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## **‘GASLIGHT, GATEKEEP, GIRLBOSS’: MEMEIFIED FEMININITIES AND DISIDENTIFICATION IN TIKTOK YOUTH CULTURES**

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### **Introduction**

Catchcries of empowerment and enterprise have been documented and critiqued by a range of scholars, and continue to be invoked within the postfeminist mainstream (Negra 2014, Winch 2013, Adkins and Dever 2016, Banet-Weiser 2015, Dobson 2014). Yet, on the social media platform TikTok, a number of alternative feminist trends have emerged. Young users are increasingly disidentifying with, or even zealously rejecting, postfeminist ideals through the use of humour and irony. This emerging form of online feminist consciousness, however, intertwines with existing regimes of femininity and girlhood, producing a fraught environment within which establishing a young, feminine identity is particularly precarious. Expanding on scholarship examining teenage girlhood on TikTok (Kennedy 2020) and the ‘memeified’ politics of Gen Z (Zeng and Abidin 2021), we consider how young girls on TikTok have developed ‘remixed’ feminine identities by positioning figures such as the ‘girlboss’, the ‘pick me girl’ and ‘that girl’ as imagined others.

### **Introducing ‘girlboss’, ‘pick me girl’, and ‘that girl’**

The term girlboss was popularised around 2014, following the publishing of pop-feminist memoirs such as *#Girlboss* by Sophia Amoruso. While the term originally equated professional success with a type of feminist activism, ‘girlboss’ is utilised within TikTok cultures ironically, often to ridicule figures such as the infamous fraudster, Elizabeth Holmes.

‘Pick me girl’ is a derogatory term referring to young women who are seen as conforming to misogynistic ideals and who seemingly base their worth on their proximity

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to patriarchal ideals. For example, girls who self-identify as 'wifey material' have been ridiculed as 'pick me girls'. Ironic depictions of 'pick me girls' on TikTok caricature these girls, often depicting them disingenuously attempting to solicit male attention.

Finally, unlike the previous two figures, 'that girl' is an idealised fantasy of girlhood that tends to be invoked sincerely. 'That girl' videos on TikTok depict idealised routines or lifestyle markers, representing an idealised 'girl' who is consistently engaged in practices of self-work. 'That girl' videos often show 'healthy' eating practices, early bedtime routines, meditation, journalling and other activities that are associated with self-care and productivity under neoliberalism.

## **Methodology**

We have selected and analysed 5 of the most viewed TikToks within each of our 3 categories: 'Girlboss', 'Pick Me Girl', and 'That Girl'. Though this project has the potential to be expanded beyond this initial sampling, we believe that these 15 videos present a strong representative sample from which key findings can be drawn. As virality is central to TikTok as a platform (Hautea et al. 2021) and digital cultures are shaped around shared knowledge of particular media artefacts (Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017), examining the most viral TikToks within these categories is central to setting the tone and establishing key trends within this emerging space.

## **Theoretical framework**

This paper draws on Judith Butler (1993) and Jose Esteban Muñoz' (1999) writing on the concept of *disidentification* as the theoretical basis of our examination. Whilst Butler and Muñoz point to the transformative and democratic potentialities of disidentification, we re-tool this concept to critically examine feminine practices on TikTok, arguing that disidentification within feminine TikTok youth cultures is a paralysing practice that re-entrenches structures of surveillance and judgement, relying on the formation of the Other as an object with which the feminine self must be contrasted. We will show that disidentification is an *affective practice* (Wetherell 2012) that is fundamentally intertwined with everyday affective realities of teenage girlhood online. Throughout our analysis, we highlight a range of tensions and contradictions that are evoked within normative frames of youthful femininity. These include performing 'wokeness' (Sobande 2019); compulsory irony (Chateau 2020); navigating digital literacies (Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017); manufacturing relatability (Kanai 2019) and compliance with hegemonic feminine norms. We argue that these tensions generate an environment where establishing a young, feminine identity is rendered particularly fraught.

## **Summary of findings**

Ultimately, we find that through selectively engaging with online feminist literacies, the humorous and ironic depictions of the 'girlboss' and the 'pick me girl' produce an always-oppositional relational structure. This establishes a collective feminist politics that lacks positive identity markers; an identity predominantly based on disidentification with imagined mainstream others.

Finally, despite feminine identity on TikTok seemingly being contingent on the rejection of imagined others, 'that girl' remains a prominent aspirational ideal within TikTok cultures. In contrast to the 'girlboss' who establishes her value in public and civic domains and is therefore opened up to political critique, 'that girl' videos tend to depict private feminine routines. By framing these practices as being divorced from the social and hence depoliticised, we argue that 'that girl' becomes a figure towards which the youthful feminine self can safely aspire. Yet, despite the sincere aspiration and idealism shown within 'that girl' videos, we argue that disidentification remains a potent framework here. Indeed, 'that girl' as a concept discursively invokes the self as 'this girl'. 'That girl' hence represents an ever-moving goal post, an unattainable figure with which the feminine self is, once again, defined in contrast to.

We show how these three 'girls' produce different modes of feminine engagement that ultimately demonstrate the centrality of disidentification within youthful feminine practices, pointing to a fraught environment in which girls online are unable to comfortably inhabit a positively defined identity, and instead must simultaneously navigate conflicting practices of identification, disidentification, distancing and rejection.

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