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Lofi Girl, cultural politics, and dichotomies of digital slowness and productivity

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary culture is saturated with artefacts that propose ways of navigating competing temporal demands. While formations such as cosy games, cottagecore and the tradwife ideal promise respite by slowing down, they sit alongside right-wing accelerationism and Silicon Valley's 'all-gas-no-brakes' ethos. These contradictory temporal politics rest on the false premise that time is equally accessible, masking how capitalist, racialized, gendered and ableist structures unevenly shape whose rhythms are valued. Within this landscape, slowness emerges not as resistance to acceleration but as a means of managing the anxieties it produces, an affective technology shaped by the pacification and depoliticisation of time. To explore how tensions between temporality, identity and digital representation materialize in platform culture, this article analyses the YouTube channel @LofiGirl. Reading her across the visual lexicon of Japanese anime, creator and fan-producer imaginaries, the symbolic centrality of (girls') bedroom culture and the sonic and affective politics of lofi hip hop, we argue that Lofi Girl mediates these influences into a coherent spatio-temporal fantasy, offering a bulwark against the contradictions of contemporary temporal life.

Introduction: Who's that Girl?

Forever peaceful yet productive. A muse and a maker. Who is she? The @LofiGirl (aka Lofi Girl) YouTube channel, of course.

As Saks and Vaitkus (2023) describe, '[c]reated by the mononymous French music producer Dimitri, Lofi Girl is a 24/7 livestream of an anime girl studying in her room and listening to lofi hip hop. For many, she's become the perfect study buddy'. At the most immediate level, the channel presents itself as a simple temporal aid: Lofi Girl appears to help viewers manage their time by supporting sustained productivity and mitigating the anxiety of 'running out of time', providing a calming auditory environment that facilitates relaxation and low-intensity leisure.

Yet this apparent functionality only scratches the surface of what Lofi Girl has become. She now circulates as a transnational, transmedia figure whose affective power lies in her capacity to accrue meaning as she moves across platforms, communities and cultural contexts. Her aesthetic draws simultaneously on (1) the visual lexicon of Japanese anime, (2) creator and fan-producer imaginaries, (3) the symbolic centrality of (girls') bedroom culture, and (4) the sonic and affective politics of lofi hip hop. Her endlessly looping image 'serves as a visual emblem for an entire genre of popular music and its associated community of internet sociality' (Gamble, 2022, p. 78), invoking both the archetypal studious schoolgirl and the contemplative listener. As Gamble (2022, p. 79) notes, even glimpsing her thumbnail implies specific modes of engagement – studying, working, unwinding, and desired states of mind – usually concentration or calm. Positioned at once as a woman at work and a figure of leisure, Lofi Girl offers a productive lens for examining the cultural politics of digital slowness, productivity, fandom and gendered domestic aesthetics (see Williams, 2024).

These tensions mirror those that characterize contemporary youth temporal experience. 'Lofi', short for low-fidelity, signifies sonic imperfection, warmth and intentional rawness (Gamble, 2022, p. 82). As a 'net-native music culture' blending functional listening with hip hop beats (Gamble, 2022, p. 81), lofi hip hop resonates strongly with young people navigating intensified academic and labour demands while seeking accessible methods of self-regulation (Landarini, 2024, p. 20). Lofi Girl thus embodies the contradictory temporal logics shaping youth today: the imperative to accelerate, stay focused and remain optimally productive, alongside simultaneous expectations to slow down, practise calm and manage wellbeing. As we outline, contemporary youth contend with increasingly fragmented, nonlinear and precarious transitions into adulthood, marked by interruptions, delays and the erosion of stable life pathways. Within this landscape, Lofi Girl functions as a fantasy bulwark, a portable aesthetic technology that temporarily stabilizes the contradictory pressures of late-modern chronopolitics.

This fantasy is reinforced by broader cultural trends in which work and play are strategically entwined. Digital platforms, games and online media are routinely marketed as technologies that help users 'do more' while simultaneously assisting them in unwinding after doing too much (Dsouza et al., 2024). The rise of 'cosy games', low-pressure, low-stakes, comfort-oriented play (Waszkiewicz & Tymińska, 2024), reflects a shift away from hustle-culture seriousness, even as these games often retain logics of accumulation and optimization. Such aesthetics soften the intensities of late-capitalist productivity culture by offering rest that ultimately loops back into productivity itself. Lofi Girl sits squarely within this economy: she promises calm, but it is a calm that keeps viewers on task.

Accordingly, our analysis attends not only to Lofi Girl's function as a digital companion but also to her status as a circulating figure whose affective value emerges from her transmedia mobility. Her design participates in the global circulation of anime-inflected imagery; her decontextualized room resonates with the longstanding cultural significance of youth bedrooms as sites of identity formation, autonomy and creative practice; and her perpetual looping animation aligns her with platform-native forms of 'soft vigilance' that blur rest and readiness. She embodies slowness without disengagement, relaxation without withdrawal, an affective configuration that captures and aestheticizes the contradictions of late-capitalist temporal life.

Our article proceeds by outlining the theoretical framework that informs this reading, followed by a discussion of our methodological approach. We then present key findings that illuminate how Lofi Girl's aesthetic, sonic environment and platformed circulation mediate tensions between slowness, productivity, youthfulness, racialized and gendered anime-derived visual traditions. Through this analysis, we argue that Lofi Girl functions both as a figure, accruing value, affect and legibility through circulation, and as a fantasy that offers a provisional buffer against the structural temporal pressures shaping contemporary youth.

Literature Review

Temporal contradictions and the fantasy of balance

Lofi Girl is situated in a conjuncture marked by investments in coziness, slowness and nostalgic imaginaries of a simpler past even as power continues to coalesce temporally (Sharma, 2014). At the same time, the erosion of linear youth transitions gives rise to a reconfigured adulthood marked by ongoing instability and renewed expressions of longstanding classed, gendered, and racialized inequalities (Adkins et al., 2022). Within this landscape, the rise of slowness-oriented cultural formations, from the 'tradwife' to cottagecore and cosy gaming, has been widely interpreted as a compensatory response to late-capitalist acceleration, the normalization of 'hustle culture' (Banet-Weiser and Reinis, 2026) and the psychic and social dislocations intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, as Sharma (2014) argues, the contemporary valorization of slowness, 'one that demands the containment and pacification of time', is deeply entangled with the paradoxical temporal organization of late modern societies, in which everyday life is structured by overlapping and frequently conflicting temporal regimes (Torres, 2021). Lofi Girl offers a clear illustration of this dynamic, encapsulating a temporal tension made visible in 'the casual juxtaposition in the stream's title of "relaxing" and "studying", as if the two were interchangeable' (Winston & Saywood, 2019). For Winston and Saywood, this apparent equivalence signals the growing indistinction between work and play under conditions of 24/7 capitalism (Crary, 2001), where the passive, ambient listening practices associated with Lofi Girl typify collapsed boundaries between labour and leisure and reinforce expectations of continuous self-discipline (Winston & Saywood, 2019). These contradictions, they argue, are particularly illustrative of how youth subjectivities are being shaped today, noting that lofi listeners represent the first generation to have grown up entirely within what Crary (2001) terms the 'expanding, non-stop life-world of twenty-first-century capitalism', with no experiential memory of anything outside its paradoxes.

