

National College of Art & Design

Fine Art Media

‘The Ever Optimising Woman: How Tiktok’s ‘That Girl’ trend presents neoliberal and
postfeminist subjectivity’

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I declare that this **Critical Cultures Research Project** is all my own work and that all sources have been fully acknowledged.

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“These days, it is perhaps even more psychologically seamless than ever for an ordinary woman to spend her life walking toward the idealised mirage of her own self-image.”

Jia Tolentino, Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self Delusion

Introduction

The following research essay seeks to uncover the way in which the ‘that girl’ Tiktok trend possesses the tenets of neoliberalism, the dominant capitalist, political ideology of our times and even further, a particularly female gendered neoliberalism called postfeminism. This is mainly through the trend’s promotion of creating individualised projects of the self in the quest for self-improvement. The ‘that girl’ trend is a trend popularised by the social media platform Tiktok that encourages young women to become the ‘best versions of themselves’ by employing a variety of mainstream health and wellness techniques and strategies. These techniques vary from waking up early to exercising and performing detailed skincare regimens, followers of the trend are highly self-disciplined and self-dependable in optimising their bodies and their lives. Content associated with the ‘That girl’ trend is characterised by a distinctly aesthetic presentation making it a particularly seductive trend that thrives on social media. Despite its pretty, pastel-like exterior, I believe there lies something sinister underneath: a set of neoliberal, postfeminist ideological values coursing through the trend. In order to support my claim, this paper will first introduce neoliberalism and postfeminism as separate ideologies in Chapter one, with the rest of the paper dedicated to drawing examples of their ideological traits within the trend in separate chapters. Chapter two provides an overview of the ‘that girl’ trend, describing its distinct characteristics. Chapter three explores how the trend evidences neoliberalism through the employment of self-

discipline within the culture of the ‘That girl’ morning routine. Chapter four is dedicated to how the trend evidences postfeminism through the emphasis on aesthetic entrepreneurialism and physical optimisation. In Chapter five, I will discuss the existence of surveillance in the trend and how this is a key property of neoliberal and postfeminist systems of power. Chapter six will explore how the trend channels neoliberal ideology through its ties to self-help culture. Chapter seven will then explore how the trend’s relation to consumerism is a key factor in the trend’s evidence of both a neoliberal and a postfeminist sensibility. I must also preface that due to the interwoven nature of social media which combines digital content from a multitude of sources, I will not only be talking about the trend within the context of Tiktok, but also how it involves the image-based platform Pinterest.

1. Neoliberalism, postfeminism and subjectivity

Neoliberalism is broadly understood as a free market ideology which promotes “individual liberty and limited government that connects human freedom to the actions of the rational, self-interested actor in the marketplace” (Mcguigan, 2014, p.225). It’s characterised by privatisation and the promotion of an individual ethic (M.J. Camacho-Miñano & S. Gray, 2021, p.727). In a neoliberal society, freedom is accessed through an individual’s capacity to grow and spend capital without state intervention. As neoliberal subjects, individuals must become entrepreneurs of their own lives “for whom activity, self-responsibility, agency and initiative mark so-called ‘success’” (Mcguigan, 2014, p.229). Through extended research on neoliberalism, feminist scholars have identified its gendered politics as well as its effects on feminism - resulting in what can be characterised as ‘postfeminism’ (Elias, Gill and Scharff, 2017, p. 6). They explain that postfeminism is similar to neoliberalism in that they are both ‘structured by a grammar of individualism’ (2017, p.6). Under

post-feminism, women are “interpolated as active, autonomous and self-reinventing subjects, whose lives are the outcome of individual choice and agency” (Elias, Gill and Scharff 2017, p.6). This bears strong resemblance to the autonomous, calculating subject of neoliberalism. Furthermore, postfeminism is best understood as ‘a distinctive sensibility’, made up of interrelated themes including a prominence accorded to the body, self-surveillance and self-optimisation, the shift from objectification to subjectification as well as an emphasis on individualism, choice and empowerment (Gill, 2007, Pg 147). Moreover, Feminist scholars argue that young women are the ideal neoliberal subjects (Eias, Gill and Scharff, 2011, p.23). as they are called on by neoliberal incitements of self-transformation through consumption and thus develop entrepreneurial subjectivity (M.J. Camacho-Miñano & S. Gray, 2021, p.727). This entrepreneurialism is often applied to the body resulting in the ‘aesthetic entrepreneur’. Much like the neoliberal subject, “the aesthetic entrepreneur is autonomous, self-inventing and self-regulating in the pursuit of beauty practises” and “preoccupations with appearance, beauty and the body are turned into yet another project to be planned, managed and regulated in a way that is calculative and seemingly self-directed” (Elias, Gill and Scharff, 2017, p.39).

2. Who is ‘that girl’? - An overview of the trend

The ‘That-girl’ trend is an internet trend popularised through various social media platforms, namely Tiktok, the Chinese owned company that has gained a mammoth global user base in the last two years, characterised by its short-form user video format. Like most internet trends there is no clear date as to its creation but the ‘That girl’ trend appears to have first materialised on Tiktok in early 2021 through a viral video on the site on January 1st. This Tiktok appeared in the form of a motivational, new-years resolution themed video containing simple tips on self care and wellness,

ranging from the generic idea of ‘you should read more’ to the importance of getting 8-9 hours of sleep (modernurlz, 2021). This was the video that christened the term ‘that girl’, casting an elusive, female figure of aspiration towards which the trend gravitates. Soon, the trend skyrocketed in popularity with the hashtag ‘That girl’ gaining nearly 800 million views by August 2021 (Arshad, 2021). In the early days of the trend, it often materialised through videos shared by young female users of Tiktok, consisting of montaged images plucked from image-based platforms such as Instagram and Pinterest and then recycled into video form. These aspirational montage videos were often captioned ‘become that-girl’ with me and featured images of aesthetically pleasing photographs associated with health, beauty and general wellness - almost serving as a form of inspirational mood-board (examples of these images can be found in Fig. 1 and 2). Frequent appearances in these Pinterest images, were variations of neatly arranged workout gear, healthy food: vibrant and prettily composed, water (commonly found in a water bottle or in a glass alongside floating slices of lemon), skincare with attractive packaging and other beauty products. Oftentimes an open journal or a neatly written to-do list. In addition, there’s almost always an image of a euro-centrally attractive young woman, engaging in some variation of a health and wellness task. Images of women in the gym were pervasive, frequently donned in matching athletic gear poised to perfection, bearing flat and toned stomachs or clutching a green juice to her chest. These images were highly aesthetic and visually seductive, a key characteristic of the Pinterest platform.



