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THE PATRIARCHY BECOMES THAT GIRL: TIKTOK AND THE MEDIATIZATION OF HEGEMONIC FEMININITY

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A Thesis

Presented to the

Faculty of

California State University,

San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment

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by

Irene Molinar-Santos

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ABSTRACT

With the advancement of digital and social media come innovative forms of self-expression and creativity. This M.A. thesis manuscript studies how content creators on the fast-growing social media platform, TikTok, arrange aesthetics, trends, and discourse to promote self-care through hegemonic beauty and wellness standards while empowering themselves through postfeminist sensibilities. Much like early beauty standards set by social media applications such as Instagram, TikTok (along with its algorithm and users) is (re)defining femininity by asking women to look at reexamine their appearance and mentalities to better themselves internally for the sake of self-improvement. Trends such as That Girl illustrate lifestyles that commercialize wellness, organization, and beauty while simultaneously engaging in rhetoric reproducing problematic gender relations, postfeminist values, and hegemonic beauty standards. Using a critical cultural approach, I examine how the mediatization of wellness and beauty essentially illustrates Western culture's transformation of mindfulness into a productivity method and asks participating women to partake in trending practices while pursuing an illusion of control in their daily lives.

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"The challenge these days, is to be somewhere, to belong to some particular place, invest oneself in it, draw strength and courage from it, to dwell in a community."

- bell hooks

My community consists of many incredible individuals who have all made contributions to the completion of this work. Because of them, I find sweet delight in my curiosities, moments of growth, and failures.

First and foremost, thank you to my beautiful husband. These past two years have been met with significant challenges, yet I have felt safe, loved, and championed because of your care and kindness. Coming home to your sweet nothings kept me going more than you know.

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To my baby sister, thank you for your genuine and loving friendship. Thank you for constantly engaging with me and reminding me to laugh at myself every once in a while. In every lifetime, *you* are the woman who inspires me the most. I love you, fish.

Thank you to the women in my cohort who have stood as fabulous cheerleaders and companions. I am thankful to witness your success and cannot wait to see what you all accomplish. Thank you for the memories.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to *Mr. Google*. Dad, thank you for your never-ending, always-inspiring support. We've come a long way from state capital tests and book reports, but I am thankful to have had you by my side every step of the way. It is because of you that I am able to venture into the beautiful world of academia. I love you.

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CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION

As social media have developed vastly, TikTok's recent follower

expansion calls for the application to be recognized as one of the fastest-growing

social media platforms. Like other popular social media, TikTok allows users to

illustrate creativity through content creation. The entrepreneurial spirit of TikTok

has quickly begun to incorporate traditionally feminine domains into its culture of

digital production.

Recognized as "trends," TikTok users combine discourse, editing styles,

audio and visual patterns, and similar messages that communicate central

themes others may build on or replicate. Trends such as TikTok's That Girl

highlight postfeminist concepts and demonstrate empowered femininity through

indulging endorsed products, foods, activities, and material. Duffy and Hund

(2015) recognize the present-day logic of postfeminism as the celebration of

"individual choice, independence, and modes of self-expression rooted in the

consumer marketplace" (p. 3). Through a new medium and this trend, women

engage in postfeminist action that illuminates their freedom of choice, allowing

them to feel empowered in relishing in their femininity, caring for their mental

well-being through amplified routine and order, and working toward proper public

presentations masqueraded as self-care.

Through extensive beauty routines, consumption, and self-discipline, That Girl resonates with women looking to be better "versions of themselves" by consuming product after product. These women construct femininity as a bodily property that highlights women's role in media shifting from objectification to subjectification with an "emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring, and self-discipline" (Gill, 2007, p. 147). That Girl commercializes intimate, everyday moments by commodifying early morning routines and encouraging a "grind mindset" through neatly edited videos. These videos often feature low-profile influencers promoting a 5 a.m. wake-up time and an immediate dive into an exercise routine, journaling, or a 10-step skincare routine. The videos incorporate rhetoric of femininity such as hashtags and captions like, "How to become that girl…" or "How to become more feminine" and display 10-15 products that may assist women. McRobbie (2015) describes this search for better as 'the perfect' that requires extensive self-regulation on the journey to an ideal life implicitly by means of capitalist patriarchy. That Girl also adopts wellness techniques that adhere to a strict organization and regulation of living experiences while simultaneously asking women to be mindful and spiritually focused—essentially illustrating Western culture's transformation of mindfulness into a productivity method. Products are being sold, but also a way of life—consumerism, productivity in the interests of capitalism and patriarchy, obsessive attention to self (narcissism), and a consumerist lifestyle. As women enlist That Girl's specific routines and products to achieve their ideal lifestyle, they do so while pursuing an

illusion of control in their daily lives. This begs the question of how TikTok serves as a new digital mode of creative production that reinforces, rather than challenges, hegemonic and oppressive beauty standards while simultaneously empowering the women that partake. This paper details That Girl content production and discourse in the analysis section, applying mediatization theory and critical cultural insights.

Mediatization theory is a fundamental framework that acknowledges how advancing technologies penetrate social and cultural life (Döveling et al., 2018). To understand how TikTok provides a new foundation for repackaged beauty and wellness standards, it is crucial to analyze how this relatively new medium permeates the social construct of gendered expectations for both production and consumption of the media. Agha (2011) argues that mediatization works in tandem with commoditization as various mediatized foundations create links between communicative processes and socioeconomic divisions of labor. This becomes evident in social media content creation, such as That Girl. To examine That Girl's virality, critical cultural perspective aids in questioning the motives of the trend participants—whether participating in production or consumption and their postfeminist sensibilities. This paper will investigate postfeminism, focusing on how ideal femininity is portrayed in the trend and how it empowers women through capitalistic consumption (McIntyre, 2021). Neatly aligned with capitalism and neoliberalism, postfeminism has asked women to participate in self-expression through individual empowerment and consumption (Adriaens &

Bauwel, 2014). Regarding contemporary digital modes of production, women are inclined to participate in social media content creation because of its ability to produce promising careers and empower online communities.

This research study focuses on the discourse and visual content surrounding femininity within That Girl and examines the relationship between commodified culture and femininity. Through a critical lens, I first examine how the entwinements of postfeminist and neoliberal principles have cultivated a solid following, creating a new sense of feminine women's communities on TikTok. This ultimately provides women with empowerment and confidence to engage in digital production and consumption-enabled everyday beautification and feminine wellness practices. I engage with mediatization theory to understand how emerging aesthetics and routines within user-generated content drive femininity discourse forward through ideas of self-expression and creativity and how they assist in commodifying culture and intimacy. In hopes of understanding the subtle shift of how women perceive and alter themselves to meet the demands of a new online trend, I depend on mediatization theory to examine the amalgamation of the human users and the medium of TikTok. Analyzing the visual culture of That Girl and the discourse surrounding it will help answer the following research question: How does TikTok afford the promotion of hegemonic beauty and wellness standards through its That Girl trend? Answering that question calls for an analysis of who participates in the trend, how they employ it, and how their audience responds.

CHAPTER TWO:

LITERATURE REVIEW

(Post) Feminist Neoliberalism

Feminist media studies have unceasingly witnessed various manifestations of feminist thoughts, concepts, and articulations. Through Banet-Weiser et al.'s (2020) acknowledgment of the intertwined relationship between postfeminism, popular feminism, and neoliberal feminism, it is evident that these contemporary approaches to feminist thought collaboratively build upon one another. By conceiving postfeminism as a sensibility, Gill (2007) argues the ability to critically approach postfeminist media culture's inconsistent nature. This inconsistency occurs as postfeminist media often enmeshes feminist and anti-feminist notions (Gill, 2007). Sensibility was intended to analytically acknowledge postfeminism within text and ideas (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020). Sensibility additionally recognized characteristics that are "explored through notions of affect, public mood, [or] atmosphere" (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020, p. 5). As feminist scholars continue to analyze the dimensions of feminism, it remains crucial to acknowledge how various media incorporate and utilize these dimensions.

Previous feminist scholars have grown worrisome about feminism's latest transformation into a commodified notion that associates itself with individual empowerment and choice (McIntyre, 2021). From Gill's (2016) demonstration of the blurred lines that exist between feminism and femininity to Budgeon's (2015)

critique of choice feminism's contributions to neoliberalism's reclamation of feminist ideals, there is a distinct and persistent call to action for feminist scholars to dependably recognize how late capitalism and neoliberalism has bonded itself to feminism. Common themes among postfeminist ideals include choice, individual consumption, and empowerment (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020; Budgeon, 2015; McIntyre, 2021; Adriaens & Bauwel, 2014; Gill, 2016).

Choice feminism often works to empower the individual woman, focusing on success concerning her career, entrepreneurial efforts, and capitalist consumption (McIntyre, 2021). Ultimately, the concept argues that the choices women can now make are evidence of their liberation that first and second-wave feminism could not grant (Budgeon, 2015). This leads to the argument that all choices are feminist. Choices to indulge in makeup, partake in gender-divided labor, become a stay-at-home mother, or enjoy pornography were all included in this feminism (Ferguson, 2010). The all-encompassing acceptance of these choices led choice feminism to become a widely accepted and attractive form of feminism (Ferguson, 2010). Women had permission to combine neoconservative and liberal values, allowing them to be "traditional, radical simultaneously, and pretty at the same time" (Adriaens & Bauwel, 2014, p. 178). With the power to choose, women's options undoubtedly widened as they began to consider what consumption might look like when they were in charge. Yet, as seen in the That Girl trend, such empowerment through choice is least concerned with hegemonic patriarchal and capitalistic influences.

This form of feminism continuously grows controversial. Bellafante (1998) critiqued the validity of contemporary feminism as she recalls the shift from a political movement to one in which personal consumption and choice receive top priority. With the idea of consumption under the guise of feminism now greenlit, women began to focus on how their private and consumer lives may grant them access to a better way of life (Adriaens & Bauwel, 2014). Placing a focus on the self essentially asked women to examine their 'rank' and highlighted the potentiality to live a life of balance. Balance, used as a measurement, forces women to locate a perfect spot of contentment. McRobbie (2015) acknowledges the 'dispositif' that acts as a façade for male dominance and takes the form of feminine self-regulation. Through choice and self-regulation, women could consume and calculate the efforts and products required to unlock their ideal lifestyle. The calculations of success done by women often include charting their efforts in their relationships, their dietary choices, their motherhood (or lack thereof), their sex appeal, their appearance, and more (McRobbie, 2015). Because women themselves, McRobbie (2015) notes, make these efforts and decisions to calculate the measures, the idea that women are in control of their affairs and lives exists. Consumption becomes an investment as women, and society, value taking care of their image (Agenjo-Calderon, 2021). Women, empowered through choice and unashamed to consume, become the target market to sell route to ideal femininity via - capitalist patriarchal consumption, which relies on woman's femininity and wellness discontent.

Discontentment and Docility

The notion of selling discontentment to women is not new. Second-wave feminism fought for society to recognize women beyond their beauty and sexuality. Third-wave feminism celebrated and asked the world to embrace the beauty of women's bodies in all shapes and forms (Riordan, 2001). The irony of female liberation and beauty is that the freedoms and privileges of modern women have yet to grant them physical contentment and satisfaction with themselves (Wolf, 1991). While women achieve new dimensions of power, consumer spending, eating disorders, and cosmetic surgery also reach new heights (Wolf, 1991). The target zones and nature of desirables features have changed since the 90s, but Wolf's observation, in principle, remains accurate to this day. Thus, it is fair to examine how women continue to incorporate this power of choice into the construction of their everyday lives.

Advertising undoubtedly plays a significant role in illustrating what could be for women. Through marketing, insecurity- and discontent-based consumption is fueled, further preserving our patriarchal society (Gurrieri, 2021). The idea that consumers, specifically women, can re-invent themselves and transform their lives through consumption is essential to American advertising culture (Kilbourne, 1999). The inherent competitive nature of American culture allowed advertisers to appeal to women looking to upgrade themselves and saw great success in individualized feminine empowerment and self-care. Using a Foucauldian perspective, McRobbie (2015) describes the 'perfect' that women strive for as a

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"highly hetero-normative vector of competition" (p. 7). Bordo's (1993) implementation of Foucault's "docile bodies" also looks at the regulation of the body. Through forms of discipline and alteration—female bodies specifically—become accustomed to "external regulation, subjection, transformation, [and] improvement" (Bordo, 1993, p. 2363). The examination of feminist discourse on the body continues as advertising culture further advances into patriarchal demands. As the patriarchy exists within complex structures that disregard women, culture lives as a primary structure that can generate gendered meanings from a patriarchal perspective and ultimately creates different norms and expectancies for both men and women (Gurrieri, 2021). As Gurrieri (2021) notes, patriarchal marketing symbolically annihilates women through trivialization, omission, and condemnation—essentially fortifying the notion that the natural condition of the female body is far from acceptable.

The idea of "better" through consumption heightens the concept of competitiveness. Women begin to regulate not only compete with themselves but with other women. The suggestion of competition is less about women and femininity and more about the institutional power men uphold (Wolf, 1991). Regarding beauty, the competition women partake in—whether against themselves or other women—becomes invisible labor. This labor of beauty and self-improvement continues to utilize a creative economy and mediums that afford immediate return of investment for some while continuing the sale of discontent for others, more and more so via social media now.

