

Girlblogging: Exploring Femininity, Aging, and Youth in Crisis on TikTok

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## Abstract

Girlblogging: Exploring femininity, aging, and youth in crisis on TikTok

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This thesis employs a critical discourse analysis and social media research methods to investigate the girlblog community on TikTok as it relates to both previous instances of girl-forward online communities (like those on #sadgirl Tumblr) and the state of post- #MeToo post-feminism today. #Girlblog is a hyper-feminine style of post that uses vintage youthful imagery to convey a desire to return to an imagined innocent youth in comparison to the harsh realities of entering adulthood, as many of these posters are between teenagehood and young adulthood. The anxieties around aging and the desire to identify with the ‘girl’ and not the ‘woman’ show how these TikTokers may feel alienated from a more political feminism and identity surrounding womanhood. Further, the prominent mental health disclosure-style videos in this sphere show how the drive to depict a perfect self through social media is no longer the dominant mode for these young women, as they, instead, share intense and troubling facts and stories to relate to one another and create community. Through both the girlblog style and the self-identifications with mental health diagnosis, labelling oneself as part of a community and shaping one's online production through these social labels gives structure and meaning to otherwise confusing and transient times of life. This research expands on the changing landscape of TikTok trends by looking into an elusive and largely non-hashtag-driven culture on the app. It additionally turns the focus to gendered elements of post-pandemic online community-making among young women using TikTok.

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## Introduction

You're a high school girl, scrolling on your TikTok "for you page" you come across a video full of contradictions. The video, with 75 thousand likes, consists of clips of actress Brittany Murphy from the 2003 film *Uptown Girls* soundtracked by indie artist Mitski's "First Love/Late Spring", as the artist sings the lyrics, "So please, hurry, leave me, I can't breathe/ Please don't say you love me". Yet, atop these clips and music sits a quote by second-wave radical feminist Andrea Dworkin. Dworkin builds off the iconic Simone De Beauvoir quote, writing, "Woman is not born: she is made. In the making, her humanity is destroyed. She becomes symbol of this, symbol of that: mother of the earth, slut of the universe; but she never becomes herself because it is forbidden for her to do so". All these disparate pieces of media come together to create a video with a layered meaning.

In another video, this one with 259.9 thousand likes, we see a young woman looking at the camera, her face mostly obscured by large text over the video. The text reads, "Maybe the reason men have become so comfortable ditching women right after intimacy is because they're used to turning the screen off right after they're finished." Backing the video is pop singer Olivia Rodrigo's song "all-american bitch" consisting of high-pitched feminine vocals singing, "I'm grateful all the time/ I'm sexy and I'm kind/ I'm pretty when I cry."

Both these videos, with their layered meanings and references, can be understood as being part of the femcel community on TikTok. In these videos, the combination of these girlish mass-media references with overt and jarring indictments of male sexuality combine to create texts where the form and message are at points seemingly disconnected or even contrary, since the media being used connotes a stereotypically naïve girlishness while the messages of the

videos are radical and direct. However, read intentionally through the genre of femcel video, they can be better understood. In broad strokes, femcel videos blend relations with existing media (typically music, film, literature) with emotional reflections on being a young woman under patriarchy, often with references to feminist literature.

Upon hearing the term “femcel”, one may imagine the archetypical male incel (involuntary celibate), with their extremist beliefs about gender roles and sexuality, and apply that to women. In some corners of the internet, this does exist. For example, on Reddit, there are several femcel spaces like the political r/WGTOW (women going their own way), the mostly satirical r/femcelgrippysockjail, or the most famous, now defunct, r/Trufemcels. These spaces, and Trufemcels most specifically, often use similar jargon to incels and host complaints about physical attractiveness and misogynistic comments about other non-femcel women, however, notably without the threats of violence and rape seen on incel fora.

Yet, there is another manifestation of femcels online which operates differently from those on sites like Reddit and 4Chan. According to *i-D Magazine*, the femcels of TikTok “use the term less as an indicator of how much sex they’re unable to have, and more as a way to express their personality traits that are perceived as pathetic or manipulative or toxic in some way” (Lanigan, 2022). From my early observations this descriptor appears largely accurate, as the girls and women using the femcel label on TikTok are not claiming that they *cannot* have sex the way their male counterparts do. Rather, the term has been appropriated as a semi-satirical self-descriptor centred around content relating to “skepticism and dissatisfaction with heterosexual relationships with men” (Tseng, 2023).

The TikTok videos reflecting femcel themes tend to follow certain aesthetic scripts and use consistent media references that communicate feelings of ‘feminine’ anger and dissociation.

For example, in preliminary research I found the Sofia Coppola film *The Virgin Suicides* was clipped often in femcel videos, pointing to an interest in the film's themes of girlhood, repression, and male desire. Further, music by artists such as Fiona Apple and Courtney Love often plays in the background of femcel videos, with lyrics relating to struggles to fit into feminine ideals and anger at male partners. Many femcel videos stay largely in this realm of emotionality, gesturing at media examples and characters that relate to feelings of loss of innocence through male violation. However, other videos venture into the overtly political, combining the aforementioned music and filmic vocabulary with quotes from second-wave radical feminist writers such as Andrea Dworkin and Catharine McKinnon, who discussed topics like sexual violence and the political formation of heterosexuality.

I was brought to this topic because, like I assume many women my age (mid-twenties), this content started appearing on my own TikTok feed. Much of the content felt familiar to me, as I recognized beloved musical artists like Mitski and Lana Del Rey and clips from films I was a fan of, like *The Virgin Suicides* and *The Piano Teacher*. In some ways, I could immediately relate to these videos, as they reminded me of the content I would post on Tumblr in my adolescence. Yet, the use of the incel-adjacent terminology, and coming across posts on topics such as dating apps and the feeling of isolation as a high schooler during COVID-19, were issues my teenage self would not have been able to relate to. I was interested in why and how a style of posting so hyperfeminine would congregate around a term so controversial and rooted in misogyny, even if ironic in its usage. The broadening and adopting of the 'incel' term interested me, as I had studied other Trump-era new-right movements earlier in my academic career. Thus, seeing this brand of internet irony from a specifically feminine point of view prompted me to want to delve into study about this community.

What I have found is that behind the irony of the femcel term, there are real concerns raised in this community's TikTok output. These videos point to concerns that young women (as most posting in this community appear to be under twenty-two, though this is difficult to verify) have about their place within a heterosexist patriarchy. The level of unease shown by the femcel videos points to an important area of research, as, often, the emotional concerns and subsequent social media posting of girls tend to go under examined (Dobson, 2015).

With this in mind, I began my project by asking: *What are the discourses present in the "femcel" public on TikTok?* And further, *how is the femcel audiovisual style configured through TikTok's sociotechnical affordances?* This research question had to expand and shift when confronted by the realities of the TikTok data. This will be explained further in the methodology section, however, femcel content overlaps and crosses heavily with several other communities on TikTok under the umbrella of a broader 'girlblog' sphere. Whereas I set out to collect videos under the femcel term, isolating them did not make sense when it appeared that girls on TikTok contribute to, and are viewers of, a wider constellation of related videos that show up in their feeds. I thought it important to analyze this broader sphere, rather than only the femcel content within it. This is because I deemed its overt use of the term 'girl' paired with the bad feelings and complaints common within femcel (and other) videos to be an important update on other online girl cultures of previous decades. As such, my research questions shifted to: *What are the discourses present in the "Girlblog" public on TikTok?* And further, *how is the girlblog audiovisual style configured through TikTok's sociotechnical affordances?* Yet, broad theoretical throughlines remained throughout the process, despite the shift in research question, so these will be reflected on in the subsequent sections.

This project starts with an overview of the theoretical and literary basis on which the discourse analysis rests. First, a discussion on the formation of gendered categories through the structure of heterosexual culture provides a feminist historical basis to the project. As so many of the anxieties seen in the discussed videos point to an unease with the social performance of femininity, it is useful to understand how femininity and womanhood are formalized and mobilized. Next, a discussion of theories of feminist complaint helps give context to these videos and places them in a longer history of women-produced media. From there, a discussion of the literature first includes a brief history of postfeminist and online feminist shifts through the past decades. This anchoring in a specific postfeminist, post-#Me Too era places girlblogs into their political context. Next, I place girlblogs within a wider scope of literature on online girl-produced media. The work in this field helps us understand both what may influence girls and young women to post online in specific ways, but it also provides guidance on how to generously critically engage with girls' media. Finally, I discuss TikTok platform affordances to better understand the specifics of the app and how people interact with it. Then, I discuss broader theories of social media community making. Following this is a discussion of the methodology of this project, combining social media-specific data collection through a modified Persona Method, and then how I went about a Critical Discourse Analysis of my sample.

In the first findings chapter, I begin by defining the girlblog as a style of video on TikTok which reflects a 'coquette' girlishness mixed with real-life anxieties of young women. The nostalgic style of video allows the TikToker to idealize girlhood in comparison to the transitional life period approaching adulthood that she finds herself in. To explore girlblogs, this chapter approaches, first, the aesthetic qualities of coquette style and what the popularity of this trend says about ideas of youth and girlhood. Then, I discuss what this focus on girlhood says about

fears of aging and the figure of the older woman in society. This section brings in a feminist lens to these seemingly apolitical, style or rant posts and asks what they can tell us about this community of young women online

The second findings chapter focuses on the emotionality of girlblog videos. First, the chapter discusses the unexpected levels of overt mental health related content within this girlblog public with an initial discussion of eating disorder videos. I discuss both how pro-anorexia content exists within the TikTok girlblog public and, further, how it relates to previous online eating disorder community practices. Then, the discussion expands to broader isolation posts within the girlblog sphere dubbed ‘bedrotting’ to understand the motivations towards social dissociation within this community. Finally, the chapter discusses representations of Borderline Personality Disorder within this sample and the desire for representation of difficult and messy female characters as seen in these videos. Overall, this research explores the current landscape of TikTok by looking at a specific non-hashtag-driven community on the app. Further, this research gives light to gendered elements of post-pandemic online cultures among young women on TikTok.

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical positioning of this study is based in feminist critique. As these young women on TikTok either overtly identifying as feminists, or simply posing their own critiques of girlhood and sexuality, connecting their complaints with a history of feminist work is useful to understand the broader context of the discourse.

### Feminist Theories of Heterosexual Culture

To understand the feminist underpinnings of these TikTok discourses, it proves helpful to turn to a discussion on theories of heterosexuality as a structuring force, beginning in the lesbian feminist critiques of the radical feminist movement. As will be discussed, much of the girlblog concerns can be tied to a feeling of being out of step with the conventions of femininity and the ‘becoming’ of a woman, a discussion of the social formation of femininity provides a helpful basis. Namely, Adrienne Rich’s (1980) concept of “compulsory heterosexuality” provides a helpful start to understand heterosexuality not as merely an innate sexual orientation, but as a mode of social structuring. At its most basic, compulsory heterosexuality is “the assumption [...] that women are ‘innately sexually oriented’ towards men” (Rich, 1980, p. 632). However, this assumption is maintained through a complex, culturally and politically entrenched network of patriarchal violence. These methods range from denying female sexual desire and pleasure to normalized rape, enforced roles of motherhood, and more. To Rich, all these social realities infect the consciousness of women to believe that heterosexuality is, if not just the only option available romantically and sexually, the only option to obtain a ‘good life’. As she explains,

“Women have been convinced that marriage, and sexual orientation toward men, are inevitable, even if unsatisfying or oppressive components of their lives” (Rich, 1980, p. 640).

Judith Butler expands on this conception of socially-enforced heterosexuality. To Butler, using a Freudian lens, heterosexuality is formed through the prohibition of homosexuality. Further, Butler conceptualizes the achievement of gender as connected to the upholding of heterosexuality, as she explains, “gender is achieved and stabilized through the accomplishment of heterosexual positioning and where the threats to heterosexuality thus become threats to gender itself.” (1995, p. 168). The prohibitions of homosexual love and desire that Butler posits form heterosexuality create a “culture of gender melancholy”, as people are forced to reject the homosexual relations they do, in fact, feel in their lives and are unable to grieve those relationships when they are lost. To Butler, “masculinity and femininity emerge as the traces of an ungrieved and ungrievable love” (1995, p. 172). Both Rich and Butler conceptualize gender and sexuality as socially intertwined and constructed, where imposed sexuality forms the basis of wider social relations.

### Complaint as Feminist Action

It is possible that many of these videos by young female posters on TikTok can be conceptualized as acts of complaint, whether complaints about personal experiences, or wider feminist arguments about the state of womanhood and patriarchy. Kathryn J. Norlock reflects on the affective use of complaint, in response to more classical arguments that complaint is not useful. Norlock argues that Kant and Aristotle’s claims that complaint is “self-indulgent” or “soft” are motivated by gendered ideas (2018, p.117). To these philosophers, the complaint is separate from the more justified ‘protest’, where complaint provides no useful result. To counter,

Norlock argues “some complaining is appropriate because it is sensitive to shared experiences, and attentive to the impulses of vulnerable people whose thriving is made more likely with the acknowledgement of others” (2018, p. 119). She conceptualizes complaining as a way to render issues ‘real’, as they move from the internal world into a shared interpersonal one. Further, Norlock argues that complaining can be an initial step in building a community around a shared problem, as, “forms of connection with others that promote ‘relational solidarity,’ sympathetic bonding through the development of intimacy, and reassurance from others that one has some legitimate grounds, a reduction of cognitive dissonance” (2018, p. 129).

Lauren Berlant similarly argues for a complex understanding of complaint as a feminist issue. Similarly to Norlock, Berlant argues that “The female complaint is thus an aesthetic “witnessing” of injury” (1988, p. 243). To Berlant (1988), importantly, we must understand that women are not self-describing their speech as complaint, ‘complaining’ is only what their words are called after the fact, due to the patriarchal social context. This labelling serves to “hystericize” the complaining woman, and position her qualms as banal (Berlant, 1988, p. 243). With this, the female complaint points to the double bind women are placed in within a patriarchal society. As discussed in the previous section on heterosexuality, “women’s sexual and affective allegiance” (Berlant, 1998, p. 243) is deemed necessary, however, this is the same allegiance that keeps women subservient. To Berlant, the complaint is a recognition of this position. She is complaining to create a record of her oppression, but all the while, aware of how her complaint will be delegitimized (Berlant, 1988).

Further, in her recent book, Sara Ahmed discusses complaints largely in the context of institutional processes. Her book *Complaint!* reflects on her research into instances of institutional abuse and the responses to them. Much of this book deals with interviews and

discourse analyses of moments of complaint. However, at the core of Ahmed's understanding of complaint is that it can "be what it takes to make something that is happening 'real,' which means that sometimes not making a complaint, not getting to or even near that point, is how something remains not real" (2021 p. 106). To Ahmed, the act of voicing a complaint makes the issue tangible both to the complainer and to the audience.

This builds on previous work surrounding the figure of the 'feminist killjoy'. In her "Killjoy Manifesto," Ahmed (2017) stresses the importance of unhappiness in feminist work. Under her second principle of the manifesto, "I Am Willing to Cause Unhappiness," Ahmed argues that the figure of the killjoy appears in the calling out of unhappiness. Ahmed explains, "Maybe this is why the killjoy appears to those who profess to be killjoys: our happiness too might depend on what we do not notice. Perhaps we keep our happiness through a willed oblivion" (2017, p. 259). Thus, the act of calling attention to the unhappiness experienced by oneself and others is what creates the pariah figure of the feminist killjoy. This notion of difficult, loud, and unhappy feminism complicates some dominant strains of feminism in the postfeminist era, as will be discussed below. However, conceptualizing some of the discussed TikTok posts as engaging in 'killjoy' complaints about sex, heterosexual culture, and patriarchy can provide a useful framework for understanding their activist potential.

While the scope of research on complaint is broad, and different definitions and approaches to this topic can aid broadly in conceptualizing these TikToks as feminist scholars, I argue that girlblog videos tend to stay in the realm of Berlant's "female complaint" rather than Ahmed's "killjoy" sensibility. These videos point at something generally being wrong, and often include complaints about seemingly minor aspects of life as young women, but they do not contain the overt structural critique of feminist complaint, more rigidly. However, with an

understanding of how to approach complaint as feminist scholars, we can better understand these seemingly apolitical, yet still strongly important, videos.

In all, the feminist theoretical base of this project takes seriously the anxieties and complaints of the girls in this study. We understand womanhood and femininity as constructed and, often times, restrictive boundaries, that are not innate or essential. With that basis, we can better explore the ways in which these girls are rubbing up against the boundaries put upon them and the anxieties that often produces. It is important to focus on these ‘bad feelings’ within feminist research and the community and art that can come out of them.

## Literature Review

### Shifts in the Feminist Landscape in the Internet Age

To situate this project, it is important to put these TikToks into conversation with the overarching feminist (and reactionary) circumstances of today. Beginning with some key works on the postfeminist era of the 90s and early to mid-2000s and transitioning into #MeToo and the resulting backlash of the 2020s, this section will place girlhood TikToks in their temporal feminist context, reflecting on the changing social meanings of ‘the girl’ and what girl-produced media does for both the producer, herself, and the different groups viewing it.