Fig. 1)

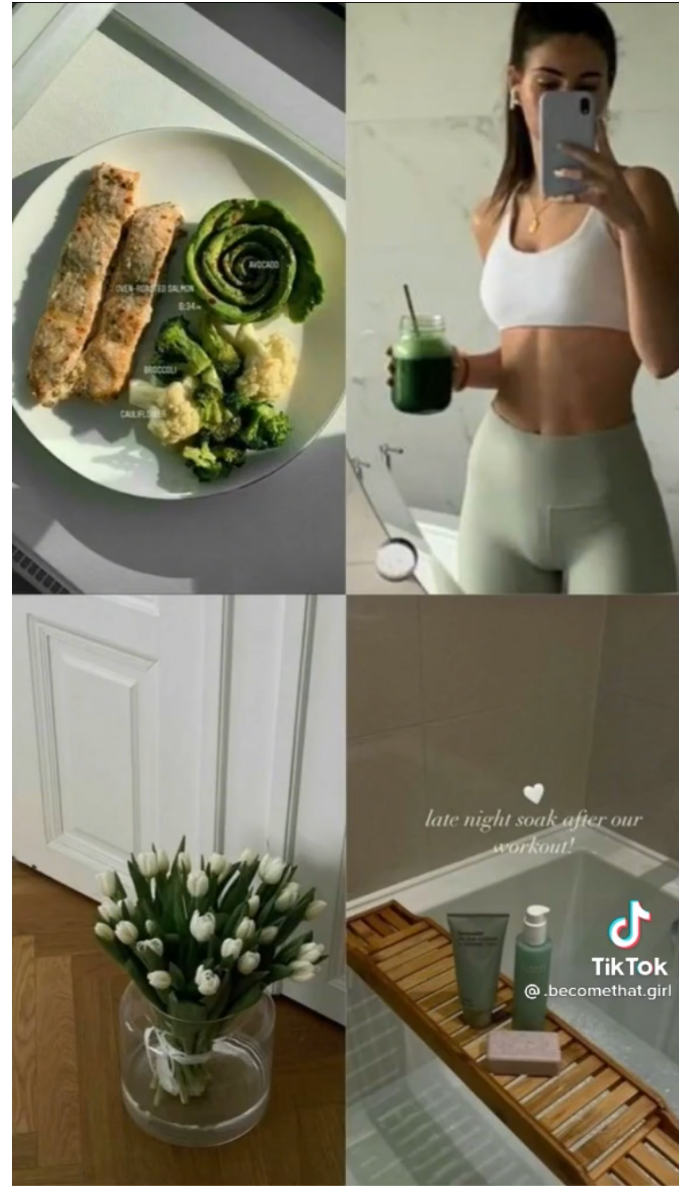


Fig. 2)

This trend of Pinterest montage Tiktok video then evolved into other variations, where young women began to film themselves in the process of ‘becoming that girl’. These short videos often appeared in the form of a That-girl themed ‘morning routine’ showing clips of them working out, preparing healthy food, writing daily to-do lists or performing a detailed skincare regimen. Some videos gave direct tips and ‘healthy habits’ on how to become ‘that-girl’ which predominantly

involved: eating healthy, drinking lots of water, working out and writing down your goals and aspirations. Other videos focused only on food with clips of meals captioned 'That-girl what I eat in a day'. These videos were equally as serene and perfectly composed as the Pinterest images the trend first appeared as and together, have created a homogenous visual appearance. Via repetitive visual and written language an overall ethos of the trend is clearly communicated: 'That girl' eats clean, wakes up early and works hard to optimise her physical appearance by working out and keeping up with a multi-step skincare routine. She is highly self-disciplined and appears to "naturally have all her sh*t together" (Aschoff, 2015). Most of all, 'That girl' is taking responsibility for her own life and implements all the tools available to her to become the 'best version' of herself. 'That girl' is who you should aspire to be and by following the advice of the trend, you can become her too.

3. The 'that girl' morning routine - practises of self-discipline and self-government

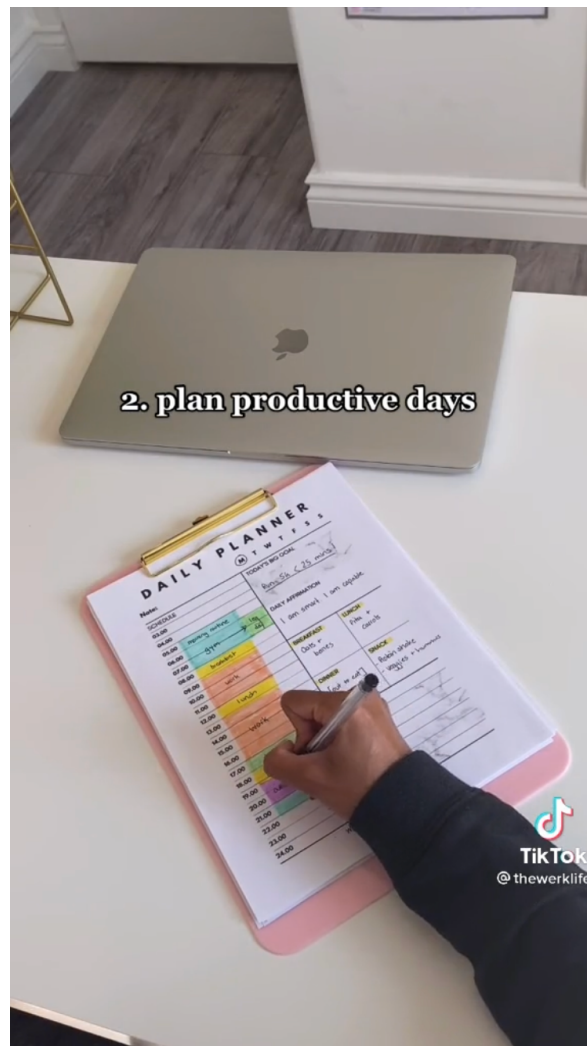
As explained earlier, neoliberal systems rely on their citizens to adopt practises of self-governance and self-entrepreneurialism in order to actively lead their own lives. These practises are extremely prominent in the 'That girl' trend. Methods of self-responsibility are further explained in theories by Michel Foucault, a key scholar in analysing neoliberalism's broad effects on society and individuals. This is explained in his theories of bio-power, a term he developed to "discuss the relation between the human body and institutions of power" (Chen, 2021, p.52). Here, Foucault argues that instead of relying on coercive measures that are imposed from above in managing and regulating their citizens, neoliberal political systems invest faith in the voluntary initiation of imperatives of its citizens to conduct themselves via methods of self-governance and self-discipline (Lufton, 2016, p.67). These imperatives are often guided by perceived moral codes in our society, with modern contemporary society viewing the care of the self as an ethical project. These moral

codes are absorbed in the pursuit of becoming ‘a good citizen’ and therefore a happy and successful person. In search of their best versions, individuals will undergo “a certain number of operations on their own bodies and semis, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (Foucault, Martin, Gutman and Hutton, 1988, p.18). These methods of self-actualisation are known as ‘technologies of the self’. Anything that helps one become a happier and healthier person can be regarded as a ‘technology of the self’, whether that be exercising, reading or working hard. (Chen, 2021, p.52). In our neoliberal society, we believe these acts, impulses and behaviours are all in the entrepreneurial pursuit of becoming our ideal selves. We feel personally responsible for our own paths in life, thus self-disciplining and lessening the responsibility of state authority (Chen, 2021, p. 52).