Gendered Relations in Social Media Production

Social media's credit as catalysts for promising careers has continuously

solidified as new platforms develop. As Duffy (2015) notes, many social media

platforms continue to act as catalysts for personal and professional success.

Linking gender to TikTok's ability to turn content creation into successful careers

provides an understanding of the patriarchal and capitalist undertones that drive

social media production. While advocates for social media flaunt platforms' ability

to embrace autonomy and liberty, media scholars call for critical approaches to

social platforms and affordances. The development of entrepreneurial femininity

relies on postfeminist notions such as choice, self-expression, and empowerment

(Duffy & Hund, 2015). Beyond choice and self-expression, individualization is an

additional concept from neoliberal ideologies. Putting the self at the forefront of

responsibility to contribute and benefit from economic success gradually became

heavily romanticized by creatives in digital media. Social media labor began to

incorporate terms such as 'passion' to amplify the reality of social media creators

being paid to do what they love (Duffy, 2016). Due to their desire to be

discovered, creatives glamorize this form of digital labor, hanging on its vague

and unstable promise of guaranteed success (Duffy, 2016). For women, the

promise of a creative career in which they are free to choose, self-express, and

feel empowered through creativity is enough to partake in 'hope labor' that

motivates digital creators to believe their content creation may lead to an

exposure that advances successful career opportunities in social media (Kuehn

& Corrigan, 2013). Despite hegemonic neoliberal drawbacks, this 'hope labor' does have tangible empowerment examples, as seen in the forthcoming section analyzing That Girl creators who earn a living through their postfeminist femininity work on platform.

Consequently, the social media influencer as a desirable career choice is born and poised to partake in 'hope labor,' gain exposure and validity through their platform. Influencer labor varies depending on their selected content niche. As video game streamers may be required to participate in live videos for hours, beauty influencers strive to edit videos of their makeup routines and finished looks—all of this is unpaid hope labor (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013). Through this hope labor, women influencers and creators undertake neoliberal feminist efforts in which they become entrepreneurial personas participating in individualized personal branding, aiming to guide and inspire their audiences to consume promoted products or experiences. The ultimate goal for the influencer is for the informal labor—whether blogging, video editing, poetry publishing, social media production, etc.—to shift into paid media work, similar to the workings of earlier media's political economy of commodifying audiences. As influencers try to obtain the economic rewards of a commodified audience, they straddle the line of work and hobby.

With new digital technology increasingly blurring the lines between what is labor versus what is leisure, explicitly regarding social media production, scholars should aim to amplify how these new technologies affect media economies and

values under neoliberalism (Dolber, 2016). Fuchs' (2012) reference to the

audience commodity as the transformation of humans into instruments for profit

illustrates the circumstances of current social media consumption where users

are not only consuming but driving forward discussion to help create new

meanings. As the audience remains the primary commodity of media, it works

alongside content and advertisers to develop these dependent relationships that

ultimately form consciousness through the exchange of conceptual meaning

(Riordan, 2001; Smythe, 1977). Recognizing the audience as a commodity

explains why brands and brand messaging—carefully crafted and altered to the

fondness of their audience—play a significant role in claiming said audience.

<u>Branding The (Un)Authentic Self</u>

A 'personal brand' allows influencers to illustrate who they are through

their work—how their personal life contributes to their journey as an influencer.

By building attractive and approachable social media profiles, influencers

strongly affect their followers' decision-making and loyalty to their cultivated

brand (Hudders et al., 2021). Duffy and Chan (2019) recall the extent to which

contemporary society promotes strategy for building a reputable brand from the

self. The authors recognize how universities across the United States and the

United Kingdom have offered courses on personal branding for young

entrepreneurs to create commodities from themselves online through their social

media platforms. Various social media engage in selective self-presentation that

allows users to customize their shared information and profiles. This ultimately

provides the opportunity for users to create a 'storefront' for the self, aiming to be the perfect combination of highly curated and genuinely authentic (Bayer et al., 2020).

Incorporating a sense of authenticity and rawness concerning gender affords influencers the ability to seem approachable, able to reach a more extensive and potentially more loyal following, and the chance to partake in "feminine self-expression and visibility within consumer spaces" (Duffy & Hund, 2015, p. 7). Reade's (2021) research looks at 'raw' as an aesthetic that female influencers on Instagram incorporate by posting raw images of their bodies, creating an everyday story through their content, and engaging in the discourse surrounding mental health and body image. This kind of emotional labor disbursed on social media demonstrates influencer interest in building affective relationships and community with their audience and is recognized as having stereotypical feminine traits (Duffy, 2016). The 'realness' in the vulnerable conversations of mental health or body image grants access to audiences' emotional capacity to relate to the influencer. This approach to authenticity and rawness creates digital intimacies between producer and consumer and may assist in helping gain emotional rewards and online encouragement (Reade, 2021; Bayer et al., 2020).

While the authentic self of an influencer appears to communicate honesty or sincerity, the primary objective of a commodifiable audience negates genuine authenticity. Eventually, it turns content development into high-strategy

techniques to gain larger audiences (Driel & Dumitrica, 2021). Reade (2021) suggests authenticity plays a role in advertising's performative ecology as the digital and actual selves become entangled. Authenticity advertising has seen promise in recent years—especially in the beauty and fashion fields, where the idea of 'real' women has been sold to women consumers. The push for authenticity in branding extends well into social media as bloggers work to enhance their relatability with their audiences. Duffy (2016) examines how female bloggers articulate and originate value from their entrepreneurial activities. Through in-depth interviews with beauty and fashion bloggers, she accounts for the disconnect between the appeals to normality from the bloggers and the actual social, cultural, and economic capital required to participate in their creative online pursuits. The research demonstrates a side of aspirational labor beyond investment and hope and illustrates a creative voice's privilege and individualized freedom. Applying the aforementioned postfeminist sensibility to this individualized freedom of a creative voice illuminates the neoliberal governmentality rooted in digital production, where the self becomes subjected, prioritized, and ultimately commodified.

Whether authentic or not, the self is a valuable asset on social media. Users' thoughts, opinions, expertise, and endorsements string together to create digital narratives. Nygren and Gidlund's (2012) application of pastoral power to digital technology recognizes technologies' ability to enable and amplify self-narratives or the 'storying of the self' and how an illusion of control is disbursed

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through individualized self-expression as seen later in the analysis section featuring That Girl creators. For them, this illusion of governance goes beyond the commodified audience, deceiving even the deceivers (themselves) through a spectacle of their neatly produced videos.

The Spectacle of Marketing

To understand the making of the spectacle in That Girl, I turn to Debord's (1967) The Society of the Spectacle looks, which explains image and presentation as deriving from intense forms of capitalist consumption. Debord argues that while capitalism had initially provided society with means for survival, the extension of consumer culture created a form of 'augmented survival' that psychologically transforms the wants and desires of consumers into needs. Evoking the concepts of image and perception, Debord explored consumer culture's shift from "having to appearing— [in which] all having must now derive its immediate prestige and its ultimate purpose from appearances" (p. 5). This shift focused on motive alterations as these new capitalist modes of production asked consumers to consider how new commodities may work to improve or adjust their image. As an image-obsessed society progresses, the success and fruition of modern advertising become even more comprehensible. Described as more of a social relation among people, the spectacle provides insight into why consumers decide about their purchases, choices, or investments (Debord, 1967).

In industries such as fashion, consumption heavily depends on consumers' ability to cultivate identities from their purchases (Manurung & Alvin, 2021). Consumers eventually, and even now, find comfort in the persona their products create for them. Technology giant, Apple, began its 2007 "Get a Mac" campaign that heavily relied on fundamentals of the spectacle by appealing to the image their MacBook representative provided as opposed to the old and 'played-out' persona given off by a PC user. Livingstone (2011) notes that the playful, creative, and laid-back identity construct of the Mac user allows the consumer to connect with this model of an individual that they would like to emulate. Lifestyle advertising often does transform consumers' wants to need— igniting a fantasy of their ideal version of themselves brought to life by the promoted products (Livingstone, 2011). This lifestyle advertising it what That Girl phenomena is all about.

As the spectacle represents a hegemonic model of life and technology mirrors hegemonic social ideas, self-presentation through social media is rooted in the notion of dominant ideals (Debord, 1967; Nygren & Gidlund, 2012). Essentially, it becomes easier for social media users to perform to the standard contemporary society finds more attractive and acceptable. This notion aligns with Nygren and Gidlund's (2012) claim that digital technology seduces users to digitally stage the self in a way that adheres to contemporary desires, needs, or ideologies that new technologies may impel on society. Because of this, the illusion of control over the self is shattered, resulting in the self gradually

becoming alienated in its effort to perform for all that is socially hegemonic (Nygren & Gidlund, 2012). Scott (2022) writes of similar foreseen social media pressures regarding performance, claiming that "self-definition can become unhealthily bound to other people's reactions to our [social media] posts" (Scott, 2022, p. 69).

Current scholarship continues to recognize social media as breeding grounds for the spectacle and often calls for the demystification of how tendencies of neoliberalism infiltrate new digital technologies. Nygren and Gidlund (2012) argue that the "norms and hierarchies governing the processes of capitalistic hegemony tend to be hidden" and further disguised as individual choice and control (p. 514). While the advancement of new digital technologies such as social media continues, examining the concept of choice on platforms—despite their opaqueness—is essential. Duffy and Chan's (2019) work looked at how various platforms carried different expectations and standards for what is socially acceptable to share by its users. Research showed that while the social media application Snapchat was more personable and intimate, Instagram was recognized as an application meant for carefully edited and curated photos and captions. Ultimately, this Web 2.0 enabled the mediatization of everyday life, creating a new culture in which the self was not only experienced but presented online (Raun, 2018). New social media application, TikTok, has shown a recent rise in popularity that calls for careful consideration of how its visual culture may

create new norms and standards for how users choose to self-express and present.

TikTok: Advancing Visual Culture and Identity Formation

Founded in 2016, TikTok rose to popularity in 2020 as it was reported to hold 800 million monthly users (Montag et al., 2021). With one billion monthly active users, TikTok's application audience averages 858 minutes per month (Geyser, 2022). As over half of the online users are between 16 and 24 years of age, TikTok remains an application heavily shaped and representative of youth culture (Barta & Andalibi, 2021). The application enables users to create short play-back videos that contain lip-syncing content, opinions, hot takes, comedy skits, how-to advice, and much more. Like other popular social media, TikTok allows users to drive up the engagement of various content by liking, sharing, downloading, and commenting on the videos displayed on one's For You Page (FYP_—the term for users' home feed. Through their interactions, users generate their FYP in which content they most align with surfaces on their screen. Unlike Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, TikTok's algorithm strays from feeding content from the users' followed accounts and instead pulls from content that users frequently engage with through video viewing time, liking, and commenting (Klug et al., 2021). The surveillance of what users like versus dislike, what they spend time with compared to what they swipe on, demonstrates the length to which social media applications cater to the self-identity. TikTok users themselves held folk theories that viewed identity as

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significant to how their FYP is curated and willingly interact with content that they perceive to align with their identity (Karizat et al., 2021).

This mirroring and projecting of their lives onto their screens illustrate the power of algorithms created through surveillance. Surveillance, while often noted for its ability to seize privacy or data from the user, should be more often remembered for its role in allowing the internet to uphold a mirror to ourselves (Scott, 2022). Through its algorithmic processes, TikTok creates users' FYP that projects everything that the user is and wants to be. Rather than the foundation of interaction being between the user and the social network itself, the exchange is between a user and their 'algorithmized' version of self (Bhandari & Bimo, 2020). This performed self loses more control of itself and furthers along the alienation process in which individuals may be unable to retreat into a place of privacy for their own sake (Nygren & Gidlund, 2012; Scott, 2022). On TikTok, the obscurity of this alienation process does not do much to prompt awareness among its users. Instead, it romanticizes the opportunities of the application as the chances for self-expression, fame, and community seem almost boundless. Previously acknowledged as a 'lottery ticket,' each TikTok video posted gives users a chance to access instant online fame and furthers the seemingly endless production of online content by its users (Granados, 2020).

The application affordances of TikTok play a significant role in distinguishing it from other applications such as Instagram or Facebook. First, its algorithms are certainly primary drivers for content distribution, as opposed to

providing content from an already established network of friends and family (Granados, 2020). Second, it positions its users as 'creators' which validates users' expressions of creativity and ownership of their videos and, furthermore, their truths shared online. Finally, its key distinction is one that lies in the perception that TikTok is recognized as more 'laid-back' and approachable for both the production and consumption of present, intimate moments packaged in bite-sized visual narratives (Granados, 2020). Barta and Andalibi (2021) found that TikTok's emotionality is perceived as more amplified, noting that users become comfortable with revealing intimate details about their fears and insecurities. This sense of emotional labor disbursed by creators is what presents them with the chance to form digital intimacies, further providing them with social and economic allowances (Reade, 2021).

