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An exploration of the dissemination of knowledge through the “Dark Academia” aesthetic

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ABSTRACT

This article attempts to explore and analyse how Dark Academia aesthetic functions as an effective mode of knowledge dissemination on social media. Dark Academia is a social media trend and subculture which became popular, especially during the recent COVID-19 global pandemic, and is based on the key concepts of intellectual curiosity for exploration, self-discovery and passion for new knowledge. The present study adopts a qualitative approach to explore how content relating to Dark Academia posted on Instagram, Pinterest, Tumblr and TikTok contribute to knowledge dissemination, by gradually transforming the followers of the aesthetic into epistemic agents who collectively and individually experiment their epistemological curiosity. The study incorporates theories relating primarily to Literary Pedagogy and Digital Pedagogy to discuss how Dark Academia contributes to the dissemination of knowledge on informal/virtual platforms. Furthermore, the research gestures at concerns pertaining to the digitalisation of education, informal education on social media and how Dark Academia provides spaces for new research areas including those related to the Digital Divide that virtual education has brought into teaching-learning experiences.

KEYWORDS:

Dark Academia, knowledge dissemination, COVID-19, Epistemological curiosity

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Introduction

Background to the research

Either one already knows what one is trying to learn, in which case there is no reason to learn anything; or one does not, in which case one will not know when he or she has been successful in the attempt. (Plato as cited in Vosniadou and Brewer, 1987, p. 51)

Knowledge has been explored as an abstract concept throughout human history and Plato posits the aforementioned thought in the form of a dilemma in the *Meno* by reflecting on how human beings acquire new knowledge. He thus contributes to a philosophical discussion on ‘knowing’ and ‘not knowing’ as his ideas were later developed into a theory of knowledge by Greek philosophers as a philosophical speculation of how human beings acquire knowledge. The theory of knowledge was revived by mediaeval theorists in relation to mediaeval theology and philosophy. In modern theory, it appeared in the knowledge paradigms of existentialism (Rene Descartes), empiricism (Hobbes and Locke) and modern theology (Anglican Bishop George Berkeley and Hume). The modern theories of knowledge display close affinities with the characteristics of the new scientific age as they have attempted to restructure the definitions of knowledge. The theory of knowledge became a term which was used interchangeably with epistemology in the twentieth century (Martinich and Stroll, nd). Thus, knowledge as a theory has been constantly reshaped by many philosophers who belonged to different schools of thought throughout history. The present study attempts to explore how the abstract concept of knowledge has been reshaped, digitised and acquired a “pensive” (Lewis, 2012, p.2) zone between art and education, formal and informal education (Balkin and Sonnevend, 2016, p.21) and physical and virtual education, accelerated by the multiple forces of globalisation. The present study explores how knowledge dissemination transcends the physical limitations of a classroom in relation to the Dark Academia aesthetic (DA).

Knowledge and education became two terms used synonymously in theories and concepts presented by the twenty-first century educationists/theorists. hooks (1994) develops the concept of Engaged Pedagogy and Freire (2005) theorises on the significance of dialogical education, used synonymously with problem posing education. Engaged Pedagogy seeks to establish a mutual relationship between the two parties engaged in formal education: teachers and students, where students learn from the teachers and vice versa. Moreover, Engaged Pedagogy recognises “each classroom as different and reiterates that strategies must constantly be changed, invented and re-conceptualized to address each new teaching experience” (hooks, 1994, p. 10). Dialogical education is an approach to education based on critical thinking, where the “student-teachers and teacher-students” (Freire, 2005, p. 120) seek to explore reality as a transformative process for the purpose of liberation. The opposite of dialogical education is the banking system of education which Freire refers to as an “act of depositing in which the students are the depositaries and the teacher is the depositor” (ibid, p. 72). In the banking system of education, students are considered as “empty vessels” (ibid, p. 79) in need of filling.

Therefore, while expanding the focus of the ancient philosophers on the nature of knowledge, hooks (1994) and Freire (2005) specifically refer to methods of knowledge (de)construction and knowledge dissemination. hooks writes in *Teaching to Transgress* that education is the “practice of freedom” (1994, p. 4) indicating that education is an essential phenomenon of human existence and its main objective is to develop critical and progressive thinking. According to both hooks and Freire, education, both within and outside the classroom, forms relationships between teacher-students and student-teachers (Freire, 2005, p. 120), engaged in the act of sharing knowledge. hooks reiterates that dialogical/problem-posing education should inspire students to construct knowledge collaboratively inside the classroom for learning to become an engaged learning experience.