Subjects of the ‘that girl’ trend are motivated by the aspirational yet elusive figure of ‘That girl’ - a symbol of ultimate feminine success and achievement. She possesses the desirable qualities of effortless, naturally achieved beauty, optimised health, organisation and cleanliness all achieved through a formula of ambition and self-imposed discipline. In many ways she functions as a female replica of Foucault’s good citizen, existing as a societal ideal for which these young women strive towards. In a similar way to what Foucault described in his theories of technologies of the self, those following the ‘that girl’ trend commit various operations and exercises on their bodies as well as their behaviours in order to become improved versions of themselves, the standards set by the ‘that girl’ ideal. These methods of self-imposed discipline are evidenced in the ‘That-girl’ routines disseminated on Tiktok. These videos are often titled ‘Productive That Girl Morning Routine’ as well as ‘A Productive Day in My Life’. In these routines, young women perform a series of tasks carried out in a specific order. The particular tasks carried out in a day vary from video to video, but mostly consist of them waking up early, making their beds, cleaning their bedrooms, preparing a healthy breakfast, working out, showering, performing a skincare regimen and writing a to-do list

for the day. There is a distinct sense of order and repetition to these routines. In the ‘that girl’ routine, time is of the essence - it cannot be wasted; the alarm clock rings at 6:00 am after 8 hours sleep, the workout lasts 30 minutes and oftentimes even leisure is planned and measured (Cappelle, 2021). Furthermore, the necessity of scheduling is evidenced through the use of the daily planner and to-do list, a pervasive object that features in the trend which compounds the need for structure and order. Used as a vital tool in conducting self-discipline, the planners serve to break the days into strict segments with a chronological list of tasks to tick-off. For example, in one particular Tiktok video, a clip of an open page of a daily planner reveals tasks allotted into strict hourly blocks, with plans for breakfast, lunch, dinner and snacks even scheduled for the day (see fig.3 below).

Fig.3)



Moreover, in one particularly meta example of self-discipline, one woman engaging with the ‘that girl’ trend films herself attempting to read the book ‘Atomic Habits’ in a single day, a self help book popular within the ‘that girl’ sphere that teaches its readers methods of building healthy habits and reaching goals (selfeduni, 2021). Here, in an almost ironic sense, her practises of self-discipline are two-fold, both through pushing herself to reach levels of perceived human productivity by completing the book in one day and by reading a book that glorifies just that. Through these combined elements of routine and regimentation, these young women are performing self-discipline in order to achieve perceived ideas of feminine success and productivity embodied by the ‘That girl’ ideal. These methods of self-discipline are internalised so deeply that they blend with their day to day habits and in turn become a lifestyle (Cappelle, 2021). In a youtube video dedicated to exploring the ‘That girl’ phenomena, Alice Cappelle states that “accomplishing the morning routine on time is about setting yourself up for success. It’s about believing that those tiny achievements will lead you to something greater” (2021). In exercising these methods of self-discipline, these women believe that they are in the process of becoming their ‘best selves’, implementing Foucault’s technologies of the self within the practises of the ‘that girl’ morning routine. In actively taking it upon themselves to govern their lives in order to emulate feminine societal ideals they present themselves as autonomous, self-governing neoliberal subjects.

4. Internalised surveillance and performance in the trend

Surveillance is a key tool within neoliberal and postfeminist cultures due to its connection with subjectification and disciplinary power, whereby “people conform to social values while feeling that agency resides within them” (Riley, Evans and Mackiewicz, 2016, p.2). Surveillance and its

disciplinary effects are evident in the ‘that girl’ trend through an interplay of self-surveillance and performance which I discuss in detail below. In understanding the role of surveillance in creating disciplinary power in society, one must understand Foucault’s theories of discipline and regulation. Foucault likened disciplinary power to Bentham’s architectural design of a prison (see fig.4) in which prisoners are surveyed from all times from a central watchtower (Riley, Evans and Mackiewicz, 2016, p.2). Aware of their constant visibility, the prisoners perform their lives, monitoring and regulating their behaviour under surveillance. (Riley, Evans and Mackiewicz, 2016, p.2). Instead of physical force, power is exerted through the feeling of constant visibility, with this power becoming even more effective as the prisoner then lives under the internalisation of a constantly watching eye (Winch, 2015, p. 5). That is, “he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection” (Foucault quoted in Winch, 2015, p. 5).

Building on the theory of an internalised panopticon, sociologist Thomas Mathieson introduced a theory known as ‘The Synopticon’, a reverse of the panopticon (Winch, 2015, p.5). Mathieson explains that technology and mass media generally have enabled an environment where instead of the ‘few seeing the many’, ‘the many see the few’ (Winch, 2015, p.5). This theory can be applied to the trend through a dynamic of popular ‘That girl’ Tiktok accounts (the few), being watched by a much larger audience (the many). Aware of the observational gaze of the many and also motivated by the popularity of their videos, these content producers continue to perform and film their ‘that girl’ videos maintaining the cycle of surveillance and self-discipline. Meanwhile the audience surveils, absorbing these aspirational performances of self-discipline. They are in turn motivated to replicate these ideals and thus self-regulate themselves in order to do so.

This power-play between the act of observing and performing, characteristic of The Synopticon, is further exemplified in the aesthetic presentation of digital content associated with the trend. Meals

are composed for maximum visual appeal, collections of skincare products are arranged neatly on a dresser: these images are effortlessly perfect, aligning with the idealistic, aesthetic vision of how ‘that girl’ lives her life. Furthermore, they appear highly curated with an audience in mind. Acutely aware of their constant observation online and the high value attributed to visually attractive images, ‘that girl’ content creators continue to compose this aesthetic content as part of performing the role of ‘that girl’ for their audience. These examples of surveillance and performance support my argument that the trend possesses a distinct neoliberal sensibility. Moreover, they demonstrate how internalised disciplinary power results in methods of self-regulation within the ‘that-girl’ trend discussed throughout the essay.