Lofi Girl is thus shaped by this contradiction, one embedded in a broader temporal regime in which social life is organized through the logics of the 24/7 network society (Hassan, 2007), marked by Crary's (2001) diagnosis of the 'end of sleep' and the emergence of the 'always-on, on-the-go' temporal subject identified by Sharma (2014). This constellation continues to shape contemporary critical accounts of late-modern temporality, not least because its effects are acutely felt by young people. As temporal pressures intensify, they generate forms of desynchronization across domains such as work, education, family life, politics, and leisure, producing frictions between accelerating demands

and the slower relational tempos of care, rest and everyday sociability (Montero et al., 2020). Lofi Girl becomes a condensed symbolic form of this tension, simultaneously invoking speed and slowness, productivity and repose and thereby crystallizing the multiplicity of temporalities that structure the current conjuncture. Slowness, in this configuration, circulates not outside but within the temporal logics that Freeman (2010) terms chrononormativity: the institutionalized, hegemonic rhythms that naturalize specific tempos of living, sustain imperatives of continual self-regulation and scaffold normative life-course expectations.

The chronopolitics that young people now navigate are shaped not only by escalating temporal pressures but also by the gradual unravelling of linear youth transitions, leaving many to inhabit blurred, stalled and internally fragmented temporalities. This condition is central to Lofi Girl's cultural resonance. Whereas youth has historically been imagined as a transitional stage defined by momentum, movement, and becoming, for many it has become interrupted, slowed or indefinitely deferred. Dominant Western imaginaries of youth are structured through three intertwined temporal regimes: a future-oriented mandate that casts young people as preparatory subjects; a present conceived as a regulated moratorium marked by postponement and sanctioned delay; and a normative imperative of linear, sequential progression through the life course (Walther and Stauber, 2025). Within this framework, slowing down, or 'time taking' (Erikson, 1994), has long been integral to normative constructions of youth, functioning as a much-needed intentional pause, where this suspension historically has served to reinforce linear temporality, maintaining 'correct' schedules for status transitions (Walther and Stauber, 2025).

Contemporary young people, however, increasingly find themselves positioned within a 'nexus of tensions that exist between future orientation, postponement, and linearity on the one hand, and present orientation, acceleration, and simultaneity on the other' (Walther & Stauber, 2025). The institutionalized markers of transition that once sustained chrononormativity (Freeman, 2010) are now continually unsettled by the contingencies and uncertainties characteristic of what Torres (2021, p. 63) terms the shifting temporal regime of late modernity. Within this landscape, 'slowing down', and more pointedly, the experience of being rendered as 'falling behind', has become a defining structural condition of youth precarity. Slowness, thus, 'remains a frustrating indicator of precarious disadvantage' (Nguyen-Thu, 2022), where these various forms of negative slowness signify the erosion of a credible, attainable future towards which life might progress. As Walther and Stauber (2025) argue, the temporal templates that historically organized the institutionalization of youth in Western contexts no longer hold: contradictory expectations now generate ambiguous constellations of being and becoming, even as profoundly uneven capacities for action persist.

Indeed, binary framings of speed versus slowness obscure the diverse ways time is lived, particularly by neurodivergent, neurodiverse and neuroexpansive people. Disabled BIPOC scholars highlight how structural and interpersonal inequalities shape whose rhythms are celebrated and whose are stigmatized (Lewis & Arday, 2025; Schalk, 2022). Concepts such as crip time (Kafer, 2021) illuminate the non-linear, flexible and adaptive temporalities that disabled people inhabit (Kaufman et al., 2024; Samuels, 2017). Informed by our own positionality as ADHD/neurodivergent scholars, we use Lofi Girl to unsettle binary temporal notions, demonstrating how race, gender and ableism shape perceptions

of tempo and capacity. Lofi Girl thus becomes a site where idealized slowness, disciplined productivity and marginalized rhythms meet, revealing the uneven politics of time that structure digital culture. As Sharma's (2014) points out, our relations to time differentially intersect with longstanding markers of social inclusion and exclusion, of privilege and oppression, in ways that our theorizing often does not adequately account for. Thus, the interchangeability between studying and relaxing, work and play, gesture towards the ways such contradictions compel individuals to continually 'recalibrate' (Sharma, 2014) their temporal practices and engage in ongoing 'time work' (Leccardi, 2021). Accordingly, we situate Lofi Girl as a resource that appears to soothe the 'persistent social contradictions' produced by productivity pressures, time scarcity and the imperative of self-management (Gregg, 2018).

Within this landscape, Lofi Girl can be read as a cultural figure mediating pervasive temporal tensions: she promises a fantasy of work, play harmony and an idealized youthfulness that contrasts sharply with young people's increasingly precarious realities. Her interchangeability of relaxation and productivity can be understood not as an achievable balance but as a fantasy through which audiences access brief respite to otherwise fractured temporal experiences. We draw on cultural and feminist media studies work on fantasy, which have long highlighted fantasy's capacity to provide such reprieve (Ang, 1982; Radway, 1984; Stacey, 1994). As Berlant and Edelman (Berlant & Edelman, 2013, p. 13) note, 'Fantasy is not what glosses over this craziness but that which makes it possible to move within it'. Fantasy offers an affective buffer that makes the contradictions of acceleration and exhaustion momentarily manageable. Lofi Girl operates squarely within this dynamic: lofi hip hop is both 'a constant soundtrack to navigate real life and a means of escaping from it' (Winston & Saywood, 2019), now intensified through wellness cultures where lofi is marketed as a productivity and calmness tool (Dsouza et al., 2024).

