#Girlhood: Why Memetic Aesthetics of Hyperfemininity Matter for Feminist Media Studies

Abstract

There is a pressing need to focus attention on hyperfemininity as a valid and valued form of gender expression and feminist protest within contemporary social media. As resistance against the heteropatriarchal gender expectations that influence femininity and that produce femmephobia, we focus our analysis around the social media #girlhood meme trend that, we suggest, embraces a wide range of femme practices through the re-mixing of femme identity, while critiquing heteropatriarchal norms. We trace the circulation of #girlhood, including coquette aesthetics, #barbiecore, and #bimbofeminism, outlining how these playful expressions of femininity contribute to subverting expectations of "successful" femme bodies. We argue that if gender norms are scripts that prescribe and describe how we must act, then widening the range of acceptable feminine behaviour through hyperfemininity, as manifest in #girlhood memes, is crucial for changing how we discipline femme bodies and how we analyze femininity within media studies.

Keywords: femininity; femme; social media; visual rhetoric; feminist media; girlhood; meme studies

Introduction: Why the "Girl"?

Across visual social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Tumblr, girlhood is—and has been—trending. From girl dinner, girl math, and hot girl walks to soft girls, "it" girls, and hot girl summer, girlhood as an aesthetic, fashion choice, and perspective has taken over our social media feeds, film screens, and pop cultural discourses. The collective feelings of glee and the deep recognition felt by many Millennial, Zillenial, Gen Z, and Gen Alpha social media users who identified with this trend led to 2023 being named "the year of the girl," as declared not only by social media users themselves but by contemporary news publications like *The New York Times*, *The Cut*, *ELLE*, and *Fortune Magazine* (Adamcyk & Hinchliffe, 2024). Identifiable not only by its popular bows, ribbons, beads, pastels, metallics, and smocking but by the "girl's girl" attitude of supporting those marginalized and targeted by the patriarchy, girlhood symbolizes, aestheticizes, and mediates critical social engagement, relationships, and forms of resistance to misogyny and capitalism. This return to and celebration of the hyper-feminine and behaviours

associated with girlhood offers space for femmes to embrace a softer, more whimsical form of femininity, contrasting sharply with previous trends of the 90s and early aughts that revered the tomboy and the #girlboss to the detriment of the "girly girl." And yet, in some instances, these viral trends re-mix themselves into more insidious forms of misogyny, white supremacy, and capitalism. Indeed, while girlhood is trending on social media, the reality of girlhood in North America, including gender identity, femme experience, reproductive justice, and bodily autonomy, is incredibly fraught.

In this paper, we argue that, within the field of feminist media studies, there is a pressing need to focus attention on this trend and specifically on hyperfemininity (Cvajner, 2011; Holland & Harpin, 2013; Rosaria & Wijaya, 2022) as a valid and valued form of gender expression and intersectional feminist protest within contemporary social media. As resistance against the heteropatriarchal gender aesthetics and expectations that influence hegemonic femininity and that produce femmephobia (Hoskin 2017, 2019, 2020), we focus our analysis on the social media #girlhood meme trend that, we suggest, embraces a wide range of femme practices through the re-mixing of femme identity, while critiquing heteropatriarchal norms. The study of femme digital phenomena, such as memes, offers a vital lens for understanding the complexity of the internet, particularly as the space for nuance in the public sphere increasingly collapses into simplistic, binary ideas that fuel polarization and online hate. Here, femme is more than just gender identity or expression; instead, femme is a complex, politicized, and often marginalized identity rooted in femininity but distinct from its mainstream notions (Hoskin & Taylor, 2019; Schwartz, 2020). As Andi Schwartz (2020) argues, femme aesthetics are an intentional choice, especially within digital spaces, used to challenge dominant ideas of power, strength, and resistance by embracing softness, vulnerability, and care as forms of empowerment. For us,

focusing here on mediated femme experiences is not to devalue or disparage other forms of gender expression, like butch, masc, or stud aesthetics, but to also make space for theorizations of femme representation. To make our argument, we trace the emergence and circulation of the viral #girlhood trend, looking towards the #coquette aesthetic, #barbiecore, and #bimbofeminism to outline how these playful expressions of femininity contribute to subverting what is expected of normative femme bodies. Next, we consider what the current moment of mediated femininity indicates about the larger politics around femininity as a site of struggle, analyzing the ways that #girlhood aesthetics center and build relationships that value various forms of (hyper)femininity and its relationship to capitalism, white supremacy, and toxic masculinity.

To conclude, we suggest that girlhood offers a space of hope for more femme, and more feminist, futures, arguing that girlhood memes comment on the tensions and anxieties felt by femme individuals in the political moment. Because digital artifacts like memes and the technologies they rely on are not neutral, as Safiya Noble (2018) argues, but encode and perpetuate racial and gender biases, girlhood memes stand as an important space for critiquing the systems of oppression that continue to frame femininity through whiteness, intelligence, and submissiveness. Indeed, if gender norms are scripts that prescribe and describe how we must act, then widening the range of acceptable feminine behaviour through hyperfemininity, as manifest in #girlhood memes, is crucial for changing how we discipline the range of femme bodies that exist and how we understand and analyze femininity within media studies.

Girlhood Trending: Aesthetics, Fashion, Pop Culture, and Politics

#Girlhood and its accompanying trends of bimbo feminism, coquette, and Barbiecore, inspired by the resurgence of Barbie, aestheticizes the nostalgia of childhood, tapping into the ideal of more carefree times that simultaneously promote confidence and self-expression. In

contrast to the #girlboss and Sheryl Sandberg "Lean in" era of the 2010s that favoured whiteness, cisness, and upper-middle classness, the nostalgia of childhood is notable here as an intersectional marker, standing as a space for those who could not experience the girly, carefree childhood they desired or did not yet know that they desired. Girlhood, while it uses the term "girl," is highly inclusive of transness and other expressions of femininity that may not be considered normative under a heteropatriarchal gaze. Speaking to the trend as a cultural construct, rather than as an identity or age specific to childhood, girlhood becomes a celebration of femininity and the femme experience. Trans TikTok content creator Dylan Mulvaney, for example, rose to popularity for her series "Days of Girlhood," where she documented her transition (Mulvaney, 2022) to celebrate and amplify her interpretation of and participation in girlhood. Simultaneously, her series highlights how the #girlhood stands as a space for her to relive girlhood on her own time, in her own way. Similarly, for those who could not afford the girly markers of childhood that they may have coveted as children or for racialized children who were forced to be adults all too quickly, #girlhood gives space to participate in the lost or stolen opportunity. As Cierra Black (2024) writes, "[f]or Black women, the 'girlhood' trend is as much a practice of survival and bodily autonomy as it is an avenue to access joy" (para. 3) As such, we suggest that the aesthetic of girlhood neither connotes gender identification nor suggests a specific socioeconomic status or race; rather, it is an opportunity to play with femininity in ways that communicate the politics of gender, race, and class in accessible ways. As a space distinct from the everyday hustle and bustle of work or the duties of being a spouse or a parent, girlhood offers a respite of self-actualization (Wasserman, 2016), a room of one's own (Wolfe, 1929)—a space that is fun, full of creativity despite one's education level, and high femme.

