"I can take what I want and adapt as needed": BIPOC Identity Making and Resistance Through Internet Aesthetics on TikTok

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Abstract

Internet Aesthetics are personal styles that are curated, instantiated, and remade on social media through collections of art, fashion, sensory experiences, literature, and media to communicate and share lifestyle narratives. BIPOC users often use Internet Aesthetics on TikTok as identity-making tools. However, they may experience algorithmic symbolic annihilation in which the platform neglects the existence of BIPOC in particular Internet Aesthetics, reducing their agency over their online identity-making. Using semi-structured interviews, we identify how BIPOC users understand Internet Aesthetics and what strategies BIPOC use to engage with them on TikTok. We discuss how BIPOC users apply algorithmic folk theories and offline strategies to resist symbolic annihilation while engaging in identity-making by extracting joy and meaning from Internet Aesthetics. We also model the uncertainty BIPOC users face around experiencing symbolic annihilation using the concept of microaggressions and give guidance on designing tools to addressing this phenomenon.

CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing** → **Social media**; *Social recommendation*; *Empirical studies in HCI*; • **Social and professional topics** → Race and ethnicity.

Keywords

Internet Aesthetics, TikTok, BIPOC, Folk Theories, Identity-making

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1 Introduction

Social media replicates and reproduces racialized ideologies and structures from the offline world (e.g., racialized algorithmic bias [48]), resulting in vastly different but frequently obscured experiences for different users [49]. Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) Internet users navigate digital spaces in distinct ways, from adjusting what they share and self-presentation (e.g., as described by the Identity Strainer Theory [1] and the rise of algospeak [2] language [34, 38]) to creating meaningful communities online (e.g., the establishment of Black Twitter[3] as a site of Black discursive identity [12]). Researching how BIPOC interact with the Internet allows us to both uplift how they use this technology to flourish as well as deconstruct oppressive racial structures online [66]. In this study, we extend a formal concept of **Internet Aesthetics** (sometimes referred to as Aesthetics[4].) to an HCI context, defining them as *personal styles that are curated, instantiated, and remade on social media through collections of art, fashion, sensory experiences, literature, and media to communicate and share lifestyle narratives.* With foundations in subcultures, Internet Aesthetics are enjoyed among many social media users as immersive and often romantic guides for lifestyles, fashion, and personas that are typically situated in a particular time period. Individuals may engage with Internet Aesthetics both offline and online by curating moodboards (e.g., collecting images of gothic university architecture for a Dark Academia Aesthetic Pinterest board), wearing clothes that evoke an Internet Aesthetic (e.g., wearing a tweed blazer that aligns with the Dark Academia Internet Aesthetic), or engaging in other activities aligned with an Internet Aesthetic (e.g., reading classical philosophy to evoke the Dark Academia Internet Aesthetic). We focus on

[1]Identity Strainer Theory is a folk theory that describes how users understand TikTok's algorithm as distributing content based on social identity, privileging certain identities as valuable and "deserving of visibility" [34].
[2]Algospeak entails users on social media "intentionally altering or substituting words when creating and sharing online content", typically to evade censorship by social media algorithms[38].
[3]Black Twitter refers to the Black Community on Twitter, now known as X, in which the number of African Americans using Twitter "[exceeded] demographic representation" [12].
[4]Internet Aesthetics or Aesthetics are distinct from Aesthetics of the Internet that deal with the visual style of the Internet itself; Internet Aesthetics are named so because they are created and presented on the Internet, but refer to personal styles

the emerging phenomenon of Internet Aesthetics as a medium to examine racialized dynamics in a digital American context, as well as how BIPOC users adapt, appropriate, and repurpose platform affordances and popular content formats to serve their own goals.

Internet Aesthetics have been frequently discussed in mainstream media as well as more formally studied in Communication and Media studies and English [26, 54] [33, 82], but there has been less formalized focus on this phenomenon in HCI. Through this work, we provide theoretical contributions to the field of HCI by expanding upon knowledge of digital identity-making and racialized structures of social media. Founded in these theoretical contributions, we also offer framing for how future researchers, designers, and engineers might imagine and design systems that account for the manifestations of racialized social structures and injustice identified through our work.

Internet Aesthetics were popularized on TikTok in the mainstream in the United States during the beginning of the COVID-19 Pandemic in 2020 [1, 30]. Since then, hundreds of Internet Aesthetics have proliferated, shaped through the accelerating rise and fall of various social media trends [56] while simultaneously promoting an equal-opportunity narrative that "anyone" can engage in Internet Aesthetic trends whether for fame and fortune via the content creator economy (i.e., using Aesthetics as a "personal brand" for content [81]) or just the fun of participating socially [30]. Some Internet Aesthetics serve as flash-in-the-pan viral moments that are briefly popular and have viral mass participation (e.g., Mob Wife [55] or Barbiecore [29]) while others are perhaps more long-lasting (e.g., Dark Academia or Clean Girl [5]). Many Internet Aesthetics have offline parallels and origins in subcultures that predate the use of Internet Aesthetics as an organizing principle for online personal style. Similarly to subcultures, Internet Aesthetics allow individuals to make sense of themselves while also offering digital means of sensemaking through processes of *organization via algorithmic curation* and *co-production with both algorithms and other users.*

Internet Aesthetics have become a vital source of identity development and expression that allows for a vivid, multi-dimensional sense of self, whether embedded in one's style or hobbies. For example, the Indie Sleaze Aesthetic draws from mid-2010s Tumblr culture with a focus on a gritty, rebellious persona that involves listening to alt music popular in the mid-2010s (e.g., the Arctic Monkeys or The Strokes) and partying in grungy party clothes like ripped tights and shorts [39]. However, many popular Internet Aesthetics have fielded criticism for being exclusionary towards certain racial groups, engaging in cultural appropriation, and promoting unrealistic beauty standards for women [1, 17, 55]. Although Internet Aesthetics have potential as a prominent identity-making tool, they can also perpetuate oppressive racialized social structures. Research on the impact of Internet Aesthetics is nascent and we seek to investigate how marginalized racial groups use them as a form of self-expression and identity development.

In this study, we explore how BIPOC engage with Internet Aesthetic content on TikTok motivated by frameworks describing the racialized nature of the Internet and online identity-making [5, 34, 40, 48]. In particular, we ask the following research questions:

RQ1: *How do Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC) on TikTok interact with Internet Aesthetics?*

RQ2: *What strategies do BIPOC use to navigate Internet Aesthetics?*

In our study, we conducted semi-structured interviews (*n = 15*) and used informed grounded theory methodology [65] to find that TikTok users had a range of strategies to adopt Internet Aesthetics into their lives. We also rely upon the concept of algorithmic folk theories, lay theories that users form to describe and prescribe their interactions with algorithms [25], to identify various strategies that users have for shaping their curating their Internet Aesthetics on TikTok. Some strategies involved using folk theories that directly dictated interaction with content on TikTok, and some strategies focused on offline enactment of and engagement with Internet Aesthetics. We argue that it is vitally important to study TikTok's design and functionality, as well as its role in mediating cultural and social structures. Investigating social and cultural phenomena on TikTok is undoubtedly a significant part of capturing our current stage of sociotechnical development as a society.

We also draw from critical theories of race and technology [5, 12, 46, 48, 49] and theories of online identity-making [34, 40] as lenses to further analyze our findings. We found that some participants sought to resist aspects of Internet Aesthetics that re-created harmful social structures and engage more with aspects of Internet Aesthetics that brought them joy and informed identity-making, and were ultimately able to shape their Internet Aesthetics to their needs. We provide guidance on designing for a more just Internet Aesthetic experience for BIPOC, and feed design that accounts for folk theories and Internet Aesthetics.

2 Related Work

2.1 Internet Aesthetics and Subcultures

Research on Internet Aesthetics is emerging, thus we draw from prior work on subcultures to examine how they draw individuals towards specific, often niche interests and practices.

2.1.1 Origins of Internet Aesthetics. As previously mentioned, we define Internet Aesthetics as personal styles that are curated, instantiated, and remade on social media through collections of art, fashion, sensory experiences, literature, and media to communicate and share lifestyle narratives. Individuals curate and participate in Internet Aesthetics by creating content representing an Aesthetic, interacting with Aesthetic content on social media and other digital spaces, adapting Aesthetic styles in their fashion or decor both online and offline, or engaging in activities related to the lifestyle narratives communicated by Internet Aesthetics (e.g., baking bread to participate in the cottagecore Internet Aesthetic). These activities and spectrum of engagement distinguish Internet Aesthetics somewhat from subcultures, as individuals need not be publicly and physically identifiable by the Internet Aesthetics that they gravitate towards. Similarly to Transgender individuals who use face filters for gender identity exploration in Brewster et al.'s work [11], Internet Aesthetics may provide a low-stakes opportunity for individuals who are exploring personal styles.

Internet Aesthetics are an evolution of subcultures in a fast-paced digitally-focused context characterized more through fluidity and messy definitions. An Internet Aesthetic's content inclusion criteria

[5] Refer to 2.1.3 for descriptions of the Dark Academia Aesthetic and Clean Girl Aesthetic

can vary according to each individual, resulting in differing and at times contradictory perceptions of the same Aesthetic [30], yet are co-produced by other a platform's algorithm and other users. The messiness and flexible definitions afforded by Internet Aesthetics allows for identity play by lowering the barrier for participation and encouraging users to explore before engaging in more structured communities.

