HAUNTOLOGY AND THE ABSENCE AESTHETICS: AN EXAMINATION OF LIMINAL INTERNET AESTHETICS

A Master's Thesis

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AESTHETICS

The Graduate School of Economics and Social Sciences
of
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By Sezen Günce Yöndem

I certify that I have read this thesis and have found that it is fully adequate, in scope and in quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts in Media and Visual Studies.

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Advisor

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ABSTRACT

HAUNTOLOGY AND THE ABSENCE AESTHETICS:
AN EXAMINATION OF LIMINAL INTERNET AESTHETICS

Yöndem, Sezen Günce

M.A. in Media and Visual Studies

Supervisor: Asst. Prof. Dr. Lutz Peschke

November 2024

This thesis examines the online phenomenon known as *internet aesthetics*, which became popular during the pandemic, focusing on its three subcategories: *dreamcore*, *weirdcore*, and *nostalgiacore*. These subcategories fall under the broader term of 'liminal internet aesthetics,' which are characterized by familiar yet empty spaces, such as abandoned malls, schools, and homes, often imbued with a nostalgic yet unsettling feeling. Within the vast visual realm of internet aesthetics, liminal internet aesthetics employ a visual language centered on the motif of 'human absence.' The aim of this thesis is to analyze this visual language created by the motifs of 'absence' and 'presence' as a reflection of societal anxieties heightened by the global pandemic and the media-saturated world. For this analysis, the research draws on the concept of *hauntology*, introduced by Jacques Derrida and later expanded upon by cultural theorist Mark Fisher, as well as Fisher's

concepts of the *weird* and the *eerie*, two modes of *hauntology* that are categorized in this thesis under the concept of 'absence aesthetics.' Further, the thesis adopts a qualitative methodology combining close visual analysis with ethnographic participant observation conducted within online aesthetic communities. Ultimately, this research seeks to contribute to the existing literature on internet aesthetics and digital culture, particularly in relation to the post-pandemic cultural landscape.

Keywords: Absence Aesthetics, Hauntology, Internet Aesthetics, Liminal Spaces, Weird and Eerie

ÖZET

HONTOLOJİ VE NAMEVCUDİYET ESTETİĞİ: LİMİNAL İNTERNET ESTETİĞİ ÜZERİNE BİR İNCELEME

Yöndem, Sezen Günce

Medya ve Görsel Çalışmalar Yüksek Lisans Programı

Tez Danışmanı: Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Lutz Peschke

Kasım 2024

Bu tez, pandemi döneminde popüler hale gelen *internet estetiği* olarak bilinen çevrimiçi olguyu, *dreamcore*, *weirdcore* ve *nostalgiacore* adlı üç alt kategorisine odaklanarak incelemektedir. Bu alt kategoriler, daha geniş bir terim olan 'liminal internet estetiği' kapsamına girmekte olup, genellikle terk edilmiş alışveriş merkezleri, okullar ve evler gibi tanıdık ancak boş mekanlarla, nostaljik ama rahatsız edici bir hisle karakterize edilmektedir. İnternet estetiğinin geniş görsel dünyası içinde, liminal internet estetiği 'insan namevcudiyeti' motifine odaklanan bir görsel dil kullanır. Bu tezin amacı, 'namevcudiyet' ve 'mevcudiyet' motiflerinin yarattığı bu görsel dili, küresel pandemi ve medya ile iç içe geçmiş dünyanın artırdığı toplumsal kaygıların bir yansıması bağlamında incelemektir. Bu analiz için araştırmada, Jacques Derrida tarafından ortaya atılan ve daha sonra kültür teorisyeni Mark Fisher tarafından genişletilen *hontoloji* kavramından

yararlanılmış; ayrıca *hontoloji*'nin iki modu olan ve bu tezde 'namevcudiyet estetiği' kavramı altında kategorize edilen Fisher'ın *tuhaf* (weird) ve *tekinsiz* (eerie) kavramlarından faydalanılmıştır. Bunun yanı sıra, tez, çevrimiçi estetik topluluklarında gerçekleştirilen etnografik katılımcı gözlemi ile yakın görsel analizi birleştiren nitel bir metodoloji benimsemektedir. Sonuç olarak, bu araştırma, özellikle pandemi sonrası kültürel manzarayla bağlantılı olarak internet estetiği ve dijital kültüre ilişkin mevcut literatüre katkıda bulunmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Namevcudiyet Estetiği, Hontoloji, İnternet Estetiği, Liminal Mekanlar, Tuhaf ve Tekinsiz

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Nostalgic media, which refers to media content that evokes a sentimental longing for the past, saw a significant increase in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic due to isolation and lockdowns individuals experienced, which acted as a coping mechanism during times of uncertainty (Gammon & Ramshaw, 2020; Batcho et al., 2023). This rise can be considered a response to the emotional stress of the pandemic, when media, especially through its narrative, audio, and aesthetic components, evoked sentimental feelings while also creating and reinforcing idealized depictions of the past (Niemeyer, 2014). With the increase in social media use during the global pandemic and the rise of the social media platform TikTok (Johnson, 2020), various nostalgic social media content appeared online. These included pandemic-related 'memes' (Paul, 2020), hashtag challenges (Feldkamp, 2021), fitness and cooking trends, documentation of everyday life, recreations of pre-pandemic activities, and "life before" trends (Unni & Weinstein, 2021, p. 866) all of which became popular on TikTok and other audio-visual sharing platforms such as Instagram and YouTube.

One of these nostalgia trends that gained popularity during the pandemic and continued to thrive in the post-pandemic era is *internet aesthetics*. Also classified as a "microcultural trend" (Papuc, 2022, p. 165), *internet aesthetics* refers to visual styles created by netizens—individuals actively participating in online communities and digital culture. These styles are influenced by early aesthetic movements, films, memetic content, internet trends, web content, fashion, music, and subcultures. The internet aesthetics phenomenon has gained popularity on the internet, particularly across platforms such as Tumblr, TikTok, and Instagram, which now has a variety of sub-categories emerging with different themes and styles. Although the phenomenon traces back to the pre-pandemic Tumblr era, the pandemic led to the emergence of more nostalgia-driven subcategories, which Gen Z users—born between the mid-1990s and mid-2000s (Katz et al., 2021)—now label as 'internet aesthetics.'

However, reducing internet aesthetics to a social media 'trend' leads to overlooking the broad audience it has reached and the online communities formed around it by fans and enthusiasts. Following Shifman's (2014) approach to internet memes, this thesis argues for analyzing internet aesthetics as a 'cultural artifact' worthy of study within cultural and visual studies, considering its impact on both newly emerging media trends and the creation of other media forms such as music, video games, and film. Moreover, such analysis is crucial for understanding the contemporary digital culture and the impact of the pandemic on online spaces and youth culture.

Within the sub-categories of internet aesthetics, this thesis particularly attempts to explore the three widely recognized ones: *dreamcore*, *nostalgiacore*, and *weirdcore*. These sub-categories are often shared on Instagram accounts dedicated to internet aesthetics, where they are frequently linked to the broader concept of liminality. Users on TikTok often use these three aesthetic categories interchangeably in hashtags, which emphasize their overlapping qualities. Therefore, with a similar approach, I group them under the umbrella term 'Liminal Internet Aesthetics' within the broader 'Internet Aesthetics' phenomenon due to their shared visual language (see Table 1).

Table 1. Liminal Internet Aesthetics within the Broader Internet Aesthetics Phenomenon
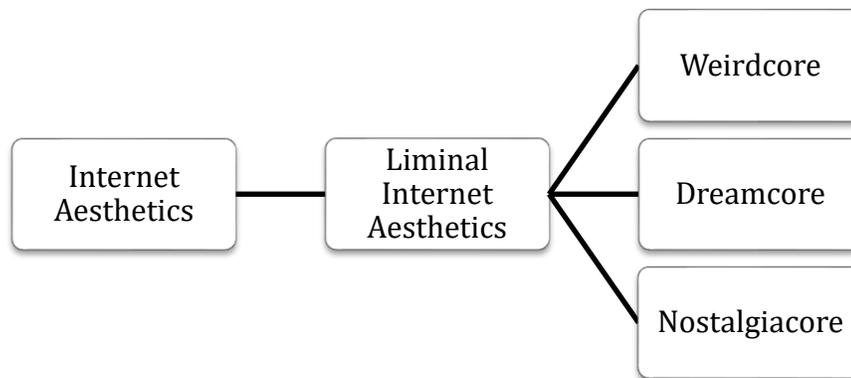
Liminal internet aesthetics stems from the liminal space phenomenon originating from the famous 'Backrooms' image uploaded on 4chan in 2019 under the "unsettling images" thread (Lines, 2023, p. 5). Having this element of horror and unsettlement in its origin, originating from a thread on a forum and circulating through communities and user-created content, liminal internet aesthetics share a commonality with online horror

media often referred to as "digital Gothic" (Landrum, 2017; Balanzategui, 2019; Crawford, 2019). As Landrum (2017) argues, digital gothic integrates "the analog past with the digital present" (p. 138), in which the past haunts the present. Indeed, liminal aesthetics incorporates the element of the analog past by using grainy VHS filters and visuals of artifacts from the analog era in the digital present and create a surreal aesthetic style rooted in nostalgia that resonates particularly with young social media users. This convergence of nostalgia and horror within liminal aesthetics constructs a unique visual language that reflects a complex relationship with the past that acts as a haunting specter in the present. Accordingly, this thesis argues that liminal internet aesthetics portrays the past not as a fixed entity but as an ever-present spectral force.

A defining motif of liminal internet aesthetics is the 'absence of humans,' which contributes to the uneasy quality of these visuals. They often depict deserted hallways, abandoned malls, empty houses, surreal settings, and childhood artifacts but with a twist of surreal and horror elements. This blend of nostalgia, surreality, and unease sparked the curiosity that initiated this thesis and led to further research. As observed examining the liminal internet aesthetics phenomenon on social media platforms, the comments under these visuals and community discussions often reflect the duality of two sentiments. Users either find the liminal internet aesthetics familiar and calming, eventually nostalgic, or unfamiliar and discomforting, thus disturbing and horrifying. This conflict in seemingly nostalgic content leads to the questions of what makes these visuals familiar and nostalgic, what makes them creepy and unfamiliar, and most importantly, why netizens are drawn to these visuals to the extent of creating online

communities around them, forming an online phenomenon. As such, this thesis aims to investigate the phenomenon of liminal internet aesthetics with an ethnographical approach and cultural studies perspective to understand its more profound implications within digital culture.

As discussed above, liminal internet aesthetics revolve around the motif of 'human absence,' using unsettling, empty, and transitional spaces—both temporal and spatial—to convey a sense of disconnection and ambiguity. This absence is intertwined with themes of nostalgia, often evoking familiar childhood memories juxtaposed with the unfamiliarity of nonexistence within these spaces. Despite the absence of the human body, the visuals imply its presence, creating ambiguity between what is visible, what is missing, and what is suggested, adding to the unease of the visuals. This 'human absence' motif further resonates with the concept of 'the people are missing,' discussed primarily in Deleuze and Guattari's *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1986) and later in Deleuze's *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (1997), which signifies the absence of a collective voice or identity which Deleuze particularly discuss within the context of cinema. Deleuze (1997) writes that "the people no longer exist, or not yet...*the people are missing*" (p. 216), suggesting that, in modern times, the traditional concept of the 'people' as a unified, cohesive body is no longer valid. Instead, the people are absent in any defined state, existing in a continuous process of becoming.

Liminal internet aesthetics reflect this process of change, much like Deleuze's vision of modern political cinema, in which the lack of people enables the potential for new forms

of expression and transformation. The absence of people in liminal internet aesthetics (or their fragmented presence) illustrates a broader cultural fragmentation or dislocation in the post-pandemic, hypermediated world, where individuals exist 'not yet' or 'no longer' in any fixed temporality but rather in a perpetual state of flux.

The absence of humans and the unsettling atmosphere set liminal internet aesthetics apart from earlier nostalgia trends, which tend to be more sentimental or romanticized. This aesthetic choice of missing people from the visuals opens the discussion on the themes of 'absence' and 'presence,' specifically the 'failure' to be absent and present in the context of the pandemic and digital age. To delve deeper into the themes of absence and presence within liminal internet aesthetics, the thesis employs two key theoretical frameworks/concepts: *hauntology* and the 'absence aesthetics' of the *weird* and the *eerie*, which are both considered two modes of hauntology by Fisher. (see Table 2)

Table 2. The Relationship Between Hauntology, Absence Aesthetics, and the Weird and the Eerie
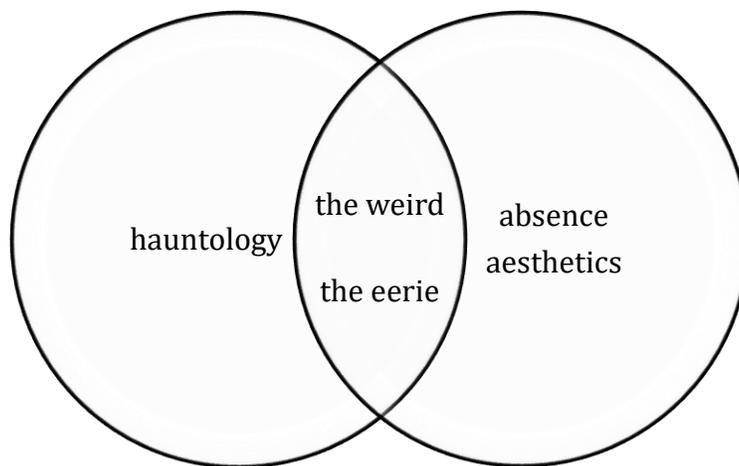
The concept of *hauntology* was first introduced by French philosopher Jacques Derrida in his work *Specters of Marx* (1993), where he defines it as the persistence of the past in the present. Derrida uses the term to suggest that our present is often 'haunted' by ideologies from the past, which are never fully resolved or gone. The concept was later expanded by cultural theorist Mark Fisher, adding the dimension of 'future,' redefining hauntology as the specter of failed pasts and futures that persist in the present. In hauntological thinking, not only does the past appear as a haunting figure in the present but also the specter of "cancelled futures" (Brown, 2023, p. 112) since the "promised worlds never arrived" (Brown, 2023, p. 101). As such, hauntology addresses not just the past but also the future, once anticipated but never actualized.

The second concept, which this study categorizes under the broader term of 'aesthetics of absence,' is the *weird* and the *eerie*, conceptualized by Fisher in his book *The Weird and the Eerie* (2016). Like *hauntology*, the *weird* and the *eerie* deal with the themes of temporal disruptions and dive deeper into the discussions on absence/presence. Through these frameworks and concepts, this thesis attempts to answer the following questions throughout the following chapters:

> RQ1: How do the depictions of 'absence' and 'presence' in liminal internet aesthetics reflect and resonate with societal anxieties heightened by the pandemic and emerging technologies, as observed through visuals and online community discussions?

RQ2: In what ways does the liminal internet aesthetics phenomenon deliver the ideas of vanishing present and disappearing future in the contemporary age?

To address these questions, this thesis is divided into several chapters. *Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework* is organized into four main subtitles. The first title, *Rethinking a e s t h e t i c s in the context of digital culture* (2.1.), aims to both conceptualize the phenomenon of *internet aesthetics* and contextualize its significance within the framework of digital culture and its usage in internet slang. The section explores how newly emerging online 'aesthetics' are described in non-academic sources and academic literature, framing the concept within the broader context of digital culture. This section involves literature on both early and contemporary internet aesthetics to trace the foundational sources of the concept of internet aesthetics. Furthermore, it provides an overview of emerging 'core' aesthetics within and in the aftermath of the pandemic era.

The second main subtitle, *Hauntology & Digital Hauntings (2.2.),* explores Derrida and Fisher's concept of *hauntology* and its adaptability to internet-born trends by examining the literature on how hauntology has been interpreted across various disciplines while also comparing it to the contemporary nostalgia trend since they often coexist in the literature. While nostalgia studies might be utilized to investigate nostalgic social media content, this subchapter proposes that a hauntological approach provides a more comprehensive picture of the pandemic and post-pandemic digital environment. As such, this part lays the groundwork for analyzing liminal internet aesthetics via a hauntological framework to understand better the emerging subculture of liminal '-core'

aesthetics. It delves into Fisher's dual perspective within hauntology, "no longer" and "not yet," as initially discussed in his 2012 essay "What is hauntology?" and subsequently expanded upon in his book *Ghosts of My Life* (2014).

The third section of the literature review, *The Weird, the Eerie, and the Aesthetics of Absence (2.3.),* presents Fisher's notions of the *weird* and the *eerie*, which are the two modes/concepts of hauntology that are classified in this thesis under the broader concept of 'aesthetics of absence.' This section reflects on how the *weird* and the *eeri*e can be applied to the contemporary liminal aesthetic subgenres, specifically in analyzing the motif of 'human absence' in the visuals. Moreover, it explores the concept of 'absence' to further deepen the understanding of the weird and the eerie. While the weird and the eerie are commonly utilized in literary analysis, this section argues for their broader applicability to various media texts, from film and television to music, video games, and media. This section mainly focuses on explaining the concepts of weird and eerie as outlined in Fisher's 2016 book *The Weird and the Eerie*, supplemented by contemporary sources to demonstrate their adaptability to media and internet phenomena.

The last subtitle of Chapter 2*, Liminality and Liminal Aesthetics (2.4.)*, dives into the origins of liminal internet aesthetics. It focuses on the concepts of liminality, the liminal space phenomenon that is considered the origin of 'core' liminal aesthetics, to explore the origins of liminal internet aesthetics for further context.