Gonick et al., (2006) explain how ‘girl power’ became a dominant term around the turn of the new millennium. Initially coined in the DIY underground Riot Grrrl movement, ‘girl power’ quickly grew from its revolutionary origins to reach broader embrace in wider popular and consumer culture. The mid to late 1990s also saw a sizable shift in girls’ representation in film and TV, with a rise in television focused on strong, fighting, female characters, most famously seen through Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Xena Warrior Princess, and Sabrina the Teenage Witch (Gonick, 2006). Further, pop music acts such as the Spice Girls took on the term in their messaging. In response to the mainstreaming of girl power as a term, post-feminist scholars have differed in thought with regard to the results of this movement. According to Gonick et al., “The effects of neo-liberal discourses individualize and depoliticize and have enabled post-feminist discourses to thrive, since the individualizing, fragmenting logic works to destabilize collective movements like feminism” (2006). Rather than a call for girls to be included in the working and public life, girl power has since changed to reflect how girls are now

expected to be fully formed neoliberal subjects, focusing on their consumer and labour power (Gonick et al., 2009).

From the early 2000s through the late 2010s, many feminist scholars were turning their focus towards what appeared to be a new dominant ‘sensibility’ within popular culture and institutional powers: postfeminism. While the scholars mentioned below all have their different definitions of the term broadly, and different focuses on the types of feminism that occupy the postfeminist moment, broadly, the 2000s saw a move in popular culture and public discourse away from feminism as a necessary collective, activist movement, and towards women’s individualized empowerment and choice as substitute.

Gill (2020) describes postfeminist sensibility as a way to take the postfeminist era on as a cultural object and to analyze it. To Gill, the postfeminist sensibility is necessarily a reaction to feminism. Not exactly a backlash, postfeminism incorporates contradictions into which girls and women are expected to perform. For example, Gill describes how within a postfeminist sensibility, girls are both ruthlessly sexualized yet still praised for their ambition and work ethic. The impossible bind of these contradictions shows how feminism and anti-feminism are employed in the present moment. As she writes, “The patterned nature of the contradictions is what constitutes the sensibility, one in which notions of autonomy, choice, and self-improvement sit side by side with surveillance discipline and the vilification of those who make the wrong choices” (163). Here, again, we see a strong focus put on individual choices and responsibilities, and away from the notion of feminism as a collective liberatory movement.

McRobbie (2009) explains how tenants of previous manifestations of feminism have been coopted into politics and consumer culture. She writes, “Drawing on vocabulary that includes words like ‘empowerment’ and ‘choice’, these elements are then converted into a much

more individualistic discourse, and they are deployed in this new guise, particularly in media and popular culture, but also by agencies of the state, as a kind of substitute for feminism” (p.1). The assumed success of women’s rights promoted through this absorption of feminism creates a lack of trust, and to McRobbie, even disgust, with feminism as a movement. Older strains of feminist thought become ugly and angering in comparison to the dominant notions of women’s choice and empowerment (McRobbie, 2009). According to McRobbie (2009), the content of feminist critiques has been largely replaced by a neoliberal notion of individual success. This can be seen in the example of “female phallicism,” the playful adopting of stereotypically masculine traits such as aggression and sexual forwardness. In the short-term, phallicism can aid in a woman’s success in male-dominated fields. Yet, this position is necessarily temporary, as adopting these domineering patterns for longer periods has the adverse effect of making a woman socially off-putting again, as she has traversed too far from feminine ideals (p. 5).

Out of this backdrop comes back what Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) calls “popular feminism,” a highly branded, mediated, and consumed version of feminism that seemed ever-present in the mid to late 2010s. Through its reliance on social media, popular feminism must function within the “economy of visibility,” where the politics that are most present, loud, and active are given the most importance. This is why feminism that focuses on empowerment and economic ascending, through its appealing positivity, is given the most visibility (p.3). From this context is where we see a new type of feminist action described as “hashtag feminism” (Kettrey et al., 2021; Kermani, & Hooman, 2022; Chen et al., 2018; Khoja-Moolji, 2015; Thrift, 2014). Hashtag feminism refers to the multiple instances of women online joining around one hashtagged term to raise awareness around a feminist social issue. Some notable examples of this are #NastyWoman from Hillary Clinton’s 2016 presidential campaign (Chen et al., 2018),

#BringBackOurGirls in response to the Nigerian mass kidnapping event of 2014 (Khoja-Moolji, 2015), and #YesAllWomen in response to the 2014 Isla Vista incel murders (Thrift, 2014).

#YesAllWomen is especially relevant to the topic at hand, as posters used the hashtag to describe, unfortunately, ‘everyday’ experiences with sexual harassment and violence.

Building off #YesAllWomen, the most notable expression of hashtag feminism would be #MeToo. #MeToo, which first trended on Twitter in 2017 (though originally started by Tarana Burke in 2006), was a hashtag used to show the prevalence of sexual violence, where survivors would post their personal story of abuse along with the tag (Mendes et al. 2018). The #MeToo movement can be seen as an example of popular feminism through its focus on individual stories, celebrities and other high-class individuals, as a means for generating press. While many of those sharing #MeToo stories online were everyday people joining in the hashtag, those whose stories were circulated widely who became the faces of the movement tended to be the already famous (Palmer et al., 2021).

According to Gill, the overarching postfeminist era, to which these movements all belong, is defined by its precarious position of women’s empowerment at a time of growing misogyny within ‘lad culture’ (2017), and incels are certainly a part of this. Thus, there has always been a tense interplay between dormant feminisms and misogyny. However, much of the discussion of neoliberal feminism (Rottenberg, 2014), and pop feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018) of this era take for granted a broader cultural acceptance of these feminisms, where especially neoliberal feminism is discussed as an accepted point of view within dominant society, especially on popular social media sites (Banet-Weiser, Gill & Rottenberg, 2020).

Yet, in the current post-#MeToo era, popular opinions have shifted rather suddenly on topics such as sexual assault and the survivor-focused feminism of the previous era (Banet-

Weiser & Higgins, 2022). Scholars point to the Johnny Depp v. Amber Heard defamation trial as a major turning point in public opinion. As Moro et al. (2021) explain, “We understand the Depp v. Heard trial as a site of struggle for meaning and power for popular feminism and popular misogyny, and as revealing the encroachment of misogyny, masculinism and anti-feminism online” (p.99). The vilification of Heard by followers of the trial online spun narratives towards a victimization of Depp, despite the legal evidence pointing towards the reality of his abuse. The popularity of the anti-Heard stance both across social media and in national opinion editorials shows a shift away from popular feminism and #MeToo’s mantra of “believe women” into a discourse much more skeptical of accusations of assault and abuse. According to Moro et al., “This new iteration of popular misogyny distorts the cultural significance of #MeToo to fuel warped definitions of domestic violence and victimization; and its misappropriation of digital feminist activism is part of a coordinated and lucrative strategy deployed by the manosphere” (2021, p. 99).

This shift in dominant views on women can also be seen in the rise of the online ‘manosphere,’ the amalgamation of many different male-focused communities online such as: Men’s Rights Activism, Pick Up Artists, incels, ‘Men Going Their Own Way (#MGTOW),’ and more. These communities all have slightly different identities and ideologies, but, broadly, they all condemn feminism and believe in natural male superiority (Sugiura, 2021). While versions of these communities have existed on the internet for pretty much its entire existence, the manosphere has formed and now risen to mainstream prominence through figures like Andrew Tate, a kickboxer and social media star who rose to fame making videos for young men routinely disparaging women, who was later arrested for human trafficking and rape (Verma & Khurana, 2023). The popularity of figures like Tate and the recent ubiquity of the manosphere has led to a

resurgence in what Sarah Benet-Wiser calls “popular misogyny” (2018). Like her definition of popular feminism, popular misogyny spreads through interconnected online and offline channels. Yet, unlike popular feminism, the ideology of popular misogyny is already embedded in institutional structures. Benet-Wiser describes the election of President Trump and the American shift to the right electorally as exemplary of this resurgent popularity (2018). Further, the anti-abortion Dobbs Decision in the United States has radically rolled back the efforts of pro-choice feminists.

I believe it is important to situate this specific #MeToo and post-#MeToo movement in this research as these are aspects of internet cultures that these TikTok posters are likely most familiar with. Due to their seemingly youthful age, these users would likely have only been independently on the internet for the tail end of the height of social media popular feminism. Many would have processed #MeToo as teens or young adults, making it likely a formative experience in their views on feminism and sexuality.

### Girl-Produced Media and Self-Representation

TikTok videos can be understood within a longer tradition of young girls’ self-representation through social media sites. This self-produced content reflects the social needs and desires of the girls posting the content and it can also tell us about the structure of their lives offline. To ground a broad discussion of online self-representation, it can be helpful to look at the context in which these girls are posting and why they may be drawn to share these personal posts on the internet. Below, I will discuss some key terms and concepts from works on girls’ self-produced online media that can help describe why and how girlhood TikToks are produced.

Hodkinson and Lincoln (2008) argue that we should look at youth use of social networking sites as an extension of ‘bedroom culture.’ The authors argue that the tumultuous time of adolescence causes this desire for the extended comfort of the bedroom as these users are “marking out of territory, the exploration and exhibition of identity and the generation and living out of personal social networks” (Hodkinson and Lincoln, 2008, p. 4). For Hodkinson and Lincoln (2008), the personalized social network profile (LiveJournal, in their article) becomes a sort of bedroom wall, where different choices of photos, quotes, and other interface choices serve as ‘decorations’ which reflect the personality of the owner. This bedroom wall metaphor does not stretch quite as far on a platform like TikTok as older platforms like MySpace and Tumblr, where users have much wider abilities to customize their sites, since on TikTok, the profile customization is simply in the username, profile photo, and biography. However, through the intentional naming, tagging, and even emoji use in the bio section of those who call themselves ‘femcel’ or self-label in relation to related identities, there are still aspects to this type of bedroom culture through specific creative choices. Further, the way a user curates their FYP can also apply to this bedroom metaphor. The intentional interaction with only certain types of content that reflect one’s interests and identity create a sort of bedroom wall through a personalized scroll on the app, even though curation is not fully chosen and much happens on the side of the app’s algorithm.

Further, these social networking sites become a space of negotiated privacy. On these sites, there is an idea (though not always accurate) of selected and limited viewership. This separate sphere empowers the young user to create a different identity for themselves than they might appear to schoolmates or family. Hodkinson and Lincoln’s work builds upon writing by McRobbie and Garber (2006) on how the bedroom served as a place for private exploration of

subcultures, fan cultures, and interpersonal relationships for girls, who are typically written out of the histories of these subcultures. However, as Kennedy (2020) asserts, while girls' TikTok videos tend to fall under the umbrella of McRobbie and Garber's bedroom culture practices, through TikTok's 'for you page' algorithm, they are no longer afforded the guarantee of privacy and are open to potential ridicule from unintentional virality. This is due to the assumed public nature of TikTok videos, which show up on non-followers' feeds by default, unless the user chooses to opt into a private mode. This feature creates a culture in which videos can be both very personal but also produced with the knowledge that they will be viewed by complete strangers, across the world. Bovill and Livingstone (2001) also ask us to think about this blurring of public and private lives within the bedroom cultures of teenagers. Bedrooms are a place of both personal identity creation and reflection, and also sharing that identity with the world through socially connected media. They argue that while teenagers are currently more likely to spend time alone in their rooms, they are engaging in public through the interconnectedness of their technologies. Further, the authors argue that we should be looking outwards to the perceived failures of the 'outside world' (less public space, access to leisure activities) to better understand the motivations of bedroom cultures (Bovill & Livingstone, 2001).

To speak more specifically about how girls create community online, in her work on "WhatShouldWeCallMe" (WSWCM) communities on Tumblr, Akane Kanai (2019) discusses the notions of "spectatorial girlfriendship" and "classificatory imagination." These communities center around a particular meme format, with a written personal moment accompanied by a GIF, indicating the feeling of the moment. The understanding of the meme is only possible through the ability to understand the references in the GIF and relate to the affective experience displayed. Relating to these memes requires what Kanai calls a "classificatory imagination". She

describes this process as users “mobilising an ‘encoded eye’ to document and monitor as an everyday social practice”, which is aided through algorithmic infrastructures (Kanai, 2019, p. 77). This classification becomes a way to read significance onto the juxtaposed specificities of these posts, and thus understand the story being conveyed. This shared lens develops into a “spectatorial girlfriendship”. Kanai describes, “The spectatorial girlfriendship [...] draws on the premise of a shared familiarity with existing Western discourses and affects of youthful femininity, and the digital modes of sense making that make the visuality of the reaction-GIF texts meaningful and coherent” (61). Thus, in these communities of practice, there exists a general shared knowledge base and broad understanding of the world through shared experiences of age and gender.

Amy S. Dobson (2015) similarly discusses young women’s social media production. In her research on what she calls “hot and hostile” photo practices, Dobson discusses the way these posted photos grapple with young women’s sexual subjecthood and agency at once. Dobson describes images of lifted skirts and topless women photographed from behind, but these photos include text or other gestures showing anger directed at the camera (2015). These “hot and hostile” photos are based upon what Dobson notes as “heterosexy” aesthetics. To move away from a discourse of totalizing “sexualization,” Dobson refers to the normative visual lexicon of rigidly-gendered heterosexual sexuality. While always in flux, modern heterosexy aesthetics rely on traditional femininity (pinks, dresses) mixed with porn-influenced imagery (heavy makeup, plastic surgery, revealing clothing) (p. 40). “Heterosexy” aesthetics (such as the hot/hostile lifted short skirts) are viewed as inherently sexual to the exclusion of any other modes of sexuality. Dobson argues that the “hot and hostile” juxtaposition signals an awareness of a sexualizing

male gaze that these posters are acting in response to. The poster is both picturing herself as a sexual person and shunning the voyeuristic gaze of the viewer of her photos.

Within this context, Dobson's work on girls and young women's social media production provides a useful example of how to research these communities in a way that highlights their importance and agency. In reflecting on the study of "girls in crisis" communities, for which I would contest girlblogs are one, Dobson argues for a need to "slow down" as adult academics and commentators (2015). As Dobson explains, many young women's communities online are the subject of either ridicule or moral panic, as the discourses these girls are engaging with are posited as harmful to them. Echoing similar suggestions, Ringrose's (2011) work on highly-sexual youth practices on the site Bebo urges that adults should not shame young people for their digital practices, but guide them into more positive interactions through education. With that, Dobson (2015) describes many of these related practices such as self-cutting, anorexia, and outward expressions of low self-esteem to be "signs of 'gender distress'" (Dobson, 2015, p. 151). This gendered look at expressions of sadness and anger map onto the girlblog culture as well, as there is a notable overlap in their postings about mental health issues and specifically about dieting and body image, showing a connection between these concerns.

### Social Media Platform Affordances

To understand why teen girls on TikTok are making videos in the style they appear, it is necessary to have an understanding of the affordances of the TikTok platform and how videos are both produced and circulated. Bucher and Helmond (2017) conceptualize technological affordances not simply as an assortment of options and buttons, but as an interactive dialogue between user and platform. Reflecting on the work of past scholars, Bucher and Helmond

contend that the features of a platform (ability to like/share, the temporality of posts, how to connect with friends/followers) have the power to influence how users interact with the platform and with each other. While the technological specifications in no way completely determine how one will interact, however, they do have the ability to help shift trends in usage.

When discussing Twitter's 2015 shift from the 'heart' button to 'likes', Bucher and Helmond discuss how we should additionally look beyond specifically what a feature *does* for/with a user, but also what it may communicate, to understand user habits more clearly. While the functionality of the heart versus the like did not change, what a heart and like *mean* to users is often different. As the authors explain, "Although technically affording identical actions, taking into account what users say, believe and expect these features to be able to accomplish varies greatly" (Bucher and Helmond, 2017, p.22).

In her work on TikTok during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, Schellewald (2023) discusses how specific affordances of the platform influenced user fondness for the app. TikTok's main landing page is its 'for you page', which is a seemingly never-ending scroll of short videos, personalized for the individual user based on past viewing habits. For Schellewald's research participants, "The personalisation offered by the app's algorithm being a key affordance that made the app appealing to them as an escape site and standing out from other platforms" (2023, p.1576). Schellewald argues that this personalization process becomes cyclical, as the user begins to engage in what she calls "reading for personalisation", or watching TikToks on the 'for you page' with an expectation that those videos will necessarily reflect oneself (2023, p.1576).

This notion of the cyclical nature between user and algorithmic technology relates back to Bucher and Helmond's (2017) notions of affordances. They explain that the interaction of the

user (likes, comments, watch-time) influences what is shown to them by algorithmic technologies. Further, there is another layer of interaction between those interactions and back-end actors such as advertisers noting the user's interests and viewing habits (Bucher and Helmond, 2017). These cycling and multi-sited dialogues should be considered to understand all the potential actors involved in the TikTok recommendation process.