Many media sources point to Tumblr, a social media and blogging platform popularized during the early 2010s, as the origin of Internet Aesthetics [32, 44, 64]. Tumblr played a significant role in developing digital subculture engagement, allowing users to explore social critiques and theories including feminism, queer theory, antiracism, and postcolonialism alongside and often through niche communities and interests within its counterpublic space [43]. As a cross-section of identity play through fandom and niche interests and of knowledge and informal education, Tumblr provided an apt environment for Internet Aesthetics to grow [43].

Internet Aesthetics rose to mainstream popularity in 2020 on TikTok during the COVID-19 Pandemic [35] [82] and have since grown in other parts of the Internet. There is also an 'Aesthetics Wiki' page on Fandom, a website that draws from Wikipedia's format to provide a space where various fan communities can create community-driven pages [68]. The Aesthetics Wiki currently has over 1,000 articles on their page detailing various Aesthetics and topics related to Aesthetics. More recently, various mainstream brands have co-opted Aesthetics to promote their brands or products. For example, Pinterest encouraged potential users to "find [their] Aesthetic" [51] in a recent ad campaign that shows a young woman falling through an *Alice in Wonderland*-esque rabbit hole floating past Pinterest posts related to various Aesthetics [51]. Makeup retailer Sephora's website has a 'Clean Girl' page that lists makeup and skincare products to attain the Clean Girl Aesthetic [58]. Brands have also increasingly devoted funding towards social media influencers who also use Aesthetics to promote various sponsored products.

There is a limited body of academic work that focuses on Internet Aesthetics within the field of HCI, nearly all of them focusing on particular Internet Aesthetics, such as Cottagecore or Dark Academia. We draw from literature in Communications and Media Studies, as well as English, to ground our ideas of Internet Aesthetics while incorporating ideas from Human-Computer Interaction. Yöndem [82] similarly characterized Internet Aesthetics as referring to style and atmosphere "associated with online trends and communities" [82]. Hur [33] characterizes what we refer to as Internet Aesthetics in terms of "Online Aesthetic Narratives" which are "the collection of media artifacts...that curate an archetype on the Internet based on shared interests, values and consumption." We argue that studying Internet Aesthetics is a significant and worthwhile endeavor because they are important tools for identity-development that are heavily mediated through social media platforms.

2.1.2 Subculture Theory. The history of subcultures and subculture theory is important to understanding the offline origins of Internet Aesthetics and contextualizing their role in digital identity-development. Internet Aesthetics are somewhat distinct from subcultures because of their digital origins and current lack of formal identity, but the role of Internet Aesthetics in identity making is largely aligned with subcultures. Subculture theory originated as a means of studying youth culture as it diverged from mainstream culture, initially defining subcultures as groups that are "distinct from but related to the dominant culture" [6, 7]. The scholarly perspective on subcultures evolved to theorize that youth were using various modes of expression such as fashion and music to push back against a dominant, ruling class culture [6, 8]. Fashion was a primary way for subculture participants to *identify themselves with a particular group* while rejecting social norms, such as the use of safety pins and ripped clothing to characterize oneself as punk and "[signifying] socio-economic dislocation of Britain [post-World War II]" [6]. Alternatively, some scholars argued that subcultures were a means for youth to *explore identity* and personal taste away from the mainstream utilizing newfound spending power [6, 8]. There is tension between two major characterizations of subcultures as niche collective consciousness that resists mainstream society or as a material means of developing taste and style [8, 53].

Internet Aesthetics raise the same conflicts between how people, especially young people, develop their identities, explore their social positions, and gravitate towards cultural objects. Internet Aesthetics reflect the progression in how we explore and understand ourselves using digital platforms and communities [30], rooted in this existing movement of self-expression.

2.1.3 Popular Internet Aesthetics. The Dark Academia Aesthetic [1] is a broadly known Internet Aesthetic that shot to popularity through TikTok during the COVID-19 Pandemic starting in 2020 [1]. The Dark Academia Aesthetic tends to situate itself in the late-1800s to mid-1900s, capturing a moody and intellectual atmosphere of gothic architecture, a tweed-centric wardrobe, and university students immersed in their studies (Figure 1).

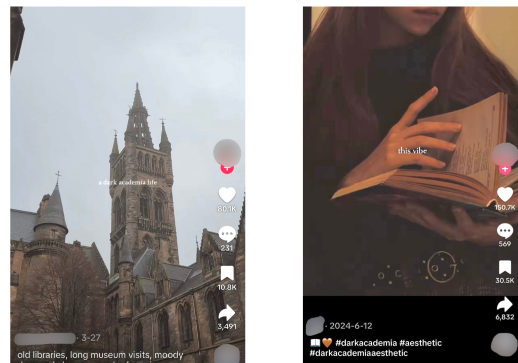

Figure 1: Two TikTok posts tagged 'dark academia' representing the Dark Academia Aesthetic.

The Cottagecore Aesthetic similarly grew in popularity during the COVID-19 Pandemic [10]. Cottagecore focuses on escape to an idyllic 1800s pastoral setting with an emphasis on a rustic sense of self-sufficiency through activities such as bread-making, knitting, and other crafts [10] (Figure 2).

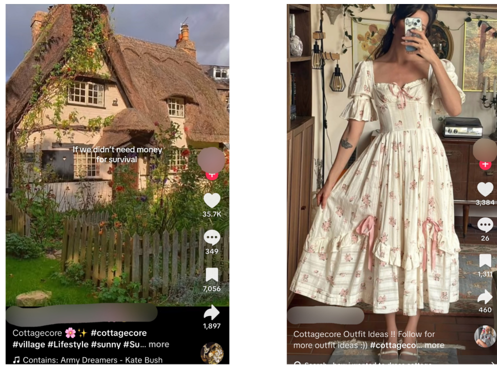

Figure 2: Two TikTok posts tagged 'cottagecore' representing the Cottagecore Aesthetic.

The Clean Girl Aesthetic diverges from the previous two in that it represents an "ideal" lifestyle rather than escapism. The Clean Girl Aesthetic embodies the look of effortless minimalism that is also polished and healthy [52]. This Aesthetic emphasizes minimalist "no makeup" makeup and regimented skincare, and activities such as pilates or drinking green juice [52] (Figure 3).

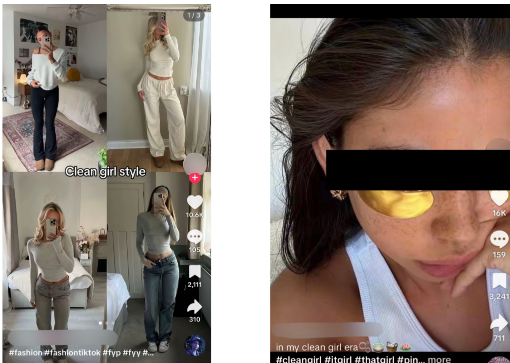

Figure 3: Two TikTok posts tagged 'clean girl' representing the Clean Girl Aesthetic.

2.2 Race, Culture, and the Internet

This study is grounded in theories of the racialized nature of technology, particularly the Internet, within an American understanding of race. We draw from Ruha Benjamin and Safiya Noble's work to inform our understanding of how race and racism manifest on the Internet. Benjamin argues that new technologies reconstruct oppressive social structures masked by their perceived objective or progressive qualities, especially compared to previous systems of discrimination [5]. These objective or progressive qualities are produced through the belief that technology is value-neutral and unbiased [5, 13, 48]. However, technology would not exist in its current state without its history of racism, from experiments conducted on slaves in the name of medical progress [50] to the development of surveillance technology used to police Black communities [47]. Noble argues that these technologies are both protected and championed for promoting technological progress and societal betterment, accomplished through the "persistent normalization of Black people as aberrant and undeserving of human rights and dignity under the banners of public safety, technological innovation, and the emerging creative economy" [48].

Work specific to social media has investigated how BIPOC perceive and resist racial structures that manifest through social media. Stevens [61] explores blackfishing, a form of "digital blackface" employed by non-Black users that exploits the popularity of Black culture to attain popularity on social media. Delmonaco et al. [22] and Dai et al. [20] discuss how BIPOC users resist racism on social media by forming understandings of and employing strategies against practices like shadowbanning, a form of content moderation in which content is reduced on a platform through demotion. Our study aims to further the understanding of racism in technology set forth by Benjamin and Noble by exploring the "creative economy" and culture developed on the Internet and social media.

