

Digital “Girl” Culture: Postfeminist Sensibilities of Social Media “Girl” Trends

Macy Browning Karasik

Vanderbilt University, USA

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the contradictory notions of female empowerment underlying digital “girl” culture and its accompanying “girl” trends on social media platforms. Tracing the emergence of postfeminism in the 1990s to its current relationship with neoliberal capitalism, this paper contextualizes the proliferation of “girl” memes and trends within Western internet culture to broader sociocultural shifts over recent decades. A discourse analysis of three current examples—the “clean girl” aesthetic, “girl dinner,” and “girl math”—reveals how “girl” culture necessitates women’s constant self-improvement and bodily discipline to emulate narrow beauty standards, regulates their consumption habits according to traditional gender roles, and shapes their decision-making around capitalist logic.

Introduction

Clean girls and e-girls and rat girls—oh my! In the age of social media, the girls are girl-bossing as they make girl dinner, do girl math, and go on hot-girl walks during hot-girl summer. Early feminists would certainly view these terms with criticism and confusion as the modern emphasis on the vernacular of girlhood is indicative of a broader post-feminist, technologically afforded shift that has occurred over the last few decades. Alongside the third and fourth waves of feminism, the proliferation of social media technologies has enabled girls and women to engage in various modes of self-expression and identity formation online, through the creation of and participation in memes, trends, and digital communities. All of these intersect and manifest into a unique internet phenomena of pre-fixing, post-fixing, and inter-fixing things with the descriptive label of “girl.”

This paper examines the converging elements that constitute contemporary social media “girl culture” in an effort to illustrate how post-feminist discourse prescribes expressions of consumption-based identity for women and girls to emulate. While such expressions promote post-feminist ideals such as individuality and autonomy, I will argue that they ultimately provide women and girls with contradictory understandings of femininity which thus limits their ability to formulate their identity outside of capitalist consumption. I’ll first explain how social media “girl culture” is indicative of a broad post-feminist shift in the American cultural zeitgeist over the last few decades. Then, I’ll briefly look at relevant “girl” trends that shaped women and girls’ identity online throughout the 2010s, before analyzing three recent examples of “girl” trends that contribute to contemporary understandings of girlhood: the “clean girl aesthetic,” “girl dinner,” and “girl math.”

Literature Review

The term ‘postfeminism’ emerged in the 1990s as a way to make sense of the paradoxical nature in representations of women in Western media and popular culture of the time. The media was rife with contradictions, as celebrations of “girl power” and the redundancy of feminism coexisted with an intensely misogynistic culture that grew increasingly interested in establishing sexual distinctions. Women’s popular representations posited them as having surpassed the political and economic barriers to gender equality, and thus any lingering gender inequalities were not a result of

sexism, but rather a result of natural differences and/or women's individual choices.¹ Though feminism has since been revived and is relatively widespread in the American public sphere, scholars argue that postfeminism remains valuable as a way to understand feminism's contemporary manifestations.

According to Rosalind Gill, postfeminist sensibility follows notions such as, though not limited to, women's autonomy, personal choice, and self-improvement.² These ideas are also key to the logic of neoliberalism which, following Wendy Brown's conception of neoliberalism as a dominant political rationality, disseminates an individualized, capital-enhancing subjectivity to all dimensions of human life.³ Sara Farris notes that neoliberalism has increasingly converged with feminist ideas, facilitating the rise of what Catherine Rottenberg deems "neoliberal feminism:" a variant of feminism that simultaneously avows gender inequality yet disavows the socio-economic and cultural structures that directly influence women's lives.⁴ In line with its principles of self-actualization and individual responsibility, neoliberal feminism promotes individualized notions of women's empowerment which reframe structural barriers as personal challenges which women are expected (and already equipped) to navigate and overcome.

