trust the picture, the profile, the perfect panoramic pretense where everything is better in your

new friend's field;

we want to be there,

the grass is greener, the kids are smiling, the birds are singing"

The poem, Mirror, Mirror on the Screen by Camille Fairbanks talks about self-esteem and social media. It revolves around how one feels validated on how many likes and reactions they receive.

"My phone is my new mirror; I scrutinize my looks.

Say mirror mirror on the screen Who's the fairest in your book?"

In her book No One is Talking About This, Patricia Lockwood talks about how a certain candida growth (satirical of the internet culture) which could attribute to the number of likes, follows, etc is obsessed so much over only to realise there was no such thing in real life. She even calls a frog that she saw online as "me". The book also talks about how one succumbs to the capitalist culture of everyday life to fit in a niche that is not designed for them. It deals with how social media majorly changes one's viewpoint of life and the blind acceptance of things.

"Why were we all writing like this now? Because a new kind of connection had to be made, and blink, synapse, little space-between was the only way to make it. Or because, and this was more frightening, it was the way the portal wrote."

Part of the novel also deals with how social media aesthetics have glorified "womanhood" and may even have reduced it to fancy 'Get ready with me" videos and expensive skincare routines.

"Modern womanhood was more about rubbing snail mucus on your face than she had thought it would be. But it had always been something, hadn't it?"

It also deals with lack of individuality because everyone become mutated versions of a particular aesthetic. What was once individualistic and creative is now just another version or recreation of the same thing.

"It had also once been the place where you sounded like yourself. Gradually it had become the place where we sounded like each other, through some erosion of wind or water on a self not nearly as firm as stone."

These are some excerpts from the novel where the author hands out a blatant portrayal of the realities of being in and being a part of the "portal".

Conclusion

With the increase in awareness in how social media trends and aesthetics can be limiting on the art of expression, one should endorse authenticity and their unique sense of style and expression without the fear of being called "cringe". Capitalist factors alone cannot be responsible for this rise in commercialised personas. With diligence and an emphasis on what is morally ethical one could curate their profile, thereby educating people of the world of their personal style, not just in fashion but also any kind of art like music, literature, etc without having the pressure to fit into the standards of someone else's. Old school ideas of "aesthetics" with a touch of modern ideas like feminism, decolonising the mind, etc will help the online community get in touch with its creativity back again. However, it comes down to choice, if the person wants to renunciate this regulated and curated form of art and find their true self or if they would want to remain rooted to the "aesthetic" niche that keeps changing. But one should realise no curation matches authenticity and personal style. Shifting aesthetics from time to time and being able to afford high end luxury products come from a place of privilege. But that is not available to every one. The access to Weblen goods are not something that is common. The knowledge about these goods were initially gatekept. But now with the advent of social media, along with the wide circulation of data, goes under the rug the ability to figure out what is good for one's self. An imitated personality could go on and about but not forever. With consumerism finding its peak at the present days, there are also non profitable

organistaions that try to create equality by providing free knowledge to the online crowd, thrift stores for fashion, etc. However, only when the ideology that "excess" is luxury is evaded out of our spaces these emerging ideas of sustainalblity can thrive. The digital world has created a huge platform to express and create but not to copy or imitate or even hero worship. With lots of creative and individual expression comes lots of ideas- philosophical and pragmatic that can help in the genuine betterment of the world.

References

1. Baudrillard, Jean. Simulacra and Simulation. University of Michigan Press, 1994.
2. Chris. "The Problematic Allure of Social Media Aesthetics." Home for Fiction - Blog, 6 Jan. 2024, blog.homeforfiction.com/2021/10/18/social-media-aesthetics- problematic.
3. de Man, Paul. Aesthetic Ideology. Edited by Andrzej Warminski, NED-New edition, vol. 65, University of Minnesota Press, 1996. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctttt6x. Accessed 14 Jan. 2025.
4. Fairbanks, Camille. "Mirror, Mirror on the Screen - No Crime in Rhymin' - Medium." Medium, 16 Dec. 2021, medium.com/no-crime-in-rhymin/mirror-mirror- on-the-screen-dcc7c1e17450.
5. Garcia, Lea. "Social Media's Obsession With Aesthetics." WINGSPAN, libertywingspan. com/70921/opinion/social-medias-obsession-with-aesthetics.
6. Hohenadel, Kristin. "What Is Cottagecore? A Simple Guide to Adding This Trending Style to Your Home." The Spruce, 16 July 2024, www.thespruce.com/cottagecore- design-style-5095952.
7. Laura Jane Atelier. "Why Is Everyone an Aesthetic Now? How Social Media Made Us Clones." YouTube, 6 Jan. 2025, www.youtube.com/watch?v=DA2fhvRg2IQ.
8. Lockwood, Patricia. No One Is Talking About This. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021.
9. Kellner, Douglas. "Jean Baudrillard." The Blackwell Companion to Major Contemporary Social Theorists, edited by George Ritzer, Blackwell Publishing, 2003, p. 322.
10. "The Rise of Online Aesthetic Culture and Social Trends." Elevator Inc., 1 May 2024, https:// elevatorinc.com/2024/05/01/the-rise-of-online-aesthetic-culture-and-social-trends/.
11. The Take. "What Dark Academia Says About Elite Education." YouTube, 8 June 2021, www. youtube.com/watch?v=_inuS6Kcwq4.
12. Tononi, Fabio. "Images of the Age of Social Media." The Handbook of Media and Culture, Taylor & Francis, https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781003372578-16/ images-age-social-media-fabio-tononi.
13. Social Media Madness by Poet Dane. allpoetry.com/poem/15152343-Social-Media- Madness-by-Poet-Dane.
14. Williams, J. "Organizing Subcultural Identities on Social Media: Instagram Infrastructures and User Actions." Pre-corrected Proof, 2023, doi:10.4324/9781003277750-8.