The seemingly objective nature of technology gives tech designers deniability when faced with claims of racial bias or discrimination while actively sewing racial bias into technology; Benjamin argues that this process causes "Racism [to become] doubled — magnified and buried under layers of digital denial" [5]. This digital denial lays the foundation for injustice, particularly epistemic injustice. Feminist scholar Miranda Fricker defines epistemic injustice as "a distinct form of injustice where someone is wronged specifically in their capacity as a knower, meaning their ability to be believed or understood is unfairly undermined due to prejudice based on their social identity" [28]. Hermeneutical injustice is a specific form of epistemic injustice that occurs when there is a lack of sensemaking resources within collective sensemaking resources that inhibits one from validating their experiences or making their experiences legible to others [28]. For example, racial microagressions, subtle, everyday interactions that demonstrate prejudice against people of color [63], are a form of epistemic injustice. Microaggressions are not only common throughout online experiences [49], but they are difficult to discuss due to the sensitive nature of the subject and the concerns victims have over the questioning of the "legitimacy" of their experiences [67]. Psychologist D.W. Sue argues that the power of racial microaggressions lies in their subtlety, that they can be dismissed for "seemingly unbiased and valid reasons" [63]. The understated nature of racial microaggressions makes them difficult to identify and address, causing psychological harm and leaving indistinct acts of bias to accumulate into systemic inequality [60, 63]. Ajmani et al. discuss how platforms such as TikTok and Reddit are sites where individuals may both encounter epistemic injustice, such as censorship of valuable health information for Trans folks by social media algorithms, and develop knowledge as communities to resist epistemic injustice, such as users engaging with r/bisexual to make sense of their experiences of bisexuality [2].

2.3 Identity-Making and Co-production of Knowledge Online

We draw from Karizat et al.'s [34] application of Stets & Burke's [14] person and social identity as a foundation for our understanding of identity-making. Person and social identity are "interconnected" conceptualizations of identity, person identity referring to the characteristics that distinguishes individuals from one another (e.g.

personal style or hobbies) and social identity referring to characteristics that distinguish social groups from one another (e.g. race or class) [14, 34]. We ground our understanding of identity-making in previous work that explores how people with marginalized social identities engage in identity-making, development, and work. Brewster et al. [11] explore how Transgender individuals use face filters for identity exploration, using these filters as a low-stakes, private way to experiment with gender. Lyu et al. [41] discuss how Blind TikTokers, known as BlindTokers, engage in identity work towards flourishing, navigating challenges of (in)accessibility. In particular, BlindTokers develop their identities by engaging in pleasureable activities like comedy and cultivating the blind community and activism[41].

We also use the concept of algorithmic folk theories to ground our understanding of how users understand and interact with TikTok's algorithm. Algorithms can appear complex and opaque, especially to people without computer science expertise. Algorithmic folk theories, or simply folk theories, are informal but useful theories devised by users without technical expertise that interpret an algorithm's decision-making paradigm [25]. Folk theories can range in complexity and interactivity: for example, the Personal Engagement Theory predicts that interacting more with another user's content will result in greater content from that user populating in the feed [27]. Folk theories can be both descriptive and predictive, meaning that they can describe what the user perceives to be occurring or predict what the user believes will happen given a certain action or input [25]. For example, Mayworm et al. explore how social media users develop descriptive folk theories in response to their perceptions of platform spirit, which describes the user's understanding of "what a platform is supposed to do and be for" and can have negative or positive associations depending on the user's experience [42].

Folk theories are not just simply conceived but also applied to resist an algorithm or manipulate it to the user's will [25]. Many social media users in marginalized groups have discussed the bias and harm that they often experience on social media [34]. One of these harms is algorithmic representational harm, in which marginalized users' experiences are "rendered invisible, trivialized, suppressed or otherwise further marginalized" because of how the algorithm perceives their identities [34]. This is produced from algorithmic symbolic annihilation, which describes how algorithms perpetuate harmful social structures by accounting for that which has "power and authority" and excluding that which does not [4].

Folk theories can also drive opportunities for algorithmic identity-making. Karizat et al. describe the process of co-production between TikTok user and TikTok's algorithm to produce knowledge, particularly knowledge of identity [34]. Users and the algorithm co-produce knowledge of identity when the user interacts with the algorithm according to their folk theories, indicating their interests and by extension, certain aspects of their identity [34]. The algorithm then responds by giving the user content based on its perception of the user's identity, which the user may incorporate into their identity going forward [34]. Lee et al. further expand Karizat et al.'s work on identity-making through their algorithmic crystal framework, which explores how social media algorithms interact with user identity and how user perceptions are shaped by algorithms, particularly on TikTok [40]. Lee et al. argue that like crystals, algorithms can be reflective of different dimensions of the self such as interests and identity, while also positioning users so that they see aspects of themselves refracted in other users, experiencing connection with groups of similar users [40].

3 Methods

Our investigation employed a constructivist grounded theory methodology [15, 16, 65], using semi-structured interviews as our primary data-gathering tool. Constructivist grounded theory is an approach to data collection and analysis defined by the use of the constant comparative method, where researchers iteratively cycle between data collection and theory-building driven by iterative coding and memoing [15, 16, 45]. Through iterative development of codes into categories and themes, researchers move from informal explanatory hypotheses to proto-theories and eventually some theoretical output with explanatory power [18, 45], often substantive theory (as opposed to mid-range or formal theories [77]), which aids in explaining a localized area of inquiry [31].

For example, in developing our theory for 5.2, our initial theorization from our memos and post-interview discussions focused on participants seeming generally dissatisfied with the TikTok algorithm with occasional exceptions. We shifted interview questions to inquire about how participants resisted the algorithm and exploring dissatisfaction with the platform. However, as data collection and coding progressed, we found that occasional exceptions were actually consistent contradictions with how participants felt about the TikTok algorithm in our coding process. These contradictions were captured in the simultaneous presence of codes such as 'Perceived platform resistance' and 'TikTok suppression' and codes such as 'TikTok takes preferences' and 'TikTok knows me.' Again, we shifted our interview questions to bring forth both moments in which participants appreciated the algorithm and moments in which they were dissatisfied with the algorithm. Consistent with constructivist grounded theory, we shifted between data collection and theorization in an iterative manner to produce theory.

In this study, we employ constructivist grounded theory, which includes increased recognition of researcher positionality, increased attention to social context, and integration of existing literature as sensitizing concepts which inform analysis and act as the basis for contributions that build and extend theory [9, 15, 65].

3.1 Participants

3.1.1 Recruitment. We recruited participants for this study from November 2023 to February 2024. Participants were restricted to BIPOC users of TikTok who were 18 years or older who participate in Internet Aesthetics. Study participants participated in Internet Aesthetics by interacting with and identifying with Internet Aesthetics on their social media feeds, decorating offline or online environments or dressing in the style of a particular Internet Aesthetic, or participating in Internet Aesthetic activities. Participants were recruited through flyering, social media posts, and word-of-mouth from university campuses on the West Coast, Midwest, and East Coast of the United States. Prospective participants completed a screening survey, and were invited to participate if they listed an Aesthetic they identified with and used TikTok for over 0.5 hours in the past week. We recruited 15 participants until our ongoing

analysis indicated we had reached saturation, with similar themes and experiences repeated in new interviews.

3.1.2 Demographics. Participants ranged from 18 to 30 years old with a median age of 21 years old. In total, 10 women, 2 non-binary people, and 3 men were interviewed. Of these people, 5 identified as Black, 6 identified as Asian, and 5 identified as Hispanic/Latinx, with 4 of the overall participants identifying with 2 or more racial identities. Participants were assigned pseudonyms in the data to protect their anonymity.

3.2 Interview Procedure

For this study, the first author conducted semi-structured interviews that lasted approximately 1 hour on average. Interviews occurred both in-person on a college campus in the Northeast United States and remotely via Zoom, and were recorded and subsequently transcribed using Otter.AI. Participants were compensated with a $20 Visa e-giftcard.

Key interview topics included how participants define Internet Aesthetics, which Internet Aesthetics they resonated with and why, as well as any activities participants engaged in to embody their Aesthetics. We also asked how participants perceived racial representation in Internet Aesthetics on TikTok and what strategies they had for navigating Internet Aesthetics on TikTok. Each interview also included a video review activity in which participants selected and then discussed TikTok videos from their For You Page, saved or liked videos, or videos under '#[Aesthetic]'. During this video review, we evaluated how individuals curate their TikTok feeds and Aesthetics by asking them to compare and contrast TikToks they defined as "authentic" to a certain Aesthetic to those they defined as "inauthentic" to that Aesthetic.

3.2.1 Ethics. This study was approved and overseen by our local Institutional Review Board (IRB) including informed consent for study procedures and data handling. Participants' data was anonymized and they were assigned pseudonyms.

3.3 Data Analysis

Our constructivist grounded theory-based analysis frame enabled us to be responsive to participant experiences in the field while also integrating key sensitizing concepts from prior work in order to inform our ongoing analysis [15, 16, 65]. During data collection, the research team as a whole met weekly to debrief and discuss interviews that had been conducted the previous week. During these meetings, the research team discussed key patterns, trends, and notable moments from interviews, as well as noting themes across interviews and past analysis sessions. The team discussed connections to prior work and engaged in the informal hypothesizing and proto-theorization that is key to the constructivist grounded theory process [15, 45]. The content of these team discussions was then reflected in further interviews, allowing us to interrogate and dive deeper on promising leads via theoretical sampling.

