

The Paradox of Anti-Intellectualism in Dark Academia

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Abstract

The subculture, aesthetic, and genre 'Dark Academia' romanticizes classical literature and academic life. However, it paradoxically contains elements of anti-intellectualism within its performative celebration of intellectualism. This paper explores how this paradox contributes to the commodification of books and the emergence of a specific readerly identity. By applying Richard Hofstadter's theory of American anti-intellectualism, this paper relates the paradox to a broader cultural trend of prioritizing aesthetic over substance as exemplified by BookTok, a subcommunity on the social media platform TikTok. The discussion centers on Donna Tartt's novel *The Secret History* as a primary example of the Dark Academia literary genre, revealing how its romanticization of academic life encourages elitism and exclusivity, yet ultimately critiques the superficial intellectualism present in both the subculture and real-life academia.

Special Issue Name

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Introduction

Dark Academia, which can be defined as a subculture that romanticizes classical literature, the pursuit of knowledge, and the university and education systems, has gained significant attention due to the social media platform TikTok and its subcommunity BookTok. While in Dark Academia, intellectualism, higher education, and the arts are seemingly celebrated, it paradoxically contains elements of anti-intellectualism within its own subculture and genre. This article will explore how Dark Academia, due to its performative celebration of intellectualism, promotes superficial engagement with the very works it celebrates and contributes to the commodification of both books and reading practices.

First, a historical overview of anti-intellectualism in American culture,

based on Richard Hofstadter's study *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* will be given.¹ He describes three types of anti-intellectualism: Anti-rationalism, anti-elitism, and unreflective instrumentalism. The historical overview serves as a backdrop for understanding contemporary manifestations of anti-intellectualism, such as certain responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequences of 'mindless' short video consumption on TikTok. Subsequently, this article examines the origins, themes, and intellectual engagement within the genre of Dark Academia, taking its Ur-text *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt as the primary and representative example of the genre. The article will scrutinize how the romanticization of academic life leads to a superficial engagement with the very material that characterizes it, such as classical literature. This leads to the claim that the embrace of intellectualism seemingly present in Dark Academia is pretentious, which in turn inspires anti-intellectual behavior among representatives of the subculture and those influenced by it.

Acknowledging and analyzing this paradox means identifying a general societal trend of valuing surface aesthetics over deeper intellectual engagement. In Dark Academia, the issue is not simply a focus on aesthetics, as many scholars engage with aesthetic matters, but rather the superficial and performative nature of said engagement. As Dark Academia presents academic life through aesthetics and vibes, its aestheticization ultimately leads to a culture in which intellectualism is associated with appearances more than actual learning. By focusing on the imagery of academia, Dark Academia reinforces elitist structures in real-life universities, where access to knowledge and education is often limited to an exclusive few. This superficial approach to intellectualism often reinforces elitist structures and exclusivity in real-life academia, as intellectualism becomes more about appearance than substance. Hence, understanding this paradox is crucial because it exposes how elitism and exclusivity suppress true intellectual endeavors. This not only marginalizes individuals seeking knowledge for its own sake but also reinforces existing barriers to entry for diverse voices. By addressing said issues, this article seeks to inspire a shift away from pretentious intellectualism and toward a more inclusive and genuine academic environment in which ideas and innovations are valued over aesthetic and image.

¹ Due to the nature of this theoretical foundation, the article is mainly concerned with American culture and society, though many of its claims may be relevant in other contexts, particularly in the Global North, as well.