The present study utilises the two terms ‘pedagogical moments’ and ‘Digital Pedagogical Moments’ from hook’s theory on Engaged Pedagogy. Pedagogical moments refer to the moments in which engaged learners come into conversation in classrooms or other physical learning spaces. Pedagogical moments are the moments in which both students and teachers engage with each other actively in the classroom in order to acquire new knowledge or reshape their worldviews. Pedagogical moments are not merely about memorising information but rebuilding, enhancing and developing information into knowledge. For instance, a student or a teacher who revisits and evaluates the knowledge which they constructed through engaged participation in the classroom either at home, at library or on the road, reconstructs the consumed information into knowledge even outside the classroom.

Digital Pedagogical Moments refer to the instances where students come into conversation in cyberspace to construct, challenge or deconstruct knowledge. These pedagogical moments transcend the spatial and temporal limitations of a classroom, since students are encouraged to explore the world beyond academe in Engaged Pedagogy. The concept and term Digital Pedagogical Moments is central to the key research problem addressed in this study. It means that Engaged Pedagogy can transcend the temporal limitations of the classroom and acquire a new digital space on new media and particularly on social media due to its hyper connectivity.

Significance of the research

The present study becomes increasingly significant given its contemporary relevance with the COVID-19 pandemic and individuals entering virtual platforms. DA is an indication of the fact that this transformation from physical to the virtual did not merely include individual transference, but finding ways of communicating and developing community, not only informally, but especially for educational purposes and in a broader sense, pedagogy.

“Recognising our location, having to name the ground we are coming from” which is crucial to Rich’s theorising of the “politics of location” (1984, p. 219), is central to the approaches of Freire and hooks and the necessity to acknowledge the embodied and lived experiences of the community of students. Further, this also draws attention to my own subject position as a Sri Lankan woman from the higher education system and the relevance and implications the study may have with reference to the Global South.

Due to the commodification and monetizing of education, the “crisis of the humanities” (Brown, 2011, p.113) becomes prevalent in light of the neoliberalisation of education. DA as a space that seeks to promote inclusivity, challenges these neoliberal undercurrents of education by attempting to produce students with a critical consciousness. While being aware of the possible ways in which education in the digital realm may contribute to certain neoliberal understandings of education, this study draws from Simon’s view that “to propose a pedagogy is to propose a political vision” (1992, as cited in Lee and Stenberg, 2002, p. 344) to suggest that DA, not only functions as a platform for knowledge dissemination but a knowledge hub or an artistic outlet which challenges the “depoliticisation” of education (Giroux, 2016, p. 7). Hence the increasing significance of the present study also lies in the political underpinnings of this epistemological endeavour to facilitate engaged learning through virtual media.¹

Furthermore, Global Social Media Statistics (2022) report that the 4.65 billion social media users worldwide use social media for various purposes apart from communication.² Informal education can be identified as one amongst the many usages of social media even though it is still an inadequately theorised idea that social media is an effective mode of disseminating knowledge. Therefore, the present study discusses how DA builds a novel virtual platform for knowledge seekers to create Digital Pedagogical Moments in their areas of interest on a daily basis.

Introduction to the Dark Academia aesthetic

Dark Academia might just be an aesthetic, but it sure did change me. (Dead Poets’ Manor, 2021)

As aforementioned, many social media users actively engage with DA on the four platforms: Instagram³, Pinterest⁴, Tumblr⁵ and TikTok⁶ considering it a coping mechanism especially during/after the pandemic⁷. DA first appeared in 2014 on Tumblr as a book club and currently caters to a specific audience called ‘dark academics’ worldwide. Dark academics are the followers of the hashtag #darkacademia who identify themselves as dark academics. DA gained popularity recently as a lockdown phenomenon during the COVID-19 pandemic among the zoomers also known as Generation Z. The history of DA can be traced back to the publication of Donna Tartt’s novel *The Secret History* (1992), Peter Weir’s *Dead Poets Society* (1989) and John Krokidas’ *Kill Your Darlings* (2013), as DA has been inspired from these texts. Dark academics include classical arts students, avid readers and passionate individuals driven by a great interest for self-discovery. While serving its main objective of restoring the will to learn, DA embraces the key concepts of liberal arts education, including a passion for knowledge. Therefore, a common characteristic shared by dark academics is, as Burton (2021) suggests in her research on *Dark Academia, Gender, and Aesthetic Practices of the Intellectual* “obsessive focus on learning... voracious readings of classics” and self-discovery through individual and collaborative learning.

In addition, DA displays a sense of nostalgia and escapism since it celebrates nineteenth century classical arts education (Latin, Philosophy and Literature) while

popularising banned literature, secret societies and decadent lifestyles. Many critics argue that DA is merely a pretentious and Eurocentric social media aesthetic due to the fact that it even requires a dress code if one wants to be identified as a dark academic (Burton, 2021). Currently, there are business pages on Pinterest and Instagram under #darkacademia which promote/sell DA clothes and accessories (ibid). However, many dark academics including starlightsonata (2021) proclaim that despite the commercialisation of the aesthetic, DA does not demand materialistic requirements since DA is a ‘mindset’.

