

Social media aesthetics as part of academic library merchandising

Social media
aesthetics

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Abstract

Purpose – The subject of this paper is the phenomenon of social media aesthetics, which can be perceived as a tool for promoting and building the image of libraries, especially in terms of merchandising. The aim of this paper is to analyse the potential of the dark academia social media trend in the promotion of academic libraries.

Design/methodology/approach – The article is based on a review of the social networking sites YouTube and Instagram and an analysis of network resources using the Brand24 tool.

Findings – Resources that are described by Internet users as “dark academia” are popular in social media. Dark academia as an aesthetic concept creates potential for the promotion of academic libraries, especially those that are more traditional in terms of their architecture, décor or how they offer their services.

Research limitations/implications – The paper concerns a phenomenon which, although popular socially, has not yet been scientifically analysed in the literature on the subject. Since the topic is new and there is no scientific literature on it, the author had to base the paper on less standard sources of information (e.g. analysis of the content of social media). The article is a review, an introduction, as well as an invitation to further discussion. The author’s aim is not to comprehensively cover this topic but only to draw attention to an interesting and rarely discussed issue that has great potential for practical activities.

Practical implications – The topic has great potential for the practical improvement of the promotional activities of libraries, especially older, more traditional libraries, to create a strong and positive image on the basis of characteristics often perceived as weaknesses.

Social implications – Social media services are powerful social impact tools. Showing the potential role of social media aesthetics for cultural institutions could serve to make the public more aware of the role of the proper use of social media for promotion and image building.

Originality/value – The use of social media aesthetics is very rarely discussed in the subject literature.

Keywords Academic libraries, Dark academia, Social media aesthetics, Social media trends, Promotion of libraries

Paper type Viewpoint

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Background

Considerations on promotion and image-building have long occupied an important place in librarianship literature. The authors draw attention to the need to promote both library resources (books, databases, etc.) and library services, and they emphasize the need to constantly search for new methods and techniques of promotion that are original and effective (Williams *et al.*, 2019; Choi and Joo, 2021). Sometimes, both in the literature on the subject and in discussions between practitioners, the opinion can be noticed that academic libraries have an easier task than public libraries when it comes to promoting their resources. The basis of this opinion is the fact that academic libraries are associated with universities, where students receive education and scientists do their jobs; therefore, in a way, they are forced to use the

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resources of these academic libraries. A closer analysis of this phenomenon, however, reveals that academic libraries are in some ways in a similar situation today as other types of libraries: they must compete for the attention of users with generally available resources on the internet. Therefore, it can be assumed that academic libraries, like other types of libraries, should look for innovative ways of reaching readers and promoting their online and stationary activities by monitoring the changing needs of users, developing their services and following new social trends. Academic libraries serve different groups of users: scientists, administration employees, doctoral students, sometimes also the general public and of course students, who constitute, because of their sheer number, a relatively large group of library users.

For young adults (e.g. students, PhD students and young researchers), an indicator of new trends is often the fact that they use social media as a source of inspiration. This is evidenced by numerous studies showing the popularity of social networks among young people and their influence on their lives (Sponcil and Gitimu, 2013; Knight-McCord *et al.*, 2016; AlFaris *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, it seems justified that libraries should also search the internet for inspiration for activities targeted at their younger audience. This is of particular importance because more experienced library users, e.g. scientists, may better understand and appreciate the role of academic libraries, while students may sometimes feel reluctant to use them, instead favouring simple Internet sources of information. This assumption is based on the fact that it is often students who experience the phenomenon of “library anxiety”, defined as feelings of stress and psychological discomfort associated with using libraries (Shehata and Elglilab, 2019; Yoo and Jeong, 2020). It is worth emphasising that, of course, not only students are prone to library anxiety; however, in the literature on the subject, the topic of library anxiety is particularly often raised to students and academic libraries. In this context, promoting the services of academic libraries targeted at students – not forgetting, of course, other user groups – seems to be especially important so that academic libraries are perceived by them as friendly and attractive places worth visiting.

A trend that has been popular in recent months and may particularly appeal – though not only – to younger audiences is the social media aesthetic trend that is referred to as “dark academia”. The thesis of this paper is that social media aesthetic trends can be a valuable tool for promoting libraries and building their image, as will be discussed in the example of popular dark academia aesthetics.