More formal coding was conducted by the first and second author, who independently conducted open coding on the interview transcripts, and then met and discussed their open codes (e.g., Aesthetics, comfort in Aesthetics, appropriation, BIPOC alienation) to resolve disagreements and redundancies as well as early overarching trends and develop and open codebook. When the open codebook was finalized and reviewed and approved by all team members and the data all open coded, the first author then conducted axial coding to organize and categorize the data and begin developing broader themes which were then discussed with the entire research team, moving from the multiplicity of themes and categories necessitated by a constructivist approach [18] to trial versions of explanatory theories, and eventually our contributions in the discussion.

Throughout our analysis, we drew from Lisa Nakamura's understanding of cultural and identity development online [46] and André Brock's Critical Technoculture Discourse Analysis (CTDA) [12] as key sensitizing concepts [9, 15, 65], enabling us to better contextualize how participants perceived social media content within the broader landscape of racialization and identity development online. Nakamura's lens of Visual Culture Studies explains how digital images of bodies are produced by Internet users "in the context of racial and gender identity formation", using the Internet as a space for the creation and dissemination of "hegemonic and counter hegemonic visuals of racialized bodies" [46]. CTDA asserts that technology reproduces existing social structures and hierarchies, and users, content creators, and designers approach technology through a racial lens informed by their own experiences and racialized social norms [12].

3.3.1 Positionality. This works focuses on experiences of race, as well as gender and sexuality. As a diverse team of researchers, we sought to respect each participant's identity equally while emphasizing certain participants, identities, and lived experiences when appropriate. Influenced by Sengers et al.'s [57] work, we acknowledge each others lived experiences with close intention when developing and contributing to this study. We hope to inspire other researchers to do the following critical analysis when working with sensitive concepts. The research team includes 3 BIPOC women and 1 white woman. The team's lived experiences as BIPOC, women, and the intersections between their identities have informed the research at each stage of the study. Given the team's makeup of mostly BIPOC researchers, the team was well-positioned to analyze the experiences of BIPOC participants. However, the team was somewhat limited because their identities did not exactly align with all participants, resulting in some limitations in their ability to connect their lived experiences with that of the participants.

The study was devised and designed by the first author, a BIPOC woman with a background in political science, philosophy, and economics in addition to HCI. This paper is written under concepts and assumptions core to the first author's education in the aforementioned disciplines. In particular, the first author has been inspired by and at times drawn from social and political philosophy, Black Feminist thought, postcolonialism, and more. This study is motivated not only to improve design and contribute to knowledge but also to act upon a moral imperative that calls us to shape society for the betterment of all people, especially marginalized peoples.

3.4 Limitations

Our work is based entirely in the experiences of American participants, and while this does afford the opportunity for deep reflection

on the specific concerns of BIPOC users in this context, future work on broader populations is necessary to establish the transferability of our findings to other national contexts.

4 Findings

To reiterate, Internet Aesthetics are personal styles that are curated, instantiated, and remade on social media through collections of art, fashion, sensory experiences, literature, and media to communicate and share lifestyle narratives. In this section, we discuss how participants perceived Internet Aesthetics, how Internet Aesthetics impacted their behavior, and advanced strategies they applied both on and off TikTok to navigate and curate racial identity in Internet Aesthetics.

In response to our research question, we explore how participants perceive racial identity in Internet Aesthetics, and how Internet Aesthetics affect participants' sense of self. We then identify the strategies that participants used in response to racial identity both on and off TikTok. In particular, these strategies include algorithmic folk theories and offline curation of Internet Aesthetics. Table 1 lists and describes the Internet Aesthetics that were most central and prominent to the findings.

4.1 Capabilities of Internet Aesthetics

In this section, we address RQ1, which concerns how BIPOC on TikTok interact with Internet Aesthetics. We find that some participants experience a substantial amount of joy and connection from the Aesthetics they identified with. However, representations of whiteness are dominant compared to BIPOC representation in some Internet Aesthetics, leading to some alienation among participants.

4.1.1 Joy, Connection, and Community. Consistently, we found that Internet Aesthetics can serve as a source of joy and comfort to users in addition to lifestyle inspiration. Participants particularly appreciated Aesthetics with narratives that centered around showing joy in the midst of pain or showing joy in unexpected places. For example, P7, who grew up in an inner-city community, said he enjoys the "Pretty Ghetto" Aesthetic that depicts joy and beauty in similar communities, noting that the visuals of this Aesthetic might include images like flowers growing out of cracked pavement in an urban setting. As P7 explained,

> "The 'Ghetto story' is always about being an inspiration or coming up and out of it, or I don't know, dying in it... But in those sorts of Aesthetics it's like people are just having fun, there's no need to leave. There's no question of staying or leaving, it's just like enjoying life."

Some participants noted that this type of romanticization within Aesthetics assisted them with completing day-to-day tasks and coping with stressful circumstances. P06, a Hispanic participant, said "academia [aesthetics] relate to my regular life, so it helps me kind of filter all the craziness that happens in real life and kind just get down to a comforting kind of base; when it looks nice, it feels nicer.". Similarly, P2, an Asian woman who enjoys the Grunge and City Girl Aesthetics (Figure 4), discussed how embodying a persona through Internet Aesthetics supports her during stressful times: "I think the whole 'romanticize your life', 'do it for the plot' idea has taken over our age group and I love it so much...I think it's just a fun thing to like, when something's getting stressful or getting overwhelming just to take a step back and be like 'it's okay.'"

Figure 4: Two TikTok Posts, the left one tagged 'city girls' and 'city aesthetic' and the right one tagged 'citygirl' and 'aesthetic', representing the Citygirl Aesthetic.

Participants also expressed appreciation for communities that they found through their Aesthetics and opportunities to connect with other users who enjoyed similar Aesthetics. P11, a Black participant who enjoys the Lolita Aesthetic (Figure 7), describes finding connection, "now that I'm on TikTok, I can see other people my age who are also into [Lolita] and also I can kind of connect with them...[Aesthetics] connect people who are in niches especially who are the minority in the minority of the niche to kind of find one another." P15, a Pilipina woman recounted a similar experience around her preferred Granolacore Aesthetic, noting that "I feel connected with people I've never met, to know that we all care about the same things, interested in the same things," in reference to how Granolacore broadened her connections to people who also enjoy the outdoors. P15 continues to discuss how, because the representation of Granolacore is primarily white, she felt even more connected when interacting with Gronolacore content by BIPOC creators. P9, a Latina women, discussed how finding community through Internet Aesthetics, such as the Skater Aesthetic (Figure 5) have supported her: "They can just be to interact, and how you're feeling day to day. So I honestly love finding little communities that I can join and feel a part of."

Overall, we find that many participants use Internet Aesthetics as a significant source of joy and connection that allows them to relate their lived experience with other users of similar lived experiences and make sense of their own identities, suggesting that Internet Aesthetics, as well as platforms such as TikTok through which they are delivered, curated, and developed, can have the potential to play a significant role in helping BIPOC users pursue positive goals.

4.1.2 Alienation and Lack of Racial Representation. Despite these positives, participants also consistently discussed a lack of BIPOC representation in Internet Aesthetics, which often resulted in a feeling of alienation. For example, P12 noted that it was very rare for her to see other Asian people in the Clean Girl and Coquette Aesthetics that she follows. This lack of representation often results in specific effort to find relevant representation, which can result

Internet Aesthetics	Description
Clean Girl	An Aesthetic that "focuses on a minimalist and fresh approach to beauty and fashion. It embraces a natural and effortless look while maintaining a polished and clean appearance" [69]
Coquette	An Aesthetic focused on hyper-femininity "that incorporate[s] elements of youth and teenage girlhood" [70]
Dark Academia	An "Aesthetic that revolves around classic literature, the pursuit of self-discovery, and a general passion for knowledge and learning" [71]
Downtown Girl / City Girl	"An Aesthetic that revolves around the romanticization of living in the downtown of a city, specifically in New York" [72]
Granolacore / Earthcore	"An Aesthetic that revolves around the idea of creating a harmonious ecosystem while also advancing in knowledge and technology" [73]
Lolita	An Aesthetic inspired by "a Japanese fashion culture inspired by girls' and young women's clothing styles from the Victorian and Rococco periods" [74]
Pretty Ghetto	An Aesthetic described by P7 that includes depictions of beauty and joy in inner-city settings
Rockstar Girlfriend	An Aesthetic "that seeks to emulate the 24/7 lifestyles and clothing styles of the girlfriends of famous musicians. This style combines elements of edgy and grunge fashion with feminine and romantic touches"; inspired by the fashions of the '70s and '80s [75]
Y2K	An Aesthetic that originally referred to the era from 1997 to 2004, but has since become a broader term in scope, expanding to often describe the societal zeitgeist, pop culture, fashion, and technology from all of 2000–2009[76]

Table 1: This table includes descriptions of Internet Aesthetics that were core to the study, drawn from Aesthetics Wiki and participant descriptions

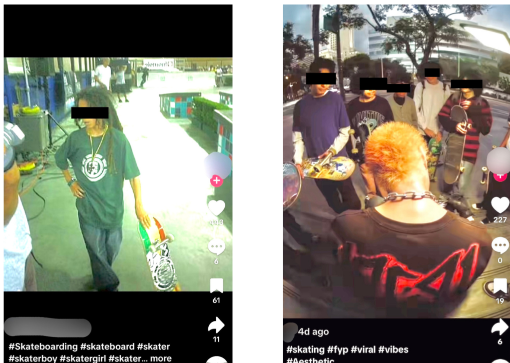

Figure 5: Two TikTok posts, the left one tagged #skateraesthetic and the right one tagged #skating and #Aesthetic representing the Skater Aesthetic.

in a demotivational feeling of increased exclusion at times. As she explained:

> "I specifically look for people who look like me in the Aesthetics and I just don't see that, like in real life, offline or on the Internet, even often outside of TikTok…For a while, I feel like I had really low self esteem…because the things I loved so much it just didn't feel like it loved me back, like I just did not feel like there was a space for me in these spaces."