Anti-Intellectualism

Richard Hofstadter defines the phenomenon of anti-intellectualism as “a resentment and suspicion of the life of the mind and of those who are considered to represent it; and a disposition constantly to minimize the value of that life” (Hofstadter 7). Hofstadter further divides anti-intellectualism into three different and rather specific types: Anti-rationalism, anti-elitism, and unreflective instrumentalism. While anti-rationalism denies the general value of critical thinking, anti-elitism suggests distrust of the elites of society, and unreflective instrumentalism looks down on ideas that do not have any immediate practical value (Rigney 435). Not only do anti-intellectuals often distrust intellectuals, but they are characterized by rejecting factual, scientific evidence. Hofstadter includes the view of intellectuals through the lens of anti-intellectualism, a view that defines intellectuals as “[...] pretentious, conceited [...], and snobbish; [...] immoral, dangerous, and subversive. The plain sense of the common man is an altogether adequate substitute for, if not actually much superior to, formal knowledge and expertise.” (Hofstadter 18f) This perspective on intellectuals—or people with higher education in general—highlights the divide between intellectuals and anti-intellectuals, promoting a preference for simplicity and practical knowledge over scholarly expertise. This attitude contributes to the persistence of anti-intellectual sentiments in society, especially in the US.

Hofstadter mentions the anti-communist movement of the early 1950s in the US, i.e., McCarthyism, named after Senator Joseph McCarthy, as one of the factors that influenced society’s view on intellectuals in a negative way (Hofstadter 3). McCarthyism greatly took advantage of people’s fears and suspicions after World War II, causing them to be easily influenced and mass-ruining the careers of many scholars who were accused of representing communist values. Since then, there has been a rise in anti-intellectual beliefs, such as anti-vaccination or flat-eartherism. Another factor contributing to the recognition of a prevalence of anti-intellectual behavior is the global skepticism observed during the COVID-19 pandemic. There is empirical evidence indicating a correlation between anti-intellectualism and a reduction in the frequency of mask usage which demonstrates the real-world consequences of anti-intellectualism (Merkley and Loewen 710). These examples show how deeply rooted anti-intellectualism is in American history

and how it is still impactful, underscoring the importance of addressing this trend to raise awareness and prevent further societal harm.

BookTok and Overconsumption

Besides the mistrust of authorities during the COVID-19 pandemic, the social media platform TikTok has also played a significant role in popularizing anti-rationalism, as well as unreflective instrumentalism. The growing popularity of TikTok ties in directly with the creation of the Dark Academia subculture, which was born on BookTok, TikTok's "very fast book club" (Roberts 27). Mainly consisting of short videos, the act of scrolling on TikTok's 'ForYou-Page' reduces its users' attention spans and thus encourages overconsumption of short and addictive content (Junco and Cotten 505-14). However, overconsumption itself is not anti-rational. Rather, consuming a large number of short videos and their information without ever questioning their factuality or, in terms of overconsumption, not questioning whether the purchase of new books is truly necessary when one already has a considerable number of unread books waiting on one's shelf, is. The previously given definition of anti-rationalism provided by Hofstadter and analyzed by Rigney contains the devaluation of critical thinking, after all.

As illustrated by Huizinga in the following quote, the BookTok aesthetic encourages readers to become consumers, which has the effect of reducing books to mere short-lived marketable trends:

BookTok acts as a helpful case study, showcasing how companies will find any way to capitalize on what people love online. Our current stage of capitalism thrives off bottling peoples' passions and interests and selling them back to them in a cheapened, sterilized package. This inevitably leads to the erosion of artistic authenticity and books becoming less of an art and more like products that tick the right boxes. (Huizinga para. 14)

In response to this, companies are marketing special editions and other book-related merchandise, capitalizing on the 'being a reader' identity that is advertised on BookTok.

[T]he focus of BookTok seemed to shift away from the reading itself and more toward the identity of being a reader. You would think that the act of reading precedes the label of "reader," but social media famously facilitates the development of appearance without substance. [...] Instead, the focus shifts to the aesthetics, which include the [...] consumption of many, many books, all of which

are tagged with copious sticky tabs to ensure viewers that you are in fact reading the book. (Huizinga para. 6)