Promotion of academic libraries – state of research

To establish the state of research on the promotion of academic libraries, a search was conducted in the Web of Science and Scopus databases, both of which index journal articles that have a high Impact Factor and Google Scholar, a popular search engine for scientific resources. Information on the search results from these sources is presented in Table 1.

The analysis showed that the promotion of the topic of academic libraries was relatively popular. The analysis conducted with the Web of Science database gave 292 search results

Table 1.
The state of research on the promotion of academic libraries – quantitative approach

Source	Query	Number of results
Web of Science	TOPIC: academic libraries AND promotion date: 2010–2021	292
Scopus	Title, abstract, keywords: academic libraries AND promotion date: 2010–2021	395
Google Scholar	academic libraries AND promotion date: 2010–2021	56,200
	allintitle: academic libraries AND promotion date: 2010–2021	24
Source(s): Own study, 2021		

for the years 2010–2021. Publications on the promotion of academic libraries appeared mainly in the field of library science and information science, but also other fields, e.g. management, pedagogy, or computer science. This topic was most often discussed in articles, much less often in conference materials and books. Interestingly, according to the Web of Science database, this topic peaked in 2020, when the highest number of publications was recorded. An analogous analysis conducted in the Scopus database gave similar results. The results related to the promotion of libraries (395) appeared mainly within the broadly defined social sciences and in the research fields of the humanities and computer science, mainly in the context of modern technical solutions used in libraries and their impact on the promotion of services. It should be noted that in the Web of Science database and the Scopus database a significant increase in the number of publications was recorded in 2020, which may be related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the pandemic-related change in the operating conditions of many academic libraries and the need to look for new solutions in the promotion of remote services. Analysis of the publications that were found using the Google Scholar search engine showed that the promotion of academic libraries was discussed quite frequently (56,200) in the context of other topics related to the general situation of libraries, but less often (24) as the main topic of considerations.

When analysing the thematic scope of articles on library promotion, the most frequently cited publications were those that had the greatest impact on the community. In all the sources analysed, the top ten most frequently cited articles were mostly papers on the activities of medical university libraries and on developing competencies in the field of information and media. In many of the publications found, the promotion of academic libraries topic was raised in a broad context, not always as the main topic of consideration. This was especially visible when searching Google Scholar, but it was also revealed in the analysis of the results from the Scopus and Web of Science databases. This shows that despite a large number of publications on the promotion of libraries, many of them are general (such publications often appear in collective works and conference materials), or they only apply to specific selected types of libraries. It seems that there is a need to intensify research on specific ideas for the promotion of academic libraries. Publications specifically related to the promotion of libraries also appear (although less frequently). From the point of view of the issues discussed in this article, the most relevant articles include “Marketing the academic library with online social network advertising” (Chan, 2012), “The role of social networks in enhancing the library profession and promoting academic library services: A comparative study of the University of Jordan and Al-Balqaa’ Applied University” (Hamad *et al.*, 2017) and “Understanding public libraries’ challenges, motivators and perceptions toward the use of social media for marketing” (Choi and Joo, 2021).

What is worth noting is that although the topic of using social media in the promotion of libraries has appeared in many papers, the specific topic of aesthetics in social media has not been discussed. This is all the more interesting, as the topic of social media aesthetics is a well-known topic in other fields of knowledge and is analysed from the point of view of sociology, cultural sciences, management sciences, IT, or even medicine. However, it seems to be completely unrecognised and neglected in library and information science (LIS). This shows that scientific publications do not always keep pace with changing social trends. This gap in the LIS literature needs to be filled.

Subject, purpose and method

The subject of the paper is the phenomenon referred to in social media as dark academia. The article aims to analyse the potential of the dark academia phenomenon for the promotion of academic libraries.

This article is based on a review of the social networking sites YouTube and Instagram (#darkacademia, accessed on May 7, 2021) and an analysis of network resources using the Brand24 tool (keyword, “dark academia”; period, May 7, 2020 to May 7, 2021).

