

Performing Effortless Beauty

A thematic analysis of aesthetic labour and the “clean girl” aesthetic on TikTok

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the “clean girl” aesthetic has emerged as a popular visual and lifestyle trend on TikTok, promoting a specific image of femininity. The look is characterised by glowing skin, minimal makeup, slicked-back hair, and natural beauty. While the trend is often framed as effortless, there is a great deal of concealed aesthetic labour, as participation in the aesthetic requires time and resources. This thesis examines how young women on TikTok perform aesthetic labour through the clean girl aesthetic, interrogating the ways in which beauty, identity, and privilege intersect in the construction of femininity online. The central question guiding the research is: How do young women on TikTok perform aesthetic labour through the clean girl aesthetic? Adopting a qualitative approach, the study employs thematic analysis to examine 52 TikTok videos posted by young, female creators who participate in the trend. Videos were selected through purposive sampling and analysed through the lens of feminist media theory, drawing on concepts of aesthetic labour and postfeminist and neoliberal discourses. The analysis reveals four key themes. *Performing Effortlessness* highlights the contradiction of achieving a highly curated “natural” look. *Consumerism and Aesthetic Labour* highlights how commodified self-care routines and product promotion are central to the clean girl aesthetic. *Norms and Exclusion* examines how Eurocentric beauty standards and upper-class femininity are upheld in the aesthetic. Finally, *Platform-Specific Representation* shows how TikTok’s algorithmic culture and platform affordances shape the aesthetic. While the clean girl aesthetic is often associated with self-care and wellness, its idealised version of femininity often centres whiteness, thinness, and affluence. This thesis concludes that the clean girl aesthetic operates as a postfeminist performance of self obscures extensive aesthetic labour under the guise of natural beauty. TikTok serves as both a platform for reproducing beauty standards and a space where creators can challenge them. The findings contribute to broader conversations about aesthetic labour, digital culture, and representation online.

KEYWORDS: *Aesthetic Labour, TikTok Trends, Clean Girl Aesthetic, Post-Feminism, Digital Identity Construction*

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1. Introduction

1.1 Context of the Study

In recent years, TikTok has emerged as a force in digital culture, shaping how individuals engage with trends, construct identities, and express themselves through short-form videos. As of 2024, TikTok hosts well over one billion users around the world, with women aged 18 to 24 representing its largest demographic group (Omnicore, 2024, para. 3). Due to the large presence of young women on the platform, Kennedy (2020) suggests that TikTok can be read as a celebration of girlhood, where young women not only consume content but actively shape popular culture through their participation in visual trends (p. 1070). Some of the most followed and influential creators on the app are young women who drive the formation of popular beauty trends (Kennedy, 2020, p. 1071). This contributes to TikTok's central role in redefining how beauty trends are formed and spread online. Aesthetic trends that have gained popularity on the app, such as "cottagecore" and "Y2K revival", have thousands of videos posted under their respective hashtags. These trends are defined by distinctive visual styles, moods, or lifestyles that others emulate and are often associated with cultural signifiers (Gansinger & Al-Aridi, 2023, p. 223). Among them, the "clean girl" aesthetic has gained significant popularity with young women on the platform. Characterised by minimalist styling, glowing skin, sleek hairstyles, neutral-toned fashion, and self-care routines, the trend promotes a version of femininity that is effortlessly beautiful (Sweeney-Romero, 2022, p. 108).

While the clean girl aesthetic is often celebrated for its promotion of natural beauty and its aspirational nature, its underlying cultural meanings and social consequences deserve closer attention. On the surface, the trend may appear benign, or even empowering, as participants are invited to embrace self-care and personal grooming (Theonila, 2022, para. 2). However, its popularity also signals deeper connections to aesthetic labour and social stratification. Scholars such as Mears (2014, p. 1332) and Elias and Gill (2017, p. 68) have argued that contemporary beauty practices often demand significant time, effort, and financial investment. In the context of the clean girl aesthetic, this labour is frequently obscured by the illusion of effortlessness (Sweeney-Romero, 2022, p. 109). These dynamics are strengthened by the platform's algorithm, which privileges content that aligns with recognisable visual patterns and behaviours (Zulli & Zulli, 2022, p. 1882). As a result, performing the clean girl aesthetic involves beauty work, strategic self-representation, and platform literacy. The trend's emphasis on cleanliness and bodily discipline also intersects with

longstanding associations between hygiene, femininity, and moral value. Scholars like Tiffin (2001, p. 45), Berthold (2010, p. 11), and O'Hagan (2018, p. 777) have shown how historical discourses have linked femininity to purity and cleanliness, often reinforcing hierarchies of race and class. These narratives persist in digital culture, where aesthetic trends like "clean girl" can reproduce narrow beauty ideals and marginalise those who do not conform (Burchell, 2022, p. 22). This raises important questions about inclusion and inequality in digital beauty culture.

To understand how the clean girl aesthetic functions on TikTok, it is also important to consider how the platform shapes how beauty trends are created and circulated. Unlike older beauty trends that were curated by editors and distributed through magazines or television, TikTok beauty trends are influenced by algorithms, audiences, and user participation (Uti & Marcella-Hood, 2025, p. 12). Additionally, creators must continuously navigate the pressures of maintaining visibility, monetisation opportunities, and audience expectations (Marwick, 2015, p. 137). These pressures give rise to an environment where aesthetic labour is central to identity performance, belonging, and economic opportunity (Mears, 2014, p. 1330).

1.2 Purpose of the Study

This study aims to explore how young women perform aesthetic labour through the clean girl aesthetic on TikTok. It pays particular attention to the social, cultural, and platform-specific dynamics that shape these performances. As a platform known for its short-form videos and trend-driven culture, TikTok offers a compelling lens through which to examine how beauty standards are created and reinforced. The clean girl aesthetic, with its emphasis on natural beauty and alignment with wellness culture, reflects deeper issues tied to beauty norms, representation, and hidden labour. By examining the trend, this research seeks to better understand how aesthetic labour is performed and maintained on TikTok, and what this reveals about identity construction and visibility online.

To do this, the study adopts a qualitative approach and uses thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78) to analyse TikTok videos that showcase the clean girl aesthetic. A purposive sampling strategy was used to collect publicly available videos from popular hashtags associated with the trend. The data was then analysed through the lens of feminist media theory, with a focus on aesthetic labour (Mears, 2014, p. 1331), digital self-representation (Duffy & Hund, 2015, p. 3), and neoliberal and postfeminist discourses (Gill, 2007, p. 271; Elias & Gill, 2018, p. 66). This approach

made it possible to look closely at how the clean girl aesthetic is performed and how it connects to broader issues of identity, aspiration, and social belonging.

The study is primarily guided by the following research question: *How do young women on TikTok perform aesthetic labour through the “clean girl” aesthetic?* Additionally, the following two sub-questions allow for a more nuanced approach to the research.

1. What does the performance of the “clean girl” aesthetic reveal about identity construction on TikTok?
2. In what ways do class, race, and gender shape access to the “clean girl” aesthetic?

By addressing these questions, this study offers a critical analysis of digital beauty culture and the evolving nature of aesthetic labour in social media spaces. The findings provide insights into how TikTok shapes contemporary beauty standards and the broader implications of aesthetic labour in the influencer economy.

1.3 Academic and Societal Relevance

Although TikTok is one of the most culturally influential platforms of the past decade, scholarly research on its aesthetic trends remains limited. While studies have begun to explore identity performance and beauty trends on social media (e.g., Burchell, 2022, p. 17; Sweeney-Romero, 2022, p. 109), specific trends like the clean girl aesthetic have received little attention within academic literature. Much of the existing commentary on this trend is found in journalistic or popular media sources (e.g., Theonila, 2022, para. 3; Jones, 2025, para. 1), leaving a gap in academic research. This study addresses that gap by offering an analysis of how beauty is performed through the clean girl aesthetic on TikTok.

By examining this trend, the research contributes to a broader understanding of how beauty practices and norms are shaped by platform culture. It also contributes to ongoing conversations about aesthetic labour (Mears, 2014, p. 1331), digital self-representation (Burchell, 2023, p. 17), and algorithmic culture (Zulli & Zulli, 2022, p. 1872). In doing so, the study not only enriches academic discussions on social media and gender, but sheds light on the sociocultural implications of aesthetic trends that might otherwise be dismissed as trivial.

Academically, this research engages with and builds upon literature on aesthetic labour, self-representation, and platform dynamics. Drawing on Mears (2014, p. 1331), the study contextualizes aesthetic labour within the influencer economy and highlights how beauty work is strategically performed and commodified. Burchell (2023) applies Goffman's (1959, p. 110) framework of self-presentation to TikTok, arguing that the platform both constrains and enables identity performances (Burchell, 2023, p. 18). Additionally, Zulli and Zulli (2022) argue that TikTok fosters 'imitation publics,' where trends like the clean girl aesthetic spread through participatory replication (p. 1871). By integrating these perspectives, this study examines how beauty trends are constructed and circulated within TikTok.

The societal relevance of this research lies in its critical examination of the pressure social media places on young women to follow specific standards of femininity. As beauty culture increasingly shapes identity formation and self-worth, it is important to understand how social media aesthetics contribute to exclusionary beauty norms and neoliberal ideals of self-improvement. By analysing how aesthetic labour is performed on TikTok, this study contributes to broader discussions on digital self-representation and gendered labour.

1.4 Chapter Outline

This thesis is organised into five chapters that build a critical analysis of the clean girl aesthetic on TikTok. While this chapter introduced the topic, Chapter 2 provides the theoretical foundation, drawing on literature about aesthetic labour, digital self-representation, and platform dynamics to frame how beauty trends are performed and circulated online. Chapter 3 outlines the methodological approach, detailing the use of qualitative research and thematic analysis of TikTok videos. This chapter also addresses the sampling strategy, ethical considerations, and limitations of the study. Chapter four presents the findings and discussion of four central themes that emerged: *Performing Effortlessness, Consumerism and Aesthetic Labour, Norms and Exclusion, and Platform-Specific Representation*. These themes offer insight into how young women engage with the clean girl aesthetic and what this reveals about identity construction and belonging on social media. Finally, Chapter 5 concludes the thesis by reflecting on the main findings, contributions, and implications of the research, while suggesting directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Aesthetic Labour

2.1.1 *The Evolution of Aesthetic Labour*

The concept of aesthetic labour was first introduced by Warhurst and Nickson (2001, p. 2), inspired by Hochschild's (1984, p. 483) research on emotional labour. Warhurst and Nickson (2001) observed that service industry recruiters hired employees not only for their skill, but for their appearance and personality (p. 12). The authors noted that companies viewed workers' ability to "look good and sound right" as a highly marketable asset, allowing them to commodify the individual for the company's benefit (Warhurst & Nickson, 2001, p. 12). Their study included the hospitality and retail sectors, in which they describe aesthetic labour as an employee's ability to embody a company's brand image through their appearance, style, and emotional expression (Warhurst & Nickson, 2001, p. 13). While the concept of aesthetic labour began as a form of branding in the service industry, it has since spread to the digital space where individuals brand themselves online (Xie et. al, 2023, p. 2).

In more recent years, aesthetic labour has grown to become a key component of influencer work within the social media economy. Mears (2014) explains that aesthetic labour is not only the performance of beauty but serves as symbolic and economic capital (p. 1340). Through aesthetic labour, individuals can modify their appearance to fit the standards of their industry and gain marketable value (Mears, 2014, p. 1330). In the context of TikTok, aesthetic labour has shifted from company branding to a strategic form of self-branding employed by influencers (Burchell, 2023, p. 24). Burchell (2023) explains that influencers curate their online identities in order to fit platform expectations, audience expectations, and cultural beauty norms (p. 24). Additionally, Xie et al. (2023) argue that the performance of aesthetic labour can help an influencer garner credibility from their audience, specifically within the fashion and beauty sectors (p. 9).

As I later demonstrate in the results section, the "clean girl" aesthetic is characterised by dewy skin, minimalist makeup, and wellness discourse, illustrating the presence of aesthetic labour online. Although the look appears effortless, it is tied to rigorous self-care routines and labour process that reflects the values of self-regulation described by Mears (2014, p. 1336). Aesthetic

labour is a useful framework for understanding this contradiction between the appearance of natural beauty and highly managed self-presentation.

2.1.2 Aesthetic Labour and Platform Visibility

With the rise of algorithm-driven social media platforms like TikTok, there is a growing relationship between beauty work and platform visibility (Elias & Gill, 2017, p. 66). Mears (2014) suggests that aesthetic labour is useful for understanding how the value of beauty is constructed and how looks matter in reinforcing social stratification (p. 1340). Drawing on Bourdieu's (1994, p. 199) notion of symbolic capital, the author argues that attractiveness is not evenly distributed or valued in society, as it is racialised, classed, and gendered (Mears, 2014, p. 1340). In industries like fashion and media, workers are often selected not only for their skill but for their ability to embody a desirable look (Mears, 2014, p. 1335). Aesthetic labour therefore reinforces existing social hierarchies by privileging those who match dominant beauty standards. This is particularly relevant to TikTok, a highly visual platform where dominant trends and beauty norms lead to algorithmic visibility and user engagement (Burchell, 2023, p. 22).

While aesthetic labour has long been a tool for social stratification (Mears, 2014, p. 1340), today it operates within a complex algorithmic system that dictates which bodies and performances are seen. As Mears (2014) explains, beauty functions as a form of capital from which individuals are able to gain attention, social status, and financial rewards (Mears, 2014, p. 1340). On TikTok, this means that influencers who align with trending aesthetics and beauty ideals often benefit from increased reach, sponsorships, and social capital (Burchell, 2023, p. 22).

Abidin (2020) describes this phenomenon as visibility labour (p. 78). The author explains that influencers must constantly perform and adjust their content to mirror what they believe will boost their visibility (Abidin, 2020, p. 79). This can mean following the latest viral trends, using popular sounds, or curating their appearance to fit specific aesthetics. As a popular visual aesthetic and lifestyle trend, “clean girl” is a perfect example of this practice. “Clean girl” thrives within TikTok’s algorithm because of what Bhandari and Bimo (2023) refer to as self-discretization, which is the way social media users fragment and categorise their identities into easily digestible trends (p. 3).

In Sykes' (2024) study of the #stayathomegirlfriend trend, the author discusses the noticeable tension between appearance and effortlessness portrayed online (p. 1). #Stayathomegirlfriend—which overlaps greatly with the clean girl trend—shows how influencers romanticise domestic chores, beauty routines, and lifestyle content as being calming and desirable (Sykes, 2024, p. 3). The real work behind staging, shooting, and editing these videos is not shown to the viewer. The trend reframes aesthetic labour as relaxing self-care, even though it is highly time-consuming and driven by the pressures of appealing to the algorithm (Sykes, 2024, p. 4).

Elias, Gill, and Scharff (2017) describe this kind of aesthetic labour as part of neoliberal self-regulation, where women derive personal meaning from constantly managing and improving their appearance (p. 84). On TikTok, young women often internalise the expectation that they must maintain a perfectly polished appearance and adhere to the rapidly changing trends (Burchell, 2023, p. 24). The pressures to “look right” (Warhurst & Nickson, 2001, p. 12) and fit into TikTok’s attention economy (Abidin, 2020, p. 78) creates an exhausting cycle of self-monitoring and performance.

2.2 Performing the Self on TikTok

While self-presentation has long been shaped by societal expectations, the rise of social media platforms like TikTok have expanded the ways in which identity can be performed and curated. Viral aesthetic trends encourage users to project aspirational versions of themselves through short-form, stylised videos. The clean girl aesthetic is a clear example of this, as influencers and participants in the trends strive to curate a polished version of themselves that combines minimalism with effortless beauty. This section explores the performance of self on TikTok, drawing on Goffman’s (1959, p. 110) concept of self-presentation and Mahmood’s (2005, p. 249) theory of agency. These frameworks are used to analyse how young women strategically perform their identities while remaining within the boundaries of aesthetic trends and audience expectations.

2.2.1 Theoretical Foundations of Identity Performance

Goffman’s (1959, p. 110) concept of self-presentation is a useful lens for understanding how young women on TikTok construct their online personas. Goffman (1959) describes everyday life as a performance in which individuals manage their appearance and behaviours in order to create a positive impression among an audience (p. 110). The author distinguishes between two types of

behaviours: front and backstage behaviours. “Front stage” behaviours refer to individuals acting in public spaces and adhering to social norms, while “backstage” behaviours refer to individuals acting in private settings where they can behave more authentically (Goffman, 1959, p. 112). An influencer’s TikTok profile serves as a continuous front stage, as every video, outfit, and caption is carefully chosen to meet audience expectations and aesthetic standards (Burchell, 2023, p. 22).

However, the apparent freedom to perform one’s identity on TikTok is shaped by platform norms and audience expectations. While Goffman (1959, p. 110) emphasises the individual’s control over self-presentation, Burchell (2023, p. 24) introduces a more nuanced view of agency by drawing on Mahmood (2005, p. 249). This definition of agency refers to the capacity for action within the constraints of dominant power structures (Burchell, 2023, p. 25). Burchell (2023) argues that while TikTok allows its users to express themselves creatively, the sense of agency is complicated by the strict beauty standards and aesthetic trends that are both propagated and rewarded by the platform’s algorithm (Burchell, 2023, p. 18).

Boyd (2007) introduces the concept of networked publics to explain how identity performance functions in digital environments (p. 119). The author explains that networked publics are spaces and audiences that are bound together by digital networks (boyd, 2007, p. 125). Networked publics are defined by four unique characteristics that separate them from other definitions of ‘public’: persistence, searchability, replicability, and invisible audiences (boyd, 2007, p. 126). These characteristics require users to be strategic in their self-presentation, as the content they post can be viewed by unintended audiences and outlive its original context (boyd, 2007, p. 129). For young people, online social platforms like TikTok become “front stages” for identity exploration and social interaction. Boyd argues that profiles and posts are used by teenagers to “write themselves into being”, as social networking platforms function as a place for self-expression, identity formation, and as a way to be seen by peers (boyd, 2007, p. 120). This aligns with Burchell’s (2023) observation that influencers on TikTok curate their self-image partially to align with aesthetic trends and the platform’s attention economy (p. 23).

2.2.2 Performing the Clean Girl Aesthetic

Young women on the platform engage in aesthetic labour through curating their self-representation to align with popular aesthetic trends (Burchell, 2023, p. 18). The clean girl aesthetic is a clear example of this. “Clean girl”, along with other trends like “That Girl” and “becoming the

main character,” promotes a hyper-individualistic, aspirational vision of success, beauty, and self-improvement (Burchell, 2023, p. 21). The clean girl aesthetic emphasizes minimalism, wellness, and effortless beauty, which is representative of the broader cultural pressures towards self-surveillance and aesthetic labour (Elias et al., 2017, p. 3). Additionally, Banet-Weiser (2017) emphasises how young women on social media experience heightened self-monitoring (p. 267). Due to the pressures to perform certain trends and aesthetics, their self-representation online becomes a continuous cycle of aesthetic labour.