Research Objectives

The limited number of academic research done on the topic (Burton, 2021), (Litovskaia, 2021)⁸ highlights the fact that the ground realities of DA are yet to be explored. The present study therefore seeks to analyse DA from a pedagogical framework in order to discover how this phenomenon in social media can be perceived as a fluid and comparatively democratic space, that facilitates the dissemination of knowledge in a globalised world.

Research Questions

How does DA construct Digital Pedagogical Moments?

How do Digital Pedagogical Moments created by dark academics digitalise the concept of knowledge dissemination by transcending the physical boundaries of a classroom?

Methodology

The research adopts a qualitative approach to explore how virtual education becomes critical to the dissemination of knowledge through Online Learning Communities. While the literature review has been integrated into the study at relevant points of the analysis, the study conducts a visual and textual analysis on the primary data, which includes visual and textual content posted under #darkacademia. All the posts analysed in this study are taken from the posts that have been archived over a period of six months (October 2021-March 2022) on four platforms; Instagram, Tumblr, Pinterest and TikTok. Comments made on these posts have also been analysed, since they function as textual expressions of dark academics on a vast number of academic topics related to the study. However, the research scope would set certain limitations to the research since it incorporates only the content available for public viewing under #darkacademia. The study utilises an intersection of theories on Literary Pedagogy and Digital Pedagogy in order to assess the multiple ways in which digitalisation of knowledge/education impacts formal and informal education.

It adopts theories on Literary Pedagogy by hooks (1994) including: Engaged Pedagogy and professional authority; Freirian theories (1996, 2005) including: epistemological curiosity, anaesthetic curiosity; and contemporary readings of Lewis (2012) on Freirian theories, in order to explore how knowledge and epistemological curiosity transcend the formal classroom. The research also incorporates theories on the Digital Divide (Barber

et al, 2015) and Digital Humanist (Fyfe, 2011) in a theorisation of the concept of Digital Pedagogical Moments aforementioned. Drawing from these theoretical frameworks, the discussion on research findings contributes to a discussion on the dissemination of knowledge beyond the classroom via DA.

Discussion

In response to the research objectives of this study, this section explores how education and epistemological curiosity transcend the physical boundaries of a classroom and contribute to the construction of Digital Pedagogical Moments in DA. The concept of a classroom has been used in this paper with the understanding of a physical learning space in formal educational institutions (i.e. school, university) consisting of learning material, teachers and students.

Dark Academia to revive epistemological curiosity

Why do we feel compelled as teachers and students to express our curiosity as *just curiosity*? (Lewis, 2012, p. 27)

Lewis thus refers to Freire's concept of "epistemological curiosity" (1996, p. 15) according to which the banking system of education diminishes the epistemological nature of curiosity (Freire, 2005). Curiosity has been an essential element/phenomenon of human existence throughout history since human beings, by nature, are curious to unveil the realities of the world around them. In progressive and transformative education, curiosity is being elevated from its basic status of spontaneous curiosity to epistemological curiosity. Freire states in an interview, "what I call epistemological curiosity is the readiness and eagerness of the conscious body that is open to the task of engaging an object of knowledge" (Freire and Macedo, 1995, p. 382). Thus, the ontological imperfection of human beings can be identified as the driving force behind epistemological curiosity. According to Freire, epistemological curiosity is different from spontaneous curiosity; since epistemologically curious students do not limit their curiosity to the sudden impulse of wanting to know facts (spontaneous curiosity) but understand reality as an unstable entity which should be critically interrogated and researched continuously. Epistemologically curious students and teachers therefore do not find comfort in the "pedagogical comfort zones" (ibid). Instead, they challenge these comfortable boundaries, question the realities and make intellectual use of their epistemological curiosity to understand the object of knowledge.

The empirical data presented henceforth are derived from the Dark Academia pages on the four social media platforms aforementioned. Given below are two posts published on a popular Dark Academia page on Instagram titled *Willy.Shakess* (figures 2.1.1 and 2.1.2) with 17.9k followers and on another personal Dark Academia account with 2749 followers titled *Fritheswitha* (figure 2.1.3).

