
BY RUBY SCOTT

‘GIRLCORE: THE
RIGHT WAY TO BE
FEMALE?’

*Examining the Effect of Choice
Feminism on What it Means to be a
“Woman” through the Language and
Trends of TikTok.*

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Introduction

The rise of micro-labelling and trends on social media is increasingly a factor in how young people define themselves, in a similar fashion that sub-cultures have been for a long time. However, I argue that these hyper-specific social media identities are harmful and divisive towards how people engage with their identity; but especially their femininity. This is due to overly specific ideas of what it means to be female, a woman or a girl and about the right way to engage with femininity, that I argue is written out in a kind of manifesto observed by social media trends. I will specifically be analysing the trends and language of TikTok since its meteoric rise to popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As a person who came of age during the pandemic itself, I found myself to be the target demographic for many of the trends and languages that I outline in this essay. “Girly” trends aimed at ‘finding your aesthetic’ or ‘how to be the best type of girl’ were everywhere. Even as a teenager I felt something both eerie and frustrating about this content.

Concurrently, I also became disillusioned with choice feminism, which is what I was perceiving as becoming the mainstream form of feminism.

Choice feminism is a form of feminism that is a response to criticisms in the past that feminism is too radical or political (Ferguson, 2010). Choice feminism thus seeks to be a ‘softer’ form of feminism with less politics; with a prevailing message that women should have individual freedom to do as they please within their lives (Ferguson, 2010). I believe this branch seeks to focus only on the individual and their short-term betterment; rather than addressing systemic issues that oppressed groups face or seeking solidarity between those who are oppressed. I see that “choice feminism”, as it has risen in the past decade or so, has had an immense effect on the way women conceptualise themselves and their femininity.

This essay outlines the way choice feminism and social-media-driven marketisation interact with one another to shape the way feminine people conceptualise their identities; through demeaning feminine identity to be more stupid or inferior than their masculine counterparts, placing their identity as being attached to a masculine counterpart in order to be whole, and the self-optimisation and micro-labelling that occurs on social media to form feminine identities only around exclusive ideas of acceptability.



My Girl Math is when Women are Stupid

“Girl Math” swept TikTok in late 2023; the trend is a format in which women list things that are within their “Girl Math”, composing of justifications for spending extra money or making mistakes about finance, such as buying things with cash being free or returning an item to a shop being a profit. Since its rise it has received criticism with some claiming that this trend is degrading towards women (ctvnews, 2023). Despite the trend being intentioned as a light-hearted joke, I see it disappointing as that this ignorance or ditsy attitude to life is cemented in its association with the feminine identity. However, even as news sources, TikTok users and academics have criticised this trend and others with similar rhetoric, this criticism is widely seen as overly political and far-reaching to criticise. Under the comments of a news segment that discussed the trend, comments widely criticised the consensus that the girl math trend was offensive with comments such as “Leave me and my girl math alone”, “Wow, the fact they really spun this is wild to me” and “It’s lighthearted fun” (ctvnews, 2023). This wider societal understanding of trends like girl math can be seen as a symptom of the grip of choice feminism on feminine identity as

there is this reluctance to approach the political and question why people who identify with feminine identities enjoy trends like this so much, and thus why they enjoy connecting their feminine identity with intellectual inferiority.

“Girl math” can be seen as part of the wider “bimbo feminism” movement that I see as an offshoot of choice feminism, seeing its rise with TikTok in 2020. Bimbo feminism shares similar beliefs to choice feminism but hinges on the idea of reclaiming the “bimbo”. I believe this movement can be identified as emerging with TikTok creator Chrissy Chlapecka who in 2020 put out a video defining what it was to be a bimbo under the modern reclamation of the term:

“A bimbo isn’t dumb. I mean... she kinda is. But she isn’t THAT dumb. She’s actually a radical leftist! Who’s pro sex-work, pro “Black Lives Matter”, pro LGBTQ, pro-choice, and will always be there for her girls, gays and theys.” (Chlapecka, 2020).

While Chlapecka’s manifesto appears progressive and inclusive, I question if what is being so-called reclaimed out of the “bimbo” label is in any way liberating for women or anyone who interacts with femininity. Historical instances of reclamation have been liberating and useful for marginalised groups, however the self-expressed stupidity and ditsy nature of the bimbo movement as well as the trends that it has sparked are not radical comments on the reclamation of original bimbo label, nor do they express the political or gendered inclusiveness of Chlapecka’s original manifesto; but instead comfortable assimilations to the comments that men used to demean women through the term in the first place.