Jackie Stacey's (1994) work is instructive for understanding Lofi Girl's affective force, as it situates spectatorship within the social, historical and material contexts that shape how media are felt and taken up. Against universal models of the viewer, Stacey conceptualizes spectatorship as a situated, embodied practice, showing that escapism is materially mediated through the textures, objects and spatial arrangements that anchor fantasy in everyday life. Lofi Girl's appeal can be read through this lens where her decontextualized bedroom distils the aesthetic and material co-ordinates of a familiar domestic space, making fantasy tangible through the spatial cues of the bedroom and the everyday objects of study: desk, lamp, headphones, notebooks and window light. This situatedness becomes especially salient within youth cultures, where the bedroom is a foundational site of autonomy, cultural production and identity work (Baker, 2004; Lincoln, 2005; McRobbie & Garber, 1967). Further, the DIY ethos of lofi music, lo-fi atmospheres, accessible tools, intentional imperfection, mirrors the material conditions of bedroom-based creativity, a hybrid 'professional/hobbyist' zone (Groenningsaeter, 2017) where young people experiment with sound, emotion and self-presentation. Indeed, the symbolic and affective centrality of the bedroom was also intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, when domestic interiors became total environments of work, study, leisure and emotional regulation. In Stacey's terms, the fantasy is felt and enacted through objects and spaces; it flows across the screen into the everyday economies of comfort and productivity, where commodities and

platforms shape how escapism is lived. Ang's (1982) perspective is also instructive here, where the fictional nature of popular forms brackets reality, enabling immersive fantasy without the obligation to reconcile it to everyday constraints. Our analysis therefore, following Stacey and Ang, understands fantasy as woven into the fabric of everyday life (its textures, affects, and routines) and as a resource that individuals mobilize in their situated negotiations with structural pressures.

The transnational construction of Lofi Girl

Understanding how Lofi Girl offers a fantasy of serene work – play balance requires tracing how she circulates as a transnational, affectively charged figure who accrues value through continuous movement across platforms. Ahmed's (2014) notion of stickiness is useful here: as Lofi Girl travels, she picks up resonances, moods and associations that accumulate over time. The sociotechnical infrastructure of the @LofiGirl ecosystem amplifies this dynamic. As Winston and Saywood (2019) observe, lofi hip hop is mediated almost entirely via the internet, with networked communities forming across YouTube, Discord, Reddit and Instagram. Lofi is therefore inherently transmedial, with meaning emerging through the interplay of sound, imagery, platform affordances and memetic cultures. While a comprehensive analysis of all these components is beyond the scope of this paper, we attend to each in part while focusing primarily on the visual figure of Lofi Girl. Landarini (2024, p. 21) suggests that 'there are three social actors in lofi hip hop, namely; the listener, the bedroom producer (artist, composer), and the DJ (curator of playlists, owner of Youtube channels and lofi hip hop labels)'. Undoubtedly, the character of @Lofi Girl, as represented in the form of an anime style visual, is not a living social actor. Yet, as we go on to discuss, she can be understood as being a socio-technological actor – reflecting and refracting people's perspectives and perceptions.

Our analysis builds on work demonstrating that anime is not only an economic force but also a cultural product that constructs race, ethnicity, and gender in specific ways (Fennell et al., 2013). We therefore consider how @LofiGirl may be read as connected to Japanese cultural forms, and more specifically, Japanese girlhood. Indeed, Lofi Girl's stickiness is inseparable from Japanese popular media, especially those associated with Studio Ghibli. The channel's original stream used a GIF of Shizuku Tsukishima from Whisper of the Heart (Kondô, 1995), embedding Lofi Girl in a globally recognizable visual language consolidated through Japan's soft-power strategies (McGray, 2002) When copyright concerns required a redesign, the 2017 global competition sought explicitly to preserve a Ghibli-esque sensibility. The resulting character inherits an aesthetic rooted in the 'Japan Cool' boom (Ohmae, 1995), in which anime, Pokémon, Hello Kitty and related exports helped produce a shared global youth media culture. This intertextual anchoring resonates with lofi's place within what Born and Haworth (2017) call a 'nostalgia genre continuum', characterized by the recovery and remediation of past media textures. In this sense, Lofi Girl mobilizes shared repertoires of memory and familiarity for geographically dispersed audiences. Even viewers without direct memories of Ghibli films or Japanese media can experience nostalgia through what Ballam-Cross (2021) terms 'reconstructed nostalgia', a process through which listeners assemble disparate affective fragments to create shared imaginaries of pasts that were never personally, or even collectively, lived.

Lofi Girl performs this cultural work by offering a nostalgic world tied less to individual biography than to a broader imaginary that coheres around her stylized youthfulness. Scholarship on youth and affect helps clarify this process. Farrugia (2018) argues that youthfulness is not simply a demographic descriptor but a 'quality and affect' produced through cultural and aesthetic practices. Building on this, Threadgold (2020, 2023) suggests that youthfulness increasingly circulates as a commodifiable asset within late-capitalist economies, detached from the lived experiences of young people. As he writes, youth now functions as 'an exploited affective figure, a material-semiotic node . . . where immaterial labour coalesces to create co-opted affect'. Drawing on this work prompts us to ask what kinds of fantasized youthfulness are being re-imagined in Lofi Girl's universe, and crucially, how these differ from the material conditions of contemporary youth. Here, youth studies scholarship emphasizes widening economic precarity, intensified academic pressure and increasingly fragmented transitions to adulthood. The contrast is stark: whereas empirical research documents youth as marked by instability, competition, and heightened demands for self-management, Lofi Girl offers a frictionless image of youth as calm, stable and unburdened. This divergence underscores the extent to which her mediated youthfulness operates not as representation but as affective idealization, a fantasy of ease and equilibrium that stands apart from, and perhaps compensates for, the structural realities shaping actual young people's lives.

Finally, Lofi Girl's affective circulation cannot be separated from race, gender and global imaginaries of Japanese girlhood. Anime frequently constructs gender and ethnicity in ways that diverge from Western norms (Fennell et al., 2013), and Thomas-Parr (2024) notes, Japanese media tends to depict girls as wide-eyed, soft, and gently anxious, traits that carry significant affective weight within shōjo visuality. 'Kawaii', denoting cuteness (Burdelski & Mitsuhashi, 2010), emerged from youth subcultural resistance (Kinsella, 1995, 1998; Madge, 1998) and Lofi Girl draws heavily on this vocabulary while circulating globally, often detached from the cultural politics that produced it. This detachment enables wide appeal but also situates her within complex racialized and gendered dynamics: her readability as gentle, diligent and composed sits uneasily alongside techno-Orientalist histories that cast East Asian femininity as docile, decorative and machinic, even as shōjo aesthetics promise liminality and imaginative freedom.

Yet, as Warren-Crow (2014) argues, Lofi Girl exemplifies a broader transcultural 'embrace of girlishness' within the contemporary digital mediascape. Although the Japanese shōjo and the Western adolescent girl are not symmetrical figures, their shared capacity to symbolize transformation and potential enables both to circulate globally, often detached from their specific cultural and national contexts. Rather than reproducing the disjuncture whereby Western feminist scholarship frequently interprets 'girl power' discourse through postfeminist and neoliberal frames, applying this to shōjo culture, it is necessary to attend to how aesthetics operate within distinct ideological terrains. Instead, Iseri (2015) highlights this tension in noting that, within Japanese popular culture, the female body is depicted as 'the flexible': a form of femininity that appears mobile and expressive but is produced through the intertwining forces of Orientalism, nationalism and neoliberalism. As she neatly argues, the key question, then, is not whether the shōjo is feminist, but how particular performances of femininity become culturally legible as 'flexible', capable of signalling resistance in one context while reinforcing dominant discourses in another.