Figure 2.1.1 (Willy.Shakess (a), 2022)

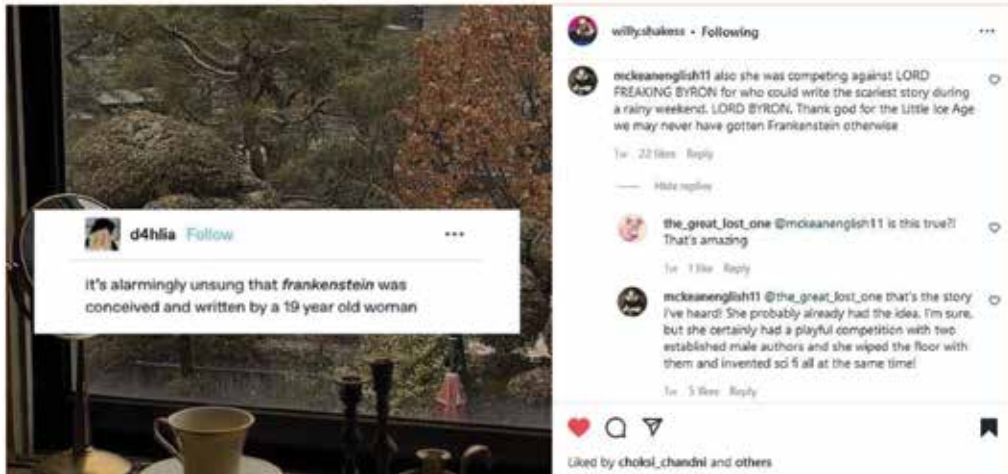


Figure 2.1.2 (Willy.Shakess (b), 2022)



Figure 2.1.3 (fritheswitha (a), 2022)

The contents of both the posts suggest that the two dark academics are researchers of women's writing as they question the viewers, or rather, themselves about what it would have meant to be a woman writer who had to publish her work anonymously due to the restrictive gendered norms of nineteenth century England (figures 2.1.1 and 2.1.2), and what it means to be a woman researcher of women's writing in the twenty first century (figure 2.1.3). These subjective and critical standpoints are indicative of the Freirian theorisation in *Pedagogy of Freedom* (1996) that there are two moments to an epistemological process; first in learning/teaching of existing knowledge and the second as the "production of what is not yet known" (Freire, 1996, p. 15). The two dark academics who seem to have a considerable amount of knowledge on Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), women's writing, and social perceptions on women's writing, thus conduct informal research on a social media platform, which is not necessarily built for knowledge dissemination but for communication and sharing of information. It stems from their epistemological curiosity of wanting to know the 'whys' and 'hows' of what they have learnt in school or university.

mckeanenglish11 (2022) in figure 2.1.1 has added what s/he already knows about the relationship between the two authors: Mary Shelley and Lord Byron to the discussion, and has even made references to the Little Ice Age.⁹ Nevertheless, what has been focused on by the other dark academics is the reference that s/he has made to Lord Byron. Thus, the spontaneous curiosity of the dark academics has been directed towards the relationships amongst the Romantic novelists/poets: Lord Byron, Mary Shelley, Percy Bysshe Shelley and John William Polidory, whereas the epistemological curiosity of the community of dark academics compels them to discover how these personal relationships had impacted the writers' work.

Therefore, epistemological curiosity, when it transforms into collective curiosity, is often explored through group conversations like the textual conversation aforementioned, both in classrooms and digital platforms. Moreover, the fragments of knowledge that each dark academic adds to the conversation play a major role in deciding the direction of the conversation. It is similar to dialogues which occur in engaged classroom settings; as each student is given the opportunity to present their critical stance to classroom conversations. Nevertheless, the main focus here is the relationships amongst the novelists, thus the context in which they wrote and published their work (Little Ice Age, stay in Switzerland) has not been given much attention. For instance, the *_great_lost_one* (2022) who replies to *mckeanenglish11* (2022) in figure 2.1.1 is interested in knowing more about Lord Byron and Mary Shelley and the reference that was made to the Little Ice Age has not been given much attention. Likewise, each comment that the dark academics have added to the conversation has decided the direction of the conversation. Similarly, classroom conversations in problem posing education occur in the same manner and each idea that is presented to the class plays a major role in deciding the direction of the discussion (hooks, 1994).

Additionally, this article argues, with reference to the two examples cited above, that neither education nor epistemological curiosity of the teacher-students/student-teachers ends when the class ends. Epistemological curiosity is therefore a key requirement of “truly liberatory liberal arts education” (hooks, 1994, p. 44) and many other pedagogical theorists who follow hook’s school of thought conform to this idea. For instance, Freire affirms that dialogical education is the only method to elevate spontaneous curiosity into epistemological curiosity. Even though the two textual conversations are dialogical and can be seen as an equivalent to the classroom discussions based on academic topics, one of the main and obvious differences between classroom conversations and intellectual conversations in DA is that classroom conversations are often verbal and thus not recorded for future usage, but the textual conversations in DA are textual and online, thus available for public viewing even years/months after the real-time conversation. For instance, the unattended fragmentary details of figure 2.1.1 would possibly revive the epistemological curiosity of other dark academics who read the comments later and enrich the conversation. However, this does not imply that the recorded textual conversations are more enriching than classroom conversations, merely due to the fact that they are archivable. There are both positive and negative impacts (misquoting and miseducation) of archiving academic conversations on social media platforms which enable informal education.

