

The Aesthetic and Narrative Strategies of Subcultures on TikTok: Analyzing the Presentation of Niche Identities

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Abstract

This paper explores the aesthetic and narrative strategies employed by subcultures on TikTok to present and cultivate niche identities in a digital age characterized by rapid content consumption and algorithm-driven engagement. TikTok's unique format—short, looping videos coupled with a powerful recommendation algorithm—has facilitated the rise and proliferation of diverse subcultural communities, such as cottagecore, dark academia, and witchtok. These groups leverage distinct visual styles, soundscapes, and narrative techniques to construct cohesive subcultural identities that resonate with both creators and viewers. Aesthetics serve as visual markers that communicate values and philosophies, while soundscapes and music act as auditory signifiers that further define the emotional and cultural landscapes of these communities. The platform's algorithmic curation significantly influences the visibility, evolution, and dynamics of subcultural communities by promoting content that aligns with user engagement patterns.

Keywords: TikTok, subcultures, cultural expression

1. The Rise of Subcultures on TikTok

TikTok, the social media platform defined by its short-form videos and dynamic content algorithm, has rapidly become a cultural epicenter for digital natives worldwide. Unlike earlier platforms where content dissemination was often limited by follower counts or connections, TikTok's recommendation engine—driven by user behavior such as likes, shares, and viewing duration—facilitates a democratized content discovery process, enabling even the most niche communities to gain visibility. This feature has proved instrumental in the rise of subcultures on the platform, where groups defined by shared aesthetics, lifestyles, and ideologies thrive in digital spaces. From the serene imagery of cottagecore, which romanticizes rural living and traditional craftsmanship, to the scholarly nostalgia of dark academia, TikTok serves as both a creative canvas and a social forum for individuals exploring alternative modes of identity. These subcultures use the platform not only to visually express their unique styles but also to build narratives that resonate with specific ideals and values, fostering a sense of belonging among members. TikTok's multimodal format—combining video, sound, text, and special effects—provides these groups with diverse tools to articulate their subcultural identities in increasingly sophisticated ways. By leveraging editing tools, soundtracks, and algorithm-driven trends, users craft content that transcends traditional media, creating a layered and immersive form of storytelling that invites both participation and reinterpretation. These strategies are particularly potent because they resonate within a media landscape characterized by short attention spans and a constant hunger for novelty, encouraging iterative engagement through 'duets,' remixes, and reaction videos that further cement subcultural bonds. As these communities form, their content often circulates in rapid, viral waves, allowing subcultures to transcend geographic and social boundaries, reaching and resonating with a diverse, global audience. TikTok serves not only as a platform for self-expression but as a fertile ground for subcultural proliferation, redefining the parameters of identity construction in the digital age. By examining the aesthetic and narrative strategies utilized by these subcultures—how they use specific visual

styles, soundscapes, and interactive elements to signal their identities—this paper seeks to understand the mechanisms through which TikTok is reshaping contemporary cultural dynamics and fostering the evolution of niche communities into influential cultural movements.

2. The Role of Aesthetic in Subcultural Identity on TikTok

Aesthetic choices on TikTok are fundamental in the construction and communication of subcultural identities, acting as a visual language through which communities signal their unique ethos, values, and shared experiences. Each subculture adopts a specific set of visual elements—such as color palettes, textures, fashion, and settings—that distinguish it from the broader digital landscape and from other subcultures. For example, the cottagecore movement, with its emphasis on an idealized rural lifestyle, employs a palette of soft, muted colors—like pastel greens, browns, and pinks—to evoke a sense of nostalgia and simplicity. This is often combined with pastoral imagery, such as fields, flowers, handmade crafts, and rustic interiors, which collectively reinforce the subculture’s yearning for a return to nature and a slower, more meaningful way of life. Similarly, the “dark academia” subculture utilizes a palette of darker, muted tones—deep browns, blacks, and dark greens—paired with visual references to classical education, vintage libraries, gothic architecture, and intellectual pursuits, thus conveying a romanticized vision of scholarship and existential introspection.