This baseline feeling of alienation is compounded by how certain Aesthetics, even some that have been created by BIPOC or inspired by BIPOC subcultures, have become specifically associated with white people. Some participants, such as P2, who identifies with the Grunge and City Girl Aesthetics, see this as explicit appropriation. When asked about Aesthetics that primarily represented BIPOC, P2 responded: "I think white people have taken [Aesthetics] over and [BIPOC] are also doing [Aesthetics] but none of these spaces I think are only for BIPOC anymore."

Even in the absence of direct appropriation, a sense that certain Aesthetics were only "for" white people increased participant alienation. For example, P15 who identifies with the Granolacore Aesthetic, recalled: "I was keenly aware of the fact that Granolacore is very much highly associated with a white girl thing. And it's typically a white girl who's affluent enough to have outdoor recreational experiences and be competent at them," which made P15 initially hesitant towards Granolacore. She reflected on how her identity has impacted her potential to feel included in spaces that eventually evolved into Aesthetics,

> "I think a lot of the time growing up... there were certain looks and lifestyles that I felt were not appropriate for me, because I was a Brown person, you know. And then, even more so as I got older, because I was a Brown, queer person,"

Participants also discussed how their racial identities made them feel as if they would be perceived as inauthentic should they display a favored Internet Aesthetic. This was particularly harmful in cases where the Aesthetic was initially inclusive of BIPOC. For example, one Black woman we interviewed (P8), was drawn to the Rockstar Girlfriend Aesthetic because it included prominent Black women in the Rock and Roll space, saying "I think [Iman, widowed to David Bowie] is biracial, and I know that one of Mick Jagger's ex wives, she's Black. Seeing someone that looked more like me… I sort of fit into that Aesthetic that they had." However, her own feed constantly suggested that this Aesthetic was primarily for white people, noting that,

> "Out of hundreds of just white people, I haven't seen anybody who is fully Black in this Aesthetic... people also believe that it's more authentic if they see [Rockstar Girlfriend] on a white woman and not me, although I am light and have a relatively loose curl pattern. I think it has to do with music and a lot of time people assume that someone who's white would probably be more interested in Rock or Indie."

For participants like P8, this dynamic questions her interests on the basis of racial assumptions.

Some participants also described feeling as though they needed to exert additional effort in pursuit of Internet Aesthetic content that represented their racial or ethnic identity. P1, who primarily enjoys the Dark Academia Aesthetic, said "For a lot of what I see within any Aesthetic...I'd have to go more out of my way to look for, I guess, people that would be like me," discussing how lack of representation has raised some barriers to exploring various Aesthetics. Similarly, P9, a Black participant who described her difficulties in finding spaces that BIPOC dominated on TikTok, said, "people of color are huge in those spaces, they just *again* are not shared and you have to really work to see their content which is harmful, because then, you know, it takes effort on something that shouldn't take effort like TikTok." Thus, although BIPOC engage with Internet Aesthetics as a source of joy and comfort, they also may struggle to feel represented in their chosen Aesthetics, resulting in feelings of alienation.

4.2 Curation Strategies for Internet Aesthetics

The dynamics described above, both positive and negative, play out via the mechanisms of social platforms, motivating RQ2, which concerns what strategies BIPOC use to navigate these dynamics around Internet Aesthetics. We find that participants developed folk theories to increase BIPOC representation in Internet Aesthetics on their feeds. In addition, we find that participants adapted and enacted Internet Aesthetics in their offline lives despite a lack in BIPOC representation online.

4.2.1 Folk Theories and Platform Interactions. Participants had varying perspectives on how responsive TikTok's algorithm is to their preferences and interactions. Some participants felt that the algorithm recognized their identities and distributed content in close alignment with their identities. P1, asserted that TikTok's algorithm "knows" her very well, and therefore distributes content created by People of Color to her, saying "the algorithm knows that I'm a Person of Color, I'm Black specifically. And they know that a lot of...People of Color, you see a lot of other People of Color's content." P12 similarly remarked, "my TikTok is made for me, literally."

Other participants felt that their TikTok feeds were not very representative of their preferences or identity, specifically observing an overall lack of BIPOC representation which often persisted despite deliberate efforts from participants. For example, P2 found that there were some BIPOC creators that appeared in her feed, but not as many as she expected, saying "I think in theory it should be more BIPOC than it is, considering who I interact with." Many participants made similar observations, with several rising to the level of folk theories of how and why the platform might construct feeds without adequate BIPOC content. P9, for example, speculated that TikTok's algorithm is attempting to influence users, saying:

> "I think it's the algorithm, really, that it wants to give you something else... When you're more casually scrolling, I feel like it doesn't always want to go give you what you want, it wants to give you new things, it wants to change you mind a little, but like is this me? Is this what I actually want to do?"

Some participants used their folk theories of the platform to find ways to attempt to push back on this lack of representation, often with little success, which fed back into more negative theories of why the platform might not be responsive to one's clear content preferences. For example,another Black participant, P8, found that despite intentionally searching for and following Black creators, her feed still did not fully represent her preferences. In addition, P8 questioned why her feed was antithetical to her sustainable style habits, saying "I would say that [the algorithm] resisted [me] because...if I'm a very thrifty person, why on my feed would I see like here's my 10,000 Stanley cups or what you need to get from Lululemon."

Regardless of the TikTok algorithm's perceived proficiency and motivations, participants shared several strategies for curating their feed and manipulating the algorithm for greater BIPOC representation in content based on their folk understandings of the platform. One of the primary strategies that participants employed was to intentionally pursue content that shows BIPOC or is created by BIPOC creators. For example, P1 discussed using search to find Black creators across different Aesthetics whom she can relate to, noting the an struggle for people with darker skin to find representation. As P1 said, "I can imagine it's very similar for other Women of Color, especially just like any Women of Color that typically are darker. They may have to look up like what came up when I looked at Dark Academia, I had 'Dark Academia' and then it was also 'Dark Academia Black Girl,'" describing the additional lengths she went through to find representative content (Figure 6).

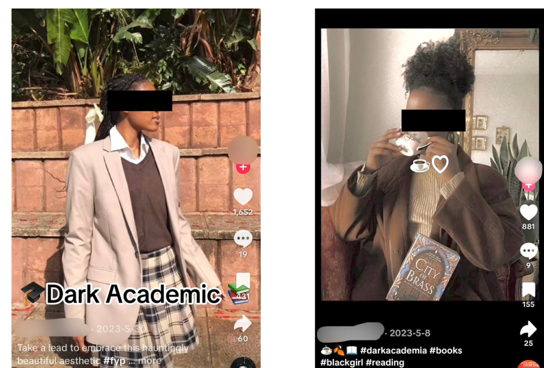

Figure 6: Two TikTok Posts tagged with 'dark academia' and 'Black girl' representing the Dark Academia Aesthetic with a focus on promoting Black girls and women in the Aesthetic

Other participants used more general searches or worked on their provided feeds, using their own interaction patterns as a way to try and correct the perceived shortcomings of the system. For

example, P2 focuses on finding and supporting BIPOC creators, saying

> "I'll start with fashion [in my feed] and then slowly you'll see one BIPOC creator every 15 videos, I'll like that video. I'll save it if it definitely pertains to me. If I really like it, I'll follow the creator. Even if I don't really like it, I will definitely just do a little deep dive of their [profile] page if I'm not following them."

Other participants, such as P13, described using the 'Not Interested' feature on TikTok when encountering cultural appropriation. As a Hispanic/Latinx woman, P13 felt personally offended by appropriation of a Chicana culture in flatting it to 'Clean Girl' Aesthetic, saying

> "I don't know, like the Chicano, Chicana [lip style]. . . .it was like Hailey Bieber did the same thing. . . I was like, she's just doing the same thing. . . and then they call it their own thing to get more exposure for their brand and makeup line, skincare line. I decided to be like, 'No, that's not it', I'm not interested and that's the first time I think I ever used the not interested because that was personal for me."

Other participants, such as P4, attempted to use this strategy, but eventually abandoned it, suggesting the lack of platform responsiveness is somewhat demotivational. As P4 noted, "knowing [how the algorithm works] doesn't give you really a lot of freedom with how it's curated."