In this context, Sarah Banet-Weiser ties feminism's increased visibility in the media to its viability as a market commodity, arguing that "popular feminisms," or the most visible expressions of feminism in popular culture and media, are visible precisely because they do not challenge structural inequalities.⁶ Rather, popular feminism's prominence relies on the profit and metric-driven motives of corporate and capitalist media platforms; as such, it easily thrives on social media platforms with its affordances of circulation and visibility. Popular/neoliberal feminism thus articulates women's empowerment in adherence to the interrelated logics of neoliberalism and capitalism, promoting individual self-improvement and self-regulation through various means, but especially through exercising one's autonomy as a consumer. This is prominent in some of the most notable feminist representations today, such as the resurgence of Mattel's iconic Barbie franchise or multi-hyphenate powerhouse Taylor Alison Swift, both of which are structured by an aesthetically oriented consumerism which ultimately promotes a conception of "girl power" based in style and consumption.⁷

All of this is exemplified when studying the use of the word "girl" on social media. Since its beginning, social media has generated various genres of self-identification and expression for women and girls to emulate. Despite the relevance of feminist sentiments today, many of these genres exhibit postfeminist sensibilities. For one, many "girl" trends focus on woman's bodies as a primary source of their identity, encouraging girls to engage in constant self-monitoring and regulation in order to conform to ever-narrower judgements of female attractiveness.⁸ The necessity of self-discipline and self-improvement manifests not only in women's attainment of ideal beauty standards, but also in their attempts to improve their fashion, lifestyle, and overall image or "vibe;" this is reflective of a self-presentation strategy that Allison Hearn describes as "self-branding," which necessitates viewing and marketing oneself as a product for others' consumption.⁹

These postfeminist themes are identifiable in various 'girl' trends and memes over the last two decades. As Alice Marwick argues in her analysis of "Instafame," Instagram sits at the intersection of three converging cultural forces: the proliferation of celebrity and microcelebrity culture, a mania for digital documentation, and conspicuous consumption.¹⁰ These forces are also evident in the "girl" memes that emerged in the 2010s, many of which idealized

¹ Banet-Weiser, Gill, and Rottenberg, "Postfeminism, Popular Feminism and Neoliberal Feminism?," 5.

² Gill, "Culture and Subjectivity in Neoliberal and Postfeminist Times."

³ Brown, "Neo-Liberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy," 38.

⁴ Farris, *In the Name of Women's Rights*.

⁵ Rottenberg, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*.

⁶ Banet-Weiser, *Empowered*.

⁷ Bae, "Interrogating Girl Power: Girlhood, Popular Media, and Postfeminism," 29–30.

⁸ Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture."

⁹ Hearn, "Meat, Mask, Burden."

¹⁰ Marwick, "Instafame."

imagined “girl” figures and documented the minute aspects of girl culture. In 2011, for example, Tumblr blog Just-GirlyThings went viral for its “aesthetic” and “hipster” style photographs with superimposed text describing mundane things or activities stereotyped as “girly,” such as ‘tanning’ or ‘having long hair.’¹¹ In a similar vein, the “Tumblr girls” that emerged in 2014 did not apply to all girls on the platform, but rather a specific type of young, often white, and conventionally attractive female user with a distinctive aesthetic affinity for melancholy.¹² And in 2019, VSCO girls, known for displaying their eco-consciousness via conspicuous consumption, reached mainstream audiences far outside of the digital youth culture from which they originated.¹³

All of these trends were heavily parodied and inspired memes in their likeness, thus becoming memes in of themselves. Yet at the same time, they reproduced stereotypical and derogatory constructions of women and girls under the guise of irony. Gill writes that the use of irony in postfeminist media culture is a way of “having it both ways:” of expressing sexist statements that are subsequently excused through their ironic framing as both “harmless and humorous.”¹⁴ By relying on aesthetic display to convey (or mock) one’s identity, women and girls’ internalization of such memes contributes to postfeminist anxieties regarding personal choice, aesthetics, and individuality—intensifying the surveillance of women in the public sphere while encouraging girls to emulate certain standards of femininity. All of this leads us contemporary social media’s popular “girl” trends.