2.2.3 Balancing Authenticity and Identity Performance

There is a noticeable tension on TikTok between the expectation and desire to appear authentic while presenting a highly curated self-image. Young women who participate in trends like the clean girl aesthetic carefully construct an image that looks effortless, even though the process behind it involves extensive preparation and styling (Burchell, 2023, p. 20). The paradox of attempting to appear “natural” through planned content creates a complex dynamic, as authenticity becomes part of the performance (Duffy & Hund, 2015, p. 6). Gill (2007) describes this phenomenon as the “surveillance of the self” (p. 261). The author explains that women internalise cultural and media pressures and then feel the need to constantly monitor and adjust their bodies and behaviours (Gill, 2007, p. 261). On TikTok, this “surveillance of the self” is amplified by both platform metrics and audience feedback, causing influencers to continually adjust themselves and their content. As Burchell (2023) observes, the labour involved in maintaining the illusion of authenticity is both physically and emotionally taxing (p. 18).

2.3 TikTok Trends and Communities

TikTok serves not only as a space for creative expression, but as a platform for trend creation. The design of TikTok encourages the rapid circulation of trends through short form video, algorithmic curation, and built-in tools for recreating videos (Zulli & Zulli, 2022, p. 1872). As a result, TikTok communities are formed due to the production of similar content with shared meanings, themes, and visual styles or aesthetics (Zulli & Zulli, 2022, p. 1883). This section explores how such trends and communities are formed and circulate on TikTok.

2.3.1 Trend Creation and Imitation

McRobbie (1993) explores the role of young women in shaping subcultures, challenging earlier studies that undermined or ignored their contributions (p. 14). She argues that fashion and beauty are integral to the formation of youth identities, particularly within female subcultures (McRobbie, 1993, p. 18). This framework can be used to understand TikTok's aesthetic trend culture, as young women actively engage in the production and dissemination of new beauty and fashion trends. Unlike traditional subcultures, TikTok's existence as a digital space allows aesthetic movements to spread globally with unprecedented speed. The clean girl aesthetic, for example, has been embraced by influencers around the world (Hammervold & Wilen, 2024, p. 1). 'Clean girl' has become a dominant beauty trend that signifies a specific type of femininity and class aspiration.

Aesthetic trends on TikTok emerge due to a combination of interactions between creators, audiences, and the platform's algorithm. Zulli and Zulli (2022) provide a framework for understanding how TikTok trends emerge, arguing that "mimesis" is the foundation for trend creation (p. 1872). The authors explain that TikTok fosters imitation and replication, as the platform's algorithm promotes content that encourages users to recreate posts rather than simply consume them (Zulli & Zulli, 2022, p. 1873). This participatory structure ensures that aesthetic trends, such as "clean girl", are popularised not only through influencer promotion but also through user replication, as participants adopt the use of mimetic visual cues and behaviours (Zulli & Zulli, 2022, p. 1873). "Mimesis" leads to the formation of "imitation publics", which the authors define as networks of people whose digital connectivity is grounded in the ritual of content imitation and replication (Zulli & Zulli, 2022, p. 1882). For TikTok users, particularly influencers, joining a trend like the clean girl aesthetic is a way to enter an imitation public and exhibit what Thornton (1995) describes as subcultural capital (p. 235).

2.4 Participatory Culture Among Young Women

TikTok's trend culture is not based entirely in its algorithm, as it also thrives due to the active participation of its users. Jenkins (2006) explains this dynamic with his concept of participatory culture, which is a media environment where users are not simply passive consumers, but also creators and collaborators (p. 3). Participation in this context is built on the circulation of content and it is often social, creative, and mostly informal. These forms of participation commonly unfold in what Gee (2017) refers to as affinity spaces, which are flexible, interest-driven communities where people connect over shared practices rather than formal group memberships (p. 28). On TikTok, affinity spaces emerge around trends like the clean girl aesthetic, as participants align through

lifestyle choices and beauty rituals (Sweeney-Romero, 2022, p. 110). The girls participating in this trend collectively enjoy belonging to a loosely defined, aspirational community.

This mode of engagement on TikTok echoes earlier patterns of how girls have used the internet to explore identity and community. Harris (2014) observes that digital spaces like blogs, fan sites, social media profiles, and personal websites have historically allowed young women to experiment with their self-representation, build peer networks, and engage in DIY cultural production (p. 213). These spaces allowed girls to act as producers of media and culture, challenging the dominant narratives that framed them as simply passive consumers (Harris, 2014, p. 214). The author builds on this idea by suggesting that social networking platforms have become an integral part of young women's personal development and socialization (Harris, 2014, p. 216). These sites provide a space for young women to create peer-driven communities outside the oversight of parents and other adult authorities (Harris, 2014, p. 218). This creates a platform for "peer-to-peer learning" that allows young women to curate their public identities without interference (Harris, 2014, p. 218).

2.5 Clean Girl Aesthetic as a Cultural Signifier

The clean girl aesthetic is one of TikTok's more recognisable trends, especially within the beauty and wellness communities (Burchell, 2023, p. 20). While there is a lack of academic literature on "clean girl", the trend is very similar to the "That Girl" trend, as both are characterised by beauty routines, minimalist style, self-care rituals, and a general sense of wellness. Although these trends appear simple and surface level, the aesthetics are shaped by deeper cultural values around femininity, discipline, and aspiration (Sweeney-Romero, 2022, p. 108). Similarly to the "That Girl" trend, clean girl content offers access to the image of the "ideal" young woman (Sweeney-Romero, 2022, p. 109). Additionally, the clean girl aesthetic functions as a signifier of social status, drawing on historical associations between cleanliness, class, gender, and race (Collins, 1992, p. 225; Monier & Mears, 2024, p. 1; Tiffin, 2001, p. 45). These themes are explored in the following sections to contextualise "clean girl" within broader cultural narratives.

2.5.1 Defining Clean Girl

The clean girl aesthetic first became popular on TikTok in the early 2020s with videos featuring minimal makeup, slicked-back hair, gold jewellery, and workout sets in neutral tones (Sweeney-Romero, 2022, p. 108). The content typically comes in the form of daily routines, makeup tutorials, and lifestyle tips for organisation, skincare, working out, and healthy habits (Sweeney-

Romero, 2022, p. 110). Influencers often present the aesthetic as part of their lifestyle and promote practices that are associated with wellness culture, such as journaling and drinking green smoothies (Sweeney-Romero, 2022, p. 114). Although the aesthetic is framed as being “natural” or effortless, it requires a significant amount of preparation. Burchell (2023) observes that creating this type of content involves consistent aesthetic labour, including grooming, styling, and carefully curated self-presentation (p. 22). Sweeney-Romero (2022) makes a similar observation in her analysis of the ‘That Girl’ trend (p. 109). The author explains that even content meant to show rest and self-care is being performed for the audience (Sweeney-Romero, 2022, p. 109).

2.5.2 Cleanliness and Purity

The clean girl aesthetic is founded on the principles of always appearing groomed, tidy, and effortlessly polished. The emphasis on this style of presentation is more than a contemporary beauty trend, as it draws on deeper cultural associations between cleanliness, morality, respectability, and social status. These associations have been shaped throughout history by race, gender, and class (Tiffin, 2001, p. 45; Berthold, 2010, p. 10; O’Hagan, 2018, p. 765). Tiffin (2001) examines the historical link between cleanliness and social hierarchies, tracing the role of hygiene to Western colonial history (p. 44). The author argues that Western notions of hygiene have been used to enforce racial and class boundaries (Tiffin, 2001, p. 45). In British imperial discourse, cleanliness became a source of national pride and moral superiority (Tiffin, 2001, p. 44). Cleanliness was used as a sign of visible inner virtue, and uncleanness was used against colonised peoples to justify their social and cultural domination (Tiffin, 2001, p. 45). These ideas resulted in white, upper-class femininity being constructed as the ideal.

Berthold (2010) also draws on the historical links between cleanliness and race, showing how whiteness has been tied to ideals of purity and hygiene in American culture (p. 10). The author argues that white people have used everyday rituals, like grooming habits and the use of “pure” consumer goods, to conceive themselves as physically and morally superior (Berthold, 2010, p. 10). Additionally, she makes the argument that whiteness has continually been upheld in media and consumer culture as the moral norm and that non-white bodies are unclean (Berthold, 2010, p. 12). This framework helps to explain how contemporary aesthetics, like clean girl, continue to flourish and reward polished appearances that align with white, upper-class beauty ideals.

Cleanliness has also functioned historically as a gendered marker of respectability. Through her analysis of a post-Edwardian girls' school exercise book, O'Hagan (2018) shows how young middle-class girls were taught to associate hygiene with morality and social aspiration (p. 765). Phrases like "*clean nails are the mark of a well brought up girl*" were used to instil the idea that cleanliness signalled good character, class mobility, and proper femininity (O'Hagan, 2018, p. 777). Cleanliness was not only a personal habit, but a public performance of worthiness and social legitimacy (p. 781).

Together, these theoretical perspectives are useful for contextualising the clean girl aesthetic within the broader histories of purity, morality, and status in Western cultures. Incorporating Tiffin's (2001, p. 45), Berthold's (2010, p. 10), and O'Hagan's (2018, p. 765) frameworks into the analysis allows for a deeper understanding of how digital aesthetics, like "clean girl", perpetuate historical associations between beauty, race, and class.

2.5.3 Femininity, Class, and Status Cultures

While the clean girl aesthetic appears visually understated, it carries strong associations with wealth, class distinction, and status. Its emphasis on minimal makeup and effortless beauty reflects a broader cultural tradition of women's appearance serving as a signifier of social status. Scholars have shown that femininity is often communicated through aesthetic labour and used to signal taste, class, and belonging (Monier & Mears, 2024, p. 1). Beyond these associations, the clean girl aesthetic also contributes to what Collins (1992) describes as the production of status cultures (p. 213). Collins (1992) argues that women play an active role in constructing and maintaining status cultures, often through their fashion, grooming, and lifestyle choices (p. 225). The clean girl aesthetic aligns with this argument, as it presents an idealised version of femininity that is aspirational and exclusionary.

Monier and Mears (2024) explain how women's bodies function as status symbols in elite social circles (p. 1). Drawing on ethnographic research, the authors show that elite women are expected to appear beautiful, young, thin, and composed (Monier & Mears, 2024, p. 8). However, their appearance is the product of intense "backstage" labour, involving cosmetic surgery, makeup, Botox, and fitness, which all requires significant time and money (Monier & Mears, 2024, p. 12). The illusion of ease and "natural" beauty is used to reinforce the idea that their elite status is inherent rather than performed (Monier & Mears, 2024, p. 12). This closely mirrors clean girl content on TikTok, where creators often hide the aesthetic labour behind their look.

TikTok's algorithmic structure further reinforces these classed beauty performances.

Research has shown that the platform tends to promote content that aligns with dominant aesthetic norms (Zulli & Zulli, 2022, p. 1883). Noble (2018) argues that the algorithm privileges creators who embody Eurocentric features, such as whiteness and thinness (p. 71). As a result, TikTok's algorithm favours certain groups of creators more than others. The platform not only reflects existing social hierarchies but actively reproduces them by amplifying and rewarding creators based on their proximity to normative ideals of beauty, wealth, and femininity.

2.5.4 Neoliberal Femininity

The clean girl aesthetic reflects a postfeminist tradition in which young women are expected to view beauty and wellness as personal responsibility. These expectations are shaped by what Gill (2007) refers to as “postfeminist sensibility”, where femininity is framed by practices related to empowerment, confidence, individual success, and self-surveillance (p. 249). The author explains that this sensibility is centred on the idea that women should always strive to look good and feel good as an expression of their personal success (Gill, 2007, p. 250).

Elias, Gill, and Scharff (2017) build on this framework by describing aesthetic labour as a neoliberal practice of self-regulation (p. 6). They argue that young women today are encouraged to constantly work on their bodies and appearance, framed by discourses of health and self-care (Elias et al., 2017, p. 6). McRobbie (2015) further critiques this dynamic through her concept of “the perfect” (p. 9). She argues that in neoliberal times, femininity has become competitive and focuses on discipline and self-regulation (McRobbie, 2015, p. 10). The pursuit of perfection is not necessarily enforced by outside sources but promoted through cultural messages that link beauty with self-worth and having a “good life” (McRobbie, 2015, p. 9). This creates what McRobbie (2015) calls a “neoliberal spreadsheet”, where women benchmark themselves against idealised standards of beauty and lifestyle (p. 10). This is a useful framework for analysing aesthetic trends like clean girl, as it offers a template for what the ideal girl should look like.

2.6 Conclusion

This literature review has explored the theoretical foundations for analysing the clean girl aesthetic as a form of aesthetic labour and identity performance on TikTok. Drawing on work by Mears (2014, p. 1332) and Elias, Gill, and Scharff (2017, p. 6), aesthetic labour emerges as a practice that is central to how women construct and communicate their identity online. Burchell (2023, p. 17)

and Abidin (2020, p. 15) explain how beauty and visibility on TikTok are shaped, in part, by platform norms and the algorithmic structure. Concepts such as self-presentation (Goffman, 1959, p. 110), networked publics (boyd, 2007, p. 112), and agency (Mahmood, 2005, p. 249) provide a lens for understanding how identity is performed as a result of cultural and platform pressures.

Furthermore, this review highlights how the clean girl aesthetic draws upon postfeminist and neoliberal ideals of empowerment, self-disciple, and self-regulation (Gill, 2007, p. 261; McRobbie, 2015, p. 9). Additionally, the trend reproduces longstanding Western associations between cleanliness, whiteness, and feminine virtue (Tiffin, 2001, p. 45; Bethold, 2010, p. 10; O'Hagan, 2018, p. 765). The algorithmic structure of TikTok reinforces these dynamics by amplifying content that aligns with dominant platform trends and beauty standards (Zulli & Zulli, 2022, p. 1872; Noble, 2018, p. 71). The following chapters present the methodological framework and findings of this study, focusing on how young women perform the clean girl aesthetic on TikTok.

3. Method

This chapter outlines the research design, analytical framework, sampling strategy, ethical considerations, and operationalisation of key concepts used in this study. The research seeks to explore how young women on TikTok perform aesthetic labour through the clean girl aesthetic, a popular visual trend that blends minimalist styling, wellness, and beauty practices. Through a qualitative approach and thematic analysis, this study examines the visual, textual, and performative strategies that influencers employ to align with and reproduce this aesthetic on TikTok. The research design is shaped by the need to critically examine how online aesthetics intersect with race, class, and gender.

3.1 Description and Justification of the Method

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore how young women perform aesthetic labour through the clean girl aesthetic on TikTok. A qualitative approach is best suited for this topic because it allows for a nuanced, interpretive analysis of digital content that is shaped by social context and cultural meanings (Fossey et al., 2002, p. 717). As Fossey et al. (2002) explain, qualitative research is most appropriate for understanding lived experiences, symbolic practices, and how individuals construct social meaning (p. 719). In this study, the focus is on how female influencers construct and maintain their digital self-representation through visual, textual, performative elements within TikTok videos. As a highly visual and participatory platform, TikTok plays a central role in shaping these digital performances. Its algorithm amplifies certain bodies, trends, and aesthetics, which reinforces dominant norms and marginalises others (Zulli & Zulli, 2022, p. 1872; Noble, 2018, p. 71). A qualitative approach allows for a critical examination of how influencers navigate visibility, aspiration, and self-presentation within this system.

The chosen method of analysis is thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, p.79). This method allows for the identification and interpretation of patterns across qualitative data, which makes it useful for social media research. According to the authors, thematic analysis is flexible and can offer a “rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78). It functions as a useful tool when examining aesthetic labour and digital performance. Thematic analysis can facilitate a close reading of how influencers portray the clean girl aesthetic in their videos through styling, gestures, routines, and audio choices.

This research also incorporates an intersectional lens, drawing on Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality in order to explore how race, class, and gender inform who is visible and celebrated within the clean girl aesthetic. The aesthetic falls into a category of aesthetic labour that centres whiteness, thinness, heterosexuality, and socio-economic affluence. This raises important questions about platform inequality and cultural exclusion. A qualitative approach supports this analysis by allowing the researcher to examine how different influencers represent, resist, or adapt to these norms in their digital self-representation.

3.2 Sampling Strategy

This study employs a purposive sampling strategy to examine how young women perform aesthetic labour through the clean girl aesthetic on TikTok. Purposive sampling is a non-probability method used in qualitative research to identify information-rich cases that align with research objectives (Palinkas et al., 2015, p. 534). The goal is not simply to produce a representative dataset, but to capture a variety of performances on TikTok. These performances illustrate how the clean girl aesthetic is constructed and circulated on TikTok. Sampling was guided by the relevance to the aesthetic, diversity among creators, and feasibility for in-depth analysis.

The dataset consists of 52 publicly available TikTok videos created by female influencers. Videos were identified through the platform's search function, using hashtags either directly or closely related to the clean girl trend. These hashtags include: #CleanGirl, #CleanGirlAesthetic, #NoMakeupMakeup, and #ThatGirl. These hashtags offer a rich pool of relevant content. While #CleanGirl and #CleanGirlAesthetic directly reference the trend, #NoMakeupMakeup is a supporting subcategory that emphasises the effortless beauty look that is central to the clean girl aesthetic. As discussed in the previous chapter, #ThatGirl is highly similar to clean girl as it highlights wellness, beauty and skincare routines, effortless beauty and self-discipline. These hashtags were chosen for their ability to curate content that aligns with codes such as minimalist makeup, slicked-back hair, skincare routines, and wellness rituals.

This sampling approach ensures that the study captures a wide array of self-representations within the aesthetic. Including influencers with a variation in follower counts allows for the examination of differences between high-profile creators and micro-influencers, who may employ alternative strategies. High-profile influencers, often referred to as macro-influencers, usually have follower counts above 100,000 and a more diverse audience when compared to micro influencers

(Conde & Casais, 2023, p. 158). Contrastingly, micro-influencers are generally defined as having between 10,000 and 100,000 followers and usually foster a loyal following in one community or niche (Conde & Casais, 2023, p. 158). This distinction is important because content style, production quality, and self-representation can differ between audience sizes and influencer status. By sampling from both groups, the study can capture a broader range of performances related to aesthetic labour.

This sample was also curated with attention to intersectionality, aiming to include influencers from diverse backgrounds. This was essential for examining how race and class influence the performance of the clean girl aesthetic among young women. Although TikTok's algorithm tends to promote creators who align with Eurocentric standards of beauty (Noble, 2018, p. 71), this study manually selected creators of colour and individuals whose appearances challenge the norms of the aesthetic. This allowed for a more inclusive analysis of how aesthetic labour is performed across different identities.

Each selected video ranges from 10 seconds to 10 minutes, which is the maximum time duration allowed by the platform. These videos include a variety of content such as morning routines, skincare routines, “get ready with me” videos, and daily vlogs. These videos provide both visual and textual data for analysis. Including multimodal elements was important for capturing the full performance of self-representation within the trend.