Zulli and Zulli (2022) suggest that TikTok meaning-making can be understood through the formation of "imitation publics". They define these imitation publics as "a collection of people whose digital connectivity is constituted through the shared ritual of content imitation and replication" (2022). This can happen in two ways. The first is the more straightforward copying of trends and features of already popular videos, such as following TikTok 'challenges' or using the same backing sound as previous videos. The second type of imitation public refers to more general memetic relationality with a broader 'side' of TikTok that is user is fed into through algorithmic tailoring. According to Zulli and Zulli (2022), these publics of TikTok include straight (mainstream), alternative (more edgy or political), and queer TikTok, among others (and these have even shifted in the years since this article's publication). These different publics produce different trends and styles within themselves that code them as being part of a particular imitation public. For the purposes of this research, the notion of imitation publics can help conceptualize the results of how the TikTok algorithm uses demographic data to send these videos to young women, and how the girlblog videos tend to share specific sounds, video effects, and other specific user choices.

Using this framework, Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström (2022) define "gesellschaft" (society) and "gemeinschaft" (community) groupings on TikTok. Gesellschaft TikTok refers to the broader, more corporate or commercial-feeling 'side' of TikTok that a newcomer to the app is

likely to experience. This TikTok is populated by influencers and TikTok-famous celebrities (Kaye, Zeng, & Wikström, 2022). However, *gemeinschaft*-type communities are more niche and are often found after the user has spent significant time scrolling the app and interacting with videos. According to the authors, “The *gemeinschaft* type is characterized by the warmth and strength of relationships - familial, kindred, and neighbourly” (Kaye, Zeng, & Wikström, 2022, p. 107). These niche, identity and interest-based ‘sides’ of TikTok are more subcultural and enable a distributed form of creativity by users (Kaye, Zeng, & Wikström, 2022). This is the ‘side’ of the app I expected girlblog TikToks to be largely found within.

Lee and Abidin further explain, “TikTok’s meme templates lure users to remix and create memetic contents for self-expression but within the boundary of ‘circumscribed creativity’ being guided by the platform features and politics. This facilitates the gathering of ad hoc publics through the circulation of affects like humor” (2023, p. 3-4). In other words, creativity on TikTok has certain borders and boundaries of the features of the app, and the creativity comes from how a user interacts with these premade features. The authors explain that the low barrier to participation of TikTok, through its ease of use and relative ease of creating videos, has allowed the app to quickly become part of the daily media landscape for many users (Lee & Abidin, 2023).

The use of ‘-blog’ in the user-created term girlblog ties together some previous social media practices with those specific to TikTok. Girl blogs (as a separate entity from *girlblogs*) have existed on the internet for decades. Sites like Fbomb, and later Rookie Magazine, were online spaces where girls could write and circulate ideas to other young women, continuing the countercultural circulation of feminist zine practices of previous decades (Keller, 2011). Online feminist blogs were spaces of concurrent learning and creating, as girls would read each other’s

content, comment, and write responses of their own. This notion continued to Tumblr, which kept the 'blog' terminology with 'micro-blogging,' but had an interface shift towards a social networking site. Still predominantly text-based, the site encouraged longform writing. However, as Keller (2019) argues, "Tumblr could be understood as a platform that prioritizes aesthetics, amplified through its allowance of user-customized short-form blogs and reflecting its original positioning as a creative community" (p.7). This brings the notion of the blog into a broader, socially focused realm as it shifts towards social media apps like TikTok, which heavily prioritize views and interaction. With that, the use of 'blog' in the term girlblog is unclear in its origins. I would argue that it refers back, almost nostalgically, to a previous more text-based internet with more user-creation and ability to alter your feeds, like Tumblr.

## Methodology

This project employs social media research methods (Highfield & Leaver, 2016; Dieter et al., 2019; Keller et al., 2015; Postill & Pink, 2012; Gibbs et al. 2015), with a focus on TikTok-based methods (Avdeeff, 2021; Duguay, 2023, Zulli & Zulli, 2022; Simpson & Semaan, 2021; Kennedy, 2020) along with a critical discourse analysis (Wodak & Meyer, 2009) as its methodological approach. The combination of these approaches aids in, first, the retrieval of useful TikTok data, and then, the examination and exploration of the videos in relation to relevant theoretical texts and historical precedents. In all, this methodology aims to understand the discourses present in these TikToks through their technosocial forms. At this point in time, doing research on TikTok requires an element of creativity through a mashing-up of multiple methodological ideas. Since the app is constantly changing its interface, and connectedly, the groups who inhabit the platform are constantly evolving their posting habits and styles, no one existing methodological approach perfectly encompasses what I aim to do in this project.

To start, I curated a personalized “for you page” feed in order to collect videos, rather than simply search by hashtag. This is because, on TikTok, algorithmic curation is a more important metric in determining what someone is being served than the hashtags used (Duguay, 2023). Even when a hashtag is searched on the explore feature of the app, what arises is still based on personal data. Thus, I intended to lean into this, not as a limitation, but as an interesting area of research. My method for data collection is inspired by Bounegru et al.’s (2019) work on persona methods for digital studies. The research team reflects on how the contemporary state of algorithmically-suggested content online requires digital methods that keep in mind the figure of ‘the user’ for data collection. Rather than ridding a dataset of personalization in an attempt to

bypass unwanted bias, the authors suggest crafting an intentional character to interact with the app. As I was more focused on accessing the videos that would be served to someone interested in femcel content than exploring *why* they are served that content, I limited my persona to only include the following general information: woman, age 18-22, attracted to men, living in Canada, English speaker. I then interacted with my ‘for you page’ with this persona in mind by liking videos, watching through the entire runtime, and beginning to save those which follow the criteria described in the following section.

This is how I began my data collection process— looking for femcel videos along these content and aesthetic lines. However, this focus on femcels soon became muddled as I discovered that the boundaries between femcel and similar niche communities were blurred almost beyond recognition. On TikTok, dozens of hashtagged and non-hashtagged style and community signifiers overlap through their use of similar girlish, messy, emotional cues. #femcel, #femaleraige, #girlhood, #coquette, #girltok, #sadgirl, #vent, #justagirl, and others were used on the same videos, showing that femcel was not necessarily a unique community of its own on TikTok (that way it appears to be on forum sites like Reddit and 4Chan) but, instead, one of many hashtag and visual signifiers that exist under a larger umbrella of content. This content follows the coquette style mentioned above juxtaposed with angry content like hypothesized among femcel content, but also with topics focused on broader issues of mental health and sadness. It became apparent that femcels were not the only ones using this girly yet troubled juxtaposition to make meaning of their experiences. Thus, I shifted my search to a term to reflect that the content being served to me encompassed a wider thematic umbrella, girlblogs. As will be discussed in subsequent findings chapters, girlblogs represent the combination of youthful girly imagery with themes of adolescent discontent. The only notable topic shift was away from an

explicit discussion of sex and sexuality, which is likely due to TikTok's stronger content moderation policies than many forum-based sites hosting femcel content, such as Reddit. However, the implicit influence of heterosexual cultures and the forming of the desired 'feminine' archetype still play major roles in the background of this community.

As TikTok research is still an emerging field, there are few widely helpful external software and resources for the collection and organization of TikTok data. There are some software tools which I considered using, for example, Digital Methods Initiative's GitHub-based browser extension, Zeeschuimer (Digital Methods Initiative, n.d.). This software is compatible with TikTok and scans your screen to collect all the posts that arise. However, as I was trying to find very specific media, and contingent on slowly paring down my FYP, this approach was not feasible as it would gather too much content, making the compiling process difficult. Further, other programs such as the Bellingcat TikTok Analysis Tool (Bellingcat, n.d.) work based upon hashtag. My desired sample was not likely to exist along one or just a few hashtags, so I could not fully rely on it to gather all the data I needed.

Thus, I collected my sample videos 'by hand.' I created a Google Sheet to place the TikTok links into, as well as the necessary metadata such as username, sound used, text appearing on screen, like and comment counts. With that, I began by tagging each video for broad topic themes (ex. beauty standards, dating apps, school life etc.) Once I reached what felt to me like theoretical saturation (200 videos), when I saw recurrent themes and topics appear in sizable clusters within the data, I went back through the sample and wrote notes on the points of view, emotionality, and other specificities of the individual videos, to work as references for myself later. This sheet with all the organized videos helped me glean overlaps, similarities, and trends within the data to then break those major themes into chapters of my discourse analysis.

I ended up with 200 saved and organized TikToks. These videos were all collected from March to July of 2024 and range from publication dates as far back as fall of 2021 (five videos) to contemporary to their collection dates. Most videos that came across the FYP were from early 2024. Of these videos, they ranged widely in popularity. The most popular video in the sample, a clip from *Mean Girls* with text overtop about the feeling of forgetting to put on your perfume in the morning, had 1.8 million likes. This was an outlier, however, with most of the popular content in my sample hovering around the 300,000-400,000 like range. The least popular TikTok in my sample had 33 likes, and the popularity of the rest ranged widely, with most videos having at least several thousand likes. However, the existence of the videos with only a few dozen likes on my For You Page shows the success of my persona method in curating highly targeted content.

From the organized sample, I structured my findings following inspiration from Wodak and Meyer's (2009) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). I connected the topics and issues present in the TikToks with the critical theory found in my literature review as well as the contemporary circulation of these discourses in popular media. After the initial collection of the TikToks and their metadata (such as like count, comment count, caption, visual descriptor, and my best approximation of the user's age and location), I performed a further round of thematic coding to uncover broader concerns, such as "relations with men," "longing/limerence," "aging," and specific mental health terms. From there, I was able to discover the overarching discourses that I delve into in my findings chapters.

As suggested by the Wodak and Meyer, I placed key attention to ideas of power within this analysis, as would be necessary for this topic, due to its connection to youth and feminist concerns. The authors state that, "CDA aims to shed light on the discursive aspects of societal

disparities and inequalities” (p.32). I believe this is a useful approach for a discourse analysis on girlblogs, as there is an apparent *problem* with young womanhood that they are responding to, and CDA can help illuminate the exact issues they are reflecting upon.

### Sample Inclusion Criteria

I began the collection process by determining what, for the purposes of this project, is a femcel TikTok (and what is not in alignment with my initial research questions). This could not be done as simply as searching by hashtag, as many, if not most, femcel TikTokers are not using obvious hashtags like #femcel or #femcelcore. Thus, this collection required a preliminary determination of what attributes constitute femcel content, with the acknowledgement that the process of data collection would expand and complicate these boundaries. Determining what is and is not femcel content was established through two means: popular journalistic coverage of the content and my preliminary research engaging with this content from an app-user position. Below, I set out my initial inclusion criteria that appeared to be common of femcel videos in order to determine an accurate sample. With this, I had the acknowledgement I would likely discover new qualities as the data collection progressed. It is important to note that while I based my inclusion criteria on other sources, there remains an element of my own personal ingrained knowledge of this style of post. As previously mentioned, I was served this sort of content on my personal FYP for a while before approaching it academically, so, behind these specific qualifications, there was still a shred of a ‘know it when you see it’ element to my collection process. This is also because, as will be discussed in the following chapter, femcel and girlblog content builds heavily on previous online styles, such as ‘sad girl’ and ‘pale blog’ content. With

that, I recognize that my personal internet habits and experiences are not fully removed from this researching process, and, in a way, aided my ability to collect broadly.

### **Backing audio and music:**

The following are artists whose music is often featured in femcel videos. Their use does not make the video automatically part of the sample, but it is one category for determining whether a video fits. Femcel music includes: Miski (Tseng, 2023) (Colombo, 2022) (Lanigan, 2022), Lana del Rey (Tseng, 2023) (Lanigan, 2022) (Ward, 2023), Fiona Apple (Lanigan, 2022) (preliminary research), Olivia Rodrigo (preliminary research), Hole/Courtney Love (preliminary research).

### **Filmic and other media references:**

As previously mentioned, femcel videos use many clips and references to popular media and characters that the posters can identify with. The following are the most prominent film/television/literary references:

- *The Virgin Suicides* (1999), directed by Sofia Coppola (Tseng, 2023) (Lanigan, 2022)
- *Pearl* (2022), directed by Ti West (Tseng, 2023)
- *Jennifer's Body* (2009), directed by Karyn Kusama (Tseng, 2023) (Ward, 2023)
- *The Bell Jar* (1963), written by Sylvia Plath (Tseng, 2023) (Lanigan, 2022) (Colombo, 2022)
- *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018), written by Ottessa Moshfegh (Tseng, 2023) (Lanigan, 2022)
- *Girl Interrupted* (1999), directed by James Mangold (Tseng, 2023)
- *Lolita* (1955), written by Vladimir Nabakov (including film adaptations) (Tseng, 2023) (Lanigan, 2022)

- *Gone Girl* (2014), directed by David Fincher (including original book by Gillian Flynn)  
(Tseng, 2023) (Lanigan, 2022) (Ward, 2023)

- *Fleabag* (2016-2019), written by Pheobe Waller-Bridge (Lanigan, 2022)

- *Possession* (1981), directed by Andrzej Żuławski (preliminary research)

- *Promising Young Woman* (2020), directed by Emerald Fennell (preliminary research)

- *Black Swan* (2010), directed by Darren Aronofsky (preliminary research)

- *The Piano Teacher* (2001), directed by Michael Haneke (preliminary research).

### **Hashtags:**

These hashtags have been noted as commonly used by femcel TikTokers: #female manipulator, #toxic femininity, #femcel moment, #femcelcore (Tseng, 2023). Additionally, Tseng (2023) identifies #grippysock as a hashtag used, referencing the socks one is given when admitted to a psychiatric facility. My preliminary research shows that #coquette is a broadly overlapping hashtag with femcel videos. Coquette refers to a contemporary trend of girlish-style clothing featuring whites and light pinks, bows, ruffles, and similar adornments (Roby, 2022). While most coquette videos are not also femcel videos, many femcels will use coquette aesthetics juxtaposed with messy, angry, or otherwise ill-at-ease content (Tseng, 2023). Further, in preliminary searches, #femcelrights appears to be a newer hashtag used by this community. Despite not specifically searching by hashtag, it was still useful to be aware of common hashtags used within this wider community. They can point to similar identities and points of view within the wider TikTok public, similar to username naming conventions and aesthetic qualities of the videos themselves.

### **Broader aesthetic qualities:**

Building on the previous section, femcel videos tend to have an element of messiness to them. As Tseng (2023) describes, femcel videos respond to normative ideas of female purity and cleanliness, as she explains, “femcelcore embraces the opposite by playing up the dirty, the unkempt, and the excessive.” A particular kind of messy yet girlish hyper-femininity marks femcel content. Further, building on the #coquette aspects, Catholic imagery is commonly seen in these videos (Lanigan, 2022). Images of saints, rosaries, and embellished crosses are common within the coquette style, and appear as a strong motif within the show *Fleabag*, thus are often seen in femcel media. To move to the editing styles of femcel videos, many femcel videos are structured as a selfie-style video with overlaid text and one of the aforementioned music clips (Tseng, 2023). Additionally, many femcel videos appear to rely on clipped scenes from the aforementioned films and shows. A consideration of both the media used in femcel videos as well as their aesthetic qualities aids in understanding how these references are incorporated into femcel discourse and also how the femcel visual style is created. Keeping with this general canon with which to collect the videos, as mentioned, my specific terminology changed to reflect femcels as part of a wider umbrella of content of similar themes. My research questions then altered to: *What are the discourses present in the “girlblog” public on TikTok?* And further, *how is the girlblog audiovisual style configured through TikTok’s sociotechnical affordances?*

### Ethical Considerations

This project deals with several ethical considerations surrounding the sampled videos and the accounts they come from. Many of these videos deal with sensitive personal matters and are posted by accounts either with unclear ages or by those under eighteen. With that, first, I have ensured the anonymity of any TikTok creator or commenters whose data I collect. While TikTok

is a widely public platform, TikTok creators are largely not posting with the intention of their videos being used for academic data, and thus I have anonymized all legal names and other identifying information. Of the videos collected, many show the faces of the TikTok users, with the creators talking directly to the camera. Thus, I only use screen captures of videos where no TikTok users are visible, and only include photos of models, spaces, objects, and clips from film and TV. While posts that include users' likenesses are notably not anonymous to the TikTok audience who viewed them on the app, I respect that transposing these videos into an academic context does provide an element of context collapse that I do not wish to impose on the creators of these TikTok videos.

### Limitations

There were some notable limitations to this project due to the time constraints of a master's thesis. First, while femcel and girlblog content has a strong presence on other social media platforms such as Instagram, it was necessary for the scope of this project to focus solely on TikTok. This allowed for comparisons between videos and not across different types of media. Further, femcel groups are prominent on forum sites such as 4Chan, however, they are quite ideologically different from those on TikTok, often subscribing to more traditionally incel ideology, which would make for an interesting comparative research project, yet due to the constraints of this project, and the shift away from a specific focus on femcels, that would require a separate study. I further did not include videos commenting on femcel or girlblog culture from an outside perspective. I came across a few videos from boys and men making fun of femcels, but deemed that outside of the scope of this project, as I am specifically looking at the qualities of this girl-produced media, itself. Further, my sample could also represent a certain

subset of TikToks reflecting girlblog themes. They were collected only over a few months and all in English (as the only language I could comfortably interpret). These videos also reflect the specific sampling choices I have laid out. While I have set out to provide thorough analysis of these videos, connecting them back to literature and similar research from previous eras, these findings can only speak to this specific sample of videos and not broad conclusions about all aspects of girls on TikTok.