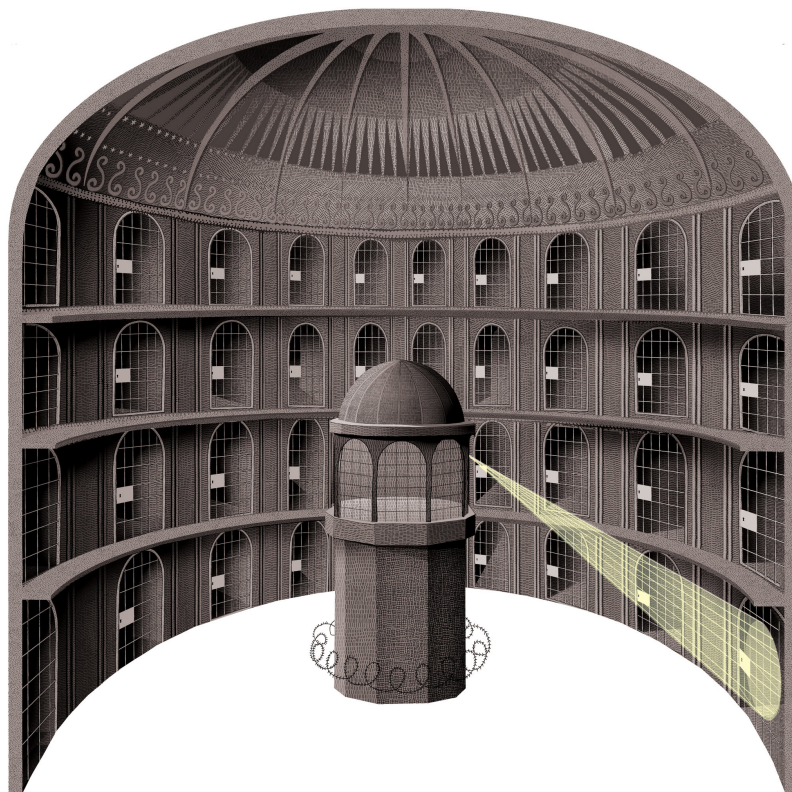


Fig.4)

5. How the trend displays postfeminism through physical self-optimisation

The 'that girl' trend reproduces several distinctly postfeminist characteristics through its culture of continuous physical optimisation. These include interwoven themes of a prominence accorded to the body, the shift from objectification to subjectification and a focus on self-surveillance resulting in a culture of aesthetic entrepreneurship to enable continuous self-transformation (Evans, Mackiewicz and Riley, 2016, p.4). Post-feminist critics identify a huge prominence accorded to the body in postfeminist cultures, with the body being crucial both for "the definition of femininity and for the value of women" (Gray, Miñano, 2021, p.727). It is thought of as "less for what it can do and more for how it appears and is figured both as the locus of womanhood and the key site of a woman's value" (Elias, Gill and Scharff, 2017, p.25). Postfeminist analysts identify that this prominence accorded to the body stems from the "pervasive sexualisation of contemporary culture" alongside an internalisation of 'the male gaze', a phrase coined by Laura Mulvey in 1975 (Evans, Mackiewicz and Riley, 2016, p.4). The theory explains the predominantly masculine viewpoint of female characters in film and how this creates a distinct power dynamic between the object and the subject. Accordingly, women are usually displayed on two levels - as the erotic object for the spectator within the film as well as an erotic object for the viewer of the film (Riley, Evans and Mackiewicz, 2016, p.3). Women are thus heavily objectified by men and come to understand themselves through the eyes of men and as objects of male desire (Evans, Mackiewicz and Riley, 2016, p.4).

Furthermore, the male gaze has informed beauty ideals outlined by Heather Widdows as emphasising thinness, firmness, smoothness to the skin as well as youthfulness (2018, p.21- p.24). Under postfeminism there is a “a shift in the way that power operates: from an external, male judging gaze to a self-policing, narcissistic gaze” (Gill, 2007, p.151). The effective power dynamic thus changes from objectification to subjectification, with the objectifying male gaze becoming internalised to form a new disciplinary regime. (Gill, 2007, p.151). The power is no longer an external force imposed from above but is now internalised with women thus self-surveilling and self-monitoring in order to emulate the sexualised bodies of male desire. This can be considered an even deeper form of objectification and works to reproduce the patriarchy (Gill, 2007, p.152). In attempting to emulate these feminine ideals posited by the male gaze, women engage in processes of self-transformation, employing various techniques to optimise their appearance which can be considered as ‘aesthetic entrepreneurship’ (Elias, Gill and Scharff, 2017, p.5).

These post-feminist characteristics are heavily embedded within the ‘that girl’ trend. Firstly, there is undoubtedly a huge prominence accorded to the body. This is mainly evidenced in the aspirational Pinterest images that reoccur in the trend, in which narrow judgements of female attractiveness rooted in a distinctly heteronormative male gaze are presented. Examples of these images can be found in fig.5 and fig.6 below. The images themselves often only focus on the body itself, with women displaying their tanned, toned, slim and smooth torsos in bikinis or sports bras but with their faces often obscured by phone cameras or cut out of the image completely. Seemingly, the women’s bodies are the focus. These images undoubtedly depict Heather Widdows’ purported beauty ideal. Reproduced in Tiktok montage form and accompanied with phrases such as #motivation, these visual representations of the trend are implicitly considered to be virtuous and of key value to the women participating in the trend, motivating them to transform their bodies in order to emulate the ideal.

Fig.5)



Fig.6)



Furthermore, in the ‘that girl’ trend, the postfeminist shift from objectification to subjectification is clear. Consumers of the trend absorb these representations of bodily ideals that pervade the trend and internalise the male gaze, this, combined with panoptical disciplinary effects explored in chapter 3, result in women thus subjectifying themselves in a process of self-optimisation and aesthetic entrepreneurship. Unknowingly or not, in striving to emulate the ‘that girl’ physical ideal, they may in fact be performing for an internalised male gaze. Methods of aesthetic entrepreneurship are most overtly presented in the ‘that girl’ routine Tiktok videos in which young women implement extensive exercise routines and skin-care regimens whilst regulating what they consume. To these women following the trend, the body is a site of potential, which can be moulded to achieve the ‘that girl’ ideal through a recipe of cleansers, green juices and push-ups. This self-imposed initiative to upgrade the body is even symbolised through the use of athletic-wear that pervades the trend. Writer Jia Tolentino, describes athleisure as a uniform that promotes optimisation and “broadcasts your commitment to controlling your body through working out” (2016, p.121). Moreover, writer Moira Weigel states wearing athletic-wear to be a “self-exposing, self-policing feedback loop”, she states that: “Because they only ‘work’ on a certain kind of body, wearing them reminds you to go out and get that body. They encourage you to produce yourself as the body that they ideally display” (Tolentino, 2016, p.121). In the ‘that girl’ trend, methods of self-regulation of the body are also extended into the popular use of what Deborah Lufton describes as ‘self-tracking technologies’ (2016, p.9). These technologies appear in the form of Fit-bits, health apps and even so far as water bottles that measure your water intake and are implemented by many of the women participating in the trend on Tiktok. These devices can be considered aesthetic entrepreneurial tools that enable the users to track and monitor their progress in achieving their bodily aspirations in minute detail.