4.2.2 Adapting Internet Aesthetics to Identity. Another key strategy participants employed to navigate the lack of racial or ethnic representation in Internet Aesthetics was evolving their own personal practice of the Aesthetics. In particular, several participants selected and adopted aspects of Internet Aesthetics that are generally dominated by representations of white people while acknowledging the lack of BIPOC representation or misrepresentation of BIPOC. This acts as a direct pushback to what P9 describes as an attempt to sort people into specific categories in Western culture. As P9 explained, "I think it has to do with that Western culture of like, we're all individuals and they're trying to fit you in a box, but humans are not that way. They have different moods and vibes and how they go about their day." Participants such as P15 deliberately pushed back on this drive towards a monolithic presentation, noting "I can take what I want and adapt as needed." She later clarified, "I'm gonna give myself what I want, like the kind of experiences that I want, even if I don't 'match' the Aesthetic, kind of like as a form of joyful resistance."

Other participants, such as P2, saw adopting and adapting from Aesthetic content created by white creators via engaging with those Aesthetics in offline life as an explicit act of resistance against the percieved lack of representation. P2 explained:

> "By taking these Aesthetics that I see normally white creators portraying, and then trying it all myself, and just existing like that, I don't want to call it influencing but it's resisting in and of itself...I'm not going into the fact that I can't be a part of that Aesthetic just because of my race."

P11 adopted a similar strategy after initially feeling dejected by the lack of racial representation in the Aesthetics that they like. They eventually shifted their mindset explaining, "It doesn't matter where I fit in. And also, yeah, there are people who like the same things as you and are also Black and that can relate to your experience of being ostracized," after realizing that they could participate in the Aesthetic despite representation and find solidarity with other Black people who enjoy the Lolita Aesthetic (Figure 7).

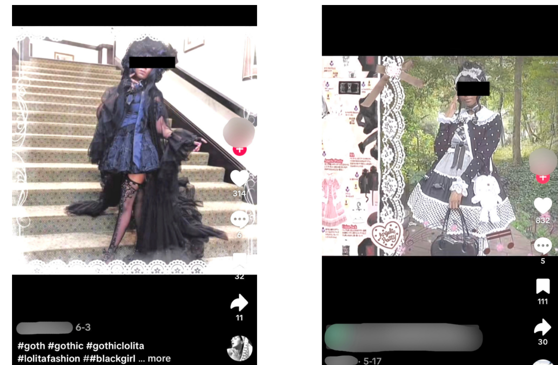

Figure 7: Two TikTok Posts tagged with 'Lolita' and 'Black girl' representing the Lolita Aesthetic.

Ultimately, many participants felt that their racial identity and representation is important, and do not allow lack of representation to prevent them from engaging with the Aesthetics that they enjoy. Rather, they adapt aspects of Aesthetics that they enjoy to their own lives. Participants develop a sense of self through their explorations of persona and style without compromising their sense of racial identity, but clearly must put in additional labor to achieve this outcome compared to white users.

5 Discussion

Overall, our results suggest that Internet Aesthetics can be a powerful tool for BIPOC users in finding joy and developing key pieces of identity and community, even in situations where this requires significant additional labor to achieve. However, our findings also paint a picture of a platform environment rife with exclusion, erasure, and other harms.

The delivery of Internet Aesthetics via social plaforms clearly has the potential to provide a path for BIPOC joy beyond resistance and suffering, but the harms produced by the algorithmic environment must be addressed before we can fully focus on BIPOC flourishing. In our discussion, we first explore the potential for building on current user resistance strategies as a way to pursue BIPOC joy. We then turn to an examination of the broad perception of technological ambivalence towards racial representation our participants reported. We use a microagression model to describe this phenomena in which participants could not fully validate their own experiences and suggest a tool that both supports user understanding of platform mechanisms and keeps platforms accountable to their BIPOC users. Our analysis offers insights for current HCI researchers to further explore Internet Aesthetics in different contexts, as well as build upon investigations of race and

identity-making on social media. In addition, we hope that future HCI researchers, designers, and developers can use our insights and suggestions as a resource to build new, more equitable social media platforms and online spaces.

5.1 Finding Identity-Based Joy Through Resistance

Throughout our results, we see evidence that our participants had mixed relationships with TikTok's feed, using it for identity development while having to persistently resist the dominant structures embedded within said feeds. Here, we primarily refer to identity-making of participants' person identities as defined in 2.3, especially related to personal style. However, we observe that participants' social identities, particularly racial identities, impact the manner and extent to which participants use Internet Aesthetics for identity-making. This reflects Brock's and Nakamura's perspectives on the Internet as a site both rooted in oppressive structures and offering the potential for resistance [12, 46], as well as past work on TikTok which highlights this dynamic of positive identity-development potential coupled with a need to constantly resist negative aspects of the feed in order to preserve potential [24, 34, 40]. Participants employed Internet Aesthetics as both an identity development tool and as a vehicle for actualizing resistance to the negatives imposed by the feed.

Many participants did see themselves and their identities reflected in the content delivered by their TikTok feeds, consistent with the *reflective* nature of what Lee at al. call the algorithmic crystal framework [40]. By posting their own content, making monetary decisions, and leaving a wealth of online data for the system to draw from, participants effectively triggered this reflection of sorts from the system, with some seeing of these aspects reflected back on them through their feed. For example, P1 remarked that their TikTok algorithm "knew" them and knew they were a Person of Color, therefore their feed was populated with People of Color.

In some cases, participants also highlighted what the algorithmic crystal framework calls *refractive* properties, or those that highlight similarities between users [40]. Participants found they could connect with others they saw as their "refracted image of self," [40] who reflected aspects of their identities, encapsulated within shared Internet Aesthetics. For example, P11 described feeling particularly connected to other Black users they saw engaging in the Lolita Aesthetic who were also "a minority in a minority." This suggests that at the best of times, the TikTok feed has the potential to not just help express identity, but connect with others that share particular facets of identity in order to make connections, build solidarity, or simply feel less alone and isolated in one's presentation.

However, the algorithmic crystal framework also suggests that a well-conceived and operated algorithmic system which effectively represents user identity is not just *reflective* but also *multifaceted*, meaning that it is not "flat, one-dimensional, or oversimplified" [40]. In the case of our participants, who co-equally valued the ability to interact and contribute to content around Internet Aesthetics and the ability to do so with other People of Color specifically, this suggests that TikTok's feed leans too heavily into what Lee et al. call *diffractive belonging* [40], which is belonging on the basis of the constituent parts of one's identity rather than the whole. For our participants, this diffractive connection was counterproductive: it was not enough to see and interact with content around Internet Aesthetics, but rather crucial to do so with other BIPOC, and the diffractive nature of the feed effectively created reflections that were not multifaceted in a way that truly supported identity-making for this group.

In fact, many participants reported that, despite seeing relevant Internet Aesthetic content, they regularly experienced *algorithmic symbolic annihilation* and resulting *algorithmic representational harm* as defined in 2.3, with the identity facet of representation being symbolically annihilated and diffractively oversimplified here being race. For example, both P8 and P9 noted that although BIPOC were prominent in and often foundational to the Aesthetics they were interested in, they were nearly invisible in Aesthetic content on TikTok. When BIPOC representation is suppressed within Internet Aesthetics, BIPOC users who would otherwise connect to an Aesthetic may feel alienated – feeling that "the things [they] love so much...don't love [them] back" as P11 described. The symbolic annihilation of BIPOC from some Internet Aesthetic promotes a narrative that BIPOC are both discouraged from participating in the Aesthetic and do not exist in the world depicted by the Aesthetic. This inhibits BIPOC users' identity-making; when BIPOC representation is suppressed on TikTok or erased completely from some Internet Aesthetics, BIPOC users have fewer opportunities to connect with the content that they view. BIPOC users may feel discouraged from or hesitant to try a different Aesthetic or wear a new style, speaking to a broader injustice that hinders creative expression and community building that can spring from engaging with different Aesthetics and their participants. BIPOC exclusion from some Internet Aesthetics and representational suppression on TikTok communicates to BIPOC that they belong only on the periphery of what they are drawn to. BIPOC may instead be directed towards spaces and narratives where they are readily accepted in the mainstream so they can fit the neat monoliths designated by the dominant system.

Despite algorithmic symbolic annihilation, BIPOC users are drawn to different styles and stories within Internet Aesthetics that align with their tastes or experiences. In response to this symbolic annihilation, our participants engaged in algorithmic resistance via folk theorization and subsequent behavior, constituting a version of the algorithmic co-construction noted by Karizat et al. [34] and the use of *refinement strategies* noted in the algorithmic crystal framework [40]. Most frequently, participants were motivated by their folk theories to prioritize engagement with BIPOC creators seeking to increase the presence of BIPOC on their feeds. They effectively rejected and combat their overly-diffractive feeds by attempting to demonstrate a desired linkage between these two facets of identity, strategically reasserting that the Aesthetic aspect of identity and the racial aspect of identity are not usefully separable in this case. Some participants also took more direct actions against culturally appropriative content where they felt that their culture or other BIPOC cultures were being misused or mischaracterized as originating from white creators. For example, P13 using the 'not interested' feature to address the appropriation of a Chicana makeup style.