## **“Does Growing Up Change Your Body or Also Your Soul?": Girlhood, Prettiness, and Aging on TikTok's Girlblogs**

This chapter aims to understand how girlhood is understood and expressed within the girlblog public on TikTok. 2023 was dubbed “the year of the girl” by numerous publications (Klien, Handel & Summers, 2024) (Bacon, 2023) (Princiotti, 2023) (Firth, 2023). This was largely due to Greta Gerwig’s *Barbie* dominating the box office, generating hundreds of memes, articles, and fashion trends. Additionally, 2023 saw the start of Taylor Swift’s *Eras Tour*, which saw millennial women celebrating the songs they had loved since their childhoods. TikTok trends and memes such as “girl dinner,” referencing the relatable situation of eating cobbled-together snacks in lieu of a formal dinner (Roy, 2023) and “girl math,” which explained away irresponsible spending and budgeting as ‘for the girls’ (Kawata, 2023) all brought “the girl” to the forefront of meme and popular culture.

While girlhood was discussed at length in mainstream publications, a culture centred on the same topic was forming on TikTok (as well as other social media platforms): the girlblog. Through this research, I argue that girlblogging, also sometimes girlcore, refers to a genre of posts made and consumed by young women aged around 15-22. Referring to themselves as girls (often despite their actual age), the posters in this sample reflect on mental health, growing up, love, aesthetics, and other topics through highly stylized and media-referential videos. Girlblogs can be viewed as a type of “intimate public,” in Berlant’s (2008) usage. This is a “culture of circulation” of texts and items that create a feeling of shared closeness between the participants. The sharing of these things creates “subjective likeness that seems to emanate from their history and their ongoing attachments and actions” (Berlant, 2008, p.5). Intimate publics are themselves

formed by market forces (as they often surround consumer items, like we see with specific style trends in girlblogs). However, Berlant argues that circulatory participation in intimate publics makes the participants feel as if these intimacies between strangers existed inherently, before the market gave them a structure and a name (2008).

Specific aspects of these videos will be discussed in later sections and chapters, but overall, the girlblog public is marked by a certain discontent with love, sex, socializing, one's body, and the future, communicated through a hyper-feminine form. Girlblog content is also largely inward-facing, focused on concerns with the self and internal life rather than specific interpersonal issues or broader social critique. Concerns about social expectations, body image, and sexualization from men are all present within these videos, but a 'capital F feminism' is oddly absent. Less of the female empowerment of Gerwig's *Barbie*, and more of the belittling and self-patronizing energy of 'girl math' and 'girl dinner' fill these videos. Further, no videos within the sample contained more than one user on camera, showing that these videos were likely produced alone. While the girlbloggers may find community in the comment sections of their videos and that of those they follow, the production of the videos themselves is an individual undertaking. This isolated nature of the videos lends to further questions about how observations of feminist issues can be discussed in spaces that feel so void of community and connection.

Through an analysis of 200 girlblog TikTok videos, this chapter aims to parse out what girlhood means in these videos, dividing the term into its component parts of femininity and youth. To discuss femininity within these videos, we will look at the key components of the girly style that runs through the majority of these videos and how existing stereotypes of women and girls are negotiated in this sample. On the topic of age, many of these videos reflect a nostalgic

yearning for the past (one's childhood) as well as fears of aging— both as a decrease in beauty and in social relevance, which I will explore through a feminist lens.

In response to the empowered, fighting girl power era is where we now find girlbloggers. If we were to compare a girlblogger to the 'girl power' era of a generation prior, the archetypal girl power girl got good grades in school, was physically strong, spoke her mind, and played with the boys, the girlblogger spends most of her time alone in her room or staring out the window of the passenger seat of her parents' car. She is either upset with or broadly disconnected from her body. She dresses and decorates her room in a hyper-feminine style and enjoys films about girls coming of age in repressive societies. The capitalist ambition of the girl power girl is virtually nonexistent in girlblogs, with no videos in the sample mentioning career ambitions, education, or any other post-adolescent life milestones. Where a main feature of girl power politics was a rejection of beauty and physical appearance as determinants of a girl's value, a focus on beauty and prettiness is central to girlblog culture. Figure 1 is a prime example of the tone and content of girlblog videos, as it references prettiness, both in its pink and girly photo and its use of "pretty girls" to reference the poster and the supposed viewer of the video. This pretty girl is tied to her domestic space, simply existing and thinking rather than creating or connecting with others. The girlblogger only thinks of her life as exactly where she is right now, going from high school to her home, where she spends time alone online, consuming media and

curating her feeds rather than interacting digitally with other girls.



*Figure 1: pretty girls rot in bed and daydream*

While, through this aesthetic sensibility and as I will continue to discuss in later sections, girlblog TikToks view girlhood from one, rather myopic, perspective, I come to this research from an intersectional lens, arguing that we cannot view girls and girlhood sharing any one experience or view. As Griffin (2004) states, “There is nothing essential about girlhood; it is always produced and negotiated (by us all, but especially by girls) in particular historical and political moments.” With that, I venture to explore how these videos construct a particular view of girlhood and identify what has influenced this formation.

## Coquette style

The predominant style seen through the sample of videos, and especially those overlapping with themes of girlhood, is ‘coquette’ (or coquette-core). Obviously, this is not a new term, yet these posters use the outline of this preexisting archetype with some notable complications and expansions. The figure of the coquette appeared first in the Victorian Era, as a literary trope appearing often in the works of female novelists. According to Hultquist (2012), “The coquette is vain; light or airy; technically virtuous, but careless about her reputation; capricious or fickle; and has capacious desire, that is, she will not choose.” This character is displayed most iconically in the novel *The Coquette* by Hannah Webster Foster (first published anonymously in 1797), where a woman is courted by two suitors, initially chooses the rakish bachelor while being noncommittal to both, to only later see the error of her choice and ultimately die in childbirth (Waldstreicher, 1992). Much like our post-feminist era, the Victorian era produced a double bind for women. According to Rosenman (2002), in the era of the Coquette novels, it was seen that “Dressing well is women’s ‘duty,’ their contribution to the pleasures of society. Yet, at the same time, a woman who takes this duty too seriously, or discharges it too successfully, is charged with vanity.” This is where the coquette became the object of demonization, as her flirtatious control over her own sexuality was seen as threatening (Rosenman, 2002).

The term coquette in its current, style-based, usage appears to take inspiration from both the literary archetype and also the period of its inception while removing the more outwardly negative connotations of the character. Coquette now broadly refers to a trend of girlish-style clothing featuring whites and light pinks, bows, ruffles, and similar adornments, as exemplified in Figure 1 (Roby, 2024). A particular kind of messy yet girlish hyper-femininity marks this

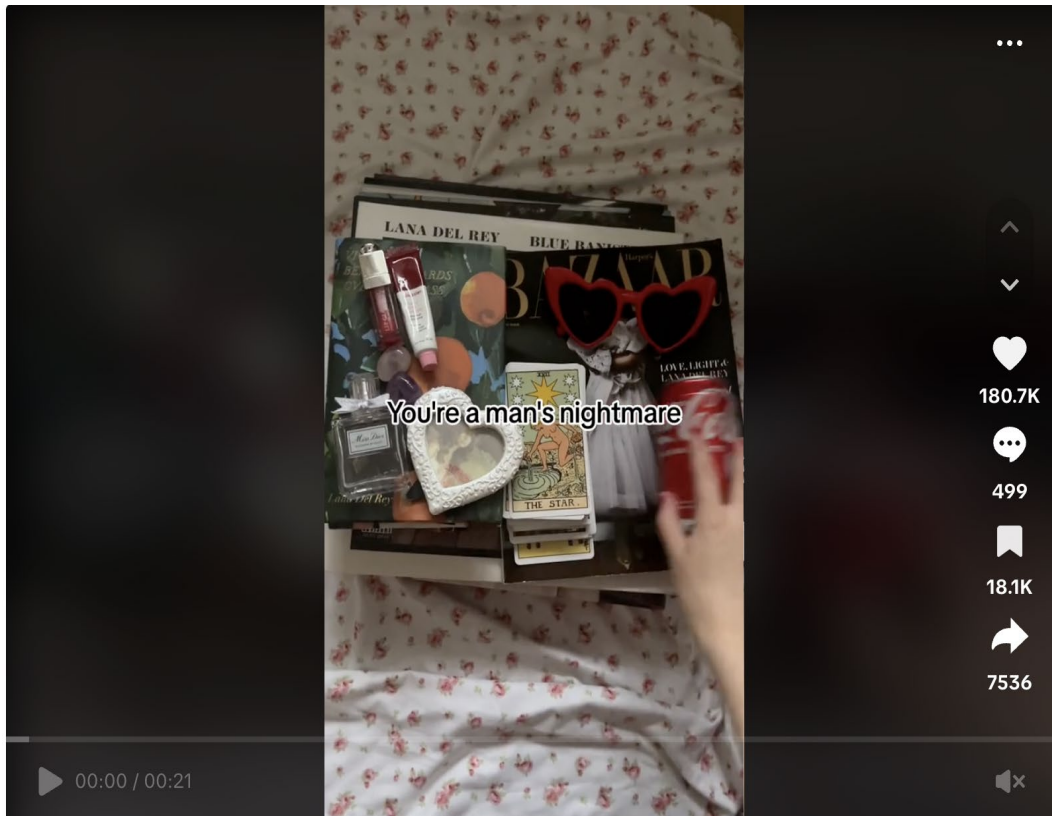
content. Further, Catholic imagery is commonly seen in these videos (Lanigan, 2022). Images of saints, rosaries, and embellished crosses are common within the coquette style. Additionally, in my TikTok sample, the following were also repeated features of the coquette style: dolls and teddy bears, lace and vintage doilies, Christian angelic imagery, Victoria's Secret fashion shows and advertising from around the year 2000, cursive and other stylized lettering, and early 1960s fashion icons such as Jackie Kennedy and Priscilla Presley.

In Figures 2 and 3, we can see some key examples of the TikTok coquette style. The first video screenshot is more classically coquette, with its light pinks and lace motif. Further, the post references keeping items in your makeup compact (if rather confusingly, as most compacts only include a mirror and powder makeup, not a separate storage space). The lace, reference to makeup compacts, as well as pocketbooks all give a vintage sensibility to this post. The compact and pocketbook reference a material culture largely replaced by the ease of media technologies, where a phone camera can be used in a pinch as a mirror and social media has largely taken over the on-the-go free-time pocketbooks once helped us occupy. The other items mentioned, such as pills, knives, and tissues, all point to a general, if mysterious, discontent. Here, the classic Victorian notion of the coquette (frills, bows) is subverted by the more violent imagery of the knives and the modern invention of psychiatric pills. Figure 3 employs a similar vintage style. Most notably, we see red heart-shaped sunglasses. These are likely nodding to Lana Del Rey, whose cult-favourite unreleased song "Every Man Gets His Wish" (Del Rey, 2009) references the accessory. As the creator flips through her items in the pile, Del Rey appears on the albums and magazine covers in the stack. Yet, Del Rey's use of the accessory is a vintage reference itself, as the glasses became iconic through Stanley Kubrick's 1962 adaptation of *Lolita*, where the titular character wears the frames in the film's now infamous poster. Much like Figure 2, this

TikTok views this vintage-inspired feminine style as something off-putting or even sinister, as the text overlay of “You’re a man’s worst nightmare” shows that the user’s taste as seen in the music, perfume, makeup, tarot cards, and more, would be off-putting to men.



Figure 2: lovely things to keep in your compact



*Figure 3: You're a man's nightmare*

As seen in Figures 1 and 3, the bedroom is the primary location where girlblog coquette style is realized. Before the emergence of TikTok, social media scholars were already theorizing about the connections between curating social media pages and designing one's bedroom. Hodkinson and Lincoln (2008) describe how the customization of social networking profiles are akin to the designing of one's bedroom, where the 'walls' (both literal and walls of posts) can be a way to show personality. Even farther back, the teenage bedroom still held immense meaning for young girls. McRobbie and Garber (2006) explain how the bedroom served as a place for private exploration of subcultures, fan cultures, and interpersonal relationships for girls, who are typically written out of the histories of these subcultures. To counter the dominant notion that girls were simply not a part of post-war subcultures such as Teddy Boys and Skinheads, McRobbie and Garber turn to the decorative, curatorial, and appreciative aspects of subcultures,

such as listening to records, discussing art with friends, and decorating one's room, as important aspects of cultural work. Adorning herself and her personal space in the style of her culture constituted connection with it, as is displayed in these coquette videos. Another video in the sample takes you around the user's bedroom, where we can see a Lana Del Rey tapestry, a girly vanity mirror full of candles and makeup, Victorian Era art prints, decorative crosses, posters of other musicians such as Ethel Cain, the collection and display of objects in one's room is a form of connection with the broader internet culture of girlblogging. This reflects and Livingstone and Bovill's (2001) assertion that, "the teenager's bedroom is where media and identity intersect: in this space media technology and content are appropriated by young people to sustain and express their sense of who they are" (p.3) In a way, the 'real life' bedroom is mediated through its use as a subject of a TikTok video at the same time as the TikTok profile itself functions as a sort of bedroom.

While the term coquette is recent in its online usage, the feminine, waifish, and messy qualities of it have predecessors in past platforms. As mentioned above, girlblogs find their visual aesthetic lineage on Tumblr. 'Soft grunge' and other blog styles under the banner of what Jade Poolen (2024) calls the "Sad Girl" used similar feminine styles to create a melancholy, curated world. Poolen describes these blogs: "Angst and sadness as aesthetic on Tumblr could for example be seen in zoomed-in pictures of bruises or teary eyes, cigarette smoke, images of pill bottles, or almost every second of screen-time of Effy in the UK version of *Skins* immortalized in a black and white GIF" (2024). While less overt images of drugs and bodily harm appear in contemporary/TikTok girlblog videos (likely partially due to TikTok's more strict content policy) this overall style is very similar to the visual references seen in girlblogs,

down to repeated media characters, as seen in figures 4 and 5, featuring characters from *Skins* UK.



*Figure 4: Sad girl collage*



*Figure 5: unfortunately i did not lock in*

A key figure in shaping the Tumblr girl cultures of the 2010s is photographer Petra Collins. Collins' work is, in her own words "fueled by self-discovery and a contemporary

femininity which explore the complex intersection of life as a young woman online and off” (Collins, n.d.). Collins’ photographs from this era focussed on intimate portraits of teen girl life, with motifs of suburban school life, female friendship, and adolescent sexuality, seen most famously in the works from her oft-reblogged series *The Teenage Gaze* (Collins, 2010-2015). Collins’ photos in this series have a hazy, dream-like quality, steeped in an angsty melancholy, as most models do not smile in the photos, but rather look pensively away from the camera. This is not to say these images are not arresting and at times political, with some of the photos depicting teenage drinking and drug use, nudity, and vivid depictions of periods, such as in Collins’ iconic images of stained pink, frilly, underwear (Collins, 2010-2015). Collins’ combination of girlish, juvenile imagery with shocking and difficult subject matter became a dominant style of young women’s expression on Tumblr in the early 2010s (Kamińska, 2017). Many other photographers and artists adopted similar inspirations to Collins and Tumblr users curated and edited their own images to mimic the artist. The legacy of this aesthetic trend can be seen in the girly but troubled imagery of girlblogs. For example, one TikTok which bares the influence of Collins’ *Teenage Gaze* shows an image of a girl in a school uniform with text overtop about wanting to stay in bed all day, with subsequent memes in the slideshow referencing wanting to cry and insecurities. Whether it is videos of the TikTok users themselves or images taken from other online sources, many of the faces of teen girls in girlblog videos are pouty and distant, much like the subjects of Collins’ work.

Another direct aesthetic predecessor of the coquette style of girlblog videos is the Tumblr ‘pale blog.’ Pale blogs were one of the popular subsets of Tumblr in the mid-2010s. Goding-Doty (2020) describes these blogs as, “a genre of digital youth culture on Tumblr that glorifies all things #pretty and #pale.” These curated blogs were largely photo and sometimes text-based

with faded filters overlaying images in a colour palette of muted greys, blues, purples, and soft pinks. The overarching tone of pale blogs was melancholy, loss, and apathy. Images referencing drug and cigarette use and mental health were prominent in pale blogs, contributing to the uneasy tone of these posts. Goding-Doty (2020) reflects on how the paleness of these blogs can be seen as an example of “Chromophobia”, the “attempts to purge colour from culture, to devalue colour, to diminish its significance, to deny its complexity” (Batchelor 2000 as cited in Goding-Doty 2020). There exists a long history of Western colonial efforts to tamp out the colour (and perceived gaudiness, excess) of non-Western peoples. The emptiness of many pale blog images contributes to the notion of “Terra Nullius” Goding-Doty attributes to pale images. These images contain few people, and when they do, it is often close-up images of pale, white women, with a disembodied nature.