In addition to this, the laborious process of self-optimisation never appears to falter. Predicated on the notion of continuous self-improvement, the young women participating in the trend always

appear to be in the process of ‘becoming’ and continuously strive to improve themselves through daily exercise routines and healthy eating. This is also true for the methods of routine and regimentation discussed in chapter 3 which portray a lifestyle predicated on self-discipline and continuous improvement. Despite the fact that the trend is based on working towards achieving an ideal, there in fact doesn’t appear to be a final destination. She appears to be “productive for the sake of being productive; in the ‘that girl’ trend there’s “no marathon you train up to. No reason to wake up at 5 a.m. other than that it seems more efficient.” (Pitcher, 2021) Despite there being no perceived ‘end goal’ the women participating in the trend appear to gain feelings of achievement and fulfilment just from merely maintaining these health routines and practising self-discipline, frequently touting the process to be “addictive”. Their displays of hard work also gain approval from their audiences online, their videos rewarded by views, likes and supportive comments. This culture of continuous self-improvement is a distinct attribute of neoliberal and postfeminist cultures. It can be accorded to the fact that, under postfeminism, the feminine self is never finished with her entrepreneurial project of the self and is always engaged in her “perpetual training” - “*becoming* is characterised as more desirable than *being*” (Winch, 2015, p.7, p.8). Neoliberal, postfeminist cultures valorise the labour of self-improvement and Alison Winch explains that in our society, “it is not so much that one should be perfect, but that one should be labouring towards this as an aspiration” (2015, p.8). This idea is reproduced by the media, which doesn’t only fetishise a flawless body but also fetishises the continuous work and struggle that occurs in working towards the ideal (Winch, 2015, p.8). Entangled with neoliberalism, “being seen to contribute to the process of self-transformation as well as participating in its attendant policing networks” is a crucial component of entrepreneurial citizenship (Winch, 2015, p.8). This portrayal of a forever-labouring body is vital support in my argument that the ‘that girl’ trend presents neoliberal and postfeminist subjectivity.

6. 'That girl' - the ideal consumer

Another way that the 'That Girl' trend presents neoliberal and postfeminist subjectivity is through its direct relation to consumer culture which in turn serves to benefit consumer capitalism. This stems from other conjoining factors attributed to neoliberal and postfeminist subjectivity presented within the trend such as self-surveillance and self-governance. In discussions surrounding postfeminist cultures, feminist scholars explain that women are ideal neoliberal consumers due to the likelihood of self-surveillance and the desire to self-transform through modes of consumption (Elias, Gill and Scharff, 2017, p.24). These consumptive practises often appear in hyper-feminine forms such as 'skin bleaching, tanning, waxing, facials and cosmetics' (Evans, Riley and Mackiewicz, 2016, p.4). In the 'that girl' trend, consumptive practises are less overtly feminine, taking the form of products related to health and wellness that are used as tools in the quest for self-betterment such as skincare and athletic-wear. The most overt example of these consumptive practises is in a Tiktok dedicated to 'That Girl Amazon faves'. Amongst the items included are a 64 oz water bottle with time markings listed on the side, an LED light therapy mask and a facial ice roller (sydneybuheller, 2021). Variations of 'That girl' Christmas wish-lists also emerged with one woman in particular desiring new athletic-wear, a juicer as well as a fit-bit smartwatch (kayliestewart, 2021).

Additionally, these consumer products are also advertised via the aspirational image culture that pervades the trend, such as the idealised images of young women selected from Pinterest as well as popular 'that girl' content producers on Tiktok (for examples refer to fig. 7 and 8). Serving as the visual guidelines of the trend, these women inadvertently advertise what one must possess in order to be 'that girl', whether that be an iPhone, a fancy water bottle or a particular facial product. These images rhetorically suggest that 'that girl' washes her face with an extensive set of luxurious skin-care products, drinks smoothies out of pretty glasses, wears matching sets of branded athletic-wear

to perform her workouts in and types emails from a MacBook Pro. They prompt the idea that in order to become ‘that girl’ you *need* to possess these products and this incites others to participate in consumer culture. This can be accorded to the female surveillant gaze whereby women looking at other women produces ‘a fantasy of identification’: “to be like the woman in the image or to own what she owns” much to the benefit of consumer culture and the beauty industry (Evans, Riley and Mackiewicz, 2016, p.5). Furthermore, these women are what Philip Mirowski outlined in a description of neoliberal subjectivity as being “simultaneously a product to be sold and a walking advertisement” (Houghton, 2019, p. 621). They serve as human billboards advertising the lifestyle, inspiring others to buy into the trend and thus benefiting consumer capitalism.

Fig.7)

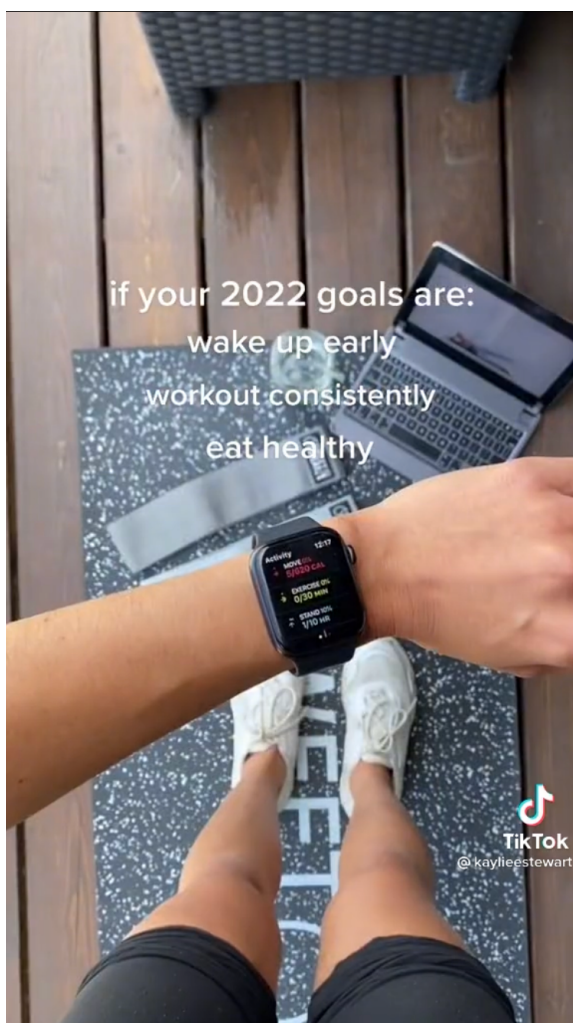
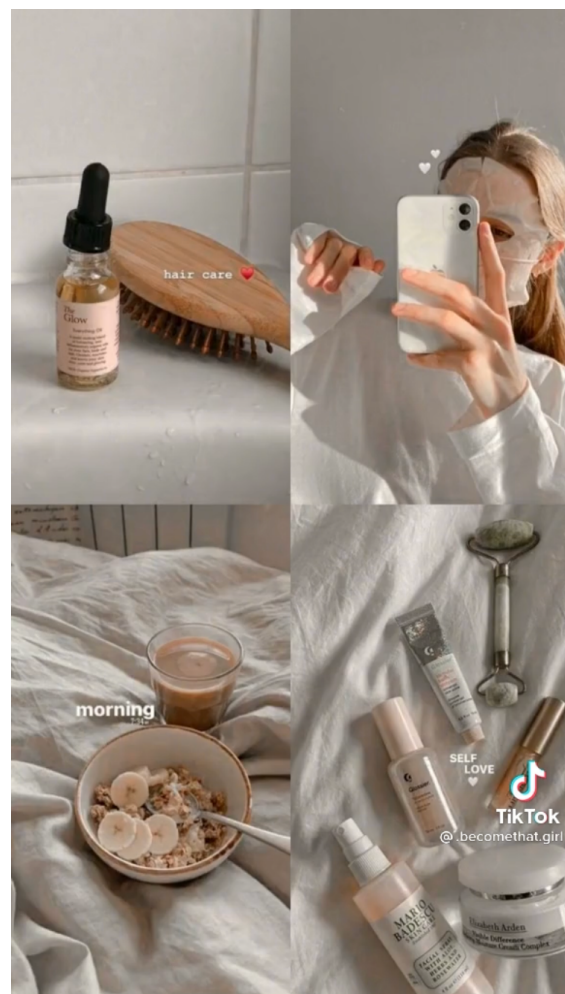