Moreover, there are two ways in which teachers utilise a dialogical approach to education in both physical and virtual classrooms; firstly, by using it as a mere technique/method to help the students to come into voice and secondly by facilitating dialogue to explore their epistemological curiosity (Freire, 1996). According to Freire, dialogue is not a mere “tactic” (2005, as cited in Leistyna, 2004, p.3) to be utilised by teachers for the sake of engagement. Freire affirms that reviving the “epistemological uneasiness” (2005, p.19) of students is the most productive approach to engaged learning. Dialogue should not be masqueraded as a mere technique in the engaged process of learning, since it is a “deceitful form of democracy” (ibid.). In contrast, the two conversations aforementioned,

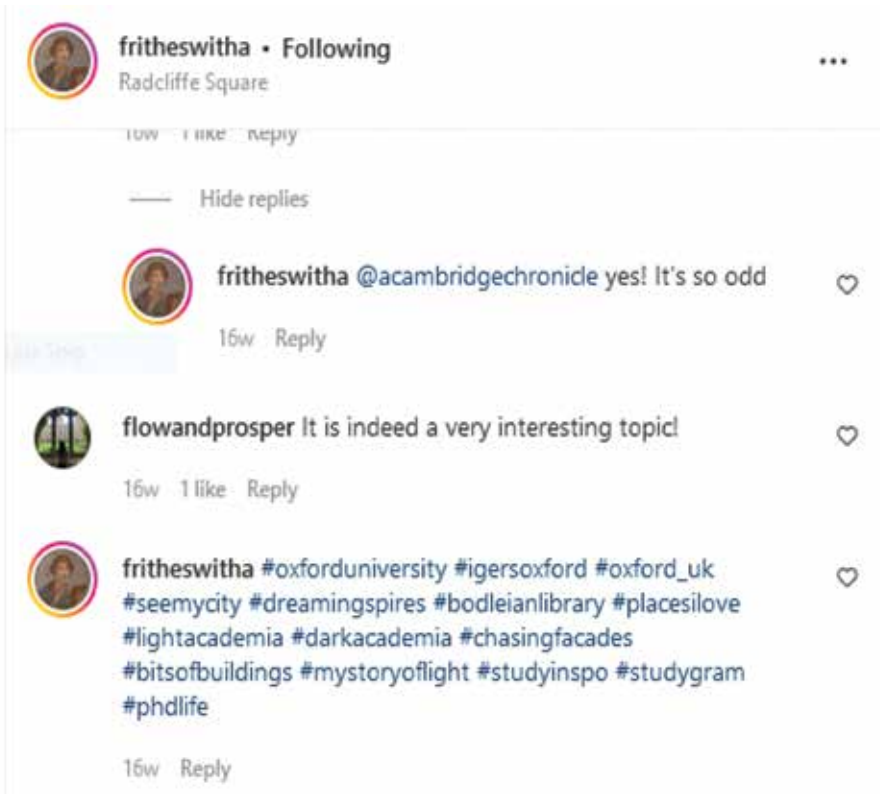
cause the spectators to re-evaluate their perceptions, since both the dialogues stem from epistemological curiosity; an honest, intellectual quest to unveil what is hidden or trivialised in the utilitarian approaches to education. The epistemologically curious fritheswitha (2022) questions why “fiction written by non-men are often seen as autobiographical” in figure 2.1.3 and D4hlia (2022) in figure 2.1.1 questions the “alarmingly unsung” fact that *Frankenstein*; the first science fiction in English Literature, was written by a nineteen-year old woman.

The other way in which teachers and students attempt to facilitate/engage in dialogue or give the impression that they facilitate/engage in dialogue is as aforementioned, by diminishing dialogue to a mere pedagogical technique. Wholesome knowledge cannot be disseminated in a classroom or in DA where the students/dark academics engage in dialogue as a method of “group therapy” (Freire and Macedo, 1995, p. 380) since it eventually turns into a “nauseating” experience (hooks, 1994 cited in Freire and Macedo, 1995, p. 381). Thus, grappling with the limitations of descriptive dialogue, subjective comments which do not enrich the conversation is a challenge in both formal education and DA. hooks writes, “the first paradigm that shaped my pedagogy was the idea that the classroom should be an exciting place, never boring” (hooks, 1994, p. 7). Excitement in a learning environment can unveil previously unseen possibilities for enriching discussions through collective participation, but at the same time it could lead to “overindulgence” (Haymes, 2002, p. 157) in lived experiences/personal narratives. The following comments taken from the comments sections of the two Instagram posts aforementioned reflect these conceptions.