These aesthetics go beyond mere visual preference; they are carefully selected to embody the underlying philosophies and narratives that define each subculture. TikTok users strategically employ visual markers to quickly communicate their subcultural affiliations, crafting a recognizable brand that is both instantly appealing and deeply resonant with its audience. For example, the use of specific filters and editing techniques—such as grain effects, vignetting, or color grading—can transform ordinary footage into a scene that perfectly aligns with the visual ethos of a particular subculture. This aesthetic consistency is crucial in a platform characterized by rapid content consumption, where viewers often decide within seconds whether to engage with a video. A distinct and cohesive aesthetic can capture attention immediately, drawing viewers into a subculture’s world and inviting them to explore its content further.

The aesthetic strategies used by subcultures on TikTok also serve as a form of resistance against mainstream culture. By adhering to distinct visual codes that deviate from dominant trends, subcultural communities create a sense of “otherness” that differentiates them from mainstream society. For instance, “goblincore,” a subculture that celebrates the messy, chaotic, and often overlooked aspects of nature—like mud, fungi, and moss—uses an aesthetic that deliberately counters the polished, idealized imagery commonly found in mainstream fashion and lifestyle content. This embrace of the grotesque and the imperfect functions as a critique of societal standards of beauty, cleanliness, and order, presenting an alternative worldview that finds value in what is typically dismissed or ignored.

Aesthetics on TikTok are not static; they are dynamic, evolving with the participation and creativity of community members. The collaborative nature of the platform allows users to remix and reinterpret the visual elements of their subcultures, creating new variations that keep the aesthetic fresh and engaging. This evolution is facilitated by TikTok’s participatory features, such as the “Duet” function, which enables users to build upon existing videos, and the “Challenges,” which often revolve around specific visual themes or trends. As a result, the aesthetic of a subculture is constantly being reshaped and refined through collective engagement, allowing it to adapt to new influences and remain relevant in the ever-changing digital landscape.

The aesthetics of subcultures on TikTok are closely tied to notions of digital intimacy and authenticity. Users often strive to present their content in a way that feels personal and genuine, even when they are engaging in highly curated or stylized forms of self-presentation. For example, the “softboy” aesthetic, characterized by a gentle, sensitive, and emotionally open style, often features visuals that emphasize vulnerability and introspection—such as close-up shots, handwritten notes, or candid moments of reflection. These visual choices are designed to create a sense of closeness and relatability, inviting viewers into the creator’s personal space and fostering a deeper emotional connection. In this way, aesthetics on TikTok not only serve to distinguish subcultures but also to create bonds of trust and familiarity among their members.

The role of aesthetic in subcultural identity on TikTok extends far beyond simple visual expression. It encompasses a complex set of strategies that involve not only the choice of images and styles but also the use of the platform’s technological affordances to create a cohesive, engaging, and recognizable identity. Through these aesthetic choices, subcultures on TikTok define themselves, communicate their values, resist mainstream norms, and build communities that are both digitally mediated and deeply human. In this way, aesthetics become a powerful tool for storytelling, identity formation, and cultural resistance, shaping how subcultures are perceived, understood, and experienced in the digital age.

3. Narrative Construction and Storytelling Techniques on TikTok

On TikTok, narrative construction is as much about form as it is about content. The platform’s distinctive

format—short, looping videos ranging from a few seconds to three minutes—demands a storytelling approach that is concise, captivating, and immediately engaging. Unlike traditional storytelling mediums that often rely on linear, chronological sequences, TikTok enables fragmented and non-linear narratives that can be pieced together by the viewer in a myriad of ways. This flexibility allows subcultures to build collective stories where each video is a piece of a larger mosaic, contributing to a shared narrative that is co-created by members of the community. This decentralized narrative construction reflects the broader ethos of many subcultures, which often reject singular, authoritative voices in favor of multiplicity, diversity, and polyphony.