Fig.8)



In an even more subtle and sinister manner, the aspirational image culture embedded within the trend further benefits consumer capitalism by engaging women in a postindustrial, postfeminist act of labour stemming from the desire to improve oneself. This theory is supported by Hilary Jones, who argues that the “future-oriented affective capacity of Pinterest engages women in a postindustrial, postfeminist third shift of labour curating yearning and self-surveilling” (2016, p.2). She states that Pinterest possesses a ‘future-oriented capacity’ demonstrated through its aspirational image culture displaying ‘perfect meals, perfect bodies, perfect vacations’ and other images of cultural capital (2016, p.8). This ‘hyper-idealised world’ enables its users to cultivate ideals and desires for how to govern their own lives, thus engaging them in ‘imagining and surveilling all parts of their life’ (Jones, 2016, p.8). This can be considered a post-feminist act of labour due to its predominant number of female users who are more inclined to self-surveil (thus making them more valuable). The users gain pleasure from acts of yearning and aspiring via Pinterest and so this can be considered as a leisurely activity. Jones argues that this is in fact a ‘third shift of labour’ meaning an activity that ‘purport(s) to be leisure yet also yield(s) production that advantages capitalism’ (2016, p.6). This is because its users are unknowingly creating data profiles for themselves, which yield marketing data en masse, thus becoming ‘capitalised via cybernetic mechanisms’ (2016, p.8). Building on this argument, in the ‘that girl’ trend, young women unknowingly engage in this act of labour by pinning and sharing aspirational health and wellness images as part of their self-improvement journey.

These theories are succinctly demonstrated in a Tiktok entitled ‘My That girl evening routine’, in which a young woman films an evening performing her various ‘that girl’ duties. The video concludes with a clip of the young woman in bed scrolling through aspirational images on Pinterest, her screen bestowed with an endless stream of women in bikinis. Labour seeps into leisure as she surveils the images, continuing a never-ending cycle of desire and self-surveillance and thus further interpolating her to self-discipline herself in an attempt to replicate these bodily ideals. This

exemplifies how the neoliberal and postfeminist incitements to self-surveil and self-optimise demonstrated within the ‘that girl’ trend directly benefit consumer capitalism. For women under neoliberal systems of governance ‘satisfaction remains’, as Jia Tolentino neatly put it, ‘necessarily out of reach’ (2019, p.97).

7. Prioritise your life: Self-help culture and Individualism within the trend

Lastly, in possibly its most prevalent sense, neoliberalism presents itself within the ‘that girl’ trend through its entanglement with self-help culture. This is evident via the repetition of self-help messages that circulate through the trend as well as via the use of self-help books and the implementation of motivational voice-overs extracted from prominent figures in the self-help industry. Writer Deborah Lufton explains that self-help culture reproduces “the notion of individuals as atomised actors who are expected and encouraged to work upon themselves in the quest to achieve health, productivity and happiness” (2016, p.70). Furthermore, self-help discourses compound the idea that optimising the self and improving one’s life can merely be achieved by applying the appropriate knowledge (of course provided by self-help experts). Lufton explains that once this knowledge is gained, most problems and difficulties will be resolved which in turn eradicates all suggestion that a person’s difficulties could be attributed to any social, biological or economic disadvantages (2016, p.72). Therefore, being unable to overcome difficulties becomes the fault of the private individual rather than that of external sources. Self-help culture emulates neoliberalism’s prioritisation of the individual, absolving the state from its responsibility towards its citizens, where “individuals are penalised harshly not only for personal failure but also for sheer bad luck in a highly competitive and relentlessly competitive environment” (Mcguigan, 2014 p. 234). One prominent example of the use of individualistic, self-help discourses in the trend is a Tiktok where a young woman performs various tasks associated with the ‘that girl’ lifestyle whilst an

inspirational message plays over the top. The voice emits a cutting message: *“You are responsible for your life and if you’re sitting around waiting for someone to save you, to fix you, to even help you, you are wasting your time, because only you have the power to take responsibility to move your life forward”*. This voice belongs to Oprah Winfrey, a tv personality and self-help guru who has been described by The Guardian as “one of the world’s best neoliberal, capitalist thinkers” (Aschoff, 2015). In an article dedicated to the topic, the writer explains that Oprah’s “enterprise [is] an ensemble of ideological practises that help legitimise a world of growing inequality and shrinking possibilities by promoting and embodying a configuration of self compatible with that world” (Aschoff, 2015). By using her own story of rags to riches as an example of the American dream, she inspires others to overcome their own barriers in order to improve their life. The article explains that although Oprah recognises the anxiety and alienation in our society, she fails to examine the economic or political basis of these problems, instead advising us to look within and turn our attentions to the self, to become “more adaptable to the vagaries and stresses of the neoliberal moment” (Aschoff, 2015). Through channelling these sentiments of self-help culture by Oprah and the like, the trend breeds the neoliberal idea of personal responsibility and flexibility against the harsh threats of society.

The self-help culture of individualism and self-responsibility has bled out across the trend, replicated in echoed phrases such as ‘focus on you’ and ‘prioritise your life’. The trend offers the idea that it is purely a matter of personal responsibility to improve one's life. It promotes the idea that individuals can reach success on their own accord and neglects possible issues of social inequality that in fact greatly inhibits many, if not majority of people to ‘excel’ in life. Furthermore, the trend accentuates notions of individualised responsibility with many young women implementing methods of the ‘that girl’ lifestyle as a solution for depression. One ‘that girl’ Tiktok video shows a girl in the midst of a ‘depressive rut’, in bed surrounded by a messy bedroom before deciding to pull herself out of it (Yungr3d, 2021). Suddenly she’s reformed into ‘that girl’,

performing a workout, cleaning her room and applying a face of makeup. The caption reads: “This is your sign to get up b*tch”. Though nothing about this seems inherently bad, (these are all important things in maintaining a healthy mind) - as an article by Refinery29 states: “It risks insinuating that you can hack your way to success and happiness by using a few shortcuts” (Sharma, 2021). This attitude lacks nuance - responsibility is individualised and wider social, political and environmental factors that may influence one's health and wellbeing are dismissed. This dynamic is a key element in neoliberal systems of governance and further compounds my argument that neoliberal ideology permeates the ‘that girl’ trend.