In fact, the modern idea of the bimbo is systematically created in order to damage the perception of women and legitimise claims that they

are lesser than men in many regards, which in fact actually damages substantive feminist endeavours such as the growth of women in politics or narrowing the gender pay gap (Komar, 2023). Under the bimbo persona it is easy to see how women may not be able to handle equal positions with men in these departments. Chaplecka’s comment that the bimbo doesn’t “do this for the misogynistic male gaze. [they] do it for [their] gaze” (Chrissy Chlapecka, 2020) sparks a wider concern that cements this ideology within the lexicon of choice feminism as she dismisses societal structures that define the way that women want to be perceived. Thus, I see this as the dawn of a specific type of choice feminism that appears to be niche to Gen Z and TikTok users and can be attributed to the formation of trends such as “girl math” amongst others.

I credit bimbo feminism as legitimising a pattern of self-identified ignorance linked to feminine identities. This can be observed in recent trends such as “girlhood” being described as an innate ineptitude at more “masculine” hobbies such as pool, as well as trending audios saying “I’m just a girl” that are widely used over women discussing things such as their poor driving skills or expensive shopping habits. What I see to be the culmination of this ideology and the most damaging expression of it is in TikTok creator nikitadumptruck explaining world issues such as Israel/Palestine or Russia/Ukraine through scenarios of girls at a party being in a fight or relationship scenarios in what she calls “girlsplaining” (Nikitadumptruck, 2022). Not only is this damaging to feminine identities but it minimises serious world struggles and legitimises itself through the aforementioned political reclamation of the bimbo. Overall, the influence that choice feminism has had on feminine identity through TikTok curated bimbo feminism is damaging without providing liberation. This is as it hinges on a femininity that is inherently countered

to a masculinity, rather than promoting more fluidity between the two binary gender expressions, which is something that can be seen widely across modern choice feminist discourse.

Wives and Girlfriends: (Fe)Male Success

Within the patriarchal system that impacts all of our lives, people engaged in femininity are often defined within a binary opposing the idea of masculinity. Choice feminist rhetoric allows women to be comfortable within this binary and embracing it. This is due to the idea that they should be allowed to embrace what makes them feel the most fulfilled at any given moment without questioning the political and historical circumstances that have built the notions of what it means to feel “right” or “safe” today.

TikTok trends are no stranger to this discourse, with a wide group of them locating feminine identity as only existing within its situation to masculine identity. Whether this be aesthetics such as the “rockstar girlfriend” or the “mob wife”, which both show this aforementioned marketability within social-media and a need to label oneself as a micro identity to feel significant but also that significance comes from being associated with a masculine counterpart rather than just being a rockstar or a mob boss. Further, a trend that encapsulates this was the “my wife is a...” trend, where generally female university students would discuss not wanting to do their academic work but being motivated by the idea that someday someone would say “my wife is a lawyer” or “my wife is a doctor”. Rather than being motivated by the impressive accomplishment of achieving a degree. It is here easier for feminine identity to see its ultimate achievement as linked to a masculine counterpart. Though the choice feminist would have no issue with as it makes these women happy, I see this movement of connecting one’s feminine identity to a masculine counterpart as a troubling rising

phenomenon which restricts feminine achievement, and is also exclusive in gender and sexual identity, as it reinforces the idea that there are only two gender identities and that they complete one another. Arguably the most fully-fledged and alarming instance of this discourse taking effect is the rising infatuation with “trad wives”.

A “trad wife”, or traditional wife, is a woman who fulfils the so-called traditional roles of being a wife in the home such as taking care of her children, doing all of the cooking and cleaning, constantly attending to her husband to make sure he is cared for and not having a job within the waged labour force. However, many trad wife influencers are in effect in the labour force due to their roles as influencers. This is often ignored as this fact demystifies the whole element of why the tradwife appeals to so many on social media; it presents the ideal submissive feminine identity, thus understanding these women as agents within the economy takes away from their mystic appeal.

There has been a significant rise of these types of women becoming influencers on TikTok and many of them have become widely popular from Ballerinafarm’s from scratch cooking with her eight children and Nara Smith’s viral heavily pregnant all-day cooking for her family to the radical marriage rules of Estee Williams. There have been online debates between the supporters and opposers of these influencers, with supporters often arguing within a choice feminist rhetoric that these women have the right to do what they want on their platforms

Critics have pointed out the inherent issues with trad wives’ presence online; not only that this lifestyle is extremely gender essentialist, but also that there is an inherent exclusivity within it as it is only achievable by the super-wealthy. Ballerinafarm’s husband’s father has a net worth of

\$400 million while Nara Smith is often cooking expensive and beautiful dishes but is never seen cleaning or performing any of the more laborious or boring domestic labours that come along with working in the domestic sphere for those who can't afford cleaners and childcare. Furthermore, the idealisation of a woman's worth pertaining to her proximity to men is rooted in the mystic ideal of the nuclear family. This ideal is only cognitively recognised through white ideals and has its history in colonial ideals used to control the population and naturalise women's role as domestic servants and white supremacy as the social norm, and thus leaves behind people of colour in this romanticisation. This exclusivity in trends and lifestyles that go viral on TikTok is not a singular occurrence but instead systemic, as vast amounts of trends that are aimed at women around femininity specifically are seen to be unattainable by the majority as they rely on ultra-feminine, white, heteronormative ideals.