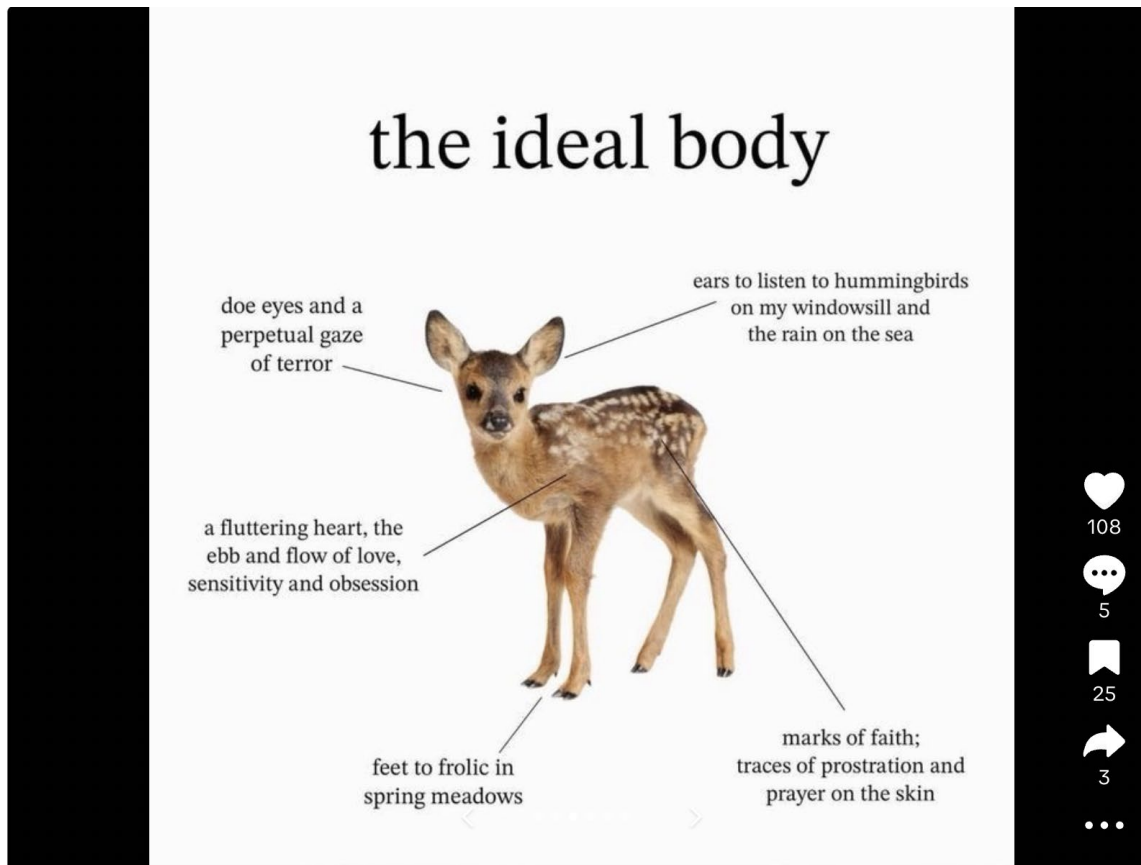
TikTok’s videos embody many of the same aesthetic qualities of pale blogs. The pale, muted colour palette of lots of whites and pinks remains. While coquette posts contain more faces than pale blogs tend to, there is a similar impersonal quality to the videos. As mentioned above, the girls and women who appear in coquette girlblog posts are overwhelmingly white, but they are also often anonymous, uncredited images of women who are likely not the posters of the videos, as images often show up in multiple posts from different authors. In Figure 6, the video fades in from black to show this image of a teenage girl with pink text overlaid. The photo fades to a washed-out image of a pink rose and then of a blonde woman in a car, with the same text overlaid. This video displays the same placelessness and unease of the pale blog images, with visual texts loosely connected by an overarching aesthetic quality which all together communicate a melancholy if vague feeling.



*Figure 6: when he doesn't want to follow me into the woods*

The imagery of baby animals (most commonly deer) appeared several times within the sample. One video shows a baby deer resting on a gravel road. Pink text is overlaid saying “‘i hate you’ literally me” with hearts and flourishes below. In this ‘relatable’ video, the poster shows her connection to the deer through “literally me,” signalling that she, like a baby deer, is innocent, docile, and not worthy of hate. This same imagery is echoed in another multi-slide post with one slide containing an image of a lying baby deer with on-screen text saying, “this is me. when you are hurting me this is who you are hurting.” This image comes from a slideshow in which the first slide appears to be the answer to a ‘spirit animal’ quiz, relaying that the user’s spirit animal is the deer and the grace, determination, and gentleness this represents. All slides

relate to similar themes, however, the third slide (Figure 7) interestingly blends religious motifs of prayer and prostration, which connects back to the Catholic imagery popular in coquette content more broadly.



*Figure 7: the ideal body*

Another video, this one with a slideshow format, contains a slide where we see an image of a lamb on top of a lacy white background with ribbons. The text surrounding the lamb says, “The little angel was asked what she was ready to stay with forever.../ crystal tears suddenly flowed down the cheeks, because everything she cherished so soon hurt her fragile heart / lolita with a broken soul.” Here, we also see the baby animal representing innocence and fragility. While it is unclear where the text came from, like in the previous video, anger and sadness are contrasted with the sweet docility of the animal which the poster appears to find a connection

with. The repetition of baby animal imagery, especially mixed with religious symbols, forges importance of innocence to the girlbloggers. The angelic lamb of this girlblog video conjures the imagery of the lamb of God, representing the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus Christ for the sins of man. Here, the blogger appears to relate to the lamb of God through her own suffering and sacrifice. In this video, the seemingly average teenage girl's suffering is given spiritual importance, and her innocence is marked as something in need of cherishing.

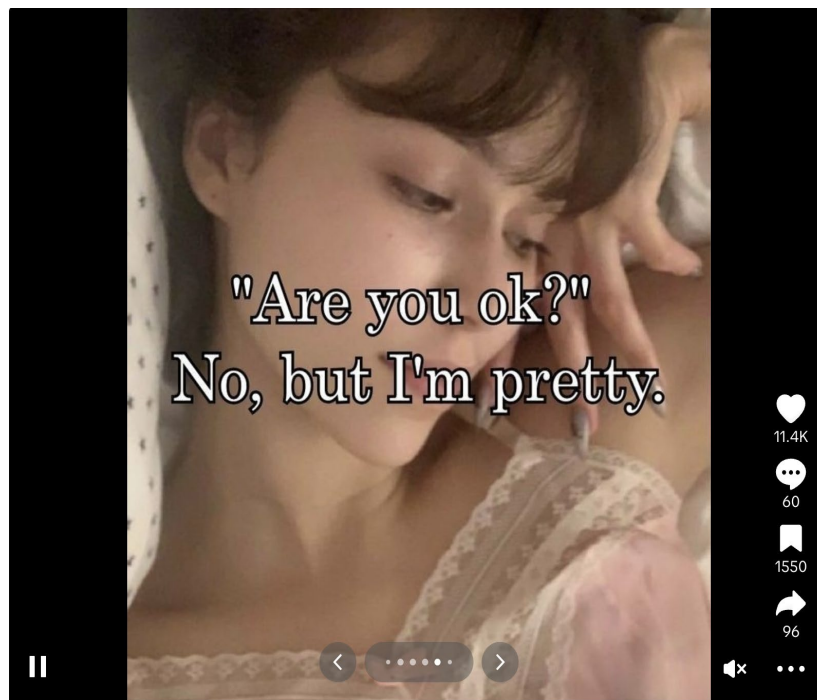
A final animal-themed video takes a different form. This video is in selfie format, with the user fully in frame. In this video, we see a teenage girl in pigtails with pink bows, first angled from above looking into the camera, then looking sadly into a mirror, and finally 'mirror selfie' mode. The text over the video states, "i don't want to be sexy i want to look like a deer was cursed to become human" with the caption continuing "or a calico critter, or a lps [littlest pet shop toy], or perhaps a lamb." Here, as well, we see a yearning for innocence. The user, sixteen at the time of posting, is at a transitional time of life, likely experiencing sexualization and other uncomfortable aspects of growing up as a young woman. Thus, she is signaling a desire to connect with symbols of innocence — baby animals and childhood toys.

What do we make of this hyperfeminine, girlish style that has become ever-present across TikTok (and other platforms as well as real-life fashion, more broadly)? This renewed hyper-femininity can be understood through what Angela McRobbie (2007) describes as the "post-feminist masquerade." In contextualizing the post-feminist era, McRobbie (2009) explains how tenants of previous manifestations of feminism have been coopted into politics and consumer culture. The author writes, "Drawing on vocabulary that includes words like 'empowerment' and 'choice', these elements are then converted into a much more individualistic discourse, and they are deployed in this new guise, particularly in media and popular culture, but also by agencies of

the state, as a kind of substitute for feminism”. The assumed success of women’s rights promoted through this absorption of feminism creates a lack of trust, and to McRobbie, even disgust, with feminism as a movement. Older strains of feminist thought become ugly and angering in comparison to the dominant notions of women’s choice and empowerment (McRobbie, 2009).

In reflecting on popular media and advertising of this era (early to mid-2000s), McRobbie (2007) describes a popular sentiment of renewed gendered stereotypes wielded by women themselves, seemingly reflecting on their lower status, yet hardly critical of it— this is the post-feminist masquerade. An example of this McRobbie uses is a page from *Grazia* magazine - a European glossy mag centred on fashion and celebrity culture, the page reads “42% of women who ask for a pay raise get one. 100% of them would probably celebrate with shoes” (2007). To McRobbie, “The young woman adopts this new masquerade (assuming for example the air of being ‘foolish and bewildered’ for fear of retribution now that she is actually and legitimately inside the institutional world of work, from which she was once barred or had only limited access to (2007, p.725).” In essence, women have seen a spike in wages and career opportunities entering into the new millennium, adopting this masquerade allows the woman to maintain her economic power through newfound employment while belittling herself enough to remain non-threatening to the male hegemony who would otherwise label her a castrating feminist. Further, this return to classical femininity is now branded as a personal choice and not an obligation, due to the social power of the woman opting for, in McRobbie’s case stilettos and designer handbags, and now coquette style (McRobbie 2009). The foolish persona McRobbie speaks of is present in the girlblog videos. As previously mentioned, an often semi-satirical, devaluing of other virtues in favour of ‘prettiness’ is prominent in this community. As seen in Figure 8, the poster

references a negative mental or emotional state, but claims that this feeling is alright because she is pretty, which is what truly matters. A state of unease and sadness is accepted in this community, but the sacrifice for this suffering is the beauty it bestows. This can also be related back to Butler's (1995) concept of gender melancholy, as these girls are experiencing a vague unease expressed through their conforming to stereotypical gendered norms. Like the self-flagellating masquerade McRobbie discusses, the girlbloggers keep themselves down through a reinforced joking comfort in not being 'okay.' Further, many videos include the tag #delusional or #delulu, where the user flags herself as someone not to be trusted, confused, and out of touch.

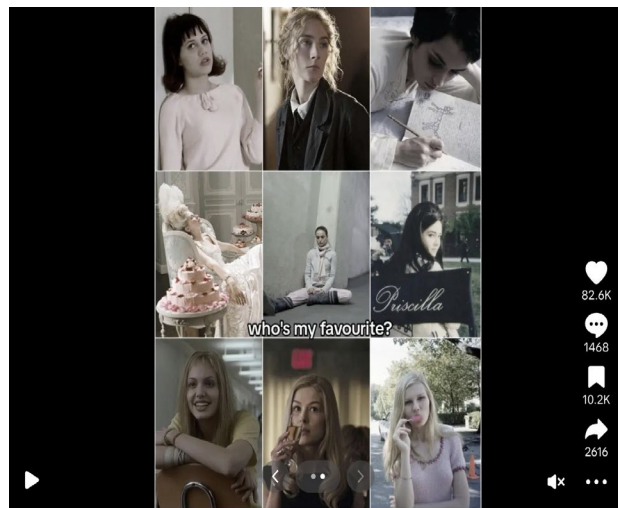


*Figure 8: "Are you ok?" No, but I'm pretty.*

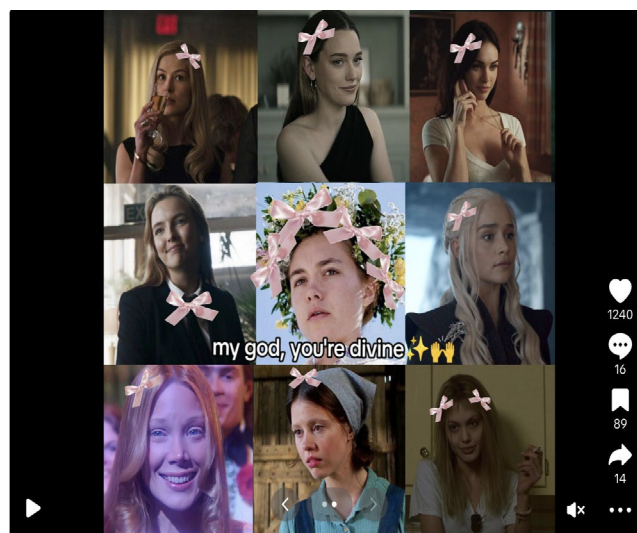
While McRobbie discusses the masquerade utilizing a kind of "seductive femininity," girlblog videos' connections to sexuality appear more complicated. As we can see from the final baby animal video with the text "i don't want to be sexy i want to look like a deer was cursed to become human," there appears to be discomfort with sexuality and sexualization. It is interesting to note how the aesthetic qualities of these videos largely do not point to a 'lolita' (despite a

select few) or even “hot and hostile” (to borrow Amy S. Dobson’s terminology) style, but one that is youthful and girly, yet knowing of sexuality, but hovering between ambivalence and disgust towards it.

A further element of note in these coquette videos is their overwhelming whiteness. As seen in figures 9 and 10, two typical examples of the canon of girlblog characters, the characters referenced in these videos are entirely white. The same is true for the models and other style-inspiration photos used in meme slideshows.



*Figure 9: who's my favourite?*



*Figure 10: my god you're divine*

This homogeneity of character influences follows a precedent of white, anglocentric girlhood being seen as the default. In research starting in the 1980s, feminist attempts to include women in youth studies were beginning in the field of cultural studies, urging girls' important role in various subcultures. However, Black scholars critiqued these models of girlhood, arguing that many frameworks did not account for Black and non-First World girlhoods (Griffin, 2004). This focus on white, Anglo girlhood extends past the academic sphere and into broader media representations as Griffin (2004) explains, "Contemporary representations of girlhood also operate to marginalize or render invisible many other possible ways of being a girl, through their lack of resonance with the full diversity of girls' lives." The postfeminist subject of 'the girl,' especially in the early 2000s, has been the white, able-bodied economically privileged girl. Thus, the efforts to 'empower' girls have largely only been relevant to this one subject of the population (Gill, 2017). Through anti-Black conceptions, Black girls are often not afforded the docile, cute, sweet stereotypes of white girls. As Gill (2007) argues, the maintenance of femininity has always been tied with race. She explains, "instruction in grooming, attire, posture, elocution, and 'manners' being 'offered' to women allow them to emulate more closely the upper-class white ideal" (Gill, 2007, p. 155). Though the ethnicities of the TikTok posters are often unclear, it is important to note that regardless of their personal background, they are reifying the perception of a singular, definitive, white girlhood.

### **Aging Anxieties**

I have discussed the feminine dimension of the coquette style of girlblog videos, but the other dimension that makes up 'coquette' as seen on TikTok is a focus on youth, specifically a notion of 'girlhood.' Coquette style is focused on a particularly youthful femininity. This is seen

through its use of bows, frilly clothing, pigtail hairstyles, Mary Jane shoes, and dolls, (particularly the vintage collector's item 'Blythe Doll'). All of these point to not just femininity but cultures of young girls. With the overt youthfulness of these videos, pointing to imagery more youthful than the TikTok users/posters themselves (ie. those older than the average age for doll play or school uniforms), the question arises as to what is attractive about this girlish style and what is communicated by this draw to childhood? Further, as I will discuss below, many of these videos overtly discuss concerns and fears of aging. With this, what are the notions of feminine aging presented in these videos and what can they tell us about the issues that concern these TikTok users?