Overall, in the face of discouragement, our participants rejected the notion that they should accept exclusion or erasure from Internet Aesthetics, and resisted algorithmic symbolic annihilation and

an overly-diffracted feed. However, as Lee et al. and others note, algorithmic refinement and resistance strategies levy the burden of labor on the user [23, 24, 40]. Still, our participants persisted. For them, resistance was not a simple means to an end, but rather a key element of a larger pursuit of the joy, comfort, and community that Internet Aesthetics can provide.

5.1.1 Building Upon Resistance and Looking to Joy. We expand work on algorithmic resistance by discussing non-algorithmic resistance to algorithmic symbolic annihilation and looking beyond resistance to a future where BIPOC can focus on the joy, comfort, and community that Internet Aesthetics can offer. We also found that our participants used non-algorithmic strategies for resisting algorithmic symbolic annihilation. Our participants leveraged the malleability of Internet Aesthetics to envision themselves within Aesthetics dominated by representations of whiteness and enact Internet Aesthetics offline. Internet Aesthetics are not rooted in rigid historical canon although they may be inspired by history; instead, they draw from history such that users can imagine new spaces for themselves in alternate past, future, or present realities. Our participants used the flexibility of Internet Aesthetics to develop counterstories (i.e., stories that challenge dominant discourse [49]) to exclusionary Internet Aesthetics content on TikTok in which BIPOC are centered and flourishing. Participants developed these narratives offline by drawing from aspects of Aesthetics that they enjoyed and applying them to their everyday lives, such as P2 dressing in the Downtown Girl Aesthetic style or P15 participating in outdoor activities to evoke the Granolacore Aesthetic. These participants often acknowledged that they were dissatisfied with the lack of BIPOC representation in their Internet Aesthetics on TikTok and consciously chose to enact the Aesthetic, resisting the notion communicated by algorithmic symbolic annihilation that BIPOC are nonexistent in these niches.

The potential of Internet Aesthetics content is evident through our participants' appreciation and continuous engagement with Internet Aesthetics despite the barriers posed by the injustice and exclusion embedded in TikTok's design and the broader Internet. Internet Aesthetic can bring comfort by providing a medium for understanding and romanticizing one's life in overwhelming moments as P11 and P6 expressed. Internet Aesthetics can also elevate joyful counter narratives like the Pretty Ghetto Aesthetic described by P7. They can also create communities for people like P9 who are seeking to connect with others through their interests and burgeoning identities. We advocate for drawing from the imaginative, joyful quality imbued by both our participants and Internet Aesthetics themselves to design future technologies that center joy, comfort, and connection, especially for marginalized communities. We draw from To et al.'s design tenets for BIPOC flourishing [66] to identify an opportunity to design for BIPOC self-actualization. In this case, applying self-actualization to drive design may involve tapping into BIPOC users' desires to see themselves not just in spaces that are already popular among BIPOC or popular in the mainstream, but also in niche areas like Internet Aesthetics. It is imperative to move beyond a general increase in BIPOC representation to promote opportunities for greater connection that touch on an individual's specific interests and consider users in a holistic manner. Considering the outcomes of applying self actualization to motivate design, applying To et al.'s call to collaborate with BIPOC and distribute power [66] in the design process would be a logical step forward. This may involve facilitating discussions on BIPOC user needs concerning BIPOC representation on social media, perhaps using Internet Aesthetics as a use case. In addition, designers may identify potential design solutions alongside BIPOC users that center BIPOC identity and community making online.

Undoubtedly, we are not yet in a space where we can think purely of joy. Yet, we have already captured glimpses of joy and seen the potential in Internet Aesthetics from our participants, therefore we can begin to imagine a future beyond resistance while still acknowledging and engaging in resistance to racist structures. One useful step towards this joyous future involves combatting overly-diffracted feeds which silo key aspects of identity in order to reduce the labor required for BIPOC users to see themselves. We call for future work that attempts to balance the positives of diffraction (e.g., connecting with broader groups) with guardrails that prevent harmful separation of necessarily-linked identity facets. However, platforms attempting to foster joy for marginalized groups must still address the major problem we turn to next: platform-embedded microaggressions.

5.2 Platform-Prompted Technological Ambivalence as Microaggression

Throughout our data, we observed participants perceiving a form of *technological ambivalence* [6], that is, feeling that the platform was at times incorporating their interests and at other times neglecting participants' preferences. This ambivalence produces feelings of ambiguity and frustration that is disruptive, especially when BIPOC users are searching for already niche Internet Aesthetic content with representation of their racial or ethnic identities. For example, P2, who actively employs strategies to increase BIPOC representation in her feed, expected her platform interactions to yield stronger results. Alternatively, P1 asserted that the TikTok algorithm knew her well and that she was Black, theorizing BIPOC users would see a lot of BIPOC content. Overall, BIPOC users sometimes come away from their TikTok feeds partially satisfied by the representation they see, but also questioning why they didn't see more BIPOC representation or why certain types of content, especially profit-driven content, were pushed to them in a seemingly unsolicited manner. The perception of this semi-responsive nature of TikTok's algorithm makes users' frustrations difficult to fully understand, express, and validate. For BIPOC and potentially other marginalized users, this form of technological ambivalence shares key characteristics with and substantively acts as a form of microaggression.

As noted in Section 2.2, microaggressions are everyday, prejudiced interactions distinguished by their understated and seemingly unbiased nature, making them difficult to identify and address [63]. Microaggressions are pervasive in digital systems [49, 67]. Here, microaggressions essentially stem from the curation decisions made by TikTok's algorithmic mechanisms. In our findings, we identify direct links between the technological ambivalence participants

[6] This is distinct from ambivalence referred to in other design and technology contexts [36, 80, 84] that characterize ambivalence as felt and enacted by participants, rather than feeling that a certain design, technology, and/or system was ambivalent towards them.

experienced and key types of microaggressions. For example, the perceived exclusion of BIPOC creators from TikTok-mediated Internet Aesthetics and the widespread appropriation of BIPOC-created Internet Aesthetics can be seen as what Sue et al. refer to as "microinsults," where the specific cultural values and visual communication styles of BIPOC are devalued and treated as lesser [63]. For example, P8's observation of the dominance of white women in the Rockstar Girlfriend Aesthetic, despite Black women playing a prominent role in rock music or P13's disapproval towards white celebrity Hailey Bieber, associated with the Clean Girl Aesthetic [19], and her appropriation of a beauty look originating from Chicana women.

In addition, Sue et al. describe microinvalidations, a type of microagression which directly negates the "experiential reality" of BIPOC [63]. In this context, microinvalidations play a key role in why participants experience their feeds as ambiguous by denying race factors into an algorithmic curation decision. This denial may occur through high-level insistence that algorithmic systems are colorblind, assertion that individual incidents do not actually reflect any form of racism, or other lines of reasoning. The economy of social media platforms plays a significant role in these microinvalidations; companies are incentivized to keep users on their platforms conceivably to keep advertisers paying for ad space, constructing users as a product to be sold to advertisers. As Simpson et al. [59] describe, TikTok users feel motivated to "domesticate" the algorithm to receive content that reflects their identities, as well as their preferences. Technological ambivalence requires users to increase their labor, as P9 notes, increasing the time they spend on TikTok. This perceived ambivalence produces a feeling of ambiguity, which is exacerbated by a lack of tracking for content history and platform interactions and leaves users with few tools which can validate their suspicions. Ambiguity is further worsened by a lack of direct knowledge of platform function with which users can substantiate and investigate what they are seeing. TikTok, like most algorithmically-driven social platforms, is purposefully opaque on a technological level, with the "For You" algorithm itself seen as a trade secret [23]. Typical of an opaque algorithmic system, this leaves users with only one tool to understand and potentially parse out when and if a platform is curating in a racist, microaggression-filled way: folk theories, or users' own informal, self-constructed theories of how the platform *might* curate content [42, 78].

5.2.1 Technological Ambivalence, Folk Theorization, and Epistemic Injustice. One of key characteristic of microaggressions is that they are often treated by perpetrators and outside observers as either not nonexistent or far too "minor" to matter or address, often being called "distractions," with the person who noted the microaggression seen as "overreacting" [62, 63]. This is already established as a baseline experience for BIPOC users, described by Benjamin and Noble's concept of "digital denial," the insistence that technology is both progressive and color-blind, leading users feel conflicted when they have racist technological experiences [5, 48]. This dynamic is exacerbated in the TikTok environment, where participants depend on user folk theories, and further complicated by the fact that users themselves have no substantial way to validate the technological effects they are perceiving.

Consider that our participants who felt that TikTok was partially ignoring their preferences could not express an obvious source or indication of exclusion. For example, P4 could not identify a difference in efficacy between different curation strategies' impact on their feed. P9 further speculated that the TikTok algorithm would push certain content regardless of user preferences. The opaque nature of TikTok's algorithm obstructs users from validating their conclusions, therefore it is difficult for individual users to determine whether or not their preferences are being deflected. In turn, this complicates efforts to prove said problems exist. Ample room is left for existing societal bias towards ignoring microaggressions to combine with this ambivalence and ensure that the potentially real phenomenon that users are reporting on can be easily ignored and dismissed. Furthermore, since Internet Aesthetics are co-produced by users and the algorithm, perceived ambivalence makes it more difficult for users to adjust their strategies for defining and curating Internet Aesthetics, particularly that with greater BIPOC representation.