As a trend, #girlhood mobilizes an ironic yet inclusive femininity by deploying styles, colours, accessories, and themes associated with the "girly girl" archetype. Often disparaged by men and historically used to justify violence against women—such as the notion embedded in rape culture that women wearing miniskirts are "asking for it"—this trend critiques heteropatriarchy and emphasizes the importance of bodily autonomy. Emerging from material and pop culture, particularly fashion and music, in late 2022, #girlhood gained momentum on visual platforms like Instagram and TikTok, ushered in by Taylor Swift's Eras Tour and Beyoncé's Renaissance World Tour before aestheticizing itself as the hyperfeminine, vibrant #Barbicore with the reintroduction of Barbie into popular internet culture through the *Barbie* movie (Kahn, 2023). The trend gained significant momentum following the 2022 Valentino Fall runway show, which predominantly featured hot pink outfits, likely in anticipation of Greta Gerwig's long awaited *Barbie* movie. The aesthetic's popularity exploded onto the pop cultural scene with the release of the film, as its promotional events, press tours, and film showings saw many celebrities, influencers, and everyday movie-goers adopting the Barbiecore aesthetic with bold, pink outfits (Barker 2023; Caruso, 2023). Signified by its hot pink, bows, lace, sparkles, feathers, mini dresses, and other accessories and references to the childhood icon of Barbie and her signature style, when the cultural phenomenon of the girlhood aesthetic took form online it was informed by visual elements from its material precursors.

While Barbiecore, with its roots in #girlhood, has been linked to forms of postfeminism and capitalism that, through infantilizing behaviours, suggest to some a lack of agency and a reliance on the purchasing of goods, we suggest that the memetic layers through which girlhood is communicated instead aim to critically and ironically comment on the complexities of the current moment. Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) writes that our "media landscape," as an economy

of visibility, makes possible "a set of tactics used by some feminisms and some misogynies to move into the spotlight with more ease than others" (p. 2). For a popular postfeminism, these tactics include a direct linking of femininity to the body, self-surveillance through self-subjectification, individualism and the false promise of "choice and empowerment," the perpetuation of sexual difference as "natural" alongside the "sexualization of culture," and a consumerist code that employs a "commodification of difference" (Gill, 2007, p. 149). On the surface, #girlhood may seem to play into these dynamics, but the heart of the trend lies in its attempts to "[break] free from societal scrutiny" through "cleverly subverting and satirizing" girlhood aesthetics to "[liberate] themselves from the patriarchal and male gaze" (Hering, 2023, para. 2). These interpretations of girlhood are not reliant on career achievements or social standards of femininity (which, too, are often belittled and demonized) but on the "intrapersonal interpretations of girlhood and self-care" (para. 3). To this point, as Hoskin and Blair (2024) ask: "if popular culture represents shared understanding and meaning within a given social system, what does this epistemic occlusion and erasure of femininity say about our shared understandings of femininity?" (4).

As Millennial, Zillenial, and Gen Z youth reflect on their feelings of estrangement from community, girlhood flips the script on what is considered the "norm" of femininity to not only symbolize a critique of the exploitation and alienation of labourers but expand our repertoires of what constitutes femininity. Girlhood challenges gender stereotypes through demanding a change in how we frame expectations of femme people, and the entitlement patriarchal society feels towards femme people, their bodies, and their purchasing power. Girlhood gestures to the nostalgia of time spent not on working, but on leisure and in connecting with the people around us—with playing outside, making friendship bracelets, and engaging in other DIY activities. If

we have more leisure time, time that is not consumed by labour, then we might have more time to reflect and critically think, rather than have all our time and brain power allotted to patriarchy and capitalism. Girlhood is not just fashion or aesthetics: such a trend, we suggest, reflects a broader cultural movement towards reclaiming, celebrating, and advancing forms of femininity that have long been viewed as powerless and submissive, framed as succumbing to women's own internalized misogyny. The trend actively confronts heteropatriarchal gender expressions, challenging the notion that hyper-femininity is not a serious or valid expression of identity through the use of irony. Girlhood thus boldly reclaims the childlike playfulness of childhood, tapping into nostalgia through visual cues such as bows, glitter, and an abundance of pink. These elements are prominently featured in memes and other forms of social media content, creating a vibrant and distinctive aesthetic that resonates with a wide audience.

Context: Feminist Media Studies and Critical Femininity Studies in Conversation

While feminist scholars of the last two decades have critiqued media representations of women and girls for perpetuating stereotypes and limiting gendered agency (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gilbert, 2009; Gill, 2007, 2008, 2016; Halbterstam, 2011; McRobbie, 2004, 2009; Ringrose & Barajas 2011;), social media continues to open new avenues for self-representation and counter-narratives (Conley 2017; MacDonald et al., 2021; Keller & Ryan, 2018; Wiens et al., 2023). Rosalind Gill (2016), for instance, emphasizes the role of digital platforms in fostering participatory cultures where young women can contest and reconfigure traditional gender norms. #Girlhood memes, in this context, serve as a form of digital resistance, encouraging girls and young women to articulate their experiences and critique societal expectations in a humorous and accessible manner. Certainly, memes can subvert mainstream narratives by exposing the absurdities of gender stereotypes (Massanari & Chess, 2018; Milner, 2016, 2013). #Girlhood

memes are thus not merely frivolous content but become, through their virality and constant circulation, imbued with the power to challenge and reshape dominant cultural scripts.