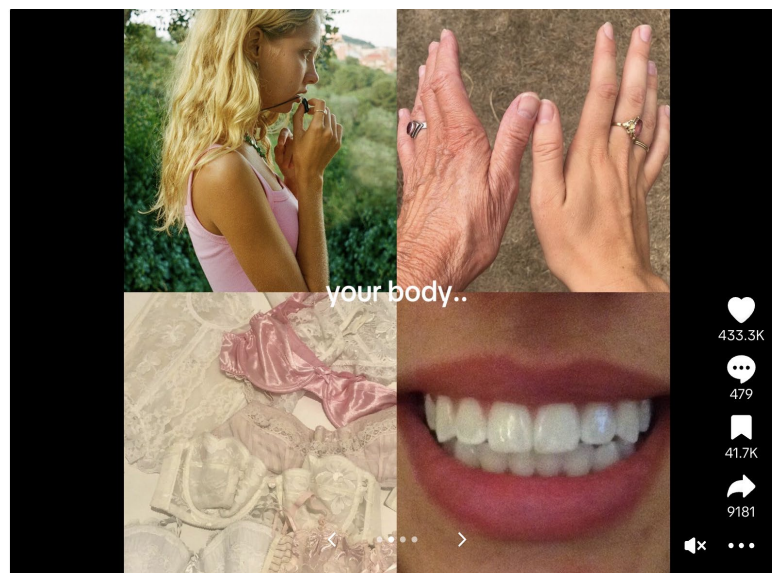
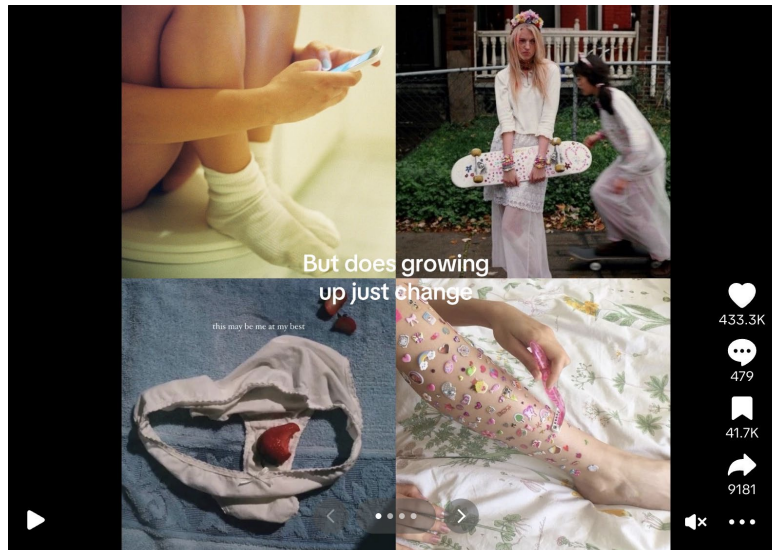
In one video, we see a series of shots of what is presumably the user's room, with a pink dress form, trinkets on a shelf, and other girly adornments. The text overlaying all these shots states, "i love being a teenage girl! (every day i am consumed by the fear of my inevitable aging, my life is just a countdown to the day i'll be but a burden to society, holding no significant value with nothing to offer)". The caption follows, "i think women were programmed to only realise the value of their youth once its faded to prevent us from all having existential crisis'. something went wrong with girls who feel this way - we're blessed with the head start of knowing yet cursed by being neglected of what would've been our ignorant bliss." This TikTok is quite rich and complex with meaning, anxiety, and criticism. Here we see an awareness of how older women are disregarded by society, due to youth-obsessed beauty standards, yet the user appears to accept this as an unchangeable fact of life.

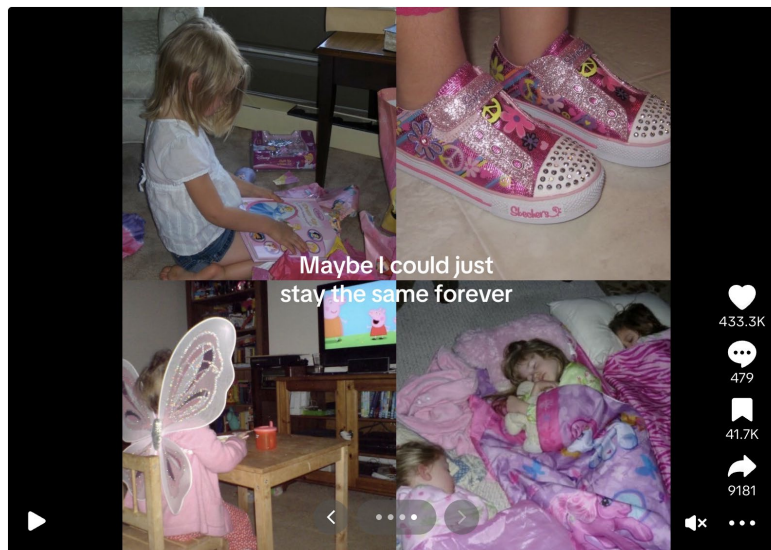
In Susan Sontag's 1970 essay "The Double Standard of Aging," the author explores how women confront the process of aging under patriarchy. Sontag describes that, unlike many rural cultures, modern, capitalist society broadly values youth above age. Men are often commended

for the worldly wisdom that comes with age. However, for women, whose femininity is associated with “helplessness, passivity, noncompetitiveness, being nice” and, most notably, sexual appeal, these are not attributes that increase with age (Sontag, 1997). In her essay, Sontag remembers a girlfriend’s struggles at turning twenty-one, upset that she was now ‘old’. Sontag reflects that, to her friend, this birthday marked the end of her girlhood and the transition into womanhood, where fun, desirability, and beauty would end. Boys and men do not share this struggle, as the transition from boyhood to manhood does not represent any loss. Sontag argues that masculinity comes with two standards of beauty: boy and man, while female beauty only comes with one: the girl. These pedophilic beauty standards force women into a bind in which by the time they reach sexual maturity and confidence (through the experience and curiosity afforded to boys at a much younger age), they are already seen as less sexually desirable (Sontag, 1997). Further, femininity is something that must be continually preserved through dress, beauty, ways of holding oneself, and more (Gill, 2007). Confronting that living ‘correctly’ as a woman is a constant, intentional work that lasts one’s entire life can be emotionally damaging. The bedroom TikTok appears to be housing the same anxiety of Sontag’s friend, as the user is approaching the realization of the gendered perceptions forced upon her.

Another video, which boasts over 433 thousand likes, takes a more philosophical direction on aging anxieties. In this video, the user is grappling with the changes of puberty. The physical changes of aging seen in the video— getting a period, growing body hair, skin wrinkling, appear to be less of a concern than the more existential fear of becoming a new, different person. In the logic of this TikTok, puberty, or female aging more broadly, alters the soul of the girl into something darker. The choice of images in Figure 13 (which appear to be inspired by Petra Collins’ work in *The Teenage Gaze*) shows female teenagehood as something

bitter, mean, and isolated. This is compared to the images of childhood in Figure 14, which are bright, sweet, and dreamy. This anxiety of aging is paired with an overt distaste for female teenagehood, likely from a teenage girl herself. The video contains a nostalgic desire to return to one's early childhood, by someone who likely only just left that time of life. How do we understand young women's disdain for the age and gender they inhabit?





*Figures 11-14: but does growing up just change your body or also your soul*

In a way, this poster simply responds to her social environment, reflecting the stereotypes and perceptions she is subject to. Teenage girls have long been looked down upon as the image of hyper-emotionality and bad taste. Much of the literature on this topic is centered around boy bands and their young, female fans (Gregory, 2019). Bands like NSYNC, The Backstreet Boys, and One Direction were all subjects of music press ridicule citing their ‘hysterical’ young fans, who cry, camp out ahead of shows, write love letters and slash fiction, and do numerous other fan activities seen as unserious by the adult men heading up the industry. Further, the 1990s and

early 2000s saw a rise in the character of ‘the bad girl’ in journalism and popular culture, following the popularity of non-fiction best-sellers like *The Secret Lives of Girls*, *Odd Girl Out*, and *Queen Bees and Wannabes*. This media focus on girls’ mean, manipulative, and even violent habits stirred moral panic about teenage girls and clique cultures through the early 2000s (Chesney-Lind and Irwin, 2004). These teenage characters are reflected in the third slide of the TikTok, as the girls are photographed glaring into the camera or potentially being the ‘odd girl out,’ in her room alone. What appears to be happening overtly in this video, and in the subtext of the coquette style more broadly, is an unease with teenage girlhood mixed with a fear (and sometimes disgust) of the aging female body which is revealing a desire to revert back to young girlhood.

This trend of imagery of early childhood within the sampled videos can be viewed as an example of #nostalgiacore. Nostalgiacore is a genre of post, most commonly on TikTok and Instagram, which circulates photos of early-mid 2000s childhoods. Toys, classrooms, playgrounds, defunct consumer technology, children’s fashion trends, and other youthful items and locations are the subjects of these photo-based posts. These posts are curated specifically to generate a nostalgic response from social media users, even if the items may not always directly reflect the age of the consumers of these TikToks, the broad reference to childhood still seems to provide a comforting experience for the viewers. Further, the broad popularity of early 2000s (often dubbed Y2K) style amongst younger Gen Z may have made these fashions and items more recognizable by young people who may not have experienced them originally (Chokrane & Pérez, 2025). Brown et al. (2024) argue that nostalgiacore can be understood through two impulses: “a reflective reckoning with the ruins of mass consumption and its dreams of utopian futures; and an effort to find comfort in the familiarity of the past against the alienation of the

present.” I would argue that girlblog uses of nostalgia lean more toward the latter, as these young people wrestle with the often rocky transition from ‘girlhood’ to womanhood, facing the expectations, responsibilities, and necessary independence of adulthood. Heightened sexualization, the need for employment and higher education, and moving out of a family home, are all changes facing the teenage users/audience of girlblog videos. The teenage years mark a time of lost innocence, as the realities of adult life become stark. Thus, it stands to reason that faced with the anxiety of this innocence lost, teenage girls are seeking escapism in these nostalgic posts and coquette aesthetics. Though, as Brown et al. (2024) explain, these posts produce a yearning for something impossible, as one cannot return to their childhoods, thus, these users are forced to reckon with this feeling of loss.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have defined girlblogs as giving rise to a public reflected in videos that share a “coquette” style of melancholy girlishness and can give us a sense of the anxieties some young women have about aging and the place of women in contemporary culture. The girlblog public allows young women to share videos about the anxieties, stresses, and big feelings surrounding their adolescent lives through a shared community of media and style references, which can be seen through the repeating canon of imagery and characters employed. While girlblogs exist as a part of a long lineage of ‘sad girl’ communities on the internet, with similarities to Tumblr’s pale blogs, TikTok’s unique interface, focused on video and on an endless scroll, lends itself to new platform practices. Girlblog videos on TikTok harken to another, imagined time in the lives of the posters and viewers. The girly, vintage style of TikTok’s coquette videos transports the viewer back to an imagined past— both the imagined

past of vintage Americana and Victorian styles, but also the imagined past of the user's childhood. These personal and cultural pasts are softened into simplistic, pure states, in comparison to the fast-paced, confusing world girlbloggers inhabit IRL. The anxious, transitional stage of teenagerhood can create a yearning for a simpler, seemingly more innocent time of life, when faced with all the responsibilities and politics of adulthood.

Womanhood is especially fraught. In this era of post-postfeminism, one's connection to her own womanhood is made more complicated. As I discussed, womanhood and femininity are ways of life that society demands be constantly upheld (through style, grooming, poise, etc.) (Gill, 2007). This can already create an unease and disconnection for women as they assess their natural state versus what is expected of them. Then, the anti-feminist backslides of recent years such as the election of admitted abuser Donald Trump, the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, the cultural backlash to the #MeToo Movement, and more have created a truly precarious situation for contemporary women. The anxieties of the girls within the girlblog public are shaped by this current political moment, even if subconsciously. With all this in mind, it makes sense that even grown women, who have not been 'girls' in quite some time, would wish to relate to a seemingly less politically fraught self-identification. Yet, in the turn away from the thorniness of modern womanhood, girlhood has become simplified. In these videos, we see girlhood understood as simplistic, an easier time before adult worries and complexities. In actuality, girlhood(s) are complex, individual, with intersecting factors shaping how every child grows up. All the political baggage of womanhood, so too has girlhood. In an attempt to escape the complexities of adult life as women, we cannot romanticize and sanitize girlhood to suit those aims.

## “Pretty When I Cry”: Girlblogs in Crisis

### Introduction

In the previous chapter, I defined girlblogs and discussed their aesthetic qualities and how age and femininity, as the two major components of this sphere, are figured and interact with each other. Now, to shift to the emotional qualities of girlblogs, this chapter will discuss how emotions and mental health are depicted in these videos and what girlblogs say about the emotional state of teenage girls and young women on TikTok. A focus on different mental health experiences was not initially proposed in the planning stages of this project. However, through the open-ended algorithmic feed curation utilized in this project, more and more videos on these topics surfaced, and it became clear that eating disorders and personality disorders were common experiences within this online community. This aspect of girlblogs is in line with other girls in crisis communities on the internet, as studied by postfeminist scholars like Amy Dobson (2015), and I will take a similar approach of coming to these videos both critically but with empathy, as policing the methods of connection between young women is not a productive scholarly approach. The chapter will begin with a discussion of eating disorder content within the girlblog public, as the first mental health related content that came across my feed. Then, I will broaden the discussion into a wider conversation on dissociation and anti-sociality in girlblogs. Then, the next diagnosis discussed is Borderline Personality Disorder, which appeared a surprising amount in my sample. This will be discussed along with a critical feminist reflection on the diagnosis and real-life responses to it. Finally, the chapter closes with a section on the fictional and media characters that appear in these TikToks and their importance through logics of relatability.

## Eating disorders

On my first day of TikTok collection, I was already inundated with eating disorder-related content, much of which could be categorized as ‘pro-ana’ - content that encourages “disordered eating, normalise[s] disordered behaviours, and provide[s] a means of connection for individuals who endorse anti-recovery from eating disorders” (Blackburn & Hogg, 2024, p. 2). As mentioned in the methods section, I began my search by interacting with and saving videos with the criteria of femcel video determiners in mind. Specific experiences with mental illness were not included as emblematic of femcel (or later girlblog) videos. However, after only about an hour of scrolling the For You Page, I began to receive videos related to experiences of anorexia. Despite not liking, saving, or otherwise interacting with this content beyond viewing it, this content became one of the larger subcategories of videos on my feed. On some days of data collection, saving one eating disorder (ED) related video (due to style or reference similarities to my sample criteria) would then spur what felt like a content loop, or hole, of only ED videos back-to-back. While the field of study on eating disorders and the internet has been active for many years, there have been few studies yet on TikTok and eating disorders. As of March 2025, no studies have yet produced a robust qualitative analysis on eating disorders and algorithmic considerations on TikTok (Benzel et al., 2025).

These ED videos in the sample are largely not prescriptive. However, many pro-ana communities focus on tips and tricks for weight loss. These communities often engage in “thinspiration” or “#thinspo,” which includes posting photos of desirable, thin bodies but also photos of larger people with text about how unattractive and undesirable those bodies are. A further common type of #thinspo comes in the form of a user posting a photo of themselves with a caption related to how ugly and fat they are. According to Fox et al. (2005), the comments on

these kinds of posts often negate the caption, saying that the poster was quite skinny and that they are, in fact, a source of thinspiration.

This behaviour stands in comparison to the wider psychological framework of competitiveness within those with anorexia, as Rich (2006 as cited in Sharman et al. 2024) states that, “individuals with AN [Anorexia Nervosa] experience aggravation and annoyance at others developing EDs, as this relinquishes their identity as ‘the anorexic’ in their social circle” (p.1109). Anorexia is strongly tied to identity and relation with one’s social circle. ‘Anorexic status’ is held in relation to the non-anorexic other, defining an in-group and out-group. Within in-groups of anorexic women, a dynamic often arises where those in the circle will evaluate each other’s experiences with AN in order to determine who is striving the most for thinness and who ‘deserves’ to label themselves as part of this in-group (Rich, 2006). Further, the secretive nature of these groups, whether online or in real-world support groups creates an identity formed around the shared holding of covert information. As Rich (2006) explains, “The selective passing on of the practices or techniques of anorexia is a way of not just reaffirming the identity, but also ensuring that it is the ‘right’ and ‘accepted’ identity” (p. 298). With that, those who post pro-ana content count themselves and their fans/commentors/followers as part of this in-group.

Some of the anorexia-related videos in the sample discussed specific tactics and numbers. For example, one video of the user in selfie format features a text overlay stating, “No ice cream isn’t an option 800cal a day; it’s summer.” The camera then turns to a blender cup with what appears to be a homemade sorbet or smoothie-type alternative dessert. Other videos refer to a specific number of pounds the user wants to lose in order to be considered beautiful. Two videos follow the same meme script of “when I see my dream man but I haven’t lost that 20 pounds,” with one of the videos including other cosmetic differences such as getting a nose job, teeth

whitening, and more. However, these types of videos are outliers. Most of the videos related to anorexia, other habits of disordered eating, and weight loss stay away from specifics and other potentially *triggering* (both to algorithmic moderation keywords and the viewer) images and terms. Instead, these videos appeal to a broader sense of relatability. For example, many of the videos are structured in the classic meme formats of “me when...” or “when someone...” describing a relatable experience living with an eating disorder laid on top of a clip from film or television that depicts the emotional state being described (while not literally about the topic). For example, one slideshow post shows a photo of Lana Del Rey looking melancholic in black and white. Above the photo is text reading, “When you thought losing weight and getting prettier would make you more confident but somehow you feel more insecure.” The subsequent slides read like blackout poems isolating the words “losing weight”, then “getting prettier”, then “when you thought but somehow you feel more insecure”, and then “more insecure.” This use of “you” connects directly to the viewer of the TikTok, bringing both creator and viewer into a shared understanding of the feeling being communicated.