Together, these strands of scholarship demonstrate that Lofi Girl's appeal lies not in any singular meaning, but in her capacity to synthesize transnational aesthetics, commodified youthfulness and racialized girlishness into a flexible fantasy that both reflects and obscures contemporary social conditions.

Methods

To trace the temporal contradictions and frictions of Lofi Girl, we foregrounded ambivalence as our guiding analytic. We followed the insights of Coccia et al. (2024) who write, 'rather than an established set of procedures, ambivalence-as-analytic provides an epistemological orientation to an object of inquiry, which includes the encouragement to notice and sit with conflicting affects and the situations that generate them'. This orientation proved particularly instructive in addressing the condition of 'middleness', or 'being in the midst', which Coleman (2025) characterizes as 'the ambivalent "and-both" feelings and a temporality that is perpetually unfolding, simultaneously forwards and backwards'. This resonates with Sedgwick's (2007) 'middle ranges of agency': 'a form of relationality that deals in, for example, negotiations (including win – win negotiations), the exchange of affect, and other small differentials … the notion that you can be relatively empowered or disempowered' (pp. 631–632). Paying attention to the middle thus captured the state of contemporary digital culture, with its interplay of nostalgia and novelty.

Resisting absolutist and binary understandings of power and agency, ambivalence-as-analytic allowed us to be capaciously attuned to contingency and friction by holding tensions and 'sitting with them rather than attempting to move through them' (Coccia et al., 2024). Thus, we looked at 'the rhythm of relations that particular technologies instigate or set off', thinking 'beyond the clock' by approaching temporality not as a linear trajectory but as a durational unfolding (Sharma, 2014). This orientation enabled us to theorize the temporal as something felt, negotiated and structurally ambivalent. Our method thus constituted a form of non-systematic noticing (Coccia et al., 2024) a feminist analytic attuned to the threads that tie together texts, temporalities and the affective textures of digital life.

In foregrounding ambivalence, Coleman (2025) suggests we are placed in 'the middle, or in the midst, of digital mediation'. Ambivalence, in this sense, does not merely reside in the object of study but also surfaces 'in the scholar themself' (Coccia et al., 2024). Pedwell's (2014) notion of 'mood work' similarly urges us to inhabit moods to grasp their ambivalence and discursive-material force, attending to how our emotional states – and in the case of our experiences of neurodivergence, our cognitive ones too – shape reading, writing, and the knowledge we produce within broader cultural and political atmospheres. Our engagement with this research is informed by our own lived experiences of navigating the politics of temporality and the structural dynamics of contemporary (academic) life, where, as Hall (1990) argued, 'What we say is always "in context", positioned' (p. 220).

We are scholars from the Global North, belonging to a generation both attuned and subject to the affective and temporal pressures we analyse; our positionalities are deeply entangled with the very dynamics under investigation. Situated across positions of precarity and permanence, we write from within institutions and a scholarly culture

increasingly driven by imperatives of speed, productivity and performative output, pressures that often sit in tension with the slow, reflexive and affectively attuned labour that critical scholarship demands. We also approach this analysis with awareness of the racial and gender politics of who tends to be praised as 'prolific' versus having their work dismissively framed as being 'quickly churned' out.

As Les Back (2016, p. 11) observes, the bureaucratic push to accelerate academic production transforms scholars 'into tacticians preoccupied with the game of professional standing', rather than with the cultivation of deep, sustained inquiry. Our positionality is marked by this tension: between the imperative to slow down, to listen, to dwell in complexity, and the institutional demand to speed up, to produce, to compete, while also being complicated by the ways in which our experiences of ADHD can result in us working in ways that may be accusatorily perceived as both 'quicker' and 'slower' than others. Such matters related to temporality and perceptions of it are impacted by racialization. The expectation to perform resilience, to be endlessly adaptable and composed, mirrors broader neoliberal narratives that disproportionately burden scholars of colour with affective and intellectual labour that often goes unrecognized and exploited. Our experiences of time, and by extension, work and play, are marked by paradox: between states of hyperfocus and various forms of dwelling and 'distraction'.

The pressure to conform to normative rhythms of productivity (e.g. writing enough but not 'too much') often clashes with the nonlinear tempos of neurodivergent thought and feeling. We live in a society in which anything perceived as obstructing productivity and/or disrupting the status quo is, by default, regarded as destructive (Sobande, 2022). Such framings reveal deeper cultural anxieties around deviation, idleness, and alternative temporalities, forms of presence and attunement that resist instrumentalisation and trouble the logics of both capitalist efficiency and the illusion of universal experiences of 'speed' and 'slowness'.

These embodied tensions inform not only how we relate to Lofi Girl as a cultural artefact, but also how we situate ourselves within the affective infrastructures of contemporary academic life. The tension between the demand for seamless and polished productivity and the reality of fluctuating focus and nonlinear thinking is one we know intimately. In this context, our interest in Lofi Girl is not incidental. We approach this project not as detached observers, but as scholars and music fans attuned, both personally and politically, to the affective atmospheres and racial and gender politics that shape music, digital culture, and academic life alike. We view collaborative work as an important antidote to the isolating pressures of academic individualism, a practice that fosters shared attunement, reflexivity and care. Working together (often, across time zones) allows us to stretch time differently and to take part in a shared rhythm of nonlinear thinking and feeling, including forms of musing and meandering that can be integral to academic enquiry and life, but are often masked by the rigid conventions of structured scholarly writing.

Multimodal and affective discursive analysis

Understanding everyday meaning-making as non-linear and layered, practicing ambivalence-as-analytic allowed us to conduct a form of multimodal 'noticing' of the 'conflicting affects and the situations that generate them' (Coccia et al., 2024, p. 785). We analysed Lofi

Girl by drawing on Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) which sees 'all communication, whether through language, images or sounds, as accomplished through a set of semiotic resources, options and choices' (Mayr & Machin, 2012, p. 15). Discourse is material, affective, embodied and atmospheric (Lisle, 2016), and Lofi Girl's affective resonance exemplifies this convergence of modes to evoke mood and emotion. As we have thus far established, Lofi Girl is a highly dynamic, transmedia text, resonating with Jones, Chik, and Hafner's (2015) observation that digital texts are 'almost always multimodal, consisting of rich combinations of semiotic modes like writing, visuals and sounds'. This is reflected in Lofi Girl, who transcends her main YouTube livestream as an ever-adapting cultural icon, continually reshaped across music, memes, merchandise, and more.