Given that memes "underscore social dynamics" in our correlating online and offline worlds (Shifman 2014) and impact trends in media engagement, marketing tactics and content, digital culture, and outcomes of political campaigns (Börzsei, 2013; Ross & Rivers, 2017; Miltner, 2014; van Dijck, 2013), #girlhood memes are central to understanding contemporary femininity within digital culture. Like Limor Shifman (2014) writes, memes have a unique ability to be parodied and remixed, which then inspires "bottom-up expression" that mixes "popular culture, politics, and participation in unexpected ways", where the re-orientation and re-creation of memetic content is situated according to larger socio-political cultural influences (p. 4). The participatory and malleable nature of memes is particularly significant in the context of #girlhood, as it is reflected in the highly shareable quality of the trend. Jenkins (2006) describes this very process as "convergence culture," where media consumption becomes a collective process, open to change based on converging interactions of media, technology, people, and culture.

The interactive nature of social media thus encourages the continual evolution and reinterpretation of these memes—that is, remixing—making them dynamic tools not only for communication and self-expression, but for resistance against heteropatriarchal norms (Baym, 2015). Within the larger context of the construction of gender and the prevalence of misogyny online, this becomes particularly pertinent. Ongoing conversations of the "manosphere," a dispersed group of men's rights activists and anti-feminists (Ging, 2017; Ging & Siapera, 2019) affect the experiences of increasing hostilities that women face online (Jane, 2017; Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016). Such interactions and ideologies, reified through interactions online (Dodge,

2015; Jane, 2018; Kramer, 2011; Wiens, 2021), maintain the rape culture we live within: a culture in which sexual violence is normalized and trivialized. The virality of #girlhood memes thus becomes pivotal in creating a shared cultural lexicon of resistance among young women, one that fosters a sense of community and belonging that is essential for identity formation during adolescence (Turkle, 2011).

Put into conversation with critical femininity studies, we might then consider how gender identity, as communicated through memes, comes to be constructed, represented, performed, and contested, while simultaneously interrogating the power dynamics and cultural scripts define what it means to be femme (de Beauvoir, 1949; Butler, 1990; Bordo, 1993). Simone de Beauvoir's (1949) foundational *The Second Sex* argued for the importance of paying attention to the social structures that impose gender roles and infer gender values, shaping femininity as a socially constructed category that positions women, and particularly femme women, as the "Other" in relationship to men and masculinity. Such gender performances (Butler, 1990) suggest that gender aesthetics and identities are not fixed but rather stand as ongoing performances, reinforcing particular ideas of how gender ought to look like through repeated social practices. Reflecting on de Beauvoir's (1949) work, Rhea Ashley Hoskin and Karen Blair (2022) point out that femininity has been mobilized as a tool of the patriarchy, framing femininity and femme identity as anti-feminist and thus less desirable and less valuable, particularly for other those who also occupy queer, racialized, disabled, and/or lower socioeconomic status social locations.

Within this intersectional context (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 1990), femmephobia, although prevalent, is easily overlooked, often invisiblized by the very structuring forces that shape dominant ideologies of femininity (Hoskin, 2019, 2020). Femmephobia, as outlined by

Hoskin, speaks to the devaluation, marginalization, and stigmatization of femininity and feminine traits, regardless of the gender of the person expressing them. Femme theory thus creates a crucial space in academia for identifying and exploring femme experiences and representations as they intersect with overlapping forms of discrimination, critiquing the marginalization of femininity in our social worlds to highlight how femme expressions of femininity can challenge and resist heteronormative, patriarchal expectations (Hoskin, 2021; Hoskin, Blair, & Holmberg, 2024). From this context, hyperfemininity through femme expression embraces the many ways that femininity can exist, even as we acknowledge the ways that race, class, and ethnicity shape and are shaped by hyperfeminine ideals (Cvajner, 2011). Hyperfeminine ideals, constructed and circulated across different cultural contexts through media, are thus open to the global and local dynamics that intersect to shape experiences and representations of hyperfemininity (Rosaria & Wijaya, 2022). Indeed, under heteronormative patriarchal structures, hyperfemininity can be both a constraint and a form of agency, a reifying of traditional gender and a subversion of its aims (Holland & Harpin, 2013). Through memes, then, we might unpack the importance of media self-representation, intersectionality, and identity performance in shaping such understandings of hyperfemininity.

Method: Visual Rhetorical Analysis through Digital Dwelling

Following an embodied method of digital dwelling (Wiens & MacDonald, 2024; Wiens, 2022; Wiens, 2021) for working with curated digital datasets, in this article we employ visual rhetorical analysis (Foss, 2012; Gries, 2015; Huntington, 2013, 2016; Olson, Finnegan, & Hope, 2008) to explore how the visual artifacts of the girlhood phenomenon influence our contemporary cultural, political, and economic material, digital, and affective realities to, in Bruno Latour's (2005) words, "reassemble the social." Drawing on feminist standpoint theory,

where listening to, including, and amplifying the many voices that have been marginalized creates the conditions for a more objective reality (Harding 1993), digital dwelling involves lingering in online spaces. As Wiens (2021) argues, such lingering enables researchers to understand tools, tactics, and counter-hegemonic rhetorics, focusing on the "intra-actions" (Barad 2003) or entanglements between researchers, participants, data, and sociopolitical contexts, as well as individual stories and their interconnected influences on the research scene to pay attention to specific discourses and rhetorics often overshadowed by dominant perceptions. Dwelling highlights the importance of presence, immersion, and engagement with environments and communities during collection, rather than treating them as mere sources of data to be extracted. As Sonja Foss (2012) argues, "as studies of visual rhetoric generate rhetorical theory…they challenge and question the linguistic boundaries of our rhetorical theories and provide a more holistic picture of symbol use" (304). In practice, then, we follow a non-random critical case sampling approach (Deacon et al., 2021; Palinkas et al. 2015) to curate datasets that best exemplify how #girlhood memes challenge dominant assumptions of femininity. As such, we look to videos and images in the social media forms of reels, TikToks, memes, and their associated hashtags, captions, and follower comments to understand how they communicate messages and persuade audiences. We focus on the use of visual elements, including colour, composition, and symbols, and their digital rhetorical strategies that convey meaning, evoke emotions, and influence perceptions. We focus on small, curated datasets (Wiens & MacDonald, 2024; Gajjala et al. 2024) or what André Brock (2015) calls "deeper data" to best illustrate the relationship between situated knowledges (Haraway 1988), affect, materiality, and digitality. The four memes selected for analysis reflect themes of femininity as rest and resistance, femininity as anti-toxic masculinity and anti-white supremacy, and femininity as necessarily complex. Our

data consists of individual posts and contextualizing media articles, which can be found linked through hashtags found through dwelling, and were a result of "long-term online observation" on our own Instagram and TikTok feeds (Latzko-Toth et al., 2017, 199) for six months from January 2024 to June 2024 and related contextual articles from contemporary news sources and blogs.