Chapter 3: Methodology explains the methodological approach taken in this thesis as informed by earlier methodological approaches to similar content in the literature. It discusses the reason for using close visual analysis and digital ethnographic methodology, which is utilized in this thesis, and how they address the research questions and objectives of the thesis. By critically examining prior research, this chapter demonstrates the advantages and limitations of these approaches, justifying their selection and acknowledging the possible challenges of using them.

Chapter 4, Examination of Liminal Internet Aesthetics, is dedicated to an analysis of liminal internet aesthetics of *dreamcore*, *weirdcore*, and *nostalgiacore* through the theoretical frameworks established in Chapter 2. The chapter begins by exploring the discussions surrounding these three liminal internet aesthetics subcategories and then delves into the themes of spectrality, the failure of absence, the failure of presence, and the 'human absence' in the visuals. This analysis is approached from a combined theoretical and ethnographic perspective, offering a comprehensive exploration of these emerging internet aesthetics forms.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Discussion summarizes the study and discusses the potential avenues for future research. It touches on the liminal internet aesthetics phenomenon, its impact on emerging media trends, and the creation of other media forms such as music, video games, and film. It also discusses why studying this microcultural trend is essential and why more research is needed into other internet aesthetics subcultures and phenomena.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The initial phase of this study involves examining the literature on chosen theoretical concepts. Therefore, this chapter is structured into four main sections to provide an overview of the concepts and theories utilized throughout the subsequent analysis. It delves into the related literature on *internet aesthetics*, notions of *hauntology*, and the absence aesthetics of *the weird* and *the eerie* to understand their applicability to studying the *liminal internet aesthetics* phenomenon and the online communities shaped around this subculture.

2.1. Rethinking *a e s t h e t i c s* in the context of digital culture

Since the meaning of *aesthetics* in the contemporary internet culture and what it refers to is not clear and thoroughly defined in scholarly works, nor does it have a dictionary definition, this section will reflect on academic literature on various early internet aesthetics, such as 'ugly aesthetics' (Douglas, 2014), 'dark academia' (Adriaansen, 2022; Murray, 2023), 'glitch aesthetics,' 'vaporwave aesthetics' (Cole, 2020; Morrissey, 2021) and more recent 'dreamcore aesthetics' (Wu, 2022), as well as non-academic

internet discussions around the concept of *internet aesthetics* to conceptualize the term within the contemporary internet culture. Initially, it is essential to understand what the term 'aesthetics' suggests outside the context of digital culture. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, *aesthetics* is:

> The philosophy of the beautiful or of art; a system of principles for the appreciation of the beautiful, etc.; the distinctive underlying principles of a work of art or a genre, the works of an artist, the arts of a culture, etc.

Considering this simple definition, *aesthetics*, in its classical sense, is primarily the philosophy of art and beauty. It refers mainly to theories related to the perception and appreciation of beauty. It provides "a system of principles" for appreciating beauty in art, literature, nature, and everyday life. It also entails examining what distinguishes and elevates various artistic creations. Aesthetics is a multifaceted concept interpreted differently by philosophers, artists, and scholars throughout history. However, this research will not dive into these discussions on 'serious' aesthetics, as *aesthetics* suggests a distinctive purpose in the online sphere.

Internet (online) aesthetics is a born-digital concept originating from the visual content-sharing platforms Tumblr and Pinterest and has become popular throughout the years with the emergence of new aesthetics subcultures, especially during the global pandemic. In the context of digital culture, the phrase refers to the visual style, design elements, and overall atmosphere associated with online trends and communities that have arisen within the online landscape. As Nicholas Morrissey (2012) argues, with the introduction of Web 2.0, new varieties of cultural and aesthetic texts, such as memes

and user-generated content, have grown in popularity worldwide. In the early 2010s,

Tumblr played a crucial role in developing Internet aesthetics since it allowed user-

generated content and opened a space for community building around the aesthetic

trends of its time. During that time, various aesthetic subgenres like vaporwave,

cyberpunk, seapunk, pastel goth, and kawaii emerged on Tumblr and Reddit. In the

2020s, Internet aesthetics became more 'hyper-specific,' as *Vogue* editor Sarah

Spellings (2022) argues, and found their way to platforms like TikTok and Instagram,

reaching a larger audience.

Building on Geert Lovink's (2005) critique of networked systems, internet aesthetics

can be viewed as cultural responses to the socio-technical dynamics of the digital age,

where user interactions and digital infrastructures co-produce aesthetic trends that

challenge conventional notions of art and beauty. As such, internet aesthetics are not

only visual expressions but also a form of cultural practice deeply embedded in the

digital networks through which they circulate.

As noted by the *Time* reporter Moises Mendez II (2023), TikTok influenced the

contemporary definition of aesthetics, which evolved into a generic term for Gen Z,

"encompassing moods, feelings, and subcultures around which people can find like-

minded users online. The niche-ification of the platform has carved out small corners of

the Internet for seemingly every special interest, mood, hobby, like, dislike, and, yes,

aesthetic" (para. 4). Internet aesthetics can be viewed as early subcultures shaped around

music, lifestyle, values, and beliefs. In the digital landscape, as Mendez II (2023) states "like-minded users" create online communities around unique interests.

According to *Aesthetics Wiki* hosted by Fandom, "Millennials and Generation Z started using that term as an adjective that describes what they personally consider beautiful" ("Aesthetics 101," n.d., para. 1). This emphasis on 'personal' recalls Kant's understanding of beauty as a subjective phenomenon. In *Critique of Judgment*, Kant refers to the aesthetic judgment that exists in the subject and depends on individual taste. This subjectivity does, however, also include universality. In the introduction to *Critique of Judgment*, Pluhar (1987) writes:

> When we call something 'beautiful' we seem to do so on the basis of a certain liking, a certain feeling of pleasure; and pleasure is something very subjective. And yet it seems that in such a judgment we say more than 'I like the thing'. For in using the adjective 'beautiful' we talk as if beauty were some sort of property of the thing, and hence we imply that other people, too, should see that "property" and hence should agree with ~ur judgment; in other words, we imply that the judgment is valid not merely for the judging subject but universally (p. xxiv).

This argument highlights the conflict between aesthetic judgments' subjective and universal nature. It poses the challenge of balancing the uniqueness of aesthetic experience with the implication of the universality of aesthetic evaluations. This discussion applies to Internet aesthetics since it is formed around shared interests and tastes under various subcultures. As stated on the *Aesthetics Wiki* page, "There is no "better" or "best" aesthetic. Aesthetics are largely subjective and have different purposes that would make them impossible to be judged on a hierarchy" ("Helping You Find Your Aesthetic," n.d.). Therefore, the concept of 'beauty' in internet aesthetics is highly

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subjective, shaped by the distinct preferences of internet users with diverse backgrounds. However, they also work collectively, manifesting themselves through Internet aesthetic communities and subgenres.

Returning to more contemporary usage of aesthetics in the digital space, Spellings (2022) writes in *Vogue* that the "'aesthetic' has evolved from an academic word and something utilized by artists and auteurs to something to categorize our own identities by" (para. 2). This categorization is one of the main features of Internet aesthetics, as they are formed according to their characteristics, similar to genres. They play a crucial role in shaping and constructing identities in the online realm, as participants within online communities frequently embrace these aesthetics, fostering a sense of belonging. The relationship between online aesthetics and identity formation through aesthetics, thus, demonstrates the extent to which users have assimilated and incorporated these subcultures into their daily lives.

According to *Aesthetics Wiki*, in the youth culture, aesthetics "have now come to mean a collection of images, colours, objects, music, and writings that creates a specific emotion, purpose, and community" with various origins such as "different historical periods, fictional genres, subcultures, music genres, and national cultures can be considered aesthetics" ("Aesthetics 101", n.d., para. 2). This multi-referential nature of online aesthetics helps us to understand the contemporary digital culture and how cultural content is remixed and referenced in the digital environment. Internet aesthetics

often integrate early digital or physical components into their visual compositions, aiming to elicit a sense of nostalgia among viewers.

The literature on aesthetic subcultures is limited, yet the research on early aesthetics, including memes and music subgenres classified as aesthetics, provides a valuable foundation to understand aesthetics in the context of online culture and how to approach this term to examine emerging aesthetic trends. One of the pioneers in online aesthetics research is Nick Douglas' (2014) seminal work on 'ugly aesthetics,' which is pivotal in enhancing our understanding of aesthetics within the digital realm.

The 'Internet Ugly Aesthetic' trend gained prominence in the 2010s, characterized by purposely ugly and memetic content that challenged the traditional concept of aesthetics. Internet Ugly aesthetic uses a visual language that purposefully incorporates features seen as chaotic, ugly, or out of the ordinary by conventional design standards. This trend established "its own standard of beauty counter to, but not precisely reversing, the mainstream values of symmetry and purity" (Douglas, 2014, p. 315). Internet Ugly became a trend for its authenticity, and as Douglas (2014) argues, even though it is "not the only core aesthetic of the internet" this aesthetic "is the one that best defines the internet against all other media. It is certainly the core aesthetic of memetic internet content" (p. 315). The use of the term 'aesthetics' in this study sheds light on its application within digital culture, in contrast to its conventional definition that accentuates beauty. Focused on authenticity and a departure from conventional ideas of beauty, the author redefines the notion of aesthetics within the digital domain. The

juxtaposition of the traditional emphasis on 'beauty' in the interpretation of aesthetics and the emphasis on 'ugly' aesthetics in Douglas's work underscores the transformative nature of the concept of aesthetics within internet culture. The term, thus, is inherently linked to both 'ugly' and 'beauty' within the contemporary internet language. Speaking of the 'ugly' side of aesthetics, Sianne Ngai, working on aesthetic theory, also challenges traditional notions of aesthetics in her work *Ugly Feelings* (2005) by arguing that less desirable feelings such as envy, irritation, and anxiety are, indeed, essential in building cultural expressions. As Ngai (2005) expresses, aesthetics can be influenced by 'ugly feelings' although they are typically identified through 'beauty.'

As with all the aesthetic content on the Internet, Internet Ugly is a user-generated product created without a clear aesthetic goal. Internet Ugly works, as Douglas (2014) argues, are the "internet's 'folk art': they reflect the cultures of the sites that invent and reshape them, they have purposes outside serious aesthetics, and they're often made by amateurs" (p. 336). Within this context, the concept of "serious aesthetics" plays a pivotal role in establishing a distinction between aesthetics in its classical interpretation and the contemporary aesthetic trends in digital culture. While 'serious aesthetics' refers to fine art, Internet aesthetics are like "folk art"; they are not "practiced by a single defined school" (Douglas, 2014, p. 315), with their amateur, authentic, and community-centered nature. In this context, it becomes evident that the notion of aesthetics within digital culture is juxtaposed with the traditional meaning of aesthetics, embracing both ugly and beauty.

As Ross Cole (2020) explains in his work on "vaporwave aesthetics," "the term "a e s t h e t i c" itself (with this idiosyncratic character spacing a metonym for ambient emptiness) often used by insiders to signal membership of what we might call a "virtual public" (p. 301). The research emphasizes how the distinctive character spacing in the word "a e s t h e t i c" is employed as a symbol for a particular kind of emptiness and how it is frequently utilized by a particular group of people to express their membership in a hyper-specific online community. In alignment with Douglas's (2014) approach, Cole (2020) similarly highlights the importance of identity formation and expression within online aesthetic communities, specifically emphasizing the notion of "membership." Although Cole's argument is focused explicitly on vaporwave aesthetics, which refers to the music genre *vaporwave*, it is one of the early examples of online aesthetics and provides an argument on how to fit the term in the online context and applies to contemporary aesthetic trends.

Vaporwave is a microgenre and "an aesthetic made possible by the very era it appears to disavow" (Cole, 2020, p. 302). On this note, Cole (2020) compares vaporwave aesthetics to "normcore," a popular fashion trend in the early 2010s that rejects mainstream and branded clothing and reinforces simplicity and functionality that opposes ever-changing fashion trends. In many contemporary Internet aesthetics, there is a paradoxical interplay with the period they seem to criticize or reject. This specifically applies to the aesthetic subgenres that use nostalgia and nostalgic artifacts for their visual styles. To exemplify, in 'dark academia' aesthetics, there is a denial of digital technology and a longing for an earlier era where the tactile experience of

scholarly studies was over the electronic interfaces (Murray, 2023). Many of these

aesthetic trends exist and survive because of the digital age's opportunity to archive and

remix cultural artifacts from that bygone era. In this context, Internet aesthetics are both

commentaries and products of the eras they reference. Despite being manifestations of

nostalgia for bygone eras, they are the creation of the digital age with social media

platforms and online communities.

As stated earlier, the global pandemic influenced digital culture and gave rise to new

aesthetic subcultures that focused on nostalgic yearnings and artifacts from earlier

decades. One of the well-known aesthetics in the digital culture, as mentioned

previously, is the 'dark academia' aesthetics. According to literary, media, and

communication studies professor Simone Murray (2023), dark academia started as a

Tumblr phenomenon around 2014 with personal 'mood boards' and was popularised

during the COVID era on Instagram and Pinterest, and lastly appeared on TikTok. It

reappeared on digital image-sharing platforms due to individuals' desire for escapism in

the pandemic era. Robbert-Jan Adriaansen (2022) defines this internet aesthetic as "an

aesthetic style used in posts on platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Tumblr that

resonates the atmosphere of life in boarding schools, prep schools, and (Ivy League)

colleges from the last decades of the nineteenth century up until the 1940s" (p. 105).

The notion of aesthetic, in this regard, is associated with a particular era, "atmosphere"

or mood. Adriaansen (2022) argues that it is the "aestheticization of the past," "by

capturing a mood and atmosphere associated with early-twentieth century campuses" (p.

114). The study similarly argues that the term "aesthetics" extends beyond visual

elements and it reveals that aesthetics creates a 'mood' and 'atmosphere' relating to a specific period.

The dark academia aesthetic is one of the pioneers of the subjects of this thesis: *dreamcore*, *nostalgiacore*, and *weirdcore*, which are aesthetic subcultures using nostalgia to create an atmosphere and a mood through locations and artifacts from or resembling the past, as well as filters to "evoke mood" (Adriaansen, 2022, p. 108). Aestheticizing the past is the core point in all nostalgia-driven Internet aesthetics; thus, aesthetics in the digital context can be understood as 'aestheticization,' making something more appealing and pleasing. Internet aesthetics often rejects the present with their visual storytelling and creates an idealized past or future. From this standpoint, the term aesthetics can be associated with a process of making something more appealing through repurposing visual elements from the past.

2.1.1. *"-core" aesthetics*

There are currently a variety of internet aesthetics and subcultures. Still, for the purposes of this study, this thesis concentrates on the most popular "-core" aesthetics of liminality *dreamcore*, *nostalgiacore*, and *weirdcore* aesthetics, which use surreal and dreamlike imagery and liminal space aesthetics centered on the phenomenon of nostalgia.

To begin with a definition, the term 'core' comes from the French word 'coeur,' meaning heart. As a suffix, it indicates the primary concept or essence of the word to which it is appended. The suffix 'core' has been highly used to describe music genres, subgenres, and movements throughout history. Although it does not indicate anything

specific, the historical usage of the suffix core indicates that it is a way of categorizing certain music styles, aesthetics, or vibes. Similarly, within the realm of online aesthetics, it is mainly employed to classify distinctive features. To exemplify, the 'fairycore' aesthetic utilizes elements of nature, fairies, and flowers with a magical twist in their visual language ("Fairycore," n.d.), while the 'goblincore' aesthetic emphasizes the "ugly" side of nature ("Goblincore," n.d.). Regarding this categorization of certain features under 'core' aesthetics, Mendez II (2023) examines the recent 'Corecore' aesthetic, which "is a style of video editing that often features seemingly random clips edited together at various speeds as somber music plays in the background," (para. 6) which appeared as a rejection of over-categorization of aesthetics appeared throughout the post-pandemic era. Therefore, the argument is that the suffix core within the digital culture suggests that it is a tool for categorization, enabling the formation of subcultures centered around specific aesthetic styles.

Especially during and after the pandemic, the subgenres of Internet aesthetics have become tools of escapism for Internet users since reality has become less desirable in global emergencies such as the pandemic, wars, and environmental and economic issues. These aesthetics offered utopic and dreamy alternative realities in a deteriorating world. As freelance journalist Amelia Tait (2022) argues, in 2022, TikTok became like a wonderland during and in the aftermath of the pandemic where users "step into a fantasy tavern, a childhood dream" of their "favorite book or film" (para. 1) to escape the reality. During that time, various aesthetics appeared on online platforms, especially the 'core' aesthetics such as 'dreamcore,' 'fairycore,' 'cottagecore,' and 'goblincore' (Tait,

2022). For instance, "cottagecore," Kaitlyn Tiffany (2021) writes in the *Atlantic*, "was a natural fit for a pandemic year" since it was a subculture that visualized a rural lifestyle "in the woods" (para. 1) that served as an escapism from the city life where individuals where in high risk during the epidemic.

Regarding nostalgia-driven 'core' aesthetics, Wu's (2022) work on *dreamcore* aesthetics is valuable for understanding an aesthetic characterized by empty, liminal spaces. As Wu (2022) argues, this aesthetic trend originated from an anonymous user's post depicting a dimly lit empty corridor on a 4chan thread on the "paranormal section collecting images that would make people feel 'uncomfortable'" (p. 153). Dreamcore aesthetic is defined by ethereal and dream-like visuals that reinterpret the past. The visuals often contain natural landscapes, cloudy skies, windows and doors, and overall whimsical details that resemble a dream and convey nostalgic feelings through childhood memories. Dreamcore aesthetic uses empty spaces and "capture a dream or a feeling of a dream in surreal photos and music" ("Dreamcore," n.d.). These visuals with surreal elements recall Cole's (2020) use of "ambient emptiness" in describing online aesthetics. In the context of dreamcore, 'ambient' refers to the overall atmosphere formed through a collage of ethereal and everyday objects, and 'emptiness' implies a lack of meaning and a sense of being lost.

