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Curatorial Epistemologies of the Young-Girl Online:

Gender as Capital on tumblr (2011–2018)

submitted by

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I would like to dedicate this master's thesis to my loved ones, professors and fellow students who have supported me along this long and at times arduous journey,

To Professor Wiemer for her encouraging words,

To Luisa for inspiring me to be more confident in my academic capabilities and providing me with a helping hand whenever I needed it, without which I wouldn't have been able to finish my graduate degree,

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We were girls on tumblr together.

## **Abstract**

The following master's thesis seeks to investigate the curatorial knowledge production around gender through an analysis of affect, power, and identity on tumblr through digital girlblogging practices, during the height of its popularity as a microblogging platform from 2011 to 2018. My main object of analysis is one of the first tumblr blogs exclusively dedicated to curating images representative of the everyday experiences of and/or 'things' beloved by self-identified girls: *JustGirlyThings*. Created in November 2011, *JustGirlyThings*' posts consist of aesthetically cohesive filtered photos with superimposed text, showcasing a wide array 'things' all girls purport to enjoy transposing the seemingly ontological truths of universal girlhood onto digital simulacra. The actual content of the images curated ranges from snapshots of popular teen heartthrobs to recreational feminine-coded activities such as getting one's makeup done or having a picnic. The immediate popularity of the blog led to the increased circulation of these images, which inversely became pictorial signifiers of conventional – that is to say, white, heterosexual, and thin– girlhood within the digital sphere in the early 2010s. My analysis seeks to traverse how these image-based representations of a specific type of girlhood – which were curated by the admins of themselves with input from the followers of the blog – accrued affective value because of their increased circulation on the internet and eventually became ubiquitous expressions of a monolithic girlness through the digital commodification of gender.

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# 1. Introduction

*“The Young-Girl is a thing to the very extent that she takes herself to be human: She is a human being to the very extent that she takes herself to be a thing.”<sup>1</sup>*

*-Tiqqun, Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*

In 2023, the international success of a confluence of ‘girly’ media – ranging from the mumblecore-ingénue-turned-auteur Greta Gerwig’s blockbuster Barbie adaptation to global superstar-turned-millennial legacy act Taylor Swift’s *Eras Tour* – led major digital publications from British countercultural lifestyle magazine *Dazed*<sup>2</sup> to New York Magazine’s *The Cut*<sup>3</sup> retrospectively declare it the definitive ‘year of the girl’. From the inescapable onslaught of online ‘girl’ trends – which satiated the desire to regress to a childhood seemingly devoid of the financial and social precarity facilitated by the post-pandemic landscape of neoliberal capitalism – to the rise in popularity of traditionally feminine-coded garments such as bows and ballet flats, the aesthetic evocation of ‘girl’ and ‘girlhood’ became a cultural phenomenon emblematic of the neotenous *Zeitgeist*. The question of what laid the groundwork for ‘the girl’ to emerge as the ultimate sovereign consumer in the digital age – under the pretext of women collectively reclaiming personal histories tainted by patriarchal oppression by way of social-media led social justice movements such as *#MeToo* – is an important point of departure for this master thesis.

A more personal point is the various frustrations I have had to endure during my own coming of age as a self-appointed girl online in a world which continues to denigrate the opinions and feelings of self-identified girls, coming into their own as women. In a formative memory, I recall being condescended to by a middle-school English teacher for declaring Jane Austen my favorite author at the impressionable age of 14. Fresh off the sun-kissed daze of a three-month summer holiday, mostly spent with my nose buried in a book, I couldn’t wait to boast about my love of *Pride & Prejudice* to anyone who would listen. So, imagine my disappointment when instead of praising me for what I considered to be a significant literary achievement for a precocious middle schooler, our teacher pursed his lips and curtly told me: “Jane Austen is for spinsters”. He crushed my budding love of classic literature in what I now see as an attempt to undermine my intellect and thus interpellate my identity as a girl into the misogynistic confines of a narrow and discriminatory

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<sup>1</sup> Tiqqun. *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*. Translated by Ariana Reines. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012, 86.

<sup>2</sup> Jess Bacon, “2023: The Year of the Girl,” *Dazed*, December 12, 2023, [accessed July 31, 2025] <https://www.dazeddigital.com/life-culture/article/61545/1/2023-was-the-year-of-the-girl-barbie-taylor-swift-era-tour-tiktok-trends>

<sup>3</sup> Isabel Cristo, “The Year of the Girl,” *The Cut*, December 19, 2023, [accessed July 31, 2025] <https://www.thecut.com/article/girl-culture.html>

worldview. Nonetheless, after that incident I stopped telling people what books I liked reading, ashamed of the unmitigated earnestness of my enthusiasm. Such marginal let-downs have led me to spend a considerable portion of my young adulthood contemplating the material conditions and political implications of being (just) a girl in an unjust world. Hence, I have tried to critically engage with the ill-defined contours of my identity as a girl and the unwitting complicity of its many reiterations in overarching systems of power and commodified desire, which seek to profit from its market-imposed insecurities.

Thus, it not only seems serendipitous but fitting that the English translation of Tiqqun's *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl* was issued on the day of my thirteenth birthday. Initially published in 1999, in their seminal text Tiqqun use the *Denkfigur* of the Young-Girl to (re)imagine the ideal capitalist subject: a flattened figure whose identity has been subsumed by capital to the extent to which she can only relate to herself as value. The Young-Girl's self-valorization assumes the form of self-actualization, wherein she deludes herself into a perpetual state of cognitive dissonance – a phenomenon which is ironically referenced in Gerwig's Barbie film – to come to terms with the total reification of her identity under the guise of self-empowerment. As Tiqqun postulate: "Nothing in the identity of the Young-Girl belongs to her, even less her 'youth' than her 'femininity.'" She does not possess attributes; instead, her attributes possess her [...]"<sup>4</sup>. She is the ideal consumer, stuck in a perpetual state of fluorescent adolescence, alienated from her desires and governed by a market-driven ego, an idealized abstraction come to life. Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*, embodied in the objectified body of a girl, spoken for and by the Spectacle<sup>5</sup>.

One can argue that the internet age has made Young-Girls out of the ever-growing number of social media users, who choose their lot among a myriad of corporatized social media apps to curate and present an image that is only tangentially aligned with their away-from-keyboard (abbr. AFK) selves. As scholar Legacy Russell postulates in her prescient manifesto *Glitch Feminism*<sup>6</sup> the distance maintained by the width of a computer screen between the in-real-life (abbr. IRL) self and its URL simulation can provide the space required to (re)imagine and disrupt the binary canons of identity but it can inversely be appropriated to reaffirm and perpetuate the violence of the gender dichotomy as exemplified by the recent proliferation of tradwives<sup>7</sup> online. The internet's obsession with the visage of the Young-Girl Online is a curious yet socio-politically precedented

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<sup>4</sup> Tiqqun, *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*, 53.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Zone Books, 1994.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Russell, Legacy. *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*. London and New York: Verso, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Devin Proctor. "The #tradwife Persona and the Rise of Radicalized White Domesticity." *Persona Studies* 8, no. 2 (2022).

phenomenon whose cultural origins I seek to partially trace back to the emergence of microblogging platforms in the early to late 2010s, by conducting a media-historical analysis of one of the first tumblr blogs exclusively dedicated to curating images representative of the Young-Girl online: *JustGirlyThings*. I traverse how image-based representations of a specific type of girlhood – created and shared by the administrators of the blog themselves with input from their followers – became ubiquitous expressions of a monolithic and quintessential girlhood through the digital commodification of gender.

I start by outlining the relevant terms for my analysis and coining the term ‘Young-Girl Online’ by critically engaging with Tiqqun’s *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*. Herein, I use Foucault’s power-knowledge paradigm, Sara Ahmed’s affect theory, and Judith Butler’s conceptualization of gender as performance as my main points of reference to elaborate on the role of power, affect, and gender in the co-constitution of the ‘Young-Girl Online’. Next, I provide a brief introduction to the history of tumblr as one of the most influential microblogging platforms of the 2010s, as a multiplicitous tumbleblog that facilitated the development of ‘counterpublics’ through content curation via reblogging. I scrutinize the specific ways in which tumblr provided ample ground for the flourishing of internet subcultures and marginalized communities, to give a holistic impression of the digital and cultural environment that led to the emergence of *JustGirlyThings*.

To that end, I conduct a retrospective media analysis by tracing the history of *JustGirlyThings* from its steady rise in popularity in late 2011 to its eventual decline and fade into irrelevancy along with the platform it thrived on in early 2018. I use the *Internet Archive*’s *Wayback Machine* tool to take a cyber trip down memory lane to my adolescent years – mostly spent as a chronically shy and inconsolably awkward teenager huddled in front of a computer. I peruse the digital archive of images curated by *JustGirlyThings*, identify recurring themes, and analyze the affective states generated by their visual motifs. Herein, I use Sara Ahmed’s affect theory<sup>8</sup> and Laura Berlant’s concept of cruel optimism<sup>9</sup> to decipher the visual semiotics of the images curated by *JustGirlyThings* concerning the production and dissemination of gender knowledge online. I use this image analysis to illustrate the cultural impact of *JustGirlyThings* – which I define as one of the first definitive girlblogs to break into the digital mainstream, on visual depictions of feminine identity and girlhood online. To that end, I consider the diaristic function of girlblogs from the perspective of scholar and artist Lauren Fournier’s conceptualization of autotheory as a feminist practice and scrutinize the transgressive potential of *JustGirlyThings* as a participatory

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<sup>8</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. 2nd ed. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011.

documentation of digital gender performance, beyond its perpetuation of white, heteropatriarchal and middle-class gender identity under the guise of universal girlhood.

I describe the curation of images representative of the quintessential ‘things’ – ranging from feminine-coded recreational activities to consumer goods marketed towards young girls and women – purported to be beloved by ‘just girls’ and demonstrate how these captioned images not only bolster a heteropatriarchal performance of girlness but also commodify gender through appeals to what scholar Nina Power calls consumerist feminism. Herein, I use Power’s seminal book *One-Dimensional Woman*<sup>10</sup> to illustrate how neoliberal feminism not only aestheticizes but also appropriates past emancipatory struggles by reducing feminist polemics to the choices of individual women. Thus, I problematize the creative output of *JustGirlyThings* as evocative of this consumerist depoliticization of gender identity as well as gender knowledge. In keeping with this, I map out the affective networks of femininity fostered by the feedback loop between the administrators and the followers of the blog in relation to the curation of gender identity as digital gender capital.

In the penultimate chapter, I consider the impact as well as the enduring legacy of *JustGirlyThings* in relation to contemporary girlblogging practices by briefly delving into the wide range of parody accounts and memes that emerged as a backlash to the blog’s ubiquity online. I inspect how the use of ironic detachment as a means of critiquing *JustGirlyThings*’ curatorial epistemologies of girlhood through parody would veer into casual misogyny that undermined the intelligence and affective agency of self-identified girls. Herein, I trace the memeification of *JustGirlyThings*, back to Tiquun’s coinage of the term Young-Girl, as a means of critiquing capitalist subjectivity, and consider the question of whether the patriarchal archetype of the Young-Girl can really be fully decontextualized from its misogynistic connotations.

In the concluding chapter, I sum up my findings and summarize the extent to which *JustGirlyThings* can be conceived of as an embodiment of the Young-Girl Online. While acknowledging the shortcomings of *JustGirlyThings* in relation to its building and fostering of a digital community based on an affinity-based understanding and production of gender knowledge, I also emphasize its contributions to the digital heteroglossia of girlhood. To that end I argue that the blog’s conflation of gender identity with consumer affinity, while being reflective of the political malaise of the Young-Girl – as described by Tiquun and expanded upon by Nina Power in *One-Dimensional Woman* – also bears potential for inconspicuous articulations of subversive selfhood and community as exemplified by the subtle yet steady incorporation of queerness into its roster of images over time. I consider the extent to which the oeuvre of *JustGirlyThings* is emblematic of

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Nina Power, *One-Dimensional Woman*. Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2009.

Tiqqun's understanding of the Young-Girl as a self-valorizing capitalist subject. Therein, I summarize the entanglement of gender performance, power-knowledge, and the circulation of affect in the construction of a fragmentary yet coherent online identity.

## 2. Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl Online

In 1999, against the nascent backdrop of the worldwide surge third-wave feminism, the French post-Marxist collective Tiqqun published their seminal analysis of the social and affective dimensions of an increasingly feminized capitalist subjectivity under the title *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*. Wherein, they coined the term ‘Young-Girl’ to refer to the subject *par excellence* of the biopolitical control exerted by capitalism on gendered bodies.<sup>11</sup> Describing the current political juncture as an all-out war waged by the imperialist capitalist state – referred to under the moniker of Empire – on all-forms of life under the sun, Tiqqun situate the Young-Girl as a *vision machine* within the battlefield, one that lends itself to manipulation by both sides and thus can be (re)oriented for the purposes of the opposition. In between the metaphorically loaded aphorisms reminiscent of Guy Debord’s Situationist treatise *Society of the Spectacle*<sup>12</sup> and the ominous call to action to annihilate Empire’s mediation of public expressions of desire through the Spectacle, Tiqqun identify the Young-Girl as the anthropomorphization of capital: a figure in whom the ill-defined line between model consumer and ideal citizen is effaced as social relations become increasingly commodified and self-identity turns into a matter of self-valorization:

“The Young-Girl would thus be the being that no longer has any intimacy with herself *except as value*, and whose every activity, in every detail, is directed to self-valorization. At each moment, she affirms herself as the *sovereign subject* of her own reification.”<sup>13</sup>

Despite the term’s gendered connotations and evocation of Simone De Beauvoir’s seminal delineation of girlhood as a “[...] discrete stage of woman’s lived experience marking a newly sexualized phase of learning gender roles”,<sup>14</sup> Tiqqun position the Young-Girl as a strictly agender figure, representative of the ideal postwar consumerist subject. However, this notion contradicts the scope of their analysis, which focuses almost exclusively on the glossy pages of French women’s magazines. Tiqqun’s aphoristic manifesto mockingly parodies the specious bits of gendered wisdom touted by these magazines as a means of deconstructing the affective artifice of a society increasingly dominated by commodity fetishism. In that they inadvertently reveal their own preconceived biases and prejudices towards the *Denkfigur* of the Young-Girl, who though purported to be absolved from the restrictions imposed by the gender binary, is nonetheless

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Jen Kennedy “The Young-Girl in Theory.” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 25, no. 2 (May 4, 2015): 176.

<sup>12</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Zone Books, 1994.

<sup>13</sup> Tiqqun, *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*, 18 (emphasis in original).

<sup>14</sup> Catherine Driscoll, “The Mystique of the Young Girl,” *Feminist Theory* 14, no. 3 (December 2013): 288.

subject to misogynistic vilification by her makers under the guise of anti-capitalist critique. Scholar Nina Power criticizes Tiqqun's condescension of the Young-Girl through their overdependence on gender stereotypes and repeated use of gendered language by asking:

"What, ultimately, would it mean to let the Young-Girl speak for herself and not through the categories imposed upon her by a culture that heralds her as the metaphysical apex of civilization while simultaneously denigrating her, or even the categories that Tiqqun mobilize to take her apart in a subtly different way?"<sup>15</sup>

In keeping with this argument, I problematize Tiqqun's negation of the patriarchal co-constitution of gender by incorporating Sarah Ahmed's affect theory, Foucault's power-knowledge paradigm and Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity into my definition of the Young-Girl Online. Using Foucault's triangulation of "Desire, Value and Simulacra"<sup>16</sup> in relation to Tiqqun's text as a foundational theoretical guide, I define the Young-Girl Online along the epistemological axes of affect, power-knowledge and gender, as a discursively constructed, self-valorizing and fragmented political subject who toes the precarious line between URL and IRL selfhoods within affective digital economies of desire.