TikTok's format encourages a kind of narrative bricolage, where users combine diverse elements—visuals, sounds, text, and effects—to create layered and multifaceted stories. Subcultural narratives frequently draw upon shared symbols, tropes, and references that are meaningful to their members. For example, within the “cottagecore” community, narratives are constructed around an idealized vision of rural life, often invoking themes of simplicity, sustainability, and harmony with nature. These stories may feature pastoral scenes, vintage clothing, and handmade crafts, all of which evoke a sense of nostalgia for a pre-industrial past. At the same time, these videos often include captions or voiceovers that articulate personal aspirations, desires, or reflections, allowing individual creators to embed their own experiences within the larger subcultural narrative.

In contrast, the narrative strategies of the “goth” community on TikTok often revolve around themes of rebellion, existential angst, and a fascination with the darker aspects of life. Videos may feature visual motifs such as graveyards, abandoned buildings, or gothic architecture, combined with music that ranges from melancholic to aggressive. The stories told by this community frequently emphasize non-conformity and resistance to mainstream societal norms, constructing a narrative space where users can explore and express their unique identities without fear of judgment. This collective storytelling fosters a sense of belonging among community members, who find solidarity in shared narratives of otherness and resistance.

The fragmented and collaborative nature of TikTok storytelling also allows for a high degree of intertextuality, where users can reference, remix, or respond to each other's content. TikTok's “Duet” and “Stitch” features, for example, enable creators to directly engage with existing videos, either by adding their own voice or by creating parallel stories that expand on the original narrative. This functionality encourages a dynamic dialogue between creators, allowing subcultural narratives to evolve organically as more voices are added. A single video might spark dozens of responses, each offering a new perspective or a different take on the original theme, thereby creating a multi-threaded, communal storytelling experience that is both participatory and democratic.

The use of text, captions, and comments plays a critical role in shaping subcultural narratives on TikTok. While visuals and sound are central to the platform's appeal, the written word adds another layer of meaning and context. Captions often serve as a narrative tool to provide background information, express inner thoughts, or convey humor and irony. They can be used to frame the visual content, guiding the viewer's interpretation or providing a counterpoint to what is seen on screen. Comments, on the other hand, allow for immediate feedback and interaction, further blurring the line between creator and audience. In many subcultural communities, the comments section becomes a space for storytelling in its own right, where members exchange stories, anecdotes, and jokes, thus enriching the collective narrative experience.

Sound is another key component of narrative construction on TikTok, and subcultures strategically use specific audio clips, songs, and voiceovers to convey meaning, set the mood, and build a shared cultural lexicon. For instance, a popular audio clip might become a meme within a subculture, with different users creating variations on a theme by adding their own visual or textual elements. Over time, these soundscapes become deeply embedded within the subculture's narrative framework, serving as auditory cues that immediately signal belonging or familiarity. In the “witchtok” subculture, for example, ambient sounds, chanting, and mystical music are frequently used to create a sense of ritualistic or spiritual narrative, immersing viewers in a world that feels both otherworldly and intimate.

Importantly, TikTok's algorithm also plays a significant role in shaping subcultural narratives by influencing which videos gain visibility and traction. The algorithm tends to promote content that generates high engagement—likes, shares, comments, and views—meaning that narratives that resonate with a broader audience are more likely to be seen by others. This creates a feedback loop where popular narrative themes are reinforced and spread, encouraging creators to align their content with trending narratives while still bringing their unique perspectives and stories to the table.

TikTok's narrative construction techniques allow for a democratized form of storytelling that is deeply collaborative, continuously evolving, and highly adaptable to the platform's affordances. Subcultural groups leverage these techniques to craft stories that are not only visually engaging but also emotionally resonant and socially meaningful, reflecting the diverse identities and experiences of their members. Through fragmented yet interconnected narratives, these groups create a rich tapestry of subcultural expression that defies conventional storytelling norms, offering a glimpse into the complexity and creativity of contemporary digital culture.

4. Soundscapes and Music as Subcultural Signifiers

Soundscapes and music are central to the construction of subcultural identities on TikTok, acting as powerful auditory markers that help define the atmosphere, emotions, and ethos of these communities. On a platform where visual and auditory elements merge to create an immersive experience, sound becomes a critical tool for subcultures to express their unique characteristics and differentiate themselves from the mainstream. Each subculture strategically selects specific sounds, songs, and audio effects that resonate with its aesthetic sensibilities and cultural references, creating a soundscape that becomes instantly recognizable to insiders and intriguing to outsiders.