Girl #1: The “Clean Girl”

Among the many “girl” trends that have emerged on social media platforms in the 2020s is the “clean girl” aesthetic, which emphasizes a minimalist approach to beauty and fashion. In spite of the clean girl’s advocacy for minimalism—the promotion of a “less is more” mentality—achieving the ultimate clean girl look requires a myriad of beauty products, clothing items, accessories, and wellness practices that are not easily accessible to many. The archetypical clean girl is one whose skin is “always glowing,” whose lips are “always glossed,” and who “never, ever, looks like they’re wearing too much makeup.”¹⁵ Her nails are well-manicured and freshly painted in a neutral polish; her hair is often kept slicked back, typically in a high pony or a bun, as she frequently applies hair serums and overnight conditioners; and her fashion appears effortless: stacks of gold jewelry (bracelets, chain necklaces, and hoop earrings) adorn the clean girl’s matching workout, lounge, or pajama sets, typically from brands such as Lululemon, Alo, and Urban Outfitters.

¹¹ “Just Little Things.”

¹² “Tumblr Girl Meaning & Origin | Slang by Dictionary.Com.”

¹³ Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström, *TikTok*.

¹⁴ Gill, “Culture and Subjectivity in Neoliberal and Postfeminist Times,” 147–66.

¹⁵ “Xolizahbeauty (@xolizahbeauty).”



Figure 1. Tiktok user @daisyherriott

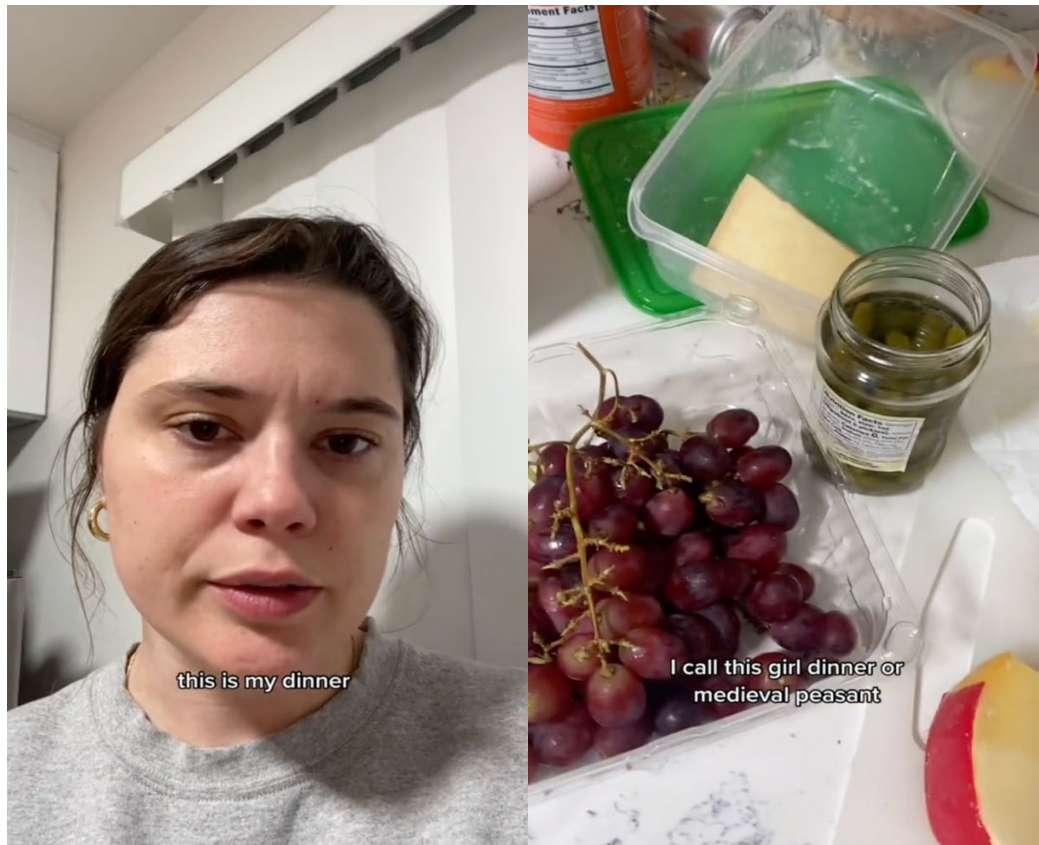
It is clear upon observing the so-called “clean girl” that her embodiment of cleanliness is largely reliant upon her adherence to conventional, and predominantly white, beauty standards; the clean girl’s skin is supple and smooth, free of acne and blemishes, and her hair is kept natural, long, and straight. While the “clean girl” aesthetic speaks to the postfeminist emphasis on self-regulation and femininity as a bodily property, it also highlights its commodification of difference. Niche sub-aesthetics have emerged from the broader “clean girl” aesthetic, as evidenced by the proliferation of popular fruit-centric micro-trends such as “strawberry girls,” “coconut girls,” and “tomato girls.” By reproducing and interpolating key “clean girl” principles in the form of hyper-specific aesthetics, these sub-genres present as individual expressions of femininity when, in reality, they all promote women’s constant self-fashioning via consumerism.