In terms of data collection, the following visual examples are memes that either surfaced in searching for data using the hashtag #girlhood on Instagram or were saved as they appeared on our respective Instagram "For You Pages." As such, we acknowledge that algorithmic bias (Anable, 2018; Gillespie, 2010; Noble, 2018) is at play here, and that our data is highly personalized to who we are as consumers of Internet content. As feminist and queer young Millennial researchers who grew up in the 90s and early aughts, and who consider our positionality through standpoint and constant reflexivity (e.g., Collins, 1990; Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1993; Hartsock, 1983), when gathering memetic data, we foreground the following meme analysis with the acknowledgement that there is a distinct perspective and lens that is crafted by networked intersectional feminism and digital feminist stories of performative assembly (MacDonald et al., 2021; Wiens et al., 2023). In this sense, this dataset has been collected to highlight everyday expressions of various aspects of femininity and the feminine experience through the aestheticization of girlhood—expressions that ultimately comment on the reclamation of femininity as a method of resistance against the everyday heteropatriarchal norms imposed on women. Further, due to the nature of Internet memetic data (that is, that their existence relies on being remixed, transformed, and shared) our collection of memes is not finite, and will undoubtedly continue to grow and evolve, leaving ample room for future study as the trend changes.

Analysis: Aestheticizing Girlhood in Memes

Meme content has the unique ability to visually communicate complex, layered messages in ways that are highly shareable based on their combined psychological, social, and technological factors, making them also highly accessible to social media audiences (Milner, 2016; Shifman, 2013; Phillips, 2015). Because memes often encapsulate common experiences and feelings of the moment through wit and humour, communicated in cultural shorthands, they offer spaces of identification and group belonging. The aesthetics of memetic content vary and change upon the re-interpretation and re-mixing of existing and emerging trends by social media content-creators and users. In many ways, meme aesthetics are nonsensical in a way that nods to the Dadaists of the early 20th century, avant-garde artists who produced nonsensical art in response to their profound disgust with the state of the world, using absurdity and irrationality to challenge traditional art and social norms (Sharma, 2023). Part of the nonsensical nature of meme aesthetic is made apparent in the visual interpretive dilemmas, presented through the visual and text being paired together in a way that may not make sense without contextual knowledge. This, though, is where the power of visuality lies for memes; they are not always meant to please the eye, rather their purpose is to engage the mind in some way (Sharma, 2023). Further, the intertextual nature of the meme necessitates a mindful connection between the meme itself and the broader socio-political and cultural influences that make it a meme. From this perspective, memetic aesthetics and digital feminist content use visual and cultural forms to challenge dominant narratives, critique social norms, and create community. Feminist meme creators often use humor, satire, and symbolism to address issues such as gender inequality, sexism, body politics, and identity, making complex feminist ideas more accessible and shareable within digital spaces. In other words, the aesthetic of a meme trend ebbs and flows

with the influences that guide it, resulting in an aesthetic that is entangled in a matrix of social, technical, political, and internet references. Given this context, the #girlhood meme trend effectively carves out a specific aesthetic that is common among the many iterations of the trend. The range of feminist content here offers various depictions of femininity and feminism, encouraging a broader understanding and acceptance of diverse femme identities and experiences.

As such, we argue that girlhood provides a hopeful space for imagining more femme and feminist futures, suggesting that girlhood memes reflect the tensions and anxieties experienced by femme individuals in today's political climate. A key example of this phenomenon is, as mentioned above, the impact of the Barbie Movie on feminine performance and expression. At its core, the Barbie Movie and the onslaught of social media content it spawned is not just a celebration of an iconic doll but a narrative about community and the collective power that historically marginalized genders can wield when supported, accepted, and united. This film and its many memes underscore the importance of embracing and empowering diverse expressions of femininity, demonstrating how cultural products can influence and reshape societal perceptions of gender roles and identity. Girlhood hashtags and the trending movements they inspire (i.e., the Barbie core, bimbo feminism, and coquette trends that we highlight below) thus play a crucial role in challenging entrenched gender stereotypes and norms, advocating for a shift in how society frames its expectations of women and the sense of entitlement it has towards women's bodies and how they express femininity. These movements reflect a growing engagement among social media users, who employ their critical thinking skills to navigate and analyze the diverse range of feminist content available online—a task that has become increasingly complex in the age of social media disinformation. Within our quickly changing mediascapes, the representation

of girlhood through social media memes thus deserves significant attention. These memes, often humorous, satirical, and perhaps nihilistic, are potent tools for expressing and challenging contemporary notions of femininity, identity, and agency.

#Girlhood's visual markers, like pinks and pastels, feminine accessories, and a potentially glittery and whimsical mood, can be found across the wide range of girlhood image and video-based memes on social media. In keeping with the Dadaist leaning of the meme aesthetics, there are other distinctly #girlhood markers that similarly resonate with users familiar with the trend that perhaps, at first, appear nonsensical. For instance, the #girlhood meme aesthetic is nostalgic in the sense that it adopts visual elements of trends of the past, like the popular late 1990s and early 2000s aesthetics produced through the early digital camera (known as "digicam") photo effect, or through notable fashion trends of the time, like low rise flared jeans, spaghetti straps, and crop tops. The aesthetic of nostalgia in this trend demonstrates the ways that contemporary culture trends re-interpret and re-mix past cultural phenomena; everything old ultimately becomes new again. This can be demonstrated by these nostalgic visual elements in the #girlhood trend, as for millennials it harkens back to the emotions and cultural aesthetics of their childhood. As Ahmed (2004) argues, emotions and affect play a role in shaping collective and individual memories, where emotions are not psychological states but cultural practices that impact how we relate to one another and construct identities. Feminist movements, and perhaps social media trends, draw on shared memories of struggle, oppression, and resistance, evoking emotions that bind people together and foster solidarity. For those who are Gen Z or Gen Alpha, it is a contemporary cultural aesthetic currently permeating throughout our digital and material culture. By re-interpreting the nostalgic aesthetic of millennial girlhood, this trend playfully, but earnestly, resists dominant heteropatriarchal expectations of how femininity is expressed.