For many subcultures, the choice of music and sound reflects a deep-seated attachment to particular historical periods, cultural movements, or artistic styles. The “vaporwave” subculture, for instance, frequently employs music that samples 1980s and 1990s electronic tunes, characterized by slow beats, synth-heavy melodies, and distorted vocals. These sounds are carefully curated to evoke a sense of nostalgia and critique the hyper-commercialization of consumer culture, presenting a surreal, dreamlike atmosphere that aligns with the vaporwave aesthetic of retro-futurism and digital decay. The auditory experience of vaporwave is designed to transport the listener to an imagined past that is at once familiar and disorienting, using sound as a medium to explore themes of memory, loss, and technological change.

In contrast, the “cottagecore” subculture often gravitates toward acoustic, folk, or classical music to complement its idyllic visual representation of rural life. Soft piano pieces, acoustic guitar melodies, and the sounds of nature—such as birdsong, rustling leaves, or flowing water—are commonly used to reinforce the subculture’s emphasis on simplicity, tranquility, and a harmonious relationship with the natural world. These auditory choices help to create a cohesive sensory experience that immerses viewers in the cottagecore narrative, amplifying the aesthetic of pastoral nostalgia and a yearning for a slower, more authentic way of living.

The use of sound on TikTok is also deeply intertwined with the platform’s participatory culture. TikTok’s vast library of sounds, songs, and voiceovers provides a rich repository for users to draw from when creating content, allowing them to easily tap into existing cultural references or create new ones. Sounds become memes within themselves, circulating widely across the platform and acquiring new meanings as they are appropriated by different subcultures. For example, a particular sound clip—be it a line from a movie, a snippet from a song, or an audio meme—might be adopted by a subculture and layered with specific visual content that aligns with their unique identity. As more users engage with the sound in similar ways, it becomes a signifier of that subculture, forming a recognizable auditory brand that enhances group cohesion and visibility.

Soundscapes also play a crucial role in setting the emotional tone of subcultural content. The “dark academia” subculture, for example, frequently utilizes classical music, ambient soundscapes, and low-fi beats to create a mood that is both introspective and intellectually stimulating. Sounds of rain, crackling fire, or turning book pages are often added to reinforce a sense of melancholy, solitude, and scholarly pursuit. These choices not only establish an auditory environment that complements the visual aesthetic of dimly lit libraries, ancient university halls, and vintage typewriters but also evoke emotions that resonate with the community’s fascination with learning, existential contemplation, and the darker side of intellectualism.

TikTok’s algorithm plays a significant role in amplifying subcultural soundscapes. The platform’s recommendation engine prioritizes content that engages users, including videos that utilize popular or trending sounds. When a particular sound or song gains traction within a subculture, it is more likely to be recommended to users who have previously interacted with similar content. This creates a feedback loop where certain sounds become emblematic of specific subcultures, helping to consolidate their auditory identity and increase their visibility. For example, the use of a specific sound by a large number of “witchtok” creators—who are part of a community focused on witchcraft, mysticism, and the occult—can lead the TikTok algorithm to push that sound to other users interested in related themes, thereby expanding the subculture’s reach.

The incorporation of soundscapes on TikTok also reflects the global and transnational nature of subcultural identity on the platform. Sounds are not confined by geographical boundaries; a song, chant, or audio meme can traverse continents and be embraced by users in diverse cultural contexts. This fluidity allows subcultures to draw from a global palette of sounds, incorporating diverse influences that enrich their auditory landscape. For example, the “K-pop stan” subculture, dedicated to fans of Korean pop music, uses specific tracks, fan chants, and sound bites from interviews or performances to express their devotion and connect with a global community of fellow fans. These sounds become rallying points for the community, fostering a sense of unity and shared enthusiasm across different languages and cultures.

