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From Hot-Girls to Femcels: Algorithmic Logics and (Popular) Feminist Fatigue on TikTok

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Abstract

This article explores the interplay between popular feminist cultures and TikTok's algorithmic neoliberal and patriarchal logics, focusing on how they shape young women's sexual self-perception and feminist identities in the postdigital era. Drawing on focus group discussions with women aged 18 to 25, we explore how women's embodied affective experiences become increasingly defined through digital affordances on platforms like TikTok. In their negotiations of algorithmically contextualised femininity, participants discussed fatigue with —and rejections of— popular feminist 'empowerment' discourses, neoliberal 'confidence culture,' and 'boss girl' formations in exchange for nihilistic heteropessimism and/or embracing of aestheticized gendered domesticity. Applying a postdigital theoretical lens to consider online and physical (offline) affective states of our participants, we argue that the algorithmic infrastructure of TikTok pacifies its users, creating apathetic affects around how femininity is experienced. Consequentially, collective grievances are co-opted by capitalist algorithmic logics and reframed as matters to be addressed through self-centred, consumer-oriented, and aestheticized practices of self-work rather than political/collective feminist praxis. Ultimately, TikTok's visibility economies privilege the circulation of stylised feminine aesthetics and commodified self-presentation over the possibilities of feminism as a mode of political mobilisation for equity and social justice.

Keywords Postdigital affect · Algorithms · Femininity · Social media · TikTok

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Introduction

This paper explores how young women respond affectively to complex negotiations of gendered discourses mediated by the algorithmic, neoliberal, and patriarchal logics of TikTok. Reaching immense popularity—particularly among young people in recent years—TikTok's platform architecture differs significantly from its competitors (e.g. Instagram, X, Facebook) by means of its hyper-individualistic algorithmic feed and its prevalent e-commerce features (TikTok Shop and tailored ads). As a result of its digital affordances, TikTok generates passive, egocentric, consumer-oriented parameters for identity construction and social interaction (Bhandari and Bimo 2022). In speaking to young women who use the app, we found an overwhelming feeling of fatigue among participants towards the neoliberal feminist pressures around sexual empowerment and confidence culture that have dominated social media in the past decade (Rottenberg 2018; Gill and Orgad 2017). Although this fatigue stems from a multiplicity of overlapping grievances among diverse groups, perspectives expressed by participants resonate with recent critiques of popular, neoliberal forms of 'sex-positive' and 'girl boss' feminism (Cappelle 2023). Additionally, participants highlight the emergence of ambivalent identifications with alternative modes of empowerment and disempowerment circulating on social media (e.g., heteropessimism, celibacy culture, tradwives, femcels) (Johanssen and Kay 2024).

In this paper, we argue that the algorithmic infrastructure of TikTok creates apathetic and passive affective experiences (Bhandari and Bimo 2022) and depoliticises its users. Collective grievances are co-opted by capitalist algorithmic logics and reframed as matters to be addressed through self-centred, consumer-oriented, and aestheticised practices of self-work rather than political/collective feminist praxis. At the same time, an illusion of 'feminine community' is sustained by fragmenting women's self-explorations into aestheticised micro-performances. Ultimately, TikTok's visibility economies privilege the circulation of feminine aesthetic self-presentation over the possibilities of feminism as a mode of political mobilisation (Johanssen and Kay 2024).

To demonstrate our argument, we first review research on popular postdigital femininity cultures, with particular attention to discussions of sex positivity, confidence culture, heteropessimism, and algorithmised self-making. Methodologically, we advocate for an affective strategy capable of capturing how young women interpret and negotiate these discourses in their postdigital embodiments. Next, drawing on focus group data, we identify a growing sense of disaffection with the logics of popular, neoliberal feminisms rooted in self-sexualisation, confidence culture, and entrepreneurial self-branding (Banet-Weiser 2018). We discuss how young women negotiate their postdigital affective embodiment in relation to reactionary feminine cultures such as the tradwives, femcels, and female manipulators movements in relation to their feelings of disappointment towards popular feminist rhetoric. We explore how their disaffection intersects with emerging discourses of heteropessimism (Seresin 2019) and 'femosphere' movements, which reflect a broader cultural critique of neoliberal feminist

optimism. Taken together, these themes point to a shifting sensibility among young women—one that rejects the promises of empowerment offered by previous popular feminist media culture while remaining caught in individualistic, passive visual aesthetic logics of femininity.

Postdigital Cultures of Femininity

As young women increasingly enact their social lives online, their embodied sexual and affective experiences of desire, intimacy, and vulnerability are mediated by—and deeply entangled with—the technological and cultural logics of the platforms they inhabit. The affordances of digital environments (sharing, visibility, quantification, surveillance) play a central role in shaping these assemblages, opening up possibilities for self-expression but also producing new risks and constraints. This entanglement subsequently complicates young women's femininity assemblages—the shifting network of bodies, technologies, norms, and affects that constitute sexualities. To contextualise this work, we explore popular neoliberal feminist rhetoric, which has been significant for feminine identity construction, discussing confidence culture, aesthetic self-surveillance, and self-sexualisation.