Dreamcore aesthetics conveys an "emotionally ambivalent experience" (Wu, 2022, p.154) through feelings of familiarity and uncanny. In that regard, in addition to evoking mood and establishing atmosphere, the concept of aesthetics in the context of digital

culture also includes the aspect of 'experience.' Wu (2022) writes: "The pasts of one viewer may or may not cross with those of another, and the aesthetics of lost items will inevitably result in a diverse aesthetic experience" (p. 160). Revisiting Kant's idea, aesthetic judgments are personal and grounded in subjective feelings. Internet aesthetics rooted in nostalgia use childhood memories and imagery of the past that may appeal to each individual differently; their 'aesthetic' is a personal experience.

The literature on online aesthetics subgenres highlights that the term 'aesthetics' in digital youth culture indicates a specific mood and atmosphere. They are primarily subjective and refer to both ugly and beautiful in their visual language. Moreover, Internet aesthetics are tools for curating identities in the online space, with their community-centered nature. Since they evoke mood through their 'aestheticization' of the past or a certain occasion, they are also an 'experience' in the online landscape.

2.2. Hauntology & Digital Hauntings

In a *Guardian* article from 2011, Andrew Gallix describes hauntology as a concept that refers to a ghostly in-between state that is neither present nor absent, alive or dead. Becoming one of the significant online trends in critical theory during that year, Gallix (2011) argues that hauntology has influenced many fields, emerging as a framework for critical and cultural discussions on time and specters, especially in the age of new technologies and the internet. The term has been applied to various fields, including electronic/futuristic music (Fisher, 2012, 2014; Reynolds; Clanton, 2012), vaporwave (Tanner, 2016; Cole, 2020; Jacobson, 2022), literature (Shaw, 2018; Korkut-Nayki, 2021), glitch and post-digital culture (Kemper, 2022), digital fiction (Henriksen, 2018;

Ondrak, 2018), everyday life and anthropology (Rahimi, 2021), retro aesthetic/consumption (Ahlberg & Hietanen & Soila, 2021), horror film (Balanzategui, 2016; Edgar & Johnson, 2023), and niche internet phenomena (Brown, 2023). Hauntology's application to various cultural texts within literature reflects its adaptability to current online trends since the term refers to temporal concepts and how modern digital environments shape and are reshaped by ghostly remnants of the past. As our interactions and experiences become increasingly mediated by online platforms, hauntology provides a framework to examine the lingering digital remnants of past cultural occurrences.

Before utilizing the hauntological framework in this study, it is essential to thoroughly comprehend its origins, historical development, and range of applications in different fields. Furthermore, there is a need to distinguish between nostalgia and hauntology, two diverse but frequently coexisting notions in the literature. Coined by Jacques Derrida in his work *Specters of Marx* (1993), hauntology combines the words 'ontology' and 'haunting' to elucidate how the past perpetually influences the present and future. In a linguistic play on the term 'ontology,' utilizing a silent 'h' in French, Derrida introduces a haunting dimension to the examination of being, revealing how this spectral presence permeates the very essence of being and existence. Originally, Derrida came up with the concept of hauntology inspired by the opening sentence of *Communist Manifesto* "A specter is haunting Europe--the specter of communism". One of the main arguments in *Specters of Marx* (1993) is the idea of Marxism as a specter haunting Western society.

The term 'haunting' here does not explicitly refer to believing in literal apparitions (Davis, 2005, p. 373) but an *effect* on the present and future.

Derrida (1993) discusses that specters exist in between spaces and times, between the past, present, and future. His engagement with hauntology and the notion of haunting, as it pertains to 'being' and 'existing,' comes from his deconstructionist perspective, challenging dichotomies such as presence/absence and being/non-being. Derrida (1993) argues that everything that exists consists of a series of absences. In other words, every presence has its absences, and "to haunt does not mean to be present" (Derrida, 1993, p. 201). According to this idea, haunting introduces the state of in-betweenness that transcends the binaries; it offers a fluid way of understanding time. As noted by Line Henriksen (2018), the concept of "hauntology forms part of deconstructionism's argument that nothing enjoys a pure presence; instead, day is defined by not being night; light is defined by not being darkness; the self is defined by not being other; and so on" (p. 270).

Building on Derrida's introduction to hauntology, cultural theorist Mark Fisher (2012) develops the term and writes that the notion of "hauntology gained its second (un)life in the middle of the last decade" (p. 16). Due to cultural and technological shifts, hauntology has become more prevalent in the current age than when Derrida wrote about it in 1993. Amidst this rapid cultural transformation, discussions concerning time and particularly the inclination to reflect on the past have taken on even more significance. Due to the web's rapidity, we experience time in a fast-forward format,

occasionally leading us to fall back on the past to seek stillness and comfort, often resulting in nostalgia for the better times. This also leads to the "slow cancellation of future," as Fisher (2014) argues. In the current age, Fisher (2014) notes, "It doesn't feel like the future. Or, alternatively, it doesn't feel as if the 21st century has started yet. We remain trapped in the 20th century…" (2014, p. 19). Fisher focuses on electronic music in the discussion on hauntology, or 'futuristic music" as he calls it at times, which lost its ability to sound 'futuristic' in the twenty-first century and fell into a 'retrospection' (2014, p. 16). This idea of being trapped in the past and not moving further points out the concept of hauntology, also described as nostalgia for the (lost) future that we were promised but never came about.

While some critics dismiss hauntology as another form of 'nostalgia,' given their shared engagement with temporal concepts, particularly the past, hauntology initiates a broader discussion on the very nature of time. On this note, Fisher poses the question of whether hauntology is another form of nostalgia (2014, p. 34). In the Oxford English Dictionary, nostalgia is defined as a "sentimental longing for or regretful memory of a period of the past, esp. One in an individual's own lifetime; (also) sentimental imagining or evocation of a period of the past" (2019). The term specifically revolves around the idea of 'sentimentality,' emphasizing a deep longing for earlier times. Although it appears as a recycled version of nostalgia, hauntology focuses on the slippery nature of time and how past, present, and future exist simultaneously rather than merely longing for the past, as nostalgia does. Therefore, whereas a sentimental yearning for the past defines nostalgia, hauntology focuses on the lasting impact of unfulfilled futures from the past on the

present. Revisiting Fisher's discussion on nostalgia versus hauntology, Merlin Coverley stresses in *Hauntology: Ghosts of Futures Past* (2020) that nostalgia has become an overused term that has lost its meaning in the contemporary age. The term had significance before since it created a contrast between the present and the future. However, due to everything being viewed through a nostalgic lens in the digital age, especially in the post-pandemic world, nostalgia has lost its ability to distinguish between different periods. Coverley (2020) notes that "In such circumstances, hauntology may be regarded as post-nostalgic, describing a world in which the present can no longer be experienced as anything other than a sum of its pasts" (Coverley, 2020, p. 8). Considering this argument, hauntology appears not simply as another version of nostalgia but as a term that works as a more relevant counterpart in the 21st century. It offers a framework for understanding the past as a dynamic force that actively shapes the present and future. Contrary to nostalgia, which views time as a progressive continuum, hauntology emphasizes the idea of the disappearance of a linear sense of time, challenging the traditional notion of time.

However, as Svetlana Boym (2001) argues in her notable work *The Future of Nostalgia,* "contemporary nostalgia is not so much about the past as about the vanishing present" (p. 529). This argument brings nostalgia closer to hauntology in the contemporary era since both concepts deal with the idea of temporal displacement and the disappearance of the present. Although Boym's discussion of contemporary nostalgia makes it challenging to distinguish between the two concepts considering their relationship with the present, viewing hauntology as "post-nostalgic," in Coverley's (2020) words, helps

to understand hauntology's emphasis on perceiving time as a specter that traverses between different temporal realms. As Coverley (2020) stresses, hauntology involves a "temporal disjuncture…questioning whether we truly experience time in so straightforward a manner as the linear model suggests" (p. 6). In Derrida and Fisher's writings, Coverley (2020) notes that there is this idea of the past repetitively disrupting the present. However, as stated earlier, hauntology centers around the influence of the past on the present and future, examining both the idealized past and its consequential impact on the future. As Fisher (2012) claims, "the future is always experienced as a haunting" (p. 16); the relics of the past interrupt and haunt our perception of the future.

In his discussion on hauntology, Fisher (2012) proposes two modes of hauntology: the "no longer" and "not yet":

> The first refers to that which is (in actuality is) no longer, but which is still effective as a virtuality (the traumatic ''compulsion to repeat,'' a structure that repeats, a fatal pattern). The second refers to that which (in actuality) has not yet happened, but which is already effective in the virtual (an attractor, an anticipation shaping current behavior) (Fisher, 2012, p. 19).

These "two opposing temporal currents" (Coverley, 2020, p. 6) present a duality that includes the influence of possible futures on the present, as well as the uneasy repetition of the past. In Fisher's hauntological framework, both the future and the past affect the present. Rahimi (2021) elaborates on this discussion by arguing that these two implications in hauntology relate to the ideas of being and time. Hauntology challenges the concept of being by rejecting the ontology centered around presence, and it introduces the ontology of absence. As for the concept of time, Rahimi (2021) states that hauntology challenges the temporal conception of time and introduces a "pantemporal"

(p. 6) understanding, which implies the simultaneity of past, present, and future, rejecting the concept of linear sense of time. This nonlinear, pantemporal understanding of time can further be expanded with Deleuze's (1994) concepts of *difference* and *repetition*. In his framework, time is structured through difference, in which moments are not sequential but dynamically connected through processes of variation and repetition.

Considering the discussions around hauntology so far, it becomes visible that the term initiates the themes of temporal disruption and absence/presence, providing a critical framework for examining cultural texts revolving around the theme of time and the "vanishing present," as Boym (2001) argues which is the subject of both nostalgia and hauntology. While hauntology has been applied to various fields, as mentioned earlier, the objective of this thesis is to use a hauntological perspective to investigate *digital hauntings* or *digital hauntology* through a case of the contemporary digital niche subculture of *liminal internet aesthetics*. Although the liminal aesthetics subculture is commonly associated with nostalgic themes, I argue that examining them within the framework of nostalgia studies oversimplifies its complexity. Hauntology offers a 'post-nostalgic' viewpoint, and it is a practical concept to discuss contemporary online phenomena and trends, which also refer to the postdigital state of the current age. For the remainder of this section, the review is limited to the literature that uses a hauntological approach to examine emergent trends, online phenomena, and subcultures.

The following part of the literature delves into the application of hauntology to internet-born subcultures of vaporwave and dead mall aesthetics, as well as digital horror fiction, which further illuminates the hauntological implications in the online space. In this thesis, I approach hauntology from two perspectives. The first draws on Fisher's concepts of the 'no longer' and the 'not yet' to explore the fluidity between the past, present, and future in liminal internet aesthetics, which highlight the 'vanishing present' and the 'disappearing future.' The second perspective positions hauntology as an aesthetic framework to understand how liminal internet aesthetics convey the interplay of absence and presence.

Examining the current microcultural trends in the aftermath of the pandemic world, sociolinguistic researcher Oana Teodora Papuc (2022) argues that "much more serious attention should be awarded to the various Internet-based niche-trends that circulate online" (Papuc, 2022, p. 169). One such trend is 'vaporwave,' an electronic music genre and a visual aesthetic that came into existence during the 2010s. Vaporwave is characterized by "a host of symbolic imagery reminiscent of "early Internet days" (Papuc, 2022, p. 172). Vaporwave's use of past cultural artifacts in both sound and visual style provides a fertile ground to discuss it in the context of hauntology. The genre uses futuristic and nostalgic elements audiovisually, such as neon lights, early computer graphics, surreal visual elements, glitches, remixing, and repurposing existing elements. This juxtaposition of past and future reflects what Fisher argued in his discussion of futuristic music and how it does not sound 'futuristic' in the contemporary age because of all the remixing and repurposing of old materials. Vaporwave

"references absence and ethereal presence, all at the same time" (Papuc, 2022, p. 177). It is, as Tanner (2016) argues, "the music of "non-times" and "non-places" because it is skeptical of what consumer culture has done to time and space" (p. 47). Given its positioning between these "non-times" and "non-places," vaporwave provides a particularly suitable subculture for analysis within the framework of hauntology.

Specializing in music studies, Cole (2020) uses the hauntological perspective to discuss Internet nostalgia and vaporwave aesthetics. The author argues that Fisher's writings on hauntology and futuristic music redefined vaporwave as a genre and how it is received (Cole, 2020). With both visual and auditory elements, vaporwave serves as an "aestheticized commentary on the postmodern era" (Cole, 2020, p. 308) while simultaneously manifesting the uncanny (*unheimlich*) by juxtaposing elements of familiarity within unfamiliar contexts. Vaporwave reflects Fisher's hauntological duality of *no longer* and *not yet*, employing nostalgic and futuristic elements in its sound and visuals. As Cole (2020) argues, vaporwave mixes the artifacts of different eras and reflects a "ubiquitous" state that reflects the fluidity of time in the contemporary digital space that hauntology implies.

In another work on vaporwave and hauntology, researcher Jordan J. Jacobson (2022) states that "vaporwave embodies a digital form of hauntology" (p. 35). The author reflects on how contemporary works are marked by "flattened temporality" (p. 30), where distinctions between different periods become blurred. This change in time structure is the product of the digital age in which the present has lost its qualities and is

overloaded with a mix of elements from the past and future. Continually revisiting the past, we are now stuck in a cycle in the digital landscape that "has been overwritten so many times that it is falling apart" (Jacobson, 2022, p. 34). As a result of the vanishing of the present, the digital space now become "futureless" (Jacobson, 2022, p. 34), in other words, the future is gradually canceled (Fisher, 2014).

As the multidisciplinary artist and writer Tam Lines (2023) argues in *Sonic Scope*, the concept of hauntology refers to the "pre-digital age" (p. 2), which means it echoes the analog past in the present digital environment. Lines uses hauntology to explore the audiovisual aspect of analog horror and online horror storytelling. The author investigates Fisher's concepts of presence and absence and notes that hauntology "concerns a relationship between actual, present reality and virtual spectres which act on reality without physically existing" (Lines, 2023, p. 3). As the author argues, Fisher's two directions in hauntology are prevalent in "contemporary horror, both online and in traditional media. However, the ghost stories which exist online are uniquely entangled in the medium through which they are shared, in its heavy absences and strange presences" (Lines, 2023, p. 3). These ghost stories transcend their surroundings and become entangled with the internet, a medium that is simultaneously and globally connected in and of itself.

The two directions of hauntology, "no longer" and "not yet," help to investigate digital horror and storytelling since it often happens through copying and pasting, circulating from user to user on the internet, which is a vast medium with the qualities of

hypertextuality and interactivity. Lines (2023) studies online hauntology through the prosumer–the producer/consumer–aspect of online storytelling and argues that "Internet mediated interactions carry an ambiguous mix of presence and absence, and internet users…leave innumerable ghostly traces scattered across various platforms, often forgotten even by their creators" (Lines, 2023, p. 4). The author focuses on the *no longer* direction more than the *not yet* in Fisher's hauntology to investigate transmedial internet horror. Lines (2023) focuses on "two hauntological *no longers*": The first one is how the consumer-producers "return to a grainy past" in online horror communities. Although these prosumers did not experience the past in question, they are reflecting on the past through use of "analog" and visual qualities that are reminiscent of earlier eras. The other *no longer*, the author notes, is how most of the content in digital space has the quality of presence and absence since users leave traces across different platforms. Lines (2023) calls these users "spectral prosumer" (p. 3-4). This discourse on the hauntological *no longer* extends Fisher's argument on hauntology, delivering an understanding of contemporary online engagements with the past.

Furthermore, Lines (2023) discusses 'Open-Source Horror,' under which he also lists the phenomenon of Backrooms, the origin of liminal space aesthetics. The Backrooms and liminal space phenomenon "began with an anonymous post on a 4chan thread for "unsettling images" in 2019" (Lines, 2023, p. 5) depicting an image of an empty, dimly lit corridor, and it popularised when it moved to other platforms. In 2022, it became more popular following the upload of a short film titled "The Backrooms (Found Footage)" on YouTube by Kane Parsons, aka Kane Pixels, which has more than 55

33

million views to date. The phenomenon continued to grow with fandoms and communities developing around the Backrooms lore, and it later inspired the creation of a game, "The Backrooms" (2022). Lines (2023) notes that "The Backrooms' defining feature is its uncomfortable audiovisual artifacts, like constant room tone. The monster presents itself via the hypermedial sound affects of the medium itself" (p. 6). The Backrooms, which later led to the appearance of liminal space aesthetics, is hauntological in its nature as it uses the analog aesthetic both in its visuals and sounds, crafting a nostalgic mood that encapsulates a spectral sense of the past, present and future.

Extending the hauntological discussion on internet horror and digital hauntology, Henriksen (2018) examines the moral ramifications of digital curses and hoaxes by using a hauntological analysis of a digital urban legend that circulates online. The article begins by introducing an internet urban legend, a cursed JPEG file with a picture of a dog called "Smile.dog". According to the myth, viewing this picture will cause the dog to haunt your dreams, and to get rid of this curse, one has to "spread the word" and pass on the curse. Henriksen (2018) notes that the "curse of Smile.jpg makes it possible to imagine a virtual space of spectrality as a constantly unfolding place of im/possibility. The monster may never arrive, but it is also paradoxically already here" (Henriksen, 2018, p. 277). On that note, Henriksen (2018) introduces the concept of "the monstrous arrivant" (p. 272), which refers to Fisher's hauntological *not yet*. The author states that the "arrivant is that which arrives without ever arriving; it is the virtual workings of the yet to come" (Henriksen, 2018, p. 272). To put it simply, when users receive the cursed

image of "Smile.dog", they "will have to orient themselves toward a future where a monster may arrive" (Henriksen, 2018, p. 269), thus, think of something "yet to come." Whether the legend happens or not, it consistently undergoes a process of becoming and exists as something "yet to come," continuously in a state of being "not yet."