How to be your Best Self: TikTok Aesthetics and their Exclusivity

"How to be that girl"; a question floating around on TikTok from around 2022 up till today, the answer of which is generally given to be a list of ways that you can look better (and by this more "feminine") through a self-optimisation that involves several products and procedures to become your best self. This idea of self-optimisation is something which is bound with choice feminist rhetoric as it is a justification that women can use to make themselves feel fulfilled while upholding problematic standards such as colonial, European beauty standards, and a shallow sense of self fulfilment that emphasises these beauty standards over a meaningful and engaging relationship between one's body and wider society.

From "that girl" came the famous "clean girl" aesthetic, which suggests that the best way to be a woman is to look always clean and immaculate.

However, the important values of cleanliness often observed yet not explicitly admitted in the "clean girl" community are built on historical ideals of beauty and cleanliness that hinge on being white and thin. This is another way in which social media and choice feminism interact to provide standards and ideals that are unachievable for the vast majority of the population and only work for the privileged few who luckily fall into certain social categories. Aesthetics like "cottagecore", "vanilla girl", "old money", "quiet luxury", "ballet-core" and so many more can be typed into the search bar of the TikTok app to provide users with an onslaught of procured photo montages of thin white women who achieve their feminine labels in ways considered appropriate to societal standards and do so in ways that allow the user to observe who they are and what they represent based on the micro-label attributed to them.

In the internet age this marketisation and branding of the body that occurs through these microtrends is a way in which we are being conditioned to respond to human identity in conceptualising one another through categories and labels. It unfortunately appears to be more comfortable for many to comprehend than embracing a wider human experience in solidarity with all other identities. It echoes Beauvoir's work on narcissism in which she argues that those who are narcissistic refuse to engage with the world and others in a meaningful way; this can be said to be truer than ever in the sphere of TikTok discourse where there is a willing ignorance towards acknowledging that others exist as people rather than as part of simulation activated when one goes online. Category based self-marketisation gives the user instant gratification through one's identity, yet once again not just anyone can choose to be accepted into these identities. People of colour cannot achieve this validation from social media aesthetics as they are so based in European colonial

beauty standards, which further demonstrates how problematic they truly are. For instance, the term “cottagecore” romanticises old-fashioned European lifestyles and much like the tradwife trend is presented as a haven that we should all aspire too, yet similar lifestyles in non-European countries are often viewed as primitive or uncivilised. This dichotomy demonstrates how exclusive TikTok aesthetics are and how they are unachievable for women of colour and anyone that drifts from the hyper-feminine European beauty standards.

Conclusion

This essay demonstrates the usefulness of TikTok trends and related language as an example of the legacy of choice feminism and what that means for feminine identities. It is my conclusion that this branch of feminist debate does not progress the movement of feminism in working towards a more fulfilling and liberated life for all regardless of their gender and sexual identity. I put forward three considerations that should be made by people who want to work towards these goals and deter the ideology of choice feminism that I argue has done little to help.

The first would be to avoid gender essentialist, binary or hyper-feminine/masculine terminology and ideology when it comes to this question. The binary nature of gender and its construction means that the feminine identity is created in contrast to the masculine and ideologies that support the continuation of this harsh binary can be seen to be contradictory to an idea of liberation and fulfilment for women or feminine people as they inherently segregate different identities.

The second is that we should be inquisitive; question why things are the way they are and how they have come to be so. A lot of my criticism of choice feminism is the fact that in attempting to depoliticise feminism, it takes things at face value rather than questioning the political, socio-economic and historical processes that build up

much of the norms and ideas within our society today. The idea of what is normal or natural, such as the gender binary or heteronormative romantic standards, are often invented, unnecessary and oppressive to many groups; by questioning them we can build an ideology built on more substantive grounds of what is better for everyone rather than the privileged individual.

Finally, intersectionality is key. As mentioned before, privilege and exclusivity are often at the heart of choice feminism as it supports women’s actions to do whatever they want to achieve self-fulfilment, and therefore most often only benefit the rich as well as white women in Western states. Choice feminism only works when you have the privilege that afford you the choices that the ideology deems to be acceptable. Within its liberal Western origins, it doesn’t really work for communities outside of this and even shames those who do not act in a way that would be the “logical choice” for a choice feminist. Intersectionality and inclusivity are key for any meaningful moves towards a better future for people of all genders and identities, which allows us all to manoeuvre through our lives without marketing ourselves around societal ideals to like we are presenting our femininity in the “right way”.

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