Girl #2: “Girl Dinner”

The next concept, “girl dinner,” gained traction mid-2023, when TikToker Olivia Maher uploaded a TikTok video showing off a simple uncooked dinner consisting of cheese, grapes, bread, and pickles, dubbing it “girl dinner” and jokingly comparing it to an average medieval peasant’s meal.¹⁶ Within weeks, the “girl dinner” meme gained viral attention and could be widely found across social media platforms. On the phrase, Maher explains that “it feels like such a girl dinner because we do it when our boyfriends aren’t around, and we don’t have to have what’s a ‘typical dinner.’”¹⁷ Thus “girl dinner” enthusiasts view the concept as a liberating force from the restrictive gender norms placed on women to cook and consume well-rounded, nutritious meals.

¹⁶ “Girl Dinner.”

¹⁷ Roy, “Is It a Meal?”



Figures 2 & 3. Tiktok user @liviemaher

Yet while “girl dinner” encourages women to opt out of cooking and eat what they want solely for their individual consumption, it simultaneously limits their ability to sufficiently nourish themselves; “girl dinner” is a bag of popcorn, not a hunk of steak. At its core, “girl dinner” is an aesthetic assemblage of snacks which, individually, do not qualify as a full meal, and yet is eaten as one. In this way, women are only allowed to eat for their pleasure within the bounds of a romanticized underconsumption. By encouraging women to act as free agents in spite of the expectations that structure their literal consumption habits while simultaneously affirming such expectations, the dichotomy of “girl dinner” is reflective of postfeminism’s emphasis on women’s supposed freedom of choice.

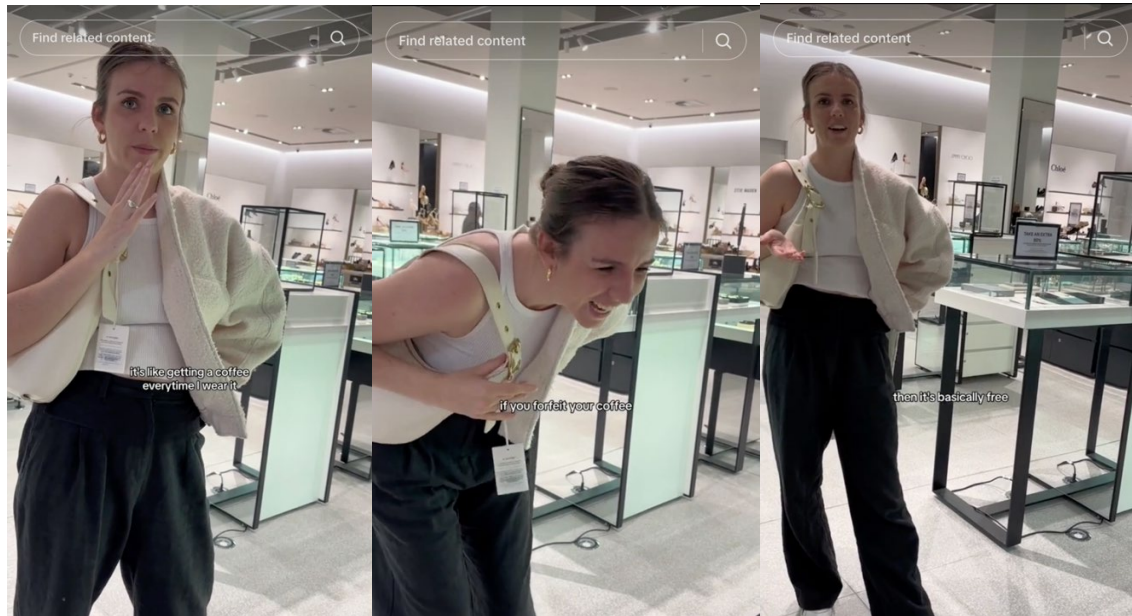
Girl #3: “Girl Math”