## **2.1 Desire / Affect**

In *Preliminary Materials* Tiqqun frequently reference the manifestations of the Young-Girl's desire within the context of the capitalist profit economy. Extrapolating Guy Debord's seminal definition of the Spectacle as an objectified social relation among people that is mediated by mass produced images<sup>17</sup>, Tiqqun describe the concrete ways in which subjects become alienated from their own authentic desires under capitalism through the market-driven logic of commodity fetishism: wherein mimetic desire becomes the primary driving principle of self-consciousness and images representative of the sociopolitical condition of the capitalist subject subsume reality. To that end, Tiqqun position the Young-Girl as the most fundamental social relation that embodies "[...] the desire of desire of the Spectacle [...]."<sup>18</sup> In that, they present her as the model consumer-subject who possesses no subjectivity outside of her relation to the capitalist market of commodified desire. In other words, the Young-Girl is a subject insofar as she consumes and remains oblivious to the material conditions that (re)produce her desire (i.e. drive her to consume). Hence, Tiqqun

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<sup>15</sup> Nina Power, "She's Just Not That into You," *Radical Philosophy*, no. 177 (2013), <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/reviews/individual-reviews/rp177-shes-just-not-that-into-you>

<sup>16</sup> Jen Kennedy, "The Young-Girl in Theory," 176.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Zone Books, 1994, 2.

<sup>18</sup> Tiqqun, *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*, 62.

postulate that a subject whose desire has been fully submerged in the constant circulation and mass consumption of commodities is eventually driven to join them as a commodity herself:

“The Young-Girl’s desire to convert herself into a sign simply expresses her desire to belong at all costs to the society of non-belonging. [...] The Young-Girl is the one who has preferred to become a commodity, rather than passively suffer its tyranny.”<sup>19</sup>

Scholar Jenn Kennedy elaborates on the broader cultural implications of the complicity of the Young-Girl’s desire in her own commodification by asserting: “She is desire that is always part of a networked economy, desire that is a negotiation constantly being calibrated with the imaginary desires we perceive in others.”<sup>20</sup> Within this framework, the Young-Girl emerges as a subject without a fixed-identity from which to navigate her desire, for it is always in flux – constantly adjusting to the market forces that shape its object.

The flattening of the Young-Girl’s desire, through constant circulation, involves an emotional layer that, though not explicitly thematized in Tiqqun’s original text, is evoked through the affective language they use to urge the reader to take the case of the Young-Girl seriously. To that end, the American scholarly duo Heather Warren-Crow and Andrea Jonsson highlight the affective impact of Tiqqun’s text on the reader by considering their strategic word choice in *Young-Girls in Echoland: #Theorizing Tiqqun*.<sup>21</sup> For Warren Crow and Jonsson, Tiqqun’s departure from a conventional philosophical argument in favor of “grinding iterations”<sup>22</sup> in the form of affective aphorisms plays a central role in the text’s conceptualization of the Young-Girl as a “non-being”<sup>23</sup>: an empty abstraction devoid of a distinct personality. Thus, the repetitive form and the disjointed structure of the text frustrate the reader into parsing through its garbled “trash-theory”<sup>24</sup> to deduce a coherent argument and subsequently respond to its call to action. This imbuing of words with affective urgency that accumulate through reiteration is reflective of the overarching role played by affect in Tiqqun’s conceptualization of the Young-Girl.

To illustrate this point, I draw on Sarah Ahmed’s affect theory in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, in which she applies the Marxian logic of capital to emotion through her conceptualization of affective economies. Ahmed refuses the idea that emotions can be reduced to distinct social and psychological processes stimulated within individual and collective bodies. Instead, she defines

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 72ff.

<sup>20</sup> Jen Kennedy, “The Young-Girl in Theory,” 182.

<sup>21</sup> Andrea Jonsson and Heather Warren-Crow, *Young-Girls in Echoland #Theorizing Tiqqun*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press–Forerunners, 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Andrea Jonsson and Heather Warren-Crow, *Young-Girls in Echoland #Theorizing Tiqqun*, 33ff.

<sup>23</sup> Tiqqun, *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*, 43.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 21.

emotion as a form of politically informed cultural practice, which produces “[...] the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, emotions function as a kind of world-making that defines the contours of a seemingly objective outside and inside (i.e. the individual psyche and the social collective). Through emotions, one perceives oneself to be interacting with an object outside oneself, which in turn shapes their own body as a realm of action. Thus, Ahmed stipulates that emotions aren’t akin to fixed bodily characteristics in that they cannot be definitively possessed but rather reacted through and impressed upon other seemingly “outside” surfaces:

“Emotions shape the very surfaces of bodies, which take shape through the repetition of actions over time, as well as through orientations towards and away from others. Indeed, attending to emotions might show us how all actions are reactions, in the sense that what we do is shaped by the contact we have with others.”<sup>26</sup>

Incorporating movement into her definition of emotion – whose etymological origins she traces back to the Latin verb *emovere* meaning ‘to move, to move out’ – Ahmed argues that emotions “[...] work as a form of capital,”<sup>27</sup> in that their objects accrue affective value through circulation over time. She refers to this conversion of signs and commodities into affect through movement as the “affective economies of emotion”.<sup>28</sup> Affective economies of emotion implicate the rudimentary notion that emotions don’t inhabit subjects or objects but rather emanate through continuous movement, thus rendering the subjective body merely a “[...] nodal point in the economy, rather than its origin and destination.”<sup>29</sup>

Applying this theoretical framework to the figure of the Young-Girl, one finds that the images that mediate her flattened subjectivity and commodified desire bear an affective dimension. Simply put, the Young-Girl’s desire pulls her towards commodified objects, establishing an affective relation between herself as the desire subject and the commodity as the desire object. The more these desired objects circulate between bodies and signs, the more they gain in affective value. Herein, Ahmed postulates that recurring objects of desire become oversaturated with affect as a consequence of their frequent circulation, making them ‘sticky’ with emotion. Sticky objects are imbued with affect, in that they evoke and sustain a connection between preconceived ideas, values and feelings that gives the impression of an intrinsic attribute.<sup>30</sup> For example, in Tiqqun’s

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<sup>25</sup> Ahmed Sarah, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 10.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Sara Ahmed, “Happy Objects,” in *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.

*Preliminary Materials* the word 'virgin' emerges as a prominent sticky object that emphasizes the precocious naiveté of the Young-Girl in relation to her budding sexuality. Thus, the gendered connotation of the word binds itself to the theoretical conceptualization of the Young-Girl as a definitive marker of her being. To that end, emotions not only shape but also concretize perceptions of reality through the circulation of such sticky objects, which are nonetheless contingent on overarching power relations that constitute knowledge.

## **2.2 Value / Power-knowledge**

Coined by French sociologist Michel Foucault, power-knowledge refers to the institutionalized interdependence of power relations and knowledge production, whereby power operates in the ratification processes of information, leading to the creation of a seemingly objective truth based on verified facts<sup>31</sup>. Through power-knowledge, Foucault draws attention to the intertwining of struggles over political power and the material conditions of thought production. Going against the grain of the Western myth of the brilliant albeit isolated creative genius who changes the course of history through their contributions to the collective well of wisdom, Foucault questions the ways in which the dominant ideologies at a given moment in time constitute what comes to be known as fact. In that, he contends that the specific mechanisms by which knowledge is produced and disseminated within the human sciences – where he situates his own work – require scrutiny for their construction of 'man' as the primary object of scientific investigation. Despite the purportedly self-evident methodologies of the humanities, Foucault asserts that knowledge both derived from and about man as a scientific object relies on exclusionary practices that engender overarching power relations, wherein those perceived as authorized experts within a given field determine what is true. As scholar Sara Mills writes on the role of power-knowledge in the substantiation of truth:

"Foucault characterises power/knowledge as an abstract force which determines what will be known, rather than assuming that individual thinkers develop ideas and knowledge. [...] in Foucault's vision, it is power/knowledge which produces facts and the individual scholars are simply the vehicles or the sites where this knowledge is produced."<sup>32</sup>

In other words, the production and subsequent circulation of what comes to be known as knowledge are contingent on a wide stratum of factors, ranging from verification processes conducted by those with institutional authority to sociohistorically anchored sets of rules and structures which Foucault defines as discourse. In Foucauldian terms, a discourse is "[...] the

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<sup>31</sup> Michel Foucault, "Prison Talk," in *Power / Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon. New York: Pantheon Books, 1981.

<sup>32</sup> Sara Mills, *Michel Foucault*. Critical Thinkers Series. London: Routledge, 2003, 70.

general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a certain number of statements [...]”<sup>33</sup>, which determines what comes to be accepted as true and thus shapes our perception of life. Discourses impose a preconceived structure on reality, through which we categorize and interpret our experiences of the material world. Hence, they not only determine how we differentiate between true and false but also how we conceive of truth in the first place. As Foucault asserts:

“‘Truth’ is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements [...] [which] is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it.”<sup>34</sup>

Discourses are closely aligned with power-knowledge, insofar as they contribute to the cementing of facts as universally acknowledged truths through their wider circulation. This begs the question of who is considered an object worthy of scientific scrutiny and why. To that end, Mills extrapolates on Foucault’s notion that knowledge production inheres a claim to power, by stipulating that institutionalized power imbalances ultimately lead to the objectification of those in less powerful positions, whereby marginalized groups of people – such as women and racial minorities – become the *de facto* objects of epistemological investigation<sup>35</sup>.

Tiqqun’s instrumentalization of the Young-Girl as a means of leftist anti-capitalist *Systemkritik* is reflective of this rhetoric insofar as it evokes socioculturally anchored misogynistic archetypes of women and young girls to raise consciousness around – and subsequently produce knowledge about – the ills of capitalist consumerism. As Moira Weigel and Mal Ahern point out in their scathing critique of *Preliminary Materials*<sup>36</sup>, Tiqqun characterize the Young-Girl as the locus point of consumer capitalism’s assault on the loosely defined spheres of youth and femininity: the former encompassing the newly emerged category of non-working adolescents with a disposable income, and the latter referring to the reproductive labor socially ascribed to women. Weigel and Ahern contend that Tiqqun conflate the Young-Girl with the object of their criticism because she is situated in the conjunction of these spheres. That is to say, the Young-Girl is inherently complicit in the reproduction of the systems that simultaneously oppress and maintain her flattened subjectivity, so misogyny becomes a prerequisite of effective political critique:

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<sup>33</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1972, 80.

<sup>34</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power / Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon. New York: Pantheon Books, 1981, 133.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Sara Mills, *Michel Foucault*. Critical Thinkers Series. London: Routledge, 2003, 69.

<sup>36</sup> Moira Weigel and Mal Ahern, “Further Materials Toward a Theory of the Man-Child,” *The New Inquiry* (blog), July 9, 2013, <https://thenewinquiry.com/further-materials-toward-a-theory-of-the-man-child/>.

"[...] [The Young-Girl] serves the traditional female role of reproducing the population and social order, but here, the social order is corrupt. Therefore, Tiqqun suggests, their intervention *requires* an ironic performance of misogyny. [...] Claiming that its mastery of the misogynist philosophical tradition entitles it to do this, Tiqqun steps into what looks a lot like an old-fashioned patriarchal role."<sup>37</sup>

In keeping with this argument, the Young-Girl emerges as a gendered *Denkfigur* that is frequently invoked in critical theory to criticize the crises of the degendered individual under late-stage capitalism. In that, she is not only informed by sexist preconceptions about young women and girls, but also reflective of the overarching patriarchal power relations that pervade leftist political discourse. In other words, "[...] *Theory of the Young-Girl* reproduces the men-as-political-agents/women-as-objects dynamic that undergirds so much of Marxist theory [...]"<sup>38</sup> through its condescension of the Young-Girl as a submissive, acquisitive and frivolous *jeune fille*. Whereby the Young-Girl not only affirms the dominant perception of young women and girls as innately oblivious to their subjugation to the Spectacle powers that be but also upholds the very patriarchal asymmetries of power its makers claim to subvert.

*Preliminary Materials* reduces the problem of consumer capitalism to the societally predicated condition of the Young-Girl, rendering her simultaneously a victim of her own commodified desire and a scapegoat for the pervasive hegemony of capitalism.<sup>39</sup> The blatant misogynistic assumptions embedded in and evoked by the signifier of Young-Girl raise the inevitable question of why one would nonetheless refer to it to consolidate the commodification of subjectivity within the context of neoliberal capitalism.

Mirroring Tiqqun's appropriation of neoliberal girl culture to commentate on and oppose societal hegemonies of capitalist power, I see value in recalibrating our *a priori* assumptions about the Young-Girl as a subject *sans* subjectivity; thereby rethinking her position in critical theory, not as a degendered object of inquiry, but as a gendered subject of knowledge production. I agree with Jen Kennedy's cautiously optimistic thesis that feminist critiques of Tiqqun's original concept are not only justified but also provide ample ground for the reappropriation of the figure of the Young-Girl as a strictly gendered signifier that can be further developed and experimented with in anti-capitalist feminist discourse. Taking inspiration from feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz's strategic redirection of Deleuze and Guattari's theoretical framework to pose questions and capture insights that don't necessarily align with their conclusions, Kennedy argues: "Just as Tiqqun detourns the Young-Girl, feminism may also detourn Tiqqun."<sup>40</sup> This so-called

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<sup>37</sup> Moira Weigel and Mal Ahern, "Further Materials Toward a Theory of the Man-Child," *The New Inquiry* (blog).

<sup>38</sup> Jen Kennedy, "The Young-Girl in Theory," 177.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Moira Weigel and Mal Ahern, "Further Materials Toward a Theory of the Man-Child," *The New Inquiry* (blog).

<sup>40</sup> Jen Kennedy, "The Young-Girl in Theory," 177.

*détournement* requires the incorporation of a third and final theoretical dimension to contextualize the Young-Girl within the simulacra-laden media landscape of the digital age: that ever-elusive and much-contested structural category we call gender.

### **2.3 Simulacra / Gender**

In 1990, American philosopher Judith Butler made waves within and beyond academic circles with the publication of *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, a seminal post-structuralist work on the innately performative constitution of gender identity. Interweaving Foucault's genealogies of power with structuralist, psychoanalytic and feminist theory, in *Gender Trouble* Butler criticize the mission of contemporary feminist practice to reduce women to univocal and categorically stable subjects through political representation. Instead, they argue that women like all political subjects, are always discursively constructed and maintained by the very structures of juridical power that claim to represent them. Invoking Foucault's definition of power as a productive force, Butler assert that representative systems of political power produce their subjects through exclusionary practices of categorization that are implemented to create the impression of an *a priori* political subject before the law. Thus, the discursive formation of the political subject through the exertion of juridical power becomes obfuscated – or in Butler's words naturalized – by the hegemony of the juridical structure (i.e. the law). Following this line of thought, Butler argue for a radical reevaluation of the category of "women" as the primary subject of feminism through an analysis of the power structures that establish it as a common identity within representational politics. Hence, they postulate that a rethinking of identity beyond the restrictive masculine/feminine gender binary is imperative for feminist representational politics to realize its emancipatory goal:

"The identity of the feminist subject ought not to be the foundation of feminist politics, if the formation of the subject takes place within a field of power regularly buried through the assertion of that foundation. Perhaps, paradoxically, "representation" will be shown to make sense for feminism only when the subject of 'women' is nowhere presumed."<sup>41</sup>

Herein, identity refers to the complex, contested, fluctuating markers of individuation which underlie subjectivity<sup>42</sup> that simultaneously reflect shared characteristics among a given group of

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<sup>41</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. 10th anniversary ed. New York: Routledge, 1999, 9.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Lynne Segal, "After Judith Butler: Identities, Who Needs Them?" *Subjectivity* 25, no. 1 (2008): 385.

people.<sup>43</sup> To that end, Butler explore the extent to which “identity” functions as a normative ideal rather than a description of a confluence of naturalized characteristics attributed to individuals.