3.3 Operationalisation

This study draws on three theoretical concepts to analyse how young women perform the clean girl aesthetic on TikTok. Aesthetic labour (Mears, 2014, p. 1340), digital self-representation (Marwick, 2015, p. 142; Duffy & Hund, p. 3), and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 139) are foundational to the analytical framework of the research and are therefore operationalised in the following subsections. Operationalisation refers to the process of translating theoretical concepts into observable and measurable elements. Translating these concepts to tools for analysis allowed for a clear and systematic approach to coding and interpretation.

3.3.1 Aesthetic Labour

Aesthetic labour is a concept originally developed in the context of the service industry. Warhurst and Nickson (2001) used the term to describe how workers are hired based on their ability to fit the “look” or “feel” of a company (p. 12). In the context of platform-based economies, Mears

(2014) applies this concept to the unpaid work people do to construct appearances that are both economically and culturally valuable (p. 1340). Aesthetic labour becomes a form of capital on TikTok, as influencers are able to align with the platform's beauty standards in order to boost their visibility and social status.

Aesthetic labour is operationalised by identifying content that reflects intentional efforts to construct and maintain a particular look or presence. For this study, this includes observable beauty routines, grooming practices, styling decisions, filters, and engagement with practices that align with the clean girl aesthetic. Content that emphasises wellness routines, organisation, or appearance management is also included, as they reflect the broader discussions of post feminism and self-surveillance (Elias & Gill, 2017, p. 59).

3.3.2 Digital Self-Representation

Digital self-representation refers to how individuals construct, manage, and communicate their identity on digital media platforms. On video-based platforms like TikTok, this involves both the conscious and unconscious choices in visual, textual, and performative elements that form an online persona (Marwick, 2015, p. 142). For influencers, this persona is often curated to show coherence across their content, establish relatability for viewers, and remain visible within an algorithm-driven platform (Duffy & Hund, 2015, p. 3).

In this study, digital self-representation is operationalised by identifying how young female influencers use visual presentation, text, captions, hashtags, and performative gestures to curate their persona. Some indicators include consistent stylistic choices, the use of specific language, and recurring content formats like tutorials or “get ready with me” videos. These practices contribute to the formation of online identities that reflect aesthetic trends, audience expectations, and attempts at platform visibility.

3.3.3 Intersectionality

As introduced by Crenshaw (1998), the concept of intersectionality describes the interconnectedness of social categories such as race, class, gender, and sexuality (p. 139). These intersecting identities influence how individuals experience privilege and oppression. The clean girl aesthetic is based in feminine beauty standards that are often associated with whiteness and affluence, shaping who is most celebrated within the trend (Monier & Mears, 2024, p. 3). By

examining the racial and class aspects of aesthetic labour, this study explores how influencers from different backgrounds navigate the clean girl trend on TikTok.

Intersectionality is operationalised through the comparison of influencers visible identity makers, such as racial appearance and body type. Factors like the setting of the video or product references are used to identify codes associated with socio-economic status. This allows for the analysis of how aesthetic labour within the clean girl aesthetic is shaped by access to material resources and consumerist goods. Videos are also analysed to examine whether creators of marginalised identities perform the trend differently.

Additionally, the study observes patterns in engagement metrics and visibility across creators with different intersectional identities. This is guided by existing scholarship on algorithmic bias and platform inequality (Noble, 2018, p. 71). These comparative insights support and intersectional reading of who is amplified and celebrated within the clean girl trend.

3.4 Data Analysis

3.4.1 Thematic Analysis

In order to explore how young women on TikTok perform aesthetic labour through the clean girl aesthetic, this study uses thematic analysis as its core method of data analysis. Outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a flexible and systematic approach for identifying and interpreting recurring patterns and meaning across a qualitative dataset (p. 79). This method of data analysis is well-suited for digital media research, where content is multimodal and often performative.

Braun and Clarke (2006) propose six distinct phases for conducting thematic analysis (p. p. 87). The first step is familiarisation with the data, wherein the researcher immerses themselves in the dataset by repeatedly reading, watching or listening to the material while taking detailed notes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). In this research, familiarisation involves watching each TikTok video multiple times and paying close attention to visuals, text, sounds, and transitions. It also means documenting observations about aesthetic labour, routines, and stylistic choices. The second phase of thematic analysis is generating initial codes, which involves identifying and labelling key features of the data that appear relevant to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). This means initially coding both visual and textual elements of the videos, such as recurring phrases and visual markers of the clean girl aesthetic. Next is searching for themes, a phase in which the researcher

organises the codes into potential themes by identifying broader patterns of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 89). The fourth phase is reviewing themes, which involves evaluating the initial themes by deciding if they form coherent patterns and represent the dataset well (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 89). At this stage, the researcher reviews each theme against the original TikTok videos to ensure consistency and clarity. They also determine whether any themes need to be merged, separated, or discarded. The fifth step is defining and naming the themes. In this phase, the researcher clearly defines the focus of each theme and determines how each theme relates to the overall research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 92). For this step of the study, themes are named in a way that reflects both the cultural significance and aesthetic qualities of the clean girl trend. The final phase of thematic analysis is producing the report. This involves weaving the themes together into a coherent narrative that answers the research questions and engages with the literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 92). The findings chapter of this thesis uses examples from the TikTok dataset to illustrate each theme, connecting the analyses to the broader discussions around aesthetic labour, visibility, and intersectional beauty norms. By applying the six-phases of thematic analysis, the researcher traces how aesthetic labour is communicated within the clean girl trend.

3.4.2 Coding Strategy

A manual coding strategy is used in this study to identify and organise recurring patterns within the dataset. Rather than using data analysis software, the researcher engaged deeply with the data by watching and annotating each video. Detailed notes were kept in a digital coding document. Manual coding allowed for close engagement with data, which is necessary due to the multimodal nature of TikTok videos. This approach is supported by Basit (2003), who argues that manual coding in qualitative research allows the researcher to be attuned to emerging meanings and contradictions in the data (p. 144).

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are essential in academic research, particularly when working with digital media that is informed by identity, visibility, and self-representation. This study uses videos from TikTok, which is a publicly accessible platform where videos are meant to be seen and shared by audiences. According to Moreno et al. (2013), content shared on social media platforms can ethically be observed and studied without informed consent (p. 709). This is particularly relevant when the research does not involve direct interaction with the users who posted the content.

Following this line of understanding, the videos included in the dataset were posted to public accounts, using trend-based hashtags, and are intended for circulation within the platform.

However, Franzke et al. (2020) argue that ethical digital research should also consider how users perceive the visibility and intended audience of their content (p. 70). This concept of perceived privacy suggests that even publicly shared videos may carry implicit expectations of boundaries from those posting the content (Franzke et al., 2020, p. 70). Although the users may expect engagement from other TikTok users, they might not anticipate their content being used in academic research.

To address these concerns, this study handles and presents TikTok content in an ethical manner. To protect creators' identities and respect their right to privacy, no usernames or account names are included in the research. Additionally, direct quotes from captions and text are paraphrased to avoid identifying the creators through the search function. This approach ensures that the focus remains on patterns and themes, rather than critiquing individual creators.

3.6 Research Credibility

Another crucial component of qualitative research is credibility. Rather than aiming for replicability or objective truth, qualitative researchers prioritise findings that are trustworthy, consistent, plausible, and well-supported by data (Tracy, 2010, p. 842). This section details how reliability and validity are ensured in this study through transparency, consistency, and careful engagement with the dataset.

One key component of credibility in research is reliability, which refers to the consistency and coherence of the research process (Silverman, 2011, p. 360). The researcher adopts a structured approach to the analysis to ensure reliability, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase method (p. 87). This framework provides a repeatable process for coding data, developing themes, and interpretation, which are all essential for producing reliable results (Silverman, 2011, p. 360). To ensure consistency, a digital codebook is created during the coding phase. Following what Silverman (2011) refers to as 'analytic reliability' (p. 37), this codebook includes clearly defined codes and examples from the data. To further increase reliability, the researcher keeps analytic memos throughout the process. These memos document initial impressions and decisions about why particular themes are developed. This creates a transparent record of the analytic process (Tracy, 2010, p. 843).

Validity is another key component of credibility in research. In qualitative research, validity is grounded in detailed engagement with the data and reflects the lived realities and practices of the community being studied (Tracy, 2010, p. 842). In this study, validity is supported through the use of thick description, which refers to rich, detailed accounts that explicate cultural meanings (Tracy, 2010, p. 843). The researcher analyses both visual and textual elements, paying close attention to gestures, statements, routines, captions, hashtags, and editing styles. Thick description ensures that interpretations are not simply surface-level or generalised but grounded in the context of a video. This allows for a nuanced interpretation of how the clean girl aesthetic is performed on TikTok.

3.7 Reflexivity

Reflexivity is a celebrated practice in qualitative research, as it requires the researcher to be honest about their strengths and shortcomings (Tracy, 2010, p. 842). As Tracy (2010) emphasises, sincere and credible research must account for the researcher's biases and how they shaped the research (p. 841). As a young woman and active social media user, I am demographically and culturally aligned with many of the influencers whose content is analysed in this study. Being familiar with TikTok's platform dynamics and aesthetic trends, my cultural proximity offers valuable insight into how the clean girl aesthetic operates. I am therefore able to identify subtle cues, like humour or subcultural references, that might be missed by an outsider of the space.

However, this cultural proximity presents potential risks for bias and over-identification with the content. There is a possibility of making assumptions about meaning based on personal familiarity rather than true, empirical observation. To mitigate this, I approached the dataset with a commitment to reflexive practice and theoretical grounding. Throughout the process, I kept memos to document interpretations, meanwhile reflecting on how my personal background may be shaping the themes I identified. Additionally, all final interpretations were grounded in theoretical frameworks, such as aesthetic labour (Mears, 2014, p. 1330), postfeminist self-surveillance (Gill, 2007, p. 261), and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1998, 139). This ensured that the analysis was critical and anchored in academic literature, rather than overly shaped by personal perspective.

As a white, Western woman, I also remained attentive to how my social position may influence my interpretations of race, class, and beauty norms within the clean girl aesthetic. Aesthetic trends, such as clean girl, have been critiqued in academic research for reinforcing white, upper-class standards of femininity (Henriques & Patnaik, 2020, p. 2). Recognising this, the analysis was

conducted with care to avoid universalising these standards or overlooking marginalised perspectives.

4. Results and Discussion

This chapter presents the findings of the study, which explored how young women perform aesthetic labour through the clean girl aesthetic on TikTok. The analysis was guided by the following research question: *How do young women on TikTok perform aesthetic labour through the “clean girl” aesthetic?* Additionally, the following two questions supported this inquiry for a more nuanced approach:

1. What does the performance of the “clean girl” aesthetic reveal about identity construction on TikTok?
2. In what ways do class, race, and gender shape access to the “clean girl” aesthetic?

The findings are derived from a thematic analysis of 52 TikTok videos created by female influencers. Selected through a purposive sampling strategy, these videos were analysed manually using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase method (p. 79). Codes were developed based on observable elements like beauty routines, gestures, captions, production choices, and broader cultural references. These codes were then organised into key themes and subthemes that reflect recurring patterns across the dataset. The following chapter is structured around four overarching themes that emerged from the data:

1. Performing Effortlessness,
2. Consumerism and Aesthetic Labour,
3. Norms and Exclusion, and
4. Platform-Specific Self-Representation

Each section discusses the themes and their subthemes, supported by examples drawn from the dataset. Identifying information, including usernames and screen names, are hidden to protect the creator's privacy. Where possible, the findings are contextualised through visual, textual, and performative elements of the videos. The themes offer insight into the strategic performances of beauty, discipline, and aspiration that make up the clean girl aesthetic on TikTok. Additionally, they shed light on how platform dynamics, economic structures, and intersectional inequalities shape digital self-representation within the trend.

Table 1*Themes and Sub-Themes*

Performing Effortlessness	Consumerism and Aesthetic	Norms and Exclusion	Platform-Specific Self-Representation
Cleanliness as Performance	Product-Based Labour	Racialised Aesthetic Norms	Platform Visibility Tactics
The Illusion of Effortlessness	Commercialised Clean Girl	Normative Femininity	Digital Identity Curation
Disciplined Femininity	Status Through Consumption	Class Participation	

4.1 Performing Effortlessness

Performing Effortlessness is the first theme that emerged, exploring how young women on TikTok construct an image of cleanliness, ease, and self-discipline as part of the clean girl aesthetic. The videos in the dataset promote an ideal of natural beauty, while often concealing the intensive grooming and preparation that is required to achieve the clean girl look. Across the dataset, this theme was consistently expressed through visual cues such as glowing skin, minimalist styling, tidy environments, and calm gestures, which together project an image of being “put together” without apparent labour. This curated performance aligns with what Mears (2014) describes as aesthetic labour, which refers to the work individuals do to conform their appearance to culturally and economically valuable beauty standards (p. 1340). This concept is particularly relevant on TikTok and within influencer economies, as they are image-driven digital environments.

The projection of effortlessness among clean girl creators is not merely a style choice, but a strategy of self-representation that communicates composure, wellness, and femininity. Influencers in the dataset achieve this through carefully staged videos including skincare routines, “no-makeup” makeup looks, and clean girl morning routines that frame routine self-maintenance as effortless rituals.

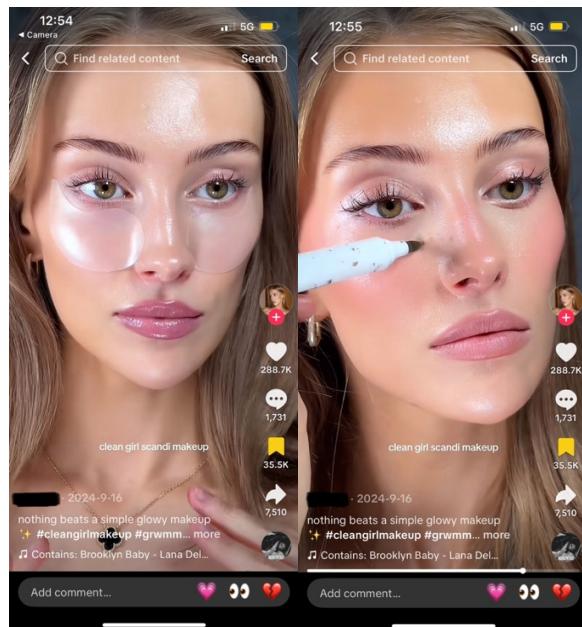
For example, one creator shares her clean girl makeup tutorial which she frames as “simple” in the caption (see Figure 1). The video opens with the creator wearing undereye masks and applying

skincare, yet she has already applied lipliner and lip gloss, undermining the idea of effortlessness. Her skin appears flawless and glowing, with long curled lashes and perfectly manicured eyebrows, accentuated by perfect, flattering lighting. Set to a slowed-down version of Lana Del Rey's sultry track "Brooklyn Baby," the video proceeds with her applying cream contour, ample pink blush, shimmering highlighter, eyeshadow, and fake freckles to emphasize "natural" beauty. Despite her polished look and apparent ease, the video uses rapid cuts and transitions to compress what is likely an extensive routine into a 28-second video. This editing technique masks the time, effort, and labour involved, reinforcing the performance of effortlessness that is central to the clean girl aesthetic.

Clean girl videos often depict calmness and the promotion of natural beauty to serve as markers of wellness and self-love. However, the creators tend to obscure or minimize the preparation, costs, and decisions behind the scenes. This phenomenon reflects what Gill (2007) refers to as postfeminist sensibility, wherein self-surveillance and discipline are rebranded as self-love (p. 153). The theme of *Performing Effortlessness* reveals that the clean girl aesthetic is not simply a style, but a curated and disciplined performance of femininity. The following subthemes include *Cleanliness as Performance*, *The Illusion of Effortlessness*, and *Disciplined Femininity*. These subthemes show how the aesthetic is performed through visual markers, routines, and behaviours, while also exploring the hidden labour and gendered implications of the trend.

Figure 1

Example of Performing Effortlessness

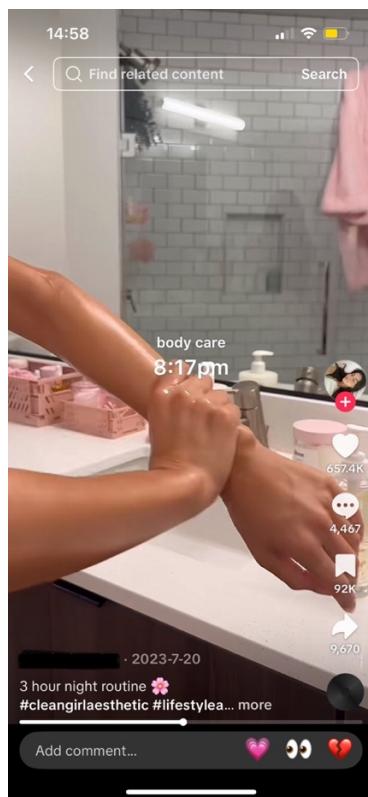


4.1.1 Cleanliness as Performance

The subtheme Cleanliness as Performance examines how the clean girl aesthetic equates looking clean with being feminine, desirable, and in control. While the term “clean” typically implies hygiene, the term “clean girl” refers to a specific self-representation and curated appearance. This can be seen in the TikTok videos through a set of visual cues that include glowing skin, silky hair, and an overall polished appearance and environment. The performance of cleanliness emerges through aesthetic choices that suggest minimalism, purity, and composure. Key examples from the data include videos where influencers display their “glowy skin,” “shower routines,” or “evening routines”. In one video, an influencer rubs lotion and body oil onto her tanned arms, presenting a seamless bodily appearance (see Figure 2). This aligns with aesthetic labour, where ones’ appearance is continually managed to fit into cultural norms (Mears, 2014, p. 1340).