The analysis carried out using the Brand24 tool gave relatively few results, but it is worth noting that the version used by the author did not analyze published entries, for example on Instagram, where dark academia is very popular, but only entries published in generally understood web resources (mainly portals, blogs, microblogs and news sites). Therefore, the analysis of the popularity of the term “dark academia” on social media was performed separately (see Table 1). The results obtained in Brand24 (1,056) show that this keyword began to be used only in the second half of 2020, gaining the greatest popularity in February 2021 (Figure 1). It is worth noting that these results differ slightly from those obtained from Google Trends, which showed that, also in February 2021, the popularity of this term started to decline. This may be because Brand24 operates at a high level of generality, thus giving results that reveal broad long-term trends but sometimes losing details related to, e.g. fluctuations in the popularity of a keyword on individual days (as in the case of February 2021); therefore, an averaged and inherently approximate picture of a given phenomenon is presented when long periods are analysed.

Mentions of dark academia most often appeared on microblogs such as Twitter, mainly in the context of discussing the content of books and movies or as a description of a type of music or aesthetics in general. Keywords most often associated with dark academia include aesthetic, vibe, style, grunge, books, playlists, or cottagecore (the name of another literature-inspired style that is popular on social media) (Figure 2). This shows once again that dark academia’s associations are primarily aesthetics and popular culture (including novels, music, television series, etc.).

Follow-up analysis showed that the hashtag #darkacademia was frequently used on social media. The search performed on 7 May 2021 showed more than 36,400,000 results on YouTube and 810,000 results on Instagram. It is worth adding that a simple search in the Google global search engine gave 164,000,000 results, which shows the popularity of this term (Table 2). At the same time, it should be mentioned that the comparative search conducted on Google Scholar (a search engine for scientific resources) gave only 24 results, none of which were relevant to the topic in question. This shows that the dark academia trend is not yet discussed from a scientific perspective.

Social media aesthetics in the context of the development of visual-based culture

Nowadays, much information transfer takes place in visual form: images, icons, photos, or infographics. This applies to all spheres of human life: from the transmission of information related to daily life to the distribution of important legal, medical, or financial information (Martin *et al.*, 2019; Tarkhova *et al.*, 2020). The reasons for the development of information culture based on visual input have already been described many times in papers from the fields of sociology, culture science and information science (Aiello and Parry, 2019;

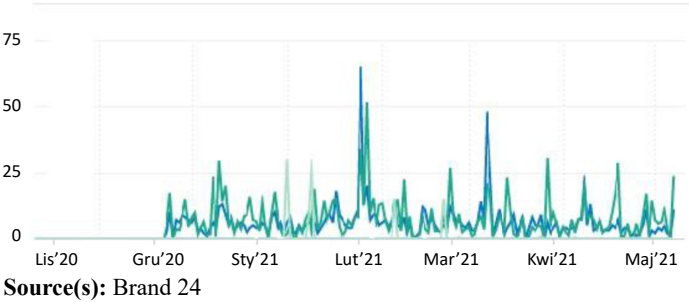


Figure 1.
The popularity of the term “dark academia” in network resources (7.05.20–7.05.21)



Social media aesthetics

Figure 2. Keywords related to the term "dark academia"

Source(s): Brand 24

Source	Number of results
Instagram	810,000
YouTube	36,400,000
Google	164,000,000
Google Scholar	24

Source(s): Own work, 2021

Table 2. The popularity of the term "dark academia" in network resources and social media

Josephson *et al.*, 2020), so they will not be analysed in detail in this paper. However, it can be briefly concluded that the modern recipient of the information is focused on fast, aesthetically pleasing, accessible services.

The shift towards image-based messages is particularly evident in the social media environment. This statement is supported by the popularity of graphic memes or the dynamic growth of social networking websites such as Instagram, which are based mainly on visual and audiovisual communication. The development of image-based forms of content transmission has meant that the aesthetic level of materials distributed on the internet has increased significantly as a result of competition for recipients' attention. This is seen again in the example of the evolution of Instagram. At the beginning of the operation of this website, the published materials – even those of influencers or professional agencies – were aesthetically disjointed and qualitatively weak. Nowadays, this situation is less likely. In this way, by improving visual communication to obtain a competitive advantage, the aesthetics of social media has developed. Social media aesthetics can be very broadly defined as aesthetic concepts related to the transmission of content that is distinguished from others by a set of characteristic features: themes, colours, shapes, props, framing, etc. Some trends are more ephemeral and difficult to define and often do not even have their own commonly accepted names; others, such as cottagecore, soft grunge, or the dark academia trend discussed in this paper, have their hashtags and videos, and their wide recognition by Internet users, especially those from the younger generation, is displayed in the fact that they can be found in posts and comments on social media.

