
Big Mood: What Online Aesthetics Can Teach Us About Design

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the role of design tools used in professional settings, moodboards in particular, in online spaces created and curated by non-designers around a particular atmosphere and a desired emotional disposition or appeal. It aims to explore the processes, methods, and sources of inspiration involved in these spaces, and how they might be translated to a professional or research design environment in order to achieve the level of balance between diversity and cohesion characteristic to this sort of organic creative habitat. The atmosphere evoked by a design has the ability to influence the mood and disposition of a product's user and to communicate a wealth of information nonverbally. By learning the wordless language of online aesthetics, a designer may improve their own process and become a better communicator through understanding the intricacies of how different features may look in the eyes of a prolific yet understudied Internet culture.

Author Keywords

Web aesthetics; online culture; moodboard; creativity; design method; visual design; cottagecore; Tumblr



Figure 1: Cottagecore aesthetic collage found on Pinterest. Source: <http://images.app.goo.gl/xyjrNqMkyPjtnW4h7>



Figure 2: Victorian gothic dress sketch found on sewing Pinterest. Source: <http://images.app.goo.gl/C3wQqwE9Q3iyu8eg9>

Introduction

In the early 2010s, a new kind of online culture was taking form on social media/ blogging websites such as Tumblr among teenagers and young adults. At the time, the author (age 16) had the pleasure of personally participating in this new development and discovering the incredibly diverse world of online aesthetics. In the phrase “online aesthetics,” the word “aesthetic” is not used in the usual sense of “having to do with beauty” but rather has a similar meaning to the neologism “having a vibe,” as in possessing a certain emotional quality, a particular atmosphere - invoking a feeling. It relates to the concept of aesthetics described in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, based on John Dewey’s *Art as Experience*: “The business of aesthetics is to restore the continuity between the refined experiences that are works of art and the experiences of everyday life. We must, in short, turn away from artistic products to ordinary experience” [6]. The focus is placed on an element of one’s everyday life - participating in social media - and while, as we will see, web aesthetics have a lot to do with art, they exist in the same plane as what could be called mundane activities.

Back in the early days of Tumblr and Pinterest blogging, the moodboard emerged as a tool of expression that could capture the desired aesthetic and convey it to one’s audience, essentially being used as a method of communication and sharing emotions. Of course, moodboards are not exclusively the realm of teenage girls: they are a design aid often used in academic, professional and corporate settings. Similarly, many other methods and tools associated with the practice of design have appeared in online aesthetic communities as a means of creating and sharing the specific form of

art that is of interest to them: collages (see Figure 1), sketches (Figure 2) and even arguably prototypes (Figure 3) easily come to mind.

In this paper, my goal is to direct attention to this curious entanglement between the spaces of (usually) amateur online creators and professional designers and design researchers. I will examine the interaction between the web aesthetics world and the design world, and try to pinpoint influences from one to the other, as well as some of the ways in which the design community could take inspiration and direction from the seemingly unassuming but in fact deeply fascinating ecosystem of online aesthetics.

Background

Moodboards are a versatile and effective design aid that can jumpstart one’s imagination and help create or clear up an idea, as well as allow the designer to express the feeling they want to invoke - something that can often be difficult to verbalize. Tracy Cassidy (2011) describes moodboards as fundamental to design processes, in addition to being varied and versatile; she discusses their importance to creativity and innovation, pointing out the fact that putting together a moodboard is “a recognizable process” [2] - one that is done not only by researchers and industry professionals, but also by self-taught creators in dedicated online spaces. They seem to be a central point of contact between the world of web aesthetics and that of design, although (as already mentioned) they are far from the only one.

In their 2019 paper, Koch et al. detail a tool they created which uses artificial intelligence to generate moodboards for designers to use in their process as inspiration and a source of surprising ideas [5].



Figure 3: From Reddit's r/cottagecore board, a "moss terrarium" - a miniature garden in a jar. Source:
<http://images.app.goo.gl/twz8a6ob9rWcGYKq8>

Interestingly, the system was based on moodboards found on Pinterest, one of the websites where a multitude of online aesthetic communities congregate. The authors' final product was a program they call "Cooperative Contextual Bandits" which serves as an aid - or even, they claim, an extra member - to a design team [5]. I argue that such a tool not only has the potential to lead designers to innovative solutions they would not otherwise have thought of, but it can also tell us something about the original material it was based on, and how that material could figure into professional and academic design projects. Personal creations found on aesthetic boards and blogs on sites such as Pinterest and Tumblr are exercises in doing design without being a designer, "feeling out" what works and what does not, and effectively communicating feelings and ideas through a nonverbal medium such as the moodboard - what's more, there are whole communities centered around sharing the same "spirit" (hence the comment often found underneath a particularly evocative post, "Big mood" - meaning the commenter strongly relates to the content). This practice can teach us a lot about how to create intuitive, expressive design that simultaneously communicates a lot of information to the user and creates a comprehensive, consistent atmosphere.