TikTok's recommendation algorithm intensifies this issue, as it prioritizes popular, visually appealing books and thus limits the diversity of voices that can be heard on the platform (Barnaby para. 13-14). By emphasizing the consumption of books and the performative aspect of reading, the deeper, more critical engagement with literature is often neglected. Barnaby emphasizes in her article that TikTok's focus on fast consumption has raised concerns about the quality of the literature being promoted (Barnaby para. 4). This is due to the rise of the 'BookTok-genre', a genre containing books that are specifically designed for being marketed on TikTok. They are usually written and produced with an eye to consumption and therefore rely on common tropes and appealing imagery (Barnaby para. 5). It is crucial to acknowledge that this observation does not suggest that the objective of each TikTok video or, more specifically, BookTok is to prompt the average viewer to consume more books. But, as the TikTok algorithm favors already popular videos over others, it is safe to assume that the majority of videos that are suggested to the user are consumption-oriented. The resulting consumption practices and development of a specific readerly identity contribute to anti-intellectual behavior on the platform, as the algorithm favors the consumption of new books over the engagement with existing works. Characterized by large bookshelves filled to the brim with special editions and colorfully annotated notes, BookTok romanticizes the aesthetic of reading and the appearance of engaging with books. While the visual appeal is often prioritized, deeper intellectual interaction with the books in question is not a prominent feature of the platform. This romanticization, together with TikTok's recommendation algorithm, encourages a kind of consumption behavior that can be characterized as unreflective instrumentalism. For example, when constantly being exposed to aesthetically appealing videos that encourage an impulsive spending mentality—such as buying more books than one can realistically read in a given time—viewers are more likely to adopt this behavior themselves. This illustrates how overconsumption can be interpreted through the lens of romanticization, as well as the anti-intellectual subcategory of unreflective instrumentalism. The three concepts romanticization, overconsumption, and unreflective instrumentalism thus serve to explain the shift away from the plot of a book to the status of owning a book. This shift highlights the broader societal trend of valuing appearance and superficial engagement over genuine

intellectual pursuit. Anti-intellectualism is thus ultimately rooted in devaluing intellectualism across American society and among TikTok users.

Dark Academia and (Anti-)Intellectualism

The Dark Academia subculture was born as an internet aesthetic during the COVID-19 pandemic and prominently popularized on TikTok (Adriaansen 108). It centers around a specific vibe, or atmosphere, as Adriaansen calls it, conveyed through moodboards, playlists, outfits, and books, often featuring elements of classical education, literature, philosophy, and fashion, such as tweed blazers, vintage books, and candlelit study sessions.

Books that engage with the conventions of the eponymous literary genre, which was established a little later, often deal with topics such as obsession, murder, mystery, elitism, and addiction. The Ur-text of the Dark Academia literary genre is considered to be Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*, even though the term did not exist when it was first published in 1992. However, in retrospect, it is considered to be one of the foundations of both the Dark Academia literary genre and the Dark Academia online subculture (Murray 350). In *The Secret History*, many, if not all of the previously listed examples for Dark Academic items can be found while the book itself functions as a tool to negotiate said examples. The topics of obsession, morality, and addiction are also explored within *The Secret History* (Tartt 29). As the Dark Academic prototype, *The Secret History* serves as the benchmark for evaluating whether a book meets the criteria for Dark Academic standards.

Within the Dark Academia literary genre,² but more prominently within the Dark Academia subculture, intellectual life and its academic achievements are romanticized. This romanticization happens through the association of academic achievements with the Dark Academia aesthetic. For example, on BookTok, colorful annotations (see Fig. 1) are shared to inspire others to read and study selected titles, while meticulously organized bookshelves filled with expensive volumes (see Fig. 2) often emphasize financial and intellectual superiority.

² In this article, Dark Academia, not only refers to an aesthetic phenomenon or a subculture, but also references the literary genre more generally, unless otherwise specified.