Dark academia as a literature genre and aesthetics of social media

The term dark academia covers both the literary genre, most often associated with books for young adults and an aesthetic concept that refers to vintage styles. It is a concept that

functions in the informal sphere of social media; therefore, it has not yet been scientifically defined or analysed. When defining the term “dark academia”, one can therefore only rely on sources popular in the Internet community, such as urban dictionaries, which describe slang expressions and neologisms and on social sources created by Internet users themselves. For example, Wikipedia defines dark academia as an aesthetic that is characteristic of social media and a subculture focused on science, poetry and art, most often in a way referring to ancient culture, classical literature, or Gothic ([Dark academia, 2020](#)). Doubts may arise when the term “subculture” is used in a definition as, according to the Dictionary of the Polish Language, this term is defined as “1. Customary norms adopted in a certain group, different from those adopted by the general public; 2. A social group with norms customarily different from those adopted by the general public” ([Subkultura, 2021](#)). Such a definition suggests the existence of norms and values that are characteristic of representatives of subcultures and that distinguish them or even separate them from mainstream culture and accepted social norms. It seems that the dark academia phenomenon does not have, at least for now, such deep connotations: it is more of an aesthetic trend that is popular in social media and which translates into selected elements of popular culture. In the context of the issues discussed in this article, the term “dark academia” is defined as a literary genre and/or an aesthetic concept that refers to vintage styles, especially ancient culture, classicism, as well as Gothic and neo-Gothic.

Books belonging to the dark academia genre have several characteristic features. As the name suggests, the action in these novels usually takes place in an academic environment, often in boarding schools, prestigious universities, or private colleges, both real and imaginary (including fantastic or magical). The word “dark” in the name refers to the dark atmosphere of these novels, which is sometimes compared to the tradition of Gothic novels and to topics related to solving mysteries, for example, crimes or supernatural situations. A strong thread in these types of the novel is the pursuit of knowledge, secrets and learning about the world. Interestingly, from the point of view of promoting books and libraries, the process of acquiring knowledge itself is often presented in a poetic or idealised way. Studying, reading, or reflecting is presented positively as an exciting and adventurous activity. Examples of books from this trend include “Deadly education” by N. Novik, “Catherine house” by E. Thomas or “If we were villains” by M. I. Rio.

Regardless of dark academia’s relationship with books and libraries, it is also especially popular on websites such as Instagram or Pinterest as it is an aesthetic style that manifests itself in fashion, architecture and design. The characteristic elements of this style include the use of traditional materials such as wool, tweed, leather, wood, etc.; the use of a natural, subdued colour palette (beige, brown, grey, dark green, etc.); and, in fashion, a return to clothing items such as berets or capes. The dark academia style also promotes historic (or simply old) buildings that are rediscovered and appreciated as unique and conducive to creating a romantic atmosphere. In interior design, items that refer (most often in a romantic way more than a historical one) to the recent or more distant past include goose feathers, traditional globes, paintings in ornate frames, etc.

In the context of libraries, some users prefer modern library buildings, while others appreciate older, more traditional buildings. People who are interested in the dark academia trend may like both, but what characterises these users is the ability and willingness to look at old library buildings with the eye of a connoisseur and see them as interesting historical objects with a particular atmosphere. For libraries operating in buildings that cannot be described as modern, purposefully appealing to the aesthetics of dark academia could be an opportunity to show the actual state of affairs – an old building, perhaps in need of renovation or improvement – in a positive light, as an original place full of atmosphere.