Figure 2

Example of Cleanliness as Performance



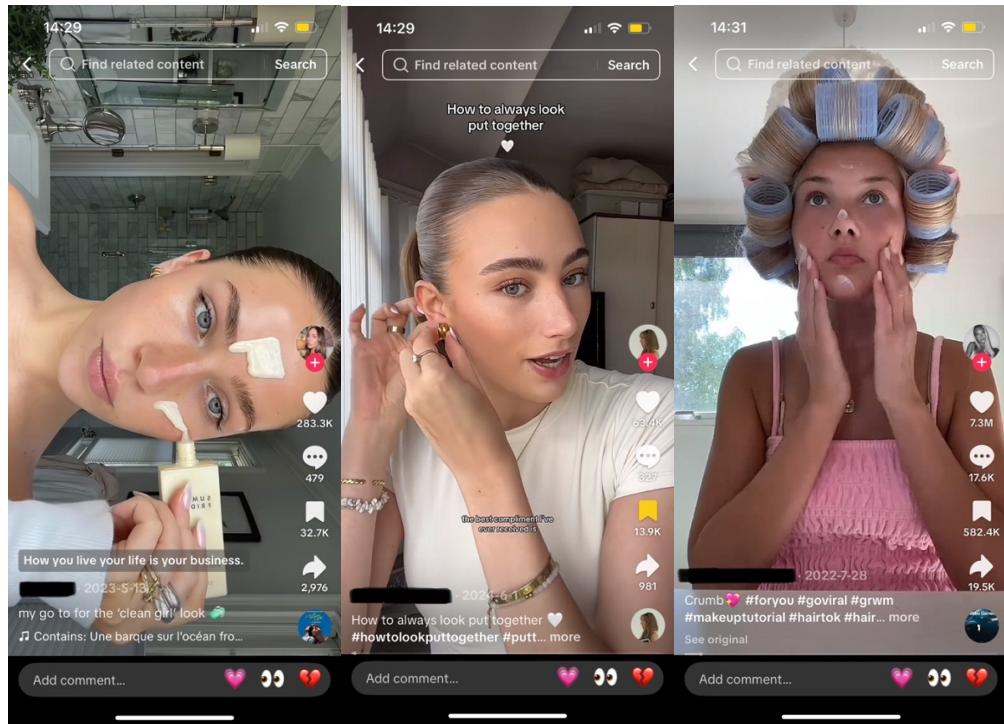
The ideal of cleanliness is communicated in several videos from the dataset. In one video, titled “how to: clean girl aesthetic,” a creator shares her tips for becoming a clean girl. She states, “*People say just take a shower and then you’ll be clean, but the clean girl aesthetic is about how you look*” (see Appendix B). This quote reveals that within the clean girl aesthetic, cleanliness not only refers to hygiene, but functions as a performance. Another creator reinforces the link between cleanliness and morality, saying “*It’s gross if you don’t have dental hygiene*” (see Appendix B). In both cases, looking clean is framed as not only desirable but as necessary. This is tied to the broader cultural associations between cleanliness, femininity, and moral virtue (O’Hagan, 2018, p. 777). These statements align with the historical narratives explored by Tiffin (2001, p. 44) and Berthold (2010, p. 12), who show that Western ideals of cleanliness have long been associated with classed and racialised notions of purity and virtue.

Across the dataset, the creators signal cleanliness through visual and performative elements. The *looking clean* code is consistently expressed through radiant skin, sleek hairstyles, dewy makeup, and matching loungewear sets, which creators consistently claim contribute to looking clean and put together. In many videos, the influencers film themselves in soft, natural lighting with a tidy background, which also aids the image of cleanliness. These videos do not depict incidental beauty and “put togetherness” but reflect Marwick’s (2015) idea that influencers consciously curate their self-presentation to please audiences and conform to dominant trends (p. 138).

Many of the videos in the dataset come in the form of routines, including morning and evening routines, skincare routines, and shower routines. Most of these videos include reference to or the documentation of grooming and hygiene tactics. In a “clean girl routine” video, one creator reveals her secrets for smooth skin, detailing her extensive grooming ritual that includes exfoliating, moisturizing, waxing, facemasks, and more. In multiple videos using the “get ready with me” format, creators talk to the audience while performing activities like washing their face, applying skincare or makeup products, putting on jewellery, and styling their hair (see Figure 3). While these beauty routines are intimate, they are performed publicly and intended for the eyes of an audience. The previously private rituals therefore become performative, mirroring Goffman’s (1959) metaphor of the “front stage” where individuals manage their behaviours to create a good impression for an audience (p. 112).

Figure 3

Examples of “Get Ready with Me” Videos



Overall, *Cleanliness as Performance* reveals that through performing the clean girl aesthetic, young women turn self-maintenance into a public performance of beauty and femininity. Looking clean is seen as an achievement, which has historical ties to hierarchies of gender, race, and class. Additionally, the emphasis on looking clean serves as a symbol of worthiness, femininity, and social legitimacy.

4.1.2 The Illusion of Effortlessness

The clean girl aesthetic is centred on projecting an image of effortlessness and polish, with creators consistently referencing minimalist beauty and looking “put together.” Across the dataset, influencers used visual cues such as “no-makeup” makeup, matching loungewear sets, slicked-back hair, and dewy skin (see Figure 4). These visual cues are used to construct a stylised version of femininity that appears effortless but is actually highly coordinated. This aligns with Monier and Mears’ (2024) observation that femininity has long been defined by the ideals of natural beauty and composure (p. 8). However, this form of self-presentation is contrasted by the extensive labour behind it that includes grooming, styling, and cosmetic procedures. While the clean girl look is

positioned by influencers as low-maintenance and natural, the effort required to achieve it often strategically hidden.

Several creators featured in the dataset exemplify this contradiction through the *hidden labour* code. In one “get ready with me” video, the influencer emphasises the importance of using minimal makeup for a natural look. She notes, “*I’ve been really into the clean girl look lately, so I’ve changed up my makeup to be more simple and lowkey*” (see Appendix B), highlighting her shift to an effortless approach to beauty. However, the creator appears visibly tanned with orange-coloured hands, suggesting the use of fake tanning products. Additionally, her hair is dyed blonde, and she noticeably wears eyelash extensions (see Figure 5). Another creator films herself in a “clean girl routine”, where she uses bronzing drops, shows her manicured nails, and wears eyelash extensions (see Figure 5). Regarding the bronzing drops she notes, “*I just feel like I look better when I look tan. It also just gives you the most natural glow, which is necessary for the clean girl look*” (see Appendix B).

Figure 4

Examples of “Clean Girl” Styling

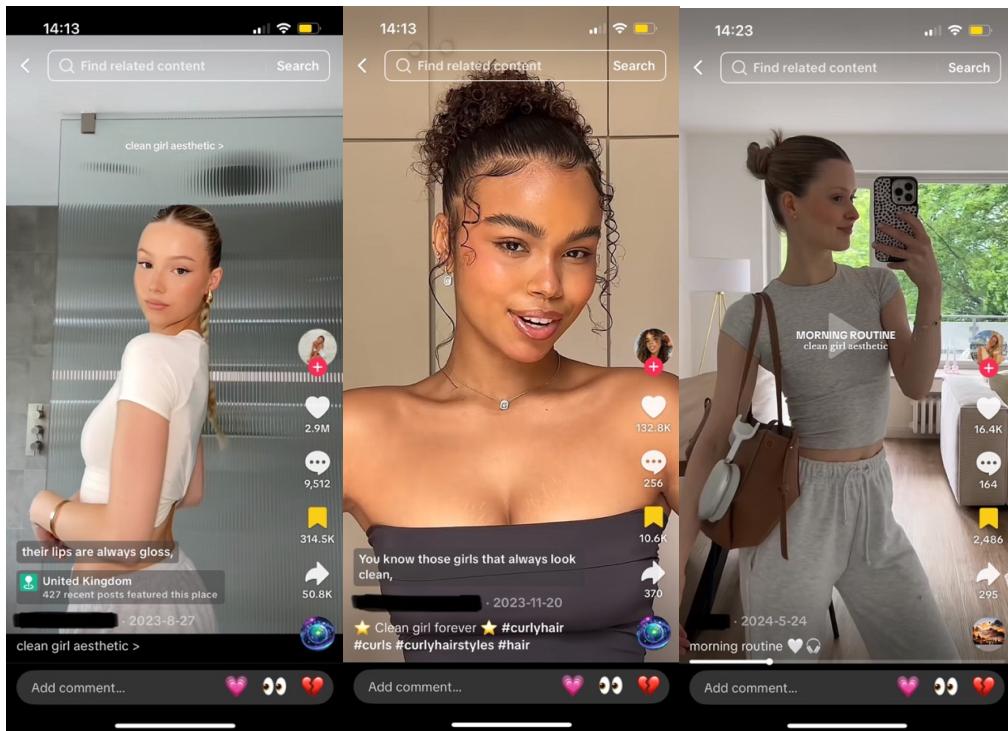
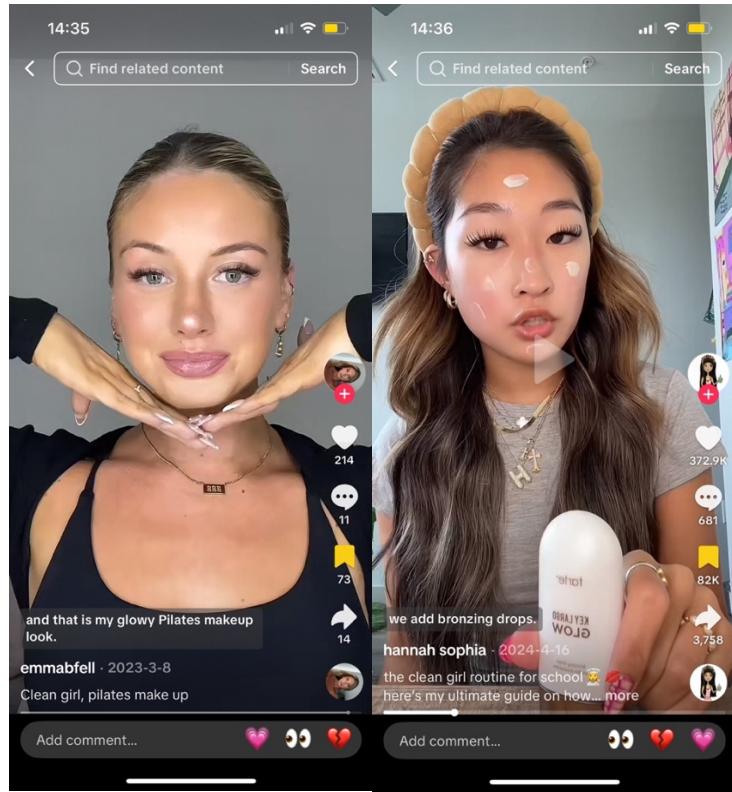


Figure 5

Examples of Hidden Labour Code



While these products and procedures contribute to the aesthetic of natural beauty, they contradict the idea of effortlessness that is central to the clean girl. These moments highlight Goffman's (1959) idea of "backstage" performances, which refers to the labour that is done in private to produce a positive "front stage" impression (p. 112). The result is an aesthetic that appears effortless but is made possible through concealed work and planning.

4.1.3 Disciplined Femininity

This subtheme explores the recurring motif of discipline in how the clean girl aesthetic is performed. The aesthetic promotes a version of womanhood defined by discipline, structure, and self-improvement. This is reflected throughout the dataset, as young women document routines involving skincare, fitness, journalling, and healthy eating (see Figure 6). The theme of discipline also appears as creators highlight the importance of looking polished and put together within the clean girl aesthetic. These practices are often framed as self-care or confidence-boosting habits, yet

they reflect deeper cultural messages about how femininity should be performed. This aligns with what Gill (2007) describes as postfeminist sensibility, where self-discipline and self-surveillance are rebranded as empowerment and choice (p. 261).

Multiple creators share “morning routine” videos in which they wake up early, make their beds, work out, and prepare matcha or fruit smoothies. One creator shares a “morning in my life” video, structured around time-stamped clips that document her carefully curated morning routine (see Figure 7). The video begins at 6:45, as she stretches and opens her curtains, letting in soft, natural light that illuminates her minimalist, neutral-toned home. She prepares her “morning green juice” before sitting down with a neatly organised agenda to plan her day. Her to-do list includes: “wake up,” “film YouTube video,” and “edit YouTube video.” By 9:00, she makes a brown sugar latte and a small breakfast consisting of one mandarin and five small French toast sticks, arranged neatly in a white bowl. She then makes her bed and changes into workout clothes for a session in her home gym. At 11:45, she showers and begins a seven-step skincare routine, which includes a red-light therapy mask which is intended for anti-aging. The video concludes at noon, when she self-tans and gets dressed for the day.

Figure 6

Examples of Disciplined Femininity

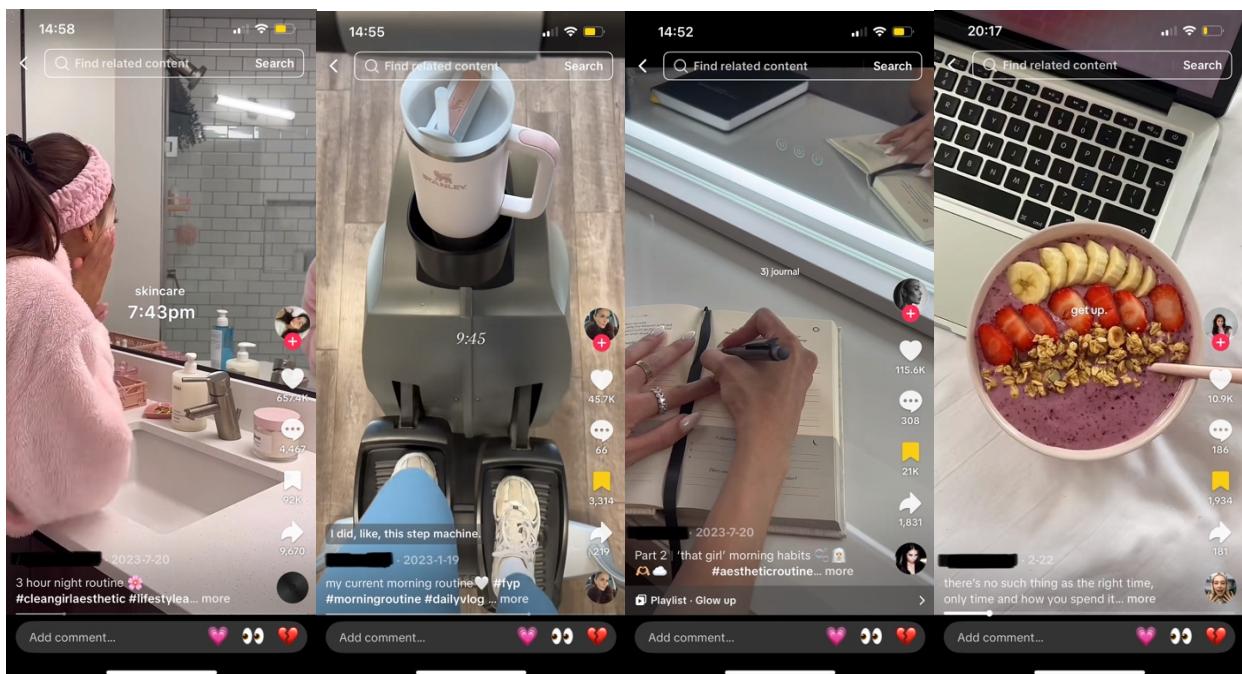
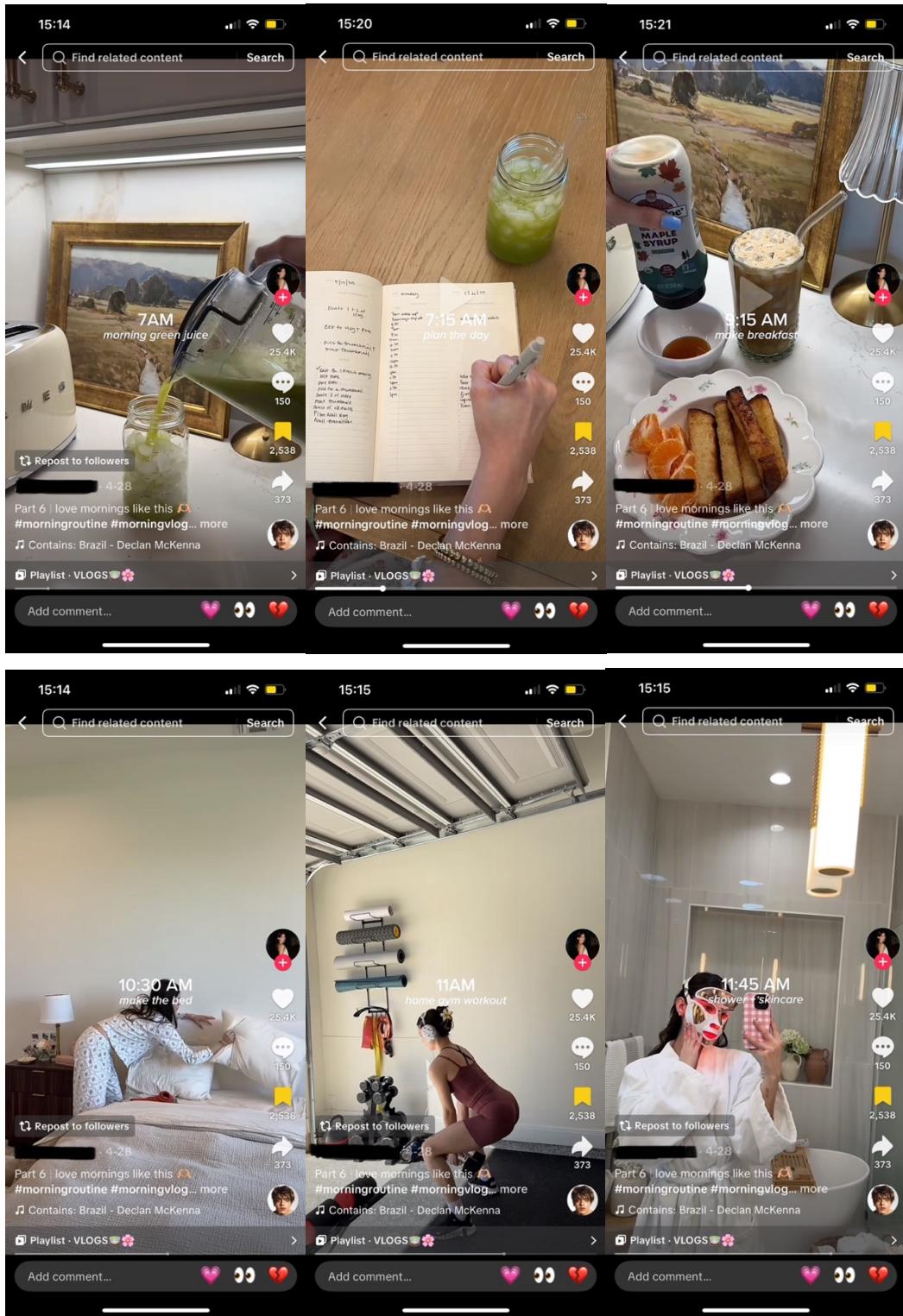


Figure 7

Example of “Morning Routine” Video



These routine videos are stylised to appear aesthetic and subliminally project moral superiority. This is because the version of femininity being promoted is defined by consistency, restraint, and self-improvement. As Gill (2007) argues, postfeminist discourse highlights the idea that women must constantly work on themselves and strive for self-improvement (p. 271). Influencers in the TikTok videos appear to use discipline to legitimise their success and beauty. Disciplined femininity therefore functions as a performance of order, restraint, and worthiness.