The visual culture of TikTok itself places very little to no emphasis or requirement on originality (Granados, 2020). Much of the production of content on TikTok is essentially reproduction, inviting users to join in on challenges, trends, and creative forms. There is a large privileging of sound versus image on the application as trending audios or audio memes receive new visual narratives or interpretations depending on the creator implementing the audio into their content (Abidin, 2020). Essentially, as one user may use an audio bite for their content to express confidence or excitement, another user may use the audio to express sorrow or pain—all completely dependent on the user's interpretation of the audio. Establishing completely new visual narratives from reprocessed

memes or trends demonstrates the inscription of identity within each video posted (Darvin, 2022). Staging the self and presenting identity through these creative pursuits becomes possible and encouraged through this new and fast-growing social media application. This staging of the self becomes conceivable through the heavy mediatization of daily life, social processes, and culture.

<div align="center">Mediatization</div>

Understanding how new media technologies, such as TikTok, can transform or influence everyday life and practices, especially in case of That Girl trend, calls for utilizing mediatization theory. Döveling et al. (2018) recognize mediatization theory's insight into the "interconnectedness of media and social life, of social processes, culture, and the everyday" and examine how social media create emotional exchanges that lead to digital affect cultures (p.1). Mediatization explores how media structures everyday life of society. The 'democratic' nature of online media has allowed it to be recognized as one in which human connection, individuality, and belonging is present. Nie et al. (2014) note that this is the very reason a dependency exists between society and media logic—referring to the "construction of reality as portrayed by the media" (p.364). Unraveling online reality and offline reality becomes especially difficult as the internet and social media partaking become rooted in our everyday, giving birth to what scholars have previously recognized as a false binary (Reade, 2021).

The restructuring of our reality through media is primarily what drives mediatization scholarship forward. Schulz (2004) approached mediatization

through four distinct dimensions. First, he claims that media technologies can extend beyond the normal bounds of human communication, limited by space and time; second, substitution, he notes, recalls society's implementation of media in place of traditional human interaction; third, the amalgamation of mediated and non-mediated activities allows us to alter reality as media slowly attaches itself to our everyday lives; and fourth, he claims accommodation illustrates the social change we have granted to media, noting many institutions' adherence to the rules of the media system (Schultz, 2004). This interpretation of mediatization shows that media's slow but consistent diffusion into our institutions and societal culture is a transformation process. This transformation of cultural beliefs does not end at the institutional level. Notions of media, such as branding or visibility, have demonstrated how media-saturated our society has become, with even private moments and experiences mediatized (Lunt & Livingstone, 2016). The media's steady infiltration of private moments has ultimately led to the commercialization of intimacy—creating new opportunities from mediatized intimacy as illustrated in the analysis section dedicated to That Girl Influencers' work in this area.

Mediatization of The Everyday

The mediatization of online users' everyday lives on contemporary media powerfully demonstrates Debord's claim that everything that was once directly experienced and lived, is now arguably set up for presentation from a distance (Debord, 1967). The self, its role in every day, and its relation to the viewer has

been a well-studied artifact as scholars have previously examined social media

users' experiment with rawness, surveillance, and intimacy (Reade, 2021; Raun,

2018; Duffy & Chang, 2019).

Social media has created a capital out of intimacy, affording content

creators with economic gain through their efforts to appear more genuine and

authentic to their audience. A social construct, authenticity is cultivated by both

the content creator and content consumer, demonstrating the active role the

audience plays determining what makes content authentic and what does not

(Barta & Andalibi, 2021). Through comment sections of social media posts, the

audience essentially governs what is authentic through their own interpretations.

This cultural interpretation drives forward discourse surrounding any subject,

opening the door for conversation, agreement (or lack of), and new definitions of

the 'truth' (Cavalcante, 2017). Regarding authenticity, audience interpretation

relies heavily on content creators' ability to capture intimacy and rawness.

Demonstrating rawness on one's social media platform or profile allows the user

to build a sense of trust and belonging, cultivating digital intimacy between

themselves and their audience or followers (Reade, 2021). Like a recipe,

creators use audience perception to create a sense of manipulated intimacy. This

manipulation may use artifacts of daily intimate routines. This strategized

intimacy asks creators to establish personas comfortable with exposing details of

their personal lives, such as their thoughts, product consumption, food habits,

sex life, insecurities, dreams, and more, to appear less regulated or controlled

(Raun, 2018). Regarding TikTok, the calibrated amateurism of the application

creates an obscure reality in which all content creators are cognizant of their

humility as they generate content from their bedrooms, kitchens, bathrooms, or

inside their vehicles. The capture of the banality of life through storytelling assists

in achieving perceptions of intimacy and authenticity (Reade, 2021). This leads to

digital media content creators to read authenticity and create empowerment

through an illusory sense of belonging and control.

CHAPTER THREE:

METHODOLOGY

That Girl, as a trend, pulls from various theoretical notions. At its core, it is a persona—illustrated through social media's ability to enhance storytelling efforts through visual media. The That Girl persona is the self, preforming for online viewers—specifically women. The literature review, much like That Girl, demonstrates multiple theoretical frameworks such as feminist media critique, the political economy of communication, the spectacle, and mediatization. Therefore, engaging in a theory-driven form of analysis proves useful for dissecting That Girl.

Mediatization, though the overall arching framework, contains multiple blind spots such as a lack of understanding the roles in which gender and power play in the discourse of this trend. To mitigate the blind spots, I work mediatization theory in with other frameworks to help conceptualize That Girl. Examining That Girl through the framework of mediatization theory asks scholars to note how new media technologies not only afford expedited and accepted consumption habits but enlist feminist language and discourse to do so. Here, mediatization is changing how users consume, engage in everyday life, and participate in defining the ideal femininity.

A Case Study Approach

That Girl remains a trend large in size and fast-paced in its online circulation. While the discussion surrounding the trend continues to grow with it holding over 10 billion hashtags on TikTok, there remains an opaqueness about the complexities of That Girl. This study seeks to demonstrate the multifaceted existence of the online TikTok trend, That Girl. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following question:

RQ1: How does That Girl afford a sense of empowerment while promoting hegemonic beauty and wellness standards?

To answer this question, I engage in an interpretative case study analysis of the That Girl trend on TikTok using the proposed literature as a tool kit.

Various methods can be used to study online trends like That Girl. Engaging with TikTok creators through interviews may prove helpful to obtain a thorough perspectives on their lives and work. And online surveys can be used to study people's exposure to such trends and their effects. However, I am interested in the larger conversation of That Girl and how it contributes to the online dialogue about ideal femininity. These contributions do not solely lie within the thoughts and perspectives of online creators and users. They also exist in the video content itself, including the editing techniques and choices, the discourse within video captions and comment sections, and its adherence to the political economy of the social media application, TikTok. So, my study focuses on That Girl videos and related texts.

That Girl is a multi-faceted phenomenon. And this study seeks to make sense of how That Girl affords empowerment while simultaneously endorsing beauty and wellness standards of hegemony. So, to understand and explain this expansive phenomenon in a rich, nuanced way, I used a multiple case study approach. Case studies are useful for describing and explaining contemporary phenomenon, and they are recognized for their ability to provide in-depth, contextual analysis (Yin, 2018). Tracy (2020) notes that case study researchers "describe and interpret a contextual scene, examine the networks and interactions of causes and effects, and interact empathically with those in the scene" (p. 61). Case studies are especially useful for studying when the "boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident" (Yin, 2017, p. 50). In the context of this study, online users may not necessarily see That Girl's relation to feminist critique or it's contributions to the political economy of communication. Preforming a case study of That Girl helps to illuminate how those processes manifest in real-world online contexts. A case study examination also proves useful in producing pragmatic wisdom as they often work to illuminate power relations existing in phenomenon (Tracy, 2020).

More specifically, this study takes a *multiple* case study approach. The following sections will explain who these TikTok creators are, and how and why I studied them in particular.

Sampling and Data Collection

That Girl is a multi-faceted phenomenon. So, rather than looking at a single case, I used a multiple-case study design to demonstrate the complex and compelling nature of the trend (Yin, 2018). Specifically, I analyzed digital profiles, videos, and resulting comments of three TikTok creators - @kaelimaeee, @enashaolivia, and @rachellldaguanno. The decision regarding which particular TikTok creators to study centered around the theoretical concepts reviewed in my literature review, including feminist media theory, the political economy of communication, and the commercialization of everyday life. In other words, I engaged in "purposive sampling," carefully considering which creators exemplify the That Girl trend and relate to the parameters of the study (Tracy, 2020).

To capture the essence of That Girl, I analyzed its target population of creators—combining through its contributors and selecting three creators who all hold high engagement with the trend. Tracy (2020) notes "identifying exemplars is like finding jewels through an ongoing process of exploring, digging, sorting, coding, and reflecting (Tracy, 2020, p. 245). These three creators— @kaelimaeee, @enashaolivia, and @rachellldaguanno—are exemplars of That Girl, and they illustrate the trend's multi-faceted dimensions, including (post)feminist neoliberalism and the mediatization of everyday life.

I analyzed the creators with the attempt to illuminate similarities and differences within each users' interpretation of That Girl. As found in Yin (2017), multiple-case studies often utilize analogous logic, allowing for the individual

cases to predict similarities or demonstrate contrasting results that are foreseen. I initially began to examine the major similarities between the creators noting that this set of data heavily existed between the three examined creators. The one variable that exists across all three examined creators includes mediatized routines and their documentation of everyday living through consumerism. I then reviewed minor similarities between the users with the understanding that the evidence found varied by one notion: their own definition of femininity demonstrated through their content. Though all women held their own interpretation of femininity, all definitions upheld the notion that ideal femininity can be commodified and essentially acquired. Furthermore, I examined concepts that were excluded to the creator of the examination. Through this technique I collected data on the (post) feminist neoliberal discourse used within That Girl, the visual editing techniques of That Girl content, and the variation of That Girl as it proceeds to grow.

I examined the content of TikTok user, @rachellldaguanno. D'Aguanno holds a following of 176,000 followers with her content gaining over 10 million likes (Rach D'Aguanno, n.d.). My selection of D'Aguanno was on account of her video content featuring multiple notions of That Girl. Her content frequently featured her perspective on what the That Girl trend signified, how it relates to femininity, and how the trend is demonstrated through consumerism. I analyzed D'Aguanno's profile as an individual case aiming to illustrate and further juxtapose collected data alongside the other selected individual profiles. In

addition to reviewing how D'Aguanno's profile shared major and minor similarities to the other examined creators, I observed her consistent use of (post) feminist neoliberal themes, language, and inspirations.

Second, I reviewed the content of user, @kaelimaee. With over 13 million followers, Mae has created a personal brand that recognizes, features, and is built upon That Girl principles and aesthetics (Mae, n.d.). Mae served as a part of my sample on account of her massive audience and recognition. With her online presence extending beyond TikTok, Mae has become recognized for her contributions to building a specific aesthetic and online persona (Espada, 2023; Aminzadeh, 2022). Her content relies heavily on That Girl's relation to systematic and methodological actions and organization activities as there is a fetishization of orderliness, cleanliness, routine, and uniformity. In addition to reviewing how Mae's profile shared major and minor similarities to the other examined creators, I observed the style of her videos and how they work to monetize once-private moments.

Finally, I examined creator @enashaolivia who holds over 500,000 followers and has accumulated over 16 million likes through their video content (Bondurant, n.d.). Bondurant, who first began to grow a profile following by her utilization of That Girl hashtags, advanced to coin a variation of That Girl—Soft Girl. Bondurant serves as part of the sample to demonstrate how online creators (re)define That Girl and its philosophy. Bondurant reworks That Girl into Soft Girl with an emphasis on 'slow' living—very relaxed and positioned as luxurious but

stands as a repurposed That Girl. Through Bondurant, I note how significant

changes to discourse and language contribute to the overall interpretation and

mediatization of femininity.

For each of these creators, I gathered and analyzed their digital profiles,

video content, and comment sections. Additional artifacts include online articles

that feature and provide commentary on the selected creators. The following

section will explain how I studies and made sense of these digital texts and the

ideas embedded in them.

Theoretically-Informed Data Analysis

Stake (2000) notes the decision to engage in a case study is less a

methodological choice and more of a choice on what to study. The massiveness

that is That Girl may call for a surplus of analytical takes. To focus on particular

aspects of the trend, this study prioritizes how notions of post-feminist neoliberal

discourse, heightened consumerism, and the ideal femininity are translated on

the digital media platform, TikTok, and work to bring to life an online trend that

(re)defines what the ideal femininity is through everyday practices and routines.

Embedding these notions within the examination of the selected TikTok creators

affords a nuance-rich analysis of the digital content.

Through various qualitative approaches, I observe the context of the trend,

its followers, and its contributors. I execute an online ethnography that examines

norms, codes, and interactions found within That Girl. From a virtual distance, I

examine how That Girl unfolds online. Because examination is done entirely

online, there is a lack of ability to utilize interpersonal skills and relationship development to extract data. Instead, I cultivate the required skillset to thoroughly analyze textual and visual data (Garcia et al., 2009). Textual analyses provide "description and interpretation of the content, structure, purposes, and consequences of existing verbal or visual texts" (Tracy, 2020, p. 80). Through discourse tracing I link concepts from the utilized theoretical framework to the findings analyzed on TikTok. Tracy (2020) explains discourse tracing at the micro level in which research looks at daily momentary interactions and conversations. By analyzing the language use in video content captions, commentary, and comment sections, I focus on how the discourse essentially influences and extends the trend.