Once a disparaged term, in a Western context, 'feminism' has, in the past decade, been rebranded as a fashionable identity within popular culture, emerging as a central theme in celebrity-authored books, podcasts, magazines, and fast-fashion merchandise (Banet-Weiser 2018). However, although this popular version of feminism advocates for diversity, bodily autonomy, and resistance to gender-based violence, its grounding in neoliberal, individualistic notions of empowerment has been problematised. Critiques highlight its lack of nuance in addressing intersectional hierarchies of power, as it often centres the neoliberal struggles of upper-middle-class white women (Rottenberg 2018; Banet-Weiser 2018). Issues are thereby not tackled through political advocacy and the breakdown of hierarchical oppressive power structures, but rather through individual women's self-confidence, personal choice, self-determination, self-entrepreneuring, and self-presentation (Gill and Orgad 2017; Bay-Cheng 2015). The 'self', represented by the female body, thereby becomes ostensibly classed as a vehicle for power and liberation (Bartky 1990). The appeal of this rhetoric is, importantly, as Evans and Riley (2023) argue, located in its 'emotional magnetism', which promotes 'emotions and affects that feel good or promise a future good feeling' (Evans and Riley 2023: 166). However, in making the achievement of this 'good feeling' dependent on self-work, the body is subject to continuous labour through close self-surveillance and body maintenance, deeply entangling 'empowered femininity' with obsessive consumption of products (Duffy 2016). Furthermore, systemic patriarchal inequalities often remain unchallenged, as positive feminine affect continues to be tied to patriarchal approval and practices of self-work aligning with normative conceptualisations of beauty. Within neoliberal feminism, women's oppression is reframed as a matter of individualised subjugation, where 'feeling good' becomes the ultimate goal—encouraging practices such as shaving one's legs or wearing makeup because they are perceived as pleasurable, without interrogating why they 'feel good' in the first place. Moreover, as argued by

authors such as Ringrose (2011), Bae (2011), and Villacampa-Morales et al. (2021), feminist 'power' has in popular culture often been constituted in close proximity to self-sexualisation, allowing women to exercise a sense of control over heterosexual men, imagined as the symbolic oppressor. As Bae (2011) notes, 'in girl power, a well-groomed, sexual, feminine body is a site of liberation by which girls attract boys' attention but use their freedom to choose what they desire' (Bae 2011: 30).

In recent years, however, this popularised liberal version of feminism has gradually waned in cultural prominence. And while the monopoly on popular content is still held by those performing neoliberal sexualised selves (e.g. TikTok creators such as Adison Rae, Charlie D'Amilio, Bella Porch), as Johanssen and Kay (2024) observe, there has been a 'reactionary turn in popular feminism'. According to Kay (2021), contemporary online phenomena such as 'tradwives' (short for 'traditional wives'), 'femcels' (the feminine counterpart to incels) (Bergeron-Stokes 2023), and the broader 'femosphere' (Johanssen and Kay 2024) have emerged in part as a repudiation of neoliberal, confidence-driven feminism. Adherents of these trends are often characterised, to varying degrees, by an idealisation of heteronormative domesticity and a commitment to bio-essentialist womanhood. Furthermore, within binaristic conceptualisations of gender, many in the femosphere express 'heteropessimist' or 'heterofatalist' views (Seresin 2019) with a nihilistic recognition of systemic misogyny. However, rather than fostering political action, defeatist sentiments encourage women to pursue individual strategies of empowerment by 'gaming the system'—that is, by attracting and manipulating men within a patriarchal hierarchy to secure care and protection. In this configuration, the female body continues to function as the primary vehicle for power; however, practices of self-maintenance are framed less as sources of pleasure and more as strategies of self-preservation.

Research Approach

In examining young women's processes of self-making, this research adopts a postdigital lens, conceptualising the digital and physical worlds as deeply entangled. As Ringrose et al. (2024: 3) note, such a perspective illuminates the 'material becomings of the postdigital body', referring to the ongoing process through which the 'embodied self' unfolds online, and how this entanglement shapes experiences in the physical world. We also draw on Hurley's (2021) framing of social media as a 'postdigital artefact' to situate our analysis. Our theoretical approach integrates postdigital perspectives (Jandrić and Knox 2022; Hayes 2021), the notion of the algorithmic self (Bhandari and Bimo 2022), as well as adopting postdigital feminist concepts (Zulli and Zulli 2022; Yoda 2015; Evans and Ringrose 2025).

We contend that, in the contemporary digital landscape algorithms increasingly constitute core elements of the digital architecture through which we move daily. As such, our sense of self becomes subjected to, and influenced by, the environmental affordances facilitated by this technology. Discussing identity construction in relation to the TikTok algorithm, Bhandari and Bimo (2022) theorise this through the notion of the 'algorithmized self', constituted through a 'reflexive engagement with previous self-representations' (Bhandari and Bimo 2022: 9).

As users scroll through their 'For You Page' (FYP), they continuously encounter their own ego in content tailored to their interests. This creates a passive experience, as users do not seek out certain creators or pages to follow and engage with; rather, the content 'finds' them.