In one “clean girl routine” video, a creator films herself getting ready before going to school. She remarks, “*I feel like I get more stuff done when I look put together,*” (see Appendix B) implying that beauty and productivity are intertwined. In another video using the “get ready with me” format, a young woman states, “*Don’t forget to use sunscreen because we have to look hot long-term.*” This quote subtly links health practices with long-term aesthetic goals. These performances of femininity align with McRobbie’s (2015) concept of “the perfect,” where young women are expected to monitor every aspect of their lives from their appearance to their productivity (p. 10). It also reflects Elias et al.’s (2017) view that femininity today is shaped by postfeminist self-regulation, where women internalise cultural expectations and view constant self-management as a form of empowerment (p. 94). The clean girl aesthetic presents self-discipline as an attractive trait that enhances one’s beauty and lifestyle.

Overall, the theme of *Performing Effortlessness* reveals that the clean girl aesthetic is a performance of feminine discipline, composure, and wellness, designed to appear natural and effortless. Beneath the illusion of effortlessness there is a significant amount of aesthetic labour and self-regulation which is often concealed. This theme also highlights how the clean girl aesthetic is shaped by practices that align with postfeminist and neoliberal ideals of beauty (Gill, 2007, p. 261).

4.2 Consumerism and Aesthetic Labour

The second theme explores how the clean girl aesthetic is constructed through the use and display of products, revealing the central role of consumption in performing aesthetic labour. While the clean girl aesthetic is marked visually by minimalism and effortlessness, it heavily involves routines that rely on specific beauty, wellness, and lifestyle products. From skincare products to matching loungewear sets, the creators in the dataset consistently position commodities as essential in achieving the clean girl look.

Consumerist values are deeply intertwined with the performance of the aesthetic. Influencers showcase products not only as tools for beauty and self-care but also as extensions of their personal identity. These displays reflect Bourdieu and Wacquant's (2013) concept of symbolic capital, in which taste and social value are signalled through the possession of objects (p. 292). As Duffy and Hund (2015) explain, influencer branding often blurs the line between authenticity and product promotion (p. 3). The authors also argue that due to the culture of postfeminist sensibilities, women are encouraged to "work through and for consumption" (Duffy & Hund, 2015, p. 2). The clean girl aesthetic operates under these concepts, as it depends on consumption and access.

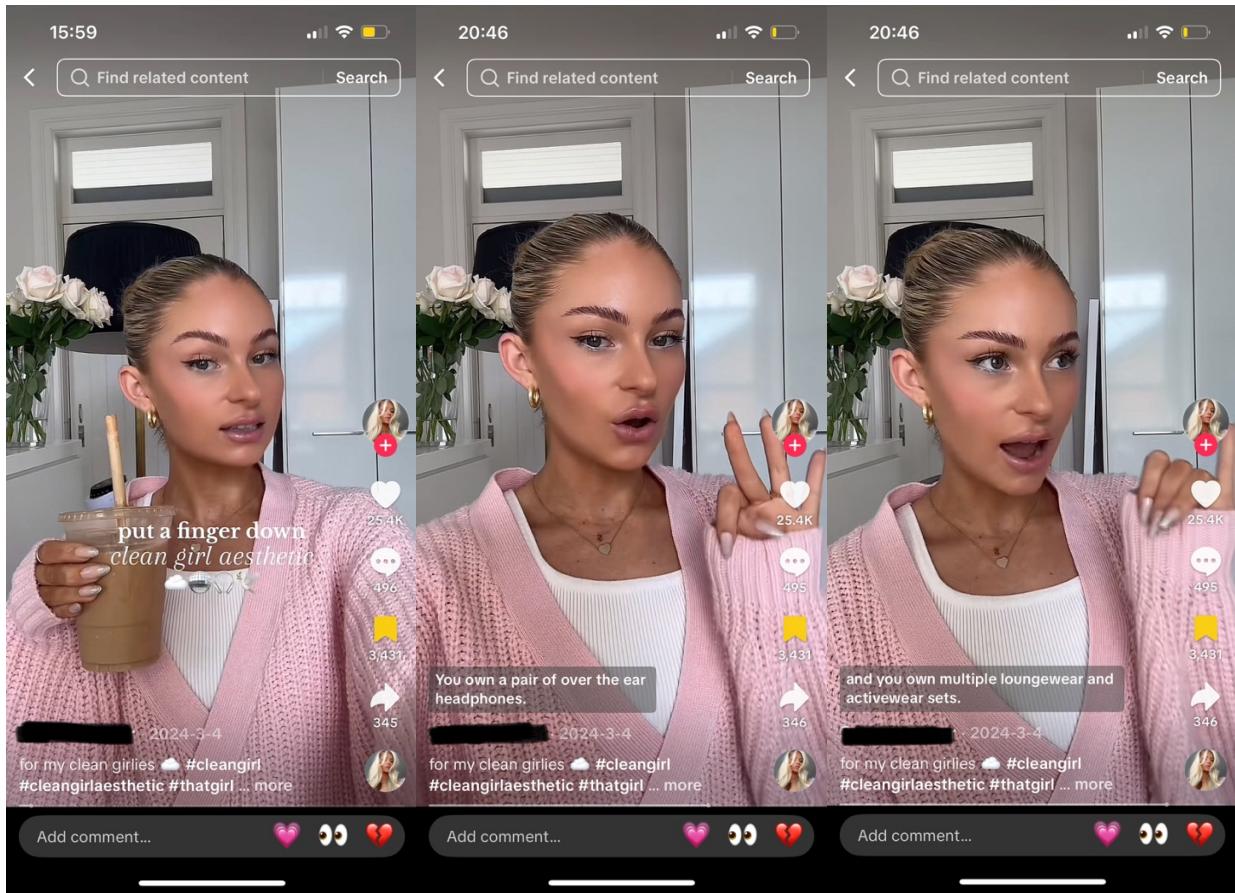
This theme contributes to answering the main research question by showing how aesthetic labour is performed through consumption practices. It also informs the second sub-question by demonstrating how class shapes participation in the aesthetic, as achieving the look often requires the purchasing of expensive products. The three subthemes that follow include *Product-Based Labour*, *Commercialised Clean Girl*, and *Status Through Consumption*. Each of these subthemes examine different aspects how consumption shapes the performance of the clean girl aesthetic.

4.2.1 *Product-Based Labour*

This subtheme explores how the clean girl aesthetic is built through consumption, with products functioning as essential tools for performing aesthetic labour. While the aesthetic is associated with simplicity and natural beauty, achieving the look depends on access to specific commodities. Influencers in the dataset frequently recommend skincare, makeup, jewellery, clothing, and even perfumes, highlighting that these products contribute to achieving the clean girl aesthetic. It is insinuated that the use of these products communicates both taste and dedication to beauty and wellness. In one "Put a Finger Down: Clean Girl Aesthetic" video, a creator invites viewers to test how "clean girl" they are based on how many products and accessories they have (see Figure 8). The categories include things like owning dainty gold jewellery, multiple matching loungewear sets, and over-the-ear headphones. These items function as visual signifiers of belonging to the aesthetic, with the implication that the more one possesses, the more they embody the clean girl.

Figure 8

Example of Product-Based Labour in “Put a Finger Down: Clean Girl Aesthetic” Video



Other videos use a tutorial format, such as “How to be a Clean Girl”, in which creators list the products necessary to achieve the look. These include lightweight makeup, hair slicking products, specific moisturisers and serums for glowing skin, minimalist wardrobe staples, and gold jewellery. In one of these videos, a creator showcases her jewellery before adding, “*real gold jewellery works a lot better because you never have to take anything off*” (see Figure 9 and Appendix A). The centrality of products in the aesthetic relates back to Bourdieu and Wacquant’s (2013) concept of symbolic capital, where value is assigned to objects based on their association with taste and status (p. 292). Owning the “right” products that indicate minimalist luxury allows young women to signal a certain aspirational identity. Their consumption choices become a means of performing femininity that aligns with dominant ideals of beauty and taste.

Figure 9

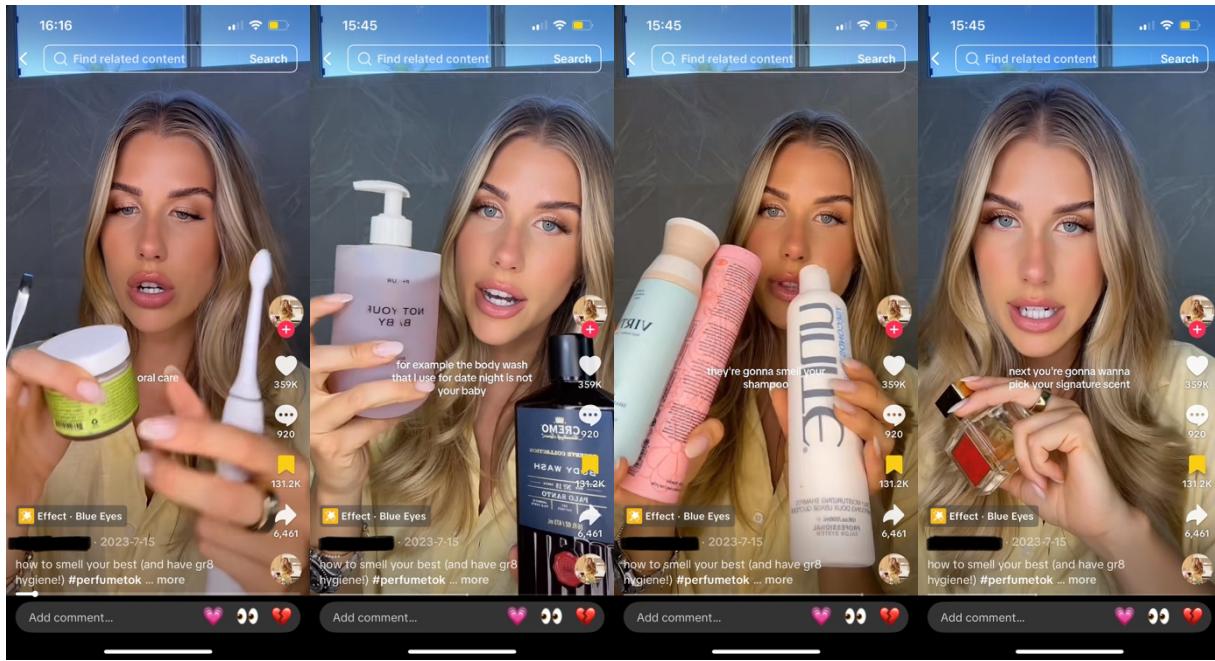
Example of Product-Based Labour in “How to be a Clean Girl” Video



In one video titled “How to Smell Your Best”, a creator details the extensive products she uses and steps she takes to smell good. This includes oral hygiene products like a tongue scraper and an electric toothbrush. She remarks, *“I don’t know who decided that normal toothbrushes were going to cut it, but they don’t. Use an electric toothbrush”* (see Appendix B). She also recommends specific products including body washes, scrubs, lotions, natural deodorant, shampoos, and body oil (see Figure 10). Additionally, the creator stresses that having a signature scent is a vital part of the clean girl aesthetic. She presents fragrance as both a marker of hygiene and a form of self-branding. This aligns with Duffy and Hund’s (2015) idea of postfeminist self-branding, where women in digital spaces curate their self-presentation through aesthetics and narratives of authenticity (p. 3). According to the authors, this form of self-branding involves blending lifestyle, taste, and appearance to project an image that is “simultaneously relatable and aspirational” (Duffy & Hund, 2015, p. 7). In this context, the creator’s emphasis on having a signature scent becomes a strategic performance of individuality and taste.

Figure 10

Example of Product-Based Labour Through Product Recommendations



In sum, this subtheme illustrates how aesthetic labour is deeply intertwined with consumption. Despite its association with simplicity and natural beauty, the aesthetic relies on products to signal cleanliness, femininity, and effortlessness. By positioning commodities as essential to the clean girl identity, influencers reinforce that the aesthetic is shaped by access and consumption.

4.2.2 Commercialised Clean Girl

This subtheme explores how creators not only construct the clean girl aesthetic through consumption but also actively monetise it by directing viewers to product links and personal storefronts. As Abidin (2016) argues, influencers build an online persona that is both charismatic and intimate to establish trust and familiarity with their audience (p. 15). This bond between the creator and audience helps facilitate commercial exchange (Abidin, 2016, p. 15). In many of the TikTok videos, creators seamlessly integrate product placements into their content. For example, one influencer concludes her skincare routine by saying, *“Everything I used is in my TikTok shop,”* while another notes, *“It’s all linked in my Amazon storefront”* (see Appendix B). These moments reflect a shift from personal sharing to strategic selling, where every day routines become opportunities for monetisation.

This strategy aligns with what Duffy and Hund (2015) define as entrepreneurial femininity, an ideal that encourages women to commodify their appearance and lifestyle (p. 4). This is due to the post-feminist narrative that frames independence and self-optimisation as a form of empowerment (Duffy & Hund, 2015, p. 4). Within this framework, emotional labour, aesthetic labour, and commercial activity are closely linked. Product recommendations are presented as authentic advice or personal preference, but they also function as commercial transactions that benefit the creators. In this way, the clean girl aesthetic serves as both a visual identity and a strategy for generating profit.

Ultimately, this subtheme reveals how platform economies incentivise the commercialisation of aesthetic trends, with influencers transforming their beauty routines into opportunities for financial gain. While the clean girl aesthetic is defined by minimalism and self-care, it is also shaped by capitalism.

4.2.3 Status Through Consumption

This subtheme explores how the clean girl aesthetic operates as a means of garnering social capital. Many creators across the dataset express pride in being perceived as “clean,” “put together”, or “soft,” suggesting that compliments about their appearance are an important source of validation. In one “get ready with me video” a creator states, *“My favourite compliment is that I always look clean”* (see Appendix B), which is a sentiment echoed by multiple creators in the dataset. In another video using the “get ready with me” format, a creator proudly shares, *“Everyone says my skin is so soft, I swear I get it every week”* (see Appendix B). These statements suggest that their aesthetic labour is motivated, in part, by the promise of admiration and social recognition. This aligns with Bourdieu’s (1984) notion of distinction, in which taste and consumption habits are used to signify status and cultural capital (p. 297). In the case of the clean girl aesthetic, taste is demonstrated through the consumption of matching neutral-toned workout sets, skincare products, dainty gold jewellery, among other things.

Elias and Gill (2017) argue that in contemporary digital culture, women’s bodies and self-presentation are sources of value that can be enhanced through aesthetic labour (p. 70). Within this framework, compliments and attention become rewards for successfully performing a desirable form of femininity. In the clean girl aesthetic, this performance is tied to consumption practices. Looking “soft” or “put together” requires both discipline and access to particular beauty, wellness, and fashion products.

This subtheme reveals how the clean girl aesthetic is not only performed as a form of self-expression but also as a strategy for receiving validation and recognition. Compliments about cleanliness, softness, and put-togetherness are treated as signs of success. This reinforces the idea the femininity and social value are earned through aesthetic labour. The products that help construct the aesthetic also serve as markers of distinction.

In sum, this theme demonstrates that the clean girl aesthetic is performed through a constant cycle of consumption. The creators in the dataset illustrate that their aesthetic labour is heavily tied to commodities, as products function as tools for beauty, identity, and distinction. Ultimately, the aesthetic reinforces class hierarchies, as the aesthetic is contingent on economic means.

4.3 Norms and Exclusion

Although the clean girl aesthetic is presented as attainable by the creators in the dataset, the trend reveals a narrow set of beauty ideals. The most visible creators in the trend are thin, white, blonde, Western, and appear to belong to affluent social classes. This pattern underscores how the clean girl aesthetic privileges certain beauty norms while marginalising others. As discussed by Noble (2018), TikTok's algorithm tends to amplify inequalities by spotlighting creators who align with Eurocentric beauty standards (p. 71). Meanwhile, creators who diverge from these norms often express notions of exclusion.

This theme draws on Crenshaw's (1989, p. 139) concept of intersectionality to critically examine how race, class, and gender shape who is included or excluded within the aesthetic. While the trend is portrayed as "natural," "minimal," and empowering, it reinforces longstanding hierarchies of Western beauty and social value by setting standards for what is considered clean, desirable, and feminine. The analysis in this section contributes to answering both the main research question and sub-question two. By examining who is represented, which norms are upheld, and what forms of femininity are excluded, this theme reveals how aesthetic labour on TikTok is shaped by structural inequalities. The following subthemes, including *Racialised Aesthetic Norms*, *Normative Femininity*, and *Classed Participation*, unpack how the clean girl aesthetic reinforces dominant ideals while marginalising alternative identities.

4.3.1 Racialised Aesthetic Norms

This subtheme explores how the clean girl aesthetic reinforces racialised beauty standards and marginalises certain identities. Among the popular videos in the dataset, the majority of creators are thin, white, Western, and affluent. Many of them have blonde, straight hair and other Eurocentric features. This visual uniformity reflects and reinforces dominant Western beauty norms that position whiteness as the ideal. Under `#cleangirl`, and related hashtags, it took considerable scrolling and effort to find creators of colour, plus size creators, and individuals who deviated from the dominant norms. This indicates that exclusion is embedded in the algorithmic visibility on TikTok. According to Noble (2018), TikTok's algorithm tends to amplify inequalities, often spotlighting creators who align with Eurocentric beauty standards (p. 71). The lack of racial and cultural diversity in the aesthetic reflects Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality, which refers to the ways that race, gender, and other identity categories intersect to produce marginalisation (p. 139).

This dynamic becomes visible in the code *Cultural Distancing*. Most clean girl videos include no reference to ethnic, cultural, or non-Western identity markers. However, one South Asian creator in the dataset directly confronts this (see Figure 11). In her “get ready with me” video, she applies makeup and dresses in traditional Indian clothing, wearing a bindi. The video is paired with the audio clip: “The clean girl aesthetic should be called, ‘I bullied women of colour for this look and then copy-pasted it on a white girl and called it a trendy aesthetic’.” Her caption reads, “Been seeing a lot of other WOC creators speaking about this issue and I think it’s super important to realize the ways in which POC are marginalized even in beauty trends.” This critique highlights the Black and Brown cultural origins of popular beauty practices including things like slicked-back hair and hoop earrings. These origins are often erased once the practices are adopted by white influencers and reframed as “elevated” or “minimalist.”

In addition to cultural erasure, several creators in the dataset express feelings of exclusion, reflected in the code *Excluded Norms*. An Asian American creator films a “get ready with me” video and states, “*can anyone please tell me what I’m doing wrong and not getting the clean girl look I want?*” (see Appendix B). The caption of her video reads, “*sorry I’m always trying to do a clean girl look nowadays to fit in.*” This suggests a desire to be accepted into the trend despite it not naturally aligning with her features or style. A white woman with curly hair remarks, “*You know what pisses me off? The fact that I feel like my natural hair doesn’t fit into the clean girl aesthetic*” (see Appendix B), revealing that straight hair is not only preferred but considered an essential trait in the

aesthetic. In another video, a Black woman confronts the intersection of the clean girl aesthetic and body norms (see Figure 12). She captions her “clean girl routine” video with, “You think I thought I couldn’t do this trend because I’m fat?” These examples highlight how non-Eurocentric features are often excluded from the trend.