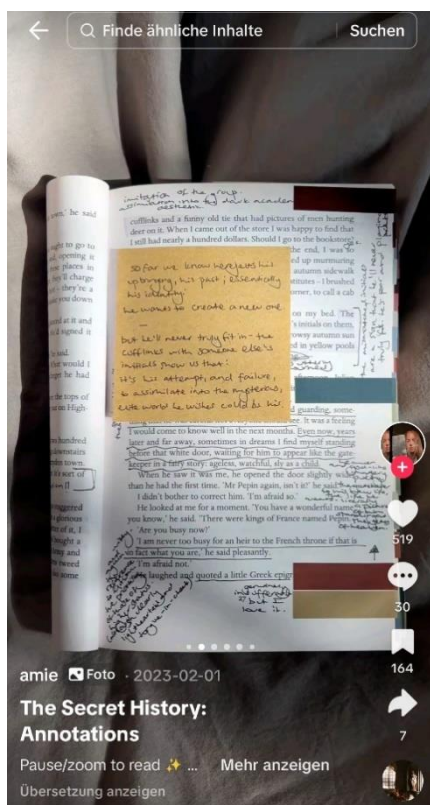


Figure 1: @literamie: The Secret History: Annotations. Aesthetic, Dark Academic book annotations found on BookTok.

Figure 2: @literamie: Bookshelf Tour. Aesthetic book displays featured on BookTok inspired by Dark Academia.

Individuals are encouraged to live a life dedicated to intellectual pursuits, thus implying that a life devoid of such achievements is inherently unfulfilling. Since this growing subculture promotes the desirability and fulfillment of an intellectual life, it seemingly counters the devaluation of intellectualism apparent in the recent history of American society.

The side of BookTok that is less consumption-oriented rarely provides book recommendations and pretty color-coded collections of expensive volumes, but instead offers insight into a more regular lifestyle with which users tend to identify (Dezuanni et al. 368). In addition, readers share genuine analytical approaches to certain works. In this segment of BookTok, individuals with similar interests are encouraged to interact and engage in philosophical conversations centered on their shared passion for analyzing their favorite books (Boffone and Jerasa 10-12). By celebrating diligence and dedication, Dark Academia encourages academic pursuits and a genuine love for learning. This

provides a positive and supportive environment for intellectual growth. In this way, Dark Academia effectively challenges anti-intellectual sentiments and advocates for the significance and fulfillment found in intellectual life.

Just as a segment of BookTok promotes a romanticized and aestheticized view of intellectualism, *The Secret History* idealizes the portrayal of an exclusive academic setting and reveals deeper tensions around intellectual elitism and moral complexity. *The Secret History* is set in the fictional elite college Hampden in Vermont where the main characters take an exclusive Greek class (Tartt 12-17). This setting is ultimately idealized within the Dark Academia aesthetic and contributes to the overall romanticization of academia. Said exclusivity also isolates the students from their colleagues and friends, creating an environment of intellectual elitism and superiority, with the latter often reflected on by the characters: “it is impossible for a mediocre intellect to render the speech of a superior one” (Tartt 36). Featuring a plotline which revolves around a murder committed by the group, Tartt uses dark imagery (examples: “shadowy figure” and “snowy twilight” (Tartt 123, 138)) which evokes a mysterious atmosphere. Henry’s use of the word “[g]lorious” (Tartt 167) to describe the first murder stands out precisely because it contrasts sharply with its conventional, positive connotation. This juxtaposition gives the word a dark and unsettling meaning in the context of the novel’s narrative and subtly hints at the morally grey behavior of the students, especially of Henry.

Dark Academia’s promotion of intellectualism is, however, fundamentally superficial. While Dark Academia glorifies the visual appeal of academia, it tends to prioritize the aesthetic over the intellectual engagement that is essential to genuine scholarship. When aesthetic becomes the sole focus, it can distract from the actual practice of studying and engaging with literary works. This focus on aesthetic alone becomes anti-intellectual when it serves as the sole reason for engaging with academia without any other effort beyond that.