Situating Lofi Girl as a multimodal text, wherein affect itself is also multimodal, we adopted a purposive sampling strategy centred on the primary YouTube livestream, 'lofi hip hop radio – beats to relax/study to'. This stream served as the entry point into the broader Lofi Girl universe. Particular attention was paid to the visual and auditory dimensions of the livestream, including the dynamic shifts in the animation that reflect changes in time of day, as well as the ambient soundtrack that loops continuously. The live chat feature was also observed as a key site of user interaction. From this core node, the analysis expanded to encompass the wider Lofi Girl universe, including the broader Lofi Girl YouTube page, which features curated playlists, seasonal livestreams and thematic spin-off videos. We also examined the Lofi Girl website including the Lofi Girl generator, branded merchandise and the brand's social media presence across platforms such as Instagram, Twitter/X and Discord. Additionally, user-generated content, such as memes, remixes, and fan art, was analysed for its role in shaping the cultural footprint and participatory dynamics of the brand. To contextualize Lofi Girl within broader societal and ideological trends, the study also incorporated secondary sources including op-eds, think pieces and cultural commentary. These sources helped situate Lofi Girl within wider discourses surrounding youth culture, productivity, affective labour and digital media ecologies. By attending to a range of sources, we were able to apply ambivalence, as 'a humanizing framework to understand people with mixed feelings, which includes, most importantly, people who are often most disadvantaged by power imbalances' (Coccia et al., 2024, p. 785).

The affective value of Lofi Girl

A stateless girl in an always-on world

Lofi Girl's global circulation is sustained by her use of a highly remixable and portable visual lexicon associated with Japanese popular culture. Her frequently described 'Ghibli-like' aesthetic is easily reproduced by creators far removed from Japan, including the channel's French founder and bedroom-producer Dimitri and the Colombian illustrator Juan Pablo Machado, who designed what we now know to be Lofi Girl. This portability reflects not only the global recognizability of the style but also its structural malleability, rooted in long-standing strategies within Japanese media industries. As Picard (2013) notes, early anxieties that Western audiences might find exported products 'too Japanese' encouraged producers to cultivate what Iwabuchi (2002b) terms cultural 'odourlessness': the softening of explicit

national markers to produce globally legible media capable of circulating as ambient fantasy. This attenuation of Japaneseness, encapsulated in mukokuseki ('without nationality'), underpins anime's 'stateless' aesthetic and facilitates its transcultural mobility (Napier, 2001a). Lofi Girl thus emerges as a paradigmatic mukokuseki figure: narratively unanchored, visually non-specific,and easily integrated into global media flows, exemplifying Iwabuchi's (2002b, p. 71) argument that stateless forms 'transcend vestigial national differences'.

The politics of this statelessness, however, are complex. Mukokuseki's racial ambiguity creates a mode of imagined universality (Yano, 2013), enabling predominant white audiences to project themselves into the image (Lu, 2009), while offering some marginalized viewers alternative avenues for self-imagining (Whaley, 2018). Yet its inclusivity is uneven: Lofi Girl's light-skinned, softly stylized features privilege white normativity, revealing how 'neutrality' absorbs racial codes it purports to transcend (Gresham, 2024). Anime's emphasis on metamorphosis and fluidity (Napier, 2005; Wells, 2002) historically enabled expressions of shifting identities. Lofi Girl's avatar generator extends this fluidity by allowing users to customize skin tone, hairstyle and clothing, transforming her from a static transcultural figure into an interactive affective commodity. Still, her circulation performs what Kalnay (2020) terms 'imperial innocence', maintaining a frictionless aesthetic that conceals underlying racial tensions.

Lofi Girl's prominence is further shaped by her position within what Steinberg (2009, 2012) identifies as anime's 'character-based media environment'. In this system, Japanese media mixes rely on a range formats, video-game consoles, mobile phones, character merchandise, that enable characters to migrate fluidly across devices and social spaces (Ito, 2005). Portability facilitates encounters 'anytime, anywhere' (Steinberg, 2009), transforming everyday environments into character-saturated media ecologies. Lofi Girl operates squarely within this logic: although visually anchored in a vignette of solitary study, she circulates across livestreams, playlists, thumbnails, seasonal reskins, fan art and algorithmic recommendation systems, producing a ubiquitous ambient presence. Her stream, accessible from any internet-enabled device, embodies what Allison (2004) calls 'pocket intimacy', a portable form of companionship that subtly re-enchants daily routines. In this way, Lofi Girl functions like earlier character goods, embedding herself into everyday practices and folding into study habits, downtime and affective micro-rituals.

This portability takes on particular significance in the context of digital youth cultures, where media consumption and identity work frequently converge in domestic space. The bedroom, often the first environment young people can materially and affectively control, functions as a site of creativity, rest and experimentation. Lincoln (2005) shows how young people curate these spaces through music, transforming bedrooms into personal-yet-collective stages for expression and resistance. Revisiting McRobbie and Garber's (1967) study of 'teeny-bopper' culture highlights the bedroom's long-standing importance for girls' cultural agency. More recent scholarship (Baker, 2004; Davies, 2010, 2014; Lincoln, 2005) demonstrates how digital technologies intensify this role, turning the bedroom into both studio and social node. Lofi hip hop's DIY ethos, its low fidelity, accessible software and deliberate imperfection, aligns with these domestic conditions (Groenningsaeter, 2017). Lofi Girl's ambient, looping presence mirrors the bedroom's temporal rhythms, circulating alongside the moods through which young people organize their everyday lives.

A further dimension of Lofi Girl's appeal emerges when placed in dialogue with the techno-cultural history of the screensaver. Designed originally to prevent screen burn-in, the screensaver soon acquired a nostalgic aura while quietly supporting a more profound shift in human – machine relations: as Forcier (2021) recounts, the screensaver permitted the computer to remain always on, signalling not rest but latent activity. Its appearance marked a brief disengagement from the user while reaffirming the machine's readiness for future productivity: a pause rather than a cessation. Lofi Girl inherits and extends this logic of soft vigilance. Her looping livestream does not merely provide ambience; it mirrors the screensaver's gentle insistence on continuous engagement, offering an aesthetic of calm that conceals ongoing forms of affective labour. As Chun (2011) notes, real-time interfaces culti- vate users who view themselves as the 'source' of the machine's action, further entangling subjectivity with digital infrastructures. This connection becomes even clearer through Lofi Girl's seasonal reskins and sensitivity to time, with the interface shifting not only between dark and light modes to reflect day and night, but also adopting holiday-specific and seasonal variations. Much like the customizable mod- ules of After Dark, the 1990s screensaver suite that let users tailor looping visual worlds (Forcier, 2021), these reconfigurations personalize an always-available inter- face. In this sense, Lofi Girl functions as a contemporary screensaver for platform time: endlessly looping, softly vigilant, customizable, and attuned to a media ecology in which rest itself becomes a mode of readiness. By drawing the logic of the screensaver into domestic space, Lofi Girl also participates in a broader 'bedroom culture', where ambient media scaffold the moods, tempos, and micro-rituals through which young people make sense of themselves.