Although not unique in its reliance on algorithms, TikTok has distinguished itself by placing its algorithmically curated FYP at the centre of cultivating a new mode of user engagement. Although the internal workings of TikTok's algorithm remain largely opaque, it is widely understood to craft highly individualised social media experiences that enhance feelings of relatability (Bhandari and Bimo 2022; Banet-Weiser and Maddocks 2023; Abidin 2021). Furthermore, TikTok has created an environment in which surveillance and governance remain hidden, optimising datafication for profit, as well as allowing for the algorithmic discrimination of already minoritised populations. As theorised by Cheney-Lippold's (2011) conceptualisation of algorithmic 'soft-bio-power', TikTok's platform moderation and algorithmic governance must be viewed less through traceable regulation, and more through users' perception of algorithmic function and governance. TikTok users are never fully briefed on the regulations, community guidelines, or TikTok's revenue architecture, which remains hidden from users. Encroaching on personal data, this fosters an environment in which users remain unaware of their exploitation. Building on Eva Illouz's (2007) analysis of 'emotional capitalism', Bhandari and Bimo (2022) frame this encroachment as 'affective capitalism' to describe how contemporary capitalism extracts value from feelings, attachments, and affective intensities. Likes, views, dwelling time, and sharing habits are all quantified into data points to optimise consumer profiles.

We furthermore argue that the postdigital carries distinct gendered implications. We therefore adopt theoretical notions of postdigital feminism to critically interrogate the intersections of gender, technology, and social justice, challenging the neoliberal rhetoric of individualistic empowerment (Banet-Weiser 2018; McRobbie 2020; Hurley 2021) while addressing the broader ethical and material implications of technology on diverse forms of life (Braidotti 2022).

While TikTok claims to foster self-expression, it in fact channels users into viral, depoliticised patterns of content creation—what Zulli and Zulli (2022) call 'imitation publics'. These 'publics' are not formed through meaningful social ties or shared lived experiences, but through participation in trends, aesthetic tropes, and algorithmic cues that rarely foster critical engagement or political community. Notable examples addressed in this paper include the tradwife movement, the femcel community, and female manipulators. Feminist messages, when they appear, are filtered through an algorithm that rewards self-commodification and aesthetic legibility, flattening radical potential into branded individualism. This process is emblematic of what Duffy (2016) terms 'aspirational labour', wherein self-presentation becomes a form of work, and self-worth is measured by engagement metrics. Thereby, femininity trends reproduce aesthetic and affective neoliberal economies, reinforcing the notion that empowerment must be earned—and displayed—through aesthetic labour, visibility, and self-surveillance (Elias et al. 2017).

Methods

Rather than treating digital and physical spaces as separate or opposing domains, our methodological design sought to trace their 'entanglements' (Evans and Ringrose 2025) and to explore how feminine identity discourses circulate and take shape across multiple social and material registers. The digital is approached as simultaneously material, discursive, and affective, acknowledging that multiple, intersecting elements—such as screens, devices, and subjectivities—intra-act in shaping processes of data collection and analysis (Warfield et al. 2020). A postdigital approach, therefore, enables a nuanced investigation of phenomena by emphasising how subjectivity and embodiment are enacted within platformised, digitally mediated, and technologically facilitated contexts, all of which shape young women's affective and embodied experiences (Ringrose et al. 2024).

We worked in-depth with seven women through a focus group, exploring how contemporary popular-feminist TikTok rhetoric around sexuality shapes sexual self-perception. The criteria for participation in the focus group were that women identified with feminist values and were regular users of TikTok. A snowball/convenience sampling strategy was adopted via email and social media platforms (Instagram and WhatsApp) where a digital flyer was shared to potentially interested groups. The final group consisted of seven women aged between 23 and 27, six of whom came from non-UK backgrounds (Bella: Norwegian; Alice: Indian-Canadia; Jessica: German-UK; Charlie: UK; Rosie: USA; Billy: USA; Jane: USA). Although participants were not asked to complete a demographic form, four voluntarily shared their queer experiences (Bella, Charlie, Rosie, and Jane). It is important to note that this research is thereby contextualised in a largely Western experience and may not apply to other international contexts.

Ethical approval for this project was granted by the University of Edinburgh's School of Social and Political Sciences Ethics Committee. Ethical guidelines were verbally reiterated before the session, and written consent was obtained from all participants before the research commenced. The focus group was recorded and anonymised in transcription. Following suggestions by Hesse-Bibber and Piatelli (2012), the interviewing process focused on creating a dialogue in which the participants were encouraged to speak using natural vernacular to avoid potentially limiting their responses. Braun and Clarke's (2012) thematic analysis was used as a first stage of sorting data with an inductive, emotion-centred coding approach. Initial analysis involved repeated listening, coding, and theme refinement, with standout quotes extracted. We then analysed key themes related to postdigital feminism, including the contradictions and fatigue generated by confidence culture, and self-sexualisation, reactionary discourses, and aestheticised consumption.

Throughout, reflexivity was vital in interpreting how proximity and shared histories shaped the discussion and the interpretations through the shared analysis. It is important to note that all participants were, to varying degrees, acquainted with the researcher conducting the focus group, and broadly shared a similar sociocultural context with them. In our analysis, this connection was considered;

however, following scholars such as Ahmed (2010), we view emotional entanglements between participants and researchers as a valuable source of insight, rather than a limitation.