In his research on Creepypasta narratives, researcher Joe Ondrak (2018) contends that communication technologies have given rise to a new type of haunting known as 'digital haunting,' which results from crossing ontological boundaries and navigating the virtual world of the Internet. In the digital landscape, the virtual content and the physical users "ontologically flattened to meet in a hauntological middle" (Ondrak, 2018, p. 172). Since the virtual space is now a common place where individuals come together, the occurrence of digital hauntings arises not only among actual people but also with fictitious and born-digital characters (Ondrak, 2018, p. 162). This connects to Lines' (2023) argument regarding the Backrooms phenomenon, in which digital haunting occurs through both users meeting on fandoms and communities around the phenomenon and encountering the digital monster through the medium. Similarly, in nostalgic liminal space aesthetics, digital haunting emerges through conjuring memories related to the past. As Ondrak (2018) notes, technology has the power to create monsters, and "the networked social media spaces that host these stories promote a sincere engagement with the myths and monsters that they conjure" (p. 164). As the author argues, "open digital spaces," after all, are "hauntological spaces" (Ondrak, 2018, p. 172) encompassing both the hauntological *no longer* and *not yet*.

Images of liminal and abandoned spaces are highly popular online in the contemporary age. In a recent study, scholar and dead mall enthusiast Maria-Gemma Brown (2023) investigates the "dead mall" phenomenon on the Internet through a hauntological approach. These eerie visuals of mall ruins have been appearing online, circulating through online forums like Reddit and video-sharing platforms like YouTube and TikTok. Characterized by liminal and analog-like aesthetics and "marked by a lack of people and shops, of life and vitality" (Brown, 2023, p. 102), visuals of the dead mall, sometimes called 'vaporwave mall' or 'liminal space mall' in online communities, became an online subculture on the internet, leading to discussions and creating "enthusiasts" who are keen on sharing and finding new abandoned malls that either exist in real life or created digitally. Dead mall enthusiasts use online communities and comment sections to discuss their findings by sharing photographs and videos of abandoned malls (Brown, 2023, p. 103).

The dead mall scene, just like the vaporwave subgenre, is an interesting take on understanding contemporary anxieties and digital culture. Similar to vaporwave, "dead malls haunt the internet" (Brown, 2023, p. 101) and reflect the lost futures that were promised but never came. Brown (2023) argues, "Videos and images of dead malls contain ghostly whispers from past consumer cultures—spectral traces of long-lost dreamworlds" (p. 108). Dead malls reflect the "inseparability of presence and absence" (Lines, 2023, p. 3) that Derrida and Fisher's hauntology emphasizes. They were once built to provide a 'utopia' (Brown, 2023) for people, including restaurants, entertainment centers, activities, and clothing. These once human-centered places are

now empty and quiet, existing far away from their function. On this note, Brown (2023) states, "We were promised a utopia but, instead, got dystopia. Enthusiasts observe that dreamworlds have passed, malls have risen and fallen, and now their ghosts surround us. They reflect that future-feeling has become past-feeling" (p. 110). This theme of failed "promised utopia" is one of the central arguments of hauntology, recalling Fisher's 'lost futures,' the future that we were promised but that never actualized.

Moreover, Brown (2023) argues that malls are ambivalent places "between past and future, interior and exterior" (p. 105), which aligns with Fisher's suggestion of two directions in hauntology: first, something that is not around and second, something that has not happened yet. In the context of the dead mall phenomenon, malls do not function according to their intended aim of having people inside; they appear as waste spaces or 'non-places,' as Mark Augé (1997) defines, without any purpose. However, they continue to exist in virtuality in the present and point out to the future through futuristic themes like dystopian aesthetics, just like vaporwave aesthetics.

Brown (2023) investigates dead mall visuals through a case study of the Reddit subreddit r/deadmalls and YouTuber Dan Bell's "Dead Mall Series," reflecting on the discussions around dead malls and how they act as tools to "reimagine the future" (p. 104). The author writes, "The future had a certain feeling. The dead mall scene channels, shares, and feels these hauntological affects" (Brown, 2023, p. 114). The purpose behind these nostalgia-driven aesthetic subcultures is made clear by this rethinking about the future through the visuals of liminal malls. The liminal space

visuals deliver this idea of the disappearance of the linear sense of time and enable a vision to view the past, present, and future from an external perspective that transcends any period of time.

2.3. The Weird, the Eerie, and the Absence Aesthetics

In his latest work, *The Weird and the Eerie* (2016), Mark Fisher introduces two modes or sub-genres within literary studies, the 'weird' and the 'eerie,' and expands their application to film, music, and popular culture. In their very essence, these two modes are related to the broader idea of hauntology due to their exploration of the themes of temporal disruptions, absence and presence central to hauntology. While weird and eerie are commonly utilized to analyze literary texts, their application area extends to philosophy, film, and artworks. In the context of this thesis, the terms provide an analysis of the internet phenomenon of liminal aesthetics, which can be considered 'weird' and 'eerie' due to their visual themes and reception in the online space. In the following part, I will reflect on the definitions of the weird and the eerie in Fisher's work and more recent research, along with how these concepts may be used to examine the absence motif in liminal internet aesthetics.

The notions of the weird and the eerie share the mutual ideas of "preoccupation with the strange" and "a fascination for the outside" (Fisher, 2016, p. 6). These ideas refer to a curiosity towards the unknown, the 'outside' of the ordinary, that draws a connection between reality and fantasy. The encounter with the unknown and the 'outside' indicates the exploration of landscapes outside everyday reality. On this note, Fisher (2016) compares weird and eerie with Freud's concept of *unheimlich* or uncanny. While these

concepts share common ground as "affects" and "modes"—modes of film, fiction,

perception, and existence—they diverge in their approach to the strange and the

unfamiliar (Fisher, 2016, p. 7). While Freud's *unheimlich* has an introspective

perspective and "is about the strange within the familiar" (Fisher, 2016, p. 7), the weird

and the eerie have an external perspective that enables "us to see the inside from the

perspective of the outside" (Fisher, 2016, p.8). Therefore, to understand these terms, it is

crucial to recognize their relationship with the 'outside.'

The weird and the eerie can be considered as aesthetic categories within the broader

framework of 'absence aesthetics,' as discussed in the Introduction chapter. They are

characterized by a lack of coherence and disruption caused by the uneasy interplay

between absence and presence. As the media studies scholar Eugene Thacker (2016)

writes in his review of Fisher's *The Weird and the Eerie* (2016), the exploration of the

weird and the eerie is valuable in the context of 'cultural aesthetics' (para. 17), since

they are aesthetic forms inherently embedded in the culture.

2.3.1 Absence Aesthetics

The concept of absence, specifically the 'absence aesthetics' or 'aesthetics of absence'

as articulated in the literature, is a vast topic investigated across various disciplines,

exploring its philosophical domain and application to different topics. In a 2012

conference focused on the theorization and application of absence across cultural

studies, the researchers argued that the concept is primarily associated with the "notions

of loss, lack, scarcity, ruins, and spectrality" (Felski, 2013). Moreover, absence has been

discussed both as an 'aesthetic' and an 'anaesthetic' in efforts to theorize it as a concept to explore various topics.

Although this thesis will not dive deep into the theory of absence since it focuses on the absence aesthetic within the framework of hauntology, weird and eerie, it is worth mentioning a few of its applications in various fields to understand its associated concepts to connect it later to the liminal internet aesthetics. As will be explored in the following sections, the weird and the eerie are two concepts that revolve around the interplay between absence and presence. They are not framed as 'presence aesthetics' or 'aesthetics of presence' in this research because, as Derrida (1993) also argues, everything and every presence consists of a series of absences. Therefore, acknowledging the weird and the eerie as aesthetic experiences of absence allows a deeper exploration of how the unsettling and the unknown emerge precisely through what is missing or concealed rather than overtly present.

The key arguments surrounding absence aesthetics and absence discourse in the literature demonstrate its interplay with presence and the notion of spectrality. As Davor Džalto (2015) argues in his essay, in the contemporary age, the visual arts began to revolve around the ideas of "nothingness" and "emptiness" (p. 652). To explain this shift in the aesthetic perception of art over the ages, Džalto (2015) uses the term "vanishing acts" (p. 652), which refers to the disappearance of conventional elements of traditional artistic expression. Although the author focuses on 'nothingness' and 'emptiness' as new aesthetic forms of art, his notion of *vanishing acts*, in fact, refers

directly to the concept of *absence*. This can be further explained through David Fenner's

(2023) conceptualization of, 'aesthetic absence' which he refers to as "something

missing" or lack of something. Fenner (2023) states that absence does not necessarily

imply "'empty space,' or 'emptiness'" (p. 163), instead it relates to something that "does

not look quite right" (p. 168) and "missing" (p. 163) which "involve a certain sort of

expectation" (p. 164). Both Džalto's (2015) and Fenner's (2023) reflections on the

absence aesthetics concerning contemporary artworks revolve around the central theme

of 'lack of something' and involve an 'expectation.' This element of expectation also

appears in a recent paper on archeology and archeological absence. As the authors

discuss, when something expected becomes missing, absence becomes crucial (Brady et

al., 2024). In line with this, Frers (2013) argues that when something or someone

expected "does not fill the space" (p. 434), absence arises. "What these "somethings"

are is infinite and can include, among other things, people, animals, objects, actions,

emotions, and images" (Brady et al., 2024, p. 292).

These ideas of 'something missing' and the 'expectation' are directly linked to the

interplay between absence and presence and can be further explained through Marita

Sturken's (2020) article on the 9/11 Memorial & Museum. The author approaches this

museum space as a spectral place in which the "ghostly presence of the buildings and

people who were shockingly rendered absent on 11 September 2001" (Sturken, 2020, p.

314). The interaction between absence and presence on this occasion demonstrates itself

with the symbolic presence of the left behind object and audio, as well as the physical

absence of the people and the buildings after the attack. Sturken's investigation on this

subject reflects the inseparability of absence and presence and illustrates further how absence can be a tool for making something present.

Since the expectation of something being present creates the feeling of absence, it appears as a concept that only arises in connection to something. As Frers (2013) argues, absence is a "relational phenomenon" (p. 433) that only becomes a thing when people experience it. "Someone has to miss something for it to be specifically absent" (Frers, 2013, p. 433). This is why absence is intertwined with expectation, an expectation of missing things appearing again, which leaves a sense of "unresolved anticipation" (Fenner, 2023, p. 166). Once the anticipation is solved, the absence disappears, replaced by the presence of the missing thing.

Considering the key discussions around the notion of absence, it emerges as a concept to frame the two modes of hauntology—weird and eerie—since these modes are fundamentally concerned with 'something missing,' which involves a certain kind of 'expectation' that creates an unease. Moreover, they are 'relational' concepts, existing only in connection to another thing. Therefore, the qualities that make something weird or eerie are primarily rooted in the experience of absence.

2.3.2. *The Weird*

The weird has already been defined in literary works, most prominently popularized in the early 20th century in American writer H.P. Lovecraft's texts. Lovecraft used the term 'weird' to describe the narratives that evoked a sense of the unknown and challenged the limits of reality. As Fisher (2016) argues, Lovecraft's writings, with their unique themes

and atmosphere, were neither horror fiction nor fantasy; they were 'weird' and

"obsessively fixated on the question of the outside: an outside that breaks through in

encounters with anomalous entities from the deep past, in altered states of

consciousness, in bizarre twists in the structure of time" (p. 13). In this context, the

weird indicates something that comes from the outside, something alien and foreign, that

intrudes the normalcy, which creates a sense of "wrongness" (Fisher, 2016, p. 13). This

feeling of wrongness is not necessarily due to something foreign that intrudes on the

familiar, but a familiar object can also intrude on another familiar thing (Cattien &

Stopford, 2022). The weirdness of this situation comes from how the combination of

these two contexts does not seem right.

Building on earlier texts on the weird, Fisher (2016) defines it as "the presence of that

which does not belong" (p. 46). He writes that:

> The weird brings to the familiar something which ordinarily lies beyond it, and
> which cannot be reconciled with the "homely" (even as its negation). The form
> that is perhaps most appropriate to the weird is montage — the conjoining of two
> or more things which do not belong together (Fisher, 2016, p. 8).

Drawing parallels between the weird and montage, this idea of 'not belonging' becomes

more apparent. In the montage, different scenes that are not connected come together to

create a single image. Similarly, in the weird, something comes from outside, evoking

an "out of place" feeling (Fisher, 2016, p. 25). As Thacker (2017) argues, the weird

refers to a "part that does not fit into the whole," and it, in a sense, disrupts "the whole"

(para. 10). This refers to the discussion on how weird is highly attached to the question

of 'outside.' As Nicholas Stock (2023) discusses, Fisher's development of the term

'weird' into the everyday "mundane" (p. 781) experiences allows one to get away from the established notions of the real world and enables one to see the familiar in unfamiliar ways by defying boundaries. This idea also parallels deconstructionism, which refers to the breaking down of existing norms to invite new interpretations.

The weird is also acknowledged as a threshold. Again, drawing from Lovecraft's weird tales, Fisher (2016) argues that Lovecraftian texts often maintain contact with realism as they navigate the realm of fantasy (p. 21). This leads to the argument that weird defines the threshold between different realms. On this note, Fisher (2016) gives examples of weird such as time travel stories that connect various worlds and times (p. 30) and David Lynch's *Inland Empire,* which uses corridors and holes, that act as a passage, a "threshold to another world" (Fisher, 2016, p. 43). As a threshold, the weird exists in between "different territories simultaneously" (VanderMeer & VanderMeer, 2011, p. 15) and allows an "alternative path" for understanding the world around us (VanderMeer & VanderMeer, 2011, p. 17).

In the book *The American Weird*, Greve and Zappe (2021) explore the weird thoroughly both as a 'concept' and 'medium,' the first exploring the meaning and the latter diving into the manifestations of the weird in various media texts such as film, television, video games, and music. Informed by Fisher's understanding of the weird, the authors discuss that weird can be conceptualized as an aesthetic category rather than a genre or a writing mode. For Fisher, "the weird is a multifaceted mode of artistic production and aesthetic experience that transcends the idea of genre" (Greve & Zappe, 2021, p. 4). In the

Introduction chapter, Greve and Zappe (2021) refer to aesthetic theory and minor aesthetics in Sianne Ngai's *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (2012). The authors add that, in the 21st century, American culture is "structured according to a distinct set of new aesthetic forms" (Greve & Zappe, 2021, p. 2), and 'the weird' can be a new addition to Ngai's aesthetic categories informed by commodity fetishism of late capitalism in the American context. Acknowledging the weird as a new aesthetic form also connects with the argument of the weird as a "sensation" (VanderMeer & VanderMeer, 2011, p. 15), which we recognize when we encounter it.

These discussions of the weird connect it back to the 'absence' argument. As explored earlier, in the weird, something from the outside comes in and disturbs due to its presence. Just like absence, weird is a 'relational' concept that can only be recognized in relation to another thing it encounters. It does not exist as a singular element but is recognized in the presence of a familiar thing. In this situation, the combination, or the 'montage' of two things, does not unite in the same context; thus, something feels off and 'weird.' Although this makes the weird a mode that can be defined by the "co-presence of things that do not belong together" (Cronin & James, 2024, p. 7), the 'co-presence' of the two or more elements creates a lack of context. At this moment, the absence of context generates a weird feeling.

2.3.3. *The Eerie*

In contrast to the weird, defined as "the presence of that which does not belong," the eerie has two modes, "failure of absence" and "failure of presence" (Fisher, 2016, p. 46), which highlights hauntology's presence/absence dichotomy. Fisher (2016) writes

that the eerie sensation arises "either when there is something present where there should be nothing, or there is nothing present when there should be something" (p. 46). Expanding on Fisher's argument, Cronin and James (2024) situate eerie as one of the "four corners of the unsettling" alongside the 'weird,' 'creepy,' and 'awkward,' describing it as the "absence of the expected" or the "presence of the unexpected" (p. 7). In the eerie, there is an encounter with the "disembodied voices, lapses in memory, selves that are others, revelations of the alien within" (Thacker, 2017, para. 10), which makes it a 'relational' concept that arises in connection to another thing. Eerie is a relational concept since "the subject is disturbed by its relation to objects that are themselves sites of de-formation" (Cattien & Stopford, 2022, p. 123). This relationality and the expectation aspect mentioned previously situate the eerie as an aesthetic of absence.

The other components of the eerie that differentiates it from the weird are "suspense" and "unknown" (Fisher, 2016, p. 46). Fisher (2016) argues that eerie sensations emerge from unexpected occurrences or the presence of something ordinarily absent. When one reaches the knowledge, the suspense is over, and "the eerie disappears" (Fisher, 2016, p. 47), indicating the first mode of eerie: *failure of absence*. To illustrate the second mode of eerie *failure of presence*, Fisher (2016) gives the example of "the eerie that pertains to ruins or to other abandoned structures" (p. 47). In this second mode, human presence is expected in some spaces, yet they are empty and abandoned, creating an eerie atmosphere.