Figure 11

Creator Critiques Cultural Distancing in the Clean Girl Aesthetic

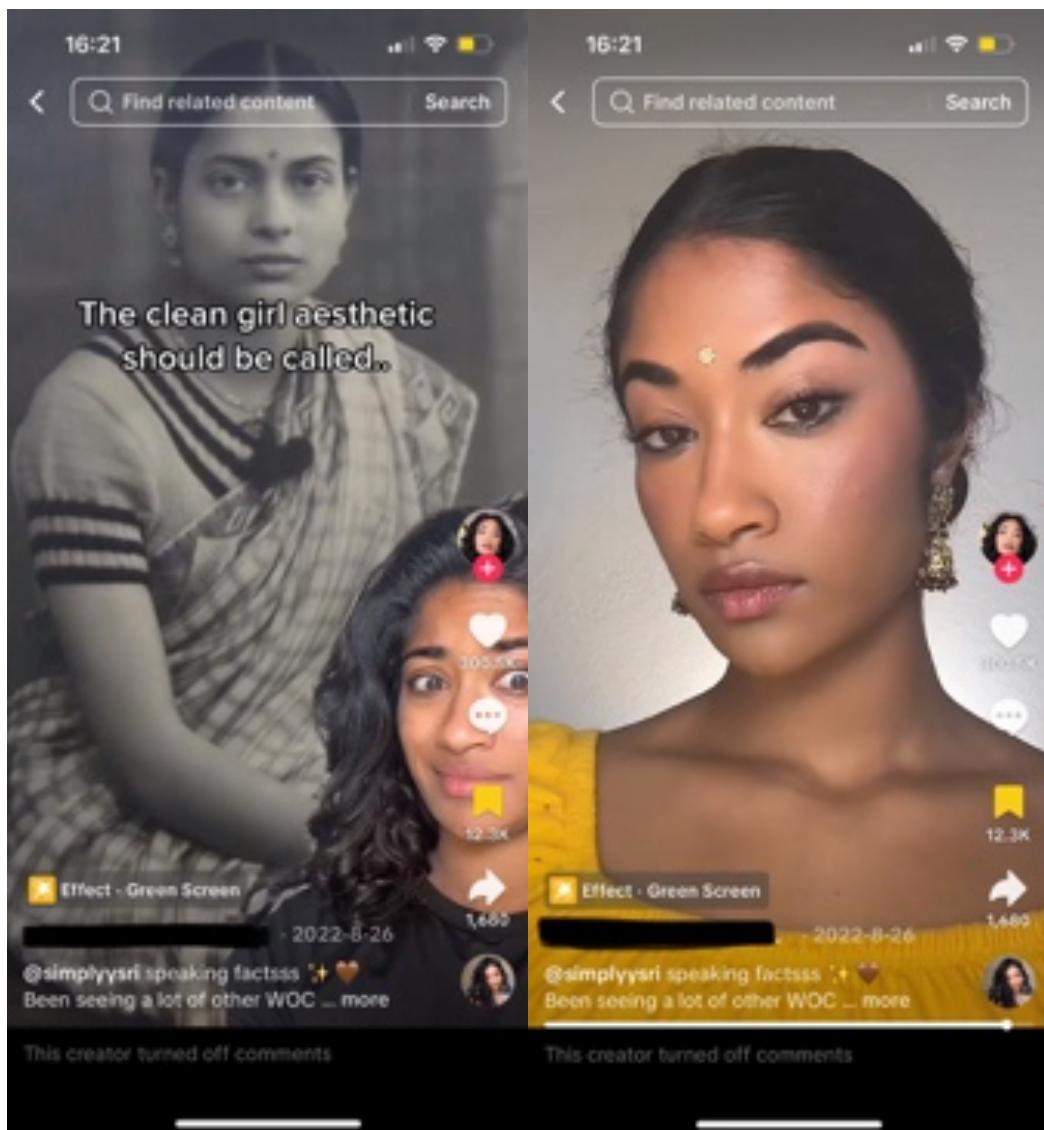
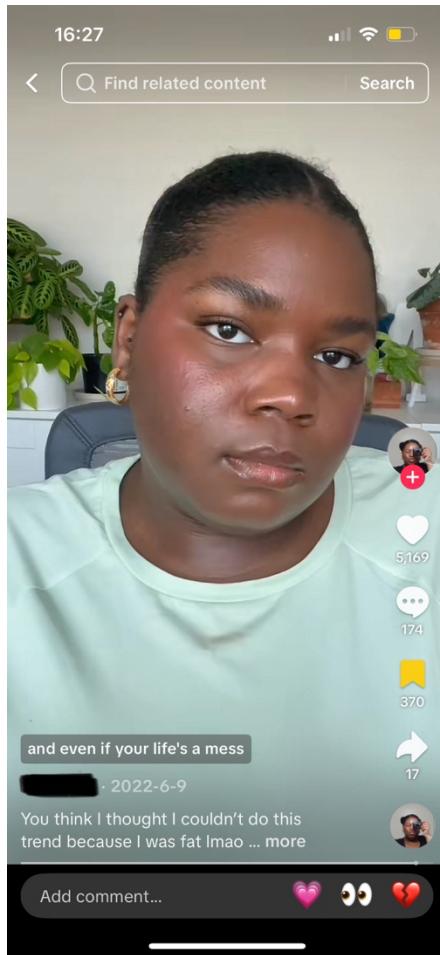


Figure 12

Creator Critiques Norms and Exclusion in the Clean Girl Aesthetic



These findings illustrate how the clean girl aesthetic reinforces boundaries around race, body, and gender, reflecting the patterns of platform inequality identified by Noble (2018, p. 71). They reveal how viral visual trends often replicate and reinforce existing cultural hierarchies. By linking these patterns to intersectionality as defined by Crenshaw (1989, p. 139), this analysis demonstrates how race, gender, and body ideals intersect with the clean girl trend. Those who align with Eurocentric beauty standards are privileged, while others are marginalised.

4.3.2 Normative Femininity

This subtheme explores how the clean girl aesthetic promotes a narrow and idealised version of femininity. The aesthetic often relies on visual and behavioural cues that align with traditional

gender norms such as conventional beauty, softness, and composure. In speaking videos, many creators in the dataset adopt an airy tone of voice and perform gentle, relaxed movements. This contributes to a soft and composed image that reinforces docility as a desirable feminine trait. Videos often show creators delicately applying skincare or slowly sipping coffee, visually signalling calmness.

The aesthetic choices in the videos reflect beauty standards that idealise polished appearances, slim body types, and understated femininity. This aligns with Sykes' (2024) analysis of femininity online, in which influencers have shifted from the assertive #girlboss type to the demure #stayathomegirlfriend (p. 1) Rather than challenging gender roles, the clean girl aesthetic often reaffirms them by highlighting soft, feminine beauty and polish as markers of success. As a result, the trend marginalises those who do not conform to its expectations. Creators with different gender expressions, alternative styles, or visible markers of queerness are largely absent from the dataset. This suggests that the clean girl look is not simply about natural beauty, but about a specific kind of gender performance. As McRobbie (2015) argues, contemporary postfeminist culture often repackages traditional femininity as an empowering personal choice (p. 9). This obscures the social pressures that shape these ideals.

Ultimately, *Normative Femininity* highlights how the clean girl aesthetic upholds a narrow view of womanhood. Those who embody composure and softness are rewarded, while gender expressions that do not align with the aesthetic are excluded.

4.3.3 Classed Participation

This subtheme explores how participation in the clean girl aesthetic is shaped by class. While the trend appears minimal, it often requires significant financial investment in products and services that are not accessible to everyone. This class tension is evident in how creators discuss the aesthetic. In one “how to be a clean girl” video, a creator stresses the importance of having freshly manicured nails to put together. She adds, “*This is super expensive and not everybody can do it*” (see Appendix B). In another video, a woman humorously exclaims, “*I’m tired of doing blowouts because my hair can’t take it. I wasn’t made for this life...I don’t own a Dyson! I have a little Revlon that gets so damn hot that when I put it through my hair, I can feel it burn and die and yell for help*” (see Appendix B). These moments reveal the hidden class dynamics in the clean girl trend, revealing that participation often relies on economic access.

Monier and Mears (2024) argue that femininity has long been communicated through aesthetic labour, where appearance is a way to signal class, taste, and belonging (p. 1). This insight is helpful in understanding the clean girl aesthetic. The creators who are celebrated within the trend are often the ones who can afford the products and services that make it possible. This subtheme answers the second sub-question by demonstration how class shapes one's ability to participate in the trend.

In summary, *Norms and Exclusion* demonstrates how the clean girl aesthetic promotes a narrow and exclusionary ideal of femininity that privileges whiteness, thinness, wealth, and conventional gender expression. The theme highlights how aesthetic labour on TikTok is not just about beauty, but about navigating intersecting systems of race, class, and gender.

4.4 Platform-Specific Self-Representation

The final theme considers how TikTok as a platform actively shapes the performance of the clean girl aesthetic. Rather than being purely personal, identity construction on TikTok is shaped by algorithmic demands and mimetic trends. TikTok is a platform that prioritises certain visual styles and forms of self-representation over others. Its algorithm, audio and visual features, and participatory culture all influence how users present themselves and interact with trends. Creators in the dataset use platform-specific tactics to align with the aesthetic and increase visibility.

This theme directly answers sub-question one by showing that the clean girl aesthetic is not just a style, but a digital performance shaped by platform norms. Creators build their identities by intentionally presenting themselves in ways that align with popular and recognisable trends. The following subthemes, including *Platform Visibility Tactics* and *Identity Creation on TikTok*, demonstrate how creators build their online personas through repetition, trend alignment, and aesthetic cohesion.

4.4.1 Platform Visibility Tactics

This subtheme explores how creators use platform-specific tactics to increase the visibility of their clean girl content. Rather than simply documenting their routines, many influencers in the dataset strategically employ viral audios, trending hashtags, and stylistic choices to increase engagement. These choices reveal that the performance of the clean girl aesthetic is closely linked to platform literacy and the need to adjust to the algorithm.

A recurring example is the use of a popular audio clip in which a soothing feminine voice states, “you know those girls that always look clean, their skin is always glowing, their lips are always glossed, and they never ever look like they’re wearing too much makeup.” This is paired with soft instrumental music, which creators use over footage of themselves applying skincare or makeup. The combination of this audio and video format has been replicated across multiple videos in the dataset. This highlights the formulaic approach that clean girl creators take, aligning personal branding with platform trends.

Zulli and Zulli (2022) explain creators must actively adapt to TikTok’s algorithm to gain visibility and maintain relevance (p. 1880). In the context of the clean girl aesthetic, this involves embodying the trend visually as well as using recognizable, trending formats. Using hashtags like #CleanGirlAesthetic and #ThatGirl signals alignment with popular aesthetic trends, helping creators position their content within established TikTok genres. Additionally, the frequent use of hashtags like #foryoupage and #viral, in addition to #cleangirl, signals deliberate attempts to increase algorithmic visibility.

These visibility tactics reveal that aesthetic labour on TikTok is not just about appearance, as it requires platform literacy. The strategic use of viral formats, audios, and hashtags allows creators to participate in popular aesthetic trends within TikTok’s competitive attention economy.

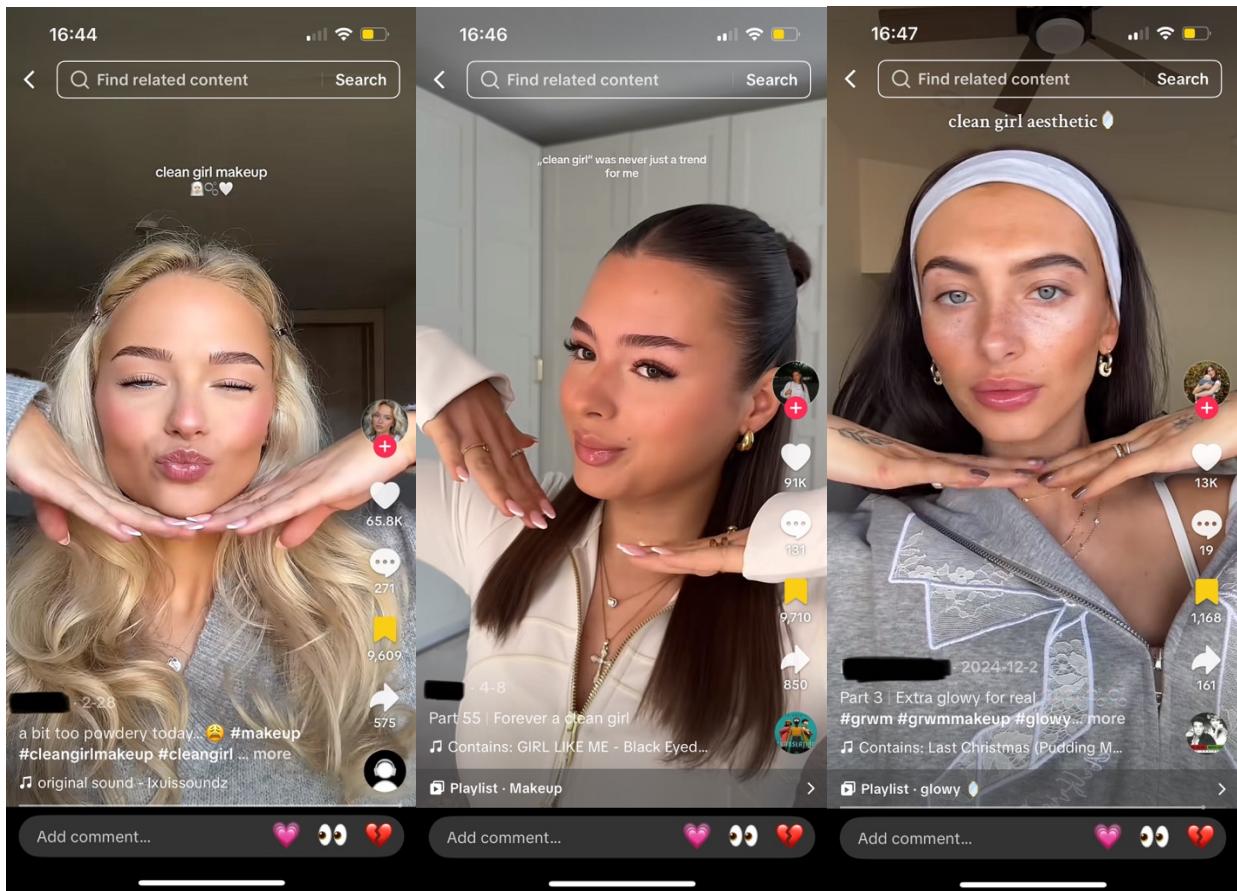
4.4.2 Identity Creation on TikTok

This subtheme examines how the clean girl aesthetic is performed through mimetic forms of self-representation. Rather than expressing unique or spontaneous identities, creators in the dataset tend to adopt nearly identical gestures, expressions, and tones of voice. This uniformity reflects the logic of TikTok’s imitation publics (Zulli & Zulli, 2022, p. 1882). Within this framework, influencers participate in trends through repeating stylistic and behavioural cues that signal their inclusion in the aesthetic.

Throughout the dataset, creators repeatedly perform the same gestures, such as blowing kisses, framing their faces with their hands, or angling their head while smiling softly to display their makeup (see Figure 13). These acts function as performative cues that align the creator with the clean girl identity. The soft, airy, and upbeat tone of voice adopted by the creators is also mimetic, serving as a unifying trait that reinforces a shared identity. By repeating the same tone and gestures, creators build a familiar style that makes the trend feel cohesive.

Figure 13

Examples of Mimetic Behaviour



Zulli and Zulli (2022) argue that TikTok fosters imitation publics, where visibility and belonging are achieved through replication rather than originality (p. 1883). Within the clean girl trend, identity is less about individualism and more about performing a specific and legible version of femininity. This dynamic helps explain why creators gravitate toward the same visuals and behaviours. Identity creation on TikTok is not an entirely individual act, but a collective process shaped by platform norms and audience expectations.

In conclusion, the theme *Platform-Specific Self-Representation* demonstrates that the clean girl aesthetic is not simply a personal style, but a curated digital performance shaped by TikTok's platform dynamics. Through algorithmic visibility tactics and mimetic self-representation, creators align themselves with dominant trends to gain recognition and belonging.

5. Conclusion

This thesis examined how young women perform aesthetic labour through the clean girl aesthetic on TikTok. Focusing on a curated dataset of 52 TikTok videos, the study investigated how the aesthetic is constructed, maintained, and circulated within the platform's algorithmic and visual culture. Characterised by effortless beauty, minimalist styling, polish, and wellness routines, the clean girl aesthetic functions as both a popular visual genre and a performance of femininity shaped by cultural norms and platform-specific dynamics. The main research question that guided the research was: *How do young women on TikTok perform aesthetic labour through the “clean girl” aesthetic?* This inquiry was supported by two sub questions:

1. What does the performance of the “clean girl” aesthetic reveal about identity construction on TikTok?
2. In what ways do class, race, and gender shape access to the “clean girl” aesthetic?

In the following sections, I first summarise the findings before answering each research question.

The first theme, *Performing Effortlessness*, revealed that creators construct the clean girl aesthetic through curated visuals and behaviours that give the impression of effortlessness, while concealing the labour involved. In *Cleanliness as Performance*, creators portrayed hygiene as signals of self-worth and femininity. Through documenting grooming rituals and managing their appearance, creators subtly equated looking clean with being morally and socially superior. The subtheme *The Illusion of Effortlessness* uncovered how the aesthetic depends on hidden labour such as fake tanning, manicures, cosmetic enhancements. This supports Monier and Mears' (2024) argument that while women in elite circles are expected to appear beautiful and composed, their appearance is often the product of intense hidden labour that requires significant time and money (p. 12). In *Disciplined Femininity*, the clean girl identity was shown to depend on routines and self-optimisation, such as early-wakeups, workouts, journaling, and healthy eating. This labour was framed as self-care, echoing Gill's (2007) concept of postfeminist sensibility (p. 261). Within this framework, self-discipline is reframed as an empowering personal choice.

The second theme, *Consumerism and Aesthetic Labour*, revealed that the clean girl aesthetic is performed in part through consumption, as products play a central role in constructing the identity. In *Product-Based Labour*, creators presented commodities such as skincare, haircare, makeup,

jewellery, and loungewear as essential to achieving the clean girl look. The products served both practical functions and symbolised taste, aligning with Bourdieu's (1984) theory of distinction (p. 297). The author argues that status and cultural capital are communicated through consumption habits (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 297). In *Commercialised Clean Girl*, the aesthetic was shown to be monetised, as creators directed viewers to product links, TikTok shop, and their Amazon storefronts. These practices reflect Duffy and Hund's (2015) concept of entrepreneurial femininity, which describes how women are encouraged to commodify their appearance and lifestyle as part of their personal brand (p. 4). In *Status Through Consumption*, the clean girl aesthetic was framed as a source of pride and validation, with creators celebrating the compliments they receive. Elias and Gill (2017) provided a relevant observation, explaining that women's bodies and self-presentation are viewed as sources of value in digital culture (p. 70). Overall, this theme illustrates how aesthetic labour in the clean girl aesthetic is shaped by conformity and consumption.