As the trend is brought to life and shaped by the internet, I connect the processes of That Girl to the utilized theoretical framework and explore how the trend translates to the physical world while analyzing data through a mediatization lens. Garcia et al. (2009) note the distinction between on and offline worlds is growing opaque as activities within the worlds increasingly merge with humans. This study examines how the activities within the two spaces of on and offline interrelate and essentially alter one another. In the case of TikTok and That Girl, I work to describe the scene of the application, providing definition to its specific functions and purposes. To translate the details of the online culture of TikTok, I provide insight on the application's norms and processes. By doing so, I am able to clearly define not only the virtual site itself

but the That Girl trend and how it functions. Furthermore, I describe how these logistical affordances of the application and its users interact with concepts regarding feminist media theory, the political economy of communication, and the commercialization of everyday life.

Through this theory-driven analysis, I identify significant similarities and differences among these three content creators that help make sense of That Girl and its multi-facetedness.

Researcher Identity Statement

As this study involves subjective interpretations, it is important to acknowledge who I am as a person and researcher. Culturally, I am a woman of color with a large interest in the beauty, fashion, and media industry—often engaged in a cultural analysis of what I consume. Academically, I stand as a critical thinker and feminist curious to connect the dots that may work to illustrate the "whys" and "hows" behind cultural phenomena. Professionally, I am a public relations practitioner who works to understand and utilize the notions of presentation, image, and communication. Weaving these intersections of my identity has allowed me to identify my position in this research study. These aspects of my identity at times often challenge each other. While I remain fascinated with cultural and gender studies, captivated by the relations of power that are embedded in our reality, and enthused over rhetoric and representation, I note the clash that exists between indulgence and critique. As I indulge in what

is online trends, feminine discourse, and the fundamentals of empowerment, I remain aware of the patriarchal tones that may endure in these indulgences.

Through this study, I am working to understand how digital media technology has not only afforded women a platform to advance their goals, missions, and identities but has created limitations on said goals, missions, and identities through the recycling of hegemonic beauty and wellness standards. A TikTok user myself, I am confident in my understanding of the dialogue and context of the application. I often remain inspired by the humanness that exists within the application. I examine how - through digital media - people bring forth new forms of art, communication, humor, protest and more. Nonetheless, I remain unable to relieve myself from critical approaches to the phenomena. In the case of That Girl, I am cognizant of the way in which patriarchy may embed itself into the consumer reality of women. While scholars before me have long proposed the need to examine the power structures that exist in mass media production, I now call for the exploration of online trends and how they may—as micro and fleeting as they are assumed—contribute to a larger discourse surrounding feminism and alienation.

I approach this research with a feminist critique in hand as I notice a postfeminist sensibility within the That Girl aesthetic. Its adherence to the values of both postfeminism and neoliberal feminism afford it the opportunity to be examined through the lens of a critical scholar. As a woman, I remain aware of the criticism women face in the span of their lives and examine with compassion

and understanding for their online endeavors and consumption habits. I have chosen to perform this case study to learn more about the impact of female consumers entwining with new digital media technologies and how it may drive feminist discourse forward.

The decision to carry out the study as a case study analysis strongly lies with my desire to illuminate the set of decisions female content creators and consumers are making and how they contribute to redefining idealized femininity. Through a case study examination, I am able to select multiple sources of evidence and data that may intersect to help conceptualize That Girl as a phenomenon. Recognizing the boundaries of the data, I note that I am approaching the trend and research with a perspective limited to that of a United States TikTok consumer. That Girl, in its entirety, is far too large a trend to capture as a singular case. In an attempt to capture and describe That Girl, I follow the hashtag on the TikTok application as a guide to the examined content. I enlist sampling strategies that help illustrate That Girl such as analyzing exemplars of the trend, media reports and coverage of the trend, and commentary analysis from consuming audiences.

My position in this research, with its privilege and limitations, affords me the opportunity to examine That Girl through a lens much similar to that of other female TikTok consumers. Inspired by the works of Bordo (1993), I work toward contributing to the political discourse pertaining to femininity and the female body. Through this research, I aim to consider the "network of practices,

institutions, and technologies that sustain position of dominance and subordination in a particular domain" (Bordo, p. 2364, 1993). I recognize the privilege that exists in my questioning and examination of the selected phenomena of That Girl. While privileges do begin with my access to various literature and resources to advance the study, they expand well beyond the realm of academia.

CHAPTER FOUR:

DATA ANALYSIS

That Girl as a phenomenon emerged as a concept on social media such as TikTok and furthered itself on YouTube and Instagram. As a trend, That Girl was incorporated into the content of online creators and quickly drew attention, support, and criticism. Media spaces reported on the required routines and products incorporated into the That Girl conversation online and noted early morning routines and plant-based breakfasts as crucial components of the trend (Joshi, 2021). To efficiently illustrate the core values of what online creators classify as That Girl, I conducted a case study analysis that treats three individual users as different case studies. In doing so, I examined comparable notions within the content of the three users, such as the mediatized consumption they displayed and their curated and illustrated definition of ideal femininity. In addition to comparable notions between the users, I observed their content to study singular concepts or data exclusive to the creator of the examination. More specifically, I review hints of post-feminist neoliberalism within user @rachellldaguanno, examine the audio and visual editing techniques of user @kaelimaee, and study how user @enashaoliva's content takes on a whole new variation of the trend.

This study aims to provide evidence demonstrating the duality of the mediatization of wellness and feminine beauty on TikTok. As the social media application offers women diverse affordances such as curated algorithms, an

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audience, and capital—both monetary and social—it undoubtedly empowers them while simultaneously tying them to hegemonic neoliberal practices of patriarchal capitalism. The call for investigating digital technologies' opaqueness regarding the display of power relations requires complex conceptualizations and structured analyses (Nygren & Gidlund, 2012). This study aims to provide a structural analysis through three case study examinations.

<p align="center">That Girl is a Beautiful Woman: @rachellldaguanno</p>

With over 170,000 online followers, TikTok creator @rachellldaguanno has curated a profile where she shares the beauty products and routines she utilizes and performs regularly. Her TikTok bio reads, "All things Beauty with a pinch of Fashion" (Rach D'Aguanno, n.d.). She also includes an email address that indicates her willingness to participate in online collaborations (Figure 1). Managed by INF Influencer Agency, D'Aguanno joins a roster of online personalities that specifically engage with audiences in the beauty, lifestyle, wellness, travel, and fashion worlds.
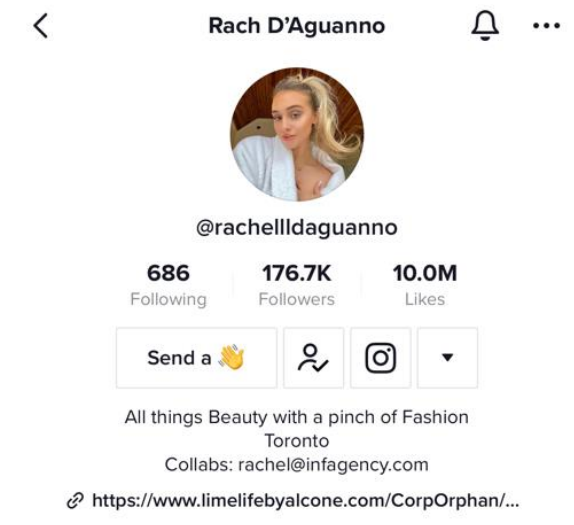
Figure 1. *D'Aguanno – captured on January 2, 2023* (Rach D'Aguanno, n.d.).

D'Aguanno's decision to endeavor into social media production as a TikTok creator is prominent and well showcased through her video content. She frequently shares posts and endorses creator tactics and objectives that ultimately assist women in obtaining financial gain. As her content has gained over 10 million likes, her credibility as a professional creator increasingly grows. But while D'Aguanno holds a large amount of influence, it is crucial to note that there is no clear and official indication that she is a professional influencer, demonstrating a sense of authenticity and relatability. D'Aguanno straddles the line between a low-profile creator and a high-profile influencer.

Though previous social media applications have revolutionized careers surrounding online influencing and content creation that may have been positioned for high-profile, affluent influencers, TikTok's perceived levels of emotionality and authenticity by its users have afforded low-profile creators

credibility and respectability (Barta & Andalibi, 2021). This proves beneficial for D'Aguanno, who continues to secure sponsorship partnerships, a large following, and high engagement rates even without the application's verification indicator, a blue checkmark. D'Aguanno's low profile, high-influence persona ultimately creates content that affects the average female user. Because D'Aguanno is recognized as a creator with relatability, there is a social support exchange from the audience of followers she holds.

A Look at (Post) Feminist Neoliberalism

D'Aguanno's video content displays traces of post-feminist discourse. With numerous nods to individual choice, autonomy, and self-expression, her content asks women to consider participating in the That Girl trend as a means to level up their lives and build better habits. In response to the criticism That Girl receives, D'Aguanno responded with a TikTok captioned:

POV: You see a lot of people talking about how the "that girl" aesthetic is toxic, but I feel like it holds me accountable and motivates me to be the healthiest version of myself. ESPECIALLY after not being able to focus my mind on anything or have any sort of motivation for the past year and a half. Becoming "that girl" is finding yourself again and building healthy habits for your future self. (D'Aguanno, 2022).

D'Aguanno posted the video using a trending audio sound that featured dialogue from HBO's critically acclaimed show, *Euphoria*, in which a character exclaims her resentment toward judgment that is given as she does what she

wants and has never been happier to do so. The trending audio here adds significance for multiple reasons. First, it illustrates how TikTok creators utilize trending audio sounds to boost their content further. With Euphoria bringing in over six million viewers during its second season, TikTok and its users are quick and witty to weave in and build upon various elements of popular culture (Del Rosario, 2022). Using popular sounds allows users to increase the traction around content and potentially go viral. Second, the audio adds a sense of pride to D'Aguanno's argument in which she remains proud to focus on improving her life by becoming That Girl. Through her on-screen caption, she acknowledges the criticism of That Girl by associating it with toxicity and counters it with the trend's ability to hold her accountable to build better habits. That Girl ultimately contributes to her self-esteem—a highly regarded notion of post-feminism (Adriaens & Van Bauwel, 2014). To D'Aguanno, the trend provides a framework for the route to enhancement. With a defense predominantly supported by empowerment, D'Aguanno speaks out against backlash and encourages women aspiring to increase their social media following to embrace That Girl. The sense of empowerment derives largely from financial gain and entrepreneurial femininity.

In an additional video, D'Aguanno champions the entrepreneurial efforts of women aiming to increase their influencer efforts (D'Aguanno, 2022). The on-screen caption shares that she receives direct personal messages from women who share how they secure funding through brand deals (Figure 2). According to

D'Aguanno, with tasks such as posting three to six times a day, identifying an

audience, connecting with followers, and remaining consistent, women may

begin to evolve as an influencer (D'Aguanno, 2022). The choice of language is

significant as D'Aguanno refers to the women in her direct messages as her 'girly

community' and hashtags' # ThatGirl' to drive her content forward. In another

TikTok, she mimics an all-call public service announcement that calls for

engagement from other women interested in beauty, skincare, content creation,
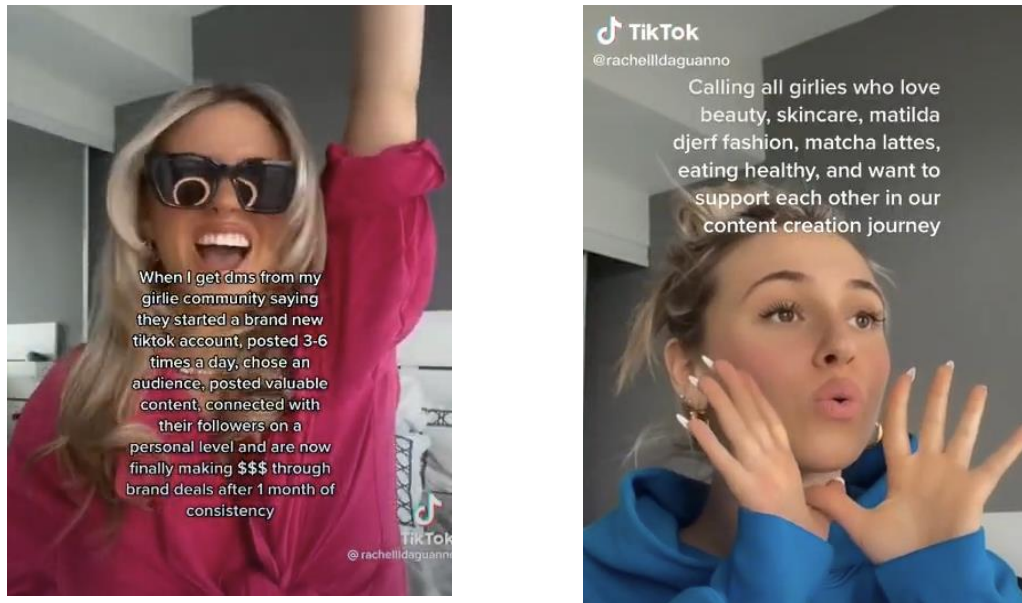
and more (Figure 2).

Figure 2. *D'Aguanno encourages online influencers* (Rach D'Aguanno, n.d.).