However, transnational media consumption often reproduces an Orientalist gaze (Iwabuchi, 2002a), inviting audiences to 'pick out' spectacular markers and reduce cul- tures to screened signs (McKevitt, 2017; Park, 2010). Within this context, the remixability and 'statelessness' of Japaneseness in Lofi Girl does not erase specificity; it recodes it. As Hjorth (2005) notes, Iwabuchi's (2002b) odourlessness is paradoxical: the erasure of overt Japaneseness becomes a mode of Japaneseness, producing what Sousa (2022) calls an 'imaginary Japan': a mediated, elastic construct that solicits affective attachment. This dynamic echoes adjacent internet-born genres such as vaporwave and City Pop revival fandoms (Kretzschmar & Stanfill, 2024; Sugiyama & Barile, 2025), which mobilize techno-Orientalist imaginaries that fetishize Japan as a retrofuturist aesthetic rather than a lived culture. Yet, as Stanislaus (2023) shows, Black British grime artists repurpose earlier techno-Orientalist imagery, once used to depict Japan as cold and machinic, as creative prosthetics, crafting 'grime cyborg' identities that merge machine and organism. Here, Japanese media becomes 'fantasy-ware' (Allison, 2006), a resource through which young Black Britons fashion hybrid, counter-hegemonic subjectivities that transform marginalization into agency. What these recirculations share is reliance on an increasingly accessible multicultural media archive and long-standing Orientalist notions of Japanese culture, often shaped by techno-Orientalism (Ueno, 1999). Morley & Robins (2002) argue that the modern-West/premodern-East pairing has been unsettled by the perceived shift of global economic dynamism towards the Pacific; Roh et al. (2025) add that techno-Orientalism 'completes' this project by imagining a futurised, machinic Asia that paradoxically reaffirms Western centrality.

Read through this lens, Lofi Girl's endlessness sutures techno-Orientalist temporalities: futuristic in her machinic perpetuity and premodern in her stylized docility. Her looping presence reprises the screensaver's techno-cultural logic, ambient animation signalling latent activity, a pause that is never rest, keeping user and machine softly 'on'. The loop thus does more than soothe; it participates in a genealogy of machinic racialization in the Global North, where East Asians have been cast as posthuman, robotic, mechanized (Rhee, 2018). Bui (2020) describes a bidirectional mapping in which robots are coded with Asian traits and Asians rendered robotic. Related accounts figure East Asians as always-already cyborg, fused with futurist technologies (Chen, 2021). Critiques of Euro-American techno-liberalism further contend that techno-Orientalism frames Asian technological advancement as excessive, threatening narratives of human mastery over technology (Roh et al., 2025; Ueno, 1999), a sense of excess that resonates with her endless stream. As Bow (2022) observes, 'At the millennium, the racialized templates of the Yellow Peril and techno-- Orientalist panic converge in the specter of a machinelike, unending, self-replicating alien-labor force'. Lofi Girl crystallizes the intersection of retro-futurism and domesticity. Her stylized room, warm light, books, soft textiles, evokes nostalgic, premodern comfort, while the perpetual stream, algorithmic availability and customizable generator anchor her in hypermodern platform infrastructures. This oscillation mirrors Ueno's (1999) claim that global depictions of Japan toggle between near-future fantasy and condescending dismissal. Within participatory remix cultures such as vaporwave, her anime-inflected aesthetic circulates as a flexible, racialized imaginary rather than lived culture. In this sense, the endless loop is not merely ambience; it naturalizes docility, discipline and always-on productivity beneath the surface of calm.

Girlishness at work

Within this retro-domestic loop, Lofi Girl's presence in the intimate space of the bedroom entwines techno-Orientalist dynamics with the gendered logics of ornamentalism, showing how racialized, machinic and decorative registers converge in contemporary ambient media. As Cheng (2018) argues, Asian femininity has historically been fashioned as a human ontology bound to commodity and artifice, neither simply object nor autonomous subject, but a personhood tethered to the decorative (pp. 415–16). Allure, she suggests, emerges through affinity with surfaces, silk, lacquer, porcelain, rather than flesh. Lofi Girl's exquisitely composed, kawaii stillness reprises this ornamental lineage, aestheticizing docility as calming décor. Her machinic endlessness and quiet precision echo techno-Orientalist narratives that ascribe perpetuity, discipline and soft compliance to East Asian bodies (Bow, 2022), recycling imperial and commercial histories in which Asian women circulate as consumable images: animated yet instrumental. The parahuman figure of the 'young, able-bodied, cisgender East Asian woman' who is so often tethered to the visuality of technology thus becomes an interface for calm productivity, her soothing labour flattened into feminine surface. Folded into bedroom culture, where digital media regulate mood, tempo and self-management, she emerges as a domesticated emblem of 'always-on' labour: a decorative, racially coded companion whose comfort obscures the disciplining infrastructures of platform time.

Yet her gendered visuality does not operate solely through ornamental docility; it also draws on a recognizable shōjo-inflected aesthetic that complicates this reading. Amplified

by Ghibli references and broader associations with Japaneseness, the shōjo mode introduces a distinct set of visual and affective cues. Although shōjo literally translates to 'girl', as Monden (2019) argues, it names a 'crafted concept' in a 'shōjo-scape' marked by large eyes, softness, liminality and a refusal of adulthood. In Napier's terms, the shōjo occupies a site of 'play' in modern Japanese culture, a liminal space between childhood and adulthood not yet bound by labour, gendered obligation or normative maturity. While shōjo figures have often been read as 'Feminine, innocent, and cute in the quintessentially Japanese form of cuteness known as kawaii … an appealing alternative identity in contrast to the image of the hardworking, highly pressured Japanese male' (Napier, 2001b, p. 473), Ghibli heroines are frequently understood as departing from convention: 'Miyazaki's heroines are notably independent and active, confronting obstacles with courage in ways that might traditionally be coded as masculine' (2005, p. 154). Despite scholarly caution against overly feminist Western readings (McCarthy, 2018), the shōjo's defiance of adulthood, temporal suspension and soft departure from normative femininity introduce a productive friction into Lofi Girl's otherwise ornamental, techno-Orientalist frame. These shōjo inflections enable wider identification, offering, through Lofi Girl, a modest fantasy of respite from the structural constraints that circumscribe young people's everyday lives.