Conclusion

From this research essay I can concur that Tiktok's ‘that girl’ trend presents neoliberal and postfeminist subjectivity in a multitude of ways. First, this is presented through the self-disciplinary, hyper-regimented nature of the ‘that-girl’ morning routine - a practise that internally controls followers of the trend to enact upon themselves a series of self-governing practices all in the quest to optimise their own lives. Methods of neoliberal control were also explained through an exploration of internalised disciplinary control resulting in self-surveillance, also providing an understanding of the performative practices occurring in the trend. Neoliberal attitudes of self-entrepreneurialism were also identified in the trend’s incitement to self-optimize the body, merging with the feminine pressures to improve the body resulting in aesthetic entrepreneurialism. The trend’s entanglement with self-help culture evidences the individualism neoliberalism traits of individualism and self-responsibility even further. Lastly, neoliberal and postfeminist attributes such as self-surveillance and the feminine desire to self-improve the body explored in previous chapters result in supporting feminine consumptive practices within the trend. Overall, the followers of the

that girl trend undoubtedly present neoliberal and postfeminist subjectivity. They exemplify autonomous, self-motivated, self-governing subjects whose desire to self-improve also benefits consumer culture. They are agents of their own success, taking it upon themselves to optimise every facet of their lives. This essay has also raised questions about how modes of behaviour and desires of individuals are unknowingly influenced by external forces of power. Though the implications of this subjectivity may seem discreet, these seemingly harmless everyday desires and behaviours promote wider societal implications such as the promotion of individualism, and the expansion of consumer culture. I also believe that the 'that girl' lifestyle is not conducive to happiness, despite it being predicated on the pursuit of a life of 'wellness'. Though there is nothing inherently wrong with wanting to self-improve, to me, the trend is too occupied with attempting to emulate and broadcast images of perfection. Followers of the trend never permit themselves time or space to sit within the void of the human experience. Moving like clockwork they rigidly perform their lives, toned limbs raised in unison, forever moving to the commanding tick-tock of the neoliberal, capitalist regime.

Appendices

Appendix A:

Four screenshots from Tiktok exemplifying the ‘that girl’ trend in tiktok video form.