Notably, there has been some relevant research done on Tumblr communities and the sharing of images within them. In their 2014 paper, Bourlai and Herring analysed a corpus of content retrieved from Tumblr blogs and found that posts featuring images were more emotionally salient and more positive than text-only posts [1]. This finding supports the notion that communication through images (among them, moodboards and sketches on aesthetics blogs and

boards) can have a lot of emotional power and reach. There are benefits to be had by studying and considering non-professional (one could even say naturally occurring) design practices such as a community engaging in the creation and development of an aesthetic. The literature strongly suggests that the features of a design have an influence on its users: for example, a 2016 paper by Liu et al. details the impact of the aesthetic qualities of website homepages on users' behaviours, attitudes and emotions: the experiment found a positive impact on both satisfaction and energetic arousal [7]. Another paper by David and Glore from 2010 studied the importance of visual content to education and concluded that its quality could influence students' perception of the teaching material's usability and credibility, leading to improvements in their educational experience [3]. This is only one example of an area where research on how and why online aesthetics come about could lead to enhanced user experience, especially since many students are in the age groups that engage with them on Tumblr, Pinterest, and lately even TikTok. Moreover, it is not just the specific online aesthetics that are worth studying for these reasons but also the ways in which they sprout from their communities as recognizable wholes by a decentralized, unguided process requiring the participation of multiple people.

Online Aesthetics: The Example of Cottagecore

Of course, before being able to take any inspiration from either online aesthetics or the way they are created, one must be aware of what they are and how they work. A catalogue of all these concepts is massively outside the scope of this short paper - although it would be a very meaningful endeavour - so



Figure 4: Cottagecore moodboard. Source: <https://images.app.goo.gl/yMBX8UzJRvpYRf1dA>



Figure 5: Cottagecore moodboard. Source: <https://images.app.goo.gl/kM6fKH6ZYf9YBtcn9>

for our purposes we will be taking one of the currently most popular aesthetics, seen across social platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Tumblr, and Pinterest, as an example: cottagecore. It is important to note that due to the nature of these aesthetics, it is way more difficult to define them in words than it is to simply recognise them visually; this is why it is useful to first arrive at a general definition before attempting specific ones.

Rowan Ellis defines an internet aesthetic as "A visual-heavy concept that is grouped around a consistent theme, repeated imagery, and a particular colour palette - and might show up in things like fashion choices, tumblr photosets, pinterest boards, or even offline activities and pastimes which are then recorded and displayed back online" [4]. Working from this description, we can explore the cottagecore aesthetic: its theme revolves around pastorality, serenity, nature, and calm rural life; imagery of villages, home baking, wooded hills, fields and vegetable/ flower gardens reoccurs; and its colour palette revolves around bright, often pastel tones, and a rustic, "natural" feeling (Figures 4 and 5). Notably, the cottagecore aesthetic is commonly related to environmentalism and anti-capitalist ideas [4], and can be seen as a double exercise in daydreaming about a different world of environmental harmony and of a meaningful life being valued above productivity, and in brainstorming and designing that world and how it would work in the day-to-day. (Another internet aesthetic that is quite different in style but quite similar when it comes to the philosophy attached to it is solar punk, which is more explicit in its anticapitalism, see Figure 6.)

These aesthetics and ideas, like all other design, do not come about in a vacuum. To continue with our

example, we may consider the history of cottagecore - as well as the difficulty of tracing it. Due to the anonymous, communal, and online nature of internet aesthetics, it is hard to say where exactly they began, if they had an originator, and when they were first conceived. In the case of cottagecore, we can look back way before the Internet to pastoral paintings and escapist art from the world war periods, but we can also focus on how it developed online, arising (seemingly) from the Japanese trend of mori kai, which was characterized by woody and earthy tones and comfortable yet artistic clothing worn in layers [4]. Naturally, there is not just one "strain" to each aesthetic: in the case of cottagecore, we can also see the so called "goth" or "dark" cottagecore, which introduces more autumnal and gloomy elements and colours into the familiar setting.

After acquainting ourselves with online aesthetics in general and cottagecore in particular, it is easy to see all the connections mentioned in earlier sections that they have to professional design practice - they are concrete and serve a specific purpose, employ design tools, and aim to communicate a set of ideas and/or feelings, often visually rather than verbally. But it is the differences that are truly interesting: the uncoordinated cooperation within worldwide communities resulting in coherent and recognisable end results, the lack of gatekeeping within these communities, and the seemingly effortless crowdsourcing of more and more new designs and ideas. The following sections are a discussion of these differences and how they may help us think about and do design in an academic or industry capacity.