D'Aguanno's encouragement of creative work in the digital world

demonstrates the contemporary ideals of self-branding and creative autonomy

that afford an entrepreneurial femininity (Duffy & Hund, 2015). There is a sense

of power and enjoyment in collecting financial gain and security through feminine indulgence.

D'Aguanno shifts from notions of post-feminism that include discourse surrounding individuality as she often references a community of women. Though the women are called and encouraged to participate in the monetized efforts of social media production, D'Aguanno calls for building a community of women who share similar interests and goals regarding social media production and beauty influencing. This negates traditional notions of post-feminism that often call for highly individualized efforts with little regard for community and other women. Rather than aiming to demonstrate how she differs or how she betters as an online creator, she shares practices and tips on how others may potentially land partnerships and brand deals. These calls for community are ultimately tethered to empowerment as D'Aguanno expresses her adoration for women indulging in the trend, social media production, and consumption of feminine ideologies and routines.

Mediatized Routines to Unlock Empowerment

The increased consumption levels of women are not a new phenomenon as they have long faced stereotypes that illustrate their conspicuous levels of consumption—especially within industries such as fashion and beauty. Through mediatized beauty routines, D'Aguanno links beauty products and practices to the identity of That Girl. Figure 3 shows D'Aguanno sharing "Clean Girl" makeup products viewers need to become That Girl. Both Clean Girl and That Girl are

trends that ask women to invest in themselves through consumerism. Figure 3

demonstrates eight beauty products that are used in D'Aguanno's makeup

routine with a caption that reads, "If you've come across this video… welcome to

"That Girl" TikTok" (D'Aguanno, 2022). As she directly inserts herself and her

content into the discourse surrounding That Girl, she displays a mediatized

consumerism in which the key to unlocking the lifestyle behind That Girl is made

possible.

Through the affordances of TikTok and her content creation, D'Aguanno

takes part in new consumption in which physical and virtual consumption is

combined with material and cultural consumption (Shi, 2022). Through a form of

accelerated metric montage editing, D'Aguanno shares eight products in the

matter of nine seconds (Figure 4). The TikTok additionally sets a scene for which

D'Aguanno achieves a relatability factor. Through the ten second clip, D'Aguanno

appears to be getting ready—with the help of her Clean Girl products—in a

manner similar to that of an average consumer. The production value is low, with

no professional hair or makeup artists. For the average viewer, the content

simply features a young woman getting ready in the comfort of her own home as

she uses semi-affordable products to achieve a trending look and style. Because

the audience is taken along for the ride as she applies her makeup, they may feel

more inclined to repeat her routine themselves or view it as one of achievement

and accessibility. Though the video implies a low budget and maintenance look,

the recommended products highlighted total out to $236.00 according to the online prices set at beauty retailer, Sephora (Sephora, 2023).

Figure 3. *"Clean girl" products D'Aguanno* (Rach D'Aguanno, n.d.).

The video's comment section appeared full of supportive messages from D'Aguanno's followers and audience. Responses included "flawless omg" and "Yessss" with emoticons encouraging adoration and support. As a low-profile creator, D'Aguanno's responses to her audience are frequent and show a resemblance of a strong parasocial relationship, with D'Aguanno directly responding to compliments given by her followers and audience (Hoffner & Bond, 2022). By directly responding, D'Aguanno displays willingness and support toward her followers as she often responds with endearing terms and language such as "babe" or "queen." With solid support occurring between D'Aguanno and her followers, it nearly seems odd to criticize the encouragement between the

women. Again, a sense of empowerment exists, and it is made possible as women create a community from their shared hobbies and interests in the beauty industry.

The language used in Figure 3 is particularly useful in understanding That Girl. The word "clean" works to build requisites surrounding That Girl. Users, such as D'Aguanno, have come to define the idea of clean as fundamental in designing their lifestyle of choice. Clean, in this case, is synonymous with minimalistic. To specify even further, the appearance of minimalistic makeup application. Ironically, the consumption levels behind a clean girl makeup look are high in both product count and value. The caption additionally demonstrates a need. D'Aguanno's word choice places emphasis on the necessity of the enlisted makeup products. As various beauty trends fluctuate, so does the call for adjustments and modifications. The weight of the word choice may influence an audience to perceive the makeup products as must have staples in their collection. Soon, products go from mildly popular to completely sold out in stores as women identify the product as high in demand and suitable in gaining access to the end result: becoming That Girl. The spectacle of behind That Girl is apparent in the female desire to demonstrate that they are an it girl of some sort, beautiful and financially able to afford high in demand products. TikTok's ability to send products into virality has been globally recognized and has called for the application to be acknowledged as a marketing force (Nesvig, 2022). Pairing the

application's high consumerism levels with virtual online trends, such as That Girl, creates a new kind of influencer power.

Creators, such as D'Aguanno, have the creative autonomy to attach any kind of persona to the products and brands in which they partner with. D'Aguanno's various content illustrates the That Girl persona in which D'Aguanno creates what she calls a better version of herself by use of several products and routines. As she achieves to be better, she—along with those consuming her content—ultimately create an ideal of beauty and femininity.

Ideal Femininity: Beauty

As subjective as ideal femininity is, its existence in and of itself originates from hegemonic design and the male gaze. Historically, women have been made to exist as synonymous with their physical appearance and bodies. Thesander (1997) discusses the production of feminine ideals in which the alteration of aesthetic ideals is called into question. The alterations of the feminine ideal come from a place that is connected to the prevailing perceptions of women in society. As our existence in the new digital age continues to develop, we are introduced to new forms of capital acquisition. For digital creatives, it is through their niche ways in which they entertain and produce that they discover how they can secure capital—both financial and social. For online creators like D'Aguanno, creating more beauty becomes synonymous with creating more capital.

Figure 1 demonstrates D'Aguanno's direct interest in sharing her feedback and perspective on all things beauty and fashion by immediately introducing

herself to her audience as a beauty and fashion creator in her TikTok bio. For

D'Aguanno, beauty and femininity are coexistent, providing the framework for her

interpretation of That Girl. As she links beauty products and routines to that of

wellness and productivity, she contributes to and reinforces the idea of That Girl

to be a well put together, healthy, beauty conscience woman interested in

bettering herself. Figure 4 references D'Aguanno's attempt to amalgamate

various activities that construct the That Girl persona.

The word choice within the captions refer to That Girl as a "feminine urge"

and an "era" in which activities such as drinking green juice, walking 10,000

steps a day, and consuming vitamins are met with hairstyles such as the popular

voluminous blowout and matcha lattes. There is a slight fetishization with the

compartmentalizing of feminine practices as she classifies women who

participate in any of the listed activities or routines as That Girl. She additionally

references contemporary beauty practices such as "slugging" in which women

slather their faces with skin-care products such as petroleum jelly or night

serums before bed (Mandell, 2022). Similar to walking 10,000 steps a day,

consuming green juice, or working out five days a week, slugging assists women

in maintaining a physical body that adheres to contemporary beauty standards.

Beauty, in relation to That Girl, has a strong relationship with health and

wellness.
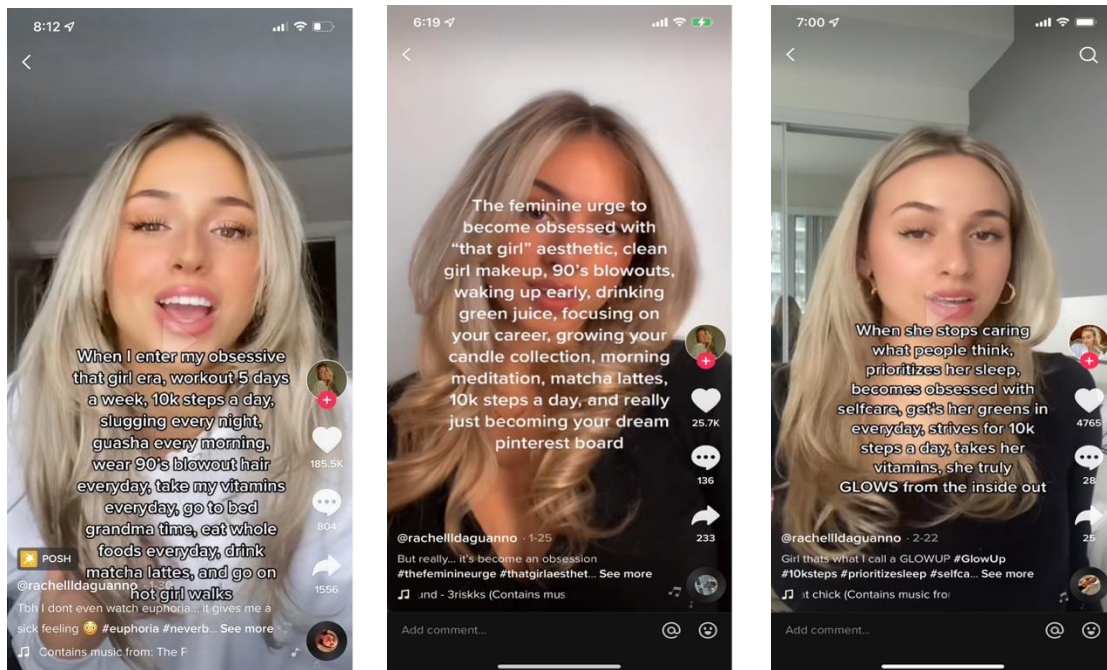
Figure 4. *D'Aguanno lists tasks of That Girl* (Rach D'Aguanno, n.d.)*.*

D'Aguanno's physical appearance plays a crucial role in her That Girl

content development. She is a white, thin, blonde woman who partakes in beauty

and fashion decisions that adhere to contemporary standards of White

patriarchy. The conversation of That Girl benefitting thin, conventionally

attractive, wealthy, White women is not lost on TikTok as users frequently

criticize how White women are the demographic placed at the forefront of the

trend. D'Aguanno, a woman meeting the general beauty standards of today's

society, holds the ability to confidently exist in the conversation of what is

beautiful and trendy as her conventional attractiveness excludes her from ever

being questioned or discredited. Therefore, defining what makes women That

Girl becomes much easier for women like D'Aguanno.

That Girl stands as an online trend that aestheticizes the notion of enhancement and improvement. The question of what is to be enhanced or improved is entirely dependent on the creator who decides to define That Girl. For D'Aguanno, That Girl stands as an empowered woman, eager to achieve financial gain through online influencing efforts, enamored by her own beauty and beauty routines, and inspired to maintain control over her general health and wellbeing. Though D'Aguanno offers vibrant illustration of who That Girl is, there remains additional layers of the persona that exist online. While That Girl's beauty routine holds her accountable for bodily maintenance and care, the routines of order and structure hold her accountable for her mentality and productivity.

That Girl is an Organized Woman: @kaelimaee

TikTok digital creative, Kaeli Mae has been widely recognized for her documentation of lifestyle and home organization tactics and routines. The 22-year-old, whose real name is Kaeli McEwen, has over 13 million followers, allowing her to achieve a high-profile influencer status with even the TikTok verification badge accompanying her username (Kaeli Mae, n.d.). Figure 5 exhibits McEwen's following count alongside her bio, which shares her presence on other applications, such as YouTube and Instagram. She lists her email address as a contact for brand partnerships and other paid media opportunities. McEwen is managed by Palette Management, a talent agency that holds a talent roster with a combined following of more than 175 million users across various

social media (Palette Management, 2023). McEwen's impressive resume

extends beyond her TikTok analytics as previous media attention includes On Air

with Ryan Seacrest and Time Magazine (Aminzadeh, 2022; Espada, 2023).
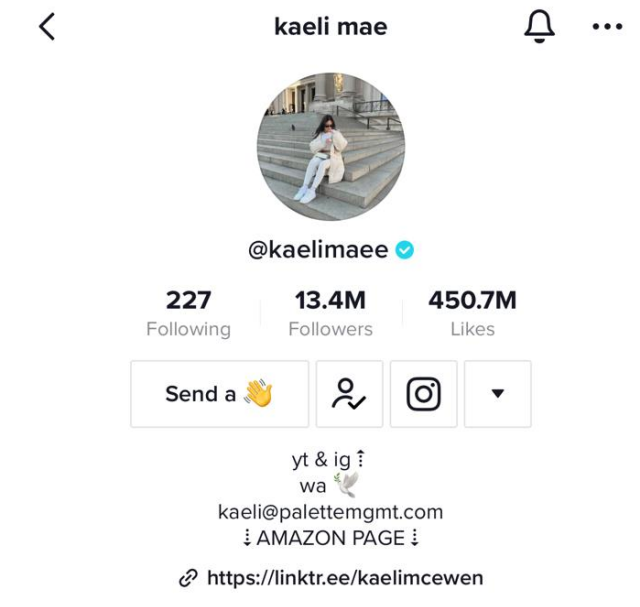
Figure 5. *McEwen's profile captured on January 7, 2023* (Kaeli Mae, n.d.).