For Butler a thorough definition of gender ought to precede that of identity as people only become intelligible individuals through conforming to societally anchored gender norms. Herein, they describe regulatory practices which seek to maintain a naturalized coherence between biological sex and gender identity (i.e. a gender identity that derives from and aligns with sex) as articulations of political power, insofar as they exclude and prohibit “specters of discontinuity and incoherence”<sup>44</sup> between gender expression and sexual practice. In that, Butler attribute the imposition of this naturalized continuity between sex and gender to the binary paradigm of compulsory heterosexuality, wherein the internal univocity of both the masculine and the feminine gender is predicated on their mutual opposition:

“The institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire.”<sup>45</sup>

In keeping with this argument, Butler draw on Foucault’s writings on the nineteenth century the “hermaphrodite” Herculine Barbin<sup>46</sup> to suggest that there is no abiding substance to gender identity that preexists a repertoire of “free floating” attributes culturally ascribed to masculinity or femininity. Hence, the idea of a naturally given gender coherence is thrown into disarray through the normative framework that produces gender by assigning femininity to female bodies and masculinity to male bodies. In other words, Butler contend that gender must be thought beyond the ontological constraints imposed on it as a naturalized category of identity for “[...] [gender] identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results.”<sup>47</sup> To that end, performativity becomes the discursive means through which gender is perceived as inherent to the subject.<sup>48</sup>

This begs the question of how Butler’s idea of gender as a discursively constructed performance that is bound by the imposed limitations of language and cultural convention contribute to my overarching definition of the Young-Girl Online. Paraphrasing Nietzsche, Butler

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<sup>43</sup> Cf. Sebastian Gießmann, *Identifizieren: Theorie und Geschichte einer Medienpraktik*, SFB 1187 Medien der Kooperation – Working Paper Series 17 (Siegen: Universität Siegen, SFB 1187 Medien der Kooperation, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/15372>

<sup>44</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 23.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Michel Foucault, “Introduction,” in *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite*, trans. Richard McDougall. New York: Pantheon Books, 1980.

<sup>47</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 33.

<sup>48</sup> Judith Butler, “Gender as Performance: An Interview with Judith Butler,” interview by Lynne Segal and Peter Osborne, *Radical Philosophy*, no. 67 (Summer 1994).

assert that there is no “doer behind the deed”<sup>49</sup> of gender; that is to say, there is no such thing as a prediscursive subject that preexists gender performativity, for gender begets subjectivity. This argument invokes Baudrillard’s notion of the simulacrum as a sign that obscures the absence of what it signifies.<sup>50</sup> Applying Butler’s theory of performativity to the Young-Girl one finds that gender functions as a simulacrum – a sign whose ‘essence’ lies in perpetual (re)iteration. In other words, the gendered subject exists insofar as it repeatedly enacts and conforms to gendered norms. Accordingly, the ontology of the Young-Girl as a gendered figure depends on her perceived embodiment of femininity through repeated performance. Taking Tiqqun’s misogynistic conflation of femininity with consumerist frivolity at face value, the more the Young-Girl succumbs to the material temptations of lifestyle capitalism the more “feminine” she is perceived to be and thus becomes. But how to account for a transposition of Tiqqun’s *Denkfigur* onto the liminal space between IRL and URL realms i.e. the digital sphere?

Within the simulacra-laden landscape of the internet, the Young-Girl Online emerges as a diligent curator of hyperlinked images that make up her feminine subjectivity. Unlike in Tiqqun’s original IRL concept, the Young-Girl Online performs her consumption through curation, in that she becomes a collector of digital signifiers – cursors if you will – that point her in the direction of herself. English multidisciplinary artist and writer Joanna Walsh illustrates this point through her personal account of coming of age on the internet as a young girl in *Girl Online: A User Manual*:

“Looking for identity online, I become an example to myself. I am shown the self-similar, similar to the self the algorithms I enter record, until I am like what I like onscreen. On Tumblr, Instagram, Pinterest I am making a self through photographs of things that self would like to have.”<sup>51</sup>

Hence, the Young-Girl Online’s gender performativity entails a double abstraction: her transgression of the material confines of a fixed IRL gendered body combined with the fluid anonymity of the internet allows her more leeway to explore the full scope of her gender expression. That is to say, while the Young-Girl IRL might circumscribe her perception of reality in the Butlerian sense by conforming to the societally imposed, naturalized hierarchy of gender AFK, her online counterpart has the option to claim the full range of gender expression by swimming against the immaterial current of the binary canon.

Curator and writer Legacy Russell expands on this digital freedom to shapeshift and transmogrify one’s gender expression – via AOL chatrooms or niche microblogs – through the

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<sup>49</sup> Cf. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Shelia Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994, 6.

<sup>51</sup> Joanna Walsh, *Girl Online: A User Manual*. 1st ed. London and New York: Verso, 2022, 11.

disruptive potential of the glitch in her prescient cyberfeminist manifesto *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*<sup>52</sup>. According to Russell, a glitch is an acute “failure to function” that encompasses a built-in machinic anxiety and reveals the inherent vulnerability of the organizational systems we take for granted. In other words, a glitch is a pesky wrinkle in the otherwise silky smooth fabric of the digital realm that threatens to spill over and disrupt the epistemological taxonomies of the AFK world. For if the structural imposition of gender as identity category becomes obsolete within the cyberrealm, how can the naturalized gender coherence of the IRL body be effectively maintained? Because “[t]he glitch acknowledges that gendered bodies are far from absolute but rather an imaginary, manufactured and commodified for capital,”<sup>53</sup> it acknowledges AFK gender performance to be just that: a discursively constructed performance. Hence, unlike her IRL counterpart the Young-Girl Online represents the potential not only of transmogrification but also rebellion against the rigid identity categories that threaten to confine her within the misogynistic archetype of the clueless yet precocious girl-consumer-subject who is happy to be sold her own commodification.<sup>54</sup>

To give succinct summary of the all the theoretical dimensions I have heretofore explored in outlining the figure of the Young-Girl Online: She not only *invokes* but also *evokes* emotions through the affective circulation of signs; though initially conceived as a gender-neutral object of *Systemkritik*, feminist critiques of Tiqqun’s formulation have convincingly shown her to be an irreducibly gendered *Denkfigur* through which power is exerted and knowledge produced about the flattened desires of the capitalist subject. Finally like all gendered subjects she exists insofar as she is perceived to be discursively (re)producing her gender through performance, which situated within the wider context of the digital realm (i.e. the internet), threatens the stability of gender as a naturalized identity category altogether. To venture beyond the immaterial terrain of feminist critical theory and apply my definition of the Young-Girl Online to the depiction of gender in contemporary microblogging practices, a brief description of the history and user cultures of tumblr as a microblogging platform becomes necessary.

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<sup>52</sup> Cf. Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*. London and New York: Verso, 2020.

<sup>53</sup> Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*, 10.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Lydia Eliza Trail, “What It Feels Like for a Post-Girl,” *Dazed MENA*, July 19, 2025, <https://www.dazed.me/tech/what-it-feels-like-for-a-post-girl>.

### 3. A Brief History of tumblr

In February 2007, three years after the launch of Facebook, self-taught web developer and budding tech-entrepreneur David Karp unleashed a new microblogging platform into the world, where users could curate their own corner of the internet by designing a customizable blog under a personalized domain name: Thus, tumblr was born.<sup>55</sup> Named after the ‘tumbleblogs’ of the early days of the blogosphere – the initial name given to short-form blogs that featured stream-of-consciousness-like mixed-media posts<sup>56</sup> – tumblr came of age at a time when the burst of the dot-com bubble in the early 2000s was giving way to the emergence of a new digital market force to be reckoned with: social media platforms. Following in the footsteps of Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg and Twitter-whiz-kid Jack Dorsey, Karp built tumblr as an open-ended and easy-to-use blog publishing platform that incorporated a variety of digital media forms into its roster of shareable content. From elaborate GIF sets to embedded audiovisual content, the appeal of tumblr lay in the versatility of the content it could host as well as its flexibility as a microblogging platform that didn’t require any prior know-how for users to effectively create and customize their blogs.<sup>57</sup> Unlike his predecessors, Karp envisioned tumblr as a digital platform for and by creatives that was significantly easier to master than long-form blogging sites such as LiveJournal or Blogger but also less restrictive in its scope of what it allowed users to share than its recent counterparts like Facebook and X (formerly known as Twitter).

From its very beginnings, tumblr was positioned as a countercultural social media platform that prioritized creative control and meaningful user engagement over the more practical social networking applications of its competitors. The aesthetic emphasis on multimedia content played a major role in tumblr’s popularization as a ‘digital scrapbook’, that users could collectively curate through reblogging: a one-button function that allows users to not only republish content they liked on their blog but also to share it with their followers.<sup>58</sup> The instant reproduction of multimedia content through reblogging coupled with Karp’s artsy, anti-Silicon-Valley sensibilities led to the flourishing of youth subcultures and disenfranchised, marginalized communities on the platform. Tumblr’s affinity-based interface provided those pushed to the periphery of society with an online safe space, in which they could come together to form digital communities based on mutual

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<sup>55</sup>FastCompany, “David Karp: When It All Came Together”, Posted December 12, 2011, YouTube video, 2:37, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gHU1pSHAisE>

<sup>56</sup> Lauren Cosgrove, “Why Is Tumblr Called Tumblr?” *Rewind & Capture*, June 29, 2015, <https://www.rewindandcapture.com/why-is-tumblr-called-tumblr/>

<sup>57</sup> Sammy Davis, “So What Do You Do, David Karp, Founder of Tumblr?” *Mediabistro*, 2015, <https://www.mediabistro.com/interviews/so-what-do-you-do-david-karp-founder-of-tumblr/>.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Allison McCracken, Alexander Cho, Louisa Stein, and Indira Hoch, “You Must Be New Here: An Introduction,” in *A Tumblr Book: Platform and Cultures*. ed. Allison McCracken, Alexander Cho, Louisa Stein, and Indira Hoch (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020), 5.

interests and express themselves creatively through the sharing of multimedia content. In time, tumblr's liberal/ progressive streak became one of its defining features as a microblogging platform, so much so that in the early-to-late 2010s it had practically become synonymous with the online social justice movement through its facilitation of esoteric digital counterpublics that ranged from LGBTQ+ fandoms to self-employed sex workers.<sup>59</sup> As Allison McCracken et al. point out in *A Tumblr Book: Platform and Cultures*, from its tentative rise in the late 2000s to its eventual downfall in the late 2010s "[t]he experience of Tumblr [has been and] is the experience of multiplicity,"<sup>60</sup> so it's no wonder that a plethora of its pseudonymous users perceived the platform as a progressive alternative to the digital panopticon of the more conventional social networking sites such as Facebook and Instagram.

Tumblr's tendency to harbor digital counterpublics is not only reflected in the platform cultures developed by its politically conscious and diverse user base but also in the unique opacity of its two-part interface and in-platform features. To elucidate the interdependence of user experience and platform interfaces, in the following chapter I will conduct a closer inspection of tumblr's technical structure.

### **3.1 Lost in the Dash: Interfaces and Features**

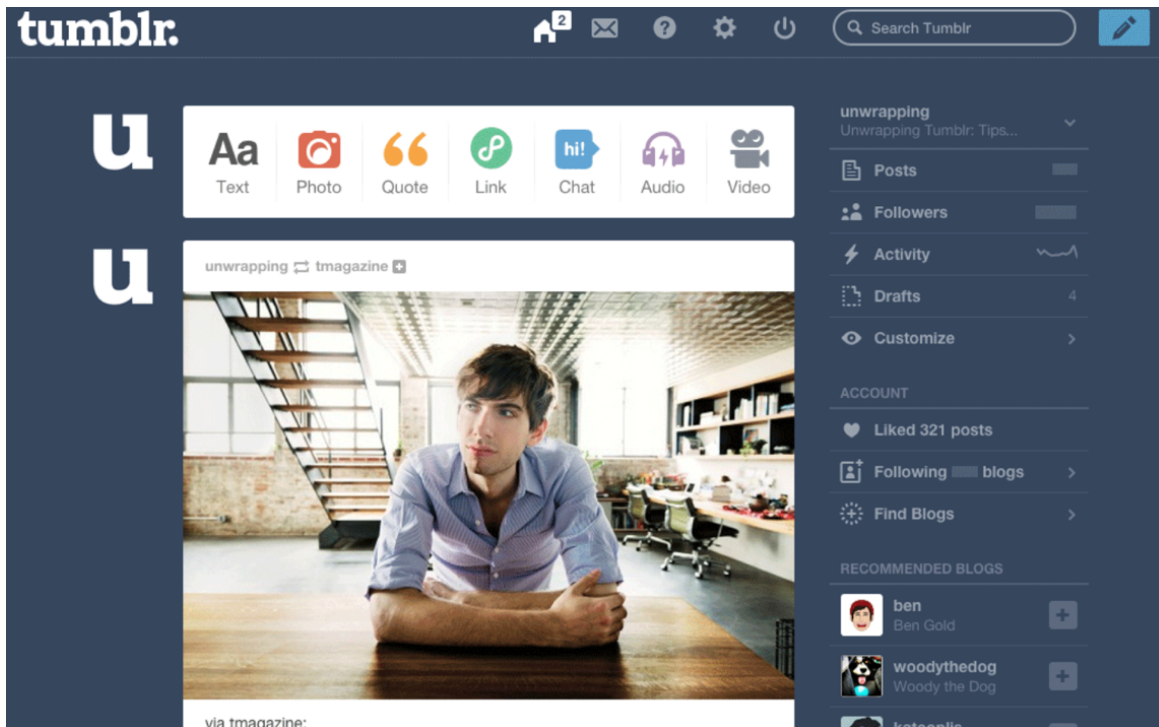
Once you have signed up to become a part of the tumblr community, the website welcomes you into the galaxy blue interface of the 'Dashboard' (abbrv. Dash): an infinitely scrollable reverse chronological feed of posts (re)published by users one follows. Unlike the algorithm-driven timelines of Facebook, Instagram and X (formerly known as Twitter), tumblr's Dashboard remains hitherto untainted by corporate greed to maximize profits by manipulating social media users' ever-shrinking attention spans through personalized 'For You' feeds.<sup>61</sup> Although the most recent version of the Dash includes a 'For You' tab (see *Figure 2*), this fundamentally differs from the algorithmically curated and non-linear timelines of TikTok and Meta platforms. Instead of a constant barrage of algorithmically optimized short-form content, the 'For You' Dash presents a mixture of posts from one's followed blogs and affinity-based suggestions, in chronological order.

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<sup>59</sup> Cf. Allison McCracken et al., *A Tumblr Book: Platform and Cultures*, 9.

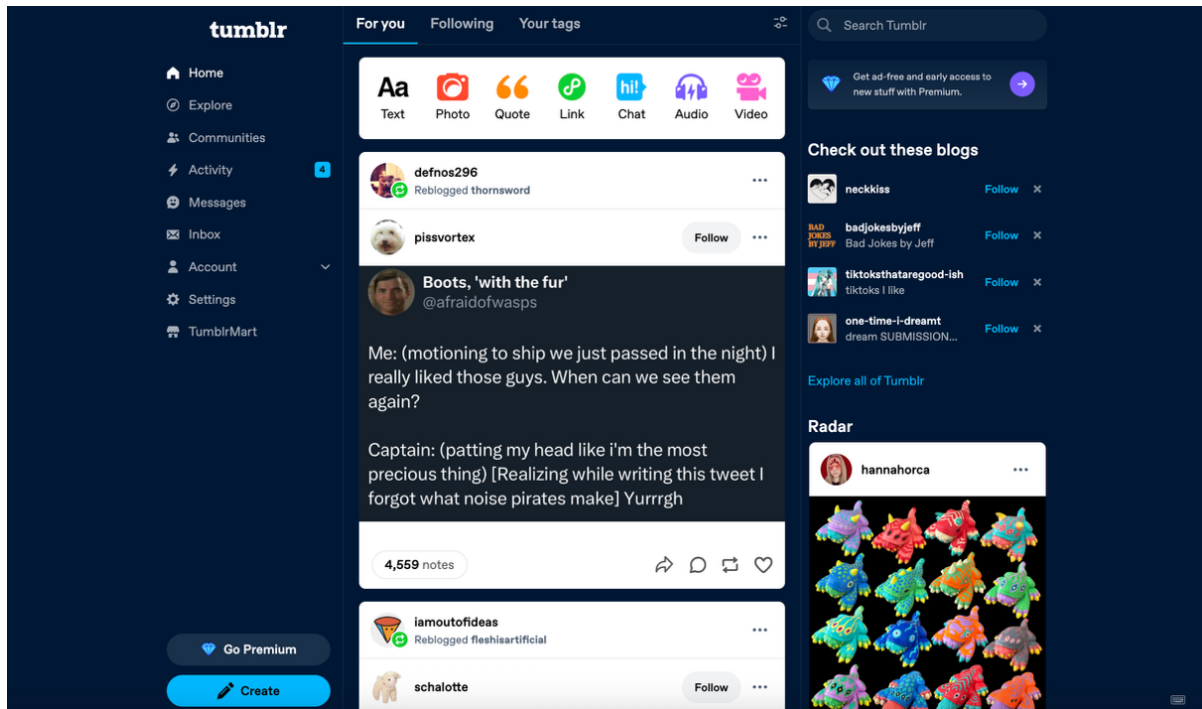
<sup>60</sup> Allison McCracken et al., *A Tumblr Book: Platform and Cultures*, 3.