Figure 6: Solar punk. Source:
<https://images.app.goo.gl/kbFSd3ohzfCH1gvz6>

What We Can Learn

Here it serves our purposes to introduce two terms in order to put names to the concepts we have been touching upon thus far. As mentioned, the practice of design in the specific online spaces that interest us does not happen in any professional capacity, and is usually done by "amateurs" - but it involves recognisable design tools and methods nonetheless (or at the very least, rudimentary versions thereof). Therefore, it could be suitable to call this practice "intuitive design" as it involves learning by doing and by watching, and intuiting what would and would not fit within a particular web aesthetic. Furthermore, we have already established that while such aesthetics are created by many people and are difficult to trace to a single origin, there is no structure to who does what, or even to how one should go about adding to the "project" - this naturally occurring kind of design has a communal quality to it, thus we might call it "decentralized design." With this in mind, we could redefine an online aesthetic as the result of many individuals practicing intuitive and decentralized design, and achieving a diverse but clearly coherent whole without the need for gatekeeping or concerted planning.

While this paper has already gone over some benefits to intuitive/ decentralized design, it must be acknowledged that online spaces - including those hosting web aesthetics - are not traditionally considered to be spaces which host aesthetic (in the sense of relating to beauty) experience [8]. However, this notion is becoming ever easier to challenge with the emergence of more and more art forms which exist primarily or entirely online, the creation of and participation in web aesthetics being one of them.

Therefore, what can be learned about and from such types of art and design becomes an increasingly relevant discussion.

A good place to start is the highly effective horizontal cooperation between members of web aesthetics communities: there is a sense of building something together, but each individual can contribute as long as certain criteria are met. It would be a fascinating (and time consuming) exercise to attempt to pin those criteria down, as they are by their very nature caught on to rather than explicitly learned - this is why such communities seem to need little to no gatekeeping [4] and are open to developing and growing in different ways (as exemplified by the sub-genres mentioned earlier on). This structure allows for an immense amount of creativity, which might be somewhat stifled in a more traditional approach to designing in a team. Brainstorming, putting together moodboards, tirelessly prototyping are constants in this creative process (not in small measure due to the fact that in online communities, they can be as much of a goal in themselves as any final product - pleasure is taken in making them) and thus the "product" is ever-evolving and has an infinite capacity to be extremely specific and cater to as niche an audience as it needs to while not losing its grasp on the overall community. Returning to cottagecore, while many highly particular sub-aesthetics exist (like goblincore, to name a curious example), almost all of them can be enjoyed by anyone in the community. This is a valuable quality for designs created in a professional context as well, and taking inspiration from intuitive and decentralized design practices might lead to similarly effective results. It also bears mentioning that working in a larger, unstructured, creative environment, replicating the

almost endless stream of new ideas present in online aesthetics communities could be possible as well.

How We Can Learn

In order to determine if the idea of taking inspiration from web aesthetics holds any water in the world of professional design, one would need more than familiarity with online spaces and speculation. There are several possible approaches to studying this phenomenon and its implications: testing could be done in teams of designers, with user evaluations of the end results; new methods could be honed and tested by themselves, or in conjunction with traditional and accepted design modes - as an example we might come back to moodboards and compare their roles in the design process between different ways of utilizing them. The concepts of intuitive and decentralized design could be applied in such studies in order to determine their usefulness in a variety of contexts. But moreover, studying online aesthetics in and of themselves could provide more insights than could be predicted or covered in a short paper; cataloguing the most prevalent ones and trying to map the intuitive aesthetic boundaries each community has set for itself could be a fascinating and worthwhile endeavour when it comes to media studies. Mike Rugnetta points out that in order to see the aesthetic importance of digital objects (and, one could argue, by extension their potential importance from the point of view of design), we must see what people do with them rather than just observe what they are [8]. Hopefully, this paper has already provided a glimpse into what Internet communities do with aesthetics; but operationalizing what we can see and taking a more organised approach to expanding our knowledge about online spaces could

provide a wealth of interdisciplinary insight in the future.

Conclusion

As the world becomes increasingly more online, an argument could be made that so should design: taking cues from Internet communities can not only allow for new ways of doing design, but also afford us a connection to the people in those communities. Speaking the language of online aesthetics, even when not adhering to any particular one of them, could help with expressing clear and specific intention and messaging with a design, as well as make it possible to pack a lot of meaning into small details. Designing for a wide audience is important, but so can be doing it for a niche one - as Mike Rugnetta, paraphrasing Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce, puts it: "an image that does not express is an image that does not exist" [8]. This goes for design with force double; it should be expressive and communicate with its user without needing to do so verbally.

As a final note, it is worth mentioning that while we have gone over some ways in which the practice of decentralized and intuitive design can be tested in an academic context, there is nothing stopping one from incorporating them (or simply trying them out) in one's own work. There is a lot for a designer to learn from amateur online communities, and an endless stream of inspiration.

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