Femininity as Rest and Resistance



Figure 1. Good morning girlboss (Source: @daily_sleeper, 2024).

In Figure 1, we see a small, soft white and tan kitten sitting in a field of long grass, looking apprehensively at itself in a dainty, girlish, pink mirror that appears to be small enough for dolls. This kitten is wearing an elegantly unfurling pink flower as a hat, and is, undeniably, adorable. The setting for the photo itself is in nature, in what seems to be a lush, summery environment of peace and leisure. The simple white text in the center of the image, in all lower case with no punctuation, reads "good morning girlboss". This juxtaposition provides a certain cheekiness to this meme, as the image is not what would be considered an aesthetic of the corporate serious girlboss, leaning into the whims of the patriarchal corporate ladder. Rather, it is

softer and more whimsical, and thus, through the juxtaposition of the image against the cultural reference in the text, actively rejects previously understood expressions of the "girlboss". In this way, this meme plays around with the interpretive dilemma created by hyperfeminine aesthetics in conversation with preconceived notions of girlbossing (and the gatekeeping and gaslighting that the archetype of the girlboss is tied to). The inclusion of elements of nature actively resists the grind culture implied by the text. Indeed, a kitten bedecked with a flower hat in a sun-drenched grassy patch is far more in line with the performance artist, theatre maker, activist, theologian, and community healer Tricia Hersey and her call of rest of resistance against, and as a disruption of, the capitalist routine.

Grounded in Black liberation theology, Afrofuturism, womanism, and Black feminism, the Nap Ministry, of which Tricia Hersey is the proclaimed Nap Bishop, aims to reclaim and honour the body via rest as this "disrupts and pushes back against capitalism and white supremacy" (see @thenapministry on Instagram). Here, this disruption is being achieved through resisting the capitalist girlboss aesthetic, instead suggesting that you do not have to be a girlboss to be a successful femme. Through this kitten's ironic use of "girlboss," the postfeminist ideals of equating feminist success to hyper-individual corporate mobility and high earning power (never to be caught wearing anything but a power pantsuit) are poked at, ushering in alternative performances of femininity. While the pantsuit does not have to be thrown out, the soft pink pastels of a dress, of hyperfeminine aesthetics, are also in. As such, the kitten in this image may very well be a girlboss, but not in the way that we might imagine; like the trend of #girlmoss, sinking into the earth as a rejection of the concrete jungle and lifestyle of the #girlboss, this kitten is returning to nature to climb the branches of trees, sprawl in the sun, and roll around in the grass. This kitten will ace the test of resting and, thus, resisting. You can, in fact, take it slow

and embrace the feeling of waking up in the morning, feeling like a tired kitten with a flower on its head, actively memeifying hyperfemininity as a rejection of the capitalistic expectations of how women should look and act. Calling on the Black feminist history of organizing imbued in Audre Lorde's (1984) infamous words, "caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare," Sara Ahmed (2014) too emphasizes how institutional systems are built for some to thrive, and others to barely survive. The self-care of girlhood is an acknowledgement of the capitalist imperative to purchase the best skincare products, which we know we do not need. What we do need is the moment of reprieve, a moment for self-expression. From this context, our kitten's call for new versions of girlboss and the aesthetics of hyperfemininity call to attention the forms of femininity that are valued within heteropatriarchal capitalism. Girlhood reclaims these representations, representations that have been used as insults to femmes, to remind audiences that the barriers that are constructed to marginalize people and keep them from community do not need to remain. Coupled with the message of rest, the very aesthetics that have been used to subordinate femme women and nonbinary people are also the very aesthetics that we can play with to push back.

Femininity as "Coquitting" Capitalism, Toxic Masculinity, and White Supremacy



Figure 2. Coquitting (Source: @ivorila, 2024, TikTok and Instagram).

In a similarly anti-capitalist sentiment, Figure 2 shows a white hand, adorned with long manicured pink nails and a pink bow around the middle finger, in a gesture commonly understood as shamelessly rejecting someone or something. The action of raising the middle finger at someone is so well known as an obscene, offensive gesture, that even the Ancient Greeks used it as an insult, often associated with sexuality and male dominance (Nelson, 2017).

In the image, the text underneath the raised, bow-tied middle finger reads, "coquitting", blending the word "coquette" with "quitting". Underneath the text, small decorative symbols are included, most notably two number nines backwards, forming the shape of a bow. This meme, through the communication between the feminine aesthetic and the text, wittily enfolds the coquette trend into a rejection of conformity with the status quo. The fusion of "coquette" and "quitting" overlaid on the raised middle finger decorated with a simple pink bow memeifies the demands of the capitalist grind; not only is it quitting, but it is quitting aestheticized and emphasized by a coquette attitude—an attitude that the patriarchal structure of capitalist actively and abjectly rejects. Notably, coquette is a distinctly feminine word and aesthetic; the French word "coquette" though absorbed into popularity online, translates in English to "flirtatious." It is not only that we are quitting the capitalist grind and not trying to be coy about it, but we are also quitting the patriarchal constraints and expectations of femininity that expect such coyness. Hyperfemininity, while leaning into female aesthetics, behaviours, and traits that have traditionally been associated with women, still affords agency and is still feminist. The resounding hyperfemme lipsticked and manicured "no" is still no.