Findings and Analysis

In this section, we present the main themes that emerged from our findings, organised into two overarching categories. The first, 'Confidence Culture Contradictions', captures participants' experiences of popular feminist fatigue: exhaustion with the depoliticised and commodified aspects of popular feminism; the imperative of aestheticised self-entrepreneurship, reflecting pressures to perform femininity as marketable, self-branded capital; and the sex-positivity paradox, highlighting tensions between celebrating sexual agency and the persistence of sexualised norms that constrain empowerment. The second category, 'Heteropessimism', encompasses perceptions of feminist betrayals, or the sense that mainstream feminism fails to address structural inequalities; the dual tendency to both villainise men and victimise women in gendered interactions; and the emergence of sympathy for reactionary femininities, illustrating the appeal or recognition of alternative, often heteronormative, gender roles (e.g. 'tradwives').

Confidence Culture Contradictions

Pop-Fem Fatigue

'Fatigue', as Jess described it, emerged as a recurrent affective thread among participants, particularly in relation to the exhaustion stemming from the contradictory expectation to perceive the self as simultaneously the source of, and solution to, disempowerment. A key point of critique from the group was the perceived superficiality of 'confidence culture' (Gill and Orgad 2017), which, in the words of Billie, failed to resonate 'in real-world settings'. Participants described the affective dissonance between the liberatory promises embedded in neoliberal feminist content—e.g., mantras such as 'dress how you want', 'be a hot girl' (both mentioned by Bella), 'strut your stuff' (Jess), and 'not care what anyone thinks' (Bella)—and the embodied experience of moving through public space under the male gaze. Bella reflected: 'I dressed like that and felt like I was folding into myself because people are staring at me', noting a growing awareness of the gap between digital scripts of confidence and the persistence of offline objectification. She added that, in the past, she felt that whenever her way of dressing made her uncomfortable, it meant that she was simply not being confident enough, expressing that she felt that she had been lied to regarding self-confidence mantras.

The group further unpacked how neoliberal feminist discourses have reframed patriarchal aesthetic norms and self-surveillance (Bartky 1990) as empowering personal choices, creating a context in which critiques of beauty work are interpreted as attacks on individual autonomy. Jess discussed her internalised attachment to

makeup in high school: 'I used to say … that I just really like doing my makeup and taking that time for myself and I like the way that it makes me look and it makes me feel … I'm doing it for me …'; yet she added that '[g]enuinely in school I would not leave the house to go to the supermarket without putting makeup on … so for me it was not true'. Her retrospective awareness complicates the 'empowered subject', revealing instead a structure of self-surveillance masked as autonomy. This aligns with Dobson's (2014) concept of performative shamelessness, in which feminist empowerment is not an escape from regulation, but a reconfiguration of it: one that demands continual emotional and aesthetic labour under the guise of self-care.

The participants' reflections expose how popular feminist discourse, while claiming to celebrate choice, frequently positions the 'self' as the only legitimate terrain for transformation, leaving broader systems of power unchallenged. As a result, the burden of empowerment becomes hyper-personalised, and any failure to feel liberated is internalised as a personal deficiency. The resulting affective ambivalence illustrates the limitations of algorithmically mediated neoliberal feminism and the need for more structurally aware, intersectional feminist pedagogies.

Aestheticised Self-Entrepreneurism Imperative on Social Media

Participants' reflections on confidence culture and neoliberal self-work were deeply entangled with their experiences of identity formation and aesthetic categorisation on TikTok. A consistent theme across the group was the platform's implicit demand for curated self-presentation. As Jane stated, TikTok requires you to create a 'brand', while Charlie noted that even just viewing content on the platform necessitated a 'look'. These remarks underscore the internalisation of market logics within everyday identity practices, positioning the self as both content and commodity.

Charlie reflected: 'In the past years, identity is a hashtag online you fit into, and every aesthetic has not only the visual attached to it, but the ideas attached to it.' Her statement encapsulates a broader dynamic whereby aesthetics become totalising frameworks that merge visual culture with ideological assumptions. Rosie elaborated on this by referring to the trend of hyper-specific online personas curated through visual references: 'It's always: "you can be anything you want, but are you a 'this girl' or are you a 'that girl'? Are you a tomato girl or an orange girl?"' She described these archetypes as a 'hyper-specific coalition of Pinterest pictures', suggesting a flattening of identity into digestible, highly curated visual signifiers. This aesthetic essentialism aligns with Yoda's (2015) concept of the 'Girlscape', in which feminine bodies, objects, environments, and affects are tightly bundled into affective aesthetic packages. As platforms target users with their specific consumer profiles, TikTok's embedded capitalist logics facilitate passive, automated product consumption. For example, based on their previous interests (e.g. Mediterranean food or beach holidays), users may be targeted with content promoting a certain 'Girlscape' in the form of a TikTok aesthetic such as 'tomato girl'. To perform the 'tomato girl' aesthetic, viewers are encouraged to purchase specific products—such as makeup or clothing—which, through TikTok's consumer affordances, can be easily accessed via links in the creator's profile or through their TikTok Shop storefront. Furthermore, as Charlie and Rosie noted, to be a 'tomato girl' does not simply denote a

fashion preference or colour palette, but implies an entire assemblage of bodily traits, personality markers, and lifestyle choices. This aesthetic taxonomy of the self reflects what Banet-Weiser (2018) theorises as self-entrepreneurism: the self as a project, product, and platform.