A critical point in defining the two modes of eerie is the question of *agency*. Fisher (2016) argues that in the case of the *failure of absence,* the focus is on whether a "deliberative agent" is present, while in the *failure of presence*, it is about "the particular nature of the agent at work" (p. 48). In other words, the first mode deals with the uncertainty about the existence of an active force, and the latter refers to the qualities and characteristics of the missing thing. The eerie emerges when something alters the familiar in ways that make it feel unsettling, challenging our sense of agency (Cattien & Stopford, 2022, p. 117). This uncertainty of agency results from disruption of *coherence* and familiarity*,* which creates an "out of place" experience that leads to eerie (Cattien & Stopford, 2022, p. 120). Compared to the weird, these eerie experiences have a "lasting effect" (Woodard, 2017, p. 1182), which permeates the landscape and changes the atmosphere. The weird is about sudden changes and encounters with external forces that intrude on normalcy.

Although framed as an 'unsettling' concept (Cronin & James, 2024), eerie also has an appealing quality. As Cattien and Stopford (2022) argue, one pursues eerie because it is simultaneously *repulsive* and *attractive,* "fascinating and threatening" (p. 114). Eerie experiences involve absences and anticipation of resolving the ambiguous state. In the eerie, there is "a moment of recognition of a traumatic absence which is also potentially a productive encounter" (Follert, 2023, p. 38). This duality within the eerie makes it more than an unsettling concept, introducing it as an aesthetic experience in between "fear" and "enjoyment" (Follert, 2023, p. 38).

2.4. Liminality

Liminality is a concept that was first introduced by anthropologists, which refers to "an in-between position, either spatially or temporally" (Thomassen, 2018, p. 40). As the social scientist and anthropologist Bjørn Thomassen (2018) argues, liminality is at the core of human beings since it refers directly to the idea of navigating change and transitions; it is the experience of "inbetweenness" (p. 40). The term initially emerged within the discipline of anthropology and has subsequently been adopted into broader academic discourse, including architecture, literature, arts, international relations, education, and popular culture (Thomassen, 2018, p.7) since it provides a versatile framework to explore ideas surrounding time, space, transitions, and change.

While introducing the concept of liminality, the majority of the studies reference the foundational works of ethnographer Arnold Van Gennep and anthropologist Victor Turner. The liminality concept was first introduced by Van Gennep in his book *The Rites of Passage* (1909), initially written in French, in which he defined the term as 'rites of passages,' which are crucial milestones and transitions in an individual's life such as birth, puberty, adolescence, adulthood, and death, concisely, "biological crises" and "milestones" (Norbeck & Alexander, 2023, par. 2). Van Gennep's conceptualization of liminality denotes a transformative journey from one state to another, both on an individual level and as a social group (Thomassen, 2018, p. 3). In the 1960s, as Thomassen argues in his book *Liminality and the Modern: Living Through the In-Between* (2014), Victor Turner redefined the notion of liminality to trace the initial stages of human experience (p. 5). This suggests a shift from viewing liminality as

biological transitions to recognizing it as an overall human experience, which is inherently 'liminal.' Therefore, Turner's liminality emphasizes that individuals are continually in a transitory 'in-between' state throughout their lives since it is an inescapable aspect of human experience. The centrality of 'experience' and transition is the core idea behind Turner's concept of liminality, which has emerged as a dominant framework in most scholarly studies on the concept.

Thomassen (2018) notes, for Turner, "liminality refers to any "betwixt and between" situation or object" and to "space and time" (p. 48). However, liminality is not just about in-between spaces or times but about how individuals relate to the 'familiar' within that space. According to Turner (1974), liminality creates a context where individuals experiment with familiar things to make them unfamiliar (p. 60). Within the liminal state, the process of defamiliarization disrupts established ontological frameworks, creating an unsettling unfamiliarity. This disruption resonates with the key characteristics of liminality identified by Thomassen (2018) –defamiliarization, dislocation, and uncertainty– which collectively create the uncanny feeling associated with liminal experience (p. 2).

Discussing defamiliarization and unsettling situations, hauntology and uncanniness, indeed, are concepts of liminality (Jenzen & Munt, 2013, p. 185). Hauntology helps to understand the unsettling nature of liminality, and it shares a connection with liminality's defamiliarization process. In hauntology, the transitional state of liminality becomes a space where the past haunts the present, and the familiar becomes uncanny.

Contrary to nostalgia, hauntology is deeply rooted in liminality, which explores a specific type of in-betweenness in which past and present co-exist, creating the 'out of place' experience of the fluidity of time. Hence, liminality resonates with Fisher's hauntological 'no longer' and 'not yet,' which emphasizes the limbo between past and future, embodying a sense of temporal ambiguity and uncertainty.

Liminality, as discussed earlier, refers to a transitional state between established structures; thus, it provides a lens through which to understand the "transformations in the contemporary world" (Thomassen, 2018, p. 1). A prime example of such transformation is the recent global pandemic and the resulting lockdowns, which had a significant impact on human lives and led to a period of prolonged liminality, creating uncertainty about the 'new normal' and the future. The concept of liminality helps to understand this contemporary period diving into the concept of an ongoing state of flux.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Studying contemporary internet phenomena and subcultures presents challenges, considering user-generated content's complicated nature. Researchers can approach a contemporary phenomenon through various methods, including analyzing the phenomenon's circulation, content, visual elements, and cultural and philosophical implications, as well as audience reception and ethnographic analysis of online communities that form around the phenomenon. Considering the currentness of the *internet aesthetics* phenomenon, there is a lack of literature investigating it in scholarly circles. Thus, the methodological approaches adopted in such study also rely on experimental, eclectic, theory-dependent, and interdisciplinary approaches, which take their sources from humanities and social sciences.

My approach to studying the phenomenon of liminal aesthetics draws from two key sources: the literature on the contemporary Internet aesthetics phenomenon and from

earlier Internet cultural phenomena such as works on the 'Slender Man' phenomenon and 'memes,' which have similarities with the liminal aesthetics phenomenon considering their origin and user-generated nature. Therefore, the previous research provides practical approaches for studying similar vernacular content on social media.

3.1. Methodologies Adopted by Other Studies

Upon reviewing the literature on earlier internet aesthetics phenomena, emerging 'niche' web content, vernacular content, and memes, it is observed that the common methodologies used in research are qualitative approaches such as visual analysis, close reading, case studies, digital ethnography, and theoretical analysis. The examined literature shows that, as the first step, the researchers often dive into the origins and the source of the phenomenon or the cultural artifact in question. Then, the online discourse surrounding it will be examined to define the phenomenon in the context of digital culture. Applying this model as a methodological structure, this thesis first traces the origins of the liminal internet aesthetics phenomenon and then examines visuals and discussions surrounding the phenomenon in online communities.

Although liminal internet aesthetics is considered a TikTok aesthetics trend since it is popularised within the platform, its origin predates TikTok. In the pursuit of tracing the origins of online liminal aesthetics, I encountered an unexpected trajectory leading to 4chan forums and the *Know Your Meme* website. Notably, both platforms are closely associated with internet memes, which frequently originate from discussions on various online forums such as 4chan before becoming popular on other platforms and being

archived on the *Know Your Meme* website. As mentioned earlier, liminal aesthetics dates back to an image in 2019 shared under a 4chan thread, "unsettling images" (later referred to as *the Backroom*), which was the initiator image of liminal internet aesthetics. As such, internet aesthetics can be assumed as a part of memetic content on the Internet since they also usually begin their life on 4chan or similar websites and become viral later. Similar to memes, internet aesthetics is a participatory experience. Users enthusiastically share and remix these visuals, creating new variations.

On social media sites and blogs, internet aesthetics is often described as 'viral' and 'trendy' videos and images on TikTok. Consequently, it is crucial to discuss the distinction between memes and content that goes viral. As communication professor Limor Shifman (2014) argues in the book *Memes in Digital Culture*, while virals are "single cultural units" such as one video or photo, internet memes are a "collection of texts" that are often initiated by virals (p. 56). Considering this aspect in circulation, liminal internet aesthetics parallel with internet memes, starting as a single unit of an image on 4chan and evolving into a phenomenon on various popular platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Reddit, and YouTube. Moreover, the liminal space phenomenon also has a *Know Your Meme* entry, a website archiving internet memes. This demonstrates that liminal space aesthetics has become a unique phenomenon in the contemporary age and can be classified under internet memes. Regarding these similarities between memetic content and liminal aesthetics phenomenon, I also consider early studies on memes as a guide to understanding how to study contemporary internet phenomena.

As Shifman (2014) notes, methodological approaches such as "qualitative close reading of texts" and "comparative, cross-cultural studies" will be valuable in studying memes since they are crucial cultural artifacts of the digital age (p. 175). As another online cultural artifact, internet aesthetics can be studied through similar methodologies. Although liminal internet aesthetics is now a widespread phenomenon on the Internet globally, most of the visuals demonstrate American institutions from earlier eras. Their nostalgic sentiments appeal to the American audience and those who grew up in the USA. Therefore, the global interest in this phenomenon also opens the way for a discussion on cross-cultural studies. Although this thesis does not apply a cross-cultural analysis, it employs close visual analysis of the liminal internet aesthetics, taking them as cultural texts and artifacts (Shifman, 2014), as stated earlier.

As previously discussed, the similarities between memes and internet aesthetics cannot be overlooked. However, internet aesthetics extend beyond mere memetic content circulating on the internet and are on the 'niche' side of the Internet, resonating with specific audiences. In this context, research on earlier internet aesthetics subcultures, particularly a study on vaporwave aesthetics, has been instrumental in distinguishing liminal aesthetics from internet memes.

In his PhD thesis, "Adventures in Vaporwave: A Participant-led Creative Practice Exploration of Everyday Life in a Weird Internet Community," Adrian Lucas-Healey (2022) adopts participatory research on vaporwave aesthetics and investigates the

subculture with an ethnographic approach. In this doctoral thesis, the author proposes the term "weird internet" building on "The 16th Annual Meeting of the Association of Internet Researchers" (2015) conference articles on "niche" internet phenomena and positions the vaporwave aesthetic as a part of "weird internet." Informed by this research and discussion on the internet memes above, I argue that liminal aesthetics can be positioned between 'internet memes' and 'weird internet' because of their unique content.

In one of those conference papers on the niche and weird internet phenomena, communication professor Adrienne L. Massanari (2015) uses the case studies of the ASMR (autonomous sensory meridian response) and Trypophobia phenomenon on the Internet to understand how "individuals experience and make use of the web as a sensorial playground" (par 1.). The author closely reads the surrounding discussions on these phenomena and examines the subreddits for ASMR and Trypophobia. In another paper at the same conference, Shira Chess (2015), a professor of entertainment and media studies, investigates Slender Man fandom, which is also a form of meme, as the author notes (par 1). Chess (2015) examines the fan communities of the Slender Man phenomenon and discusses how new versions of the original content later appeared as parodies. In this study, the author uses the case of Slender Man and closely reads the surrounding material found on the web.

Returning to research on *internet aesthetics*, Douglas (2014) presents a valuable work on online cultures by using the *Internet Ugly* aesthetic trend as a case to study its

cultural implications and visual aesthetics as a form of resistance against mainstream designs. Internet Ugly is an umbrella phrase that encompasses Internet memes characterized by purposefully ugly designs created by amateur users. In this study, the author aims to highlight the importance of this aesthetic within the digital culture since it gives information about Internet communities and creators. Douglas (2014) delves into this specific online phenomenon, beginning with its definition, origins, examples, causes, shifts, and future within online culture. Douglas' (2014) approach is explanatory and offers a close analysis of several subcategories of Internet Ugly as case studies to understand user-generated memetic content.

In another research, Cole (2020) explores the vaporwave aesthetics phenomenon, which he suggests is a part of "meme culture" since users reuse and remix earlier materials, similar to memes (p. 301). The author makes a close analysis of videos uploaded by vaporwave-dedicated YouTube accounts, albums, and user comments under these videos. Cole (2020) delves into the origins of vaporwave aesthetics and the online discourse surrounding it, exploring the discussions on YouTube comments and Reddit. Moreover, the author examines the interviews with vaporwave creators on the Internet to better understand this aesthetic phenomenon and its creation process. Since the article focuses on vaporwave's 'nostalgia,' it explores the aesthetics through a close reading of visuals and soundtracks to explore this specific theme.

Wu's (2022) article on *dreamcore* aesthetics serves as another example of the methodology this thesis adopts. Beginning with exploring the phenomenon's origins,

Wu (2022) then examines its characteristics and visual elements, investigating the themes of 'lost items' and 'exposed shame' visible in the visuals. The study explores this contemporary phenomenon through several theoretical concepts, including 'liminality' and 'defamiliarization.' It analyses the style of dreamcore compared to art movements such as surrealism to understand this online aesthetics within the broader context of digital culture.

In another research on contemporary internet aesthetics, Adriaansen (2022) uses the case of *dark academia* aesthetics, which became an internet subculture during the coronavirus pandemic lockdowns. The author delves into how platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Tumblr enable a space for curating aesthetics that both romanticize earlier eras and challenge dominant societal norms. Similarly, Murray (2023) combines a close reading approach and content analysis on several hashtags to investigate *dark academia* aesthetics subculture through the concept of 'bookishness' as an online identity and connect literary culture and digital media. The author delves into the creation of *dark academia* aesthetics and the criticisms it received online.

As previously stated, studies on internet phenomena other than contemporary internet aesthetics also serve as an example of the methodology used in this thesis. In his article, communication professor Andrew Peck (2015) uses the case of the Slender Man myth and investigates the discussions around the phenomenon through the *SomethingAwful.com* forum and how it became a popular internet myth from its first

appearance in a forum to a digital legend through collaborative performances of netizens.

In another research, senior lecturer in media Jessica Balanzategui (2019) analyses the emerging internet genre 'digital gothic' which she defines as "the new type of vernacular creativity on the internet" (2019, p.188) through a case study of the 'Candle Cove' (2009) story, one of the Creepypasta stories. Creepypastas are horror-related stories, and each story is a product of digital storytelling practices created by online users. The term comes from the words 'creepy' and 'copypasta,' "a portmanteau of copy and paste" (Balanzategui, 2019, p. 188) that first emerged in 4chan boards and became popular around 2007. The author begins by defining the Creepypasta phenomenon, digital gothic, and storytelling practices on the Internet and then moves on to analyzing 'Candle Cove,' which she identifies as a form of digital gothic. The in-depth analysis of the story enables the author to discuss the intersection of digital and analog media and explore the characteristics of gothic to justify the reasons for positioning it as a form of digital gothic. The article does not only analyze the narration of the story but also demonstrates its surrounding discussion since it is a phenomenon created online by Internet users. Balanzategui (2019) investigates the forum posts on the *NetNostalgia* Forum related to the story of Candle Cove and examines how the netizens interact with the story and each other in the community.

As studies on earlier Internet aesthetics, memes, weird Internet, and Internet phenomena demonstrate, studying vernacular content and phenomena on the Internet often involves

a variety of qualitative approaches. The scholars employ these methodologies to investigate the cultural implications of the specific subcultures and phenomena to understand the broader societal trends, communication dynamics, online behavior, and the evolution of digital culture. Specifically, investigating the origins of the phenomena and the discussions surrounding it on the forums appear as a fundamental stage of the analysis. Moreover, ethnographically informed approaches appear useful in analyzing online phenomena and subcultures as they usually involve studying communities in digital and sometimes in physical space.

Following the earlier research on internet phenomena, this thesis utilizes a combination of close visual analysis/close reading and digital ethnography methodologies. To investigate visual elements of the liminal core aesthetics phenomenon and their reception, the thesis focuses on the three liminal internet subcultures: *dreamcore*, *nostalgiacore*, *and weirdcore*. Through examining the discussions around those subcultures through forums, user comments, and online communities devoted to liminal aesthetics subgenres, this study aims to understand these contemporary phenomena within the broader context of digital culture.

The initial observation regarding the circulation of Internet aesthetics visuals is that they are either shared within Internet aesthetics online communities (on *Aesthetics Wiki*, Reddit, and Discord) or through social media accounts (on TikTok, Instagram, Tumblr) specifically dedicated to sharing these images and videos. Therefore, the first stage of the analysis is finding and collecting images from relevant sources to analyze the visual

motifs and themes that specifically refer to the research questions. Given the lack of

significant differences between the images and videos shared across various platforms

and their tendency to circulate from one platform to another, I have limited my selection

to five platforms: *Aesthetics Wiki*, TikTok, Instagram, Reddit, and Discord.

Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, TikTok became one of the most popular

platforms for sharing short videos on various topics. It is a platform where many digital

subcultures circulate and evolve, and many internet aesthetics subcultures circulate and

gain popularity on this platform. As a "visual zeitgeist" (Leaver et al., 2020, p. 245),

Instagram also serves as a place to find visuals on any specific and 'niche' content. It is

also a platform to find subcultures and liminal internet aesthetics-dedicated accounts

that regularly share visuals related to online aesthetics. Therefore, several user accounts

on TikTok and Instagram will be used for the analysis in this thesis.

While hashtags can be a helpful tool for finding visuals, they are not effective for

researching liminal internet aesthetics. This is because they are often used inconsistently

to boost engagement, which leads to irrelevant content. Therefore, instead of hashtags,

visuals are collected from liminal aesthetics-dedicated accounts on Instagram and

TikTok that specifically focus on sharing visuals of liminal aesthetics and attract many

liminal aesthetics enthusiasts, as well as the *Aesthetics Wiki* webpage. In addition to

analyzing the visuals, the thesis also examines threaded discussions on Reddit and

Discord communities. These discussions provide valuable insights into how community

members perceive and interpret the visuals and the phenomenon as a whole.