Another high-level “girl” concept that emerged from “girl dinner” is “girl math,” a meme which highlights the various ways in which women use irrational math to justify their purchases or expenses.¹⁸ TikToker samjamessssss was the first to discuss this phenomenon in August of 2023, describing key principles such as “Anything under five dollars feels free.”¹⁹ The concept captures women’s various justifications for their spending habits: “anything paid in cash is free;” “if something is on sale and I don’t buy it, I’m losing money;” and “If I don’t buy myself a coffee today, I’m making money,” to name a few examples. By sharing similar mental accounting techniques on social media, engaging

¹⁸ “Boy Math / Girl Math.”

¹⁹ “Samjames on TikTok.”

in the “girl math” trend allows women to feel seen by others who resonate with it as “universal experience” and “lifestyle” shared amongst women.²⁰



Figures 3, 4, & 5. Tiktok user @caitlinwiig

The irony of “girl math” is implied by the media texts in which it circulates, though this doesn’t mean that the meme encourages reflection on the issue of women’s spending habits whatsoever. On the contrary, “girl math” invites viewers to project their own behavior onto the meme, thus perpetuating a mythologized consumption without spending. More specifically, though, “girl math” reduces the importance of one’s consumption to that which occurs in the present. Rather than the sum of one’s past financial decisions, “girl math” posits women’s present consumptive choices as a defining point of their identity; though it may not follow a conventional understanding of fiscal responsibility, “girl math” follows an economic rationale constructed by individual women themselves. In this way, “girl math” simultaneously promotes poor financial management while empowering women to manage themselves around and through capitalist consumption, in order to maximize their capital and become their fullest, most “logical” selves.

Conclusion

As this analysis aims to illustrate, contemporary “girl” culture promotes female empowerment through individualized aesthetics and behaviors which encompass consumptive practices. Plenty of scholars have explored the related “girl” trends not mentioned here—such as the rise (and fall) of the #girlboss and the carefree hedonism associated with Megan Thee Stallion’s “hot girl summer.”^{21,22} Among the two most prominent “girl” trends in social media culture thus far, both of these concepts aided in the widespread digitization of “girl” culture and thus established the foundation upon which micro-trends like the “clean girl” aesthetic, “girl dinner,” and “girl math,” have emerged. While social media enables new modes of identity, expression, play, and community, contemporary “girl” culture remains privy to

²⁰ “Daniela | Holistic Health on TikTok.”

²¹ Perro, Ebony L., “Thee Megan Movement: Defining and Exploring Hot Girl Rhetoric.”

²² Alexandersson and Kalonaityte, “Girl Bosses, Punk Poodles, and Pink Smoothies.”

the patriarchal norms and coercive logics of neoliberal capitalist society. In this light, the contradictions within “girl” culture today present an opportunity for more inclusive and progressive representations of girlhood in the future.

Bibliography

Alexandersson, Anna, and Viktorija Kalonaityte. “Girl Bosses, Punk Poodles, and Pink Smoothies: Girlhood as Enterprising Femininity.” *Gender, Work & Organization* 28, no. 1 (January 2021): 416–38. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12582>.