Although this aesthetic labour is often framed as a means of self-expression, participants articulated its restrictive dimensions. The pressure to maintain a coherent yet constantly shifting personal brand was described as exhausting, exacerbated by the fast-paced nature of TikTok. As Gamble (2025) suggests, unlike earlier aesthetic subcultures such as punk, mod, or emo—which offered community and resistance—TikTok aesthetics operate through shallow and individualised identifications with limited collective potential. Charlie reflected on this dissonance: 'I feel like I've fallen into this trap … I feel like I know someone who listens to the same artists as me, and then I think, oh, we're going to relate on these values … because I'm like, oh, that's the same vibe and the same aesthetics.' Her words captured the affective disappointment that emerges when aesthetic resemblance fails to deliver meaningful relational or ideological alignment, a trend further worsened by TikTok's highly individualistic algorithmic affordances.

Participants also described the predominance of 'self-composition' content in their feeds—videos where creators narrate their transformation journeys or emotional resets in response to fleeting trends. Examples of these trendified re-compositions raised by participants included creators going to nail salons, getting (or removing) piercings, selling or returning clothes, or acquiring or disposing of anything from food supplements to makeup. Rosie observed a pattern in videos that invited viewers to 'come with me to get rid of something that I picked up from a trend', signalling the cyclical nature of aesthetic consumption and rejection. Jane summarised this process as witnessing people 'building themselves and taking themselves apart'. These forms of digital self-fashioning are emblematic of what Zulli and Zulli (2022) term 'imitation publics'—temporary and performative collectives forged through shared mimicry rather than sustained relational engagement.

While TikTok's algorithm simulates intimacy through its FYP and confessional video aesthetics, participants remained sceptical of its capacity to foster genuine social connection. As Bhandari and Bimo (2022) argue that algorithmically tailored content essentialises the intimate public, reducing it to a depoliticised arena of self-focus. This was echoed in the group's frustration with the isolating nature of TikTok interactions, wherein frequent exposure to other people's faces, routines, and aesthetics did not translate into actual relationality.

Sex Positivity Paradox

Participants critically engaged with the dominant discourse of sex positivity that circulates across digital platforms. Their responses reflect a sense of alienation and pressure rather than liberation, challenging the notion of self-sexualisation as empowering. Jess articulated this dissonance: 'It's strange to say, but the wave of sex positivity online has impacted me very negatively.' She further argued that, although the promotion of sex positivity emerged in opposition to earlier forms of sexual repression, it has 'swung too far in the opposite direction'. Instead of fostering

freedom, it has generated a new normativity around hypersexual expression: 'It's framed like if you aren't sleeping around and you aren't kinky, you aren't liberated, then you are oppressed … I just feel like we've missed this area of neutrality.' Her observation points to the absence of legitimate space for moderate or non-sexual expressions of feminine identity within dominant scripts online.

Jane echoed this critique, describing the pressure she experienced in her relationships to conform to what she described as 'a porn fantasy' for men, shaped in part by expectations embedded in online discourse. She reflected that she would have preferred more 'vanilla sex'—a term she dislikes due to its dismissive connotations—expressing discomfort with the way non-violent, emotionally connected sex is trivialised. This illustrates how sex-positive rhetoric, while claiming to be liberatory, often functions through exclusionary binaries that marginalise women who do not conform to hypersexual or kink-oriented scripts. Such experiences resonate with critiques by Ringrose (2011), Bae (2011), and Villacampa-Morales et al. (2021), who argue that feminine power is increasingly constructed through self-sexualisation by allowing them to choose roles in their desired sexual fantasies. Gill (2007) critiques the internalisation of pornographic norms, whereby 'constructing oneself as a subject closely resembling the heterosexual fantasy found in pornography' (Gill 2007: 152) becomes positioned as feminist agency. Rather than offering genuine choice, this pseudo-liberation functions within a narrow spectrum of acceptable sexual subjectivities—ones that remain tethered to toxic heterosexuality.

The group's reflections further echoed concerns raised by anti-porn feminists, who argue that sexual scripts framed as empowering often replicate patriarchal dynamics. As Angel (2021) notes, the casualisation of kink and fetishism through platforms like TikTok has normalised forms of 'rough sex' that, while aestheticised as liberatory, often remain embedded in gendered hierarchies of domination. The group contended that, if these scripts for 'liberating' sex are still bound up in patriarchal hierarchies of desires and required women to perform within a heterosexist matrix, they cannot be an act of feminist liberation (Boyle 2011; Tyler 2011). The participants' discomfort underscores the limits of 'choice' when those choices are constrained by cultural scripts that reward women for performing heteronormative desirability.

In addition to critiquing sexual performance norms, participants raised concerns about the commodification of the female body under the guise of empowerment. Jess noted that during the Covid-19 pandemic, her TikTok feed was saturated with content encouraging women to monetise their sexuality through platforms like OnlyFans: 'If you're gonna be objectified by men, you might as well get paid for it.' Statements like this, common across her feed, reflect what Blunt and Wolf (2020) identify as the neoliberal entanglement of empowerment with entrepreneurial self-sexualisation. The body becomes a site of labour and capital extraction, aligning seamlessly with a neoliberal hustle culture (Idriss 2022) while masking exploitation behind the language of choice. Importantly, Billie, a former teacher, expressed concern about the impact of such discourses on younger audiences, highlighting the ethical blind spots of algorithmic amplification: '[Young people] are so … exposed to online digital pressures, and it's really reflective of the way they are presenting themselves … all this content that's portraying sex work as not as something that

we need to, you know, make safe for women but is a viable option … it would be naive to think that sex work as it is right now is not an exploitative space.' Billie's comment underscores how the algorithm's indiscriminate distribution of adult content intersects with child and adolescent digital use, collapsing boundaries between developmental stages and market ideologies.