This openness of identification underpins shōjo culture's expansive reach. Kawaii aesthetics and shōjo modalities circulate through consumer culture in ways that detach them from gender, enabling adults, and ultimately global audiences, to reclaim 'girlhood' as an affective possibility rather than a demographic category. Lofi Girl exemplifies this drift in the digital: her shōjo-inflected aesthetic functions less as a fixed identity position than as a soothing emblem of creative autonomy and temporal suspension. She offers an affective atmosphere into which viewers can project themselves, one that holds together past and future, work and play, relaxation and study without requiring their reconciliation. Takahara Eiri's concept of girl consciousness (in Aoyama & Hartley, 2006) illuminates this dynamic. Girl consciousness is not tied to bodies but to a mode of thinking defined by freedom, irreverence, critique and a peripheral stance that unsettles adult logics. Characters shaped by this sensibility often possess forms of agency typically denied to adolescent girls, subtly transcending gender norms while acknowledging feminine coding. Crucially, Takahara describes the 'feeling of a girl' as available to anyone seeking release from socially imposed roles—'daughterhood, wifehood, motherhood, boyhood, manhood and so on'. Lofi Girl's calming ambience approximates this consciousness as mood: an invitation to inhabit liminality, resist adult tempo and recenter self-governance, all while continuing with the tasks of everyday life.

For young people navigating increasingly precarious conditions, this invitation carries particular force. Historically, shōjo imagery has signified an ambivalent relation to growing up, a socially unanchored state freed from rigid adult responsibilities. This resonates with youth-cultural scholarship that reframes such suspension, or forms of 'doing nothing' (Corrigan, 2006), as meaningful rather than idle waste, aligning it with contemporary refusals of normative productivity such as hikikomori (Goodman et al., 2012) or lying flat (Zhou, 2023). Yet, as Cuzzocrea (2025) observes, young people are rarely afforded the legitimacy of meaningful leisure unless it can be folded back into economic value. Accordingly, attachments to an imagined youthfulness, where play, rest and retreat are possible, signal the extent to which such temporal freedoms have been foreclosed by

neoliberal acceleration. Mengilli (2025) similarly argues that practices of 'chilling' or 'hanging out', often dismissed as 'doing nothing', should be understood as responses to intensifying social acceleration, revealing forms of youth temporal agency.

Through this lens, Lofi Girl's shōjo-like liminality becomes clear. As Kilpatrick (2022) notes, the shōjo transforms the threshold between girlhood and adulthood into a space for dreaming freely and resisting confinement. Writing on the magical girl, Saito (2014) likewise suggests that this threshold is her power: youthfulness and cuteness operate as gender configurations that blur binaries while acknowledging crises of adulthood across genders. Lofi Girl fosters broad identification because she offers this youthfulness without consequence, echoing the magical girl's fantasy of infinite potential. This imagined youthfulness hinges on nostalgia. If nostalgia is 'reconstructed' (Ballam-Cross, 2021), here it is rebuilt through an imaginary that casts youth as a protected zone, a site of comfort, stability and freedom from responsibility, regardless of whether viewers' own youth resembled such ease. The stream gestures towards memories of anime and adjacent media, but its nostalgic force derives as much from the fantasy of a gentler past as from specific recollection. Lofi Girl engages youthfulness as an affective resource (Farrugia, 2018; Threadgold, 2023), using comfort to create a liminal space where viewers can temporarily step outside adult pressures while remaining tethered to work. Her designation as a 'girl' reflects both the channel's focus on concentration, culturally coded as youthful, and a youth-obsessed culture that often sidelines older women. The stream's aesthetic reinforces this attachment to a student-centred fantasy of suspended yet productive time: the desk, neatly arranged books, looped soundtrack and even the original title ('lofi hip hop radio – beats to relax/study to') map the stream onto study routines. Yet by fixing Lofi Girl within this static, idealized academic moment, the representation collapses the complexity of youth into a single, endlessly looping act of disciplined learning.

The commodification of youthfulness within this fantasy exposes the uneven distribution of its burdens: why are girls and girlishness tasked with soothing contemporary pressures? This feminized capacity to absorb contradiction is central to shōjo's appeal. As Prindle observes (in Napier, 2001a, p. 119), the shōjo occupies 'a shallow lacuna between adulthood and childhood, power and powerlessness', a liminal position offering imaginative possibilities less available to young men already disciplined by workforce expectations. It is this magical liminality, harmless yet full of possibility, that grants the girl her transformative potential. Lofi Girl participates in this tradition, providing a soft space of waithood (Mengilli, 2025), a dreamy, intimate sphere shaped through shōjo inflections. The girlish glow surrounding her mirrors postfeminist luminosity (McRobbie, 2008, p. 54), 'a moving spotlight, [which] softens and disguises the regulative dynamics' of neoliberal society. Such imaginaries converge with the 'successful girls' discourse, which casts girls as beyond sexism (Pomerantz et al., 2013) and elevates them as symbols of social mobility and progress. In line with Harris's (2004) 'can-do girl', typically middle-class and imagined as the ideal neoliberal subject (hard-working, entrepreneurial, author of 'choice biographies'; Koffman & Gill, 2013), Lofi Girl's comfort becomes crucial. Surrounded by analogue tools, books, notebooks, pens, she evokes slowness and tactility, even as her perpetual study aligns with expectations that young women must internalize achievement, self-regulate and appear effortlessly composed. She lacks overt political voice, yet her quiet labour

embodies the affective demands of neoliberal girlhood: to cope, to perform, to remain composed. As Harris argues, girls are celebrated as models of future-oriented adaptability while being subtly governed through expectations of emotional and temporal discipline.

This logic becomes clearer when contrasted with Lofi Boy. Lofi Girl's world aligns with the discourse of the 'successful girl' celebrated for discipline, resilience and self-improvement. Her serene workspace, neatly arranged books, ordered time, analogue tools, embodies traits associated with the ideal neoliberal subject: self-regulating, achievement-oriented, emotionally controlled (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2008). This aesthetic reinforces longstanding associations between femininity, diligence and domestic stability, offering a comforting fantasy of calm productivity. Lofi Boy, by contrast, has never achieved equivalent cultural recognition. His retro tech, gaming consoles and glitchy synthwave hues signal distraction and non-linear temporality. His persona evokes a familiar developmental narrative: boys who are 'too fast and too slow' (Driscoll & Grealy, 2024), too impulsive for institutional rhythms yet lagging in maturity. His 'chill/game' universe sits in tension with Lofi Girl's 'relax/study', mapping gendered imaginaries of drift versus discipline. The visual grammar of his room conjures familiar tropes of the isolated young man- hackers, gamers, disaffected teens - whose bedrooms or basements become symbolic sites of retreat and stalled adulthood. As Gottzén (2025) notes, cultural anxiety about young men clusters around these spaces, imagined as zones where boys 'play video games, watch pornography, troll online and spread hate'. This resonates with contemporary panic over young men's refusal to 'grow up', amplified by right wing reactionary figures like Jordan B. Peterson, whose injunction to 'clean your room' stands as metaphor for assuming responsibility. Within this context, Lofi Boy's retro-futurist drift becomes entangled with broader fears about waning masculinity, isolation and failed transition into normative adulthood. Viewed together, the juxtaposition is striking: Lofi Girl embodies serene productivity, while Lofi Boy figures digital drift. Girls appear as symbols of progress; boys as emblems of crisis. The endless, soothing study loop and the nostalgic, drifting game loop do not simply mark aesthetic differences but visualize gendered temporalities, one saturated with promise and forward momentum, the other with uncertainty and stagnation.