<sup>61</sup> Kyle Chayka, "How Tumblr Became Popular for Being Obsolete," *Infinite Scroll*, *The New Yorker*, January 14, 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/infinite-scroll/how-tumblr-became-popular-for-being-obsolete>



**Figure 1:** Screenshot of *unwrapping's* Dashboard, October 2014.

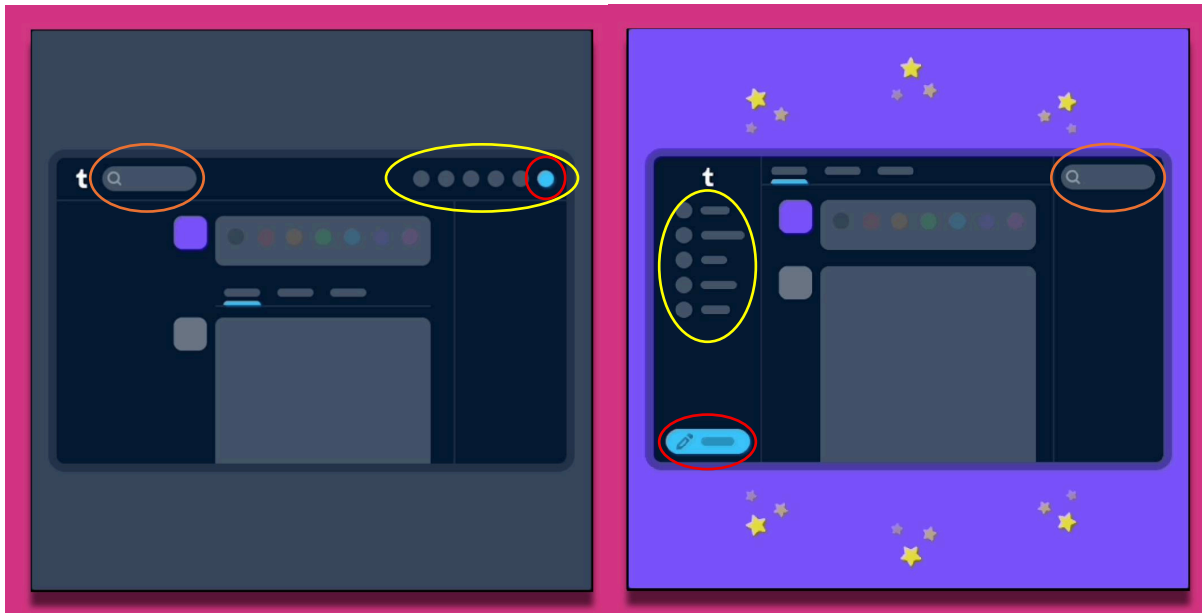
Herein, it is important to note that although the main function and features of the Dashboard have remained relatively unchanged since tumblr's initial launch in 2007, its interface has gone through major redesigns to the all-round dismay of its users. The most recent of which came about in the summer of 2023, when tumblr rolled out a new web interface of the Dashboard (*Figure 2*), eerily similar to X's UX design.



*Figure 2: Screenshot of the author's own tumblr Dashboard, August 2025.*

The redesign switched out the top-hand navigation menu with graphic icons for a more mobile friendly toolbar on the lefthand side and moved the create a post button to the bottom left (*Figure 3*). For veteran tumblr users, who lamented the impending “Twitterification” of their beloved site, these changes ultimately made the Dashboard feel too cluttered and less intuitive to navigate.<sup>62</sup> Although recent updates to the tumblr interface aren’t the focal point of this master’s thesis, which is chiefly concerned with the platform’s user cultures between 2011–2018, the broader implications of its redesign remain relevant, in so far as they elucidate the interrelation between users’ affective attachment to the site and the design of the Dashboard interface.

<sup>62</sup> hyster1a, “how to fix dashboard layout?” *Reddit*, August 12, 2023, [https://www.reddit.com/r/tumblrhelp/comments/15p84l8/how\\_to\\_fix\\_dashboard\\_layout/](https://www.reddit.com/r/tumblrhelp/comments/15p84l8/how_to_fix_dashboard_layout/)



**Figure 3:** Side by side comparison of the old (on the left) and the new (on the right) Dashboard designs, Tchradar, August 2023

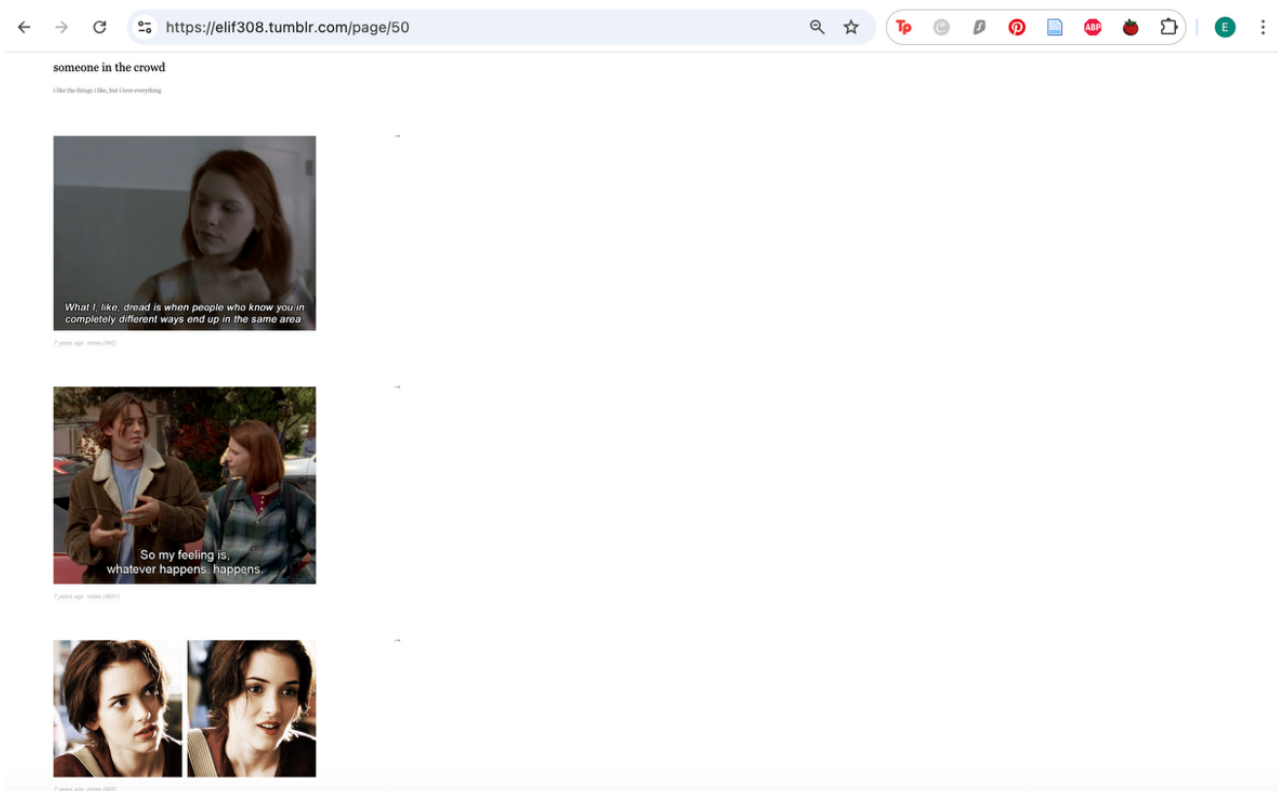
The public-facing blogs of individual users – accessible via the URL [username].tumblr.com – make up the second part of tumblr’s basic twofold user interface (*Figure 4*). These customizable personal blogs, colloquially referred to as ‘tumblrs’, are where reblogged content gets displayed for all to see, followers and non-followers alike. Through reblogging tumblr prioritizes content curation over creation,<sup>63</sup> whereby users can interact with published posts of myriad formats in-real time; tailoring them to the aesthetic sensibilities and creative expectations of their imagined audience through additional input and commentary. Long before the ill-fated implementation of the retweet button on X, reblogging had become a mainstay function of tumblr, designed to channel content-induced feedback loops among users via public facing comment threads called ‘notes’.<sup>64</sup> According to Karp the idea for the reblog button originated from a desire to have a built-in feedback mechanism that allowed input from users engaging with the content circulating in cyberspace, all the while keeping the meaning of the original post intact:

<sup>63</sup> Nicholas Proferes and Katherine E. Morrissey, “Lost in the “Dash”: How Tumblr Fosters Virtuous Cycles of Content and Community,” in *A Tumblr Book: Platform and Cultures*, ed. Allison McCracken, Alexander Cho, Louisa Stein, and Indira Hoch (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020), 30.

<sup>64</sup> It is of note that during the writing of this master’s thesis Instagram incorporated their version of the reblog button into the app’s interface through the option to automatically ‘reshare’ content with one’s followers, thus underlining the enduring relevance and impact of Karp’s contribution to the microblogging format.

“We realized we needed some mechanism for feedback... To say something you had to have your own soapbox over here and take what I say and you wrap your commentary around it. You're not allowed to just show up and say I'm a jerk. It's much harder to twist my words.”<sup>65</sup>

Reblogging then was conceived of as a means of combatting digital contextomy: the practice of distorting the meaning of one's words by taking them out of the context in which they were typed and shared.<sup>66</sup> It is all the more ironic then that the reblog's arguably more well-known successor 'the retweet' has ostensibly become one of the most powerful tools for spreading misinformation online by reproducing quotes out of context en masse.<sup>67</sup>



**Figure 4:** Screenshot of the author's own tumblr, August 2025.

While onymous social media platforms based on reciprocal interaction like the Meta platforms Instagram and Facebook impose a self-surveilling gaze on one's online self-presentation,<sup>68</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Tomio Geron, "David Karp: Tumblr Reblogs Created To Fix Comment 'Awfulness,'" *Forbes*, November 5, 2012, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/tomiogeron/2012/11/05/david-karp-reblogs-created-to-2x-commenting-awfulness/#3aae6a575c5d>

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Matthew S. McGlone, "Contextomy: The Art of Quoting out of Context," *Media, Culture & Society* 27, no. 4 (2005).

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Pedro Guerra et al., "Antagonism Also Flows Through Retweets: The Impact of Out-of-Context Quotes in Opinion Polarization Analysis," *Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media* 11, no. 1 (2017).

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Jia Tolentino, "The I in the Internet," CCCB LAB, February 19, 2020, <https://lab.cccb.org/en/the-i-in-the-internet/>.

tumblr's reblogging-driven unidirectional networks encourage parasociality rather than sociality.<sup>69</sup> Hence, on tumblr curation takes precedence over personal interaction. To that end, tumblr blogs serve as windows into users' aesthetic tastes: functioning as distinct 'content broadcasting networks' for their followers<sup>70</sup> on the one hand and curated mood boards for an imagined audience on the other. Although this structural emphasis on parasociality might seem counter-intuitive to the cultivation of in-platform connection, as I will show in the next chapter tumblr's unique combination of platform opacity and multimedia content features allows for the flourishing of affinity-based communities, that are predicated on mutual interests and similar aesthetic sensibilities.

### 3.2 Curatorial Aesthetics: User Behavior and Platform Cultures

The Dashboard's visual emphasis, coupled with the proliferation of image-based content through reblogging, contributes to one of the most distinguishing features of tumblr as a creative digital hub for the young and artistically inclined: its aesthetics. From its rise to the fringes of mainstream culture to its gradual fade into the background as a once beloved microblogging has-been, tumblr has always been associated with specific visual cues and aesthetic trends, that users have incorporated into the color scheme, layout design and overall look of their blogs. Whether that be through the clean-cut edges of minimalist photoblogs or the subdued – albeit racially charged<sup>71</sup> – pastels of pale blogs, on tumblr aesthetics not only precede but actively inform user practice.

As McCracken et al. point out, in tumblr speak #myaesthetic stands for a specific vibe or mood users want to evoke through the curation of aesthetically cohesive multimedia content.<sup>72</sup> To that end, tumblr blogs not only function as self-curated mood boards that represent a particular combination of personal interests and identity-related stances but they also generate an affective attachment to the aesthetic judgement of their curators. Shared URL interests take precedence over IRL relations on tumblr. In that, users connect through shared affinities,<sup>73</sup> that are aestheticized in the form of interactable clusters of multimedia content that make up a tumblr blog.

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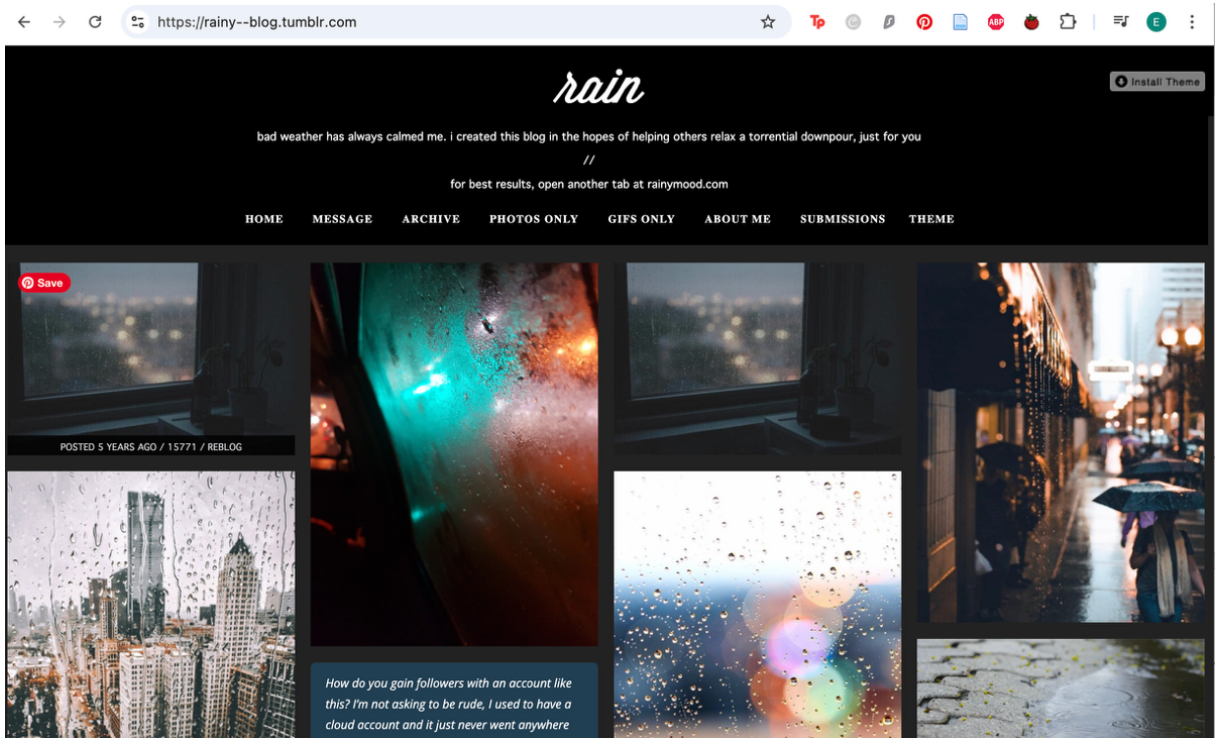
<sup>69</sup> Cf. Yi Chang et al., "What Is Tumblr: A Statistical Overview and Comparison," *ACM SIGKDD Explorations Newsletter* 16, no. 1 (2014): 21.

<sup>70</sup> Nicholas Proferes et al., *A Tumblr Book: Platform and Cultures*, 30.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. Christine Goding-Doty, "Beyond the Pale Blog: Tumblr Pink and the Aesthetics of White Anxiety" In *A Tumblr Book: Platform and Cultures*, 344–354.