Dark academia in the context of analogue culture

The concept of dark academia is loosely inspired by vintage styles and is a kind of fantasy about the past. Dark academia's colours, props, costumes and everyday objects are modelled on artefacts that existed in the past, but they are a free, romantic interpretation of them. The fashion for vintage items has been going on for a long time and is a trend in alternative culture (Velikonja, 2017). This phenomenon can be seen as a manifestation of the "nostalgic turn", also described as retromania and retrotopia, i.e. longing for bygone times, which are often idealised and seen to counterbalance the problems of the present. Interestingly, the phenomenon of the "nostalgic turn" applies largely to young people, for whom idealising the past becomes a way to escape the problems of everyday life. As D. Brzeziński writes when commenting on the results of C. Goulding's research: "The respondents felt a strong longing for the past, which – due to their age – they were not able to experience" (Brzeziński, 2020, p. 66).

The popularity of a nostalgic desire to return to the past is confirmed by the presence of vintage clothing, polaroid cameras, board games and a return to the use of turntables, film projectors and typewriters. Against the backdrop of the fashion for returning to analogue culture but with the advantages of new technologies, hybrid and convergent forms are also developing that combine, for example, a traditional typewriter with a tablet screen, a turntable with a smartphone, or polaroid cameras that also save digital copies of photos. An interesting phenomenon is also so-called retro-innovation, i.e. products (and sometimes also services) that are deliberately stylised in the convention of past epochs (Grębosz and Pointet, 2016; Wójcik, 2020). An example is the popularity of barber salons or household products that have a 1950s style.

In the context of the discussed phenomena, libraries, especially those with more traditional architecture or decor, may become more attractive, as may books themselves, especially those published in paper form. In the era of digital culture, when people use technology all the time, they can feel tired of electronic stimuli. Libraries can offer a place of rest which still offers modern solutions but also a chance for silence and relaxation without the use of technology (silent reading, discussion, book clubs, etc.) (Wójcik, 2020).

It is also worth noting that the dark academia phenomenon began to gain popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic, as shown, among others, by analyses conducted with the use of the Brand24 tool. It can be assumed that more intense than usually forced contact with technical solutions (including remote learning and work) resulted in users' natural desire to reach for other forms of culture and entertainment that are not related to the electronic environment. In this context, it seems natural and justified to turn (even temporarily) towards analogue culture and the romantic vision of the learning process that is typical of the dark academia convention, including positive sentiments for traditional library buildings or printed books.

It is worth noting that the dark academia trend does not mean negating modern technological achievements; instead, it is based on appreciating selected elements of the past while actively using the benefits of technology, especially the Internet, mobile devices, or social media, all of which fit well with the way modern libraries operate.

Dark academia in the context of the experience economy

The conscious use of dark academia aesthetics in the arrangement of library spaces can be perceived as a manifestation of the implementation of values that are characteristic of the so-called experience economy. This is an economic model in which the customer experience has the greatest value, most often defined as a unique, positive and worth-remembering experience related to the implementation of a commercial process (Pine and Gilmore, 2011). In recent years, the experience economy has increased in importance as a way of gaining a competitive advantage. Traditional methods of attracting customers, such as competing in

terms of price or the scope of an offer, are often not enough anymore, which is why entrepreneurs try to gain an advantage based on the ability to create a comprehensive experience for which the customer is willing to pay. Unique customer experiences include innovative stores or service points (and even their smell), the way electronic services and communication on social media are designed, approaches to customer service, the appearance and behaviour of employees, the way products are packaged and many other small factors that build the overall experience. The key element in creating the customer experience is always establishing a leitmotif, a central value, or aesthetics around which the other elements are coherently designed. In this context, it is helpful to use dark academia or other social media aesthetics as a starting point and inspiration to create a guiding theme for a specific library that fits in with the general aesthetics but takes into account the unique, memorable and positive elements characteristic of a given library. This is very important because, according to the principles of the experience economy, the theme used by a particular institution should be consistent with the company's general features, as well as with its mission and vision (Wójcik, 2019).