Ultimately, both the sex-positive scripts and the algorithmically boosted promotion of digital sex work during the pandemic exemplify what Gill and Orgad (2017) describe as a cultural formation that re-centres the body as a site of discipline, capital, and self-making. As participants noted whether through performances of desirability for sexual pleasure or for economic gain, the female body remains relentlessly curated for male consumption. This re-inscribes, rather than dismantles, patriarchal power, positioning men not as agents but as empty conduits through which women are expected to demonstrate empowerment. In this context, participants' narratives reflect a postdigital affect of popular feminism that alienates rather than affirms. Framed as choice and liberation, participants instead experienced pressure, confusion, and disempowerment—a constellation of contradictions we term a paradox—highlighting the constraints of empowerment when it is tethered to the neoliberal, heterosexist, and algorithmic logics that govern the platforms through which it circulates.

Heteropessimism

Emerging from complex affective experiences shaped by confidence culture, the aestheticised self-work of the female body, and sex positivity in popular feminism, participants expressed ambivalent and often disillusioned emotions towards men. These feelings were replicated and amplified through their TikTok feeds, forming a postdigital feedback loop.

Feminist Betrayals

Discussing their relationship with male approval, participants described a sense of disappointment with the absence of genuine empowerment in how popular feminism represents heterosexual relationships. 'It's always attractive people that are saying it', Billie noted, referencing TikTok content encouraging women to 'just be confident' to attract male attention. However, this message left her feeling 'disappointed' when 'just being herself' did not yield the desired attention. Bella echoed this tension: 'It's like a vicious cycle, because I don't want attention from these certain people, but when I don't get it, then I feel upset.'

Alice spoke about how popular feminist messaging often lacked nuance and failed to reflect her lived realities as a woman of colour. 'There is so much safety in being perceived as conventionally attractive … especially as a woman of colour … when white men find you attractive it's some kind of safety from racism that you don't really get otherwise.' (Alice) She added that she struggled to 'detach [herself] from the system' due to the beauty ideals reinforced on TikTok: 'As women of colour, you can only be perceived as beautiful through your proximity to whiteness,

and then that's just reinforced by TikTok so much.' (Alice) Related to algorithmic affordances, Alice's comments portray how TikTok's capitalist logics are deeply entangled with—and recreate—dominant beauty ideals grounded in whiteness. This aligns with arguments by Cottom (2019), who critiques the assumptions of white privilege embedded in popular feminist 'choice' narratives. These discourses often presume that all women can reject beauty norms without consequence, overlooking the restricted choices available to racialised women whose aesthetic labour is already constrained by hegemonic standards.

Jess and Jane similarly critiqued popular calls to 'love yourself, be this hot girl and not care' (Jess), stating that such messages ignore the social context that continues to demand conformity to narrow beauty standards and valorises male attention. Jess noted that calls to be 'carefree' made her feel like a 'bad feminist' for still desiring male approval: 'I shouldn't need that … it makes me feel like I'm failing somehow. It's my fault because I'm just not at that high level not to care what men think.' (Jess). To this, Jane added: 'The overarching issue is that women will always bear the burden of responsibility… but me, as an individual, cannot fix it.'

These testimonies reveal a growing frustration with the contradictions in popular feminism, which continues to situate the female body as the primary site of resistance, rather than structural political spaces. On TikTok, feminism is often diluted into easily digestible, algorithmically favourable messages. In this postdigital affective economy, participants struggled to reconcile the empowerment promised online with their lived, physical realities.

Villainising Men and Victimising Women

Participants also noted that their disillusionment with popular neoliberal feminism was deepened by the proliferation of heteropessimistic content on TikTok, which circulated narratives of sadness, disillusionment, and fear regarding relationships with men, exemplified by trends such as 'Boy Sober', femcels, and female manipulators. While some participants continued to engage with the 'hot girl' side of feminist TikTok, others described a noticeable algorithmic shift towards increasingly sex-negative discourse, which they referred to as 'femcel' and 'female manipulator' content. Although these two categories were often used interchangeably, 'femcels' were identified as embodying defeatist self-hatred, stemming from rejection by men and the perception that they are rendered worthless within a patriarchal system. By contrast, 'female manipulators' were characterised as more active in pursuing beauty standards that enable them to manipulate men.