<sup>72</sup> Alison McCracken et al., *A Tumblr Book: Platform and Cultures*, 327f.

<sup>73</sup> The facilitation of these affinity-based connections between users is what scholar Wendy Chun defines as 'homophily', which can be harnessed for the digital creation of exclusionary *gated communities*, based on an Us (community members) vs. Them (non-members) mentality. Although not fully relevant for this master's thesis, opposition to the idea that similarity breeds connection through exclusion, Chun explores the question of what digital communities based on difference rather than affinity would look like by reimagining the term 'homophily' through the lens of affect and queer theory.



**Figure 5:** Screenshot of *rainy--blog.tumblr.com*, August 2025

Consider the curatorial downpour of the *rainy--blog* (Figure 5), which – in the words of its pseudonymous creator – is intended to ‘help others relax’ by maintaining a perpetual sense of being ‘rained in’ via its adopted aesthetics. Through a carefully selected collection of static images and GIFs that curate the impression of watching an incoming deluge out of a window, *rainy--blog* cultivates a sense of cozy tranquility for its imagined audience. To enhance the experience of immersion into the blog’s pluviophile aesthetics, its creator & curator (on tumblr these roles are one and the same) even goes so far as to suggest that the viewer open *rainymood.com* – a free-to-use website that plays thunderstorm sounds on a loop – on a separate tab. The incorporation of third-party audio material to intensify the curated vibe of *rainy--blog* illustrates the entanglement of aesthetic experience and affective immersion within tumblr’s user cultures.

Given tumblr’s unique status as a microblogging platform that prioritizes curation over creation,<sup>74</sup> its aesthetics are much more contingent on the various in-platform features that enable and (in)form user behavior than the individual user profiles themselves. That is not to say, however, that the question of identity doesn’t play a role in the digital self-presentation through curated content. As film and media studies professor Jennifer Malkowski remark, reblogging scaffolds in-platform aesthetic identity:

<sup>74</sup> Cf. Nicholas Proferes et al., *A Tumblr Book: Platform and Cultures*, 30.

“On Tumblr, more so than on other social media sites, the content one reblogs is a crucial means of self-definition, particularly for the large portion of users who rarely or never upload their own content, running accounts solely as engines for reblogging.”<sup>75</sup>

To that end, the platform-wide pseudonymity and the content-based communication model encourages users to interact with one another by building affinity-based communities with like-minded people. On tumblr most interpersonal interaction involves engaging with content that others have posted, liked or reblogged rather than direct two-way communication.<sup>76</sup> As such, active engagement with content as a means of connection vests shared interests and common experiences with a collective potency when it comes to building an audience for one’s blog. In other words, through the curation of their blog users attract like-minded followers and in turn foster a community. As Brady Robards et al. observe in their comparative study on how young queer people turn to tumblr as a digital tool for community building:

“[...] Tumblr operates as a distinct platform where users are motivated to connect with a difficult-to-define, amorphous sense of “community,” based on shared experiences and interests. These might be related to gender and sexuality or race and ethnicity or fandoms like Harry Potter and One Direction.”<sup>77</sup>

Anything from a casual interest in the homoerotic subtext of a modernized Sherlock Holmes adaptation<sup>78</sup> to the shared struggles of coming of age online as a nonbinary person of color<sup>79</sup> can foster the growth of a tumblr community around it. These affinity-based communities provide their members (i.e. followers) with digital safe spaces that facilitate creative self-expression and promote mutual dialogue. This in-platform culture of communal feedback is reinforced through notes – a digital paper trail of user interactions that are saved at the bottom of each piece of content (*Figure 6*). Notes provide a chronological overview of the users who have liked and reblogged the content in question, complete with the blogs they have reshared it from.

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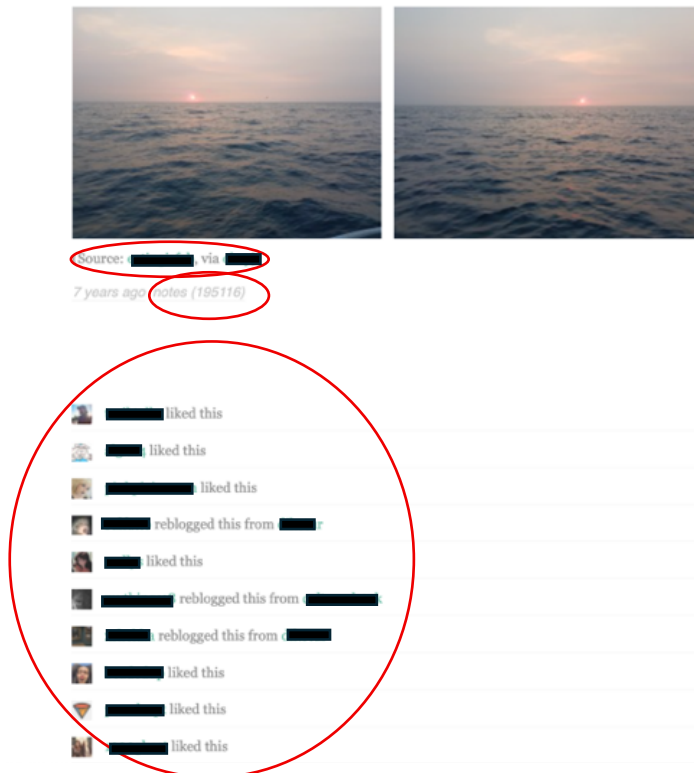
<sup>75</sup> Jennifer Malkowski, “Tumblr’s Gallery of Loops: GIF Art Beyond Reaction GIF Culture” In *A Tumblr Book: Platform and Cultures*, 360.

<sup>76</sup> It is important to note that since 2015 tumblr has featured a Messaging function that allows users to share content with and send direct messages to other users. Messaging was preceded by Fan Mail, a one-button function that debuted in 2012 and allowed users to send customizable ‘fan mail’ to blogs they followed. After rolling out Messaging in late 2015, tumblr decided to discontinue Fan Mail in early 2016.

<sup>77</sup> Brady Robards et al., “Tumblr as a Space of Learning, Connecting, and Identity Formation for LGBTIQ+ Young People,” in *A Tumblr Book: Platform and Cultures*, ed. Allison McCracken, Alexander Cho, Louisa Stein, and Indira Hoch (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020), 284.

<sup>78</sup> Cf. Diana W. Anselmo, “Gender and Queer Fan Labor on Tumblr: The Case of BBC’s Sherlock,” *Feminist Media Histories* 4, no. 1 (2018): 84–114, <https://doi.org/10.1525/fmh.2018.4.1.84>

<sup>79</sup> Cf. Strugglingtobeheard, “Developing a Black Genderfluid Feminist Critique via Tumblr” In *A Tumblr Book: Platform and Cultures*, 302–306.



**Figure 6:** Screenshot of a reblogged post with open notes from the author's tumblr, August 2025

These visible chains of likes and reblogs – in direct contrast to tumblr’s structural opacity as a social networking platform – suggest a certain degree of communal transparency when it comes to users’ sharing practices. Notes give the impression that each piece of multimedia content that ends up on one’s Dash – whether it be screen-recording-turned-GIF sets or memefied viral text posts – has gotten there through the grapevine of affinity-based intimacies. Users can retrace the digital steps of the content they reblog through notes, which in turn renders the curation of each personal tumblr blog a *de facto* product of creative collaboration. Harkening back to Ahmed’s concept of affective economies, tumblr posts accrue in affective value through repeated reblogs. Hence, the more “emancipated” content is from its creator through in-platform proliferation, the more effective it becomes at cultivating meaningful, affinitive relationships between users. In other words, communal exchange and participation supersedes ownership on tumblr,<sup>80</sup> with platform-based affinity networks fostering diverse niche user communities based on similar aesthetic tastes, shared experiences, esoteric in-jokes, and collective authorship.

Although the obscurity of these specialized in-platform communities varies greatly, due to tumblr’s lack of an ‘always-optimizing’ algorithm that surveils and guides user behaviour along

<sup>80</sup> Cf. Alison McCracken et al., *A Tumblr Book: Platform and Cultures*, 6.

hyperpersonalized filter bubbles, most affinity-based communities do not venture beyond the given audience range of their niche. That is to say, even blogs with followers in the millions can fail to cross over to the cultural mainstream, as there is no definitive, monolithic tumblr culture beyond the common denominators of multiplicitous content and curated aesthetic cohesion. Even so, over the years a bespoke few blogs have managed not only to attract followers across a diverse range of identitarian categories but also to transcend tumblr's own infrastructural opacity, breaking into the digital mainstream and becoming contentious reference points in contemporary discourses around digital identity, self-expression, and internet culture. One such blog is *JustGirlyThings*, which became a cross-cultural phenomenon when its in-platform popularity spilled beyond the Dashboard and spread across the wider stratum of the internet. From its rise as a tumblr blog that collectively curated 'things all girls like' to the subsequent backlash that ridiculed its content for being frivolous the case of *JustGirlyThings* epitomizes the political implications and contradictions of the digital performance of girlness/girlhood through the theoretical lens of the Young-Girl Online.

## 4. JustGirlyThings

In November 2011 a fifteen-year-old middle schooler named Becky from the suburbs of Chicago, Illinois launched a tumblr blog called *JustGirlyThings*, that was dedicated to documenting ‘a bunch of things girls love’ through its posts.<sup>81</sup> The blog, which accumulated a hundred thousand followers in the span of a few months, mainly comprised of heavily filtered photos with superimposed text (i.e. customized image macros), that depicted typical ‘things’ purported to be enjoyed by all ‘girls’, ranging from sugary Starbucks drinks and fashion magazines to socially imposed beauty practices like putting on makeup or losing weight. *JustGirlyThings* drew from the ‘block text over image’ format popularized by *JustLittleThings*,<sup>82</sup> another tumblr blog which had gained a massive following in early 2010s through its roster of image macros that celebrated life’s mundane yet simple pleasures. The unprecedented popularity of *JustLittleThings* – which culminated in the publishing of coffee table book that compiled 247 of the little things shared on the blog in thick, glossy paper – led to the emergence of its snowcloned<sup>83</sup> copies, with “Little X Thing” blogs starting to pop up across a variety of niche tumblr communities.<sup>84</sup>

Unlike most derivatives of *JustLittleThings*, the mission statement and content output of *JustGirlyThings* was not fandom focused, in that it explicitly appealed to a loosely defined yet gendered audience – namely girls – without relying on a celebrity figure or popular media franchise to act as an intermediary between the blog’s multiple teenage administrators (abbrv. admins) and its following. Celebrity teen heartthrobs as well as popular Young Adult (abbrv. YA) franchises would appear in the odd *JustGirlyThings* post every now and again, but only insofar as they appealed to the blog’s intended ‘girly’ audience. Hence, *JustGirlyThings* became the spiritual successor to *JustLittleThings* not only through its production of original content via a distinct image macro template but also through its lasting impact on wider internet culture long after tumblr’s popularity had died down in the late 2010s.

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<sup>81</sup> *Just Girly Things*. December 1, 2011. Wayback Machine.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20111201130454/https://JustGirlyThings.tumblr.com/>

<sup>82</sup> *Just Little Things*. May 19, 2011. Wayback Machine.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20110519235244/http://justlittlethings.tumblr.com/>

<sup>83</sup> Geoffrey K. Pullum, “Snowclones: Lexicographical Dating to the Second,” *Language Log*, January 16, 2004, <http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/000350.html>

<sup>84</sup> Cf. LiterallyAustin, amada b., “Just Little Things,” *Know Your Meme*, March 22, 2013, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/just-little-things>

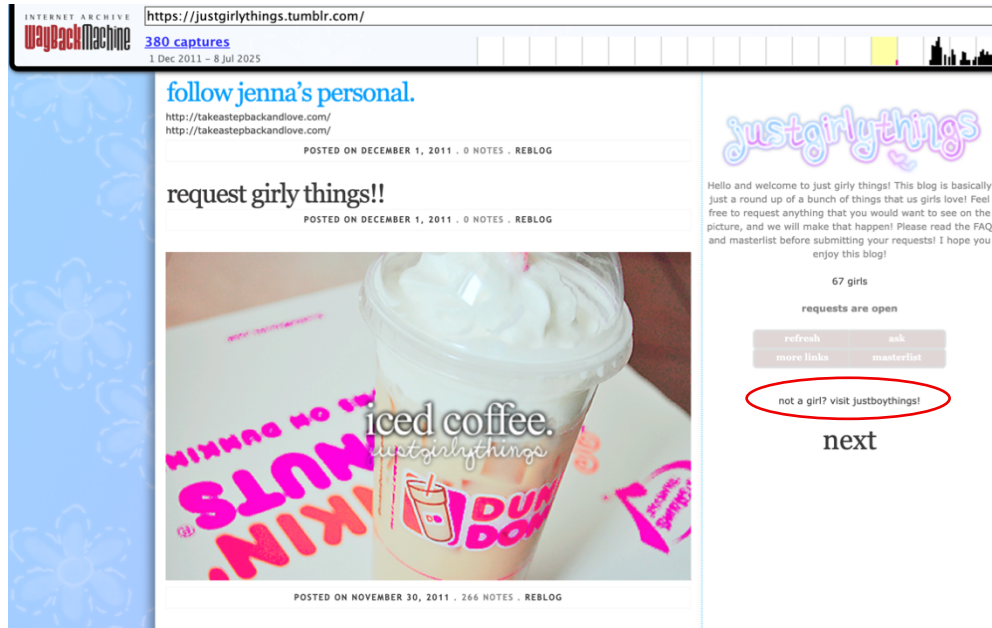


Figure 7: Screenshot of the JustGirlyThings tumblr blog from December 2011

Given the digital legacy of *JustGirlyThings* as a blog for and by girls online, I conduct a retrospective media-analysis of its content during the peak of its popularity between 2011 and 2018. This analysis intends to concretize my definition of the Young-Girl Online as a gendered and affective *Denkfigur* that is frequently invoked in cultural discourse to produce knowledge around capitalist subjectivity in the internet age. To that end, I define *JustGirlyThings* as a precursor to contemporary girlblogging practices, in relation to its depiction of a consumption-oriented feminine (i.e. girly) identity and affective aestheticization of digital girl culture.

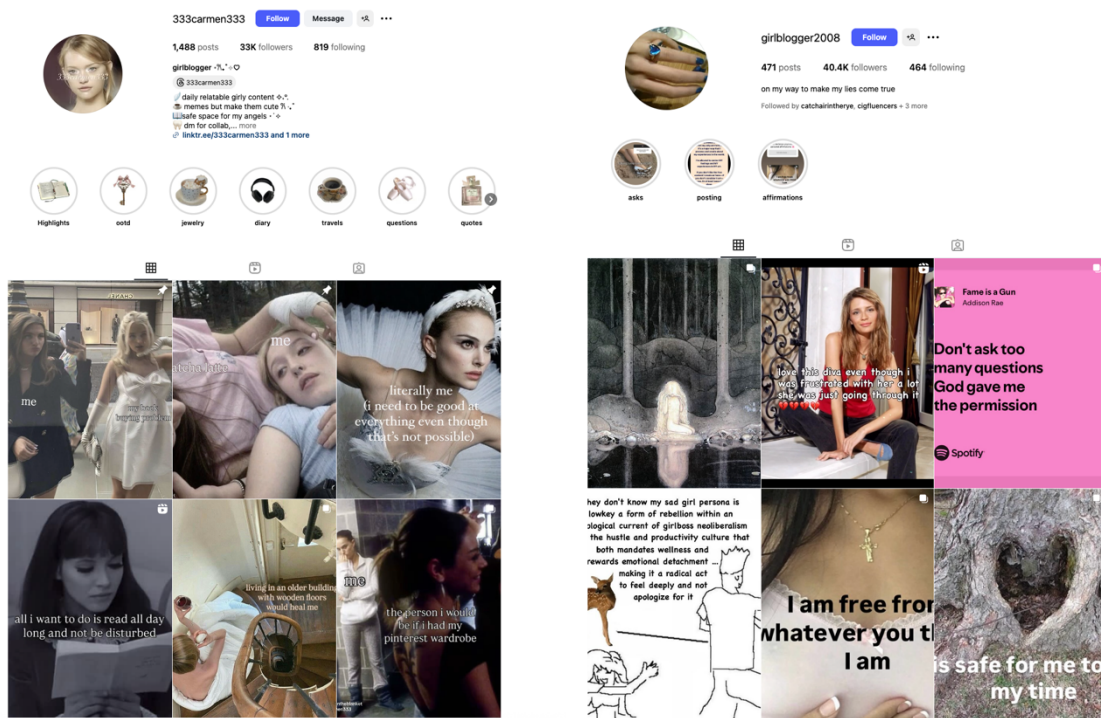
#### 4.1 The Beginnings of Girlblogging

Although it is hard to pinpoint the exact moment in time when the portmanteau of the words girl and blog started gaining traction in internet speak to refer to a specific type of personal weblog, the phenomenon of curating a stereotypically feminine online presence through confessional blog entries and aesthetically cohesive multimedia content can be traced back to the widespread proliferation of the internet in the early 2000s.<sup>85</sup> In its contemporary use girlblogging refers to the act of presenting an aestheticized image of oneself through the curation of mainly visual multimedia content, which project a monolithic – i.e. white, conventionally attractive and heteronormative – idea of femininity.<sup>86</sup>

<sup>85</sup> Cf. Maylis Aledo, “*Life Is Better When You Girlboss Together*”: Building a Safe Space within the Digital Sphere, a Case Study (dissertation, Malmö University, 2023), <https://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:mau:diva-62758>

<sup>86</sup> The limitations of *JustGirlyThings*' visual depiction of femininity is further explored in chapter 4.1.2.