Soundscapes on TikTok are also a form of cultural resistance and critique. By curating specific soundtracks or audio elements, subcultures can challenge dominant cultural norms and narratives. For instance, the “queercore” subculture, which intersects with LGBTQ+ identities and punk music, might use aggressive punk rock tracks,

defiant spoken word pieces, or subversive sound bites to assert a rebellious stance against mainstream expectations of gender and sexuality. In doing so, the subculture not only articulates its opposition to the status quo but also creates an alternative auditory space where marginalized voices are amplified and celebrated.

Soundscapes and music on TikTok function as vital subcultural signifiers that communicate identity, foster community, and facilitate cultural expression. By carefully selecting and curating sounds, subcultures on TikTok are able to construct rich, multi-sensory narratives that go beyond the visual, creating immersive experiences that are both engaging and deeply meaningful. Sound thus becomes a critical tool for storytelling, identity formation, and cultural negotiation in the digital age, enabling subcultures to carve out spaces for themselves within the broader TikTok ecosystem.

5. Algorithmic Curation and Community Building

The role of TikTok's algorithm in shaping subcultural communities is both profound and multifaceted, acting as both gatekeeper and facilitator within the digital ecosystem. TikTok's "For You Page" (FYP) is a unique feature that curates a personalized feed for each user, driven by a complex algorithm that takes into account various forms of user engagement—such as likes, comments, shares, and the duration of time spent watching a video. This algorithmic curation has a significant impact on how subcultures form, sustain themselves, and evolve on the platform, as it effectively determines which content is amplified and reaches a broader audience. The FYP serves as the primary point of discovery for TikTok users, and its ability to push content that aligns with a user's preferences means that even niche subcultural content can achieve viral status, thereby attracting new members and strengthening community bonds.

One of the most powerful aspects of TikTok's algorithm is its capacity to create highly personalized content ecosystems, where users are continually exposed to videos that match their interests and viewing habits. This has crucial implications for subcultural community building, as it enables users to discover content that aligns with their specific tastes, often leading them to communities they may not have found otherwise. For example, a user who frequently engages with videos tagged #goblincore or #darkacademia is more likely to encounter similar content, fostering deeper engagement and encouraging participation within those subcultures. This targeted content delivery allows subcultures to flourish by continuously connecting like-minded individuals, creating a feedback loop that reinforces community values, aesthetics, and narratives.

TikTok's algorithm amplifies content based on engagement rather than follower count, which democratizes the potential for visibility and virality. This stands in stark contrast to traditional social media platforms like Instagram or Twitter, where the reach of a post is often limited by the creator's follower base. On TikTok, a single video by an unknown creator can reach millions of viewers if it garners sufficient engagement. This dynamic has significant implications for subcultures, as it allows new voices to emerge and contribute to the community narrative. For instance, a creator within the "cottagecore" subculture can produce a video that resonates with the broader audience's longing for a simpler, nature-oriented lifestyle. If the video gains traction, it can quickly go viral, bringing new attention to the subculture and inviting further participation from those who find affinity with its themes. TikTok's hashtag system plays a crucial role in algorithmic curation and community building. Subcultures strategically use specific hashtags—such as #witchtok, #cottagecore, #aesthetic, or #emo—to categorize their content, making it easier for the algorithm to identify and recommend related videos to users who have shown interest in similar topics. Hashtags create digital pathways that guide users through TikTok's vast content landscape, enabling them to explore subcultures more deeply and engage with creators who share their interests. For instance, the use of niche-specific hashtags like #darkacademiaaesthetic or #cryptidcore can create micro-communities within the broader subcultural framework, allowing members to find content that aligns even more closely with their preferences. The algorithm's role is not solely about content dissemination; it also facilitates community interaction and dialogue. TikTok's design encourages rapid feedback through comments, likes, and shares, allowing creators to directly interact with their audience and fostering a sense of community and immediacy. For subcultural communities, this means that creators and viewers can engage in ongoing conversations, share experiences, and exchange knowledge in real time. For example, within the "witchtok" community, practitioners often use the comments section to discuss spellwork, share insights on crystals or tarot readings, or offer advice and support to newcomers. This level of interaction enhances community cohesion and creates an inclusive environment where members feel seen, heard, and valued.