McEwen's rise to fame is tethered to her online presentation of

cleanliness, order, and a neutrally colored manner of living. She works to create

TikToks that demonstrate aesthetically pleasing routines that promote

organization and productivity. In building her brand, McEwen modified her early

content of ASMR (autonomous sensory meridian response) and restock videos

to meet That Girl's visual and content standards that arose in 2021. Her initial

video that featured That Girl content was posted in April of 2021 and shared an

on-screen caption that stated, "become THAT girl with me" and disclosed her

excitement to work on herself (McEwen, 2021). The video featured a morning

routine consisting of latte making, facial skin care, the highlighting of McEwen's

clothing outfit, and a glimpse of goals and to-dos. Most of the comments

encouraged McEwen to continue producing material that could assist women in

becoming That Girl. Her profile also highlights her partnership with Amazon,

indicating that her Linktree guarantees access to her Amazon Storefront (Figure

5). Through the link, users are granted direct access to the products McEwen

uses in each of her videos. As users purchase the items through McEwen's

store, McEwen receives compensation similar to a sales commission.

With a growing audience of followers, McEwen soon developed more

content that featured #thatgirl and #aesthetic. By linking her prioritization of

highly organized living tactics and routines to the That Girl trend, McEwen

contributed to the online discourse of what it means to be That Girl. McEwen

quickly adapts to the trend and popularity because of her ability to edit her video

content to what TikTok users find amusing and visually pleasing.

A Visual Analysis

The dynamics of visual styles on TikTok alter by the second. TikTok's

current video limits vary from fifteen seconds to three minutes as users are

encouraged to create and consume bite-sized productions. McEwen's content

often stands as fast-paced, sequential montages with high-energy activities

promoting productivity and routine. Often using inductive approaches to her video

sequences, McEwen takes the audience on a visual journey where viewers can participate in the meaning making of the scene. Her videos act as short storytelling, displaying the daily aspects of her life. Following a cause-to-effect sequence along a timeline, McEwen's followers engage in each routine's beginning, middle, and end.

McEwen often employs a fast-cutting editing technique which serves to draw the viewer into the scene. There can be as many as 50 different shots in a one-minute video. The editing allows McEwen's information or message to spread quickly and keep the audience captivated. With her routines often linked to the That Girl trend as she frequently uses the #ThatGirl in her video captions, the information or message shared demonstrates how women can obtain a lifestyle similar to McEwen's (or That Girl) by employing the shared routine and products used in their daily lives. McEwen often exhibits nightly routines that embrace femininity, routine, self-care, and consumerism as seen in Figure 6. Like D'Aguanno's Clean Girl makeup routine that embodied minimalistic efforts in her beauty routine as seen in Figure 4, McEwen created a sequential montage that shared her That Girl nightly routine before bed.

Figure 6. *McEwen's illustrates a routine before bed* (Kaeli Mae, n.d.).

McEwen's clean girl night routine video acquired over 300,000 likes
(McEwen, 2022). With over 50 shots (in a one-minute video), she enhanced the
storytelling efforts of the routine as she kept the audience intrigued by what was
to come next. The audience may wonder what product will appear next, how she
will utilize it, and even question its effect on them. The consistency between the
cuts adds to the video's appeal, as there is a tempo from the equally spaced
intervals. Through a series of close-ups in which the camera zooms in on certain
products or product applications, the audience may be drawn in even further
through the limited vertical frame of their smartphone.

In the clean girl night routine video, McEwen's physical body is used to
enhance the effect of the routine being transformed into a beautified and
comforting visual (McEwen, 2022). All products utilized and showcased are

modeled on McEwen as she demonstrates how to use them and their

significance in granting access to the That Girl lifestyle. In an online interview,

McEwen is complimented on her "beautiful" hands as the interviewers note the

significant role McEwen's well-kept hands play in her videos' success (Seacrest,

2022). Similar to conventional forms of advertisement, the model is used to

promote a product that further affords a certain lifestyle. Unlike conventional

forms of advertisement, McEwen's production efforts rely solely on her as she

films from her cellular device, which appears to be set up on a tripod or placed

against simple household items.

The consequential effects stem from beyond what the audience sees

visually. The use of sound and audio on TikTok has an incredible impact on what

audiences are receptive to. McEwen's clean girl night routine video featured a

one-minute sound clip of Kate Bush's 1985 single "Running Up the Hill" which

was recognized for its renewed popularity on TikTok partly due to Netflix's hit

show, *Stranger Things* (Kaye, 2022). As of March 2023, Bush's single has been

featured in 2.4 million videos. Like many content creators, McEwen works to

incorporate trending concepts, editing styles, and audio into her material. Aside

from her ASMR videos that feature no sound, she employs popular audio to

assist in driving her content forward.

As McEwen's account grows in both content and following, the

transformation of her account has included her transition to showcasing a more

neutral way of living. McEwen's TikTok profile has grown into an account that

demonstrates neutral colors and minimalist home décor. As seen in Figure 7,

McEwen's recent grid of thumbnails, which give a visual preview and often

feature an on-screen caption, have transitioned from full of color to quite beige

and neutral.
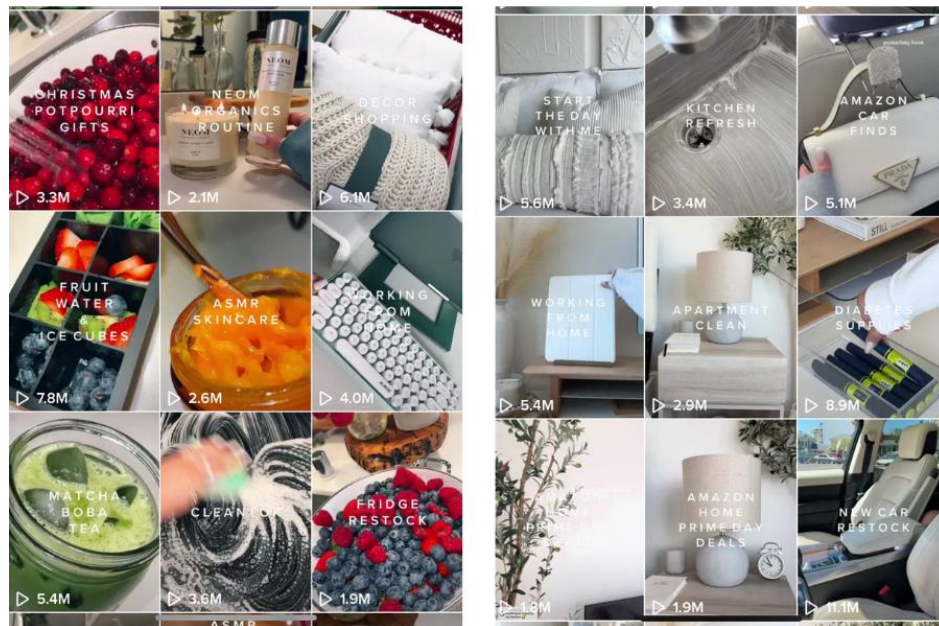
Figure 7. *McEwen's videos transition from colored to neutral* (Kaeli Mae, n.d.).

A neutral-toned way of living is highly popular and criticized on TikTok as

users often comment on the refrainment from individuality and creativity (Espada,

2023). Although the rise of neutrality in contemporary home and lifestyle design

did not commence solely on TikTok, discourse on social media has created a

social phenomenon known as the "sad beige aesthetic." Online creators have

frequently criticized the aesthetic as dull and have made calls to society's fascination with beige being linked to levels of classism (Tolppi, 2023).

On the contrary, creators such as McEwen have embraced the aesthetic and made it synonymous with clean, uninterrupted, minimalism. In embracing the visual aesthetic, McEwen has succeeded in creating an influencer identity from it, tailoring her diverse content of organization hacks and tips to meet the visual requirements of a minimalist lifestyle. The minimalist lifestyle has been recognized as one in which allows individuals to escape the heavy saturation of color and noise that may often feel like chaos (Espada, 2023). The desaturated scenes also force the viewer to apply psychological closure to fill in for the missing colors—inviting even greater participation on the part of the viewer. With this perspective, it seems as if color and neutrality also guarantee a sense of order that the viewer participates in.

<u>Mediatized Routines to Unlock Order</u>

McEwen's mediatization of her routines has gained her incredible visibility. During a virtual interview with media personality, Ryan Seacrest, McEwen shared how her online influencing efforts allowed her to quit her former job as a Starbucks barista to produce content on TikTok full-time (Seacrest, 2022). McEwen notes that she initially began to create content based on her organizational talents because she was inspired by the online organizational content amplified during the quarantine period in 2020 (Seacrest, 2022).

The fetishization of routine and order that exists in McEwen's content plays an integral role in the appeal of her profile. Cultural pressures such as the modern reality of working from home or online trends such as That Girl have transformed the concept of a traditional well-organized woman—once synonymous with a homemaker—from outdated to trendy and aspirational. This is likely due to TikTok creators' ability to visually romanticize mundane aspects of life and identity, ultimately leading to users interpreting content as an aesthetic. The term, "aesthetic" has acquired a specific meaning in the context of Gen Z productions. For example, today it is more understood as an adjective co-opted by Generation Z to essentially describe a cultivated and curated image. The image—or aesthetic—is regularly built through social media applications such as TikTok. McEwen is commonly recognized for contributing to multiple aesthetics, including the beige minimalistic aesthetic, the That Girl aesthetic, and the organized aesthetic (Espada, 2023). As she documents her efforts, she creates a stimulating production in which audiences are drawn to her routine videos. The routines often vary, far from limited to the bounds of the beauty industry.

McEwen has created a surplus of routines that include their link to the That Girl aesthetic. In one video, she documents That Girl Amazon "car finds" in which she shares items she has invested in enhancing and organizing her Range Rover (McEwen, 2022). The items include a car key fob, purse hooks installed onto car seats, a steering wheel cover, travel-sized cosmetic bags, and more. In an additional video, she presents a monthly office refresh in which she cleans up

and reorganizes her office (McEwen, 2022). The video utilizes no sound and relies on an ASMR technique to add its appeal as audiences watch her maneuver office items into their designated spot. From highlighter pens to hand sanitizer to energy drinks, McEwen shows a heightened level of consumerism in a nonchalant manner as she casually places items in drawers, bins, and office refrigerators. The strategically placed items demonstrate logos of various brands, assumingly opening more opportunities for brand partnership or financial gain. Captioning her video, "everything has its place" McEwen expresses her adoration for a highly organized lifestyle (McEwen, 2022).

Her organized routines even caught the attention of the United States Internal Revenue Service (IRS) when she posted a video that received around 4.8 million views (Steinhardt, 2023). The video featured McEwen setting up her workspace in which she was about to prepare her taxes. Upon making an iced coffee, she got office supplies and her 2022 expense receipts as she sat to document her tax process (McEwen, 2023). H&R Block's lead tax research analyst, Manny Dominguez, credited McEwen for capturing an audience's attention on something frequently recognized as daunting or difficult (Steinhardt, 2023).

As society naturally gravitates toward inspirational yet relatable content, online videos featuring beautified routines provide an impactful albeit fleeting moment of motivation. McEwen's profile has capitalized on the pleasure audiences experience as they watch videos that may inspire them to bring a

sense of control to their lives. As McEwen demonstrates her routines as attainable and associates her content with That Girl, she contributes to the trend with her definition of femininity. The effects of minimalism, methodical routines, and highly organized living essentially all lead to the notion of productivity. As productivity becomes the goal, routine becomes a tool for McEwen to utilize. Ultimately, by linking That Girl to routine and order, McEwen creates an ideal femininity of her own.

Ideal Femininity: Routine

That Girl has become a persona and lifestyle which McEwen best channels through her organizational skills. Her creative efforts display the discipline and self-regulation required to become That Girl. In an interview with Time Magazine, McEwen stated, "My content inspires and motivates a lot of people that are especially trying to be 'that girl.' I think they keep coming back to my videos to find inspiration to be the best version of themselves," (Espada, 2023). In trying to create the best version of themselves, women become inclined to search for what is defined as best.

As previous generations of women have faced the dilemma of trying to better themselves to fit the standards and expectations of society, many see That Girl as a digital filter that seduces women to revert back to traditional norms of homemaking. McEwen admits her entire income comes from her online influence, in which she demonstrates her cleaning efforts (Seacrest, 2022). These efforts resemble traditional principles of housekeeping and homemaking.

Her content features these principles with the intention of creating aspirational living ideals. Eventually, it became possible for McEwen to generate income and partake in the creator economy by informing women on how they too can feel a sense of empowerment and pride in decluttering their lives. The ideal woman in this case has her life together, constantly working toward keeping a tidy home. The difference between That Girl and 1950 advertisements marketed to homemakers is the producer behind the video. As the creator economy has now created incredible rewards for digital creatives—so incredible that it removes the consideration to offer an alternative to consumerist schemes and instead further aestheticize and glorify patriarchal and consumerist values.

For McEwen, becoming That Girl embraces femininity through the beautification of productivity and togetherness as the trend is tethered to routine. While Figure 7 does demonstrate McEwen endorsing beauty and skin-care products, the habitual practice of building a consistent routine of applying the products is the focal point of McEwen's message. That Girl builds better habits and holds herself accountable for her mentality and productivity. The narrative That Girl upholds is one in which women receive rewards through increased orderliness. She may see beauty rewards such as healthier hair, softer skin, or cleaner teeth because of her consistent beauty routines. She may see mental rewards like an organized schedule, higher productivity, or a focused mind. Due to increased productivity, she may gain financial rewards such as online partnerships within the creator economy or work promotion.