Importantly, the assumptions of the experience economy are implemented not only in the commercial services market but are also beginning to be adopted by public institutions, which, like enterprises, are trying to attract new customers/users. In the context of library activity, the user experience is sometimes built according to the LUX concept (Library User Experience), which assumes the possibility of the comprehensive, conscious design of a library user's experience (Schmidt and Etches, 2014). LUX consists of a whole range of complementary elements, such as the appearance of a library, the behaviour of librarians, the design and functionality of the website, or how the library's offer is presented on social media. Similarly to the experience economy model, this concept assumes that libraries adopt a specific leitmotif in line with the mission, vision and values of a given library (Wójcik, 2019). In this context, referring to the dark academia trend may become a way for libraries to build a characteristic and original message based on appreciating the traditional elements of book culture; on the other hand, it also shows that libraries are modern institutions that can follow trends in social media (such as the dark academia trend) and support a positive, though often idealised, vision of the process of acquiring knowledge.

Dark academia in the context of library merchandising

The specificity of dark academia, as both a book genre and an aesthetic, creates interesting opportunities for the promotion of libraries. The literary genre itself, which presents a romantic vision of science as an exciting path to self-discovery, development and adventure, can help build a positive image of research institutions and encourage the use of academic libraries. The profile of libraries' collections, which in the case of academic libraries sometimes do not include fiction and references to the aesthetic aspects of the dark academia trend seem particularly interesting. This can be treated as an idea that fits into the concept of library merchandising, defined here generally as the art of developing and thoughtfully arranging library spaces (Wojciechowska, 2011). The term "merchandising" comes from the business sector and is traditionally associated with the way stores and other commercial spaces are arranged to arouse customers' interest and persuade them to perform specific behaviours (e.g. entering a store, or buying goods). In this technique, it is important to build a holistic impression through the way a store is arranged (whether stationary or online) to present its goods. All the elements are important, including the colours, lighting, decor and the way of combining goods, all of which are designed to attract the attention of customers and encourage them to buy. Building a comprehensive, positive impression based on a well-thought-out strategy fits well with the previously discussed concept of the experience

economy. In the context of libraries, merchandising can therefore also be seen as an important element of building the overall user experience.

Merchandising is particularly often used in the fashion industry, but also other market sectors, such as food, cosmetics, or interior design items (Bailey and Baker, 2021). As emphasised by, among others, M. Wojciechowska, libraries increasingly often use the arsenal of activities known from the commercial market to attract users (Wojciechowska, 2011). References to the aesthetic style of dark academia can be treated as a manifestation of thinking in terms of library merchandising, as well as—in a broader context – part of creating a positive user experience in a manner consistent with the principles of the experience economy. At this point, it is worth emphasising that all key concepts discussed in this article are perceived by the author as related to each other. The dark academia trend, understood as an example of social media aesthetics that refers to a romantic vision of the past, is part of library merchandising, which in turn is part of the experience economy principle.

Constructing library merchandising based on the dark academia concept provides an opportunity for some academic libraries to use their old-fashioned architecture and decor to promote themselves, even though these are not always perceived as positive. In particular, libraries located in old buildings without the prospect of quick relocation or major renovation can use the dark academia style to change the narrative about themselves. In this context, an old, not very modern building can become an original, romantic place marked with history, while properly arranged interior design that is based on existing – but not always desired – elements (e.g. dim colours or worn shelves and books) can attract fans. Importantly, the implementation of the dark academia style does not consist of simple historical or historical-styled exhibitions of a library's architecture and equipment: it consists of deliberate, conscious and holistic narrative building in the spirit of the experience economy that includes the use of modern information and communication tools, such as social media or mobile applications. By this, it can be understood that even if a library building is old and the interior is old-fashioned, it can still be promoted with new tools and technology. Therefore, it is important to act in the spirit of the experience economy to thoughtfully create a comprehensive user experience with the use of various tools.

It is worth noting that using the dark academia aesthetic is not a solution recommended for all libraries, but it may be an interesting promotion opportunity for some that are in a specific situation. Conscious leaning towards the vintage style could be a good idea for some libraries that do not have the funds for better equipment or renovation of old buildings and want to make the best use of the resources they already have. This is, of course, a risky strategy that will not work for all libraries, but for some, it may be an opportunity to turn their imperfections and problems into an element of their self-creation and promotion.

Discussion

The main aim of the article is to analyse the potential of the dark academia phenomenon for the promotion of academic libraries. The analysis of the promotional activities of libraries through the prism of their compliance with social media trends opens up interesting threads for discussion, various theoretical considerations and the development of new research topics. An example of considerations inspired by the analysis of social media aesthetics maybe those on the delicate relationship between novelty and tradition in libraries. On the one hand, one may wonder to what extent libraries should follow trends from the Internet environment in their activities and how much should they stick to their vision of development and not be influenced by trends. The second thread, in a similar vein, concerns the more general issue of the clash of tradition and modernity in the activities of libraries.