Akane Kanai (2019) discusses relatability within women’s meme production and circulation on social networking sites. Relatability is posited as “an affective relation produced through labour that reflects a desirable notion of common experience to an unknown audience” (Kanai, 2019, p.4). Kanai describes an affinity that is shared between the poster and viewer, where pleasure is found in an imperfect sameness. She follows, “relatability is a sense of shared promise positioning both blogger and reader, not as perfect, but buoyed by a sense of common desire to remain in a nebulous zone of proximity to it” (2019, p.4). The memes analyzed by Kanai communicate a shared feeling of failing. One meme shared in the chapter depicts a cat

falling as like the experience of stumbling around after getting too drunk. Here, the relatability is in an assumed universally (at least within women) shared embarrassing situation.

However, women do not have all the same experiences and situations. Kanai describes this as the “fantasy of generality,” as these memes assume a shared experience that does not exist. For many viewers of these memes, they are not, in fact, relatable (2019, p. 5). This creates an in-group and out-group, where those who do not ‘relate’ no longer belong. Further, the relatability of these memes assumes an understanding and connection to the experiences depicted, here, experiences of disordered eating and body dysmorphia. These troubling experiences are rendered the norm through their relatability logic. Author Alison Winch expands on Kanai’s discussion of ‘girlfriendship’ to explore the circular and panoptic nature of feminine normativity, especially as it exists in online communities. To Winch, thinspiration communities demonstrate the peer control emphasized in girlfriend cultures. In these communities, through friendly convincing, girls police each other’s actions and posts online. They are watching both their own bodies and the bodies of their peers in relation to societal ideals and by policing themselves publicly, police their friends as well. As Winch explains, “the affect of bestfriendship functions as a powerful form of surveillance and control because belonging to an intimate female group signifies normativity” (2013, p.32). In all, girls’ feelings of normalcy are played out on a peer-to-peer level with the body being the domain of focus to achieve belonging in the world of ‘the girl.’

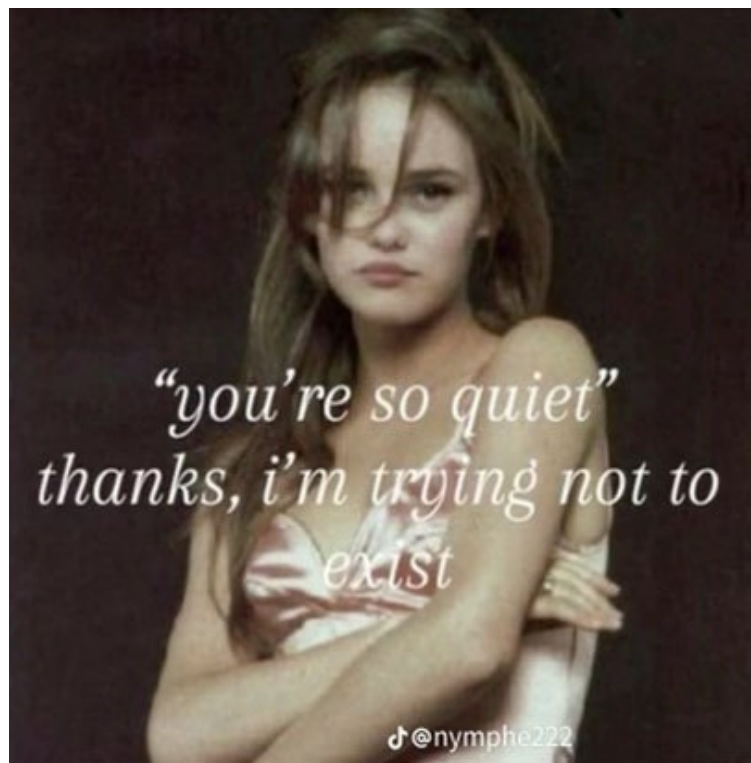
Past research into pro-ana or eating disorder-related social networking practices largely focused on blogs, forums, and sites specifically related to such topics and practices. However, with TikTok’s For You Page and infinite scroll, the way the user accesses pro-ana content has changed. Now, the content comes first, before the interest or inquiry. Fox et al.’s (2005) research

on the anorexic identity within the “Anagrll” forum website shows how users would create buddy relationships where other individuals would share one-on-one support and tips. Here, while still public, the text-based nature of posts and lengthy reply sections still held this information on a human-to-human level. Users could return to the forum, check-up on friends, and continue ongoing conversations. The homepage of the website additionally contained a warning that the site contained pro-ana content, this was a common practice for similar websites (Fox et al., 2005).

Alternatively, TikTok’s design assumes pro-ana relatability simply by logging in and scrolling on the site. As #GymTok and #FoodTok are two prominent content areas on TikTok, the app frequently boosts the visibility of ‘wellness’-based diets such as detoxes, and so-called ‘clean eating,’ which Blackburn and Hogg (2024) claim can be only a quick turn to a healthy eating-based disorder called Orthorexia. With the grey area between ‘clean’ and ‘disordered’ habits and suggestions, TikTok’s moderation of diet content on the FYP is loose, aided by the fact that the vast majority of TikTokers are average, non-celebrity figures, who will not likely receive sizable amounts of flags or backlash to potentially triggering content (Blackburn and Hogg, 2024). Further, when users engage in ED-promoting behaviour on the app, many use ‘algospeak,’ a way of speaking and typing popularized on TikTok, for the thought that it would evade algorithmic censors. For example, swapping out a letter in hashtags such as #anorexia or #thinspo for a number, or doubling one of the letters (Benzel et al., 2025). Aglospeak and the methods used on pro-ED TikTok exist in a lineage of in-group signaling on other platforms. Tumblr groups used similar hashtag bypassing with tags like “#thyghgap” (thigh gap) and shorthand labels for one’s starting, current, and goal weights, which would be difficult for human

moderators to catch, if dramatic weight loss in numbers is even something that would be technically against the rules on the platform (Gerrard, 2018).

The anorexia videos within the girlblog sphere reference a desire to disappear, or even, as I will discuss later, rot away. The ugly and repulsive quality of ‘rotting’ appears to stand at odds with the dominant notions around anorexia as prompted by a desire for the beauty that comes from thinness. Figure 15 shows a photo of a young, slim model, dressed in light pink silk, which fits within the coquettish, ‘nymphette’ style of girlblog videos discussed in the previous chapter. While not directly referencing weight or body image, the photo and the fact that it was sandwiched between multiple overtly pro-ana videos on my TikTok feed’s scroll show the connection between waifishness and disappearance in girlblog culture.



*Figure 15: "you're so quiet" thanks, i'm trying not to exist*

If we are to understand anorexia as a disorder of body image, with acts of starvation and over-exercising as methods to achieve social acceptance and beauty, as much of the mainstream

discourse around eating disorders suggests, how could we make sense of these ways girls are speaking about their motivations? How can we understand how some anorexic patients lose weight so drastically they slip to the other side of social body acceptance, becoming deemed too thin for beauty? To understand these videos, and anorexia as well, it is necessary to discuss anorexia through the lens of embodiment.

At the core of critically grasping anorexia is understanding anorexia as a struggle of visibility. The anorexic body becomes more visible as it fades away. As the body shows the signs of malnutrition and illness, it becomes more noticeable to outside viewers, and at the same time, it slowly loses mass and takes up less space. The young female body is made hyper-visible in culture through its constant commodification and sexualization. Much is written onto the body of young women before any internal choice is made. To Malson (2009), there exists a “cultural obsession with bodies (as image), which is at the same time an equally obsessive cultural repudiation of (fleshly, lived-in organic, active) bodies” (p. 143). Images of (especially female) bodies and the surface maintenance of beauty are taken for granted as undeniable facts of life, where the actual biological processes of the body— digestion, sexual urges and fluids, the fleshy reality of embodiment- are taboo and pushed out of popular discourse. In turn, women are made to live in constant regard for this omnipotent, effusive viewer, always performing for the patriarchal eye (Martin-Hondros, 2004). In a way, anorexia is an assertion of the fleshy, permeable body. The visibly anorexic body is a body where it becomes evident that human intervention has taken place. Women under patriarchy are erased and buried in numerous ways, as the ‘second sex’, to borrow De Beauvoir’s terminology— through being denied political voice, being written out of historical record, through being forced to adopt strict body ideals.

Anorexia exemplifies this impossible position by exhibiting a literal fading away of the female body (Malson, 2009).

This physical fading away is especially fraught within the postfeminist era. As Dobson (2015) describes, young women are “called toward active and assertive sexual performativity and displays of strong self-confidence” (p.24) (while still being punished for being sexual in ways deemed ‘wrong’). Women are expected to be sexual in a way that can be consumed easily for the heterosexual male gaze. This is less about actual individual women’s sexual desires and more about shifting the image of the woman as object to now an object deemed as a free and willing sexual agent. This new image of the postfeminist woman is a strong agent who happens to be sexual as a part of her strength (Dobson, 2015). The anorexic young women discussed above are leaning away from this strong and sexy image and into one that is uncomfortable with and directly confronting the male gaze through its disengagement with the postfeminist pull to power.

### **Bedrotting**

The notion of disappearing and disengaging from life is not specific to the anorexia-related videos on TikTok, but is somewhat of a genre onto itself through the meme of “bed rotting.” While there does not appear to be academic literature on the term yet, the meme of bed rotting refers to the impulse to not leave one’s room, passively consume media, and not interact with the outside world for long periods. The connotation of bedrotting is that the activities done in one's bed are not productive or social, as the body begins to ‘rot away’ from lack of use.

Most bed rotting videos express a relatability to the state of bed rotting, following classic meme syntax of “me when...” “when you...”, and fabricated conversations around the act of not leaving the bedroom. As seen in figure 17, the poster is leaning into a hurt, isolated, left-behind

identity. She is the one who ‘lost’ her breakup while her former partner is seemingly happy and social. Here, the dominant notions of social media as posed, aspirational, and competitive fall away. Instead, these bed rotting memes position the poster as a social outcast (but not a countercultural or political one), subsumed by either clinical depression or simply a lack of will or desire to engage in productive activities. Through the communal, relatable suffering of these posts, they engage a community of girls with similar experiences of heartbreak and isolation. As Ask and Abadin (2018) explain, “the memefication of everyday struggles are not merely online presentations of offline pain, they also allow new public discussions to take place by addressing conversations and topics not normally granted public attention” (p. 837).



*Figure 16: Me sitting in my room and rotting away*

The bed rotting trend among young women and girls on TikTok stands in opposition to the postfeminist roles imposed on girls earlier in the 2000s. In her formative work “Top Girls,”

Angela McRobbie (2007) discusses how under the postfeminist sexual contract, young women are made to strive endlessly for a “perfectable self” (p.718). A new focus on girls by government, commercial, and non-profit stakeholders made the capitalistic success of young women a major social concern at the turn of the new millennium. As McRobbie explains, “We might now imagine the young woman as a highly efficient assemblage for productivity. (This too marks a shift: women now figure in governmental discourse as much for their productive as reproductive capacities)” (2007, p. 722). High-earning jobs in non-traditionally feminine fields like business and computer science became prized markers of this new femininity. However, the ‘top girl’ push extended beyond just employment, towards a generally individualistic, self-sustaining, self-fulfilled identity. Under this postfeminist sensibility, young women are also expected to be at peak physical and mental health, advocating for themselves and seeking therapy and medical interventions whenever necessary. She is also expected to be social and fun, perfectly balancing work and her personal life. This top girl is the perfect consumer, with disposable money from her high-earning job, but the fun and freedom to engage in non-necessary spending. Rottenberg (2020) notes the importance of discourses of “balance” in this feminist era, where work and family life were seen as two forces and the balancing of them as the feminist ideal (Banet-Weiser, Gill & Rottenberg, 2020). The notion of choice is central to this sensibility, as the political focus of this feminism is girls' and women's ability to create whatever life they so choose, where the political action rests in the ability to choose in itself. This focus on choice has been sustained in contemporary iterations of neoliberal and popular feminism.

This sensibility led to a social media landscape in which the dominant mode of expression was an attempt to show that you are living a good life and ‘have it all.’ As Duffy and

Hund (2015) explain in their research on mid-2010s fashion bloggers, these popular accounts would display an entrepreneurial femininity that focused on the blogger as a business owner woman. Self-branding and creating an easily understandable and digestible social media character that could still sell products by harnessing viewers' aspirations was key to this popular style of content creator. Life and labour meld together as hobbies and passions become entwined with the career of content creation, and the mechanisms of posting and creating content were hidden (Duffy & Hund, 2015).

Bed rotting videos stand in opposition to the dominant blogger-influencer culture of the 2000s and 2010s, which promoted posting the 'best' version of yourself. Against these expectations of high-achieving young women, the girls in the girlblog sphere are showing how unproductive, non-achieving, and unhappy they are. We can potentially understand the desire for bed rotting through Jack Halberstam's (2011) work around feminist unbecoming. Halberstam documents numerous written and performance art works that revolve around feminine disappearance and self-mutilation. From that, he posits that there exists a desire to push against the notion of 'becoming a woman,' as an action forced upon one by patriarchy, and, instead, refuse 'becoming' altogether and cease existence, and by ceasing to exist you are then ceasing to reproduce patriarchy (2011). He argues, "The antisocial dictates an unbecoming, a cleaving to that which seems to shame or annihilate, and a radical passivity allows for the inhabiting of femininity with a difference" (p.144). In this way, the social removal as seen through the bed rotting trend, popular among young women, shows a radical disengagement with public life. Femininity, especially as one ages, is an act (Gill, 2007) that requires maintenance and effort, in direct contrast to letting oneself go. As young women, these TikTok users are likely coming to terms with all that is expected of and shoved upon them as women. Rather than ascribing to these

outward-facing ideals, they are reverting to an unfeminine unbecoming. Further than the reversion to nostalgic childhood discussed in the previous chapter, a section of these girls on TikTok move even farther into dissociation. Several TikToks in the sample refer to a feeling of unease that hit after puberty, such as one that shows a clip from a video game set in a mental hospital with the caption “girls after turning 13.” Here, at puberty, the moment of ‘becoming’ an adult and a woman, these girls are feeling like they are unbecoming altogether.

### **Borderline Personality Disorder**

Second to eating disorders, the next most common mental health issue referenced in the video sample was Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD). BPD is formally marked in psychiatry by four domains of instability. These domains are: “relationships (e.g., alternating between extremes of idealization and devaluation of a relationship), behaviors (e.g., recurrent suicidal behaviors or self-harm), emotions (e.g., intense and shifting mood episodes), and sense of self (e.g., markedly and persistently unstable self-image)” (Ma & Else-Quest, 2024, p. 4). The videos related to BPD are often relatable and venting in nature. They discuss specific experiences of obsession, mental volatility, or difficulty in relationships with the tag #BPD and/or #BPDTok. For example, another video uses this ‘relatable’ tone to vent about the user’s experiences with BPD. A video in selfie-mode of the user standing outside in the snow says, “i literally constantly need something to be obsessed with whether it's a show/band/person etc or else i have no motivation or purpose to live like being obsessed is everything that keeps me going.” Many of the videos use the first-person in captions both over the video and in the

description. While many of these videos do not include the faces of the poster, instead using film clips, the use of “I” statements keeps the videos personal and candid.

One video tagged #bpd uses an image of Effy from the series *Skins (UK)*, a character popular in girlblog and previous Tumblr pale blogs for her grungy style and storylines dealing with adolescent drug use. We see this in a slideshow format that blurs and fades with each subsequent slide (a trend discussed in the previous chapter). The text states, “i wanna get better, i can't keep living this way. / i've created a horrible image of myself in my mind that constantly reminds me i'm always gonna be this way no matter how hard i try to change” and overlaps onto itself as the user scrolls through. Here we see a depressed, ‘doomer’ point of view on living with BPD, different from the pull to normalize and make peace with mental health experiences seen in previous online movements (Thelandersson, 2023). Other BPD videos are more user-focused with some users making repeated similar content in selfie-mode with text about life living with the diagnosis. Through the use of hashtags, we can see how femcel, girlblog, and BPD identities are overlapping and in discussion with each other.

BPD is a controversial diagnosis, with a long history of medical and academic arguments as to its validity, categorization, and treatment. BPD is clinically diagnosed at a rate of 3:1 in women to men (Ma & Else-Quest, 2024). There is a strong contingent of feminists who urge turning away from BPD as a diagnosis and categorization (Johnson, 2021). Through a social-constructionist and antimedicalization stance, this line of thinking emphasizes the connection between BPD and the patriarchal history of hysteria diagnoses wielded against women who did not conform to their demure gendered expectations. BPD is thus simply an updated version of hysteria, more in line with modern psychological and pharmaceutical methods. The critiques of the diagnosis argue that BPD medicalizes the effects of patriarchy like rape, familial and partner

abuse, as well as simply the different ways the genders are taught to internalize and externalize emotions. As it is common for this diagnosis to come after disclosures of trauma, where the patient is seen to be engaging in self-destructive behaviours, the diagnosis can become a form of victim blaming, policing the ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ ways to respond to gendered trauma. The medical eye is turned to the results of patriarchy, but not the systems that caused the pain. Further, BPD’s depiction in media, specifically Hollywood films, through the lens of male directors, has aided in the stigmatization of this diagnosis. Through depictions in films like *Fatal Attraction* and *Black Swan*, the BPD patient is figured as a dangerously sexual, deceptive, violent white woman (Johnson, 2021). All of this has the result of painting BPD as an identity status, something emerging from the woman’s psyche and personhood, which are figured as wrong and disorderly.