The Secret History provides an illustrative example of the superficial engagement with intellectualism that is also evident on BookTok. While the novel does include one example of an intellectually stimulating conversation set during the Greek class (Tartt 36-39), it primarily serves to create an ambiance of intellectualism rather than to demonstrate a deep immersion in specific material. Furthermore, it serves as the only detailed philosophical conversation between teacher and students in the book, while another conversation between them is mentioned by Henry (Tartt 164) but is never

rendered in direct speech. This conversation is about the Dionysian ritual, which is a key point of the plot and the catalyst for the first and second murders, respectively. Nevertheless, these two instances are insufficient for the narrative to be regarded as intellectual as giving details on main plot assets is necessary for a smooth narration. Henry, the student who proposes the performance of a Dionysian ritual, provides only fragmented information regarding the ritual itself. He and the other members of the group refrain from offering any precise details about what actually happened during the ritual and if they do, their statements are unclear and contradict each other: “We are not too clear on what happened after that,” “Charles tells a different story,” and “Every time you talk to him, he remembers something different” (Tartt 169). Readers of *The Secret History* are thus forced to mistrust the ‘elites,’ the group of students, as the exact circumstances of the ritual remain uncertain and are only known to those who experienced it.

Furthermore, instances of intellectual gatekeeping can be observed when students make remarks in Greek, Latin, or even French, and readers are required to translate them on their own. In the absence of a provided translation within the novel, it is possible to inadvertently miss the intended meaning of jokes or lines with significant connotations. One example of this is the Latin nickname “[c]uniculus molestus” (Tartt 190), which Henry gives to Bunny in his diary. This nickname undoubtedly highlights Henry’s growing dislike towards Bunny, foreshadowing the murder of his friend and fellow student. The decision of Richard, the novel’s narrator, to not translate words and phrases in non-English languages contributes to his (own) characterization as an unreliable narrator (Tartt 7) who seemingly takes pleasure in alienating himself. Nevertheless, when lines in non-English languages are not integral to the plot, as in Henry’s “*Consummatum est*” (Tartt 99) after having removed a piece of glass from Camilla’s foot, they may appear pretentious and excessive. However, when this biblical quote reappears in the book after Bunny’s death (Tartt 276), it enforces the idea that Bunny—just like Christ—died for their sins, i.e., the killing of the farmer during the Dionysian ritual and, unlike the first use of said Latin words, it has a much deeper, integral, and apparent meaning for the plot.

A third example of superficial intellectualism within *The Secret History* can be found when Richard lies to Henry about having read works by Plotinus. Richard even blatantly states: “‘Yes,’ I lied. I have never, to this day, read a word by Plotinus” (Tartt 35).

Subsequently, this prompts the reader to question Richard's expertise and sincerity in his intellectual pursuits and thus build a relationship of mistrust towards him as well as the other characters. The above examples show how readers are pressed to reconsider whether the 'intellectuals' of the novel are intellectual at all.

The Paradox and Its Consequences

Thus far, this article has demonstrated that BookTok romanticizes the act of reading by encouraging individuals to engage with literary works of the BookTok genre, while the majority of videos favored by the algorithm often only promote a surface-level engagement. As the Dark Academia subculture emerged and continues to thrive on BookTok, it mirrors this pattern, where it is more concerned with aesthetic characteristics than with actual academic pursuit. Therefore, the observation that it seems to celebrate intellectualism is transferable. There are many aspects in *The Secret History*, such as discussions of classical literature, reverence for ancient languages, and the intellectual atmosphere created by those two aspects together, which lead the reader to conclude that the characters actually value intellectual pursuit. Nevertheless, this form of intellectualism is a façade and devoid of substantial depth, as my earlier examples show. Enjoying and engaging with Dark Academic media, its aesthetic, and vibes is not anti-intellectual in itself; however, engaging with academia for mere aesthetic reasons is. The previously mentioned romanticization of academia fuels a cycle of superficial engagement, prioritizing visual appeal and trendiness over genuine intellectual depth, ultimately leading to overconsumption as seen on BookTok, which is heavily influenced by behavior that comes close to what Hofstadter and Rigney call unreflective instrumentalism. The short video format on TikTok has led to a situation in which BookTok readers must race to keep up with the fast pace of recommendations.