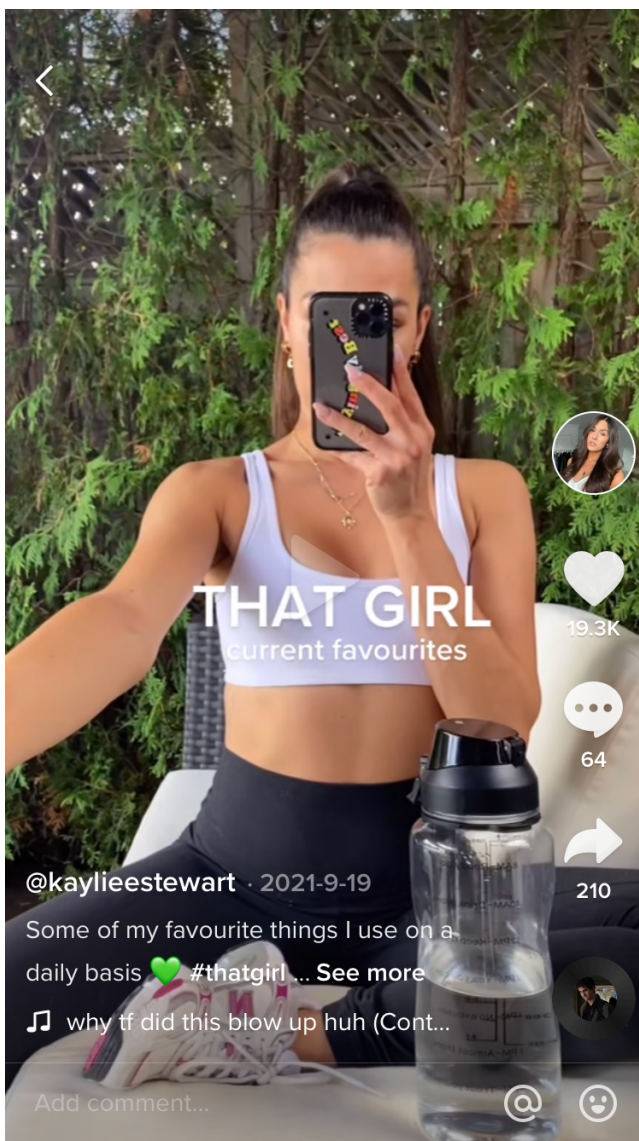


Fig. 1) Screenshot taken from Tiktok account: @kaylieestewart Posted: 19/9/2021

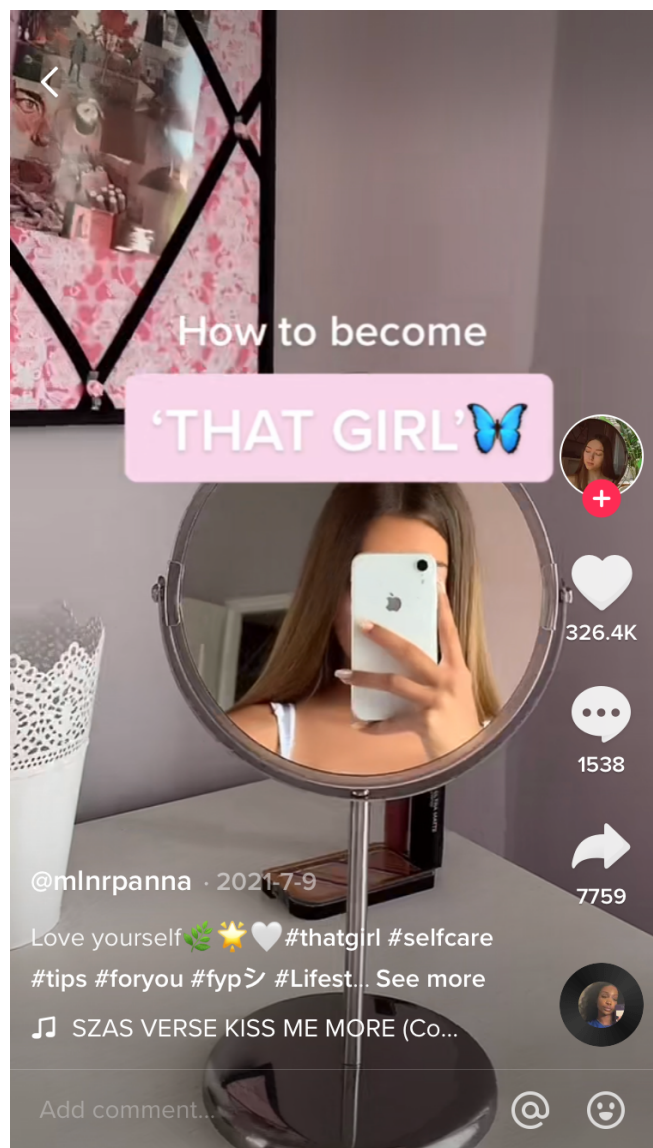


Fig. 1) Screenshot taken from Tiktok account: @mlnrpanna Posted: 19/9/2021

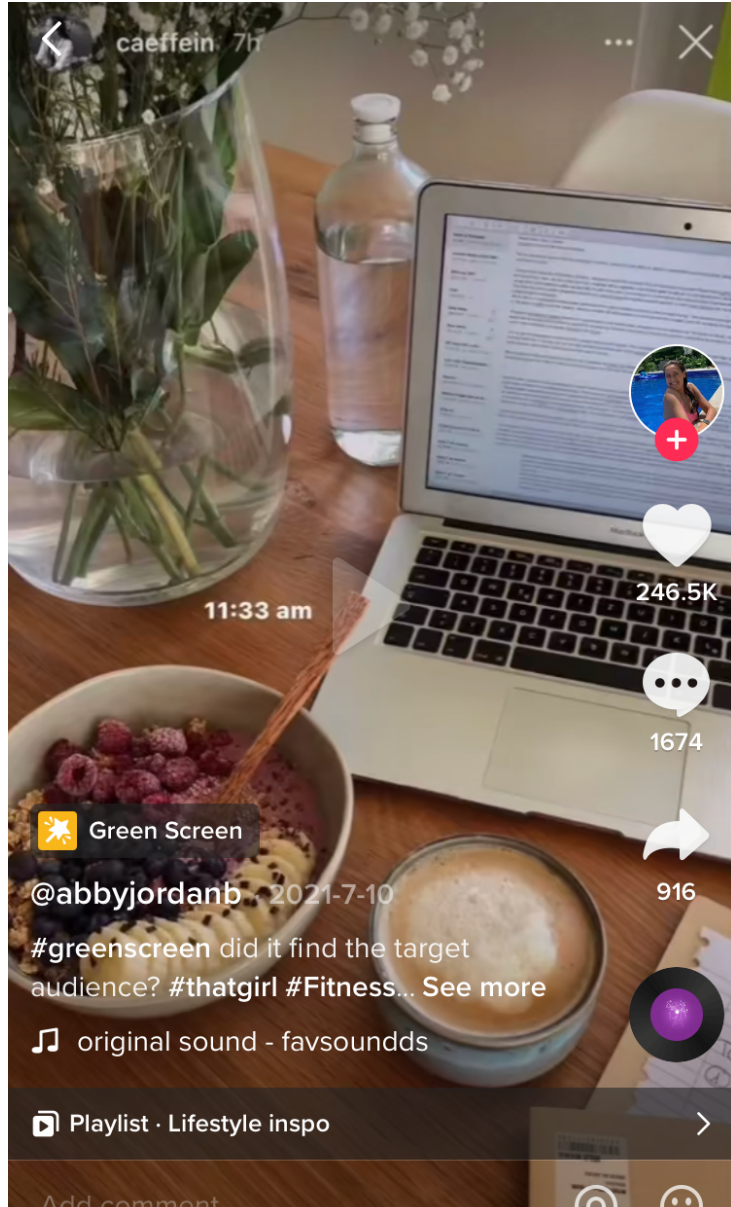


Fig.3) Screenshot from Tiktok account @abbyjordanb
Posted on: 20/2/21

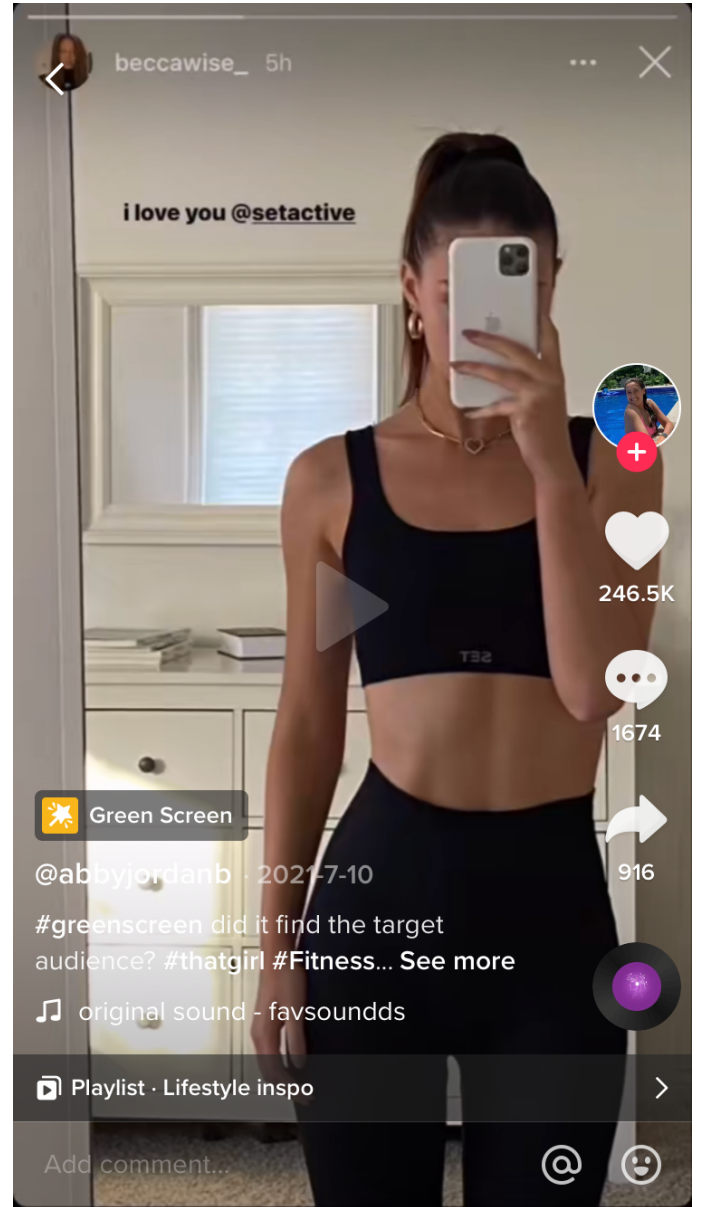


Fig.4) Screenshot from Tiktok account @abbyjordanb
Posted on: 20/2/21

Appendix B:

Two examples of Pinterest images associated with the ‘that-girl’ trend.



Fig.5) Photo taken from Pinterest Available at: <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/9007267997692206/>

Fig.6) Photo taken from Pinterest account: Sophia Weight

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