Figure 2.1.4 (Willy.Shakess (c), 2022)



Figure 2.1.5 (fritheswitha (b), 2022)



As evidenced through the above comments made on the same two posts, there is a significant difference between casual dialogues (which students have with other students/ dark academics have with other dark academics) and dialogue inspired by epistemological curiosity. These comments in figures 2.1.4 and 2.1.5 are neither based on epistemological curiosity nor spontaneous curiosity as they can only be seen as personal narratives that the dark academics have made on a post which interests them.

Similarly, the following TikTok videos are displayed on a DA page with 344.7K followers (Cosyfaerie, 2021) and 73.1K followers (Cosyacademia, 2021) and they reflect on the overindulgence of subjective perspectives. Due to the practicalities of displaying the video, captions of the two dark academics have been inserted into the following table.

Table 2.1 Captions of (Cosyfaerie, 2021) and (Cosyacademia, 2021)

Dark academic	Number of likes	Number of comments	Number of shares	Captions
(Cosyfaerie, 2021)	188.1K	3366	10.5K	“I was obsessed with DA... but I could barely see any Representation. So I decided to do it myself and add a little bit of spice”
(Cosyacademia, 2021)	417K	3366	10.5K	“When you want to be this... (Living in Scotland as a professor) But you also want to be this... (Living and making art in Paris) But you also want to be this... (Living in a cosy woodland cottage) But you also want to be this...(Living as a writer in the city)”

An extensive analysis conducted on the comments on the two posts suggested that even though there is a relatively larger engagement with DA content on TikTok than on Instagram, the platform structure, ambience and target audience on TikTok do not provide a stimulating environment for the experimentation of epistemological curiosity. For instance, experimenting with the complex concept of representation means wearing aesthetic clothes to Cosyfaerie (2021) and becoming a dark academic is only a form of escapism to Cosyacademia (2021). Similarly, the fleeting and inherently personal and subjective commentaries/opinions on the two posts on Instagram (figures 2.1.4 and 2.1.5) uncover the fact that epistemological curiosity cannot always be present neither in the classroom nor DA, and that it is impractical to expect each student/dark academic to contribute to every discussion with the same intellectual eagerness or epistemological quest. It is due to how they negotiate and navigate their subject positions within/outside classrooms and the politics of their locations as Rich (1984) suggests and their perceptions on the phenomenon of DA on different platforms.

The following example (figure 2.1.6) is taken from a DA page on Pinterest with 2.3K followers and selected comments made on the post are displayed below (figure 2.1.7). It depicts how epistemological curiosity leads the dark academics to pursue what they perceive as important in their academic careers. alezanderlancelot (2021) in figure 2.1.7 agrees with the contents reposted by Aphra (2021) and their epistemological quest to major in different disciplines demonstrates how DA functions as a knowledge hub and a platform for like-minded communities.

Figure 2.1.7 (Aphra (b), 2021)



Even though students/dark academics often present their subjective perspectives and personal narratives to the learning community, it is those who are inspired by an epistemological quest that thrive in dialogical education. For instance, an attentive analysis of the comment sections of figures 2.1.1, 2.1.2 and 2.1.3 reveals that the ideas that revive the epistemological curiosity of the viewers are the ones that are mostly engaged with. Similarly, in a classroom discussion where one student fails to present his/her perspective perfectly, another student would succeed, and this is a major aspect of Engaged Pedagogy and humanising education (hooks, 1994).

Therefore, the present study, with reference to the DA content presented, asserts that it is the task of engaged/dialogical learning to satisfy the epistemological quest of learners by reviving it from an anaesthetic state.

It is the goal of dialogue to help us shift from anaesthetized curiosity to epistemological curiosity...we can see the fruitful and productive possibilities of the internal connections between curiosity, aesthetics, and education. These experimental communities exist in an ambiguous, pensive zone between art and education, wherein aesthetic appreciation becomes a new mode of learning and learning becomes a new mode of aesthetic curiosity. (Lewis, 2012, p. 6)

The question cited at the beginning of this section, as to why students often express their epistemological curiosity as “just curiosity” (ibid, p. 27) can be answered through what Lewis refers to as “internal connections between curiosity, aesthetics and education”. (ibid, p. 6). In restrictive classroom settings which utilise a banking system of education, the epistemological curiosity of the students is often put into an anaesthetic state when dialogue has not been facilitated. Thus, the epistemologically curious students are compelled to conceal their intellectual quest of wanting to explore. It is at this point, as Ranciere argues, aesthetics come into play, since he insists “curiosity is not epistemic (concerned with how we know the real reality) but aesthetic (how we create new sensory experience)” (2008, as cited in Lewis, 2012, p. 42). Therefore, the pensive zones between art and education like DA, function as informal platforms for critical interrogation of preconceived knowledge.