Here, then, we must also consider quitting the whiteness that currently runs throughout the girlhood trend. Critics of the girlhood trend rightfully argue that the memes represent white experiences and aesthetics, further marginalizing the experiences of racialized girls and women. This exclusion reinforces a narrow and homogeneous representation of girlhood that overlooks the diversity of experiences related to race, ethnicity, and socio-economic background, perpetuating harmful tropes and limiting the understanding of the multifaceted nature of girlhood across different racial and ethnic groups. Black (2024), interviewing Professor Omise'eke Tinsley, argues that there must be more than one version of girlhood and that girlhood as a trend,

particularly for Black women, needs to hold space for the "right to be read as feminine on our own terms" (para. 11). As Tinsley notes, "For Black women, [it's more than] trying to hold on to an imagined girlhood ideal, but it can also be deeply healing in terms of giving yourself an experience of girlhood that you may never have gotten in a racist, sexist culture that constantly treats Black girls as far older than they actually are" (para. 9). For racialized femmes, adorning themselves in the girlhood markers of makeup, frills, dresses, and long manicured nails speaks to the "hierarchy of feminine ease" (Black, 2024, para. 13). That is, makeup, perfectly coiffed hair, and long nails are not practical for manual labour—a form of labour that racialized bodies are often expected to participate in. Racialized femmes who thus participate in girlhood aesthetics are, indeed, coquitting, "demonstrating a powerful practice in body autonomy by insisting that their 'bodies are a work of art, not simply bodies for labor'" (Tinsley quoted in Black 2024, para. 13). By widening the scripts of femininity through girlhood aesthetics, similar to that of #BlackGirlMagic and #BlackGirlJoy, we thus create space for subverting white supremacist, heteropatriarchal ideologies. Expanding narratives of girlhood by examining its intersectional successes *and* failures is a crucial step in advocating for more inclusive understandings of femininity which is, in a way, what figure 3 aims to do.

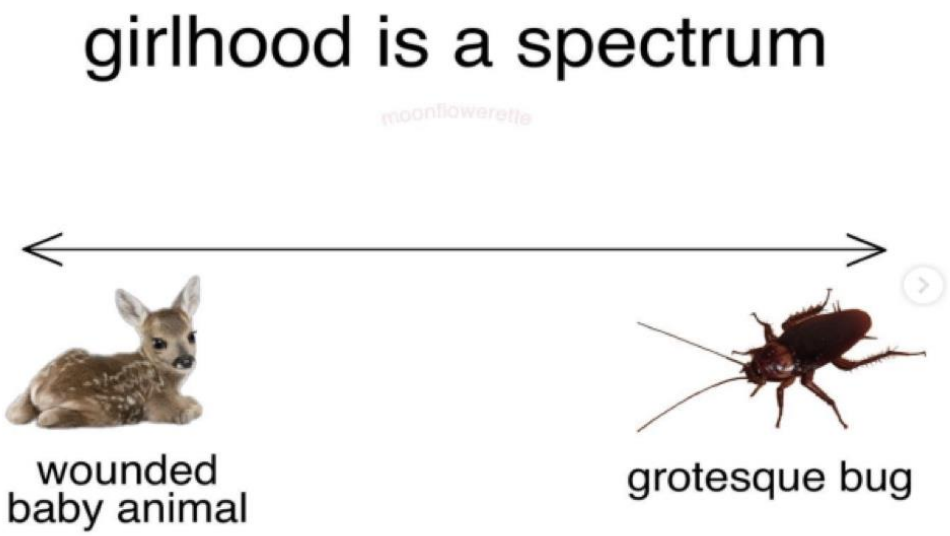


Figure 3. Girlhood is a spectrum (Source: @moonflowerette, 2022, Instagram).

Posted early in the onset of the #girlhood trend, this template has since been adopted as a widely usable base for various iterations of the "girlhood is a spectrum" idea. The basic template is simply the text "girlhood is a spectrum" with the double-sided arrow underneath. It is customized by social media users (primarily on Tumblr, X, Instagram, and Tik Tok) to represent and comment on, and ultimately expand, contemporary femme identities and experiences in satirical and cheeky ways (Know Your Meme, 2023). This particular remixed meme was posted in December 2022, shortly after the original surfaced on Tumblr, and garnered a significant level of viral engagement across platforms (Know Your Meme, 2023). This iteration of the "girlhood is a spectrum meme" suggests that girlhood can be anything from the delicate vulnerability of a wounded fawn to the monstrous Kafka-esque grotesque insect. In this meme and its many iterations, what is clear is that girlhood resists categorization and resists the binary notion that

there is one acceptable way to perform femininity or partake in the #girlhood trend. Aestheticizing Kafka, who wrote on themes of alienation, bureaucratic absurdity, and the individual's struggle against an incomprehensible and oppressive system, this meme symbolizes the idea that the experience of girlhood and how individuals relate to it is complex and fluid, suggesting a necessary inclusivity in the #girlhood trend. As Bacon (2023) writes, "girliness isn't exclusive to girls either (young, female-identifying): everyone and anyone can be a girlie" (para. 3). As such, conceiving of girlhood as a spectrum allows for an embrace of a range of forms of femininity both independently and within the community of girlhood. Across all three memes here (figures 1, 2, and 3), we see a push back against patriarchy's toxic masculinity to subdue and punish femininity in the capitalist system, and so these examples emphasize the aesthetics of femininity to actively "meme back" (Khosravi-Ooryad, 2024) at heteropatriarchal, capitalist, white supremacist grind culture and toxic masculinity. Indeed, girlhood and femininity are complex, perhaps even tricky, things.

Femininity as "a tricky, tricky thing"

On March 11, 2023, TikTok content creator and stand-up comedian Keara Sullivan (@superkeara) posted a video entitled, "Girlhood is a tricky tricky thing", where she begins by stating that "it's so hard explaining to men what it feels like to be a girl…" (Sullivan, 2023). She goes on to say that the reason for this is that "[girlhood] is such a wide spectrum of experience and emotion" (Sullivan, 2023). Sullivan states that on the one hand, "being a girl is really fun, you wake up and you're like…" before pausing for a moment and then giggling coquettishly before expressing that "…it's really cute…" (Sullivan, 2023). On the other hand, she states that "...there are other days where you wake up and it's just…", she has no words to express the other end of the spectrum and can only fully express this through guttural sounds of distress (Sullivan,

2023). The video ends abruptly, and we are left chuckling at the comically helpless noise Sullivan makes to communicate this other end of the girlhood spectrum. This TikTok video re-mix of the original "girlhood is a spectrum" echoes the original memeification of the wildly complex and difficult realities of the feminine experience. Some comments posted on Sullivan's video indicate that this is not an isolated perception of the girlhood spectrum, with one comment in particular making a direct reference to Figure 3: "baby deer to kafkaesque metamorphosis Gregor bug spectrum of girlhood" (@gabby, 2023). This comment, and the memetic expression of the girlhood spectrum implies that the experience of being a girl is metamorphic, and that where the femme self or experience lies on the spectrum depends on the conditions that make it so. The memetic aesthetic of girlhood here is then making a statement on how these expressions of femininity contribute to subverting what is expected of normative femme folks under the duress of heteropatriarchal conditions. Further, mediated expressions of femininity, such as these girlhood memes, are situated in memetic dialogue across platforms among communities of women, which rejects the impulse of patriarchy's toxic masculinity to punish femininity and isolate women from each other.