McEwen's use of That Girl defines beauty in an overarching manner that demonstrates the allurement of having one's life together and indulging in living outside of chaos or spontaneity. A sense of order is a sense of control. The illusion of control and perfection is just that, an illusion. What McEwen does so well is provides a lively visual of that illusion. Through tight, intimate framing, precise editing, and a restrictive (classicist) color palette, she sustains the illusion that perfect does exist. According to McEwen, perfect is merely one product and one routine away and is camouflaged as self-help and productivity methods. As McEwen beautifies the results of a highly controlled and productive lifestyle, others work to glamorize That Girl's ability to provide a feeling of luxury, wellness, and softness.

That Girl is a Soft Woman: @enashaolivia

That Girl is susceptible to change, alteration, and development as a trend. The creators who infuse That Girl into their content understand its general message that embraces a strong presence of femininity. For creator Enasha Bondurant, she welcomes That Girl by demonstrating a life of luxury, slow living, and wellness. With over 500,000 followers and 16 million likes, Bondurant is rising to internet fame and recognition (Ena, n.d.). As seen in Figure 8, Bondurant identifies herself as an Afro-Latina and notes her content includes vlogs (or video blogs), demonstration of a 'soft' life, and videos surrounding the conversation of hygiene. Her listed email address reveals her work with the digital creative talent agency Digital Streamers. Like McEwen, Bondurant's bio

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features a link granting access to her other platforms, her Amazon storefront, and contact information.
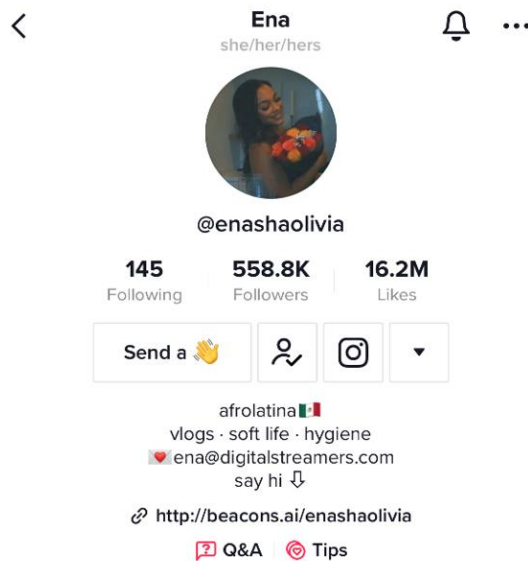
Figure 8. *Enasha Olivia – Profile captured on December 12, 2022* (Ena, n.d.).

Bondurant interprets the lifestyle of That Girl as one in which self-care and luxury are eminent. Her first video to feature That Girl depicts how That Girl spends her Sunday (Bondurant, 2022). Similar to D'Aguanno and McEwen, Bondurant illustrates a lifestyle that becomes possible through consumerism. Through That Girl, Bondurant channels her energy into attaining and sustaining a feminine persona that is socially acceptable and adored. In addition to That Girl, Bondurant creates content from variants of the That Girl trend (i.e., Clean Girl and Soft Girl). These alternative trends are rooted in similar principles of That Girl as they promote hegemonic beauty standards translated through modern self-care, productivity, and wellness practices. Bondurant's digital content provides

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visibility into what it means for women to feel empowered by living softly. She notes that through product consumption and routine development, women are better able to make the necessary adjustments to their lives to look and feel more feminine, relaxed, and ultimately cared for.

<u>Redefining That Girl</u>

Bondurant's Soft Girl acts as a variant of That Girl, providing online viewers with a sense of inspiration and motivation to embrace femininity and put themselves first through acts of self-care. Bondurant often depicts her version of a soft girl life and calls it her 'soft girl era.' Here, softness refers to peaceful, well-cared-for, pampered lifestyle choices. Online creatives have previously described the soft girl aesthetic as deliberately feminine, yet it holds far more depth than can be seen at the surface level. Traditionally trivialized for their indulgence in products, activities, and hobbies that embodies notions of softness and cuteness, women like Bondurant have created an online persona that allows them to feel empowered while enjoying hyper-feminine living. In a video where she embodies soft girl living, Bondurant uses a voice-over editing technique to narrate the clip as the audience follows her through her evening journey, which includes acts such as cleaning, fine dining, and a night routine (Bondurant, 2022). Audience support for Bondurant's content is evident as the comment section illustrates women longing for more content and sharing gratitude for her uplifting and inspiring videos, as seen in Figure 9.

Figure 9. *Comments left under Bondurant's Soft Girl living video* (Ena, n.d.).

The comments exemplify women's support for Bondurant as she paints a virtual picture of what soft living may provide. In another clip, Bondurant delivers a how-to guide for women to embrace aspects of their femininity (Bondurant, 2022). The video shows Bondurant partaking in alone time as she informs women of the benefits of embracing solitude and independence. As she captures a night of self-care, she shares footage of herself creating a dessert platter, grabbing dinner, performing skin-care maintenance, and enjoying her dessert platter to conclude her night (Bondurant, 2022). Though exuding relaxed energy, the videos contain surplus product placement and endorsement, ultimately conveying that heavy consumption habits and high maintenance routines make a life of softness and feminine wellness possible.

The reconstruction of That Girl to Soft Girl does little to no actual adjustment aside from a shift in focus from hyper-productivity to hyper-relaxation. Bondurant's content illuminates a consistent emphasis on feminine pastimes and investments that provide a peaceful life. In an additional video, Bondurant demonstrates soft girl activities such as baking a cake, cleaning her kitchen, or

creating a comfortable area with candles and scented house sprays (Bondurant, 2022). As she combines the actions to create an illusory persona of a well-kept woman, she embraces traditional notions of homemaking while she champions them as empowering and rewarding for women looking to relax and enjoy their womanhood. The filming of her actions ultimately creates a persona from the routine and further contributes to the opaque promise of a certain lifestyle unlocked by certain actions and routines.

Mediatized Routines to Unlock Comfort

The mediatization of Bondurant's routine creates change in numerous ways. Concerning Bondurant, the opportunity to mediatize these beauty and wellness routines ultimately changes how she performs them. With the potential to capitalize off content creation, Bondurant seemingly understands the importance of eliciting emotions of comfort, relaxation, and peace through her video content. The actions become more performative, the voiceovers used to narrate become increasingly charming, and the everyday life increasingly loses its tie to spontaneity. In hopes of maintaining an authentic, relatable profile, Bondurant's videos often invite her followers and audience to be a part of private moments demonstrating consumerism. In a video illustrating a comfortable night at home, Bondurant films in her shower as she unwinds and consumes various self-care and hygienic products—all strategically placed, allowing their logos to appear (Bondurant, 2023).

As seen in Figure 10, Bondurant defers to candles, showers, and wine to

create an effect on her audience that leaves them desiring more—either from

Bondurant or themselves. Either the audience follows Bondurant and encourages

further content production, or they take it upon themselves to recreate

Bondurant's filmed life. Nonetheless, a sense of comfort is unlocked through

these actions. As society is well aware of the momentary benefits of pleasant

scents, showers, and wine, the videos are not necessarily generating profound,

new ideas or suggestions. Instead, as creators mediatize their routines, the

routines are given a name and an identity and eventually stand as a how-to guide

that grants access to a lifestyle. Comparing Bondurant's editing techniques to

McEwen's, Bondurant places a darker filter on her videos and utilizes slower

audio. This creates a more relaxed environment as opposed to one that

endorses high productivity and a hustle culture.

Figure 10. *Bondurant's video enjoying a night in one's home* (Ena, n.d.).

Bondurant's video on-screen caption reads, "watch me stay in for the night," illustrating her hope that her audience does observe her (Bondurant, 2023). A guaranteed view leads to guaranteed social media engagement and following that favor Bondurant's financial state. The mediatization of routines that encourage soft living additionally affects the consuming audience as they view Bondurant's content as attainable. A large part of the attraction to Bondurant's That Girl videos is that just about anyone can perform the same habits and live the same life, except that's not precisely true as certain minimal beauty standards and body types are required for this kind of work. The videos exclude the privilege of soft living and transform luxurious living into a simple lifestyle achieved through relaxed routines backed by heavy consumerism. Hustle culture has been recognized to create feelings of anxiety and guilt as it has asked individuals to essentially monetize their life. While Bondurant avoids utilizing language that embraces hustle culture, she contributes to the monetization of her everyday life by mediatizing mundane moments such as grocery shopping, showering, or cleaning. The ideal woman in this case has her life together, constantly working toward keeping a tidy, comfortable home.

The difference between That Girl and 1950 advertisements marketed to housewives is the producer behind the video. As the creator economy has now created incredible financial awards that benefit women like Bondurant, it is evident that influencers align themselves more closely with old consumerist deceits than that of average consumers. Similar to the messages of D'Aguanno

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and McEwen, Bondurant shares a message that utilizes traditional commercial ideas used by advertisers: one more product guarantees some kind of success for the consumer. To seduce other users into making similar investments, she employs That Girl to code these actions as empowering, feminine, and ideal.

Ideal Femininity: Wellness and Luxury

As Bondurant highlights her life through vlogs, her audience grows curious about where she receives the financial means to afford the products that help her create the life she films. From questions about the camera she uses to film to the jeans she wears in her videos, her audience shows little hesitation in asking where she purchased her items and how she can afford to do so. In a video that grossed over 95,000 likes, Bondurant shared her tips on how women can look and feel more feminine (Bondurant, 2022). The video was part of a three-part series that acted as a how-to guide for women eager to adopt similar feminine habits. Like most of her content, Bondurant recommends makeup items such as blush and lip gloss, fresh manicures, and jewelry. A user took notice of the costly investments Bondurant recommended and commented, "I'm broke," to which Bondurant responded with "All it takes is vibes" (Bondurant, 2022). As seen in Figure 11, users frequently note the financial resources required to obtain the lifestyle Bondurant is projecting.

Figure 11. *Hesitating comments left by Bondurant's audience* (Ena, n.d.).

Bondurant responds with encouraging messages justifying the idea of a shopping addiction and persuading users to embrace a glamorous and healed life. In another video, Bondurant posts a comment that quickly addresses her income status saying, "I'm in Chicago, I'm 21 years old, 100% of my income comes from social media, shorts are American Eagle, and everything in my apt is in my storefront" (Bondurant, 2022). A slight irony occurs as Bondurant remains upfront and transparent about how she generates income yet cultivates the illusion of a soft life as easily attainable. Due to time and work constraints, the average American employee may not allow partaking in slow mornings or creatively editing TikTok videos to further their online career in influencing. Rather than creating a video that informs viewers how exactly her social media efforts work to sustain her lifestyle, she posts a comment under her video that may become buried underneath responses or be left unseen. This creates a mystified understanding of how the creator economy truly operates and creates a sense of guilt in women as they second-guess if their self-care or mindfulness efforts is enough. As Bondurant encourages her audience to purchase or use

certain products, it remains unknown if Bondurant purchases all of her endorsed

products or if they are gifted from brands.

Where McEwen creates content that suggests That Girl is unlocked

through hard work and productivity, Bondurant creates content that illustrates the

benefits and rewards of hard work. Through her emphasis on softness, luxury,

and glamour, Bondurant reaffirms the hegemonic standard of wellness and

mindfulness and asks viewers to internalize the task of becoming That Girl. Their

access to a luxurious lifestyle depends on their efforts to attain the necessary

resources and practice mindfulness.

CHAPTER FIVE:

CONCLUSION

As TikTok advances and offers innovative forms of self-expression and creativity, the creator economy excels as online users become seduced not only by these forms of self-expression but potential rewards benefiting their financial and social status. As previous scholarship has called for an investigation of the seductive forces of social media engagement and participation, this thesis sought to examine how the mediatization of wellness and beauty on TikTok essentially illustrates western culture's transformation of mindfulness and self-care into a productivity method. That Girl asks women who participate in the trend to enlist trending practices, routines, and consumption habits while pursuing an illusion of control in their daily lives. The trend illustrates a lifestyle that commercializes wellness, organization, and beauty while simultaneously engaging in rhetoric reproducing problematic gender relations, postfeminist neoliberal values, and hegemonic beauty standards.

Individuals have longtime collaborated on what defines health in spaces of physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing. In the case of That Girl, women feel as if they are performing empowering and mindful habits as they get their life together. Much of their performance is in a consumerist space, investing in numerous products to assist them in their journey to become more beautiful, put together, and comfortable. Products are being sold, but also, *a way of life*.

Through a multiple embedded case study, I have examined multiple female TikTok creators who have applied That Girl to expand content and create niche profiles. I began the examination by looking at the major similarities between the creators. The one variable that exists across all three examined creators included mediatized routines and their documentation of everyday living and consumerism. I then reviewed minor similarities between the users with the understanding that the evidence found varied by one notion: their own definition of femininity demonstrated through their content. Though all women held their own interpretation of femininity, all definitions upheld the notion that ideal femininity can be commodified and essentially purchased. Furthermore, I examined concepts that were excluded from the creator of the examination. Through this technique I collected data on the (post) feminist neoliberal discourse around That Girl, the visual editing techniques of That Girl content, and the variation of That Girl as it proceeds to grow and alter online.