Girlblogging content mainly comprises of photo dumps and text posts that romanticize the commodification of girl culture in hues of what feminist artist Audrey Wollen describes as the politicization of female sadness or *Sad Girl Theory*.<sup>87</sup> Wollen argues that female suffering has historically been dismissed as self-involved, frivolous and narcissistic, when on the contrary – from Simone Weil to Sylvia Plath – accomplished young women have been channeling their pain as a source of artistic and political resistance against patriarchal domination for centuries. Given the prevalence of sad girlism within the cyberrealm,<sup>88</sup> it comes as no surprise that Wollen’s artistic medium of choice coincides with that of contemporary girlbloggers (*Figure 8*), who preach their pastel pink gospel of ‘relatable girl(y) content’ through aesthetically cohesive images of supermodels, designer makeup and heart-shaped cigarettes.



**Figure 8:** Screenshots of two popular girlbloggers on Instagram

Culture writer Biz Sherbert defines the contemporary girlblogger as “[...] a girl who blogs about being a girl, a girl’s girl, a girly girl who looks like she dances ballet, weighs little, wears lip products from Dior, and is tightly wound but loosely tied together with silk ribbon.”<sup>89</sup> That is to say, a

<sup>87</sup> Cf. Ava Tunnicliffe, “Audrey Wollen on the Power of Sadness.” *Nylon*, July 20, 2015, <https://www.nylon.com/articles/audrey-wollen-sad-girl-theory>

<sup>88</sup> Cf. Veronica Obenauer, “Performing Cybertenderness: On Authenticity in Vulnerability in Digital Spaces” (Very Digital Grafik, 2025), <https://very.digitale-grafik.com/performingcybertenderness/about.html>

<sup>89</sup> Biz Sherbert, “Intimacy and the Machine: Slouching Towards Girlblogging.” *Various Artists*, January 28, 2022. <https://various-artists.com/girlblogger/>

girlblogger is someone who not only curates an aestheticized – albeit racially charged – image of femininity but also projects her digital persona onto her followers. She gives a glimpse into her tortured inner monologue, cynical worldview and sophisticated aesthetic taste (i.e. her consumption habits) through a collage of hyper stylized images. That the content output of most girlbloggers is virtually interchangeable is beside the point. Much like the affinitive yet insular networks of niche tumblr communities, girlbloggers cultivate a tight knit following of ostensibly like-minded young women who thrive on exchanging beauty secrets, low-calorie diet recipes and skincare advice in the comments section of their posts. This participatory sharing of ‘sisterly’ advice not only facilitates but also reinforces the digital performance of a rigid femininity that conforms to and perpetuates the hegemony of societal beauty norms online.

Although Sherbert makes an explicit distinction between what she describes as the “psychologically charged”<sup>90</sup> diary voice of girlbloggers and the relative impersonality of creating digital mood boards out of stereotypically ‘girly’ things one has likes, I identify a direct link between the waifish ambitions of the former and the childlike earnestness of the latter, which was epitomized by *JustGirlyThings* in the early to late 2010s.



**Figure 9:** *JustGirlyThings* posts from 2013

*JustGirlyThings* can be discerned simultaneously as precursor to and an early iteration of an internet presence that we now subsume under the umbrella term of girlblogs. At the height of its popularity *JustGirlyThings* was a blog curated by a handful of teenage girls that reflected the things they liked and desired in the form of a digital collage. The affective scope of these so-called ‘girly things’ was vast, in that the images shared on the blog could depict anything from a casual desire for romantic intimacy to a longing for a place of one’s own to be alone and self-reflect (*Figure 9*).

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

Like many a niche tumblr community, the unofficial goal of *JustGirlyThings* was to connect and facilitate mutual exchange between like-minded users who shared an affinity for things all girls were purported to like. The unique conceit of the blog lied in its ability to render anyone who could relate to its content as a ‘girl’ by sheer association; that is through collective affinity instead of individual identity. In other words, the premise of *JustGirlyThings* prioritized an identification *with* girly things over an identification as a girl online. Hence, as one of the first examples of a girlblog gone mainstream, the mission statement of *JustGirlyThings* diverged significantly from the gender-essentialist rhetoric of its contemporary successors. Nonetheless it still upheld and perpetuated the bifurcation of gender into vaguely defined categories of girl and boy as illustrated by its endorsement of *JustBoyThings* in *Figure 7*.

In its early days a significant majority of *JustGirlyThings* posts painted a monolithic – heteronormative, white and thin – picture of femininity that was oriented around the conspicuous consumption of stereotypically girly clothes, media and beauty products. However, over the years the blog’s content evolved in tandem with main admin Becky’s own coming of age as a lesbian who started adapting its posts to become more inclusive of queerness.<sup>91</sup>

Looking back at some of *JustGirlyThings*’ posts between 2011-2018 during my research, I was reminded of a less cynical moment in time of widespread internet use – which as will be revealed in the course of my analysis nonetheless had its faults– when digital self-expression was not curtailed by what has now become the almost mandatory dash of semi-ironic detachment and personal blogs provided a creative outlet for one’s everyday experiences as well as preferences, no matter how mundane. Before the tyranny of social media algorithms and AI chat-bots came to dominate our desktop screens, blogs were akin to digital ‘remediations’ of personal diaries, that provided a sense of belonging and connection for the reader.<sup>92</sup> It is against this backdrop that *JustGirlyThings* can be conceived of as a diaristic mood board: a digital assemblage of images that chart the emotional and aesthetic contours of the Young-Girl Online through an affective commodification of gender.

#### **4.1.1 *JustGirlyThings* as a Diaristic Mood Board**

In *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* British scholar and curator Lauren Fournier draws on biographer Sarah Bakewell’s description of the French philosopher and

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<sup>91</sup>STRANGE ÆONS, “The History of JustGirlyThings,” Posted January 14, 2022, Youtube video, 21:54, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VDAwll4nwgI>

<sup>92</sup> Cf. José van Dijck, *Writing the Self: Of Diaries and Weblogs*, ed. Sonja Neef et al., with Mediarep.Org (Amsterdam University Press, 2006), <https://doi.org/10.25969/MEDIAREP/13242>.

essayist Montaigne, as “the first blogger”<sup>93</sup> for primarily writing about himself. According to Bakewell, Montaigne’s attempts at trying to understand his own existence – and by extension the greater world – through a documentation of his everyday thoughts and experiences resembles that of the modern blogger, who writes about their life online as a means of building kinship with like-minded individuals. In that, the public-facing nature of blog-writing as a direct means of establishing connections with other people is what differentiates it from merely jotting one’s meandering thoughts down into a coveted notebook. Although media scholar José van Dijck argues against the idea that keeping a diary has ever been a solely private endeavor – by positing that “[w]riting, even as a form of self-expression, signals the need to connect, either to someone or something else, or to oneself later in life [...]”<sup>94</sup> – she also contends that blog-writing as a digital cultural practice has fundamentally changed the way we conceive of and interact with the diaristic genre, which continues to inform the epistemologies of the weblog and by extension the digital self.

On image-based microblogging platforms such as tumblr, which allow for an instantaneous sharing of information through multimedia posts, users create new means of relating to one another by mediating between the output of their blogs and their imagined audience – thereby commodifying their blogger identity through shared images while simultaneously turning their followers into willing consumers of personalized content. To that end, tumblr’s unique visual emphasis as a microblogging platform engenders the incorporation of distinct aesthetic markers into the diaristic output of user blogs; in effect rendering them into distinguishable mood boards of the digital self, that curate and cultivate a certain vibe.

Journalist and cultural critic Kyle Chayka of *The New Yorker* defines vibes on social media as an ephemeral yet “concise assemblage of image, sound and movement” that has become representative of a mood in society at large.<sup>95</sup> He contends that vibes are distinct from aesthetics for they go beyond the purely visual realm of images to include multisensory elements that evoke a certain feeling. In other words, vibes are a confluence of sensory perception and multimedia content, which make up what German philosopher Gernot Böhme defines as the affective atmosphere of aesthetics.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Cf. Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021: 30, EPUB.

<sup>94</sup> José van Dijck, *Writing the Self: Of Diaries and Weblogs*, 121f.

<sup>95</sup> Kyle Chayka, “TikTok and the Vibes Revival,” Cultural Comment, *The New Yorker*, April 26, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/tiktok-and-the-vibes-revival>

<sup>96</sup> Cf. Gernot Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, 1st ed., ed. Jean-Paul Thibaud (Routledge, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315538181>

In the case of *JustGirlyThings*, the diaristic vibe – which makes up the affective atmosphere of the blog’s aesthetics – is evoked not only through its purple-pink color palette, the cursive font of the logo and image-based shared intimacies but also through the structure of its layout. Recalling Canadian media scholar Marshall McLuhan’s oft-cited dictum “the medium is the message”,<sup>97</sup> the tumblr blog format itself plays a role in the perception of *JustGirlyThings* as a scrolling feed of curated images that mimic the stream-of-consciousness-like-flow of a teenage girl’s diary. At the height of the blog’s popularity between 2011 and 2018, *JustGirlyThings* admins conveyed their ‘girly’ preferences through a visual collage of consumable items, recreational activities, and lifestyle markers that followed the seasonal rhythm of the Western hemisphere. Hence – in keeping with tumblr’s chronological Dashboard feed – the passing of time was actively reflected in the blog’s content output, giving the casual viewer an impression of flipping through an everygirl’s scrapbook diary in real time (*Figure 10*).



**Figure 10:** *JustGirlyThings* posts from 2013

Despite the mundanity of the opinions expressed on images branded with the signature *JustGirlyThings* watermark – taking pleasure in donning yourself in scarves in autumn is hardly a seasonal sentiment unique to teenage girls –, there is an almost confessional nature to the phrasing of the captions superimposed on Google Image photos of girls frolicking by the beach or braiding their hair. It’s also notable that none of the captions contain fully formed sentences: they are all made up of present participle phrases, that resemble passing thoughts and pithy observations hastily scribbled down in a notebook, lest they be forgotten. Scrolling through past *JustGirlyThings* posts, one gets the impression of a teenage girl preemptively reminiscing about all the things that once defined her ‘girlness’ and ‘girlhood’ in the privacy of a bedroom-like digital safe space; holding onto the youth she has at one point in time possessed, as evidenced by

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<sup>97</sup>Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Oxford: Routledge, 2005), 7-23.

images that illustrate her gendered predisposition for putting on lipstick and going shopping with her friends at the mall.

Much like a personal diary which provides the diarist with ample ground for personal growth through self-reflection, *JustGirlyThings* functions as a URL testament to the coming of age of the blog's founder and main admin, Becky who after coming out as a lesbian in 2014 started incorporating posts that hinted at queerness into its roster of 'girly things'. To ease *JustGirlyThings* followers into the more explicitly progressive turn of its content Becky would often do back-to-back posts depicting straight and queer couples (*Figure 11*), thus managing to be more inclusive without fundamentally altering the blog's output or alienating its imagined audience. Becky's fear of estranging the blog's following is a testament to the notion that despite *JustGirlyThings*' affinity-based approach to gender identity, in practice its following was indeed primarily comprised of straight young women, who resonated with the overtly femme gender expression depicted in many of the blog's posts. This is backed by Becky herself who has gone on record to admit that prior to her coming out she had used *JustGirlyThings* as a URL vessel to (over)compensate for her personal disinterest in stereotypically girly things IRL<sup>98</sup>; closing the gap between her AFK self and its overtly heteronormative girly presentation online.



**Figure 11:** Screenshots of *JustGirlyThings* posts from 2014

At first glance *JustGirlyThings* seems to (re)present an earnest albeit polished account of what it's like to have come of age on the internet in real time, with its idealized depiction of what the world looks like through the eyes of a proudly hyperfeminine teenage girl online, but on closer inspection one can't help but notice the performative nature of the blog's relation to and presentation of gender identity within the cyberrealm; echoing the innate contradictions of the Young-Girl Online as a subversive *Denkfigur*.

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<sup>98</sup> STRANGE ÆONS, "The History Of Just Girly Things," Posted January 14, 2022, Youtube video, 21:54, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VDAwll4nwgI>

### 4.1.2 Analysis of Visual Tropes & Messaging

Scrolling through the *JustGirlyThings* archives, a couple of distinct pictorial markers stand out immediately. Namely, the aforementioned watermark of the blog's name in cursive – plastered either right below the caption in the middle or on the left-/righthand corner above (*Figure 10*) – with which the admins branded their posts. This practice of name branding the blog's original content with a distinct cachet resembles tumblr's in-platform tagging feature, which helps users categorize posts by creating searchable, blog-specific and/or themed hashtags. Although *JustGirlyThings* also deploys hashtags to sort posts according to the type of girly thing(s) they depict (e.g. celebrities, technology, love, self-image etc.), the watermark is more akin to the blog's official seal of approval than a tool for content categorization.

Another distinguishable feature of the typical *JustGirlyThings* post is the narrative interplay between the main image and the caption superimposed on it. To that end, *JustGirlyThings* posts almost always portray a white, thin and conventionally attractive young woman with a partially cropped face and/or body who – combined with her surroundings – is meant to evoke the caption's meaning through affective recall. Posts that don't frame conventionally attractive young white women as the archetypical everygirl the viewer can project their desires onto, instead feature filtered, stock-adjacent images that are used as visual storytelling devices. For example, in *Figure 12*, the aesthetic framing of the posts combined with the oddly specific yet relatable sentiment of the captions is meant to establish a knowing kinship between the viewer and the creator of the images, thus creating the illusion of a shared parasocial intimacy.



*Figure 12: JustGirlyThings posts from 2014 (left) and 2016 (right)*

In other words, *JustGirlyThings* posts accrued affective value by appealing to seemingly universal experiences of girlhood that were mainly oriented around conspicuous consumption and heteronormative beauty rituals, evoking Tiqqun's initial characterization of the Young-Girl as the ideal consumerist subject. The more conventional thus relatable the sentiment conveyed by the

posts, the more they circulated among tumblr users through reblogs, in effect reinforcing the reputation of *JustGirlyThings* as a blog for and by teenage girls. Invoking Sara Ahmed's affective economies of emotion, the blog's instant popularity coupled with the widespread circulation of its posts on the internet over the years, has rendered images branded with the *JustGirlyThings* seal of approval sticky with nostalgic sentiment. As an avid tumblr user myself during the peak of *JustGirlyThings*' popularity, I found the images I have compiled during my research to be so reflective of the ubiquitous fashion, beauty and internet trends of the time that they practically served as a time capsule for the mid 2010s, preserved in the pixelated digital snapshots of the *Wayback Machine*.