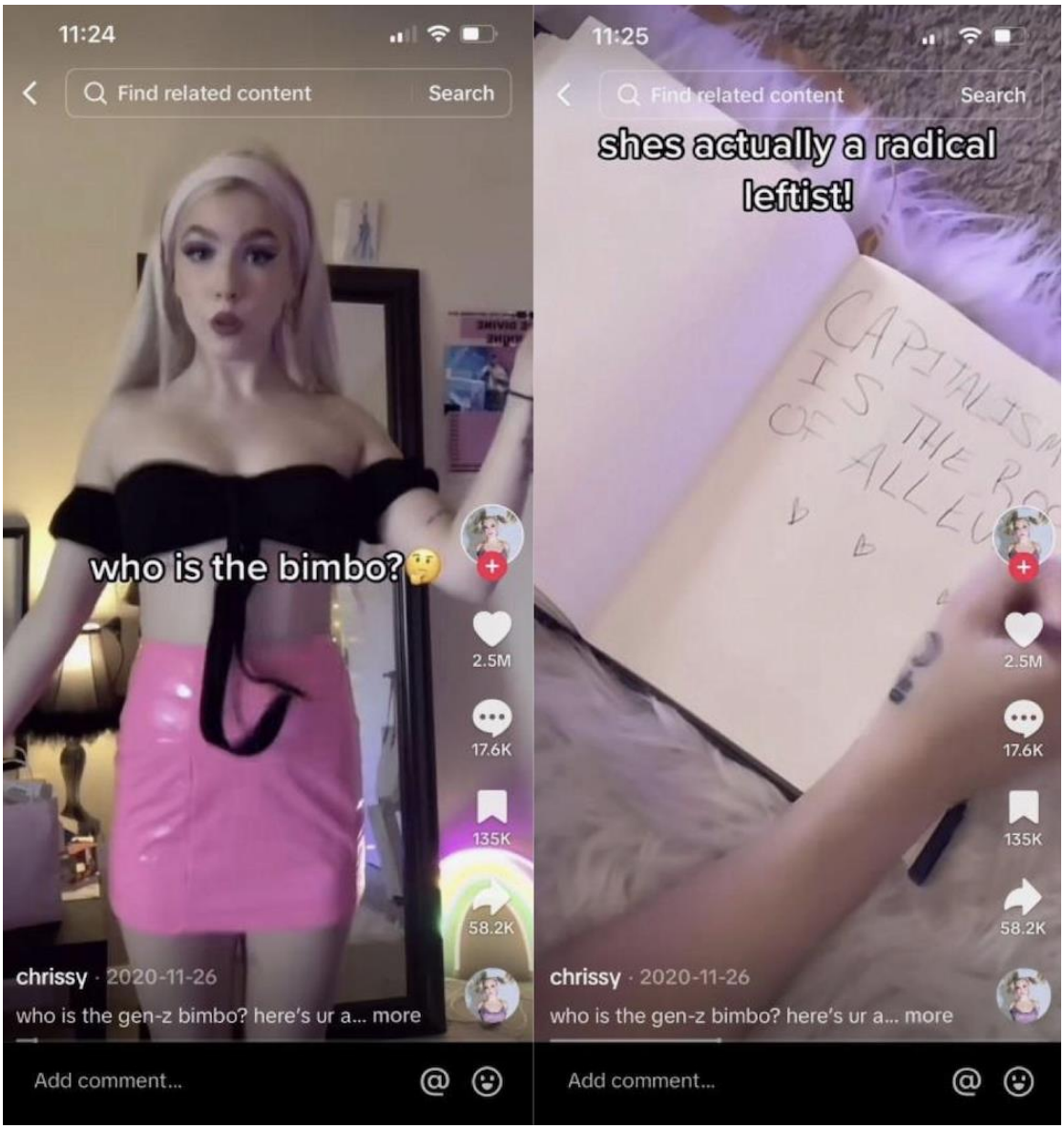


Figure 4 and 5. Who is the gen-z bimbo? (Source: @chrissychlapecka, 2020, TikTok).[1]

With 2.5 million likes, Chrissy Chlapecka's video entitled "who is the gen-z bimbo? here's ur answer <3 luv y'all xoxo #bimbo #ihatecapitalism #ily" (posted November 26, 2020) has popularized the era of the bimbo and of bimboification across social media platforms.

[1] Full video: https://www.tiktok.com/@chrissychlapecka/video/6899540522721922310?lang=en

Though the trend has evolved in kaleidoscopic ways, Chlapecka's definition of the new age bimbo extends the political potential of hyperfeminity to confront restrictive heteropatriarchal norms of how to exist in a femme body. In Chlapecka's popular TikTok she reveals the main characteristics of the new age, or Generation Z, bimbo to be radically leftist, anti-capitalist and an ally for her "girls, gays, and theys" (Chlapecka, 2020). Chlapecka states in her video that a bimbo doesn't exist for the misogynistic male gaze, she embodies bimboism for her own gaze, and thus exemplifies a radical self-acceptance of her own femininity. In making such open remarks on the polemics of the male gaze and sex-positivity, bimbos like Chlapecka encourage other women to take pleasure in simply existing as a woman in the world as a way to express and challenge contemporary notions of femininity, identity, and agency (McWebb and Luan, 2024).

Although BimboTok (the nickname for this trend on TikTok) is criticized for reinforcing gendered stereotypes, a closer look at the politics of the new age bimbo reveals that "that they are conscious of their own frivolity, and that it is precisely the hyper-feminine, yet politically critical, commentary that satirizes the heteronormative expectations of someone who may present as a bimbo" (McWebb and Luan, 2024, p. 4). Everyday expressions of femininity and the self-actualization that is an integral part of cultural trends like bimboism epitomizes the political as deeply personal, because its critical nature is intertwined at its core with individual identity and the reclamation of femininity within the self. To be truly intersectional, though, it is necessary to consider that many representations of bimboism across platforms are largely white women who fit within media-centric conventional beauty standards, however, as bell hooks (1981) writings reveal, femininity is not a monolith: there are deeply influenced by intersecting systems of oppression that shape social constructions and performances of race, class, and sexuality. This comes through in the bimbo trend as users stitch, duet, and collaborate with one

another to deconstruct the heteropatriarchal politics that have built up normative expectations of acceptable femininity. A trend such as bimboism, which exists as part of the larger #girlhood trend fosters a sense of community and belonging among women that is essential for identity formation and feminist resistance by reclaiming and encouraging purposeful frivolity and confidence.