Despite this history and controversial uses of the BPD label, as we can see from the videos, there still exists a desire to relate to and connect to others through embracing a BPD identity. Through the tagging of videos as #BPD or #BPDTok, these various experiences are made understandable through a supposed shared experience of this disorder. Here, hashtagging BPD and posting about it situates the user within a shared identity of BPD online. BPD communities have existed on platforms predating TikTok and have shaped the way the diagnosis is discussed today. For example, Tumblr’s BPD hashtag would blend stories of the condition with humour and emotional venting to create an affirming community space (Hendry, 2020). Users even co-created new, non-clinical terms to describe their experiences which gained wide usage. For example, “favourite person” or #fp is a term that appears to have started on Tumblr to connote someone as a person with BPD who they feel they have a particularly strong attachment to and may have unrealistic and unachievable expectations for (Hendry, 2020, p.320). This term,

and other adoptions of clinical terms into looser, more relatable definitions, continue to be popular on TikTok as a way to signal an in-group knowledge of particular experiences.

Through the tagged experience of BPD, those claiming the term are able to explore these stigmatized experiences and identities. Erving Goffman describes “perceivability” as a frame in which visual signs distinguish someone as a member of an outside community and render them as morally/socially failed (1968). Since, often, BPD only seldomly shows its marks on the body/skin through self-harm (which could often be misinterpreted as depression), the self-tagging of BPD renders the internal visible. For many, it appears that the online claiming of BPD identity helps legitimize experiences past just negative generalized notions of being attention-seeking or having too strong a personality (Hendry, 2020). Tagging the videos as BPD gives the poster an explanation for their stigmatized experiences and reactions through this shared identity, as seen in the repeated use of pseudo-clinical terms like “hyperfixation,” “favourite person,” and “splitting” that are echoed back in the comment sections by relating viewers.

To understand both the troubling history of BPD and how individuals can, at the same time, find solace and support in the identity, a ‘neuroqueer feminism’ proves useful. Johnson (2021) explains, “neuroqueer theory maintains looseness between people and their psychiatric labels, recognizing that people often inhabit such labels without being subsumed by them” (p. 642). In this way, we can recognize the ways BPD has been, and continues to be, used as a weapon against non-neurotypical women while still holding space for how the framework of BPD diagnosis can help structure the lives of those who live with it. This approach maintains a belief in the person with BPD to be able to critically engage with their own experience and not prescribing how one, especially an affected woman, should view their own internal life. As Johnson further states, “Critically inhabiting a label, as opposed to identifying straightforwardly

with it, means rewriting it from the inside out rather than adopting wholesale the culture's beliefs and expectations for people in that category." Through the vulnerable disclosure of experiences in the #BPD videos, these young women are documenting their lived experiences with the diagnosis.

### **Characters and Relatability**

Many videos in the sample feature edited clips from Hollywood films and collages of female characters. Through the collection of these videos, as expected in my methodology, a canon of repeating media examples emerged. The following are the most prominent film/television/literary references as predicted at the proposal stage:

- *The Virgin Suicides* (1999), directed by Sofia Coppola
- *Pearl* (2022), directed by Ti West
- *Jennifer's Body* (2009), directed by Karyn Kusama
- *The Bell Jar* (1963), written by Sylvia Plath
- *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018), written by Ottessa Moshfegh
- *Girl Interrupted* (1999), directed by James Mangold
- *Lolita* (1955), written by Vladimir Nabakov (including film adaptations)
- *Gone Girl* (2014), directed by David Fincher (including original book by Gillian Flynn)
- *Fleabag* (2016-2019), written by Pheobe Waller-Bridge
- *Possession* (1981), directed by Andrzej Żuławski
- *Promising Young Woman* (2020), directed by Emerald Fennell
- *Black Swan* (2010), directed by Darren Aronofsky
- *The Piano Teacher* (2001), directed by Michael Haneke

Further repeating examples found through data collection were:

- *To the Bone* (2017), directed by Marti Noxon
- *Midsommar* (2019), directed by Ari Aster
- *The Love Witch* (2016), directed by Anna Biller
- *Buffalo 66* (1998), directed by Vincent Gallo
- *Little Women* (2019), directed by Greta Gerwig
- *Priscilla* (2023), directed by Sofia Coppola
- *Euphoria* (2019), directed by Sam Levinson

What connects these films and shows? The most apparent throughline is that these media pieces center on young female characters. From adolescent coming-of-age stories to more explicit stories of love and deception, all these stories focus on love and pain through a lens that is focused on a uniquely feminine point of view. The films tend to focus on two problems: love and mental health (and often the overlap of these topics), from the more literal examples of *To the Bone's* anorexia depiction to the more magical and stylized stories of insanity like *Possession* and *Black Swan*.

This canon of media and artists has precedence in sad girl cultures (as mentioned in the previous chapter). Sad girl cultures look like many things. Generally, on social media, this refers to communities and styles of posts that bask in a stylized sadness of young women. On Tumblr, this looked like gifs and edited photos which stylized images like mental health medications, self-harm scars and implements, tears and tissues, and, like TikTok, sad female characters from film and TV (Thelandersson, 2023). The mood on sad girl Tumblr was more melancholic than outright depressive (despite the use of the term and the medical iconography). Thelandersson (2023) describes this posting style as inspired and creative rather than reflective of the stuckness

that comes with depression. Tumblr sadness tended to be more of the sort of romanticized sadness that is connected to the trope of tortured creative geniuses. Sad girl icon Lana Del Rey appears often in girlblogs both through her music, her image as a celebrity, and her lyrical connection to other referenced media like *Priscilla* and *The Bell Jar*. Del Rey's vintage femininity and lyrics relating to the emotional hurt that men have brought into her life, and the regretful desire to stick with them, soundtrack the sad girlblog videos. Her songs and accompanying visuals pair sadness with glamour in a way that had critics accusing her of 'romanticizing' abuse and feminized sadness (Poolen, 2024).

In contrast, the sad girl subset of girlblog TikTok leans away from the melancholy and more towards the grotesque. The use of horror film characters and the videos' focus on clips of female characters weeping, thrashing around, and screaming point to a sadness that is more focused on the idea of going through a breakdown than quietly sitting in unhappiness. As one of the TikTok claims, "We need more female loser movies.. like truly boring rotting freak loser woman protagonist loser no charisma cinema." This video is shot in selfie-mode from a very close-up and angled down position, showing her eyes close up, but the rest of her face and body distorted by the angle. As she stares uncomfortably into the camera, she twitches her eye slightly, signaling a joking anger or insanity. From this video, we can see the connection with the descriptors of "freak" and "loser." Whereas in previous iterations of sad girl media, there was still a focus on the beauty of sadness and mental instability, now, as seen in this sample of videos, it is the trend to lean more into the gross and offputting.

This grossness is somewhat at odds with girlblogs' focus on prettiness and femininity. Yet, from the characters employed, we can still see a strong feminine throughline through these films. All these characters, even if they become more monstrous as the narrative continues, begin

as rather poised, stereotypically feminine characters. These are not tomboys, they all have highly curated feminine looks, spanning different genres and styles. Further, when we think about the TikTok posters themselves, even the girl who is discussing being a loser and feeling out of place still has to hold up her camera to capture a video. In the act of filming, the poster is aware of her angles and the conventions of TikTok selfie videos, never leaning too far into the truly unflattering.

The desire for relatability is important in girlblog videos. As we can see from the “female loser movies” example, there is a strong urge to see yourself in the media you consume, and further, have that media reflect you. The relatability of the figure of the ‘loser girl’ connects to Gill and Kanai’s view of neoliberal relatability politics. The authors argue that, “whilst young women may acknowledge the existence of problems, they must be quickly resolved through humor, with the individualized self as the butt of the joke” (Gill & Kanai, 2018, p. 322). These girls are reflecting on the postfeminist ‘double bind’ mentioned previously, where they are pressured to shrink themselves and conform to patriarchal ideals, but at the same time, present themselves as self-assured actors. This relatability of the messy, freakish, sad girl allows the poster to point the joke back on herself in a controlled way, that shows her flaws, but also that she is in on the joke and aware of it, thus holding an element of control. She is the one calling herself these names and relating to these monstrous characters, and by doing so, she can get ahead of anyone else ascribing these characteristics onto her.

The film and TV references take on a new life in these TikToks, separated from the text of their scripts and the situation of their production, as the clips and characters are given new meaning through memetic reproduction. As Milner (2016) describes, “Memetic phrases, videos, performances, and images are all intertextual, self-aware, and premised on transformation” (p.

18). The viewer has to do a lot of work in understanding any individual video, combining their knowledge of the films with potential overlay text and knowledge of TikTok communities and style trends. The characters and films signal a certain relation to ‘girlblog’ culture through their reuse in video after video. Through this, girlblogs become an imitation public, or “a collection of people whose digital connectivity is constituted through the shared ritual of content imitation and replication” (Zulli & Zulli, 2022 p. 1882). These references, characters, songs, and aesthetic flourishes all signal the connection with the imitation public of girlblogs.

Through the use of meme formats, character identification and other forms of relatability-focused posting, it is helpful to view this community through Raymond Williams’ (1977) concept of “structures of feeling.” Structures of feeling refer to the emergent/pre-emergent actively felt values and states that exist before formalized ideologies or movements coalesce. Williams describes this as, “a social experience which is still in process, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating, but which in analysis (though rarely otherwise) has its emergent, connecting, and dominant characteristics” (1977, p. 132). Turning to the emotions and tones of these videos helps us understand the desires and drives of this community before we are able to place a coherent political descriptor onto the posts. These young women posting girlblog content are all experiencing their own independent, often isolating feelings, which they share through TikTok, exposing us, the viewers, to a wider framework this shared emotional world.

## **Conclusion**

What we can glean from this emergent structure of feeling is that there appears to be a pull in these young women to dissociate and disconnect from social and public life. The

bedrotting, anorexic desires for disappearance, and intentionally labeling oneself as a freak or outcast all point to feeling out of step with dominant culture. This desire to retreat could be connected to instability felt by teenagers approaching adult life. As the first findings chapter discussed, this period of young womanhood can be difficult to navigate, as many are experiencing for the first time what it means to age socially as a woman. Connected to that, so much of this age group's adolescent development was spent indoors and online, being now thrust into the 'real world' can feel especially foreign and intimidating to those who spent those crucial years socially distanced through COVID-19. Further, the structure of feeling expressed through this girlblog content shows us how young women are responding to the changing landscape of public life in North America. These feelings of isolation prompt young people to find community online, and these young women are finding community through their shared anxieties and bad feelings. While the 1990s and 2000s era of girl-centric feminism promised young women that they could achieve anything they attempted, this new generation of girls are looking around them and realizing this may no longer be true in the Trump, post-#MeToo era. This is a structure of feeling that is not expressly feminist in its ideology, but instead, an embodied mood in response to a long history of feminist gains and losses.

## Conclusion

Throughout this research, I have explored the girlblog public on TikTok and the discourses present within it to better understand the anxieties and preoccupations of young girls on the app today. This project saw a few different forms, initially focused on the femcel community, before broadening to the umbrella term of girlblog when it became apparent that what I was studying was a more wide-ranging public than initially hypothesized. Finally, I came to the project with the following questions: *What are the discourses present in the “Girlblog” public on TikTok? And further, how is the girlblog audiovisual style configured through TikTok’s sociotechnical affordances?* Through my collection and analysis of 200 TikTok videos, I was able to define girlblogs as follows: an online public which uses ‘coquette’ style and imagery and references to girlhood and girliness to discuss difficult topics relevant to young women as they wrestle with their shared anxieties of approaching adulthood.

The first findings chapter discussed how girlhood is mobilized in these videos. Girlblogs’ style of ‘coquette’ girliness allows the TikToker to revert to an imagined past of both vintage sensibilities as well as their own childhoods, even if both are reflected back in a hazy half-truth. As a type of #nostgaliacore (Brown et al.,2024), girlblogs provide a nostalgic escapism through the curation and posting of this youthful style. From specific posts about aging, these videos show a fear of ‘growing up’ in terms of adult responsibility and loss of innocence, as well as ‘growing old,’ in terms of loss of beauty and the social status afforded to young women. Girlblogs can be viewed as a way to see how teenage girls and young women are experiencing their own femininities. Further, we can see how these girls are interacting with femininity in ways that are different from even ten years ago. The empowerment-focused ‘girl power’

neoliberal feminism has fallen out of fashion in this sample, and we see, instead, a more disengaged, anxious femininity at the forefront.

In this way, girlblogs stand as one of several forms of soft backlash in our current era. Following the years of liberal feminism almost taken for granted in mainstream culture, we are now seeing a turning away from those ideals towards more antifeminist, traditional values. Much like ‘tradwives,’ male incels, and other gender binary affirming groups, girlblogs are leaning back into traditional stereotypes that were becoming less popular in recent years. Rather than standing in opposition to Trump-era conservative shifts towards women returning to the home and away from independent careers, girlblogs revert from political participation all together, framing the domestic space of being at home and in one’s room as the desirable thing for girls and young women.

The second findings chapter deals with the discussions of mental health and emotional states within girlblog videos. A key takeaway from this research is the unintentional discovery of pro-anorexia content on TikTok through my persona method of data collection. Without searching hashtags or intentionally engaging with this content for several days, the FYP continued to display this often untagged content. With that, this chapter discussed eating disorder communities’ ways of building relations and sharing content within algorithmically moderated sites, showing that these TikTok users are aware of the app’s limitations for the kinds of content they produce. Further, mental health-based communities within the broader girlblog sphere, such as BPD content, showed us ways in which young women are using TikTok to relate to each other through the open discussion of negative emotions and troubling experiences. Across these videos, I found a broad sensibility of disappearance, fading away, and dissociation. This points back to the aging and adult anxieties of the previous chapter, where, instead of barreling into

empowered adulthood as previous neoliberal feminist girl communities championed, these girls are choosing to focus inward and lean into these bad feelings.

This research has potential implications for the further study of social media communities in which hashtags are not the central organizing feature. While hashtags are used by girlbloggers, they do not maintain formal bounds of this community and many girlblog videos show up without any tags. The effusive and visual nature of this community and the way I have studied it could provide inspiration for projects on TikTok communities likely to pop up in coming years. Further, this project expands on the years-long field of girls' online communities, providing an update to research on communities from previous platforms like Tumblr. When placing girlblogs in conversation with previous sad girl cultures, scholars can gain a deeper sense of what issues continue and what has changed, both politically and through different technological interfaces. As research on young people, this could aid parents, guardians, and teachers in better understanding the posting and media habits of the young people in their lives. Rather than writing off TikTok use as a distraction, or passive consumption, this research urges us to take seriously what young women are doing online, as it can help us understand the broader issues in their social and internal worlds.

Girlblogs are a rich online public with many areas for potential further research. One approach that would shed more light onto this topic would be an interview-based project with young girls active in these communities. Due to the limitations of a master's project, and ethical difficulties interviewing minors, this was out of my scope. However, interviews could aid in understanding first-hand the issues facing the lives of teens and young women and their motivation towards these specific corners of the internet. To reiterate Dobson's (2015) urging of academics to not speak for or invalidate the feelings of young women and girls in their research,

I believe that participant-forward research on this topic would be crucial to fully understand girlblogs and what they mean to those who participate.

Further, it would be compelling to add more platforms to the study of girlblogs. As previously mentioned, the term also has wide usage on Instagram. From preliminary research, it appears that many of the tropes, characters, and aesthetic qualities are similar across Instagram and TikTok. However, further questions arise as to how the public/private natures of both apps would influence the kinds of girlblog posts users create. Is there more of an influencer or fame-focused aspect to girlblogs on Instagram, due to the app's longer history and greater encoded abilities to monetize? Asking how the posts differ on these apps would contribute to the app analysis of this topic.

Also, outside of the scope of this project would be a deeper genre and film studies dive into the content of the media within the femcel/girlblog media cannon. As these characters and narratives appear to be so beloved and relatable to the women in this community, I would have liked to have been able to give these pieces of media a closer reading. A further paper specifically mapping girlblog films or music as a genre, explaining their throughlines, and defining their parameters would be useful for further research on both this community but also similar online communities that create elusive canons of relatable, preexisting media (incels, cottagecore etc.) For its part, this study has defined the girlblog as it exists on TikTok at this time. Analyzed through a lens of feminist theory and postfeminist critique, the project has placed girlblogs into their current post-#Me Too context to better understand the ways in which this community is engaging with each other and with TikTok itself.

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