Algorithmic curation on TikTok also influences the evolution of subcultural content by rewarding creativity and innovation. The algorithm tends to promote content that demonstrates high engagement or uses trending audio, effects, or formats, incentivizing creators to experiment with new styles, themes, and narratives. This has led to the emergence of hybrid subcultures that blend elements from different communities, creating new and unexpected forms of expression. For instance, the blending of "cottagecore" and "goblincore" aesthetics has given rise to a niche subculture that combines the pastoral, idyllic elements of cottagecore with the earthier, more chaotic motifs of goblincore, resulting in a unique fusion that is continually evolving. This fluidity allows

subcultures to remain dynamic and adaptable, ensuring their relevance in the fast-paced digital environment of TikTok. The algorithm's role in community building extends to shaping the visibility of marginalized voices and alternative narratives. TikTok's content recommendation system has been instrumental in amplifying the voices of individuals who have traditionally been excluded from mainstream media representations. Subcultures like #DisabledTikTok, #BlackTikTok, #IndigenousTikTok, and #QueerTikTok use the platform to challenge dominant cultural narratives and create spaces where diverse identities and experiences are centered and celebrated. The algorithm's ability to surface content based on user engagement rather than traditional gatekeeping mechanisms has democratized access to visibility, allowing these subcultures to build robust communities and engage in meaningful cultural production and resistance. The algorithm's influence is not without its complexities and challenges. While it has democratized content creation to some extent, it is also opaque and unpredictable, with content creators often struggling to understand why certain videos succeed while others do not. Subcultures must constantly adapt to the changing dynamics of the algorithm, experimenting with different formats, hashtags, and engagement strategies to maintain visibility. This can create a pressure to conform to certain trends or content styles that are favored by the algorithm, potentially diluting the uniqueness of subcultural expression or leading to a homogenization of content. For example, a subculture that thrives on dark, contemplative content may find it challenging to gain traction if the algorithm is currently favoring more upbeat, entertaining videos. The algorithm's prioritization of high-engagement content can sometimes privilege sensational or controversial material over more nuanced or complex narratives, leading to the potential misrepresentation or oversimplification of subcultural identities. For instance, within the "witchtok" community, videos that sensationalize witchcraft or present it in a stereotypical manner may receive more views and likes than those that offer deeper, more authentic explorations of spiritual practices. This can create a skewed perception of the subculture for outsiders, reducing its richness and diversity to a few easily digestible tropes.

TikTok's algorithmic curation is a double-edged sword for subcultural communities. It has created unprecedented opportunities for visibility, community building, and cultural expression, allowing niche subcultures to thrive and connect on a global scale. At the same time, it presents challenges that require constant negotiation, adaptation, and resilience from these communities. Understanding how the algorithm functions and leveraging its affordances effectively is essential for subcultures that seek to maintain their distinct identities while navigating the complexities of digital representation and community building in an algorithm-driven environment.

6. The Future of Subcultural Expression on TikTok

Looking ahead, the future of subcultural expression on TikTok will be shaped by an ongoing interplay between creativity, technology, and community dynamics. As the platform continues to evolve, we can expect subcultures to further harness TikTok's advanced tools—such as augmented reality effects, live streaming, and enhanced editing features—to deepen their aesthetic and narrative complexities, creating even more immersive and interactive content. Additionally, the growing sophistication of TikTok's algorithm will likely refine how subcultures target and attract new members, optimizing content visibility and engagement in increasingly nuanced ways. However, this future is not without its challenges; as the platform becomes more commercially driven, subcultures may face pressures to conform to trends favored by advertisers or mainstream audiences, potentially risking the authenticity that defines them. Despite these challenges, TikTok remains a fertile ground for innovation, serving as a vital laboratory for experimenting with new forms of digital storytelling and identity creation. In this context, TikTok's subcultures will likely continue to thrive, adapt, and redefine the boundaries of cultural expression in the digital era, pushing the limits of how we understand community, belonging, and creative resistance in an increasingly interconnected world.

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