Beyond the overwhelming sense of nostalgia evoked by the images analyzed, I've pinpointed two main aesthetic common denominators which stick the idealized (re)iterations of the Young-Girl Online together as a digital object of desire: namely whiteness and thinness (the latter is further explored at the end of this chapter in relation to Lauren Berlant's theoretical concept of cruel optimism). Recurring visual cues that reference whiteness and thinness formed the basis of *JustGirlyThings*' depiction of the Young-Girl Online as the ideal capitalist subject. In that, they anchored the blog's digital (re)iteration of girlhood through seemingly free-floating gendered signifiers of conspicuous consumption (i.e. drugstore makeup, popular fast-fashion brands and magazines etc.) by sticking them together into an idealized and cohesive whole, making up the visage of the Young-Girl Online. Between 2011-2018, *JustGirlyThings*' ubiquity across the internet had rendered it the go-to reference point for how the average girl was purported to experience life online. Thus, beyond its original content, the name of the blog itself became a 'sticky' sign, tinged with emotion: at first evoking feelings of feminine kinship and recognition among its core audience, which in the wake of the backlash against all-things 'girly' became subsumed by masculine ridicule and condescension.

In that, through their wider circulation – on and beyond tumblr – *JustGirlyThings* posts established an affective connection between an image-based, consumption-oriented depiction of girlhood and authentic gender expression online. To understand the greater significance between the signifier of individual *JustGirlyThings* posts and their signified (the figure of the Young-Girl Online), I categorized more than a hundred *JustGirlyThings* posts shared between 2011 to 2018, according to overarching themes. From this analysis, I identified fourteen main categories, which I grouped into four broad clusters, namely: consumption habits (Popular Media, Celebrity Culture, Shopping, Food & Drink, Internet Use); relational aspirations (Friendship, Romance, Everyday Relatability); self-optimization and independence (Productivity, Adventure, Money) and self-image (Beauty & Looks, Politics/ Current Events, Self-Reflection). In that, these thematic clusters reveal

the extent to which the *JustGirlyThings* blog both narrowed and amplified the figure of the Young-Girl Online through its posts into identifiable registers: namely, as a digital consumer, a relational/romantic subject, an autonomous individual, and an introspective soul. My categorical analysis revealed relational aspirations to be the most dominant thematic cluster, encompassing 30% of the posts analyzed, followed closely by consumption habits at 29%. In that, the majority of *JustGirlyThings* posts I've looked at either expressed a desire for intimacy and kinship – romantic or otherwise – or framed the conspicuous consumption of girly media and/or commodities as aspirational. Among individual categories, Beauty & Looks accounted for 20% of the image-based posts, thus underscoring the centrality of beauty practices and body image in the construction as well as the (self-)perception of the Young-Girl Online.

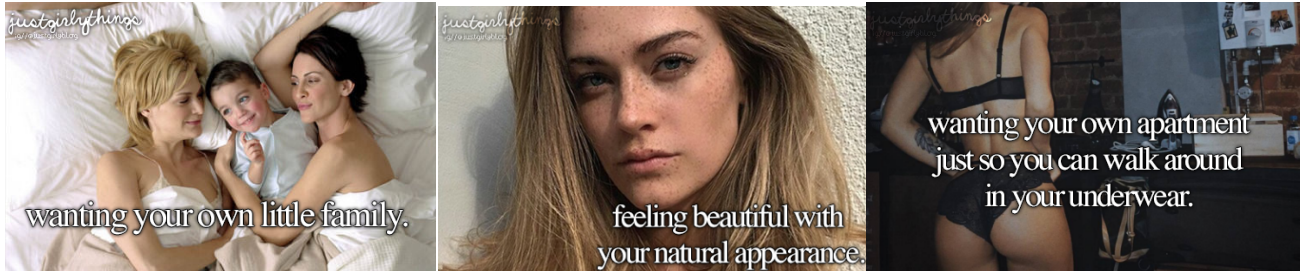
Although the thematic range depicted in *JustGirlyThings* posts serve as an argument against the flattened one-dimensionality of the Young-Girl Online, taken as a whole they paint a relatively monolithic picture of gender identity, one that is continually informed by heteronormativity, fatphobia and consumer feminism. The latter -ism, coined by scholar Nina Power,<sup>99</sup> describes the contemporary subsumption of feminist movements under the all-pervading desire to consume 'stuff'; whether it be drugstore makeup or digital images that fetishize their regular purchase as a 'nature rite of passage for young women. Consumerist feminism depoliticizes the emancipatory goal of the feminist movement by reducing its gains to the lifestyle choices of individual women; ultimately stripping it of its structural critique of heterocapitalism.

*JustGirlyThings* plays into this every-woman-for-herself rhetoric of consumer feminism by adhering to a normative image of girlhood that emphasizes conspicuous consumption and reduces structurally embedded societal issues such as queer liberation to the choices of individual users, who engage with content that align with their values. In that, main admin and blog founder Becky's well-meaning efforts to incorporate more LGBTQ+ friendly messaging into the blog's roster of posts hints at this notion of gesturing at inclusivity without wanting to risk a deeper analysis of the sociopolitical issues pertaining to queer people, lest it alienate the *JustGirlyThings* audience. This is exacerbated by the fact that the blog's content posted within my research timeframe disproportionately featured conventionally attractive white or light-skinned women as pictorial stand-ins for the universally relatable 'everygirl' (Figure 13). By framing these creative choices as at best politically neutral and at worst politically ignorant, *JustGirlyThings* ultimately perpetuated the racially charged implicit biases embedded in the neoliberal media landscape. That is to say, despite Becky's efforts to be more inclusive and disrupt the norms that the blog– through

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<sup>99</sup> Cf. Nina Power, *One-Dimensional Woman*. Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2009: 27.

the better half of its heyday – helped uphold and perpetuate, *JustGirlyThings*' legacy as a precursor to the gender essentialist girlblogs of today, is inevitably tied to the white, conventionally attractive, thin and middle-class girlhood the majority of its image-based posts evoked.



**Figure 13:** Examples of *JustGirlyThings* posts analyzed from different categories, thematic clusters from left to right: relational aspirations, self-image, self-optimization and independence

The irony of Tiqqun's Young-Girl who is happy to be sold her own commodification isn't lost on *JustGirlyThings*, which made an instantly recognizable brand out of the supposedly unanimous preferences of all girls everywhere, for whom the blog's admins were to happy to serve as stand-ins. In that, the admins behind *JustGirlyThings* – who were teenage girls themselves at the time of the blog's creation – performed their feminine gender identity through the creation and sharing of posts that made no distinction between their own subjectivity as individuals and their collective gender performance as 'girls'. Hence, the digital (re)production and widespread circulation of images reflective of a heteronormative girlhood oriented around consumption, created by and for girls initially stripped the Young-Girl Online of her subversive potential, in effect rendering her a gendered simulacrum, that is only tangentially aligned with her AFK counterpart. In other words, as a blog that reflected the coming of age of its adolescent admins in real time, *JustGirlyThings* fails to fully deliver on the cyborgian promise of an affinity-based approach to gender solidarity as advocated for by Donna Haraway.<sup>100</sup> Nonetheless, it presents one of the most authentic accounts of digital gender performance, shaped by the affective economies of attention on tumblr through the figure of Young-Girl Online and in the manifestation of her desire in digital posts.

Beyond the relatable rhetoric of its captions, the sentiment expressed by many *JustGirlyThings* posts exemplify what American cultural theorist Lauren Berlant defines as *cruel optimism* or the desire for an object that actively impedes or runs counter to one's flourishing.<sup>101</sup> According to Berlant, every attachment that draws one to a certain object of desire can be defined as optimistic. In effect, optimism induces an affective relation to a particular scene of fantasy, to which the

<sup>100</sup> Cf. Donna Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>101</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011:6.

optimist longs to repeatedly return. To that end, optimism becomes cruel when the inciting object of desire/scene of fantasy actively withholds the optimist from viably attaining their goal, thus maintaining them in a doomed, one-sided relation to their aspirations. This sense of cruel optimism is especially acute among *JustGirlyThings* posts under the Beauty & Looks category, a considerable portion of which express an unmitigated desire to achieve a vaguely defined “perfect figure” to the image backdrop of emaciated white bodies (*Figure 14*). This longing for the ideal body manifests itself in an affective attachment to images of the so-called perfect body, thus leading to the widespread circulation of posts that express an all-consuming desire to one day achieve that ever-elusive beauty ideal. In turn, the in-platform proliferation of these images that position a slender figure as aspirational maintain and perpetuate the cruel optimism of what is more commonly known as thinspiration (abbrv. thinspo) on tumblr.



**Figure 14:** Screenshots of *JustGirlyThings* posts from 2011 (left) and 2016 (right)

Thinspiration is an umbrella term for digital multimedia content that encourages extreme weight loss in pursuit of the socioculturally embedded beauty ideal of a slim figure.<sup>102</sup> Its origins date back to the beginnings of widespread internet use in the early 2000s and the emergence of pro-anorexia (abbrv. pro-ana) forums where members would encourage each other to practice disordered eating by sharing tips and tricks on how to remain thin, often to the detriment of their mental and physical wellbeing. tumblr’s emphasis on visual content coupled with its pseudonymous user base, allowed thinspo content to thrive on the platform during its heyday, leading to the emergence of dedicated pro-ana user communities with a distinctive affective language of their own.<sup>103</sup> Thinspo culture engenders the logic of cruel optimism, wherein the more one becomes inundated with

<sup>102</sup> Cf. Madeline R. Wick and Jennifer A. Harriger, “A Content Analysis of Thinspiration Images and Text Posts on Tumblr,” *Body Image* 24 (March 2018): 13–16.

<sup>103</sup> Cf. Munmun De Choudhury, “Anorexia on Tumblr: A Characterization Study,” *Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on Digital Health 2015*, ACM, May 18, 2015, 43–50, <https://doi.org/10.1145/2750511.2750515>.

messaging that actively encourages them to attain their dream figure through restrictive dieting and bodychecking practices, the more one scrutinizes their corporeal being and thus fails to achieve the ever-moving goalpost of the perfect figure.

As Berlant contends, the logic of cruel optimism is invoked by liberal-capitalist societies that rely on the illusion of a well-functioning meritocracy (i.e. the promise of ‘the good life’ to anyone who works hard to earn their keep) to function.<sup>104</sup> Nonetheless, beyond the realm of systematic socioeconomic inequality, cruel optimism is often imposed on young women during their formative years through media, whether it be the doomed hope of conforming to patriarchal beauty standards glamorized in the glossy pages of fashion magazines or bodily self-surveillance practices that are normalized through the widespread circulation of thinspo content online. These disciplinary scripts imposed on the “female” body and psyche through media bind impressionable young women to infantilizing and commodified forms of selfhood under the guise of joining a community formed around the shared struggles of women. As one such medium that contributed to the digital knowledge production around the Young-Girl Online through the proliferation of original multimedia content, the cruel optimism invoked in and perpetuated by *JustGirlyThings* is underpinned by the participatory curation of gender identity as gender capital.

#### **4.2 Participatory Curation of Gender Identity as (Gender) Capital**

The term gender capital builds upon French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s seminal analysis of capital as a resource and signifier of societal class distinction, wherein he differentiates between three main forms of capital: namely economic, social and cultural. Each of these manifestations refers to a different type of accumulated wealth, that is contingent on one’s habitus (i.e. the embodied realm of knowledge and social schemas that shape and guide one’s conduct in different contexts<sup>105</sup>). Wherein, economic capital alludes to economic wealth and affluence, social capital encompasses the accumulation of advantageous social networks, and cultural capital invokes intellectual knowledge, educational qualifications as well as cultural know-how.<sup>106</sup> Despite Bourdieu’s self-admitted belief in the inherent entanglement of sex, gender and class properties,<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Cf. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*. 2011:8.

<sup>105</sup> Cf. Tristan S. Bridges, “Gender Capital and Male Bodybuilders,” *Body & Society* 15, no. 1 (2009): 89. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X08100148>

<sup>106</sup> Cf. Kate Huppertz and Susan Goodwin, “Masculinised Jobs, Feminised Jobs and Men’s ‘Gender Capital’ Experiences: Understanding Occupational Segregation in Australia,” *Journal of Sociology* 49, nos. 2–3 (2013): 291–308, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1440783313481743>

<sup>107</sup> Cf. Bourdieu, Pierre, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Nice, Richard (Routledge, 1984).

his theoretical framework pays little if any attention to the interrelation of gender and capital, to the extent to which the former can be conceived of as a distinct embodiment of the latter.

Hence gender capital can be understood as an application of the Bourdieusian model of capital to feminist theories of gender and sex. In keeping with this line of thought, sociologist Kate Huppatz makes a point of differentiating between sexual (i.e. female or male) and gender (i.e. feminine or masculine) capital, wherein the former engenders the perceived alignment of one's gender identity with their biological sex, and the latter derives from the attribution of feminine or masculine gender characteristics to one's disposition:

"In short, female capital and male capital relate to the gender advantage that is derived from being perceived to have a female or male body, whereas feminine capital and masculine capital relate to the gender advantage that is derived from a disposition or skill set, or from simply being hailed as feminine or masculine."<sup>108</sup>

In other words, gender capital invokes the advantage afforded to normative (re)presentations of gender identity within a relevant context, that are "[...] interactionally defined and negotiated."<sup>109</sup> To that end, the mosaic of *JustGirlyThings*-branded images that label and propagate 'girly' things as quintessential to normative girlhood as well as feminine gender identity, function as accumulators of gender capital for users who circulate them within – as well as beyond – the wider tumblr-sphere. In that, taken as a whole these shared images function as a digital commodification of the feminine gender, through their construction of a cohesive and consumable collage of visual references oriented around the consumption of commodities as well as experiences. Hence, those who like and reblog *JustGirlyThings* posts implicate themselves as self-identified girls who relate to the sentiments expressed in the images shared, which reflect on them through an increase in their perceived gender capital.

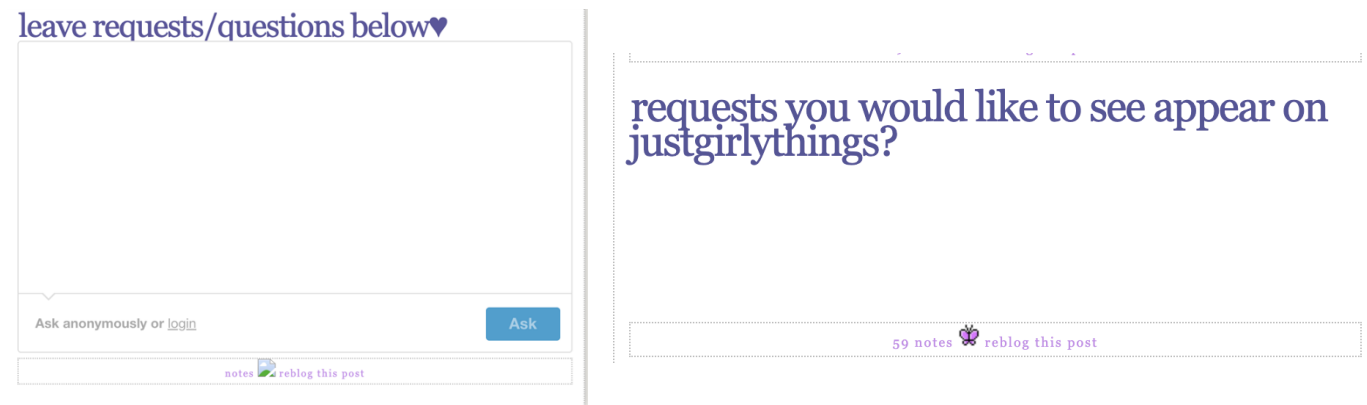
Given the curatorial meaning-making practices that made tumblr unique among the virtual sea of microblogging platforms, *JustGirlyThings* followers' input on its posts through requests is relevant, in so far as they can be understood as a communal consolidation of gender capital. During the blog's heyday, the submission of requests was enabled through the 'ask' feature, which allowed users to give feedback on its output, ask general questions and send in content suggestions anonymously (*Figure 15*). The admins then had the option to publicly respond to submissions through individual blog posts. Often, fans and followers of *JustGirlyThings* would send requests for 'girly' things, experiences and/or opinions they would like to see adapted into

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<sup>108</sup> Kate Huppatz et al., "Masculinised Jobs, Feminised Jobs and Men's 'Gender Capital' Experiences: Understanding Occupational Segregation in Australia," 2013: 295.