Epistemological curiosity is present (but unaddressed) even in restrictive banking systems of education. Social media aesthetics like DA are, while attempting to circumvent its limitations, capable of reviving the epistemological curiosity by providing a democratic platform for the experimental communities to explore their curiosity. Therefore, the main conception that this research formulates is that both knowledge and epistemological curiosity transcend the physical boundaries of a classroom, and it can be further substantiated since in DA, “aesthetic appreciation becomes a new mode of learning” and vice versa (ibid). It is because dark academics, through each conversation, eventually contribute to the creation of Digital Pedagogical Moments as further discussed in the next section.

Dark Academia to build Digital Pedagogical Moments

If we limit ourselves to this academic prescription pad, serving our students a traditional dose of only text based assignments, we will remain far behind the Digital Divide. (Barber et al, 2015, p. 66)

To be a Digital Humanist, you don't even need a computer. (Fyfe, 2011, p. 1)

The above quotations include two important terms/concepts; the Digital Divide and Digital Humanist. The Digital Divide¹⁰ in the current educational system became prevalent, was challenged and reduced to a considerable extent during the COVID-19 pandemic. Both teachers and students, and even parents attempted to find solutions for the multiple challenges that the pandemic brought into education. Web developers created and updated the previous versions of web conferencing platforms including Zoom, Google Meets, Microsoft Teams and Calendly. Teachers found alternative pedagogical methods/approaches to education to ensure that virtual learning would not turn into an exhausting experience. Web archives including: Library Genesis, Bookfi, OpenStax and JStor provided free access to many text books, novels, journals in Portable Document Format and also added many downloadable materials for free into their archives. Thus, the Digital Divide of education became prevalent during the pandemic and the modernised approaches to virtual education attempted to bridge the gap, but with certain challenges related to economic and social inequality.

Therefore, DA, even though it does not function as a substitute for formal education, transcends the task of content generation and creates Digital Pedagogical Moments as evidenced through the discussions in the previous section. The aforementioned conversations exemplify the fact that the epistemological curiosity of the dark academics is the inspiration behind the majority of posts found under #darkacademia. Dark academics are therefore an experimental group of avid readers/learners with a quest for new knowledge, who attempt to find new ways of knowing and forming knowledge. Digital Pedagogical Moments are the results of this intellectual quest which Eisner refers to as “educational connoisseurship” (1997, as cited in Barber et al, 2015, p.60). Digital Pedagogical Moments assert the fact that Engaged Pedagogy, in this regard, does not necessarily require the physical presence of a group of learners. They provide the dark academics with a myriad of opportunities to explore their areas of interest collectively. Moreover, when learning becomes virtual

and independent, learners/dark academics begin to take the responsibility of their own learning which can be identified as a goal of Engaged Pedagogy. Thus, a Digital Humanist in the rapidly changing technological world is not a victim of technofetishism but an avid knowledge seeker who attempts to explore the world beyond academe, using technology as a tool. Though it might sound as an exotic reference to the youth, Digital Pedagogical Moments also indicate a generational shift in education since these social media movements including DA are largely followed and embraced by the digital generation also known as Generation Z.

As mentioned in the second quote cited above, Fyfe (2011) elucidates that working with a computer does not automatically turn a student or a teacher into a Digital Humanist. Digital Humanities and being a Digital Humanist extend the basic necessity of using electronic devices in the physical/virtual classroom as ‘tools’. Moreover, the present study argues that all the followers of #darkacademia do not automatically become dark academics and it is authentic/engaged participation in the aesthetic that turns a follower of the hashtag into a dark academic. Similarly, educators who facilitate technology in classrooms cannot be identified as Digital Humanists unless they blend the technology effectively with the pedagogical goals of the particular course unit/lesson to enhance student participation. Thus, Digital Pedagogy is about the effective usage of technology to combine it with the pedagogical goals of the lesson and Digital Pedagogical Moments are about an enriching amalgamation of Engaged Pedagogy and modern technology.

Therefore, in conclusion, not all the discussions on DA can be identified as Digital Pedagogical Moments unless they generate enriching pedagogical moments with engaged participation. Neither technology nor DA are mere tools to facilitate virtual/informal education, but platforms which generate hybrid scholars who negotiate with multiple disciplines and elevate their collective experiences of teaching-learning to a more enriching one beyond the four walls of the classroom.

Results/Conclusions

Based on the present study, the following observations and conclusions could be made.

Firstly, educational possibilities of social media are beginning to expand as DA functions as an informal mode of education (Burton, 2021). Apart from DA, there are many other variations/sub communities that have been formed by the community of dark academics with a wide variety of academic/aesthetic interests; including Light Academia¹¹, Pastel Academia¹², Chaotic Academia¹³, Fairy Academia¹⁴ and Theatre Academia¹⁵. All of these sub communities formed under DA prove that learning does not happen in a vacuum. Similar to the proto-digital period when both formal and informal education occurred simultaneously; digitalisation of education, aesthetics and human relationships have made social media into an informal site of knowledge dissemination (Balkin and Sonnevend, 2016, p. 21). Informal education has continued to exist even before the social media aesthetics took over socio-cultural life as professional educators have never been the only source of education and students have always learned from their peers, relatives, friends,

and co-workers (ibid). The present study observes that DA as a social media aesthetic only digitalises the practice of informal education which previously happened in Literature circles/study groups in the form of casual conversations on academic topics during/before/after the class or lecture.