Participants such as Alice and Charlie reflected on how such content often generated fear-based representations of male violence. Contributing to what they described as a form of affective disempowerment, they referred to 'fear mongering' (Alice) content, wherein men were framed as inherent threats and women as perpetual victims. Jane observed that this framing had tangible effects on her own sexual desire, making her 'sex drive go down', noting that an atmosphere of distrust undermined her sense of intimacy and sexual autonomy: 'the feeling of "you can't trust anyone" is a turn off, because it makes you only think of what could go wrong' (Jane). Alice echoed this sentiment, describing a growing confusion and

internalisation of fear, which ultimately led her to question whether intimacy with men was even possible: 'It was confusing me, getting that much content … I was wondering … am I missing something there or do all these men wanna kill me? which I know sounds crazy, but I was getting to a point where I was like … can I not date men?' Such narratives, she suggested, stripped women of agency and reinforced a fatalistic outlook. 'It's just veered into disempowerment…', she noted, 'as if nobody has any agency in this and men are just coming to get you.'

Charlie and Bella further critiqued this content as a form of victim-blaming, in which women are positioned as responsible for managing male violence by always making the 'right' romantic choices, thereby reinforcing a passive model of femininity. Bella also highlighted that these reductive portrayals are not accidental but are incentivised by TikTok's algorithmic logic, which amplifies sensational and emotionally charged narratives for visibility: 'because we only hear about the really messed up narratives because that sells, that gets clicks.' Ultimately, participants expressed concern that the pervasive trope of villainised men and victimised women contributes less to feminist empowerment than to a recursive sense of helplessness, narrowing feminist discourse to a cycle of fear, blame, and resignation.

Sympathy for Reactionary Femininities: Tradwives and Female Manipulators

Participants identified their fatigue with popular feminism, combined with an algorithmically reinforced fear of men, as key conditions that enable the appeal of reactionary femininity subcultures such as tradwives, female manipulators, and femcels. Jess described this appeal as a response to exhaustion: 'It preys on this fatigue that if I can't make it by myself … then maybe I need to find a way to game the system.' Alice noted that alongside fear-based content, her FYP frequently displayed 'female manipulator' videos, which framed heterosexual relationships not as spaces for intimacy but as transactional arenas where empowerment was equated with extracting financial resources by 'manipulating high value men to spend money on them'. This rhetoric, Alice noted, was particularly spread by the notorious influencer Shear Steven, who advises on how to best engage in these transactional heterosexual relationships, using her catchphrase 'sprinkle sprinkle'. Alice described how failed manipulative attempts on social media were often dismissed with comments such as 'not sprinkle sprinkle'. She observed that this content appeared to discourage women from pursuing genuine romantic connections, instead framing heterosexual relationships as transactional and focused primarily on financial exchanges: 'it's all about how much money he spends on you' (Alice).

The group also discussed the aesthetic and emotional pull of the tradwife ideal, linking it to the cottagecore TikTok trends that became popular during the pandemic, which signified a nostalgic return to slower, more traditional domestic life. This was interpreted as an escapist response to pandemic-induced uncertainty and part of what Duffy (2016) terms aspirational labour, with TikTok functioning as both stage and marketplace for these fantasies. Charlie suggested that Gen Z's attraction to this content stemmed from the psychological burden of growing up amid global crises and the expectation to enact societal change, to 'be the generation that will change everything'. Alice highlighted economic anxieties, observing that many

videos carried an implicit 'pre-recession' tone, adding that she felt that there was an 'undertone in a lot of these videos that people are stressed about money'. These concerns also fed into the rise of hustle culture and the perceived necessity for women to secure financially stable partners.

Although participants distanced themselves from full identification with femcel, manipulator, or tradwife ideologies, Jess remarked that traces of this rhetoric often surfaces in everyday joking among friends, with ironic phrases; 'We'll joke … "just bat your eyelids and you'll get something for free" and we'll say "[i]t's not what you can do for the patriarchy but what the patriarchy can do for you"', reflecting a low-stakes engagement with such ideas. This points to a broader postdigital affective environment, in which ideologies circulate through irony and repetition, often without full endorsement.

Yet, despite the occasional humour, the group expressed discomfort with the content's implications. They were particularly concerned about the promotion of harmful beauty standards, self-surveillance and eating disorders among women under the guise of agency and choice. Alice noted, that even self-aware content often reinscribed the ideal of the thin, desirable 'trophy wife': 'Ultimately, it's promoting eating disorders, because you have to keep your body in a certain way, while still self-aware, like they're so self-aware and they're still saying we have so much agency here and we're still choosing this, and we want to be this like trophy wife person.'

By the end of the discussion, the mood had shifted: participants recognised the emotional toll of trying to navigate or reject these narratives, with Rosie summarising this feeling as 'it's just so hard trying to free yourself'. The popularity of these reactionary femininity tropes, they concluded, may offer temporary relief or empowerment, but ultimately sustain the very gendered constraints they claim to subvert.

Conclusion

While the 2010s saw a resurgence of feminist visibility, its neoliberal manifestations arguably reduced the political thrust of these discourses, thereby limiting the ability of widespread 'popular feminisms' to challenge systemic inequalities (Banet-Weiser 2018). Today, the rejection of popular neoliberal feminism does not necessarily herald a revival of transformative feminism; rather, it signals a shift in sensibility—one that oscillates between aesthetic withdrawal, pessimism, and individualistic cynicism. In this paper, we have discussed young women's postdigital algorithmised negotiations of their sexual self-making as a postdigital process. By tracing their algorithmically mediated affective experiences, we argue that a sense of frustration with the paradoxes of previously dominant popular feminist rhetoric has emerged, creating a susceptibility towards nihilistic, heteropessimist, reactionary digital femininities such as femcels and tradwives.