Across the #girlhood meme trend, the various aesthetics of hyperfemininity such as the coquette influences and bimbofeminist content shows that trends such as this one build upon and remix each other. The nature of feminist media is such that trends and protest sentiments are informed by previous iterations that have been drawn from other feminist media, and so on and so forth. Bimboism for example, certainly has roots in late 1990s and early 2000s films such as *Legally Blonde* (2001), *Clueless* (1995), and *The House Bunny* (2008) where female protagonists are deemed as unserious, frivolous, and too feminine to be competent. The character arcs that the women in these films embark on follow a pattern of proving the heteropatriarchal normative assumptions of their identities and feminine expressions wrong. The memetic expressions of hyperfemininity, then, build on and remix upon such earlier popular culture hyperfemininities. Trends evolve and are adopted across platforms, so it must be noted that not all versions of femininity are tied to liberal and progressive politics. That being said, memetic aesthetics of hyperfemininity effectively "meme back at misogyny" (Khosravi-Ooryad, 2024) by challenging, disrupting, and questioning the boundaries of heteropatriarchy, and emphasizing the importance of femme bodily autonomy.

Conclusion: Girlhood as Hope for more Femme(inist) Futures

The embrace of femininity as rest and as resistance to capitalism, toxic masculinity, and white supremacy, as well as an acknowledgement of its complexities, illustrates a range of

depictions of femininity that speak to the agency to choose and to act through ending sexist, racist, and classist exploitation. Girlhood memes, through the ways they draw on a range of entangled ideas to comment on interlocking forms of discrimination, get at the heart of the matter of femininity by asking social media users to question who does and does not hold and wield power and who does and does not benefit from these systems of oppression. At present, girlhood is incredibly precarious. We are continuing to witness the criminalization of trans* bodies and the rolling back of reproductive rights since the US Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*; more American states are passing anti-abortion laws, forcing birthing bodies to carry unwanted pregnancies to term and criminalizing pregnant people who miscarry. The National Institute of Mental Health has reported that depression and anxiety rates are increasing among adolescent girls, with more than one in four girls, 29%, experiencing major depressive episodes (National Institute of Mental Health, 2023). As Law Professor Melissa Murray, interviewed by Mattie Kahn (2023), notes, while women and girls can preach the power of their independence, prompted by one of #girlhood's leading women Beyoncé herself ("all my independent women—where you at?"), the reality remains that women, trans, and non-binary peoples' "actual independence is conditional—jurisdiction-dependent" (para. 15). Despite these realities, though, girls still hope for more feminist futures, ones where a wider range of femme existence is possible. Through #girlhood memes, these conversations are happening in ways that are creating a sense of communal understanding and collective conversation, speaking to the affective economies of girlhood and the complex registers of hope, innocence, nostalgia, frustration, and confusion that girls—inclusive of all who identify as a girl—feel. As Murray (quoted in Kahn, 2023) reflects on Beyoncé's call to "wear silver" at her upcoming Renaissance shows because

"it's Virgo season," Murray wonders, "how else might we be rallied? What else could we do if we decided to get organized and band together" (para. 17)?

This reflection is a stark reminder that, even as girlhood is fraught, spaces of hope are crucial for cultural change; hope serves as the driving force behind collective action, resistance, and the envisioning of a better future. Yet, who can band together under the #girlhood trend? While social media platforms can amplify the voices of young women, these same platforms also subject them to the biases encoded in their algorithms, as seen above. Content from young women, especially from marginalized communities, might not get the same visibility as that from more privileged groups. As Safiya Noble (2018) has argued, the algorithms of our search engines and social media platforms perpetuate systemic biases and reinforce oppressive social norms, with search engines often misrepresenting or underrepresenting marginalized groups and searches related to Black girls or women often yielding hypersexualized, negative results. While the #girlhood trend offers opportunities for empowerment and self-expression, it also exists within a digital landscape that is influenced by the very biases and oppressions that Noble critiques. As consumers, critics, and creators of such content, we have the capacity to create spaces for critiquing the white supremacy, toxic masculinity, and capitalist intent of such memes, as we sought to do above. Indeed, these memes frequently employ irony and satire to critique normative femininity: memes that parody beauty standards or the "perfect" social media presence reveal the pressures and contradictions inherent in performing femininity, as well as showcase the contradictions inherent in using the platform's "algorithms of oppression" (Noble 2018) to circulate such messages. However, such forms of humor can be a mode of the feminist killjoy, disrupting the smooth functioning of patriarchal norms by making their absurdities visible (Ahmed 2010, 2017). #Girlhood memes, through such irony and absurdism, stand as

hope-full spaces for communicating that girlhood and femininity are not monolithic, varying greatly based on race, class, sexuality, and other social locations.

Memetic aesthetics of hyperfemininity thus matter not only because they widen the range of possibility for femme embodiment, but because they are also constantly remixing themselves to address the ever-expanding culture of the internet. #Girlhood memes, through juxtaposing idealized images of femininity with the realities of everyday girlhood, highlight the dissonance between systematic, societal expectations and personal experiences. Crucially, #girlhood memes facilitate a critical reflection of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989; Collins 1990) and lack thereof, pushing users to interrogate the ways that normative femininity relies on specific constructions of cisness, race, class, sexuality, and body politics. As such, continuing to follow these trends and their impacts matter, especially as we trace the metamorphosis of #girlhood into new territory. Considering the use of the #girlhood trend by those who do not identify as women but who embody femme identities, contemplating how acts of femmephobia are reflected in the trend, exploring how different racial and cultural backgrounds influence the interpretation and reception of these memes, and expanding on how #girlhood addresses or fails to address various intersections of identity are all crucial areas for further exploration. Ultimately, these memes and their hyperfeminine aesthetics are not only a means of entertainment, a space of absurdity and laughter. They also stand as hope-fuelled tools for cultural critique and identity formation that encourage audiences to navigate, resist, redefine, and expand normative narratives of girlhood and femininity.

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