The third theme, *Norms and Exclusion*, revealed how the clean girl aesthetic upholds narrow ideals of race, gender, and class. *Racialised Aesthetic Norms* showed how the trend was dominated by white, thin, affluent creators with Eurocentric features. This reflected Noble's (2018) argument that platform algorithms tend to amplify creators who embody dominant Western beauty standards (p. 71). Crenshaw's (1989, p. 139) concept of intersectionality helped reveal how overlapping identities shape exclusion in the trend. *Normative Femininity* shows that trend promotes traditional feminine traits like softness and composure. This aligns with McRobbie's (2015) critique that post-feminism reframes conventional femininity as empowering (p. 9). In *Classed Participation*, moments that indicated class tensions within the trend were highlighted. Together, the theme shows who has access to participation in the trend.

The final theme, *Platform-Specific Self-Representation*, revealed that the clean girl aesthetic is shaped not only by beauty norms but also by TikTok as a platform. In *Platform Visibility Tactics*, creators strategically used trending audio clips and hashtags such as #CleanGirl and #ForYouPage to increase algorithmic visibility. This indicates that aesthetic labour within the clean girl trend requires platform literacy. Zulli and Zulli (2022) support this claim, arguing that creators must adapt to TikTok's algorithmic culture to remain visible (p. 1880). In *Identity Creation* on TikTok, the findings showed that creators adopt mimetic behaviours, like repeating gestures, tones of voice, and visual styles, to align themselves with the trend. This reflects Zulli and Zulli's (2022) concept of imitation publics, where replication fosters community and belonging on TikTok (p. 1882). As a whole, the

theme demonstrates that identity performance on TikTok is a collective process shaped by platform norms.

Answering the main research question, the findings demonstrate that the performance of aesthetic labour through the clean girl aesthetic is multifaceted. It includes visual styling, behavioural cues, social conformity, and platform literacy. Creators construct the aesthetic through maintaining a polished appearance that involves skincare, haircare, minimal makeup, and curated outfits. These visual markers of the aesthetic are used to project an image of effortlessness and natural beauty. The aesthetic labour also extends beyond appearance, through the adoption of behaviours like soft speaking voices, calm gestures, and wellness routines that convey effortless composure. This performance aligns with Goffman's (1959) concept of "front stage behaviour", where individuals manage their self-presentation to meet audience expectations (p. 112). The clean girl aesthetic thus requires continuous self-monitoring and appearance maintenance to perform an aspirational version of femininity. This version of femininity resonates with audiences and aligns with TikTok's visual and algorithmic culture.

In response to sub-question one, the findings show that the performance of the clean girl aesthetic reveals identity construction on TikTok to be highly curated and shaped by platform dynamics. Rather than purely personal expression, identity is constructed through the repetition of recognisable gestures, tones, and visual cues that align with the trend. Creators adopt stylistic uniformity, like soft-spoken narration and neutral-toned clothing, to signal their inclusion within the aesthetic. According to Burchell (2023), influencers on TikTok shape their online identities to align with platform demands, audience preferences, and dominant beauty standards (p. 24). Additionally, the platform's algorithm favours content that adheres to established formats and visual codes (Zulli & Zulli, 2022, p. 1882). This encourages creators to continuously refine their online identities to adhere to dominant trends. Therefore, identity on TikTok emerges as a performative process shaped by platform norms and affordances, where creators engage in aesthetic imitation to gain belonging.

Addressing sub-question two, the findings demonstrate that participation in the clean girl trend is shaped by intersecting inequalities of class, race, and gender. The theme *Norms and Exclusion* revealed that the aesthetic disproportionately privileges white, thin, affluent creators whose performances of femininity align with narrow, post-feminist ideals of beauty. For example, creators of colour and those with non-Eurocentric features expressed feeling excluded from the aesthetic. Additionally, participation often requires access to expensive beauty products and services,

indicating class-based exclusions. As Monier and Mears (2024) suggest, aesthetic labour is not only a mechanism to convey femininity but also signals social status (p. 1). Access to the clean girl aesthetic is noticeably stratified, reinforcing systems of privilege and marginalisation within digital culture.

In conclusion, the findings underscore that aesthetic labour on TikTok is not simply about looking a certain way, as it is a performance shaped by platform affordances, consumer culture, and existing social hierarchies. The clean girl aesthetic illustrates how femininity online is carefully constructed and maintained, rewarding those that can align with its ideals. The labour is often obscured, yet it requires time, money, and emotional investment.

5.1 Theoretical Reflection

This study drew on several key theoretical frameworks to understand how aesthetic labour is performed through the clean girl aesthetic on TikTok. Mears' (2014) definition of aesthetic labour was especially essential, as she explained that the labour requires managing one's appearance and behaviours to align with social and professional expectations. Her work helped make sense of how TikTok creators invest time, money, and energy into looking effortlessly beautiful and polished, translating offline beauty expectations into online performances shaped by platform norms. Gill's (2007, p. 249) concept of postfeminist sensibility, along with Elias and Gill's (2017, p. 70) work on digital femininity in neoliberal culture, offered a valuable lens for understanding how self-care and self-discipline are framed as empowering. However, these theories also reveal how such practices reinforce traditional beauty norms by encouraging continuous aesthetic labour and self-surveillance. These ideas were reflected in the routines and behaviours that clean girls presented as part of their daily lives.

Goffman's (1959, p. 110) theory of self-presentation also proved relevant. His concept of "front stage" behaviour helped articulate how creators manage their tone, gestures, and appearance in front of the camera to create a positive impression and align with a desirable aesthetic. Duffy and Hund's (2015, p. 2) concept of entrepreneurial femininity shed light on how clean girl creators turn traditionally private, "backstage" routines into public performances, reflecting the desire to commodify everyday life. Zulli and Zulli's (2022, p. 1882) theory of imitation publics was central to understanding TikTok's platform dynamics. Their work explained how creators replicate trending formats and behaviours to gain visibility on the platform.

To explore inequalities within the trend, Crenshaw's (1989, p. 139) theory of intersectionality was essential. It provided a lens to examine how overlapping identities of race, class, and gender influence who can participate in the clean girl aesthetic. The framework revealed how platform culture can reinforce existing systems of privilege and marginalisation. These insights were further deepened by Tiffin (2001, p. 45), Berthold (2010, p.11), and O'Hagan (2018, p. 777), whose work traces the historical associations between cleanliness, race, class, and femininity in the Western world. Their work helped situate the clean girl aesthetic within a broader cultural history that links femininity and social status to ideas of purity and virtue.

While there is a noticeable gap in academic literature on online aesthetic trends and TikTok in general, Burchell's (2023, p. 17) research offered important contributions to this study. Her work on algorithmic aesthetics and identity performance among young women on TikTok provided valuable insight into how creators shape their personas in response to platform norms.

Overall, the literature offered a valuable foundation for this study, drawing on key theories of aesthetic labour, post-feminism, self-representation, platform logics, and intersectionality. However, it also revealed a noticeable gap in academic research relating to TikTok and aesthetic trends. While existing studies have examined influencer culture and algorithmic visibility, there is still much to explore in how aesthetic trends are created and performed within TikTok's fast-paced, visual environment. This research contributes to that emerging field by examining how aesthetic labour is shaped by the platform's norms, visual culture, and algorithm.

5.2 Methodological Reflection

This study used qualitative thematic analysis to examine a curated dataset of 52 TikTok videos tagged with #CleanGirl and related terms. The method was well-suited to exploring how aesthetic labour is performed through visuals, behaviours, and platform conventions. Thematic analysis made it possible to identify patterns and recurring themes across the content, offering insight into how identity, beauty norms, and platform dynamics intersect in the clean girl aesthetic. As the research focused on meaning-making, a qualitative approach provided the flexibility to explore nuances in tone, gesture, and self-presentation that are central to the trend.

5.3 Theoretical and Societal Implications

This study contributes to the growing body of work on digital identity and aesthetic labour by extending existing theoretical frameworks into the context of TikTok. Building on Mears' (2014, p. 1330) concept of aesthetic labour, the research highlights how beauty work on TikTok is not only shaped by cultural norms but also by the platform's conventions and algorithmic structure. It also builds on Marwick's (2015, p. 142) work on digital self-representation and Duffy and Hund's (2015, p. 2) theory of entrepreneurial femininity by illustrating how creators strategically construct their identities and personal brands to align with dominant aesthetic trends. These practices are often motivated by the desire for visibility, validation, and belonging within TikTok's attention economy. Additionally, this study builds on Crenshaw's (1989, p. 139) framework of intersectionality by demonstrating how overlapping identities such as race, class, and gender can influence participation and visibility within beauty trends on TikTok.

Beyond theory, this study also carries broader societal implications. The clean girl aesthetic reinforces narrow ideals of femininity that are often racialised, classed, and tied to consumerism. As the findings show, participation in the trend frequently depends on access to specific products and services. The trend also privileges those who embody Western, Eurocentric beauty ideals. This not only reinforces long-standing beauty hierarchies but also influences how young women come to understand desirability, success, and their own sense of self-worth online. Furthermore, the clean girl trend promotes a version of femininity that is highly aspirational, as it is tied to routines and self-discipline. This creates added pressure for young women to constantly work on themselves and maintain a polished image. Finally, the study raises important questions about the well-being of young women on TikTok, particularly around the emotional and financial toll of aesthetic labour, the fear of exclusion, and the desire for social validation. By highlighting these dynamics, the study contributes to ongoing conversations about inequality, representation, and mental health online.

5.4 Limitations

While this study offers valuable insights into how aesthetic labour is performed through the clean girl aesthetic, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample was limited to publicly available TikTok videos identified through the platform's search function. Because the search results are shaped by TikTok's algorithm, they tend to reflect content that is already popular or promoted by the platform. Although I aimed to manually include a diverse range of creators, the

dataset may not capture the entire spectrum of participants in the trend. Secondly, the study relied exclusively on observational data, without direct input from creators themselves. This limits the ability to explore their intentions, motivations, and lived experiences. Finally, the process of thematic analysis is inherently interpretive. While I approached the analysis with critical awareness and care, the findings are ultimately shaped by my own perspective. They should therefore be understood as one of many possible readings.

5.5 Suggestions for Future Research

Future research could expand on this study by including interviews with both creators and audiences. This would offer deeper insight into the intentions behind content creation and how trends like the clean girl aesthetic are interpreted, embraced, or resisted by viewers. Comparative studies could also be valuable, such as examining how the clean girl aesthetic differs from or overlaps with other beauty trends on TikTok. Such research would further illuminate the various ways femininity is performed and understood on the platform. As TikTok's cultural influence continues to grow, ongoing research will be crucial for understanding how the platform shapes identity, beauty norms, and social belonging.

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Appendix

Appendix A

Coding framework

Theme	Subtheme	Codes
Performing Effortlessness	Cleanliness as Performance	Looking clean, beauty routines
	The Illusion of Effortlessness	Hidden labour, minimalist styling, stylised environment, looking put together, relatability/authenticity
	Disciplined Femininity	Self-discipline, wellness discourse, affirmation statements
Consumerism and Aesthetic Labour	Product-Based Labour	Product-based aesthetic labour, aspirational lifestyle
	Commercialised Clean Girl	Product-based aesthetic labour
	Status Through Consumption	Product-based aesthetic labour, social validation
Norms and Exclusion	Racialised Aesthetic Norms	Racialised beauty norms, cultural distancing, excluded norms
	Normative Femininity	Beauty standards, softness as aesthetic
	Classed Participation	Accessibility/class tension, narrative of outsiderness, relatability/authenticity
Platform-Specific Self-Representation	Platform Visibility Tactics	Platform performance, digital self-representation
	Digital Identity Curation	Beauty standards, digital self-representation

Appendix B

Codebook

Code	Description	Examples from data
Beauty routines	Visible actions related to grooming, skincare, or makeup routines	V36: Creator applies skincare, brushes eyebrows, gels hair, and applies makeup
Stylised environment	Background setting that appears visually curated or intentionally aesthetic	V03: Creator films in a white, uncluttered bedroom with sunlight
Visual coherence	Consistency in visual theme (e.g., colour palette, lighting) across videos	V05, V07, V29: The use of neutral tones, matching sets, and gold jewellery
Softness as aesthetic	Use of soft lighting, neutral colours, or calm gestures to suggest effortlessness	V18: Creator speaks softly and performs gentle movements
Excluded norms	References to exclusion based on race, ethnicity, or non-Eurocentric beauty traits	V17: Plus-sized woman stating, “you thought I couldn’t do this trend because I was fat?”
Relatability/Authenticity	Reference to being ‘real’ or performing modesty/humility	V06: “I don’t always have it together, but here’s my routine to look put together”.
Aspirational lifestyle	Settings, tone or visual cues that evoke upward mobility,	V20:

	wealth, or an idealised form of living.	Creator films video in her luxurious home with close up shots of designer products
Minimalist styling	Intentional use of neutral toned items or styling for a clean visual look	V21: “I’ve been really into the clean girl look lately, so I’ve changed up my makeup to be more simple and lowkey”
Digital self-representation	Refers to how creators construct their online persona through visual, textual, and performative choices	V35: Creator blows a kiss at the camera and smiles softly.
Wellness discourse	References to health, balance, or self-care within the context of beauty/lifestyle	V19: Creator mentions of journaling, working out, and clean eating
Social Validation	Expressions of pleasure or pride related to compliments or positive attention from others	V03: “My favorite compliment is that I always look clean,” V34: “Everyone says my skin is so soft, I swear I get it every week”
Cultural distancing	Avoidance of cultural, ethnic, or non-Western identity markers across content	V40: A Black woman states, “clean girls always have their hair styled, mine is natural today but usually I have it slicked back”

Affirmation statements	Use of self-empowering captions or speech	V18: “There’s no need to wait until the new year to start becoming the person you want to be”
Self-discipline	Emphasis on routines, habits, self-optimisation, and self-improvement that imply moral value or self-control	V09: “I feel like I get more stuff done when I look put together”
Beauty standards	Physical appearance norms across clean girl content	V15: Creator exhibits the flawless glowing skin, and minimal makeup central to the clean girl aesthetic
Product-based aesthetic labour	Emphasis on purchasing, using, or recommending beauty products to achieve the look	V46: “I don’t know who decided that normal toothbrushes were going to cut it, but they don’t. Use an electric toothbrush,”
		V18: “real gold jewellery works a lot better because you never have to take anything off,”
		V04: “Everything I used is in my TikTok shop,”
		V03: “It’s all linked in my Amazon storefront”

Accessibility/class tension	Mentions or signs of financial constraints in the clean girl aesthetic	V01: Creator mentions that clean girls always get their nails done, but “This is super expensive and not everybody can do it,”
Narratives of outsiderness	Moments where creators express insecurity, exclusion, or resistance to the aesthetic	V11: “I wasn’t made for this life...I don’t own a Dyson!”
Looking clean	Performance of “looking clean”	V11: “You know what pisses me off? The fact that I feel like my natural hair doesn’t fit into the clean girl aesthetic”
Looking put together	Intentional presentation of a polished and composed appearance	V03: “People say just take a shower and then you’ll be clean, but the clean girl aesthetic is about how you look. My favorite compliment is that I always look clean”
Racialised beauty norms	Beauty ideals across content that explicitly centres whiteness and Eurocentric features	V14: “Constantly thinking about how I can look more put together, more clean girl aesthetic, and have more of a Jesus glow”
		Blonde/white dominance throughout dataset

Platform performance	Use of trending audio, hashtags, or styles, that align with TikTok visibility norms	V17, V26, V29, V39: Use of popular clean girl audio: “you know those girls that always look clean, their skin is always glowing, their lips are always glossed, and they never ever look like they’re wearing too much makeup”
Hidden Labour	The concealed or downplayed beauty work involved in achieving the clean girl look.	V21: Creator describes her makeup as “minimal” while visibly wearing eyelash extensions, fake tan, and having dyed hair.

Note. The abbreviation “V**” refers to the video IDs seen in Appendix C: Data Overview.

Appendix C

Data Overview

ID	Duration	Description of Data	Link
V01	01:48	In this “get ready with me” video, the creator shares her tips on how to embody the clean girl aesthetic, blending beauty advice with product suggestions. The creator is white, blonde, and thin with blue eyes. As she goes through her skincare and makeup routine, she offers style hacks like the “sandwich method” for outfits, recommends having a signature scent, and talks about the importance of always having fresh nails. The tone is casual and aspirational.	https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rV75nW/
V02	00:10	In this “get ready with me” video, the creator uses a trending audio that describes the characteristics of the clean girl look: glossy lips, glowing skin, and minimal makeup. The creator is white, blonde, and thin. She gets ready in a bright, modern bathroom while applying makeup, styling her hair, spraying perfume, and putting on gold jewellery. The vibe is soft, with quick edits and subtle gestures that project effortless beauty. The caption reads “clean girl aesthetic >,” reinforcing the aspirational tone.	https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rVKn3H/

V03	02:41	In this “get ready with me” video, an Asian American creator walks viewers through a clean girl routine, blending product recommendations with advice. Speaking in a laid-back tone, she explains that the clean girl aesthetic is more about how you look than actually being clean, emphasizing skincare, minimal makeup, slicked-back hair, and matching loungewear sets. Filmed in her cozy, white bedroom with natural lighting, she applies affordable beauty products and shares tips like having a signature scent. The video feels approachable and down-to-earth. She also notes, “I’ve put it in my TikTok shop!”	https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rqYuW8/
V04	01:31	This fast-paced “get ready with me” video offers viewers a hygiene tips designed to help them embody the clean girl aesthetic. The blonde, blue-eyed creator discusses her daily routine from skincare and shower rituals to oral hygiene and scented products, all while applying a full face of minimal, glowy makeup using luxury beauty items. The video blends beauty advice with product promotion, ending with the note that everything can be found in her TikTok shop, reinforcing the aspirational yet consumer-driven tone.	https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rq22GE/

V05	00:40	Using the “put a finger down” format, a blonde Australian creator invites viewers to measure their alignment with the clean girl aesthetic through a list of lifestyle habits and appearance traits, ranging from slicked-back hair and journaling to owning loungewear sets and neutral-toned nails.	https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rVGBFM/
V06	01:42	In this advice video, a white, brunette creator breaks down how to look like a clean girl, even when life feels messy. shares her tips with an aspirational tone, ending with a kiss to the camera. She recommends slicked-back hair, neutral-toned activewear, and gold jewellery.	https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rVtS2g/
V07	04:20	This advice video features a kind, softly spoken creator offering tips on how to always look clean and put together. The creator is African American and thin. Speaking over green-screened product images, she highlights slicked-back hairstyles, neutral nails, and layered gold jewellery, while tailoring her aesthetic guidance to resonate with a Black audience.	https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rVt713/
V08	00:54	In this upbeat advice video, a white, blonde, American creator shares styling tips on how to elevate a casual outfit to	https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rqFDg9/

		match the clean girl aesthetic. Speaking with a vocal fry and confidence, she recommends layering accessories, adding colourful sneakers, and throwing on a denim jacket. She poses, smiles, and blows a kiss to the camera at the end.
V09	03:00	<p>In this school focused “clean girl routine,” an Asian American creator walks viewers through her get-ready process using expressive hand gestures and a calm, monotone voice. She emphasizes skincare, “no makeup” makeup, and layered gold jewellery, claiming that looking put together helps her feel more productive. Her tone blends advice with a laid-back presence. The video uses quick cuts and natural lighting.</p> <p>https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rq6Bp9/</p>
V10	01:16	<p>In this soft spoken “get ready with me” video, a white, blonde creator shares her clean girl routine while applying makeup and perfume with slow, gentle movements. She focuses on moisturized skin, vanilla scents, and neutral basics. The video’s soothing music, minimal cuts, and gentle gestures convey an aspirational but approachable tone.</p> <p>https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rqeUe2/</p>
V11	00:59	<p>In a humorous and candid confessional video, a white Canadian creator expresses her frustration</p> <p>https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rVThHK/</p>

that her naturally curly hair doesn't seem to "fit" the clean girl aesthetic. With sarcasm and vulnerability, she critiques the pressure to use damaging heat tools to achieve the look and calls for more representation of curly and wavy hair. Her video challenges narrow beauty norms while embracing her own natural features.