Secondly, it was observed that DA has changed the conventional definition of an ‘aesthetic’ by digitising the idea of an aesthetic. An aesthetic in rational terms means a branch of philosophy dealing with the nature of beauty, art, and taste with the creation and appreciation of beauty (Merriam Webster, 2022). DA aesthetic, in contrast, extends this definition in two ways; by digitising the core values of an aesthetic which are: beauty, art and taste and by elevating the aesthetic value of the movement to an intellectual level.

Moreover, it can be observed that DA breeds hybrid scholars/teachers (Rorabough, 2013) as DA is a combination of multiple disciplines (Beat, 2020) and students/undergraduates/graduates who major in different disciplines; but mainly in classical arts education, Greek and gothic architecture, calligraphy and philosophy. Dark academics often negotiate hybridity; “the physical and digital, professional and social, individual and communal” (Rorabough, 2013). DA thus elevates the followers’ cross-cultural and interdisciplinary knowledge along with digital/social media literacy.

It was observed through the present study that DA promotes/inspires a growing appreciation of Humanities subjects which were marginalised due to the neoliberalization of education after the twentieth century. Dark academics, while romanticising studying, reading books, writing poetry/fanfiction draw the community towards these subjects by creating a knowledge hub/artistic outlet around the aesthetic. Thus, despite a number of limitations including, “cyber window shopping” (Balkin and Sonnevend, 2016, p.35), dark academics contribute to the making of an online learning community inspired by the theories of the pioneers of Engaged Pedagogy: hooks (1994) and Freire (2005).

In conclusion, “Pedagogy is a practice within which one acts with the intent of provoking experience that will simultaneously organize and disorganize a variety of understandings of our natural and social world...to propose a pedagogy is to propose a political vision” (Simons, 1992 cited in Lee and Stenberg, 2002, p. 344). DA thus opens space for more academic research to be conducted on issues pertaining to DA, which is inaccessible to certain communities of the Global South due to socio-economic inequalities, how education ought to be transformative to suit the technologically advanced world that the students live in and their growing identities in a changing digital world as they negotiate the many changes that the contemporary socio-cultural and political realities have brought into their lives.

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Endnotes

1. The data portal (Global Social Media Statistics, 2022) reveals that the social media users worldwide in April 2022 equates to 58.7 percent of the total global population.
2. According to the statistics in April 2022, 22.5% of social media users worldwide use social media for work- related networking research and 22.1% for finding like-minded communities and interest groups. These two purposes secure the 12th and 13th place respectively in the list of main reasons for using social media in April 2022 (Global Social Media Statistics, 2022).
3. A photo and video sharing social network founded in 2010, currently with approximately 1.6 million DA posts.
4. A social network that allows users to visually share, and discover new interests by posting (known as 'pinning') images or videos to their own or others' boards.
5. Tumblr is a blogging and social media tool that allows users to publish a "tumblrlog", or short blog posts.
6. TikTok hosts a variety of short-form user videos, from genres like pranks, stunts, tricks, jokes, dance, and entertainment with durations from 15 seconds to ten minutes.
7. "Today, I'm living through a pandemic, and going through a trial separation. As a result, I'm spending my days mostly alone, rambling around a huge old house. But I'm also starting something new...But it (DA) was more of an allegiance to an ethos than an intentionally curated aesthetic" (O'Bryan, 2021).
8. An academic research partially based on DA and currently available on the internet. However, it provides an English translation only for the abstract and the paper is written in Russian.
9. Little Ice Age (LIA), climate interval that occurred from the early 14th century through the mid-19th century.
10. The gap between demographics and regions that have access to modern information and communications technology (ICT), electronic devices to connect to the internet and those that do not or have restricted access to these facilities
11. An aesthetic that focuses on the softer and gentler side of dark academia. What naturally links DA and Light Academia is a passion for acquiring knowledge in the fields of classic literature, music, art, or history.
12. Visually stems from a mixture of East Asian (mainly Japanese) and European cultures. Having a cosy space to study in and having cute supplies like washi tape and personalised notebooks are also part of Pastel Academia.

13. An aesthetic that involves haphazard routines, messy habits, unusual or banned literature, and studying with a passion.
14. A feminine, otherworldly offshoot of DA, inspired by the aesthetics of Victorian and Edwardian childhood.
15. An academic aesthetic that revolves around studying dramaturgy.