CHAPTER IV

EXAMINATION OF LIMINAL INTERNET AESTHETICS

4.1. Liminal Spaces of the Internet: Between Transition and Transformation

Regarding the question of what liminal space is and how it became an internet

phenomenon, it is necessary to trace its first appearances and internet discussions on the

phenomenon. In the *r/LiminalSpace* community on *Reddit*, 'liminal space' is described

as "the time between the 'what was' and the 'next.' It is a place of transition, waiting,

and not knowing. Liminal space is where all transformation takes place, if we learn to

wait and let it form us" (*Reddit*). Expanding upon this, liminal space refers to the

transitory period between past and future, as well as uncertainty. While the terminology

might refer to physical locations, Turner's (1974) emphasis on the 'experimental' nature

of liminality expands the concept, framing liminal spaces as transcending mere

physicality to serve as metaphors for the internal transformations one encounters

throughout life.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, the online liminal space phenomenon originates from the famous "Backrooms" image that was uploaded on 4chan in 2019 under the "unsettling images" thread (Lines, 2023, p. 5). This image, uploaded by an anonymous user, portrays an empty corridor with an old-style patterned wallpaper and wall-to-wall carpet, all in yellowish tones (Figure 1.). It was shared as a response to the thread on 4chan with a prompt that writes, "post disquieting images that just feel 'off.'" This initial call for 'unsettling images' later led to the popularization of liminal space aesthetics, one of the most well-known internet aesthetics in contemporary digital culture. Delving into the origins of the liminal space phenomenon, its initial relation with horror content becomes evident, which later expanded to incorporate nostalgic connotations. Contrary to the pre-pandemic internet nostalgia trends, liminal spaces of the online realm carry an underlying sense of horror and distress. This disquieting effect is achieved through the motif of human absence in spaces where their presence is expected.

Figure 1. "post disquieting images that just feel "off" posted on May 12, 2019, by an anonymous user (retrieved from 4chan archives)[1]

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[1] https://archive.4plebs.org/x/thread/22661164/

During the global pandemic, liminal space aesthetics evolved into a full-fledged online

phenomenon, branching into sub-categories such as liminal '-core' aesthetics examined

in this thesis, each with its distinct fan base and community. These visuals, often shared

with accompanying ambient and electronic music soundtracks on TikTok to evoke

nostalgia and uneasiness, encompass both transitory and public spaces like abandoned

malls, playgrounds, and swimming pools, as well as domestic settings such as empty

hallways, living rooms, bedrooms, and bathrooms that connect to the audience's

nostalgic childhood memories, evoking a sense of safety, and the comfort that

familiarity brings. These visuals seem to reflect what Thomassen (2015) describes as the

"mixture of joy and anxiety...that pleasant but unsettling sensation of infinity" of leaving

the familiar home setting that liminality evokes (p. 4). This feeling of departure is

depicted in liminal space aesthetics by the imagery of missing people, which creates an

eerie and unpleasant atmosphere that reflects the leaving of the home and its comforts

behind.

When discussing liminal spaces, it is useful to make a comparison between *space* and

place to understand their further implications. French anthropologist Marc Augé (1997)

distinguishes between the two concepts, stating that the former lacks a distinct identity

while a place embodies a sense of identity, a "rootedness." Augé's (1997) concept of

non-places, which are transitory areas not inhabited by living beings, such as highways,

airports, and shopping malls, which lack identity, resonates with the liminal space

aesthetics found online, as they reflect the transitional, in-between spaces Augé

describes. These in-between spaces, as philosopher and theorist Elizabeth Grosz (2001)

argues in *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space*, are "a place related to other places but with no place of its own" (p. 114). Augé's *non-places* and Grosz's *no-place*, which only becomes real through other places, help to understand the liminal space aesthetics in terms of their representation of the past and its haunting presence in contemporary environments. The visuals of liminal spaces hold a 'haunting presence,' representing an authentic past and triggering a sense of nostalgia only when viewed by the audience and connected to their blurred memories. Without this interaction, the visuals lack inherent nostalgic elements since they are not "independent spaces" on their own "but rather 'transitional spaces'" (Wu, 2022, p. 154) that only become actualized through their relation to other spaces.

Given that the phenomenon of liminal spaces is driven mainly by the interest of users and online communities, it is necessary to comprehend how communities understand this concept. Within the *r/LiminalSpace* Discord community, discussions about liminal space revolve around two primary interpretations. The first focuses on the *spatial* dimension of the visuals, defining it as "transitional spaces." The second emphasizes the *temporal* aspect, defining the visuals as "photos that remind how it feels to be a child again," functioning as nostalgic artifacts. Drawing on liminality's earlier definitions, 'childhood' is a liminal phase that can also be argued as a transitional act. Therefore, both interpretations contribute to understanding the range of sub-categories that have emerged within the broader liminal space phenomenon.

4.2. Liminal Internet Aesthetics

After the popularization of liminal space aesthetics, various versions and highly specific subcategories with slightly different styles started to appear on video and image-sharing platforms, and "a huge number of netizens have mimicked this style by creating large numbers of images or turning them into motion flicks with appropriate soundtrack" (Wu, 2022, p. 153). These subcategories share the common motif of liminality, often intertwined with nostalgic imagery. Upon observing the trends and accounts on liminality and liminal space aesthetics, it becomes evident that several aesthetics with a '-core' suffix have branched out from liminal aesthetics, the most popular ones being *dreamcore*, *weirdcore*, and *nostalgiacore* aesthetics.

It is challenging to track the exact origin of core aesthetics. Early dreamcore visuals likely did not have distinct labels and were categorized separately since they emerged from the broader liminal space aesthetics later. However, as liminal internet aesthetics began to gain popularity, characteristic motifs of each aesthetics category began to emerge. These characteristics have also sparked discussion within online communities dedicated to these three subcategories as users debated how to identify and differentiate each one. Considering the user-generated nature of internet aesthetics, it is difficult to distinctly define each category since they have all become interwoven, specifically under the term 'liminal aesthetics' on the internet. However, the following section will explore these three aesthetic subcategories, examining their origins, characteristics, and connections to liminality, hauntology, the weird, and the eerie while discussing their similarities and distinct features.

4.2.1. Dreamcore

Dreamcore, also known as *Liminal-Dreams,* is one of the subcategories of liminal space aesthetics characterized by "a surrealist aesthetic that uses motifs commonly associated with dreams, daydreams or nightmares, portrayed through media such as images, videos and, on occasion, music" ("Dreamcore," n.d.). The *dreamcore* visuals often demonstrate illogical and surreal environments with a juxtaposition of exterior and interior environments, such as doors opening directly into a cloudy sky or entrances from the ethereal realms into earthly settings (Figure 2.), suburban houses placed in vast and empty landscapes with unrealistic perspectives and distorted sizes (Figure 3.), flowers and outdoor plants scattered across indoor corridors (Figure 4). As the name implies, *dreamcore* creators try to capture the scenes from dreams by blurring the line between reality and imagination in the visuals. Utilizing collage, digital manipulation techniques, and vibrant and blurry filters, they create liminal environments that create out-of-reality imagery, often described as 'strangely familiar' by social media users and enthusiasts.
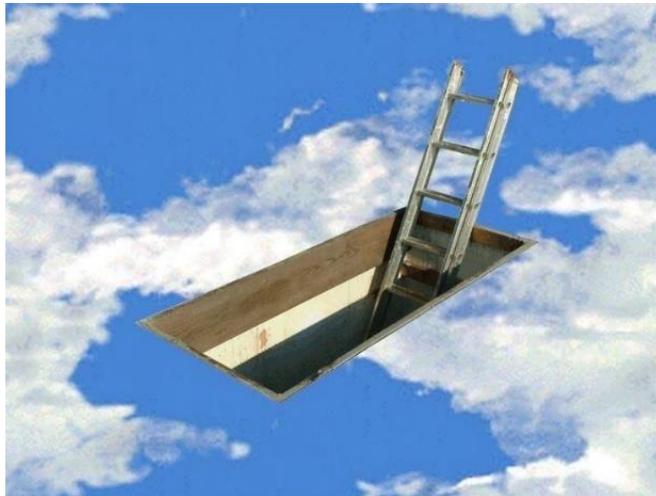
Figure 2. "Ladderdreamcore" added by user Lektricfergus, posted on Dreamcore (*Aesthetics Wiki*)[2]

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[2] https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Dreamcore?file=Ladderdreamcore.jpg

Figure 3. "Home" created by -SleepyLeaf-, posted on r/dreamcoreaesthetic community on Reddit[3]

Figure 4. "Hallwaydreamcore," added by user Lektricfergus, posted on Dreamcore (*Aesthetics Wiki*)[4]

This familiar sense evokes nostalgia in the viewer, although the edited visuals hardly

represent the audience's own past or raw memories. According to Wu (2022),

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[3] https://www.reddit.com/r/dreamcoreaesthetic/comments/16i5j11/home/
[4] https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Dreamcore?file=Hallwaydreamcore.jpg

dreamcore communicates familiarity because the visuals often include the objects or the "lost items" that once belonged to a person. Viewing dreamcore images triggers a "sense of material" in the viewer, which is a feeling that something is present but "outside of the functional sphere" (Wu, 2022, p.157). The recognizable objects found in these visuals create a feeling that is both familiar and strange simultaneously. However, the nostalgia evoked here does not work on the individual level but by viewing someone else's life, which leaves the audience with an uneasy feeling. As Wu (2022) suggests, users connect dreamcore images "to the past or memories" as they involve the "items" that are "lost" that once belonged to a person (p. 157).

It is at this point that dreamcore images transition into hauntological territories more than nostalgia. The audience encounters the images in the present, just like encountering a specter. On the other hand, the images themselves act as specters by involving 'left behind objects' or an indication of human presence. For instance, in Figure 4, an unidentified human silhouette and lively flowers indicate an ambiguous presence, a spectral remnant, rather than a completely abandoned place. As such, dreamcore's nostalgia is mediated not through direct recollection but through a haunted encounter with another's lost past, producing an unsettling sense of what once was but is no longer.

When asked about the best thing about dreamcore aesthetics in the Discord community *dreamcord*, under the 'dreamcore-discussion,' one user answered:

> this weird feeling
> i have no idea how to describe it

but you know what i mean

The uneasiness and weirdness of dreamcore come from connecting different realms and reflecting a combination of dream and reality. The weird, as discussed in Chapter 2, is an "aesthetic experience" (Fisher, 2016, p. 4). One of the earliest popular dreamcore videos on TikTok, uploaded by the user @thebackr0oms in 2022, reflects this aspect of 'experience' in dreamcore phenomena. In the video, a series of dreamcore images cycle in the background while a narrator reads the following:

> *There exists a world that you can only reach between 3:30 and 3:33 AM. Before you travel, I must advise you of a few rules. Rule Number 1: No matter how lovely they are, do not pick the flowers. If you do, you'll never get rid of them. Rule Number 2: If you see a tall man with no face, JUST KEEP WALKING. Whatever you do, don't stop to look at him. Rule Number 3: If someone offers you tea, politely decline and keep walking. If they follow you, RUN! Anything is better than drinking the tea. And Rule Number 4: the most important of them all, wear a watch at all times. Time is weird there, and if you don't have a clock on you, time will warp into nothingness and you won't know when to leave. That's all! Safe Travels =)* (TikTok).

The narrative involves crucial themes that point to crucial visual motifs that most of the dreamcore images involve, such as flowers, human figures without faces, indications of some kind of presence, such as voices, and temporal ambiguities. Moreover, it is like a handbook before going into these dream worlds, which is, as the narrator says, dangerous. While the images shown throughout this narration do not indicate a certain threat, the narration emphasizes a weirdness and eeriness in these seemingly normal spaces with an uneasy tone.

However, this uninviting tone is paradoxically combined with a sense of escapism. As the user *Meridian* discusses in the *dreamcord* community on Discord, dreamcore visuals often have these "narratives" in which a text on screen guides the users to escape from

reality and "enter a dreamcore," and experience "the aesthetic as a place." As noted by Wu (2022), dreamcore's "aesthetic purpose is to induce cognitive dismay in viewers, followed by a slight sense of discomfort and disquiet in their inexplicable familiarity, or an emotionally ambivalent experience" (p. 154). The exploration of the dream landscape, thus, emerges as a central aspect of this online aesthetic. This aesthetic purpose involves both disturbing the audience with unsettling narrations and surreal visuals while also offering a comforting experience by inviting them to the 'dream worlds,' offering an escape from everyday life.

Drawing inspiration from dreams, dreamcore's visual elements show parallels with surrealism. As a "surrealist aesthetic popularised on TikTok" (Turner, 2023, para. 1), dreamcore content that users share is never unedited raw pictures; instead, they are always created by combining disparate elements in unconventional and strange ways resembling dreams. Dreamcore visuals and narratives guide users to escape the ordinary and enter an alternative realm with unsettling juxtapositions and dreamlike atmospheres. As a pandemic-era internet aesthetic, they foster the idea of "freedom" and an "experience," but as discussed above, they also disturb the audience, which is also the aim of surrealism in art (Blagrove & Lockheart, 2023, p. 200).

However, as Wu (2022) argues, dreamcore and surrealism are very different, considering how they use "familiarity and strangeness" together (p. 159). While surrealism uses defamiliarization to challenge logic, dreamcore uses a specific type of defamiliarization, the 'lost items,' to create an unsettling and nostalgic mood. Despite its

dreamlike imagery, dreamcore remains in the realities of everyday life (Wu, 2022, p. 158). As an online aesthetic born in the COVID era, it constantly reminds the unsettling emptiness of once lively and bustling settings, highlighting the normalcy that became inaccessible. This sense of loss aligns with hauntological *no longer* and *not yet*. The dreamcore aesthetic involves the 'no longer' depicting familiar spaces that have moved beyond and embodies the 'not yet,' inviting the audience into alternative and imaginary realms that can never be fulfilled or actualized.

4.2.2. Weirdcore

While dreamcore often employs dreamlike imagery with some form of uneasiness and surrealism, the weirdcore aesthetic delves into the darker realm, using the surreal in a more unsettling manner. In light of the description provided on the *Aesthetics Wiki*, weirdcore "is a surrealist aesthetic" that often uses "amateur or low-quality photography and/or visual images" ("Weirdcore," n.d.) that have been highly edited. In comparison to dreamcore, weirdcore employs surreal elements more disturbingly, creating a sense of disorientation. Recalling Wu's (2022) discussion on surrealist art versus dreamcore, weirdcore appears less similar to surrealist art than dreamcore does. The reason for this is that the weirdcore aesthetic often takes its visual references from the early internet era rather than dreams and combines them with low-quality images, with a "lack of content" ("Weirdcore," n.d.).

In terms of visual style, weirdcore visuals resemble Douglas's (2014) "ugly aesthetics" memetic trend from the 2010s utilizing intentionally ugly designs as a form of rebellion against traditional aesthetics. For example, in Figure 5, there is an image of a counter

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that includes a cloudy sky at the bottom, a starry night at the top framed with green color, and in the middle, a low-quality text that says: "Where did the time go?".[5] The image is purposefully edited poorly, which resembles the early years of the internet and web aesthetics of the late 1990s and early 2000s. The text on the image further suggests a longing for the past. For Douglas (2014), the ugly aesthetic style of the 2010s "is the one that best defines the internet against all other media" (p. 315). Likewise, the weirdcore aesthetic puts the old 'internet' in the center of its aesthetic style and celebrates the early years of the web, which was simpler and straightforward compared to today's complicated and advanced designs.

Figure 5. "Where did the time go?" posted by u/Goldenbatling on the r/weirdcore community on Reddit.

In addition to the old web aesthetics, weirdcore often incorporates images of old devices such as monitors from the 2000s (see Figure 6.) as well as text-on-screen style (Fig. 5 and Fig. 6) "which conveys a message that is incomplete or out of context, thus leaving

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[5] https://www.reddit.com/r/weirdcore/comments/1b2baow/where_did_the_time_go/#lightbox

the viewer to ask questions and make their personal interpretations in regards to the

meaning of the statement presented to them" ("Weirdcore," n.d.). While crafting the

weirdcore aesthetic, the creators use an image from the past and often add text to it,

which carries the typically anonymous creator's voice to the present-time viewer and

destroys the temporality. The text on the screen serves as a specter from the past who

talks to the audience. Through the visuals, the image from the past, the specter-creator,

and the present-time viewer meet on the same ground through the medium of the

internet.

Figure 6. "My friends! :)" created by u/Scp_71047, posted on r/weirdcore community on
Reddit.[6]

In the r/weirdcore Discord community, a user writes:

> Weirdcore is specifically set in the 2000s because its meant to be nostalgic to
> that time period. It draws a lot from 2000s internet stuff, not as in having old
> web elements, its more like memories of seeing weirdly edited images you'd
> find on random websites (Discord).

[6] https://www.reddit.com/r/weirdcore/comments/1bnui1p/my_friends/

This return to the feelings and 'memories' of experiencing the past is one of the characteristics of the weirdcore aesthetic. They are not a pure representation of the past nor a nostalgic remediation but the second-hand experience of early web aesthetics. This reconstruction of past experiences and interest in recreating copies of the early web can be explained by the concept of 'analog nostalgia.' In the book chapter, "Analogue Nostalgia and the Aesthetics of Digital Remediation," Schrey (2014) argues that the concept of 'analog nostalgia,' initially discussed by Laura Marks in 2000, "embodies a return to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries' fascination with ruins and its fragmentary aesthetics, which eventually led to the construction of artificial ruins" (p. 28). Indeed, weirdcore is an attempt to relive the formative years of the internet, a time characterized by its bizarre, ugly, and 'weird' aesthetics found on the web.

Although the weirdcore aesthetic indicates a sense of nostalgia, considering its implications of a longing for a bygone era, the recreation of the analog past through mimicking early web aesthetics with newer tools and techniques results in hauntological 'not yet.' In this context, the 'not yet' suggests the impossibility of fully recreating or returning to that past. This further highlights the temporal ambiguity and liminality in these visuals. The past is represented, yet it is not exactly the same as it once was since it is manipulated with contemporary tools and techniques. This aligns with Henriksen's (2018) concept of the 'arrivant,' which suggests a future possibility that haunts the present, similar to the weirdcore's recreation of the past, which appears surreal and uneasy, reminding the impossibility of fully returning to bygone eras.