V12	00:26	In a "get ready with me" video, an Asian American creator embraces the clean girl aesthetic up until the lipstick. As she applies skincare, makeup, and perfume to a Lana Del Rey track, she humorously admits she can't give up bold lips, poking fun at the rigid aesthetic standards while still participating in the trend.	https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rqjxyU/
V13	00:06	Filming from her car, a Black American creator shows off her clean girl "look of the day." Dressed in activewear with slicked-back hair and gold jewellery, she smiles and sips iced coffee to a Frank Ocean track. She radiates confidence and effortless beauty.	https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rqN41N/
V14	00:11	In a video set to Amy Winehouse audio, a mixed-race (White and Asian) creator lounges on a couch while asking her audience for tips on how to look more "clean girl" and "put together." As she	https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rq2Qsy/

		poses between shots, her slicked-back hair, minimal makeup, and gold jewellery mirror the clean girl look she's trying to achieve.	
V15	04:28	A Black Spanish creator shares her detailed shower and scent routine in a calming, humorous video that highlights her glowing, makeup-free skin. Speaking softly while showing her moisturizing products (especially African brands) she walks viewers through how she stays fresh, smooth, and smelling like vanilla.	https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rqY3Qj/
V16	00:10	A plus size South American creator showcases her outfit of the day (jeans, a white tee, and slicked-back hair) in a confident, upbeat video. She poses, smiles, and flips her hair while highlighting that the clean girl aesthetic can look great on all body types, not just the thin ideal.	https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rV773U/
V17	01:39	Set to the viral “you know those girls that always look clean” audio, this non-speaking “get ready with me” video features a Black American creator applying minimal makeup with gentle, shy gestures. Despite her non-Eurocentric features, she embraces the clean girl look, subtly	https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rV35Rc/

		challenging beauty norms with quiet confidence and soft humour. Her caption reads: you think I thought I couldn't do this trend because I was fat lmao?	
V18	01:39	In this calm and softly spoken “get ready with me” advice video, a Hispanic-American creator walks viewers through her skincare and makeup routine, emphasizing a polished look through minimal effort. Set in a modern bathroom, she applies products while sipping a smoothie. She highlights the importance of hydration, signature scent, and simple gold jewellery to achieve the clean girl aesthetic.	https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rqJr7K/
V19	00:10	This fast-paced morning routine video, in a non-speaking montage style, shows a white creator performing daily “that girl” habits like journaling, skincare, making matcha, and tidying her minimalist, modern home. Emphasizing wellness and luxury, the video highlights expensive products and projects a calm, aspirational lifestyle.	https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rqdFvE/
V20	01:03	This evening routine video shows a Hispanic woman walks through her home that is carefully staged. She receives flowers, arranges them, unboxes Chanel heels, cooks	https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rqRBRT/

		dinner, and tidies up her large, luxurious home. The video emphasizes wealth, femininity, and effortlessness through close-ups of designer goods and self-care tasks.	
V21	02:56	<p>This “get ready with me” video features a soft-spoken Australian creator applying minimal, glowy makeup in preparation for a Pilates session. With slicked-back blonde hair and a tanned complexion, she details her product use while emphasizing natural beauty. However, she has visible lip filler, eyelash extensions, and fake tan. Her tone is sweet and innocent. She embodies the clean girl aesthetic through neutral activewear, gold jewellery, and manicured nails.</p>	https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rqeXqF/
V22	00:10	<p>A non-speaking self-care routine video set to a trending audio clip. A white, blonde creator moves through calming wellness rituals including journaling, lemon water, facials, and workouts. Filmed in a luxurious home with designer products and clothes, the video subtly blends relaxation with signals of wealth and aspirational living.</p>	https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rVoUtk/
V23	00:42	<p>A fast-paced morning routine video by a white, thin creator showcasing health and beauty rituals. She works out in a</p>	https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rVoUtk/

		matching activewear set, showers, and applies skincare. The quick cuts and aesthetic visuals create an aspirational tone typical of the clean girl trend.	
V24	00:31	An advice-style routine video by a white, thin brunette creator promoting clean girl habits. She mentions waking up early, yoga, skincare, minimal makeup, and neutral toned activewear sets. The tone is motivational, with text overlays outlining a step-by-step guide to adopting a “clean girl era” lifestyle.	https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rqUCQR/
V25	02:16	A perfume recommendation video by a blue-eyed Hispanic creator with a soft tone and natural makeup look. She shares her signature scents and favourite designer perfumes, filmed in natural light with quick cuts. The vibe is aspirational yet down-to-earth, with honest commentary on cost.	https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rVGUfc/
V26	00:30	A non-speaking “get ready with me” video set to the viral “you know those girls that always look clean” audio. She is a white, tan-skinned creator with slicked-back hair and glowy minimal makeup. She puts on gold jewellery, applies perfume, and poses confidently in a tidy, sunlit	https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rqDkmA/

		bedroom. The vibe is polished, effortless, and aspirational.	
V27	00:10	A non-speaking motivational “clean girl” routine. A Black creator in a pink sweater films her peaceful morning, which includes journaling, smoothies, skincare, supplements, and matcha. Lots of jump cuts, natural light, and calming vibes. The video highlights wellness habits and luxury products, set to viral audio. The tone is aspirational, gentle, and polished.	https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rqNgaM/
V28	00:59	This is a voiceover vlog of a “clean girl” morning routine. A Hispanic creator with long, straight hair shares her peaceful start, which includes making her bed, journaling, skincare, matching activewear, and prepping a smoothie. Natural lighting and soft aesthetics, with an emphasis on products and productivity. The video has a calm and aspirational tone.	https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rqYJyC/
V29	00:30	A “slow morning routine” vlog by a white, blonde creator with a soft, minimalist aesthetic. She films herself waking up at 9:15, making her bed, opening the windows, and prepping coffee. She has braided hair, gold jewellery, a matching loungewear set, and luxury	https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rV7FgJ/

		products that signal wealth and aspiration. Edited with calming cuts and a viral audio.	
V30	00:19	This is a non-speaking “get ready with me” video featuring a white, American brunette creator who embodies effortless beauty. She gets ready in a large, modern bathroom, using designer makeup and jewellery. She has glowing skin and a slicked-back hairstyle as she smiles softly and poses for the camera. The video’s relaxed pacing, clean edits, and calming viral audio enhance the polished and aspirational vibe of her “clean girl” look.	https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rqDkmA/
V31	02:14	This is a fast-paced, upbeat “get ready with me” advice video by a white, American blonde creator. She applies makeup quickly in a brightly lit, large bathroom while giving tips in a high-pitched, valley girl tone. Emphasizing routines like the “sandwich method” and 14k gold jewellery, she connects cleanliness with discipline and aspirational self-care. She recommends designer products, supplements, and neutral-toned fashion to achieve the look of someone who “has their life together.”	https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rqCxfU/
V32	00:19	This evening routine video features a thin, tanned	https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rVThrM/

Hispanic woman in a luxurious New York City apartment with a skyline view. The video is full of quick cuts showing her working at her desk, sipping a health drink, and showering with high-end products. Her gestures are relaxed and effortless, and she ends the routine with a facemask and layered skincare. The video emphasizes luxury, hygiene, and self-care. It portrays the “clean girl” as both aspirational and economically privileged.

V33	01:42	<p>This "clean girl tutorial" video features a thin white British creator with glowing skin, a slicked-back hairstyle, and soft, minimal makeup. She speaks with a light, airy voice and shares advice on appearing effortlessly put together. She emphasizes neutral nails, matching loungewear sets, and staple wardrobe basics. Through her gentle tone and nonchalant gestures, she reinforces the aspirational, effortless clean girl image.</p> <p>https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rqRBbV/</p>
V34	02:42	<p>This "clean girl routine" and advice video shows a thin Asian American creator. She has slicked-back hair, glowing skin, bright manicured nails, and stacked silver and designer jewellery. Her tone is somewhat patronizing as she emphasizes hygiene as</p> <p>https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rVo6P9/</p>

both aesthetic and virtuous. She shares grooming practices like laser hair removal, dermaplaning, and tongue scrubbing, underscoring how the clean girl aesthetic extends beyond appearance into self-discipline and social desirability (e.g. “everyone always says I smell so good”).

V35	00:07	<p>This humorous, non-speaking video uses a viral audio clip to highlight how being called “clean” is the ultimate compliment. The creator is a thin white woman with blonde, slicked-back hair and a tanned complexion. She leans into the clean girl aesthetic with manicured French nails, gold hoops, and minimal makeup. She poses, blows a kiss, and smiles at the camera in a luxurious bedroom, subtly signalling affluence and aspiration. The tone is light and self-aware.</p> <p>https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rVKMCn/</p>
V36	00:29	<p>In this “get ready with me” video, set to the viral “you know those girls that always look clean” audio, an Afro-Latina creator with natural curly hair shows her clean girl routine for textured hair. She wears a fitted black top with minimal silver jewellery. Her movements are gentle as she applies gel, brushes and slicks back her curls, then poses and smiles at the camera.</p> <p>https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rqYk1n/</p>

		She appears confident yet grounded.	
V37	00:14	<p>In this satirical “get ready with me” video, an Indian American creator uses an audio stating, “the clean girl aesthetic should be called I bullied women of colour for this look and then copy pasted it on a white girl and called it trendy aesthetic.” As she oils and slicks back her hair, applies makeup, and wears a traditional Indian outfit with a bindi, she displays historical images of Indian women. The creator critiques the double standards in beauty trends, highlighting how beauty practices rooted in non-Western cultures are often looked down upon until rebranded by white influencers. She does not smile, maintaining a serious tone that underscores the video's message.</p>	https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rqJbM4/
V38	00:24	<p>This “get ready with me” video shows an Asian American creator with fair skin and short, straight hair. Set to a calming audio, the video depicts her applying skincare and a slightly heavier makeup look than the traditional clean girl look. She smiles softly and models for the camera. Her caption and on-screen text reads: “can anyone please tell me what I’m doing wrong and</p>	https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rVTLkF/

**not getting the clean
girl look I want?"**

V39	00:23	<p>This video features a blonde Australian woman with tanned skin, long blowout hair, and glowing skin. Set to the trending audio "you know those girls that always look clean," the video shows her clean girl makeup routine. Her calm movements give off an effortless and polished vibe. Dressed in neutral loungewear, gold jewelry, and natural nails, she occasionally smiles and poses for the camera.</p>	https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rqYrTk/
V40	2:37	<p>This advice video features a Black American woman with glowing, makeup-free skin, natural curly hair, and a welcoming energy. She wears a matching neutral loungewear set and gold jewelry, speaking directly to the camera with expressive hand gestures. She emphasizes things like hydration, eating well, moisturizing, using lip balm, threading your eyebrows, and minimal makeup. She emphasizes natural beauty and wellness routines.</p>	https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rVv95L/
V41	01:00	<p>This is a "get ready with me" video featuring a young white woman with blonde hair, blue eyes, and glowing skin. Filmed in a bright, minimalist bedroom with soft natural lighting, she wears pink</p>	https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rVT7hN/

		<p>loungewear and uses gentle movements while curling her hair and applying her skincare and makeup. The video includes jump cuts and is set to a Lana Del Rey song.</p>	
V42	01:29	<p>This is a calming "morning routine" video featuring a white woman with brunette hair. The video is filmed in soft, natural lighting and features a neutral-toned aesthetic throughout. She starts her day by getting out of bed, stretching, and opening the curtains, followed by journaling, a workout, and making her bed. The focus is on self-discipline and wellness. Products are showcased throughout, particularly skincare and health-related items.</p>	https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rVE8fA/
V43	00:57	<p>This morning routine video shows a thin white woman with brunette hair. She films a slow, aesthetically pleasing start to her day. She's shown waking up in a spacious, minimalist home filled with neutral tones and natural light. She wears a matching activewear set, prepares matcha, journals, and applies skincare.</p>	https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rq1dx4/
V44	02:48	<p>This Sunday morning vlog shows a thin white woman with dyed blonde hair, wearing pink and beige loungewear. She films herself in a large home</p>	https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rVnSfU/

with a white bathroom. The video shows her waking up, showering, and applying skincare, going on a walk, baking, and styling her hair. Everything is framed to appear effortless and aesthetically pleasing.

V45	01:30	This makeup routine video shows a young white woman with tanned skin, blonde hair, and bright blue eyes. She appears polished with glowing skin, manicured eyebrows, and manicured nails. The video shows her smiling gently and applying her makeup.	https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rVG3fD/
V46	02:20	This video is a light-hearted “how to smell good” video, focusing on fragrance and personal hygiene. The creator is a white woman with blonde dyed hair, clear skin, and blue eyes. She has neutral-toned clothing, glossy lips, and minimal makeup. She mentions how she regularly receives compliments on how she smells. The tone is aspirational yet accessible.	https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rVtRMR/
V47	00:22	This aesthetically styled morning routine video focuses on luxury beauty and lifestyle products, rather than on the creator. Her face is not shown. The visuals show close-ups of high-end items, matcha, and reading. The video is aesthetically pleasing and	https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rq89Mw/

		creates a sense of quiet luxury.	
V48	00:39	This “skin care routine” video shows the creator’s skincare routine. She uses calm gestures and minimalist styling. She appears effortlessly polished, wearing a white top and styled, highlighted hair. She ends the routine with blowing a kiss to the camera.	https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rqLSF/
V49	00:15	The creator lip-syncs to an audio while casually posing in a mirror. She’s styled in a matching loungewear set, with slicked-back hair, and gold accessories. Her bedroom is large, modern, and tidy. The video is non-speaking but communicates a curated, aspirational lifestyle.	https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rq1b4k/
V50	00:10	Two women appear in loungewear sets with slicked-back buns and minimalist makeup. They sip iced coffee while lip-syncing to a trending audio, posing and pouting at the camera. The video celebrates their commitment to the “clean girl” aesthetic, humorously acknowledging its persistence into the new year.	https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rqNcuy/
V51	00:28	A “get ready with me” routine featuring a white woman who embodies effortless beauty. She applies skincare and	https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rqJL62/

makeup in a well-lit room. Her skin is glowing and she adds highlighter, blush, and subtle fake freckles. She wears gold hoop earrings and designer jewelry. Throughout the video, she poses for the camera without smiling.

V52

00:24

A white, brunette woman with slicked-back hair films herself in a large, minimalist white room while getting ready. She wears a neutral-toned activewear set and gold jewellery. She looks polished, with manicured nails and lip gloss.

<https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rq6JYf/>

Appendix D

Declaration Page: Use of Generative AI Tools in Thesis

Student Information

Name: Madeleine Driscoll

Student ID: **698584**

Course Name: Master Thesis CM5000

Supervisor Name: Dr. Alkim Yalin Karakilic

Date: 26 June 2025

Declaration:

Acknowledgment of Generative AI Tools

I acknowledge that I am aware of the existence and functionality of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, which are capable of producing content such as text, images, and other creative works autonomously.

GenAI use would include, but not limited to:

- Generated content (e.g., ChatGPT, Quillbot) limited strictly to content that is not assessed (e.g., thesis title).
- ~~Writing improvements, including~~ grammar and spelling corrections (e.g., Grammarly)
- Language translation (e.g., DeepL), without generative AI alterations/improvements.
- Research task assistance (e.g., finding survey scales, qualitative coding verification, debugging code)
- Using GenAI as a search engine tool to find academic articles or books (e.g.,

I declare that I have used generative AI tools, specifically [Name of the AI Tool(s) or Framework(s) Used], in the process of creating parts or components of my thesis. The purpose of using these tools was to aid in generating content or assisting with specific aspects of thesis work.

I declare that I have NOT used any generative AI tools and that the assignment concerned is my original work.

Signature: Madeleine Driscoll

Date of Signature: 26 June 2025

Extent of AI Usage

I confirm that while I utilized generative AI tools to aid in content creation, the majority of the intellectual effort, creative input, and decision-making involved in completing the thesis were undertaken by me. I have enclosed the prompts/logging of the GenAI tool use in an appendix.

Ethical and Academic Integrity

I understand the ethical implications and academic integrity concerns related to the use of AI tools in coursework. I assure that the AI-generated content was used responsibly, and any content derived from these tools has been appropriately cited and attributed according to the guidelines provided by the instructor and the course. I have taken necessary steps to distinguish between my original work and the AI-generated contributions. Any direct quotations, paraphrased content, or other forms of AI-

generated material have been properly referenced in accordance with academic conventions.

By signing this declaration, I affirm that this declaration is accurate and truthful. I take full responsibility for the integrity of my assignment and am prepared to discuss and explain the role of generative AI tools in my creative process if required by the instructor or the Examination Board. I further affirm that I have used generative AI tools in accordance with ethical standards and academic integrity expectations.

Signature: Madeleine Driscoll

Date of Signature: 26 June 2025

Prompts used:

- Please check the structure and clarity of this paragraph
- Do a spell and grammar check on this section
- Fix the structure of this paragraph while keeping the content the same
- Read this section and give me feedback on what can be improved
- What is the correct APA7 citation for (x)
- Explain what (x) concept is
- How do I cite a chapter in a book using APA7 style?
- Please suggest some traceable academic sources related to (x)
- What are some synonyms for (x)?
- Please help me sort my references in alphabetical order
- What is the difference between (x) and (x)?
- Can you explain (x) concept in simpler terms so I can better understand how to use it?
- What are some key words you would suggest based on my topic?
- Please check my reference list and identify which citations need to be corrected according to APA7