Bae, Michelle S. “Interrogating Girl Power: Girlhood, Popular Media, and Postfeminism.” *Visual Arts Research* 37, no. 2 (2011): 28–40. <https://doi.org/10.5406/visuartsrese.37.2.0028>.

Banet-Weiser, Sarah. *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*. Duke University Press, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478002772>.

Banet-Weiser, Sarah, Rosalind Gill, and Catherine Rottenberg. “Postfeminism, Popular Feminism and Neoliberal Feminism? Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg in Conversation.” *Feminist Theory* 21, no. 1 (January 2020): 3–24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700119842555>.

Brown, Wendy. “Neo-Liberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy.” *Theory & Event* 7, no. 1 (2003). <https://doi.org/10.1353/tae.2003.0020>.

Dictionary.com. “Tumblr Girl Meaning & Origin | Slang by Dictionary.Com.” <https://www.dictionary.com/e/slang/tumblr-girl/>.

Farris, Sara R. *In the Name of Women’s Rights*. Duke University Press, 2017. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv11sn2fp>.

Gill, Rosalind. “Culture and Subjectivity in Neoliberal and Postfeminist Times.” *Subjectivity* 25, no. 1 (December 2008): 432–45. <https://doi.org/10.1057/sub.2008.28>.

———. “Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility.” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10, no. 2 (May 2007): 147–66. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549407075898>.

Kaye, D. Bondy Valdovinos, Jing Zeng, and Patrik Wikström. *TikTok: Creativity and Culture in Short Video*. Medford: Polity Press, 2022.

Know Your Meme. “Boy Math / Girl Math,” September 26, 2023. <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/boy-math-girl-math>.

Know Your Meme. “Girl Dinner,” July 12, 2023. <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/girl-dinner>.

Know Your Meme. “Just Little Things,” March 22, 2013. <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/just-little-things>.

Marwick, Alice E. “Instafame: Luxury Selfies in the Attention Economy.” *Public Culture* 27, no. 1 (January 1, 2015): 137–60. <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-2798379>.

Perro, Ebony L. “Thee Megan Movement: Defining and Exploring Hot Girl Rhetoric.”

<https://web.p.ebscohost.com/abstract?direct=true&profile=ehost&scope=site&authtype=crawler&jrnl=21600104&AN=161923501&h=QDXtUcNGNzFp0A%2bFm6NaeHNj3R0DGTXI7933BLRKiOGsqDDNPNkJzcSIJgd3k5cxM0ejaYAK9rPL%2fkkuY%2fKbhg%3d%3d&crl=c&resultNs=AdminWebAuth&resultLocal=ErrCriNotAuth&crlhashurl=login.aspx%3fdirect%3dtrue%26profile%3dehost%26scope%3dsite%26authtype%3dcrawler%26jrnl%3d21600104%26AN%3d161923501>.

Rottenberg, Catherine A. *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*. Vol. 1. Oxford University Press, 2018.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190901226.001.0001>.

Roy, Jessica. “Is It a Meal? A Snack? No, It’s ‘Girl Dinner.’” *The New York Times*, July 8, 2023, sec. Style.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/08/style/girl-dinner.html>.

TikTok. “Daniela | Holistic Health on TikTok.”

https://www.tiktok.com/@danielasotohealth/video/7267396650690268417?referer_url=knowyourmeme.com%2Fmemes%2Fboy-math-girl-math&refer=embed&embed_source=121355058%2C121351166%2C121331973%2C120811592%2C120810756%3Bnull%3Bembed_card_play&referer_video_id=7267396650690268417.

TikTok. “Samjames on TikTok.”

https://www.tiktok.com/@samjamessssss/video/7262888081236282630?referer_url=knowyourmeme.com%2Fmemes%2Fboy-math-girl-math&refer=embed&embed_source=121355058%2C121351166%2C121331973%2C120811592%2C120810756%3Bnull%3Bembed_card_play&referer_video_id=7262888081236282630.

TikTok. “Xolizahbeauty (@xolizahbeauty).” <https://www.tiktok.com/@xolizahbeauty>.