Again, in terms of style, aside from the early internet aesthetics style of memetic ugly aesthetics, weirdcore also takes inspiration from glitch art and Tumblr-era amateur editing. Tumblr is known as a platform that significantly influenced popular culture and the social media landscape in the 2010s with its style and aesthetics that allow users to share their content and combine several forms of digital media (Hoch et al., 2020, p. 4). Taking inspiration from the aesthetic style of the early 2000s, weirdcore embodies a nostalgic yet unsettling combination of revisiting a fragmented memory.

4.2.3. Nostalgiacore

Among liminal aesthetics, *nostalgiacore* approaches the concept of liminal from a slightly different angle. As explored under the liminal space phenomenon, liminality is interpreted by the community members of liminal space aesthetics as a phenomenon having both *spatial* and *temporal* meaning. Nostalgiacore falls closer to the latter definition, the *temporal*, which is a feeling of reliving your childhood memories. Nostalgiacore visuals often include empty playgrounds and arcade rooms from the late 1990s and early 2000s, and frequently used visual themes are nostalgic and popular commercial artifacts from that era, such as "childhood/teenhood TV shows, movies, music, snacks, trends, fashion, video games and other forms of technology, Hangout places (such as malls), books, comics, and many other things" ("Nostalgiacore," n.d.) (See: Figure 7).

Figure 7. "Tamagotchis" added by user ToastedMarsmallow, posted in Nostalgiacore, Gamercore (*Aesthetics Wiki*)

Nostalgiacore first emerged as an internet aesthetics phenomenon during the COVID-19 pandemic. This aesthetic often revolves around childhood-centered nostalgia and the goods and media individuals consumed during their formative years. This nostalgia in the twenty-first century is, indeed, similar to the characteristic of twentieth-century nostalgia. As noted by Gary Cross (2018), a professor of modern history, twentieth-century nostalgia diverges from the nostalgia of earlier eras since it centers on "individualistic" and "consumption-based nostalgia," emphasizing the "personal past" (p. 27). As the author argues, individuals "found identity and meaning in specific goods, often encountered in formative years, but, as a result, felt that their selfhoods were threatened when those things disappeared" (Cross, 2018, p. 27). This aligns with Wu's (2022) dreamcore discussion and how it incorporates 'lost items' in its visual theme to make individuals feel the unease of confronting the items that once belonged to a

person. Like the dreamcore's lost items, nostalgiacore showcases commercial goods

from one's childhood that have since vanished. The visuals often include goods that

were produced targeting children in the late 1990s and early 2000s, such as popular toys

and school supplies, and childhood activity centers, such as indoor and outdoor

playgrounds and arcades.

Nostalgiacore aesthetics often go hand in hand with accompanying POV (Point of View)

videos on TikTok. The POV video trend is not unique to nostalgiacore aesthetics, it is a

form of narrative that has already been used on TikTok for a while in a variety of

contexts and also in earlier image-based memes. The purpose of POVs is to position the

audience in an alternative reality "into the speaker's narrative about an event," and this

"speaker rhetorically asks of the reader to consider that this propositional information is

their own point of view" (Greene & Schmid, 2024, p. 4). This type of narration creates a

dialogue between the creator and the viewer since "the performing user becomes the

subject of the viewer's POV" (Cervi & Divon, 2023, p.4).

One example of POV videos that existed before the liminal internet aesthetics is the

'#POVchallenges' on TikTok, a participatory trend through which TikTokers took some

occasions and acted for short videos, creating an immersive experience from the

viewer's perspective. Tom Divon and Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann (2023) delve into the

#POVHolocaustChallenge on TikTok, in which creators "reenacted fictionalized

memories of Holocaust victims" (p. 1). In these "video-memes," as the authors argue,

the creators acted as 'victims' of the Holocaust, and although this 'victim trend' might

become offensive for the actual victims and their families, as Auschwitz Memorial Museum reported (Guy, 2020), POV videos around these kinds of "controversial issues" actually help "to raise awareness about and visibility for victims" (Cervi & Divon, 2023, p.4). The #POVHolocaustChallenge on TikTok invited users to "empathetically "play" with the memory of the Holocaust by using audiovisual memes as vehicles for victim perspectives" (Divon & Ebbrecht-Hartmann, 2022, p. 4).

In POV videos of nostalgiacore, creators often use a series of photographs from the early 2000s to the 2010s, and humans are absent in those images. For instance, a TikTok video shared by @nostalg1ac0re with the caption "getting ready for school" demonstrates a series of photos, including a photo from a bathroom, tubes of child-friendly toothpaste, liquid soap, a lunch box, and a backpack. On the video[7], the caption writes: "POV: It's 2010 and you're getting ready for school". In this POV video, the viewer is supposedly taken back to the 2010 morning and gets ready for school as a child or teen. Through this video format, the viewer is taken back to a specific period, often their childhood years.

Likewise, in a TikTok video[8] shared by @_f4lse_.reality_, a collection of images features iconic artifacts from the 2010s era. These include a monitor displaying the Wii console game homepage, a snapshot from a popular teenage TV show, a photo of McDonald's, a box full of toys, rubber bracelets, Monster High dolls, a photo of an

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[7] https://www.tiktok.com/@nostalg1ac0re/video/7207716888359521542?q=%23nostalgiacore&t=1715192376680
[8] https://www.tiktok.com/@_f4lse_.reality_/video/7185622208465734954?q=%23nostalgiacore&t=1715192376680

iPhone screen with games in it, Play-Doh, and Capri Sun. Accompanying these visuals is the caption "POV: it's 2015," which invites viewers to immerse themselves in the nostalgia of that particular year. This childhood nostalgia recalls the "consumption-based nostalgia" (Cross, 2018, p. 27) and the anxiety that comes with the disappearance of these familiar items from one's childhood.

Although the nostalgiacore aesthetics initially center around images of nostalgic items, it has a different usage on other social media platforms. The initial categorization on *Aesthetics Wiki* tends to define it through the depiction of goods from the past, yet, as stated earlier, liminal internet aesthetics are often used interchangeably, overlapping in their visual motifs. In the case of nostalgiacore, there is this shift toward liminal space aesthetics similar to dreamcore and weirdcore, yet with a more emphasis on nostalgic imagery rather than surreality.

One of the most viewed videos on TikTok's #nostalgiacore hashtag was shared by the account @nostalg1ac0re in 2023 with the caption: "id do anything to go back." (Figure 8) In the video edit, a series of photos are displayed as a slideshow, from a child picking flowers to chalk on the ground, from an image of a sunset viewed through a window to a photo of a grass field on a bright day, and a bird sound accompanies as a soundtrack. The images shown in the video reflect a longing for an era devoid of smartphones and modern gadgets that dominate contemporary life, as the video's caption hints.

Figure 8. "id do anything to go back" TikTok edit video shared by @nostalg1ac0re [9]

However, the nostalgiacore aesthetic is not just another nostalgia trend on the internet.

As a sub-category of liminal aesthetics, it shares the eerie and haunting characteristics

with dreamcore and weirdcore aesthetics. The TikTok video (Figure 9) from the user

@nostalg1ac0re exemplifies this juxtaposition of nostalgia and unsettlement. It depicts

images from various indoor playgrounds tapping into the audience's sentimental

attachment to memories of childhood and innocence, accompanied by bird sounds and

on-screen text:

> when I was younger I wanted to stay in the playground forever, then one day my
> parents left me there, now twelve years later i'm still here, I hide from the
> workers when it's closing time, and eat the food and drink from the cafe, because
> for some reason, I can't leave (TikTok).

The beginning of the narration, "*When I was younger I wanted to stay in the playground*

forever," reflects a nostalgic memory of childhood happiness, yet, as the narration

continues, it takes a surreal turn "*Then one day my parents left me there, now twelve*

years later i'm still here...for some reason, I can't leave." In that moment, the nostalgic

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[9] https://www.tiktok.com/@nostalg1ac0re/video/7209568494890011910

qualities of the video become disrupted by the narrator's spectral, almost ghostly

presence. The narrator's lingering presence in the playground—which is hidden from

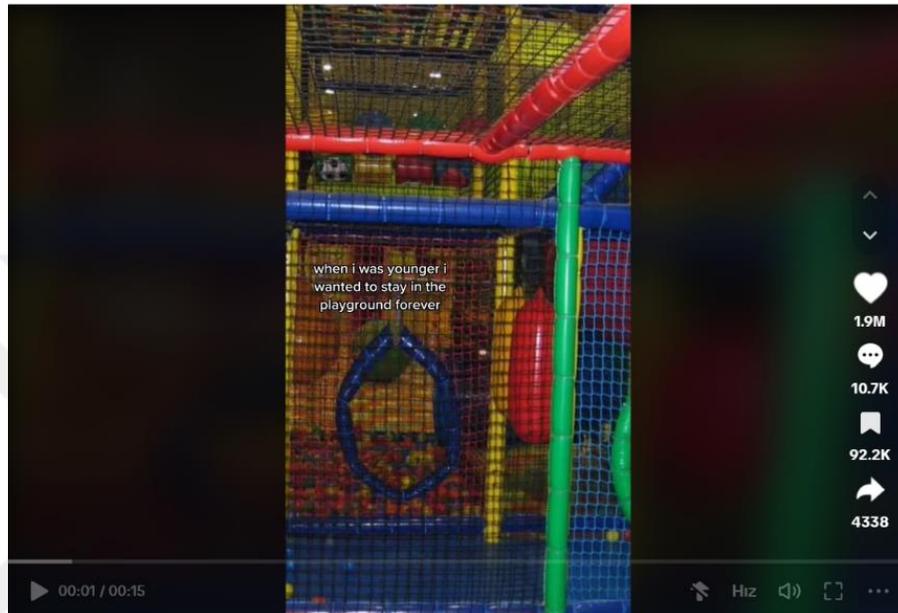the audience and only implied through the on-screen text—creates a haunting effect.

Figure 9. Playground images shared by @nostalg1ac0re on TikTok.[10]

4.3. Human Absence and Presence

The following section focuses on the human absence motif in liminal internet aesthetics,

particularly in relation to societal anxieties caused by the pandemic and the fast-paced

nature of contemporary life. Through this analysis, the human absence—or its

presence— becomes a key theme in understanding liminal internet aesthetics.

4.3.1. Failure of Presence: Absent People and the Spectrality of Spaces

A major motif of liminal internet aesthetics is the absence of humans. The visual

elements emphasize the emptiness of spaces that conventionally "should be" (Fisher,

2016, p. 46) inhabited by individuals yet conspicuously 'fail' to be present. This 'failure

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[10] https://www.tiktok.com/@nostalg1ac0re/video/7069860103091916037

of presence' creates an *eerie* encounter between the liminal visuals and the spectator. The inability to be present in these digital reimaginings of spaces from a *no longer* time creates unease and mystery that go along with nostalgia.

Liminal internet aesthetics is marked by 'expected' human presence. This anticipation mainly derives from associating specific spaces with human presence and activity. A prime example of such a space where human presence is expected is the 'home.' The home marks a central position in Western thought (Bachelard, 1969; Fiddler, 2017). It is a space directly built for human use, embodying personal and collective memories and serving as a symbol of safety, familiarity, and identity. The home is also tied closely with nostalgia, described as "a longing for a home" (Boym, 2001, p. 13) or "homesickness" (Reynolds, 2011, p. xxv), emphasizing the deep emotional and psychological connection people have with the idea of home.

Figure 10. "Liminal house" added by Saifkandil2010, posted in Liminal Space (*Aesthetics Wiki*).[11]

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[11] https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Liminal_Space?file=Liminal_house.jpg

The home figure is a very frequently used imagery in liminal internet aesthetics. In Figure 10, the picture demonstrates the interior of an American suburban house. The door on the left is open to darkness, the stairs lead to the upstairs, and the room at the right (probably the kitchen) has a cold, white light. Although once inhabited, the home is now empty and abandoned. This aligns with Fisher's (2016) observation of "the eerie that pertains to ruins or to other abandoned structures" (p. 47), where the expectation of human presence contrasts starkly with the emptiness, creating an unsettling atmosphere. One thing that denotes human presence in this space is the left-behind objects, the furniture. As Wu (2022) argues, while viewing these images, people experience a "sense of material" (p. 157) since the objects that are left behind, such as the cabinets, doors, and stairs, are "outside of the functional space" (p. 157). The presence of the objects points out the missing subject: the human. This juxtaposition between the absence of individuals and the presence of objects leads to the eerie discussion again since the absence of something lends an unexpected importance to what is present (Woodard, 2017, p. 1183). The missing element creates a sense of tension around what is present and how the presence is experienced. This situation can further be explained through horror narratives in which the scene becomes unsettling and eerie due to what is concealed or unseen—like a ghost.

Even though humans are absent in the images, they are eerily there as a haunting specter. This absence of people has hauntological implications, as it conveys the feeling that the traces of human life still inhabit the space. The empty spaces of liminal internet

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aesthetics also suggest a potential for future presence. In Figure 10, the cold light in the kitchen, the dark hallway, and the stairs create a sense of anticipation where the liminality reflects a transformation in which a missing human subject could reappear or something new can appear in the space. This suspended sense of the future adds a haunting dimension to the eerie atmosphere, where the absence of human presence leads to a possibility of what is yet to come. As such, the space carries this tension between 'what was' and 'what will.' Although the furniture in the room makes the space appear abandoned, this sense of future possibility makes it feel like a threshold for something yet to unfold.

In another post entry on Reddit, the image (Figure 11) shows an old empty kitchen with wood cabinets and an island. It is shared with the caption: "I'm afraid we're stuck in the past, nobody is here anymore." Once again, the image showcases a room in a once-inhabited house, which connects with people's sentimental memories and emotions. Furthermore, the caption indicates an 'eerie' feeling triggered by the empty liminal space and the objects in the image. As mentioned in the caption, the viewer becomes 'stuck in the past' by viewing the image, although they are not present in that space. The viewer's immersion in this past, despite their physical distance, highlights the hauntological potential of digital images, as described by Ondrak (2018), where the boundaries between the viewer's physical space and the digital content become ontologically blurred, meeting in a hauntological space.

Figure 11. "I'm afraid we're stuck in the past, nobody is here anymore." posted by u/Intelligent_Bank4600 on r/LiminalSpace community on Reddit.[12]

The comment under the image (Figure 11) by a user reads: "This is a very similar layout to a house I knew as a kid. I don't remember the detail well enough to know if this exact one is it, or not."Another user writes, "I'd rather be there. I miss when life was much more simple." These reactions to the image of an empty kitchen reflect a nostalgic yearning for childhood and a more stable life compared to the contemporary digital age. These comments by two users highlight the shared sense of longing among users, where personal memories and idealized pasts converge within the digital space. The mention of a 'familiar layout' by the first user suggests a blurred boundary between the digital representation and real-life experiences, where the image triggers a visceral, almost forgotten connection to a distant past. Meanwhile, the second user's remark expresses a desire to escape the complexities of modern life, underscoring a collective sentiment of

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[12]https://www.reddit.com/r/LiminalSpace/comments/13vazme/im_afraid_were_stuck_in_the_past_nobody_is_here/

nostalgia that is not just about places but also about a perceived loss of simplicity and certainty. As Reynolds (2011) argues, technological developments have had an impact on the way individuals experience time and space, and the feeling of being at home eventually vanishes in the present age. The liminal aesthetics resemble individuals' childhood memories and homes that have "disappeared" (Bachelard, 1969, p. 48).

The liminal home photos evoke nostalgia, but they also have an unsettling quality due to the furniture appearing separated from the spectator and residing in an unidentified place and time. As Cattien and Stopford (2022) argue, "the agency we intuit in eerie objects is nothing more than the sense of an object's being apart from us: our sense of the object-world having an existence independent from our own" (p. 115). The familiar objects in the images serve as "temporal reference points" (Cattien & Stopford, 2022, p. 128), grounding the viewer's nostalgia in something familiar yet unsettling. This duality—the comfort of recognition and the discomfort of separation—underpins the eerie nature of spaces that exist independently, without human presence, leaving the viewer between longing and unease. The separation from familiar spaces and failure to be present reflect societal anxieties regarding the isolation experienced during the pandemic and in the increasingly digital and isolated world. The human absence in these spaces resonates deeply with a collective experience of disconnection that people worldwide experienced during the pandemic. In this sense, liminal internet aesthetics mirrors a cultural shift in which the figure of home becomes a site of longing for something lost rather than a symbol of comfort and familiarity.

The recurring theme of the absence of people is also observable in institutions and facilities other than home in which human presence is expected. As stated earlier, abandoned mall images "contain ghostly whispers from past consumer cultures," and they depict the "inseparability of presence and absence" (Lines, 2023, p. 3). The images of empty malls communicate this idea of the failure of human presence. As Brown (2023) argues, malls were built for human use, and their emptiness communicates an eerie feeling since, as Wu (2022) states, they are now beyond their functional territory.

As discussed so far, the eerie's mode of *failure of presence* provides a focused perspective on what specifically is missing. In this mode, the eerie is produced by what is not there, what is absent. In the familiar spaces of home, mall, school, or playground, which are designed for human use, one expects an 'agency,' yet the eerie spaces of liminality demonstrate a picture of an almost 'paused life,' without activity, in which nothing progresses. For instance, Figures 12 and 13 capture a moment in transitional spaces, as if life has paused, with no human presence in sight. This lack of human activity results in purposeless, empty spaces that are incomplete without a form of presence. It is in this failure to be present that viewers find discomfort and unease. The caption in Figure 13 reads: "I went there when i was a child.. but it isn't a real place is it?" The remark suggests a feeling of familiarity while simultaneously questioning the reality of the empty space as if it exists in a dream or memory. This interplay between recognizing the spaces and doubting their reality highlights the failure of presence. This failure of presence allows the viewer to reflect on the missing element, the human activity and connection.