In recent decades, libraries as institutions have undergone a huge transformation: from watchtowers of knowledge focused primarily on the protection of collections, to resilient

service institutions focused on satisfying the changing needs of their clients (Lynch and Smith, 2001; Coleman *et al.*, 2016; Tzanova, 2020). The profile and structure of library collections have been transformed from printed publications into a mixed model that combines traditional library services with online services, heading towards so-called smart libraries that apply sophisticated, highly automated, intelligent solutions to better serve their users (Chan and Chan, 2018; Liang and Chen, 2020; Asemi *et al.*, 2021). This may suggest that libraries have survived this change and that following new trends is a condition for their survival. On the other hand, however, the main mission of libraries – to mediate between information resources and users to meet their needs and provide them with information and media literacy competencies – remains unchanged, as does the core of the tasks and activities performed. However, ways of carrying out this core mission change and priorities shift, as was shown well during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the implementation of the mission of academic libraries had to be moved almost entirely to the online environment (Martzoukou, 2020; Fasae *et al.*, 2021; Yu *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, it is clear that traditional and new solutions constantly intertwine and collide in libraries.

What is particularly interesting is the fact that, as a result of these dynamic changes, it is now difficult to indicate which changes are still new and which are already part of library tradition. Examples are the computerisation of libraries or the withdrawal of card catalogues, which not long ago were seen as new and controversial solutions but are now perceived as standard in most libraries (Wells, 2022). Analogously, it can be said that social media, which was once foreign to libraries, has now become an important part of their promotion, as well as other activities—communication with users, provision of services or education (Zhu, 2016; Çakmak and Eroğlu, 2021; Choi and Joo, 2021; Wu and Yang, 2021). On this basis, it can be assumed that library merchandising based on social media trends and aesthetics, as well as conducting library activities in the spirit of the experience economy, are still relatively new and rarely discussed ideas that might soon become a new standard.

To sum up, it is worth emphasizing that the use of social media aesthetics is still very rarely discussed in the subject literature. This gap needs to be filled taking into consideration both the potential for further research and possible practical implications. Using social media aesthetics has great potential for the improvement of the promotional activities of libraries, especially older, more traditional ones, to create a strong and positive image based on characteristics often stereotypically perceived as weaknesses. Showing the potential role of social media aesthetics for cultural institutions could also have some social impact and serve to make the public more aware of the role of the proper use of social media for promotion and image building.

Conclusions

Dark academia is both a book genre and an aesthetic concept that refers to the vintage style. The conducted analysis has shown that resources tagged in this way are gaining great popularity in social media, especially since mid-2020. It is also worth noting that dark academia, despite its popularity on social media, is not yet a scientifically studied phenomenon; this may be considered surprising given the sociological, psychological, or cultural contexts (including librarianship) within which it could be analysed.

The dark academia trend, especially in terms of the aesthetic concept, creates the potential for the promotion of academic libraries, especially those that are more traditional in terms of their architecture, décor, or how they provide their services. This makes it possible for a library to change its narrative and consciously create a positive image based on features (architectural, functional, or decorative) that are usually perceived in an unfavourable light as not very modern. The strategy of consciously referring to the vintage style will not work for all libraries, especially those that build their brand based on a different set of values, such as conventionally perceived modernity, which is reflected in the premises and the technical

possibilities of providing innovative services. However, this trend might be an opportunity for some older, more traditional libraries to create a strong and positive image based on characteristics that are usually perceived as weaknesses.

Social media
aesthetics

Limitations

The paper concerns a phenomenon which, although popular socially, has not yet been scientifically analysed in the literature on the subject. Since the topic is new and there is no scientific literature on it, I had to base my paper on less standard sources of information (e.g. analysis of the content of social media). The article is a review, an introduction, as well as an invitation to further discussion. The author's aim is not to comprehensively cover this topic but only to draw attention to an interesting and rarely discussed issue that has great potential for practical activities.

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