Most of the time, books of the BookTok genre do not lend themselves for an in-depth analysis. This is largely due to the fact that they are primarily designed for immediate consumption. This consumption pattern, which fosters a new readerly identity, encourages anti-intellectual behavior on the platform, where the algorithm prioritizes the acquisition of new books over the serious engagement with those already read. Ultimately, the Dark Academia subculture was born through the anti-intellectual behavior of BookTokers. It is necessarily anti-intellectual, as its fundament, TikTok, is anti-intellectual and discourages users from thinking critically by shifting the focus from

reading to consuming. Thus, Dark Academia and BookTok are both a product of mindless consumption and therefore invite anti-rational and unreflective instrumentalist behavior.

The paradox of Dark Academia is that it claims to celebrate intellectualism, yet this very act of celebration is a performative one and even contains anti-intellectual elements, such as superficial engagement with literary works and the commodification of reading. It imitates the elitist structures of real-life universities by focusing on aesthetic and performativity, as evidenced by the organized shelves of BookTokers, meticulous aesthetic note-taking, and the Dark Academia literary genre's obsession with classical education. However, it also critiques these structures by romanticizing them to the point of appearing satirical, considering how intellectual appearances are valued over actual intellect and equated to academia. The commodification of academic interests observed on BookTok serves as another critique of how real-life academia turns education into a commercial product, further alienating those who are not part of this elite institution. It is crucial to acknowledge the existence of this paradox within the context of Dark Academia because it functions as a means to both mirror and criticize the elitist structure and exclusivity of real-life universities.

Conclusion

To conclude, this article has unearthed the critical tension present within Dark Academia: its outward celebration of intellectualism on the one hand, and its involvement with superficiality and commodification on the other. The analysis has shown that this very act of celebration is a performative one by containing anti-intellectual tendencies, as introduced by Hofstadter, as well as inspiring anti-intellectual behavior in people interacting with the subculture and aesthetic. The Dark Academia subculture sheds light on a complex relationship between pretentious intellectualism and actual intellectual celebration. While it does present a romanticized version of academia, it simultaneously reduces academic engagement to superficial aesthetics and symbols rather than encouraging deeper intellectual engagement. Once those two things become indistinguishable, Dark Academia proves to be a misleading and deceptive approach that diverts attention away from the real labor of the university. By analyzing anti-

intellectualism in Dark Academia, we can make ourselves aware of elitist structures and dynamics present in *The Secret History*, which may well apply to real-life academia.

The commodification of reading, as exemplified by BookTok, is a prominent feature of contemporary culture. However, the emphasis on aesthetic of Dark Academia also allows it to critique the very structures of academia, which it simultaneously mirrors. By recognizing the absurdity of reducing real-world academia to its aesthetic, Dark Academia satirically dismantles said elitist structures that promote exclusivity and intellectual superiority.

If students and the general public read and study in a performative and superficial manner, it might have dire consequences for reading as a significant cultural practice. As our reading processes shift from a focus on deep intellectual engagement to a search of vibes and emotional resonance, there is a risk of succumbing to anti-intellectual sentiments. In doing so, readers may support anti-science and anti-rational positions, ultimately endangering societal and cultural well-being.

As this article has been primarily concerned with anti-intellectualism in American culture, and society, it has introduced the possibility of a field of future research that includes examining global perspectives on anti-intellectualism. With TikTok being a relatively new global phenomenon, it presents researchers with the opportunity to explore how anti-intellectual tendencies manifest themselves across different cultures. It would be immensely valuable to better understand how different cultures interact with and are influenced by anti-intellectual behavior.

While the paradox of (anti-)intellectualism in Dark Academia highlights the overall need for a more genuine approach to intellectualism—one that values substance over superficiality in both academic and public discourse—understanding and addressing the paradox is crucial for inspiring action towards a more genuinely intellectual academic environment.

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