Taken together, girlishness at work names a constellation in which Lofi Girl's shōjo-coded calm, ornamental composure and platformed endurance absorb contradiction. She makes productivity feel cosy, discipline feel gentle and precarity feel navigable, precisely by packaging youthfulness as mood, intimacy as interface and labour as ambience.

Conclusion: go work and play, girl

As Fennell et al. (2013, p. 440) remind us, anime 'presents many faces', inviting partial and situated identifications. This multiplicity is central to Lofi Girl's cultural work: her meaning emerges relationally, shaped by the gendered, racialized and capitalist conditions through which she circulates. Throughout the article we have shown that Lofi Girl is both a figure, accruing affect and value through transmedia circulation, and a fantasy bulwark that offers affective shelter from the structural temporal pressures borne by contemporary youth.

Her extraordinary portability rests on anime's strategy of cultural 'odourlessness' (Iwabuchi, 2002b). The channel's widely described 'Ghibli-like' look exemplifies mukoku-seki, a non-specific visual lexicon that invites global recognition while attenuating overt national markers (Picard, 2013; Napier, 2001a, 2005). This statelessness is affectively powerful yet politically ambivalent: it enables imagined universality while reproducing uneven racial legibilities, with lighter-skinned, softly stylized forms more readily legible as 'neutral'. Platform-native customization (e.g. avatar generators) converts statelessness into interactive commodity form, expanding legibility and personalization even as a frictionless surface can obscure latent racial tensions.

Her reach is intensified by media-mix logics that design characters for encounter 'anytime, anywhere' (Steinberg, 2009, 2012). Lofi Girl disperses across livestreams, play-lists, thumbnails, seasonal reskins, fan art and algorithmic recommendations, producing a transmedia ecology that is ambient and ubiquitous. In Allison's (2004) terms, she offers pocket intimacy: a portable companion folded into study habits, leisure rituals and digital downtime. Crucially, her endlessness translates legacy screen culture into platform time. Like the animated screensaver that normalized the always-on computer, idle yet alert, the loop aestheticizes stillness while disciplining attention, suturing rest to readiness and keeping both user and system productively 'on' (Chun, 2011). Seasonal and holiday variations 'monogram' this interface, personalizing a governance of ambience in which calm becomes a mode of preparedness.

These temporal and aesthetic logics are also racialized and gendered. Techno-Orientalist imaginaries have long oscillated between envisioning East Asia as futuristic (machinic, precise) and docile (ornamental, compliant) (Morley & Robins, 2002; Roh et al., 2025; Ueno, 1999). Lofi Girl sutures these temporalities: her perpetual avail-ability reads as machinic futurity, while her placid composure aligns with ornamentalism (Cheng, 2018), where Asian femininity is fashioned as aestheticized surface tethered to commodity and artifice. The result is a machinic calm, a racialized, feminized serenity that renders always-on productivity soft, cosy and unthreatening.

Simultaneously, Lofi Girl draws on shōjo/kawaii formations, softness, conscientious-ness, gentle anxiety, that promise liminal freedom even as they aestheticize discipline (Thomas-Parr, 2024). The shōjo's suspended threshold between girlhood and adulthood offers a potent fantasy of waithood, a zone of dreaming that appears open-ended yet remains tethered to study, diligence and self-management. In Takahara Eiri's terms, 'girl consciousness' is a stance rather than a body, an orientation to critique, play and refusal that anyone might inhabit, rendered here as youthfulness-without-consequence: a portable mood detached from the material precarity of lived youth (Farrugia, 2018; Threadgold, 2023). This mood is inseparable from bedroom culture, long central to girls' creativity, intimacy and identity work (Baker, 2004; Lincoln, 2005; McRobbie & Garber, 1967). The lo-fi ethos, intentional imperfection, accessible tools, laptop production, mirrors these domestic conditions (Groenningsaeter, 2017), making the room's mise-en-scène both a setting and a technology of feeling.

Interpreting @LofiGirl solely through commerce would miss these gendered musical and para-social dynamics. Pre-dating the wave of virtual influencers, Lofi Girl demon-strates how a looping, fictional character can elicit recognizable forms of para-social attachment. As Winston and Saywood (2019, p. 51) argue, lofi hip hop is 'both a product of and an escape from socioeconomic pressures'; Lofi Girl embodies this

doubleness as a socio-technological companion whose calm carries the ambivalence of comfort and control. The wider field now shows derivative and divergent takes, for instance, A Lofi Soul, with a character visually coded as a Black woman, and genre crossovers like Pure Noise's lofi remixes of emocore/post-hardcore, indicating a template whose bedroom aesthetics travel across repertoires. Future research might examine how such channels rework or resist the gendered, racialized and classed imaginaries Lofi Girl helped consolidate, and how identifications/exclusions are mediated through avatar customization and merch ecologies.

As Kim (2011, p. 233) argues, global 'girl industries' saturate contemporary media; Lofi Girl participates in this economy of aestheticized girlhood, where the 'girl' becomes a flexible, profitable cultural resource. While meanings remain contested, the dominant framing positions her as a double resource: a soothing tool that helps viewers relax and do more. She condenses contradictory injunctions placed on young women, to self-care, self-optimize, self-manage and self-soothe, into an image of serene composure.

The politics of slowing down are not simply about resisting speed or embracing mindfulness, and speeding up is not only about meeting the demands of the capitalist wheel. They are about recognizing how time itself is a site of struggle, how it is allocated, controlled, and contested. However, we argue that Lofi Girl does not resolve this struggle but makes it visible, offering a lens through which to understand how inhabiting time differently increasingly requires the reinforcement of different inequalities.

Lofi Girl is a Western transnational figure that presents a fantasy of serenely sound-tracked work and play, reflecting the international marketability of certain ideas and imaginaries related to youth culture, bedroom culture, and, specifically, aestheticized girlhood. Essentially, and as implied by the main visual associated with Lofi Girl, of an anime-style girl dreamily leaning on a desk and appearing to take a moment of pause amid working on something, @LofiGirl appears to be promoted as a productivity tool and a source of rest/relaxation entertainment to help you take it easy. She is there to help you work hard, rest well, and rinse and repeat.

Author contributions

CRediT: **Natasha Zeng:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Francesca Sobande:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Disclosure statement

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