When reflecting on aspects of popular feminist content widely consumed by young women in recent years—such as 'confidence culture' (Gill and Orgad 2017), 'performative shamelessness' (Dobson 2014), and aesthetic self-surveillance (Bartky 1990)—participants frequently reported feeling misled or disillusioned by these pervasive mantras. Our findings indicate that the popular feminist curation

of aesthetic femininity is deeply entangled with TikTok's algorithmically mediated platform affordances. The algorithmically shaped postdigital self emerges through the passive consumption of personalised visuals, fragmenting the construction of femininity into endless 'girlscapes' (Yoda 2015). Constant prompting for self-categorisation into aesthetic groups generates a postdigital, embodied hyper-awareness of appearance on the one hand; on the other, it fails to provide the desired community among those with shared interests. Contrasted against previous aesthetic subcultures such as punks and mods (Gamble 2025), the algorithm produces what Zulli and Zulli (2022) define as 'imitation publics'.

Backlash against popular feminist rhetoric on TikTok responds particularly to the 'sex positivity' that has circulated on the platform, setting expectations for hypersexuality bound up in toxic heterosexual scripts (Boyle 2011; Tyler 2011). Although often framed as empowering, women's agency is constrained when their 'choices' are shaped by cultural scripts that reward the performance of heteronormative desirability. Paradoxes emerge in sex-positive framings of choice, particularly in postdigital contexts, where the monetisation of female sexuality on platforms such as OnlyFans is positioned as 'feminist' empowerment, yet simultaneously constructs the body as a commodity for male consumption and profit (Blunt and Wolf 2020).

Compounding the backlash against neoliberal, popular feminist algorithmised content, disillusionment towards men emerges as young women grapple with a desire for heterosexual relationships and male approval. Notably, we argue that postdigital embodied affect is crosscut with intersectional inequities, seen in the proximity to white beauty standards, which grant privileged treatment. As argued by Cottom (2019), in a popular feminist context, it is often those already ascribing to beauty standards who most advocate for their rejection, since the consequences of minor deviations (such as not shaving) are not likely to affect them as they affect racialised bodies. Furthermore, sex-negative content became increasingly prevalent for some TikTok users as they developed a critical awareness of normative forms of sex positivity and its tendency to obscure underlying power dynamics. This illustrates a notable connection between TikTok's algorithmic logics and postdigital algorithmic affect, as inflammatory, 'fearmongering' content—framing men as villains and women as victims—appears to reinforce heteropessimistic attitudes and behaviours among young women (Johanssen and Kay 2024). While concern around heterosexual dynamics and relationships is, of course, popular due to many women's shared experience of patriarchal oppression, we argue that the TikTok algorithm further heightens the popularity of this content as it pushes sensationalist, explosive content with high engagement potential (Ringrose et al. 2024).

Finally, we explored how heteropessimistic attitudes leave young women susceptible to reactionary feminine identities such as tradwives, femcels, and female manipulators. Building on a nihilistic understanding of patriarchal systems, femcel and female manipulator content was perceived to create pressure around attracting men, providing financial security as the only true form of 'empowerment'. Similarly, tradwives were interpreted as still focused on men as providers, but less focused on empowerment, and more about aesthetic escapism rooted in nostalgia (Duffy 2016).

Overall, we found that while neoliberal feminist branded content proliferates on TikTok, the app's algorithmic functions prioritise highly individualised, viral

content, which shapes the formation of the self (Bhandari and Bimo 2022). The platform's architecture limits the possibility of collective feminist connectivity, belonging and political organising, which was tactically and strategically possible in previous networked social media formations like Twitter (Papacharissi 2015; Mendes et al. 2019). TikTok's algorithmic design privileges neoliberal and aestheticised identities. The platform perpetuates depoliticised feminist narratives and promotes reactionary formations of femininity, which our participants experienced as a set of contradictions and paradoxes. Ultimately, the circular feedback loops and forms of reactionary content were experienced as exhausting. Indeed, as we have termed it, such engagements produced a sense of 'fatigue' with TikTok's neoliberal content logic, reflecting how its individualising and aestheticising systematically erode any potential for genuine political engagement, activism, or critical consciousness on the platform.

Taken together, these findings highlight TikTok as a quintessential postdigital interface, where feminist discourse is entangled with algorithmic logics, platform affordances, and affective circulation. By tracing young women's postdigital negotiations of popular feminist content, our study demonstrates how the platform both mediates and amplifies contradictions in contemporary feminist sensibilities, producing affective responses such as fatigue, heteropessimism, and susceptibility to reactionary femininities. This analysis contributes to understandings of postdigital feminism by foregrounding the ways algorithmic architectures shape the enactment of feminist subjectivities, revealing the limits of empowerment in contexts where agency is filtered through monetised, individualised, and aestheticised digital practices. In doing so, the study provides a framework for understanding how postdigital platforms complicate feminist visibility and activism, extending scholarship on the interplay between digital culture, embodiment, and gendered power in the 2020s.

Declarations

Ethics declaration Ethical approval for this project was granted by the University of Edinburgh's School of Social and Political Sciences Ethics Committee.

Competing interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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