Although the empty spaces of liminal internet aesthetics illustrate a life that has almost 'stopped,' the eerie spaces also adopt some kind of movement that is hidden from the human eye. According to Cattien and Stopford (2022), The eeriness of these spaces comes not only from the lack of human activity but also from the fact that empty spaces have an underlying 'agency' within them. This leads us to the 'failure of absence' discussion, which is the other mode of eerie.

Figure 12. "The average road you've seen in your dreams" created by u/Niikuro, posted on r/dreamcore community (Reddit)[13]

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[13]https://www.reddit.com/r/dreamcoreaesthetic/comments/16lwyg8/the_average_road_youve_seen_in_your_dreams/

Figure 13. "I went there when i was a child.. but it isn't a real place is it?..." created by u/Mr_Sniffler-The_One-, posted on r/dreamcorecommunity (Reddit)[14]

4.3.2. Failure of Absence: The Moments of Presence

The second mode of the eerie, 'failure of absence,' connects with Derrida's (1993) argument on how absence is an inherent part of how we perceive presence. This mode of the eerie indicates moments that something should be absent, but instead, it is present, which creates an eerie sensation. The eerie arises when an expectation of absence is disrupted by the moments of presence. These moments refer to the things that refuse to disappear completely. Just like the 'failure of presence' mode, human absence is one of the main motifs in this mode of the eerie, but here, the formation of the eerie is not caused by what is missing but emerges from the remaining objects.

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[14]https://www.reddit.com/r/dreamcoreaesthetic/comments/15yw9lt/i_went_there_when_i_was_a_child_but_it_isnt_a/

It is the lingering presence, the moments of presence, that causes the tension and eerie

sensation. This tension can only be resolved by revealing all the hidden presences that

cause the suspense (Fisher, 2017). Only if the audience is informed about the hidden

presences that disrupt the absence does the eerie disappear, and the absence becomes

irrelevant (Fenner, 2023). In Figure 14, one of the sources of the tension is its indication

that someone who is 'absent' in the space is watching the viewer. Although this watcher

is missing in the image, there is a hint of their presence that causes a disquieting

experience. The audience is not informed about what is or who is missing, they are only

aware of a sign of presence that fails to be absent in the moment. As Thacker (2017)

argues in his review of Fisher's work, the eerie involves encounters with the

"disembodied voices, lapses in memory, selves that are others..." (para. 10). In the

mentioned image, a 'disembodied voice' disrupts the space by refusing to leave

completely.

Figure 14. "Watching!" created by u/hurtmyeyes, posted on r/dreamcore community on
Reddit.[15]

The discussion of lingering presences leads to one of the important aspects of the eerie, 'coherence.' Coherence is crucial for understanding the world because, without it, the familiar starts to feel strange. In liminal internet aesthetics, coherence is frequently broken by the manipulation of the spaces. This can be explained by one of the most popular visual styles of liminal internet aesthetics, which is created by inserting black shape motifs into vacant areas. In Figure 15, the coherence is interrupted by a black rectangular shape and the text on the image. Similar to glitch aesthetics, also referred to as 'ghost in the machine,' which points to the instances of "faulty interference in the regular operation of a technology" (Kemper, 2023, p. 48), the black shape motif emerging in liminal internet aesthetics displays an attitude that defies logic. In this instance, the expectation of emptiness is interrupted by the presence of glitch-like figures. The text on the screen in Figures 15 and 16 further suggests the presence of something that is not entirely missing despite being concealed.

Figure 15. "Do you see it?" created by u/Snowrock5, posted on Reddit on the r/weirdcore community[16]

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[16] https://www.reddit.com/r/weirdcore/comments/1fbg4nm/do_you_see_it/

Figure 16. "TakeALook" added by the user OhOkayThen3243, posted on Weirdcore (*Aesthetics Wiki*, Fandom)[17]

As Cattien and Stopford (2022) argue, in eerie occurrences, the "dialogue between subject and object breaks down" (p. 120). Therefore, the thing that creates the eerieness in these spaces is not the way they appear abandoned. Instead, the objects within these spaces appear unclear and "haunt the subject" (Cattien & Stopford, 2022, p. 119). In Figures 15 and 16, the visuals communicate a form of existence through the mystery of the texts and the dark shapes, which results in a failure of absence. Although the people—or perhaps other 'things'—are absent in those liminal spaces, they have not completely disappeared. They persist in being present and "come back at us out of the mist" (Cattien & Stopford, 2022, p. 128). In the eerie, as Follert (2023) claims, there is an ambiguous mystery that leads us to the question of "what is this thing, or non-thing" (Follert, 2023, p. 25). This question goes unanswered in Figures 15 and 16, leaving the audience with a spectral voice that blurs the everyday cohesion of reality and familiarity.

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[17] https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Weirdcore?file=TakeALook.jpeg

4.3.3. *"The presence of that which does not belong"*

In liminal internet aesthetics, surreal and dreamlike imagery appears frequently as a characteristic visual style. The visuals often incorporate elements from different contexts and eras to create montage-like aesthetic styles to emphasize the dreamy and weird aspects of the subject. The juxtaposition of several elements from these visuals creates a visual language that points to the 'human absence' theme by depicting 'weird' moments through juxtaposing objects from outside intruding on normalcy. These objects do not belong to the ordinary and familiar, resulting in a feeling of "wrongness."

This wrongness within the weird shows itself in the liminal aesthetics visuals through a combination of elements such as contrasting interior with exterior settings or indications of human presence through either adding human body parts to the setting or an omniscient text on visuals, which adds a spectral dimension to the images. To illustrate this point, the 'eye' figure often adopted in weirdcore aesthetics reflects a partial presence of a human being. The interplay between the 'eye' and 'I' suggests the notion of human presence; however, in the absence of a complete human form, the eye/I turns into an object that feels alien in liminal spaces.

To exemplify, in Figure 17, the human eye floating in the middle of a grocery store creates a weird atmosphere due to the two contexts not matching. The eye image "does not fit into the whole" (Thacker, 2017, para. 10) and disturbs the space since there are two contradicting realities—the space of the grocery store and the surreal presence of a floating eye. The caption, "Don't let it find you," suggests a form of specter that can be

either the eye figure itself or another form that is hidden in the image. This creates an ambiguity for the audience, placing them between the familiarity of spaces—in this case, the grocery store—and the disturbing presence of something that does not belong in this context.

Figure 17. "Don't let it find you" posted by user @rkur on *Instagram* [18]

As discussed in the context of the absence aesthetic of the weird, the intruding object or element does not have to be something foreign; it can also be something very familiar that intrudes on the ordinary. The eye figure in the example (Figure 17) is a familiar object to human knowledge, yet its proportions, compared to the space and being separated from the context of the human body, create a weird atmosphere. Similarly, in Figures 18 and 19, there are two houses situated in space disproportionately. Although the houses are in their usual context, which is the outside, the way the visuals are

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manipulated creates weirdness. Again, in this context, two very familiar things, the

house and the field, do not belong together.

Figure 18. Floating home image shared by @w.e.i.r.d.c.o.r.e_ on Instagram.[19]

Figure 19. "Home" created -SleepyLeaf-, posted on r/dreamcoreaesthetic community on Reddit.[20]

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[19]https://www.instagram.com/p/C0Pt_9tIWDx/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFl ZA==

[20] https://www.reddit.com/r/dreamcoreaesthetic/comments/16i5j11/home/

As stated previously, another often-used visual of liminal aesthetics is the text-on-screen style, which suggests an omniscient narrator who is constantly watching, giving directions, and commenting. This surveillance of the spectator has a hauntological attribute as it refers to the ontology of presence and absence. In the image, presence and absence appear simultaneously by positioning the spectator into the image through a narrator directly speaking to them. In this context, the viewer becomes the subject of the haunting as the text positions them within the image. The spectators find themselves in a familiar setting, which often has nostalgic qualities, yet they feel weird being there since they do not belong to this setting, and it feels 'off' looking at this space. The viewers feel uneasy due to the surveillance, yet, drawn to the visuals because of familiarity. In Figures 20 and 21, the texts on the screen are quotes taken from earlier literary texts. Although this is not the case with all liminal text-on-screen images, the creators used certain elements from early media and writings in the compositions, just like they use visual elements from the early internet and analog era in other liminal aesthetics visuals. The spectrality of this style comes from the way the speaker is unidentified. It directly speaks to the viewer, usually trying to make them question their existence by playing with the 'familiarity' aspect through contrasting familiar texts, images, and objects. In that sense, the presence of the familiar feels 'off' despite communicating nostalgia and comfort.

Figures 20 & 21 "Don't get close to the houses" posted by user @rkur on Instagram.[21]

As highlighted previously in Chapter 3, liminality allows a space for making something

unfamiliar by deconstructing the familiar (Turner, 1974). This is similar to the

deconstruction process of the weird, where the object coming from outside creates a

'wrongness' in the system inside and acquires a different meaning. In liminal internet

aesthetics, the spectator is drawn to this defamiliarization process, viewing the

familiarity with a new perspective. However, this new image of familiarity is

accompanied by an uneasiness that reflects the anxieties of the physical space.

The weird spaces of liminality stand as 'thresholds' to alternative realities that transcend

the boundaries of temporal and spatial. They carry this hauntological quality where the

past, present, and future lose their unique identifiers by intertwining and meeting in a

common ground. This liquidity of temporality creates a space for change, reflection, and

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[21]https://www.instagram.com/p/CxwdbchNf-C/?img_index=2

transformation. The destruction of reality and truth are depicted through surreal, weird imagery that is neither nostalgic nor horrific; they are hauntological, standing at the thresholds of reality, evoking a sense of loss and ambiguity. This, in fact, aligns with the post-truth era we are said to be in, in which the elements to acknowledge the truth and reality disappear or become less important, leaving their place to personal understandings and ideas that are often fragmented. The social isolation and uncertainty brought about by the pandemic, along with the rapid advancement of technology at a pace that disrupts daily life, suggest we are crossing a significant social threshold. Liminal internet aesthetics capture this unsettling yet nostalgic state, reflecting the ambiguous nature of this transition.

CHAPTER V:

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The present thesis has critically examined the youth internet phenomenon of liminal internet aesthetics with a specific emphasis on the three subcategories of *dreamcore*, *weirdcore*, and *nostalgiacore* through visuals and online discussions on the social media platforms of TikTok, Instagram, Reddit, and Discord. Following the methodological approaches adopted by earlier studies of internet phenomenon and trends, this thesis initially traced the origins of this phenomenon and, subsequently, how it is received and discussed within the online environment through a digital ethnographical analysis of several online communities and user comments. By combining visual analysis with digital ethnographical approaches, this thesis aimed to comprehensively analyze liminal internet aesthetics through its visuals and online discussions. This study reveals the broader implications of these aesthetics within digital culture, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and reactions to an increasingly media-saturated world.

Before a theory-based visual analysis of liminal internet aesthetics, this thesis first set the conceptual boundaries, placing the term 'aesthetics' as understood in the digital youth culture since it is often confused with the classical understanding of aesthetics, which takes 'beauty' as central to aesthetic experiences. Therefore, a literature review on internet aesthetics served a critical purpose in understanding online aesthetics. The review demonstrated that internet aesthetics revolves around the ideas of 'atmosphere,' 'mood,' or 'aestheticization' (Adriaansen, 2022) instead of the idea of 'beauty.' As argued by several researchers, 'ugly' things are also aestheticized within the internet aesthetics categories. These categories are not created or defined by a group of individuals but are more eclectic, like 'folk art' (Douglas, 2014), formed by amateur netizens and later appeal to a larger community. As discussed in Chapter 2, the majority of internet aesthetics emerged as a criticism of the period they are in (Adriaansen, 2022). In that sense, they serve as a social commentary and a reflection of the era they emerged from. The three aspects of liminal internet aesthetics examined in this thesis emerging within the coronavirus outbreak stand as a criticism and a reflection of contemporary societal anxieties. They imply an 'emptiness,' lack of meaning, and being lost in the contemporary era (Cole, 2020). However, they also serve as an escapism that allows one to experience imagining alternative realities of past, present, and future.

Throughout the thesis, it is argued that liminal internet aesthetics is not yet another nostalgia trend on the internet but remains in the 'post-nostalgic' (Coverley, 2020), hence, the hauntological territory with its 'uneasy nostalgic' visual language. Considering the two opposing receptions of liminal aesthetics visuals on the internet—

one within the sentimental side and the other on the uneasy side of nostalgia—liminal

internet aesthetics serves as a manifestation of how youth experience nostalgia in the

contemporary age. It provides insights into how internet nostalgia practices have shifted

after the coronavirus outbreak and with the technological developments, which, as the

analyses of this thesis have shown, had an impact on individuals' perception of

the concept of temporality. As such, rather than examining this phenomenon through the

theories of nostalgia, this thesis suggested viewing it through the 'post-nostalgic,'

hauntological perspective since, as argued in the literature, nostalgia does not capture

the current state of the world in which past, present, and future are perceived not in a

linear way but as more fragmented and a 'pantemporal' (Rahimi, 2021) perspective. To

further grasp this state of internet nostalgia practices in the contemporary age, which

have shifted after the coronavirus outbreak, this thesis has focused on the theme of

'absence,' precisely the motif of 'human absence.' The reason for this is that social

anxieties that emerged, especially during and after the pandemic, are based on the

unsettling experience of people being unable to exist somewhere. By using the motif of

absence to express a haunting, shattered relationship with time and human presence, this

thesis demonstrates how liminal online aesthetics mirrors this shared sense of

displacement and estrangement.

For the analysis of this theme of human absence central to liminal internet aesthetics,

Mark Fisher's theoretical framework of *hauntology* and the absence aesthetics of the

weird and the *eerie* have been utilized, which have served as critical tools to discuss the

concepts of absence, presence, liminality, temporality, and spatiality. As the analysis

showed, the lack of human figures in the visuals results in 'weird' and 'eerie' experiences, which creates an uneasy feeling along with sentimental nostalgia. The weird and the eerie, according to Stock (2023), are a mode of thinking that suggests a "search for an exit" (p. 779), an escape from the dominant systems of capitalism and everyday life. Accordingly, the concepts of the weird and the eerie helped to view liminal internet aesthetics as a means to 'escape' to alternative realities and imagine new realities.

As discussed in the examination of liminal spaces, the concept of liminality refers to a state of 'in-betweenness,' 'transitions,' and transformations both in an individual sense and as a social group (Thomassen, 2018). The liminal internet aesthetics enthusiasts interpret liminality from two perspectives: *spatial* and *temporal*. Therefore, the liminal visuals of online culture do not only include the physical transitional spaces but also images of childhood artifacts that reflect a transitional period in individuals' lives. In that regard, the thesis has emphasized the connection between the concepts of liminality and hauntology since they share this idea of turning something familiar into unfamiliar.

To answer the proposed questions: (1) How do the depictions of 'absence' and 'presence' in liminal internet aesthetics reflect and resonate with societal anxieties heightened by the pandemic and emerging technologies, as observed through visuals and online community discussions? and (2) In what ways does the liminal internet aesthetics phenomenon deliver the ideas of vanishing present and disappearing future in the contemporary age? Chapter 4 presented an analysis of the liminal internet aesthetics

using the established theoretical framework, exploring the further implications of the human absence motif.

This analysis argues that the portrayal of human absence in liminal internet aesthetics reflects the societal anxieties of dislocation and estrangement in relation to the pandemic. The representation of human absence motif captures this feeling of isolation and the disruption of normalcy heightened during the pandemic. These depictions in the liminal internet aesthetics reflect a collective sense of being disconnected, displaced, or lost in a world that has changed during global crises and through technological developments. In doing so, the research also dives into the concepts of time, temporality, and spatiality in the contemporary digital age and discusses whether this content serves as a commentary and critique of contemporary societal anxieties on the 'vanishing present' and 'disappearing future.'

Consequently, this study highlighted the value of recognizing liminal internet aesthetics as a 'cultural artifact' that comments on the complexities of contemporary life and gives insights into the digital youth culture and practices. However, it is important to note that this thesis has several limitations, considering its reliance on theory-based discussions primarily focused on visuals and its methodology of using participant observation in online communities. Future studies on internet aesthetics can follow various directions, such as conducting interviews with community members, enthusiasts, and amateur creators to understand the further implications of this phenomenon and its creation process. They can examine the reception of internet aesthetics in a more global context

since different audiences may perceive it differently, considering their diverse cultural backgrounds, specifically in the context of nostalgic content.

Ultimately, this thesis has attempted to understand liminal internet aesthetics and provide insight for further research on digital youth culture and online nostalgia trends. Considering that liminal internet aesthetics is influenced by early media, as well as having an impact on the emergence of new products in return, it has a transmedial aspect. Examining the period during which liminal internet aesthetics emerged as a popular trend, it becomes apparent that it gave rise to various media products. Some examples of these transmedia manifestations include games like "The Backrooms" (2019), "Escape the Backrooms" (2022), "Backrooms: Escape Together" (2022), and "Dreamcore" indie horror game, which will be released soon. Moreover, Kyle Edward Ball's directorial debut horror film *Skinamarink* (2022) was highly inspired by online liminal internet aesthetics, specifically weirdcore and dreamcore[22][23]. These new media inspired by liminal internet aesthetics further highlight the importance of doing research on internet phenomena to understand the digital culture and its practices.

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[22] https://www.denofgeek.com/movies/skinamarink-reddit-internet-leak-created-horror-box-office-hit/

[23] https://www.vulture.com/2023/01/skinamarink-director-kyle-edward-ball-on-viral-fame.html

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