This environment of technological ambiguity towards the platform acts similarly to an environment of microaggression, inhibiting BIPOC users' ability to critique the platform that could otherwise be used to improve the user experience. Participants' experiences are undermined by the perceived progressive, race-blind nature of technology [21] and thus their experiences as BIPOC seeking greater representation are invalidated. Even upon encountering broader recognition of TikTok's ambiguity, participants struggled to both validate and describe their experiences with the algorithm. Essentially, the combination of an opaque algorithmic environment and a larger societal context that is predisposed to ignoring microaggressions leads to a persistent environment of epistemic injustice for BIPOC platform users.

Within this environment, the hermeneutical injustice of denying direct knowledge and tools to understand and substantiate one's own experiences is exacerbated by the testimonial injustice of repeated communication that the microaggressive injustices are merely personal overreactions. In this dynamic, we see similarities to the outcomes of microaggressive environments: due to the opaqueness of the algorithm, many TikTok users abandon the idea of understanding how the platform operates, as Arne and Moe predicted [83]. Therefore, they abandon their ability to both prove and substantively address platform microaggressions. The lack of knowledge of how the algorithm operates, which constitutes a lack of hermeneutical sensemaking resources, has the potential to make the users accept the ambivalence based on their theories of the algorithm's opaqueness and confusion not being validated. This can directly damage the potential for using one's own online behavior, as informed by one's folk theories, as a way to resist microaggressions and broader racist structures in society and enable healthy identity-making and the creation of legitimate sources of BIPOC joy. It also constitutes an area where we as researchers, designers, and developers, may be be missing or ignoring important user-generated data in the form of user folk theories themselves. In the vein suggested by Mayworm et al. [42], this data can be seen as high-value diagnostic data indicating where users are observing the types of very real and serious problems that a disconnected development, design, or policy team may struggle to otherwise see and understand. Future work in this area should seriously consider examining environments that feature the kind of technological ambivalence we have described here as environments that may,

in fact, best be seen and addressed through the lens of microaggressions exacerbated by epistemic injustice. This could enable us to harness user folk theories to address technological ambiguity as crucial pointers towards what needs to be addressed in future updates, and what types of harmful phenomena our existing efforts may be missing due to larger societal biases around race. Efforts to use this microaggression-based lens as a tool should be deliberate and explicit, with the direct involvement of users who experience these microaggressions, so as not to further exacerbate testimonial injustice and the broad societal predisposition towards microinvalidations.

5.2.2 Addressing Technological Ambivalence and Microaggressions through a Racial Microintervention Model. While our findings paint a somewhat dire and concerning picture of our online platform landscape, examining these issues as microaggressions also affords us the opportunity to learn from and integrate techniques for fighting microaggressions into our design, development, and policy-making processes. Here, we draw from Sue et al.'s model of Microinterventions, "everyday words or deeds, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicates to targets of microaggressions: (a) validation of their experiential reality, (b) value as a person, (c) affirmation of their racial or group identity, (d) support and encouragement, and (e) reassurance that they are not alone," to identify strategies that may address technological ambivalence [62]. In particular, we identify Sue et al.'s Making the Invisible, Visible and Seeking External Reinforcement or Support strategies as strategies with that can be translated into a technological ambivalence context [62].

Sue et al. describe "Making the Invisible, Visible" as exposing the unconsciously prejudiced aspects of microaggressions by rendering them visible and indisputable, with the goal of eliminating the ambiguity so that decisive action may be taken against prejudice [62]. The first step towards our version of this principle is encapsulated in our earlier call for future work on BIPOC users' experiences with algorithmic social media that uses our paired microaggression + epistemic injustice lens, which will help researchers act to validate and more robustly and respectfully catalogue the BIPOC user experience with algorithms. Even without this additional work, there are immediate design and policy steps we can take to improve the situation.

We suggest designing and integrating tools that directly instantiate "Making the Invisible, Visible" by allowing users to observe and record their interactions with social media algorithms so that they can directly see the impact of their strategies and how the algorithm does or does not react to their preferences. This also aids not just in individual folk theorization, but also the use of these folk theories to detect, directly substantiate, and push back against platform-mediated microaggressions. For example, designers could develop a tool that focuses on tracking platform interactions and the algorithm's response in order to provide an opportunity for user reflection, validation, and potentially holding the platform accountable. Such a tool could even use the now well-known format of other reflective tools such as Spotify Wrapped by summarizing how users have interacted with the platform (e.g., how much a user likes, scrolls past, follows, etc.) and the resulting content (e.g., content users see as a result of their interactions). In particular, the tool could display a post, describe what category of content it is (Aesthetics, political commentary, humor, etc.) and how the user arrived at the post (were the majority of previous posts liked, scrolled past, etc.) in order to help users understand what they've actually experienced. However, if such a tool were to be created, it is imperative that data collection is completely localized to the user's device so as not to infringe on their right to privacy and mitigate concerns of a third party data collection on their platform behavior that are associated with Spotify Wrapped[3].

It is also crucial to provide new ways to instantiate Sue et al.'s "Seeking External Reinforcement or Support" principle [62] by providing systems and spaces where users can discuss their experiences with algorithmic social media, as well as their strategies for investigating, substantiating, and dealing with the microaggressions that platforms may or may not be allowing or creating. Creating dedicated online spaces would help BIPOC users receive more validation about their experiences. Notably, folk theories are one of many representations of how the TikTok algorithm operates. HCI researchers and designers are still developing new techniques to assess the algorithm because of the algorithm's lack of transparency and continual growing research on the algorithm's personalization [37]. Our participants theorized that their feeds were built by their own interaction with the platform, a common theory. However, we observed that participants also believe that their feeds were based on their followers and friends offline due to shared experiences and interests. The folk theories of individualized personalization and community driven personalization both contend with one another and we believe that designers should account for this complexity. These spaces would also serve as starting points for designers and developers who wish to truly understand and address these issues by directly connecting with and honoring the experiences of those most heavily impacted by microaggressive platform behaviors. Moreover, there is substantial potential in building systems that directly encourage feedback around algorithmic ambiguity, perhaps in the form of user folk theories paired with novel platform procedures for recognizing and actively investigating microaggressive problems based on this ambiguity data. Consider the utility of a system where BIPOC users can directly report and tag potentially microaggressive curation incidents and express their current folk theories alongside this reporting, and where some threshold number of shared reports from BIPOC users automatically triggers an internal (preferably public) process of critical algorithmic auditing of current platform design. This would provide both a detection system and a pre-packaged set of high-value observations to aid in locating and addressing the technical side of this harmful sociotechnical dynamic.

6 Conclusion and Future Work

In this paper, we contribute a perspective on Internet Aesthetics for HCI and examined how racial identity plays into BIPOC interactions with Internet Aesthetics on TikTok. We observe how BIPOC perceive Internet Aesthetics as mediums that promote joy and identity development but can also be alienate users through a lack of racial representation and prompt additional labor to search for representation. BIPOC have several strategies for navigating Internet Aesthetics on TikTok, including applying folk theories

to curate their feeds for their Aesthetics and for racial representation and adapting aspects of Internet Aesthetics they enjoy to their lifestyles. We apply the algorithmic crystal framework [40] to elaborate on the identity-making process as reflection and refraction of identity using Internet Aesthetics as a mode and TikTok, which can result in meaning making and joy for BIPOC users. However, identity may also be communicated through Internet Aesthetics on TikTok in a diffractive way that taps into a BIPOC user's Aesthetic preferences while negating their preferences for racial representation, resulting in what Karizat et al. [34] describe as algorithmic representational harm. Furthermore, TikTok's algorithm can leave BIPOC users lacking validation on their experiences with racial representation in Internet Aesthetics and other forms of content on TikTok. We propose a microaggression model for understanding the epistemic injustice stemming from the uncertainty that BIPOC users feel from the TikTok algorithm and apply theory on microaggressions as principles to address this injustice. We also suggest designing a tool that will allow users to validate their own experiences and potentially aid researchers and designers in identifying design opportunities concerning microaggressive platforms. Internet Aesthetics and other Internet trends should continue to be studied and taken seriously as distinct indicators of societal development and design opportunities for creating a more just digital experience.

In future work, we hope to expand upon the impact Internet Aesthetics have on consumerism, especially with the emergence of features like TikTok Shop and co-optation of Internet Aesthetics by brands. The context and findings of this study highlight tensions that have already been identified by previous literature between identity, self-expression, and capitalism and commodification [59]. More specifically Wolf et al. [79] describe the inherent tensions in rectifying unjust technological systems under capitalist incentives and structures in the tech sector. While diving deeper into this dynamic fell beyond the scope of this study, we believe there are fruitful directions for future research in this intersection of identity development, Internet Aesthetics, and commodification of identity. In addition, we believe that future work that applies a specific lens of intersectionality, explicitly evaluating both racial and gendered elements (as well as their intersections and that of other social identities found to be relevant) of identity-making with Internet Aesthetics would be greatly beneficial. Ultimately, we look to the evidence of racist, status quo structures embedded in social media design and Internet Aesthetic narratives as an urgent call to action and we look to BIPOC identity-making and cultural engagement as a means of resistance and hope.

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