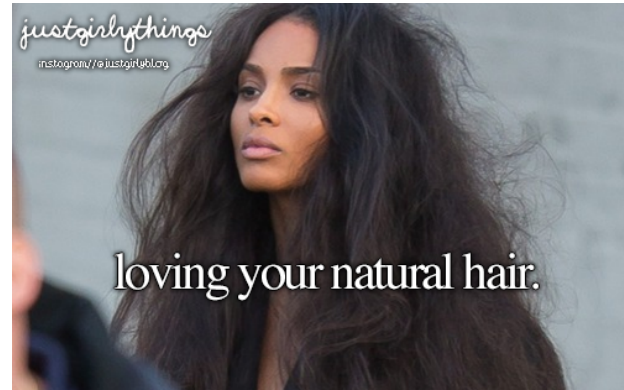
<sup>109</sup> Tristan S. Bridges, "Gender Capital and Male Bodybuilders," *Body & Society* 15, (2009): 84

the blog's signature macro template, which the admins would then hastily convert into visual content. Hence, many of the so-called girly things depicted in *JustGirlyThings* posts were in effect crowdsourced. In turn, the participatory curation of the blog's content not only strengthened the affective networks of femininity among its 'girly' audience but also maintained the impression of authenticity through its communal portrayal of a relatable girlhood.



**Figure 15:** Screenshot of the *JustGirlyThings* ask box (on the left) and a blog post asking for requests (on the right) both from 2015

On the one hand, the incorporation of user requests into *JustGirlyThings*' content creation process encouraged the inclusion of a vast spectrum of perspectives on gender identity as well as gendered experience in the blog's depiction of girlhood (*Figure 16*), on the other hand, the consolidation of these submissions into a cohesive collage of *JustGirlyThings* branded posts, flattened their unique point of view to the detriment of presenting a multifaceted account of a digitally rendered feminine subjectivity. In other words, despite the transgressive potential of the Young-Girl Online to overcome the imposed constrictions of the gender binary on feminine subjectivity – as imagined in Legacy Russell's glitch-feminist manifesto – the collaborative curation of gender identity on *JustGirlyThings* was circumscribed by the consolidation of users' contributions into digital gender capital. In that, instead of widening the URL horizon of gender identity to capture a diverse array of digital (re)iterations of girlhood and girlness, *JustGirlyThings* restricted its depiction of gendered subjectivity to the narrow confines of the idealized feminine subject (i.e. Young-Girl).



**Figure 16:** Screenshots of *JustGirlyThings* posts, exemplary of a more diverse representation of gender expression as well as race, 2015

Hence, the subversive potential of the Young-Girl Online was curtailed by the participatory curation of gender identity as gender capital. While the feedback loop between administrators and followers of the blog fostered an interactive environment of creative exchange, the visual grammar and messaging of *JustGirlyThings*' content, kept the subjectivity of the Young-Girl Online tethered to a societally sanctioned depiction of femininity. Wherein, interacting with the images created and shared by *JustGirlyThings* became a means of affirming and subsequently reinforcing users' self-identification as 'girls' through their love of 'girly' things. To that end, by engaging with these branded images users simultaneously signaled their membership to a distinctive subset of conventionally feminine presenting online subjects and accumulated digital gender capital.

That is to say, at the peak of its popularity *JustGirlyThings* posts functioned as digital currencies of gender capital, that circulated within the affective economies of tumblr. Given the blog's popularity, the wider circulation of these images contributed to the digital epistemologies of femininity and girlhood online, cementing the Young-Girl Online's image as definitively white, thin and conventionally attractive. In that, communally sourced images that depicted individual experiences and interpretations of girlhood gained wider traction and credibility within the digital sphere by being stamped with the *JustGirlyThings* seal of approval. However, the digital cachet of the *JustGirlyThings* name entailed a double bind: on the one hand it fostered a sense of belonging to a niche digital community, that revolved around an unapologetic love of traditionally feminine (i.e. girly) things, on the other hand, it circumscribed its depiction of girlhood and girlness to the designated realm of an idealized and consumption-oriented femininity, to maintain its status as an arbiter of feminine gender capital.

In other words, despite its affinity-based origins *JustGirlyThings*' manifestations of the Young-Girl Online didn't stray far from Tiquun's original conceptualization, ultimately remaining within the

rigid confines of the gender binary. However, as an unadulterated depiction of what a digitally informed white, heterosexual girlhood looked like at the time, the blog itself as well as its self-identified girly followers became targets of misogynistic backlash.

The internet-wide counterresponse to *JustGirlyThings* culminated in the creation of numerous parody blogs that poked fun at its content and audience through absurdist additions to the tumblr canon of things all girls are purported to like. *JustGurlyThingz* was the most infamous of these spoof blogs ridiculing all things *JustGirlyThings* on tumblr and beyond. This online backlash, spearheaded by countless parody/ spoof blogs eventually spilled beyond the fringes of tumblr into the digital mainstream, leading to the gradual decline in popularity and eventual disappearance of *JustGirlyThings* from online consciousness. I briefly delve into this cultural response to *JustGirlyThings*, to illustrate the extent to which – much like in Tiqqun's *Preliminary Materials* – valid critiques of the blog's shortcomings were co-opted by misogyny.

## 5. *JuztGurlyThingz*: Parodies of the Young-Girl Online

By 2015, *JustGirlyThings* had amassed a total of six hundred thousand followers<sup>110</sup> and its content output had become synonymous with the much-ridiculed ‘basic white girl’ archetype (more widely known as ‘the basic bitch’): a pejorative term that was frequently invoked online to condescend to young women who embodied conventionally feminine characteristics through their aesthetic taste and consumption habits.<sup>111</sup> In the early to late 2010s, the ‘basic white girl’ stereotype occupied ample space within the collective consciousness both within and beyond the cyberrealm: from BuzzFeed checklists designed to pinpoint where one lands on the spectrum of basic white girlhood<sup>112</sup> to numerous viral spoof videos that poked fun at the uniformity of the fashion and lifestyle trends most young women followed.<sup>113</sup> Within such a cultural climate that was actively hostile to any and all earnest depictions of femininity – *JustGirlyThings* provided an easy punching bag for this not-so-covert misogynistic backlash, that not only undermined the affective agency of young women and girls but also infantilized behavior associated with conventional, white-coded femininity. Consumer brands perceived to be favored by the ‘basic white girl’ – such as the American multinational coffeehouse chain Starbucks and the sheepskin boots retailer UGG – became visual shorthand online for a femininity that was almost exclusively associated with frivolous spending and myopic vanity. Young women and girls who conformed to these derided signifiers of ‘basic white girlhood’ – which became sticky with condescension and self-induced shame – were mocked for their uniformity, not as a means of critiquing the systematic bending of their desires to the whims of consumerist capitalism but as a means of establishing them as deserving subjects of endless online ridicule.

On tumblr, the brewing backlash against the basic white girl culminated in the emergence of numerous parody blogs, that imitated the format and content output of *JustGirlyThings* to poke fun at its earnest idealization of white girlhood. Much like Tiquun, who utilized the Young-Girl as a *Denkfigur* to parody and mirror the misogyny at the heart of heteropatriarchal capitalism under the guise of Marxist critique,<sup>114</sup> these parody blogs instrumentalized humorous ironic detachment, to gloss over the rampant misogyny that undergirded the bulk of their content. One of the most well-known of these digital parody accounts was *JuztGurlyThingz*, which memefied the original *JustGirlyThings* macro template to create absurdist reimaginations of things all girls purportedly

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<sup>110</sup> Cf. STRANGE ÆONS, “The History of JustGirlyThings,” Youtube video.

<sup>111</sup> “Basic Girl,” *Aesthetics Wiki*, October 16, 2025, [https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Basic\\_Girl](https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Basic_Girl)

<sup>112</sup> Chelsea Marshall, “How Basic Are You?,” *BuzzFeed*, April 16, 2014, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/chelseamarshall/how-basic-are-you>.

<sup>113</sup> CollegeHumour, “How To Tell If You’re a Basic Bitch”, Posted April 2nd 2014, Youtube video, 3:26, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PaghldSJKvQ>

<sup>114</sup> Cf. Nina Power, “She’s Just Not That into You,” *Radical Philosophy*, (2013).

liked. Following in the footsteps of the blog it parodied, *JuztGurlyThingz* adopted a submission-based model of content creation, wherein requests made by avid followers would be adapted into rebloggable images by the admins (which I should note identified as girls themselves). This resulted in the creation of a vast spectrum of humorous visual content, with captions ranging from gross-out scenarios revolving around the menstrual cycle to fantastical hypotheticals intended to elicit a baffled, laughing reaction from the viewer (*Figure 17*).



*Figure 17: Screenshots of various JuztGurlyThingz posts from 2015*

The majority of *JuztGurlyThingz* posts didn't function as well-thought-out satires of *JustGirlyThings'* exclusionary depiction of digital girlhood so much as attempts at subverting expectations by turning the pristine and polished image of online (re)iterations of femininity on its head. In that, *JuztGurlyThingz* played into the 'not like other girls' trope, which offered young women a way out of the 'damned if you do, damned if you don't' logic of conforming to feminine gender norms. In other words, it allowed young and impressionable women the leeway to position themselves as diametrically opposed to the basic white girl archetype. Nonetheless, this dissemination of content, that made light of and mocked earnest expressions of girlhood online, had repercussions within the wider sociocultural domains of internet culture. By tagging their visual recreations with the original *JustGirlyThings* tumblr tag, *JuztGurlyThingz* admins ensured that their content would reach and potentially upset the audience they were making a point of mocking. Thus, the increased visibility of parody content coupled with the growing derision for 'the basic white girl' archetype led some of the biggest online creators of the time to hop on the trend, to make a spectacle out of mocking things young girls and women liked. One of the most notable examples of this is the Youtube video titled "ULTIMATE justgirlythings"<sup>115</sup> published by former-internet-personality-turned-musician Joji under his online alter ego/alias 'Filthy Frank', in which he used

<sup>115</sup> TVFilthyFrank, "ULTIMATE justgirlythings", Posted April 24, 2015, YouTube video, 6:39, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eGSYqhlbt20>

gross-out and edgy humor to reenact various *JustGirlyThings* posts, under the pretense of teaching his predominantly male audience how to attract girls. The video which garnered more than thirteen million views, epitomized the click-bait backlash unassuming expressions of conventional girlhood drew at the time, to the monetary benefit of various well-established creators.

The internet-wide bad-faith critiques of *JustGirlyThings*, cannot be decoupled from the misogynistic connotations of Tiqqun's original conceptualization of the Young-Girl as a means of anti-capitalist *Systemkritik*. Much like Tiqqun, who weaponized misogyny against the all-pervasive cultural malaise of consumer capitalism, the online critics of *JustGirlyThings* used ironic detachment and humor to conceal the more impervious implications of ridiculing conventional femininity. This begs the question of whether as an embodiment of the Young-Girl Online, *JustGirlyThings*' legacy can ever be fully decoupled from the misogynistic connotations of the original term's origins.

## 6. Conclusion

This master's thesis has sought to provide a succinct media analysis of the content output and digital presence of the tumblr blog *JustGirlyThings* at the height of its popularity between the years 2011-2018 through the framework of the Young-Girl Online: a digital *détournement* of French Marxist collective Tiqqun's theoretical concept of the Young-Girl as the idealized capitalist subject.

I have defined on the Young-Girl Online as a distinctly gendered *Denkfigur* across three distinct epistemological axes, namely desire/affect, value/ power-knowledge and simulacra/gender, establishing conceptual connections to Sara Ahmed's affect theory, Michel Foucault's paradigm of power-knowledge and Judith Butler's definition of gender as a discursively constructed performance respectively. To that end, I have critically engaged with and built upon Tiqqun's initial conceptualization of the Young-Girl as the ideal capitalist subject whose subjectivity has been subsumed by capital to the extent to which she is happy to be sold her own commodification. I have coined the term Young-Girl Online, to problematize Tiqqun's negation of the patriarchal co-constitution of gender despite the frequent invocation of feminine sociocultural signifiers in their initial conceptualization as well as to account for the newfound URL possibilities of swimming against the current of the socially imposed IRL gender binary by way of glitch feminism.

Next, I provided a brief history of the rise and fall of tumblr in the early aughts to the late 2010s as well as its lasting impact on the microblogging sphere through its implementation of the reblogging function, emphasis on visually pleasing 'aesthetic' content as well as its fostering of tight-knit niche online communities.

Following this brief foray into the tentative beginnings and eventual decline of tumblr as a leading microblogging platform, I introduced my main object of analysis, namely the tumblr blog *JustGirlyThings*, by recounting its origins as the afterschool passion project of a handful of teenage girls, which eventually grew into one of the most ubiquitous and well-known tumblr blogs of at the peak of the platform's popularity. I positioned *JustGirlyThings* as a predecessor to contemporary girlblogging practices through its earnest centering of normative femininity and digital depictions of an authentic yet relatable girlhood from a first-person point of view. In that, I made a point of emphasizing the difference between *JustGirlyThings*' affinity-based approach to gender and the gender essentialist rhetoric espoused by most contemporary girlbloggers. Next, I conducted a retrospective media analysis of *JustGirlyThings* content published during the height of tumblr's popularity between 2011- 2018 with the help of *Internet Archive's Wayback Machine*. To that end, I framed *JustGirlyThings* as a diaristic mood board and considered the extent to which it functioned as an in-real-time account of the feminine coming of age online. In keeping with this argument, I examined the visual tropes and messaging of *JustGirlyThings*' content, as a semi-coherent collage

of image-based posts that make up Young-Girl Online. I categorized these images under four broad thematic clusters, namely consumption habits, relational aspirations, self-optimization and independence and self-image. Having concluded that the majority of the posts analyzed fall under the first two of these clusters, I then questioned the extent to which this seemingly vast thematic range depicted across *JustGirlyThings*' content was mirrored in its depiction of a decidedly monolithic – that is white, thin and conventionally attractive – girlhood. In that, I problematized the notion that *JustGirlyThings* perpetuation of a rigid femininity along the culturally embedded axes of whiteness and thinness could be retroactively compensated for by its main admin's well-meaning efforts to incorporate more diverse and inclusive posts into its roster of content. Therein, I delved into the affective function of *JustGirlyThings*' posts glorifying the emaciated white body, as embodiments of cruel optimism. I then explored the participatory curation of gender identity as affective gender capital, by describing the blog's consolidation of a seemingly diverse array of perspectives into digital emblems of normative femininity.

In the penultimate chapter I briefly delved into the contemporary backlash against *JustGirlyThings*, which became co-opted by misogyny under the guise of valid critiques of conventional femininity based on consumerism.

In summation, *JustGirlyThings* can be conceived of an embodiment of the Young-Girl Online insofar as it emphasized an affinity-based digital performance of gender identity, which was nonetheless undergirded by normative beauty ideals and consumerism. As a product of its time, the blog contributed significantly to the digital heteroglossia of girlhood, fostering an affinity-based URL community where young women could participate in a shared, albeit commodified, expression of femininity. Although *JustGirlyThings*' affinity-based approach to gender bore subversive potential, it remained unrealized due to its self-appointed role as an accumulator of digital gender capital for its audience. That said, its impact and legacy as a direct account of the feminine coming of age as well as the misogynistic backlash it received for its earnest and affinity-based portrayal of digital girlhood, remains relevant for critically engaging the construction of a gendered identity online.

Keeping in mind the epistemological constraints of a retrospective media analysis spanning a timeframe of seven years, it is necessary to apply the theoretical framework of the Young-Girl Online on present-day forms of digital gender expression, to parse the nuances of its evolution in tandem with the accelerationist trajectory of platform capitalism. The specific ways in which the various short-form-content-based successors of tumblr (e.g. TikTok) have (re)shaped the Young-Girl Online – and by extension our understanding of and affective attachments to gender online – to fit their algorithm-optimized visual feedback loops remain to be examined. That is to say, the

theoretical basis and methodology of this master's thesis should be extrapolated to further scholarly research on the entanglement of affect, power-knowledge and gender in the everchanging and simulacra-laden landscape of digital media culture.

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