Perceiving That Girl as western culture's transformation of mindfulness and self-care into a productivity method first called for an all-inclusive examination of how the trend seduces women into engaging in the discussion of enhancing themselves and what that looks like. The following identifies points of convergence between the examined creators and other key findings from this study.

Body, Mind, and Soul: Becoming That Girl

Becoming That Girl is no easy feat for women. The three creators examined provided a comprehensive investigation of who That Girl is. She is beautiful, organized, and soft—reminding women of the proper public presentations that are frequently tethered to socially accepted beauty and wellness standards. That Girl asks women to perfect their self-care efforts through these multiple dimensions of the self—the body, mind, and soul. The mainstream narrative that the trend pushes claims that becoming That Girl is attainable for the average consumer, neglecting to explicitly mention that certain minimal beauty and body types, financial stability, and social status are required for this kind of work.

Rachel D'Aguanno has cultivated an online following by reviewing and trying beauty products. Her endorsement of extensive beauty routines asks women to examine the products in their drawers and reconsider the impact the products may have on transforming them into That Girl. McRobbie (2015) notes that an illusion of control exists because women set the standards or calculate the measures required to enhance themselves. *Women* are in control of the work they do for themselves. No higher institutions are at play here that require women to believe in an ideal femininity.

Regarding That Girl's call for ideal femininity, enhancing one's beauty is an investment. That Girl beauty practices include minimalist makeup product that alludes to a "clean" appearance. As this last decade has seen an increase in

minimalist approaches, the beauty industry is no exception. That Girl emphasizes beauty products that enhance the natural appearance of women. Seen as an antidote to the maximalist makeup trends that have come and gone, That Girl appears as a trend on the "right" side of the moral discussion as it prioritizes natural beauty. However, taking account of the recommendations of a That Girl clean makeup routine would argue otherwise. D'Aguanno's (2022) clean girl makeup video features products that total over $200.00 in price. This price set is not necessarily accessible to the average consumer. Disguised as a beauty practice that embraces natural beauty and asks very little from women in terms of both pricing and effort, That Girl beauty routines recycle previous advertisements that encourage insecure-based consumption and further preserve a patriarchal society.

When she completes her beauty routine, That Girl turns to bettering her mind. Kaeli Mae (McEwen) has created a massive following on TikTok. She has become recognized for her captivating videos that show her restocking, reorganizing, and replenishing her household and stationary items. McEwen visually transforms That Girl's call for minimalism into enchanting, strategically edited videos to keep the viewer enticed. McEwen exemplifies entrepreneurial femininity, transforming her participation in the trend into a full-fledged career in the digital economy and generating incredible income. Her interpretation and application of That Girl prioritized the importance of women enhancing their lives through decluttering efforts and creating a well-organized home to promote

productivity in the interests of capitalism and the patriarchy. She demonstrates the significance of holding oneself accountable for habit-building and productivity. The end game of taking accountability is the rewards women may see through an increased orderliness. These rewards also preserve a patriarchal demand that asks women to reinvent themselves in search of becoming better and perfect through self-regulation (McRobbie, 2015). The yearning for perfection is displayed through these strict routines women are encouraged to follow.

Finally, That Girl feeds her soul by tapping into a mindful practice of slow living, focusing on building luxury and gratitude. Enasha Olivia's (Bondurant) soft life journey that she documents uses similar editing techniques, rhetoric, and messaging as the other women who promote strict beauty and wellness routines. However, she strays from encouraging a sense of hustle culture that the other influencers demonstrate and instead chooses to share vlogs that promote an indulgent environment. Despite her efforts to create a peaceful and grateful online persona, her videos share a similar message of promise through consumption. The promise to viewers is that a life of luxury is attainable for anyone. Yet Bondurant's demonstrations of luxury and softness are made possible due to her career in online influencing, allowing her to receive gifts from brands, spend time developing and editing video content, and perform all necessary influencer tasks at any time she chooses. As these affordances are not necessarily available for women working in traditional sectors, a feeling of guilt arises as women consume and question their inability to reflect on their lives

and demonstrate gratitude in the same way Bondurant does (through luxurious candles, expensive makeup, and visits to the nail salon).

The three creators ultimately downplay the calculated capitalist aspirations and reaffirm postfeminist neoliberal ideals of success attained through internal self-improvement and self-discovery. Beauty investments, intense productivity routines, and conscious living contribute to the power relations within hegemonic beauty standards. Becoming That Girl is an all-encompassing goal that reminds women of their docile bodies that exist to meet the demands of regulation and modification. TikTok affords the promotion of hegemonic beauty and wellness standards through the opaque promises made by both the patriarchy and feminism—ultimately revealing That Girl as inherently paradoxical.

That Girl informed by The Patriarchy

The nature of That Girl inherently clings to patriarchal social demand. The women who promote and participate in the trend are ideal representations of beauty. White women currently stand at the forefront of the trend, eager to not only engage with the trend but capitalize off of it. Though Bondurant is a woman of color, she hardly presents a challenge to hegemony.

That Girl turns womanhood into a commodity as it dangles feminine practices in front of women while tethering it to appealing forms of self-care. Under neoliberal feminism, new feminist subjects surface, wholly accepting responsibility for their well-being, and taking charge of their self-care (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020). As creators and viewers, women understand the necessary

actions required to achieve their ideal success of beauty, productivity, and wellness. That Girl translates these capitalistic actions as *investments*, creating a false sense of empowerment that enchants online users. Pertaining to beauty, their purchases grant women access to a physical attractiveness. Regarding productivity, their purchases create opportunities for flawless systems that benefit the interests of capitalism and patriarchy. Concerning wellness, their purchases afford a peaceful environment that exudes soft, cozy living.

The women who create digital media participate hoping to secure financial and social status in online influencing. Through self-branding, empowering consumerism, and autonomy over their work, these creators reproduce challenging gender constructions (Duffy, 2015). Capitalizing on a patriarchally-motivated image of female beauty, That Girl creators reaffirm existing power relations. Viewing these relations through a Foucauldian perspective, I note that the power here is not transferred to and from man to woman but exists across the various mediums at play. As capitalism flaunts itself as a system of innovation, it eventually reveals itself as a system of reproduction, seducing the working woman to engage in new ways of perpetuating positions of dominance and hegemony.

That Girl informed by Feminism

Bordo (1993) calls for a political discourse that understands and approaches the "insidious and often paradoxical" forms of contemporary control brought upon society (p. 2364). Through an analysis of That Girl, I note the

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undeniable paradox within the trend and the gender relations of social media

production. The traces of (post) feminism within That Girl are sufficient for

women to defend and further promote the trend, claiming it holds empowering

capabilities. The pattern amongst the illusion of empowerment is exactly what

fuels the paradox as women engage in what Bordo (1993) calls a "privileged

male world" or a safe space of value (p. 2372). Because women discover

rewards such as those gained in the creator economy (financial and social

status), building online communities of women that support their displays of

hyper-femininity, and reaching for perfection of the body, mind, and soul through

That Girl, perceiving the trend as liberating becomes without difficulty for them.

Bordo (1993) claims, "To feel autonomous and free while harnessing body and

soul to an obsessive body practice is to serve, not transform, a social order that

limits female possibilities" (p. 2373).

What sets these notions of body transformation and self-regulation apart

from previous patriarchy-serving advertisements in mainstream media is that

women can now take control of the game. They are choosing to engage in the

trend, choosing to supply the trend with their own digital interpretations of it, and

deciding to perceive it as encouraging and instrumental to their general health. It

is crucial to note the health concerns of individuals during the trend's conception.

Women, much like all who were impacted by the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic,

began searching for a sense of control and predictability during an

unprecedented time. With their ability to obtain community, financial security, and

a sense of control from this trend, women see it as somewhat of a means to an end. Women, feeling simultaneously empowered yet tethered to hegemonic neoliberal practices of capitalism, ultimately decide to dwell where they feel championed and respected. In this way, it becomes unfair to critique them for them indulging in these forms of self-expression and care. Though it is important to recognize and dissect the ties to the patriarchy here, it remains just as critical to understand the embodiment of the social standards calling on women to continue to engage in self-enhancing fads disguised as liberation.

<div align="center">Mediatizing Hegemonic Femininity</div>

The mediatization of That Girl, her routines, principles, the products she consumes, the philosophies she holds, and her everyday life drives the discourse forward. As mediatization examines how media and social life amalgamate, it provides critical insight for understanding the social life changes resulting from new media technologies' influences (Döveling et al., 2018). The social changes brought upon by TikTok continue to multiply as users, corporations, and institutions all work to implement and navigate its social influence. As mediatization has ultimately transformed the media from a tool to an institution of its own (Shi, 2022), this study examined how female creators utilize new media technologies to mediatize their processes of enhancement and self-regulation to spark social and cultural change.

As I examined the dual nature of the mediatization of wellness and feminine beauty on TikTok, I attended to the (post)feminist sensibilities on the

application that exemplifies Western culture's transformation of mindfulness into a productivity method. By mediatizing their routines, women create a new network of norms that are made possible by the affordances of contemporary digital technologies and new consumption habits. Through their mediatized consumption habits, the women succumb to the society of the spectacle in which they participate in heavy forms of consumerism to create an online persona and image (Debord, 1967). Like a snowball effect, other female users become engulfed by the trend and consume the identity of That Girl. I soon witnessed the trend creating new norms and standards around femininity and ways of expression. I watched as the trend transformed products and practices into identity elements. Green juice, plastic organizing bins, and candles quickly become translated into necessary factors of healthy, feminine living. Audiences begin to recognize items as vital components in unlocking a lifestyle. Consequently, there becomes a massive demand for products that are shown online that aid women in becoming That Girl—indicating the magnitude of influence this trend has on the beauty and wellness markets.

A shift exists amongst viewers as well. The mediatization of these routines and practices changes how female viewers consume, perform, and perceive other women. Though the message of That Girl is far from novel as it reproduces and glorifies traditional consumerist values, the medium can repackage these values making it easier for the creator and audience to accept and adapt to. Consumers adjust to the Amazon Storefronts that allow for quick

ordering of their newly discovered products and must-haves. So much so that creators often face backlash when product information is not shared and are deemed as gatekeepers. Creators begin to perform and perfect self-care routines as they film their every move and decision, creating an illusion of real everyday life that has truthfully abandoned spontaneity at the start of production. Finally, the mediatization of hegemonic femininity alters the way in which women perceive one another and themselves further perpetuating a sense of hetero-normative competition in which perfection is the ultimate goal (McRobbie, 2015).

As mediatization's concern is the mutual construction of society and the media, I note co-creation of the phenomenon of That Girl. Humans and technology work together and collaborate to bring to life new notions, norms, and considerations. It is the human interaction that occurs with the technology and through the medium that gives birth to a very unique algorithm on TikTok. Women provide their definitions and visuals of who That Girl and TikTok works as the medium to further disseminate the message. That Girl, as a phenomenon, has even transcended the application itself, taking up space on multiple social media sites such as Instagram, Pinterest, and Twitter.

Alternate Considerations and Future Research

Alternate considerations of this study demonstrate great potential for research expansion. First, in seeking to demonstrate the multifaceted existence of That Girl, this study employed numerous theoretical frameworks. Though all necessary for illuminating the opaque power dynamics at play within That Girl,

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future studies may benefit from further narrowing the scope of the study. To conceptualize That Girl, it was necessary to rely on the frameworks of gender relations, the political economy of communication, and mediatization. However, approaching the vastness of That Girl through a narrowed lens may prove useful in further defining its impact on women and the creator economy.

Secondly, this study was performed by a woman and solely examined the efforts and actions of other women. As That Girl immediately restricts itself within its name, the research may benefit from implementing insights on how themes of self-regulation and enhancement concern male content creators. Why is there no That Guy trend? Does it exist under another alias? Juxtaposing data on equivalent patriarchal demands on men alongside That Girl data may expand the findings.

Additionally, I note the social concerns regarding the surveillance culture of TikTok during the time in which this study was conducted (Thorbecke & Fung, 2023). An indirect connection exists between the potential ban of TikTok and this study as the social platform faces scrutiny from U.S. lawmakers however, this study aimed to capture the essence of That Girl and notes its impact on gender relations. The potential ban of the platform does not remove the social impact of That Girl as the trend now endures on other social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and Pinterest.

Finally, though purposive sampling proved useful in identifying exemplars of the trend, no data illustrated creators' and viewers' thoughts and insights other

than commentary found in captions and comment sections. Further research may benefit from modification to the methodology to incorporate interviews with content creators, followers, and even audience members with opposing opinions on the trend.

Final Thoughts

This study aimed to contribute to Bordo's (1993) call for political discourse that understands and approaches the threatening and paradoxical forms of contemporary control on women's bodies brought upon by society. In attempt to make sense of how the mediatization of wellness and beauty exemplifies the transformation of mindfulness into a productivity method, I almost immediately noticed the trend's sense of belonging, beautification, and empowerment that the creators appreciated. From a critical standpoint, it was easy to note the ways in which women were bound to the demands of the patriarchy under this trend. From the position of a woman though, it was easy to account for all the ways in which the capitalist (whiteness-serving) patriarchy presents women with emotions of guilt and shame during moments of indulgence and self-expression. I am hopeful that this study contributes to Bordo's (1993) call for discourse and provides new understanding on how mediatized routines create capital out of everyday life.

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